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By ROBERT PIERCE

- Leader & Times

Seeking to free itself from a wide range of state legislation and rules passed by the Kansas State Board of Education, Hugoton's USD No. 210 school district was one of eight districts in the state to recently apply for a special designation as an "innovative district."

Hugoton Superintendent Mark Crawford said he got permission to apply for the status from the USD 210 Board of Education, which supported the application.

Crawford likewise talked to Hugoton's teacher negotiation bargaining unit, which he said wanted to be kept in the loop of the plans. He added over the past several years, some laws passed at

the state level have been quite frustrating for USD 210.

“That’s why we sought the ‘innovative school district’ designation – to get freedom from some cumbersome state laws,” he said.

The innovative district status is part of a sponsored bill passed in the Kansas legislature that allows up to, Crawford estimated, 26 school districts in the state to apply for and be granted the designation.

“My understanding is the governor’s office accepts our applications, and it will go on to the state board of education,” he said.

Crawford said if granted the status, USD 210 would be given relief for up to five years, but the designation could be revoked within those five years.

“We’re going to hold ourselves to higher standards in those areas, and if we don’t meet the innovative higher standards, we may lose that status,” he said.

The primary legislation USD 210 would like relief from deals with teacher licensure and the administration of the Kansas English Language Proficiency Assessment (KELPA).

Crawford said when it comes to teacher licensure, the Hugoton district would like to have a level playing field to recruit the best possible teachers at the secondary levels.

“We hire a lot of teachers from the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandle, as well as Colorado,” he said. “Those out-of-state licenses are not recognized. It’s not a level playing field for those teachers to be considered highly qualified. We’ve spent over \$79,000 in the last seven years trying to get our teachers highly qualified. We want to be held to outputs, not inputs.”

Crawford made the assertion that a math teacher could be required to have a PhD, which he called "ridiculous," and he said in this case, the truth was not stretched too far.

He added many teachers have to take plans of study, which he said pulls not only educators but also dollars from the classroom. That money, he said, pays for teachers' coursework, time away from school and trips to Topeka to meet with the state licensure board.

"It's just a cumbersome and unnecessary requirement," he said. "Is that truly innovative? That's more common sense. We do want to level the playing field. We want the best teachers no matter where they're from, but we don't want an out-of-state teacher to be a second class citizen."

The Kansas Association of School Boards has supported the law designating districts as innovative, but the legislation has drawn concern from others because it includes exemptions from KSBE regulations and the Professional Negotiations Act, which sets out bargaining rights for teachers' unions.

Crawford said USD 210 educators have no such problem with the designation.

"I've already told our teacher leaders that we're going to leave the negotiated agreement alone," he said. "This isn't about the negotiated agreement. This is about being innovative with teacher recruitment and testing, and they understand that. My five teachers that service our English language learners, they are ecstatic at the possibility of not having to give very, very time consuming tests."

Crawford said the only purpose the KELPA test serves is to exit students out of the English language learners (ELL) program.

"We have created multiple measures of assessments aligned to our current Kansas college and career ready standards," he said.

Crawford said the KELPA test is pulling kids out of classrooms and is extremely time-consuming.

"I believe our kids are overtested anyway," he said. "We're trying to get relief from testing. This test is double testing. It's redundancy, and it's not relevant. In order to become proficient according to this test, you have to score proficient in four areas two years in a row."

Crawford compared that level of proficiency to hitting eight consecutive free throws in basketball.

"Even our best and brightest gifted ELL students many times will get six or seven out of eight, but not eight out of eight," he said.

Crawford then talked about the federal law No Child Left Behind, saying that act had some positive features, but Hugoton's teachers want to teach using more traditional methods rather than teaching to a test.

"We want to teach authentic reading, writing, listening and speaking," he said. "We don't want to test concepts and isolations. We want a throwback education that is more relevant to our kids in real world applications."

Crawford said district officials are hoping to hear about the possible innovative designation before the second semester starts in Hugoton.

"I would hope before the new year," he said. "I'm hoping within a month. I would think it would be the governor's office that would let us know maybe a timeline and what role the state board is going to have in this process."

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