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Briefing Report 1

Nebraska Legislative Issues Symposium
University of Nebraska at Omaha

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BRIEFING REPORT

1

NEBRASKA LEGISLATIVE ISSUES SYMPOSIUM

DO WE KNOW WHAT PROMOTES QUALITY LOCAL EDUCATION?

Contact person: Katherine Kasten, Associate Professor
Education Administration and Supervision
University of Nebraska at Omaha
Omaha, NE 68182
(402) 554-3442

We often know when we are in the presence of true quality—whether a person, a piece of music, a football team, or a school—but the attributes of quality are not easy to describe, and the whole is always more than the sum of the parts. Although people may generally agree on some of the attributes of quality in something as complex as local schools and school districts, quality is ultimately judged by individual interests and needs.

Nebraska has many high-quality schools and school districts. One of the reasons is that they have not had to deal with the overwhelming problems of social and cultural diversity, economic scarcity, and political divisiveness that have confronted other states. But, regardless of these advantages, the accomplishments of Nebraska's schools have been impressive. For example:

- Graduates have ranked well in national comparisons;
- The graduation rate is high, and our student/teacher ratio is low;
- Schools have supplied well-educated, reliable workers for the state and the region; and
- Although Nebraska's teachers have been paid poorly, compared with teachers in other states and with other professionals,

education and the system for delivering it have been valued highly and given high priority, particularly at the local level.

Values and Priorities

In the mid-1980s, the values and priorities of previous eras are changing because of the following:

- Depopulation, particularly in rural areas;
- An aging population;
- A decline in the proportion of households with school-aged children;
- Changing family structures;
- An increased number of children living in poverty; and
- A state economy that lags others in generating employment.

As society changes, peoples' needs for services change, and their spending priorities change. State general aid to education in Nebraska has been reduced at a time when the pattern nationally has been to increase state support because of its links to economic growth and well-being. Local taxpayers are being asked to assume a greater share of the cost of schooling at a time when fewer of them are involved directly with the public schools. At the

same time, there is an increased sense that educational systems, including elementary and secondary schools, will be critical to the ability of states and localities to garner their share of the jobs generated by an information-based economy. A changing economy will require many changes, particularly in the area of providing students with problem-solving skills.

ADVOCATES MUST BE AWARE OF THESE SHIFTS: As support for the public schools is threatened, it is imperative that Nebraskans consider what can be done to promote quality local education. The states that have done the most to reform education in the 1980s have tended to be those that had the most to do to upgrade the quality of schools. What can we learn from their experiences so that we may act before Nebraska, too, is faced with low-quality schools and intractable educational problems? Can we use what we know to maintain and enhance the quality of one of our most important resources, our system of strong and effective local schools?

Factors Promoting Quality Education

Nine factors that promote quality local education are described. None is sufficient in itself, and none is a guarantee of quality. Some can be used to diminish quality as well as to support it. All are difficult to attain and sustain. Quality has always been reserved for those who are willing to make special efforts.

STATE INITIATIVE FOR CHANGE: We know that initiative for change at the state level can promote quality local education.

What indicates pressure for change?

- Statewide task forces and commissions established to consider educational issues;
- New legislation passed;
- State requirements for teacher and administrator certification established or intensified; and
- State requirements regarding curriculum, graduation, and student assessment are established or intensified.

What's happening in the states?

- Over 300 state commissions on education were formed in the early 1980s;
- The California Assessment Program (CAP) tests students at grades 3, 6, 8, 10, and 12;
- Since 1980, 45 states and the District of Columbia have altered their

requirements for earning a standard high school diploma;

- Testing of practicing teachers was implemented in Texas at an estimated cost of over \$30 million; and
- Six states have made computer literacy a requirement for graduation.

SUPPORT FROM ADVOCATES: We know that support from advocates at the state and local levels can promote quality local education.

What indicates support from advocates?

- Public addresses by the governor focusing on educational issues;
- Strong advocates of education serving on legislative education and appropriation committees;
- Attention given to education in the news media;
- State superintendent of schools identifies themes and issues;
- Business leaders pay attention to education issues; and
- Local programs have local advocates.

What's happening in the states?

- Governors in Arkansas, Colorado, New Jersey, and Tennessee, among others, gained national reputations for concern with education;
- In New Mexico, in 1987, the governor and the state board of education submitted a joint public school budget recommendation;
- Six North Carolina businesses designed and financed a study of conditions in the state's public schools; and
- In Texas, businessman H. Ross Perot headed Governor Mark White's special committee on school reform.

SUPPORT FROM STATE DEPARTMENTS: We know that support from the state department of education promotes quality local education.

What indicates state department support?

- Collegial relations between the state department of education and local schools;
- Resources, such as technical services, data collection, and program expertise, available from the state department; and
- Advocates for program improvement in the state department.

What's happening in the states?

- In Maryland, the state's school chief, David Hornbeck, led efforts to help

districts improve achievement;

- Don Roberts, chief state school officer in Arkansas, initiated the Program for Effective Teaching (PET); and
- Only a few states, including South Carolina and Tennessee, have earmarked significant money for analysis of the impact of reform.

