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Teaching coaches make regular trips to Liberal

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times Teachers might be pros at the basics they present to students, but they, too, benefit from occasional instruction. That's the reasoning behind USD 480's use of educational consultants, which will continue through the 2013-14 school year. Director of curriculum and staff development Lana Evans presented a report at Monday's school board meeting, outlining plans for next year.

The district has learned, Evans said, "that this is the best way to do our professional training." Rather than sending a handful of teachers to a faraway conference, Evans said bringing the experts right to local classrooms "helps keep our teachers excited about it, and gives them the opportunity to ask questions that relate to what they're actually seeing in the classroom."

Garfield Elementary School principal Kendra Haskell agreed.

"Having that consultant come and meet with the teachers every month keeps us true to what the process is supposed to be," she said. With changes coming soon as Kansas moves to the Common Core of educational standards, "it's going to be a little more rigorous than what we've been doing, in math especially," she said. "The continual training helps."

Evans has scheduled teams of reading and math consultants to visit classrooms from preschool to 12th grade. Literacy First will send five consultants to spend four full days coaching teachers, with additional time devoted to Garfield, Washington and Sunflower elementary schools and the two middle schools. Nearly half the cost of the Literacy First services will be drawn from funds specially provided for "Focus/Priority" schools.

Math consultants will address an array of topics for improving learning in the elementary and middle-school classroom. Two consultants will split time between district schools, spending six full days at each K-3 school and eight full days at intermediate and middle schools.

Teachers new to the district will receive four full days of training from both Literacy First and the math consultants, in order to get them up to speed on the local challenges. Teachers who have just completed college may hold degrees, but they still need on-the-ground information about this district and the particular challenges they will encounter, Evans noted.

"We have so many specific strategies at work in the district that are intertwined, and so many students who may have different learning styles. This training helps teachers reach their students, and stay attuned to the larger goals," she said.

South Middle School Gib Rito said teachers at his school have already benefited from materials presented during coaching sessions. At conferences, he said, presentations simply provide information. By contrast, when the consultants appear in local classrooms, “it’s a 10-90 split,” he said. “They spend 10 percent of the time reviewing the facts with us, then the other 90 percent of the time is about solutions and strategies to remedy the problems the teachers ask about.”

At a total cost of \$329,800 for the year, some of which is drawn from special governmental funding sources, the consultant programs provide more consistency and availability for all teachers in the district, said deputy superintendent Paul Larkin.

“We’re financially better off doing it this way, and it answers the question of getting everyone on the same page,” he said. In the past, teachers might hear about training or methods that could help them, and they’d approach building principals to ask “Can I go to this?” But, Larkin said, such moments of inspiration did not serve to transform the district.

“It’s very hard to make a change with five or 10 people who’ve gotten extra training, when you have 300 teachers in the district,” he said. “This has really helped.”

At Monday’s board meeting, USD 480 board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott asked if the ongoing consultations would eventually taper off.

“Will we ever be weaned off this approach?” she asked Rito.

Superintendent Lance Stout said “probably not.”

“Our goal is to do that,” he told Sutherland-Abbott, “but the reality is, with our high turnover, [30 to 50 teachers per year], I don’t see us ever getting rid of it.”

A teacher-to-teacher mentoring program sought to replace the need for ongoing consultants’ visits in the past, Stout said. However, funding cuts ended the modest stipend that mentoring teachers received for the additional time required to help train newcomers to the district.

“That program left us two years ago,” he noted.

Evans expressed admiration for the men and women who embrace on-the-job learning in addition to the teaching they provide for their students.

“It’s a lot of work, and I have to take my hat off to the teachers,” she said. “They work longer and harder than teachers ever had to do in the past. We’ve got to give them credit for embracing this and seeing the benefit.”

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