



Nebraska
Improvement
Grant Program

ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT
December 2024

Nebraska Department of Education
500 So. 84th Street, 2nd Floor
Lincoln, NE 68510-2611



Executive Summary

The Nebraska Department of Education Innovation Fund and Improvement Grant Programs were created with the passage of Legislative Bill (LB) 519, effective August 30, 2015. This bill was codified in the Nebraska Revised Statute 79-1054. This grant program provides resources and opportunities to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to support the development, expansion, and investment in innovative best practices that improve (1) education outcomes for early childhood, elementary, middle school, or high school students, (2) transitions between any successive stages of education, or (3) transitions between education and the workforce.

On October 20, 2016, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) requested applications for grants through the Innovation Grant Program. There were five original projects funded with \$4.4 million, which began work in 2017.

This program provides funding to support the development, expansion, and investment in evidence-based best practices to improve educational outcomes for students in kindergarten through 12th grade while helping them pave their paths toward successful education and college and career readiness.

In 2019, to expand access to the resources and opportunities available through the Innovation Grant Program, the Nebraska State Board of Education approved five Education Innovation Networks. Through the networks, LEAs gained access to innovative best practices, as determined by the NDE, that were replicable, scalable, and have the potential to improve education outcomes.

With the passage of LB705, the Nebraska State Board of Education approved seven new projects in May 2023 for the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years. Starting July 1, 2024, this fund is now known as the Improvement Grant Program. These projects represent established best practices which will be studied further within the Nebraska context to determine opportunities to scale up.

Additionally, 2024 saw the implementation of the Learning Platform Program. The Legislature amended statutes with respect to the use of lottery funds for education in 2023 and 2024 to include the use of improvement grant funds for a grant program that uses a statewide learning platform(s), which took effect on July 19, 2024. See below statutory language (79-1054):

(b) For purposes of this subsection, learning platform means a three-dimensional, game-based learning platform for use by middle school and high school students.

(c)(i) The Nebraska State Board of Education shall establish a grant program to procure or purchase an annual license for learning platforms for use in schools to engage students



in coursework and careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Such grants shall be funded using lottery funds pursuant to section 79-3501.

(ii) The Nebraska State Board of Education shall establish standards that a learning platform shall meet in the subject areas of chemistry, physical science, and mathematics. The state board shall develop the criteria to prioritize the grant applications.

(iii) A developer may apply to the Commissioner of Education in a manner prescribed by the state board for a grant under this subsection for a learning platform that:

(A) Is designed to teach information related to chemistry, physical science, or mathematics;

(B) Aligns with the standards established by the state board relating to chemistry, physical science, or mathematics;

(C) Connects such standards with real-world technologies and applications;

(D) Highlights science, technology, engineering, and mathematics career pathways in Nebraska; and

(E) Meets any additional requirements set out by the State Board of Education.

(iv) Any developer that receives a grant under this subsection shall provide access to and use of its learning platform to all Nebraska school districts.

(v) Any grant awarded pursuant to this subsection shall be awarded by July 1 of each year.

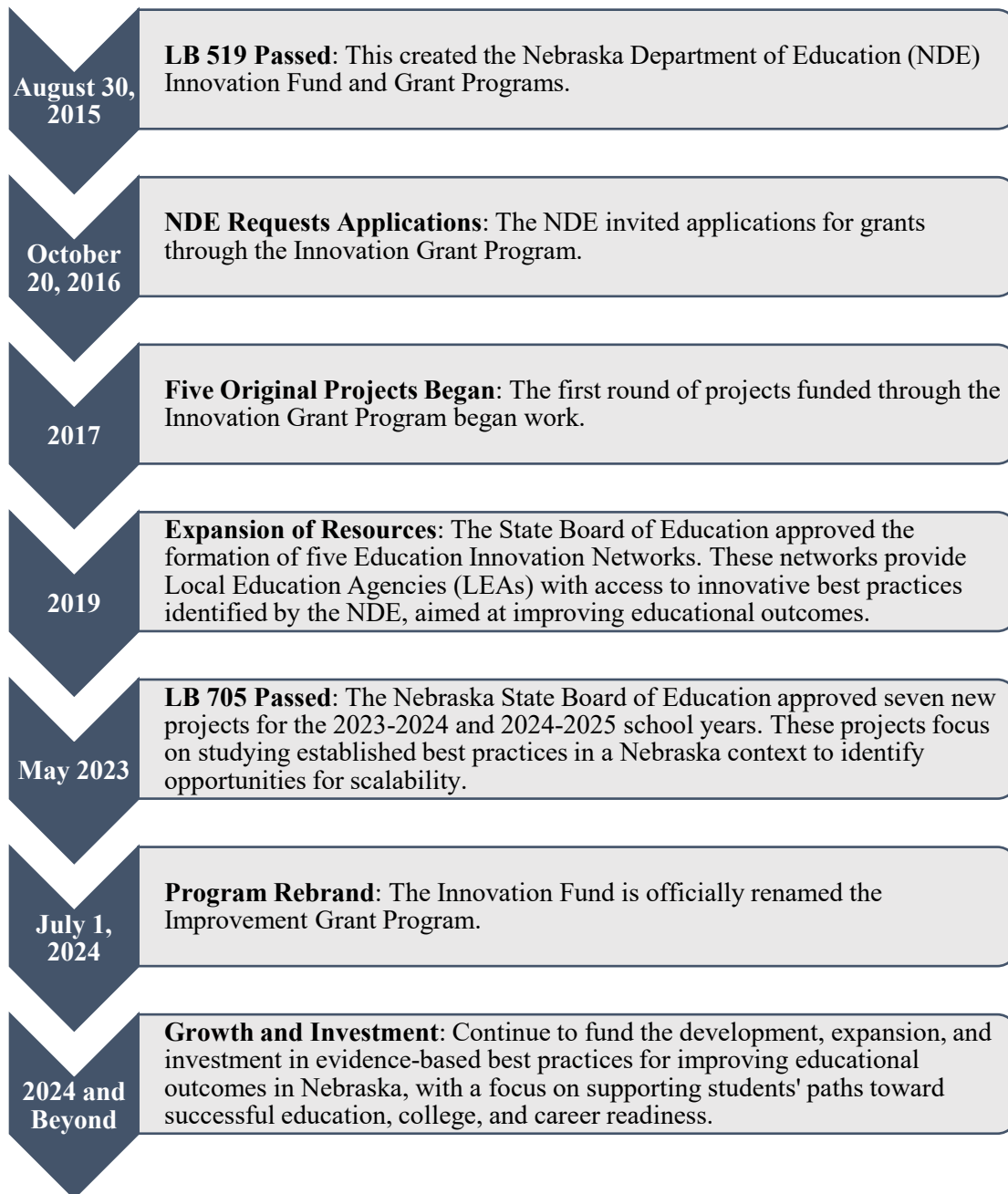
(d) On or before December 1 of each calendar year, the state board shall electronically submit a report to the Clerk of the Legislature on the grant program, including, but not limited to, the recipients of the program and evaluations of the effectiveness of the grant program. The State Board of Education may adopt and promulgate rules and regulations to carry out this subsection.

