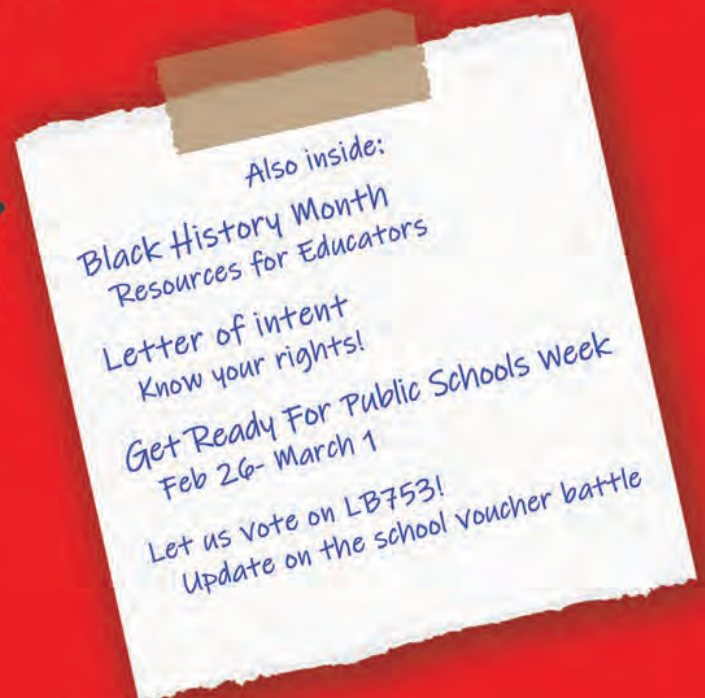


The VOICE

Nebraska State Education Association • February 2024

LEARNING *the* LANGUAGE *of* POVERTY

**An Educator's Role
in Breaking Poverty Barriers for Students**





Nebraska State Education Association
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Get Ready for Public Schools Week February 26 - March 1, 2024

This month, celebrate the heart of our communities—our public schools!

Join us in the celebration of Public Schools Week from February 26 to March 1, 2024. During this annual advocacy week, Nebraskans are encouraged to share success stories and highlight the vital role that public schools play in providing equitable and quality education for all students.

Public Schools Week brings together Learning First Alliance (LFA) and its partners across the country—representing more than 10 million educators, principals, parents, and community members—to show the strength of our nation’s public schools and our students’ futures.

Help spread the word on social media about the outstanding work happening in public schools by visiting the Public School Proud website at www.publicschoolproud.org where you can sign up for news and updates regarding the webinars

and other activities taking place during Public Schools Week 2024.

Nebraska is Public School Proud!

NSEA's "Public School Proud" campaign launched in fall of 2022 with the help of a grant from the NEA.

The campaign featured a diverse group of Nebraska public school graduates who shared how teachers and their public school education laid the foundation for their success—and how that success benefits their communities.

Lux Middle School teacher and NSEA member Mindy Diller shared her story during the campaign. You can hear Mindy's story and others by visiting www.nsea.org/proud.

Help us build support and share what makes you Public School Proud during Public Schools Week 2024!

Would You Like to Write for The Voice?

Would you like to write an item for *The Voice*? Perhaps an opinion column or an article on what is working in your classroom? Submissions can be classroom-related, humorous, inspiring or otherwise teaching related. Submit your questions about the process, and your topics to us at:

thevoice@nsea.org

On the Cover: Dr. Donna Beegle's insider perspective on poverty has led to impactful work that she uses to guide educators seeking to help students facing the challenges of poverty. More about her story and helpful informational graphic, pages 7-9.



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

JENNI BENSON

WATER IS LIFE



My first water stop of 2024!

Lake Wanahoo State Recreation Area near Wahoo.

Brrrrrr!



As the new year begins many people choose a word to focus on for the year. Last year my word was *Balance*. I did my best to balance the loss of my husband, the demands of being NSEA president, and my growing family.

As the new year began and the Nebraska Legislature started, I considered my word for 2024. Gratitude, Perseverance, Grace and more. I heard a radio personality reflect on the previous year and their word was *Water*.

I have decided *Water* will be my word for 2024. Here is what my Google Assistant bot told me about the word water:

“Water can be seen as a source of inspiration in many ways. Its fluidity and adaptability can symbolize resilience and the ability to overcome obstacles. Its calming and soothing qualities can inspire a sense of peace and tranquility. The power and force of water, as seen in rivers and oceans, can symbolize strength and determination. Additionally, water’s role in sustaining life and its ability to carve out landscapes over time can inspire creativity and the appreciation of natural beauty. Overall, water can serve as a powerful metaphor for various aspects of life and can inspire art, literature, and personal reflection.”

As I travel around Nebraska and the world, I am making it a goal to stop at as many water locations as possible. One exception to this rule will have to be the Platte River. In 10 days, I have crossed the river 12 times! Platte River aside, when I see water, I plan to take time to breathe, walk, reflect, and of

course drink more water. I think we all need to take time for ourselves to recharge to help others.

Helping our students, educators, families, and communities across Nebraska is a top priority of the NSEA. The day before the new year began, I participated in a news conference to encourage the Governor to accept the Federal Summer EBT funding to help feed children. Food, like water, is a basic need for all of us. Nebraska would need to invest \$300,000 for \$18 Million in funding. While the Governor turned down the money, there is a bill in the Legislature to address this—stay tuned.

My news conference comments were picked up by an opinion columnist. In the article, author Alan Guebert asks, “How much food assistance is too much?” He uses my words as an answer. Guebert writes, “Jenni Benson, president of the Nebraska State Education Association, asks the right question of Pillen... “Why would we even question that people and children deserve food?” Why, indeed.”

Educators in Nebraska know about poverty. We all have stories about our students, and even some personal experiences about living with poverty. I’m asking members to please consider attending NSEA’s Poverty Immersion Conference Feb. 24 in Lincoln. Dr. Donna Beegle will lead the training. Registration and details on page 9.

I’m grateful for your work as educators and as I write this—on yet another snowy day—I am grateful for the water which provides the moisture we need.



Photos: Neb. State Board of Education Member Deb Neary supporting public school funding at the April rally to support Nebraska public schools. NEA Director and Omaha Education Association member Edward Ventura holds his "STOP LB753" sign at the rally. Member Tracia Blom with a "Just say No to LB753" sign.

Tax Voucher Proponent Attempts to Deny LB753 Vote

Neb. senator seeks to remove Support Our Schools Nebraska Referendum from Ballot

In early January, months after the Support Our Schools Nebraska (SOSNE) referendum petition was certified for the November 2024 ballot by the Nebraska Secretary of State, State Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn sent a letter seeking to remove the issue from the 2024 ballot.

After verifying thousands of petition signatures collected over the summer by Support Our Schools Nebraska volunteers, Secretary of State Bob Eeven certified the referendum petition in October. In fewer than 90 days, public school supporters gathered 117,415 signatures in more than 60 counties, sending a clear and strong message to the Governor and state lawmakers: Nebraskans want to vote on the issue of diverting public tax dollars to pay for private schools.

