

The VOICE

Nebraska State Education Association March 2024



LITERACY LEGISLATION

**Advocating for Evidence-based
Reading Instruction in Nebraska**

What to Do if You
Receive a RIF Notice

The BAIT-AND-SWITCH
of School Vouchers

School Retirement
Planning Seminars



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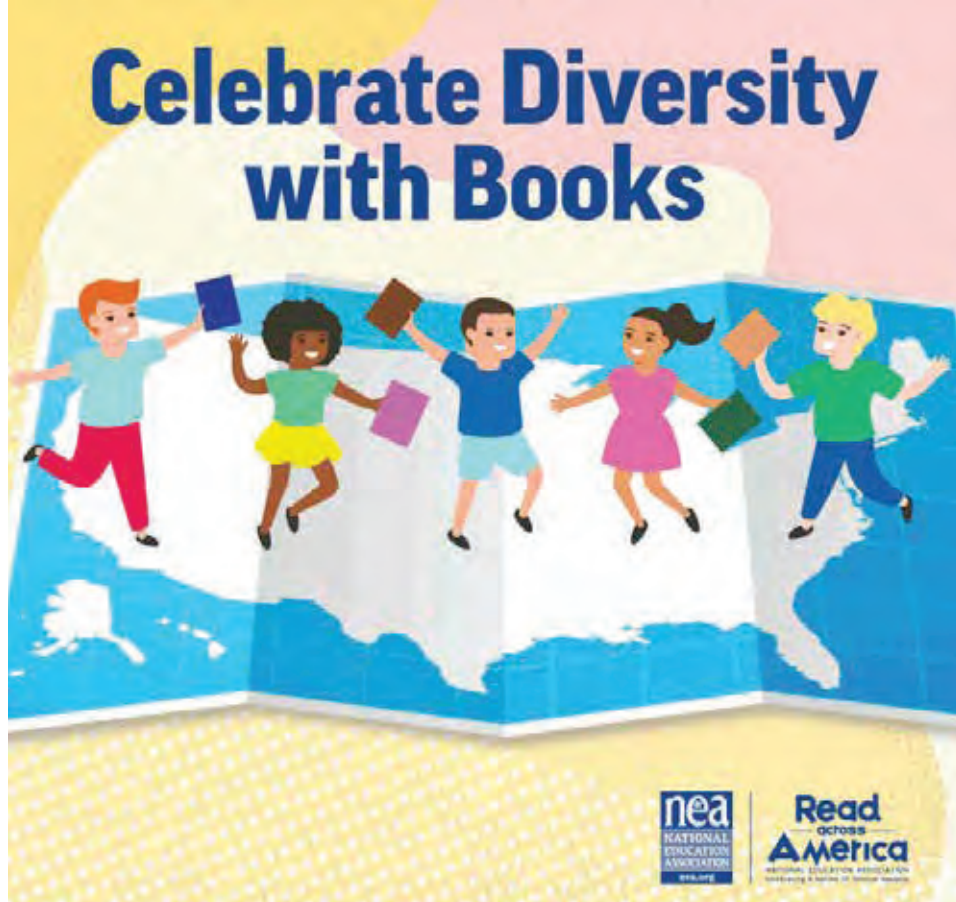
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Celebrate Reading this Month

Share stories that raise up diverse voices and help kids discover their own potential by reading titles that reflect and respect all. March is National Reading Month and NEA has curated a calendar of books, reading activities and events, reading tips for parents, and booklists to help connect children and their families to diverse books and cultures while spreading the joy of reading. Find the complete calendar at bit.ly/NEA-READ

Women's History Month for the Classroom

Teach about the challenges and accomplishments of women throughout history through lessons, activities, background reading and more. Find resources at bit.ly/WomensHistoryNEA



Read Across America Day

Read Across America Day celebrations will be held on March 2.

Find more at bit.ly/NEA-READ

Reading Certificate

Recognize participation in a Read Across event this month by printing a Certificate of Participation for your students. Download the certificate at bit.ly/RAA-Certificate

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: Omaha Education Association member and dyslexia therapist Teresa Franks is advocating for evidence-based reading changes in Nebraska. Read her story on pages 7-8.



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

JENNI BENSON

Washington D.C.

Coordinates:
38°54'36"N 77°00'52"W



NSEA Leaders on Capitol Hill

Your NSEA Executive Team travels to Washington, D.C. three times a year to meet with other state association leaders and the Nebraska congressional delegation.

Being in our nation's capital always brings to mind President Abraham Lincoln's quote that so succinctly describes what democracy should look like – our government's focus is to be on the will of the people and the vital role that we play as citizens.

In February, your NEA Directors Edward Ventura and Renae Noble, along with NSEA Vice President Paul Schulte and I met with staff working for Nebraska's two U.S. senators and three House representatives to discuss education policy. We discussed education issues that are directly linked to Nebraska's educators, classrooms, and communities. We shared stories from NSEA members from across the state, as well as the positive or negative impacts public policies have on our schools.

We focused on three current bills during our February visit:

1. The Child Tax Credit Act

would increase the amount of that credit over three years and index the increase to inflation. It would also enhance the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit to spur the construction of affordable housing;

2. The ESP "Bill of Rights" Resolution would recognize the vital roles played by educational support

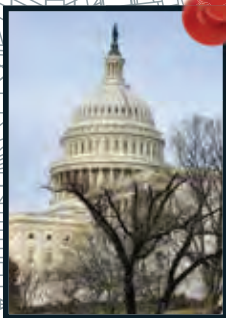
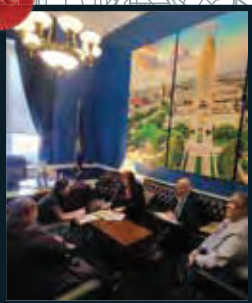
professionals in our public schools as well as help increase their salary and benefits; and

3. The Secure Rural Schools Act would extend the current financial support for schools, roads, and public services in the nation's rural communities. Rural communities in Nebraska already feel the effects of the educator shortage, and the loss of this funding would exacerbate the problem.

I am pleased to report that all three bills were well received, so much so that we earned a few co-sponsors and supportive votes.

I believe that using our voice to advocate for the students and educators of Nebraska helps bring our state and country closer to the ideals that President Lincoln envisioned.

“Democracy is the government of the people, by the people, for the people.”
- Abraham Lincoln





Rita Bennett

offended at the lack of respect for our constitution and for voters,” Bennett told lawmakers.

Bennett spent last summer gathering petition signatures and engaging in meaningful conversations with Nebraska voters of all ages.

“So many voters already knew about LB753 and shared my deep concerns about the bill,” she said. “I may have retired a couple of years ago, but I cannot retire from my passion: supporting all children and standing up for our public schools.”