In anticipation of the enactment of this legislation, in the Spring of 2024, NDE sought a Request for Information to solicit information from potential vendors to inform recommendations to the Nebraska State Board and develop the grant application. The State Board discussed the standards the learning platform should meet and the criteria to prioritize grant applications in May and June 2024. The State Board approved criteria and priority areas at the August 2024 meeting. NDE has received and is reviewing applications, with input from the State Board.



This report summarizes the progress of the Improvement Grant and highlights important developments that have occurred in the past year while shedding light on future opportunities for expansion, investment, and growth for Nebraska’s students.

Timeline of Nebraska Department of Education Innovation Fund and Improvement Grant Programs



2024 Projects

Nebraska Career Connections

Nebraska Career Connections (NCC) was developed through a research project seeking to determine how to best address the career planning needs of Nebraska students and adult job seekers. The NDE currently holds a contract with Kuder to provide this service to all Nebraska schools. NCC provides career interest inventories, work value assessments, and information on careers and postsecondary education in Nebraska.



Most Nebraska school districts count on Career Connections as the career development site used in school counseling programs and career education classrooms. A unique aspect of NCC not available from other career information services is the 24 hours a day, 7 days a week access for students and parents. Students can access the site away from the school building, unlike other career information systems that require the student to be at the school site. Nebraska Career Connections has gone through a major revision that allows the site to be used from any mobile device, in addition to other significant upgrades. In addition to Nebraska schools, NCC is used by Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation, the Nebraska Department of Labor, and Corrections.

From Network Leader Katie Graham:

“Lottery funds support statewide access to Nebraska Career Connections, which profoundly impact both students and educators by providing a comprehensive platform for career exploration and planning. For students, it offers assessments and personalized guidance in identifying career paths aligned with their interests, skills, and values, thus empowering them to make informed decisions about their educational and professional futures. Educators benefit from robust tools that support curriculum integration, enabling them to tailor instruction and advising to meet the diverse needs of their students. By fostering a deeper understanding of career options and the steps required to achieve them, Nebraska Career Connections helps to ensure that students are well-prepared to transition from education to meaningful employment.”

Progress/Impact:

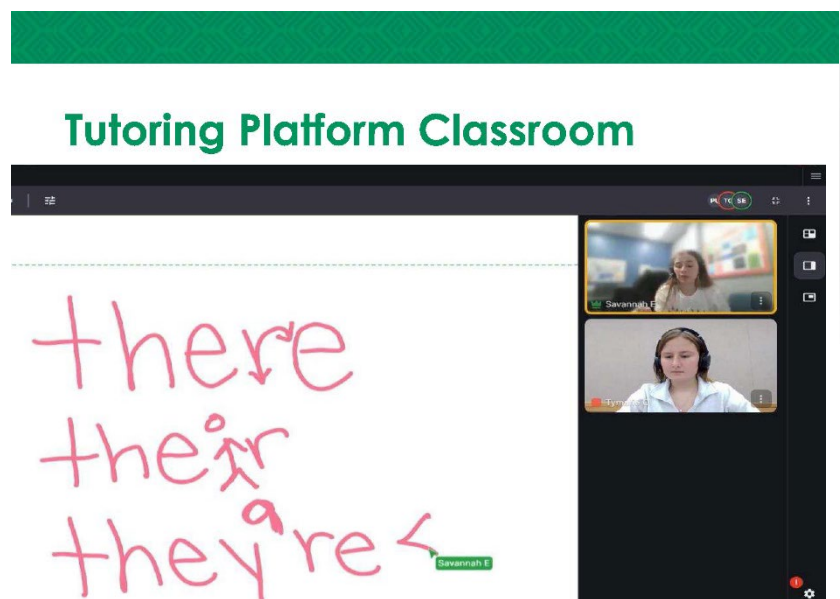
- 89% of Nebraska’s public schools (217 districts) utilized NCC.
- Over 25,000 registered users and over 140,000 unique logins in 2022, a 12% increase from last academic year.
- Over 45,000 assessments were completed.





