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Marilyn Ott directs Washington Elementary second-grade music students in a performance at the USD No. 480 board of education meeting Monday. L&T photo/Rachel Coleman

Board member voices concern over CBG, parent-teacher conferences

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

“Sometimes, people don’t get along — but it’s still possible to find a solution,” said Washington Elementary School music teacher Marilyn Ott Monday night as she introduced her second-grade students to the USD No. 480 Board of Education. As part of the district’s ongoing “Good Things” program, Ott and her students performed for the board and set a feel-good tone for the remainder of the meeting.

Ott summarized the theme and storyline of "The Unity Tree," a musical the second-graders will perform at 7 p.m. March 11. "Cats and dogs always fight," she said, noting that using animal themes allows the children to think about how people sometimes run into conflict. In the musical, a group of animal enemies encounters conflict when each discovers a missing member. The cats assume the dogs have "catnapped" one of them; the dogs accuse the cats of "dognapping" their friend. Meanwhile, the renegade kitten and puppy have become friends and are spending a playful afternoon together. The message, Ott said, "is that we can get along, no matter who we are."

Students performed excerpts from two songs in the musical, along with several lines of memorized dialogue. Board members gave the students a hearty round of applause and voiced appreciation for the performance.

"It's great to see them so excited. They really got into it," said board member Matt Friederich. "I love how enthusiastic their teacher, Mrs. Ott, is, too."

"And it's a positive message," noted superintendent of schools Paul Larkin.

Board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott said she'd enjoyed the performance and wished the board could find a way to expand on the connection formed with families who attended to see their children perform.

"I think it would be cool if we didn't let the parents leave unnoticed," she said. "It would have been cool to interact with them; that would be awesome."

Larkin and deputy superintendent Renae Hickert agreed to think of ways to include a board-parent interaction component in future "Good Things" presentations.

In the second part of her report to the board, Hickert offered an update about the Competency-Based Grading system at Liberal High School. Having created a compromise, opt-in or opt-out structure for teachers whose opinions about the CBG method vary, administration plans to present a final report at the end of the semester.

Sutherland-Abbott said she would prefer to hear more, sooner, particularly from teachers who don't like CBG.

"I had a teacher contact me, and, of course, teachers are afraid to come forward publicly," Sutherland-Abbott said. From what she's heard, Sutherland-Abbott said, use of CBG varies widely.

"Some kids are taking a test, and three weeks later, no more grades have been added to the book or updated on Powerschool. They don't know what their grades will be," she said.

Hickert said that problem related more to instructional practice than CBG, "and needs to be dealt with."

Sutherland-Abbott also questioned the optional nature of spring parent-teacher conferences. Instead of planning conferences for all students in the district, schools sent letters to parents of students whose behavior, grades or other issues merited special attention.

"This new attitude" about attendance at parent-teacher conferences worried her, Sutherland Abbott said, because "all parents are integral to the education process, and for us to say some kids don't need to have their parents show up — I don't think conferences are a waste of teacher time. It's an investment in our students."

Sutherland-Abbott presented fellow board members with an information packet from a school improvement coordinator at the Kansas Department of Education.

"This is what Tammy Mitchell sent me to back that up," she said.

Despite Sutherland-Abbott's concerns, discussion of the issue came to a standstill and the

board moved on to other business.

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