Eeven's office made clear in October that the Repeal LB753 referendum petition met all statutory and constitutional requirements to put this issue on the ballot for the voters to decide. Eeven's office has now received Linehan's request to remove it from the ballot. Support Our Schools Nebraska will continue the fight.

"Sen. Linehan has made it clear that she and her billionaire buddies

are afraid to let Nebraskans vote on whether to repeal LB753," said NSEA President Jenni Benson, a sponsor of Support Our Schools Nebraska. "They failed miserably in their attempt to derail the petition drive. This is their latest attempt to try to deny Nebraska voters the right to vote on this issue."

Up to \$100 million tax dollars will be diverted to private schools through LB753 - public funds that

would otherwise be available to help fund Nebraska public schools. The Legislature's own fiscal analysts project an initial reduction of more than \$11 million in state aid to public schools.

"Now, we redouble our efforts to inform Nebraskans of the harm LB753 will cause if it is not repealed," said Benson.

Watch for updates on the status of this ongoing effort in *The Voice*.



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REPUBLICAN RESPONSE

LETTER TO THE EDITOR



Greg Adams



Kathy Campbell



Curt Friesen



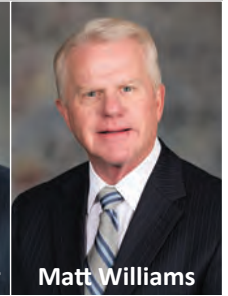
Mike Gloor



John McCollister



Paul Schumacher



Matt Williams

Sunday World-Herald

SUNDAY, JANUARY 21, 2024

WHERE YOUR STORY LIVES

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Respect voters' decision on diverting tax dollars to private schools

MIDLANDS VOICES—*The writers are former Nebraska state senators Greg Adams of York, Kathy Campbell of Lincoln, Curt Friesen of Henderson, Mike Gloor of Grand Island, John McCollister of Omaha, Paul Schumacher of Columbus and Matt Williams of Gothenburg.*

Legislative Bill 753 will be on the ballot in November 2024, and it's up to Nebraska voters now to decide if the state should go forward with a program to divert tax dollars to fund private school tuition.

The bill, passed by the Legislature earlier this year, sets aside \$25 million in state tax credits for annual donations to organizations created to give scholarships to students attending private K-12 schools. The tax credits will cost the state up to \$100 million within a decade, each year reducing Nebraska's general fund which is used to pay for public education, health and human services, and public safety.

Under LB 753, individuals and businesses who make donations to these new private school scholarship organizations qualify for a dollar-for-dollar tax credit on the amount they owe the state up to \$100,000 a year. Estates and trusts can qualify for tax credits of up to \$1 million.

These new tax credits far exceed the tax deductions provided to taxpayers who make contributions to other charities, such as local food banks, the Boys and Girls Clubs, American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, Alzheimer's Association, and other groups. Under LB 753, a \$5,000 donation to these new private school scholarship organizations reduces tax liability by \$5,000, while donations to other charitable organizations save taxpayers only pennies on the dollar.

The program is first-come, first-served and easily accessible only to those well-positioned taxpayers able to swiftly navigate its red tape. For those who qualify for tax credits, they are essentially sending to private school scholarship organizations money that they owe the state.

The Legislature passed LB 753 on May 24 and Gov. Jim Pillen signed the legislation on May 30.

Over the next 90 days, 117,145 Nebraskans sought out petition circulators to say that they wanted to vote on this huge policy change. That's nearly twice the number of petition signatures needed to put the question on the 2024 ballot.

As former senators, we were elected

by Nebraska voters, and we respect the key role voters play as Nebraska's "Second House." We heard regularly from our constituents when we were in office and know they care deeply about their tax dollars, how they are spent and the public services they provide.

Since LB 753 is essentially a workaround to Nebraska's Constitutional prohibition on state dollars going to private schools, voters should get a say, especially given the potential impact not only on the state budget but also on our public schools. The vast majority of Nebraskans are educated in our public schools and they form the backbone of hundreds of communities, both rural and urban.

On Jan. 1, LB 753 became law and we as Nebraskans can begin to assess what it means for K-12 education. Over the coming months, there will be ample opportunity for supporters and opponents of LB 753 to share information on the legislation.

With their signatures, the people of Nebraska have spoken. Now, it's up to them to say whether they want to repeal or retain LB 753 and decide the issue of diverting public tax dollars to private schools.

(As printed in the Omaha World Herald)



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Dr. Donna Beegle gives her keynote address, “An Insider’s Perspective on Growing up in Poverty in America” for NSEA members at the 2023 NSEA University in Kearney.

Learning the Language of Poverty: An Educator’s Role in Breaking Poverty Barriers for Students

Donna Beegle learned to speak a new language as a 28-year-old single mother living on welfare. At the time, she was studying under Dr. Bob Fulford, a 30-year communication professor and founder of the journalism and communication department at University of Portland. He studied and did research on language and social class.

“When he met me, I said ‘ain’t’ in almost every other sentence and did not know when to say ‘gone’ or ‘went,’ ‘seen’ or ‘saw.’ Dr. Fulford said to me, ‘Can I help you learn a second language? And I said, ‘Huh?’”

The “language” that Dr. Fulford was referring to was middle-class sentence structure. Donna didn’t know she wasn’t speaking the same language as her peers.

“I did know that people had trouble hearing me because of the way I talked,” she said. “They would talk around me and over me and about me. Dr. Fulford understood that it didn’t have anything to do with my intellect, but everything to do with how the people around me talked. So, he helped me to learn a second language,” Donna said. “I’m now bilingual and speak fluent middle-class English.”

The Language of Poverty

Donna grew up not knowing the words her teachers used. Her teachers would tell her to “look it up in the dictionary” but Donna only found that the definitions contained five more words she didn’t know. Most of Donna’s family members could not read or write, and they survived in temporary seasonal jobs. In Donna’s world, no one succeeded in education, and she didn’t believe that education was for people like her. She dropped out of high school her freshman year.

“I grew up believing that people didn’t care. But when I got to the university it quickly became clear that people do care about poverty, they just didn’t have a clue what life is like living in poverty,” she said. “They could no more describe what my life was like in generational

migrant-labor poverty than I could describe middle-class norms.”

Communication Barriers

Research has shown that students and families who live in the crisis of poverty communicate and relate differently than their middle-class peers and educators.

“I think you see so many educators trying to motivate students in poverty, without really knowing what motivates them. For instance, when I told my teacher at 15 that I was quitting school, she said, ‘You need to stay in school to get a job.’ Well,

a job to a teacher means something very different than a job to a migrant-labor worker or a minimum-wage worker. I saw people work hard my whole life and they still got evicted. They went hungry. The only thing a job did was take us away from our family. I looked

“I grew up believing that people didn’t care. But when I got to the university, it quickly became clear that people do care about poverty, they just didn’t have a clue what life is like living in poverty.”

