

# *The* VOICE

Nebraska State Education Association • March 2021



- **Loan Forgiveness for Student Teachers**
- **Remote Instruction**
- **Epidemic Pay for ESPs**
- **Reliable Internet**
- **Voucher Schemes**

## MEMBERS TESTIFY



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# Receive a Reduction in Force Notice? Call NSEA

Some of Nebraska teachers may receive Reduction in Force (RIF) notices on or before April 15 this year. These notices inform a teacher that his or her contract may not be renewed for the coming year.

However, thanks to specific state legislation proposed by NSEA years ago, there is a procedure that allows a teacher to ensure that the Reduction in Force process is followed correctly and fairly.

In some instances, the process can result either in saving the teacher's job or in creating other options for the teacher.

NSEA Director of Advocacy Trish Guinan says that upon receiving a RIF notice, teachers should contact NSEA.

There's also a second 'must' for teachers who want to preserve their rights when facing a RIF: always request a

hearing. Doing so gives NSEA time to help the teacher sort out options. But the hearing must be requested within seven days of receiving the RIF notice (five days for community college faculty).

"The only way to preserve the rights of the teacher affected is to request a hearing. Doing so gives us time to sort out the issues and help the member make the best possible decision on how to proceed," Guinan said.

As soon as a teacher receives an RIF notice, the teacher should scan and email a copy of the notice to their organizational specialist. Find your specialist at [www.nsea.org/field-staff-units](http://www.nsea.org/field-staff-units).

Once a copy of the RIF notice is received at NSEA headquarters, the NSEA staff will provide a written request for a hearing to the affected member.

Guinan also offered this advice: "Teachers receiving settlement or buyout offers in lieu of a hearing should contact the NSEA before agreeing to anything."

If you have questions concerning the RIF process, contact your organizational specialist. NSEA headquarters can be reached toll-free at 1-800-742-0047.



**Guinan**

## 2021 NEA Conference Offered Free to ESPs

The 2021 NEA Education Support Professional National Conference will be virtual March 19-21, and free for 2,000 NEA ESPs to attend.

"This is the premier professional development opportunity for ESPs across the nation," NSEA President Jenni Benson said.

The conference will offer up to 30 live and 15 on-demand professional learning opportunities over three days. Participants will have opportunities to network and share best practices and strategies with peers.

The conference is offered to NEA members only. Registration opened in February and is free, but will be capped at 2,000 participants confirmed on a first come, first served basis. All workshop sessions will be 75 minutes in length and will be held in the afternoons on Saturday, March 20, and Sunday, March 21.

The conference will be followed by the NEA ESP of the Year celebration on Friday, March 26. Details may be found at:

[www.nea.org/esconference](http://www.nea.org/esconference)

## Would You Like to Write for The Voice?

Would you like to write an item for *The Voice*? Would you like to write 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](mailto:thevoice@nsea.org)

**On the Cover:** NSEA members spoke to senators at the Capitol in support of expanded broadband services, paying education support professionals during epidemics, student loan forgiveness and more in February. See more on page 7.

# Vaccines and the Tax Treadmill



**NSEA President  
Jenni Benson**

“

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”

Some of you may have noticed that we've gone toe-to-toe with the governor in recent weeks on some quite important issues. Advocating for the best possible outcome is NSEA's responsibility.

COVID-19 vaccines for educators and fundamental support for public schools have been addressed. We can now add property taxes to that list. More on property taxes in a moment; first let's talk about the pandemic.

While we understand that state officials have multiple priorities and are struggling to address this hopefully once in a lifetime event, we're frustrated with the state's moving-target-of-a-plan for distribution of the COVID-19 vaccines for educators.

Last fall, Gov. Pete Ricketts put teachers on the essential worker list, supporting a statewide directed health measure that allowed educators who come in close contact with someone who tests positive for the virus to remain on the job. Being an essential worker who is to continue working even after exposure, however, has not translated into any kind of organized approach to early vaccinations for educators. We have pushed hard for those school employees who want to be vaccinated, but as of this writing, little progress has been made. School employees are left feeling expendable, not essential.

Among other efforts, I sent every local association president in the state a template for a letter they can send to their local health department, offering the local association's assistance in distribution and administration of the vaccines.

It is vital that, to slow the virus spread, educators get vaccinated early. Read more about your Association's efforts on page 5.

## Step Off the Treadmill

In his weekly column dated Feb. 2, Ricketts talked of stopping "the property tax treadmill."

To tell the truth, we're not so fond of that treadmill either. It seems every year we see more trite and tired candidates step on the treadmill and vow "action" on property taxes. And every year, "new" ideas are proffered in the legislature that promise to fix the property tax issue. Many are not well thought out, and most would do more harm than good to public schools and other essential public services.

The governor is in full support of the notion that local spending, pointedly, spending by local school districts, is out of control. Thus, he is in full support of both LB408 and LR22CA, two peas-in-a-pod proposals that would put a strict 3 percent property tax lid on all political subdivisions – not just schools – either in statute (LB408) or the constitution (LR22CA). Never mind that school boards are the only political subdivisions in the state that currently operate under two spending constrictions: levy limits and spending lids. The Ricketts plan puts a 3 percent cap on what school districts can raise through

property taxes – and we all know property taxes are the main source of revenue for schools.

Ricketts alleges that property taxes have risen 4.3 percent annually and 51.8 percent total since 2010. What he omits is that state aid to schools has barely moved since 2010. In 2010, state aid to schools was at \$1.009 billion. This year, it is at \$1.043 billion, a miniscule increase at best, and that's over 11 years. In fact, six times since 2009-10, state aid dollars have been cut from the previous year.

Our suggestion is that if Ricketts and others hope to solve the property tax issue, they step off the property tax treadmill and begin working toward a comprehensive approach to taxation that benefits every citizen, every public institution, and in particular, every child in Nebraska.

## Hurtful Remarks

While we should have come to expect such an approach by now, like most other Nebraska educators, I was still surprised by Ricketts' late January remarks.

When asked whether he would sign a proclamation celebrating Public Schools Week, Ricketts said no, that education-related proclamations issued by his office focus on "excellence and choice."

The governor's comment was offensive and wrong-headed. Nebraska public schools clearly do, in fact, provide both excellence and choice.

Ricketts' remarks are more than hurtful to the 330,000 children attending and the 28,000-plus teachers, 1,200-plus administrators and thousands of education support professionals working in our Nebraska public schools.

His words were also demeaning, coming from an official who is elected to serve every Nebraskan.

He ignored that Nebraska public schools collectively rank as the sixth best in the country by U.S. News and World Report and 11th best in the nation by Forbes.

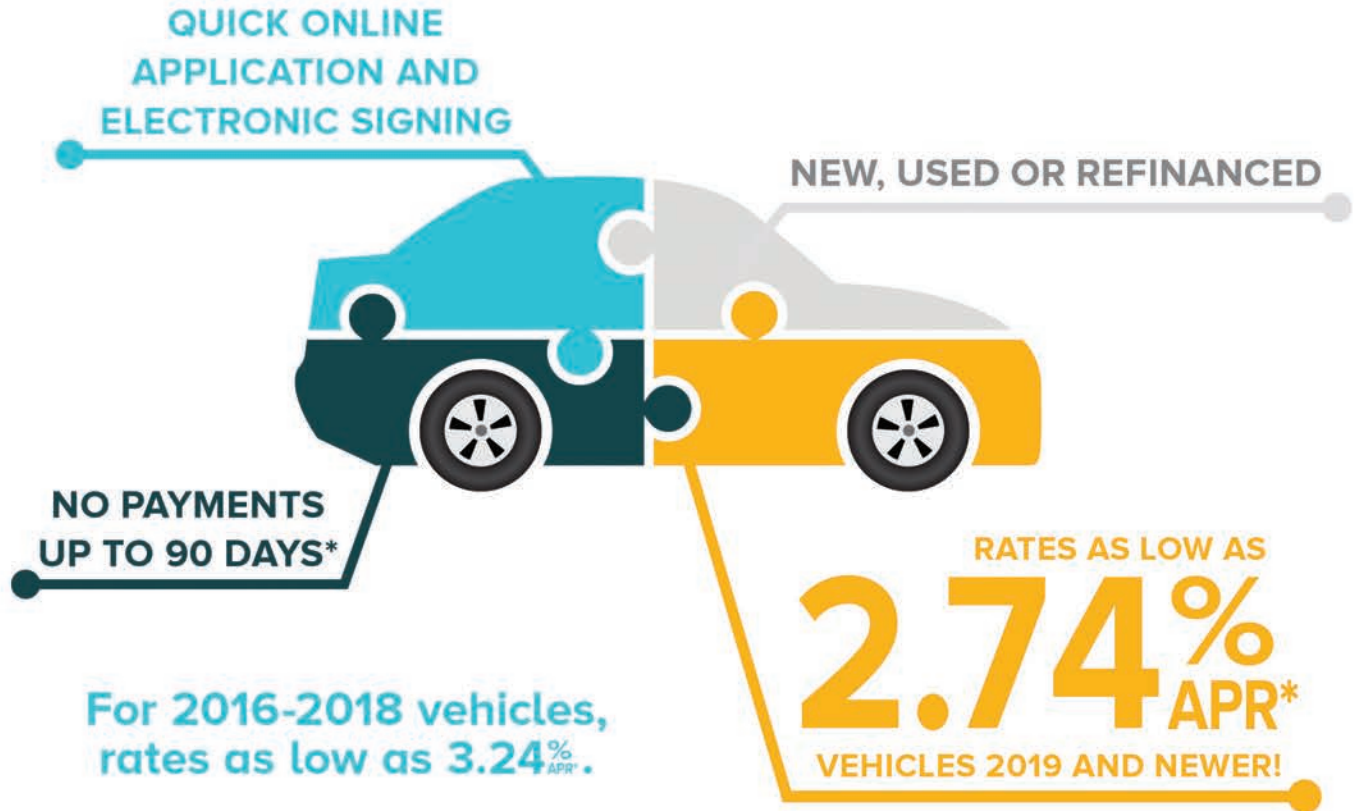
He ignored the fact that graduation rates in Nebraska have risen for each of the last four years. He ignored that the composite ACT scores of Nebraska students rank only behind Wisconsin and Utah among states where 100 percent of students take the ACT.

