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Board contemplates whether program should continue

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times The dual-language program at USD 480 has sometimes been touted as a huge success, sometimes as a daring experiment. In the next year or so, however, it faces the possibility of being phased out.

Administrators and board members discussed the program's future as part of a strategic planning session Monday.

"If we are to continue the dual-language program, we'd have to hire an additional teacher," said Jill Stout, director of data and testing. Stout explained the program comes with several unique challenges. It requires double the teachers needed by other classrooms; the teachers themselves must do additional work, writing lesson plans in both English and Spanish; teacher burnout leads to high turnover; and recruitment of new teachers is difficult, because it's hard to find instructors who are truly bilingual.

Along with the question of whether it's time to expand the program, Stout said, "the option is the question, 'is it time to start phasing the program out?'"

With the district poised to undergo another population jump, Stout and her fellow directors have recommended major initiatives that will cost large sums of money. The dual-language program, she pointed out, "has a higher cost per-pupil" than other classroom models. In discussion with McDermott Elementary School Principal Kathy Fitzgerald, board members revisited the district's original vision for the dual-language program. Retiring board member Cheryl Louderback, whose term will end this summer, said she remembered discussions that debated whether to expand dual-language programs vertically — by adding higher grade levels in schools where the program had taken hold — or horizontally, by offering dual-language instruction in more locations.

"That's what we planned to do," she said.

Enthusiasm about the Spanish-English instruction fills the kindergarten classrooms. Currently, McDermott operates two all-day sessions of dual-language kindergarten, with 20 students enrolled in each; students spend half the day in English instruction, and half in Spanish. Elsewhere in the district, kindergarten is a half-day affair.

Dual-language teaching “is a tremendous workload,” Fitzgerald said.

While the program is in place from kindergarten through third grade at McDermott, the number of participants tends to drop off as students advance. Dual-language participation at the intermediate school level dwindles further.

“Especially by sixth grade, those students often leave Sunflower [Intermediate] to attend school with the same kids who will attend West [Middle School] with them. Their parents feel they need that year to get to know the other kids,” Stout said.

In its recommendations to the board, USD 480 administration suggested the district set up a committee to evaluate the effectiveness and value of the dual-language program beginning with the new academic year.

“We’d like to have a recommendation by Dec. 13, 2013 about what to do,” said superintendent of schools Lance Stout. “For [the upcoming] year, our recommendation is to continue the dual-language program just the way it is.”

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