
Nebraska

Part B

State Systemic Improvement Plan

Phase I
March, 2015

INTRODUCTION

Based on the work with Nebraska stakeholders, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) adopted one Part B State Systemic Improvement Plan. The process by which the plan was developed is described below.

INFRASTRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Uniquely Nebraska

Nebraska is a unique state and tends to do things in unique ways. From its fierce sense of individual and community ownership to its Unicameral Legislature, from its bedrock family and community local values to its statewide pride in who Nebraskans are, Nebraska is unique. Although it has an almost central location within the United States, Nebraska is located on the Mid West plains and has many landmarks that claim to be the gateway to the west. Like many states in the region, Nebraska enjoyed a population explosion in the second half of the 19th century due to the great California Gold Rush.

Nebraska's land area is 76,872 square miles with 24.3 persons per square mile, compared to the national average of 88.6. Measured by northwest to southeast diagonally, Nebraska would stretch from Richmond, Virginia to Portland, Maine, but its population would only fill the Baltimore metropolitan area. The population of Nebraska is 1,870,291, including 845,351 males and 867,912 females. There are 449 villages and cities in the state, with Omaha being the largest with 421,570 and Lincoln being second largest with 258,000 to Monowi with a population of 1 and Gross with a population of 2. Nebraska's population is concentrated in the eastern one-third of the state and along Interstate 80 that crosses the state from east to west. According to the 2010 Census, the racial makeup of Nebraska was as follows:

- 86.1% White (82.1% non-Hispanic)
- 9 % total Hispanic or Latino of any race
- 4.5% Black or African American
- 2.2% two or more races
- 1.0% American Indian and Alaska Native
- 1.8% Asian
- 0.1% Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander

The largest ancestry groups in the state are German (38.6 %), Irish (12.4%), English (9.6%), Mexican (8.7%) and Czech (5.5%). This makes German-Americans by far the largest group in Nebraska. Nebraska has the largest per capita population of Czech-Americans in the country. Both rural and urban districts across the state are experiencing an influx of Hispanic and refugee students.

Inter-relationships among the people of the state and their governments have always been largely up-close, personal, and face-to-face. Nebraskans place the highest values on its families and its communities. "Family and community first" ensures protection for those values Nebraskans treasure. It ensures that the institutions Nebraskans create and the government services Nebraskans provide, protect, support and strengthen families and communities. Specifically, schools in Nebraska are seen as extensions of and are seen as essential to the community's roles in supporting families and providing education for the next generation of adults and leaders. ¹

¹ <http://worldpopulationreview.com/states/nebraska-population/>

Nebraska's Schools

The state has been under a constant process of consolidating school districts for the past thirty or more years and the number of districts is slowly decreasing. With 587 school districts in 2003 ranging in size from one student to 45,000 students; with 300 plus elementary only school districts; with 400 plus districts of 100 students or less; and, with 60% of the students enrolled in the largest 20 school districts (data taken from "Race to the Top, Round One Application, 2010"), the numbers have changed ten years later. In 2013, there are 249 public school districts in Nebraska, with 1017 public schools in Nebraska, and 307,398 public school students in Nebraska (data taken from Nebraska Department of Education Data Reporting System and State of the Schools Report).

The state's largest school district, the Omaha Public Schools, has 51,069 students, while the McPherson County Public School district enrolls only 94 students. There are 134 Nebraska school districts that have less than 390 students or fewer than 30 students per grade level. Of Nebraska's public school students, 44.93% qualify for free or reduced price lunch, 6.04% are English language learners (ELL), and 15.74% have special education needs. These percentages, particularly students in poverty and ELL students, have risen in the state over the past decade.

Of the 93 counties statewide, 17 counties comprise the eastern third of the state where one-half of Nebraska's population resides. The western two-thirds of the state cover a region of approximately 60,000 square miles and are distributed in small populations over large land areas. Fifty percent of the districts are elementary only. Only 7% (38) of the districts have membership of 1,000 students or more and only 13% (68) have membership of 600 or more (less than 50 at a grade level). Excluding preschool, each grade level cohort in the state has about 22,000 students.

Nebraska has a history of schools with strong academic and performance traditions. For example, Nebraska students graduate from high school at a rate well above the national average and score relatively high marks on national tests, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and the ACT. This high performance level, however, does not hold-up for all student groups and the state has significant achievement gaps and graduation rate disparities. Nebraska is committed strongly to closing achievement gaps for all students. Education is about opportunities for high achievement levels for all students and Nebraskans want all students to graduate from high school career and college ready.

Nebraska School Districts

Number of students age 3-21:	307,398	Number of school districts:	249
Graduation rate, 4-year cohort:	88.49%	Graduation rate, 5-year cohort:	91.03%
FTE of teachers:	22,641.45	Per-pupil spending (2012-13):	\$11,582.44

Governance

Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) and Office of Special Education

NDE's State Board of Education, Office of Special Education, the Commissioner and State Director of Special Education are focused on improving results for all students in the state through general school improvement activities and support districts in their implementation of evidenced-based practices as well as the State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP).

Education Service Units (ESUs)

Nebraska's ESUs are intermediate education agencies mandated by state statute in 1965 to provide professional development for educators as a part of state defined core services. ESUs are service-oriented, non-regulatory agencies designed to achieve a better balance of educational opportunities for students regardless of the population, financial differences, or geographic limitations of school districts. The ESUs are uniquely situated to assist the Office of Special Education in implementing the SSIP.

Quality Standards

The NDE Office of Special Education has a statewide system for improving outcomes for children with disabilities – Improving Learning for Children with Disabilities (ILCD) that has been in place for several years. With stakeholder input, the NDE Office of Special Education organized the SPP/APR Indicators into the following three Impact Areas:

- Improving developmental outcomes and academic achievement (school readiness) for children with disabilities (ages 3-21);
- Improving communication and relationships among families, schools, communities and agencies; and
- Improving transitions for children with disabilities from early intervention to adult living.

This comprehensive, “big picture” approach provides a broader view for improving developmental outcomes and academic achievement. Accountability for children with disabilities is provided in a continuous improvement framework. The ILCD system is a key component in the RDA initiative for Nebraska schools as the focus shifts from one of compliance to a balanced system of compliance and improving results for children with disabilities and supports the implementation of the state's SSIP.

To assist in achieving the SIMR, Nebraska is in the process of developing a system in which school districts will develop a multi-year Targeted Improvement Plan (TIP) based on challenges identified through the analysis of the Impact Area data, the district infrastructure, and other pertinent district data that supports measurable improvement of results for children with disabilities and builds district capacity. The TIPs will include goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely (SMART) and state the desired results for the focus of improvement in one or more of the Impact Areas. Annually, districts will be required to report to the NDE Office of Special Education on the effectiveness of the TIP, how the district tracked progress and ensured fidelity of implementation of the TIP, and the measurable progress toward achieving the improved outcomes for children with disabilities. Revisions to the TIP will be made in response to the evaluation of the plan's effectiveness.

The model to be used by NDE for continuous improvement, Accountability for a Quality Education System, Today and Tomorrow (*A QuESTT*), is under development. This model is intended to assist Nebraska schools in aligning and coordinating the various school improvement initiatives that may be in progress in each district. Through *A QuESTT*, schools will be categorized according to multiple measures including how well students meet academic standards. Work with *A QuESTT* supports the implementation of the SSIP and districts that are designated as needing improvement will be offered targeted assistance to help student achieve standards.

Data

The Office of Special Education is represented on the NDE Data Cadre, a collaborative professional development effort between the NDE and the ESU Coordinating Council. The goal of this Cadre is to

provide a statewide system of professional development training for data analysis that reaches every district. Data literacies, which are included in the ILCD process, are the guiding framework for the statewide professional development initiative and the analysis of ILCD data includes the following:

- Data comprehension questions such as “What do the data show?”;
- Data interpretation questions such as “Why might this be?”; and
- Data use questions such as “How should we respond?”