Neighborhood public schools remain the first choice of the overwhelming majority of Nebraska families. Public schools are the heart of our communities, they are governed by our elected neighbors, are accountable to the public, and are the bedrock of our democracy.

Contact your senator to urge them to protect Nebraskans’ right to vote on the issue of public funds for private schools in November.

Sign the pledge online at www.Repeal753.org and stand in support of protecting public education in Nebraska!

Keep public dollars for public schools: Vote to REPEAL LB753 in November!



New Bills Seek to Expand School Vouchers, Deny Voters' Right to Decide Fate of LB753

On Valentine's Day, NSEA-Retired member Rita Bennett spent all afternoon and evening waiting for the chance to urge Education Committee members to indefinitely postpone LB1402.

LB1402 and LB1403, introduced by Senator Lou Ann Linehan of Elkhorn, are just LB753 clones and are the latest attempts to circumvent the will of 117,451 Nebraskans who signed a petition making it clear they want to vote on whether tax dollars should be used to fund private schools. The petition put the repeal of LB753's voucher scheme on this November's ballot.

“It is disheartening and disingenuous that instead of waiting for voters to send a loud and clear message to you in November, LB1402 has been crafted to create another scheme to divert public money for private use, in an effort to do an end-run around the will of the voters with LB753,” Bennett told the Education Committee.

While LB753 uses tax credits in an attempt to circumvent the state constitution, LB1402 directly appropriates public dollars to fund private education, which is explicitly prohibited by the state

constitution. Article VII-11 of the Nebraska Constitution states, “appropriation of public funds shall not be made to any school or institution of learning not owned or exclusively controlled by the state or a political subdivision[...].”

“As a voter, I am



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THE BAIT-AND-SWITCH OF SCHOOL VOUCHERS

Gotting Public Schools to Privatize Education



Taxpayers "ON THE HOOK" for Private Schools

Baiting with private school vouchers to hook, line and sink public schools.

The claims used to lure states into passing school voucher programs—like LB753, LB1402 and LB1403—are not unlike an exaggerated fishing tale. Proponents of voucher schemes spin a yarn of helping children by giving dollar-for-dollar tax credits to the wealthy. This will help students, they say, by diverting owed state taxes to private school scholarship-granting organizations (SGOs). The bait has fooled many states that have learned that the switch leaves public schools, the students who attend them, and taxpayers on the hook for the cost of funding private and religious schools.

Nebraska taxpayers are on the hook to pay for these voucher "scholarships." And, the cost of each voucher? Well, according to LB753, the voucher can cover all or part of a private school's tuition and fees, with the only limitation being that the amount can't exceed the "cost of educating an eligible student" as determined by each school. In this year's new voucher scheme proposals, LB1402 and LB1403, the costs become even more vague, changing LB753's maximum scholarship amount from "tuition and fees" to "the cost necessary to educate" the student.

So, what is the cost necessary to educate the eligible student? Well, in Arizona, taxpayers have been on the hook to pay for trampolines, kayak lessons, Sea World tickets, Legos, ski trips and ninja training. In Florida, taxpayers have footed the bill for skateboards, Disney tickets, video game consoles and big-screen TVs.

Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds sold its state school voucher plan as a way to help low-and middle-income families but the now-implemented program has been used to subsidize parents who already send their kids to private schools. Meanwhile, LB1402 and LB1403 give first priority to students who have previously received a scholarship voucher and their siblings, while second priority is given to students whose households are at or below the federal poverty level.

Beyond the surface of this voucher tale, there is a much deeper narrative at play. The skyrocketing costs of these voucher programs will divert funding from our public schools – and 90% of students in Nebraska attend our public schools. Nebraska cannot afford to pay for two school systems. Public dollars should be sent to support our public schools.

NEBRASKA



OTHER STATES:



In Iowa, the cost of taxpayer-funded vouchers for students to attend private school this year is expected to blow past an initial **\$107M** projection. By 2027, it's estimated to cost **\$345M**.¹



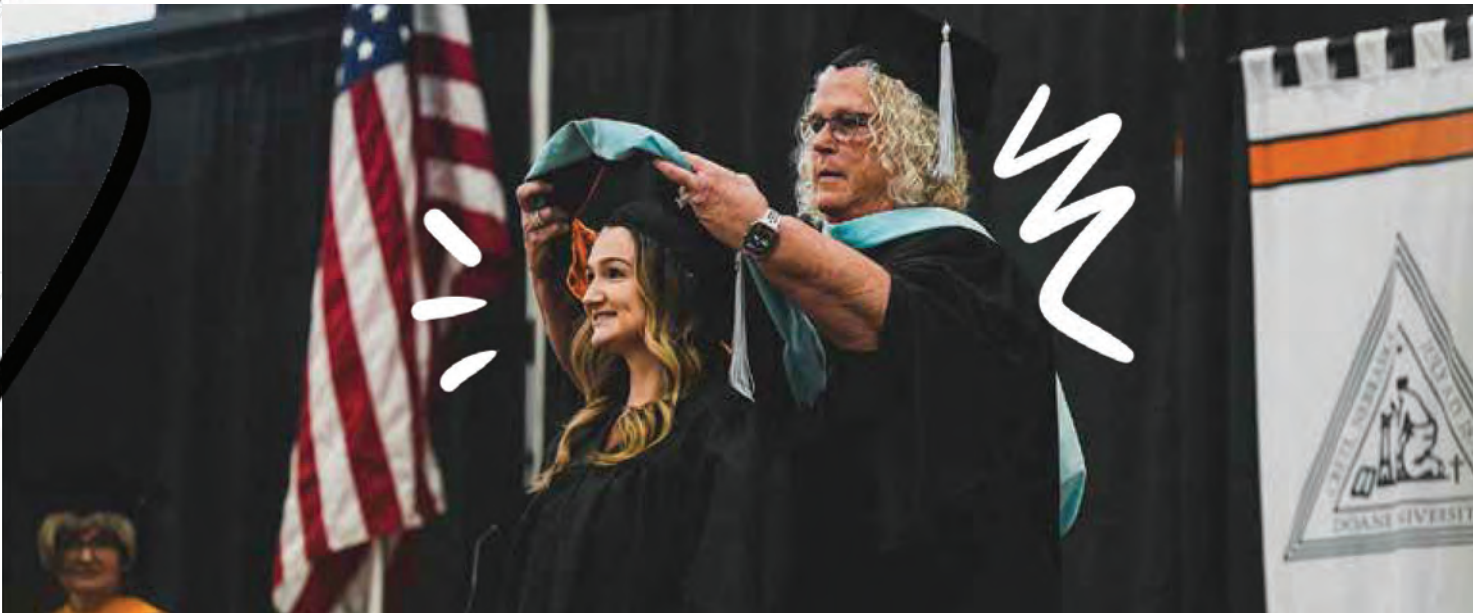
The nation's first tax credit scholarship program was introduced in Arizona in 1997 at an estimated annual cost of **\$4.5M**. An expanded voucher program is estimated to cost **\$900M** in FY 2024.²

WHO CLAIMS CREDITS?