The governor also knows, and ignores, that there are almost no limits on school choice in Nebraska. If there is room in the accepting school district, an Omaha kid can transfer to Elkhorn. A Norfolk kid can transfer to Stanton. A Maxwell kid could transfer to North Platte.

Adding insult to injury, just days after jilting public schools with his "excellence and choice" remarks, Ricketts signed a proclamation touting School Choice Week. Just days later, on February 4, he signed a proclamation honoring Catholic Schools Week.

Ironically, not mentioned at all in either instance was the 154-year-old Gold Standard of excellence and choice in Nebraska: our great public schools.

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# NSEA Supports Members in Fight for Vaccines

## Association Pushes to Keep Teachers Safe

Getting school employees vaccinated for COVID-19 has been a struggle for months, though the thousands of Nebraska teachers and support professionals have been deemed “essential workers.”

Originally in the top tier of essential workers to receive the vaccine, that status meant little. On Feb. 11, state officials pushed teachers further down the priority list, even removing them from some pharmacies’ vaccine registries.

“We were pleased when Governor Ricketts and DHHS Incident Commander Angie Ling said in multiple press reports that 10 percent of the vaccine doses would be set aside for infrastructure workers, including school employees,” the NSEA wrote in a letter to Ricketts co-signed by NSEA President Jenni Benson and Executive Director Maddie Fennell.

“Our hope was that this 10 percent would be set aside across the state and that health districts would begin work to develop a plan to distribute that 10 percent to school employees and other infrastructure workers.

“Unfortunately, our research on this distribution has found that this is not being done uniformly and educators are being bypassed. Some health districts have been excellent at setting aside the 10 percent. Others have completely ignored the directive or have not yet devised a specific plan that is being communicated effectively.”

The directive to set aside 10 percent of vaccines came on Jan. 29. That 10 percent was to go to infrastructure workers in Phase 1B of the state’s vaccine rollout plan, which includes health care workers, first responders and utility workers, as well as school employees who, unlike in other states, have been predominately teaching in-person since August.

In a Feb. 12 press conference, Ricketts expressed frustration that the federal government has begun its own rollout plan, working with pharmacies to deliver separate doses of the vaccine in addition to what has been allocated through state governments.

Ricketts said the pharmacy rollouts were “ill thought out by the federal government,” and said the state had no control over that program.

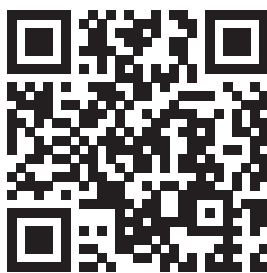
However, teachers across the state have registered for vaccines at their local



### Sign Up to Get the Vaccine

NSEA created a map of Public Health Departments across Nebraska. Use your smartphone to scan the QR code below to open the map. Click the location marker of a department near you to find details on how to register for a vaccine. You can also access the map at:

[www.bit.ly/NEVaccineMap](http://www.bit.ly/NEVaccineMap)



pharmacies, only to learn later that their names have been pulled from the list.

From Feb. 12 to 15, more than 300 teachers emailed the governor through the NSEA’s Action Center, asking him to prioritize teachers and detailing the effects of COVID-19 on their students and families.

### Essential, But At Risk

In a Sept. 1 Directed Health Measure, the State of Nebraska declared teachers essential workers, which puts them in a tough spot – at the front of classrooms – if they can’t get vaccinated.

Ricketts said people ages 65 and older will continue to be at the top of the list, along with health care workers, first responders and utility workers – but not teachers, unless they’re over age 65 or have health conditions that put them at high risk.

Later in February, even those persons under age 65 with co-morbidities were moved down the priority list.

He said it could take another three to four months to get through Phase 1B,

which means some teachers could be without vaccines until May or June.

Yet some teachers received their shots in January because extra doses were available in their communities at the end of vaccination clinics.

### ‘Stay in School’

In a television interview Feb. 1 with Omaha’s KETV, Benson said she believes the state should treat teachers the same as other essential workers who are being prioritized in the first tier of the Phase 1B vaccination plan.

“(Ricketts) said, ‘You will stay in school. You will not quarantine if you’ve had close contact if this, this and this happens. You will wear a mask. You will take your temperature. You will do these things and you will continue to put yourself and your family at risk as well as the students,’” Benson said.

She said Nebraska needs to do a better job to get teachers vaccinated – and to do it fairly while balancing other prioritized populations.

“I want our state leadership to step up and look at it in an equitable way,” Benson said.

Tim Royers, president of the Millard Education Association, told the Lincoln Journal Star that the lack of vaccines is having a “demoralizing effect” on teachers. Millard schools have held classes in-person all school year.

Royers said teachers would be an easy group to vaccinate because they’re already at school and could file through a vaccination line quickly if doses were available.

### Local Associations Can Help

The NSEA drafted a letter template in early February and sent it to all local education associations to use in contacting their local health department officials. The letter highlights the association’s willingness to help with distribution and administration of vaccines.

“Our organization and our members stand ready to work with you to help address any logistical or coordination issues that may exist,” the letter says.

Benson said school districts have what it takes to get the vaccines into arms efficiently and that most teachers are more than ready for their turn.

“We are saying, ‘Let us as an association help you,’” she said. “School districts are saying, ‘We have gymnasiums. We have school nurses. We have ability to figure these things out.’”

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**Speaking for Student Teachers:** Alicia Laufenberg shared her story with the Legislature's Education Committee, asking it to support legislation to forgive \$1,000 on loans for student teachers.

# Student Loan Forgiveness Would Help Aspiring Educators

## \$1,000 Off State-Run Student Loan Program Proposed for Student Teachers

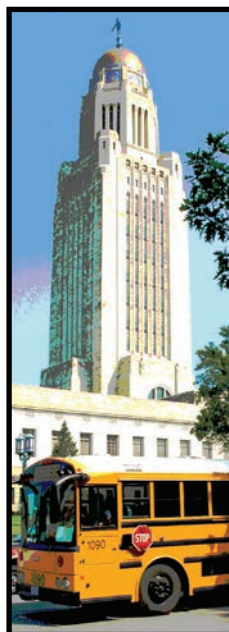
Alicia Laufenberg paid \$4,000 to go to work every day during her student teaching semester. Her story isn't unusual, but it highlights the financial struggles aspiring teachers face before they even get to their own classroom.

In her first two months of teaching special education for Millard Public Schools, Laufenberg addressed the Legislature's Education Committee in support of LB529, which would help ease the financial burden student teaching places on college students by forgiving \$1,000 from a student teacher's Attracting Excellence to Teaching Program loan.

The bill comes with more than a half-dozen other public education-friendly provisions, including the creation of the Behavioral Intervention Training and Teacher Support Act, which would provide educators and staff the training to spot potential mental health issues and refer students for help.

LB529 also includes a loan component to cover up to \$270 for the cost of the Praxis Core exam. Passage of the Praxis is currently required for all students pursuing admission to a Nebraska college of education.

Laufenberg is a member of the Millard Education Association and NSEA, having graduated from the



**Nebraska  
Legislature '21**

University of Nebraska at Omaha in December 2020 with endorsements in elementary education, special education and English as a second language.

"My parents did not have the means to pay for my education, because they are still paying off their own student loans; therefore my tuition was paid for mainly by loans," Laufenberg told the committee.

Her student teaching experience was invaluable, but it was the busiest and most stressful semester of her college career.

"I was teaching full-time, planning and preparing lessons in the evenings, and working on a graduation requirement project for my university – all during a pandemic," she said.

On top of that, it was costing her thousands of dollars.

"While student teaching was my full-time job, I was paying nearly \$4,000 in tuition during that semester to go to work every day," she said. "Like many other education majors, I saved pennies and cut corners my whole undergraduate career in order to be able to afford to student teach."

Laufenberg noted that several of her peers switched majors, leaving education for another career because

they knew they would be unable to support themselves or their families financially during that student teaching semester. Others tried to juggle student teaching with other part-time jobs just to make ends meet.

