

The background of the cover is a photograph of the Nebraska State Capitol building, showing its iconic dome and classical architectural details. The sky is a pale, overcast blue. In the top left corner, there are some brown, autumnal leaves from a tree.

The VOICE

Nebraska State Education Association • January 2025

SPECIAL EDUCATION SUPPORT

*NSEA to prioritize funding
for behavioral support for students*

• Letter of Intent:
Know Your Rights

• Members Honored for
Excellence in Teaching

• NSEA Elections:
What You Need to Know



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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.

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: Lincoln Education Association member **Kate Regler** is advocating for more behavioral support for her special education students. NSEA will push for more funding at the state level as part of its 2025 state policy agenda. See the story and photos on pages 7-8.



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

TIM ROYERS

Opportunities for Growth

“Your three minutes of testimony could help pass a bill that could positively impact thousands. Only together can we advance the mission of our organization, and I hope in this New Year, you will find new and exciting ways you can elevate your role in that work.”



The beginning of a new year is a powerful reminder that every day holds fresh opportunities for growth and change. I hope everyone had a wonderful winter break and had the chance to rest and recuperate before we head into the second half of this school year. As we embark on a new calendar year, I encourage you to reflect on three ways you can contribute to strengthening our association and supporting the growth of our colleagues in the profession.

Celebrate Excellence

First, I would encourage members to consider nominating one or more of their colleagues for one of the many awards that NSEA presents every year at Delegate Assembly.

Recognition can inspire confidence, reflect a supportive and collaborative culture in our schools and create benchmarks for excellence in teaching.

From acknowledging new educators to those in the community who champion public education, we have several different opportunities to elevate people for their hard work and dedication.

Please review the awards on page 4 and make a commitment to nominate at least one person before the February deadline.

Run For Something

The second way you can help strengthen our association is by running for one of our positions on the NSEA Board of Directors that will be up for election at this year's Delegate Assembly. This year, we will be electing our Secretary/Treasurer, our NEA Director, and our Education Support Professional

at-large member of the board. These all serve three-year terms and play critically important roles in the governance of our organization.

More strong candidates provide our members with well-rounded representation within NSEA. Having multiple, qualified candidates to choose from helps ensure that we have the strongest union possible, so please consider stepping up and serving in one of these important roles!

Your Voice

As we prepare to navigate another Legislative session this January, please think about utilizing your voice in ways that maybe you hadn't previously considered.

If you haven't yet, sign up for the Capitol Update on our website. It is the best way to receive regular, detailed updates on what is happening in our Legislature. If you are willing to go a step further, consider calling or emailing state senators when the time comes to advocate for a certain bill.

And finally, as we advocate for a pro-public education agenda, consider coming and testifying on a bill that you feel passionately about. As I alluded to last month, your stories will be the most effective tool we have to get our state lawmakers to understand the importance of the policies we are advocating for. Your three minutes of testimony could help pass a bill that could positively impact thousands. Only together can we advance the mission of our organization, and I hope in this new year, you will find new and exciting ways you can elevate your role in that work.

Coming Soon: 2025 Delegate Assembly

NSEA's Delegate Assembly is just around the corner! Delegates will gather April 25-26 at Lincoln's Marriott Cornhusker Hotel. At the helm of the 165th assembly in NSEA history will be NSEA President Tim Royers.

Delegate Assembly is NSEA's annual business meeting. Members from across the state, representing local associations large and small, urban and rural, are elected to attend and represent the NSEA's 26,000 members. These delegates manage the business and set the future course

of the Association.

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

The event also features an awards presentation, recognizing the Early Career Educator of the Year, Educational Support Professional of the Year, Teaching Excellence Award recipient, NSEA's 2025 Friend of Education and more. See award details and deadlines in the article

below, on this page.

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

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

Nominate Outstanding Colleagues for Recognition: Celebrate Excellence in Education!



Meet Shelbea Hinrichs

Palmer Education Association Member Shelbea Hinrichs received NSEA's Award for Early Career Educator at the 2024 Delegate Assembly.

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

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

Members can also nominate individuals or groups for these awards:

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

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

Local Public Relations Award Renamed in Honor of Long-time Member, Advocate Tom Black

Tom Black, 88, of West Point, passed away on Aug. 1, 2024. However, his legacy will live on, as the NSEA Board of Directors opted to rename the Local Public Relations Award in his honor, now known as the Tom Black Local Public Relations Award.

The decision to rename the award reflects Tom's extraordinary contributions to the association, his unwavering dedication to students, and his tireless advocacy for the cause of public education.