This process will assist school districts in identifying research-based strategies that target the areas identified for improvement and will serve as a baseline measurement for the goals of the TIP, progress toward the SIMR, as well as the identification of resources needed to achieve results.

Collaboration with the Data Cadre within the Data, Research, and Evaluation Team in coordinating data analysis is also a positive endeavor at the state level in that data analysis is a key element in determining the state SIMRs. Similarly data analysis represents an essential component in the ILCD process as the identification of the Focus for Improvement and is based upon the review of the data at the district level. Drilling down with pertinent questions provides a clearer understanding of the root cause of systemic issues to be addressed in order to improve results.

Monitoring and Accountability

The Office of Special Education is currently engaged in a review and revision of the monitoring system. The current system (which is explained in more detail in the Introduction to the SPP/APR) will be revised to include the concept of differentiated monitoring and supports. Districts with more significant issues will receive more intensive reviews and supports from the NDE Office of Special Education. The level of review and support provided to the district will be determined by a review of:

- Policies and procedures;
- Selected student files;
- Complaints;
- Parent contacts;
- District Determinations; and
- Targeted Improvement Plans.

It is anticipated that the revision of the current monitoring system will be completed within the next year.

Currently, the NDE Office of Special Education issues District Determinations based on a review of district compliance and performance data. Districts receive credit for improving performance or maintaining the same level of performance. Over the next few years, the Determination criteria will be revised with more specific requirements for improving the performance of children with disabilities. The revised system will continue to take into account both compliance and performance data, however, the system will need to emphasize the importance of improved results for children with disabilities.

Technical Assistance

The NDE Office of Special Education has several mechanisms in place to ensure the timely delivery of evidence-based technical assistance and support to local education agencies. Nebraska’s statewide

system of technical assistance is based on regional support networks with multiple collaborating partners engaged in this process.

Through regional and statewide assignments, the NDE special education staff provides ongoing technical assistance to support school districts in addressing their unique needs and challenges. The NDE Office of Special Education created the ILCD process based upon the State Performance Plan (SPP) Part B indicators. The ILCD process is designed to enhance program improvement that will result in improved outcomes for children with disabilities and will assist districts in monitoring progress toward the SIMR. With stakeholder input, NDE organized the SPP indicators into three Impact Areas:

- Improving developmental outcomes and academic achievement (school readiness) for children with disabilities;
- Improving communication and relationships among families, schools, communities and agencies; and
- Improving transitions for children with disabilities from early intervention to adult living.

This comprehensive “big picture” approach provides a broader view for improving achievement outcomes within a continuous improvement framework.

Technical assistance for the ILCD process is also delivered through regional ILCD facilitators located in each ESU across the state.

The University of Nebraska System is a major component of the statewide infrastructure with specialized expertise leveraged in the delivery of technical assistance to local school districts. Disability specific regional networks of technical assistance include cadres within the ESU structure that support a full-range of technical assistance and professional development in evidence-based practices related to various disabilities.

Through the framework of the Nebraska Council of Teacher Education, stakeholders representing LEAs, ESUs and institutions of higher education (IHEs) assist NDE in the revision of general and special education endorsements to ensure that IHEs meet the highest professional standards in their degree programs and produce highly qualified staff to support children with disabilities.

Professional Development

NDE provides an array of professional development opportunities through cross-team efforts within the Department to ensure that education providers have the skills to effectively provide services that improve results for children with disabilities. The NDE Office of Special Education also works in partnership with LEAs, ESUs, and IHEs to provide a coherent, comprehensive and aligned network of professional development to support the implementation of the SSIP.

These statewide networks work in collaboration with NDE to increase the capacity of regular and special education teachers, related services providers and administrators to implement evidence-based practices such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, including Response to Intervention (RtI). The networks also focus on specific supports for students who experience autism spectrum disorder, traumatic brain injury, and sensory impairments.

In building capacity for the SSIP at the local level, the NDE Office of Special Education provides grants to the intermediate educational agencies in the State, ESUs, to provide ILCD facilitators to assist districts in the development of the multi-year TIPs. NDE Office of Special Education staff work collaboratively with ILCD facilitators, most recently created web-based training for the ILCD process for RDA. Specifically, ILCD facilitators are charged with ensuring that each school district in the ESU area has a TIP in place by August 1, 2015. In order to provide the most effective technical assistance to school districts in the future, a reevaluation of the focus and effectiveness of these grants is underway.

The Office of Special Education also collaborates with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in providing technical assistance and professional development to Nebraska school districts with regard to the implementation of the MTSS/Rtl framework, the coherent, measurable improvement strategy to narrow the achievement gap between general and regular education students on the NeSA.

Conclusions

1. The monitoring system used by the Office of Special Education needs to be revised to create a better balance between compliance and improved outcomes for students with disabilities to support the SSIP.
2. The system of “Determinations” currently used by the Office of Special Education needs to be revised to put a greater emphasis on improved results for children with disabilities ages 3-21. A system which rewards growth while emphasizing the need for improved outcomes is necessary to achieve the SIMR.
3. The governance system including the State Board of Education, Department of Education and ESUs is positioned to assist the state in implementing the SSIP and achieving the SIMR.
4. There is a strong link between the general education improvement process and the special education improvement process. Each system is centered upon improving outcomes for students and the system for improvement established by the Office of Special Education fits squarely within the requirements for general school improvement. NDE will encourage districts to submit one improvement plan containing both special and general education improvement activities.
5. The system of technical assistance and professional development currently in place in Nebraska will support the implementation of the coherent strategies necessary to achieve the SIMR.
6. The SSIP is aligned with current improvement strategies in place in Nebraska.
7. The current data system will provide the data necessary to determine the effectiveness of the coherent strategies surrounding the SSIP.

STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

Stakeholder Process

In January 2014, the NDE Office of Special Education began organizing a state-wide Results Driven Accountability (RDA) stakeholder umbrella committee. This committee was organized in order to ensure appropriate representation and build capacity with a consistent group of partners. The members of the committee were formally invited to serve as representatives and as part of the agreement to participate, the individual agreed to serve for up to three years. The intent is that Nebraska’s RDA

stakeholder committee will continue to meet while the State's Systemic Improvement Plans are developed and implemented. This will help the state's planning to continuously evolve and help ensure ambitious and meaningful change.

Nebraska's RDA committee represents diverse disciplines and experiences. Committee members represent multiple internal and external partners. Additionally, Nebraska was intentional about organizing a group of stakeholders involved in supporting children with disabilities ages birth through age 21. Therefore, the committee representation has supported the state in planning seamless improvement strategies that will focus on improved results for infants and toddlers and their families (Early Intervention ages birth- 3); preschool children in early childhood (Part B, ages 3-5); and school age children and youth (Part B, ages 6-21). The stakeholder group included representatives of parents, special education directors, special education staff, general education administration (principals, superintendents), institutions of higher education, NDE teams (Approval/Accreditation, School Improvement, Equity and Instructional Strategies, Curriculum and Instruction), community agencies, nonpublic schools, and the Nebraska State Education Association and the Nebraska Association of Special Education Supervisors.

This group has met periodically throughout the past year and will continue meeting to establish/review targets and performance as indicated in the SPP/APR and the development and implementation of the SSIP. In April 2014, the stakeholders met for the first time. This initial meeting provided an opportunity for the stakeholders to learn about the required components of Phase 1 of the SSIP. After introducing these requirements, broad data analysis and infrastructure analysis was conducted. Trend data for all SPP indicators were reviewed. Data were disaggregated in multiple ways in order to present a complete and comprehensive picture of state and regional performance. Furthermore, the April meeting offered facilitated conversations about current projects and results data derived from these evidence based initiatives. The purpose of the discussion was to analyze current improvement efforts and those which closely align with existing state priorities.

Nebraska's stakeholder group convened again in October 2014. Stakeholders were provided additional state data and updates on timely state priorities which lead to discussion and selection of the SIMR and coherent improvement strategies to support the SIMR.