LB529, instigated in part by NSEA, would forgive at least \$1,000 of student loan debt for student teachers utilizing the state's Attracting Excellence to Teaching Program loan.

"Nebraska needs high-quality teachers in our public schools. Yet we are missing out on so many potential teachers and are losing some of the best and brightest along the way, because of the unbearable expense of student teaching," Laufenberg said.

Jason Hayes, director of Public Policy and Legislative Research for the NSEA, said the loan forgiveness would lighten the load for student teachers.

"That would be a very small token of encouragement for those educators-to-be who have, in most cases, worked as unpaid full-time teachers for four months," Hayes said.

Hayes also expressed NSEA's support for some of the bill's other components, including the need for mental health training.

"Especially with the events and conditions of this past year, there is a great need for mental health support services in our public schools," Hayes said. "Starting this fall, Educational Service Units across the state would ensure annual behavioral awareness training is available in every school building. ESU staff will develop, implement and administer a statewide support system to ensure that teachers and other school staff receive that training."

Beginning in the 2023-24 school year, staff would receive such training every three years. Each school would designate a behavioral awareness "point of contact" and maintain a registry of local mental health and counseling services.

"Administrators, teachers, support staff – and most importantly – our students – know this training is very much needed," Hayes said.

With regard to Praxis Core admission test fees, Hayes said the opportunity for students to get loans would help level the playing field. The testing fee is \$150 to take all three parts at once, or \$90 each to take the math, reading and writing portions separately, for a total of \$270.

"LB529 would provide a one-time loan for the cost of the test to cash-strapped college students who wish to pursue education as a career," Hayes said. "We should not bar potential educators from the profession because of



**Pay for ESPs: NSEA member Travis Vo spoke in favor of a bill that would require school districts to continue paying ESPs during an epidemic.**

## ESPs Deserve Pay During Epidemics

### Pay for Teachers Continued, Bill Would Do Same for ESPs

Teacher jobs were protected by the provisions of a 1919 state statute when the coronavirus hit last spring, but Nebraska's education support professionals were not as fortunate. LB641, initiated by the NSEA, seeks to ensure that school districts continue to pay bus drivers, custodians and other support staff if a school closes because of an epidemic.

Travis Vo, a member of the NSEA Board of Directors and an information technology specialist with Westside Community Schools, spoke in support of the bill at the State Capitol Feb. 1.

"With almost no notice, teachers completely rebuilt and redesigned the delivery of instruction," Vo told members of the Education Committee. "At the same time, nutrition staff regeared their menus to provide thousands of meals for families that could be stored and re-heated at home. Bus drivers stopped picking up students and instead began delivering meals. School secretaries helped with drive-through food disbursement.

"Meanwhile, custodial staff deep cleaned and began to study how to provide the safest environment when everyone returned," he said. "IT specialists such as myself worked to

prepare thousands of computers for students and staff, as well as maintain the platforms needed for remote learning."

While teachers continued to be paid as they taught, many ESPs worried about providing for their families.

Jenny Wood, NSEA member and sign language interpreter at the South Sioux City Community School District, wrote the committee.

"We all serve an important role in the everyday success of our students and the school district," Wood wrote. "Many ESPs rely on these wages to support their families, and by stripping that away, it demeans our value."

Wood and her husband are both employed by the school district. Each saw their hours cut by 24 hours a month during the shutdown.

Vo pointed out that many districts repurposed support staff, asking secretaries to paint classrooms or work on special projects, giving them financial stability and keeping them off unemployment. It also meant those staff would be retained when in-person classes resumed.

Elsewhere, however, support professionals' positions were cut. "We urge this committee to acknowledge the sacrifice of education support professionals, just as teachers are recognized, by providing them the economic security needed should such an event occur again," Vo said.

the cost of an admission test."

### NSEA Delivers Testimony on More Than a Dozen Bills

NSEA members, leaders or staff testified and delivered written testimony on these bills at legislative committee hearings in January and February. Committees will vote whether or not to advance each bill to the full legislature

for consideration and may amend the bills along the way. NSEA is watching nearly 200 individual bills related to public education.

### Purple Heart Schools

A letter from NSEA President Jenni Benson voiced support for LB5, which would designate qualifying school buildings as Purple Heart Schools.



# Brown: Better Internet a Must

## NSEA Backs Bevy of Broadband Bills

LB388 is the headliner in a package of broadband internet expansion proposals and would provide \$20 million in grants to expand service across the state.

NSEA Capitol District President Burke Brown of District OR-I at Palmyra told the Legislature's Transportation and Telecommunications Committee that "the broadband gap must be addressed for all rural Nebraska communities to thrive." Brown chairs the Association's Broadband Technology Committee. He said COVID-19 has shown a spotlight on the lack of affordable, reliable service Nebraska students endure.

"A teacher shared that she had to explain to a county deputy that she was parked on the crown of a rural road because that was the closest point from which she could access strong enough cell service to join a

virtual meeting," Brown said.

He also testified in favor of three other bills meant to enhance internet service in Nebraska. LB455 facilitates broadband expansion through pole attachment agreements that allow utilities to share poles for aerial cable.

He spoke of his district's effort to bury fiber between its high school and its athletic facility less than four blocks away.

"I was truly shocked at how challenging the process is to bury fiber within the village – and our district enjoys a very friendly relationship with village leaders," Brown said. "The additional cost and physical challenges of burying fiber will lead me to first look to utilize aerial fiber," which would be more accessible if existing utility poles could be utilized.

LB456 provides \$10 million in grants and loans to assist in building networks, targeted to underserved areas with developed broadband and digital inclusion plans but without adequate connection



**Building Up Broadband:** NSEA member Burke Brown spoke to senators about the importance of increasing reliable internet access.

access.

LB520 focuses on cost and timing issues for broadband projects by limiting consultant fees, excluding "small cell" projects that only individual schools would use and enacting a 60-day clock for approving project applications.

Among other requirements, a building would have a designated staff member as a point of contact to ease the transition for military families as they move into the community.

### Community College Tax Levy

NSEA submitted testimony for LB60 that will offer "an important adjustment in the tax levy available to community college boards" and would bring college levy power "in line with the current funding needed for community colleges." Funds from the levy would support college operations, bond payoff and the establishment of bond sinking funds.

### Student Journalists

NSEA supported member-delivered testimony by sharing with the Judiciary Committee that LB88 declares "that all college and public school-sponsored media are true public forums, subject to the First Amendment free speech liberties and limitations." Further, LB88 specifies and clarifies "that student opinions are not necessarily the opinion or policy of the college or school, administrators, boards and employees of the institution."

### Open Meetings Act

LB112 would require that members of the public be allowed to speak at any public meeting subject to the Open Meetings Act, with the public body allowed to set terms of speaking time. Benson said LB112 "will increase transparency and accountability by all governing bodies covered and will offer

members of the public an opportunity to provide input, which is a vital part of our democracy."

### Childhood Hunger

NSEA urged advancement of LB117, which would provide public school students with breakfast and lunch at school at no cost to families.

The hunger relief organization Feeding America reports that one in six Nebraska children struggles with hunger. NSEA testimony said "Teachers know what happens when a child lives in hunger: they don't do well in school."

### State Aid Study

A comprehensive study of the 30-year-old Tax Equity and Educational Opportunities Support Act would be conducted under the provisions of LB132 – much needed since it has been more than 30 years since the TEEOSA formula's creation. A 16-member school finance review commission would be appointed to conduct the study, which would review TEEOSA and consider improvements in the state aid to K-12 schools process. NSEA supports LB132.

### Special Education Aid

Sen. Anna Wishart's LB135 would increase, over a five-year period, the amount of aid the state reimburses local school districts for special education services. Historically, the reimbursement rate was set at 80 percent, yet the state reimburses at 51 percent.

Over time, the rate and level of funding

provided has dropped during years of state revenue shortfalls as past legislatures sought to achieve a balanced budget. This has happened to the detriment of the special education services provided to our most needy children.

Reestablishing the 80 percent rate would not only benefit children, it would become a key part of the solution to the property tax crisis in Nebraska.

### Short-Term Suspension

LB136 is supported by NSEA; it provides the same due process rights to students facing short-term suspension as those students facing long-term suspension.

### Early Childhood Credentials

LB137 would require, rather than allow, early childhood educators to report their educational degrees, professional credentials training and work history.

This bill aligns with NSEA resolutions by seeking the safest educational environment possible for every child.

### Student Discipline Act

LB198, which was passed as LB515 last year but not signed by the governor, clarifies that students charged with discipline violations must be allowed to complete class work and homework.

### 'Safe Time' Leave

LB258 would require "safe time" leave to be offered by employers for use by employees for absences related to domestic abuse, domestic assault, sexual assault or stalking. The leave time

# Lids on Kids Do Not Belong in Constitution

NSEA President Jenni Benson wrote a letter to the legislature's Revenue Committee opposing LB408 and LR22CA, mirror image proposals that limit the annual increase in property tax revenue for schools and all other Nebraska political subdivisions to 3 percent, unless otherwise allowed by a vote of patrons.