"We are deeply grateful for Tom's countless contributions," said NSEA President Tim Royers. "Tom's legacy will continue to inspire future generations of educators, and renaming this award in his honor is a small way to express our gratitude for the lasting impact he made on the NSEA community."

About Tom Black

Tom was born Aug. 2, 1935 in Shenandoah, Iowa, where he lived until graduating from high school. He went to college at Iowa State, then Tarkio, Mo., graduating from Iowa University with a double major in English and History. Tom moved to West Point in 1962. Soon after joining the Cuming County Education Association (CCEA), Tom attended NSEA Delegate Assembly (DA) and began a DA attendance record made for the history books—representing members at 65 Delegate Assemblies.

In 1964, Tom was elected President of CCEA and within the next year Wisner and West Point decided to form their own locals. Tom was President of WPEA for 10 years before being elected to the NSEA Board of Directors in 1979. Tom served on the NSEA Board of Directors from 1979-1995 and 2000-2005. This position included Elkhorn District Director from 1979-1985, NSEA Vice President from 1986-1990 and NEA Board of Directors from 1990-1995.

Tom taught at West Point until 1996, finishing with 36 total years of teaching. According to his obituary, he was a great teacher with a heart for his students, listening to their problems as well as their joys. He taught them to think for themselves and he is remembered by many as the best teacher they ever had.

Tom's role for NSEA-Retired Board of Directors spanned from 1998 to the summer of 2023: Vice President 1998-2000; President 2000-2005; Elkhorn District Member 2005-2011; Vice



Tom Black
1935-2024

President 2011-2017; Elkhorn District Member 2021-2023. During that time, Tom was chair of the SEAN/NSEA-Retired Scholarship Committee.

Tom was editor of the NSEA-Retired page for NSEA's publication *The Voice* from 1998-2012 and then editor of the NSEA-Retired Advocate from 2006 to 2014.

Tom's impact on public education is a testament to the difference one person can make. His advocacy, leadership and service have left an indelible mark, not only on his colleagues but on the entire educational community.

Through the Tom Black Local Public Relations Award, NSEA-Retired will continue to celebrate those who, like Tom, demonstrate an exceptional commitment to advocating for public education and the needs of students.



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NSEA's 2025 State Policy Agenda priorities focus on reforms to support educators like Lincoln Education Association member Kate Regler, who is advocating for more behavioral support for her special education students.



Support in Special Education: NSEA to prioritize funding for behavioral support for students

While Lincoln Education Association member Kate Regler has more than a decade of experience in the classroom, this is her first year in Special Education. Regler became a certified special education teacher in 2018, but she is in her first year as a special education resource teacher.

In the past decade, the number of students with disabilities has grown nationally, along with an increasing mental health crisis. Shortages of qualified educators to fill open special education vacancies have been a challenge for districts in Nebraska for both rural and urban schools.

What Members Need

Results of a late-September member survey provided insights into the challenges educators are seeing within special education, specifically the need to expand external behavioral support for special education students.

In special education, "Tier 3" refers to the most intensive level of intervention for students within a multi-tiered system of support. Tier 3 interventions are individualized to the student and often require smaller

student-teacher ratios. Regler explains that the needs of her students in the Tier 3 classroom, where she spends a portion of her day, are diverse and complex.

"In the Tier 3 room we get a mixture of kids," Regler said. "In addition to concerning behaviors, some have mental health concerns. We have also had students who exhibit extreme behavioral challenges, such as aggression and they throw things or furniture. We have students with heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli.

"Despite having very supportive building administration, it can be quite overwhelming. Imagine one student is having a behavior and is throwing things, which sets off another student who can't handle extra stimuli. Some days are like this and all you can do is respond to the disruptions."

What Students Need

Regler believes that in an ideal environment, special education would have two alternative placements or programs for kids needing Tier 3

interventions.

"One placement or program would be tailored to mental health specifically, and the other would focus on adverse behaviors," she said. "Unfortunately, in our Tier 3 rooms there isn't always a way to accommodate both."

Nebraska does have Level 3 facilities staffed with trained professionals, including behavior specialists, counselors, psychologists and special education teachers. However, many of these facilities are operating at full capacity and are unable to accommodate additional students.

The process to get a student placed into a Level 3 facility can sometimes be tedious.

"We document everything, including incidents, referrals and suspensions. Due process can sometimes feel like a long process, especially when the student is exhibiting aggressive or harmful behaviors despite multiple plans and interventions," Regler said.

Even after completing the process, there is no guarantee a student will be placed in a Level 3 facility due to capacity. The delay in providing

On the Cover

students with the necessary resources of a Level 3 facility can place both educators and students in potentially dangerous situations.

