

April 12, 2005

Discussion of budget yields frustration with legislature

Funding for 2005-2006 for Arkansas City Public Schools is up in the air with the current school finance package from the Kansas Legislature awaiting approval from the Kansas Supreme Court. Today, April 12, is the deadline set by the Court for the Legislature to develop a plan that provides more money for K-12 school districts and distributes the money more fairly. Several mid-sized school districts in Kansas, including USD 470, won a lawsuit against the state claiming the way funds are distributed for school districts is unconstitutional.

Last night USD 470 board of education members expressed their frustrations with the school finance package approved by the Legislature. Although it does provide a little more than \$790,000 in additional revenue for USD 470, it is not adequate in its distribution. District administrators have been building the budget for 05-06 for months, but cannot really have a good idea where the district stands financially until there is resolution with the state's school finance package.

"I am completely disgusted by the Legislature," board member John Mars said. "They are passing the buck onto (local districts)."

Board Vice President Daren Reese echoed Mars' statements adding that the school finance package doesn't help mid-sized districts and that when the Legislature argues that plan includes no new taxes, that statement is completely untrue.

"(Kansans) are going to get new taxes any way," Reese said. "Either everyone pays their fair share or it will be pushed onto property owners (through local taxes)."

Board President Sue Saia expressed frustration that board members have been calling, writing and e-mailing local legislators and wants to know what else the board should do. Superintendent Dr. Perry L. Perkins urged board members to keep the pressure on, and to bring up the issue of school finance with community members to make them aware of the situation.

The Kansas Supreme Court's directive to the Legislature was to determine the costs of education based on the true costs of educating children and not on politics. The Court could close all Kansas schools until a satisfactory school finance package is submitted to the Court.

"Can you really plan on school starting in August?" Perkins asked the board. "We need to be very flexible in August."

The Supreme Court could close all schools or it could appoint a special master to oversee the Legislature's work. Thirdly, a special legislative session could be called. The districts that filed the lawsuit have asked that a special master be appointed.

Board discusses vacancy

The board also discussed the current vacancy on the board and if that vacancy should be filled for the remainder of the fiscal year, which ends June 30. The board would have to publish a vacancy notice in the local paper 15 days prior to appointing someone to fill the vacancy. The board discussed options last night with attorney Bert Wilson. The board came to a consensus that it would like to appoint Joe Woodard, who was voted in on April 5 to a four-year term beginning July 1.

The board could not formally decide to publish the vacancy because it was not an action item on the agenda. The board will have a special meeting Thursday at noon to take action on publishing the vacancy.

The board will have a vacancy on July 1 following the re-election of Gary Wilson to the board. Wilson resigned his seat on the board after discovering that it is not recommended by that attorney general that a person hold office on a school board and a county commission. Wilson was elected in January to the Cowley County Commission. He resigned from the USD 470 BOE in January.

Wilson will not accept the seat on the BOE, but the vacancy is not official until after July 1. The board decided to come back after July 1 and make a decision regarding that vacancy.

In other business the board:

- Approved the retirement of Steve Haslouer, high school night security.
- Approved the resignations of Laura Casto, middle school physical education teacher; Debra Heskett, Four-Year-Old Program teacher at Frances Willard; Amber Sisson, Head Start lead teacher; and Zoe Ann Verhage, freshmen math teacher; and Barbara Ward, third grade teacher at Adams.
- Approved the hiring of James K. Campbell, business manager/director of operations; Karla Defore, high school social science teacher; and Eric Lolar, high school physical education teacher/head boys' basketball coach.
- Accepted a \$700 anonymous, individual donation to the Ark City Travelers to assist with travel expenses related to the yearly New York City trip.
- Accepted the March 2005 Cowley County Head Start report. Enrollment is 115; attendance is 91.67 percent; over-income students is 3 percent; students on Individual Education Plans is 33 percent; and free/reduced lunch rate is 98 percent.
- Approved for high school language arts teacher/forensics sponsor Jamie Hibbs and junior Elizabeth Bagot to attend the Tournament of Champions in Chicago and to raise funds for such trip. The board also approved for the district to pay the entry fee for the TOC. Invitations for the TOC are sent only to those students who have met the qualifications to compete at this caliber of tournament, Hibbs said in a letter to the board. She said only the "best of the best" extemporaneous speakers in the nation compete in this event.
- Approved the addition of the Future Business Leaders of America club at Arkansas City High School. Karen Cornejo-White, chair of the business department at ACHS, will be the sponsor.
- Authorized a three-year lease-purchase agreement with Apple Computer. This agreement does not represent any additional cost due to the recent final payment made on one of the district lease-purchase computer packages from previous years. The majority of new computers will replace technology that is at least five years old.

- Authorized a contract with Energy Education, Inc. Assistant Superintendent/Business Manager Dr. Ballard received feedback from four similar school districts that contract with the company, and the feedback was positive. The districts, Salina, McPherson, Haysville and Newton, all indicated two things: 1) a positive financial result from the Energy Education program, and 2) the firm has been cooperative and works well in an education environment and setting. The district will now hire a half-time energy coordinator from within the district to implement the Energy Education program. More about Energy Education can be found in the Feb. 14 Board Briefs (www.arkcity.com/b_briefs/2142005.pdf).
- Approved the district Discipline Handbook and student handbooks for 2005-2006.
- Approved the purchase of a chiller from Trane, Inc. for \$23,807. The chiller will be used at ACMS until the district can make a decision regarding future HVAC needs at the building. A portable unit currently is being rented to cool the building. The district took bids to replace the current chiller design with rooftop units that would heat and cool individual areas of the building independently. Bids for the project came in much higher than anticipated. The total cost for the middle school alone was expected to be approximately \$1 million, so it is not feasible at the current time. The chiller from Trane should last five to seven years and comes with a full warranty.

The board will meet in a special meeting noon Thursday at the district office, 119 W. Washington Ave., to take action on publishing a board vacancy. The next regular meeting of the board will be April 25, at 7 p.m., at Arkansas City Middle School. All meetings of the board are open to the public.