



# The Emerging Role of the Nebraska Department of Education in Leading for Equity in School Improvement

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The Emerging Role of the Nebraska Department of Education in  
Leading for Equity in School Improvement

Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.)  
Capstone

Submitted by  
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To the Harvard Graduate School of Education  
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*Para mi mamá, Paula Olinda Vargas Seminario*

*Mi guía, mi inspiración, mi luz*

*For my mother, Paula Olinda Vargas Seminario*

*My guide, my inspiration, my light*

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## Abstract

With the recent authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) positions State Education Agencies (SEA) to reconsider their traditional role of conduits of federal and state funding to schools and districts to designers of equitable accountability and school improvement systems. While various states are on different levels of this transformation, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) has taken critical steps to shape the narrative of their changing role. Within the last five years, the NDE has created a new accountability system that classifies schools as Excellent, Great, Good, and Needs Improvement, based on multiple indicators, and set rigorous college and career ready standards. Since 2015, the NDE has also identified and supported three Priority Schools: a state-designation that provides state-directed interventions in schools with the greatest need. As the NDE prepares to identify schools for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI), per ESSA these are the lowest-performing five percent of Title I schools and high schools with graduation rates lower than 67%, there is a need to identify, coordinate, and deliver the supports necessary to positively impact student learning and outcomes.

This capstone describes my strategic project, which focused on co-designing a professional learning series for Priority Schools and co-creating a system of supports for Needs Improvement, Comprehensive Support and Improvement, and Priority Schools. I draw on bodies of literature focused on the SEAs' role in school improvement, equity in school systems, and the importance of systems thinking in building coherence across an organization to answer these questions:

- What systems/structures/culture need to be in place to effectively support student growth and academic achievement?
- What are the conditions necessary to ensure school improvement is grounded in equity?
- What are the key elements SEAs need to possess to ensure connectedness and alignment of school improvement work?

## **Introduction**

Since the inception of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), federal education law has refined the role of a State Education Agency (SEA) from conduits of federal funds to schools and districts to prescribing interventions for low-performing schools. ESEA was designed to strengthen the federal government's role in providing equal access to high quality education for all students, specifically students living in poverty. As time evolved, so did the level of accountability for the federal funding provided to schools and districts to close achievement gaps. Each reauthorization of ESEA came with a linear focus on student achievement, heightened accountability, and the identification of low-performing schools. The most controversial reauthorization was the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which required yearly standardized testing and reporting of schools' progress and performance and resulted in labeling schools. Thus, schools were put on "lists" and a punitive, blame and shame culture was pervasive (García & Thornton, 2015).

The latest reauthorization, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), was signed into law in December 2015. ESSA is positioned as a vehicle to promote state flexibility and autonomy in designing accountability systems, yet state officials still grapple with pinpointing the conditions of sustained school improvement and how to promote it far from the locus of change – the classroom. SEAs have had much practice with identifying what constitutes a school in need of improvement, yet there is not much clarity on how to improve schools across a large system and how to coordinate school support at the state level.

Situated in the middle of the country, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) operates on the behalf of the policies and regulations set forth by the Nebraska State Board of Education (SBOE), whose members are elected by the public. This constitutional body represents its constituents from the eight districts in the state and appoints the chief



state school officer. Nebraska is one of the few states that did not follow nationwide trends, such as adopting Common Core State Standards. It was one of the last states to apply for an ESEA flexibility waiver during the NCLB days. During that time, schools were ranked in numerical order, based on student achievement data that was nearly impossible to compare across Nebraska's school districts because Nebraska's accountability system was grounded in local-assessments: STARS (School-based, Teacher-led, Assessment and Reports System). Districts had a set criteria to meet, and educators had the power and flexibility to create assessments that would provide them with the data necessary to best teach their students. The wide variety that existed across districts between methodology and processes made the daunting task of determining how individual student groups were *actually doing* extremely difficult (Dejka, 2018). While there was educator buy-in and support for that assessment and accountability system, educators still needed more than locally developed assessments to support students with diverse backgrounds and experiences (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2005). As education reform shifted, so did the need for the NDE to rebrand itself as an organization that strives for educational equity by identifying its lowest performing schools and taking an asset-based approach to support them.

### **Organizational Context**

Through Rule 10, the NDE's regulations and procedures detailing the accreditation of schools, all public-school districts must engage in an annual accreditation process. This determines if districts are abiding by rules and regulations that govern their operations, such as ensuring there are appropriately certified staff for all positions, an account for number of instructional units, and accurate course codes. The 1996 revision of Rule 10 required each district to maintain a continuous school improvement plan that outlines goals, activities, and

implementation and evaluation processes. External visitations occur every five years, by a group of educators from across the state, to ensure progress is made and recorded toward goals in the plan. Many of these visits are coordinated by the NDE Accreditation team, which is made up of three people. The NDE has 490 employees (see Appendix A for organizational structure), 110 are male and 380 are female, and less than 10 percent of total employees identify as a person of color.

**The NDE's role in school improvement.** Traditionally, the NDE's role in school improvement has been to provide technical assistance, such as on-site visits and conference calls, when requested by the school or district and to provide compliance checks for federal programs such as, Title I-Economically Disadvantaged and Title III-English Language Learner. Additionally, financial resources have also been awarded to schools to support the implementation of their improvement plans. Most recently, the NDE has provided funds to schools identified as Persistently Lowest Achieving Schools (PLAS), which applied for School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds. While the NDE provided schools with funding and convened monthly meetings to check on progress, they did not lead the process for schools to create and implement their improvement plans.

**The ESU's role in school improvement.** Schools and districts rely on support and guidance from their regional service provider, Educational Service Units (ESU), which are geographically-based throughout the state. There are 17 ESUs (see Appendix B for ESU map) and they are funded through property taxes in their region, as well as through contracted services in districts. Nebraska statute §79-1204 outlines the statutory responsibility of ESUs, "primarily as service agencies in providing core services and services identified and requested by member school districts." While ESUs must be accredited, the NDE does not dictate services, nor does it evaluate the ESU's effectiveness.

**Nebraska demographics.** The NDE serves approximately 320,000 students across 1,000 public schools in 244 districts in rural, urban, and suburban areas. The student population is comprised of 67 percent white, 33 percent students of color, and 7 percent identified as English Language Learners. Fifteen percent are identified as students with disabilities and 46 percent receive free/reduced lunch. Nebraska is also one of the largest refugee resettlement areas per capita in the country, with 76 refugees for every 100,000 residents (Nohr, 2016). While refugees settle in large cities like Lincoln and Omaha, the population of the state continues to grow in the diversity of its people and their experiences. This means that educators and school leaders must be prepared and flexible for the diversity that exists and continues to evolve in their communities. The need for a comprehensive accountability system that is more than student test scores has positioned the NDE to not only identify schools in need of improvement, but also identify which supports positively impact student outcomes the most.

**A new accountability system.** In 2014, the state accountability system was developed, Accountability for a Quality Education System, Today and Tomorrow (AQuESTT) (See Fig. 1). It considers multiple indicators of school performance built on two domains: the first is Teaching, Learning, and



Figure 1. AQuESTT Framework. The Nebraska Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://aquestt.com/resources/>

Serving and the second is Success, Access, and Support. Both domains are supported by six key research-based tenets: 1) Positive Partnerships, Relationships, and Success; 2) Transitions; 3) Educational Opportunities and Access; 4) College, Career, and Civic Ready; 5) Assessment; and, 6) Educator Effectiveness. As an example, high school graduation rates inform the transitions tenet. Multiple indicators are associated with each tenet, which classifies schools into four categories: Excellent, Great, Good, and Needs Improvement. At the center, is leadership which, serves as a link for all tenets to come together. The system does not rank schools or districts however; it provides schools and districts with information that is necessary for their continuous improvement process.

**Priority School statute and support.** In 2014, the Nebraska Legislature enacted Legislative Bill 438 and modified Nebraska statute §79-760.06 which required the NDE to identify no more than three schools at any time, from the Needs Improvement classification, for Priority School status. At that time, three schools were written into statute without knowing how many schools would be identified as Needs Improvement, or the capacity necessary to intervene in more than three schools. Additionally, if a Priority School was designated for a fifth consecutive year, the State Board of Education (SBOE) would determine if a significant revision of its plan was needed, an entirely new plan was needed, or an alternative administrative structure was needed.

In December 2015, for the first time, the AQuESTT system classified all 1,009 schools, and 87 were Needs Improvement. To identify three Priority Schools, all Needs Improvement schools were further categorized into four theme areas, in an effort to reflect the diversity of the state and apply interventions to other like schools: Demographically Transitioning Schools; Native American Schools; Small Community Schools; and, Urban/Metro Schools. The three schools named for Priority School status were Santee

Middle School (Native American School), Druid Hill Elementary School (Urban/Metro School), and Loup County Elementary School (Small Community School). They were selected through an additional in-depth review which focused on raw classification data, evidence-based analysis responses, demographic characteristics, school improvement plans, and existing systems of support. At the time, the remaining 84 Needs Improvement schools did not have a statewide system of support to rely upon.

Once identified as a Priority School, an Intervention Team collaborates with the school, district staff, and local school board to guide the improvement process. Both the Intervention Team and school staff diagnose key areas of focus, develop a progress plan, and monitor and support the implementation of that plan. The progress plan is reviewed and approved by the SBOE. Following the identification of three Priority Schools, the NDE contracted with an external consulting firm to provide support in developing a model for school improvement that could be used with the Priority Schools and potentially more schools. The external consulting firm already had a working relationship with one of the identified Priority Schools, Druid Hill Elementary. The model for school improvement was grounded in three research-based levers for highly effective schools: 1) clear, compelling direction, 2) instructional leadership, and, 3) student and staff culture. The external consultant conducted a diagnostic review at each school, provided support with strategic planning, and, focused on building the capacity of the school leaders through coaching conversations and establishing a common language for instructional practices.

Priority Schools remain with such designation until removed by the State Board. At the end of each school year, the Priority School engages in a self-assessment of progress and, along with the external consultant, provide a progress update to the SBOE. In 2017, the SBOE removed the Priority School status of Druid Hill Elementary and in February 2018,

Schuyler Central High School (SCHS) was identified as the next Priority School.

Legislative Bill (LB) 1081 and LB 1110, passed in spring 2018, modified Nebraska statute §79-760.06, which states the number of designated Priority Schools and the frequency in which those schools are identified. LB 1081 changed the law to expand the authority of the NDE to designate no fewer than three Priority Schools, as well as shortening the timeframe for improvement from five years to three years before the SBOE takes additional action. While AQuESTT was originally designed to classify schools every three years, LB 1110 changed the statute to require that the NDE classify schools annually.

**Leading for educational equity at the NDE.** The Strategic Vision and Direction, created by the SBOE and the NDE and adopted in December 2016, laid out two strategic priorities that ground the vision for educational equity: “Ensure all Nebraskans, regardless of background or circumstances, have equitable access to opportunities for success” and “Increase the number of Nebraskans who are ready for success in postsecondary education, career, and civic life.” (State Board of Education, 2016). The strategic plan also identified five specific roles, champion, regulator, capacity builder, connector, and change agent, the NDE will assume to meet the strategic priorities and achieve the goals identified in the plan. During the July 2018 NDE Administrator Days, an annual event sponsored by the Nebraska Council of School Administrator, education commissioner, Dr. Blomstedt, shared his equity commitments to improving outcomes for all Nebraska students. As the NDE identifies schools for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI), per ESSA these are the lowest-performing five percent of Title I schools and high schools with graduation rates lower than 67%, there is a major opportunity for the NDE to step into each of the roles to achieve educational equity.

The NDE is positioned to learn from past experiences and lessons learned from other states also attempting to support school improvement efforts. However, a key problem of practice I seek to address is that it is unclear who “owns” the work of school improvement and coordinates, monitors, and supports the interventions of Priority Schools. As a result, there is confusion of the NDE’s role/responsibilities and that of its partners, such as ESU’s, and the external consultant. During a presentation at a division meeting, a process in which the various offices in each division come together to provide updates and engage in problems of practice, I framed Priority Schools as an opportunity to promote and achieve educational equity, as it is a state designation for schools that may or may not receive federal aid. A colleague mentioned, “I don’t even know if the Priority School designation is supposed to promote equity” (personal communication, September 10, 2018). This statement illuminated the need for a shared understanding of and purpose for the Priority School designation, as well as surfacing assumptions that I and others may hold about school improvement, educational equity, and state interventions in classroom level processes.

In this capstone, I describe my work at the NDE as the Student Achievement Coordinator, where my strategic project focused on two interconnected parts: first, co-designing a professional learning series for Priority Schools, based on common needs of the three schools and second, co-creating a system of supports for Needs Improvement, Comprehensive Support and Improvement, and Priority Schools. A question driving my work is, “How does an SEA lead change and lead for equity?” As a result, I draw on bodies of literature focused on the SEAs’ role in school improvement, equity in school systems, and the importance of systems thinking in building coherence across an organization. I consider and examine critical points throughout the project and share implications for myself as a leader, for the NDE, and for the education sector more broadly.

## **Review of Knowledge for Action (RKA)**

The NDE's role in school improvement has shifted over time. Throughout the last 20 years, it has moved from providing technical assistance and offering formula grants to supplement federal and state aid to schools, to now collaborating with school and district officials to support schools identified as Priority Schools. Simultaneously, the NDE is promoting educational equity in services provided to schools, measuring student subgroup performance, and evaluating rules and regulations that perpetuate inequities. I have chosen to focus on school improvement and not school turnaround to change the narrative that only "identified" schools are responsible for "turning around," when in fact, every school should be working to create and sustain the conditions necessary for each child to succeed. While the NDE and the focus of this capstone is grounded in Priority Schools, which are "identified" and resemble NCLB nomenclature, the lessons learned from Priority Schools are intended to be shared statewide as a way to lead for equity and promote continuous school improvement. No one is absolved of the responsibility of sustaining optimal conditions for each student's success. The NDE is still exploring ways to coordinate offices and services across the agency to provide a multilayered system of support for all schools, specifically Priority Schools.

As I embarked on my strategic project, I wondered about the conditions necessary to support a comprehensive school improvement approach at an SEA. I also noted that if equity would be the true change agent in school systems, then I needed to know about systems thinking and how to link equity to how organizations learn and operate. I have organized the RKA by themes: states' role in school improvement, leading for equity in school systems, and systems thinking to answer the following questions:



- What systems/structures/culture need to be in place to effectively support student growth and academic achievement?
- What are the conditions necessary to ensure school improvement is grounded in equity?
- What are the key elements SEAs need to possess to ensure connectedness and alignment of school improvement work?

### **States' role in school improvement**

Unlike many countries across the world, the United States does not have education written into the U.S. Constitution and has left matters about education up to the states. However, since the humble beginning of the ESEA, both federal and state agencies have attempted to address school improvement as a way to ensure student preparedness for various postsecondary opportunities. An SEA's role in school improvement has been focused on school turnaround. The last two decades have focused heavily on identifying low-performing schools, providing financial resources to the schools, monitoring the implementation from afar, and ensuring corrective action is taken if the goals are not met.

SEAs across the country have been working to understand and support the best approaches for school improvement, while acknowledging the complexity of each school and the local context. A recent report by A. Jochim and the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) (2016) posits, "state involvement in the work of school and district turnaround is often framed as a radical impingement on local control; in reality, it can be a modest extension of existing state authority to ensure all students are offered a quality education program, as most states constitutionally require" (p. 6). While the federal education law has been in operation for over 50 years, SEAs have only been taking a step

deeper into school operations for the last two decades. The report highlights how the role has shifted over time and identifies five common approaches to school turnaround: 1) state support for local turnaround, 2) state-authorized turnaround zone, 3) mayoral control, 4) school takeover, and 5) district takeover (Jochim & CRPE, 2016). The report suggests that not all state-driven efforts end in failure, and it outlines “four ingredients” that must be present for state-driven efforts to even be a potential success, “the will to initiate changes to practice, sufficient authority to implement effective strategies, adequate capacity to execute the turnaround plan, and political support to sustain changes over time” (p. 2). The common approaches identified above, coupled with the ingredients mentioned, point to the possible success SEAs can experience in leading school improvement efforts when all the pieces are in place.

An SEA’s role must move from ensuring rules are followed to ensuring those rules are followed with what is best for students and communities in mind. This requires a sharing of knowledge and practices that allows the SEA to possess the necessary internal capacity to carry out its vision. Jochim and CRPE (2016) believe that it “requires states to reach far more deeply into the operation of local schools, as well as to draw upon talent and expertise outside of the state education agency’s (SEA) traditional compliance roles” (p. 8). In order to make these shifts, an SEA must be coherent in its actions and processes. As a result of my experience and career in education, I have come to define coherence as a way of making sense of the interconnectedness of various elements that contribute to a greater purpose and function. Fullan and Quinn (2016) define coherence as, “shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work... and is what is in the minds and actions of people individually and especially collectively” (p. 2). Coherence is about the people, the

actions, the connection between those two elements, and that all relates to the purpose and the nature of the work.

Redding and Nafziger (2013), like Jochim and CRPE (2016), argue that SEAs have not been designed to strive for coherence or to clarify the mission of the agency. They have been compliance vehicles guided by bureaucratic roadmaps with little regard for the destination. Additionally, they assert, “SEAs are often structured around funding streams and regulatory regimes and, in many cases, are person dependent in that positions have conformed to the competencies of particular individuals rather than the functional needs of the organization” (Redding & Nafziger, 2013 p. 11). To strive for coherence, the agency must be organized based on its functions, which are those services provided to the field, such as leadership and advocacy and assisting with continuous improvement, and those functions related to internal management and performance management systems (Redding & Nafziger, 2013). Stanton and Segal’s report for Mass Insight Education (2013) also believes that performance management systems allow for SEAs to be held accountable and build credibility in the school improvement space. They argue that public and transparent goals, which are reported annually, “are powerful levers for SEAs. Establishing and reporting on goals for turnaround provides SEA leaders with a unique opportunity to engage the public in a conversation about our expectations for all students and all schools” (Stanton & Segal, 2013 p. 12).

With ESSA plans underway, it is important to acknowledge that accountability systems provide SEAs, districts, and schools with information to make decisions about school improvement efforts. Elgart (2016), believes that, “reporting on and analyzing a broad range of indicators can help decide where to reallocate resources, such as support for new teachers and professional development, in ways that make a difference. All schools can

improve, including those whose high test scores mask complacency” (p. 27). In order to make this happen, he asserts that, continuous improvement systems must be “connected and aligned so they work together, system improvements are driven by a process of continuous improvement and feedback, and system actors understand and engage each other and the system successfully” (p. 27).

There are two specific processes that support the notion of continuous improvement for all schools and school systems. Bryk et al. (2015) believe that continuous improvement systems support schools in achieving their desired results. Through their work in improvement science, they argue that if schools/school systems want to improve, they must get better at learning and making changes based on the learning. One process schools can use is the Plan-Do-Study-Act Inquiry Cycle. In this process, the change is carried out, data is analyzed, and next steps are decided based on the new learning. Bryk et al. (2015) provided an example of a district seeking a robust teacher feedback process, and found that the district leaders “learned their way into a workable solution” instead of spending so much time trying to identify all the possible solutions (p. 125).

The second process offered by Bryk et al. (2015) is Networked Improvement Communities (NIC). Bryk et al. (2015) presented the work of Douglas Engelbart, who coined the term NIC, as a method to accelerate learning that addresses a need shared across the community. “NICs are intentionally designed social organizations, and participants have distinct roles, responsibilities, and norms for membership. They maintain narratives that exemplify what they are about and why it’s important to affiliate with them” (p. 144). This type of social and organizational learning is necessary to shift the narrative that school improvement only happens to schools that are “labeled,” as well as to support collaborative

learning environments necessary for all students to be successful and support a continuous improvement culture.

