

The VOICE

Nebraska State Education Association • March 2026



THE ONGOING FIGHT FOR PAID FMLA



EMPLOYEE



RECOVERY



ADOPTION



SICK



MATERNITY



PATERNITY



CAREGIVER



BENEFIT

THE REAL COST OF OUTDATED FAMILY LEAVE POLICIES

- Statewide Summer Conferences Scheduled
- Millard Para Finalist for ESP of the Year
- 2026 Delegate Assembly Details



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605 S. 14th Street, Lincoln, NE 68508
www.nsea.org
402-475-7611 · 1-800-742-0047
Volume 79, No. 6
ISSN Number: 1085-0783
USPS Number: 000-369

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Official publication of the Nebraska State Education Association, 605 South 14th Street, Lincoln, NE 68508-2742. Periodical postage paid at Lincoln, NE, and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send address changes to NSEA Voice, 605 S. 14th Street, Lincoln, NE 68508.

Published 9 times yearly according to this schedule: October, November, December, January, February, March, April, May and August.

Payment of annual NSEA membership dues entitles Nebraska educators to receive *The Voice*. Total cost of producing 9 monthly issues of *The Voice* each year is less than \$2 per member.

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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: NSEA continues to push for paid family and medical leave for educators, warning that stalled progress at the bargaining table and in the Legislature is creating real consequences for educators. See the full story on pages 7-8.



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

TIM ROYERS

Public Funds, Public Accountability

During this short session, I testified before lawmakers on several education issues. This February, I went before the Appropriations Committee to oppose—yet again—the use of Nebraska taxpayer dollars for private schools. This is not simply a position NSEA members hold. Nebraskans made their voices clear in November 2024 when they repealed LB1402 and affirmed that public funds belong in public schools.

Voucher Grift Continues

Last fall, our governor opted Nebraska into a federal tax credit program despite voters rejecting voucher-style policies. The program operates as a backdoor voucher scheme, diverting public resources into private systems without the transparency or accountability Nebraskans expect. When policies contradict voters, it underscores why advocacy for strong public education remains essential.

At the same time, the governor's budget proposal set aside \$7 million within the Department of Labor to create a new Education Savings Account program. This plan would divert state resources toward private education while public schools work to meet growing student needs. My primary concern is that the proposal is duplicative. The federal program was promoted as a way to avoid trade-offs with public education budgets, yet this new state-funded initiative undermines that promise and raises serious questions about priorities, especially as funding pressures remain in areas like special education. I also raised concerns about the process being used to establish this program. Major policy changes should move through stand-alone legislation, not budget adjustments that leave key details undefined. Placing an education

initiative under the Department of Labor only adds uncertainty and weakens transparency for families, educators and communities.

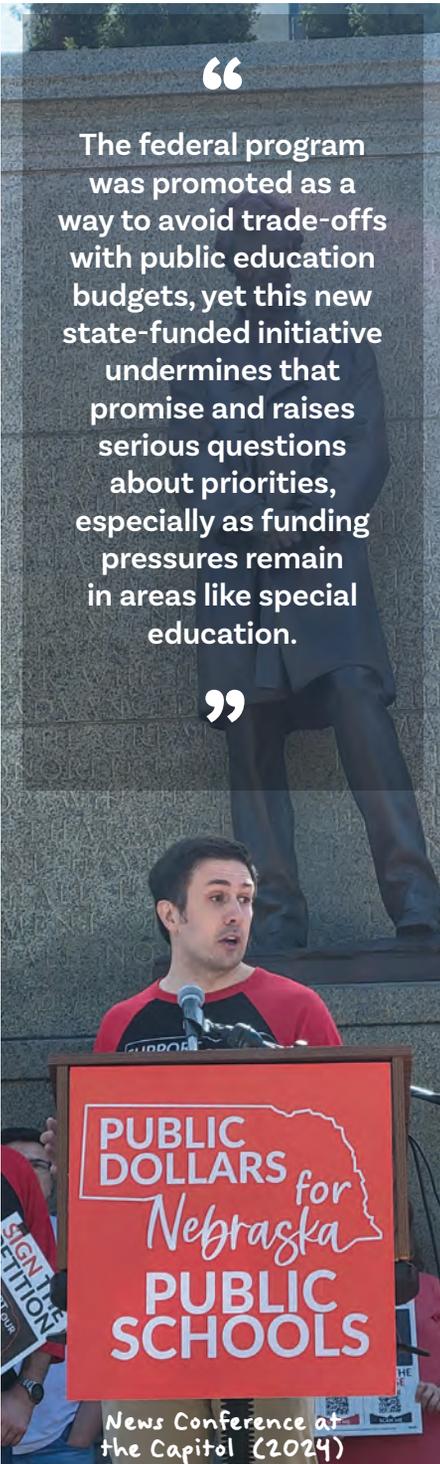
Equity and Learning

During the hearing, lawmakers asked questions about opportunity, income and how different systems serve students. I shared data showing that comparisons between scholarship programs and public schools are often misaligned. Nearly half of Nebraska's public school students fall within the income range used to determine free and reduced-price meals, a reality that must be part of any honest conversation about who these policies actually serve.

The discussion also turned to equity and student success. I made it clear that educators are not satisfied with the status quo. We know there are gaps to close, but solutions must remain transparent and accountable. Public schools already offer diverse learning environments and supports designed to meet the needs of every student. Strengthening those systems—not diverting funds away from them—is the most effective path forward.

Improving outcomes requires addressing broader structural challenges. Many barriers begin long before a child enters a classroom. Expanding early childhood access, strengthening community supports and investing in models like community schools can help address those challenges while keeping public education at the center.

Testifying isn't about one bill—it's about ensuring educators and students have a voice. I will continue advocating for policies that reflect the will of Nebraska voters and strengthen publicly accountable education for every student.



“

The federal program was promoted as a way to avoid trade-offs with public education budgets, yet this new state-funded initiative undermines that promise and raises serious questions about priorities, especially as funding pressures remain in areas like special education.

”

PUBLIC DOLLARS for Nebraska PUBLIC SCHOOLS

News Conference at the Capitol (2024)



Mary Reynolds-East
Millard Education Assoc.

Millard Para Among NEA ESP of the Year Finalists

Millard Education Association paraeducator Mary Reynolds-East has been named one of five finalists for the 2025-26 National Education Association Education Support Professional of the Year Award, one of the highest honors for education support professionals in the country.

Reynolds-East's recognition follows her selection as the 2025 Nebraska Education Support Professional of the Year, reflecting her dedication to students, her school community and her profession.