Innovative Tutoring Network

Nebraska SMART (Success Made Accessible through Rural Tutoring) was established in partnership with the Nebraska State College System to provide K-12 students with free online tutoring. The program, in its second school year, leverages teacher candidates at each of the three state colleges and is expanding further through partnerships with the Educational Service Units and Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association. This expansion is predicted to more than triple the current student base.



"Kayleigh was absolutely wonderful and so helpful! She was patient and very knowledgeable. She tutored on his level, and he can't wait to have another session with her. Thank you!"

"I just wanted to let you know that it has been very helpful having tutors for the kids! This is such a wonderful program! Thanks for all you and the [Tutors] do."

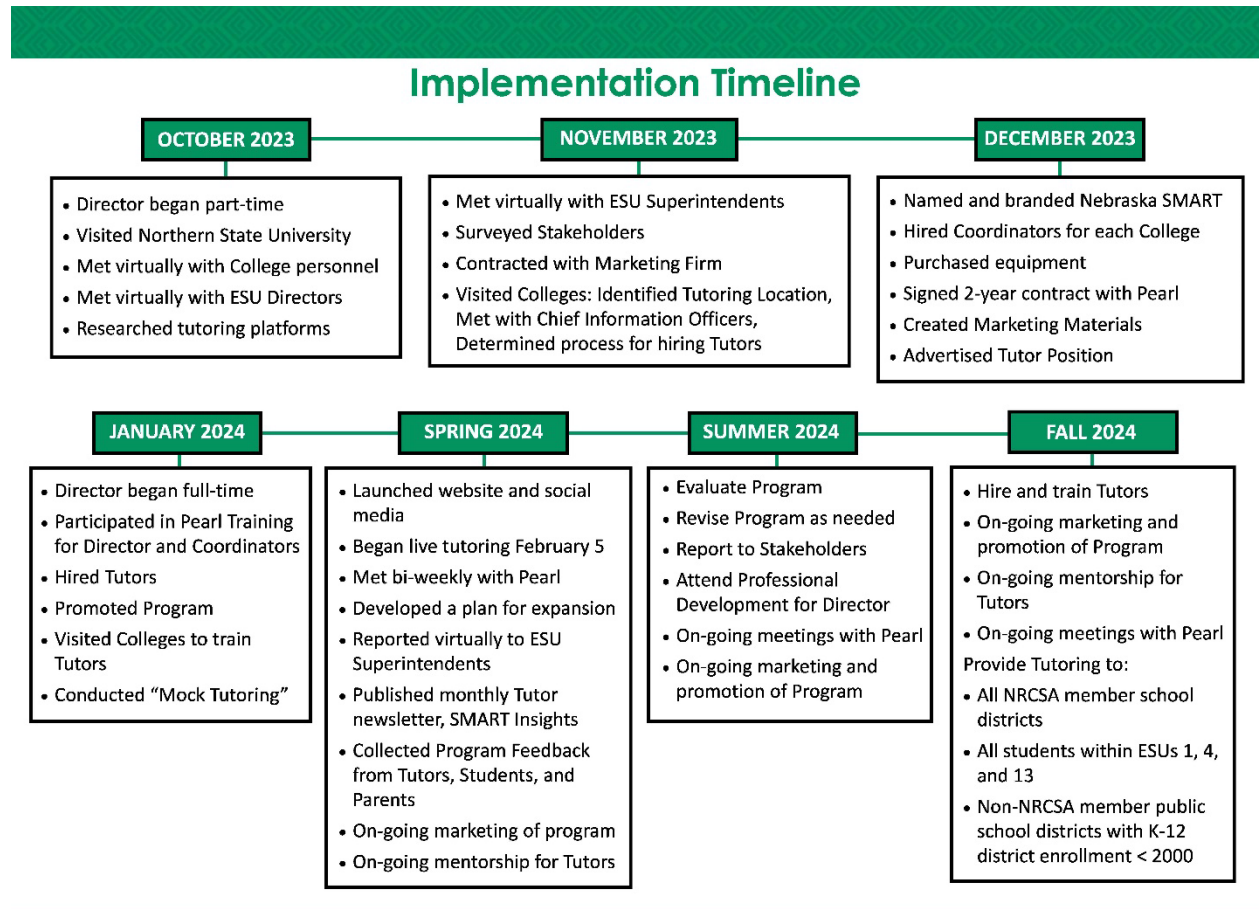
Teacher education candidates from Chadron State, Peru State, and Wayne State Colleges remotely tutor students through an online tutoring platform. Current tutoring hours and availability by school are available online at Nebraska SMART's website: <https://www.nscs.edu/nebraskasmart>.

