Board restarts altered LEAP

Board entertains adding student advisers to dais

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The Las Cruces Public Schools board met Wednesday to discuss bringing back the Leading Edge Accelerated Program, or LEAP, to receive an update from Superintendent Stan Rounds on reorganization at the district's central office, and to address a pending lawsuit over the district's furlough plan.

After more than two hours in closed session, the board emerged and President Maria Flores called for a motion to declare a state of emergency under the Public Employees Bargaining Act. Twice, the request was met with silence from the board. No motion was made, and the board moved on with the agenda.

The declaration was intended to strengthen the district's position in a lawsuit filed by the Classified School Employees Council of Las Cruces over furloughs ordered for all employees as part of a budget-cutting effort.

During public input, Patrick Sanchez of the National Education Association-Las Cruces rhetorically called his own "state of emergency," and accused the district of sending out contracts for new employees that reflect 180 work days rather than the 183 in the teachers union's collective-bargaining agreement. He said sending out contracts that reflect the three-day furlough while the union and district are still at the bargaining table showed a lack of good faith.

CSEC, which represents custodians, cafeteria workers and employees in other non-teaching positions, has filed for an injunction against LCPS over the furloughs in district court, and with the state's Public Employees Labor Relations Board. No rulings have been handed down in either case.

“The fact that the school board did not vote on a declaration of emergency doesn't impair our continued efforts toward reaching a resolution with the CSEC bargaining team,” Rounds told the Sun-News.

The board voted unanimously Wednesday to follow the Public Education Department's directive to restore its Leading Edge Accelerated Program at Mesilla Valley Alternative Middle School. The PED refused to approve the district's budget submitted in May because defunding the LEAP program effectively closed MVAMS, in violation of the department's protocols for closing a school.

The district had hoped to save $350,000 by discontinuing the program. At Wednesday's meeting, Chief Academic Officer Andrea Fletcher told the board it could be reinstated for $323,000.

The district’s Behavior Intervention Classroom Setting, or BICS program, will also be moved to Mesilla Valley Alternative Middle School as a cost-saving measure. The BICS program primarily serves elementary children who need additional attention due to behavioral issues.

Fletcher said LEAP will continue to utilize a “project-based learning approach,” but former principal Kathy Adams will no longer lead the program. Adams, who is Rounds’ fiancée, will continue to head the Joint Ungraded Multi-age Primary program. Dennis Padilla, the BICS administrator, will take over LEAP as well.

The board also heard from students interested in organizing and serving on a youth advisory council. A presentation by Kathie Davis, principal of Rio Grande Preparatory Institute, recommended asking the staffs at each high school to nominate students who are empathetic, have demonstrated leadership abilities, and have shown a history of fulfilling commitments.

From those nominees, three students each will be selected from Las Cruces, Mayfield, Oñate and Centennial high schools. Two students each will be chosen from Arrowhead Park Early College High School and Rio Grande Preparatory Academy. If the plan goes through as presented, student representatives will sit on the dais for one meeting or work session in a non-voting capacity, on a rotating basis. The student advisers could be in place as early as this September.

“I think the students can offer valuable input into the decisions we make,” said board member Ed Frank.
Flores said including student voices on the board is something she’s been pushing for six years.

“I’m just so excited about this,” she said. “And I’m really excited that the principals are going to get all of their staff involved.”

Rounds said he also thinks it’s a great idea, and that it plays into an idea he’s been hoping to implement.

“We’d like for students to experience what goes on with the school board. We think it’s a good opportunity,” Rounds said. “In putting this together, we’ve turned to our experts — the principals in those schools, and asked them to come up with a plan.”

Rounds said he liked the plan that was presented, and hoped that he could use the panel of students to serve as a student advisory committee to help inform his decisions as superintendent, as well.

“I hope that this can serve as an opportunity to educate the students, but also to bring student issues to the board, through the superintendent’s report,” Rounds said. “In that way, we can give them a voice through my seat at the dais, and hopefully bring relevancy to some of the issues that they raise.”

The resolution to move forward in exploring ways to implement the plan passed, 3-0, with board members Barbara Hall and Chuck Davis abstaining.

Wednesday’s meeting was also the last for LCPS Chief of Staff Leslie Cervantes, who has been with the district since November 2006 and has served as chief of staff for the past two and a half years. Cervantes is leaving the district to serve as the vice president for alumni engagement and participation at New Mexico State University.

“It’s been my honor to work for Las Cruces Public Schools for the last eight and a half years, as we created programs and business partnerships that positively impacted our schools and our kids,” Cervantes told the Sun-News. “I’ll miss the great people who work for LCPS. They’re hard-working people, and I respect them greatly.”

Cervantes said she was looking forward to joining the NMSU family, and making new relationships and partnerships in her role at the university.

“I never stand in the way of careers,” Rounds said. “And she’s very talented — but, boy, what a loss. I’m losing my right hand.”

Flores took a moment in Wednesday’s meeting to personally thank Cervantes for “her beautiful personality, and her incredible helpfulness.”

Board member Maury Castro echoed Flores’ sentiments.

“When we joined the board, she welcomed us with open arms. She’s really helped us a lot,” Castro said.

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