In bringing these pieces of literature together, it is evident that for some time, SEAs have implemented school turnaround practices under the guise of school improvement. An implied theory of action is if an SEA can provide the resources, flexibility, and oversight to the lowest performing schools, then student achievement will increase and those schools will no longer be “on a list.” While it is important for schools to ensure students are meeting standards, there must be a greater purpose for why school improvement exists. These pieces of literature have not centered on equity as part of the school improvement process, the students or communities in which the “lowest performing schools” are situated, or the conditions that positively impact student achievement for all students. School improvement is not just about increasing test scores but also about creating and sustaining the necessary conditions that ensure each child experiences success in rigorous and engaging instruction.

### **Equity in school systems**

While NCLB has had mixed reviews, the focus on disaggregation of data was a cornerstone of the legislation (Westerman, 2015). For far too long, we have focused on average student data and have missed opportunities to engage in critical conversations about why gaps persist and what should be done to address them. At the core, this is an equity issue because average student data does not depict the successes and challenges that different student groups and each individual student face. As a result, there must be a common definition for equity, one that brings clarity and holds high expectations for adults and students. Equity, however, is different from equality. While equality ensures that we provide all students with the same education, equity means, “every student has access to the

educational resources and rigor they [sic] need at the right moment in their [sic] education across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background and/or family income” (Aspen & CCSSO, 2017, p.3). This will require SEAs, districts, and schools to do things differently and track progress towards goals to ensure each child has access and success throughout his/her educational experience.

To truly lead for equity, it is important to understand the research body that exists about what positively impacts students and the conditions necessary to create and sustain those systems and structures in place over time. In *Multiplication is for white people* (2012) author and researcher, Lisa Delpit illuminates the critical role that teachers and the quality of their instruction have on students. “For children of poverty, good teachers and powerful instruction are imperative. If there is not a strong culture of achievement in a school, many teachers may not be teaching as effectively as they are capable of doing” (p. 73). She identifies the successful teachers she observed as warm demanders. They are educators that hold high expectations for their students, believe in their students, and help students believe in themselves. They “see themselves as advocates for the young people within a system that may not be so caring. They adopt many of the attributes of parents. They consider the whole child, not just his or her mind...they focus on promoting character, honesty, responsibility, respect, creativity, and kindness” (p. 85). While teachers are an integral part of the education of students, the system in which they operate, may not always position them for success.

In TNTP’s (formerly known as The New Teacher Project) recent publication, “The Opportunity Myth” (2018), “students spend most of their time in school without access to four key resources: grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers who hold high expectations” (p. 4). In the report, five school systems, a mix of rural and urban, and large and small, public and charter, are reviewed and students, teachers,

administrators are interviewed. They found that “classrooms that served predominantly students from higher-income backgrounds spent twice as much time on grade-appropriate assignments and five times as much time with strong instruction, compared to classrooms with predominantly students from low-income backgrounds” (p. 4). What is often discussed as an achievement gap is actually masked by an opportunity gap. Marginalized students are repeatedly led to believe that if they do all their work, show up to school, and try their hardest, they will reach their dreams and be successful. The fallacy of meritocracy leads students to “meeting the demands of their assignments, [but] they’re not prepared for college-level work because those assignments don’t often give them the chance to reach for that bar” (p. 21).

From her research in New York City studying “gifted” programs for over 20 years, Yvette Jackson (2011) argues that the same pedagogical approaches and expectations used in “gifted” programs are essential for reversing underachievement, because “the critical ingredients of pedagogy for those labeled gifted were belief and high expectations” (p. 24). “School would be the place where they would learn and would be guided on the path to a liberating future. However, these students are among the first to recognize that there is an enormous gap between their performance, their potential, and what they are provided with in school” (p. 37). Nearly two decades later, TNTP (2018) finds that the same is true. “Millions of students across the country are working hard to get through school, only to find themselves ill-prepared to live the lives they hope for. They’re planning their futures on the belief that doing well in school creates opportunities” (p. 2).

While much of the research presented has focused on large urban districts, rural schools also face similar challenges. The geographic distance and isolation pose a challenge to recruit and retain educators and leaders, as well as thinking of creative ways to do more

with less. “With little district capacity to support its schools’ improvement efforts and few education service providers nearby, the rural school must rely more heavily on its own resources and ingenuity to drive its improvement than elsewhere. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it requires teaming, defined purposes, ample planning, and disciplined work” (Redding & Walberg, 2012, p. 4). Wendy Horman, lawmaker from Idaho committed to reimagining state funding for rural schools, explains that, “part of the problem (besides getting stronger leadership into schools) is that the system is teaching and funding one average student who just doesn’t exist. She’s trying to figure out if it’s possible to broaden the legislative perspective to treat students as individuals” (Sangha, 2017). While funding formulas vary across the country, Horman believes that more can be done to improve school funding to rural schools.

Leading for equity requires those in positions of power and authority to lead the charge. Teachers, students, and community members require the support and guidance of their leadership teams to truly engage in a paradigm shift about how equity is the foundation for school improvement and systems thinking processes. In “Beyond Random Acts of Equity,” Glenn Singleton (2018) discusses this paradigm shift with systemic partners, those organizations that use the tools from *Courageous Conversations* to lead system-wide improvements. He found three key lessons that play a critical role in systems improvement: 1) Race matters; 2) Leadership must lead; and, 3) Courageous conversations are essential (p. 30). Singleton reminds us that “systemic equity transformation requires a shift in the organizational culture and climate of schools and school systems. Achieving racial equity in education is an unapologetically top-down process” (p. 30). When school systems don’t have the commitment “to racial equity work at the leadership level, districts and schools too often engage in ‘random acts of equity.’ Those event- and incident-driven piecemeal



approaches...do not engage educators in sustained and thoughtful understanding of their own status, that of their students, and the impact of race on their daily interactions” (p. 31). The commitment to lead and the conversations focused on racial equity will ensure that equity is not a fad and permeates all levels of education systems.

### **Systems thinking**

When thinking about school improvement, there is an innate obsession with identifying what parts of the system need to be “fixed” and then applying an intervention with little or no regard to what effect it will have on the rest of the system. Peter Senge (2006) argues that, “since we are part of the lacework ourselves, we tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system, and wonder why our deepest problems never seem to get solved” (p. 7). There is an overemphasis on identifying the problem without the intentional focus on the root cause and strategies to address them and not the symptom.

Senge (2006) defines systems thinking as “a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that has been developed over the past fifty years, to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively” (p. 7). He highlights the five disciplines of a learning organization: 1) personal mastery, 2) mental models, 3) building shared vision, 4) team learning, and, 5) systems thinking – which Senge refers to as the fifth discipline. Fullan (2006) believes that education needs more systems thinkers but specifically, “system thinkers in action.” He argues that “to change organizations and systems will require leaders who get experience in linking to other parts of the system... and in turn must help develop other leaders with similar characteristics” (p. 114). It is not about how effective principals are at raising student achievement but rather about “how many good leaders they leave behind who can go even further” (p. 114).

The five disciplines together are designed to create and sustain the conditions of a learning organization that is organized to execute a shared purpose and vision, continuously address assumptions held about the world, and objectively view problems and the contributions of those that are part of the system. “A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality and how they can change it” (p.13). Similarly, Edmondson (2012) asserts that teaming is an integral part to a learning organization, we must learn to team, in order to team to learn. Once in teams, there are two specific conditions to ensure teams are successful: psychological safety and failing better to succeed faster. These pillars and conditions allow for teams to move from what she calls execution-as-efficiency to execution-as-learning. Organizations have been designed to execute on a strategy, plan, etc., but not necessarily oriented toward learning, where, “groups must access knowledge, develop a shared understanding of how best to apply it, and act in a coordinated manner that is reflective of new insights” (Edmondson 2012, p. 27).

At the heart of learning organizations is the need to continuously evolve to produce the best results for the problems they seek to address. However, too often we jump to solutions without understanding the outcomes the system is currently producing. Bryk et al. (2015) describe the problem of educational improvement as complex because there are too many factors that intersect with schools and then there are too many policies and reforms that layer on top of one another when you are barely getting started with a new one. Systems thinking allows for change leaders to see the larger system and what it is producing. It also allows for preliminary hypotheses to emerge, which Bryk et al., refer to as “primary drivers” (p. 74). It is tempting to jump into a solutions oriented frame; however, without knowing how the current systems generates the outcomes that it does, it is like throwing a dart into a

dark room, you do not know where you are aiming, you hope you hit the target, and do not cause any damages.

Another aspect to consider about systems thinking and school improvement is that too often solutions are misaligned with the problems they are trying to solve. Bryk et al. (2015) caution us to consider how we make the work problem-specific and user-centered and see the system that is producing the current outcomes. It is human nature to want to find a quick solution to a problem, especially when dealing with students. However, when the solution becomes a new problem, the original problem is no longer the focus. Bryk et al. (2015) refer to this as “solutionitis,” the idea that we jump to a solution without truly understanding the problem. “When decision makers see complex matters through a narrow lens, solutionitis lures them into unproductive strategies” (p. 24). Change leaders must empathize with those who are experiencing the problem regularly. While a superintendent might notice a problem in student performance on a standardized test, he/she is not entirely aware of all contributing factors and can introduce a misaligned solution. It is one thing to know that there is a problem and it is another to use that knowledge in action to actively address a problem (Bryk et al., 2015; Fullan et al., 2009).

With the implementation of ESSA and the opportunities that exist for states to design context-specific systems of support, it is important to understand the potential of an SEA’s role. The role can be one of removing barriers and creating coherence for schools, setting clear and ambitious goals that address the gaps that exist for students across the state, and knowing how to intervene in schools where gaps persist and leadership is required. The integrative nature of an SEA’s role in school improvement, how equity manifests itself in school systems, and systems thinking are necessary concepts to imagine what state-led equity-focused school improvement can look and sound like.

As part of the review of knowledge for action, I have also drawn upon my professional experience with leading school improvement processes as a Talent Coach and Director of School Renewal, within the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE). As a Talent Coach, I supported school leaders across the city with the implementation of a teacher evaluation and development system. This work required me to design and execute professional learning sessions for teachers and school leaders related to the instructional model used throughout the city. As a Director of School Renewal, I supported school communities in creating strategic plans focused on three-year goals using a clearly defined school improvement process. In both positions, I worked closely with school leaders to provide job-embedded coaching on identified areas of strength and areas for growth to increase teacher and school leader capacity. These experiences provided me with the perspective and credibility to lead this work and allowed me to see things more systemically within the organization. As a result, I have created a theory of action, which digs into all of the concepts within the RKA in order to set the foundation for the emergence of a statewide strategy for school improvement.

### **Theory of Action**

If I:

- Create a holding environment where all partners can collaborate and engage in meaningful dialogue (Provide space to engage in conversation about roles and expectations of convening and beyond),
- Convene NDE, ESU, external consultants, and school and district administrators around a problem of practice that is identified through multiple sources of data,
- Build relationships and trust through consistent communication to sustain buy-in in this process,
- Build coalitions with different internal offices to establish a system of supports for schools identified as Needs Improvement, Comprehensive Support and Improvement, and Priority Schools,

Then the NDE will:

- Maximize its capacity and that of its partners through structured collaboration.
- Articulate a working theory of action for school improvement.

## Description of the Strategic Project

### Strategic Project Overview and History

The NDE's mission is *to lead and support the preparation of all Nebraskans for learning, earning, and living*. The agency is comprised of 490 employees, approximately half based in Lincoln and focused on K-12 systems and the other half partly in the field representing the Vocational Rehabilitation program. My strategic project focused on the collaboration between multiple partners to maximize capacity, build trust among partners and schools, and position the NDE as leaders in school improvement work. To make the collaborative professional learning session successful, it was important to understand the problem(s) the three schools shared and ensure that it would be meaningful for them.

### My role

I entered the agency as the Student Achievement Coordinator (see Fig. 2), which per statute, serves as a liaison between the NDE and the Learning Community of Douglas and

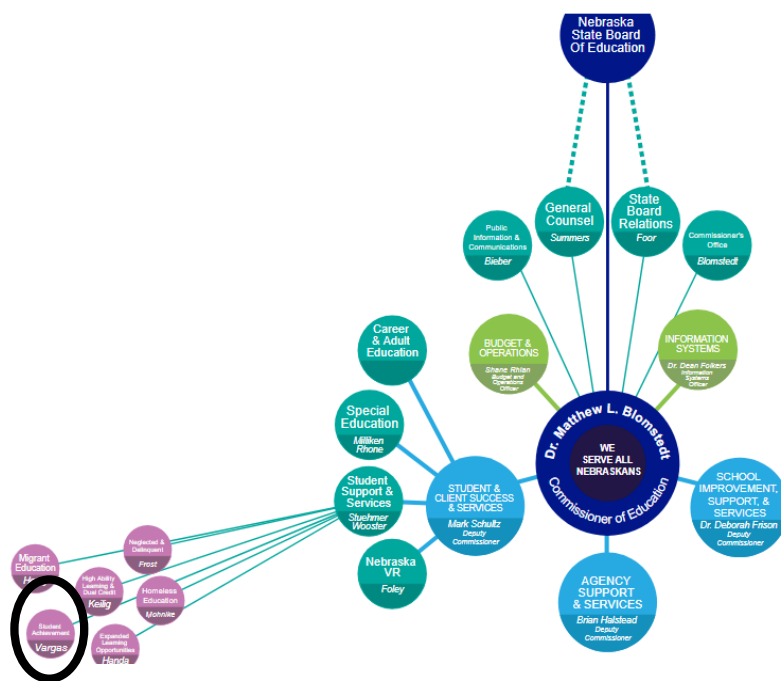


Figure 2. My role in the NDE. Nebraska Department of Education. Retrieved from internal server.

Sarpy Counties, in the Omaha metro area (Neb. Rev. Stat. §79-11,155.). Additionally, the position focuses on providing leadership and support in school improvement efforts to address the unique educational needs of student groups in the state, such as those in

poverty, English learners, or those that are highly mobile. This was a position that had been vacant for almost a year and given my previous experience with the NYCDOE, my personal interest in school improvement, and dedication for centering the perspectives of marginalized populations, this position seemed like a great fit. I was also mindful of being an “outsider” in that I was not only new to Nebraska, I was also new to SEA work. While I spent the summer after my first year of my doctoral program as an intern with the South Dakota Department of Education, this was my first full-time employment in an SEA.

Understanding where my role is situated is important because it will matter greatly how I move and access different offices and sections across the agency. Without positional authority, I had to use my influence to engage in problem identification and generate solutions across various offices. Being involved in different meetings throughout the agency allowed me to use my influence to move work along. It also indicates how linear some internal staff saw their work and role in school improvement. The agency is organized by three divisions: 1) School Improvement, Support, and Services, 2) Student and Client Success and Services, and, 3) Agency Support and Services (see Fig. 3, also Appendix A). Within each division (blue circle), there are offices (aqua circle), sections (orange circle), and programs (purple circle) (Nebraska Department of Education, n.d.). When I entered the NDE, my supervisor was Diane Stuehmer, Office Administrator for the Office of Student and School Support and Services and she worked between two divisions, School Improvement, Support, and Services led by Deputy Commissioner, Dr. Deborah Frison, and Student and Client Success and Services, led by Deputy Commissioner Mark Schultz. Prior to my arrival, the role was in the Office of Accreditation, Accountability, and Program Approval in the School Improvement, Support, and Services division.

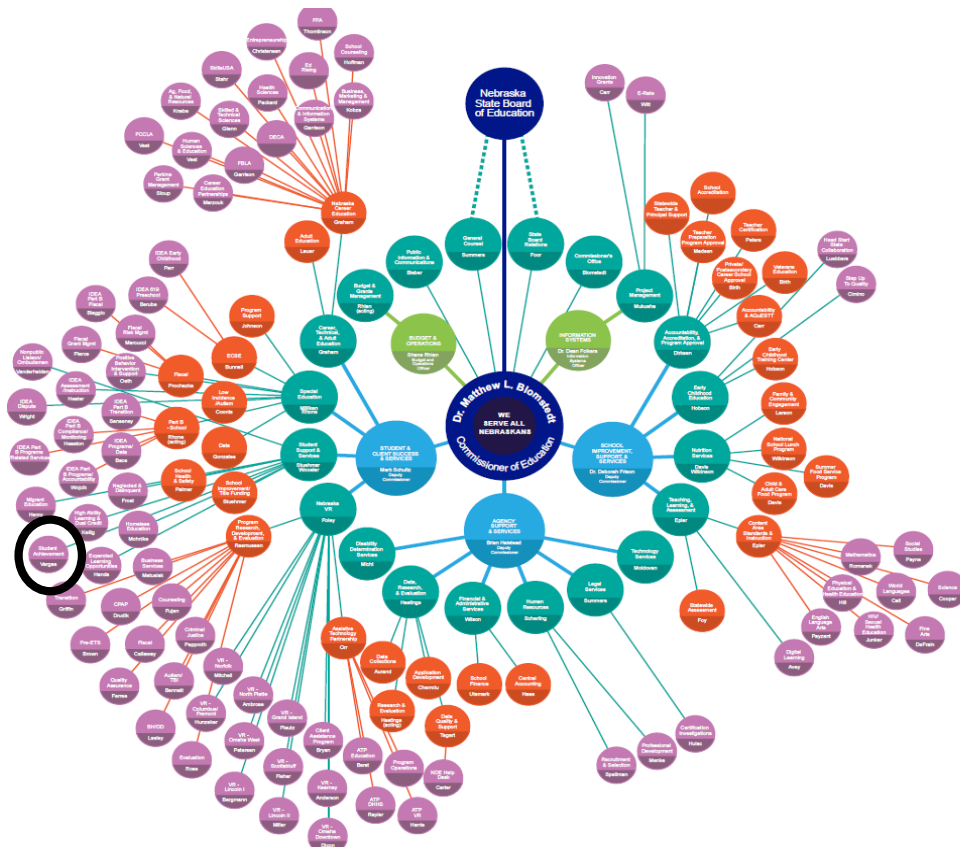


Figure 3. NDE Organizational Structure. Nebraska Department of Education.  
Retrieved from internal server.

After discussing my previous work in school improvement in NYC and teaching experience with English Learners, I was appointed the Priority School liaison for Schuyler Central High School, the most recently identified Priority School. My colleague Russ Masco, who is part of the Office of Information Systems, was the only remaining Priority School liaison. Additionally, Lane Carr, Director of Accountability, had also been involved in the Priority School work. As I engaged in document reviews and conversations with internal NDE staff members, ESU staff, the external consultant, and school staff, I began to uncover the depth of the context and the problem of practice I was attempting to address. I needed to learn about the similarities and needs of the schools, as well as assess the current relationships among all the partners.

To help guide the evolution of my strategic project, I have identified three phases:

<b>Phase I:</b> (June 2018 –Aug. 2018)	<b>Phase II:</b> (Sept. 2018 –Dec. 2018)	<b>Phase III:</b> (January 2019 - Present)
Visit Priority Schools, convene various partners to determine common needs among Priority Schools, generate buy-in, communicate plan and obtain feedback.	Co-design and implement the intervention – professional learning session focused on a high-leverage content area: secondary math. Engage internal staff about creating a system of supports for low-performing schools.	Co-design and implement the next intervention and consider implications for additional schools other than Priority.

## **Phase I**

Once identified as a Priority School Liaison, I reviewed various documents and met with people who have been involved with the Priority School process and/or have provided support to the schools. The first documents I reviewed were the Progress Plans. These documents contain the goals each school is responsible for meeting in order to be removed from Priority status. The three schools, Loup County Elementary School, Santee Middle School, and Schuyler Central High School, represent different grade bands and are situated in distinct geographical locations. While both Loup County Elementary and Santee Middle School serve approximately 40 students each in a town of about 500 people, Santee Middle School is on the reservation of the Santee Sioux Tribe of Nebraska, and Loup County Elementary is in the rural town of Taylor, Nebraska, near the center of the state. Schuyler Central High School, in Schuyler, Nebraska, serves approximately 550 students in a town of nearly 6,000 people.