Since the end of the Spring 2024 Semester, over 315 new students have registered, bringing the total to 459 students, 75% of whom attend NRCSA member school districts. The Tutors have been conducting an average of 50-60 sessions each week. There has been a steady increase in both student registrations and tutoring sessions. Since the start of the current semester in September, 563 sessions have been completed, totaling 777 sessions since tutoring began in February. The Tutors have spent over 300 hours this semester helping students across rural Nebraska.



From Network Leader Lane Carr:

“The unfinished teaching and learning because of COVID-19 have created an increased need to focus on instructional time. This focus on tutoring was intentional, to increase exposure to rich, on-grade-level content, and provide more time for students to re-learn, to learn for the first time, or to master content. While eventually having a statewide reach, this program has leveraged regional support from the Educational Service Units (ESUs) and state colleges to target school districts with significant numbers of schools classified as Needs Support to Improve. Costs include funding for the tutors, support for a digital platform to connect the tutors with students, marketing, and evaluation.”

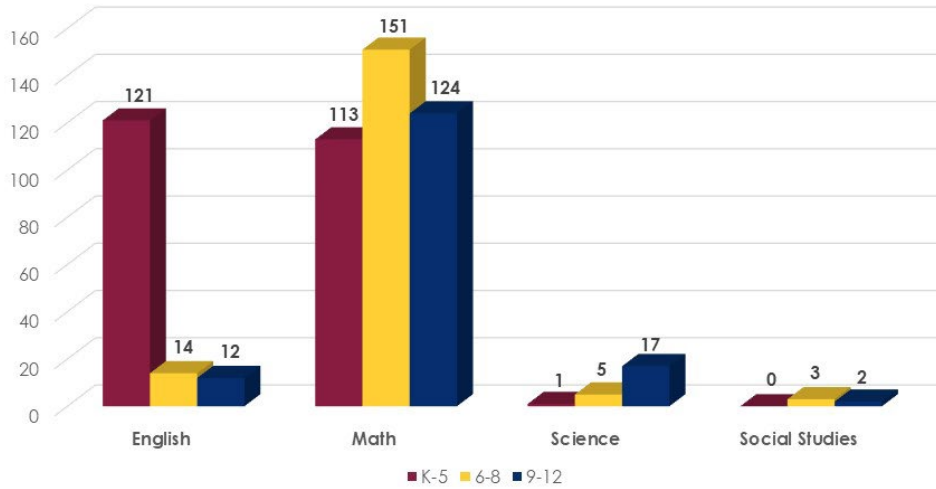


Progress/Impact:

- Skills and Knowledge Tutors Gained and Developed as a Result of Tutoring:
 - Finding creative ways to help students learn one-on-one.
 - Using resources and technology to improve teaching.
 - Applying teaching methods learned in teacher education courses.



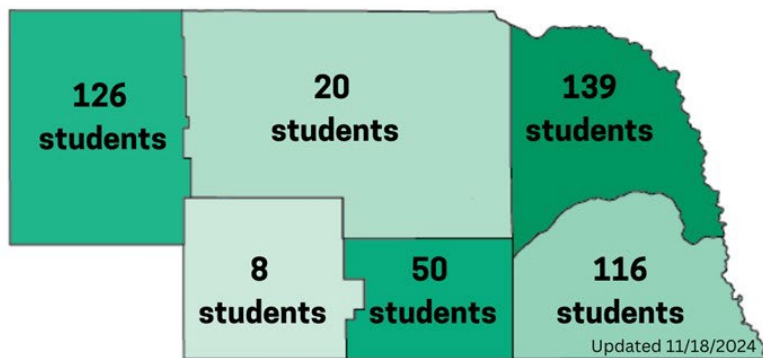
Fall 2024 Semester Tutoring Sessions Completed



563 Total Sessions: 151 English, 388 Math, 23 Science, 5 Social Studies;
over 300 hours of tutoring

updated 11-15-2024

Students Registered by NRCSA District



75% of the 459 registered students attend a
NRCSA member school district





Beyond School Bells

nebraskachildren

Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Innovation Network

The goal of this network is to provide additional opportunities for state-level partners to work closely with new and established ELO programs to expand access to high quality, locally sustainable ELO programs designed to serve Nebraska youth, including youth from urban and rural educational environments. The network will also identify and cultivate characteristics of high-quality programming that can be shared with other communities across the state through a variety of in-person and online platforms.

The 2022-2023 Partners Grant Program included 11 communities across Nebraska. Each ELO program worked with Beyond School Bells (BSB) to create a grant package that fit their local context needs and capacity. Excerpts from Beyond School Bells' Annual Report follow.

THE ELO INNOVATION NETWORK INCLUDES FOUR COMPONENTS:

CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE

Supports established organizations to develop resources that can be shared statewide

ELO DESIGN STUDIO

Provides opportunities to design and pilot new ELO content

PROGRAM ENHANCEMENT

Support for communities expanding existing ELO programs

PILOT PROGRAMS

Support to communities launching new ELO initiatives

Student Advisory Teams provided input that was used to inform programming offerings, providing valuable insights into preferences and interests.

Programs **restocked Maker Spaces**, started art clubs, or expanded existing STEM and craft clubs that allowed students to be creative and innovative.

Community Advisory Team members advocated & raised awareness about afterschool programs and informed family and community engagement strategies.

Family events were held that included meals, STEM and sports activities, and themed nights such as carnivals.



