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By RACHEL COLEMAN

Leader & Times

With just four members, the Liberal High School debate team may be small. Competing in debate and forensics is not a spectator sport like athletic competitions. Even, so, said parent Christine Buchanan to the USD 480 Board of Education at its most recent meeting, “these students are very good ambassadors for the high school. Those are four of your best, brightest, hardworking students who earned a trip to nationals, and they should get to go.”

Buchanan approached the board with concerns that the team’s trip to the National Catholic Forensics League tournament May 23 to 25 in Chicago might not materialize.

“I’m here concerning the LHS debate team’s deadline management, money management, and the competency of the head coach,” Buchanan said. Although the team qualified for national competition based on points earned through the debate season, a glitch in the registration process delayed confirmation that the LHS team could attend the national event.

A few days after Buchanan approached the board, debate coach Craig Bagley received word that the team had been granted two of the last available spots at the NCFL tournament.

“This parent might have gotten ‘clear answers’ if she had come to me directly, instead of going to the school board, the director of human resources, the principal, and the athletic director,” Bagley stated in a written response to the Leader & Times. “Never once was I approached for an explanation by the parent, she bypassed that process in favor of speaking to my superiors. The parent never called me, but I did call the parent in question — before the board meeting — to explain the situation.”

Buchanan said her public approach was the result of a season's worth of frustration.

"In the past, when I've gone to him, it's felt kind of fruitless," Buchanan said. "It's just not right that he has dropped the ball in getting the team registered for the national event. That's why I bypassed him. It's not personal. I'm just concerned that these kids, some of whom want to get into law school, could miss out on scholarship opportunities because of missed deadlines."

In her presentation to the board, Buchanan described a typical weekend for debate students:

"These children get up at 3 a.m. on Saturday mornings to go to school at 4 a.m. to drive three, four, five, six hours, to debate five, six, seven hours, and then to drive back," Buchanan told the board. "They're extremely dedicated. They're extremely good at what they do."

Despite the level of student commitment, she said, "they are undermanaged, underfinanced, and unappreciated. They have not been to as many tournaments this year. No one seems to know why. The tournaments are still there, but they're not getting to go."

Bagley took over the debate coaching job for the 2013-14 school year after former coach Jenifer Jones moved to a different position at LHS. Buchanan said the management style was different in previous years:

"The kids got to stay overnight sometimes, they ate at good restaurants instead of only McDonald's and Subway, and there was money in the fund for that," she said. "There's only four of them. They were told that if they do get to go to nationals, there's no money for it. I don't understand why; last year there was a surplus. They had a fundraiser this year, and they've only gone to two overnight stays this year, which is a lot less than previous years. So where is the money?"

District officials were not prepared to offer details about the debate team's budget.

“The first time I heard about fiscal concerns was at the board meeting,” said USD 480 human resources/public relations director Jason McAfee. “What I can say is, we’re not perfect, and when mistakes are made, we try to rectify them. We want to support this team. They’re not different than our soccer team or the football team.”

As for personnel issues, McAfee said he couldn’t comment. However, he noted that anytime a new coach takes over a position, the transition can be difficult for everyone.

“I understand that feeling,” he said. “It happened to me in high school. For the students, it’s rough; you’ve worked so hard and now everything is different.” Though it’s a normal part of the broader educational experience to deal with changes, McAfee said, adapting can be hard to accept.

“In the long run,” he added, “the ability to persevere will get you further in life than anything.”

LHS Principal Keith Adams agreed that transitions can be challenging. Though LHS has sponsored a debate team for years, he gave former coach Jones credit for revitalizing the program with participation in the Catholic Forensic League.

“That’s voluntary, and not part of the state organization,” Adams noted. “Jenifer Jones came in with a strong passion and expertise and built the program up to be competitive and respectable. It expanded and became more successful. The transition this year to a different coach, who’s not as experienced ... has been a little bit of a challenge. You find room to grow. We’re trying to get through some of the issues we’ve experienced and make it as beneficial to the students as we can.”

For Buchanan, however, the slow response to the issues she raised was cause for concern.

“Most of these kids are riding on debate for college scholarships at top schools like Duke,” she said. “My daughter is looking at almost \$50,000 in scholarships based on her debating ability alone. We come from a very small family that doesn’t make much money, and \$50,000 is a lot of money when it comes to college. To not get to go to nationals could hurt that, and she’s not

the only one. That's just not fair to the students if it's because of the coach's inability to do his job."

With confirmation of the May tournament in hand, Bagley said his focus is now on fundraising for the Chicago trip.

"It cost the team about \$11,000 to go to Philadelphia last year, and this should be a bit less," he said. "We've got a couple fundraisers planned. We will be auctioning off work by debate students, selling advertisements on shirts." Bagley said it was his pleasure to confirm to the kids that they'll be going to Chicago.

"I'm happy," he said.

Buchanan would still like clearer answers about what changed in the debate team's budget, and why the season has been so rocky.

Adams noted that the debate team's regular budget "is pretty small, to fund state and local tournaments. For a trip of the Philadelphia national tournament's caliber, the team would have had to request additional funds from the district."

Both McAfee and Adams felt optimistic that the trip to nationals will take place.

"The plans are to finish the season with every tournament, including the national tournament, as originally planned," Adams said.

"We're going to support our debaters," McAfee said. "We want them to succeed."

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