At first glance, the schools appear very different; however, they have some similarities. In each Priority School Progress Plan (see Appendix C), there is a need for alignment between Nebraska content area standards, instructional materials, and pedagogical practices. Typically, Priority Schools are single schools; however, given the student population of Loup County Public Schools, 69 students in K-12 and Santee Community



Schools, 199 students in K-12, the external consultant has worked with the entire system, leading to interventions being employed in all grade levels not just those of the identified school (see Table 1).

Table 1.  
Comparison of town population, students in district, and students in Priority School.

<b>Name of Town</b>	<b>Town population</b>	<b>Number of students in district</b>	<b>Number of students in Priority School</b>
Taylor, NE	183	69 (Loup County Public Schools)	40 (Loup County Elementary School)
Santee, NE	341	199 (Santee Community Schools)	27 (Santee Middle School)
Schuyler, NE	6,212	2,017 (Schuyler Community Schools)	573 (Schuyler Central High School)

Note. Data for town population from United States Census Bureau (2017), number of students from Nebraska Education Profile (2018).

In my initial visit in July to Schuyler Central High School with the external consultant, we engaged in a deep review of the progress plans. In it, we discovered the need for the NDE math content specialist to support the work of teachers unpacking the standards and ensuring alignment between standards and lessons. I was tasked with returning to the office and enlisting the support of the NDE math specialist, Deb Romanek, and English Language Arts (ELA) content specialist, Dr. Marissa Payzant. I immediately emailed them and copied their administrator, Dr. Cory Epler. He was a former Priority School liaison and had worked with the external consultant in the past. In his response, he offered additional supports such as external organizations, as the content specialists were already working on multiple projects. His response signaled to me the need for a joint meeting with the content specialists, Lane, Cory, Russ, and myself, to understand the work that had been happening in schools and see how we can support Schuyler. As I planned that

meeting, Marissa called a meeting to discuss the support taking place in Loup County. It appeared that the school principal was receiving conflicting information about ELA strategies from the external consultant and wanted everyone to come together to discuss the role of the NDE content specialists in Priority Schools. The initial meeting occurred on July 30, 2018, and questions about expectations and roles of the content specialists arose. Deb identified a potential role the content specialists could play, which would be to build a content area standards implementation framework that ESUs and districts could use. Additionally, she highlighted the potential of bringing all the schools together to build the collective capacity of the teachers around both ELA and Math content areas.

Before moving into planning and action for a collaborative professional development day, I called an additional meeting with Cory, Deb, Marissa, Lane, and Russ. I decided to add a few more people from the Office of Teaching and Learning and Office of Federal Programs (see Appendix D for a list of all meetings and Appendix E for sample agendas). I asked Terri Schuster, Title III Director, Becky Keilig, High Ability Learners and Dual Credit Specialist, Harris Payne, Social Studies Content Specialist, and Sara Cooper, Science Content Specialist, to join the meeting. Sara had just led the science standards revision, Harris was about to embark on that process for social studies standards, and both Terri and Becky had been part of the goal-setting meeting at Schuyler. In this meeting, which I called, “content and curriculum support for Priority Schools,” I asked the team to think through what they believe is a working theory of action for their work with Priority Schools and to identify potential roles and strategies to support their work. This step was informed by Edmondson’s (2012) organizing to learn concept, in which people understand how they contribute to their current reality and consider ways to make impactful change. While the team did not discuss the theory of action in-depth, the team completed a preliminary role

identification quadrant (see Fig. 4), in which they identified the current and future state of the work they do with Priority Schools. This meeting was pivotal in informing my next steps, which were to work on finding a date for the professional development session,

<b>I should and I'm not</b>	<b>I should and I am</b>
<b>I shouldn't and I'm not</b>	<b>I shouldn't and I am</b>

*Figure 4.* Preliminary role identification quadrant

identifying who at each ESU would be part of this work, securing funding for this session, and obtaining contact information for each of the schools.

In addition to meeting with the content specialists, I met with each deputy commissioner, along with office administrators, section directors, and program leaders to learn about their perspective on school improvement and Priority School work. I also provided an initial Problem of Practice and Theory of Action during a division meeting. Some of the feedback I received warned me about taking on the Priority School process because it was too big of a job for someone completing a 10-month residency. While a part of me believed that to be true, I continued to present on Priority School progress plans/goals and any additional information about the process. I captured people's perceptions through a K-W-L-Q chart that identified what people know, what they want to know, what they have learned, and what questions they still have.

Some findings and outcomes of Phase I pointed to the necessity of continued conversations with members from different offices to ensure we are sharing information about the Priority Schools, as well as a need to formalize a process that would clearly delineate who "owns" the Priority School work. While many believe they do Priority School work because they work in Priority Schools, it was clear that there needed to be more conversations about the purpose of this identification, as well as an articulation of what it

means to be a Priority School and the supports provided to them. This was in accordance with the findings from a Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) internal capacity review (see Appendix F) conducted in late spring and presented to the Commissioner's Cabinet, comprised of senior leadership members in the agency, in June 2018.

## **Phase II**

From September to December, I coordinated and engaged in meetings with the NDE content area specialists, the external consultant, and ESU staff that support the three Priority Schools. The first meeting in September, involved all parties coming together for the first time and engaging in a collaborative dialogue about what is happening in each of their schools, as well as developing plans for common strategies. At that time, we did not have 2017-2018 student achievement data available. Instead, we looked at overall math student achievement from 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years for each district. We also looked at overall student group performance, statewide (see Appendix G). We focused on math because of classroom observational data, as well as the overall need to support teachers in making the shift from procedural to conceptual math. Once assessment scores were released in December 2018, I reviewed math achievement data for the 2017-2018, in comparison to the previous three school years to check for overall student proficiency and student group performance (see Fig. 5a for Schuyler, Fig. 5b for Loup County, and Fig. 5c for Santee).

Prior to the 2016-2017, the NDE utilized the Nebraska Statewide Accountability system (NeSA), which assessed students in grades 3-8 and 11 in math, reading, writing, and science. Since 2017-2018, the NDE has moved to the Nebraska Student Centered Assessment System (NSCAS), which assesses students in grades 3-8 in math, English Language Arts, and science. In 11<sup>th</sup> grade, students take the NSCAS-ACT, which is a college aptitude test. The NSCAS assesses students on the most updated, more rigorous academic

college and career ready standards, and account for the significant dip in test scores in 2017-2018.

<b>Schuyler Community Schools: % Proficient Mathematics Achievement</b>				
	2017-18	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15
All Students	43	75	72	73
Hispanic/Latinx	41	75	70	72
Black/African American	*	50	45	52
Native American	*	*	90	78
Asian	*	*	*	*
Pacific Islander	*	*	*	*
White	57	85	84	81
Two or More Races	*	*	*	*
English Learners	37	65	66	69
Students with Disabilities	12	39	32	38
Economically Disadvantaged	39	74	70	70

*Figure 5a.* Schuyler Community Schools Math Proficiency by student groups. Adapted from Nebraska Education Profile (2018).

<b>Loup County Public Schools: % Proficient Mathematics Achievement</b>				
	2017-18	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15
All Students	59	74	62	41
Hispanic/Latinx	*	*	*	*
Black/African American	*	*	*	*
Native American	*	*	*	*
Asian	*	*	*	*
Pacific Islander	*	*	*	*
White	65	75	63	41
Two or More Races	*	*	*	*
English Learners	*	*	*	*
Students with Disabilities	*	*	*	*
Economically Disadvantaged	58	72	82	43

*Figure 5b.* Loup County Public Schools Math Proficiency by student groups. Adapted from Nebraska Education Profile (2018).

Santee Community Schools: % Proficient Mathematics Achievement				
	2017-18	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15
All Students	*	*	9	8
Hispanic/Latinx	*	*	*	*
Black/African American	*	*	*	*
Native American	*	*	9	8
Asian	*	*	*	*
Pacific Islander	*	*	*	*
White	*	*	*	*
Two or More Races	*	*	*	*
English Learners	*	*	*	*
Students with Disabilities	*	*	*	*
Economically Disadvantaged	*	*	*	*

*Figure 5c.* Santee Community Schools Math Proficiency by student groups. Adapted from Nebraska Education Profile (2018).

\*There are less than 10 or more students at a given performance level and data is masked for fewer than 10 students.

During school visits, I shared the idea of 7-12 math PD with school and district leaders and requested their input in communication, as well as content. Additionally, we encouraged a school/district administrator to attend along with teachers, as a way to continue to build capacity with this work. While only Schuyler Central High School was named Priority, we extended the invitation to the Schuyler Middle School math teachers as well, in an effort to ensure coherence and consistency of message across the district. This step was informed from my research about systems thinking and continuous improvement. It was important to illustrate for schools the interconnectedness of the work, along with ensuring a shared understanding about what supports were necessary to strengthen mathematics instruction (Senge, 2006; Elgart 2016).

Gathering school and district leader input was necessary to ensure that we, as designers, understood the problem the way in which they experience it daily (Bryk et al., 2015; Fullan et al., 2009). With the feedback from the schools and the team, I proceeded to

secure funding for the professional development by applying for and receiving a Title II-A grant (see Appendix H) to finance a Priority School 7-12 Math PD Day. Deb took the lead, and we planned the session with support from the ESU staff. We shared the agenda prior to the event and ensured we had feedback forms to complete. We selected a central location to all the schools and enlisted the support of a different ESU in securing the location and food. Teachers and administrators appreciated getting together with the other schools and engaging in conversation about their experience, as well as the central location. This was the first time the Priority Schools had come together to engage in professional development around a problem of practice. The session focused on understanding the instructional shifts in math and what it requires teachers and administrators to understand, know, and do to ensure they are teaching to standards and creating rigorous and engaging lessons.

The feedback informed our next steps. Their feedback signaled the need to engage in standards review, curriculum unpacking, and instructional practices for different groups of students. I continued to collaborate with all partners by conducting an After-Action Review, where we reviewed our stated objectives in comparison to what actually happened, reviewed feedback from participants, and determined next steps for the group.

### **Phase III**

The planning team and I wanted to capitalize on the urgency of the work and provide a follow-up session that focused on the four key resources necessary to ensure all students have an equitable education experience, such as grade-appropriate assignments, great instruction, active student engagement, and teachers with high expectations (TNTP, 2018). Taking this learning, along with the desire to move from a compliance-driven organization to a service-oriented one, Lane and I, along with NDE colleagues and ESU staff, developed and executed technical assistance sessions, also known as Support for

Improvement (SFI) workshops from December 2018 – February 2019. These sessions were created for the 27 identified Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools throughout the state. As an agency, significant time was spent shaping the message of support and autonomy and not labeling and shaming of these schools. Unfortunately, the same had not been true for Priority Schools. Lane and I used the success of the math professional development work as a springboard for the SFI workshops. As we traveled around the state leading these sessions, we modeled for schools the differentiated support we could provide, such as problem identification and root cause analysis, and continued sharing the message of educational equity as a shared responsibility.

In February 2019, I applied for and was awarded an additional Title II-A grant (see Appendix I) to conduct a follow-up spring and summer session to the fall PD day. As a result of the shift in school improvement processes, my position was moved from the Office of ESEA Federal Programs, formerly the Office of Student and School Support and Services, to the Office of Accreditation, Accountability, and Program Approval, as school improvement is embedded in the accreditation process, and is a direct result of the accountability system.



## Strategic Project Results

### Evidence to date

The evidence provided in this section illustrates the progress made to-date on the theory of action driving the strategic project. The table below summarizes the connection between each statement of the theory of action and the evidence provided. While the evidence associated with each “if” statement indicates positive outcomes, early evidence for each “then” statement shows preliminary neutral to positive outcomes. Given the 10-month scope of this residency, further progress monitoring and refinement of desired outcomes can better illustrate the impact of the strategies employed.

### Theory of Action: “If” Statements

Theory of Action “If” Statement	Evidence and Results
If I create a holding environment where all partners can collaborate and engage in meaningful dialogue about Priority School work,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Between July 2018 and February 2019:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Served as point of contact</li><li>Convened 12 meetings establishing relationships with shared objectives and goals</li><li>Co-planned and shared agendas</li><li>Identified areas for support for Priority Schools</li><li>Engaged the participation of The Director of Accountability and Administrator for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment to support strategy development and push thinking</li><li>Conducted an After-Action Review (Appendix J)</li></ul></li></ul>

**Create a holding environment for meaningful dialogue.** Between July 2018 and February 2019, I hosted a total of 12 meetings (see Appendix D) that brought together NDE staff, ESU staff, and the external consultant, at different times, to gain a deeper understanding of the work taking place in Priority Schools. The meetings, while co-planned with colleagues, were typically led by me and provided a space for NDE staff to share their perspectives on the Priority School process and work. People brought to the space what was

most important to them and an informal objective emerged. Having a space for people to share their ideas about what supports could be provided to Needs Improvement and Priority Schools was critical to building and sustaining relationships. During an initial meeting, it was expressed that expectations needed to be set for the work NDE content specialists will do at Priority Schools, along with acknowledging the limited capacity at ESUs. A colleague asked, “How do we know if ESUs have the capacity to do the work?” Currently, a measure of capacity or performance does not exist for ESUs, making it difficult to distinguish their ability to lead school improvement efforts, as well as math-specific professional learning. Following the math PD, I conducted an After-Action Review (AAR) (see Appendix J) to discern our collective next steps in the work, continue working on building relationships, and think through a continuum of supports for Priority Schools and Needs Improvement Schools.

Theory of Action “IP” Statements	Evidence and Results
If I convene NDE, ESU, external consultants, and school and district administrators around a problem of practice that is identified through multiple sources of data and keeps equity at the center,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Through observational data at each school and overall statewide achievement data, math emerged as a focus area. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>However, insufficient data was used to inform the math focus. In the future, multiple sources of data, such as local trend data, teacher input, and formative and interim assessment data should be used.</li> <li>Equity was not an explicit objective of the session. I did not provide tools to support the other designers in explicitly addressing equity in and throughout the session. Explicit connections must be made between professional learning sessions and equity, along with equity-focused norms and common expectations for professional learning provided by NDE.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**Convene NDE, ESU, external consultant, and schools.** Embedded in this strategy was bringing the three Priority Schools together to create a community of practitioners. Some quotes from participants included, “I liked that we had time over lunch

to talk with other teachers from other schools.” “I liked hearing from multiple people; administrators and teachers.” “I liked the activities and I enjoyed having a voice.” “I plan to use more strategies with vocabulary.” “I plan to try more projects/activities with my students to understand the concepts better.” These quotes indicate the session was positively received and the potential to impact teacher practice is great. However, the explicit connection to equity was missing. In each Priority School Progress Plan, there is a specific focus on ensuring alignment between content standards, curriculum, and tasks. During our September 4<sup>th</sup> meeting, it was decided that secondary math was a high leverage area of focus based on observational data and overall statewide achievement data. Unfortunately, there was insufficient data used to inform the math focus. In the future, multiple sources of data, specific to each school’s performance, such as trend data, teacher input, and formative and interim assessment data should be used. Additionally, addressing math content is an equity focus; however, I did not provide the other designers with tools to make explicit connections between the content of the session and leading for equity in school improvement. In the future, for equity to be centered in the work, there must be explicit ties to the NDE’s educational equity definition and SBOE strategic priorities, as well as some equity-focused norms to guide the work.

Theory of Action “If” Statements	Evidence and Results
If I build relationships and trust through consistent communication to sustain buy-in in the process of convening Priority Schools,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow up on next steps to continue progress. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Shared draft email to schools with planning team. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Sought feedback and shared results.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>• Quotes from planning meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “I should be building relationships with Priority Schools but I’m not because I wasn’t asked to provide input.”</li> <li>○ “Why don’t we bring the three schools together and start with the why of standards and connect to assessments.”</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <i>Omaha World Herald</i> article (Appendix K)</li> <li>• Collaborate with ESU administrators on events/meetings</li> </ul>

**Build relationships and trust through consistent communication.** During my first visit to Schuyler Central High School in August, an *Omaha World Herald* reporter and photographer joined the visit and followed us around. While the story was published in January 2019, the article (see Appendix K) captures visual evidence of the NDE, ESU, external consultant, and the school working in partnership to build relationships and trust. At the end of a meeting I hosted on September 4<sup>th</sup>, I asked participants to include any pluses or deltas they had for the meeting. One respondent shared, “We are finally having the important collaborative conversations that will ultimately send ‘one message’ to our districts.”

After the professional development in November, I conducted an After Action Review (AAR), in which I led the team in a conversation about what worked, what could be improved, and most importantly, what is the future of the work. Following the AAR, an ESU staff member suggested I share the draft email with the planning team before sending it to the schools. I asked the team to provide feedback and thoughts. I received two comments from two ESU administrators that illustrate the importance of building relationships and trust through communication. One administrator wrote: “I appreciate you gaining feedback and this email. I think it is very important as you have stated that we are listening to their feedback.” Another administrator wrote: “Thank you for sending this draft. I think it's always good practice to share the results of survey information that is collected with those that submitted it. This should help lead to additional conversations and frame the next steps. Conducting these sessions in connection with ESU PD staff is crucial because they are the ones who will [be] providing regular and ongoing support to these teachers.”

Theory of Action “If” Statements	Evidence and Results
If I build coalitions with different internal offices to establish a system of supports for schools identified as Needs Improvement, Comprehensive Support and Improvement, and Priority Schools,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• K-W-L-Q activity (Appendix L) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “I understand there are approximately 80 schools in ‘needs improvement’. If only 3 schools are designated at one time for 3 yrs., it seems like it will take a lifetime to help all the schools who need it!”</li> <li>○ “How are we meeting individual needs of the priority schools as they have different challenges? Also- good to look at commonalities among them.”</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Support for Improvement workshops (internal planning sessions)</li> </ul>

**Build coalition with different internal offices to establish a system of supports.**

During Phase I, I presented the Priority School process during a division meeting, and I asked everyone present to engage in a K-W-L-Q (Know, Want to Know, Learn, Questions) chart, as we went throughout the session. While the session focused on Priority Schools, the quotes provided (see Appendix L) demonstrate the beginning of building a coalition that will inform a system of supports for schools classified as Needs Improvement, and schools identified to receive Comprehensive Support and Improvement and Priority School support. The quotes allude to the need for continued communication of the vision for school improvement and inclusion of various people in the agency in that work. “I understand there are approximately 80 schools in ‘needs improvement’. If only 3 schools are designated at one time for 3 yrs., it seems like it will take a lifetime to help all the schools who need it!” “How are we meeting individual needs of the priority schools as they have different challenges? Also- good to look at commonalities among them.” Parallel to this work, Lane and I held three meetings where we brought staff together from across the agency to discuss the idea about hosting regional Support for Improvement workshops to support our Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools. This resulted in staff identifying areas they believed schools would struggle with and how we, as designers, should address them. For example,

one colleague mentioned, “You should share a pre-work email which shares the objectives and activities of the session and the necessary mindset to engage in this work.”

### Theory of Action: “Then” Statements

Theory of Action “Then” Statements	Evidence and Results
The NDE will maximize its capacity and that of its partners through structured collaboration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-designing the PD 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Announcement to schools (Appendix M)</li> <li>○ Agenda for the session with resources (Appendix N)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Focus on an increased number and types of schools</li> <li>• Changed relationships with and support of schools</li> </ul>

**Maximize the NDE’s capacity and that of its partners.** Once it was decided that secondary math would be the focus of the professional development, I focused on logistics and communicating with schools and Deb and the ESU staff members collaboratively planned the sessions. (see Appendix M for email to schools and Appendix N for agenda for the session). Ensuring that NDE, ESU, and school staff had a voice in the process is part of maximizing the capacity. At the end of the program, the educators from Santee, along with their principal, invited Deb to their school. She extended the invitation to the ESU staff developer of the region, and together they planned and led a math professional development session for all teachers. During the After-Action Review, both NDE and ESU staff wanted to ensure that we stayed grounded in the school’s progress plan, as well as include teachers’ perspectives: “As a group: do we want to go in this direction? We should consider next steps from the perspective of teachers. We need to ensure that we go back to the progress plan.”