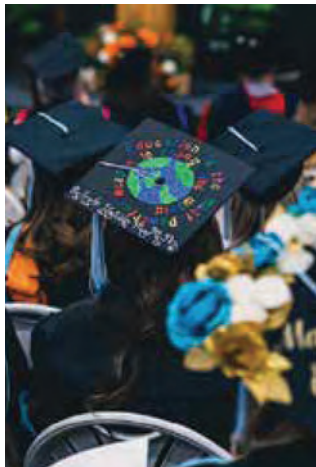
In other states, these programs have rapidly expanded in cost. The tax benefits flow largely to wealthy taxpayers. A high percentage of tax credits went to households with incomes earning more than \$200,000 annually.³

1. Arizona Center for Economic Progress, "Arizona School Vouchers, Explained," July 1, 2023.
2. The Gazette, "More than 29,000 apply for Iowa education savings accounts. Majority of approved students already attend private school," July 6, 2023

3. Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, "Tax Avoidance Continues to Fuel School Privatization Efforts," March 3, 2023.



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Omaha Education Association member, reading interventionist and dyslexia therapist Teresa Franks is advocating for evidence-based reading instruction for all students in Nebraska

LITERACY LEGISLATION: Member advocates for evidence-based reading instruction in Nebraska

Teresa Franks was working in corporate training and development in Memphis, Tenn. when she decided to pursue a career in education.

“I wasn't finding my job especially fulfilling at the time and so I did a volunteer job at the Adult Literacy Center,” Franks said. “I was really moved by the experiences. We had people who came into this adult literacy center because they couldn't read their hospital discharge papers, people who came in because they couldn't read well enough to take the GED classes to get a GED, and some people came in because they wanted to read their Bible.

Low literacy touches all aspects of a person's life.”

Franks, a Tennessee native, describes being “obsessed” with trying to understand why it is so easy for some people to learn to read and hard for others.

Journey to the Classroom

Franks wanted to intervene with students who needed help reading early. Learning about dyslexia became a kind of passion project and her search for answers led her to graduate school for a master's in teaching and far beyond. Franks is a Certified Academic Language Therapist (CALT) through the Academic Language Therapy Association, a Certified Structured Literacy Dyslexia Specialist (C-SLDS) through the Center for Effective Reading Instruction and OGCE, Classroom Educator, Academy of Orton Gillingham Practitioners and Educators.

Now 13 years into her career in education, Franks has taught in multiple states, both in specialized schools for students with dyslexia and in public schools. Today,

Franks is a reading interventionist at Wilson Focus School in Omaha, an Omaha Education Association member and vice president of the Nebraska Dyslexia Association. Before coming to Nebraska, she worked in Mississippi public schools during a significant time, often referred to as the “Mississippi Miracle.”

Lessons from the Mississippi “Miracle”

In the spring of 2013, Mississippi legislators adopted the Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA). At the time, Mississippi ranked 49th out of 50 states in reading, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

The bill targeted literacy efforts with an emphasis on K-3 grade-level reading skills and set clear standards and detailed interventions if a student was performing below grade-level reading. It also delivered professional development to educators with in-depth knowledge and the skills needed to teach “The Science of Reading” instruction.

“I firmly believe that providing comprehensive professional development in reading instruction is essential for the academic success and lifelong achievement of our students.”

— Teresa Franks
Omaha Education Assoc.

The Science of Reading

The “Science of Reading” is a body of research that emphasizes phonics, phonological awareness, vocabulary development, fluency, comprehension, and writing and the structure of the English language.

“In Mississippi, Kindergarten through third-grade teachers were required to take Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) and then they offered it for all educators,” said Franks. “They were taught how they should teach spelling because spelling has a powerful effect on word reading ability.”

The “Science of Reading” replaced all other approaches to reading instruction for K-3 students in Mississippi, including the “balanced literacy”, “whole-word”, and “Three-Cue” approaches. Literacy coaches were hired by the state and deployed statewide in classrooms struggling the most in reading scores.

“If you ever heard anyone say, ‘English is crazy,’ or ‘English doesn’t have any rules and has all these exceptions,’” it’s because we were never taught the rules and the patterns that English actually has,” said Franks. “98% of English words are decodable or follow a rule or pattern.”

Under LBPA, the reading performance of Mississippi’s children improved significantly. The largest gains in performance were made by Black and Latino youth. Over the next 10 years Mississippi’s children soared from last among all states to 21st and have stayed there, even after the pandemic.

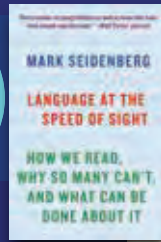
“What we learned from Mississippi is that if everyone in education is moving in the same direction, using science-based reading. You can change their trajectory in a very short period of time. My experiences in Mississippi have really driven me as a literacy advocate,” Franks said.

Support for LB1055

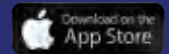
In February, Franks shared a letter of support for LB1055. Introduced by Sen. Lynne Walz (District 15), LB1055 would require the State Department of Education to create a professional learning system to provide professional learning and training in reading for teachers and early child educators. NSEA supports the bill which also appropriates \$10

The Science of Reading

Recommended Reading from Teresa Franks



Recommended Podcast



Word Recognition
Sight Recognition
Decoding
Phonemic Awareness

Language Comprehension
Background Knowledge
Vocabulary
Language Structure
Verbal Reasoning
Literacy Knowledge

The Reading Rope:

The Reading Rope consists of lower and upper strands. The word-recognition strands work together as the reader becomes accurate, fluent and increasingly automatic with repetition and practice.



Concurrently, the language-comprehension strands reinforce one another and then weave together with the word-recognition strands to produce a skilled reader.

Source: Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, Theory, and Practice

million in state general funds to the Nebraska Department of Education for these purposes.

“I firmly believe that providing comprehensive professional development in reading instruction is essential for the academic success and lifelong achievement of our students,” Franks wrote in her testimony. “By equipping educators with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to implement evidence-based reading strategies, we can ensure that all students receive high-quality instruction that meets their diverse learning needs.”

LB1055 would also utilize educational service units (ESUs) to provide regional coaches—much like Mississippi’s literacy coaches—to give assistance in teaching reading to educators who teach students in K-5 grades.

LB1055 has not yet advanced from

the Education Committee to the full Legislature but Franks remains hopeful for change.

“I know many teachers who are doing this on their own time just so they can do better for the kids they have now,” she said.

