

Comments from former school board member spark interesting conversation

Written by Wauneta Breeze
Thursday, 12 May 2011 20:42 -

By Josh Sumner

The Wauneta Breeze

Hot on the heels of recent news of state aid cuts to Nebraska schools came an interesting question to WP School Board members during the public comment portion of Monday's regularly scheduled meeting.

The question: What if Wau-Pal refused state aid all together?

Asked by former longtime WP board member Rod Wheeler, of Wauneta, the question spurred an interesting discussion among district officials and those in attendance. Wheeler said he thought the idea was possible following a recent conversation between himself and Sen. Mark Christensen.

"We might be able to operate a better school, for less money, without state aid," said Wheeler. Wheeler went on to point out that state aid is about 20 percent of what it was just a few years ago.

Though he said he shared Wheeler's frustration stemming from state and federal compliance mandates, WP Superintendent Stan Sibley said the fact that Wau-Pal is a public school makes the idea non-feasible.

"We are not created by the people of Wauneta, or Palisade or both," said Sibley. "We are created by the state of Nebraska. Our only right to exist is given to us by the constitution, through the Legislature."

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Sibley added that all state and federal mandates would still exist regardless of the school's decision to accept or refuse state aid. Factoring in the relatively high number of special needs students the school district serves — a demographic that is low at most private and parochial schools — creates reliance on state aid, too, said Sibley.

“We're here to serve all the children, of all the people who live in our district,” said Sibley. “It's our privilege to be able to serve them.”

The conversation was underlined by a non-adversarial tone, and was constructive according to board members and attendees. Sibley said he welcomed Wheeler's comments, and added that it's a complex conversation that could continue outside the time constraints of the board meeting.

School board considers new transportation schedule

In response to the school district's quest to eliminate what it has identified as the major “time bandit” of the learning day, Transportation Supervisor Kenny Lawless spoke to board members about a revised transportation schedule.

Given the district's unique position of having two attendance centers 15 miles apart, and in different time zones, Lawless has determined a plan that he believes will save time during the morning and afternoon trek.

The most dramatic change would be the synchronization of start times between the two schools. School currently begins at 8 a.m. MT and 8:30 a.m. CT in Wauneta and Palisade, respectively.

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Though no time has been set, the new plan would involve both school days starting at the same moment.

A pair of shuttle busses would meet in Hamlet before and after school, at which time drivers would change vehicles and return to their original destination with students from the other town, said Lawless as he explained the tentative plan.

“People probably aren’t going to like some of it, but it would work a lot better, I think,” said Lawless. “You wouldn’t have kids sitting in the library waiting for the kids from Wauneta to get to Palisade. Right now, they’re missing out on an hour of classroom time.”

Sibley added that the topic is purely for discussion at this point, but a decision on whether to enact the plan could come as early as next month. He and the board members said they hope to open a dialogue with the public in order to find out what the community thinks about the idea.

Curriculum adjustments discussed

WP Principal Troy Holmberg addressed areas for improvement in the school district’s curriculum, as has been identified by himself and members of the Wau-Pal faculty.

Among the suggested changes to next year’s curriculum is the requirement that students take World Geography during their freshman year, followed by World History their sophomore year. Students currently have their choice between the two.

Holmberg said making each class a requirement during the first two years of high school is a standard practice among many high schools. He added that he believes this adjustment would help students gain an in-depth understanding of each subject, while covering many state standards.

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Holmberg also talked about the possibility of dropping certain high school writing classes in conjunction with the implementation of a new district-wide writing initiative, which will instead span all subjects and grades.

Removal of the grading system for the school's work release program was among some of the other ideas discussed.

Also at the meeting

- Graduation for next school year was set for Saturday, May 26, 2012.
- Summer improvement projects, including cosmetic upgrades such as painting and installation of new fixtures, were outlined for both the Wauneta and Palisade Attendance Centers.
- Kenny Lawless was promoted to Director of Operations, Maintenance and Transportation.
- The school board accepted the resignation of Roger Lauhead, who has chosen to participate in the district's early retirement incentive program.
- Board members motioned to have the WAC gymnasium floor refinished at a cost of \$3,456.
- The school board approved the second reading of a pair of amendments to board policies: Board Policy 4005 and Board Policy 5103.

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- A special meeting was set for Monday, May 23 at 5:30 p.m. MT/6:30 p.m. CT, to discuss the possibility of adjusting this year's budget for expanding the district's budget authority.

- The board entered executive session to discuss legal matters. No action was taken.