

Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee
of the House Education and Labor Committee

Back to School: Meeting Students' Academic, Social, and Emotional Needs

Testimony Prepared by
Matthew L. Blomstedt, Ph.D.
Nebraska Commissioner of Education
September 20, 2022

Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens and members of the Subcommittee,

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to submit testimony for this important hearing on the most precious investments in the future of our states and country, our students. When it comes to an area of mutual concern and hope, I find myself both filled with pride and humbled by the opportunity to work in educational leadership in Nebraska. I want to share Nebraska's journey from March 2020 to today, and highlight the importance of ESSER funds in that journey

Overview: At the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, I publicly expressed concern that the various impacts of the pandemic would be realized and felt for years to come. Some criticized my public message as alarmist while others expressed concern about my call to find a path to a safe return in-person learning early in the pandemic. By early May 2020, I announced that I believed most, if not all, Nebraska schools should open in person on the regular 2020-21 schedule. Our team worked hard to bring together public health experts, teachers, and school leaders to draft comprehensive back to school safety guidance that was adaptable for local conditions and decisions. Naturally, I provided guidance for flexibilities for the yet unknown and the disruptions predicted. I was very proud of school leaders and teachers' dedication to open for that first full year of Covid-impacted learning in 2020-21. I reflect on that now in more amazement as I reviewed the history on our dedicated website, Launch Nebraska (www.launchne.com) that now also serves a detailed historical accounting of those efforts, meetings, and ongoing guidance to manage the education needs across the state.

However, a special thank you is in order for the Congressional foresight to act across the pandemic and project to the current and future needs of students, families, teachers, schools and communities. The initial Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES)) funding set the path to allow us to open schools in 2020-21 and invested in the planning and initial infrastructure that helped Nebraska walk boldly through the first wave of the pandemic. Not only did these funds ensure a safe return to in-person learning, they also bridged the digital divide by providing both devices and stable internet connectivity. By Fall of 2020 the challenges facing our schools were increasingly complicated and the eventual passage of ESSER II (Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA)) bolstered the educational infrastructure and supports that began to focus energy and resources on the negative impacts that were contemporaneously being realized with each day of quarantine and/or isolation of students and teachers and each situational closure. Even then, I

worried about the academic, social, and emotional tolls that were occurring, but most had little additional capacity to manage much more than the crisis directly upon us. Each day and distraction was almost certainly taking that toll.

With the passage of American Rescue Plan (ARP) ESSER III, the historic investment of funds has further set schools on a path to address unfinished teaching and learning and the non-academic effects on students. In Nebraska's case, the passage of the American Rescue Plan allowed state and local education leaders to invest in addressing the multiple impacts already realized but also to build on the capacity to counteract the ongoing challenges that are just coming to be fully realized. I share a few examples here.

The Start of 2022-2023 School Year - Restoring A New Normal: I start each school year with an address to the educational leadership of the state and at the beginning of this year I addressed several of the challenging trends we saw exacerbated in the midst of the pandemic. Strikingly, chronic absenteeism increased by about 70% from 45,000 prepandemic to 77,000 in 2020-21. Additionally, the math achievement gap between English learners and all students increased by five percentage points on statewide assessments. Pandemic impacts coupled with ongoing and pre-existing achievement gaps across race, ethnicity, poverty and special needs have had an impact in Nebraska commensurate with preliminary numbers from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Academic Impacts: As I examine a [Covid Special Report](#) we conducted in the fall of 2021 and prepare to review and release the latest figures in Nebraska, I am reminded of pre-pandemic research in Nebraska that demonstrated that as few as four days of school absence in a year had a significant negative impact on achievement as measured by state assessment. Although we are yet uncertain of the specific impacts of lost days of school operation, we already have seen a number of things that eroded instruction time even though school was in session. At the very least, instruction time was impacted by necessary mitigation strategies that disrupted normal school routines and even the cumulative time that was taken for extra cleaning, hand washing, careful transitions and social distancing all may have slowed the normal opportunity for learning. We further identified a substantial list of such potential impacts in the Fall of 2021 that we hope to mitigate in the current year. We are also able to begin to see the impacts through academic data becoming available now which further helps in the effort to invest in strategies for recovery.

