

By Jan Schultz

The Imperial Republican

Now in its fourth year in grades K-6 at Chase County Schools, the Reading Mastery program got some low marks from school administrators last week.

In his monthly meeting report to school board members, Elementary Principal Pat Lane said due to “dismal test scores” in reading, a new language arts program may be in the future at CCS.

“Reading, writing, spelling, grammar, you name it,” Lane said regarding a new program.

Lane said Reading Mastery’s reading segment doesn’t address what the state tests on.

Lane said it’s also a “scheduling bear,” does not address comprehension and is too structured.

“It’s not too student-centered and does not build on the interests of the student,” he continued.

Due to Reading Mastery’s strict scripting structure, it doesn’t allow time for independent, shared or “paired” reading, areas that are now emphasized in the latest research on student reading, he said.

Lane said, however, Reading Mastery could still be used as an intervention tool for younger students who are really struggling.

The writing segment in Reading Mastery is also weak in parts of speech, and doesn’t allow “for much creativity,” Lane added

It does not use the six traits of writing, he said, “and that model is what we get tested on. It does not have a lot of alignment with the state.”

Reviewing test result data with the board, Lane noted the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for CCS may be deceptive.

That’s because a class may be showing some improvement over the previous year, but it’s not keeping up with the expectations of the state, which increases “the bar” each year.

In 2010, the average of grades 3-6 at CCS showed 56 percent met the state standards for reading, exactly the same 56 percent the state required for AYP.

However, the state doesn’t look at averages. Each grade is reviewed individually. Broken down by grade in 2010, the percentage of students meeting the AYP per grade were:

Third—38 percent

Fourth—58 percent

Fifth—73 percent

Sixth—55 percent

While the fifth grade was 17 percent above the AYP, the third grade class in 2010 was 18 percentage points below it.

In 2011, Lane said, the AYP was raised to a 67 percent by the state. The CCS average for grades 3-6 that year was 60 percent, an improvement of four percent overall.

Individually in 2011, here’s how each grade performed in meeting the AYP:

Third—73 percent

Fourth—50 percent

Fifth—50 percent

Sixth—66 percent

In 2012, the four CCS grades showed another four percent improvement (64 percent) as a group, but the state’s AYP bar went to 78 percent. None of the CCS grades individually met the minimum.

Individual class performances in 2012 were:

Third—63 percent

Fourth—72 percent

Fifth—63 percent

Sixth—57 percent

In 2014, the state will expect that 100 percent of students meet the AYP, the principal said.

“The difference is (at CCS), you’re not seeing any positives,” Lane said. “And, that’s the reason we’d like to try something different.”

Board member Sheila Stromberger expressed concern with the high financial investment CCS made in Reading Mastery.

When considering just the cost of the Reading Mastery program materials and consultant fees, it cost the taxpayers nearly \$150,000.

That does not include the multiple trips to Gering where teachers and administrators reviewed the program, and several new teacher aide hires.

“Are there things in Reading Mastery that can be adjusted rather than jumping ship?” she asked.

Lane said it’s going to take more than “just a little bit” to make a difference.

“We haven’t gained a lot,” he said.

Stromberger expressed dismay at how the program “was sold to us” by Reading Mastery officials as well as the other schools that gave the program good reviews.

“What is their answer to why we are stagnant or even possibly declining?” she asked.

She wonders what Reading Mastery officials are saying about the other Nebraska schools using it that are improving and why CCS is not.

Lane said Gering Schools, where CCS staff traveled multiple times to look at their use of Reading Mastery, aren’t showing a lot of improvement, either.

Changes the state has made in meeting the AYP bar, which is upped each year and was not a factor in state testing measurements when Reading Mastery started here, could be an answer, Lane said.

Supt. Brad Schoeppey agreed.

“Reading Mastery was not developed to align to Nebraska state standards,” he said.

“The proof is in the results of the test scores. We can look at the test scores of those other schools and they are falling behind also,” Schoeppey said.

“The thing is, when people sell you a program they are going to tell you what you want to hear.”

Schoeppey said the staff taught the program the way they were told to “but we are just not seeing the results,” he said.

He said CCS teachers have worked hard at that.

“We are not moving up at the rate the bar is, so we are getting further and further and further behind the longer we do it,” he said.

Neither Schoeppey nor Lane were at CCS when Reading Mastery was implemented, but Schoeppey said he knows how much was spent on it.

Stromberger said her concern surrounds CCS now getting into another program, and then the state changes things again “and we keep spinning our wheels.”

She asked what happens if CCS tells the state they want no part of the state testing program.

Schoeppey said schools don’t have any choice if they want to remain accredited.

There are also sanctions when schools don’t reach the “bar,” which CCS has received two straight years and is currently on “school improvement” status, Schoeppey said.

While those sanctions have been minor so far, each year they “ratchet them up,” he said. A fourth year of not meeting state standards, according to Schoeppey, could mean removal of the administration and the state taking over the school.

Directing comments to Principal Lane, board member Gregg Smith recalled, last spring, that confidence in Reading Mastery was given.

“What changed?” Smith asked.

Lane said the preliminary results then looked good.

“But then we got the ‘cut scores’ and actual information showing we were growing only four percent a year,” he said.

Lane said it’s a change for him personally to see a lack of the love of reading among students here.

However, fifth grade teacher Sherry Clevenger has noticed a change in her class since she set a 15-minute time period each day for reading a book students selected from the library.

At first it was a forced thing, but now, Clevenger said, “they are all engaged. We live our books when we are reading,” she said.

Stromberger responded, “So it’s just that we are not meeting the state standards.”

Lynn Rinehart, curriculum coordinator for the school, said the staff was warned that Reading Mastery was weak in comprehension and vocabulary.

He said there is “no magic program” out there, but it has to be one in which teachers and staff can adjust.

In addition, the change to Reading Mastery was followed by a new math program instituted last year, causing a lot of stress in the staff.

Switching to another program may hurt kids’ learning, too, just as doing nothing would, Rinehart said.

“There is more than just picking a new program here. Make sure you take time to do it right,” he said.

Stromberger said they did do it right, and everyone took a lot of time, looked at a lot of data and traveled to schools.

“I don’t think we jumped into it by any means,” she said.

“So I resent the implication a bit that we jumped into Reading Mastery. We all took it very seriously and took a lot of time,” she said.

Rinehart said a lot of other schools didn’t go with Reading Mastery. Among the reasons were problems with comprehension and vocabulary, he said.

Board member Dan Reeves said he didn’t believe Reading Mastery is a failure.

“It was probably the right program at the time,” he said.

Reeves also sees value in possibly using it in the lower grades in remedial situations.

Process just starting

Schoeppey noted the process of looking at other options is just starting, but noted there is some interest in keeping Reading Mastery for K-2 students, possibly for helping kids rebuild basic skills.

Another program for grades 3-6 may be considered, but consistency would be necessary as students move into third grade, according to meeting comments.

Principal Lane said Reading Mastery does do a good job in the lower grades with “decoding.”

Schoeppey foresees formation of a committee involving teachers, administrators, and at the suggestion of board member Smith, parents, too.

“We can’t continue to do what we are doing because we are not seeing the results,” he said.

While the state requires meeting certain standards and the AYP, it makes no recommendations on which reading programs to use.