

Waco school board to look at costs of out-of-state travel for training

By Wendy Gragg Tribune-Herald staff writer

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The Waco school board will take a closer look at the money the district spends on out-of-state travel.

School board member David Schleicher asked that the board explore the topic during its June workshop.

The topic came up as trustees questioned whether spending \$84,000 to send a large group to Las Vegas for training was the best use of professional development money.



School board member David Schleicher asked that the board explore the costs of out-of-state training during its June workshop.

Rod Aydelotte/Tribune-Herald

“I think it may turn out to have been a valid decision, but I want to know what alternatives were considered,” he said.

Waco Independent School District is sending more than 60 teachers and administrators to Las Vegas from June 6-9 for a Professional Learning Communities Institute, offered by a company called Solution Tree.

From June 10-12, another group from WISD will be in St. Louis for similar training.

The trips are funded by federal Title I money. The government requires a portion of those funds to be spent on professional development because WISD failed to meet federal standards in 2008-09, spokesman Dale Caffey said. The district must spend the money before the 2010-11 school year.

Professional learning communities involve teachers within a school coming together to talk about goals, lesson planning, instructional techniques and best practices for teaching.

The out-of-state conferences are designed to train a small group of educators from each campus who then will pass on the training at their home schools, said Karen Hassell, WISD’s coordinator of professional development.

Waco ISD administrators and trustees put a priority on setting up such communities on campuses as a way to improve district performance.

Hassell said other PLC institutes are offered this summer but the Las Vegas and St. Louis venues were more cost-efficient than options in Massachusetts and Florida.

One session was offered in Texas, but in September. Hassell said district officials preferred to not interrupt the school year by scheduling the training in the fall.

“This money is money received from the federal government, specifically earmarked for professional development. They’re not dollars we can use on teacher salaries, health insurance or pre-K benefits,” trustee Pat Atkins said.

“But I think it’s a fair question to ask whether this was the best use of those professional development dollars, with (Education Service Center) Region 12 availability and the availability of Internet resources and groups who are willing to bring trainers into the district for various institutes.”

Schleicher said he wonders whether, for the cost of sending staff to Las Vegas and St. Louis, the district could have had someone come to Waco during the course of a year to train with an even larger group of employees.

Hassell said the PLC institutes this summer are good timing for Waco ISD, which adopted a policy recognizing professional learning communities “as the most-effective means of implementing high-quality, effective professional development.”

Solution Tree, which will run the Las Vegas and St. Louis conferences, is run by some of the best professional-learning communities in the country, she said.

“We expect teachers to learn the nuts and bolts of learning communities and how to create them on their campuses,” she said.


In the 2008-09 school year, the district spent more than \$5.2 million on professional development, Caffey said. So far in 2009-10, the district has spent \$3.75 million.

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