The Nebraska Department of Education established a [Framework for School Renewal and Acceleration](#) in the Spring of 2021 that helped us focus ESSER II and III funds on the critical nature of moving from “learning loss” to “unfinished learning;” from “recovery” to “renewal;” and from “remediation” to “acceleration.” We created professional learning opportunities for school and district teams to operationalize the framework and target their allocations to address unfinished teaching and learning. The Framework was also the foundation for the [budget roadmap](#), a tool that engaged schools and stakeholders in a meaningful dialogue about the American Rescue Plan / ESSER III funding planning process. One of the detailed steps provided direction for schools to properly engage with students, families, and the community writ large. At the state level we sought

to model these engagements in our own work and conducted surveys, held focus groups, and identified key constituent contacts. We also asked schools to create a theory of action in their plans and to use several key considerations aligned with the evidence-based interventions available in a similar fashion as we also modeled at the state level.

Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs: Anecdotally, this year has started with much more reason for optimism this fall. I am hearing that schools believe student negative behaviors that were markedly up in 21-22 seem, at least for now, to have waned. This I believe to be a product of increased attention to social and emotional needs of students coupled with resources that schools have implemented in the midst of the pandemic. Nebraska has made several investments in mental and behavioral health supports and invested in training for teachers and staff. For instance, the single largest investment in mental health has been in partnership with Nebraska's intermediate agencies to scale and regionalize supports accessible to schools. I also see that the situational optimism has increased, and teachers and students alike seem more engaged. This will take further study, but I also remain optimistic this apparent trend holds across school settings.

The expansion of mental health services has been led by American Rescue Plan state set aside investments in access to mental health services and through partnerships with schools, communities, educational service units (intermediate agencies), and private and public health providers and agencies. Specifically, the investments made at a school and community level have been to organize support for students in schools and through providers who partner with schools to provide services. Again, anecdotally, the numbers and access to licensed mental health providers in schools and for communities has been a focus that has assisted both classroom teachers and students and families. These investments are proving to be a substantial assistance in providing mental health support when most needed. Additionally, I believe the strategy to sustain critical investments after ESSER funds are exhausted include both state and local investments in all such areas. Although, I cannot yet definitively state these investments account for the successful start to the new year, I know school leaders and teachers have witnessed improvements that are likely the direct result of these efforts.

Targeting Investments: The Nebraska Department of Education sought to make the best and highest use of the funds available to schools and the state to enable and promote safe school operations and equity-driven, sustainable evidence-based programs to serve students and to continue to strengthen teaching and learning across the state. This is evidenced in a [letter](#) I sent to school leaders on May 28, 2021 as I shared the message of the expectations outlined in ARP/ESSER III. Additionally, the NDE team worked to assist in the targeting of resources and [overlaid a map](#) of the [CDC social vulnerability index](#) with schools designated for federal and/or state support. To further support our schools in their intentional and diligent use of funds, the NDE also developed the [budget roadmap](#) and additional supports for selecting and implementing evidence-based interventions.

Instructional Supports: Early in the pandemic the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) efforts were focused on support for teachers, support for high quality instruction, strategies for

acceleration and the likelihood that students across the state had been set back by unfinished teaching and learning. In the midst of the 2020-21 school year it was clear that teachers and schools were just struggling to pin down the key priorities as pandemic safety outweighed the normal routines of instructional focus and improvement. The NDE issued [essential content guidance](#) in that year and then followed up with supports for summer that included [Zearn Math](#) as high quality instructional material and instructional support. [Preliminary findings](#) demonstrate that the investment in Zearn Math helped students across the state accelerate through math content and helped students in the summer and school year recover from pandemic impacts in math in the early and middle grades. We anticipate that the data will show significant positive impacts for all students but additionally for students with special needs. The summers of 2021 and 2022 also realized positive and beneficial partnerships for expanded learning opportunities in efforts to expand summer learning across the state and especially in efforts with our largest school district in Omaha Public Schools. Creating and leveraging both state and local ESSER investments allowed for economic scale for content like Zearn math while maximizing the local partnerships found in extended learning partnerships.