Theory of Action “Then” Statements	Evidence and Results
The NDE will articulate a working theory of action for school improvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Themes from January 2019 meeting: Creating a system of supports               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Need for a common understanding about school improvement</li> <li>○ Concerns about the capacity of the NDE to provide support to many schools.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Internal theory of action workshop developed               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ CCSSO-led, scheduled for March 2019</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**Articulate a working theory of action for school improvement.** On January 22, 2019, Lane and I held a meeting with the accreditation team and office administrators about the current Priority School work and how it fits into a more coherent system of supports for schools identified as Needs Improvement, Comprehensive Support and Improvement, and Priority. A major theme that emerged from the meeting highlighted the need for accreditation, accountability, and school improvement to inform one another, however, there was a need for a common understanding about what the NDE means by school improvement. Another major theme that emerged focused on the capacity of the NDE to provide support to multiple schools. During the meeting, a colleague mentioned, “if we have over one hundred schools that over time become Priority Schools because of our continuum of supports, how will we ever support them? We don’t have the capacity to do that.” From the CCSSO Capacity Review presented in June 2018, the NDE decided to enlist the support of the CCSSO to articulate a theory of action for school improvement. The evidence to support this outcome is still in development, as the CCSSO will be on site with the NDE and is currently scheduled for March 2019. If there were more time in the residency process, it would be beneficial to observe similarities and differences between current and previous theory of action conversations.

## **Strategic Project Analysis**

When I came into this work, the Review of Knowledge for Action (RKA) served as a preliminary way of thinking about the strategic project. It provided me with the content and framing necessary to make research-based decisions for the professional development sessions, focused on our Priority Schools. The three major areas of the RKA: 1) systems thinking, 2) equity in school systems, and, 3) understanding states role in school improvement helped in drawing connections to a broader strategy and theory of action about school improvement in the NDE. However, as I engaged with the work and the people involved, it became less about the content and more about the process of leading change. Like any change initiative, there are successes and challenges. Throughout this residency, I not only learned about organizational change and leadership and influence without formal authority, but also about my own leadership style.

In this section, I analyze why the events and decisions happened the way they did. I draw on the various pieces of evidence and organizational and leadership frameworks to aid me in developing a deeper understanding of the organizational context and my leadership in relation to the context. To begin, I provide a brief description of Mark Moore's Strategic Triangle, Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky's Adaptive Leadership Framework, and Childress, Elmore, Grossman, and King's Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) Coherence Framework to set the stage for the analysis. While the content of the RKA was informative and important, I garnered the greatest learning from analyzing the adaptive challenges and struggles to understand how to do the work of school improvement in a sustainable way using these frameworks. I conclude this section with a revision of my theory of action.



## Strategic Triangle

Mark Moore's seminal work, *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government* (1995), provides a framing for how to understand and interpret the role of public managers. Through the research and case studies presented, he offers the strategic triangle, a framework (see Fig. 6) that illustrates the links between the public value of an organization, the operational capacity to meet its mission, and the legitimacy and support required to operate. Moore offers the strategic triangle as a check for the key functions and tasks managers must do to realize their vision. "Judging the value of the imagined process, managing upward toward politics, to invest their purpose with legitimacy and support; and managing downward, toward improving the organization's capabilities for achieving the desired purposes" (p. 23). Additionally, "The strategic triangle is designed to influence how managers distribute their attention, thought, and action across their operational environments" (p. 74). The relationship between each element of the framework is just as important as each element individually.

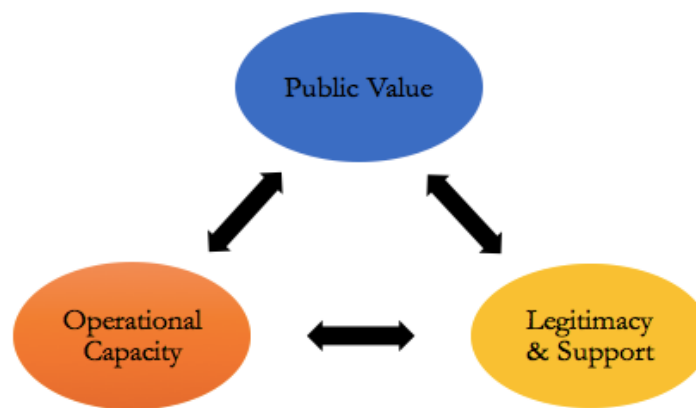


Figure 6. Strategic Triangle. Adapted from *Creating Public Value* (Moore, 1995).

## Adaptive Leadership Framework

Typically, leaders are expected to have all the answers and know how to solve all the problems. However, there is growing literature that illustrates the importance and need of

leaders who are able to bring employees together to capitalize on their collective intelligence and problem solving. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) describe adaptive leadership as, “the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenge and thrive” (p. 14). The authors argue that one of the major failures in leadership is treating an adaptive challenge as if it were a technical problem. They describe technical problems as having “known solutions that can be implemented by current know-how” and adaptive challenges as those that “can only be addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties” (p. 19). Additionally, they offer a table (see Table 2) that outlines the distinctions between technical problems and adaptive challenges.

Table 2.  
Technical problems and adaptive challenges

Kind of challenge	Problem definition	Solution	Locus of work
Technical	Clear	Clear	Authority
Technical and adaptive	Clear	Requires learning	Authority and stakeholders
Adaptive	Requires learning	Requires learning	Stakeholders

Note. Adapted from *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009).

## PELP Coherence Framework

Organizations are comprised of various interdependent parts that when functioning together, create organizational coherence and reach desired results. Through their work with districts, Childress, Elmore, Grossman, and, Johnson (2007) created the PELP Coherence Framework (see Fig. 7) as a tool for district leaders to identify the key elements needed to design a district-wide strategy in a coherent manner. The authors describe coherence as, “the elements of a school district work[ing] together in an integrated way to implement an

articulated strategy” (p. 43). They identify the elements as culture, stakeholders, systems, structures, and resources. They state the framework supports coherence-making by connecting the instructional core in the center, identifying and illuminating the interdependencies of the elements that support or hamper strategy implementation, and acknowledging the environmental forces that impact strategy implementation (p. 43).

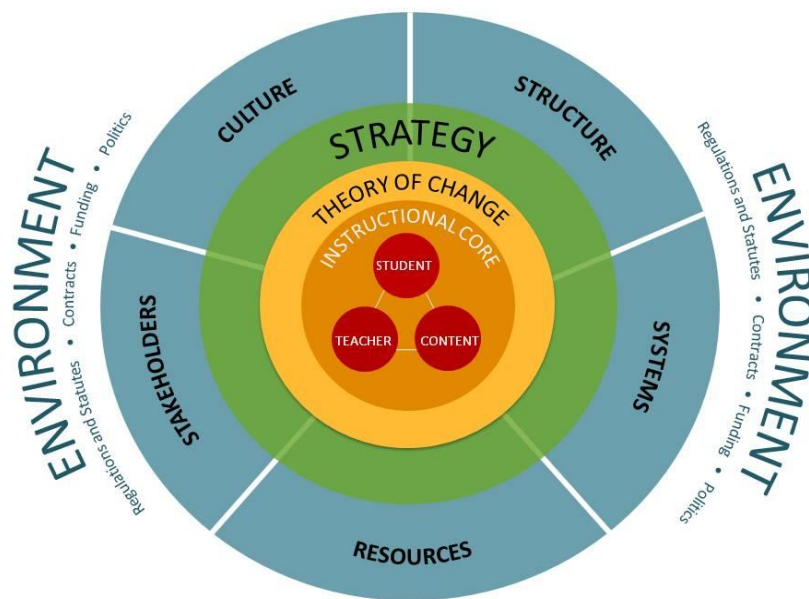


Figure 7. PELP Coherence Framework. Childress, S., Elmore, F., Grossman, A., & Moore Johnson, S. (2007).

## Successes

**Priority School collaboration and relationship building.** One of the major successes from this strategic project was the emerging networking and collaboration amongst the three Priority Schools. Additionally, the relationships that were cultivated at the session, enabled the schools to request and welcome support from the NDE instead of the deployment of support that would typically occur, possibly without a foundation of trust or relationship building. The way internal NDE staff viewed Priority School work also shifted.

Before the project could take hold, I needed to understand the system in which I worked, as well as how others viewed the system. In the “content and curriculum support for Priority Schools” meeting, I asked the team to identify what they should be doing but are not doing and what they should not be doing but are doing. I decided to create the quadrant for the team to capture their perspective on the work. Additionally, I knew engaging in this conversation would be tricky because I was still building my relationship with the team. As such, I positioned myself as someone seeking a complete picture of the work they’ve done with Priority Schools but more importantly, I wanted their ideas for what they saw as their roles in working with Priority Schools. I valued their unique experience in working with multiple schools and ESUs that I did not have, as well as their content expertise.

My next move involved coordinating a meeting between the NDE staff, ESU staff from the three schools, and the external consultant. I decided to arrange this because it was important for all partners to engage in a collective visioning of what could be a strategy to address a common need across the three schools. I shared the agenda in advance, along with pre-work, which was to complete a communications style survey I have used in prior work experiences (see Appendix E). During the conversation, it was evident this was the first time all partners had been together to identify common challenges across the schools. We discussed anecdotal/observational data and statewide data results from the previous two academic years and landed on secondary math as the focus area. The ESU staff mentioned the importance of obtaining school input, and so I nominated myself to support the ESU staff in creating the survey.

While we collectively believed that bringing the schools together would be a good strategy, we needed to ensure that we were creating something of value. “To the extent that the organization can exploit opportunities to perform its traditional mission more efficiently

or more fairly, to the extent that it can adapt to changing circumstances, and to the extent that an organization can exploit its distinctive competence to produce other things that would be valuable to citizens, the enterprise will be more valuable than it seems from observing its current performance” (Moore 1995, p. 52). The public value created through this gathering supported the changing narrative of regulators to service providers, working in partnership with ESUs.

A colleague from the Teaching and Learning team said that it was important to build relationships with the schools and work collaboratively on an area of focus. However, that was not always possible because of competing initiatives and limited capacity at the agency. This was the first time the three Priority Schools were brought together for professional development around a common problem of practice. At the end of the session, one school team asked for Deb to visit and provide on-site support, along with the ESU staff. This was a shift in perspective about the partnership and learning that is occurring between NDE and ESUs. The school saw the value of the work that occurred and the amount of content knowledge that is required to lead this work at the school level.

Heifetz et al. (2009) provide a concept about creating a holding environment, where diverse stakeholders come together to address problems of the organization. “A holding environment consists of all those ties that bind people together and enable them to maintain their collective focus on what they are trying to do” (p. 155). Given the limited capacity of the NDE and the ESUs, it was important that I held the learning container so that there would not be concerns about who was responsible for bringing people together and for what purpose. The holding environment is part of a larger strategy, which is about orchestrating conflict, in which you create the conditions for issues to surface in order to move forward in addressing the adaptive issues (p. 151). One of the ways people or organizations respond to

conflict is to look to authority. There were moments in which the team looked for higher authority and in one meeting I said, “I am using my urgency as the authority to move this work.” I was reminded of Heifetz and Linsky’s (2004) quote, “we will not meet our current challenges by waiting for higher authorities to figure out the answers” (p. 36). I also felt confident in my urgency because I’ve experienced success in previous work around bringing schools together to engage in shared learning experiences on a common problem of practice. I believe this could happen because the agency provided me the space to work within my own capacity and to assume authority and influence even though it was not positional authority.

**Emerging success for cross agency coalition.** I have identified building a cross agency coalition, as an emerging success for it is the second part of this strategic project. Co-creating a system of supports for low-performing schools will require more evidence over a longer time frame to determine actual success.

To get to the preliminary success of a cross agency coalition, it was necessary to understand the perception held throughout the agency about the Priority School process and vision for school improvement. I found that people were willing to share their insights and perspectives on the work already taking place in Priority Schools and how they would like to be involved, either through initial consultation, open lines of communication, or other ways. Heifetz et al. (2009) assert that, “adaptive challenges are typically grounded in the complexities of values, beliefs, and loyalties rather than the technical complexity and stir up intense emotions rather than dispassionate analysis” (p. 70). It was important to obtain and include their perspectives in decision making as a way to build trust and illustrate that we all share some common value, belief, or loyalty.

The Support for Improvement (SFI) workshops served as an example of bringing members across the agency together to lead the learning with the schools identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement. This was an initial success because this was an opportunity to come together in collaboration instead of feeling like there were competing commitments between the work already taking place and the vision of these workshops. Further, there was space for people to name concerns they had or could foresee. In my experience, building coalition is not just about finding a common goal but more so about knowing that each voice is heard, validated, and included in the decision making. I needed to understand the adaptive challenge the organization was facing before presenting the workshops as additional ‘work,’ divergent from all the initiatives already taking place.

This is also an emerging success because the feedback from the workshops was overwhelmingly positive. More importantly, it helped to reshape the narrative and reestablish the credibility to lead school improvement work. Lane and I worked closely to envision and co-design the workshops that would bring people from various offices together. Despite the hierarchy that can and does exist in large bureaucratic agencies, the informal culture allowed us to create the space for people to come together and share their thoughts.

**Short-term funding for professional development activities.** To ensure the project’s success, I needed to secure funding. This is both a success and a challenge because of the process in which I was able to obtain the funding and the longevity of the funds.

As part of ESSA, there were Title II-A and Title IV-A federal funds set aside to support statewide activities that support teacher and school development and well-rounded education activities respectively. Prior to the release of the funds, I wondered where the money to pay for substitute teacher stipends, mileage to location, along with facility fees and working lunch, would come from. Once I learned that the application for funds would

become available in October, I asked Lane to support me in writing the application. I did not have any experience completing a funding application, nor did I know what to expect. The application process was competitive. So, while I applied for the money, there was no guarantee that I would be awarded any money. When I applied, I was also unclear how the process would work, so I only asked for enough money to do the first session, without thinking or securing sufficient money for a long-term strategy. I fell victim to my urgency and desire to want to execute on a common goal that all partners believed in. Heifetz et al. (2009) provide the metaphor of “getting on the balcony” as a way to obtain a different perspective of what is happening on the “dance floor” (p. 7). When I was on the dance floor, the urgency and need to secure funding was palpable. The authors share that, “when you move back and forth between balcony and dance floor, you can continually assess what is happening in your organization and take corrective midcourse action” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 8). It would have been better to have gone to the balcony too so I could have foreseen the need for more funds than I had applied for and reflect on a long-term strategy. Since there were remaining funds, I applied again in February 2019 and secured funding for a spring and summer session for our Priority Schools. I was grateful there was still funding available and could think a little more clearly about this serving as a potential strategy for more schools, not just those that are identified as Priority.

## **Challenges**

**School Improvement Infrastructure.** In consultation with my supervisor and mentor, it was decided that I would focus on Priority Schools. While the Priority School designation was in its third year, there were some challenge areas when attempting to understand where my strategic project would be situated, as well as understanding the overall school improvement strategy. The school improvement infrastructure proved to be the



biggest challenge caused by three major components: 1) a narrow-focused strategy, 2) an agency-wide aspirational equity focus, and, 3) ambiguous authority over the school improvement work. In this section, I used the PELP Coherence Framework to pinpoint areas of focus and plot the landscape of the agency. I utilized the Strategic Triangle to analyze the relationship among the elements inside and outside of the agency. Lastly, I examined the leadership dynamics present and identified missed opportunities using the adaptive leadership framework.

***Narrow-focused strategy.*** The PELP Coherence Framework allowed me to diagnose the areas of strength, as well as areas of focus. Childress et al. (2007) define strategy as a set of deliberate actions taken to increase the capacity and supports to the instructional core. In addition, having a clearly articulated strategy enables leaders to know what to do and what not to do (p. 46). For the past three years, the strategy in action was enlisting an external consultant to provide leadership support to each Priority School to strengthen instructional leadership, establish and maintain clear and compelling direction, and increase student and staff culture. This past year, an added layer to the strategy was investing in the knowledge transfer of the consultant through facilitator trainings, similar to a train-the-trainer model. ESU administrators identified which of its staff members would participate in the training. NDE office administrators also identified its staff members to participate. Because the strategy was still being defined as the facilitators were engaging in it, many questions about roles, expectations, and timelines continued to emerge. The disconnectedness between the strategy and the stakeholders and the overall school improvement system was a missed opportunity to make sense of the school improvement infrastructure and communicate it in such a way that people can see themselves in the vision. “A major problem many public managers face is that there isn’t equal importance to

substance, politics, and organizational implementation. Currently, these elements remain disconnected” (Moore 1995, p. 74). The Priority School designation was mandated by the Legislature in 2015, providing the NDE with the authority to shift the way it has supported its low-performing schools. However, the limited operational capacity and undefined public value of Priority Schools caused the narrow-focused strategy to address the immediate need of identifying no more than three Priority Schools and not the long-term vision of school improvement for all students in other Needs Improvement schools.

The facilitator training served as a strategy to support ESU’s in expanding their capacity to provide instructional leadership coaching beyond Priority Schools. Although I attended a few of the training sessions, I chose not to speak up and provide a possible vision for the work because I, too, was operating from the narrow-focused strategy while on the dance-floor (Priority School professional development) and did not move often to the balcony to consider how to message a need for a more broad and comprehensive strategy for Needs Improvement and ultimately, Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools. Additionally, the ESU’s react to the demands of the schools they serve in their regions and play a non-regulatory/non-compliance role. Without a clearer, broader, and articulated school improvement strategy from the NDE, some ESUs are hesitant to move beyond the Priority Schools in their regions to other schools needing improvement because of their supportive role and micropolitics within their own organization statewide. The Priority School designation enables ESUs to work with schools in ways they might not have done in the past, given their statutory authority. However, this narrow-focus on Priority Schools poses a challenge ESUs may or may not be ready or willing to address, because their potential to positively impact Needs Improvement schools is dependent on what school’s request, not what ESUs believe schools need to improve.

***Agency-wide aspirational equity focus.*** The agency has been working on ensuring there is a coherent message about educational equity throughout the state. Along with the commissioner's speech during Administrator Days, the agency has also been participating in various equity-focused initiatives through their partnership with the CCSSO, such as the Diverse and Learner Ready Teacher (DLRT) Initiative, the ESSA Leadership Learning Community (ELLC), and High Quality Instructional Materials Initiative. While I have been part of some of the initiatives, I did not lead with the vision and urgency for equity in my strategic project. I would typically find myself being the only person of color in a room, and there were times in which I would mention something related to equity or different student groups and it became 'my thing.' During a meeting, a colleague shared aloud while looking at me, "well, if we include cultural relevance, then we can get to the equity thing you talked about." I believe it was not the intention of my colleague to make it seem like equity is 'my thing.' However, the impact of the statement reminded me that I must remain in the conversation, in order to shift the perspective from one person doing equity, to one of shared responsibility and ownership across the agency, with a focus on equity for all students, faculty, and staff.

