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By Rachel COLEMAN • Associated Press Annual contract negotiations between USD No. 480 and the Liberal NEA, once so difficult that the process threatened to delay the beginning of the school year, have improved. In fact, they've improved so much that the recent work session to hash out details of next year's contract got the job done in less than two hours.

Superintendent of Schools Lance Stout and LNEA president Grant Mathews both reported the news to the school board at its regular meeting Monday night. "I have to say I am so impressed with how this process has made negotiations such a great occasion," Stout said. "I want to thank both groups for their professionalism, trust and cooperation."

The tentative agreement reached by the negotiators "was due to the communication lines we've kept open over the past few years," said Mathews. "We were all on the same page. We all know and understand the difficulties we face in the district, and we're able to settle on those items."

The ability to compromise was prized by both sides, who remembered the turmoil of previous years. Board members joked a bit with Mathews, who included in his report the news that he will be stepping down as LNEA president after this school year.

"Had all the fun you can stand?" asked board member Nick Hatcher.

"Actually, I'm taking a step back from a lot of things," Mathews replied. "I want to refocus on teaching [band] and be sure I continue to enjoy it."

Board president Delvin Kinser formally thanked Mathews for his years of work as LNEA president, noting that smooth negotiations this year were a direct result of the consensus-building effort Mathews has devoted to the job.

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