— Dr. Donna Beegle

at my teacher and said, 'I don't want a job.' Then my teacher responded from her middle-class experience and said 'You're lazy. You're not motivated. And you won't get anywhere in life with that attitude.' If the teacher had known and understood poverty competencies, she might have broken through the communication barriers. If she had known that my life's dream was to be a good mom, she might have said, 'What if one day you have a child, and that child comes home with schoolwork and needs your help? If you stay in school, you're going to be able to help your child.' That's a completely different motivator than 'stay in school to get a job' when you don't have a frame of reference for a job."

What is Poverty?

The term 'poverty' itself can pose a significant obstacle when attempting to tackle both the symptoms and underlying causes of poverty. If you have ten people in a room and ask them what poverty is, you will come away with ten different definitions.

"There are many policies and programs that are created in ignorance because we use the term 'poverty' so broadly. There are many kinds of poverty; generational poverty is completely different than situational poverty, which is different than working-class poverty, which is different than immigrant poverty, which is different than mixed-class poverty," Donna explained.

"One example of this barrier is from my own experience during my doctoral research. I put out a call for research candidates who had lived in generational poverty and were able to get a bachelor's degree. A student in my department said, 'I'll do your study. I grew up poor.' I said, 'Okay, tell me how your family got by?' He explained, 'My father was a physician. He died when I was 12 years old. I had to go live with my grandparents. I had the right mindset, was motivated, and had a good work ethic. I worked at my grandparents' store and pulled myself up by my bootstraps. I became a doctor just like my dad.'

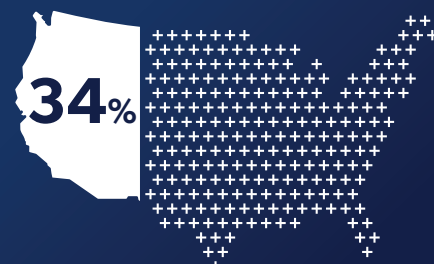
I'm listening to him—through the experience of generational poverty—thinking, 'You knew someone who owned a store and you were related

GENERATIONAL



10 Million

Over the past decade, an average of 10 million U.S. children lived in families with incomes below the poverty line.



Among U.S. children born around 1980 who grew up in families with incomes below or near the poverty line, 34 percent also had low household incomes in adulthood.

Social Security continued to be the most important antipoverty program in 2022, moving 28.9 million people out of poverty.



14.3 Million

The USDA estimated that 11.1% of U.S. household were food insecure in 2018. This means that approximately 14.3 million households had difficulty providing enough food for all their members due to lack of resources.

Source: The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine

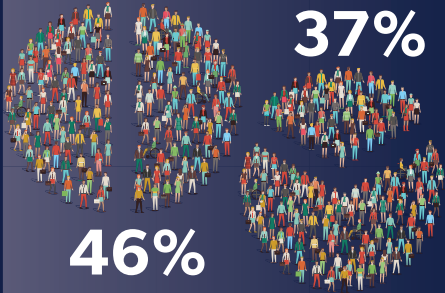
to them? That's not poverty.' He had experienced situational poverty—which is the kind of poverty where you grow up with money and a crisis happens (a divorce, a medical emergency, etc.) and you are thrust into poverty. Before the crisis, you grew up around people who had all their teeth, access to healthcare, middle-class language, etc. But from his point of view, he was taken from his regular life and thrust into something much more akin to poverty. Both

situational and generational poverty are hard. But those from situational poverty have a different set of skills and networks to help them move out and stay out of poverty."

Donna believes that most information on poverty comes from the media, which predominately provides stories that perpetuate myths and stereotypes.

"Some educators have attended a poverty workshop or may have read a book about poverty. But many of

POVERTY TODAY



Close to half (46%) of Native American children and more than one-third (37%) of Black children who grew up in low-income families had low incomes in adulthood.



The poverty rate for people living with a disability was 25.7% in 2018. That's nearly 4 million people living with a disability—in poverty.

7 Key Drivers

Key drivers of generational poverty influence the developmental trajectories of children living in households below the poverty line.



Children's Education



Child & Maternal Health



Family income, wealth & employment



Family Structure



Housing & Neighborhood Environments



Neighborhood Crime & the Criminal Justice System



Child Abuse

Visit: bit.ly/Intergenerational-Poverty-Findings to see the full report

these perspectives are typically from someone who has never lived in poverty or deeply studied its impacts on education," she said.

"Through my work, I help educators, policy makers, and other sectors get a language to actually have a conversation about poverty."

NSEA's Poverty Immersion Conference

NSEA members will have an opportunity to learn the language

of poverty from Dr. Donna Beegle herself on Feb. 24 during a Poverty Immersion Conference in Lincoln. Dr. Beegle will engage participants to challenge the communication and language barriers that get in the way of student success. Conference registration can be found at www.nsea.org/Spring2024

NSEA's Poverty Immersion Conference comes on the heels of a truly bleak time for families in poverty in Nebraska. In late December, Gov.

Pillen opted Nebraska out of a new national child nutrition program that would have delivered an estimated \$18 million in grocery-buying benefits next summer to kids and their families. Recent data from the U.S. Census reveals that in 2022, the national child poverty rate doubled, and the median family income decreased. This coincided with the expiration of various government benefits, including the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, that were implemented during the pandemic.

Surveys conducted by NSEA show that finding ways to help students living in poverty is a top concern for many educators. During her information-packed course, Donna will engage members in interactive activities to raise consciousness and explore how assumptions and judgments may prevent us from breaking barriers.

NSEA Children's Fund

The increased need for resources to help families in crisis of poverty is felt statewide. Nonprofit programs meant to help students, like the NSEA Children's Fund, have helped shoulder the blow.

"We have had a 42% increase in requests so far this year as compared to last year at this same point," said NSEA staff member Karen Hunt, who oversees distribution of the fund. "The top three requests from members have been for clothing and coats, eye exams and help with utility payments."

NSEA created the Children's Fund in 1994, and since then donations to the Fund have provided hundreds of thousands of dollars to help children in need. Contributions to the Children's Fund are tax-deductible, and every penny goes to help children. NSEA covers the administrative costs out of its own budget. Local associations are encouraged to host fundraisers and challenge other associations to contribute to the fund. For more information, to make a donation or to request help for a child in need, call 1-800-742-0047 or go to nsea.org/childrensfund.

LEGISLATURE

NSEA TRACKS BILLS THAT COULD AFFECT PUBLIC EDUCATION

BILL INTRODUCTIONS CONCLUDED

Senators introduced 597 new bills and 11 new constitutional amendments for consideration in the short, 60-day session of the Nebraska Legislature. Because Nebraska operates on a biennial session, bills introduced last year that were not passed or indefinitely postponed carry over into this year's session. This is in addition to the newly introduced bills.

The Governor outlined his budget proposals during his State of the State address on Jan. 18, and the Appropriations Committee has begun working on the state's finances. Your NSEA Government Relations team is hard at work tracking all legislative proposals that could affect public schools, educators and their students.

So far, 130 bills and resolutions have been identified as affecting students, PreK-12 public education, postsecondary education, and state aid to education funding.