In other words, the proposals would place spending lids on kids.

LB408 proposes the limitations through state statute. The resolution, LR22CA, would send the matter to voters at the November 2022 General Election and, if passed, would entomb such limits into the state constitution, making it more difficult or impossible for future legislatures to amend or reverse the measure.

Neither LB408 nor LR22CA addresses fluctuating property valuations or changes in other sources of revenue, each of which could create revenue flow or other unforeseen financial crises for school districts.

"A school district may lose a large portion of state aid due



**Benson**

to valuation increases but would not be allowed to recoup that revenue loss without a majority vote of district citizens," Benson wrote in separate letters of opposition to each bill.

"Our election process is not nimble enough to handle such contingencies, and districts caught in such instances would be forced to make dramatic cuts to services. We should not hamper the education of our children in such an unpredictable and whimsical manner."

The existing levy rate lid and the budget cap limitations work together to ensure that local public school spending is in check.

"Adding yet another limit on the ability of our school districts to meet the educational needs of their children is shortsighted," Benson said. "Doing so runs the risk of creating a 'perfect storm' of multiple caps and lids, with varying levels of negative consequences for school districts across Nebraska."

would allow employees to seek mental, physical and legal aid without fear of loss of employment.

## Health Care for Foster Kids

LB262 would allow access to non-lawfully permanent resident foster youth up to age 21 to have access to comprehensive health care through the Bridge to Independence Program. NSEA Resolutions state support of direct and comprehensive health care for all children.

## Family and Medical Leave

NSEA written testimony submitted to the Business and Labor Committee gave NSEA support to LB290 provisions designed to provide partial wage replacement for eligible workers to care for themselves or a family member following a serious illness, military

exigency or to care for a new child through birth, foster care or an adoption procedure.

The bill is of special benefit to early career educators who have been employed by a school district for a short period of time and have not accrued sufficient sick leave to cover maternity leave.

NSEA testimony said "Many early career educators take significant losses in pay after the birth or adoption of a child. As a result, at a time of life when they need steady income the most, they struggle to make ends meet."

## State Aid 'Safe Harbor'

NSEA urged passage of LB323 and noted when the pandemic crisis passes, the effects will be felt for years to come. NSEA urged passage of LB323, which "acknowledges the changes that school

districts have been forced to make in this past year and the effect that those changes had on school budgets. LB323 provides a 'safe harbor' by making the adjustments necessary to the TEEOSA formula so that budgeting is based on our 'normal' routines and not the exceptional circumstances schools operated under during this pandemic."

## Financial Literacy

NSEA opposes LB327, which requires students to complete a minimum of one half-hour credit in financial literacy in order to graduate. Financial literacy curriculum is already a requirement of the recently updated Nebraska Social Studies Standards. NSEA also opposes LB452, which requires each Nebraska school district to develop a financial literacy curriculum.

# Standards Needed for Remote Instruction

A team of NSEA members worked with Sen. Tony Vargas on LB623 to create parameters for districts offering remote instruction.

Lee Perez, an English as a Second Language teacher at Omaha Public Schools, served on the team and testified in favor of LB623. It would ensure that standards such as instructional pedagogy, consistent access and hours of actual instruction would be followed so that any student learning remotely is offered the same high-quality education as those attending in-person.

"It is far more than just placing students in front of a screen and expecting them to watch a teacher engage with the students physically present in the classroom," Perez said. "Effective remote learning is not being on screen for seven hours a day."

LB623 also addresses hardware and learning platforms, access to technology and internet, instructional strategies, professional development, funding, mandated subjects of bargaining and more, all while giving school districts the flexibility to do what makes the most sense for their teachers and students.

"I can tell you that remote teaching is the most difficult thing I have ever done in my teaching career," Perez said. "This bill provides a lifeline to teachers who know we need a structured approach to online learning that involves all decision makers and provides continuity for learners and educators."



**Going Remote:** ESL Teacher Lee Perez called for statewide efforts to make remote instruction more equitable for all students.



### The Doctor Knows Best

NSEA supports LB337, which allows physicians to override the practice of step therapy, in which a patient is required to try and fail a treatment or treatments selected by an insurance company before the company will cover the original treatment prescribed by his or her health care provider.

### Telehealth Treatment Costs

LB487 would prohibit any health insurance plan from setting rates for telehealth treatment of mental health conditions at a higher rate than for in-person services.

NSEA testimony submitted to the Banking, Commerce and Insurance Committee said COVID-19 has created a mental health crisis at a time when Nebraska is already struggling to employ enough mental health providers.

“COVID has changed our lives in many ways, and LB487 provides an opportunity for us to carry one of the good things – parity for telehealth with in-person treatment – into what we hope to be a healthy future,” the testimony said.

### Surreptitious Recording

Students making recordings of classroom activities, and later altering and using those recordings to mislead on classroom activities, or to defame a school employee, is a real threat.

A Nebraska teacher who endured such a scenario recently testified in favor of LB518. Because the incident resulted in threats to her ongoing safety and the safety of some of her colleagues at the time, NSEA has chosen not to identify her by name.

The teacher told senators she received telephone and emailed death threats, visits to her home during early morning hours and some vandalism to her home.

“To my knowledge, no one was ever punished for the harm caused by that surreptitious recording and the resulting viral social media video. Unfortunately, there is no law or legal path established to deal with students engaged in surreptitious recordings in the classroom,” she said.

NSEA testimony touched on a privacy aspect, noting that parents or others could record classroom activity while a child participates remotely. “The right to privacy of other students in the classroom must be upheld.”

### Excessive absenteeism

LB568 would remove truancy as a juvenile status offense under court jurisdiction but would allow the court

# Revised Tax Credit Scheme Would Cut School Funding

## Opposition Forms Around Opportunity Scholarships Act

Offering tax breaks for private school scholarships only takes money away from already-underfunded public schools, and LB364, introduced by Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn, seeks to cause more damage.

Similar to a previous Linehan proposal, LB364 calls for adoption of the Opportunity Scholarships Act to provide tax credits for people who contribute to a scholarship fund for a private school. Projections indicate it could divert up to \$10 million in 2022, and more in subsequent years, from the pool of tax dollars that support public schools.

Jared Wagenknecht, a high school social studies teacher at Papillion-LaVista South and chair of the NSEA Government Relations Committee, spoke LB364 in front of the legislature's Revenue Committee on Jan. 28.

“There are plenty of wealthy people in this state who have the means to provide for anyone who wants tuition assistance right now,” Wagenknecht said. “They can often already get a charitable deduction for this type of donation.”

“The real choice being provided here is for the wealthy to have more choices about how they can avoid paying taxes for essential public services that they don't intend on using. It simply shifts the tax burden to other taxpayers.”

NSEA President Jenni Benson noted

the cost to the state, and ultimately, to local school districts.

“LB364 is expensive,” she wrote. “Specifically, the proposed expenditure begins at \$10 million in tax credits annually, with the ability for that amount to grow based upon utilization. This amount will likely quickly balloon to nearly \$100 million annually within 10 years.”

In a followup letter to answer questions from Linehan, Benson wrote “if the dollar-for-dollar tax credits are such a good idea, why not for cancer research? The United Way? The Salvation Army?”

Wagenknecht also spoke on the legislature's dodging tactics when it comes to fully funding public schools on a regular basis, something it has only done four times in the past 17 years.

“Instead of committing to ensure that there is a well-funded, high-quality public school in every child's neighborhood, we are telling families that they are on their own,” Wagenknecht said.

Wagenknecht pointed out that private schools aren't required to provide transportation to or from school, don't have to accept students if they don't have enough openings, can discriminate against students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer, and do not have to offer services for those with special education needs.



**Wagenknecht**

to continue to address excessive absenteeism from school as part of disposition hearings. It also allows the State Board of Education to set rules and regulations to carry out statutory provisions related to excessive absenteeism.

NSEA's written testimony said “A student with excessive absenteeism should, in partnership with the family and school, receive community-based services to address the student's needs and behaviors to remain safely in the home and in the classroom learning.”

### Teaching Reciprocity

LB558 allows Nebraska to maintain strong teaching and learning standards while also allowing teaching certificate reciprocity for educators moving to Nebraska from other states. NSEA supports LB558.

### YRTC Reports

LB638 would allow deeper reporting on outcomes of juveniles discharged from the state's Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers. The reporting would illustrate details of recidivism as well as each individual's history within the probation system, among other data. Privacy of the juveniles would be protected.

### Property Tax Limits

This proposed constitutional amendment would limit a school district's property tax revenue to 33 percent of the school district's total budget needs. Against the idea, NSEA written testimony said “There is no indication or requirement in LR13CA that future legislatures would expand state aid to education to cover the reduction in revenue contemplated by the proposed amendment.” NSEA opposes LR13CA.

## Retirement Board Lowers Rate of Return

The Nebraska Public Employees Retirement Systems Board of Directors approved a plan to lower the assumed rate of return for retirement plan investments from 7.5 percent annually to 7 percent. The drop will take place incrementally, over the next four years.

Lowering the assumed rate of return increases the chance that the rate of return will be met in future years. The move was suggested by representatives of Cavanaugh Macdonald Consulting, a firm that advises the board, during a presentation in November.