The NDE has made attempts to engage its employees and external stakeholders in equity conversations. Singleton (2018) asserts that "achieving racial equity in education is an unapologetically top-down process" (p. 30). The organization and its leader operate as the authority, legitimizing the need to work towards achieving racial equity and mobilizing others to action. "When they discuss how racial belief and bias yield racial disparities, they authorize the system at large to engage in the same development process to acquire new understanding and translate it into effective practice" (p. 31). However, there appears to be a gap between the espoused values and behaviors in the agency. While there is a focus on equity, offices

continue to focus on what equity means in their discreet work and not explicitly on how it contributes to the larger equity picture in the agency, and ultimately, how it impacts students and communities. Heifetz et al. (2009) share, “Individuals and organizations alike, come face-to-face with their real priorities when the gap between their espoused values and their behavior can no longer be ignored” (p. 79). Despite equity being my life’s work, I managed to focus on the technical aspects of the work and not on how to embody equity principles in school improvement efforts, or lead others in that work.

Moving to an equity-focused school improvement infrastructure requires more learning and surfacing assumptions that affect daily interactions. Senge (2006) has found, “entrenched mental models will thwart changes that could come from systems thinking...until prevailing assumptions are brought into the open, there is no reason to expect mental models to change, and there is little purpose in systems thinking” (p. 189). The disconnectedness between the shifting equity-focused culture, the values of the stakeholders of the agency, and the strategies employed to achieve educational equity, left some staff, including myself, unclear about how to embody equity principles.

***Ambiguous authority over school improvement work.*** Part of the strategy for Priority Schools was to distribute the work. Like mentioned earlier, each school had a Priority School Liaison and that person coordinated supports to the school. However, in an effort for the agency to build its capacity by distributing work, it had reverse results. There was confusion of roles, responsibilities, authority, and strategy on how to support each Priority School. Through various conversations, I learned that many people involved with Priority Schools were interested in bringing the schools together to build the schools’ capacity. With that, I moved forward with setting up meetings and ensuring that I included all that were part of the Priority School work. In one meeting, a colleague asked, “who said

we could move forward with this?” To which I responded, “I am using my urgency as the source of authority.” Heifetz and Linsky (2004) state that, “You place yourself on the line when you tell people what they *need* to hear rather than what they *want* to hear. Although you may see with clarity and passion a promising future of progress and gain, other people will see with equal passion the losses you are asking them to sustain” (p. 34). In their later work, Heifetz et al. (2009) describe how people look to authority, not so much for direction but as a way to displace responsibility. They remind us that adaptive challenges come with resistant and defensive behaviors that might be unplanned and unconscious.

Although I was able to mobilize people through my ‘urgency,’ it was a slow mobilization because of the unknown authority to lead the work. In the end, the professional development session took place; however, it was initially planned as a single event with the potential to develop into something more. My ability to truly co-design an entire scope of professional learning activities, specifically for Priority Schools, that could serve as a model for Needs Improvement schools fell short because I attempted to solve a large problem with one short-term solution. “To practice adaptive leadership, you have to help people navigate through a period of disturbance... this disequilibrium can catalyze everything from conflict, frustration, and panic to confusion, disorientation, and fear of losing something dear” (Heifetz et al. 2009, p. 28). The challenge with Priority Schools appeared as technical and adaptive and the problem definition seemed clear, develop professional development sessions. However, the solution required learning, and the locus of work required the appropriate authority and stakeholders to be deeply involved in the process. I knew the planning team was finding ways to make this work happen in addition to their assigned duties and responsibilities. I did not ask them to give up any of their work and without a clear strategy and dedicated team for school improvement work; it was a challenge to

prioritize Priority Schools. Without being provided the appropriate authority, I assumed roles and expectations that contributed to the disequilibrium.

***Revised Theory of Action.*** The challenge areas within the school improvement infrastructure that surfaced throughout my residency: 1) narrow-focused strategy, 2) agency-wide aspirational equity focus, and 3) ambiguous authority over the school improvement work, caused me to revisit my theory of action.

	Original Theory of Action	Revised Theory of Action
If I:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a holding environment where all partners can collaborate and engage in meaningful dialogue (Provide space to engage in conversation about roles and expectations of convening and beyond),</li> <li>• Convene NDE, ESU, external consultants, and school and district administrators, around a problem of practice that is identified through multiple sources of data,</li> <li>• Build relationships, trust through consistent communication to sustain buy-in in this process,</li> <li>• Build coalition with different internal offices to establish a system of supports for schools identified as Needs Improvement, Comprehensive Support and Improvement, and Priority Schools,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify levels of stakeholders involved in authorizing Priority School work, within and outside of the NDE,</li> <li>• Utilize the principles of adaptive leadership alongside the systems thinking principles,</li> <li>• Co-construct a common language for discussing equity in school improvement,</li> <li>• Create a holding environment for the professional development team, which focuses on data, equity, and multidirectional communication, and resulted in timelines, objectives, and deliverables,</li> <li>• Provide distinction between leadership and authority,</li> <li>• Build relationships, trust and collaboration through consistent communication with and among various partners to sustain buy-in in this process,</li> </ul>
Then, the NDE will:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maximize its capacity and that of its partners through structured collaboration.</li> <li>• Articulate a working theory of action for school improvement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a shared vision for school improvement in our schools with the greatest needs.</li> <li>• Articulate a working theory of action for school improvement.</li> <li>• Maximize its internal capacity through purposeful and intentional strategy development.</li> </ul>

## **Implications for Self**

Throughout my involvement in my strategic project and my analysis, I gained new insights about myself and my leadership style, as well as refined my thinking about driving change. Here I outline three key implications for self.

### **A. Leadership Matters.**

Throughout my professional experiences, I have learned to lead with informal authority. As a teacher, I learned how to engage middle school students in world language learning and lead them through a learning process for second and multi-language acquisition. As a principal coach, I learned how to support school leaders shift or adapt their practice when conducting teacher evaluations and developing their teachers, moving from a compliance activity to one of continuous learning. As a school improvement director, I learned how to support principals in co-constructing strategic plans with community members and to implement their school improvement plans. In each role, I had to influence someone else or a group of people to make a change, engage something new, or trust in a process they did not previously know before. Despite not having formal authority during my residency experience, I had previous professional and academic experience that supported my credibility in leading my strategic project. My experience throughout this residency has solidified for me what people look for in leaders, regardless of positional authority. People look for direction, vision, and commitment, as well as room to innovate. During my residency, I experienced colleagues who wanted to be part of bringing an equity-focused vision for school improvement to life but were unsure if they could or knew how.

An insight for me and my leadership style is a continued need for self-confidence and building confidence in others. I used to think leaders needed to be confident in their actions, words, and vision to lead for change and generate buy-in. I now think that while

self-confidence is important, more important is the ability to spark the confidence in others and motivate them to action. Harvard Business School Professor, Dr. Kanter (2006) argues while self-confidence is important, leadership really “involves motivating others to their finest efforts and channeling those efforts in a coherent direction. When leaders believe in other people, confidence grows, and winning becomes more attainable” (p. 328).

**B. Leading for equity requires an open mind, a team, and tough skin.**

One of the first key phrases from Ed.L.D. Director, Liz City, was “stay in the conversation.” One of the most challenging things I have had to do while in residency and living over 1,300 miles from home, is learn to hold multiple truths and remain engaged in conversations at times when I am deeply bothered. When faced with comments coded for low expectations, deeply held stereotypes, and misconceptions of communities, I must welcome those as learning opportunities for the receiver but more importantly myself. I found that most times, people’s comments and beliefs did not stem from willful ignorance but from limited learning experiences and/or limited mobility in particular communities, etc.

On the other hand, when faced with comments that I perceive as attacks on my identity and communities I hold close, I must find ways to remain engaged and not hold it against anyone. In reviewing plus/delta exit cards at the end of a workshop earlier in the year, two specific cards stood out to me: 1) “I don’t understand the relevance of mentioning “First People” (Native Americans) to begin and 2) “New York did you no favors! Practice your pacing. There are times when you speak too fast.” While I was taken aback immediately, it signaled for me the need to look inwards and reflect on why I was bothered by those two specific comments. Additionally, it also reminded me to stay in the conversation and seek to understand other perspectives rather than to judge and question intently.



As I continued to visit schools, I realized the need for continued conversations about leading for equity across school systems. There are so many things that may appear superficial like mascots, school logos, course materials, etc., and are laced with various messages, whether transparent or subliminal, which students and teachers alike internalize and then ascribe widely. Using moments like this to provide counter-narratives, which are stories that contradict basic stereotypes, I believe will lead to conversations that go beyond pleasantries to deep understanding. For example, during a school visit, the school leader referred to a family as “illegal.” I noticed no one else said anything, so I interjected with, “Did you mean that the family was undocumented or maybe the family is comprised of mixed status members?” To which the school leader asked me what I meant by those terms, and it was the start of a necessary conversation.

### **C. Building and sustaining relationships are critical to driving change.**

Relationships are always critical and most necessary when driving change. During my first few months in residency, I spent time listening and asking a few questions. People wanted an opportunity to share their ideas, concerns, and aspirations. It was important for me to take care of peoples’ basic desire to be heard and feel validated in what they were experiencing. At the end of a meeting, I would be met with a, “thanks for listening,” “thanks for taking this on.” Furthermore, when conducting internal presentations, I typically led with what I knew and did not know. This helped to position myself as someone who is continuously learning and is seeking to be precise not all knowing. At first, identifying as an ‘outsider’ helped to enter conversations to listen and ask questions. I eventually moved from, ‘I’m new here,’ and ‘you all’ to using ‘we, us, our’ to make the transition from an ‘outsider’ to ‘one of us’ and implicate myself in the change I was asking others to do as well.

## **Implications for Site**

The following are recommendations for the NDE to ensure the work is sustained internally and partnerships are strengthened to maximize its capacity and future of leading for equity in school improvement throughout the state.

### **Build upon and strategically invest in the school improvement infrastructure.**

The NDE should build on its current structure for school improvement by formalizing a section or office dedicated to coordinating and collaborating with multiple offices across the agency to streamline efforts. For this work to be successful and sustained, the role must have clearly delineated responsibilities with the appropriate authority to engage with various offices across the agency. There must be available funding to organize statewide activities, and they must be grounded in a theory of action that is equity-focused and guides everyone's work to ensure alignment with the agency's strategic plan.

The NDE should create a position such as School Improvement Officer, who would be responsible for the coordination of current systems in place to ensure equitable distribution of resources and supports to the state's lowest-performing districts and schools. The position of the school improvement officer should be provided the appropriate level of formal authority to support movement across the agency and engage in cross agency collaboration and coalition building. The NDE has positions such as Academic Officer, Information Systems Officer, and Budget and Finance Officer. Additionally, this officer would build relationships with local school districts, ESUs, and institutes of higher education, to broaden the strategies available to the schools who need the most support to improve and continue championing the narrative of a service-oriented agency. The officer would be supported through the creation of a team from across the agency or a team of newly hired personnel to ensure that supports deployed to schools and districts are of high

quality and coordinated. Further, this position would need to clarify the school improvement models that will be used to promote school improvement efforts across the state. The officer position will support the building of public value and legitimacy for the NDE by leading for equity in school improvement and continued messaging of the interconnectedness of assessment, accountability, and AQuESTT for school improvement.

To support the work of this new office, there must be funding available to aid statewide school improvement activities. The funding should be a mixture of federal, state, and any additional funding sources that can be secured such as federal or private grants, philanthropic money, etc. Currently, the NDE offers competitive grant funding for internal projects that are focused on Title II-A (teacher effectiveness) and Title IV-A (well-rounded education). The NDE should reallocate some of that funding to the school improvement officer or director, whose responsibility will be to co-design statewide activities with offices across the agency to address the needs of all schools and activities for schools identified as Needs Improvement, Comprehensive Support and Improvement, and Priority Schools.

The work of school improvement should be guided by a clear, coherent, and meaningful theory of action, which is co-created by members from various offices throughout the agency. The theory of action would serve as the vision for leading for equity in school improvement. It would also serve as a tool to allocate time and human resources, ensure appropriate funding of initiatives, and achieve consensus about future partnerships to reach the desired results and impact. The theory of action protects the school improvement infrastructure by clearly defining its purpose, its strategies, and its desired results and impact.

**Maximize statewide capacity through reimagining ESU partnership and support.**

To continue leveraging its partnerships with the ESUs, the NDE should engage in a joint articulation and agreement of core services for school improvement efforts and

consider potential revisions to Rule 84, the accreditation policy of ESUs. The ESU Coordinating Council (ESUCC), which was designed to coordinate activities across all 17 ESUs, can serve as a conduit to engage in conversations about the current and future work of leading for equity in school improvement across all ESUs. This supports the need for systems thinking at all levels of the educational landscape and ensures equity of services for all schools and students.

The NDE should support refining the articulation of core services for equity in school improvement efforts. Jochim and CRPE (2016) believe that SEAs need to extend their reach to schools and districts by capitalizing on the capacity that exists outside of the organization. One of the major roles of ESUs is to provide core services to schools within their region. Nebraska statute §79-1204 describes core services as “improving teaching and learning by focusing on enhancing school improvement efforts, meeting statewide requirements, and achieving statewide goals in the state’s system of elementary and secondary education.” There must be some mitigation for the variation that exists across the ESUs. The NDE, in conjunction with the ESUCC, should engage in frequent, structured conversations that focus on clarity of roles, purpose of work, and progress towards shared goals.

The NDE should consider revisions to Rule 84 as a possible lever to provide the authority and urgency to lead for equity in school improvement efforts across all ESUs. Rule 84 articulates the language for the accreditation of ESUs. The NDE should jointly create goals and outcomes, which focus on progress made towards achieving equity in school improvement efforts. Singleton (2018) stresses that leading for racial equity is an unapologetically top-down approach. As a result, the NDE must write into its accreditation

policy for ESUs the necessary commitments and practices ESUs must embody to ensure they are actively working towards educational equity.

One of the challenges of these recommendations is the need to consider the line between centralized authority and autonomy. Both the school improvement infrastructure and reimagining the partnerships with ESUs run the risk of providing too much structure that people become static and feel immobilized. The recommendations must be connected to the necessary adaptive work required for various stakeholders to see themselves in the work and the impact. The coordination and augmentation of the school improvement infrastructure, coupled with the partnership between the NDE and ESUs, will support streamlining efforts, communicate consistent messaging about work, and increase expectations and accountability for leading for equity in school improvement.

## **Implications for Sector**

The lessons learned from this strategic project have greater implications for all involved in education. The following are recommendations for the education sector at large. Federal responsibility to intentionally support State Education Agencies (SEAs) in achieving coherence, along with raising expectations for principal and educator preparation programs will support SEAs in meeting the demands of their ever-changing roles, while leading for equity in school improvement.

**From silos to an open field: federal responsibility to support SEAs in achieving fiscal and operational coherence.**

To ensure that leading for equity in school improvement is prioritized and understood throughout the field, the federal education department must provide specific support to SEAs to think innovatively about the use of federally provided funds. Currently, SEAs are organized by funding streams, such as Title I, Special Education, Perkins, etc., and require that compliance and monitoring activities occur in silos, despite their intended outcome to support underserved student groups. However, having a clear theory of action with supports from the federal level will enable SEAs in thinking strategically about their organization, processes, and supports provided to schools and districts. SEAs, with support from the federal education department, must “take comprehensive approaches to critical new education reforms rather than relying on the silos in which they have operated in the past” (Hanna 2014, p. 3).

There remains a need and responsibility to identify and support low-performing schools, and while there are many contributing factors, they all do not stem from the school. Unfortunately, schools are left with a major responsibility of addressing all contributing factors. It is not the sole responsibility of the education sector to address and solve all the

societal ills that exist outside of the school walls. To support the work of SEAs to achieve their missions, there must be a focus on cross-sector collaborations, among other statewide agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Transportation, and, Department of Labor, which focus on shared values and agendas, and are grounded in a systems thinking approach, with appropriate funding. The federal government can provide model policy or practices, as well as innovative structures that exist in other sectors, which can help propel the education field from a focus on reform and compliance to a focus on transformation.

**Raising expectations for principal and educator preparation programs.**

Equity in school improvement requires teachers and school leaders who are ready to engage in difficult and courageous conversations about student performance, teacher capacity, and instructional leadership. To restore dignity to the profession, there must be high levels of accountability and support to teacher and administrator preparation programs. Setting clear expectations of the core competencies necessary to enter the profession, especially those needed in low-performing schools, will be essential to supporting institutes of higher education in meeting the demands of the field. To understand these needs, there must be opportunities to provide immersive learning experiences for prospective teachers and school leaders to build empathy, establish collaborative relationships, widen perspectives, and think innovatively to identify and solve problems appropriately. Leading for equity in school improvement will require a multi-step approach that equips those entering the profession, as teachers, school leaders, or system-level leaders, with the knowledge, skills, and mindsets necessary to positively impact student learning and outcomes.

## Conclusion

To lead for equity in school improvement, state education agencies must be able to develop a strategy that unapologetically names the inequities that persist in school communities and deeply understand what research-based strategies exist or need to be studied to positively impact student outcomes. Additionally, SEAs must also organize to continuously learn about their system, adjust accordingly based on data, and address the culture of change. More importantly, SEAs must effectively partner with schools, regional service units, institutes of higher education, and consultants to maximize their capacity and embody an equity-focused school improvement theory of action.

My residency experience provided me with an opportunity to co-design a professional learning series for the identified Priority Schools that focused on collaborative learning, understanding the instructional shifts to better plan for student learning, and raising expectations for high quality instructional materials and tasks. Further, co-creating a system of supports for Needs Improvement, Comprehensive Support and Improvement, and Priority Schools illuminated the need for further work to be done throughout the agency around articulating a theory of action for school improvement and leading for equity across streams of work. The NDE has and continues to work towards achieving educational equity through its equity commitments, measures of progress and success in accordance to their strategic plan, and engaging various stakeholders in the process of creating an equity-focused school improvement model.

For nearly 50 years, state education agencies have been positioned to be regulators of federal education law, alongside any state education mandates set forth by their legislature. The emerging role of the NDE in leading for equity in school improvement is evidence that it takes time and commitment from all people involved, coordination of services, and



shifting of resources to truly establish credibility, generate public value, and create stability in the work. Understanding a state's role in school improvement, identifying and codifying equitable practices in school systems, and operating with a systems-thinking mindset, set the foundation for the opportunity to bring important and distinct work together to create systems and structures that support a coherent school improvement strategy. Analyzing the organizational context and adult behaviors provided an added layer of complexity in conceptualizing how to do meaningful school improvement work sustainably. For our schools, students, and communities to receive the best educational experience that addresses and tackles inequities, it requires an SEA to set a clear vision for improvement, articulate its strategies and outcomes, and maintain high expectations and high accountability for itself and its partners.

