



Overhauling Nebraska’s Educational System

After successfully shepherding a bill to shrink the Omaha Public School Board in the last session and introducing legislation to allow charter schools in Nebraska, Sen. Scott Lautenbaugh recently released a series of proposals aimed to improve Nebraska’s education system.

Several of these proposed reforms were originally introduced by the Platte Institute in our January 2012 study “Teacher Evaluation and Selection” authored by Dr. Vicki Alger, and center largely around administrative changes and offering incentives to increase teacher and student performance. As outlined by Lautenbaugh, the reforms would encompass six general areas.ⁱ

Proposal 1: Increasing pay for board certified teachers while offering reimbursement and raises for those who work in high poverty districts.

Tying teacher pay to performance is an idea that has received support from diverse institutions such as the Heritage Foundation and Center for American Progress (CAP). Studies show that salary incentives may incentivize good teachers to stay in low-income districts. For example, a study by the RAND Corporation and Harvard University showed a \$20,000 incentive increased the chances of new, academically distinguished teachers working in low-income districts in California by 23 percent. Similarly, surveys of teachers leaving high poverty areas often indicated that poor salaries were their primary reason for leaving, which indicates higher salaries may compensate for the challenges of working in low-income districts.ⁱⁱ

Proposal 2: Assess school performance with grades and offer bonuses to schools who show improved performance and for teachers whose students pass AP exams.

By rewarding schools and teachers who raise their graded assessments, ensure students pass AP exams, and are prepared for college incentivizes teachers to focus on student achievement.ⁱⁱⁱ However, the state and school districts must be strict in their implementation and evaluation and offset incentives by other reductions in spending, likely in non-education related administrative functions. But, as Nebraska does not currently link student performance to teacher evaluation or pay in any way, these changes would be positive steps forward.^{iv}

Proposal 3: End “social promotion” where students are moved up a grade simply because of their age even if they are not ready to do so academically and increase graduation requirements so that students do not have to take remedial courses in college.

A 2004 study by the University of Chicago on the effects of the “promotion gate” in Chicago between 1992 and 1998, where eighth grade students had to reach a minimum score on basic skills tests in reading and mathematics in order to continue on to ninth grade, effectively ended social promotion in those grades. In the three years before its implementation, dropout rates for 17 and 19 year olds who had not gone through the promotion gate hovered between 43 and 45 percent. While those numbers were not immediately reduced following implementation, the dropout rate fell to between 25 and 28 percent within several years. Similarly, academic achievement for those going through the promotion gate increased; for example, a student who scored in the 70th percentile in the 1992 pre-promotion gate class would have only scored in the 50th percentile in the post-promotion gate 1998 class, indicating the achievement of the entire class increased significantly.^v These methods ensure students are academically prepared for future grade levels and do not struggle due to lack of preparation.

Proposal 4: Require principals to approve teacher transfers to remove failing teachers from the classroom instead of moving to different schools.

Proposal 5: Eliminate administrator tenure and reform teacher tenure and pensions; specifically, ending the “last in, first out” layoffs of new teachers and instead lay off the lowest performing teachers without regard to seniority.

These administrative reforms and changing the pension system would refocus education in Nebraska on student achievement. Nebraska teachers currently receive tenure after three years, and are subsequently evaluated at the district level.^{vi} The National Council on Teacher Quality gave Nebraska an “F” for removing ineffective teachers from the classroom, as ineffectiveness is not considered an explicit reason for dismissal. The appeals process for dismissal can also be lengthy and expensive, giving districts incentive not to dismiss sub-par teachers in order to prevent the substantial legal implications that can drag on for years, and perhaps contributing to poor teachers being transferred to different schools rather than being removed from the classroom altogether.^{vii}

Proposal 6: Provide alternative ways for teachers to be certified, so those who have degrees in fields other than education could get on-the-job training, complete community college programs, or other similar routes to obtain a teaching certificate.