Franks has provided professional development for NSEA members during NSEA University and recently facilitated a district-supported book study on “Uncovering the Logic of English.”

Franks is encouraged by the support within her district and encourages members to engage in their own local association for students.

“Your local association can play a role in advocating for evidence-based literacy,” said Franks. “We can empower educators to unlock the full potential of every child.”



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LEGISLATURE

VOICES IN EDUCATION: NSEA members testify before lawmakers

GRANTS TO RETAIN AND RECRUIT

As Nebraska grapples with the challenges of an evolving educational landscape, the spotlight is increasingly turning toward the critical need to retain experienced teachers and recruit new talent into our K-12 schools. One key strategy gaining traction is providing scholarships and grants aimed at bolstering both teacher retention and attracting fresh faces to the profession.

Recruit New Teachers. Across the country, including Nebraska, there has been a growing concern over teacher shortages in various subject areas. The demand for qualified educators is on the rise, making it essential to actively recruit new teachers to fill these gaps. Grants can be instrumental in attracting individuals to the teaching profession by offering financial incentives, scholarship



Aspiring Educators: Aspiring Educator and University of Nebraska-Lincoln student Winona Mitchell spoke in support of LB953, which would waive tuition for student teachers attending a state college for the semester that the student is student teaching in a Nebraska school.

programs, and support for teacher training programs. Three bills introduced this session will help address this area of need:

LB953, introduced by Sen. Kathleen Kauth (District 31), provides student teachers to be entitled to a waiver of 100% of resident tuition charges of the University of Nebraska or a Nebraska state college for the semester that the student is student teaching in a Nebraska elementary, middle, or high school, provided the student teacher meets certain criteria.

LB964, introduced by Sen. George Dungan (District 26), would assist individuals studying to become special education teachers by supporting forgivable loans to those individuals who commit to teaching in Nebraska following their certification as a teacher with a special education endorsement. Up to 25 students per institution per academic year may be awarded forgivable loans by the state Department of Education.

LB1160, introduced by Sen. Lynne Walz (District 15), would allow eligible teacher college students to apply for forgivable loans of up to \$6,000 per year for three (3) years, instead of the current program of up to \$3,000 per year over five (5) years. This would increase the maximum loan

Retain Current Teachers. Competitive teacher salaries and compensation are crucial for attracting and retaining top talent. Grants can be used to supplement teacher salaries, making the profession more financially appealing and helping to retain experienced educators who might otherwise be tempted to take an early retirement. There are three bills introduced this session that will address this need:

LB1121 introduced by Sen. Dungan, authorizes an additional grant of \$1,500 following a teacher's sixth complete school year once the teacher has signed a new contract to continue teaching full-time in Nebraska under the Nebraska Teacher Recruitment and Retention Act.



Retain Current Teachers: NSEA President Jenni Benson spoke in support of LB1121, which offers a financial incentive for experienced teachers to stay in the teaching profession.

Teachers would be eligible to receive up to three years of grants totaling \$4,500.

“The education sector often faces high turnover rates among teachers,” said NSEA President Jenni Benson. “Offering a retention grant provides a financial incentive for experienced and effective teachers to stay in the profession, reducing turnover and ensuring a more stable learning environment for students. Experienced teachers bring valuable knowledge and expertise to the classroom. By encouraging them to stay, you ensure that students benefit from the wisdom and skills that come with years of teaching.”

LB1052 introduced by Sen. Walz, would allow a K-12 grade teacher employed at a school in Nebraska to receive reimbursement for school supplies paid for by the teacher. Teachers who have paid for school supplies can apply to NDE to receive up to \$300 in reimbursement each school year. This bill is on General File.

LB1053 introduced by Sen. Walz, authorizes up to five \$2,500 extended-career retention grants for teachers who qualify for retirement when the sum of the member’s attained age and creditable service total 85 if they sign a contract to serve as a full-time teacher for additional years

past retirement. Teachers would be eligible to receive five grants totaling \$12,500.

Bottom Line. Prioritizing grants for K-12 teachers emerges as a vital step toward fortifying the backbone of our Nebraska schools. Investing in Nebraska’s K-12 teachers is not merely an expenditure but also a strategic move toward building a robust and dynamic education system. By addressing recruitment challenges, supporting professional growth, and enhancing overall teacher satisfaction, these legislative proposals, if adopted, will play a pivotal role in shaping the future of education and ensuring that every student has access to high-quality instruction.



Extended Career Retention Grant: Millard Education Association member Matt Heys testified in support of LB1053 before the Education Committee.

EDUCATION ASSOCIATION RETALIATION BILL NOW ON GENERAL FILE

In February, the Education Committee advanced **LB1091**, a bill by Sen. Dave Murman (District 38). The bill is intended to retaliate against teachers and the NSEA for the successful LB753 referendum petition effort. The bill undermines local control and the collective bargaining rights of educators in Nebraska.

LB1091 requires a school board that grants access by a professional employees’ organization (NSEA and local

Legislature

affiliates) to a school employee's physical or electronic mailbox or a meeting to grant that same access to any other organization that requests access. The bill prohibits a school board from designating any day or break in the school calendar using the name of any professional employees' organization.

It is revealing that LB1091 does not say that districts must permit "competing" organizations to have access. There is a reason: the fact is there are no competing organizations. There are no other organizations that provide the services and advocacy that our association provides.



This bill undermines local control, disrespects voters and our duly elected school boards, and disregards the collective bargaining process. Our local associations' capacity to negotiate on behalf of bargaining units is earned. To be a certified bargaining unit, all teachers—whether they are association members or not—vote.

"When Papillion LaVista recently held its certification election, more than 90% of ALL teachers, not just union members, voted to recognize our affiliate, the Papillion LaVista Education Association, as the exclusive bargaining agent for teachers," Millard Education Association President Tim Royers explained. "When we recently conducted our election in Millard to be the recognized bargaining agent for MPS paraprofessionals, 99.1% of paras voted to recognize the MEA. Again, that vote went out to ALL paras in the district, not just our members."

To tell a school district that it must allow any outside organization to come in simply because the district has engaged in collective bargaining flies in the face of local control.

WHO VOTED FOR LB1091?

The bill's committee statement is now online and shows how members of the Education Committee voted. Here are the senators who voted YES to advance LB1091, a bill directly targeting NSEA and your local education association:

- Sen. Joni Albrecht (District 17) Thurston
- Sen. Danielle Conrad (District 46) Lincoln

- Sen. Lou Ann Linehan (District 39) Elkhorn
- Sen. Fred Meyer (District 41) St. Paul
- Sen. Dave Murman (District 38) Glenvil
- Sen. Rita Sanders (District 45) Bellevue
- Sen. Justin Wayne (District 13) Omaha

ACTION NEEDED: The Education Committee has advanced LB1091 to General File. This bill is bad policy and should be indefinitely postponed. Please contact your senator and urge them to oppose LB1091.