Regler, like all teachers, wants her students to have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

“When we're able to get students in an alternative setting where there's additional structure and trauma-informed educational practices, they can be successful,” she said. “Traditional buildings don't always have the staffing or—quite frankly—the mental health staff necessary to support all kids.”

On the Frontlines

Behavioral issues in Nebraska classrooms have increased in recent years, many of which are tied to broader societal, developmental and systemic factors. The expectation that educators address all societal inequities stems from the unique position of educators as frontline responders to students' needs, but it's time for policymakers to provide the necessary funding, training or resources to support these efforts effectively.

NSEA's 2025 State Policy Agenda Priorities (right) focus on reforms to support educators like Regler who have students in need of external behavior support.

In the upcoming legislative session, NSEA will advocate for increased state funding for critical programs, such as Level 3 facilities, that operate outside of schools but are vital to supporting student needs.

Member voices are essential in driving these legislative initiatives forward. Sharing your story can shed light on the challenges and inspire lawmakers to take meaningful action toward building a stronger, more supportive education system.

Any member interested in sharing their story can contact their NSEA Organizational Specialist or call NSEA at 402-475-7611 or toll-free at 800-742-0047. Members can also send questions and information through the 'Contact Us' feature of the NSEA website at www.nsea.org/contact-us.

NSEA Priorities for 2025

- 1. Improve Working Conditions:** Ensure teachers have the resources, planning time, and administrative support necessary to create positive learning environments. Address burnout by reducing non-teaching duties and expanding support services.
- 2. Family Medical Leave:** Establish a program that provides every PK-12 teacher in Nebraska with six weeks of paid FMLA leave.
- 3. Revise State Aid to Education Formula (TEEOSA):** Convene experts and stakeholders to propose substantive changes to ensure equitable and sustainable funding for public education across Nebraska.
- 4. Increase Teacher Salaries and Retention Support:** Advocate for retention grants for veteran educators. Simplify access to existing retention and recruitment grants for early-career educators by making them automatic, requiring no additional paperwork, to attract and retain top talent.
- 5. Strengthen Certification Pathways:** Ensure all student teachers in Nebraska receive compensation for their time. Develop alternative pathways for gaining initial certification through district programs and training.
- 6. Enhance Special Education Services:** Secure additional funding to manage 504 plans, hire paraprofessionals, provide training, and acquire assistive technology to address growing student needs.
- 7. Strengthen Early Childhood Education:** Expand access to early learning programs to ensure all children, regardless of background, are prepared for school.
- 8. Support Postsecondary Educators:** Address issues of low pay, job insecurity, and limited professional development opportunities to maintain high-quality instruction in colleges and universities.
- 9. Expand External Behavior Supports:** Advocate for increased state funding for critical programs, such as Level 3 facilities, that operate outside of schools but are vital to supporting student needs.
- 10. Protect the Diversity of Educators and Students:** Support equitable hiring, cultural competency, and inclusive policies to ensure all educators and students feel valued and empowered. In addition, build upon existing diversity, equity, and inclusion programs.

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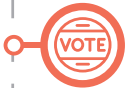


FILE FOR OFFICE



Jan. 1 - Feb. 2, members file for state and district offices to be elected during Feb. 14 - March 9 voting.

VOTING



Voting for district officers, NSEA Board, RA At-Large & Cluster Delegates will take place **Feb. 14 - March 9**.

DA CLUSTER DELEGATES



Filing for NSEA Delegate Assembly Cluster Delegates runs **Feb. 18 - March 2**.

NSEA SEC/TREAS, NEA DIRECTOR AND ESP AT-LARGE



Elected at Delegate Assembly. Candidates' campaign materials for delegates are due by **March 10**.

VOTING



Locals with fewer than 26 members will vote for NSEA Delegate Assembly Cluster delegates **March 9 - 18**.

LOCAL NSEA DELEGATES



Locals of 26+ members will elect delegates by secret ballot and report verified delegates by **March 20**.

NSEA-RETIRED



Election of NSEA-Retired officers, and delegates to both DA and RA will be by mail-in ballot in **March**.

ASPIRING EDUCATORS



Aspiring Educators members will vote for their NSEA Delegate Assembly delegates at the AE Delegate Assembly on **April 4 - 5**.

NSEA DELEGATE ASSEMBLY



April 25 - 26
Election of NSEA Sec/Treas, NEA Director and ESP At-Large, plus Bylaws and 2025-26 Association dues.