OVERVIEW OF ELO INNOVATION NETWORK GRANTS



BSB PARTNERS GRANT PROGRAM

\$296,706 AWARDED IN 2022-2023

The Beyond School Bells Partners Grant is awarded to schools and school districts working to make their ELO programs exciting, engaging, inspiring & supportive learning environments for children and families in their communities.



PROJECT-BASED GRANTS

\$356,198 AWARDED FOR 2022-2024

BSB provides a range of project specific grants including Family Engagement, Youth Videography, Entrepreneurship, Environmental Education, and more.



SUMMER OF YOUTH

\$171,971 AWARDED IN 2023

The Summer of Youth 2023 Grant provided unique summer learning opportunities for youth across Nebraska to create enriching, impactful, and lasting experiences.



ESSER III

\$10,925,714 AWARDED FOR 2022-2024

While not the grantor, BSB is helping the NE Department of Education administer ESSER III COVID-relief funding to support the growth of new and expansion of existing afterschool programs. The BSB team provides TA & coaching support to new programs and coordinates grant compliance and evaluation.



CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE (COE)

\$325,273 AWARDED FOR 2022-2023

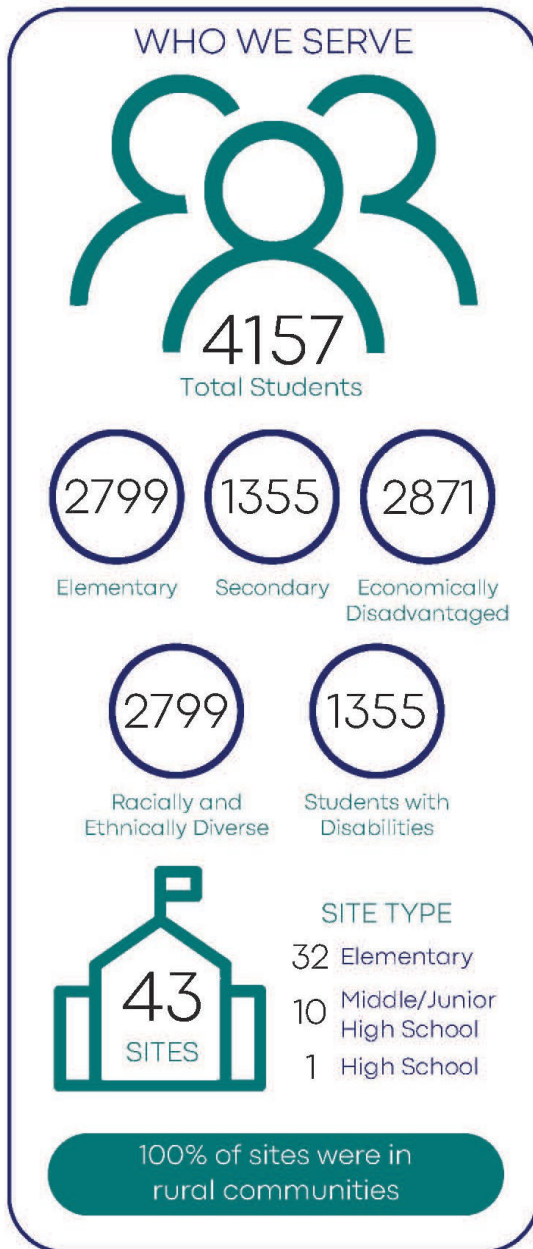
These grants support established organizations with expertise in their fields to develop high-quality resources that can be shared statewide.

Total BSB Grants \$1,150,148



Progress/Impact:

BSB PARTNERS GRANT PROGRAM



In 2013, Beyond School Bells initiated the Nebraska Statewide Coalition of Community-wide ELO Systems—which launched grant-based partnerships between Beyond School Bells and school-community ELO partnerships in multiple communities across Nebraska. In 2021, the BSB Coalition Grants were renamed and expanded to become the BSB Partners Grants. Recipients of the BSB Partners Grants are schools and school districts working toward making their ELO programs exciting, engaging, inspiring, and supportive learning environments for the children and families in their community.

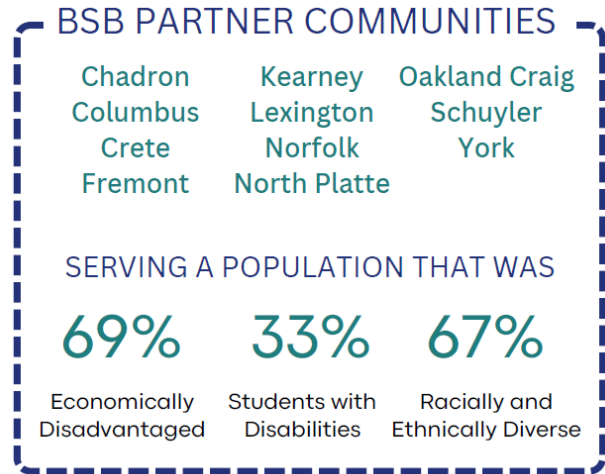
Beyond School Bells' Partners Grant Program focuses on four primary goals:

- Enhance the long-term sustainability of high-quality, community-based ELO programming in partner communities.
- Support BSB partner efforts in developing and implementing effective communication tools, outreach strategies, and events to promote ELO awareness.
- Accelerate development of innovative, locally relevant ELO programming that meet youth needs and reflect youth interests.
- Support efforts to build and maintain high-quality staff teams that are informed of current best practices in youth education and ELO innovations in youth development.



