March 10, 2006

Dear Nebraska Educators,

We have recently had a number of questions regarding our state’s policy towards reading instruction for young children in Nebraska. This letter, therefore, is intended to review and reinforce the Nebraska State Board of Education and the Nebraska Department of Education’s position regarding teaching reading in our schools.

The State Board of Education Reading Policy, Guidelines for Reading Instruction, and our Nebraska State Reading and Writing Standards continue to be the documents that will be used by districts as they make curriculum decisions related to literacy instruction for their students. Nebraska educators will continue to assume responsibility for creating conditions that support successful readers and writers. As in the past, districts are encouraged to utilize instructional approaches that are based on the needs of their individual students. We continue to expect that you will utilize a comprehensive approach to teaching reading which includes not only skills instruction, but extensive time spent reading and writing so that children develop and apply the reading skills that they are learning.

As you probably know, Nebraska is currently receiving funds from the federal government to implement Reading First, a focused reading initiative that supports students learning to read in grades K-3. Nebraska presently has 12 districts that participate in this grant, impacting students in 24 Nebraska schools. Our state is currently in year three of a six-year grant. In order for these 24 designated schools to receive Reading First funds, specific requirements must be met related to eligibility, program selection, program implementation, and assessment. No one reading program is required; however, programs selected must meet rigid criteria specified by the U.S. Department of Education. The requirements for participation in the Reading First program pertain only to those Nebraska schools that were granted Reading First funds.

In addition to the money and services that go directly to Reading First schools, the state receives additional funding to offer summer workshops that provide information related to five areas of reading instruction for students in grades K-3: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. All Nebraska educators are invited and encouraged to attend these workshops where they will learn research-based strategies for teaching reading. Participation in these summer workshops does not, however, require that you adopt certain programs or utilize specific assessments as you teach students to read.

The documents that are referenced in this letter are available on the web at www.nde.state.ne.us/read/BoardPolicyMain.htm. A summary of these documents is also enclosed for your convenience.

If you have questions regarding requirements for participation in Nebraska Reading First, or would like additional information regarding our State Board of Education policy and guidelines for reading instruction, please feel free to contact Kim Larson, Nebraska Department of Education Reading/Writing Director, at 402-471-4336.

Sincerely,

Douglas D. Christensen, Commissioner
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Summary of the Nebraska State Board of Education Policy and Guidelines for Reading Instruction

State Board of Education Reading/Writing Policy (October 1997)
www.nde.state.ne.us/read/BoardPolicyMain.htm

- Encourages persons closest to the child to assume responsibility for creating conditions to support successful readers/writers
- Encourages local school districts to establish a policy that recognizes the importance of providing children with reading instruction that teaches skills that are based both on the structure of language and the meaning of language in context
- Encourages instructional approaches that are based on the needs of the student and should include emphasis on appropriate strategies that recognize the developing skills of the student
- Supports systematic phonics instruction for students K-3
- Encourages students to read and write extensively to apply and develop the reading skills that they are learning

State Board of Education Guidelines for Reading Instruction (December, 2001)
www.nde.state.ne.us/read/BoardPolicyMain.htm

- Summary documents of recent research completed by the National Reading Panel (2000) were adopted as guidelines for reading instruction
  a) Teaching Children to Read - an Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction
  b) Put Reading First - The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read
  c) Put Reading First - Helping Your Child Learn to Read
- Research summarized in these documents addresses five specific areas of beginning reading instruction for students K-3: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency

Nebraska Reading/Writing Standards K-12 (September 2001)
www.nde.state.ne.us/ndestandards

- Specifies what students should know and be able to do by the end of grades 1, 4, 8, and 12
- Address skills related to reading, writing, speaking, and listening