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5 items, 1 new course, 30 laptops

By RACHEL COLEMAN • Leader & Times Although the USD No. 480 school board meeting Monday was short, at just under an hour, it accomplished big things for South Middle School. More than one third of the items listed under “New Business” involved purchases and programs for the middle school once in danger of being turned over to the federal government for reorganization. Through the use of SIG (School Improvement Grant) money specifically earmarked for SMS, the school board approved five hefty items, despite some tense discussions.

Board members Tammy Sutherland-Abbott and Steve Helm questioned SMS principal Gib Rito about several of the items. For example, would the SMS subscription to online resources be available for other schools in the district to use? Would West Middle School add the same new computer and robotics course to its class offerings? Why did SMS need so many laptop computers for its student body of a little more than 300 students?

“We have an excess of laptops at SMS,” said Sutherland-Abbott.

“It sounds like there are more laptops than kids, but they’re stationed at various places in the school,” said board member Dan Diepenbrock. Rito said Diepenbrock was correct — that laptops are often classroom-specific, set up to do one set of tasks at a certain time, for a certain purpose. Finance director Jerry Clay reviewed the the facts about SIG money: It is special funding specifically targeted at SMS. It cannot be redirected for district-wide use, or distributed to other schools. If it is not used, it must be returned. Despite the many restrictions that come with SIG money, the district has tried to use the funding for the widest possible benefit, establishing pilot programs that, if successful, would later be implemented at other schools. “If the new robotics course works out well at SMS, we plan to incorporate it into our math program district-wide,” said deputy superintendent Renae Hickert. “It’s a natural fit.”

In some cases, like the P.D. 360 training online materials, SMS has the freedom to share its 35 user accounts with educators throughout the district, “and we intend to do that,” said SMS principal Gib Rito. “With the accounts, we have the flexibility and possibility to cover larger groups of people. You can take one account and review something with a whole group, such as

this one. It's our intention to share it with other schools."

Board member Cheryl Louderback spoke up in favor of the SIG purchases for SMS.

"When we have a program that's good, even if it's just for one school, we have to think about how it's positive for those kids, and what a difference it will make for them – that's a good thing," she said. "We shouldn't be negative, and say we don't want it if it's not for every school."

Ultimately, the board approved all five actions for SMS. These included:

- Purchase of the P.D. 360 service, which provides access to an online library of training videos for teachers. Cost: \$35,674, funded by SIG money. The vote was 5-2, with Helm and Sutherland-Abbott against.
- Purchase of 30 Lenovo "ThinkPad" laptop computers, at a price of \$593 each, along with two computer carts. The ThinkPads will be used by individual students enrolled in E.S.L. (English as a Second Language) classrooms and by students taking part in the new robotics course. Cost: \$17,790, funded by SIG money. The vote was 5-2, with Helm and Sutherland-Abbott against.
- Purchase of various classroom supplies, above and beyond the routine materials usually provided by the district, including math manipulatives, office supplies and student-use materials for presentations and projects. Because the supplies are part of a site-specific grant, they will not be warehoused with the district materials under the inventory supervision of director of auxiliary services Robert Burkey. Cost: \$12,669, funded by SIG money. The vote was 6-1, with Sutherland-Abbott against.
- Electrical upgrade at SMS, due to demands created by the additional technology. A similar project was completed at West Middle School in 2012. The board bid out the project, and awarded the job to the only bidder, B & B Electrical. Cost: \$30,874, funded by SIG money. The vote was unanimously in favor.
- Addition of a new elective course, "Computing Systems," at SMS, starting during the upcoming school year. The curriculum council approved the course as part of the district's "Technology Career Pathway" plan. Initial costs for the course are to be funded through SIG money, and any extra costs for materials will be submitted for board approval. Cost: included in the previous item for new laptops, the course budget totaled \$31,000, which was covered by SIG money. The vote was unanimously in favor.

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