Additional and Summary of Statewide Investments:

In 2021, I communicated with Nebraska educators and school leaders the “Opportunity of a Lifetime” we had at our fingertips with these ESSER funds. The opportunity comes with responsibility to taxpayers for the best use of funds, transparency, and ensuring the funds have measurable impact on students. Although it may be challenging to study and document the immediate benefits, I anticipate the strategies necessary to re-engage students and families and address social, emotional and academic impacts in the long run would have been unreachable without the dedicated funding to address the various impacts on students and educators. Even with the results we anticipate seeing in assessment/accountability, we are doubling down on this opportunity of a lifetime to change the trajectory of the pandemic and restore and improve on pre-pandemic normalcy.

Using data and stakeholder input in May 2021, the [NDE determined five key priority areas](#) for statewide investments. A few specific projects across these areas are highlighted below:

1. Access to Comprehensive Mental Health Services
 - Significant investment (\$15 million) to scale up and improve mental health access in partnership with Nebraska’s intermediate agency partners, Educational Service Units.
2. Reimagined Family and Community Engagement
 - Leveraging existing Statewide Family Learning Community, and investing to expand programming

- Partnering with Latino American Commission, Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs, African American Commission to develop strategies and deepen connections to address needs of these specific student groups.
3. High-Quality Professional Learning and Bolstering the Teacher Pipeline
- Investing \$1.6 million in educator shortage grants to incent creative approaches to improve teacher pipeline
 - Bolstering the Education and Training Program of Study (Career and Technical Education) and investing in Educators Rising
 - Expanding training opportunities for principals in PK-3 settings
4. Focus on Unfinished Learning and Supporting Learning Acceleration
- Partnership with Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFF) to expand and deepen high-quality summer and after school programming.
 - Partnering with Nebraska Chamber to ensure alignment between education and the workforce
 - Supporting the five school districts that did not qualify to receive ESSER funds by providing per-pupil allocations from statewide set aside. *(Note: These school districts were generally very small enrollment districts and did not previously participate in ESEA poverty and/or USDA School Meal programs.)*
 - Focusing on high-quality instructional materials, and professional learning
 - Partnering with NCFF to hire early learning specialists for math and reading
5. Modernize Information, Data, Technology, and Process Systems
- Improving state and local systems and capacity through investments data use, educator certification improvements, data and grants management, and assessment and accountability data to improve research and evidence-based interventions.
 - Partnership with research, public health coordination, and leadership in ongoing Covid response and protocols.

In Closing:

Federal investments made in education across Nebraska are critical support for students’ academic, social and emotional needs. Nebraska continues to encumber and spend federal funds in a timely and prudent manner. Though I have heard concerns of schools’ and states’ ability to spend down resources, Nebraska has encouraged plans that meet local needs and state processes in accord with federal expectations. I know that schools are also working to meet deadlines on proposed

investments and projects. Regardless of accounting timelines, Nebraska endeavors to invest and target funds where they are most needed. We are just beginning to see the fruits of those investments and will continue to measure progress in the year ahead.

I am proud about how Nebraska educators and students managed in these times. As we addressed the difficulties of 2020-21, a false sense of “normal” was established and we entered into the 2021-22 year to an equally or perhaps even more difficult set of circumstances as the pandemic intensified and disrupted education further. It became quite clear that school and student impacts were not at all normal; it is still clear. As we start this 2022-23 school year, I am personally grateful for the investments made through the American Rescue Plan as this will be the opportunity to not simply restore normal, but to manage through the remainder of the pandemic and grow out of this crisis to establish a better future.