

Porch visits, extra training take its toll

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

The first nine weeks of school at USD 480 ended recently, with parent-teacher conferences winding up Friday. A quarter of the way through the 2013-14 academic year, teachers in the district are already feeling worn out.

That's what LNEA vice-president Grant Mathews told the USD 480 Board of Education at its Oct. 7 meeting.

"Teacher fatigue is setting in earlier than usual," he said. "I've heard from a lot of teachers and it's increasing exponentially."



Mathews, a band teacher, said it's not uncommon for teachers to spend between six and eight hours a week, outside of school hours, to prepare.

Now, district-wide policies implementing new teaching methods have increased teacher overload, sometimes tripling or quadrupling those hours, Mathews told the board. As a new, idealistic teacher and a bachelor, Mathews regularly stayed at Cottonwood Intermediate School after everyone else had gone home for the night.

"Around the time when we introduced Literacy First a few years ago, I found myself in a line three to four people deep, waiting to use the copier," he said. "It was 10 p.m."

While such dedication may seem admirable, Mathews shared, "it takes its toll. I got burned out. My inspiration about teaching was sometimes diminished."

Mathews isn't the only one.

The board heard more teacher complaints at the Monday meeting from LNEA president Jeannett Moore. This time, however, the report came with a bit more bite. Frustrated by four problematic issues — porch visits, plan time, new lesson plan templates and technology walk-throughs — members of the Liberal branch of the National Education Association (LNEA) have begun talks with Pamela Torgerson of KNEA. Moore said the local teachers intend to file at least one grievance.

"Whether teaching is a profession or a vocation, those working in education should not have to devote their entire lives to the work," Moore said. The four issues in contention result in teachers giving up free time after school or on weekends.

For example, teachers have been asked to go on porch visits to the homes of students outside of contract time, Moore said.

“The teachers are not prepared for this service, nor have they been prepared in any way. Many emails have been sent to teachers ‘encouraging’ them to do porch visits,” she said.

LNEA suggested to superintendent of schools Paul Larkin that principals emphasize to teachers that such visits are voluntary and to word their emails accordingly.

Teachers also asked about safety and insurance coverage for such visits.

“The feelings that our teachers have is that they are being sent out to do these visits with the hope that something will come of it” in terms of better parent-school engagement. At this time, though, LNEA doesn’t view the porch visits as a safe or effective way to accomplish that goal.

After-hours work is a sore point for many teachers, Moore said, whether they’re being asked to do porch visits or attend meetings for further training.

“Whether these activities are considered voluntary by the district, newer teachers believe they must comply if they want to continue working for USD 480,” she said.

In terms of regular school-day work, teachers have another frustration: new lesson-plan templates introduced at some of Liberal’s schools this year. They have increased teacher workload, Moore said, although the official administrative position maintains the work has “diminished since they first came out.”

Moore said she’s received many comments from teachers who disagree. Not only are the new templates time-consuming, the teachers said, they are not helpful in the classroom.

“I have also had people telling me (the templates) are not easy to follow. Many teachers are making separate lesson plans for the week so it follows their daily schedule,” Moore said.

Planning time has proven to be a difficult issue as well.

“This has been an issue for many years,” said Moore. “For example, testing programs, computer lab closures, library time being cancelled, interfere with teachers’ ability to plan. Administration is only allowed to take two plan times away during the week.” In spite of much discussion, the union and the district disagree about how to define planning time.

“We could not come to an agreement ... and are working on a grievance,” Moore said.

Some of the problems might be solved by clearer communication. Teachers sign a form about plan time at the beginning of the year, and those agreements are binding. LNEA believes that many educators don’t understand they have a choice about whether or not to agree to planning schedules presented to them by administrators.

“Teachers do not have to sign if they don’t agree to the planning time,” Moore said. “Teachers have the choice.”

Members of the teachers’ union felt the board should be aware of the concerns many are having, Moore said.

“LNEA would like to work with the district rather than against them.”

Although the board thanked Moore and Mathews for their reports, no action has been taken yet to address the issues raised.