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.



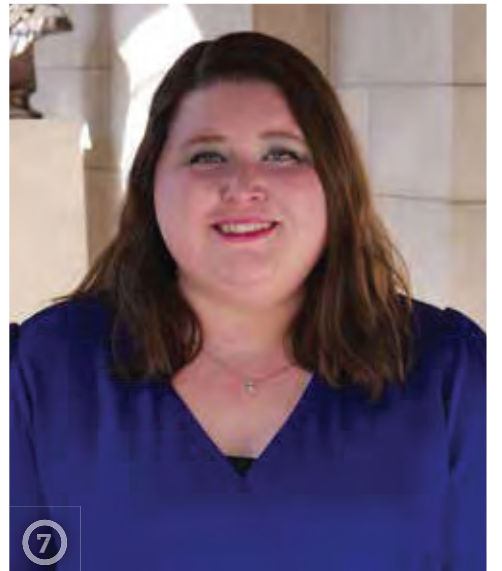
See page 13 for photos of members and other important voices in education.

1. **School Counselors:** School counselors testified in support of LB1322. Left to Right: Tasha Osten, Katie Cameron, Doug Hauserman, Melinda Baptiste and Martha-Jane Matthews.
2. **Deb Rasmussen**, Lincoln Education Association (LEA) President, spoke in support of LB953.
3. **Becky Turner**, Fremont Education Association, testified in support of LB1213.
4. **Shannon Heng**, Omaha Education Association, opposed LB1339.
5. **Mindy Diller**, LEA, spoke in support of LB1050.
6. **Will Aviles**, University of Kearney Education Association President, opposed LB1064 and LB1330.
7. **Megan Pitrat**, Syracuse Dunbar Avoca Education Association, spoke in support of LB964 and in opposition to LB1253.

NSEA LEGISLATIVE DINNER, MAR. 12

The NSEA Legislative Dinner will be at the Champions Club in Lincoln on Tuesday, March 12. The reception will begin at 5 p.m., with dinner at 6:15 p.m. There is no cost to members, and mileage is paid. For those traveling more than 120 miles, substitute costs and sleeping rooms will be available if your senator plans to attend.

Member Registration: www.nsea.org/2024LegisDinner



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 deliver RIF notices is April 15.

However, thanks to legislation proposed by NSEA years ago, there is a statutory 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 in saving the teacher's job.

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.

"Requesting a hearing gives our team the needed time to review and assist our members on how to proceed," said NSEA Director of Advocacy Jason Wiese.

"If an educator receives a settlement or buyout offer in lieu of a hearing, please contact the NSEA before agreeing to anything," he added.

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



Bancroft-Rosalie Education Association President

Brittany Stanek

Bond Issue Support For Bancroft-Rosalie

When it was time to rally community support for a bond issue in the Bancroft-Rosalie Community School district, members of the Bancroft-Rosalie Education Association (B-REA) knew that NSEA could make a difference.

B-REA officials sought out the expertise of NSEA Director of Field Operations Brian Mikkelsen, and also asked NSEA for matching funds and other services.

The goal is to pass a nearly \$18 million dollar bond issue to renovate the entire elementary school, including adding two preschool classrooms. The bond would also fund a new music room, upgrade the shop and agriculture education areas, renovate

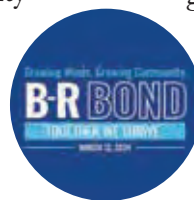
the old gym, improve the weight room used for wrestling, add a new gymnasium and community fitness center and upgrade security at the school's front entrance.

NSEA provided matching funds to the B-REA to support the pro-bond efforts and also provided yard signs.

Ballots are in the mail to registered voters in the B-R school district and will need to be returned by March 12. Watch for updates on the status of this ongoing effort in the April edition

of *The Voice*.

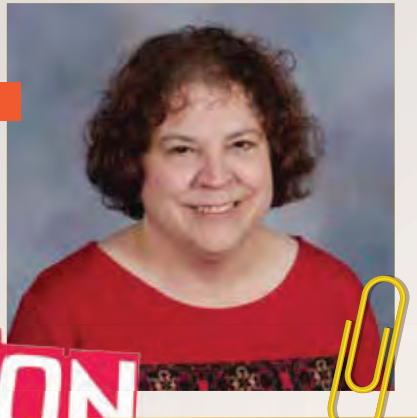
To learn more about how NSEA can assist locals with bond efforts, contact NSEA at 1-800-742-0047.



Source: Bancroft-Rosalie Bond Facebook page

Mary Reynolds-East

Millard Education Association



**EDUCATION
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Las Vegas, NV
March 22-24

nea
NATIONAL CONFERENCE

#WeLoveOurESPs

Zero to Fifty in One Drive ESP Member to Present at National Conference

When paraprofessional Mary Reynolds-East learned that no one was running to fill the role of vice president of the Educational Paraprofessional Association of Millard (EPAM) she offered to step up.

Soon Reynolds-East found herself at the table as part of the EPAM negotiations team over the summer of 2021.

“The whole group of us had never done negotiations before so we weren’t sure what we were doing but we had a goal of increasing wages for paraprofessionals,” said Reynolds-East.

Negotiations were challenging and extended well into the summer.

“We met with the district 11 times over the summer, and we didn’t get our new contract until well after the start of the school year,” she said.

Reynolds-East and the negotiations team leaned on Millard Education Association President Tim

Royers for support and advice during negotiations. What started as an act of solidarity between the EPAM and MEA soon expanded into a membership push to encourage ESPs to join the MEA.

MEA helped reduce membership dues for ESPs and allowed new members to join at a reduced rate then gradually increase to full dues over a three-year period. Through the 2022 membership push, MEA gained more than 50 new ESP members.

Reynolds-East and NSEA Organizational Specialist Judy Roach will present on the success of the membership drive at the Education Support Professionals National Conference in Las Vegas in March 22-24.

Reynolds-East hopes attendees will use MEA’s success as a source to cultivate inventive ideas for increased ESP membership in other states.



Letter of Intent Date: March 15 *Know your rights if asked to sign early*

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

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

Yet some administrators distribute letters—and ask for them back—before this date. Often in an effort to get a handle on next year’s staffing situation, superintendents might suggest letters be returned by March 1 or earlier.

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 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.

