By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times In the 1990s, a shooting took place at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo. Since then, shootings have occurred at other schools, including Virginia Tech and last year's incident at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Conn.

With those crimes in mind, gun control issues have once again popped up in the American conscience, and one of those concerns were addressed at Monday's USD No. 480 Board of Education candidate forum.

The five candidates seeking the three open seats on the board were asked if they think teachers and administrators should be allowed to carry concealed weapons in Liberal schools and to give their reason for their point of view.

The first candidate to answer the question, Tammy Williams, paused for about 10 seconds before explaining her position.

"That's a really hard question," she said.

Williams said she would not support the carrying of concealed weapons, but she did say security guards and detectors are in place at schools in the district to make those in the school feel safer.

"I just have a problem if a teacher has a concealed weapon," she said. "Can a student get to it? A student can overpower a teacher. I would say no."

Candidate Crystal Clemens, a gun owner and NRA member, who has taken a concealed carry class, said she believes weapons are great for personal protection, but there are many things to look at and questions to answer on the topic.

"If the police department comes in, how will they know who is the assailant and who is the good guy?" she said.

Clemens then asked if teachers could be injured due to police officers not knowing who is the assailant in the supposed crime.

“I don’t think there’s a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to this,” she said. “I think there’s a lot to look at with this.”

Incumbent Nick Hatcher agreed the question was tough.

“I don’t know if I have an answer,” he said. “It’s something that I’ve thought about for some time now. To me, that’s a question that would have to be looked at, talked out, discussed with teachers, discussed with staff, administration.”

Hatcher said those people are in the school, and therefore, they are the ones dealing with potential crises.

“Currently, we don’t have enough security in our buildings and our schools now,” he said.

Hatcher said having many portable buildings in the district adds to the security problems.

“There’s no way we can secure those classrooms,” he said. “If somebody wanted to terrorize one of the portable classrooms, there’s absolutely no way we can protect those teachers and students.”

Candidate Matt Friedrich said he was not a fan of having concealed weapons on school premises since that is where they need to be removed from.

“I just don’t think it’s a very safe environment to introduce more to the school district,” he said. “Can I say I’m going to stay firm on that? No. This is the infancy stage of this whole argument. Should we, or shouldn’t we? I have to better collect my data and better collect my facts to why, but initially, my answer is no.”

Candidate Travis Combs also gave the idea a ‘no,’ and he agreed security personnel are on hand to deal with situations.

“The administrators in the building should be going over with their faculty and staff the emergency action plan that should go into effect if the issues were to occur,” he said. “I don’t feel allowing educators to bring concealed weapons into the classroom is really the best thing to do.”

Combs added reports in the media indicate teachers in other parts of the country are abusing their power.

“Can I say I’m going to stay firm on the issue?” he asked. “As for now, I would have to say no.”

Candidates were next asked about having all day kindergarten in Liberal. With a majority of Kansas school districts now having all day kindergarten, the candidates were asked if they supported the idea and the potential mill levy increase that could go with it.

Clemens said regardless of the increase, all day kindergarten is an idea whose time has come in USD 480.

“We’ve got to start moving towards all day kindergarten,” she said. “The effect that it has on test scores shows that it makes a difference.”

Hatcher noted 85 percent of Kansas schools now have all day kindergarten, and data indicates the students in those districts achieve higher test scores.

“They do better. They stay in school. They graduate,” he said.

Hatcher said he would likewise like to see more preschool opportunities for students in Liberal.

“It helps those students stay in school,” he said. “They’re better people in our community when they graduate. Absolutely, I would support all day kindergarten. Our administration and staff supports it and tells me that’s what they want to do.”

Friedrich said from listening to faculty, it is hard to get curriculum started in the small span that half day kindergarten now allows.

“When you start at that age, I feel it’s going to continue to develop that child on throughout its education,” he said. “It’s very much important that we have all day kindergarten.”

Combs agreed, saying all day kindergarten is effective at increasing student learning.

“We really need to focus on the waiting list for pre-K,” he said. “There are 280 students in the pre-K program and a waiting list of about 100 other students who didn’t get into the program. We need to provide them the opportunity so they can move into the all day kindergarten. Studies show it improves graduation rates. The students are better members of our community, and it’s just probably the best thing that could happen for the district.”

Williams, who previously worked at McDermott Elementary, a school that has all day kindergarten, said having the system would be a great opportunity for all of USD 480.

“How much more these students learn and how much more they stay focused, by the time they got into first grade, they retained all the stuff they learned, whereas the half a day didn’t always retain everything,” she said. “They had to be retaught. I believe it’s a great benefit. It’s just wonderful. It will help them achieve more, want to learn more and graduate and go on to college.”

With those thoughts in mind, the candidates were later asked if they would be willing to fund an additional 11 classrooms and teachers to make all day kindergarten a reality in Liberal.

Friedrich said local students are the community’s future, and if the school district is to move forward, it is imperative that a way be found to get all day kindergarten in USD 480.

“It’s no different than trying to get to the next level,” he said. “You’re going to have to have expenses with that, so yes, I would find a way to fund that.”

Combs said with the district’s vision that “Excellence is achieved through continuous improvement,” he would be willing to fund all day kindergarten.

Williams said all day kindergarten is an asset to the students and staff of USD 480.

“I’m willing to fund that,” she said. “I know that if there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Both Clemens and Hatcher said they would support the idea, but the incumbent said other means could be used to bring all day kindergarten to Liberal.

“I would be willing to support it, but before we need to look at possibly increasing the mill levy, I do think we would have to give administration and staff an opportunity to tighten budgets or tighten expenses to fund that,” Hatcher said. “That could happen possibly without raising the mill levy.”