By Jan Schultz
The Imperial Republican

Classroom teachers in the K-6 grades at Chase County Schools and administrators appear excited about a new language arts program that will be instituted during the 2009-2010 school year.

School board members voted unanimously at their meeting March 10 to adopt the Reading Mastery program.

Along with purchase of new language arts textbooks and materials, the board also approved training of teachers in the “Direct Instruction” program that utilizes a more structured teaching method.

Elementary Principal Nathan Vitosh said the Reading Mastery program and Direct Instruction method of teaching fit Chase County Schools’ needs.

What spearheaded the research into a new language arts program was the fact a portion of students “across the board in K-6,” were not reading at grade level, Vitosh said.

“And, some of the past and current curriculums for language arts used here have been inconsistent from grade to grade and teacher to teacher,” he said.

As the School Improvement Team looked at achievement test scores, it appeared reading needed the most attention, Vitosh said. The team and other staff members then started researching new reading programs.

“The Reading Mastery and Direct Instruction programs fit those needs,” Vitosh said.

The new Reading Mastery textbooks and materials, coupled with the new way of teaching through Direct Instruction, will not only help the students who aren’t at grade level in reading skills, but will aid all students with reading improvement, he said.

Staff and administrators have been to Gering three different times since January, where both the Reading Mastery materials and Direct Instruction are used.

Gering elementary students have shown “significant increases in performance,” Vitosh said.

“That’s one of the things that excited me about it, is seeing it in action at Gering,” he said.

“Kids are excited about coming to school there, and are confident in their reading skills.”

Gering has set high goals in improving student reading skills, according to last week’s discussion at the board meeting. Gov. Dave Heineman has even visited the school.

Gering’s goal is to have 90 percent of students at grade level in reading, up from 33 percent when they started the programs five years ago.

The cost of the Reading Mastery materials will run about $63,000. Training teachers in Direct Instruction will be $70,000 plus, said Supt. Matt Fisher.

The big expense in training comes from four days when professional trainers in the program come to the school to teach CCS teachers. That’s followed by 24 on-site visits during the first year it’s in use.

Fisher told board members he didn’t foresee budget problems with adding both programs.

The school budgets for textbooks and teacher training every year, Fisher said, and they will be able to use School Improvement dollars CCS was awarded, as well.

In the interest of helping parents to fully understand the new programs, Principal Vitosh will be submitting a couple of articles to this newspaper in the coming weeks with further details.

He will also be sending home information in the school newsletters, and will schedule a

Parents Night at the start of the school year this fall when samples of the curriculum will be shown.

Vitosh told board members last week that a “vast majority” of the 30 staff members polled on the program were supportive of it.

“No one checked ‘no’” he said. Some teachers did express concerns on how it will fit into the schedules, he noted.

Resignations

Gary Patch’s request to resign from his junior high football and wrestling head coaching positions was approved by the board.

Patch, who teaches fourth grade, has been coaching those sports for 24 years, said Supt. Fisher.

“He’s one of the few elementary teachers who also coaches, and he’s done it a long time,” Supt. Fisher said.

Fisher recommended approval of his resignations at the end of this school year, noting Patch’s long tenure.

Also resigning was Tonya Bush of Haigler as accounts payable/secretary, effective March 23. The school has begun advertising for her position.

Other school board business

- A new bus was purchased and an old one sold. Purchased was a new 2010 Bluebird 47-passenger bus that will be equipped with a wheelchair lift. The bus cost from Nebraska Central Equipment will be $65,865. An estimated $5,000 will be added to that cost for the additional door required to accommodate the lift. McCool Junction Public Schools was the only bid received on the used 1993 bus, which they purchased for $1,501.25. CCS maintains two backup busses in its fleet.
- Driver’s education rates will remain the same for the 2009 summer class at $150 per student, based on the board vote last week. On a suggestion from Lynn Rinehart to consider placing driver’s education back into the school curriculum, board president Sheila Stromberger said it could be considered for the following year.
- The repaired set of two portable bleachers have been delivered to the school, Fisher told the board. The balance owed to CBS Constructors of McCook was paid.
- An update on state legislative issues was given by Supt. Fisher. He said it’s been “very quiet” on educational issues in Lincoln. State aid figures are supposed to be out the first of April, and Fisher expects Chase County Schools to get less than this year. He said a lot of the legislature’s time has been spent on early childhood education and the new “Learning Community” in Omaha.
- Concerning federal stimulus money POSSIBLY coming to Chase County Schools, Supt. Fisher said he’s not counting on “getting a big boost.” He said the only possible areas CCS might receive funding would be in the Title I or special education areas.