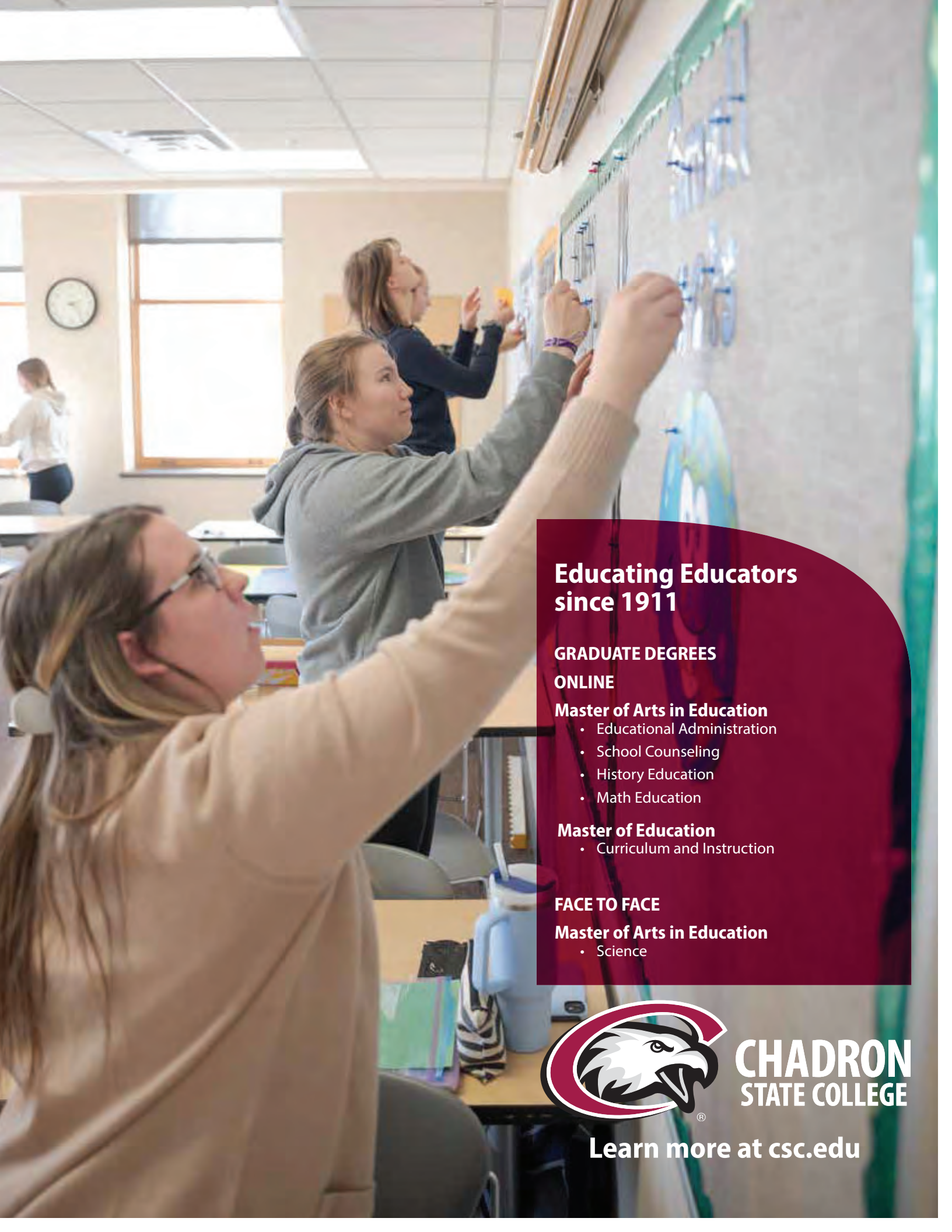
However, failure to sign and return the letter by stated deadlines that fall **on or after** March 15 is a threat to a teacher’s employment.

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 email 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.

A photograph of a classroom where several students are gathered around a large whiteboard. They appear to be engaged in a collaborative learning activity, possibly a project or a group assignment. The students are dressed in casual attire like hoodies and sweaters. The whiteboard is covered with various papers and diagrams, and the students are pointing at different parts of it. The classroom has large windows in the background, and the overall atmosphere is one of active learning.

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Children's Fund Receives Generous Donation as Need Increases

The NSEA Children's Fund has received a much-needed influx of cash thanks to a generous donation from Nebraska businessman, Mark Leibman.

Mark is an Omaha native but has spent much of his adult life in Louisville where he founded his financial advising business, Leibman Financial Services, Inc.

"I've worked in financial services my whole life. I turned 68 this year and I plan on working until I'm 92 because I love what I do."

Leibman comes from a family of teachers and before passing, his wife of 44 years, Cathy, ran a home daycare business.

"Education was always a big part of our lives and I have great respect for the teaching profession," he said.

NSEA created the Children's Fund in 1994,

and since then donations to the Fund have provided hundreds of thousands of dollars to help children in need.

"I heard about the NSEA Children's Fund, and appreciate what teachers, working together, have been able to build with small contributions overtime," Mark said. "I have resources beyond my needs, which had me looking around for places I could do some good."

The contribution comes at a time when the fund has experienced a substantial uptick in requests for help.

"We have had a 42% increase in requests so far this year as compared to last year at this same time," said NSEA staff member Karen Hunt, who oversees distribution of the fund.

For more information, to make a donation or to request help for a child in need, call 1-800-742-0047 or go to nsea.org/childrensfund.



Mark Leibman



Van Beek



Roach



Nielsen

NSEA Staff Shuffle

NSEA Organizational Specialist Judy Roach is now assigned to the Omaha Education Association. Roach previously served as the OS for Sarpy County. Taking her place is David Nielsen who had previously been assigned to the Northeast Unit. Nielsen is a 20-year veteran teacher and long-time Louisville Education Association member. The departure of OS Heather Fritz in early January led to the staff shuffle and a new hire for the Association.

Joining the NSEA team is Teresa Van Beek. Van Beek brings 21 years of classroom experience to the role of Organizational Specialist for the Northeast Unit. Van Beek was active in her local association, serving as chief negotiator for 11 years, and membership coordinator and treasurer of the Arlington Education Association for 17 years.

Van Beek lives in Fremont and was a business teacher at Arlington Public Schools High School for 20 years. She taught for one year at Tecumseh High School.

Van Beek joined the NSEA team in February. Members can email Van Beek at Teresa.VanBeek@nsea.org or call her cell at 531-310-6736 or at (402) 475-7611.

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For More Information:
[CEHHS.UNOMAHA.EDU / TED-GRAD]
Dr. Chris Wilcoxon, Graduate Program Chair
Email: cwilcoxon@unomaha.edu | Tel: 402.554.2119

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Nebraska Omaha



Gerry Brooks



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

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

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

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

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

Last chance to sign up to attend NSEA Spring Conferences

A simple word of encouragement or a gesture of support from an educator can uplift a student's spirits, instill confidence, and even change the trajectory of their life. New York Times bestselling author, illustrator and founder of FableVision Learning, Peter Reynolds, says he is proof of this power and credits his math teacher.