Progress/Impact (Cont.):

- Included in the excerpt above, from the Beyond School Bells Annual Report, is a list of the 11 partner communities and a breakdown of the populations served. (Right)
- A partnering organization, Beyond School Bells, has successfully raised almost \$3 million in private resources to facilitate growth in these and other ELO programs across the state. These investments have included targeted funding for Centers of Excellence, organizations that have the potential to support ELO programs statewide, and individual communities offering ELO innovations. For example, Improvement Grant funds were leveraged to secure a \$350,000 subaward from a federal grant focused on the intersection of out-of-school time and career exploration and development.
- As part of the ELO Innovation Network, Beyond School Bells developed and refined a free, online toolkit <https://bsbtoolkit.com/>, to help Nebraska communities that engage in starting, growing, and seeking to sustain high-quality afterschool and summer programs.
- Beyond School Bells partnered with the NDE and Extension to host a statewide afterschool professionals conference, Get Connected 2024, in Kearney in September.
- The second annual ELO Innovation Invitational conference was held March 5-6, 2024, at the UNL Innovation Campus. This gathering brought together both new and established ELO programs to share best practices including strategies for long-term sustainability.
- All these initiatives are being thoroughly evaluated by a combination of a team of seasoned evaluators at the Munroe Meyer Institute and consultants associated with the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFF).





Zearn Network

In the Summer of 2021 and into the 2021-22 school year, the NDE used pandemic relief funding to provide all Nebraska districts access to Zearn Math. The original purchase gave full K-7 digital access for either core or supplementary instructional materials use. In partnership with the NDE, Zearn found:

- Across student groups and all proficiency levels, students who use Zearn consistently had 2.5 times the growth in their state assessment scores compared to students who did not use Zearn.
- Consistent Zearn usage led to double-digit increases in proficiency for Black and Latinx students, students eligible for free/reduced-price lunch, and English learners, compared to declines in proficiency for matched students not using Zearn.

In 2021, the Zearn Summer Intensive Series included a curated set of lessons by grade for rising 1st through 8th graders designed to help students catch up on grade-level learning, boosted with built-in foundational math support. Summer Intensive Series could be used by students new to Zearn as well as students who have used Zearn throughout the school year. Each Intensive Series could also be used by districts and schools for targeted intervention programs for students who have missed grade-level work due to COVID-19 learning disruptions. Each Series included a 12-week program of priority content. For each grade, additional recommended content was provided for those with extra time.

Zearn's elementary and middle school math curriculum connected hands-on instruction and immersive digital learning. As a result, it ensured every student had multiple pathways to content and unlocked deep learning at each student's pace. More than 500 Nebraska schools (public and non-public) utilized this resource for tutoring, at-home use, and across core instruction to accelerate learning. Districts with consistent use saw 2.5 times growth in NSCAS math achievement.

New this year was Nebraska's [ZEARN Implementation Playbook](#). This is a new, four-phased approach to support schools and districts as they implement Zearn, and ultimately get to impact faster for their kids. We explored the School Lead view and District Lead view. Schools and districts in the Launch phase focused on teacher and student sign-ins. Then moving to the Grow phase, they focused on consistent, weekly sign-ins.



Welcome to the Zearn Implementation Playbook!

Impact comes from strong implementation. This four-phase approach helps schools and districts achieve results with Zearn Math.



PREPARE LAUNCH GROW REFLECT

This phase gets you ready for students' first day on Zearn. You'll set expectations for usage and scheduling, build your district team, and share resources and materials with schools.

This phase encompasses the initial weeks during which students begin using Zearn. You'll monitor the frequency of usage by teachers and students, assist schools as they implement the platform, and address any issues that may arise.

This phase lasts for most of the school year. You'll monitor school data and celebrate progress as schools aim to have every student complete at least three Zearn lessons per week.

This phase happens at the end of the school year. You'll wrap up the year by analyzing data, reflecting on successes and opportunities, and planning for next year's implementation.

Typical Implementation Timeline

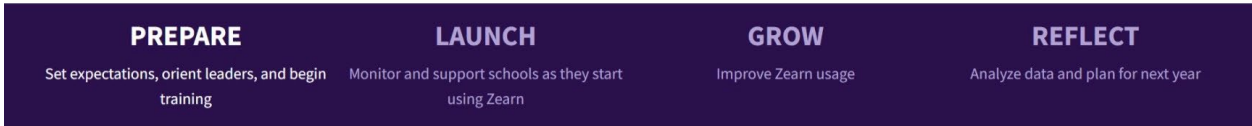
[District Lead Playbook](#)[School Lead Playbook](#)



School Lead Playbook

District Lead

School Lead



This phase is focused on getting ready for students' first day on Zearn. You'll ground your implementation in clear usage and scheduling expectations, build buy-in with teachers, and distribute resources to make sure students have what they need for day one. **By the end of this phase, staff and student accounts will be rostered.**

- Set expectations

- Engage and train staff

- Schedule support structures

- Prepare accounts, devices, access plans, and materials for launch

- Ready staff for launch

[Next Phase: Launch](#)



From Network Leader Marissa Payzant:

“Nebraska was featured for our partnership with Zearn in a fun [“March Mathness”](#) competition from the Collaborative for Student Success. I’m proud we were able to invest in the Zearn with ESSER funds and sustain it through our Innovation Grant projects. It continues to be a national model!”