The plan, approved in December, lowers the assumed rate of return from 7.5 percent to 7.3 percent the first year, and then to 7.2 percent, 7.1 percent and 7 percent in the ensuing three years.

In October 2016, the board reduced the

actuarial assumed rate of investment return on plans from 8 to 7.5 percent annually, effective July 1, 2017. At the time, consultants said lowering of expectations was an industry trend, and that before the Great Recession, 60 percent of retirement plans used the 8 percent assumed rate. By 2016, that figure had fallen to 20 to 25 percent of retirement plans.

In 2016, the drop from 8 percent to 7.5 percent, combined with a slight upward adjustment of mortality rates, reduced the projected school plan funded rate to 84 percent in 2019. However, that drop was never realized, and the plan's sturdiness has strengthened each year since. At the board's annual review of the plan in November, the plan's funded ratio was 91.65 percent, much improved over the 77 percent funded ratio of seven years ago.

## Past President and NPERS Chair Kaldahl was 89

Philip E. Kaldahl, a former two-time president of NSEA and longtime active association member, died Jan. 24, 2021, in Papillion. He was 89.

Kaldahl taught English at Bellevue Public Schools for 41 years. He is the only member to serve as NSEA president twice in non-consecutive terms, serving in 1973 and 1975. He served on the NEA Board of Directors from 1977 to 1984 and on the NEA Board of Review from 1988 to 1992, as well



**Kaldahl**

as on many other Association committees.

He was three times the president of the Bellevue Education Association and served a term as president of NSEA's Metro District. He served on the NSEA Board of Directors in some capacity from 1967 to 1984.

"Phil always had a steady hand and a sharp mind to sort through the many challenges of that era. His long-time contributions will be honored and remembered by all who served with him," wrote Nebraska City member Gary Schaffer, who served with Kaldahl on the NSEA board.

Kaldahl represented Nebraska on the NEA Board of Directors from 1977 to 1984, when he became the first active association member to receive NSEA's highest honor, the Friend of Education Award.

Active in retirement plan issues, he was a three-term member and past president of the Nebraska Public Employees Retirement System Board of Directors in the 1970s.

He spent a year teaching at Plattsmouth High from 1955 to 1956, and served as adjunct faculty at Bellevue College, Northwest Missouri State College and the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Kaldahl was a Fulbright Scholar in the 1960s, lecturing on British and American literature at the Government College for Men in Peshawar, Pakistan. He was Bellevue's first Outstanding Young Educator award recipient, and earned the Outstanding Alumnus Award from Dana College.

He belonged to the Nebraska Council of Teachers of English, the National Council of Teachers of English and the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

Kaldahl retired in 1997, but continued to serve, with time on the Bellevue City Council and with various local, state and national service projects. He was a former president of the Sarpy County Historical Society.

He is survived by his wife, Ann, sons, Tim and Eric, and two granddaughters.



**From Bully to Bestie**  
By Jacquelle Lane M.Ed.

**JACQUELINE LANE, M.ED. FOR NSEA BOARD OF DIRECTORS, MIDDLE LEVEL METRO SEAT, AND RA.**

A Fresh New Voice for a New Generation of Educators  
Educator|Advocate|Author|Speaker|Artist



### About Jacquelle Lane

Jacquelle Lane is the leading voice behind "Every Child Matters: Preventing Teenage Suicide and Reducing Bullying," and isn't just any teacher; she's the teacher everyone remembers, the one that goes above and beyond the day-to-day so that every kid doesn't just feel special but knows that they are special.

A resident of Nebraska, Jacquelle has teaching endorsements in English and English as a Second Language and a Master's degree in education administration and is currently pursuing a graduate degree in school counseling. Her new book, *From Bully to Bestie*, is a guide for students, teachers, parents, and counselors on strategies that students can use to cope with bullying behavior and create more positive behaviors along the way!

### From Jacquelle Lane

"It would be a privilege to serve on the NSEA Board of Directors.

"I have taught in both Lincoln Public Schools and Omaha Public Schools and know the demands all too well that are being placed on teachers at this tumultuous time in our school's history. I have been a member of the Lincoln Education Association since 2009 and then joined the Omaha Education Association in 2016 when I transferred to Omaha Public Schools.

"Having taught in the two largest school districts in our great state, I feel that I have a good concept of the issues facing public education today. It is my hope to bring a fresh new perspective and voice to the NSEA Board of Directors that is working hard for teachers who tirelessly give of themselves each and every day for their communities!"



# Wolf was Force Behind CIR Compromise

## Former President Also Led Association Headquarters Remodel

Former NSEA President Jess Wolf died at his home in Hartington on Feb. 11. He was 69.

Wolf was a long-time classroom teacher, school administrator, community volunteer and association leader in Nebraska. He was NSEA's 116th president and served from August 2005 through July 2011.

It was under Wolf's watch in early 2011 that NSEA turned back drastic changes to the state's collective bargaining law proposed by LB397, avoiding a battle that could have resulted in the elimination of collective bargaining in Nebraska. The final compromise version of LB397 preserved the Commission of Industrial Relations, set a firm bargaining calendar and added a mediation step.

Under his leadership, the Association in 2009 completed a \$4.6 million renovation of the 47-year old NSEA Headquarters building, retaining the key location across the street from the State Capitol. Prior to renovation, there had been discussion about moving from the site, which has been home to NSEA since 1931.

The remodeling gutted and modernized the NSEA building, replacing all heating, cooling, electrical, plumbing, windows and the roof, and put new walls in a more efficient configuration. Also added was a geo-thermal well field to provide thermal heating and cooling.

### 'An Amazing Teacher'

NSEA President Jenni Benson served on the Association Board of Directors for three years while Wolf was president.

"Jess was an amazing teacher who skillfully led the NSEA with dedication for our students, educators and public education," she said.

Dr. Craig R. Christiansen was NSEA executive director during Wolf's presidency and knew Wolf for nearly 40 years. In 1992, they both ran for the NSEA presidency. Christiansen won by just four votes.

"We started that election as friends, and we ended as friends," said Christiansen.

"He was a class act. Absolutely honest in everything he did, he was also absolutely fearless in standing for what he believed was right. Jess was proud of his Sioux heritage and was very respectful of that legacy. At the end of his long career in teaching, Jess and I served as a team: he as NSEA president and I as NSEA executive director. In those six years, I came to know just how much he was respected across the state, in the NEA Western Region, and nationally at the NEA. Teachers across the state have lost a true friend."

A college professor



**A Voice for Teachers:** Then-NSEA President Jess Wolf was among Nebraska education family leaders and others who spoke out in February 2010 against nine legislative bills that proposed changes to the Commission of Industrial Relations.

nudged Wolf to a career in education. He was a lab assistant at Mount Marty College in Yankton, SD, when the professor suggested Wolf had a talent for teaching. He later worked in a summer environmental science course for high school juniors.

"I got along with the kids well, they were fun to be around, and I felt like I was accomplishing something," Wolf said after he was elected NSEA president in 2005.

### 30 Years at Hartington

Wolf completed 30 years with the Hartington Public Schools in May 2005. He taught high school science for 29 years, and in his last year served as the district's high school principal.

In just his second year of teaching, Wolf was elected president of his local association, and his involvement in association work grew from there. He served multiple terms as president of his local; was chief negotiator for the Hartington Education Association for 20 of the 25 years he was on the negotiations team; twice served as president of one of NSEA's six regional districts; served six years as a member of the NSEA Board of Directors; and served a three-year term as NSEA vice president.

Wolf sponsored the Hartington High School Student Council and was a district advisor for Student Council. He was also Junior Class adviser.

At Christmas, he loved to dress as Santa and give out candy. He also enjoyed decorating his home for Christmas, and making cookies and candies for his nieces and nephews.

Wolf served on the Holy Trinity Catholic Church Parish Council, the library board, the Cedar County Foundation Board, the Hartington Education Foundation Board and on the Mount Marty College Alumni Board.

His wife Loxie, a retired Hartington High School English teacher and counselor, survives.



**Working with Kids:** Wolf often participated in classroom activities as president. On NEA's Across America Day in 2006, he read to these students at Lincoln's Maxey Elementary School.



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# Time for Change: Race-Themed Mascots Cast Shadow on Schools

## Misuse of Indigenous Names and Symbols Perpetuates Harm

By Edward T. Ventura Jr.

A national conversation on racial equality and anti-racism has renewed attention to and interest in a number of issues. One topic that seems to sit on the back burner being forever deemed okay is the use of American Indian-themed school mascots.

While there are many issues we as Indigenous People must address, our task is much more difficult when mascots and caricatures prevent others from seeing Indigenous People for what they are: people.

Native Americans constitute roughly two percent of the United States' population and less than 1 percent of students.

Thus, if Native American voices must outweigh the voices of those who want to retain harmful mascots, our battle will never be won.

Rather than engaging in a heated, divisive debate, it is time to start listening to research and voices that have been drowned out for decades.

Addressing the issue of race-themed mascots is not political correctness. It is about racial equity and justice. It requires the courage of a whole society to stand up against an accepted norm to overcome racism.

