

THE EMPORIA GAZETTE



Reading Elementary to close; new superintendent hired
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The North Lyon County Board of Education passed a resolution to close Reading Elementary School at the end of the current year at a meeting Wednesday night in Americus.

The resolution passed by a vote of 4-2, with board members Mitchell Maxfield and Tammie Reed opposed.

The decision came after a lengthy discussion about the sustainability of a proposed charter school specializing in dyslexia at Reading Elementary. Superintendent Aron Dody had been tasked by the board to gather information about how charter schools have fared in the state. Currently, Dody said, there are 10 charter schools operating in Kansas and one is set to close at the end of the year.

"Back in the early 2000s there was funding for charter schools in the state, so a lot of schools opened up a charter school because they received some additional funding in order to set up that charter," Dody said. "In 2007 or 2008, the state stopped that funding, so there was no new dollars from the state for charter schools. The majority have closed since because they cannot sustain them."

Dody said he spoke with several of the existing charter schools in the state; one that has continued to stay solvent and the one slated to close.

"The bottom line from what the state told me is a charter school is basically no different than public school," Dody said. "There's no longer any funding for them and the only additional funding you would receive is if you got students from out of district to come in to that."

Board members expressed concerns about how the district could fund the charter school when the district was already struggling with overhead. With questions about how many students would actually be enrolled in a charter school, the majority felt there were too many unknowns.

Reed said she felt turning down the opportunity to open a charter school would be like turning down a gift. She said she was concerned with how losing students once the closing was official would affect the district's continued decline in enrollment.

After the meeting, Reed expressed her disappointment in the vote and said she wished the board had been able to take more time to explore more options.

"I would have liked to have had all the pieces of the puzzle before we did such a major thing," she said. "I know we have the finances looming over us, but I don't know if we have all of the pieces. I honestly feel like if we have had faith in what we have as a community and believed in our community, it would have worked."

Board Member Tim Burton questioned whether opening a charter school for dyslexic students inside Americus Elementary School would be a better option. He said opening a charter inside of Americus would reduce the overhead of the district, and would give the district a chance to see if the charter school was viable.

"We've got to do what's right for the district, not what's right for the building," Burton said. "I really think we can do it in the building together and grow in one building."

The board also voted to extend an offer of employment to Mike Mathes for the Superintendent of Schools position that will be vacated by Dody on June 30. Mathes retired after 20 years from USD 345 Topeka Seaman in 2016. The board has extended Mathes a one-year contract for the 2018 - 2019 school year.

Board President Matt Horton said Mathes was excited to come on board.

"It's nice to see Mr. Mathes is excited and ready to hit the ground running for next year," he said. "I hope we can keep him abreast of our situations as we move ahead. I'm excited to see him take over July 1."

The board also voted to bring Wendy Linsey onto the board by a vote of 4-2. Linsey will fill the District No. 1 seat left vacant after the death of Earl Lyddane earlier this year.

The board will meet again at 7 p.m. April 25 at the district office in Americus.