In addition to the stakeholder group established specifically for the purpose of gathering input on the RDA and the development of the SSIP, Nebraska also obtained input from two longstanding stakeholder groups with some members serving as liaisons to the RDA stakeholder committees: Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) and the State Results Matter Task Force. The council is established pursuant to 34 CFR 300.167 and as such provides for input from a diverse group of stakeholders. SEAC and the Task Force, which regularly discusses the SPP/APR and provides input on the targets and strategies contained therein, has reviewed and supported the work of the stakeholder group. SEAC and the Task Force will continue to be utilized for input on the development of Phases II and III of the SSIP and monitor progress toward the SIMR.

A complete listing of the stakeholders is included in Appendix A (Nebraska's RDA Stakeholder Membership).

Conclusions

1. The stakeholder groups consist of those parties necessary to plan and implement strategies necessary for improving results for children with disabilities.

2. Stakeholders were involved in the process to select, identify, and analyze existing data.
3. The stakeholders analyzed the infrastructure and supported the plans to revise the monitoring and determination system.
4. The stakeholders will continue to be involved in the development of Phase 2 and 3 of the SSIP.
5. The stakeholders supported the development of TIPs at the local level.
6. The stakeholders supported the development of the SIMR and coherent improvement strategies contained in Indicator 17.
7. The stakeholders support the “Theory of Action” and will be provided with a graphic illustration of how implementation of the coherent improvement strategies will lead to improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

Data Analysis

ACTION 1:

In approaching the Part B State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) Nebraska began by conducting a broad data analysis of each of the Part B APR indicators. NDE staff and the RDA stakeholder group met to review the performance on each of the Indicators over time. (Appendix B - Indicator Data Broad View)

DEDUCTION 1:

Review of the compliance indicators confirmed that Nebraska is continually meeting nearly all of the compliance targets therefore, it is not expected that compliance factors will pose a barrier to results improvement. Compliance training by NDE, school districts and ESUs over the years has had a positive impact on the state’s performance.

Performance indicators that showed the greatest need for improvement included graduation rate and assessment data for both school-age and preschool. As the SSIP should impact results for children, the stakeholder group felt that addressing reading assessment data was important and would also have an impact over time on the state graduation rate.

ACTION 2:

Stakeholder groups engaged in a focused data analysis in the area reading assessment proficiency. A review was done of reading results at the elementary, middle and high school level for both special education students and the all-student population (see Table 1A-C). The gap between special education reading performance and all-student reading performance at each grade level was assessed (see Table 2). In addition, multiple variables regarding reading proficiency of special education students compared to all-students by race/ethnicity (see Table 3) and gender (see Table 4) was addressed as well as special education reading proficiency rates by disability category (see Table 5). The detailed analysis revealed that regardless of how the assessment scores were disaggregated, there was a significant gap between the performance of special education students and their nondisabled peers on the statewide reading assessment.

