Board narrows down superintendent candidates to 3, hosting meet-and-greets for public this week

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times As part of the search for a new superintendent of schools, Liberal USD No. 480 school board members and administrators hosted a meet-and-greet reception for candidate Dean Katt Tuesday evening. Over cookies and punch served at the Hampton Inn, district employees and patrons got to meet Katt before his evening interview with the board. Katt, who currently works as a consultant for the Ottawa school district outside of Kansas City, served as the superintendent of schools there until March 1, when he resigned. Katt, who had served as superintendent since 2006, earned a salary of $130,786 per contract year, and board members in Ottawa did not specify whether he would continue to receive that amount for his work as a consultant.

Ottawa enrolls slightly more than 2,537 students K-12. USD 480's student body numbers are nearly twice that, with 4,959 students K-12. According to articles published in the Ottawa Herald and Lawrence Journal-World, details about Katt's resignation were sketchy, though Ottawa school board president Susan Ward noted Katt planned "to kind of slow down on his working" and might set aside more time for his three grandchildren, who live in the Kansas City area. At Tuesday's reception, though, Katt spoke positively about getting back into the superintendent game in Southwest Kansas.

"My wife and I spent nearly 20 years out here," he said. "We were at Deerfield for nine years, Holcomb for 10 years and Scott City for four years. We like this part of the state. It has a whole different mindset, and everybody is so friendly."

In Ottawa, Katt oversaw a predominantly white population, "with a few Hispanic and afro-American students," he said. Though the demographics were markedly different than Liberal, where the student population is now majority-minority with more than 70 percent Hispanic, Katt said the issues of truancy and drug use were common to both districts, as is the problem of space.

"We're going through the same things," he said. "The budget cuts over the last few years forced us to close two elementary schools, and now we're bursting at the seams. The high school is an older building that was renovated, but it has become crowded. So, coming to Liberal would be

like working with the same problems."

Katt toured Liberal schools earlier in the day with director of auxiliary services Robert Burkey.

The need for more facilities in this district "was very evident," Katt said. That was a welcome observation to Gloria Quattrone, principal of Southlawn Elementary School, where the kindergarten students must press against the gymnasium wall during the morning assembling "because I don't want them to get hurt," Quattrone said, adding, "the main thing we need is more space, more facilities."

For the local National Education Association members who attended the reception, the prime question was how Katt, if selected, would handle negotiations with the NEA.

"We worked really hard last year on the bargaining process," said treasurer Amy Ricks, "and I wanted find out how he felt about that."

Newly-elected LNEA president Jeannette Moore said she wants the district to hire a superintendent who will build on the progress made by the union and school board in recent years.

"I don't want us to stop or go backward," Moore said. "I want to keep moving forward in a positive way."

With new Common Core test standards to be implemented over the next few years, both teachers expressed concern that their mostly low-income students might lose their way in the standardized-test shuffle.

"I worry about that," said Ricks. "It's going to be really different, especially for children who do not have access to computers at home."

Board members Chris Jewell, Nick Hatcher, Delvin Kinser, Dan Diepenbrock and Steve Helm also attended the meeting, warming up for the interview session to follow. Jewell expressed the desire to keep the children first, with an eye on the future.

"It's all about the kids," he said. "That's what we're here for. We also need somebody who's got vision. He or she has to care about kids first, providing quality education for every kid in the district … and that means we've got to deal with the question of expansion."

Garfield principal Kendra Haskell, whose school is located uncomfortably near the mill fire that destroyed an old building adjacent to the Perryton Equity grain elevator, agreed. Though her school is crowded and in need of updates and expansion, she was "really relieved that it was not affected by the fire."

Donna Sill, principal of Cottonwood School, said her wish list for a new superintendent is topped by character qualities that will determine the focus of leadership.

“I want to see us hire a good, compassionate, caring person who’s going to take care of our district,” she said.

To find such a person, the board asked the Kansas Association of School Boards to vet applications and send recommendations to Liberal. Kinser, president of the board, said KASB brought 11 finalists to the attention of the board.

“Now we’ve whittled it down to four, though one later withdrew her name,” he said. “As newer board members, Steve (Helm) and I haven’t done this before, but we are clear about what we want in our superintendent, so the interview tonight will move us forward.”