The National Education Association Education Support Professional of the Year Award honors members whose accomplishments illustrate the vital role support professionals play in public education. These professionals, including paraeducators, campus supervisors and transportation workers, help ensure students are safe, supported and positioned to succeed each day. For 2025-26, five finalists were selected from a field of state nominees nationwide, each demonstrating exceptional service, leadership, advocacy and a commitment to enriching the lives of students and colleagues.

NSEA Executive Team Takes Members' Voices to Capitol Hill

Washington D.C.

Coordinates:
38°54'36"N 77°00'52"W



The NSEA Executive Team, including President Tim Royers, Vice President Paul Schulte, Secretary-Treasurer Renae Noble and NEA Director Edward Ventura Jr., traveled to Washington, D.C., in late February to advocate for Nebraska educators, meeting with staff from the offices of Sen. Deb Fischer, Rep. Don Bacon and Rep. Mike Flood, as well as with Rep. Adrian Smith.

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

CLUSTER DELEGATES: Voting for Cluster Delegates takes place from Sunday, March 8 through Tuesday, March 17.

BYLAWS: Deadline to submit Bylaws Amendments is 11:59 PM on Tuesday, March 10.

RESOLUTIONS: Deadline to submit Resolutions Amendments is 11:59 PM on Friday, April 10.

NEW BUSINESS ITEMS: Deadline to submit New Business Items is 11:59 PM on Friday, April 10.

DELEGATE ASSEMBLY: The 2026 Assembly will be held April 24-25 at Lincoln's Cornhusker Marriott Hotel.

DELEGATE ASSEMBLY: Together We Move Forward

2026 Nebraska Teacher of the Year Sarah Hardin will deliver a keynote address at the 2026 NSEA Delegate Assembly, scheduled for April 24–25 at the Cornhusker Marriott Hotel in Lincoln. Hardin, a Mullen Education Association member and high school science teacher at Mullen Public Schools, is known for turning curiosity into hands-on learning opportunities that extend far beyond the classroom. An O'Neill native who once envisioned a career in science rather than education, Hardin took what she describes as a “leap of faith” into teaching nearly two decades ago, completing a transition-to-teaching program through the University of Nebraska at Kearney while stepping directly into her first classroom.

Since then, Hardin has built a reputation for innovation and community engagement. She has helped launch initiatives such as a geothermal greenhouse project that allows students to study sustainable ecosystems year-round and co-founded a STEM club that grew into a widely attended Family STEM Night. Named the 2026 Nebraska Teacher of the Year this past fall, Hardin has been recognized for her dedication to continuous growth and her belief that learning happens through exploration.

Together We Move Forward

The Delegate Assembly is NSEA's annual business meeting, where locally elected educators from districts

across Nebraska gather under this year's theme, “Together We Move Forward, Together We Make Change,” to set policy, conduct association business and help shape advocacy priorities for the year ahead. Representing more than 23,000 members from urban and rural communities and from both large and small districts, delegates will take part in keynote sessions, discussions on pressing education issues and votes on proposed bylaws and resolutions that guide the association's legislative and professional focus throughout the year.

The assembly will also recognize outstanding professionals from across Nebraska through several annual awards honoring excellence in public education.

Members interested in attending as delegates must be elected by their local association. Those wishing to serve are encouraged to contact their local association president, building or faculty representative or NSEA organizational specialist to learn more about the process. Serving as a delegate provides an opportunity to advocate for colleagues, help guide association priorities and take part in decisions that impact educators and students statewide. As Nebraska's oldest professional education association, NSEA has convened Delegate Assemblies for generations, continuing a long-standing tradition of member-led governance, reflection and forward momentum.

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Nora Lenz



Raeanna Carlson



Kathy Poehling

THE PRICE OF INACTION: The Push for Paid FMLA Amid Bargaining and Legislative Barriers

Lincoln Education Association member Nora Lenz, a 30-year classroom veteran, has the kind of career lawmakers praise in resolutions and speeches. By all accounts, Nora has done what teachers are always told to do: be dependable, be steady, be there for students. But when her parents' health collapsed, reliability became a trap. Because in Nebraska, for too many educators, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) is protection on paper and punishment in practice.

Impossible Choices

In the summer of 2019, Nora's mother moved into a nursing home. Her father, still in good health at the time, stayed in his home. The family made a decision that will sound familiar to anyone who has ever watched a parent decline: Her mother should never be alone. Nora took the Friday-through-Sunday shifts, building her weekends around a nursing home 150 miles away. She did it while teaching full-time, absorbing the travel, the exhaustion, and the emotional weight because that is what families do when the system gives them no other choice.

Then January 2020 arrived, and with it, her father's illness. His health

declined rapidly. She described watching him lose the will to live. The clock was running out, but she could not afford to stop hers. The bills did not pause because her parents needed her. So, she did what educators do. She kept going. She was with her father for the last four days of his life. She held his hand as he took his last breath. And then she said the part that should haunt anyone who sets policy for working families:

"I truly believe that if I had been able to take even a short leave from work, he might have lived longer," Nora told lawmakers.

Seventeen days after her father died, her mother died, too. This is the kind of loss you carry long after the moment is over.

Nebraska lawmakers can say FMLA exists. They can say teachers can take time off. But "can" is meaningless when it comes with a pay cut big enough to destabilize a household. A benefit that requires you to risk your rent, your mortgage or your groceries is not a benefit. It is a gamble.

NSEA Fighting for FMLA

In the spring of 2025, when Nora shared her story before the Education Committee, it felt like forward

momentum in the Nebraska State Education Association's push for paid FMLA for educators. LB440, originally introduced by Sen. Ashlei Spivey to create the Education Leave and Support Act, was prioritized but struggled to gain traction on its own. Instead, it advanced only as part of a larger committee amendment that bundled it with unrelated proposals—an approach that drew resistance from senators and prevented a focused debate on paid leave for teachers.

Lawmakers raised concerns about the cost of adding another payroll-based assessment, while others argued that paid FMLA should remain a topic for local collective bargaining rather than statewide policy. The bill stalled and, in the months that followed, NSEA worked with lawmakers to craft an amendment aimed at addressing those concerns. At the same time, hundreds of local associations drafted paid FMLA proposals to bring to their bargaining tables. According to NSEA Collective Bargaining Specialist Jen Dubas, none of those proposals resulted in adopted policies, and in some districts the ideas were labeled nonstarters before negotiations even began.

Every year Nebraska debates how to recruit and retain educators while districts compete with industries offering stronger benefits. Meanwhile teachers look at their lives—real lives with births and deaths and cancer and caregiving—and they do the math. Many leave. Some decide to never enter the profession.

