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By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

The federal government removed prayer from schools more than 50 years ago, but it will go on in Liberal, led by students and allowed by the school board. Taking action on an item spontaneously added to the agenda near the end of Monday's meeting, the USD No. 480 school board voted unanimously to allow student-led prayer at all activities in the district.

Because it specifies that school officials do not initiate or lead the prayers, the action is intended to comply with federal law even as it makes prayer possible.

"I think that's one of the greatest things we've ever done," said board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott, who seconded board member Nick Hatcher's motion.

Hatcher introduced the idea during his portion of the time allowed for board comments.

“I would like to see us bring prayer back to the games,” he told his fellow board members, after expressing admiration for the LHS Redskins football team. “I have struggled with that — not having prayer at our activities — because it’s ‘not the thing to do,’ but if the board thought it was important enough that they would support it, and defend it if the time came, I’d like to ask that we do that at our next meeting.”

“Why not do it now?” asked Sutherland-Abbott.

“We do live in a democratic society, and I personally feel like our community would support that decision, regardless of the rest of the world,” Hatcher said.

Several years ago, LHS discontinued prayer at events like football games. Administration voiced concern that, by making the P.A. system available for prayers led by students or community members, the district could be perceived as sanctioning or even promoting traditional Christian prayer in violation of federal law. Student-led prayers then moved to the football field itself, prior to the game. However, no microphone or speaker system allowed spectators to hear such prayers. Monday night’s vote will permit students to utilize the P.A. system for prayer before football games and all other special activities in the district.

Board president Delvin Kinser said that the LHS Christian fellowship group, StandOut, would participate in student-led prayer with enthusiasm.

“I happen to know they’re meeting at the school right now, and I can just betcha they’d be willing to provide students to pray at football games,” he said.

Superintendent of schools Paul Larkin cautioned the board members that they should be aware of challenges that could arise.

Board votes unanimously to allow student-led prayer

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“We can have student-led prayer, but if we turn away certain groups — if you have someone who wants to serve up a prayer or a thought that isn’t the mainstream thinking — you’re going to have a problem,” he said. “The thing to do is take it to (board attorney) Mr. Yoxall and get some advice.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” replied Hatcher. “I’m sure he’ll come back and tell us the reasons not to, or at least show us where the liabilities lie, but if there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Board member Matt Friederich supported the motion, noting that “we make it a priority to open every board meeting with prayer.”

“We sit up here like hypocrites, and we pray,” said Sutherland-Abbott, “but we won’t let our kids do it.”

Though Larkin offered to contact Yoxall in order to bring a legal opinion to the next board meeting, Sutherland-Abbott interrupted:

“We don’t need to wait for that. We can make a board decision, as long as it’s student-led, to support prayer. I’ll make that motion. I’m gonna do it.”

Sutherland-Abbott said she understood the federal law that prohibits school officials from leading prayer, but that she was tired of allowing the opinions of a few in America dictate what “the rest of us” could do. She made a motion to add the item “Student-Led Prayer” to the evening’s agenda.

That item, and the following vote to allow student-led prayer at all USD 480 activities, passed 7-0, with yes votes from Hatcher, Crystal Clemens, Chris Jewell, Kinser, Sutherland-Abbott, Friederich and Steve Helm.

Student-led prayer scheduled for Wednesday

While the USD 480 board debated allowing student-led prayers at district activities, a group of students was already planning an early-morning prayer service for Wednesday morning. See You At The Pole, or SYATP, is a 26-year-old nationwide event designed to encourage students to prayer together, for their schools, at their schools.

This year's SYATP is set for 7 a.m. Wednesday. Students around Liberal and the nation will gather at the flagpoles of their respective school buildings to worship in song and offer prayers. The event is entirely student-led.

At Liberal High School, the student fellowship group StandOut organizes and runs the event. Similar gatherings take place at many other schools throughout the district.

Board president Delvin Kinser encouraged his fellow board members to arise early on Wednesday and take a look.

"If you go by the schools and see the kids who've turned out, praying for their schools and their teachers — it's awesome," he said.

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