BALANCE BETWEEN STATE AND LOCAL CONTROL: We know that respect for the balance between state and local control of schools promotes quality local education.

What indicates balance of control?

- Fit between state programs and local needs,
- Improvement plans developed at the local district and local school levels and approved at the state level,
- Compliance balanced with assistance,
- Consultative relationships between state and local policy groups, and
- State efforts targeted at developing local expertise.

What's happening in the states?

- School improvement projects were mandated in Colorado and Pennsylvania, among other states;
- Incentives for schools to participate in improvement programs were provided in Ohio and Connecticut;
- Maryland's School Improvement Through Instructional Process (SITIP) program is voluntary and based on matching grants;
- Discretionary money was provided to schools in California and Massachusetts, among other states;
- The state may intervene in academically bankrupt school districts in seven states;
- Virtually none of the reform reports of the 1980s discussed the role of local school boards in promoting quality education; and
- State-mandated school district reorganization has been difficult in South Dakota and Illinois.

STABILITY IN STAFFING: We know that stability of teacher and administrator staffing at the local level promotes quality local education.

What indicates stability?

- Low turnover in faculty and administration,
- Good labor relations, and

• Minimal threats of cutbacks in programs or reductions in staff.

What's happening in the states?

- Nationally, 41 states have career ladders or other kinds of teacher incentive programs;
- Iowa raised minimum teachers' salaries to \$18,000 beginning in fall 1987; and
- New York City developed the Mathematics and Science Relicensing Program to retrain teachers in the system to teach in shortage areas.

ADEQUATE RESOURCES: We know that adequate resources are necessary to promote quality local education.

What indicates adequate resources?

- Financial support for program improvement,
- Support for staff development and materials,
- Acceptable local per pupil expenditures,
- Safe and appropriate facilities, and
- Class sizes and adult-to-pupil ratios within tolerable ranges.

What's happening in the states?

- Nationally, state funding for education rose from 37 percent to nearly 50 percent between 1970 and 1980;
- The average pupil to teacher ratio in 1986 was 17.9, down from 18.9 in 1982;
- Average expenditures per pupil in 1986 were \$3,449, up from \$2,726 in 1982;
- A one-cent sales tax enacted in South Carolina provided \$213 million to fund the Education Improvement Act of 1984; and
- A blue-ribbon panel in Michigan and the governor's commission on local property tax relief in Wisconsin both called for shifts from local property tax to state sources to support schools.

BELIEF THAT ALL STUDENTS CAN LEARN: We know that the belief that all students can learn promotes quality local education.

What indicates this belief?

- Choice and opportunity provided to all students in all school districts in the state;
- The state mission and school district and school goals include a clear commitment to the education of all children; and

- State policymakers, school district board members, administrators, and teachers question the effects of proposed reforms on all children.

What's happening in the states?

- Twelve states have minimum competency testing for grade level promotion, and 24 states have minimum competency testing for graduation;
- The Condition of Children Project in California will compare California children to children in other states and nations on equity criteria, trends, values, and attitudes;
- The North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics, a residential school for academically talented 11th and 12th graders, opened in Durham in 1980; and
- Under the Colorado Voucher Program for Dropouts, students who have not succeeded in their public high school may attend school in another district.

QUALITY PROGRAMS: We know that the use of high-quality programs for the improvement of education improves local educational quality.

What indicates quality programs?

- Programs are perceived as legitimate by constituent groups,
- Programs are theory-based and research-driven, and
- Programs have been validated in classrooms.

What's happening in the states?

- Maryland's SITIP program offers a choice of four research-based instructional models;
- The PET program in Arkansas is based on Madeline Hunter's clinical teaching and Benjamin Bloom's concept of mastery learning; and

- Several major cities, including Chicago, Milwaukee, New York, Minneapolis, San Diego, St. Louis, and Washington, DC, established school improvement programs based on effective schools research.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: We know that the involvement of parents and community members in schools can promote quality local education.

What indicates involvement?

- Parents are interested in their children's schooling,
- Parents and community members are well-informed about local schools,
- Parents and community members are involved in making school policy,
- Schools are open to community and parent volunteers, and
- School board positions are sought actively and filled responsibly.

What's happening in the states?

- The California School Improvement Program requires partnership councils composed of equal numbers of community members and staff within each school;
- Currently, 60,000 business-sponsored projects are underway in American schools;
- COMPACT in Boston and Partnership in New York City provide business support for urban schools;
- Minnesota and Colorado are among the 15 states that have taken formal action to increase the range from which families may select schools; and
- Education reform in Minnesota was shaped in part by a statewide "Dialogue on Education" in 1984, whereby 291 town meetings were arranged by local school districts with support from the State Department of Education.

This *Briefing Report* was developed by the Center for Applied Urban Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha for the Legislative Council Executive Board, to provide background information for the 1987 Nebraska Legislative Issues Symposium. The *Briefing Report* is intended to provide an overview,

pose important questions, and identify alternative policies and strategies for a specific issue. The views and opinions expressed are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent those of the University of Nebraska at Omaha.