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One teacher described having to bring his/her own children to the school on Saturday and Sunday, in order to complete preparations for the next week's teaching. And one added, "I don't want to live at the school. It's not a healthy lifestyle to work overtime this much." Courtesy photo

Educators sound off about increasing workload

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

For several years, the Liberal teachers' union and USD No. 480 have enjoyed a peaceful, collaborative relationship, but the partnership seems to be fraying a bit. At least, that's the message delivered to the board of education at its last three meetings.

The Nov. 4 meeting recorded the loudest complaint yet: results from a survey completed by 179 teachers in the district. Fifty-two respondents added comments, which were copied to board members and USD 480 administration.

Overall, what the teachers had to say was not positive. More than 40 of the teacher comments expressed frustration and even anger. Five teachers said they were content with working conditions in the district. A handful of comments were neutral observations or wishes for things such as “more time to teach science, social studies and art.”

The two-question poll asked teachers to indicate what level of students they teach, and how teachers felt about information that had been presented to the board thus far.



More than 80 percent of the teachers who responded to the survey said they either agreed with everything that LNEA had presented to the board (51.67 percent) or agreed with some of the information (30 percent).

USD 480 board members have heard escalating concerns this fall, starting with the Oct. 7 appearance by LNEA vice president Grant Mathews, a band teacher who works at intermediate schools and Liberal High School. He reported that teacher fatigue had already taken hold of educators a mere one fourth of the way through the academic year.

“It’s setting in earlier than usual this year,” he said, listing programs such as Literacy First and a new computer-based lesson-planning template as significant sources of teacher overload.

LNEA President Jeanett Moore, who teaches at Washington Elementary School, returned two weeks later on Oct. 21 to provide board members with more details about teacher morale and the union’s point of view. In her written report, she listed four areas of contention — porch visits, planning time, new lesson plan templates and technology walk-throughs. In meetings with superintendent of schools Paul Larkin, Moore said, “We have made some progress but not as

much as we would have liked.”

Teacher comments from the survey largely reflect Mathews’ and Moore’s description.

“We are continually being told that we are professionals, but I often don’t feel like a professional in the various tasks we are told to perform,” one teacher wrote. “For instance, teachers are making porch visits. I don’t recall other professionals making such visits, i.e., my doctor, dentist, accountant, attorney.”

Many teachers expressed deep weariness with the afterschool hours they clock.

Elementary classroom teachers are often at school until 5:30 p.m. or later, one wrote, “and I still take home work almost daily.”

“I am buried,” said another.

“The district keeps adding to the teacher’s workload without compensation,” a teacher noted. Another wrote, “I arrive at school at 7 a.m. and then don’t leave until sometime between 5 and 7 p.m. Then I go home to grade more when I get my kids off to bed.”

One teacher described having to bring his/her own children to the school on Saturday and Sunday, in order to complete preparations for the next week’s teaching. And one added, “I don’t want to live at the school. It’s not a healthy lifestyle to work overtime this much.”

Many teachers shared feelings of conflict, as they struggled to do their jobs to a high standard and still maintain a balanced life.

“To properly do all the things” assigned to us ... is physically impossible,” one teacher wrote. “At

some point, we have to draw a line and say 'I have to stop here.' For some of us, that is extremely stressful. We want to be able to accomplish all we are given, but it is truly not possible, especially if it's to be done well."

Instructional coaches, placed in order to help coach teachers in new methods and programs, don't always help, some respondents stated.

"The coaches at the high school make things up for us to do and we already have enough things to do already," a frustrated teacher said. "We have PLC meetings just to be meeting to satisfy the coaches and the administration."

"In my years teaching in USD 480, it seems like I have gone from loving what I do to trying to find time to do all the requirements I need for the job I love to do," one teacher wrote. "Yes, I still love teaching, but I am exhausted."

Not all the teachers focused on complaints.

One survey respondent expressed concern about how difficult it might be for the district and the LNEA to find common ground:

"I just feel like in the past, the negotiating team and the board seemed to fight against each other. But in the last two years, the relationship seemed constructive," wrote one teacher. "Now it seems it's going back to a power struggle. There are certain things to be negotiated, but I think we need to be careful about asking for too much. We should work with the board and central office and not against."

However, some teachers feel it's prudent to let the union negotiate on their behalf. After writing a half-page response that listed concerns about instructional coaches, planning time and paperwork, one teacher said, "I was scared to list my concerns because I don't want them to be identified with my name. I do not want to be in trouble with my principal or the district or the school board for voicing my concerns, but I also do not feel it is OK to remain silent in fear of getting in trouble for voicing my opinion."

A coworker echoed the sense of disconnect:

“Where did the trust go between the labor and management? One observation: to keep and maintain a quality team is to treat them right.”

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