As Nebraskans, we must push to advance a more equal and just society for all people. We must accept that the time to advance equality for America's first people is long overdue.

I recognize that many may feel a sense of pride and identity with race-themed mascots adorning the hallways and sports facilities. I recognize that a call to retire familiar mascots will bring feelings of anger, defensiveness and confusion.

I recognize that it is easier to name and call out racism in other communities

and institutions than to do so within an institution we have grown up in and identified with. I recognize that it is difficult to speak the word "racist" in association with a school district in which we feel great pride.

I also recognize that many students, educators, alumni and, yes, even you, may feel uncomfortable with the mascot but are hesitant to say so publicly at the risk of upsetting friends and family and perhaps loss of elected or appointed position.

When I look at the Bellevue Public Schools website, I see a proud, successful and award-winning school district. I also see the misuse of many Indigenous names and images. This use causes significant divisiveness and distracts from the district's core mission: to provide the highest quality, equitable education for children and youth.

However, we have an obligation as educators to discontinue any practice that could create a racially hostile educational environment.

The Bellevue Public Schools' race-themed mascots undermine education efforts regarding the struggle of Indigenous and Native Americans who were wiped out by white greed and racism. This lessens the value of education because the district continues the legacy of racist

oppression and humiliation.

By turning a minority group into caricatures, the Bellevue Public School District invalidates our identities and makes our voices less accepted by those in power.

That no harm was intended when the logos were adopted may be true. It is also true that we – American Indian people – are saying that the logos are harmful to our cultures, and especially to our children, in the present.

When someone says your actions cause harm, that harm becomes intentional if you persist.

Today the Bellevue Public School District has the opportunity to represent American Indians with respect by removing such mascots in a show of respect for all current, former and future American Indian students. To ignore this issue means to continually and knowingly inflict harm and perpetuate racism.

*Edward T. Ventura Jr. is a Bellevue resident and a member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation. He serves as the chairman of the Nebraska State Education Association Ethnic Minority Affairs Committee. This opinion piece originally appeared in the Omaha World Herald on Feb. 7, 2021.*




Ventura

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- ◆ Science (elementary and secondary)\*
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- ◆ Special Education (K-12)
- ◆ Special Education – Early Childhood
- ◆ Special Education (Birth-Kindergarten)

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Spectrum Photo, Gering, NE

Keri Homan

Principal at Morrill Elementary School  
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CSC has also designated an individual to coordinate the college's efforts to comply with Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Inquiries regarding Title IX may be directed to: Ted Tewahade, Title IX Coordinator, Chadron State College, 1000 Main St. Chadron, NE 69337, Telephone: 308-430-0980, Email: [titleixcoordinator@csc.edu](mailto:titleixcoordinator@csc.edu).



# DA to Feature Dintersmith, Award Recipients

## Author, Filmmaker Will be Keynote

The keynote address for the 2021 NSEA Delegate Assembly will highlight what author Ted Dintersmith has learned in conversations with thousands of educators across the country about what school could be.

Dintersmith has produced films, keynotes and now a book that focus on the urgency of reimagining school to keep pace with the innovation that is reshaping society.

In 2012, Dintersmith was appointed by President Obama to represent the U.S. at the United Nations General Assembly. In 2018, he received the prestigious NEA Friend of Education Award.

The April 23-24 Delegate Assembly is NSEA's annual business meeting. Any members in good standing can seek election to attend and participate in Delegate Assembly. Friday night will include the Call to Order, Dintersmith's address, a message from NSEA President Jenni Benson and Executive Director Maddie Fennell, as well as beginning business sessions.

On Saturday, April 24, delegates will consider proposed



Dintersmith

changes to Association Bylaws and Resolutions and approve dues for the 2021-22 Association year. They will also vote on an Ethnic Minority Affairs Committee representative and a Higher Education Academy Committee representative on the NSEA board.

Any candidate for the EMAC or HEAC positions who wishes to have campaign material included in the electronic materials available to all delegates in advance of Delegate Assembly must submit that request to NSEA Executive Director Maddie Fennell not less than 45 days prior to April 23. The deadline for that action is 11:59 p.m. CST on Tuesday, March 9. Contact Fennell at:

[maddie.fennell@nsea.org](mailto:maddie.fennell@nsea.org)

A handful of awards honoring members and those who have contributed to the betterment of public education will be presented. Winners will be recognized during the virtual assembly, and awards presented in-person at a later date.

The 2021 event will be NSEA's 160th Assembly since the Association's founding in 1867.

To make your interest in serving as a delegate known, contact your local association president, your local association building representative or your NSEA organizational specialist at 1-800-742-0047. All delegates must be elected in order to attend the event. Learn more at:

[nsea.org/delegateassembly](https://nsea.org/delegateassembly)

## Learn About Contract Issues in March 4 Webinar

### March, April Webinars Free to NSEA Members

The timing is just right for the newest addition to the NSEA stable of online workshops, **Contract Issues & Disputes**.

This session is for members only, and will discuss letters of intent, end of the year resignations, contract terminations, nonrenewals, reduction-in-force and release from contract.

Each of those terms describes a teacher's departure or potential departure from a school district's employment, nuanced in a slightly different manner.

That session is set for Thursday, March 4, at 7:30 p.m.

Also set is **Understanding and Using Power to Succeed**, a look at who has the power and how they use it. The session will explore the various components, uses and structures of power in an organization, school district or community, and will be helpful to local association leadership teams. This session will be held Thursday, March 25, at 7:30 p.m.

Also in development is a session on **Tips and Tricks for TOY Applicants**. Educators interested in applying for, or interested in nominating a colleague for, the Nebraska Teacher of the Year (TOY) program, should attend.

NSEA is fast becoming your best

## Race, Belonging Applications Being Accepted

Applications are now being taken for another cohort of NSEA's Conversations on Race and Belonging seminar.

The series is designed to encourage participants to improve their personal racial understanding based on self-examination and awareness. The program builds a peer cohort and peer-to-peer relationships through conversation and storytelling, among other methods.

Participants meet for 90 minutes every other Saturday for six sessions, beginning on April 3. To apply, go to:

[www.nsea.org/conversations](https://www.nsea.org/conversations)

source for professional development. Check this list of opportunities on a regular basis for seminars that assist members in meeting classroom needs, personal care and education technology issues. Sessions are one hour, unless noted, and all times are central time. To learn more, or to register, go to:

[www.nsea.org/webinars](https://www.nsea.org/webinars)

### Membership/Association Workshops

■ Tuesday, March 16, 4:30 p.m.: **NEA Member Benefits Overview**. Learn more about the value of membership. Exclusive deals and discounts for members.

■ Thursday, March 18, 5 p.m.: **Financial Essentials**. Specifically designed to help education professionals plan for retirement by reviewing financial concepts that can impact members during each life-stage (Early,

Mid, and Late Career), especially as they move closer to retirement. The Financial Essentials workshop can help members by discussing long term planning, retirement savings and state pension options and help members gain confidence in taking control of their retirement plan. Presented by Security Benefit.

■ Tuesday, April 13, 5:30 p.m.: **NEA Member Benefits Overview**. Learn more about the value of membership. Exclusive deals and discounts for members.

■ Thursday, April 15, 5 p.m.: **Lifestage Investing**. A discussion around saving for the long term, identifying retirement income sources and gaps, and important information about the long-lasting financial impact of the Social Security and health care decisions you need to make when you get close to retirement. Presented by Security Benefit.





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This online reading endorsement can be added to your existing bachelor's or master's degree, or you can apply the credit toward earning a master's degree.

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## The Mind Inside, Episode Three, Now Available

### NE Loves Public Schools Studies Mental Health

In episode three of the Nebraska Loves Public Schools docuseries, *The Mind Inside*, audiences will follow the journey of two school heroes who advocate for vulnerable children and families, offering hope for the future.

Episode three follows two school heroes who take on the often-daunting task of connecting vulnerable children and families with the necessary support to keep their kids engaged in school.

The film reveals how inherited trauma, generational poverty, drug abuse, neglect, and other home dynamics complicate the path to academic success and impact the greater community.

The 50-minute film is available free online. The third episode debuted in February and is now available online. Episode one premiered in January 2019, and episode two appeared in October 2019. Both are also available online.

The series looks at mental health in public schools, the challenges students face, the social, emotional, and behavioral resources available for students who struggle, and the short- and long-term solutions communities provide.

The episodes were filmed and produced by Nebraska Loves Public Schools, an organization dedicated to supporting public education through filmmaking. Nebraska Loves Public Schools received NSEA's highest honor, the Friend of Education Award, in 2015.

Executive Director Sally Nellson Barrett said the series was created to explore what students are struggling with today, what social, emotional, and behavioral resources are available, and what schools and their communities are developing as short- and long-term solutions. For details, go to:

<https://iloveps.org>

## Giraffes, Tigers and Brooks, Oh My!

### NSEA U Plans Take Shape; Zoo Tour, Brooks Encore Set

Plans for NSEA University 2021 are coming into focus, and those plans include an encore by well-known educational humorist Gerry Brooks as well as an evening tour and reception at the famed Lincoln Children's Zoo.