From March Mathness, Collaborative for Student Success:

“Statewide adoption of Zearn (Nebraska, Louisiana, Colorado, Ohio) — These states now offer this high-quality math supplemental resource free to all public school students. Studies show that consistent use of Zearn results in larger student gains on state assessments, including significant proficiency gains for the lowest-performing math students, English learners, Black and Latino students, and those eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.”

Progress/Impact:

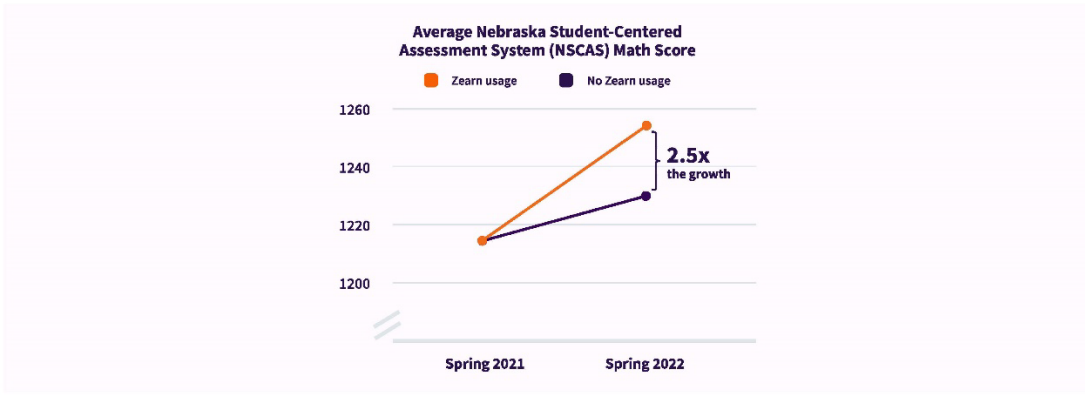
- NDE expanded its partnership with Zearn and continues to evaluate the usage and impact of students in this network.
- During the 2023-24 school year, 25 districts with 183 schools use Zearn. Each week, roughly 8,000 students log in to Zearn and use it regularly.
- Additional evaluations are planned to investigate the continued impact of Zearn math on students who use it regularly.



Progress/Impact (Cont.):
 (From Zearn’s ESSA Qualifying Efficacy Research, Nebraska Statewide Study)

FIGURE 1

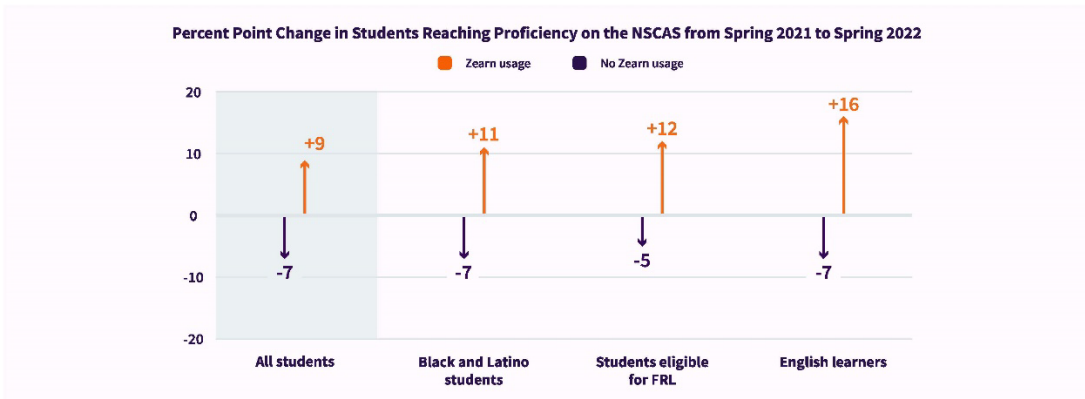
Students who consistently used Zearn had 2.5 times the growth on the 2022 state assessment than students who did not use Zearn.



Based on data from 2022 state assessment scores, Nebraska elementary- and middle-school students who consistently used Zearn during the 2021–2022 school year experienced large gains in their math learning. These students had 2.5 times the growth in their state math assessment scores than students who did not use Zearn.

FIGURE 2

Consistent Zearn usage resulted in double-digit increase in proficiency for each student subgroup, while similarly matched students experienced declines.



Nebraska districts also saw a significant increase in the percentage of students meeting proficiency on the state assessment: a nine percent increase in the number of Nebraska students meeting proficiency. By contrast, among students who did not use Zearn, there was a seven percent decrease in students reaching proficiency.

This increase in students meeting proficiency was even greater for students in historically marginalized subgroups. Across Nebraska, there was a double-digit increase in the number of Black or Latino students, English learners, and students eligible for FRL meeting proficiency. Consistent Zearn usage over the 2021–2022 school year was particularly effective for English learners—these students experienced a sixteen percent point increase in students reaching proficiency on the 2022 state assessment.