REPRESENTATIVE ASSEMBLY



National Education Association Representative Assembly **July 2 - 6**

ALL NSEA MEMBERS ARE ELIGIBLE TO VOTE FOR DISTRICT OFFICERS AND REPRESENTATIVE ASSEMBLY AT-LARGE DELEGATES. VOTING WILL BE FEB. 14 - MARCH 9.

ALL MEMBERS ARE ELIGIBLE TO VOTE FOR THEIR LOCAL ASSOCIATION DELEGATES TO NSEA DELEGATE ASSEMBLY. CLUSTERED LOCALS WILL VOTE MARCH 9 - 18. LOCALS WITH MORE THAN 26 MEMBERS, TALK TO YOUR LOCAL PRESIDENT FOR YOUR LOCAL ELECTION TIMELINE.

NSEA ELECTIONS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

It is time to consider filing for Association office or as a delegate to the statewide and national assemblies. Elections will occur in the coming months in order to comply with **federal statute which dictates all officers and delegates must be elected by secret ballot**. Here are the details:

NSEA Sec/Treas NEA Director and ESP At-Large: 3-year terms

Elected at NSEA Delegate Assembly

Candidates seeking these offices must declare their candidacy by Saturday, Feb. 15, in writing to the NSEA Executive Director, trish.guinan@nsea.org. Alternatively, candidates may mail their declaration to NSEA Elections, 605 S. 14th St., Lincoln, NE 68508. Candidates are responsible for reviewing the candidate policy guidelines found at:

www.nsea.org/delegateassembly

NSEA Board of Directors: 3-year terms

Deadline to File: Sunday, Feb. 2

Elected during statewide online elections

Members in five of NSEA's six governance districts will elect representatives to serve on NSEA's statewide Board of Directors.

The NSEA Board of Directors meets at least seven times each year, and as needed. The board carries out the Association's mission as directed by members at the April Delegate Assembly.

There is one open seat each from the Tri-Valley, Elkhorn, Capitol, Panhandle and two seats from the Metro district. There are no NSEA board vacancies in the Sandhills district (*see map*).

District Officers: 3-year terms

Deadline to File: Sunday, Feb. 2

Elected during statewide online elections

Each of NSEA's six governance districts includes a set of officers and executive committee members. Officers are elected by members in that district. The term of office is determined by the Bylaws in each district. Members will fill these vacancies:

- **Capitol District:** President and two seats on the executive committee.
- **Elkhorn District:** Secretary/Treasurer and two seats on the executive committee.
- **Metro District:** Vice President and three seats on the executive committee (subdistrict seats 3, 6 and 9).
- **Panhandle District:** Secretary, Treasurer and two seats on the executive committee (areas 3 and 6).
- **Sandhills District:** Secretary/Treasurer and one seat on the executive committee.
- **Tri-Valley District:** Vice President and two seats on the executive committee (one each from the Central and East subdistricts).

NEA RA At-Large District Cluster Delegates: 1-year term

Deadline to File: Sunday, Feb. 2

Elected during statewide online elections

The 2025 NEA RA will be held July 2-6, 2025, in Portland, Ore.

To elect members to serve as voting delegates to the National Education Association’s annual Representative Assembly business meeting, **local associations with fewer than 76 members** are grouped in clusters per district. For instance, all local associations in Elkhorn District with fewer than 76 members will vote on a common set of candidates to serve as delegates to RA.

Cluster delegates fund their own RA costs. The exact number of openings will be set after the membership count for 2024-25 is finalized in mid-January, but there are approximately:

- **Capitol District:** 10 openings
- **Elkhorn District:** 9 openings
- **Metro District:** 1 opening
- **Panhandle District:** 5 openings
- **Sandhills District:** 6 openings
- **Tri-Valley District:** 9 openings

Aspiring Educators (formerly Student Education Association of Nebraska) Delegate to NEA RA: 1-year term

Members of Aspiring Educators will elect delegates to the NSEA Delegate Assembly at the AE Delegate Assembly on Saturday, April 5. They also will elect region representatives, secretary, president elect and an underclass representative. Watch for the Aspiring Educators newsletter for details on how to attend.

Aspiring Educators members will then elect delegates to the NEA Representative Assembly in statewide balloting following the March AE Delegate Assembly.