Brooks was a hit with the 300-plus who attended the inaugural NSEA University in July 2019.

The Lincoln Children's Zoo is home to more than 40 endangered species, and most recently added giraffes and a red panda to the list of animals in residence. The critically endangered Sumatran tiger and threatened Galapagos turtle also reside at the zoo. The zoo also added penguins in recent years.

NSEA University was first organized in 2019, and combined the Association's fall Advocacy Conference, August membership meetings and new professional development together in one location — the University of Nebraska

Lincoln's sparkling new Innovation Campus. That first event offered more than 180 breakout sessions for members. The popular NSEA Leadership Institute will also be incorporated into the program again this year.

The pandemic caused the 2020 edition to go virtual during a single day of sessions, but plans are to return to in-person activity for the 2021 event. The conference is scheduled for July 13-15, again at Innovation Campus.

Brooks, who also works full-time as an elementary school principal in Lexington, KY, will headline the Thursday, July 15, luncheon program. The quick-talking Brooks has parlayed short, humorous videos into internet sensation status by drawing on his experiences in education, including six years in the classroom and two years as an intervention specialist.

More than 850,000 people follow Brooks on social media sites, listening to his thoughts on *Flair Pens*, *Smarters*, *Carpet Time* and more. He has written two books, *Go See the Principal: True Tales from the School Trenches*, and *If You Give a Teacher an Assignment*.

The Tuesday schedule will feature an evening reception and tour of the Lincoln Children's Zoo, with the zoo closed to all but NSEA University attendees. The zoo opened in the summer of 1965, the vision of founder Arnott Folsom. Today it includes more than 400 animals and a miniature railroad that circles the zoo grounds. More than 345,000 visitors toured the zoo in 2019, the last full year of operation.

Development of the schedule continues. If you would like to present, submit your idea here:

<https://bit.ly/nseau-rfp>

For more details, read upcoming editions of *The Voice* and watch the website at:

[nseu.org/nseu](https://nseu.org)



**Brooks is Back:** Educational humorist Gerry Brooks will be a featured speaker at the 2021 NSEA University in July.



*Elect*

# Susan Kalina

◆ NSEA-Retired Metro  
District Director

◆ NSEA Delegate  
Assembly

◆ NEA Representative  
Assembly



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# Blessings Sometimes Play Hide and Seek

As I write this, my hands are chapped from washing dishes – my dishwasher is broken. My only recent outing was to the laundromat – my washing machine is kaput and the part is on back-order.

But I'm in a home that is warm and dry on one of the coldest nights on record. I can afford to have someone come and fix my dishwasher and my washing machine. So I choose to count my blessings...on my chapped fingers!

Most of 2020 seemed to go that way – blessings that played hide and seek...

In the fall of 2019, my husband Bill and I took an amazing trip to Europe. Right before we left, I noticed a growth on his right cheek. I told him he needed to get it looked at as soon as we got home.

Well, that pencil eraser sized growth turned out to be a squamous cell skin cancer. The simple removal in the doctor's office was the first of multiple surgeries as those cancer cells traveled.

As the world was beginning to shut down because of COVID, we were starting the journey into a major cancer fight.

March 20 of last year was the first surgery. The surgeon painted a grim picture when he met with me while Bill was in recovery. I went to my car and started calling my blessings – friends who pick up the phone and let you panic, cry and pull yourself back together to tackle what comes next.

On May 20, Bill endured an 11-hour surgery that sacrificed his facial nerve, the entire parotid gland, four teeth and 50-plus lymph nodes, and required shaving his mandible and an extensive transfer of skin from his leg to his face. I was allowed to visit one time in the ICU. I couldn't sleep for days.

When I picked him up from the hospital, we both cried in relief. We celebrated our 10th anniversary by holding hands and feeling blessed to be home together.

Bill endured 33 radiation treatments that made his throat raw and left sores in his mouth. Family and friends organized a meal train and kept tempting Bill with incredible meals (somehow those meals shrunk my jeans!). He began to rebuild his strength, and we took nightly walks around the block, reminding ourselves that weeks earlier he couldn't walk 20 feet.

In the fall, we spent a socially distant week in northern Wisconsin just as the leaves were at their

autumnal brilliance. It was a gift of quiet time spent learning about cranberry harvesting, reading, going on lots of long drives and recharging.

Bill had a post-treatment scan in late October. He was feeling good except for a slight cough we attributed to fall allergies. My heart hit the floor when the doctor said there was a new mass on Bill's lung. Tests showed that it was inoperable, probably metastasized

from his face, and growing fast. If we didn't do a chemo and radiation combo this time, the tumor would suffocate Bill.

I drove to Ogallala and delivered the news to Bill's parents. A week later they began to quarantine so they could see Bill. They were with us for seven weeks, celebrating Thanksgiving and Christmas, enjoying long talks and gaining a few needed pounds themselves!

After 19 more rounds of radiation and four rounds of chemo, the tumor has shrunk significantly. Bill has

one more chemo visit on March 3, then hopefully a full year of immunotherapy.

2020, COVID and cancer really challenged my "glass half full" kind of personality. I remember praying during one difficult time that God would help me see the silver lining in things in my timeframe, not His. God has the patience to grow mountains and I'm frustrated that the microwave isn't fast enough!

Our challenges were balanced with silver linings. I was able to be with my husband when he needed me. The NSEA team stepped in any time I needed them – and even pushed me out a time or two! We've had an amazing healthcare team at the UNMC Buffet Cancer Center (one of my former students checked us in almost every day this summer!).

When people asked, "How are you?" I didn't say "fine." I told people the truth. I stopped being the person who did it all and became the person who let others cook for us, shop for us and lift us up in waves of prayer and goodwill.

I don't know if we are at the end, middle or just a rest-stop in our cancer journey. What I do know is that if there's a day where I'm hanging on by my fingernails, someone will come running with a ladder. That's pretty darn blessed!



**Changing Colors: My husband, Bill, and I visited northern Wisconsin last fall. It was a quiet time spent together. The foliage was breathtaking!**

“

*If there's a  
day where I'm  
hanging on by  
my fingernails,  
someone will  
come running  
with a ladder.*

”

**Executive  
Director  
Maddie Fennell**

# NSEA-Retired Supports Social Security Bill

Social Security taxes were a focus for NSEA-Retired members during their virtual Governance/Lobby Day event on Feb. 22.

Members advocated for Legislative Bill 64, which phases out the state tax on Social Security over a five-year period. Sen. Brett Lindstrom of Omaha introduced the bill, with NSEA-Retired playing an instrumental role in its proposal.

The event also included opportunities for members to visit with senators, hear additional updates on the legislature and get assistance contacting senators about current issues.

## TAKE 5 at spring conference

NSEA-Retired will take its spring conference virtual in 2021. Because of COVID-19 and gathering restrictions, the April 22 conference will be held online—but that won't halt opportunities to connect and learn.

The morning session will include a behind-the-scenes tour of the Lincoln Children's Zoo, presented by Zoo President and CEO John Chapo.

Attendees will then hear from the Lincoln Yoga Center about the TAKE 5 program, addressing the need for a holistic approach to childhood mental wellness in schools and giving students an effective way to quell inner turmoil in just five minutes.

Breakout rooms and a short session about I Love Public Schools' recent work will round out the conference.

Registration details for the conference are available online. To register, go to:

[nsea.org/retired](http://nsea.org/retired)



**Re-Elect  
Margie Nowak**  
to the  
NSEA-R Board,  
Capitol District

# 'Sandy Crane' Born of Burwell Teacher's Brush

Retiring from teaching art at Burwell Public Schools meant Paula Warner had to make a choice.

"In my art classes, I taught students to work in as many media as I could. I really had to think about what I wanted to work with the most," Warner said, now that she had the time to create her own art.

She decided oil painting and pencil drawing would be her media of choice, though she wasn't necessarily expecting to become a children's book author and illustrator.

One of her projects quickly evolved into a face and a name: Sandy Crane, an exuberant bird just trying to make her way in the world.

"I created her for an art exhibit for a crane season art show," Warner said.

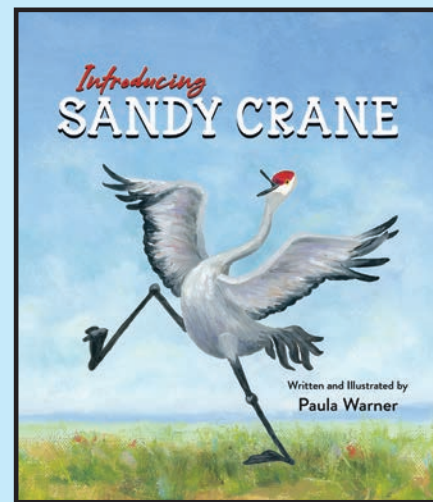
The annual crane season in Nebraska is from mid-February to mid-April, when more than half a million sandhill cranes spend six weeks in the North Platte River valley, preparing to nest.

"I really meant for her to be a realistic crane, but this cartoon kept popping out as I sketched," Warner said. "Finally, Sandy emerged as a character. I decided to go with it."

