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‘Good Things’ brings students, adults together

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times The Liberal USD No. 480 School Board meeting on March 25 featured the usual agenda — approval of budget items, reports from directors, an appearance by the local teachers’ union president. But the evening also included a few feel-good appearances by local educators and students.

The upbeat opening to the meeting was no accident. Deputy Superintendent of Schools Paul Larkin started the “Good Things” portion of the school board meetings in a deliberate bid to boost morale and the cooperative spirit.

“It was last spring at the national school board convention that I came across this,” he said. “Sometimes you think these conventions are interesting, but don’t really pertain to what you see happening locally. This was one instance where I came across an idea that I felt could transform the culture of the USD 480 board.”

Larkin hoped “Good Things” presentations would serve to inspire everyone in attendance with positive feedback about what was working well in the district. He also hoped it would remind his fellow administrators and the elected board members “that these kids, educating them, is what we’re all here for.” Last month, the board meeting offered plenty of inspiration, starting with the presentation of the Chamber of Commerce Teacher of the Month award to Jack Hanson, an instructor at West Middle School. Hanson, said principal Troy McCarter, “is always engaged. He’s been with us only two years, but his teaching is way beyond his years of experience.” With lesson plans that link from week to week, building on the material previously presented, Hanson teaches his students masterfully, McCarter said. “His lessons are intertwined — I don’t know how he does it — like a perfectly sewn quilt.”

Veteran teacher Deena Fuller was recognized for an award she will receive from Newman University, where Fuller is completing her master’s degree. MacArthur Principal Shawna Evans shared with the group that Fuller was selected from a group of 500 graduate students for the honor.

Next up were high school science students, with LHS teacher Malesa Westerman. Riley Hay and Kaitlyn Ralston presented information about their award-winning project, which focused on wavelengths of light and photochemical reactions. Fellow students Jenna Wyrick and Daniel Dowell explained their project, titled “Can fast plants grow faster?” in which they revved up the

growth of plants in the interest of helping farmers produce more crops. Both groups of students will compete at the state science fair, and hope to advance to national competition.

Bob Smithson of Seward County Community College-Area Technical School brought several students along to explain the concurrent enrollment program offered through LHS.

“It’s a win-win situation,” Smithson said, as he described the certification programs at the technical school. “You guys aren’t paying for it, we aren’t paying for it — the state of Kansas is picking up the cost, and we’ve got kids graduating with credentials that enable them to get out there, think, write, create and fix cars.”

Though Smithson joked that it had taken \$50 worth of pizza to get the students to the board meeting, he added, “I look at them, and I see an economic engine. It fills you with confidence.”

In Larkin’s last “Good Things” item, he turned the tables on school board members, who took on the role of learners. Their instructors? A group of 12 second-grade students from McKinley Elementary School, who attended the meeting to demonstrate how to use the district’s testing technology, informally known as “clickers.”

Students paired up with board members and administrators to show them how to use the clickers – similar in size and complexity to a television remote-control device — to input answers to a simple test displayed on an overhead screen.

“Today, we’re going to have you take a little quiz on shapes,” their instructor said.

As students coached the adults through the process, the room hummed with laughter and conversation. In the end, everyone passed the basic geometry test, and the students left with smiles on their faces.

Board members, too, seemed happy with the experience.

“That’s what we want,” Larkin said. “How can it not put a smile on your face, to have those kids come in with all their enthusiasm? I really do feel having these positive experiences sets the tone for the evening. It reminds us of why we’re in this business.”

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