

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

The cleverly-chosen acronyms that name the afterschool programs for elementary – and intermediate-school students in Liberal appeared to be right on target at the board of education meeting. Students from the BEST program at Sunflower Intermediate attended as part of the “Good Things” portion of the meeting, showing off their “best” work, which program facilitators hope will enable them to “soar.”

The district’s three programs, BEST, ROCK and SOAR, currently serve more than 550 students each week, said federal programs director Shari King. More students have added their names to the waiting list, which is a good and bad thing, she noted. The high demand demonstrates that younger students in Liberal need support, and that the program provides real benefits to families.



“Our kids need help after school, whether it’s with homework or a good, safe place to go or something fun to do,” King said. To accomplish this, the afterschool programs put an emphasis on partnering with community groups, “so we’ve been branching out.”

Partners include Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, Mid-America Air Museum, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Liberal Parks and Recreation Department, K-State Extension and 4H groups.

Fourth- and fifth-grade students from Sunflower took over the board meeting for about 20 minutes to demonstrate the skills they've learned in a robotics unit at BEST. Working around the theme "Nature's Fury," they have mastered basic programming skills in order to tell small robots to complete tasks like lifting fallen branches or picking up "people" who need to be rescued.

The robotics program, a joint venture of BEST, the Mid-America Air Museum and Seward County Extension/4H, has given the students a chance to sharpen their math and science skills.

As board members watched, an eight-inch-tall robot completed a square pathway on the floor, then responded to the sound of the students clapping but coming to a stop. Some robot constructions have sound sensors, while others respond to light, temperature or simple computer programming instructions.

"I want to do this," said superintendent of schools Paul Larkin as a second group of robotics students showed off their inventions.

"It's pretty cool," agreed board member Nick Hatcher, as a pair of LEGO-block "woodsmen" sawed back and forth, and another robot appeared to snore.

King thanked the board for welcoming the students, and added her thanks to the community groups that continue to develop the district's afterschool programs.