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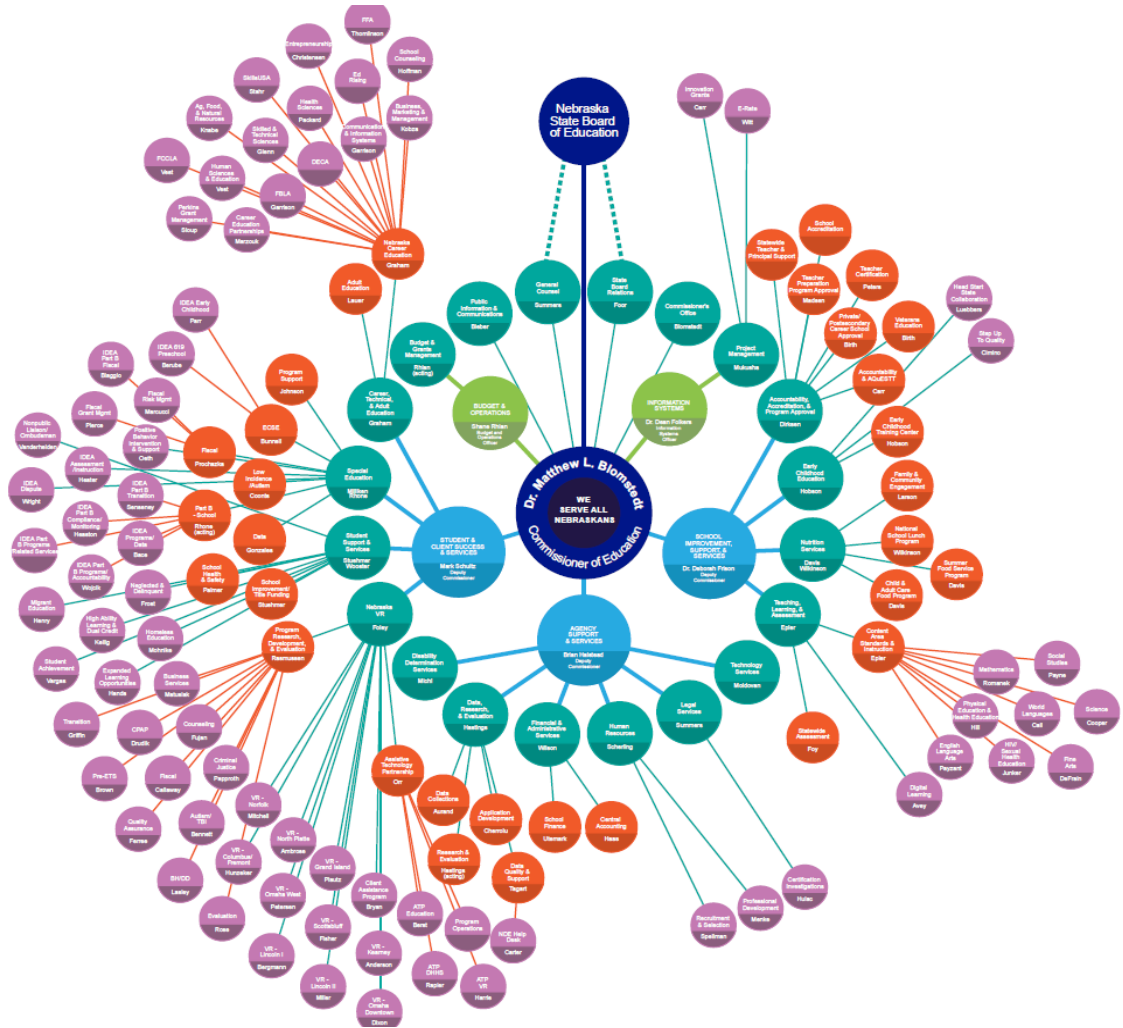
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## Appendices

### Appendix A

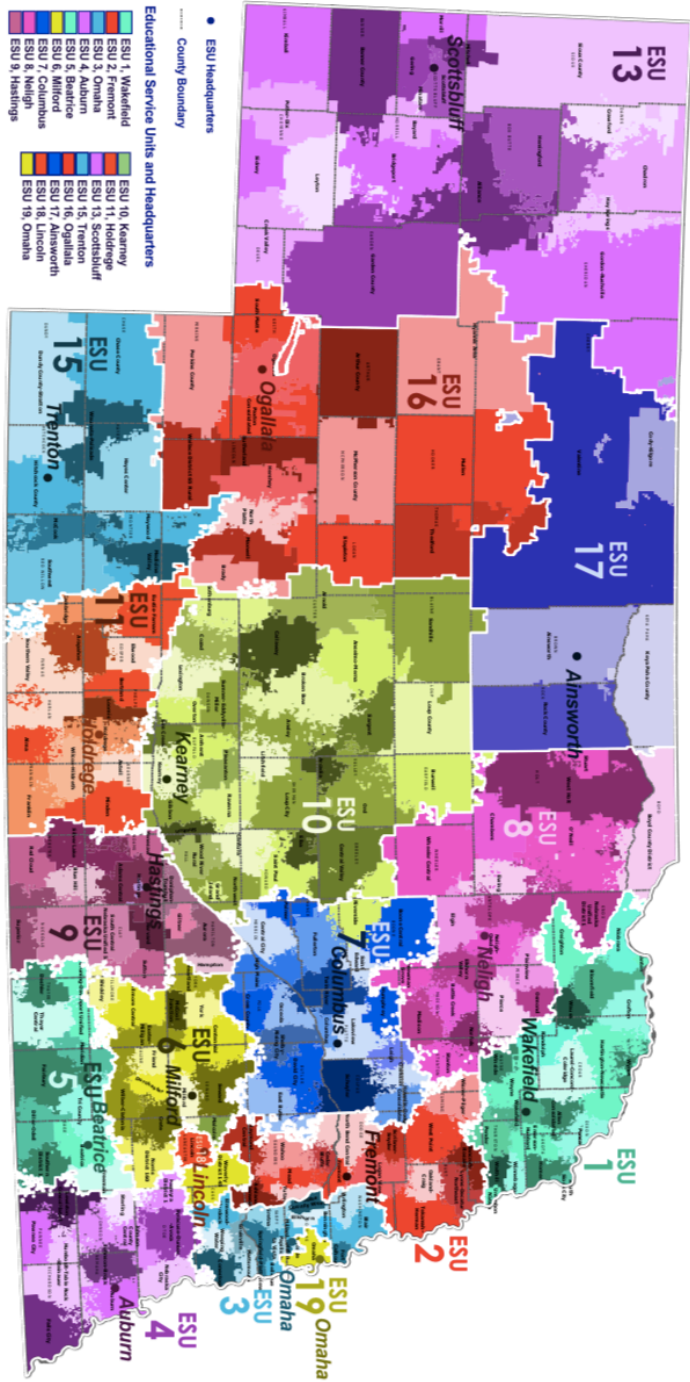
### Nebraska Department of Education – Organizational Structure



Appendix B  
Educational Service Units (ESU) Map



# 2017-18 Nebraska Public School Districts and Nebraska Educational Service Units



## Appendix C

### Excerpt of Priority School Progress Plan – Schuyler Central High School



**2018-2019**

### **Priority School Progress Plan for Schuyler Community High School**





## 2018-2019 Priority School Progress Plan for Schuyler Community High School

### Purpose(s)

Each Priority School under AQUESTT, Nebraska's accountability system for public schools and districts, is required to submit a Progress Plan for approval by the State Board of Education (79-760.07 R.R.S.). The purpose of the Progress Plan is to identify: goals and areas for growth and improvement; measurable indicators of progress; strategies and actions to achieve improvement; associated timelines and resources; and evidence to monitor progress. The Progress Plan will serve as the primary improvement plan for the Priority School and will also be part of the continuous improvement plan for the district in which the Priority School is located (92 NAC 10, Section 009.01B2).

### AQUESTT Framework for Support and Intervention for Priority Schools

AQUESTT provides the framework for intervention and support of improvement efforts by Priority Schools. The AQUESTT domains of *Student Success and Access* and *Teaching and Learning* rely on the following AQUESTT tenets to guide schools and districts in achieving a quality education system and ensuring student success:

- Positive Partnerships, Relationships & Student Success
- Transitions
- Educational Opportunities & Access
- College & Career Readiness
- Assessment
- Educator Effectiveness

Within the framework for Priority School interventions, the following indicators of effective schools support the AQUESTT tenets and will guide the identification of improvement areas and assist in determining appropriate actions and strategies for improvement:

- *Clear, Compelling Direction*
- *Student and Staff Culture*
- *Instructional Leadership Capacity*

Goals, actions, and strategies for improvement aligned to one or more of these indicators will form the basis of the Progress Plan for Priority Schools. As such, these indicators will focus the improvement efforts of the Priority School on the domains and tenets of AQUESTT.

### Priority School Progress Plan

The Progress Plan for Priority Schools under AQUESTT is intended to identify improvement areas; outline goals, actions, strategies for improvement, and measurable indicators of progress; establish time lines for improvement; identify resources to support improvement efforts; and cite evidence to monitor progress. The Progress Plan will include goals and strategies for improvement for the school and may also include goals and strategies for improvement for the district superintendent and the local board of education. Additional information (e.g., school data, reports, improvement plans, etc.) may accompany the Progress Plan in order to provide rationale(s) for improvement goals and to document progress efforts.





## 2018-2019 Priority School Progress Plan for Schuyler Community High School

<b>School Name:</b> Schuyler Central High School	<b>School District:</b> Schuyler Community Schools
<b>School Address:</b> 401 Adam Street Schuyler, Nebraska 68661	
<b>School District Superintendent:</b> Dr. Daniel Hoelsing	<b>Superintendent Signature:</b>  <b>Date:</b>
<b>High School Principal:</b> Mr. Steve Grammer	<b>Principal Signature:</b>  <b>Date:</b>
<b>Schuyler Board of Education President:</b> Mr. Richard Brabec	<b>Board President Signature:</b>  <b>Date:</b>
<b>Commissioner of Education:</b> Dr. Matthew Blomstedt	<b>Commissioner Signature:</b>  <b>Date:</b>
<b>State Board of Education President:</b> Mr. John Witzel	<b>State Board President Signature:</b>  <b>Date:</b>



## 2018-2019 Priority School Progress Plan for Schuyler Community High School

### Section 1: School Goals and Improvement Actions

#### Indicator of an Effective School: Clear, Compelling Direction

**Improvement Goal:** During the 2018-2019 school year, Schuyler Central High School and all stakeholders (i.e. district administrators school administrators, students, teaching and classified staff, local school board members, parents/guardians, community members) will engage in a systematic, clearly documented, inclusive and comprehensive process to communicate the school purpose and direction through a shared commitment to its vision, mission, beliefs, and core values in order to ensure student success, which includes meeting the cognitive, emotional, social and physical needs of each student as measured by perceptual survey data and artifacts (meeting agendas, data analysis, newsletters, revised vision/mission/values, interviews, etc.).

#### Rationale for Improvement Goal:

- May 2018 Executive Summary: Diagnostic Review indicated the following recommendation, "Work together with students, staff, parents and community to create and communicate a shared purpose and coherent effort of the core values, beliefs, mission, vision and goals of Schuyler Central High School."
- January 2018 Advanced Review indicated the following, "A number of action items are associated with each goal in the strategic plan yet, the goals do not have a measure of success."

#### Indicators of Success:

- A sense of mission permeates throughout the school and community.
- Perceptual Survey data indicates all stakeholders engage in a shared purpose for school improvement and the success of all students.
- Artifacts indicate a communicated vision, mission, core beliefs, core values, and implementation of Progress Plan goals and strategies.



## 2018-2019 Priority School Progress Plan for Schuyler Community High School

AQUESTT Tenet Alignment	Action/Strategy for Improvement	Timeline	Resources	Person(s) Responsible	Progress Monitoring	
					Dates	Artifacts
<b>CLEAR, COMPELLING DIRECTION</b>  Educator Effectiveness  College and Career Ready  Positive Partnerships, Relationships, & Student Success  Transitions  Educational Opportunities and Access  Assessment	1. Create and communicate a school vision, mission, core beliefs, core values and meeting norms so that a shared purpose and coherent effort permeates throughout the school and community	August 2018 – May 2019	School vision, mission  School Beliefs, Core Values  Progress Plan Goals and Strategies  Common Meeting Norms	Superintendent  Principals  School Staff  School Board	August 2018 – Revisit the vision and mission with staff, School Board and student representatives	Vision/mission updates (English and Spanish versions)
					September 2018 – Establish core beliefs, core values and meeting norms	Core beliefs, core values (English and Spanish versions)
					October 2018 – Share the school vision, mission, core beliefs, core values and meeting norms with the School Board	Meeting Norms  Updated Website
					November 2018 – May 2019 – Communicate the vision, mission, core beliefs and core values with the students, staff and community	Facebook page and other social media communication of shared purpose  Posters/Flyers  Staff/Student handbooks
						Meeting agendas/minutes showing meeting norms



## 2018-2019 Priority School Progress Plan for Schuyler Community High School

AQUEST Tenet Alignment	Action/Strategy for Improvement	Timeline	Resources	Person(s) Responsible	Progress Monitoring	
					Dates	Artifacts
<b>CLEAR, COMPELLING DIRECTION</b>  Educator Effectiveness  College and Career Ready  Positive Partnerships, Relationships, & Student Success  Transitions  Educational Opportunities and Access  Assessment	2. Increase the frequency, clarity, and variety of two-way communication in a timely and efficient manner so that all stakeholders (i.e. students, staff, parents/guardians, community) will increase their knowledge of and commitment to the school vision, mission, core values, and goals.	August 2018 – May 2019	Various forms of communication including paper, electronic, up-to-date websites, social media, face-to-face conversations  Stakeholder surveys  Important Dates for Staff	Superintendent  Principal  Assistant Principal  School Staff  School Board Members  Student Council Representatives	August 2018 – May 2019  Weekly communication with students, staff, families, community members, etc.  April 2019 Stakeholder survey	Website Updated Weekly  Meeting Agendas sent ahead of scheduled meetings  Social Media  Email  Stakeholder Survey results
	3. Complete a comprehensive review of programs implemented at Schuyler Central High School so that the school can measure the return on investment and the effectiveness of each program as it relates to the school's goals	August 2018 – May 2019	ESU 7 Comprehensive Review Process	SCS Teaching and Learning Director  ESU 7  Principal	October 2018 List of programs provided to ESU 7 by Teaching and Learning Director  November 2018 – March 2019 Comprehensive Review by ESU 7	Results of Comprehensive Review and Recommendations



## 2018-2019 Priority School Progress Plan for Schuyler Community High School

AQUESTT Tenet Alignment	Action/Strategy for Improvement	Timeline	Resources	Person(s) Responsible	Progress Monitoring	
					Dates	Artifacts
<b>CLEAR, COMPELLING DIRECTION</b>  Educator Effectiveness  College and Career Ready  Positive Partnerships, Relationships, & Student Success  Transitions  Educational Opportunities and Access Assessment	4. Ensure families are included in the decision-making process to inform students' academic and behavioral plans and goals by encouraging participation in conferences at least once each semester so that families are empowered to be partners in their student's education.	August 2018 – May 2019	Conferences with Families/Students (may be in a variety of formats to include student-led, family/teacher conferences, individual Education Plans, Etc.)	Superintendent Principal Assistant Principal School Counselor School Board	October 2018 – May 2019 Scheduled conferences for each student's family at least once per semester  December 2018 and May 2019 Report conference participation to the School Board	Schedule of meetings, conferences, etc.  Published protocols for Whom to Contact in English and Spanish  School Board Agendas
	5. Provide monthly Clear, Compelling Direction implementation reports to the School Board so that the School Board is supportive and kept abreast of the implementation of strategies from the Priority School Progress Plan.	September 2018 – May 2019	Progress Plan: Clear, Compelling Direction	Superintendent Principal	September 2018 – May 2019 Monthly School Board Updates on Progress Plan Implementation	School Board Meeting Agendas

## Appendix D

### List of meetings and activities related to Priority School Professional Development Series

Date	Focus of Meeting/Activity
07/19/18	Email to content specialists
07/25/18	Lunch with ESU 7 Administrator and staff developers
07/30/18	Meeting organized by Marissa to discuss Loup County
08/01/18	Meeting organized by Shirley to discuss Schuyler Central HS
08/07/18	Meeting with Marissa and Deb to gather initial ideas
08/13/18	Meeting organized by me with members of the Office of Teaching and Learning to discuss their role in Priority School work
09/04/18	Zoom meeting for planning session for content-area professional development with NDE/ESU/External consultant
09/11/18	Zoom meeting to create and disseminate Priority Schools input survey to inform PD creation, myself and each ESU staff developer working with Priority School
09/19/18	Zoom planning meeting with NDE/ESU
10/25/18	Apply for Title II-A funds for professional development session
10/26/18	Planning meeting with NDE/ESU for 7-12 Priority School Math PD
10/26/18 – 11/15/18	Offline preparation between NDE/ESU
11/16/18	Professional Development Day!
11/19/18	Email sent to all participants after PD, highlighting statements from feedback form and sharing additional resources
11/30/18	Conduct an After-Action Review
12/06/18	Obtain feedback from planning team on draft email to be sent to Priority Schools and share next steps
12/12/18	Email participants feedback from September survey and PD feedback form
02/01/19	Apply for Title II-A funds for spring and summer PD session

Appendix E  
Sample meeting agendas

“Planning Session for Content-Area PD for Priority School Educators” September 4, 2018						
Attendees:	Facilitator: Timekeeper: Note taker:					
<b>Pre-work:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Complete “<a href="#">Communication Styles Survey</a>” (pgs. 4-6)</li><li>Review <a href="#">Draft agenda</a> and come with thoughts about the objectives, logistics (activities, processes, place for event, etc.) and attendees.</li></ul>						
<b>Meeting Objectives:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Set a date for our 1st session with Priority Schools</li><li>Create a long-term plan for our vision of work (providing standards/content support to Priority Schools and thinking through how to scale to other schools)</li></ul>						
<b>Schedule:</b> 12:30pm-2pm (independent work time: 2pm-3pm)						
Time	Mins	Activity				
	15 mins	<p>Welcome:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Objectives / Norms:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Take an inquiry stance</li><li>Assume positive intention</li><li>Ground statements in evidence</li><li>Be present</li></ul></li><li>Communication Activity – this activity is adapted from my work in NYC as a principal coach.</li><li>“The Effective Communications activity is adapted from an exercise in <a href="#">The Platinum Rule: Discover the Four Basic Business Personalities and How They Can Lead You to Success</a> by Tony Alessandra Ph.D. The book argues that the "Golden Rule" is not always the best way to approach people. Rather, it proposes the Platinum Rule: "Do unto others as <u>they'd</u> like done unto them.” In other words, find out what makes people tick and go from there” (personal communication, NYCDOE, 2013)</li></ul> <table><tr><td><u>Driver</u></td><td><u>Expresser</u></td></tr><tr><td><u>Relater</u></td><td><u>Analyzer</u></td></tr></table> <p>Some benefits to know communication style?</p>	<u>Driver</u>	<u>Expresser</u>	<u>Relater</u>	<u>Analyzer</u>
<u>Driver</u>	<u>Expresser</u>					
<u>Relater</u>	<u>Analyzer</u>					

	10 mins	External consultant update				
	5mins	<p>What are we trying to create? For what purpose? What’s our vision for our support structure?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What’s the long-term plan for supporting and sustaining this work?<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Thinking beyond the first session</li></ul></li></ul>				
	2 mins	<table><tr><td><b>Plus</b></td><td><b>Delta</b></td></tr><tr><td></td><td></td></tr></table>	<b>Plus</b>	<b>Delta</b>		
<b>Plus</b>	<b>Delta</b>					
	45 mins	<p>Draft Schedule/Plan Collect Feedback/thoughts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Objectives<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ What’s the common message across the day?</li></ul></li><li>• Logistics<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ When/where to hold session for educators?</li><li>○ Materials</li><li>○ Activities</li><li>○ Facilitation</li></ul></li><li>• Attendees</li></ul>				
	10 mins	<p>Communication Plan for schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How will we communicate with schools and get their feedback on what is created?</li></ul>				
	3 mins	<p>Our next meeting to debrief our session with Priority School educators: (Possibly: doodle poll, google survey, etc.,)</p>				
	~60 mins	Independent work time				



### Communication Styles Survey

This is an informal survey, designed to help identify your common communication style. Circle A or B in each pair of statements below, choosing the one which you feel *most describes you*.