Public hearings began on Jan. 22. Millard Education Association President Tim Royers testified on two bills—LB1091 and LB1052—before the Education Committee.

LB1091—Introduced by Glenvil Sen. Dave Murman, LB1091 seeks to ensure school districts provide equal access to any professional employees' organization if the same access is given to one professional employees' organization. LB1091 is a poorly written bill with the expressed purpose of undermining local control and the collective bargaining rights of educators across the state. **NSEA is opposed to LB1091.**

In his testimony, Royers told committee members, "To tell a school district that it must allow ANY outside organization

to come in simply because the district has engaged in collective bargaining flies in the face of local control. It signals that this Legislature does not trust its educators. It signals that this Legislature does not trust the voters and their locally elected school boards."

LB1052—Introduced by Fremont Sen. Lynne Walz, this bill would help offset the personal expense teachers incur providing supplies for their classrooms and students. LB1052 would provide up to \$300 in reimbursement per school year, per teacher for school supplies purchased. **NSEA is in support of LB1052.**

PRIORITY BILLS

A unique aspect of this session is that many senators have already declared their priority bills for the year. That is much earlier than is typical and is likely a signal to the speaker that this group wants their bills scheduled as early as possible. This is a substantial departure from past practice where most senators would wait until closer to the deadline for priority designation, sometime near the middle of the session. This change may be because of some uncertainty over how this session will progress considering last year's filibuster packed session. A list of priority bills can be found at www.bit.ly/4968tsy.

CLOTURE VOTE RULES STAND

Senators concluded floor debate on proposed legislative rule changes with the main issue being how many senators it will take to invoke cloture. Lawmakers successfully avoided attempts to weaken the filibuster.

The current rule requires 33 senators to vote in the affirmative to invoke cloture. If 17 senators vote either no or are present but not voting, the bill will not advance to the next stage of debate.



Royers



DINE AND DISCUSS

Ahead of the convening of the Nebraska Legislature in January, NSEA members from the Capitol District met with senators to share their biggest challenges and concerns with the goal of supporting Nebraska public schools.

The Capitol District Dinner, held on December 14, was attended by NSEA members, NSEA-Retired members, governance leaders, State Board of Education members and senators. Members discussed how teacher and support staff shortages are creating a significant strain on educators, students and schools and the need to address the decades-old, near-last-ranking in state aid to K-12 education. The Metro District Dinner was held virtually in November.

The 2023 session was contentious and saw setbacks to public education in the form of LB753's private school tax voucher scheme and a new, third lid on local school districts. This session, NSEA will push for legislation that expands both the quality and quantity of learning in our public schools, because learning is how we prepare future generations to succeed.

NSEA will fight for the protection of the health – both mental and physical – of students and school staff, and work to help recruit and retain qualified educators.

Stay up-to-date on important information that affects you and public education by subscribing to the Capitol Update at www.nsea.org/subscriber.

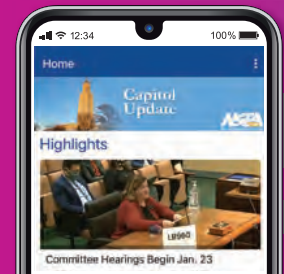


Capitol District Dinner: 1. Sen. Beau Ballard (Dist. 21), LEA members Matt Erb, Kate Regler, Dina Lado Andrea, Nora Lenz and Megan Simsic. 2. (Back) NSEA-Retired President John Heineman, Arlene Rea, Chris Martin, Pat Etherton and Sarah Brown. NSEA-Retired President John Heineman, Arlene Rea, Chris Martin, Pat Etherton and Sarah Brown. (Front) De Tonack, Joe Shandera and Margie Nowak.

Download the NSEA Capitol Update App!



- Receive alerts and calls-to-action during the legislative session.
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The Impact of Teacher Leaders

In Nebraska, the celebration of teacher leadership stands as the foundation of impactful education. This belief is upheld through the Supporting Educator Effectiveness through Development (SEED) System, recognizing teacher leaders as the vital force within schools and systems. Together, Nebraska Teacher and Principal Performance Standards (NTPPS) and SEED empower educators for ongoing development, laying the groundwork for student success.

Defining Leadership

Defining teacher leadership is critical. According to Carol Dweck, the author of "Mindset," teacher leadership involves not only teaching students but also influencing others within the school and beyond through the demonstration of skills. This mindset holds significant importance in the Nebraska SEED system, as it aligns seamlessly with the system's fundamental philosophy of supporting and developing educators to create an environment conducive to student success.

Meaningful Change

SEED places a strong emphasis on leadership and collective efficacy, emphasizing the shared belief among educators that meaningful change in students' lives can be achieved through collaborative efforts. This collective mindset cultivates a culture of collaboration where teachers collaborate to innovate, share best practices, and collectively contribute to the growth and success of the entire educational community. The existence of this environment relies significantly on teacher leaders playing a crucial role in steering this culture of efficacy and collaboration.

The Nebraska Teacher Performance Standards Rubrics identify teacher leadership as a highly effective behavior and highlight those that "lead efforts to develop, test, model, or promote processes" in planning, the classroom environment, instructional strategies, assessment, and professionalism. Teacher leaders not only impart knowledge within a classroom but also influence, inspire and support colleagues. They serve as catalysts for positive change, leveraging their skills to extend their influence throughout the school and beyond.

Teacher leaders stand as exemplars among us, embodying a unique blend of instructional expertise, collaborative spirit, and an unwavering commitment to educational excellence.

Teachers in both rural and urban schools navigate diverse classrooms, address challenges and foster an inclusive educational environment.

Public schools serve as community pillars and teachers have the power to bridge the gap between education and their communities, often taking on roles beyond the classroom.

Teachers as leaders are essential in championing innovative practices, inspiring others, and contributing to growth and success of the educational community in all settings. Their ability to navigate the complexities of diverse environments and lead by example makes them invaluable contributors to the success of the Nebraska education system.

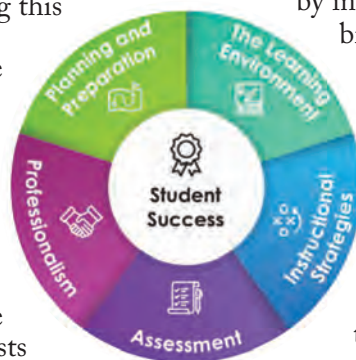
Teacher leaders in the SEED system embrace the dual responsibilities of teaching students and guiding their peers. They actively contribute to the development of a collaborative culture, sharing insights, and working with colleagues to enhance the overall educational experience. Through their leadership, teacher leaders become champions of their craft, demonstrating how empowering educators translates into empowering students.

In the Nebraska SEED System, teacher leadership is not just a role; it is a mindset that embodies the spirit of collaboration, efficacy, and continuous growth. As teachers embrace their role as leaders they contribute to a transformative educational experience for both themselves and their students. SEED's commitment to supporting and developing educators reflects the understanding that by investing in teacher leaders, we pave the way for a brighter future for our students and communities.

