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Dismal Scores Represent Need for Choice by Jordan Cash

Last month, the Nebraska Department of Education released the Nebraska State Accountability (NeSA) scores for all the public school districts in the state. These exams-administered last spring-test students from 3rd to 11th grade in Reading and Math; 5th, 8th, and 11th graders in Science; and 4th, 8th, and 11th graders in Writing.[\[1\]](#)

Overall, Nebraska students met the standards set by the state. A sizeable contingent, however, fell below state standards. Of the grades tested in math, at least 25 percent of students failed to meet math standards, and the number only increased as students got older, with 38.3 percent of 8th graders and 44.4 percent of 11th graders below standards. Reading scores were slightly better, but most of the grades tested still had roughly a quarter fail to meet expectations; 11th graders again did the worst, with 35.5 percent below standards. In science, at least a third of students in all three grades failed to meet the state's standards. The scores for 8th and 11th graders in writing were dismal, with 35.9 percent and 37.4 percent of students below standards in each respective grade.[\[2\]](#)

Unfortunately, the number of students falling below state standards is higher in certain areas of the state. Omaha Public Schools (OPS)-the state's largest district-had the most students fail to meet the standards. Looking at 4th, 8th, and 11th grade scores as a microcosm of the district, only 4th grade reading and math did not have a majority of students fall below state standards. Among OPS 8th graders, exactly half, 50 percent, failed state reading standards, while 68 percent failed math standards and 60 percent failed the science standards. The writing scores were only slightly better, but 53 percent of OPS 8th graders still failed to meet expectations. Only one OPS middle school did not have a majority of their students below standards in science, while four had over 70 percent below science standards, including one with an 81 percent below standards rate. In math, nine of OPS's eleven middle schools had a majority of students below the math standards; three had over 80 percent of students below standards, with rates as high as 87 percent. Five of the other six had below standards rates ranging from 70 to 79 percent, the sixth school's rate was 63 percent.[\[3\]](#) The scores were generally worse for 11th graders; 70 percent failed state math standards, 56 percent failed the reading standards, 59 percent failed the science standards, and 55 percent failed the writing standards. Only two of OPS's seven high schools did not have a majority of students below standards in all four categories.

While OPS clearly had the worst scores in the state, they were not the only district to struggle. Ralston saw 55 percent of its 8th graders and 60 percent of its 11th graders fail the state math standards, and 51 percent of its 11th graders also failed to meet state writing standards.[\[4\]](#) A majority of Grand Island's juniors also failed to meet state standards in reading, math, and writing.[\[5\]](#) Fifty-one percent of 11th graders scored below math standards in both North Platte and Hastings. More than 50 percent of 11th graders also scored below standards in math in Fremont, Kearney, and Scottsbluff.

While these are only a few of the more egregious examples, it is clear there are shortcomings in Nebraska's public school system. But what is most concerning is the fact that many of the students in these low achieving schools, particularly in OPS, have few other options.

Parents who wish to send their child to schools outside their resident district currently have only three options: homeschool, pay for a private school, or use the option enrollment program to send their child to another public school district. As many of the low performing schools are in low-income areas, it is unlikely those parents would be financially able to homeschool their children or send them to private schools in their area, effectively leaving the option enrollment program as the only one available. But this option poses several problems too. Outside of Douglas and Sarpy County, there are few places in Nebraska that have many school districts close enough together to allow for students to easily travel from their home to another district. Even within Douglas and Sarpy County-which has a Learning Community encompassing all of its school districts-the same problem applies, as the most troubled schools tend to be farther away from other districts, so a parent who wishes to take their child out of the neighborhood school may have a substantial cost in both time and money transporting them to a better-performing district.[\[6\]](#) Additionally, parents can only use option enrollment once, so if a student changes schools and the new out-of-district school underperforms, the child is effectively stuck. Of course, this assumes the better-performing districts have room for students from the other districts. [\[7\]](#)

The disappointing NeSA scores and the lack of choices available for parents demonstrates the need for more options for parents and students; and while there are many ways Nebraska can expand educational choice, the most immediate would be charter schools or a private school tax credit program.

