

By Jan Schultz

The Imperial Republican

It wasn't unanimous, but the Chase County School board of education adopted a new K-6 reading program.

On a 7-2 vote, the board approved purchase of the Reading Wonders program from McGraw-Hill Education.

The board's vote specified the purchase will not exceed \$67,894.29, the cost of materials outlined in the invoice reviewed by board members.

At last month's meeting, about 20 teachers were in attendance when a CCS staff reading committee made a presentation on Reading Wonders.

The committee recommended a change from the Reading Mastery program as CCS's primary reading instruction tool. Reading Mastery was used the past four school years in grades K-6.

Supt. Brad Schoeppey said he supports the committee's recommendation to change to Reading Wonders.

He said Reading Wonders provides more flexibility in meeting each student's needs. It will return all students to their grade-level classrooms for reading, rather than meet in groups based on their reading skills no matter what their grade level is as was done with Reading Mastery.

Reading Mastery will continue to be used as a secondary program and for students needing more help, according to discussion Tuesday and last month.

Board President Jeff Olsen supported the change to Reading Wonders, saying there has been a lot of research on it. Last month, the committee used Reading Wonders evaluations from Indiana University in its presentation.

He said there are no guarantees with any program that it will meet all of the school's needs.

But, the school still has the ability to use Reading Mastery where staff sees fit, Olsen said.

He noted Reading Mastery is a 1960s product, "and look at all the change that happened" since it was developed.

Olsen also noted Reading Wonders comes with both ELL (English Language Learners) and technology components and has take home materials that parents can use to work with their children. Those components weren't included with Reading Mastery.

While most of the board supported the change to Reading Wonders, two did not.

Board member Sheila Stromberger said her main concern is that Reading Wonders has not been fully implemented in any schools.

"There's no research, there's no data, it's not proven itself," she said.

She added that there is no information, either, on whether it aligns with Nebraska's state standards testing.

Supt. Schoeppey responded that was the job of the reading committee, "to look at those things."

Stromberger said she was also concerned with staffing. Many additional aides were hired when Reading Mastery was implemented.

In addition, she said it was her opinion that Tom Hansen's and Angie Dickey's positions both "need to go back into the classroom."

Supt. Schoeppey said Han-sen already will be in a different position next year. He'd like to keep Dickey available for those students using Reading Mastery and utilize her more as a reading and math expert, working directly with teachers.

Olsen said he'd like to see the K-6 Title I program more utilized, as well. In addition to her position as reading coach the past couple of years, the Title I program is also under Dickey's supervision.

Schoeppey said he doesn't plan to replace a recent aide who resigned, and likely will do the same if another aide chooses not to continue employment.

Agreeing with Stromberger, board member Karl Meeske said he would also like to see more data on Reading Wonders "before we jump on board with it."

He said there likely will be a learning curve with the new program, and wondered how that will affect reading test scores, which are expected, based on a preliminary report, to show some good gains this August when state scores are released.

He also noted that teachers and staff now have the flexibility and creativity to make changes in how Reading Mastery is taught.

At last month's meeting, fifth grade teacher Sandy Silvester said the school has spent a lot of money on Reading Mastery. Changes were made the past year, and scores came up, she said. "I don't feel it's right to just dump it," she said.

Board member Gregg Smith felt it was important to support the committee's recommendation, as well as that of the school's new superintendent and board president. He also said it's not unusual for schools to change programs.

He suggested that the expected rise in scores this August may have been due to a strong effort from the staff.

Stromberger noted that Supt. Schoeppey's No. 1 goal at the start of the school year was to get the state test scores where they need to be.

"That could have lit a fire" and the staff worked really hard to prepare for the tests, she said.

"I'm just not so sure it's the program," she said.

Voting for the motion to purchase the Reading Wonders program were Olsen, Smith, Tom Gaschler, Dirk Haarberg, Willy O'Neil, Dan Reeves and Penny Strand. Stromberger and Meeske voted no.

There will be training on the new Reading Wonders program for teachers at in-service days in August.

Members of the reading committee included Tonya Olsen, Kim Spady, Melissa Wallin, Jaclyn Paisley, Virginia Harford, Tom Hansen, Angie Dickey, Becky Odens and Principal Pat Lane.

More on Tuesday's meeting will be in a story next week.