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Learning Community: Millard school board skeptical

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As the Omaha-area learning community moves closer to implementation, Millard school officials are becoming more vocal with their concerns about the new metro schools cooperative.

Millard school board members on Monday targeted the 2009 legislative session to address their concerns.

"It's got to be fair to all kids," Superintendent Keith Lutz said.

The Douglas-Sarpy County learning community officially starts in January. As the area's largest suburban district and one of Nebraska's top academic performers, Millard will be a major player in determining whether it succeeds.

Board member Mike Kennedy has steadily criticized the learning community law. But as the Legislature debated the law in 2007, other Millard board members went out of their way to distance themselves from Kennedy's concerns.

That didn't happen at the board's Monday meeting.

Board member Mike Pate said the learning community "is just another layer of government that doesn't need to exist."

Pate also said he has seen nothing to convince him that "the learning community council will have a positive impact to those students in need."

The learning community's governing council will have at least 20 members, who will be paid up to \$12,000 annually. The learning community organization itself will receive \$500,000 next year from the state to help fund its operations.

The council will regulate a new shared property tax system for schools, develop a metro-area integration plan and have a say in districts' plans for educating poor kids.

When one of Millard's lobbyists suggested finding a legislative means to limit the council's authority, Pate responded, "We have to do that."

Kennedy criticized new learning community agencies called elementary learning centers, which will offer students in poor areas access to programs such as tutoring. He said the law is set up so that the centers will be far away from poor suburban families.

"There needs to be a lot reworked on this," Kennedy said.

Board member Brad Burwell asked how much it would cost to bus students to meet the law's school diversity goals. Then he said, "I don't want to see that number."

Millard lobbyist Bill Mueller told board members criticizing the law, "This was not our idea. This was not our concept." But, he said, lawmakers also believe work remains to be done regarding the learning community.

Board President Jean Stothert, in an interview prior to the Monday meeting, said she is concerned about the unknown aspects of the law. But, she said, "It's the law, and we will abide by the law."

After the meeting, Lutz described Millard's attitude toward the learning community as "mixed." He said the Legislature needs to clear up ambiguities in the law.

"I have to make sure our patrons' and our kids' interests are protected," he said.

Board member Linda Poole questioned the learning community's level of public support. "I don't know that the community . . . has bought into it."

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