If the state is serious about keeping skilled educators in classrooms, it cannot keep asking them to sacrifice their families to prove their commitment to students.

Protection Gap

Lexie Wiseman expected long days, careful planning and the dedication that comes with working with children and families. What she did not expect was that becoming a mother—or facing a medical crisis—would require years of saving leave just to stay financially afloat.

A speech-language pathologist with Educational Service Unit 10 (ESU 10), Lexie is nine years into a career serving students from birth to age 21 while raising four children of her own. For educators like her, even joyful milestones like childbirth begin with a calculation: How many sick days can I afford to use? She built up nearly three years of leave before starting her family, knowing maternity leave often means paying yourself with days you have saved.

During her first pregnancy, Lexie learned at a 20-week ultrasound that her baby had congenital heart disease. The next day, she returned to work because she had no leave to spare.

“I didn’t have the opportunity to just sit with my emotions,” she said.

Months later, her infant required lifesaving open-heart surgery, forcing her to take unpaid time off.

“My son is fighting for his life in the hospital... and I’m not getting paid,” she said.

Lexie loves her work and the students who keep her grounded, but her story underscores a larger truth: paid FMLA is not an abstract policy debate. It is the difference between focusing on a child’s surgery and worrying about a paycheck that never arrives.



Lexie Wiseman

The Caregiving Gap

Omaha Education Association (OEA) President Kathy Poehling didn’t testify before lawmakers to talk about pregnancy. She came to talk about the parts of life educators carry quietly—the foster children who need stability, and the moments when teaching collides with responsibility at home and the system offers little more than unpaid days and impossible choices.

More than two decades ago, Kathy and her husband became foster parents to a toddler. The child was just 22 months old and had endured abuse in nearly every form imaginable. For three and a half years, Kathy’s family provided stability. Then the state returned the child to her biological parent. Two months later, she was back in foster care, moving through 10 different homes over the next three and a half years while Kathy and her husband fought quietly, persistently, to bring her back.

When that call finally came, Kathy had just begun her teaching career. Like many new educators, she had no leave built up. But trauma does not wait for contract language in a negotiated agreement.

“I still had to take her to Project Harmony. I still had to take her to numerous medical appointments, and on top of that, therapy twice a week,” Kathy said.

She described receiving just \$200 a month to help support the child while absorbing the emotional and financial strain herself.

Zero Dollar Paychecks

In 2021, OEA member Raeanna (Rae) Carlson and her husband made a move many teachers make for opportunity and growth. They left Niobrara for Omaha, trading six years of accumulated leave for a fresh start. On paper, those six years should have meant more than 50 days of sick leave. In reality, chronic illness and the everyday exposures that come with working in a school had already chipped away at that balance.

Her health story began years earlier with a kidney disease diagnosis

and other medical challenges she continues to manage. Like countless educators, she kept working through appointments and flare-ups because teaching rarely allows space for long absences.

When she arrived in Omaha Public Schools, she was rebuilding everything from the ground up—new classroom, new district, new leave bank. She was also pregnant.

As a new teacher in the district, Rae received 10 sick days. After that, the remaining weeks of maternity leave were unpaid. She described opening paychecks that read zero dollars. Colleagues told Rae to keep the paychecks and apply for assistance.

“Some teachers had told me they used those checks to get on WIC to help offset the cost of a newborn and unpaid leave,” Rae said.

The financial strain was not the result of reckless choices or poor planning. It was the result of taking time to recover from childbirth—time the system acknowledges as necessary but refuses to support financially.

Where FMLA Stalled

This session, a refined version of LB440 paired with amendment AM1699 sought to address earlier concerns by removing the proposed payroll fee while requiring districts to provide up to six weeks of paid leave for qualifying FMLA events with local flexibility. The amendment protected educators’ existing sick days and excluded substitute costs from budget limits. Despite those changes, the standalone proposal has stalled, leaving lawmakers without a focused debate on paid FMLA for educators this year.

NSEA's Promise

NSEA leaders say the fight is far from over. President Tim Royers warned that if lawmakers fail to act, the organization is prepared to take the issue directly to voters through a petition drive.

“Our members can’t afford to wait while another session passes without paid FMLA,” Royers said. “It isn’t too expensive. What’s expensive is burnout. What’s expensive is turnover. What’s expensive is losing experienced teachers because we refused to build a system that acknowledges that life happens to educators, too. Paid FMLA is not a perk. It is dignity.”



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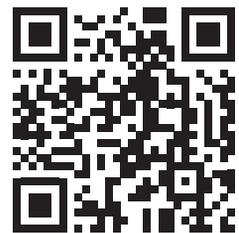
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“My professors were understanding while holding me to a high standard. They not only provided me with an invaluable education with skills to use in the classroom but also taught me how to seek out knowledge, learn independently, and never settle for less than my best effort.”

— Kattie

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LEGISLATURE

NSEA Member Testimony Shapes Debate on Key Education Bills

In February, the Appropriations Committee held a hearing on Gov. Jim Pillen's proposed mid-biennium budget adjustments in LB1071, including a \$7 million allocation to the Department of Labor for a new education savings account program that would fund private school vouchers. Supporters have described the proposal as "gap funding" for prior scholarships, but critics say it disregards the outcome of the November 2024 Support Our Schools referendum, when Nebraska voters repealed the state's previous private school scholarship law.

NSEA President Tim Royers testified in opposition, arguing the proposal was unnecessary in light of the federal tax credit program Nebraska has already opted into.

"In our perspective, this is duplicative and unnecessary given the existence of the new federal tax credit program," Royers told lawmakers, noting that the federal initiative is expected to provide dollar-for-dollar tax credits for

contributions supporting students across public, private and homeschool settings without drawing directly on state funds.

Royers also raised concerns about how the proposal is being advanced. Rather than moving through stand-alone legislation, the Education Savings Account (ESA) plan is included within a budget bill and housed under the Department of Labor. During his testimony, Royers said placing an education initiative outside the traditional education framework "raises significant alarm bells," and warned that creating a new program through the budget process risks limiting legislative oversight. "This program should be in a separate bill and given its own hearing," he said.

The hearing included discussion about income thresholds and who benefits from scholarship-style programs. Royers shared data indicating that nearly half of Nebraska public school students fall within the income range used to determine eligibility for free and reduced-price meals, underscoring concerns about how resources are distributed and who is ultimately served by voucher programs.