Nebraska is one of only nine states that does not allow charter schools.[\[8\]](#) Charter schools are publicly funded schools operated by private organizations who have a legislative contract or charter with the state or local district.[\[9\]](#) As such, charter schools are exempt from many state and local regulations, giving them the flexibility to innovate. Conversely, charter schools are expected to be more accountable, and can be closed down if they do not meet expectations. While charter schools vary from state to state, several studies show charters have an overall positive effect on student achievement, particularly for low-income students. A 2010 study from the Institute of Education Sciences showed low-income and low-achieving students at charters performed better in math than their traditional public school counterparts.[\[10\]](#) A similar 2009 report from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes also found that charter schools designed to help low-income students produced higher student achievement

for those students than traditional public schools.^[11]

Another option to give parents in failing districts more choice would be a tax credit program that follows the child to local private schools. Ten states currently use tax credit programs, and studies examining students who attended private schools using tax credits have shown students achieving more than their public schools counterparts.^[12]

The NeSA scores demonstrate serious deficiencies in our public schools, especially in urban areas. Parents in these districts often have no other choice but to send their children to schools that are not delivering a quality education to some of their students. Charters and tax credits would help parents find other ways to get their children the education they deserve.

[1] Nebraska Department of Education, "Nebraska State Accountability 2012." Available at <http://www.education.ne.gov/nesainitial/>, accessed September 27, 2012.

[2] Nebraska Department of Education, "Nebraska State Accountability 2012." Available at <http://www.education.ne.gov/nesainitial/>, accessed September 27, 2012.

[3] Nebraska Department of Education, "State Accountability (NeSA) District Report of School Performance Spring 2012: Omaha Public Schools," August 16, 2012, accessed October 1, 2012. OPS scores for reading, math, and science may be viewed at http://www.education.ne.gov/nesainitial/docs/28-0001-000_NESA_SCHOOL_PERFORMANCE_DISTRICT.PDF the writing scores may be viewed separately at http://www.education.ne.gov/nesainitial/docs/28-0001-000_NESA-W_SCHOOL_PERFORMANCE_DISTRICT.PDF.

[4] Nebraska Department of Education, "State Accountability (NeSA) District Report of School Performance Spring 2012: Ralston Public Schools," August 8, 2012, accessed October 1, 2012. Ralston's reading, science, and math scores may be viewed at http://www.education.ne.gov/nesainitial/docs/28-0054-000_NESA_SCHOOL_PERFORMANCE_DISTRICT.PDF, writing scores may be viewed at http://www.education.ne.gov/nesainitial/docs/28-0054-000_NESA-W_SCHOOL_PERFORMANCE_DISTRICT.PDF.

[5] Nebraska Department of Education, "State Accountability (NeSA) District Report of School Performance Spring 2012: Grand Island Public Schools," August 8, 2012, accessed October 1, 2012. Grand Island's reading, science, and math scores may be viewed at http://www.education.ne.gov/nesainitial/docs/40-0002-000_NESA_SCHOOL_PERFORMANCE_DISTRICT.PDF, writing scores may be viewed at http://www.education.ne.gov/nesainitial/docs/40-0002-000_NESA-W_SCHOOL_PERFORMANCE_DISTRICT.PDF.

[6] The state does provide a small reimbursement for option and open enrollment, but it is

fairly small and most of the cost would fall on the parent.

[7] Nebraska Department of Education, "Frequently Asked Questions About Enrollment Option." Available at http://www.education.ne.gov/fos/OrgServices/EnrollmentOption/Downloads/FAQ_May2012.pdf, accessed October 2, 2012; Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy County, "About Us." Available at <http://www.learningcommunityds.org/about/faqs/>, accessed October 2, 2012. The state mileage rates may be found at <http://www.education.ne.gov/fos/ReimbursementRates/Index.html>.

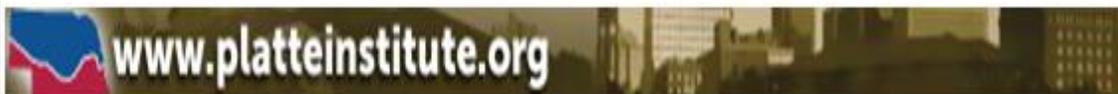
[8] Center for Education Reform, "Charter School Law." Available at <http://www.edreform.com/issues/choice-charter-schools/laws-legislation/>, accessed October 2, 2012.

[9] National Center for Education Statistics, "Fast Facts: Charter Schools." Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=30>, accessed October 2, 2012.

[10] Philip Gleason, Melissa Clark, Christina Clark Tuttle, Emily Dwoyer, "The Evaluation of Charter School Impacts," Institute of Education Studies, June 2012. Available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20104029/pdf/20104029.pdf>, accessed October 2, 2012.

[11] Center for Research on Education Outcomes, "Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States," June 2009. Available at http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf, accessed October 2, 2012.

[12] David Figlio, "Evaluation of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program Participation, Compliance and Test Scores in 2009-2010," University of Florida, Northwestern University, and the National Bureau of Economic Research, August 2011. Available at http://www.floridaschoolchoice.org/pdf/FTC_Research_2009-10_report.pdf, accessed August 9, 2012.



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