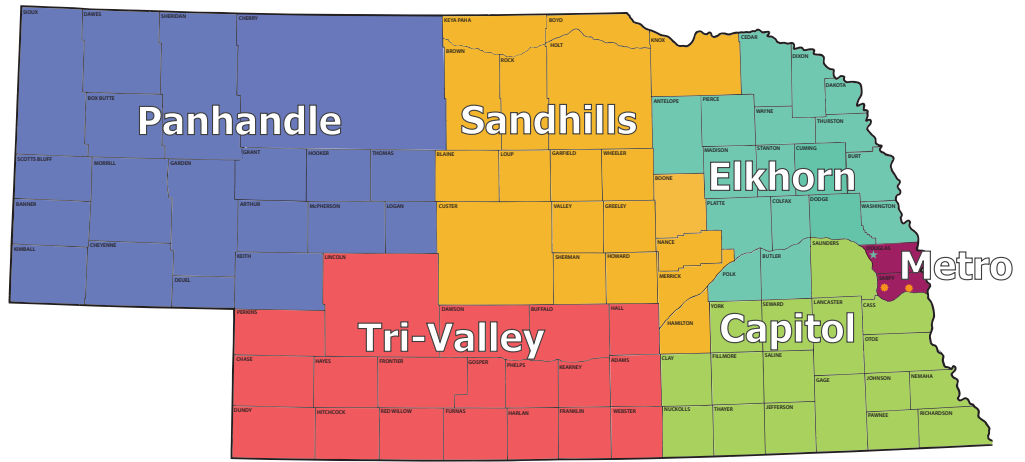
NEA RA At-Large Statewide Delegates: 1-year term

Deadline to File: Sunday, Feb. 2

Elected during statewide online elections

Delegates from **local associations with more than 76 members** must be elected by secret ballot, according to federal statute.

Any active NSEA member is eligible to place his or her name on the state-



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.

wide, at-large delegate ballot for NEA Representative Assembly by filing at nsea.org. Members elected as statewide delegates will be reimbursed for transportation, lodging and meal expenses. There will be one at-large delegate for the RA position.

NSEA-Retired Officers; Delegates to NSEA Delegate Assembly and NEA RA: 1-year terms

Deadline to File: Sunday, Feb. 5

Elected during mail-in ballots in March

Members of NSEA-Retired will use mail-in ballots in March to elect the following positions:

Retired Board of Directors

- **Secretary** (3-year term)
- **Treasurer** (3-year term)
- **Metro District** (3-year term)
- **Panhandle District** (3-year term)
- **Tri-Valley District** (3-year term)

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

NSEA Delegate Assembly At-Large District Cluster Delegates: 1-year term

Deadline to File: Sunday, March 2

Elected during online election by cluster locals per district, March 9-18

To elect voting delegates to NSEA’s annual Delegate Assembly business meeting, **local associations with fewer than 26 members** are grouped in “clusters” in each of NSEA’s six governance districts. For instance, all local associations in NSEA’s Capitol District with fewer than 26 members will vote on a common set of candidates for delegates to DA.

The exact number of openings will be set after the membership count for 2024-25 is finalized in mid-January. There are approximately:

- **Capitol District:** 7 openings
- **Elkhorn District:** 9 openings
- **Metro District:** 1 opening
- **Panhandle District:** 7 openings
- **Sandhills District:** 7 openings
- **Tri-Valley District:** 11 openings

NSEA Delegate Assembly Local Delegates: 1-year term

Deadline to File: Set by each

Local Association

Secret ballot elections held at the local association level, with delegate names reported to NSEA by March 20

Delegates from **local associations with 26 or more members must be elected by secret ballot**. Presidents from those associations will be notified of the number of delegate representatives they may elect, based on their local association membership.



Bennington Education Association member Lindsey Wilson with her students during a surprise presentation of the Nebraska 2025 Teacher of the Year. (Photos by Nebraska Department of Education)

Bennington Middle School Teacher Named 2025 Nebraska Teacher of the Year

Lindsey Wilson is not afraid to break from tradition and shake things up to help students.

“I believe that students learn best when they are actively engaged,” she said.

Wilson is a 6th-8th grade math, science and social studies teacher at Bennington Middle School.

“In my classroom, I’m constantly looking for new and better ways to connect with students and capture their imagination and passion,” Wilson said.

What's in the Box?

Wilson captured the imagination of a panel of Nebraska educators who selected Wilson as the 2025 Nebraska Teacher of the Year (TOY). As part of the selection process, Wilson was tasked with providing panelists with a lesson she uses in her classroom. Her “What’s in the Box?” science experiment challenged



Wilson

the panelists to formulate a hypothesis and use the scientific method to guess what is hidden in a box.

The key to the lesson is that students cannot open the box. They rely solely on observations like shaking the box, listening to sounds or feeling its weight to test their hypotheses.

In spite of their excitement to learn what was in the box, Wilson never permitted panelists to open the box.

Nebraska Department of Education spokesman David Jespersen mused at the TOY awards reception in December that panelist and Nebraska State Board of Education Member Kirk Penner was still wondering about what, exactly, was in the box Wilson presented.