NSEA leaders said they appreciated the Appropriations Committee's preliminary decision to exclude the \$7 million appropriation from its initial budget draft, calling it a sign lawmakers are prioritizing public education funding. The association continues to argue that public dollars should remain invested in Nebraska's public schools, which serve all students and remain accountable to taxpayers.

ACTION NEEDED: NSEA calls on members and supporters to contact the members of the Appropriations Committee. Thank them for not funding the program in their preliminary report, and urge them to maintain that stance by ensuring no public dollars are used for private school vouchers moving forward. Email your senator at www.nsea.org/EmailSenator

HIGHER ED BILL ADVANCES

As debate over the budget continues at the Capitol, NSEA is also celebrating a significant step forward for postsecondary educators. **LB956**, introduced by Sen. John Cavanaugh on



Substitute Teacher Shortage: NSEA-Retired President John Heineman testified in support of LB824 which would reduce the separation period for school retirement plans from 180 days to 120 days, aligning school employees with other Nebraska public retirement systems.



FMLA: Lincoln Education Association member Renee Jones testified in support of LR303CA, requiring paid family and medical leave in Nebraska, starting with six weeks in 2027 and expanding to 12 weeks by 2028.

behalf of NSEA's higher education members, has advanced to Select File—the second round of legislative debate—after clearing General File, Select File and the adoption of AM1943, a clarifying amendment from Cavanaugh.

LB956 would require Nebraska's public postsecondary institutions to collect and report compensation data, including salaries and benefits for faculty and staff, to the Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education. Supporters say increased transparency will help address salary trends, equity concerns and recruitment challenges across higher education.

Comparable compensation data is essential for effective collective bargaining. Unlike K-12 districts, where salary schedules allow straightforward comparisons, postsecondary data is often locked behind proprietary systems, making it difficult for educators to advocate for fair pay. By making key information publicly available, LB956 aims to level the playing field for faculty and staff negotiating contracts amid ongoing financial pressures.

If enacted, the bill would impact educators across community colleges, state colleges and the University of Nebraska system. As LB956 moves through Final Reading, NSEA is urging continued legislative support, calling the bill an important step toward fairness, transparency and

informed decision-making in Nebraska's higher education landscape.

BILL UNDERMINES LOCAL CONTROL

Nebraska educators, take note: LB429, introduced by Sen. Dave Murman and cosponsored by Senators Ballard, Clements specifically targets the NSEA and our local education associations by mandating "equal access" for alternative quasi-groups that claim to provide professional development, such as Turning Point USA or similar third-party organizations. Under the bill's language, if your local association has access to new member orientation meetings, these outside groups would gain the right to infiltrate school employee emails, display signage in schools, and attend district meetings, potentially overwhelming resources and undermining the democratic representation earned by NSEA through certification elections.

This legislation is flawed and constitutes special legislation under Article III, Section 18 of the Nebraska Constitution, as it arbitrarily excludes other school employees like custodians and bus drivers represented by unions such as Service Employees International Union (SEIU) or Teamsters, while focusing privileges on instructional staff to weaken NSEA's role. The vague definitions could invite non-bargaining entities to disrupt school operations with unrelated solicitations, distracting from our core mission of



Third-Grade Retention: Omaha Education Association member Emily Theis testified in opposition of LB1050 which would require retention of third-grade students who do not read at or above grade level.



Third-Grade Retention: Gretna Education Association member Danielle Larson testified in opposition of LB1050 which would require retention of third-grade students who do not read at or above grade level.

supporting students and fair working conditions.

While NSEA opposes LB429 outright, we do support an amendment being offered by Sen. John Cavanaugh as a compromise proposal. The amendment addresses key flaws by limiting access to organizations engaged in collective bargaining or providing liability protection and aligning with existing statutes on certificated employees, reducing constitutional risks and preventing misuse by external groups. Overall, the amendment limits potential misuse of school resources and mitigates issues related to special legislation targeting NSEA members.

SPECIAL EDUCATION FUNDING CUT

In early February, NSEA President Tim Royers testified before the Appropriations Committee in opposition to LB1071, the governor's proposed mid-biennium budget adjustments, raising concerns about a planned \$18.4 million reduction in state funding for special education services in fiscal year 2027. The proposal would freeze reimbursement levels at fiscal year 2026 amounts despite rising costs, effectively shifting more of the financial burden onto local school districts.



FMLA: NSEA-Retired member Rita Bennett testified in support of LR303CA, requiring paid family and medical leave in Nebraska, starting with six weeks in 2027 and expanding to 12 weeks by 2028.

During his testimony, Royers emphasized that special education is not simply a federal mandate but a constitutional responsibility to provide equitable educational opportunities for every student. He highlighted the foundational principle of public education: meeting students where they are and ensuring communities uphold their obligation to serve all learners, regardless of need or background.

Although the proposed budget maintains total special education funding at \$527 million, Royers warned that reducing reimbursement rates would force districts to absorb growing expenses tied to specialized services, staffing and compliance requirements. Because special education funding is shared across Nebraska's public school systems, he said the cuts would likely result in higher property taxes as districts work to meet legally required services.

Royers described state budgets as moral documents that reflect policy priorities, arguing that reducing support for students with disabilities to address a fiscal shortfall sends the wrong message about Nebraska's commitment to equity. He cautioned that districts facing reduced reimbursements would be left with limited options, including increasing local levies or scaling back services such as intervention time, staffing ratios and program supports.

THREAT TO SCHOOL BONDS

The Nebraska Legislature is considering LB765, introduced by Sen. Rick Holdcroft of Bellevue, a bill that would impose a stringent new requirement for school bond elections. Under current law, school bonds pass with a simple majority of votes cast in favor. LB765 would change this by mandating that more than 50% of all registered voters in the district must participate in the election (a turnout threshold of at least 50.1% of qualified electors), and a majority of those voting must approve the measure. If turnout falls short—even if nearly all participants strongly support the bond—the issue would fail, effectively making it nearly impossible for many school districts to secure voter approval for critical infrastructure funding.

This high turnout hurdle would create significant challenges for Nebraska schools, where special elections or off-year voting often sees lower participation despite strong community interest in school improvements. Bonds fund essential needs like safety upgrades, expanded classrooms, accessibility modifications, and infrastructure repairs—projects that prevent higher future costs from delayed maintenance or inflation in construction prices. Failed bonds due to turnout alone would delay these investments, disrupt planning, and impose a six-month waiting period before resubmission (except in emergencies), straining school budgets and local economies that benefit from construction jobs and improved facilities that help attract families and workers.

