

**From:** NDE Commissioner <[NDE.Commissioner@nebraska.gov](mailto:NDE.Commissioner@nebraska.gov)>

**Sent:** Friday, August 14, 2020 12:55 PM

**To:** NDE Commissioner <[NDE.Commissioner@nebraska.gov](mailto:NDE.Commissioner@nebraska.gov)>

**Subject:** The New School Year and Additional Thoughts on Discord and Discourse and Finding the Energy to Move Forward

**To: Nebraska School Leaders, Educators, and Friends in Nebraska Education**

**From: Matthew L. Blomstedt, Commissioner of Education**

**Re: The New School Year and Additional Thoughts on Discord and Discourse and Finding the Energy to Move Forward**

Dear colleagues and friends all,

Thank you for the dedication you have shown over the past weeks and months to address the unique challenges this pandemic presents for education. From the beginning, I knew the proper response would rely on strong local leadership to meet the demands that we would face. I also felt that the only path forward would be to rely on partnerships between, and among, local leaders and supported by state and local partners. I continue to believe this is the best path forward. As I shared in my NDE Day remarks, *Discord and Discourse and Finding the Energy to Move Forward*, there are many similarities to the challenges of the 1918 pandemic. As my predecessor W.H. Clemmons wrote concerning that time, “It has disorganized the schools and crippled the work everywhere. To make up, during the remaining part of the year, the time which has been lost, **each district and community must judge for itself the best thing to do.**” We are in different times now but the reality is the same. It takes local leadership and courage in these moments to build plans and adapt efforts as needed to maintain both the need to address public health and to sustain educational opportunities. We have heroic efforts in classrooms, cafeterias, janitorial services, transportation, and in the administrative and policymaking efforts across the state and nation.

None of us has ever faced a greater challenge than this moment. I understand the levels of angst across your communities, state, and nation that the present situation puts on education. I feel that the best path forward is exactly what we have laid out, not in each specific detail, but in the reliance on strong local leadership, informed by local health departments, and supported by state officials. We are not in a time of absolutes where any “one size fits all” solution is appropriate. In fact, we reside in a moment that requires a thoughtful set of foundation values.

- **Equity** - We must ensure our students, especially those who have been historically underserved, maintain access to high quality teaching.
- **Quality** - While flexibility and innovation must be pursued, we must not back down from our standards for quality.
- **Flexibility** - We must pursue flexibilities in regulations and innovations to ensure students have access to high quality teaching.
- **Safety** - Learning cannot occur if the school community does not feel safe in their environment.
- **Decisive** - Given the size and scope of the challenge, we must move deliberately and make tough choices. We will make mistakes, and we will adapt quickly as variables on the ground change.

It is also not enough that we lead safely but that we collectively understand and lead a unified effort to address the challenges we will face beyond the pandemic. This moment has amplified the inequities, injustices, and insecurities that were brought to the forefront of the national consciousness through the protests in the name of George Floyd and all such senseless acts of violence that we fail to learn to

overcome. Yet, as I shared with you in 2017 about our need to push on addressing equity and from Martin Luther King's own words shared at Pershing Auditorium in Lincoln on December 30, 1964:

*“One of the great liabilities of history is that all too many people find themselves standing amid a great period of social change and yet, they fail to achieve the new attitudes, the new thought patterns, the new mental outlooks that the new situation demands.”*

And, as I shared W.H. Clemmons words in 1918, *“More than ever before the present demands that we modify and enrich our courses of study, that we simplify our methods of instruction and that we define more accurately our aim and purpose in education.”*

This new situation demands so much of us and I want to encourage you to use this disruption as a moment for innovation. We need a vigorous response and recovery to the pandemic and crisis that afflicts the nation and the world. We affirm our aim and purposes of education, that our students are ready for their futures, that they are Nebraska Ready. We must provide an unmitigated focus on addressing inequity, challenging racism, and focus our collective efforts to improve educational circumstances and outcomes for all students.

I know you all face remarkable challenges. It has been a long several months of planning and as we proceed with this year I want to state clearly that the NDE supports superintendents and local districts in their decisions when:

- A clear plan has been developed built upon science, the healthcare community, and the overall safety of students and staff and each situation is driven by securing the public health so as to safely return to, or maintain, in person learning as appropriate for each community;
- Parent and community engagement has been foundational to their planning efforts and implemented throughout the school year;
- Plans and efforts prioritize learners who need the most support (English learners, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students);
- A focus on accelerated learning is balanced with a relentless tending to the social-emotional needs of students and staff.

Is this easy? Not at all. Are you up to it? I believe you are. Already, we have positive stories of schools beginning to return. We will have bumps in the road and barriers to overcome. However, I have an unending faith in the strength and resilience of the dedicated educators of this state. You have so much to be proud of so remember that through these next steps forward.

**Matthew L. Blomstedt, Ph.D.**

*Commissioner of Education*

---



**Nebraska Department of Education**

301 Centennial Mall South

P.O. Box 94987

Lincoln, NE 68509-4987

TEL: (402) 471-5020

[www.education.ne.gov](http://www.education.ne.gov)

[matt.blomstedt@nebraska.gov](mailto:matt.blomstedt@nebraska.gov)