Wilson believes that students learn best when they are actively engaged in real-world applications of scientific concepts and has developed and implemented a number of collaborative, inquiry-based projects

providing students with hands-on learning experiences. As an educator, she often asks her students to take risks, to be vulnerable in their learning and to embrace new challenges.

Wilson has been a teacher since 2009, working in Omaha at King Science and Technology Magnet School and Morton Magnet School in OPS until her move to Bennington Middle School in 2022.

Teacher of the Year

As the 2025 Teacher of the Year, Wilson wants to remind teachers why they entered the profession and help them find joy in the classroom again. She also wants teachers to truly understand their value and impact.

“Our influence extends far beyond the walls of our classrooms, reaching into the lives of our students, their families and the broader community,” Wilson wrote in her application. “We are not just conveyors of information, but shapers of future citizens, thinkers, doers and leaders. This realization is empowering, and it’s essential that every teacher recognizes the profound

difference they make each day.”

The Teacher of the Year program recognizes the contributions of classroom teachers who are exceptionally dedicated, knowledgeable, skilled and who have the ability to inspire students of all backgrounds and abilities to learn.

Wilson will participate in the National Teacher of the Year competition later this year.

Teaching Excellence

Wilson was one of three finalists for the Nebraska Teacher of the Year award. Syracuse/Avoca/Dunbar Education Association member Megan Pitrat and Millard Education Association member Tom Whisinnand were also finalists and recognized as Award of Excellence winners.

Whisinnand currently teaches at Neihardt Elementary School in Millard and is an adjunct instructor at Doane University.

As an educator for more than 20 years, Whisinnand has had the opportunity to observe and come to a deep understanding that great teachers intentionally build a classroom community, they

actively participate as a member of the classroom community and they provide students with guidance in behaviors that make them successful, both inside and outside of the classroom.

In his application, Whisinnand said his message for both teachers and students is simple, “It is all about you. Both groups of people have tremendous pressure on them, both groups of people have expectations coming at them from all directions and both groups of people need to be reminded that they need to take time and reflect on what truly matters in their lives. The world needs you.”

Megan Pitrat has taught Special Education in grades 7-8 in Syracuse since 2016. Before that she was a Special Education instructor at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln and a Special Education teacher for grades 5-12 in Central City.

In her application, Pitrat said that she embraces that the mission for teachers is to teach but often they also do so

much more.

“My work as a teacher, leader and researcher has always been evolving toward a genuine understanding of how I can help every single student who walks through my classroom learn, grow and succeed. I have conceptualized my teaching practice to prioritize students/ humanness as the foundation for learning. And I have always led with my heart.”

Pitrat earned a Bachelor of Science in 7-12 Special Education from Peru State College, a Master of Education in Special Education and a Doctorate in Education in Teaching, Curriculum and Learning from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln.

Pitrat is a member of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the National Art Education Association, the Council for Exceptional Children, the Nebraska State Education Association and the Nebraska Art Teachers Association.

Wilson, Whisinnand and Pitrat were honored in early December at the Nebraska Teacher of the Year & Excellence in Teaching Awards Reception and Program at the Lincoln Children's Zoo.



Pitrat



Whisinnand



Former Nebraska Teacher of the Year (TOY) winners and NSEA members in attendance at the 2025 TOY Awards Reception and Program in December gather for a photo at the Lincoln Children's Zoo.

NEBRASKA

SMART

SUCCESS MADE ACCESSIBLE THROUGH RURAL TUTORING



CHADRON STATE COLLEGE

Chadron State College invites rural students to participate in the expanded SMART tutor program

Nebraska Success Made Accessible through Rural Tutoring (SMART) is expanding its mission to provide high-quality, free tutoring services to K-12 students across rural Nebraska school districts.

The program connects students with dedicated teacher education candidates from the three Nebraska State Colleges: Chadron, Peru, and Wayne.

Program Expansion and Eligibility

- The program now serves students from all school districts affiliated with the Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association (NRCSA), those in districts supported by Educational Service Units 1, 4, and 13, and several other select rural districts.

How the Program Works

- Tutoring services are delivered online, allowing students or parents to schedule sessions between Monday and Thursday.
- Students can either schedule an appointment or select on-demand tutoring.
- Tutors have been admitted to their college's teacher education program, passed background checks, and received comprehensive training.
- Nebraska SMART ensures students are paired with tutors who specialize in their grade level and subject area.



Learn More and Register

For more information or to register for tutoring, visit the Nebraska SMART webpage.

