

Sutherland-Abbott, Helm ask for documentation

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Whether they are kindergarten students who've just mastered the alphabet or 12th-graders focused on where to go to college, students in USD 480 are expected to put "Literacy First" — and the district puts its time and money behind that goal. USD 480 board of education members opted to support continued implementation of the program with a 5-1-0 vote at Monday's meeting. Board member Crystal Clemens was absent, and board member Steve Helm voted against the item.



The district will spend \$139,800 to bring five consultants to Liberal in 2014-15, with each school building receiving four days with a consultant who evaluates the overall effectiveness of Literacy First at that site. New teachers at all levels will receive training.

The district adopted Literacy First around five years ago as part of a three-sided plan to transform the culture of Liberal schools through research-based programs. Dating back to the days of "No Child Left Behind" policies set in place by the Bush Administration, Literacy First

claimed that it not only could make children better readers, it could “foster a district and building culture that has traditions, rituals, habits and unwritten rules that support excellence in student reading achievement.”

At Monday’s meeting, board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott voiced questions about the program’s effectiveness.

“Are we ever going to receive documentation for Literacy First to see whether it’s working or not?” she asked, noting that she had requested such information more than a year ago, when Dr. Lance Stout served as superintendent of schools.

Current superintendent of schools Paul Larkin told Sutherland-Abbott that looking over one document for a clear answer “is very difficult.”

“Wouldn’t the Literacy First people have something that’s measurable?” pressed Sutherland-Abbott.

Board member Steve Helm also voiced skepticism.

“The test scores for reading should be going up rather than down,” he said.

The primary problem with using test scores to decide whether a program works or not, said Larkin and Lana Evans, is the ever-changing test requirements. Assessments of Kansas schools have been thrown into a topsy-turvy condition as the state struggles to adopt the Common Core standards, which in themselves have sparked contention. The bottom line: Because state assessment methods changed in the past year, no previous data exists. Districts are not able to compare how students are performing this year to the year before.

“It’s like apples and oranges,” Evans said.

Administrators promised to locate solid data for Sutherland-Abbott and Helm, but in the meantime, several offered first-hand accounts of how the program has affected the district.

“An eye-opener would be looking at our kindergarten classes,” said Evans, director of curriculum development. She related that, thanks to the Literacy First program, students enrolled in kindergarten arrive in first grade with a higher level of reading skills previously lacking. The gains continue through elementary school, she said.

“We have third-grade teachers who no longer have to spend the first few weeks of school teaching skills to catch up,” Evans said. “That is one huge thing I’ve seen. I have had testimonials like that from teachers kindergarten through sixth grade.”

Sutherland-Abbott asked whether the positive results continued at higher levels.

“What about middle and high school?” she asked. “Are we losing it somewhere?”

Larkin explained that high turnover, and a constant influx of new students at those grade levels makes it tougher to track from grades 7 to 12.

“At Liberal High School last year, they enrolled 27 new kids who don’t speak English at all,” said deputy superintendent Renae Hickert. “Where do you put those kids?”

And how do you measure their reading skills, put in board member Matt Friederich: “It’s like they’re starting kindergarten at age 14,” he said.

For her part, said director of special education Vicky Adams, Literacy First has had a positive effect on students who struggle with various disabilities.

“When I became director, our reading scores in special education were in the 30 percent range,” she said. “They’re 66 percent now. We’ve made huge progress.”

Where does the money come from?

In USD 480, Literacy First programs are funded through Title IIA and Title III grants, federal money distributed through the states. Title IIA funding is intended for use in teacher development activities, especially for districts that have difficulty recruiting and retaining quality instructors. Title III is a part of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 proposed and signed into law by the George W. Bush Administration. It is specifically targeted to benefit Limited English Proficient (LEP) children and immigrant youth.