DINE WITH YOUR SENATOR

NSEA Legislative Dinner will be at the Champions Club in Lincoln on Tuesday, March 10. There is no cost to members who want to attend and mileage is paid. The reception will begin at 5 p.m. For those traveling more than 120 miles, substitute costs and sleeping rooms will be available if your senator plans to attend. Additional information can be found at www.nsea.org/2026LegisDinner.



Educating At-Risk Youth: NSEA President Tim Royers and State Code Agencies Teachers Association (SCATA) members Tricia Jacobsen and Lisa Irwin spoke in opposition of LB1013, which would change or eliminate provisions related to state institution names and gender requirements at youth rehabilitation and treatment centers, raising concerns about potential job losses for educators working with at-risk youth.

VOICES FOR EDUCATION

NSEA supports you by advocating for the needs of students, promoting excellence in education and advancing policies and initiatives that support the success and well-being of educators, students, and communities across the state. If you have a classroom story or legislative concern you want your senator to know about, but can't make the trip to Lincoln, we are here to help. Share a brief summary of your story at www.nsea.org/capitol-connections and we'll coordinate with fellow NSEA members closer to the State Capitol to meet with your senator in person, deliver your message, and bring back a response. Simply submit a one-sentence headline, a paragraph or two describing the issue, and the outcome you would like to see; then we will take it from there.

Your experiences matter, and your story can help shape policy and strengthen our collective voice across Nebraska!



Retirement Benefits: OEA-Retired members Roger Rea and Cheryl Richardson supported LB1102 to require adjustments of COLA timing after a January 2025 payment delay.



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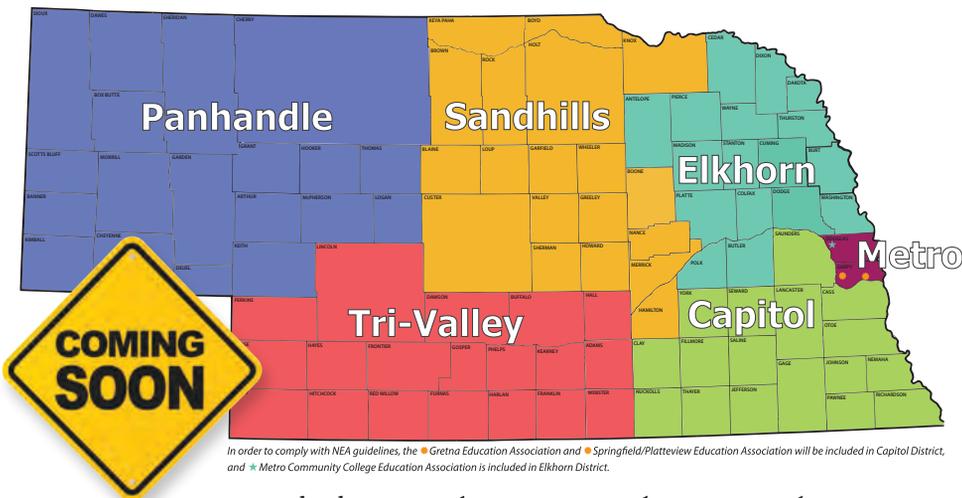
Member-Driven Professional Development

NSEA is planning a new approach to member engagement in 2026, shifting from a single statewide conference to a series of regional professional learning opportunities designed to increase access and reduce travel barriers for educators. The change reflects a broader effort to expand opportunities for members to connect, collaborate and strengthen leadership skills closer to home.

NSEA President Tim Royers said the shift comes after ongoing conversations with members across Nebraska about what engagement looks like at both the individual and local association level. The goal is to ensure every member has meaningful opportunities to get involved, grow as a leader and make their voice heard on the issues that matter most to them.

Rather than hosting one central event, NSEA plans to offer six professional development opportunities—one in each governing district. Exact dates and locations have not yet been finalized, but the regional approach is intended to make participation more accessible in a geographically large state while strengthening connections within local associations and creating space for more localized conversations.

The professional learning opportunities will be designed to meet members at different points in their leadership journey. Sessions will support experienced local leaders looking to deepen their skills, newly elected officers seeking foundational guidance, members involved in negotiations



In order to comply with NEA guidelines, the Gretna Education Association and Springfield/Platteview Education Association will be included in Capitol District, and Metro Community College Education Association is included in Elkhorn District.

and educators who want to explore ways to become more engaged in their association. Organizers say the regional format will also allow for more tailored content that reflects the day-to-day realities educators face in different parts of the state.

NSEA leaders say the regional approach will help professional development better reflect the unique experiences of educators in each area of Nebraska. Additional details, including confirmed locations and schedules, are expected this spring, and members are encouraged to watch for updates and consider setting aside time to participate in a professional learning opportunity close to home. Official dates and locations will be unveiled at this year's Delegate Assembly in April, with additional details published in the April issue of *The Voice*.

NSEA Aspiring Educators to Host Spring Conference in Hastings

@Hastings College
to do list

March 27-28

Register to attend by March 13.

- _____
- Find information @ _____
- www.nsea.org/AspiringEducators-DA
- For Questions call Noah @ NSEA
- _____
- (402) 475-7611
- _____
- Invite a friend to join AE!
- @ www.nsea.org/JoinNow
- _____
- _____

Friday
March 27
Aspiring
Educators
Delegate
Assembly

Followed by
Ice Cream
Sundaes &
Socializing!

Saturday
March 28
Professional
Development
Sessions

Career
Fair!
Dress
business
casual

The NSEA Aspiring Educators will host their annual Spring Conference and Delegate Assembly at Hastings College on March 27-28, bringing together aspiring educators from chapters across Nebraska for a weekend focused on professional growth, leadership development and the future of public education. The annual gathering serves as the organization's business meeting, where delegates come together to share ideas, strengthen connections and help shape priorities for the year ahead while building skills that support them as future educators.

The event will feature professional development sessions, a career fair and networking opportunities designed to help members prepare for student teaching and entry into the profession. Attendees will also take part in the Aspiring Educators Delegate Assembly. Social activities and informal networking opportunities will provide additional chances for members to build community while celebrating the work of aspiring educators across Nebraska.



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The online master's degree in school administration is designed to prepare you for a career in an administrative position, such as principal, director, department head, or supervisor, and includes an extra focus area in athletic administration. If you already have an MSE, you may be eligible to add this as an endorsement to your existing degree.

Master of Science in Education: Special Education (Online)

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Reading Specialist (PK-12) (Online)

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.