Laughter & LEGISLATIVE POLICY

Metro District Hosts Senator Dinner



IMPORTANT REMINDER

Request PAC Refund by
Feb. 15, 2025



Metro District Senator Dinner held Dec. 17, 2024: 1. Bellevue Education Association member Julie Adams, Nebraska NEA Director Edward Ventura, Jr. and Senator Wendy DeBoer (Dist. 10). 2. NSEA Vice President Paul Schulte and Senator-elect Ashlei Spivey (Dist. 13). 3. Senator John Cavanaugh (Dist. 9) with NSEA-Retired member Dave Richardson. 4. Omaha Education Association (OEA) member Michelle Richards, Cheryl Rountree, Senator-elect Victor Rountree (Dist. 3) and OEA President Kathy Poehling. 5. Senator Machaela Cavanaugh (Dist. 6) with NSEA President Tim Royers and Millard Education Association President Stacy Kester Pearson. 6. NSEA-Retired member Tamara Bailey with OEA member Tracy Hartman-Bradley.

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

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

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

Requests must be postmarked no later than Feb. 15, 2025. In order to efficiently use dues dollars, requests for refunds received by the due date will be processed and mailed in a single batch after that date.

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



Make the most of your new **MEMBERSHIP!**

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- Plan ahead for retirement

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To help us continue to advocate for all educators, NSEA asks each local to sign up at least ONE new member between Jan. 1 and Feb. 28. New members who join in January and February will pay the remaining portion of the association year's dues. That's about \$1.50 a day for the remainder of the membership year.

Every new member who joins, and the member who enrolled them, will be entered into prize drawings!

Every local that gains more than one member will receive \$50 to be used at the local level for a membership event of its choosing.

Make a plan for how you will reach out to all potential members. Engage in one-on-one conversations with potential members. This can be done by matching current members with a potential member they may know or assign building representatives

to potential members. Explain the benefits of membership and share your reasons for joining.

Host a member recruitment event, invite potential members to a local meeting or membership event. If you'd like to schedule a local event, contact your NSEA Organizational Specialist ASAP for help in planning.

New members can join online or download an application at www.nsea.org/joinnow. If enrolling with a paper application, please submit it promptly to the NSEA Membership Department via fax, email or U.S. Mail. Enrollment date must be between Jan. 1 and Feb. 28 at: www.bit.ly/NSEAOne-to-One. Contact your NSEA Organizational Specialist if you need assistance with this step.

DON'T DELAY! Apply for Certificate Renewal Early



Educators who need to renew their certificate in 2025 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. This year, the department is encouraging certificated teachers who will need to renew in 2025 to apply between the months of January and March.

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

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

Have a student teacher? Sign them up for Aspiring Ed!

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.





ELECTIONS AHEAD!

Consider running for one of the leadership roles in NSEA-Retired.

Candidate filing for the upcoming elections is available online at nsea.org/retired. Filing deadline is Feb. 5.

Open Seats

NSEA-Retired leadership opportunities for 2025-26 include:

NSEA- RETIRED SECRETARY

- 3-year term
- Term begins Aug. 15, 2025

NSEA- RETIRED TREASURER

- 3-year term
- Term begins Aug. 15, 2025

METRO-1 DISTRICT DIRECTOR

- 3-year term
- Term begins Aug. 15, 2025

PANHANDLE DISTRICT DIRECTOR

- 3-year term
- Term begins Aug. 15, 2025

TRI-VALLEY DISTRICT DIRECTOR

- 3-year term
- Term begins Aug. 15, 2025

NSEA-Retired Members Represent at Metro District Senator Dinner



NSEA-Retired members play a critical role in helping lawmakers understand the current challenges facing public schools, educators and students. Those who attended the Metro District Senators Dinner in December shared their insights with lawmakers. Years of practical knowledge gives them a unique

perspective on how educational policies affect students, teachers and school communities.

Photo (Left to Right): NSEA-Retired President John Heineman, Tamara Bailey, Jane Erdenberger, Dave Richardson, Colleen Richardson, Lynne Elwood, Mark Schulte, Carolyn Grace and Sue Kalina.

Register Today for NSEA-Retired Governance Day & LEAD Conference

NSEA-Retired members who wish to become more active and engaged in the Association are encouraged to attend the inaugural LEAD event in conjunction with Lobby Day on Feb. 17-18 at the NSEA office in Lincoln.

Inaugural LEAD Event

The LEAD event will feature sessions, which include networking opportunities with retired educators from across the state, and strategies for recruiting and engaging retired educators within your community.

Participants will also have an opportunity to observe an NSEA-Retired Board meeting to gain a deeper understanding of the governance structure and role of NSEA-Retired.