“He did one of the most powerful things an educator or caregiver can do—he noticed me. He took the time to see who I was,” Peter said. Years later, Peter dedicated his book, “The Dot” to Mr. Matson. It’s the story of a young girl, Vashti, who is challenged by her teacher to draw a dot which inspires a creative adventure.

Teaching Character Strengths & Life Skills

Peter and his twin brother, Paul Reynolds, have developed the

FableVision brand as a social change agency to help move the world to a better place by creating “stories that matter, stories that move.”

Paul Reynolds will be the keynote of NSEA’s Thriving Together conference, March 9 at Gretna East High School. You can find more details and register to attend the conference at nsea.org/Spring2024.



Paul Reynolds

Uniting Generations with Gerry Brooks

Gerry Brooks is an American educator and YouTube satirist known for his humorous and relatable videos about the experiences of educators.

Brooks is no stranger to Nebraska and was a popular headliner at the association's summer conference, NSEA University.

Brooks will keynote NSEA’s Uniting Generations Conference in Kearney on March 23. Details, including links for hotel reservations, can be found at nsea.org/Spring2024.

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

School Retirement Planning Seminars Dates Set

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

To learn about those options, staff from the Nebraska Public Employees Retirement Systems office will offer seminars throughout the spring and summer months. Educators can choose to attend an in-person seminar at one of nine locations across the state or join a virtual webinar.

The seminars are for school plan members and their spouses, age 50 and over. Each eligible employee is entitled to receive leave with pay to attend up to two retirement planning programs (one per fiscal year).

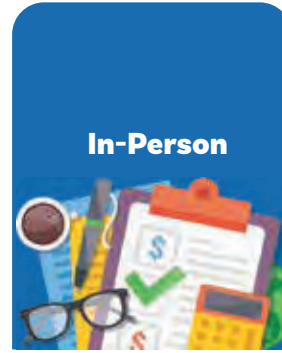
NPERS officials indicate that according to state law "...leave with pay shall mean a day off paid by the employer and shall not mean vacation, sick, personal or compensatory time."



School retirement plan members may choose to attend a retirement seminar more than twice, but such leave beyond the second seminar will be at the employee's expense and at the

discretion of the administrator.

The seminars are scheduled at locations across the state. Members must enroll in advance to attend at npers.ne.gov.

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



In-Person Seminars (Location/Dates)	1/2 Day Webinars
LINCOLN: March 5, March 6, March 21, May 22, May 23	March 19
LA VISTA: March 7, April 17, April 18, May 14, May 15	March 20
GERING: April 9	April 23
NORTH PLATTE: April 10	May 21
MCCOOK: March 26	June 5
KEARNEY: March 27, April 2, April 3	June 6 (evening)
VALENTINE: May 8	 
NORFOLK: April 19	
GRAND ISLAND: April 4, May 9	

Start Saving in Three Easy Steps!

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Sign in to your NEA Member Benefits account and click the Explore Now button to activate your travel account. \$500 Travel Dollars will automatically be added to your account upon your first visit. These Travel Dollars are valid for one year and will replenish yearly.

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Start shopping with Travel Dollars to lower your cost of hotels, resorts, cars, cruises, and tours.

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TRISH GUINAN

Message from the Executive Director

During the school year, many Nebraska children rely on free or reduced-price meals provided at schools. However, educators know that when schools close for the summer, these meal programs are unavailable, leaving vulnerable children without consistent access to nutritious food.

So when Nebraska Governor Jim Pillen reversed his decision on the Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer Program (EBT) and announced the state's participation in a federal program to provide summer food assistance for approximately 150,000 children, I along with many Nebraska educators let out a collective sigh of relief.

Your Voice Matters

The Governor's change of heart came after a powerful chorus of organizations—including NSEA—and young advocates spoke about the immense need and highlighted the challenges of accessing food during summer breaks.

The decision marks a significant step in ensuring year-round food security for Nebraska's children.

The Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer Program for Children will distribute around \$18 million in aid during school vacation months, offering up to \$40 per child per month on an EBT card for groceries.

Despite missing the initial deadline, Nebraska will now implement the program, emphasizing that lending your voice to advocate for change can have a meaningful impact.

Access to Food is a Fundamental Right

Educators know that when students are hungry, their ability to focus and engage with lessons decreases. Hunger can lead to irritability or even aggression, which can disrupt the

classroom and significantly impact students' well-being. Lack of food can have a lasting effect on a child who may experience stunted growth or developmental delays. Food insecurity tends to increase during the summer months when children lose access to school meals.

Access to nutritious food is a fundamental human right and ensuring that children have enough to eat is a responsibility shared by all.

The Mission and Values of NSEA

Summer EBT programs help bridge the gap in food access between low-income children and their more affluent peers during the summer months. By providing families with electronic benefits specifically for purchasing groceries, these programs aim to ensure that all children have equal opportunities for healthy nutrition regardless of their socioeconomic status. This aligns perfectly with NSEA's mission statement:

"The mission of the Nebraska State Education Association is to advocate for all education professionals, empowering them to provide an excellent public education for every student."

By advocating for policies and programs that promote equitable access to healthy nutrition, the Association upholds its mission of championing the well-being and success of every student, ensuring that no child is left behind due to socioeconomic disparities.

Recognizing the critical link between nutrition and academic achievement, empowers education professionals to address the holistic needs of their students, fostering an environment where every child can thrive academically, physically, and emotionally.

“
Access to nutritious food is a fundamental human right, and ensuring that children have enough to eat is a responsibility shared by all.
”

Register today to attend the SPRING CONFERENCE

APRIL
18



Register today to attend the NSEA-Retired Spring Conference on April 18! This year NSEA-Retired members will gather at Eugene T. Mahoney State Park, located near Ashland.

The park is set along the Platte River and provides stunning views of the surrounding landscape. The park will host members and invited guest speakers. See a tentative agenda for the conference below.

The event is free for all members and \$10 for guests.

Register at nsea.org/retired under Calendars, Events & Registrations.

TENTATIVE AGENDA



Morning

- 8:30: Registration, Coffee & Rolls, Silent Auction
- 9:00: Welcome & Keynote
Speaker Sara Skretta, UNL
- 10:15: Breakout Session # 1
- 11:15: Breakout Session # 2

Afternoon

- 12:15: Lunch
- 1:15: Business Meeting & Legislative Update
- 2:15: Spotlight on Nebraska

BEYOND THE BELLS

Beyond School Bells, Nebraska's statewide after school and summer learning network, is thrilled to invite former educators to join in the movement to support after school and summer programs across Nebraska.