Warner spent 16 years teaching seventh through 12th grade art and information technology in Burwell before retiring in 2016. Once Sandy Crane flew into the picture, she knew she had to do something more.



Warner



**Cover Worthy:** The cover of Paula Warner's book, "Introducing Sandy Crane," features the former art teacher's painting, inspired by the crane migration on the Platte River.

Warner painted Sandy in six "pre-flight" yoga poses and turned them into greeting cards. The next step seemed to be a story Sandy was itching to tell about migration and the environment—and the children's book was born.

The book is geared toward 3- to 7-year-olds. It guides readers through Sandy's first year of life, with humor and environmental lessons along the way.

Warner focuses her art on landscapes. She exhibits her work regularly at Studio K in Grand Island and Main Street Gallery in North Loup. Her work has also been a part of various shows including the Association of Nebraska Art Clubs exhibition. She enjoys creating with the Painting in the Black Hills plein air group in the summer.

"Retirement for me seemed like an opportunity to focus on creating art for myself and letting go of the need to develop a lesson plan for every new idea I have," Warner said. "It has developed into far more than I ever thought it would."

**Have you started a new adventure or hobby? Share details with us by sending your story to NSEA-Retired President De Tonack at:**

[dtonack@neb.rr.com](mailto:dtonack@neb.rr.com)

## Discount for new members

To show appreciation for all teachers have done, NSEA-Retired is offering a \$75 rebate on NSEA Pre-Retired/Retired Lifetime memberships for new members joining by June 1.

After retirement, NSEA-Retired members continue with classroom liability insurance, access to NEA member benefits, opportunities to support and assist educators and NSEA, free newsletters, and conference

and lobbying opportunities.

To join, go to [nsea.org/retired](http://nsea.org/retired) and select 'Join Now.' The costs for NEA-Retired and NSEA-Retired memberships are shown, and installment payments may be available. Once you join as a new member, you will receive a \$75 rebate from the NSEA-Retired dues. For more details, contact Rebecca Smith at [rebecca.smith@nsea.org](mailto:rebecca.smith@nsea.org).

— De Tonack,  
NSEA-Retired President



## Retireds Plan New Member Grants in '20-21

The NSEA-Retired Board of Directors has decided to go in a new direction with scholarships to college students seeking to begin teaching careers in the 2021-22 school year.

In the past, NSEA-Retired had delivered \$1,000 scholarships each year to three Aspiring Educators members, with the grants awarded during the applicant's student teaching semester.

This year, the board opted to spread the dollars more widely and will give 15 first-year teachers \$200 toward their first year of membership in NSEA.

"Once they have a Nebraska teaching position and join, recipients will receive \$200 to cover a portion of their dues," said NSEA-Retired President De Tonack. "We also hope to connect each recipient with a local retired member, not so much as a mentor, but as a welcome to the profession."

Watch future issues of The Voice for details on the grant application process.

NSEA-Retired also typically offers materials to attendees at the spring conference of Aspiring Educators. Since there will be only a Delegate Assembly and no spring conference for Aspiring Educators this year, the funds budgeted for those materials will go elsewhere, said Tonack.

"We are providing 60 books on first-year teaching advice via a raffle, and copies of Robert's Rules of Order for our state Aspiring Educators executive team members," Tonack said.

### Neel Earns CSCFA Stipend

This year's recipient of the \$500 **Chadron State College Faculty Association** Student Scholarship is **JoAnn Neel**, an elementary education major from McCook.

Neel is a junior at Chadron State and plans to complete her one student teaching semester in December and graduate that

## CSC's Fette Will Fill NSEA Board Vacancy

A new face will represent Higher Education on the NSEA Board of Directors.

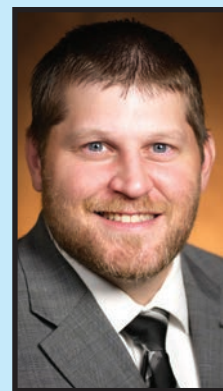
Chadron State College Instructor Adam Fette was appointed in January to fill a vacancy caused by resignation. Fette will serve the remainder of this Association year.

A biology teacher by trade, Fette is a professional studies and education instructor at Chadron State. He has a grades 7-12 certificate to teach biology and a principal's certificate for grades 7-12.

"I would like to continue my active involvement in NSEA by serving in a larger role as a strong advocate for our educators, students and communities we serve," Fette wrote in a letter of application to the NSEA Board.

Fette taught science at Palmyra-Bennett High School from 2012-15 and was the high school principal and activities director at Dundy County Stratton High School from 2015-20. He has been at Chadron State for the past year.

He earned a bachelor of science degree from Chadron State in 2009; a bachelor of science degree in education from Chadron in 2011; and a master's in education from Chadron in 2015. He is on track for an education specialist degree from the University of Nebraska at Kearney and a doctoral in school improvement, concentrating on educational leadership, from the University of West Georgia.



Fette

same month. She hopes to teach at the early elementary level.

"I have a strong passion for teaching students how to read," Neel said. "Seeing a student's excitement and joy from all their hard work is the most rewarding part of this profession."

Neel said the scholarship has helped her avoid the burden of a student loan and has opened the door to more summer class work. The scholarship has given her the chance to meet and discuss the benefits of the scholarship with several of her previous and current Chadron State professors, as well as created a connection with many of the members of the faculty association.



Neel

### Miscellaneous

**Diane Schutt**, retired member of the **Fairbury Education Association**, has been re-appointed to the Board of Directors for the Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

Longtime NSEA and NSEA-Retired member **Joanne Sokalsky** died Jan. 22 in Omaha. Sokalsky taught Spanish and business at **Omaha South High School** for 44 years. She is a member of the South High Hall of Fame. She was 84.

Two **Omaha South High School** members of NSEA were the January winners in the Association's Just 1 membership campaign.

**Jennifer Synowiecki**, an association representative for the **Omaha Education Association**, signed colleague **Jeremy Szczpaniak** to membership. Their names were selected in a drawing to win the January prize – a virtual learning survival kit that included a NexiGo selfie ring light with a webcam mount and phone holder for Logitech Webcams.

## Professional Development Proposals Sought for NSEA U

Hot and humid weather of mid-July is still a few months away, but talks are already heating up as plans are made for the third edition of the members-only NSEA University.

The first edition, held over three days in 2019, featured more than 180 professional development breakout sessions and 300 educators attending at the University of Nebraska's Innovation Campus. The 2020 edition was virtual and was shortened by the pandemic, but was a success as well.

Planning has begun for the July 13-15, 2021, edition, and the



first step is the RFP — request for proposals — process, which is now under way. A return to Innovation Campus in July is in the works, with hopes of a healthier 2021.

Topics are expected to cover issues such as social justice, leadership, educator wellness, advocacy and more. The conference will also attract nationally known keynote speakers.

If you have an area of expertise and would like to share your knowledge with teachers from across the state, complete the RFP application form found at:

<https://bit.ly/NSEAU-RFP>

## Speaking of Education

“Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and greater strength for our nation.”

— John F. Kennedy  
35th U.S. President, 1917-1963

## Multilingual Education Survey Opens

Educators who want to share their thoughts on language and working with multilingual students are encouraged to do so through a new survey being conducted by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's International Coalition for Multilingual Education and Equity, in conjunction with the University of Nebraska at Omaha. The federally funded coalition supports teachers in their work with multilingual students and families, including racial justice education.

The ICMEE is asking classroom teachers across Nebraska to consider taking the survey to assist in understanding more about teachers' perspectives of language and work with multilingual students. Teachers who finish the survey will be entered into a raffle for one of 20 \$100 Amazon gift cards. The survey may be accessed at:

<https://bit.ly/3tKpzIF>

ICMEE also will offer free professional learning opportunities for all interested educators this summer. From May 1-July 31, educators may take advantage of a broad menu of online asynchronous development options. Modules range from Assessment During COVID and Foundations of Race in Education to Translanguaging and Transformative Social Studies. Several book clubs also will be available, with many centering on themes to combat racism.

Additional information and registration details are available at the organization's website:

<https://cehs.unl.edu/icmee>

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## Members Eligible for Cash, Gift Card Prizes

California Casualty, the provider of the NEA Auto and Home Insurance Program, is offering NSEA members eight chances to win cash in 2021.

The \$2,500 Educator Jackpot giveaway was created to bring excitement to members across the country.

The timing could not be better, with educators and staff working in schools and remotely through COVID-19.

Winners for the \$2,500 prize will be randomly selected every three months, with two winners each round. There is no obligation or purchase necessary to enter. Go to:

[www.readyfor2500.com/nea](http://www.readyfor2500.com/nea)

### Gift cards for quotes

The company also is offering \$25 Amazon gift cards for NSEA members. The cards are a thank you for members who visit with California Casualty about a quote for their member-exclusive auto insurance rate. There is no purchase or additional commitment necessary.

After hearing their quote, the gift card is emailed within a few weeks. This promotion was supposed to end in 2020 but is carried over while supplies last.

To sign up to get your quote with California Casualty's Field Marketing Manager Stephanie Whitmore, go to: [www.readyforquote.com/Stephanie](http://www.readyforquote.com/Stephanie)