Table 1A

Elementary Reading All Student and Special Ed Achievement

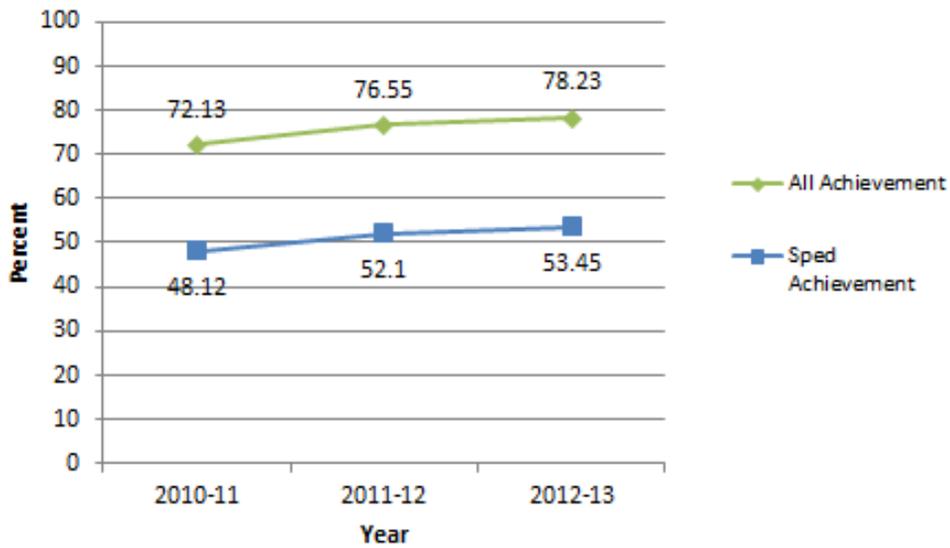


Table 1B

Middle School Reading All Student and Special Ed Achievement

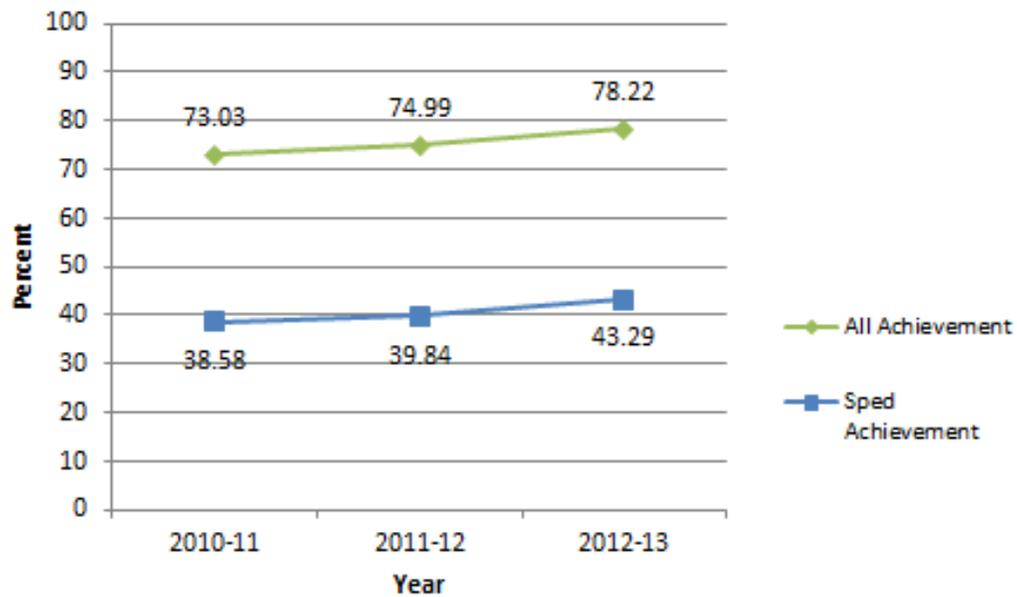


Table 1C

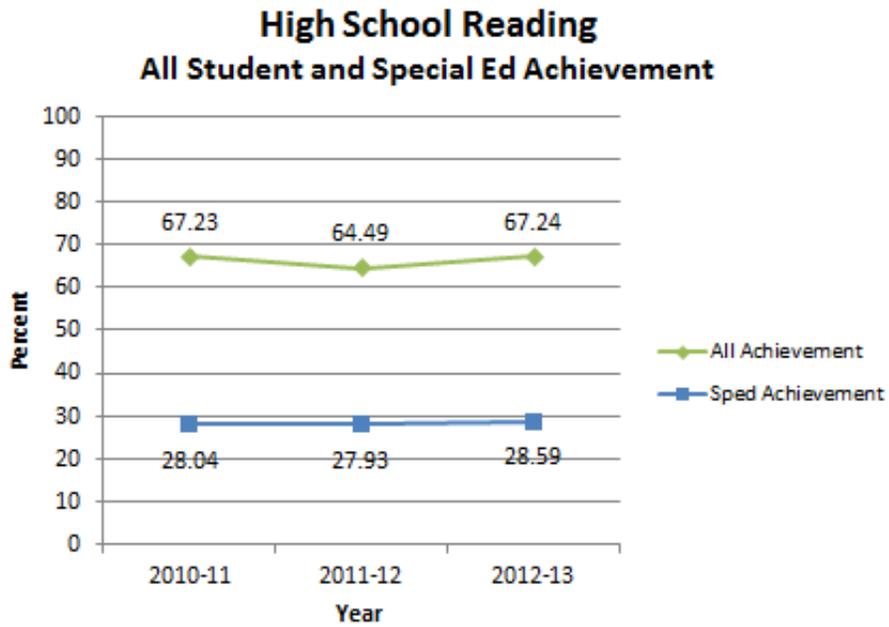


Table 2

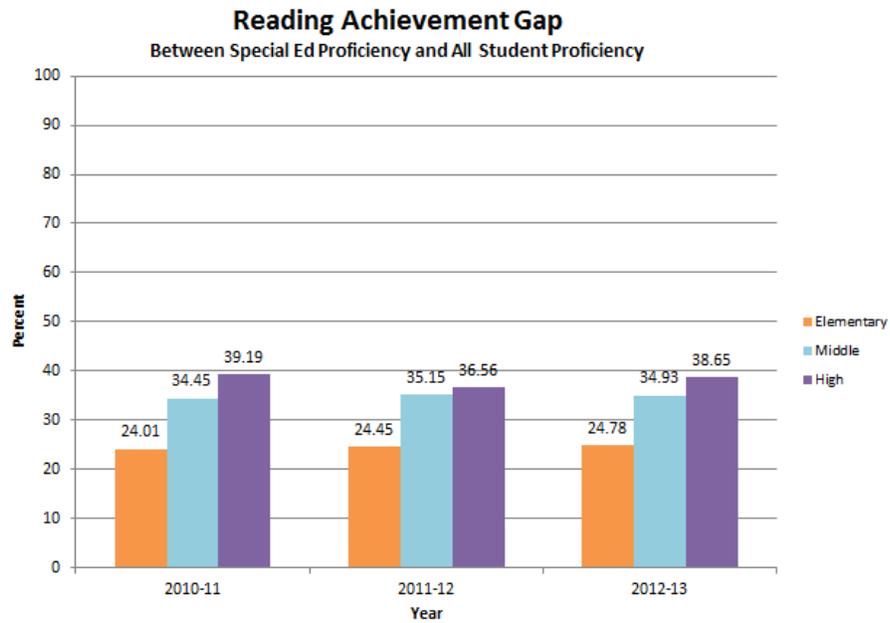


Table 3
Reading Proficiency by Race
2012-2013

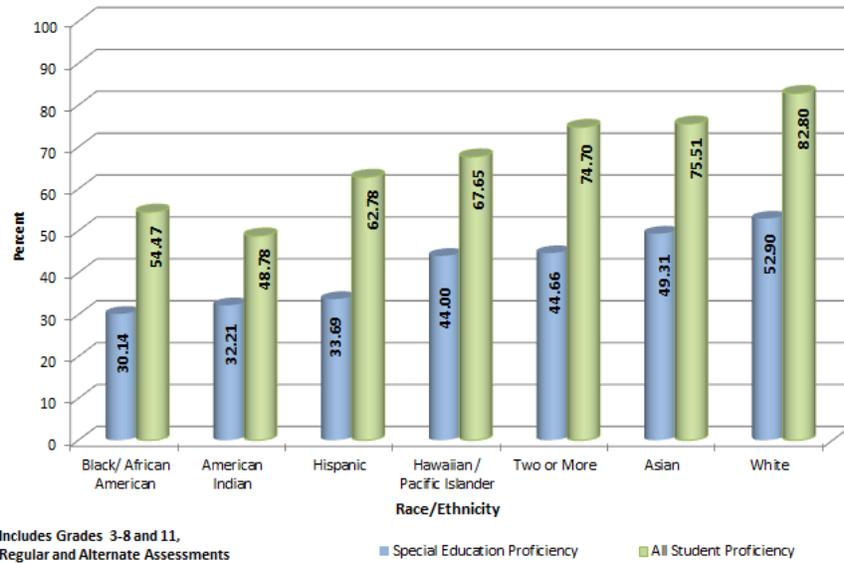


Table 4
Reading Proficiency by Gender
2012-2013

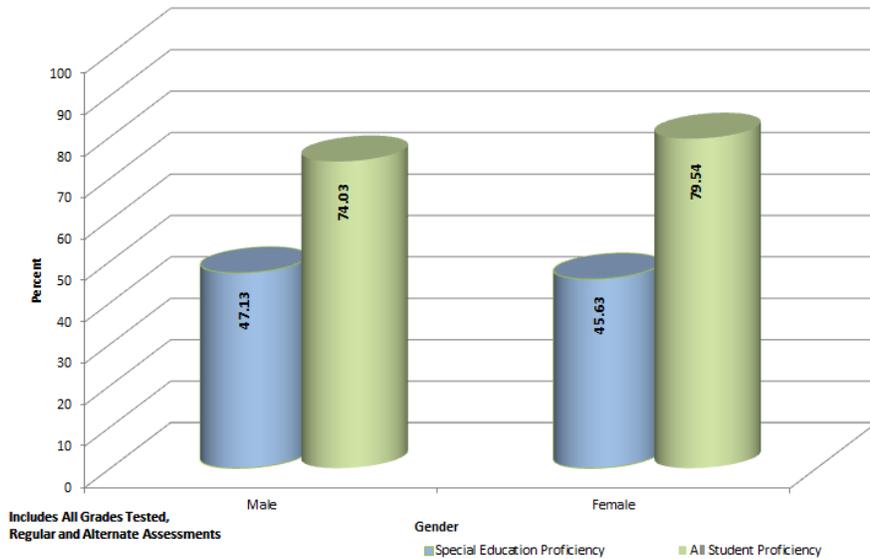
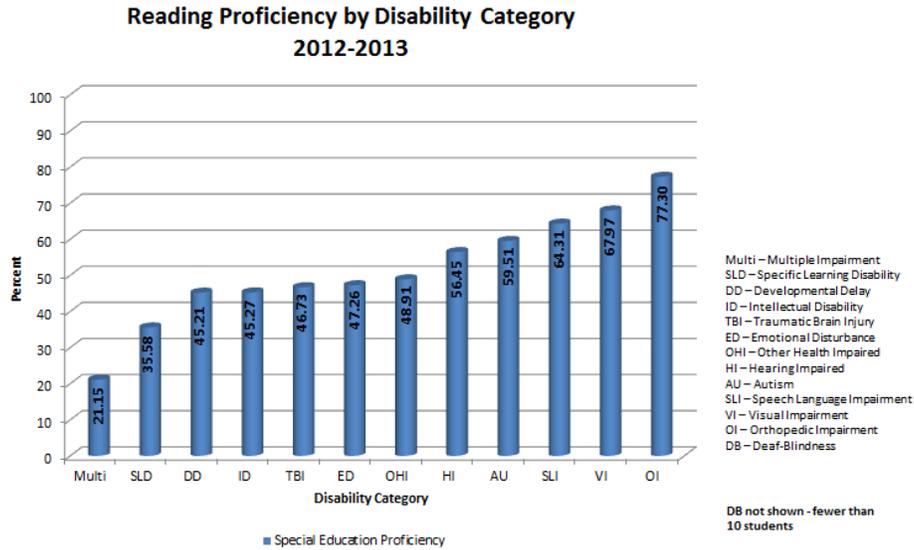


Table 5



DEDUCTION 2:

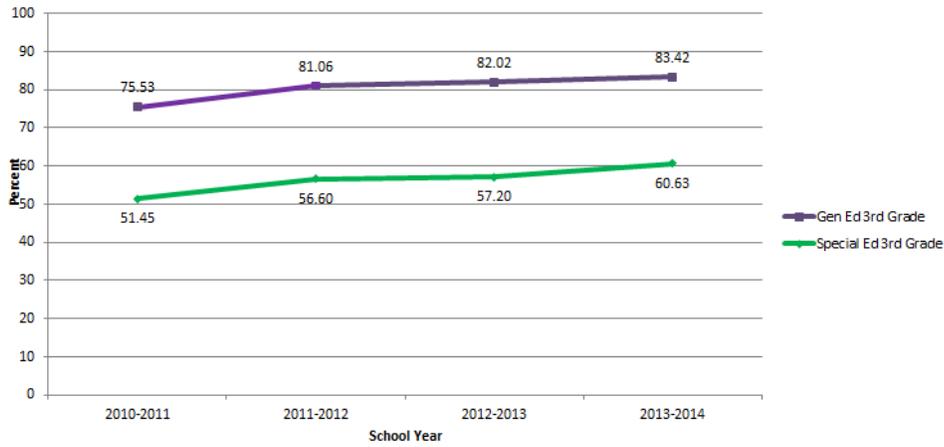
Using root cause analysis, stakeholders determined lack of coherent, scientifically-based research interventions at early ages has led to the widening of the achievement gap for reading over the grade levels. There is some disparity between races/ethnicities in reading performance (see Appendix C) but it was not felt that the significance was such that it warranted a focus on one particular group. Because the achievement gap persists across all groups it is envisioned that all races/ethnicities and all disability categories will benefit from the SSIP.

The current statewide reading assessment began in 2009-2010. With several years of implementation and use of the assessment tool, Nebraska feels that the quality of the data is reliable and holds a consistent trend over time. Continued work is done with the Data, Research, and Evaluation Office and the Assessment Office to assure data quality. Currently the state does not have a way to measure reading performance prior to grade 3; however, districts monitor student progress through measures such as MAP, AIMSweb, and DIBELS a minimum of three times a year.

ACTION 3:

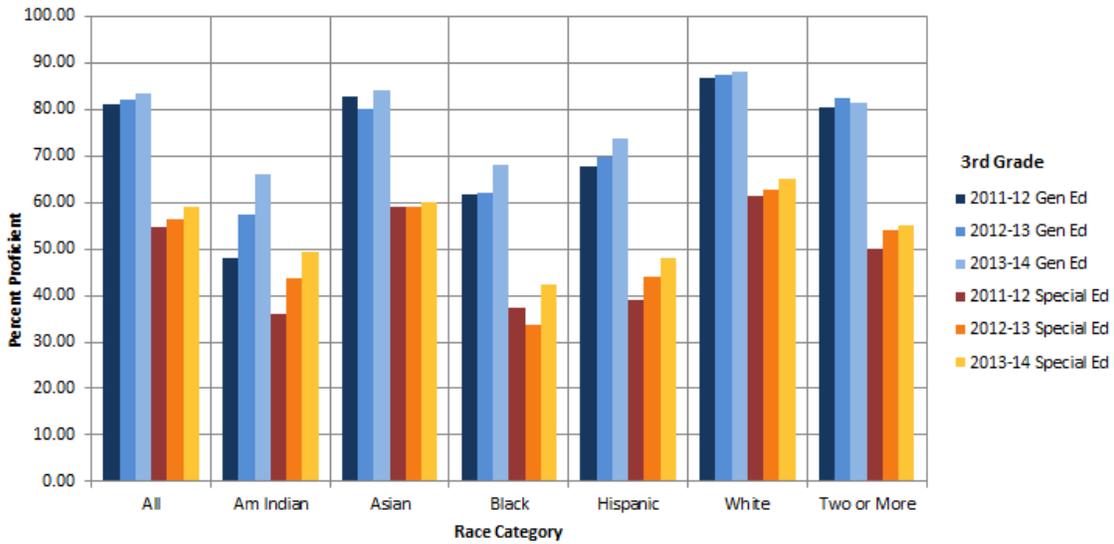
To provide direction for the SSIP, stakeholders felt that initially focusing efforts on early literacy would provide the greatest impact. Providing reading intervention at the earliest ages is critical. Research indicates that students not performing at grade level in reading by third grade will achieve limited academic success. As state level assessment in reading is done for the first time at grade three, an in-depth focus analysis of third grade data was done. The achievement gap in reading between special education and general education third grade students over four years was assessed (see Table 6). It was observed that the increase in 3rd grade reading proficiency has been improving at close to the same rate for special education students and general education students however, a substantial reading gap continues. The proficiency level of third grade students by race/ethnicity (see Table 7), disability category (see Table 8) and gender (see Table 9) was also reviewed. English Language Learners and Low Income are factors that impact education as a whole and were data points that were also considered (see Table 10).

Table 6
Reading Percent Proficient
Grade 3



	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
Gen Ed Grade 3	75.53	81.06	82.02	83.42
Special Ed Grade 3	51.45	56.60	57.20	60.63
Achievement Gap Grade 3	24.08	24.46	24.82	22.79

