

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

They joked that speaking to the USD 480 Board of Education after a presentation by charming third-graders was “a hard act to follow,” but Liberal High School Principal Keith Adams and a team of four teachers won praise from the board Monday night. They’d come to update board members about the ongoing attempt at LHS to create a consistent grading policy.

Instructional coach Jenifer Jones recapped the grading odyssey, which sparked heated arguments in the community last fall. The introduction of Competency-Based Grading methods, also known as CBG, caused frustration for some students, parents, teachers and board members.

Monday night, onlookers would never have known CBG was a point of contention. Teachers Lindsey Diepenbrock, Margaret Porter and Shelley Tiedeman walked the board through a one-page handout that explained the LHS grading philosophy.

“When we had our Grading Framework last fall, teachers were not likely to read it,” said Diepenbrock. “We came up with what we call a one-pager to boil down the most important concepts. It gives them the ability to see quickly, in one place.” Diepenbrock noted that Teacher of the Year visitors who came to Liberal from Dodge City, Garden City, Hays and Colby for a visit Monday were fascinated by the LHS approach to grading, and requested copies of the sheet.

Jones reviewed the process LHS used to get input from teachers — who did not all agree with the CBG approach — and students. The School Improvement Team, which includes many veteran teachers who expressed doubts about CBG early in the process, weathered arguments fueled by many strong opinions, she said.



Tiedeman, a math teacher, described herself to the board as “a happy medium,” a teacher who uses some CBG methods but likes being able to give her students credit for homework.

“Is this method the end-all, be-all?” she asked. “No. We’re still having conversations about grading. But I do feel the high school is making a great step forward in trying to create consistency.”

Tiedeman pointed out that college education majors come to the profession with almost no experience or training in how to evaluate grades and use them effectively.

“They don’t teach you how to grade in college,” she said. When new teachers arrive in the district, having an information sheet like the one presented to the board provides guidelines. “They have to know that you can’t build 20 percent of extra credit into a grade just on a whim.”

In all, the board responded with warmth to the presentation. Board member Nick Hatcher asked Tiedeman, who’d been part of a stormy first meeting with the board several months ago, if this time around was better.

“It’s much better,” she said with a smile.

“Thank you for doing this,” said board member Matt Friederich. “You’re making this a positive

process moving forward.”

Fellow board members Chris Jewell, Delvin Kinser and Steve Helm also praised the teachers and Adams. Kinser gave the group credit for “keeping the conversation going,” with the help of deputy superintendent of schools Renae Hickert, who has overseen the process. The group appeared at the request of board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott, who said during the question-and-answer session that she continues to hear complaints about CBG from some parents in the community.

Hickert told the board she will return in May to present a year-end review of the grading policies at LHS, along with Adams and team members from the high school.

A brief review of CBG

Much of the controversy about Competency-Based Grading revolved around confusion about how grades were assigned, whether homework “counted,” and what happened when students failed tests.

While CBG instruction still requires students to complete practice assignments, or homework, called “formatives,” more weight is given to students’ performance on tests. In some classrooms, CBG means students earn grades based solely on test scores, and in some instances, retakes of tests are allowed once students have met requirements to review the material and demonstrate they’ve actually learned it. At LHS, the group of teachers explained, CBG has been modified to allow teachers more individual leeway in how much weight to give homework assignments, and whether or not to allow retesting.

Currently, 70 percent of the LHS teachers have chosen to adopt some version of CBG in their classrooms.