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Daily Leader staff report A group of concerned parents met at McDermott Elementary Thursday evening to listen to a presentation by district ESL director Laura Cano on whether the dual language program would continue. Currently, students who sign up to learn both English and Spanish are placed in the dual language program at McDermott. These students spend half of the day in English and the other half in Spanish. The goal is to not only have these students bilingual but bi-literate where they can read and write in both languages.

Parents with students in the program have seen the positive results of the program.

“My daughter was conversing with the dental assistant in Spanish,” April Warden said during the meeting.

“No one is questioning the effectiveness of the program,” Cano said. “It is a good program.”

The issue was where the funding from the district came from to pay for the program.

The dual language program used \$266,000 from Cano’s budget to fund five teachers and five paraprofessionals, money she felt could be better used to help more students district-wide.

However, if the program was discontinued, the district would have to pick up the cost of paying for some of the staff that is coming from Cano’s ESL budget.

To continue the program, the district would have to contribute \$143,000 from the general fund in addition to the costs of the teachers that have to shift back to the general fund as they were prior to the program’s inception four years ago.

Cano presented two options to the group. One was to continue the program and expand it to the fifth grade. The other was to discontinue the program.

A third option was presented by Earl Watt who is the father of two McDermott students in the dual language program. He pointed out that some of the teachers would be switched back to the general fund even if the program was discontinued, and that the district could consider picking up the \$143,000 to continue the program.

When students reach the intermediate schools, Watt recommended making Spanish an elective for those who would like to continue to learn the language. Spanish is already offered as a class in middle and high school, so students would have the opportunity, Watt said, to continue to learn Spanish from the dual language program and throughout their education in Liberal. ESL teachers would be in place to help the Spanish-language students come up to speed in English.

The district could then consider taking dual language to all elementaries over time, at a cost of about \$143,000 per school above what costs they already have now, to make dual language

district-wide with an infrastructure of support at the higher levels, crating a bilingual and bi-literate program throughout the district.

According to McDermott principal Kathy Fitzgerald, there is a significant waiting list for those who want to enroll their children in the dual language program, but the number of spots are limited.

Cano was concerned that state budget cuts, projected at a possible \$2 million for USD No. 480, could prevent the general fund from being able to fund the program, but she said she would be meeting with district representatives and would discuss the third option.

At the school board meeting earlier in the week, board member Stacy Johnson shared his frustration about starting programs and then discontinuing them before they have had a chance to make an impact.

“We talked about this a year ago, and what a good program this was, and we said then that if we were going to do it, we were going to stick with it,” he said. “And now, we are talking about dropping it.”

Board president Dan Diepenbrock shared that the results of the program wouldn't be realized until the students in the dual language program reached the high school level.

“You still haven't convinced me why we should discontinue the program,” Diepenbrock told Cano at the Monday board meeting.

At the parent meeting Thursday, there was agreement between parents and the school district that the program was effective, which frustrated some parents.

“If the program is working I don't see why we would want to discontinue it,” Warden said.

Questions were asked by both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking parents.

Mrs. Hidalgo said her child in third grade can speak and write English better than her high school children because of the dual language program.

Cano continued to reiterate the cost of the program and the number of students reached as compared to the district as a whole.

In a comparison with Garden City, however, Liberal's ESL instruction was very similar. Garden City has 3,027 ESL students and 240 ESL qualified teachers. That means there is one ESL teacher for every 12.6 students.

Liberal has 2,110 ESL students being serviced by 140 ESL qualified teachers. That's one teacher for every 15 students. The dual language program has a ratio of one ESL qualified teacher for every 13 students.

Parents discuss options to keep dual language program

Friday, 09 April 2010 11:21

Both districts said it was difficult to find qualified ESL teachers. Board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott suggested that the district consider incentives beyond what is currently being offered to help teachers receive their ESL endorsement. School districts are reimbursed at a higher level from the state when they have ESL instructors providing contact time with ESL students.

Crystal Clemens, another parent of a McDermott student, suggested that parents attend the next board meeting scheduled for April 26 at the Educational Service Center.

Cano said it was her hope that the parents and district would be unified on a proposal to the board.

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