Table 7
3rd Grade Proficiency by Race Category



Pacific Islander
 – Not Shown,
 fewer than 10
 students

Table 8
3rd Grade Proficiency by Disability Category

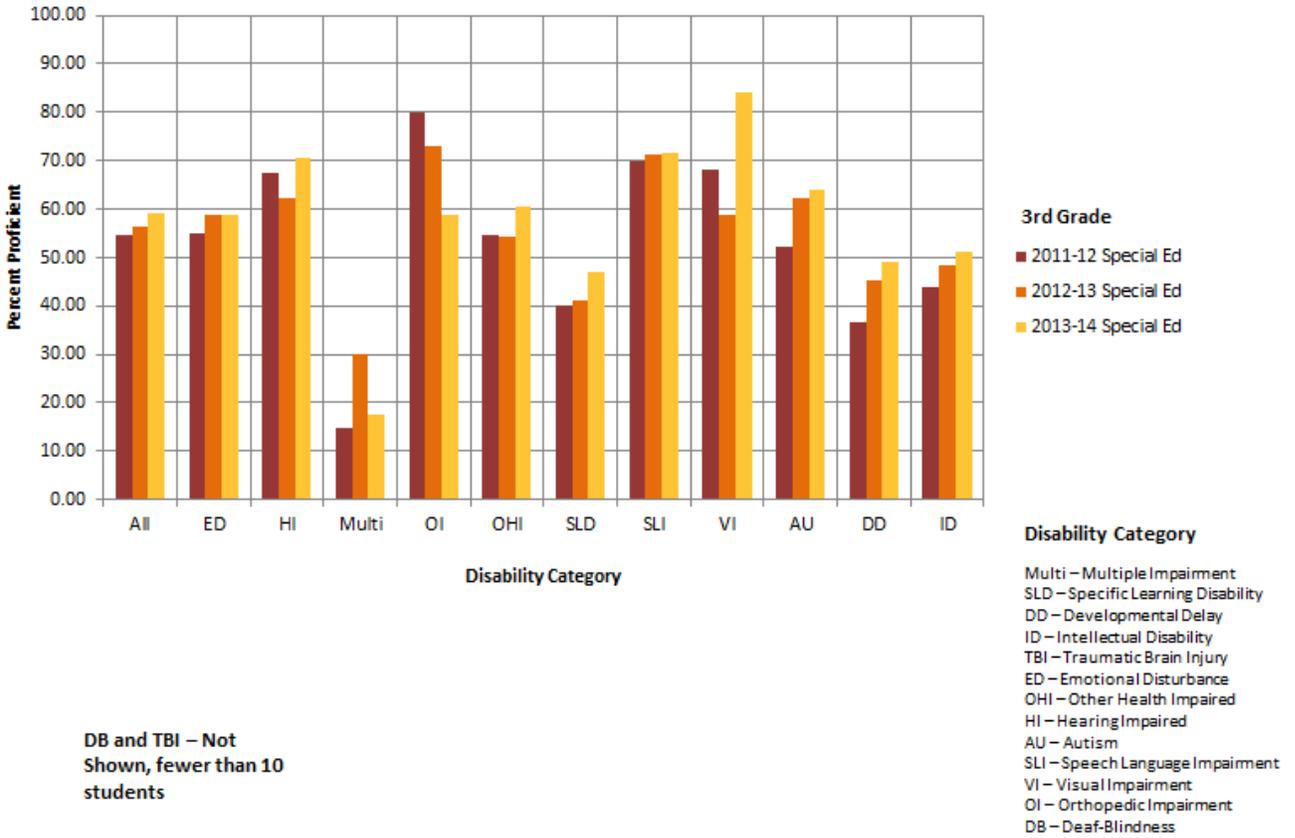


Table 9
3rd Grade Reading Proficiency by Gender
2013-2014

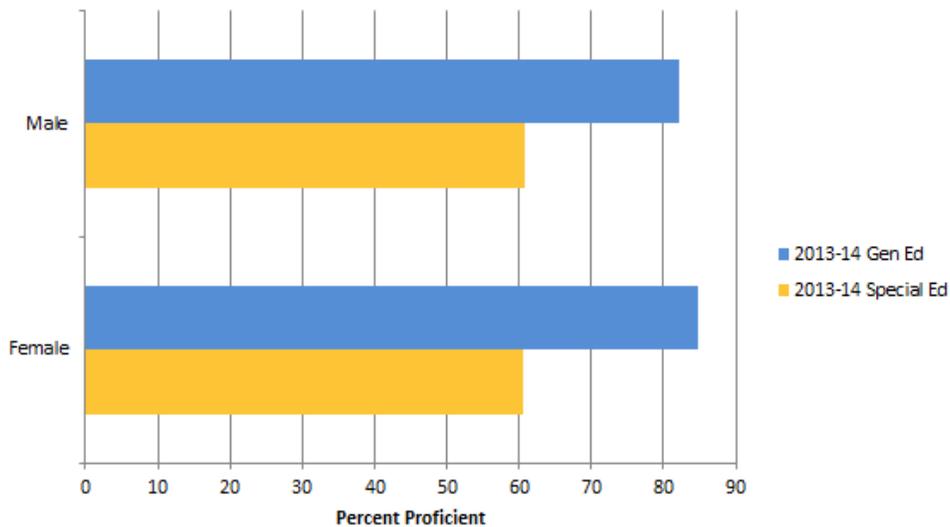
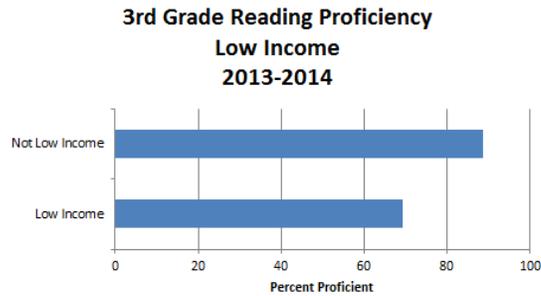
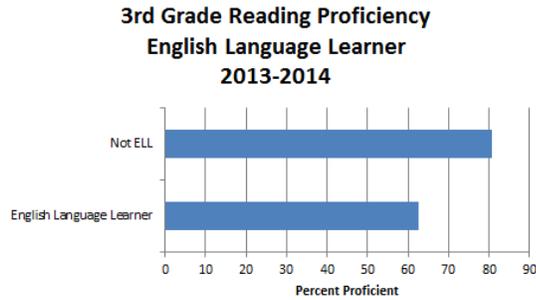


Table 10



DEDUCTION 3:

Again, stakeholders did not feel the data by race/ethnicity, disability category or gender warranted a narrow focus on only one or more groups because the reading gap was persistent across the measures. It is proposed the entire population will benefit from the SIMR. As the scientific research-based intervention, Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) has been selected as a coherent improvement strategy for narrowing the achievement gap for reading between general education and special education students. By implementing this strategy, Nebraska expects to narrow the achievement gap for reading. Further, it is anticipated, the plan to focus resources on early literacy success will improve reading proficiency across the grades. Research indicates students meaningfully engaged will stay in school thus improving Nebraska’s graduation rate. More data from the MTSS project (such as scores from MAP, DIBLES, and AIMSweb for students in kindergarten through 3rd grade) will be collected and analyzed as the evaluation process is developed for Phase II of the SSIP.

State-Identified Measureable Result

After the stakeholder committees engaged in a thorough analysis of the data and discussion of the infrastructure in place in Nebraska, the following State Identified Measurable Result (SIMR) was selected for school age students with disabilities receiving services under Part B of the IDEA:

Narrow the gap between the reading proficiency rates of students with disabilities and the general education students at 3rd grade.

Baseline and Targets

Baseline Data – Reading Proficient Gap 2013

	Proficiency Rate	
General Education Grade 3	83.42%	Gap between General and Special Education (3 rd Grade) 22.79%
Special Education Grade 3	60.63%	

FFY 2013 – FFY 2018 Targets

FFY	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Target	22.79%	22.79%	22.29%	22.20%	21.79%

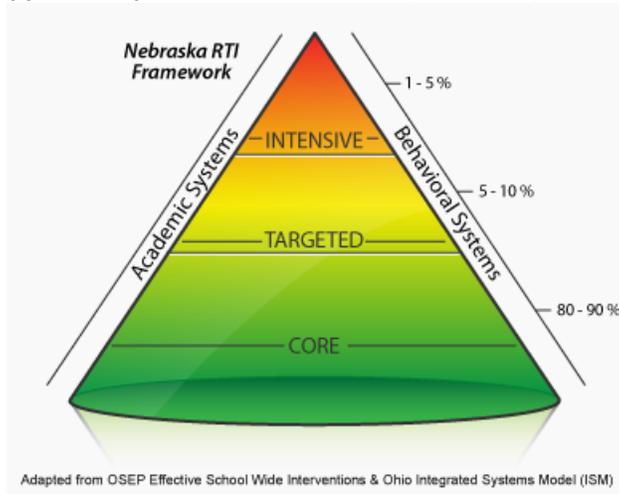
The SIMR was selected based on its alignment with Indicator 3C of the SPP as well as its close tie to the Nebraska State Board of Education statewide initiative for continuous improvement. In selecting the SIMR, the stakeholder committees reviewed and analyzed the data and infrastructure in place in Nebraska. The stakeholders reviewed the Office of Special Education’s activities, cross-team activities and current state initiatives to identify and support improvement. Internal and external data was reviewed and analyzed to isolate key factors through a drill down process, which would influence the selection of the SIMR. State improvement initiatives were studied and opportunities for aligning with these initiatives explored, from both a state and a local level. Benefits for students with disabilities, as well as students without disabilities, were debated from the perspective of the impact of an increased capacity by school districts and programs to narrow the gap between the reading performance of children in special education and the children in general education, while also demonstrating improved results for the individual child.

Review of the data on the Reading Proficiency Gap over a 4 year period (2010-2011 thru 2013-2014), indicates that while the reading proficiency rate has increased for both children in special education and children in general education, there continues to be a 22.79% gap between the reading proficiency of children in special education and of children in general education (see Table 6).

There are a number of initiatives, both on the state level and the local level, that address the issue of narrowing the gap between the reading performance of children in general education and children receiving special education services. In reviewing the data, the reading proficiency rate had an impact across levels. To focus on improving results, coherent improvement strategies that were sound and aligned with state and local initiatives were identified. To successfully achieve the SIMR, the development of coherent strategies including a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) and the implementation of evidence-based practices for reading are necessary.

The focus of MTSS is on improved student outcomes for all students through the provision of high-quality scientifically/research-based reading instruction and interventions that are matched to student academic needs. Through a multi-tiered framework, the process enables districts to provide early literacy support and assistance to students who are struggling to attain or maintain grade level reading performance. Teachers no longer have to wait for students to fail before reading interventions can begin. MTSS provides a consistent model and procedures to make collaborative data-based educational decisions for all students.