The Supporting Educator Effectiveness through Development initiative stands as a testament to the dedication of Nebraska's education community. As it continues to evolve, it empowers educators to believe in their potential to shape young lives and reinforces the collective belief that together, they can inspire lasting educational transformation.

Resources

- You can find a link to the Educator Effectiveness site at www.education.ne.gov/educatoreffectiveness
- The standards can be found at www.bit.ly/NDE-TPPS



About the authors: This article was coauthored by Dr. Julie Downing and Ryan Ricenbaw. Dr. Downing is an Educator Effectiveness Specialist with the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE). Ricenbaw is a Leadership and Learning Network Specialist with NDE.



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Letter of intent date: March 15

Know your rights if asked to sign early

Signing and returning a letter of intent to your district employer is important, but don't let the pressure get to you – especially if you're asked to do so too early.

A letter of intent (and/or accompanying contract) signifies your plan to return to teaching in your district next year. State law allows school districts, on or after March 15 each year, to require certificated employees – teachers, counselors, speech pathologists, psychologists and others – to sign binding letters of intent and/or individual contracts.

Yet some administrators distribute letters – and ask for them back – even before the winter holidays. Often in an effort to get a handle on next year's staffing situation, superintendents might suggest letters be returned by Feb. 1 or March 1.

Knowing your rights is important. Members should not rush to sign, but rather be deliberate and use the time allotted by law. Making a decision months in advance may

cause problems down the road if your personal situation changes.

State statute is clear: A school district cannot require teachers to make a commitment before March 15.

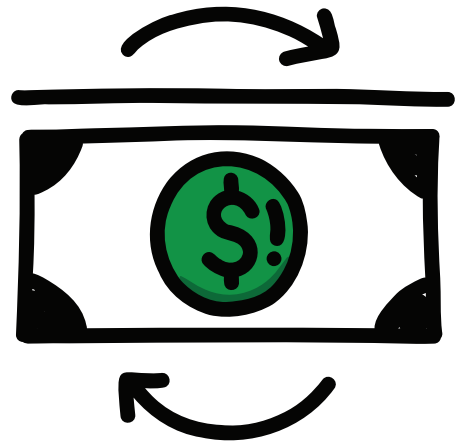
However, failure to sign and return the letter by stated deadlines that fall **on** or **after** March 15 is a threat to a teacher's employment.

If administrators distribute such a letter or contract prior to March 15 and ask for its return prior to March 15, a local association representative should fax a copy to their assigned NSEA organizational specialist at 1-402-475-2630.

In the meantime, an appropriate response to the letter is "I don't know yet" or "I'm not sure."

Letters that ask for a signature and return **on** March 15 or on a specified date **after** March 15 are appropriate. In such cases, it is vital to sign and return it by the due date.

Have questions? Call NSEA at 1-800-742-0047 to speak with your region's organizational specialist.



IMPORTANT REMINDER

Request PAC Refund by Feb. 15, 2024

NSEA's Political Action Committee is supported by voluntary donations collected with NSEA dues. Support for the election of recommended candidates is provided by an annual contribution of \$15 from each NSEA member.

Any member may request a refund of those contributions for the current membership year. Alternatively, members may direct the \$15 contribution to be used for bond elections and school ballot issues only.

Refund requests must be in writing to NSEA President Jenni Benson. Each letter must be individually composed and contain an original signature of the member. Photocopied, computer-generated letters or email messages are not accepted. Each letter must indicate whether all or part of the contribution is to be refunded or designated for ballot issues.

Requests must be postmarked no later than Feb. 15, 2024. In order to efficiently use dues dollars, requests for refunds received by the due date will be processed and mailed in a single batch after that date.

Send requests to NSEA President Jenni Benson at 605 S. 14th St., Lincoln, NE 68508. For questions, email Jenni.Benson@nsea.org or call NSEA at 1-800-742-0047.

BINGO!

Educators: This two in one Bingo! card game is a fun way to teach second through fifth graders about the many useful items made from pig and soybean by-products. The "Pork" game is on one side of the card, the "Soy" game on the other. The free Bingo kit includes game tokens, worksheets, call-out-cards, and a classroom poster.

The Nebraska Pork Producers Association is proud to offer this educational resource and several others, all available to you for **FREE**.

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Order your Bingo! kit today by visiting neporkeducation.com or scan the QR code.

PORK BINGO!

SOY BINGO!

Sandhills District FINANCIAL SEMINAR



In November, more than 20 members of the Nebraska State Education Association (NSEA) representing more than four local associations convened in Broken Bow for the Sandhills Financial Seminar. The purpose of the seminar was to discuss strategies for enhancing wages, securing benefits, and improving the overall teaching and learning conditions, as part of the gathering.

There are countless reasons membership in your professional association is a good idea and help with navigating your financial future is just one element.

NSEA Organizational Specialist Mike Weisen provided insights into the Nebraska Public Employees Retirement System (NPERS). Mary Oestmann from Security Benefit offered an overview of resources provided by the National Education Association (NEA) to assist educators in planning for their future.

Attendance at the seminar, which aimed to address financial concerns, was complimentary for members. NEA Director Renae Noble also presented valuable information on NSEA's Political Action Committee during the event.

Last chance to apply for a 2024 Belz, Lynch, Krause Grant!

Good teachers are always looking to improve their skill set, and the NSEA makes learning easier with an award from the Belz, Lynch, Krause Educational Grant Fund. The 2024 application deadline is Friday, March 1.

Grants are awarded for projects related to improving a local association, development of instructional materials or for staff development for individuals of a local association. Eligible recipients are any NSEA member, group of NSEA members or any NSEA local association.

The application must include an abstract of the project (not to exceed four typed pages) including the following information:

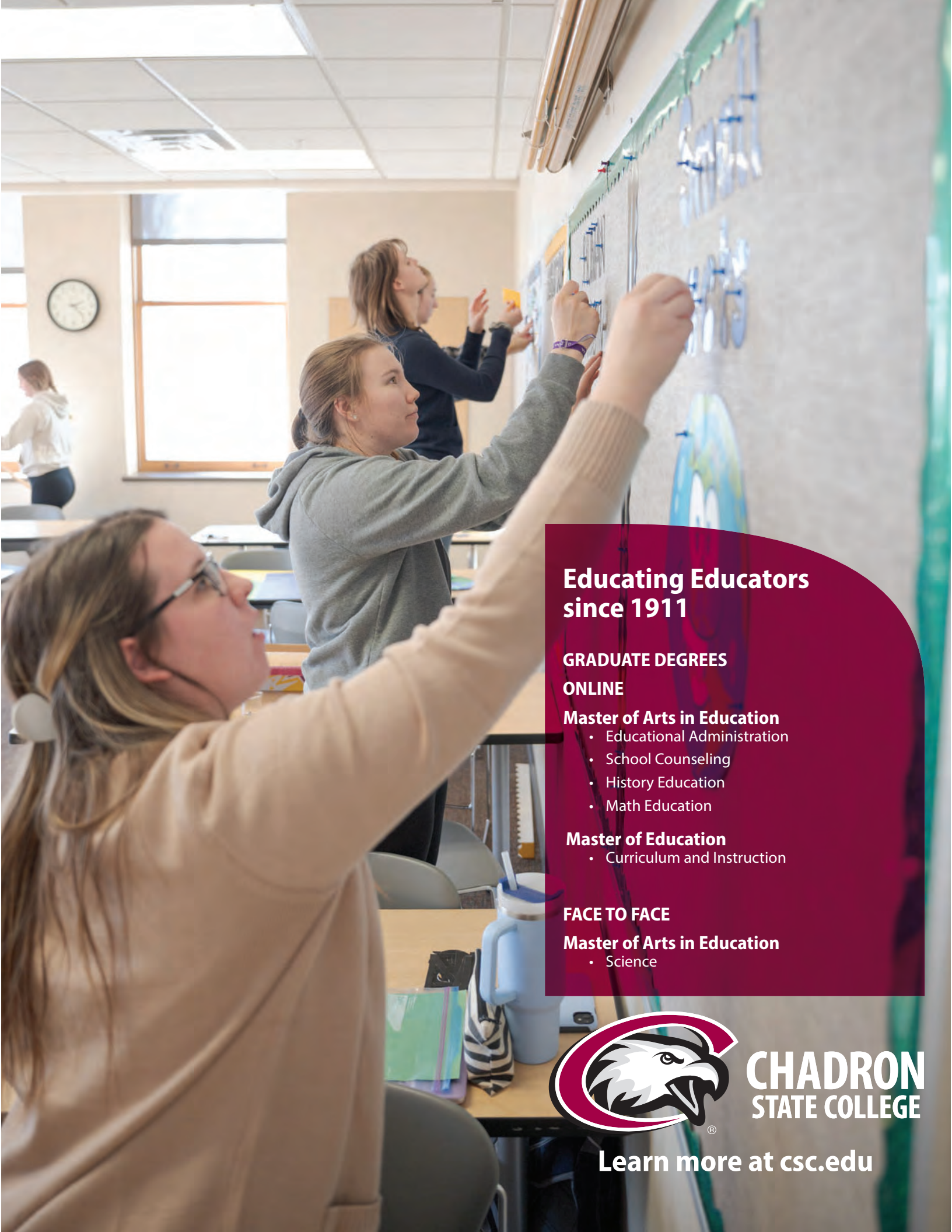
- need;
- how the project will address that need and relate to professional growth goals;
- project description;
- timeline;
- a budget statement; and
- methods of evaluating project success.

Applications must be submitted online by 11:59 p.m. CST on March 1, 2024. Recipients will be notified in March.

A letter describing and evaluating the project must be submitted by the recipients to NSEA's Scholarship and Grants Committee within three months of project completion.

The grants are named for John Lynch, NSEA's executive director from 1959 to 1974; Paul Belz, executive director from 1974 to 1984; and Helen Krause, NSEA president in 1966 and the first Nebraskan to serve on NEA's Executive Committee.

Further details and the application form can be found at www.nsea.org/BLK. For questions, contact Chris Garcia at 1-800-742-0047 or email Chris.Garcia@nsea.org.



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NSEA Executive Officers and staff stand for the Pledge of Allegiance at the April 2023 Delegate Assembly.

DELEGATE ASSEMBLY AHEAD Let's Get Down to Business

The Delegate Assembly is NSEA's annual business meeting where elected members representing local associations across the state gather to manage the Association's business and shape its future.

Members representing local associations large and small are elected to attend and represent the NSEA's 26,000 members. Plans are underway for the 2024 Delegate Assembly – the 164th assembly in NSEA history. The Assembly will be held as an in-person gathering April 19-20 at Lincoln's Embassy Suites Hotel.

A keynote speaker, discussion of educational issues and consideration of updates to NSEA Bylaws and Resolutions are all part of the assembly action. Watch for details in upcoming editions of *The Voice*.

The event also features an awards presentation, recognizing the Early Career Educator of the Year, Educational Support Professional of the Year, Teaching Excellence Award recipient, NSEA's 2024 Friend of Education, and more. See award details and deadlines in the right-hand column on this page.

Members must be elected by their local association in order to attend as a delegate to the assembly. To make your interest in serving as a delegate known, contact your local association president, your local association building or faculty representative or your NSEA organizational specialist.

NSEA is the state's oldest professional association and has held a Delegate Assembly almost every year since, and in some cases, twice a year.



NOMINATE COLLEAGUES FOR TOP HONORS

Any NSEA member may nominate a member teacher, Education Support Professional or deserving group. Members are eligible for:

- **Early Career Educator:** To honor a teacher who has excelled in their first five years of teaching.
- **Award for Teaching Excellence:** Honors a teacher who has excelled in the classroom over a period of time.
- **Education Support Professional of the Year:** Honors an ESP who has excelled in their job. Finalists will be notified in March, with winners announced at the Assembly. Recipients receive a \$250 cash award.
- **Community Service:** Honors NSEA members or local associations involved in volunteer work outside of classroom hours.
- **Local Public Relations:** Honors local associations for outstanding internal communication.

Members can also nominate individuals or groups for these awards:

- **The Great Plains Milestone:** Honors an individual or group for promoting human and civil rights.
- **Administrator of Excellence:** Honors a public school administrator who strives every day to help students and staff be successful.
- **Friend of Education:** NSEA's highest honor is presented in recognition of an individual or organization that has made a statewide contribution to education or to Nebraska educators.
- **Outstanding Media:** Honors a newspaper, television or radio station for coverage of education issues and promotion of public education.

Nominations may be submitted online at www.nsea.org/DA or mailed to NSEA Awards, 605 S. 14 St., Lincoln, NE 68508-2742. All nomination materials must be received at the NSEA office no later than 5 p.m. on February 16, 2024.

Two Great Spring Conferences

NSEA is thrilled to offer members an invitation for our upcoming series of conferences, each designed to enrich and empower educators in their professional journey. Here's what's in store:

March 8-9: Thriving Together

"Teaching Character Strengths & Life Skills"

Keynote Speaker: Paul Reynolds of FableVision Learning

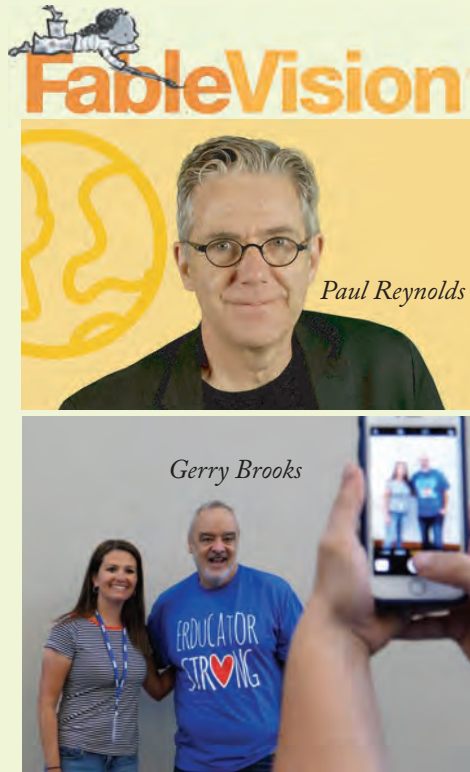
Location: Omaha Public Schools and Gretna East High School

March 23: Uniting Generations

NSEA Educator Development

Keynote Speaker: Gerry Brooks

Location: Crowne Plaza Kearney



Find more details and register today at nsea.org/Spring2024



Apply today for a Summer Food Service Grant

Children need good food all year long, even when they are not in school. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides healthy meals to children, ages one to 18, free of charge.