MSE Community of Learning (hybrid, one Saturday per month and online)

Take your teaching to the next level through this unique, community-focused program. Spend five Saturdays per semester collaborating and learning with others while driving your own professional development to directly impact your students. Two-year cohort starting this fall in Grand Island, Fremont, and South Sioux City.

For information: www.wsc.edu/community-learning

MSE Counseling: Low Residency Format

Complete the foundation courses for your master's degree in counseling in only four semesters! Classes meet two weekends per semester. Summer courses are completely online. Weekend residencies are interactive and involve small and large group processes, discussions, and experiential skills-building activities. For information: 402-375-7389 or visit

www.wsc.edu/mse-counseling

Master of Arts in Teaching Degree (MAT)

The MAT program is designed for those who hold a non-education bachelor's degree and are looking to transition to a teaching career. The program provides a clear path to initial (first-time) teacher certification in Nebraska.

For information: www.wsc.edu/mat

APPLY TODAY!



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402-375-7389



jegriff1@wsc.edu

APRIL

15

What to Do if You Receive a RIF Notice: Call NSEA.

Notification Deadline: April 15

It happens every year: Some K-12 Nebraska teachers receive Reduction in Force (RIF) notices informing them that their teaching contract may not be renewed for the coming year. The statutory deadline for school districts to hand out RIF notices is April 15.

The best way to deal with a RIF notice is to be prepared. The moment you receive a RIF notice, a countdown begins. To preserve your rights when facing a RIF you must always request a hearing. The hearing must be requested within seven days of receiving the RIF notice (five days for community college faculty). While your situation may never reach an actual hearing, immediately calling NSEA will give you and NSEA's Advocacy department time to determine what steps are in your best interest.

Email a copy of the notice to your NSEA Organizational Specialist. Once a copy of the RIF notice is received at NSEA headquarters, members will be encouraged to request a hearing to preserve their rights.

If you have questions concerning the RIF process, contact your NSEA Organizational Specialist or NSEA Director of Advocacy Jason Wiese by calling 1-800-742-0047.



Don't Delay! Apply Early for Your Certificate Renewal

Educators who need to renew their certificate in 2026 may want to complete their application early to avoid processing delays with the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE).

Each year, the NDE sends certificate renewal reminders to thousands of Nebraska educators. The teaching certificate is valid for teaching in all Nebraska school systems and must be renewed every five years. Certificates expire on Aug. 31 each year. Backlogs at the department in recent years have sent members to NSEA for help to get answers about the process. In 2024, the department hired additional staff to help manage certificate renewals. This year, the department is encouraging certificated teachers

who will need to renew in 2026 to apply between the months of January and March.

"This will help with the processing time for their certificates and not put them in a bind if they wait until it gets closer to August when our office has many new grads that are working through the system," said NDE Director of Educator Certification Katelyn Larson.

Teachers who are unsure if their certificate expires this year can log in to the Nebraska TEACH portal and check the expiration date: teach.education.ne.gov/#/verifylicense.

To renew, log on to: teach.education.ne.gov and start an application. The application can be found at the top of the account portal.



Teacher of the Year: Sarah Hardin, a high school science teacher at Mullen Public Schools, was named the 2026 Nebraska Teacher of the Year during a surprise award presentation in September.



**Have a student teacher?
Give the Gift of Aspiring
Educators Membership!**

A semester of student teaching is a unique time for an educator, and it's the perfect time to surround oneself with support from other new and seasoned educators.

If you have a student teacher in your classroom this year, encourage them to become a member of the NSEA-Aspiring Educators. You may even set aside some time to walk them through the process and help them understand the myriad of benefits they'll receive as a member of the Association.

Feeling especially generous? Pay their Aspiring Educators dues—just \$40 for the year!

Benefits of membership for Aspiring Educators include student loan forgiveness workshops, access to year-round professional development opportunities, big savings through the NEA Discount Marketplace, the \$1 million Educators Employment Liability insurance policy and much more.

First-year educators will also benefit from involvement in NewGEN, NSEA's New Generation of Educators in Nebraska. The organization is comprised of early career educators in their first seven years of teaching who network and support each other through the challenges of a new teaching career.

For more information or to help a new member register, go to www.nsea.org/JoinNow, or contact the NSEA Membership Department by calling 1-800-742-0047 or emailing membership@nsea.org.

Are You Nebraska's Next Teacher of the Year?

Nominations for the 2027 Nebraska Teacher of the Year Will Open Soon

In 2027, one teacher will represent the good work of all the teachers in the state as the Nebraska Teacher of the Year (TOY).

Application forms will soon be available through your school administration or at the website listed below. Teachers may self-nominate or nominate a colleague for the honor.

A panel will review applications, and up to five finalists will be selected for interviews in August. The 2027 recipient will be recognized at an awards luncheon.

Since 1972, the Nebraska Teacher of the Year program has recognized outstanding certified teachers in a pre-K-12 classroom setting who plan to continue in active teacher status in a state-approved or accredited school.

The application seeks information on educational background and

personal development, community involvement, philosophy of teaching and learning and commentary on the teaching profession.

The Teacher of the Year will maintain a regular teaching schedule while also participating in a year of professional learning through the National Teacher of the Year Program.

The TOY Review Committee also selects up to five Award of Excellence Teachers.

The NSEA, Nebraska Council of School Administrators, Nebraska Association of School Boards, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Nebraska, Data Recognition Corporation, as well as the State Board of Education present cash awards or grants to the Teacher of the Year and other finalists. For additional details, visit www.education.ne.gov/toy.



Dates Set for School Retirement Planning Seminars

If you are nearing retirement age, it may be time to begin considering your retirement benefit options.

To learn more, staff from Nebraska Public Employees Retirement Systems (NPERS) will offer seminars throughout the spring and summer months. Educators can attend an in-person session at locations across the state or join a virtual webinar. Omaha School Employees' Retirement System (OSERS) members now also have the opportunity to participate.

The seminars are open to school plan members, OSERS members and their spouses age 50 and older. Eligible employees may receive paid leave to attend up to two retirement planning sessions, with only one session per fiscal year eligible for paid leave. State law defines leave with pay as time off paid by the employer and not as vacation, sick, personal or compensatory time. Leave may be used only for sessions that occur during an employee's normal workday, and for leave purposes, a day equals eight hours.

The amount of leave granted may vary depending on the program and any related educational components, which may be completed separately. Employees may attend more than two sessions, but additional leave is

at the employee's expense and subject to employer approval. Participants are encouraged to consult their employer regarding leave approval. Seminars are scheduled at locations across the state.

Members must enroll in advance to attend at npers.ne.gov. OSERS and NPERS members must complete different registration forms, so participants should select the appropriate option when signing up.