Multi-Tiered System of Support/Response-to-Intervention (MTSS/RtI) Framework in Nebraska



Coherent Improvement Strategies

The goal of Nebraska's SIMR is to narrow the achievement gap for reading between general and special education students on the statewide assessment (NeSA). Nebraska selected a coherent improvement strategy based upon data from the NeSA test for reading at third grade. A trend analysis from the past four years indicates a significant achievement gap between general education students and students with disabilities at grade 3. In 2013-14, the gap was 22.79 percent (see Table 6).

Statewide data indicates a clear need to improve the reading performance of children with disabilities in local school districts throughout the state. While Nebraska's overall special education data is favorable with regard to compliance, Nebraska school districts are not meeting the targets for the Nebraska State Assessment (NeSA) for reading at grades 3, 4, 8 or 11, and there is a significant gap between the performances of students in general education and children with disabilities on NeSA.

The NDE, Office of Special Education, with stakeholder input, identified MTSS/RtI as a sound, logical, coherent strategy that is aligned with the SIMR. MTSS/RtI is a multi-tiered, evidence-based model of providing instruction and intervention supports to ALL students based on needs identified through data. Student data and data on instructional delivery are used to make decisions about the effectiveness of supports being provided for students. As students' needs increase, the intensity of the instruction and intervention increases.

The MTSS/RtI strategy addresses the need to improve reading performance as identified through the analysis of state data. First, MTSS/RtI provides a district/school-wide approach by building systems of support for all students. At the same time, MTSS/RtI focuses on improving skills of teachers to more effectively address literacy development by providing multiple levels of support for all learners, including students receiving special education supports. MTSS requires teachers, administrators, district personnel, and student support specialists to collaborate in providing support to all students, regardless of whether they have been identified as being eligible for special education services or the category in which a child may qualify for additional supports. The focus on instructional data assists in informing and improving the quality of reading instruction. Further, the strong emphasis on differentiated coaching and training in the MTSS/RtI framework offers support for teachers, which is a key factor in enabling districts and schools to reach high levels of implementation of evidence-based literacy

programs and practices. The overarching goal of MTSS is to build the infrastructure to provide the most effective reading instruction and supports for all students. Resources are best leveraged by providing supports based on need, not labels. Design and implementation of an MTSS/RtI system is a multi-year effort.

MTSS/RtI is a logical strategy to promote improved results in Nebraska school districts as it is a state-supported initiative already underway. NDE currently partners with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), Nebraska Multi-Tiered System of Support Implementation Support Team (NeMTSS IST) that provides training and technical assistance to schools across the state to assist them in building an MTSS model. The NeMTSS IST helps schools apply the findings from Implementation Science (Fixsen et al)² to create an infrastructure for selecting evidence-based practices and building capacity of school personnel to achieve deep implementation of those practices. Schools electing to work with the NeMTSS IST establish school/district implementation teams that receive training on these frameworks and MTSS/RtI components as well as onsite support from a NeMTSS IST Technical Assistance (TA) provider.

Following training sessions NeMTSS IST TA providers work directly with individual district/school teams to apply content from training to build an MTSS model that enhances local capacity. The NeMTSS uses a systematic scope and sequence for training teams and the training includes topics such as:

- The what and why of MTSS;
- Systems change and implementation science;
- Getting better results from core reading instruction;
- Building an effective intervention system;
- Explicit instruction; and
- Data-based decision making and individual student problem solving.

Research has shown that children who are at risk for reading difficulties can be identified as early as preschool and that a strong foundation for young learners leads to long-term benefits. Intervention provided at 3rd or 4th grade takes 4 times longer than intervention delivered at kindergarten (Lyon, 1998)³. Nationally, 1 in 6 students not reading proficiently at 3rd grade do not graduate from high school on time (Hernandez, 2011)⁴. Without intervention, 90% of struggling first graders are still struggling at the end of elementary school. Without intervention 74% of students who are poor readers in third grade will be poor readers in ninth grade, and struggling readers have a higher risk of academic failure and school dropout (Al Otaiba & Torgesen, 2007⁵; Hart & Risley, 1995⁶; Felton & Pepper, 1995⁷; Francis, et al., 1996⁸; Juel, 1988⁹; Torgesen and Burgess, 1998¹⁰; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007¹¹).

² Fixsen, D.L.; Blase, K. A.; Naoom, S. F.; and, Duda, M. A. (2013). National Implementation Research Network (NIRN)

³ Lyon, G. R. (1995). Toward a definition of dyslexia. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 45, 3-27.

⁴ Hernandez, D.J. (2012) *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*. Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

⁵ Al Otaiba, S. & Torgesen, J. (2007). Effects from intensive standardized kindergarten and first grade interventions for the prevention of reading difficulties. In S. R. Jimerson, M. K. Burns, & A. M. VanDerHeyden (Eds.), *The handbook of response to intervention: The science and practice of assessment and intervention* (pp. 212-222). New York, NY: Springer.

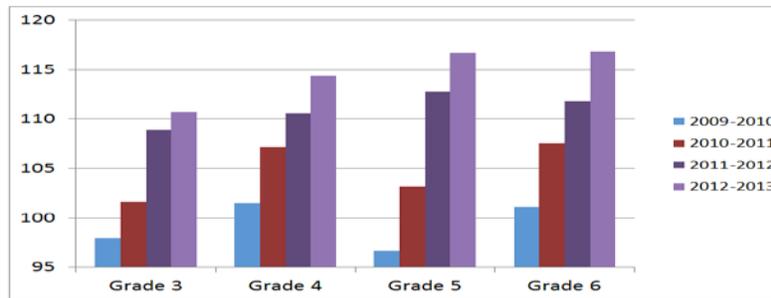
⁶ Hart, B., & Risley, R. T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

One hypothesized root cause for low performance is a lack of deep implementation of evidence-based literacy practices for students with disabilities. In Nebraska schools, several hypotheses for why there is a lack of deep implementation of these practices include:

- Lack of knowledge about evidence-based literacy practices;
- Underestimation of the amount of training and coaching support needed for teachers to implement evidence-based literacy practices; and
- Lack of clear indicators of what deep implementation will look like and collection of instructional data to guide decision making about support needed for teachers.

The NeMTSS will provide a structure for schools to select and achieve deep implementation of evidence-based practices. This strategy has a high likelihood of addressing the root cause because (1) MTSS has a strong research base (Burns, Appleton & Stehouwer, 2005)¹², (2) there is an infrastructure in place to provide training and support for district/school teams (NeMTSS IST), and (3) schools in Nebraska implementing the MTSS/RtI model have achieved improvements in outcomes for students with disabilities. The data from Nebraska school districts engaged in the MTSS/RtI process shows the performance level and progress of students in reading from grades 3 through 6 (see Table 11 and 12).

Table 11
Average NeSA Reading Scores at Each Grade Level across Years for Schools Receiving Technical Assistance (n=64)



⁷ Felton, R. H., & Pepper, P. P. (1995). Early identification and intervention of phonological deficits in kindergarten and early elementary children at risk for reading disability. *School Psychology Review*, *24*, 405-414.

⁸ Francis, D. J., Shaywitz, S. E., Stuebing, K. K., Shaywitz, B. A. & Fletcher, J. M. (1996). Developmental lag versus deficit models of reading disability: a longitudinal, individual growth curves analysis. *J. Educ. Psychology*, *88*(1), pp. 3-17.

⁹ Juel, C. (1988). Learning to read and write: A longitudinal study of 54 children from first through fourth grades. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *80*, 243-255.

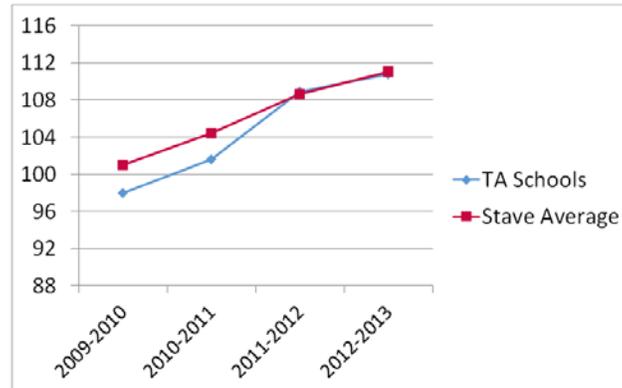
¹⁰ Torgesen, J. K., & Burgess, S. R. (1998). Consistency of reading-related phonological processes throughout early childhood: Evidence from longitudinal, correlational, and instructional studies. In J. Metsala & L. Ehri (Eds.). *Word recognition in beginning reading* (pp. 161-188). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

¹¹ Wanzek J. & Vaughn, S. (2007). Research-based implications from extensive early reading interventions. *School Psychology Review*, *36*(4), pp-541-561.