School Transformation Network

In April 2024, the NDE leveraged Innovation Funds to partner with TNTP to provide a two-part learning opportunity for educators across the state of Nebraska on the Secondary Science of Reading. Part one of the learning opportunity, which had 175 total participants, was an asynchronous 6-module online course that covered topics core to the science of reading such as phonics and word recognition, fluency, text complexity, and building knowledge and vocabulary through strong questioning and close reading systems. The second part of the opportunity was an in-person, three-day capstone in Kearney, Nebraska that applied the core tenets of the asynchronous course to the classroom context. The facilitated sessions provided live demonstrations of instructional strategies aligned to the science of reading, exploration of lesson internalization and preparation protocols, and opportunities to workshop with curricular materials adopted in their school or district. About 50% of the total participants - 88 educators - opted to travel to Kearney to engage in the capstone. To offset some of the costs associated with the learning opportunity, classroom teachers who completed the online course and attended all three days of the capstone were given a \$500 stipend.

“I have had students writing far more than I have in the past, I am scaffolding my lower readers with the complex texts, so all students are engaging with the text in a similar way. I have found that extended, modeled writing was an effective way to begin during the first quarter, and students will be moving more toward, “you do” second quarter.”

– Anonymous, Teacher enrolled in TNTP
Professional Learning

Progress/Impact:

The capstone experience for attendees was largely positive. As a result of the sessions, participants reported that they felt a greater investment in both HQIM and grade-appropriate materials:

- 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they want to ensure grade-level, complex texts are in front of students during Tier 1 instruction.
- 99% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they recognize how the effective use of questions and tasks aids deeper engagement with texts and graphics.

Additionally, participants reported leaving sessions with more knowledge, resources, and skills at their disposal:

- 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they have a stronger understanding of the four qualitative features of text complexity.
- 93% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they can apply practices for building knowledge and vocabulary.
- 96% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they have more writing and discussion strategies in their toolbox to put the responsibility of complex thinking on students.





Every Day Counts: Addressing Chronic Absenteeism Across NE Schools

The Every Day Counts collaboration sponsored by the Nebraska Department of Education has been instrumental in guiding MOEC schools through a transformative journey aimed at enhancing attendance and overall student outcomes. With support from the NDE, participating schools have refined existing and developing new strategies to tackle chronic absence, fostering deeper connections between educators, families, and community partners.

Throughout the cohort experience, challenges like time constraints and alignment with external directives were met with collaboration and adaptability. National and local experts enriched discussions, ensuring a tailored approach to each school's needs. Despite obstacles, the cohort has shown promising progress with increased parent-school engagement, improved adult-child relationships, and a focus on early interventions. This holistic approach integrates attendance initiatives into school cultures and community settings, underscoring MOEC schools' commitment to sustainable improvement.

MOEC Elementary and Middle School Attendance Improvement Cohorts convened teams from multiple districts to improve school attendance at their own building, with the goal of decreasing the chronic absence rate in the metro. Eligible schools had a chronic absence rate of above 10%, identified a school team dedicated to improving school attendance and data, agreed to collaborate with other school attendance teams four to six times a year, and resolved to develop, share, and revise as needed their school's plan for the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years.

Challenges to attending school are often connected to a lack of protective factors and toxic stress. Districts, community agencies, and county government are engaged together in identifying the unmet needs of families and students and in seeking resources to provide the buffers and supports that help families succeed. At the school building level, a challenge voiced consistently is transportation to school. Other school challenges include: time to focus on attendance amid other building, district, and state requirements; increased student behaviors; teacher and staff buy-in; building meaningful connections with families; purposeful iteration of the importance of showing up every day and on time; adult follow through once parents have been referred for needed assistance; adult follow through with attendance plans; required follow through with teachers and staff to ensure fidelity and capacity building for attendance initiatives.

District leaders engage in holistic practices that consider the child, family, and community. Such effective practices include referring students for mental health services with trusted entities and in-school counselors; establishing formal and informal mentoring relationships; and connecting



families with religious, secular, and foundation entities to fulfill basic needs. Challenges include long waitlists for services, district, and community capacity to respond to many needs, and family engagement.

Implementation of grant funds included student attendance incentives, assemblies, building-specific slogans, and signage, “best day ever” events and regular dissemination of attendance awareness, newsletters, and homeroom lessons, strengthening parent-community bonds through events like parent nights and school-wide attendance challenges, enhancing teacher-student connections, incorporating attendance into all regularly scheduled parent/child events, and creating a more welcoming school climate and culture. These strategies collectively aimed to embed attendance discussions into various facets of school life, enhancing overall engagement and support for students' attendance goals. Additional strategies included professional learning and Attendance Works coaching sessions through the development of cohorts.

Progress/Impact:

- Survey information provided by Attendance Cohort schools demonstrated a rich and important relationship between schools and their communities. Community Connections by The Numbers (as shared by the attendance teams in the Attendance Cohort).
 - 21 Elementary Schools
 - 12 Middle Schools
 - 7 School Districts
 - 10 Mental Health Groups
 - 25 Churches
 - 5 Mentor organizations
 - 6 Hospitals/Clinics
 - 44 Local Organizations
 - 9 Foundations
 - 11 Civic/City/State Entities
 - 7 Companies
- Anecdotal information from individual attendance teams suggests improvements in chronic absenteeism rates.
- Increased parent-school connections.
- Initial success using student mentoring programming with trusting adults.
- Increased intentionality to consider attendance across systems.
- Initial success in weaving attendance messaging at regular school gatherings.
- Increased professional development regarding the issues that cause chronic absences.
- Intentional planning for the 2024-2025 school year including summer messaging and attendance kick-offs at the start of the school year.

