

By Carolyn Lee

The Imperial Republican

The Chase County Schools board of education tabled the election of officers and appointment of committee members Monday night due to a question on the legality of hiring a school board member as classified staff.

The question arose after consideration of an agenda item asking the board to elect current board president Sheila Stromberger as a secretary for the remainder of the school year. She was hired by the administration to replace Kaye Dean, who resigned recently.

Stromberger was unable to attend the meeting.

Superintendent Matt Fisher, in answer to a question from board member Gregg Smith, said he'd contacted the legal counsel for the Nebraska School Board Association and was assured that there was "nothing wrong with her serving as a board member when she's a classified employee."

A classified employee is one with an hourly wage, such as secretaries and custodial employees.

The superintendent said the attorney told him it is common in Nebraska to have classified school employees on school boards.

Fisher said the state does have a law against certified teachers serving as school board members.

However, the stumbling block to Stromberger's approval as a secretary was brought up by Smith, who pointed to the school's Policy BBE, regarding "Board Member Conflicts of Interest."

Smith read, "A board member shall not have any direct pecuniary interest in a contract with the school district, nor shall he or she furnish directly any labor, equipment, or supplies to the district except as provided by law."

The policy adds that if a board member is employed by, or has an interest in, a business that is bidding for the school's business, the board member shall refrain from debating upon or voting upon the question of contracting with the company.

Fisher said the policy was directed "more to doing business where a board member might benefit if the board chooses his business."

Board member Penny Strand pointed out that Stromberger would be making a contract with the school in becoming a secretary.

Fisher said that as both a board member and employee, Stromberger would have to excuse herself from discussing or voting on some issues, such as classified salaries and administrator salaries and employment.

When asked by board member Todd Burpo what their reaction was to hiring Stromberger, teacher Becky Odens said she wanted "a school board member who can vote on things."

Teacher Linda Lakey said she wanted "someone capable of doing the job, be here regularly, and be pro student, pro teacher and pro school," as a secretary.

Smith also asked Fisher how many people applied for the position, who interviewed them and why Stromberger was most qualified.

Fisher said there were 15 candidates, 11 of whom were interviewed. The other four had applied for other positions in recent months.

The applicants met with current secretaries to get to know them, then were interviewed and selected by the three administrators. Fisher said they felt Stromberger was the most qualified,

based upon the interviews.

Several board members also acknowledged Stromberger's years of valuable experience on the board.

The board agreed to table approval of Stromberger's employment pending additional legal advice concerning Policy BBE.

Following an executive session, the board announced that salaries with a 4.9 percent package increase would be offered to Secondary Principal Mike Sorensen and Elementary Principal Nathan Vitosh for the upcoming fiscal year.

For Sorensen, that means \$75,775, or a \$3,275 increase, according to Board Vice President Charley Colton. For Vitosh, that means \$73,150, a \$3,150 increase over last year.

Recently, the board gave Fisher a 4.49 percent increase from \$98,000 last year to \$102,400 this year.

Last year the board entered into a two-year contract with the teachers that raised their salaries about three percent, from a base of \$28,782 to \$29,600 for this year, with another \$800 raise next year.

Resolution on LB 1021

In other board discussion, members voted to adopt a resolution to support the Nebraska School Activities Association (NSAA) in opposing LB 1021, now before the Legislature.

Sponsored by Sen. Bill Avery of Lincoln, LB 1021 creates the High School Activities Association Act. The act would divide the state into six equal districts based upon population, for the purpose of managing high school activities.

Any educator in the state is eligible to be elected to a district position within the organization, which will "work with the Department of Education and Legislature to develop and administer public policy with respect to high school activities."

CCS board members said they felt LB 1021 creates a whole new set of guidelines the NSAA must follow, dictated by the Legislature. Fisher said when the NSAA can't meet the guidelines, the Nebraska Department of Education takes over those responsibilities, or control.

Board members agreed in voting for the resolution that supports the NSAA that there is too much state government in local schools.

Other business

Vitosh told the board that reading scores in the elementary grades have improved since the fall. Showing the board a graph, Vitosh added that the tests get tougher during the year, so he doesn't foresee as much dramatic improvement in the spring.

"I'm excited to see them moving in the right direction," he noted.

The school implemented a Reading Mastery program last fall.

The graph shows that the third and fourth grade students are still below average in reading. Reading Mastery coordinator Angie Dickey told the board 18 students in the third grade are almost a year behind in reading.

While that wasn't a surprise, it was a concern, Dickey stated. She said a teacher will soon be freed up to work with those students.

She also noted that the fourth grade students have "almost closed the gap" between being below average and above average in reading.

Vitosh and Dickey both urged parents who want to learn about their child's reading level to ask the reading teacher or themselves.

In other board action, members approved an additional five days of sick leave for Alice Musgrove, who has had major surgery and is facing chemotherapy. She is an aide at the

school.

Members also approved a five-day absence without pay for bus driver Barb Wood to attend an Eastern Star state convention.

The superintendent will continue to research a security system at the Wellington School gym, possibly utilizing key cards.

In executive session, the board discussed personnel, with no action taken afterwards, Vice President Colton said.