If you have questions on seminar scheduling, contact the NPERS Education Services department at npers.seminars@nebraska.gov or call 402-471-9671.

In-Person Seminars (Location/Dates)
BEATRICE: April 29
COLUMBUS: March 12, April 9
GRAND ISLAND: March 19
HASTINGS: May 8
KEARNEY: March 18, May 5
LA VISTA: May 19
LINCOLN: March 3, March 4, March 24, April 2*, April 16, May 14*, May 21
MCCOOK: April 21
NORFOLK: March 11, April 8
NORTH PLATTE: April 22
OMAHA: March 31, May 12

Webinars
March 27
April 13
May 1
OSERS: June 2
June 3

* Indicates the session is a half day.

Download the NSEA Capitol Update App!

- Receive alerts and calls-to-action during the legislative session.
- Stay up-to-date on events and education news from the Nebraska Legislature.



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BlueCross BlueShield
Nebraska

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Nebraska, an independent licensee of the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association MSZ-005 (10-16-25)

nea Member Benefits

Enter the NEA Member Benefits Annual Giveaway

All-Inclusive Adventure



Enter by March 30 to Win the NEA Member Benefits Sweepstakes

The NEA Member Benefits program has launched its annual travel giveaway, offering three National Education Association members the chance to win a five-night, all-inclusive resort stay at select beach destinations, officials announced.

The prizes include accommodations at resorts in Puerto Plata, Cancún, Los Cabos, Mazatlán, Puerto Morelos or Cozumel. Each winner will also receive \$150 in cash, according to NEA Member Benefits.

The giveaway is open to eligible NEA members, and entries will be accepted through March. Winners are scheduled to be selected and announced March 30.

NEA Member Benefits, which provides discounts and programs to NEA's membership, said the promotion is intended to highlight travel opportunities available to educators and education support professionals.

No purchase is required to enter. Additional eligibility requirements and official rules apply.

Members can enter the giveaway and find more information at www.nea.mb.com/pages/sweepstakes.



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.

Schools, community organizations, tribal and local governments, 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, 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 27.

To verify your eligibility, contact the NDE at 402-471-4407 (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.

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ISAU METES

Message from the Executive Director

The Room Where It Happens

In my time with this association, Delegate Assembly has remained one of the most meaningful moments of our shared work. More than 10 years ago, long before I served members full time, I experienced my first Assembly as a midcareer high school English teacher. What stayed with me then, and what continues to resonate today, was not just the scale of the gathering—several hundred educators—but the collective commitment of educators who came together to lead the organization and protect public education for every student. The roar of an “aye” or “nay” when the question is called feels powerful. It is one of the few spaces where I continue to feel a deep sense of belonging, even after leaving the classroom to serve members full-time.

Delegate Assembly has always been a space grounded in listening. Educators from across Nebraska debate ideas, work through policy proposals and set the direction of the association in the year to come.

In this room, educators reflect on something much deeper than procedure—they weigh their impact on every public school student and educator, and that feels truly powerful. I wish every member could experience it at least once in their career.

Delegate Assembly Belongs to You

The strength of Delegate Assembly has always come from the collective voice of its members. Members who show up prepared to engage thoughtfully, even when conversations turn challenging.

Delegates are dedicated professionals who lead in classrooms all day, support students long after the final bell and still answer the call to guide the association’s direction as its highest authority. A delegate stays informed on issues that matter to their students and colleagues. Delegates show up for students with needs that don’t always have easy answers. They stand alongside families when the world outside the classroom feels heavy or unsure. Their dedication shapes every discussion and every vote. Delegate Assembly belongs to you.

Bringing the Heat

If you know me, you know I will not sugarcoat the experience. The assembly can bring the heat no matter what card a delegate is holding at a mic. Red card, yellow card or green card—passions flare, emotions rise and conversations grow intense. Even then, I remain confident that every voice in the room is driven by a shared purpose: advocating for the students we serve. That is the power of an Assembly that makes space for educators to speak their truth, challenge one another and still leave united in purpose.

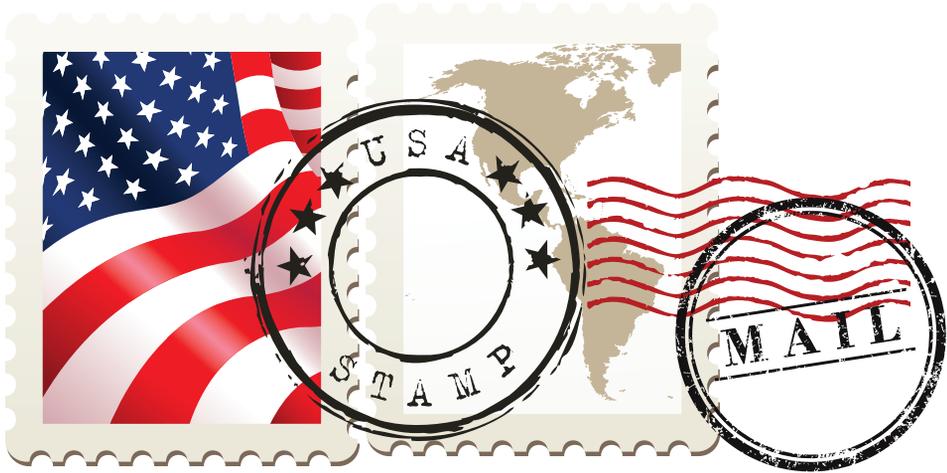
Because of You

To the delegates gathering in Lincoln next month, thank you in advance for bringing your voice, your perspective and your heart to Delegate Assembly. This work only happens because of you, and it keeps NSEA’s direction clear so you can stay grounded in what matters most—caring for students. I look forward to seeing you there.

“
In this room, educators reflect on something much deeper than procedure—they weigh their impact on every public school student and educator, and that feels truly powerful. I wish every member could experience it at least once in their career.
”



Save the Date
NSEA-RETIRED
SPRING CONFERENCE



2026 ELECTIONS

Return Your Ballots by March 15

NSEA-Retired members are encouraged to participate in the upcoming election by submitting their mail-in ballots before the deadline on March 15. This election is a vital opportunity for retired educators to have their voices heard and influence the future direction of the organization.

Mail-in ballots have already been distributed to members. The cover letter has the incorrect date. Ballots must be postmarked by March 15 to be considered valid. Members who have not received their ballots or need assistance with the voting process are encouraged to contact Kristen Sedlacek, Matt Pittman or Andrea Longoria at 800-742-0047.