Opening up alternate avenues to teaching would give talented individuals the opportunity to enter the classroom and share their practical experience and knowledge with students. Nationally, the number of teachers entering the field tripled from 16,000 to 45,000 between 1999 and 2009. Research also indicates that states with rigorous alternative

routes to teaching often have higher student achievement.^{viii} As Sen. Lautenbaugh pointed out, changing the requirements would allow programs like Teach for America (TFA) to operate in Nebraska.^{ix} TFA is well known for its success, particularly in low-income areas; a recent study by Mathematica Policy Research showed that students with TFA instructors received the equivalent of an additional 2.6 months of education, concluding that “TFA teachers were more effective than the teachers with whom they were compared.”^x Similar studies in Louisiana, North Carolina, and Tennessee also found TFA teachers to be better comparatively than their public school counterparts.^{xi}

These proposals are an excellent attempt at reforming Nebraska education for the benefit of students and teachers alike, and should be seriously considered in the next session.

ⁱ Deena Winter, “Omaha senator to propose sweeping education reforms,” *Nebraska Watchdog* August 29, 2013. Accessed September 19, 2013, <http://watchdog.org/103475/omaha-senator-to-propose-sweeping-education-reforms/>; Vicki E. Alger, “Teacher Selection and Evaluation in Nebraska,” Platte Institute for Economic Research. January 2012. Accessed September 19, 2013, http://www.platteinstitute.org/docLib/20120109_Teacher_Selection_and_Evaluation_in_Nebraska.pdf.

ⁱⁱ Jennifer L. Steele, Richard J. Murnane, and John B. Willett, “Do Financial Incentives Help Low-Performing Schools Attract and Keep Academically Talented Teachers? Evidence from California” (Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 14780, March 2009); Richard M. Ingersoll, “Why Do High-Poverty Schools Have Difficulty Staffing Their Classrooms with Qualified Teachers?” (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2004). Accessed September 19, 2013, http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2009/05/pdf/performance_pay.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ Todd Thurman, “Performance-Based Pay for Education,” Heritage Foundation, October 29, 2008. Accessed September 19, 2013, <http://blog.heritage.org/2008/10/29/performance-based-pay-for-education/>.

^{iv} Vicki E. Alger, “Teacher Selection and Evaluation in Nebraska,” Platte Institute for Economic Research. January 2012. Accessed September 19, 2013, http://www.platteinstitute.org/docLib/20120109_Teacher_Selection_and_Evaluation_in_Nebraska.pdf.

^v Elaine Allensworth, “Ending Social Promotion: Dropout Rates in Chicago after Implementation of the Eighth-Grade Promotion Gate,” Consortium on Chicago School Research, March 2004. Accessed September 19, 2013, <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/p69.pdf>.

^{vi} “Nebraska.” Accessed September 19, 2013, <http://www.teachersunionexposed.com/state.cfm?state=NE>.

^{vii} Vicki E. Alger, “Teacher Selection and Evaluation in Nebraska,” Platte Institute for Economic Research. January 2012. Accessed September 19, 2013, http://www.platteinstitute.org/docLib/20120109_Teacher_Selection_and_Evaluation_in_Nebraska.pdf.

^{viii} Vicki E. Alger, “Teacher Selection and Evaluation in Nebraska,” Platte Institute for Economic Research. January 2012. Accessed September 19, 2013, http://www.platteinstitute.org/docLib/20120109_Teacher_Selection_and_Evaluation_in_Nebraska.pdf.

^{ix} Deena Winter, “Omaha senator to propose sweeping education reforms,” *Nebraska Watchdog* August 29, 2013. Accessed September 19, 2013, <http://watchdog.org/103475/omaha-senator-to-propose-sweeping-education-reforms/>.

^x Mathematica Policy Research, “The Effectiveness of Secondary Math Teachers from Teach For America and the Teaching Fellows Programs,” National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Science, United States Department of Education, September 2013. Accessed September 19, 2013, http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/Education/HSAC_final_rpt_9_2013.pdf.

^{xi} Zenon Evans, ““Teach for America” Outperforms Standard Public Education, Despite Outcry from Teacher Unions,” *Reason Magazine*, September 13, 2013. Accessed September 19, 2013, <http://reason.com/blog/2013/09/13/teach-for-america-outperforms-standard-p>.