1. A) I'm usually open to getting to know people personally and establishing relationships with them.  
B) I'm not usually open to getting to know people personally and establishing relationships with them.
2. A) I usually react slowly and deliberately.  
B) I usually react quickly and spontaneously.
3. A) I'm usually guarded about other people's use of my time.  
B) I'm usually open to other people's use of my time.
4. A) I usually introduce myself at social gatherings.  
B) I usually wait for others to introduce themselves to me at social gatherings.
5. A) I usually focus my conversations on the interests of the people involved, even if that means straying from the business or subject at hand.  
B) I usually focus my conversations on the tasks, issues, business, or subject at hand.
6. A) I'm usually not assertive, and I can be patient with a slow pace.  
B) I'm usually assertive, and at times I can be impatient with a slow pace.
7. A) I usually make decisions based on facts or evidence.  
B) I usually make decisions based on feelings, experiences or relationships.
8. A) I usually contribute frequently to group conversations.  
B) I usually contribute infrequently to group conversations.
9. A) I usually prefer to work with and through others, providing support when possible.  
B) I usually prefer to work independently or dictate the conditions in terms of how others are involved.
10. A) I usually ask questions or speak tentatively and indirectly.  
B) I usually make empathic statements or directly expressed opinions.
11. A) I usually focus primarily on ideas, concepts, or results.  
B) I usually focus primarily on persons, interactions, and feelings.
12. A) I usually use gestures, facial expression, and voice intonations to emphasize points.  
B) I usually do not use gestures, facial expressions, and voice intonations to emphasize points.
13. A) I usually accept others' points of view (ideas, feelings, and concerns).  
B) I usually don't accept others' points of view (ideas, feelings, and concerns).
14. A) I usually respond to risk and change in a cautious or predictable manner.  
B) I usually respond to risk and change in dynamic or unpredictable manner.
15. A) I usually prefer to keep personal feelings and thoughts private, sharing only when I wish to do so.  
B) I usually find it natural and easy to share and discuss my feelings with others.
16. A) I usually seek out new or different experiences and situations.  
B) I usually choose known or similar situations and relationships.
17. A) I'm usually responsive to others' agendas, interests, and concerns.  
B) I'm usually directed toward my own agendas, interests, and concerns.
18. A) I usually respond to conflict slowly and indirectly.  
B) I usually respond to conflict quickly and directly.

## Communication Styles Answer Key

### Directions:

1. Total the numbers of items circled in each column.
2. Compare the "◇" column with the "○" column. Circle the symbol that has the highest total. Then, do the same for the "□" versus "△" columns.
3. Find the matching symbol combinations in the "Communication Styles" table below and read about the style you tend toward.

◇	○	□	△
1A	1B	2B	2A
3B	3A	4A	4B
5A	5B	6B	6A
7B	7A	8A	8B
9A	9B	10B	10A
11B	11A	12A	12B
13A	13B	14B	14A
15B	15A	16A	16B
17A	17B	18B	18A

TOTALS \_\_\_\_\_

Communication Styles	
<b>○ and □ ~ Driver</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commander</li> <li>• Values getting the job done</li> <li>• Decisive risk-taker</li> <li>• Good at delegating work to others</li> <li>• Not shy but private about personal matters; comes on strong in conversation</li> <li>• Likes to be where the action is</li> <li>• Take charge; has an enterprising, competitive, efficient approach</li> <li>• Fearless; no obstacle is too big to tackle</li> <li>• Results-oriented</li> </ul>	<b>◇ and □ ~ Expresser</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entertainer</li> <li>• Values enjoyment and helping others with the same</li> <li>• Full of ideas and impulsive in trying them</li> <li>• Wants work to be fun for everyone</li> <li>• Talkative and open about self</li> <li>• Asks others' opinions</li> <li>• Loves to brainstorm</li> <li>• Flexible; easily bored with routine</li> <li>• Intuitive, creative, spontaneous approach</li> <li>• Optimist; nothing is beyond hope</li> <li>• Celebration-oriented</li> </ul>
<b>◇ and △ ~ Relater</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harmonizer</li> <li>• Values acceptance and stability in circumstances</li> <li>• Slow with big decisions; dislikes change</li> <li>• Builds networks of friends to help do work</li> <li>• Good listener</li> <li>• Timid about voicing contrary opinions; concerned for others' feelings</li> <li>• Easy-going; likes slow, steady pace</li> <li>• Friendly &amp; sensitive; no person is unlovable</li> <li>• Relationship-oriented</li> </ul>	<b>○ and △ ~ Analyzer</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessor</li> <li>• Values accuracy in details and being right</li> <li>• Plans thoroughly before deciding to act</li> <li>• Prefers to work alone</li> <li>• Introverted; quick to think and slow to speak; closed about personal matters</li> <li>• Highly organized; even plans spontaneity</li> <li>• Cautious, logical, thrifty approach</li> <li>• Thoughtful; no problem is too big to ponder</li> <li>• Idea-oriented</li> </ul>

## Communication Styles Guide

	EXPRESSIONER	DRIVER	RELATER	ANALYZER
How to Recognize:	They get excited.	They like their own way. They are decisive and have strong viewpoints.	They like positive attention, to be helpful and to be regarded warmly.	They seek a lot of data, ask many questions, behave methodically and systematically.
Tends to Ask:	Who? (the personal dominant question)	What? (the results-oriented question)	Why? (the personal non-goal question)	How? (The technical, analytical question)
What They Dislike:	Boring explanations wasting time with too many facts.	Someone wasting their time trying to decide for them.	Rejection, treated impersonally, uncaring and unfeeling attitudes.	Making an error, being unprepared, spontaneity.
Reacts to Pressure and Tension by:	"Selling" their ideas or being argumentative.	Taking charge, taking more control.	Becoming silent, withdraws, introspective.	Seeking more data & information.
Best Way to Deal with:	Get excited with them, show emotion.	Let them be in charge.	Be supportive, show you care.	Provide lots of data and information.
Likes to Be Measured by:	Applause, feedback, and recognition.	Results, is goal-oriented.	Friends, close relationships.	Activity and business that leads to results.
Must Be Allowed to:	Get ahead quickly, likes challenges.	Get into a competitive situation.	Relax, feel, care, know you care.	Make decisions at own pace, not cornered or pressured.
Will Improve with:	Recognition and some structure with which to reach the goal.	A position that requires cooperation with others.	A structure of goals and methods for achieving each goal.	Interpersonal and communication skills.
Likes to Save:	Effort. They rely heavily on hunches, intuition, and feelings.	Time. They like to be efficient and get things done now.	Relationships. Friendship means a lot to them.	Face. They hate to make an error, be wrong or get caught without enough info.
For Best Results:	Inspire them to bigger and better accomplishments.	Allow them freedom to do things their own way.	Care and provide detail, specific plans, and activities to be accomplished.	Structure a framework or "track" to follow.

<p align="center"><b>“Content and Curriculum Support for Priority Schools”</b> <b>August 13, 2018</b></p>		
<p><b>Attendees:</b> <b>Facilitator:</b> <b>Timekeeper:</b> <b>Note taker:</b></p>		
<p><b>Pre-work:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review Priority School Plans for Loup County, Santee Middle School, and Schuyler Central High School.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Meeting Objectives:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Articulate the role of NDE content specialists and the relationship with partners.</li> <li>Create a prototype of a process that can be used with priority schools.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Schedule:</b> 12-3pm</p>		
Time	Mins	Activity
	50 mins	<p>(Russ and Shirley)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Warm-up</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Watch: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfmQvc6tB1o">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfmQvc6tB1o</a> <b>(It's possible it's been viewed by ppl in the room)</b></li> <li>First show a still image of the beginning and ask participants to jot down, “I notice/ I wonder”</li> <li>Share out noticings and wonderings</li> <li>Watch remainder of video -- purpose (something like this): the evolution of this idea called “Priority Schools” started off as something unknown, ambiguous, confusing, potentially frightening, and over time, with support and encouragement, it can transform into something revolutionary and captivating. Change is always messy in the middle.</li> <li>“Norms”</li> </ul> </li> <li><b>Co-construct a preliminary “Theory of action”</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is guiding our priority school work?</li> <li>Work off this doc: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vQyiVzD0SAyUIr8ifXejAXpCjOY3d-STPHc4bD5_E60/edit?usp=sharing">https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vQyiVzD0SAyUIr8ifXejAXpCjOY3d-STPHc4bD5_E60/edit?usp=sharing</a></li> <li>We don't have a clear vision for our involvement</li> <li>Co-construct plans with schools</li> <li>PS prior driven by deadlines -- now we are taking a step-back</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ “If we do this... then ... may happen.” -- we haven’t always had this</li><li>▪ How do we measure the implementation of our strategy?</li><li>▪ Who’s identifying the outcomes? having buy-in from stakeholders in our outcomes.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is the measure actually measuring those outcomes?</li><li>• What evidence are we gathering?</li></ul></li><li>▪ Test the reasoning of TOA.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To discover what works and what doesn’t.</li></ul></li></ul> <p>Preliminary Role Identification:</p> <table><tr><td><b>I should and I’m not</b></td><td><b>I should and I am</b></td></tr><tr><td><b>I shouldn’t and I’m not</b></td><td><b>I shouldn’t and I am</b></td></tr></table>	<b>I should and I’m not</b>	<b>I should and I am</b>	<b>I shouldn’t and I’m not</b>	<b>I shouldn’t and I am</b>
<b>I should and I’m not</b>	<b>I should and I am</b>					
<b>I shouldn’t and I’m not</b>	<b>I shouldn’t and I am</b>					
	10 mins	<b>Identifying the content/curriculum needs of 3 priority schools</b>				
	115 mins	<b>NDE Role &amp; Strategies for addressing need</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• NDE Role: content specialists lead the standards work</li><li>• Read through standards<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ Dig into them</li><li>◦ What changes from each grade, across strands</li></ul></li><li>• Reflection<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ What should I focus on? Articulation cross grades?</li><li>◦ Experience activities:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ What processes did we do?</li><li>▪ What understandings must we have?</li></ul></li></ul></li><li>• <b>Identifying obstacles</b><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ School policies</li><li>◦ Address content issues across the system (district)</li></ul></li></ul> <b>Identifying stakeholders/partners to support strategies</b>				
	3 mins	<b>Next steps: who, what, and by when?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Get all priority schools together</li><li>• ID ESU partners</li><li>• Get a contact list of all the teachers at the 3 schools</li><li>• Extend invitation: Sept 21st - Sci/Math Conference - \$150 per teacher (Kearney -lodging) Thurs evening, Friday all day, Sat morning.</li></ul>				
	2 mins	<b>Plus/Delta</b> What worked about the meeting/the process? What can be improved?				

## Appendix F

### CCSSO Findings from Internal Capacity Review, June 27, 2018, Internal Presentation

The capacity review suggests the Nebraska Dept. of Education should focus on a few key areas of work in the next several months

#### Focus on high-leverage school improvement strategies

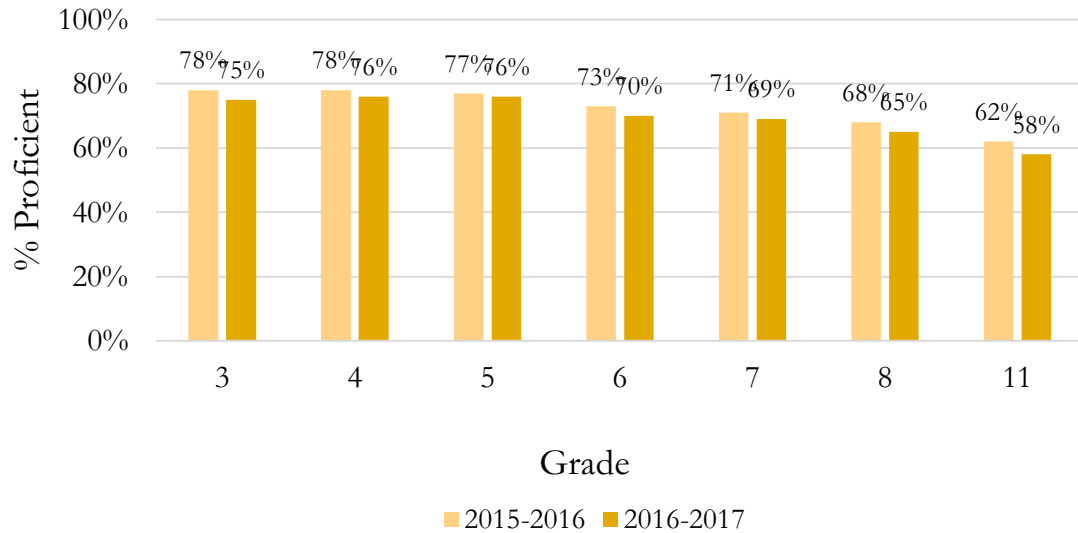
1. **Improve the current supports to priority schools as you expand to more schools**
  - Ensure transparency and communication about the selection, system of supports and exit process for identified schools.
  - Increase NDE engagement and alignment with the consultant so the support is viewed as NDE-led and there are no concerns about a conflict of interest.
  - Develop strategies to expand beyond instructional support to also include social-emotional support for schools that require it.
  - Establish a platform for priority school administrators to connect and learn from each other.
  - Diversify the staff providing supports to priority schools to better reflect the populations they serve.
2. **Communicate and further engage with AQuESTT to ensure its not a “standalone activity”**
  - Communicate and clarify the purpose, expectations and intended outcomes of the AQuESTT system.
  - Utilize AQuESTT data to strategize on the types of supports NDE should provide to schools and districts.
3. **Develop a targeted strategy around building the capacity of school leaders**
  - Learn from the supports Dr. Kennedy provides to priority school leaders and think about how to potentially scale those supports.



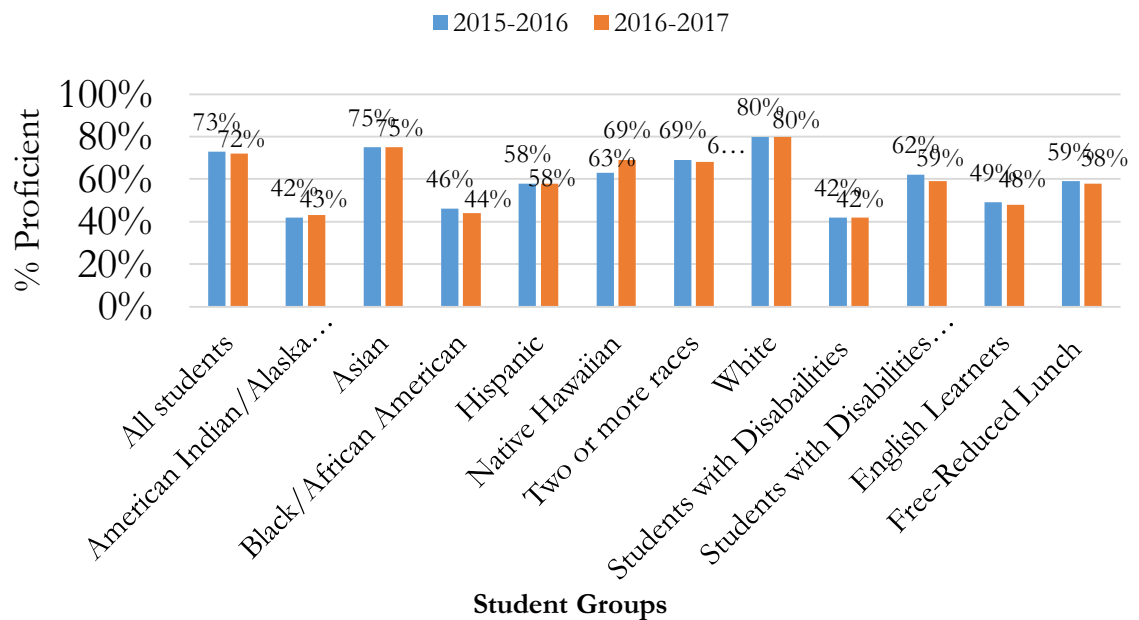
## Appendix G

### Statewide student achievement data by grade and student groups

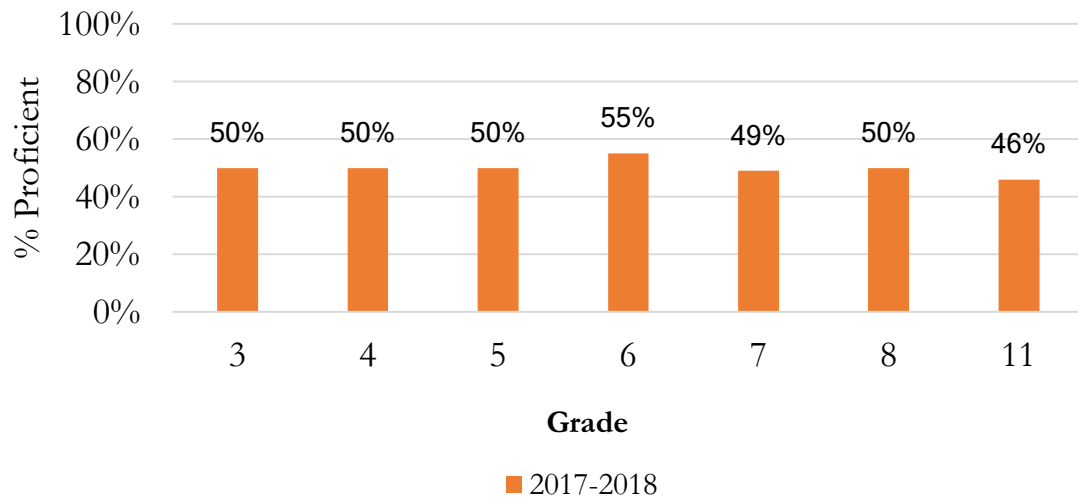
**NeSA Math - % Proficient for all students by grade**



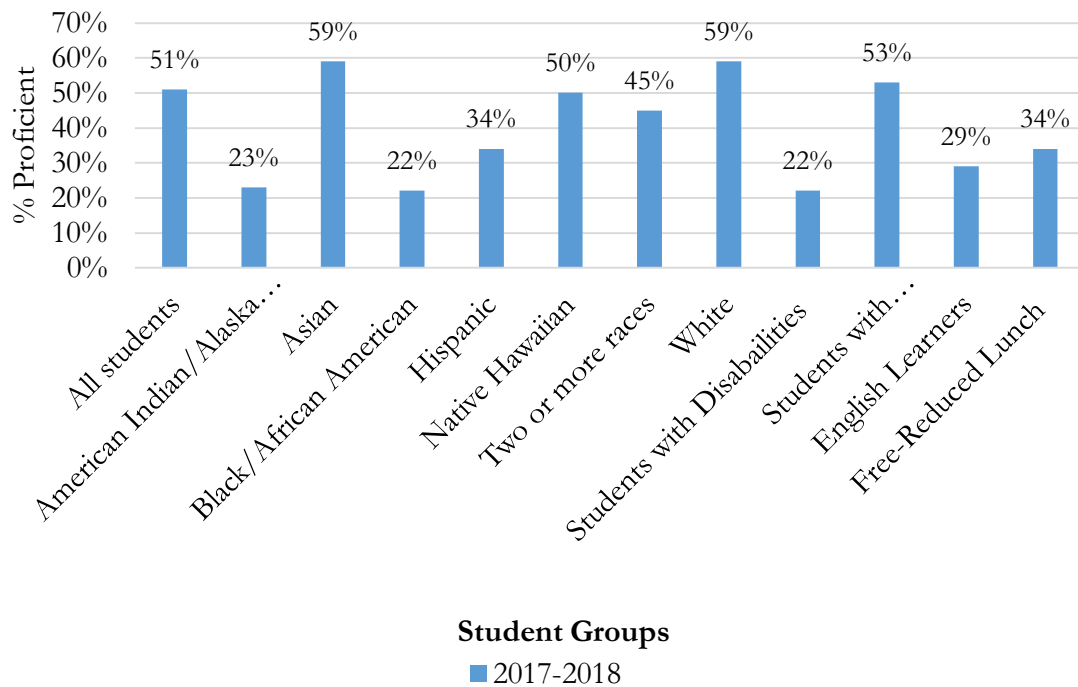
**NeSA Math % proficient for student groups across all grades**



**NSCAS Math % proficient for all students by grade**



**NSCAS Math % proficient for student groups across all grades**





## Appendix H

### Title II-A Statewide Activities Application and Budget Sheet – October 2018

#### ESSA STATE-WIDE ACTIVITY PROPOSAL

2018-2019

Name: Shirley Vargas Department: Accountability & AQuESTT

Date: 10/15/18 Type of Activity: 7-12 Math Professional Learning for Priority Schools

**Due Date: October 25, 2018**

**Title II-A Part A-Supporting Effective Instruction**  
(ESEA SEC. 2101)

**Title IV-A Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants**  
(ESEA SEC. 4101)

1. Mark the appropriate box to identify the funding source, include the section of the law and how it supports the proposed activity.

