



Finding a New Vision for Nebraska Education

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By Dick Clark

In the waning days of the 2014 legislative session, the Nebraska Unicameral passed Legislative Bill 1103, authorizing the body’s Education Committee to conduct a “strategic planning process to create the statewide vision for education in Nebraska.”^[1] The bill directs the committee to meet with stakeholders and the general public, hold at least three public hearings, and develop a report by the end of the year spelling out its findings. This process is intended to yield “aspirational goals, visionary objectives, meaningful priorities, and practical strategies” for education in the state.^[2]

Born out of disputes over the particulars of the state aid formula, the new strategic plan is intended to better define the “big picture” priorities for the state’s schools. Members of the committee have expressed hope that the end product of the strategic planning process will be useful in making education funding decisions in the future.^[3] During the month of June, the Education Committee is circulating a survey to get public feedback on its draft vision, mission, and goals.^[4]

So far, the committee’s draft contains little that is objectionable. It also contains little that is clearly actionable. While it is necessary to agree on particular desired outcomes for any public project, the general goals of education are only one part of the policy discussion. More telling will be the committee’s take on educational priorities and the proposed means for achieving them.

One thing is clear: the need for reform in Nebraska’s public schools is critical. Although Nebraska enjoys an enviable statewide high school graduation rate of 88 percent,^[5] too many students are still being left behind, including a disproportionate number of minority students. According to the latest State of the Schools report from the Nebraska Department of Education, fewer than half of African-American and American Indian students are deemed proficient in math, writing, and science. Latino students are also significantly behind the curve in key skill proficiency.^[6] Though more students may be graduating, too many of them lack the skills that will allow them to succeed in today’s careers or in the pursuit of higher education.

As described in the Platte Institute's April 2014 policy study, minority students at Omaha Catholic Schools have fared significantly better than their peers in Omaha Public Schools despite far fewer dollars being spent on each student.^[7] Demographics do not by themselves determine educational outcomes. Nor is the task of helping students from challenging circumstances simply a matter of throwing more money at the same schools that have inadequately served them in the past. Instead, policymakers should consider significant structural reforms that enable administrators and teachers to creatively tackle their students' unique challenges. Unfortunately, the Education Committee has been unwilling to advance major education reform bills for debate by the full Unicameral. Even limited pilot programs, such as the one set out in Sen. Scott Lautenbaugh's Independent Public Schools Act this year, cannot seem to draw the interest of a majority of the Committee.^[8]

On Tuesday, June 24, over a hundred educators, policymakers, parents, and other education stakeholders will be in attendance at the Platte Institute's 2014 Education Summit, "K-12 Education Reform: From Start to Finish." The summit will feature six expert panels on issues including early childhood development, curriculum, teacher accountability, minority student achievement, school choice, and college and career readiness. Dwight D. Jones, the reform-minded former superintendent of the fifth-largest public school system in the country, will be the featured speaker over the lunch hour. The summit is an opportunity for people with different experiences and perspectives to meet and talk about actionable policy solutions that will be effective in achieving the educational goals that all Nebraskans can get behind.

^[1] Legislative Bill 1103. 103rd Nebraska Legislature, second session. 2014. [URL: http://nebraskalegislature.gov/bills/view_bill.php?DocumentID=22215]

^[2] *Ibid.*

^[3] Stoddard, Martha. "Nebraska legislative panel seeks defined 'vision' for education system." *Omaha World-Herald*. June 9, 2014. [URL: http://www.omaha.com/news/metro/nebraska-legislative-panel-seeks-defined-vision-for-education-system/article_442acdd2-719f-56d5-99cd-204664e4c1a2.html]

^[4] "Education Starting Point Survey." Education Committee. Nebraska Legislature. May 28, 2014. [URL: <http://news.legislature.ne.gov/edu/2014/05/28/education-committee-starting-point-survey/>]

^[5] 2012-2013 State of the Schools Report. Nebraska Department of Education. September 2013. [URL: <http://reportcard.education.ne.gov/>]

^[6] *Ibid.*

^[7] Alger, Vicki. "Ending Nebraska's Achievement Gap: A First Look at Student Achievement in Omaha's Public and Catholic Schools." Platte Institute for Economic Research. April 2014.

[URL: <http://www.platteinstitute.org/library/docLib/Ending-Nebraska-s-Achievement-Gap-042814.pdf>]

[8] Clark, Dick. "Legislative Update: Achievements and Room For Improvement on Taxes and Spending." Platte Chat. Platte Institute for Economic Research. April 1, 2014. [URL: <http://www.platteinstitute.org/research/detail/legislative-update-achievements-and-room-for-improvement-on-taxes-and-spending>]