Governance Day

The 2025 NSEA-Retired's Governance/Lobby Day will be held virtually, with an in-person component, on Tuesday, Feb. 18.

The day is a chance for NSEA-Retired members to learn about issues affecting public education and advocate for change.

The Zoom meeting will run from 10 a.m. to noon. Members may sign on after 9:30 a.m.

NSEA-Retired President John Heineman and Jason Hayes, NSEA Director of Public Policy and Legislative Research, will give a legislative update and overview of procedures for visiting with senators.

Participants also are encouraged to write their senators.

Register for both events online at nsea.org/retired. Click "Calendar, Events & Registrations." The deadline to register is Friday, Jan. 24. The Zoom link will be provided to registered participants.



Omaha Education Association (OEA) members Cathy Armbeck-Hughes, Lee Perez, OEA President Kathy Poehling and Faith Johnson.

Closing the Gap: OEA Members Advocate for Solutions to Bridge the Achievement Gap

In November, several NSEA members testified before the Legislature's Education Committee during public hearings regarding student achievement and equity in Omaha Public Schools (OPS).

Introduced by Senator McKinney, LR439 and LR440 sought to explore ways to enhance student academic achievement and improve outcomes for students in this large urban school district.

LR439 interim study was crafted to evaluate whether the size of school districts has contributed to historical student underachievement within the Class V school district.

LR439 sought to investigate whether

the size of OPS has contributed to historical underachievement within the district. This study aims to understand if the district's large scale impacts student performance by examining various factors, such as academic trends, teacher turnover and resource distribution. The study also assesses how OPS compares to regional and national benchmarks, especially concerning poverty, student-to-teacher ratios and community engagement.

Ultimately, LR439 seeks to determine if breaking OPS into smaller districts could benefit students or if a unified district is better positioned to serve Omaha's diverse student population.

In 2006, a similar effort was introduced by Sen. Ernie Chambers and resulted in the formation of the Douglas/Sarpy County Learning Community.

During the hearings, members testified that size alone doesn't determine educational outcomes; factors like targeted resources and teacher support are more crucial.

OPS's economies of scale ensure equitable resource distribution, which smaller districts may lack. Dividing the district could worsen inequalities. Efforts should focus on improving resources, teacher support and interventions to uplift all students. A unified OPS is better equipped to serve its diverse population.

The Political Decisions Shaping Our Schools

Nebraska's 109th Legislature convenes on Jan. 8. The 90-day session is expected to cover a wide range of proposed bills that will affect all Nebraska public education, our public schools, students and staff.

Every decision made regarding education is a political decision. From funding to teaching certificate requirements, from the number of students in your classroom to the standards you teach to, from your curriculum and the resources you can access, to the amount on your paycheck – all are tied to legislative action.

The NSEA's Government Relations team monitors

legislative activities and advocates for the best interests of our members, students and public education. Legislative bills change quickly throughout the session, and NSEA works to keep you in the loop about how your job as an educator or education support professional may be affected.

Stay up-to-date about legislative activity and decisions affecting public education with NSEA's Capitol Update, sent to your personal email inbox each week of the legislative session. Subscribe to the Capitol Update at www.nsea.org/subscriber.

In Memory

We recognize these members whom we've lost recently:

Sherman Hirsch, 93, North Platte

Benjamin Vrana, 84, Columbus

Kathleen Darling, 64, Millard

Turn to the NSEA Children's Fund This Winter



Teachers often go above and beyond, spending their own money to help students in need. But they can't support every child, which is why NSEA created the Children's Fund in 1994.

Donations have provided hundreds of thousands of dollars to assist with expenses like glasses, clothing, medical care, fire relief and transportation for students. There is never any red tape or lengthy delay for members wanting to use the fund to help a student. A call to Karen Hunt at the NSEA (800-742-0047) is usually all that is needed. For more information, visit nsea.org/childrensfund.

Apply now for 2025 Belz, Lynch, Krause grants

Good teachers are always looking to improve their skill set, and the NSEA makes learning easier with an award from the Belz, Lynch, Krause Educational Grant Fund. The 2025 application deadline is Saturday, March 1.

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

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

- need;
- how the project will address that need and relate to professional growth goals;
- project description;

- timeline;
- a budget statement; and
- methods of evaluating success.

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

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

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

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

It's a new year and a good time to get your financial house in order!

Horace Mann, a long-time corporate supporter, is thrilled to launch HMScore™ — a free tool for credit monitoring and reporting that empowers you to take control of your financial health. As you shape future leaders, let us help you build your own financial future.

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AM-C04812 (Oct. 24)

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