- ☒ Title II-A  
(B)(x) "Providing training, technical assistance, and capacity-building to local educational  
☐ Title IV-A Student Support & Academic Enrichment Funds

2. Identify how your proposed action plan ties to the initiatives selected with these funds.

- ☒ Champions For Equity in Education  
Academic Progress: The NDE commits to equity of achievement by measuring and tracking academic progress.

- ☐ State Board Strategic Plan Goals

- ☒ AQuESTT.

This state-wide activity is connected to the domains of Success, Access, and Support, and Teaching, Learning, and

3. Budget Proposal: Please indicate total amount requested and any breakdown of implementation by month/sections of the proposal. (*funds may only be available for a portion of the request; State-Wide Budget Page must be submitted; worksheet not needed in submission*).

The 7-12 Math Professional Learning for Priority Schools is focused on bringing the mathematics teachers and their administrators from all Priority Schools to engage in a community of practice to build off collective strengths, network with other teachers across the state, and receive consistent messages about content and instructional practices from NDE staff, ESU staff, and . The session will be led jointly by NDE staff and ESU staff. This will support to increase the capacity of the ESUs to lead this work, specifically in mathematics, in the future. It will also support NDE in strengthening relationships with our ESU partners.

The session will be designed to provide teachers with tools, experiences, and networking opportunities to ensure that each student is prepared for postsecondary educational opportunities and to pursue their career goals. Teachers and administrators will dive deeply into content-area standards to make connections to instructional practices.

To make this project cost effective, we have selected Neligh, NE as the mid-point of the three Priority School sites. We have budgeted a fee for facilities rental in Neligh (\$100). We have allotted mileage stipends for the three schools (\$270). We have also covered the mileage (\$150) and lodging (\$375) of three NDE staff, two Priority School Liaisons and Math Content Specialist to travel from Lincoln to Neligh the night before the event. We will also cover the meals for all 20 participants (\$400). The total cost is \$2170. (See full budget analysis for details).

4. Timeline: Indicate in the box below a tentative date this state activity will be implemented and length of time. The activity must occur prior to September 30, 2019. **Payment for all obligations need to be paid prior to October 31, 2019.**

Friday, November 16, 2018  
8:30am-3:30pm

5. Performance Indicators: Describe metrics used to determine efficiency or outcome measures of proposed activity.

Educators will be provided feedback surveys to determine impact of professional learning session, including activities, tools, and overall educator disposition towards secondary math instruction. Feedback survey will also inform if and when future sessions are necessary.

During the December and January Priority School Visits, we will engage in math classroom observations, provide targeted feedback connected to the November session, and support school leaders with providing targeted and actionable feedback to teachers to strengthen practice. We will also track the practices observed and make connections to student work collected across all schools to see where more intensive support is necessary.

6. Application to be reviewed by NDE Internal Committee.

ESSA STATE-WIDE DOLLARS BUDGET			
Please mark appropriate box to indicate funding source(s).			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Title II-A		<input type="checkbox"/> Title IV-A	
<b>Project Name:</b>	7-12 Math Professional Learning for Priority Schools		
<b>Person Responsible:</b>	Shirley Vargas		
<b>Implementation Date:</b>	Nov-18		
<b>Project Description:</b>	The 7-12 Math Professional Learning for Priority Schools is focused on bringing the mathematics teachers and their administrators from all Priority Schools to engage in a community of practice to build off collective strengths, network with other teachers across the state, and receive consistent messages about content and instructional practices from NDE staff, ESU staff, and [REDACTED]		
Line items	How many	Cost per item	Total cost
Facilities rental	1	\$ 100.00	\$ 100.00
Lodging (NDE Staff)	3	\$ 125.00	\$ 375.00
NDE Mileage	1	\$ 150.00	\$ 150.00
Stipends (Includes coverage for substitute teachers)	7	\$ 125.00	\$ 875.00
Mileage (Priority Schools)	3	\$ 90.00	\$ 270.00
Meals	20	\$ 20.00	\$ 400.00
<b>Materials: (list items)</b>			
			\$ -
			\$ -
<b>Other expenses not included above (please list)</b>			
			\$ -
			\$ -
<b>Total cost of project:</b>			\$ 2,170.00

## Appendix I

### Title II-A Statewide Activities Application and Budget Sheet – February 2019

<b>ESSA STATE-WIDE ACTIVITY PROPOSAL</b>			
<b>2018-2019</b>			
Name: <u>Shirley Vargas</u>		Department: <u>Accountability &amp; AQUESTT</u>	
Date: <u>February 1, 2019</u>	Type of Activity: <u>7-12 Math Professional Learning Series for Priority Schools</u>		
<b>Due Date: Friday, February 1, 2019</b>		Submit to: <u>nde.ecsstatewide@nebbraska.gov</u>	
<p>1. Mark the appropriate box below to identify the funding source. On the line below the selected funding source, include the section of the law and how it supports the proposed activity. (e.g. Sec 2101(4)(B)(1)(i)) Teachers have necessary subject matter and teaching skills...The professional development activity being offered will provide...)</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Title II-A, Support and Academic Enrichment Grants</p> <p>(B)(x) "Providing training, technical assistance, and capacity-building to local educational agencies that receive a subgrant under this part" AND (B)(xvii) "Developing and providing professional development and other comprehensive systems of support for teachers, principals, or other school leaders to promote high-quality instruction and instructional leadership in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics subjects, including computer science." All Priority School Progress Plans contain goals that are focused on strengthen teacher's mathematics pedagogy to ensure students are meeting NE math standards.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Title IV-A Student Support &amp; Academic Enrichment Funds</p>			
<p>2. Identify and include evidence that supports your proposed action plan as it ties to the initiatives selected with these State-Wide funds.</p> <p><u>    X    </u> Champions For Equity in Education, Evidence:</p> <p>Academic Progress: The NDE commits to equity of achievement by measuring and tracking academic progress. Using each school's formative and summative assessment data, we will be able to tailor specific activities to educators and ensure that they are using accurate data to inform their instructional practices.</p> <p><u>    X    </u> State Board Strategic Plan Goals, Evidence:</p> <p>Leadership Outcome Statement: Provide leadership and high-quality services in processes, regulations, interagency collaboration, data systems, fiscal responsibility, and evaluation that enhance the success of educational systems in Nebraska. Additionally, the NDE will be playing out it's new role of "Capacity Builder," outlined in the Strategic Plan. Furthermore, NDE Goal 6, a specifically calls out mathematics achievement. This project focuses resources on Priority School math professional development, and continues a session held fall 2018 that kicked off the learning. Through continued interaction and capacity building with the Priority Schools, the NDE is considering how to scale up these trainings to even more schools in an effort to achieve Goal 6.4.</p> <p><u>    X    </u> AQUESTT, Evidence:</p> <p>This state-wide activity is connected to the domains of Success, Access, and Support, and Teaching, Learning, and Serving. The tenets Educational Opportunities and Access, College, Career, and Civic Ready, Assessment, and Educator Effectiveness are integral to ensuring that the professional learning session is connected to their school and district plans.</p>			

3. **Budget Proposal:** Please indicate the following- description of how each budget line estimated/used, include why receiving funding is important to activity, clear explanation how funds will be maximized/prioritized, plans included for leveraging of funds. *(Funds may only be available for a portion of the request; State-Wide Budget Page must be submitted; worksheet not needed in submission).*

The 7-12 Math Professional Learning Series for Priority Schools is focused on bringing the mathematics teachers and their administrators from all Priority Schools to engage in a community of practice to leverage collective strengths, network with other teachers across the state, and receive consistent messages about content and instructional practices from NDE staff, ESU staff, and [REDACTED] g. It also builds off of the previously held session in November, where teachers and administrators enjoyed the real-world application of math but want to get deeper into the alignment of instructional materials with standards and formative assessments to drive instruction. This project will be led jointly by NDE staff and ESU staff. The Series will increase the capacity of the ESUs to lead this work, specifically in mathematics, in the future. It will also support NDE in strengthening relationships with our ESU partners.

The Professional Learning Series will consist of a Spring (March) and Summer (July) session, where the participants from the Fall (November) session return to continue their learning in this networked environment. The sessions will be designed to provide teachers with tools, experiences, and networking opportunities to ensure that each student is prepared for postsecondary educational opportunities and to pursue their career goals. Teachers and administrators will dive deeply into content-area standards to make connections to instructional practices and formative assessments that will yield them useful data to inform their instructional decisions.

To make this project cost effective, we have selected Neligh, NE as the mid-point of the three Priority School sites. We have budgeted a fee for facilities rental in Neligh for both sessions (\$250). We have allotted mileage stipends for the three schools (\$270). We have also covered the mileage (\$150) and lodging (\$375) of three NDE staff, two Priority School Liaisons and Math Content Specialist to travel from Lincoln to Neligh the night before the event. We will also cover the meals for all 20 participants (\$400). The total cost is \$5465. (See full budget analysis for details).

4. **Timeline:** Indicate below a tentative date this state activity will be implemented and outline a projected project timeline. The activity must occur prior to September 30, 2019. Payment for all obligations need to be paid prior to October 31, 2019.

February 15, 2019 (NDE, ESU, K12 Planning Meeting to discuss concrete objectives for both session, ensure alignment of message); March 2019, 8:30-3:30pm & July 2019, 8:30-3:30pm

5. **Performance Indicators:** Describe metrics or evaluation system used to determine effectiveness and efficiency measures for your ESSA State-Wide Activity proposal.

In December, educators were provided feedback surveys to determine the impact of the professional learning session, including activities, tools, and overall educator disposition towards secondary math instruction. This rich data has informed the development of the series. During subsequent Priority School Visits, we will engage in math classroom observations, provide targeted feedback connected to the March and July sessions, and support school leaders with providing targeted and actionable feedback to teachers to strengthen practice. We will also track the practices observed and make connections to student work collected across all schools to see where more intensive support is necessary.

ESSA STATE-WIDE DOLLARS BUDGET			
Please mark appropriate box to indicate funding source(s).			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Title II-A		<input type="checkbox"/> Title IV-A	
<b>Project Name:</b>			
<b>Person Responsible:</b>		Shirley Vargas	
<b>Implementation Date:</b>		Mar-19	
<b>Project Description:</b>		The 7-12 Math Professional Learning for Priority Schools is focused on bringing the mathematics teachers and their administrators from all Priority Schools to engage in a community of practice to build off collective strengths, network with other teachers across the state, and receive consistent messages about content and instructional practices from NDE staff, ESU staff, and [REDACTED]	
Line items	How many	Cost per item	Total cost
Facilities Rental (March & July)	2	\$ 250.00	\$ 500.00
Lodging (NDE Staff- March & July)	6	\$ 125.00	\$ 750.00
NDE Mileage	2	\$ 150.00	\$ 300.00
Stipends (March - Substitute Pay)	7	\$ 125.00	\$ 875.00
Stipends (July - Stipend)	7	\$ 200.00	\$ 1,400.00
Mileage (Priority Schools)	6	\$ 90.00	\$ 540.00
Meals (20 participants x 2 workshops)	40	\$ 20.00	\$ 800.00
			\$ -
<b>Materials: (list items)</b>			
Mathematics resources and materials	3	\$ 100.00	\$ 300.00
			\$ -
<b>Other expenses not included above (please list)</b>			
			\$ -
			\$ -
<b>Total cost of project:</b>			\$ 5,465.00



## Appendix J

### After-Action Review of Priority School Math PD Day

#### Agenda

1. Check-in: NDE staff, ESU staff
2. AAR Questions (debrief)
  - What were our goals/objectives?
    - To get the three schools together (the schools made it a priority)
    - Conversations within districts that were planned
    - Represent our work collaboratively - not working in isolation
    - Find something that was a common need among the three districts
  - What actually occurred (in general/in relation to goals)?
    - Lunch conversations
    - Activities - four groups and four problems - (the Silo problem)
    - Building relationships
  - What went well and why?
    - Strength in feedback forms: educators included “plan to do...”
    - Activities using math that are applicable to real-life - the Silo problem
    - The location worked (Neligh)
  - What can be improved and how?
    - How do our NE standards correlate to ACT?
      - What did we do before?
      - What do you want for your kids? (vision)
        - How can we tie, tools and practices to that?
      - HS, K-12, match Math standards to ACT
      - Studies that show how students’ performance in college because of an ACT?
        - The ACT is used as a predictor - but not sure if students are followed in college
    - Strategic grouping among teachers
    - Consider the location of session
    - Extension to others in the district? Like elementary teachers?
  - What is/can be the future of this structure?
    - What do schools need?
  - Additional notes
    - Where does long-range plans fit into this?
      - Loup County: have been doing this work
      - Santee: adoption of reading curriculum
      - Schuyler: long range plan is in Priority plan. So far, the focus has been on clear learning targets
      - Beneficial to get teachers together to do this work?
        - Session needs to have meaning
        - Living document
        - Need conversations for admin team (processes in place for district?)
      - As a group: do we want to go in this direction?
      - Survey: next steps from the perspective of teachers?
      - Ensure that we go back to progress plan
3. Wrap-up
  - Survey before the holiday break
  - Schedule our meeting after the new year: Please ID availability for mid-January: <https://www.when2meet.com/?7355907-6eeE5>

## Appendix K

**Work of \$4,000-a-day consultant at struggling Nebraska schools shows promise, but some question cost.** Omaha World Herald. January 15, 2019.

### **Work of \$4,000-a-day consultant at struggling Nebraska schools shows promise, but some question cost**

By Joe Dejka / World-Herald staff writer Jan 15, 2019



Kennedy talks with student Nasro Garad during a physical science class at Schuyler Central High School. Kennedy and her North Carolina consulting firm have received contracts worth more than \$2.3 million to help improve schools in Nebraska districts, including OPS.

[Buy Now](#)



Kathy Kennedy, second from right, at Schuyler Central High with, from left, Jim Kasik, assistant principal and athletic director; Shirley Vargas, student achievement coordinator with the Nebraska Department of Education; and Mark Brady, professional development coordinator with Educational Service Unit 7. Schuyler is one of four low-scoring "priority schools" Kennedy has worked with.

[Buy Now](#)

BRENDAN SULLIVAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

## Appendix L

### Excerpt of K-W-L-Q Chart from division meeting

What do we <b>know</b> ?	What do we <b>want to know</b> ?	What did we <b>learn</b> ?	What <b>questions</b> do we still have?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “One school has moved off Priority Status”</li> <li>• “There is criteria for selection”</li> <li>• “There is targeted professional development through an external consultant”</li> <li>• “The exit strategy is not clear to everyone”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Has student achievement increased in these schools?”</li> <li>• “What have we learned about the process that can be scaled”</li> <li>• “How can we sustain the work without additional resources?”</li> <li>• “Content specific training for teachers”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The process for plan creation is changing to be able to utilize resources (NDE) in support.”</li> <li>• “Saw a plan! That’s great! Shirley is open with communication - appreciated!”</li> <li>• “There is a need to continue to ask for feedback/input from NDE staff.”</li> <li>• “Saw the priority school plan. Lists artifacts as items showing how schools progress toward their plan.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I understand there are approximately 80 schools in ‘needs improvement’. If only 3 schools are designated at one time for 3 yrs., it seems like it will take a lifetime to help all the schools who need it!”</li> <li>• “How are we meeting individual needs of the priority schools as they have different challenges. Also- good to look at commonalities among them.”</li> <li>• “How can the work be duplicated/replicated to be able to meet needs across the state?”</li> <li>• “Who implements, plan, organize and provides professional development/ teacher training/administrative support &amp; instructional materials (extra if needed) to the priority schools?”</li> </ul>



## Appendix M

### Sample email communication with Priority Schools about PD opportunity

You're Invited: Priority School 7-12 Math Professional Development

Vargas, Shirley

Mon 10/29/2018 8:28 AM

To:

Cc:

Good morning Superintendent [REDACTED] & Schuyler Central High School Team,

I'm so excited to share with you details about the opportunity to engage in a collaborative professional development session oriented around 7-12 math content and instruction. We have a full day of learning that will strengthen our collective mathematics content knowledge and instruction, build a community of practitioners across schools, and support our goals in our Priority School Progress Plans. We strongly encourage a school administrator to attend the session, along with their teachers, to ensure alignment of messaging, follow-up on any action steps, and consider how to turnkey knowledge gained with other educators in your school/district.

Please take two minutes to [complete this survey](#), where you identify which school-based administrator will attend, which math teachers will attend, and the number of substitutes you are requesting. This information will help us prepare the appropriate number of materials, contracts, and of course, food! We would love a representative from the middle school and at least two from the high school, but you are more than welcomed to send more from the high school.

**Who:** Priority School principals, secondary math teachers (7-12 focus), ESU, and NDE partners

**What:** 7-12 math professional development, building connections with colleagues in other Priority Schools

**Where:** Ag Building in Neligh, NE: 709 E Hwy 275, Neligh, NE 68756

**When:** November 16, 2018, 8:45 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

NDE will provide a light breakfast and a working lunch. We will also reimburse the mileage for one personal vehicle per district traveling to Neligh. Please expect a contract for substitute teacher reimbursement.

If you have any questions, please let me know!

Best Regards,  
Shirley

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Shirley B. Vargas  
Student Achievement Coordinator  
Nebraska Department of Education  
[REDACTED]

## Thank You and Resources

Vargas, Shirley

Mon 11/19/2018 6:56 PM

To:

Cc:

Body

4 attachments (816 KB)

Resources for Nov 16 2018 Neligh HS Math Day.docx; InAction2.jpg; InAction1.jpg; MeanMedianMode.jpg;

Good evening all,

Thank you all so much for participating in our Priority School Math PD Day in Neligh. It was a great day of learning, laughing, and collaborating.

In reviewing the feedback forms, some statements that stick out:

- "I liked that we had time over lunch to talk with other teachers from other schools"
- "I liked hearing from multiple people; administrators and teachers"
- "I liked the activities and I enjoyed having a voice"
- "I plan to use more strategies with vocabulary"
- "I plan to share this information with my colleagues"
- "I plan to try more projects/activities with my students to understand the concepts better"

Additionally, there were comments that focused on things you'd like to know more about:

- "How NE standards correlate to ACT CCR standards"
- "Different resources for ELL students"
- "Free resources"
- "Different strategies for teaching different topics"

Attached you will find the one-pager mathematics resource list with the live links and the [Instructional Shifts: Math PPT](#).

As you dig into these resources and those available through your ESU and NDE, consider how you'd like to build out this network of educators. Please share your ideas with me, Russ, your ESU, etc.

I am grateful for the collaboration that exists amongst this group of educators and I look forward to seeing you all soon.

(I've attached some pictures!)

Best Regards,  
Shirley

Appendix N  
Agenda for Priority School math PD session

**Math Day November 16, 2018, Neligh, NE**

Welcome & Introductions	NOTES/Questions
MATH is a 4 Letter Word	
EL & Math Project	
Yes... But... → Yes, And	
Instructional Shifts	
CCR 2015 Math Standards Story	
When will I ever use this?	
Working Lunch Hot Topics: IM and Acceleration	
Debrief Comments and Share Resources	
Mental Math – How did your brain figure out the answer?	
NE MATH Processes & CC Mathematical Practices	
Which Holds More?	
What does MEAN mean?	
Resource Review	
Next Steps/Follow up support – How do we continue to network?	