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-Abbott, Helm question staff travel
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By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

As another batch of snowflakes coated the frozen surface of Liberal, the sound of hot jazz filled the USD 480 Board of Education chambers Monday night. Members of the fledgling West Middle School Warrior Jazz Band, led by teacher Zeb Tiedeman, opened the 6:30 p.m. meeting with two numbers.

“Just imagine you’re in a warm place, on the beach,” Tiedeman told the board members as he introduced a song meant to evoke Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Students in the Warrior Jazz Band were selected by Tiedeman based on their playing level, dedication and attitude, he told the board. The miniature concert was the first public appearance by the seventh- and eighth-grade group.



“We really have it pretty nice here,” Tiedeman said. “This board and administration really do help support music education, so thank you.”

Perhaps buoyed by the feel-good music, the board zipped through the evening's agenda in less than an hour. The Liberal Chamber of Commerce presented Teacher of the Month honors to Sunflower Intermediate School's Dane Parcel, who teaches special education classes and serves as a mentor to new teachers in the district.

Superintendent of Schools Paul Larkin updated the board about the district's efforts to get out the word about the April 8 bond issue special election.

"There's a lot of work going on behind the scenes," he said, noting that DLR architecture/engineering consultants and JE Dunn construction managers have teamed up with the district to set up information kiosks at each school. The hope is that students, parents and staff will become familiar with the plan designed by the community and register to vote.

Though reports from other directors were accepted without much discussion, board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott asked finance director Jerry Clay several questions about the summary of district finances he provided in the agenda packet.

"Ultimately, this board is responsible to our community for making sure that finances are in order," she said, "so thank you for providing this report."

Sutherland-Abbott questioned several expenditures on the report, particularly in departments that appeared to be over budget. Clay explained that some of what appear to be overages are in fact a timing issue — grant money that will be applied to offset costs, or salaries that were paid in a time frame that does not correlate to the way spreadsheets are designed. Documenting expenses can be messy, Clay noted, but by the end of the fiscal year, "the budget matches reality."

Clay said he intends to supply a summary of finances with all board agendas, going forward.

In discussion of staff travel, board member Steve Helm voiced concern about training events

that take teachers away from their regular students.

“I’m really concerned about some of these trips, where we’re taking seven or more teachers out of the classroom for multiple days,” he said.

Larkin said building principals and the Central Office administrators “keep an eye on it,” trying to balance the benefits of teacher training with student needs.

Helm was unconvinced.

“I’ll be up front with you,” he said, “I don’t agree with it.”

Sutherland-Abbott asked the administration to justify teacher training with a tally of the long-term results.

“Can you tell me how many first and second-year teachers aren’t in the district anymore?” she said. “I’m wondering how much money we should put into our teachers, when we have so much turnover. We lost 80 teachers last year.”

Larkin said teachers who receive training and support to earn ESL (English as a Second Language) certification are required to stay at least a year after they earn the credential.

“They have to pay us back if they don’t stay,” he said.

Helm noted that he wants to make teacher retention a priority. Board member Nick Hatcher agreed with that goal and said teacher training, even if it takes instructors out of the classroom for a day or two, is one method of accomplishing it.

“Anything we do ... is probably beneficial for that teacher,” he said.

Running numbers on specific programs — such as Literacy First — that are offered with training opportunities would be complicated, explained deputy superintendent Renae Hickert.

“We pay consultants to come to Liberal, and everyone receives the training,” she said. However, she said it would be simple to research and report on the number of first- and second-year teachers who left the district in previous school years.

In votes to approve the consent agenda and to approve staff travel requests, the board split 5-2, with Sutherland-Abbott and Helm voting against the actions.

A final agenda item concerning the use of a State of Kansas reading program, Lexia 5, received a unanimous “yes” from the board. USD 480 is already using an older version of the program, which is aimed at helping students who score lowest on reading achievement tests. The free, two-year upgrade of Lexia offered by the state will extend the district’s use of the program to five years at no additional cost.

“We really struggle to find interventions for these kids,” Hickert said, “This is a good fit with Literacy First and other programs already in place. We really want to get it for the kids who are struggling.”

The board meeting ended with an executive session to discuss future facility needs and property possibilities.

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