

October 27, 2020

Chairman Groene and members of the Education Committee

RE: LR 402 - Interim study to examine the impact of COVID-19 on the education of Nebraska's children

Thank you for the opportunity to share what has been happening in the local district during this time. I would like to start by sharing what has gone well in public school districts since last March. The local educator, administrator, and support staff met this challenge as true Nebraskans. They have rolled up their sleeves and used the resources they access to and continue to deliver the exceptional product that is public education in Nebraska. Most of Nebraska educators are now teaching in ways they never considered prior to March; whether that's delivering instruction wearing a mask, doing live instruction and then preparing a virtual lesson for their hybrid model or solely teaching remotely. Teachers are doing this with grit and humility. This is a monumental task that we would have told you is impossible in January.

Our Administrators have been put in problem solving situations that they have no background in: virus risk mitigation, epidemiology and contact tracing. A Superintendent described it to me as an airline company moving from flight travel to a taxi service. The goal is still transportation but now the model of delivery is wildly different and the decision to switch models was made overnight with no training. 244 districts did this. Some exceptionally well, some struggled but all rose to the occasion using the skills and knowledge they had access too. One of the primary functions of a Board of Education is to evaluate the Superintendent, we are now evaluating district leaders on an entirely new job description.

From March until August districts, administrators, school board members, teachers and support staff developed "reopening" plans with multiple contingencies. Districts reopened in a variety of fashions; they did what they thought was best with the information they had been given. ***Districts did all of this with unknown liability exposure lurking. We did not, and still do not have a mechanism in place to combat this unknown liability that exists.*** We work with local health departments to do what we can to mitigate risks, make decisions about epidemiology and create learning environments that are safe-even though there is no consensus on what is safe. School districts have created plans with multiple contingencies, but as new information develops, new contingencies are created, and plans adapted within 24 hours' notice. When cases increase, school leaders have to become tracers b/c local health departments are overwhelmed. Districts would benefit from additional resources and training for our staff so we can contact trace and keep kids in school. Our administrators are now functioning in roles that are outside their area of expertise, again, with the unknown liability exposure.

Districts are grateful for the Department of Education and State Government leading with philosophy of local control, it is something Boards of Education know is vital to keeping public schools strong in Nebraska. This of course has come with challenges that we were not prepared for, just as I am sure several state leaders were not prepared for. We have found that mitigating risks in the schools is a politically charged topic that makes the local board room the junction for community frustrations. We then find our boards and administrators making decisions that we do not have expertise in, it is an incredibly complicated environment to make public health and safety decisions in. Sometimes these decisions lacked clarity as there were so many opinions from local, state and national sources about what was best for students. And sometimes decisions come down to practical

issues like workforce. How do we keep kids in school if we don't have enough staff because of quarantining while waiting for test results?

What do local districts need now? We need flexibility, we need support, and we need clarity.

Clarity about liability will help us make decisions with the proper lens.


Clarity about how to now operate under boundaries and systems that worked in the past but were developed pre-pandemic.

Clarity about how districts will be held accountable for instructional hours and test scores. We agree that accountability is important and knowing the accountability standards well in advance districts can then prepare and make decisions accordingly. And clarity about who is making decisions, when schools are charged with making decisions based on recommendations of local health departments it can work, but it can cause great confusion when the district 10 miles away makes a very different decision. At times it puts school districts and their leaders on an island.

Clarity about community "risk dials" and the metrics used to create them and how that impacts the school population. School district leaders are not epidemiologists, local health experts and have never created a risk dial before--but they are doing all those things now. Board meetings then become hotbeds of political discussions (masks, etc) and not student achievement discussions which is what should be happening in boardrooms.

In addition, during this pandemic, boards would benefit from some flexibility in the Open Meetings Act, that would allow boards to meet virtually when some members have to quarantine due to Covid.

All of this would help the local district continue to navigate this situation. Thank you again for the opportunity to share what we are seeing through the lens of a local board member.



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