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Majority agrees to hire now, pay later

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times USD No. 480 will add another 15 teachers next year following a 5-2 vote by the school board at its regular meeting Monday night. Board members Steve Helm and Tammy Sutherland Abbott voted against the motion, after Sutherland-Abbott's proposal to table the action failed in a 2-5 vote that exactly mirrored the proposal to add more instructors. "I'm not opposed to teachers," Helm explained. "I just think this district has been irresponsible, spending money on other things instead of teachers, and now we're passing the expense along to the taxpayers."



Helm listed the addition of new administrative positions, the expense of the improvements at Liberal High School Redskin [Cornelsen] Field, the Literacy First program and more costly cell phone service for administrators as examples of expenditures using money that should have been earmarked for new teachers. "The state gives us money when our enrollment goes up, and that money is for classroom instruction," he said. "But we've added very few teachers. It's like we say, 'We're going to take that money and spend it however we want to,' and then we expect the tax payers to make up the difference." In her motion, Sutherland-Abbott objected to putting a plan in motion that would have to be funded through budget adjustments made by the incoming school board, which will include two newly-elected members who take office in July.

"They'll have to be responsible for the funding," she said.

But timing trumped concerns about how to pay for the new positions, said board member Nick Hatcher.

"We need to give our human resources director time to go out and get teachers," he said. "If we delay until July, when they do try to hire more teachers, they're not going to be getting the cream of the crop."

Cheryl Louderback pointed out that, with an increasing student body and an average class size that threatens to exceed the recommended student-teacher ratios, "the students are already here [in the district] and we have to take care of them."

The school board already knows it will have to review, debate and approve a new budget, noted

board member Dan Dipenbrock.

“I don’t think there’s any dispute about that,” he said. The proposal to hire more teachers, as presented in the April 8 board meeting, “resonates with me. It rings true with me,” he said.

Sutherland-Abbott continued to argue for fiscal restraint.

“The board is going to have to raise the mil levy to pay for [additional teachers],” she said. She expressed a concern that backlash against higher property taxes would result in voter unwillingness to approve a bond issue that could fund much-needed building projects across the district. “The community defeated the last bond issue. This is going to have the same effect.”

“For the sake of the kids, we’ve got to add more teachers,” said board member Chris Jewell.

“You’ve got to get the adults on board before you can help the kids,” Sutherland-Abbott responded.

Even so, the motion to add 15 teachers, made by Louderback and seconded by Diepenbrock, passed easily.

For the 2013-14 school year, USD 480 will add the following positions:

2 — 4th-grade teachers

2 — 5th-grade teachers

2 — ESL teachers

1 — PE teacher

1 — Music teacher

1 — Special Ed position

1 — computer para

1 — ESL para

1 — Migrant para

1 — IT Staff

2 — Auxiliary Service positions

New students bring money to district

Every new student that enters USD 480 sets a funding process in motion that eventually results in about \$10,000 for the district. At last night's meeting, USD 480 board member Steve Helm asked Finance Director Jerry Clay why that money is not set aside in order to pay for additional teachers. "I estimate that we've been provided the money, about \$4 million, over the last few years," he said. "So why do we have to raise the mil levy to pay for more teachers now?" Clay said such funding does not arrive in the district until the ongoing school year is nearly finished. "Mr. Helm, how can we go hire teachers, when the funding comes in March?" he said.

According to state and national databases, Kansas districts spend \$10,201 on each student, using a combination of state and federal funds. Of that amount, in the upcoming school year, the state of Kansas provides \$3,838 for each student.

Compared to other states, Kansas ranks right in the middle. The high mark for per-student funding is the District of Columbia at more than \$19,000 per pupil; the low mark is Utah, which spends \$6,600 to educate each student.

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