School, tribal and local governments, community organizations and private nonprofits can apply to be sponsors to operate meal sites in low-income areas, or in locations that serve a group of mostly low-income children, or operate a summer camp with a high proportion of low-income participants.

SFSP sites are needed statewide, especially in underserved communities located in higher need areas of the following counties: Brown, Franklin, Grant, Harlan, Hayes, Hitchcock, Logan, McPherson, Red Willow, Rock, Red Willow, Sheridan, and Sioux.

NDE has grant funds available to assist new and existing SFSP sponsors with expenses for expanding and/or initiating SFSP services. Each applicant may apply for a maximum of \$15,000 per year. The deadline to apply for a grant is March 29, 2024.

To verify your eligibility, contact the NDE at 402-471-2488 (Lincoln) or 1-800-731-2233 (outside of Lincoln).

Access the online grant application at www.education.ne.gov/ns/sfsp/news/ or scan the QR Code in the sandwich above.

Free Simply Swine Fact Sheet!

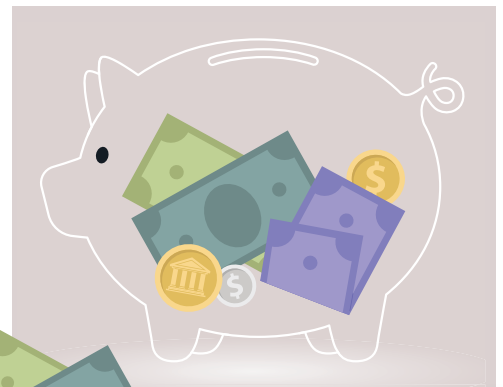
Attention, middle school and high school educators: Nebraska pig farmers have created a worksheet just for your students.

This four-page worksheet, *Simply Swine*, gives your students the opportunity to learn fun facts about pigs, identify breeds, be able to distinguish between facts and "hogwash," learn pork jargon, and identify the section of the pig that gives us our favorite pork products. Plus, they'll get a recipe for grilling a tasty pork burger.

The Nebraska Pork Producers Association is proud to offer this educational resource for FREE!

Order your *Simply Swine* worksheets today by scanning this QR code or visiting neporkeducation.com





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1. NEA-vetted student loan forgiveness tool for teachers provides trusted sources that give you legitimate options.
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4. If you need additional help, you can access student loan forgiveness experts via telephone or chat.
5. Receive a complete list of relevant debt-relief programs based on your situation.
6. Prevent errors and improve your odds of qualifying for student loan forgiveness programs by e-filing your paperwork.

To learn more about NEA Student Debt Navigator visit www.neamb.com.

NEA Member Benefits has partnered with Rakuten to bring you the NEA Discount Marketplace giving teachers the ability to earn Cash Back while shopping at your favorite online stores.

Place an order with an eligible merchant through

Cash Back links in the NEA Discount Marketplace and Cash Back will automatically be added to your Rakuten account!

Check deals in February and search retailers at www.neamb.com/marketplace!



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TRISH GUINAN

Message from the Executive Director

Time for a Change

The successful evolution of an educator only happens when they do what's best for students and commit to improving the practices and the systems that support those students. Fostering improvements in teacher practices, ensuring accountability, and recognizing when current strategies are no longer beneficial to public schools, students or educators are important.

During my time as Executive Director and in my previous role of Advocacy Director, I have had a front row seat as the tactics and methods of accountability within the Nebraska Professional Practices Commission have grown outdated and ineffective as a system of accountability for educators. There are changes needed to the Nebraska Professional Practices Commission (NPPC) and the 2024 Legislative Session is the appropriate time for that change.

The NPPC In-Theory

The NPPC, in theory and according to its mission statement, is to develop and enforce standards of professionalism for Nebraska educators. This includes ethical and professional performance, competency, and continuation in professional service. The NPPC is made up of 12 members appointed by the Governor who are representative of elementary and secondary teachers, school administrators and postsecondary education. NSEA is in favor of the NPPC's mission, full stop.

Here's how the NPPC is supposed to work: As a body, NPPC has developed criteria for ethical and professional performance, competency, and contractual obligations for those holding certificates in Nebraska. The criteria developed by the NPPC covers classroom teachers, administrators and supervisors holding public school certificates.

A case is brought before the NPPC following an investigation and petition filed by the Commissioner of Education alleging violations of the professional standards for educators. A

hearing is then held before the NPPC which results in a finding of fact and nonbinding recommendation to the State Board of Education. The State Board of Education considers the action recommended by the NPPC and renders a final decision. In theory, this should be an adequate method of accountability for certificated educators—but the NPPC in practice falls short.

The NPPC In-Practice

The NPPC in practice has become a drawn-out process that can loom over educators for months – and sometimes more than a year – as they await the findings of an investigation and their hearing before the NPPC (the NPPC generally convenes only four times a year). The infrequency of the NPPC's meeting schedule creates a bottleneck of petitions and the need for the NPPC to hear multiple cases in a single, day-long meeting. With limited time to present their case, educators' livelihood and reputation are left hanging in the balance. The nonbinding nature of the NPPC's recommendation allows the State Board of Education to give whatever, if any, deference to the NPPC it chooses. It is not uncommon for the State Board of Education to impose a sanction different from that recommended by the NPPC. Lastly, the NPPC is expensive. In 2023, teacher certification fees increased from \$55 to \$75 with a percentage of each certificate fee being siphoned away to pay for the NPPC's expenses. Those expenses are significant, even though the commission members are not paid.

LB1306 eliminates the NPPC and provides for petitions filed by the Commissioner to be heard by a hearing officer who will make findings of fact and recommendations to the State Board of Education. By utilizing a hearing officer, cases will be heard in a more timely manner and will allow adequate time for certificated educators to present their defenses. It will also result in lower teacher certification fees. NSEA supports LB1306.

“
There are changes needed to the Nebraska Professional Practices Commission and the 2024 Legislative Session is the appropriate time for that change.
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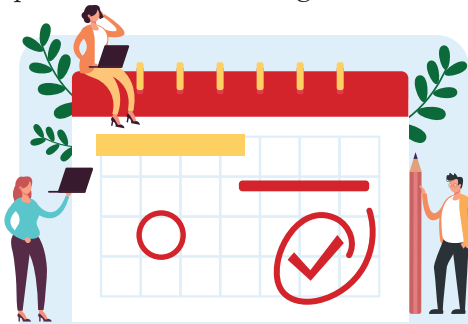
NSEA-Retired Elections Coming Soon!