Retired teachers understand the pivotal role after school and summer programs play in providing students with additional learning opportunities beyond the regular school day and year. Yet, staffing shortages in programs across the state pose a challenge. This is where NSEA-Retired members can make a difference. Your classroom experience positions you as an ideal candidate to contribute to or assist in after school programs. There is also an emerging trend in Nebraska — the increased involvement of high school students as staff and club leaders for elementary and middle school programs. Combining the expertise of retired teachers with the enthusiasm of high school students creates a winning formula benefiting both the programs and students. This experience just might be the gateway for launching these high school students into a career in education. Here's how NSEA-Retired members can get started locally:

1. Reach out to an elementary or middle school in your community to inquire about their after school program.

2. Once connected, ask to meet with the site director and explore their needs or propose a club idea that sparks your passion and ensures engagement with the youth in the program. Share your availability with the program director and, if you are interested in mentoring a high school staff member, let them know.

3. While Beyond School Bells doesn't operate after school or summer programs, it does have a network of contacts and can connect you if you need a place to start. Contact Katie Christensen at kchristensen@nebraskachildren.org if you would like more information.

OVER 45? GET SCREENED

Colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer among Nebraskans. Early detection saves lives, so doctors recently lowered the recommended screening age from 50 to 45.

Your EHA health benefits cover screenings and preventive treatments at no extra cost.

Visit NebraskaBlue.com/EHAPOP to connect with a coach and schedule a screening.



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



NSEA-Retired Lobby Day

Advocating for the Future of Education

The NSEA-Retired Lobby Day provides retired educators with the opportunity to advocate for public schools, teachers, students, and other legislative issues.

This year's event was well attended with more than 40 participants joining in-person or by Zoom. NSEA-Retired President John Heineman greeted members and thanked them for attending. NSEA Director of Public Policy and Legislative Research Jason Hayes presented an overview of education-related bills before attendees walked to the capitol to meet with senators.

Retired educators bring a wealth of experience and firsthand knowledge about public education in Nebraska. NSEA-Retired members play a crucial role in emphasizing the significance of adequately funded and well-supported public schools in their communities.



1

1. (Top photo) NSEA-Retired Lobby Day attendees sit in the south balcony observing the morning Legislative session on Feb. 6.



2



3

2. (Left to right) Arlene Rea, NSEA-Retired President John Heineman, Steve and Rhonda Burbach.



4



5

3. (Left to right) Lenny VerMaas, Sen. Rick Holdcroft (District 36) and Hope Smejkal.

4. (Left to right) Sen. Danielle Conrad (District 48), Sen. Jana Hughes (District 24), Rich Wergin and Pat Carpenter.

5. (Left to right) Kathy Jensen, James and Elayne Landwehr, Janice Barnason and Pat Etherton.

Vote Lisa Fricke

for NSEA-Retired Delegate to NSEA Delegate Assembly (Metro & At-Large) and NEA Representative Assembly

- Active NSEA member since 1976
- Local President
- Served on Elkhorn & Tri-Valley Boards
- Government Relations Chair
- Campaigned for candidates & legislation
- Attended DA many times
- Presented a resolution that passed at RA
- NASBE policy chair
- Teacher mentor for NSEA
- Intergenerational Mentoring Program
- Elected to Neb. State Board of Education




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



Elect Ruby Davis
Please Vote for Ruby for the

- NSEA-Retired Board of Directors
- NSEA-Retired DA Delegate
- NSEA-Retired RA Delegate

In Memory

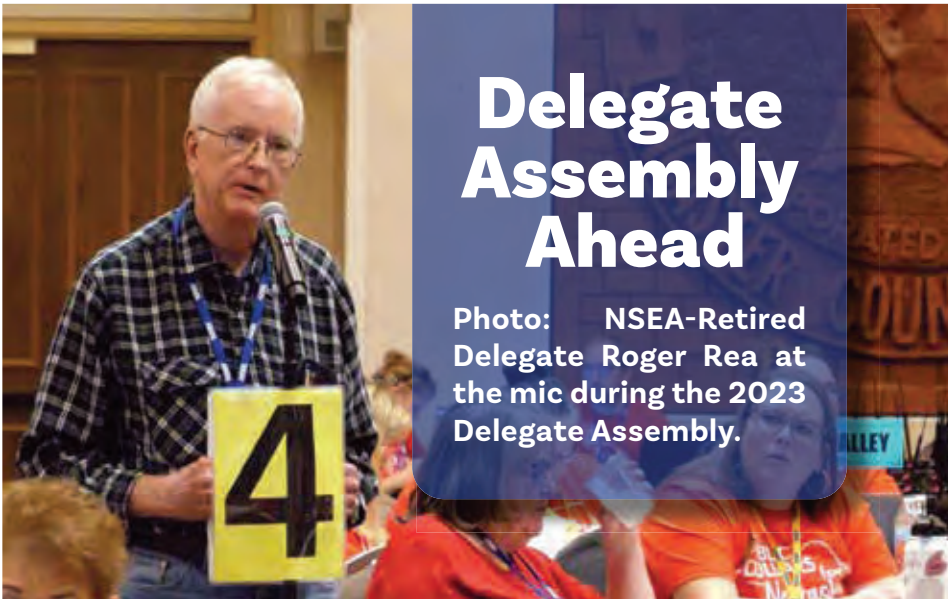
We recognize these members whom we've lost recently.

Clyde R. Lincoln, 82, Omaha

Keith, L. Gille, Scottsbluff

Vivian Parker, Syracuse

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



Delegate Assembly Ahead

Photo: NSEA-Retired Delegate Roger Rea at the mic during the 2023 Delegate Assembly.

The Countdown to the 2024 NSEA Delegate Assembly

The countdown to the 2024 Delegate Assembly is officially underway. In just a matter of weeks, NSEA members representing thousands of educators will leave their respective cities and towns to make their way to Lincoln for the annual business meeting.

This in-person gathering will be held at Lincoln's Embassy Suites Hotel, April 19-20.

The positions of NSEA President and EMAC and Higher Ed At-Large seats will all be up for election for three-year terms at the April assembly.

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

The year's event will feature an awards presentation, recognizing the Early Career Educator of the Year, Educational Support Professional of the Year, Teaching Excellence Award recipient, NSEA's 2024 Friend of Education, and more.

Members must be elected by their local association in order to attend as a delegate to the assembly. All NSEA members are eligible to vote for district officers and Representative Assembly At-Large delegates. Voting is available online through March 10.

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

HELLO March

MARCH 10-19 Voting for Cluster Delegates

MARCH 5 Proposed Bylaws submission deadline

MARCH 5 Campaign material request deadline

HELLO April

April 5 Proposed Resolutions and New Business Items are due

April 19-20 2024 April Delegate Assembly