¹² Burns, M. K., Appleton, J. J., & Stehouwer, J. D. (2005). Meta-analysis of response-to-intervention research: Examining field-based and research-implemented models. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, *23*, 381-394.

Table 12

Average Grade 3 NeSA Reading Scores across Years for TA Schools (n=64) Relative to State Averages



Design and implementation of an MTSS/RtI system is a multi-year effort. To continue to scale up MTSS/RtI, NDE will take the following steps:

- Additional staff will be added to the MTS/RtI Implementation team;
- Training of staff at the intermediate ESUs;
- Training of LEA staff; and
- Additional outreach at the state level to develop greater involvement by NDE teams to enhance the connection with general education initiatives.

These steps will assist in scaling up the MTSS/RtI system and provide a broader base of support for Nebraska school districts in improving outcomes for children with disabilities.

As part of the MTSS process, schools collect data on students in kindergarten through third grade using universal screening and progress monitoring measures. Each school working with the MTSS IST will identify a technically adequate screening tool to be administered 2 or 3 time per year to all students. The screening measures are used to determine whether or not students are meeting grade level benchmarks/expectations on key reading/early literacy skills. After each screening period, schools teams (often grade level teacher teams) will examine the data and identify students who are not meeting grade level benchmarks/expectations. Identified students will begin receiving intervention. Schools may identify a variety of interventions to make available. The NeMTSS IST assists schools with selection of intervention programs that are evidence-based and have a high-likelihood of being effective. Additionally, the NeMTSS IST will work with schools to develop a training and coaching plan to ensure deep implementation of the intervention system and support for interventionists to become proficient at delivery of the intervention using effective instructional practices. For students receiving interventions, progress monitoring data will be collected on an ongoing basis (at least bi-weekly) using a technically adequate progress monitoring tool and the data will be graphed. Progress monitoring data for each student will be examined by a team (including the student's teachers) in combination with data on intervention dosage (e.g., average intervention session duration, number of intervention sessions,

etc.) and in-program assessment data to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. Pre-established decision rules will be used to determine if the student is meeting goals and making adequate progress. Based on progress monitoring data, school teams may continue interventions as designed or intensify interventions if the student is not making expected progress. This ongoing collection of data will allow schools to examine student progress formatively and make changes as determined by data prior to the student taking the NeSA.

Nebraska is a strong local control state with regard to educational decisions. Thus, participation in the MTSS/RtI framework, while not required, has generated positive results in those currently participating in this evidence-based practice. The stakeholders emphasized the need to share the positive results of districts currently engaged in the MTSS/RtI system as a way to encourage other districts to adopt the MTSS/RtI process. The stakeholders felt this would be particularly effective with other districts seeking to improve outcomes for their students. Additionally, the stakeholders emphasized the need for a strong linkage between the special education RDA process and the general school improvement system. The MTSS/RtI evidence-based strategy aligns with the NDE overall school improvement process in AdvancED and the data analysis strategies of the Data Cadre as well as the Special Education ILCD initiative to improve learning for children with disabilities and has the potential to drive individual student success throughout a district.

The NDE is currently developing an Accountability for a Quality Education System, Today and Tomorrow: *A QuESTT* for Nebraska, a framework around six tenets: College and Career Ready, Assessment, Positive Partnerships, Relationships & Student Success, Educator Effectiveness, Transitions, and Educational Opportunities & Access. Each tenet is further defined by areas of focus and specific indicators, measures (data points) and timelines will be developed. Best practices in schools of excellence will be highlighted and shared among schools, as will effective intervention strategies and plans. The MTSS/RtI improvement strategy is a good fit for the state accountability system and will be recommended to schools whose students are struggling to meet standards.

THEORY OF ACTION: PART B PRESCHOOL AND SCHOOL AGE

	Strands of Action for NDE	If...	Then...		
			District	Teacher	Student
Leadership	Goals are established by the Nebraska State Board of Education which provide guidance for all NDE initiatives; and include a continuous improvement process which provides a framework for state and local improvement activities.	State activities continue to be aligned with the state goals and the continuous improvement process...	Expectations for improvement will be consistent across all programs and should ultimately provide a common message to all school districts.	Will use evidenced-based strategies with deep implementation.	Will demonstrate improved results on the state reading assessment (NeSA).

	Strands of Action for NDE	If...	Then...		
			District	Teacher	Student
Collaboration	Partners with school districts, regional Educational Service Units (ESUs), higher education, national technical assistance centers, agencies, advocacy groups, and families to ensure supports are in place to assist schools in improving results for children with disabilities 3 to 21 years old.	NDE Office of Special Education continues to collaborate with these partners...	Resources and supports can be leveraged to support districts in implementing improvement plans with fidelity.		
Resources and Supports	Cultivates collaborative partnerships to provide differentiated resources and evidence-based information.	The State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) coherent improvement strategies are implemented by the districts with fidelity...	Over time the state level 3 rd grade reading proficiency gap will narrow for special education and general education students.	Will use evidenced-based strategies with deep implementation.	Will demonstrate improved results on the state reading assessment (NeSA).
	Has identified coherent improvement strategies to improve 3 rd grade reading proficiency in order to narrow the gap between special education and general education students.	Districts review data by Impact Area on an annual basis...	Districts will continuously be revisiting results of special education students and will have an opportunity to review and revise overall school improvement plans and the supports provided to children with disabilities.		
	Utilizes three Impact Areas which guide districts in evaluating all SPP/APR indicators on an annual basis.	NDE Office of Special Education continues to support improved outcomes through multiple initiatives (tied to multiple SPP/APR indicators) including but not limited to the SSIP coherent improvement strategies...	NDE can better identify districts doing well and what specific improvement activities may be contributing to this improvement.		

	Strands of Action for NDE	If...	Then...		
			District	Teacher	Student
Accountability	Does not currently have an ESEA waiver and is developing and implementing a new state accountability system for all children in all districts. Teams throughout the NDE are engaged in aligning regulations and requirements specific to quality, accountability and school improvement.	NDE provides leadership through an individualized monitoring process and the implementation of coherent improvement strategies...	Schools identified under the accountability system and the focused monitoring system as needing support will have access to the identified coherent improvement strategies including Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).	Will use evidenced-based strategies with deep implementation.	Will demonstrate improved results on the state reading assessment (NeSA).
	Is developing and implementing a focused monitoring system which enables the state to (1) ensure compliance with federal and state regulations; (2) focus on the uniqueness of the individual district; and (3) support the linkage between compliance and improvement.	NDE provides leadership through an individualized monitoring process and the implementation of coherent improvement strategies...	Districts identifying improved reading performance will have access to supports provided through the state's coherent improvement strategies.		
Stakeholder Involvement	Engaging external stakeholders in the development of the SSIP beginning in April 2014 creates a Nebraska Results Driven Accountability Stakeholder Group to provide input and guidance specific to improve results for children with disabilities (Birth-21). The NDE presents and gathers input from the Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) and the Early Childhood Results Matter Task Force regarding the new SPP/APR and SSIP requirements.	NDE continues to engage stakeholders representing diverse disciplines and experiences throughout the development and implementation of the SSIP...	Nebraska's plans outlined in the SSIP and in the District's Targeted Improvement Plans will continuously evolve to ensure ambitious and meaningful change.	Will use evidenced-based strategies with deep implementation.	Will demonstrate improved results on the state reading assessment (NeSA).

