

By JESSICA CRAWFORD

• Daily Leader

Following a tearful plea from Southlawn secretary Cecilia Medina regarding having to choose only 10 members of her family of 60 to attend her daughter's graduation, Liberal High School Principal Keith Adams' decision to keep graduation at the Big House rather than Redskin Field will stand as of Monday evening's USD No. 480 board meeting.

Prior to the approval of the agenda Monday evening, board member Reid Petty moved to add allowing the 2010 commencement exercises to take place at 3 p.m. on May 23 at Redskin Field, weather permitting, to the agenda. His addition to the agenda was approved by all board members with the exception of board president Dan Diepenbrock.

When the item made its way to the table late in the meeting, board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott quickly made a motion to approve the change in location of the LHS graduation. Board member Reid Petty made a second to bring the item to a vote.

Prior to making a decision, board vice president Dr. Jim Jury asked to once again hear the opinion of LHS Principal Keith Adams.

"I would like to hear a review of Mr. Adams' comments on that situation," Jury requested. "Has there been some change as to the status of your opinion where that should be held?"

“No, not at all,” Adams replied. “If you recall the last board meeting, my recommendation was to keep it in the gymnasium on Sunday afternoon at 3 p.m. My recommendation still stands at it was at the last board meeting.

“That was where it was originally set, the proposal I brought to the board was to change it to Saturday and that wasn’t inducted that night,” he continued. “Between that first meeting and the second meeting, there was a survey that we tried to conduct with students that they skewed completely. It was not 80 percent of the students (that wanted graduation outside), it was 80 percent of whatever response we had. So, we didn’t have a legitimate survey from the students.

“To me, time was of the essence to get the information to the parents, whether they could continue their plans and finalize their plans,” he explained. “So, I sent a letter home with the first semester grading period for the senior parents stating that graduation would be Sunday afternoon in the gym.”

According to Adams, the survey offered LHS seniors several different choices as to the time and location of graduation. However, more than 400 responses were gathered from a class of approximately 260 students, Adams said.

Diepenbrock stood by his opinion that Adams should ultimately make the final decision regarding graduation – not a survey.

“He is the decision maker,” Diepenbrock said. “And he goes out and he, from various sources and various methods, gathered information to determine what his decision is going to be. Just because he asked someone’s opinion and he makes a decision contrary to what the majority is, that is his job. He may have very legitimate reasons to do that. Otherwise, we are talking about making decisions by poll and that is not the way I want to make decisions.

“I wasn’t speaking for the entire board,” he continued. “But, I said I want Mr. Adams to make the decision, and he came back and he made the decision. Now he is being second guessed.”

Adams again defended his decision as he added reasons as to how he arrived at the decision

he made.

“If you recall, I brought the class president and class vice president with a proposal to move it to outside on Saturday morning,” Adams said. “That wasn’t accepted. There was a lot of confusion there that came after that. So, it did become my choice to make the decision based upon some information. But, determining what was what was difficult. I know what the class officers brought in initially and that wasn’t accepted. So, I went back to Plan A, the original plan. That is where I stand today.”

Jury informed board members that a certain chain of command must be maintained in order to have a correctly functioning system.

“I think it is my issue, too, that there is a certain chain of command,” Jury said. “I think that, as a board, if we are going to start overriding the decisions that those that are in put in the position to decide, I almost feel like we are overstepping our bounds. Not allowing our principal to decide this, potentially, is a problem because how do you draw the parameters that allow us to do that. What other decision are we allowed to go in and intervene based on our system. And is that an organized, wise choice – for us to start micro-managing every decision made by those that are in charge?”

“Dr. Jury, we do support the administration and go with almost 99 percent of what they go after,” Petty said. “I don’t really see a purpose of a board if we rubber stamp 100 percent of everything. I think it is our job to do what is in the best interest. To me, if we have graduation indoors, we will have family members, possibly grandparents, who will not be attending graduation this year.”

Diepenbrock again took the stand that Adams had been placed in charge of the decision, and his decision should stand.

“That is why a person needs to make that decision,” Diepenbrock said. “The person that we have charged with that duty to gather the information and make the decision. If we are going to override him on this, what is the next thing?”

“This is not the signal we want to send administrators,” Diepenbrock added. “This is not the thing we want to be doing. If the majority of the board wants to do it, then that is the way it is going to be.”

In an effort to fully educate board members regarding district policy, finance director Jerry Clay read aloud the graduation policy adopted by USD 480.

“Formal public graduation activities will be conducted only at the high school level,” Clay noted. “Graduation exercises will be at the control of the building principal, as approved January 5 of 2000.”

Celilia Medina patiently waited for board members to finish their discussion for a chance to speak. She was almost unable to address the board when Diepenbrock felt enough had been said regarding the issue.

“Ma’am, I mean you know disrespect,” he said. “But, I don’t know what you are going to say. This is the principal of our high school, and we have has been already under a lot of fire. We have heard both sides of the issue, so I am sorry, unless the board wants to make a motion to allow the floor to speak, I have heard all I need to hear about this. I am sorry.”

Board members felt it important to let Medina speak, due to the fact that she was, in fact, part of the school system and she was not present when comments from the floor were requested earlier in the meeting.

“I have known Mr. Adams since he has moved to Liberal,” Medina said. “I have nothing against him, I understand tough decisions. I have heard from lots of parents, they don’t understand why we are limited to 10 tickets. I, myself, have roughly 60 family members. To limit to 10 people at graduation, I think is unfair, very unfair. I am not the only one that would have a big family. I think that if we are going to have it at the stadium, it is our decision to stand out in the heat. My daughter has gone through 13 years of school, it will be worth standing out there watching and have the entire family with us.”

School board votes to keep graduation indoors

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Ultimately, the board let Adams' decision stand to once again conduct graduation in the Big House, with each student receiving 10 tickets for family members. Diepenbrock, Jury, Cheryl Louderback and Nick Hatcher voted in favor of Adams' decision. Petty, Sutherland-Abbott and Stacy Johnson voted to allow Redskin Field to be utilized for commencement exercises.