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Streamlining Educational Bureaucracy

As the State of Nebraska prepares to replace its retiring Commissioner of Education, Dr. Roger Breed, state leaders have an important opportunity to reflect on how our educational system is structured and how it can be improved. Now may be the right time to bring our state's chief education official within the Governor's cabinet of top state officials.

As dictated by a 1972 constitutional amendment, Nebraska's Education Commissioner is neither a cabinet official nor appointed by the Governor; instead, the commissioner is elected by the eight members of the State Board of Education, who are themselves elected to four-year terms from single-member districts spread across the state.^[1] In contrast, twelve states currently have their Governor involved in the appointment of Chief Educational Officers, and 26 include those individuals within their Governor's cabinet.^[2]

Moving the Education Commissioner into the Governor's cabinet could allow for education reform to be more easily implemented. Currently, education policy-making is separated, as the Governor and Legislature are able to make certain education initiatives and control the amount spent on education while the Board of Education is also responsible for formulating, implementing and evaluating policy, along with numerous other administrative duties. This set-up makes communication between the Board, Governor, and Legislature absolutely essential in designing effective education policies.

While such an arrangement has contributed to successful programs such as the "Virtual Library," a free statewide clearinghouse of digital resources for teachers and students,^[3] the potential for conflicting policy and miscommunication remains. Putting the Education Commissioner in the Governor's cabinet could help ensure direct communication between the various policy making bodies, and result in a more unified education program avoiding the bureaucracy of working with three separate areas of government. It may also allow the Commissioner to have more of an active role in the creation and implementation of policy, rather than following the strict policies of the board he could be more independent in the creation of his own policies as a member of the cabinet.

Such a change would likely come with some alterations in the manner in which the commissioner is selected, and there are several different avenues it might take. As the Education Commissioner is an important position with direct impact on everyday

Nebraskans perhaps it would be a good elected position similar to the Secretary of State, Attorney General, Treasurer, and Auditor; thirteen other states currently elect their chief educators this way. As a member of the Governor's cabinet it may be advisable to have the person be appointed by the Governor as twelve other states do. A different yet similar process to the one we use currently would be to have the Board of Education picking who it believes is the most qualified and recommending them to the Governor and Legislature for approval; five other states use this process.^[4]

Such reforms would be extremely beneficial for Nebraska students, as the current system is not as successful as it could be. A 2012 study by *Education Week* ranking state educational systems put Nebraska 49th out of 50 for educational policy and performance.^[10] Similarly, two studies attempting to standardize dropout rate measurements found that Nebraska had one of the highest dropout rates for black students in the country, with less than 50 percent reaching graduation, and the achievement gap between black and white students remains fairly drastic. State tests in 2012 showed that black students in Omaha Public Schools scored well below their white peers across the state in all categories; with a 36.2 percent reading proficiency gap, a 45.1 percent math proficiency gap, and a 52.7 percent science proficiency gap. A 2009 study by the United States Department of Education also showed that Nebraska had the widest achievement gap in the nation for black eighth graders at 51 points and one of the widest achievement gaps overall.^[11] The achievement gap is also visible for Hispanic and Native American students; Hispanic students have average reading and math proficiency scores 27 and 31 percentage points lower than their white counterparts, respectively, and the gap for Native Americans students is slightly larger.^[12] Clearly, Nebraska's education system is not working for many of its students. Changing the structure of educational leadership could help facilitate a change so all of Nebraska's students are able to succeed and compete with their national and international peers in the global economy.

A reform-minded Commissioner is able to be more active in policy development and implementation working closely with a determined Governor, Legislature, and Board of Education. Changing the constitution to have the Education Commissioner as part of the Governor's cabinet would help our State unify education policy and give reform-minded Commissioners more opportunities to help craft important reforms to improve Nebraska's education system.

^[1] Nebraska State Board of Education, "Nebraska State Board of Education Members." Accessed July 11, 2013, <http://www.education.ne.gov/StateBoard/Members.html>; Nebraska State Constitution Article VII, Section 4. Accessed July 31, 2013, <http://www.nebraskalegislature.gov/laws/articles.php?article=VII-4>.

^[2] National Association of State Boards of Education, "State Education Governance: State-by-State Chart of Essential Governance Information," April 2012. Accessed July 11, 2013, <http://www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/State-Education-Governance-A-State-by-State-Chart-of-Essential-Governance-Information.pdf>. The 26 number of

cabinet level education officials comes from the author's evaluation of each state's cabinet composition.

[3] Nebraska Governor, "Gov. Heineman Announces Nebraska Virtual Library Launch," August 8, 2012. Accessed July 11, 2013, http://www.governor.nebraska.gov/news/2012/08/08_virtual_lib.html.

[4] National Association of State Boards of Education, "State Education Governance: State-by-State Chart of Essential Governance Information," April 2012. Accessed July 11, 2013, <http://www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/State-Education-Governance-A-State-by-State-Chart-of-Essential-Governance-Information.pdf>.

[5] John O'Connor, "Indiana Superintendent Tony Bennett Is Florida's Next Education Commissioner," StateImpact, December 12, 2012. Accessed July 11, 2013, <http://stateimpact.npr.org/florida/2012/12/12/indiana-superintendent-tony-is-floridas-next-education-commissioner/>.

[6] Chris Sigurdson, "Trustees elect Mitchell E. Daniels Jr. as Purdue's 12th president," Purdue University News Service, June 21, 2012. Accessed July 11, 2013, <http://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/general/2012/120621KrachPresident.html>.

[7] Andrea Neal, "Mitch Daniels: The education governor?" *South Bend Tribune*, November 7, 2012. Accessed July 11, 2013, http://articles.southbendtribune.com/2012-11-07/news/34979057_1_mitch-daniels-graduation-rates-education-reform.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Andrea Neal, "Mitch Daniels: The education governor?" *South Bend Tribune*, November 7, 2012. Accessed July 11, 2013, http://articles.southbendtribune.com/2012-11-07/news/34979057_1_mitch-daniels-graduation-rates-education-reform; Platte Institute, "Indiana Leading the Way on Vouchers," July 2, 2013. Accessed July 11, 2013, <http://www.platteinstitute.org/blog/detail/indiana-leading-the-way-on-vouchers>.

[10] *Education Week*, "State Report Cards," Vol. 31, Issue 16. Accessed July 31, 2013, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/qc/2012/16src.h31.html>.

[11] Henry Cordes, Cindy Gonzalez, and Erin Grace, "Omaha in Black and White: Poverty amid prosperity," *Omaha World Herald*, January 6, 2011. Accessed July 31, 2013, <http://www.omaha.com/article/20110106/SPECIALPROJECTS/706179826>; Paul Goodsell, "Achievement gap still tests OPS," *Omaha World Herald*, March 10, 2013. Accessed July 31, 2013, <http://www.omaha.com/article/20130310/NEWS/703109912>; *Chicago Tribune*, "Black-white achievement gap narrows nationally; but not in Illinois," July 16, 2009. Accessed July 31, 2013, <http://newsblogs.chicagotribune.com/race/2009/07/blackwhite-achievement-gap-narrows-nationally-but-not-in-illinois.html>.

[12] Paul Goodsell, "Achievement gap still tests OPS," *Omaha World Herald*, March 10, 2013. Accessed July 31,

2013, <http://www.omaha.com/article/20130310/NEWS/703109912>

