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Competency grading up for discussion

By RACHEL COLEMAN

- Leader & Times

The Liberal USD 480 board conducted its regular meeting Monday and worked through a long list of items in short order. With one member, Crystal Clemens, absent, and another, Tammy Sutherland-Abbott, taking part by phone, the board wrapped up regular business in just one-and-a-half hours.

That doesn't mean board members will have a light week, however. In discussion, board members voiced optimism and concern about upcoming meetings scheduled for the week.



Today, the board's Long Range Financing committee — members Delvin Kinser, Steve Helm and Matt Friederich, along with superintendent of schools Paul Larkin — will meet with the Liberal City Commission to discuss sales-tax funding for the district's needs.

The committee feels positive about the collaborative effort, said Kinser, who will serve as spokesman.

“I’m very encouraged with what I’ve heard,” he said. In response to the district’s idea that voters would like to have a say in whether sales-tax money might be used to help expand school facilities, he said, city commissioners “have expressed to us that they want to be a part of what’s happening in the community. I anticipate a positive outcome.”

Board members were not quite as confident that the Wednesday meeting, a work session to discuss competency-based grading, will unfold as smoothly. Scheduled in response to board and community questions about the system being used for roughly half the classes at Liberal High School, the meeting could be rocky.

Larkin offered the board suggestions about how the evening could be structured in order to give all participants a fair hearing.

With board president Kinser, Larkin said, “We’ve discussed what the format of that should look like” in order to allow for public and board input.

The meeting, set for 6 p.m. Wednesday at the Education Service Center, 624 N. Grant, will begin with a presentation by LHS principal Keith Adams.

“Along with some of the teachers, he will share about the process, and then we’re going to open it to the public,” Larkin said.

In keeping with board protocol, those who wish to speak or ask questions will fill out “yellow cards” in order to keep the process orderly.

“We’re asking people to limit their comments to five minutes, and we’ll try to keep that part of the meeting to one hour,” Larkin said. “We’re just trying to put some parameters on that.”

Following public comments, the board will also have time to ask questions and discuss the grading system.

Board member Steve Helm expressed misgivings about the competency-based grading meeting being scheduled on a Wednesday. Student activities are discouraged on Wednesdays, he said, and “we need to follow that philosophy, too.

“As far as limiting the talk from the audience, if we have people who are willing to come out, who have legitimate questions, and it goes to an hour and a half, two hours — that’s what we’re here for, to listen to the people,” Helm said. “I hate to set a time limit on something like that.”

Helm suggested the board “play it by ear,” leaving room for unasked questions even if the time exceeds an hour.

Board member Chris Jewell agreed that a time limit might be useful, but should not result in closing down unique questions or new discussion.

“I’m expecting that we’ll hear a lot of repeat questions,” said Larkin. At the end of the first hour, he suggested, the board could issue a “last call” for new discussion or comments.

In other business, the board approved several items:

- A proposal by director of auxiliary services Robert Burkey and the transportation committee, to begin a search for two used buses for the district, at a total maximum price not to exceed \$85,000. The district will look for a yellow route bus, and a 34-passenger activity bus.

School board plans for public input at Wednesday meeting

Tuesday, 08 October 2013 10:01

- Acceptance of a school improvement grant totalling \$177,689, from the Kansas Department of Education. The money, given to close the achievement gap in schools identified as “Focus” or “Priority,” will be used primarily to pay for visits by consultants. South Middle School receives the largest share of the grant, \$89,000, while four other schools, West Middle School, Washington Elementary, Sunflower Intermediate and Garfield Elementary, will each receive \$22,000.
- Continuing the contract with the district’s audiologist, who serves USD 480 as part of a cooperative agreement with other districts in Southwest Kansas.
- Hiring two half-time paraprofessional employees to work in special education services, one to help visually-impaired students, and one to train as an interpreter for hearing-impaired students. The interpreter position is expected to become a full-time job for the 2014-15 school year.

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