The results of this election will play a significant role in shaping policies and supporting ongoing efforts to improve conditions for both retired

and active educators.

Retired Board of Directors

- President
- Vice President
- Capitol-1 District Director
- Elkhorn District Director
- Sandhills District Director

Delegate Assembly

- Capitol District: 4 delegates
- Elkhorn District: 2 delegates
- Metro District: 5 delegates
- Panhandle District: 1 delegate
- Sandhills District: 1 delegate
- Tri-Valley District: 3 delegates
- At Large: 2 delegates

Representative Assembly

- Metro and Capitol Districts: 1 delegate
- Other Districts and Out-of-State: 1 delegate
- At Large: 3 delegates

The NSEA-Retired Spring Conference will be held Thursday, April 23, at Lincoln Children's Zoo, offering retired educators an opportunity to reconnect with colleagues while engaging in meaningful professional and personal enrichment. This annual gathering highlights the lasting impact of Nebraska's retired public education professionals, creating space for thoughtful conversation, shared experiences and continued advocacy for public education.

The day will include engaging sessions, opportunities to network with fellow members and time to enjoy the unique setting of the zoo. Whether participants are returning longtime attendees or joining for the first time, the conference is designed to celebrate the wisdom and contributions of retired educators while strengthening connections across generations.

Registration is available at www.nsea.org/retired. The event is free for all members and \$10 for guests. A light breakfast and lunch will be provided.

VOTE FOR PAT EHERTON

- ✓ NSEA-R CAPITOL DIST. DIRECTOR
- ✓ NSEA-R REP. ASSEMBLY
- ✓ NSEA-R DELEGATE ASSEMBLY

"I ask for your vote for NSEA-Retired Capitol District Director, NSEA Delegate Assembly and NEA Representative Assembly."




Elect Susan Kalina
 NSEA-Retired Vice President

Members Advocate for the Future of Public Education

NSEA-Retired members gathered Feb. 17 for Lobby Day, an annual advocacy event that brought retired educators together to support public schools, educators and students while engaging directly in the legislative process.

The day began with an orientation session, preparing participants to advocate on the legislative priorities outlined in NSEA's 2026 State Policy Agenda. Members also discussed strategies for communicating with lawmakers about policies affecting Nebraska's public schools.

More than 40 participants attended the event in person or by Zoom. NSEA-Retired President John Heineman welcomed members and thanked them for their continued commitment to public education advocacy. NSEA Director of Government Relations Jason Hayes provided an overview of current education-related bills before attendees walked to the Capitol to meet with state senators.

Participants met with senators, attended legislative hearings and, in some cases, testified on key education issues.

Members also heard from state senators during a luncheon, creating additional opportunities for dialogue and reflection. Organizers said the event demonstrated the lasting impact retired educators have on shaping education policy and strengthening public education across Nebraska communities.

NSEA-RETIRED LOBBY DAY



**Vote For
Chris Martin**
Capitol Dist. Director,
Rep. Assembly &
Delegate Assembly

1. Sen. Danielle Conrad (Dist. 46) with her mom, NSEA-Retired member Stephanie Nantkes. 2. Nebraska State Board of Education member Kristin Christensen (Dist. 1) with NSEA-Retired Member Jan Olmstead. 3. Sen. Myron Dorn (Dist. 30) shakes hands with member Nancy Wingate. 4. Sen. Jana Hughes (Dist. 24) with retired member Rich Wergin. 5. (Left to right) Retired members Diana Lamb and Terri Marti with State Sen. Jane Raybould (Dist. 28) and NSEA-Retired President John Heineman. 6. NSEA-Retired members Lobby Day participants gather for a group photo at NSEA following lunch.

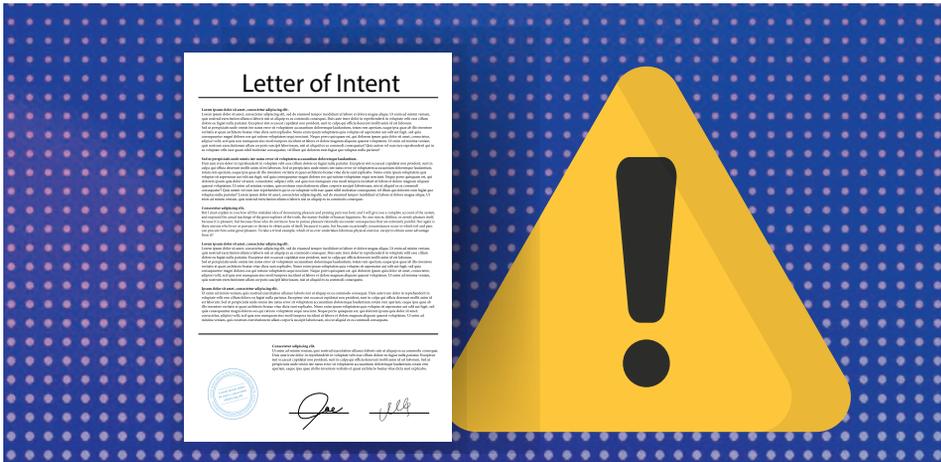
In Memory

We recognize these members whom we've lost recently:

Marcia Benner, 73, Lincoln

Mary "Liz" Wroblewski, 75, Ravenna

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

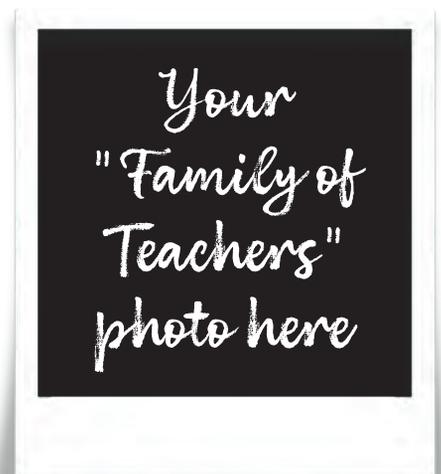


Family of teachers

Teaching isn't just a profession—it's a legacy. Whether it's a family of educators spanning generations or a new tradition in the making, "Family of Teachers" celebrates those who dedicate their lives to shaping young minds.

If teaching runs in your family, we want to hear your story! Submit a photo of you and your fellow educators—parents, siblings, grandparents or even aunts and uncles—who share this incredible calling. Let's honor the passion, dedication and impact of families who make a difference in the classroom every day.

Submit your photos today and be featured in "Family of Teachers" at www.nsea.org/Family.



Letter of Intent Date: March 15

Know your rights if asked to sign letter 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.