Filing deadline is Feb. 5

Consider running for one of the leadership roles in NSEA-Retired. Candidate filing for the upcoming elections is available online at nsea.org/retired. Filing deadline is Monday, Feb. 5, 2024.

Open positions on the Retired Board of Directors, each for a three-year term, are Metro-1 District Director and Capitol-2 District Director.

Probable numbers for NSEA Delegate Assembly will be four delegates from Capitol District, five from Metro, three from Tri-Valley, two from Elkhorn, one from Panhandle, one from Sandhills and two at-large. NEA Representative Assembly delegates will include one from the Capitol and Metro districts combined, one from the remaining four districts and out-of-state members combined, and three at-large delegates. NSEA-Retired President John Heineman serves as a delegate at both DA and RA by virtue of office. Candidates are encouraged to provide a 50-word statement with their applications. All of these positions take office Aug. 15, 2024.



MARK YOUR CALENDAR

- February 5**
Deadline to File
- February 16**
Award Nominations Due
- April 19-20**
NSEA Delegate Assembly
- July 3-7**
NEA Representative Assembly



SAVE-THE-DATE, ADVENTURE AWAITS! NSEA- RETIRED SPRING CONFERENCE

Plans are underway for the NSEA-Retired Spring Conference this April! This year members will gather at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park, located near Ashland on Thursday, April 18.

The park is set along the Platte River and provides stunning views of the surrounding landscape. The park will host members and invited guest speakers. The event is free for all members and \$10 for guests. Registration will be open soon at nsea.org/retired under Calendars, Events & Registrations. More details will be available in the March edition of *The Voice*.

NSEA-Retired Advocate or the NSEA Voice magazine?

Send your idea to
John Heineman:
[**RingoJohn@aol.com**](mailto:RingoJohn@aol.com)

Elect
Margie Nowak
to the
NSEA-Retired Board,
Capitol District



The Gift of Health

For more information, visit ehaplan.org.

New Option for Retired Educators

New EHA plan provides out-of-pocket savings for retirees.

The Educators Health Alliance (EHA) Board of Directors has approved a new health insurance option for some early retirees and other members in the Direct Bill plan. The EHA is a consortium of three statewide public school groups that manages the medical and dental insurance plans used by nearly every Nebraska school district.

Currently, EHA's lowest deductible plan for early retirees provides a \$1,050 deductible. Come Sept. 1, 2024, members may select a plan with a \$400 deductible packaged with one of the two alternate networks in the regions of Nebraska where they are available. The two networks are Premier Select BlueChoice and Blueprint Health.

"The EHA Board continues to look for cost-savings for its members, and we are pleased to be able to offer these alternate network options with lower out-of-pocket costs to our retired members," said Board Chair Trish Guinan.

Earlier this fall, the EHA Board of Directors voted to limit the 2024 rate increase for its medical and dental plans to only 1.99%. The rate increase takes effect Sept. 1, 2024, and there will be no benefit changes made to any of the plan designs.

"Given the rate of inflation, we are pleased we've been able to maintain our streak of more than 20 years without a double-digit increase in rates and to average an increase of 4.45% for the

last decade," said Beth Kernes Krause, EHA Vice Chair and Auburn Public Schools Board of Education member.

"The EHA Board understands the financial concerns of our members as well as the fiscal constraints facing school districts," said Colby Coash, associate executive director of the Nebraska Association of School Boards. "With 80,000 members in the plan, EHA has the largest risk pool in the state, which allows more predictability and stability in rates. This benefits both districts and individuals and their families."

The Educators Health Alliance is a non-profit corporation that was created to procure quality, affordable healthcare insurance for Nebraska educational employees. The rates set by the EHA Board are for the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Nebraska (BCBSNE) healthcare plan used by more than 400 public school districts and affiliate groups in the state. The plan is governed by a 12-member board representing the Nebraska Association of School Boards, the Nebraska Council of School Administrators, and the Nebraska State Education Association. More than 80,000 Nebraskans are covered by the plan, making it the largest health plan in the state.

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Health benefits for EHA are provided by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Nebraska, an independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association.

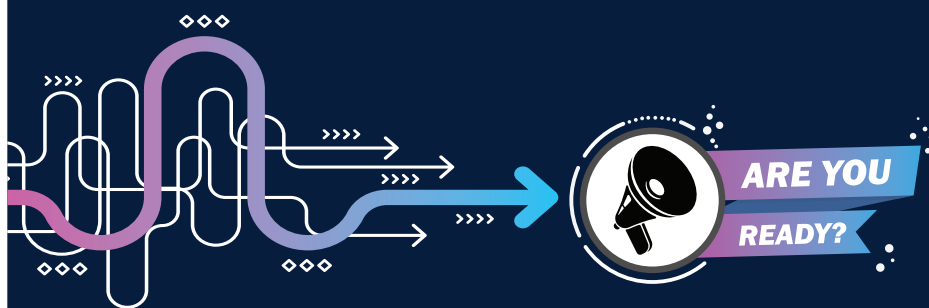
Speaking of Education

“The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.”

— Alice Walker, novelist and social activist

Mailed By: The Nebraska State Education Association
605 S. 14th St., Lincoln, NE 68508-2742

File for NSEA office, and get ready to **VOTE!**



Is it time to step forward and consider a leadership role in your association?

Starting Friday, Feb. 16, NSEA members will vote for candidates to fill dozens of district leadership posts, as well as openings on the NSEA's Board of Directors. Electees will assume roles in determining the Association's future. But first, those candidates must file.

The positions of NSEA President and EMAC and Higher Ed will all be up for election for three-year terms at the April 2024 Delegate Assembly. Candidates for these offices must declare their candidacy by Thursday, Feb. 15, in writing to NSEA Executive Director Trish Guinan at trish.guinan@nsea.org.

The window for filing for NSEA District offices opened Jan. 1 and closes Sunday, Feb. 4. To view the vacancies

and to file, go to nsea.org and click on the 2024 District Elections link. Select your district, and then select the office of interest.

Candidates will need their 10-digit NSEA membership number. That number can be found above your name on the mailing label of *The Voice*.

All NSEA members are eligible to vote for district officers and Representative Assembly At-Large delegates. Voting will be available online from Friday, Feb. 16 to Sunday, March 10. All members are eligible to vote for their local association delegates to the NSEA Delegate Assembly.

Clustered locals will vote March 10-19. Locals with more than 26 members, talk with your local president for your local election timeline. Call NSEA for more information at 1-800-742-0047.

February is Black History Month

Feb. 1 marks the start of Black History Month, bringing opportunities for critical reflection and honest conversation with our students about our history.

Check out and share this curated list of Black History Month classroom resources that includes a podcast with NEA member and social studies teacher Kevin Adams on teaching Black history more meaningfully.

Scan the QR code to find ideas or visit:

www.bit.ly/BlackHistory-NEA-List



BLACK HISTORY MONTH