



## PROPOSED AGENDA ITEM RATIONALE

**DATE:** May 21, 2025

**TO:** Brian L. Maher  
Commissioner of Education

**FROM:** Lane Carr  
Administrator, Office of Policy and Strategic Initiatives

Jessica Javorsky  
Strategic Initiatives Grant Specialist

**PROPOSED AGENDA ITEMS:** Nebraska Improvement Grant Projects

**AGENDA ITEM TYPE:** Action

### RATIONALE/BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

#### *Statutory Context:*

Nebraska Revised Statute 79-1054 established the Innovation Grant Program, with guidelines that have shifted over time. Prior to 2025, grants and awards have been focus on innovative solutions for today's schools, teachers, and students.

In May 2023, the State Board approved a third cohort of 2- and 3-year innovative network grants. Results of these investments can be found in the NDE's Legislative Report here: [793\\_20241127-133811.pdf](#).

The following projects sunset at the end of June 2025:

- Nebraska Career Connections
- SMART Tutoring
- Future Ready Digital Learning Collaborative
- Beyond School Bells
- Zearn (ended after one year)
- School Transformation Network
- Every Day Counts (Addressing Chronic Absenteeism)

- Learning Platform - As statutorily required, the State Board discussed standards the learning platform should meet and criteria to prioritize grant applications in May and June 2024. The State Board approved criteria and priority areas at their August 2024 meeting.

#### *NDE Improvement Grant*

With changes to statute in 2023 and 2024, the Innovation Grant Program was renamed the Improvement Program Fund, shifting the focus away from new and exciting opportunities that *may* create an impact for some or all of Nebraska's students and toward evidence-based programs that *will* have a measured impact in schools and on students across the state.

According to NRS 79-1054, in fiscal years 2025 through 2029, the NDE shall use these lottery funds on four categories of programs:

- i) Teacher recruitment and retention,
- ii) Improvement for schools and school districts,
- iii) Improvement in student performance in the subject areas of reading and mathematics, and
- iv) Other improvement areas identified by the state board.

With the passage of LB296 (the "Bellwether bill"), the NDE must now use Improvement Funds to hire registrars. These positions, and the requisite expenses for their work, would provide continuity of educational services to students experiencing the justice system.

#### *Proposed New/ Continued Projects:*

- Every Day Counts - Metro Omaha Education Consortium (MOEC) Attendance Network (\$250,000 per year, \$500,000 total)
  - NDE seeks to continue a current partnership and Improvement Grant project with the University of Nebraska-Omaha (MOEC) and schools in the metro area with chronic absenteeism rates higher than 15%.
  - Funding would focus on improving systems at a school level which provide:
    - Targeted professional development
    - Improved family engagement and communication
    - Support for school leaders
    - Tier 1 & 2 strategies
    - Access to timely data
    - Tools for developing attendance campaigns and incentives
  - Results across schools have shown demonstrable reductions in chronic absenteeism at the elementary and middle school levels, with a hope to expand further into high schools.
- Literacy Screener Study with UNL Buros Center (\$75,000)
  - The Nebraska Reading Improvement Act (NRIA) (Section 79-2601-79-2607) requires that each school district administer an approved reading screener assessment three times during the school year to all students in kindergarten through grade three. Any student performing below the threshold level is identified as having a reading deficiency for purposes of the NRIA.
  - For the 2025-2026 school year, NDE approved eight reading screener assessments and has identified a goal to approve a smaller number of assessments for subsequent years to gain

more consistency in data collection and interpretation and increase the likelihood that students who need additional support are appropriately identified.

- The NDE is proposing a contract with UNL's Buros Center for Testing to:
  - Identify the reading screener assessments that most closely align with Nebraska's College and Career Ready Standard for English Language Arts, and
  - Analyze the cut scores and classification accuracy to determine if they are relevant and appropriate for NRIA purposes and the student populations in Nebraska.

#### *Next Steps*

- Begin implementing provisions of LB296 for systems involved youth.
- Begin contracting processes for proposed items above.
- Launch procurement process to identify vendor(s) for other improvement activities.
- Bring any additional contracts to the Board for approval in August 2025

**PROPOSED BOARD MEETING (MONTH/YEAR):** April 2025

**ESTIMATED COST:** \$570,000

#### **FOR CONTRACTS AND GRANTS:**

- Indicate the Funding Source: Improvement Grant Funds (Lottery)
- New or Renewal: Renewal, New
- If renewal, date of first approval: May 2023

#### **FOR NEW CONTRACTS OR OTHER CONTRACTS REQUIRING PROCUREMENT:**

- Indicate the method of procurement: Non-Competitive
- Rationale for method of procurement: Per 73-507, agreements for services to be performed by or between a state agency and the University of Nebraska system are exempt to the requirements for competitive bidding or negotiation.
- Rationale for contractor selection: N/A

#### **FOR GRANT SUBAWARDS:**

- Describe the grantee selection process: N/A
- New or Renewal: N/A
- If renewal, date of first approval: N/A