



Statewide Community Focus Group Key Findings

During Phase II of the strategic planning process, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) hosted and conducted twelve focus groups around the state with the intention of gathering external stakeholder input on several key factors as identified through the surveys distributed during Phase I.

Based on the data collected during the focus groups conducted, the following key findings have been identified. During each focus group, participants were presented with three values as identified by the surveys; participants were encouraged to share how they understood each of the values. Similarly, the six core issues facing education in Nebraska were presented to participants. Participants were encouraged to share the impact and evidence of each, as well as potential solutions or best-practices. For each of the values and core issues presented during the focus groups, a brief summary, key themes, and keywords have been identified for the purpose of informing the formation of the NDE's new strategic plan. These are as follows:

Accountability

Summary: Participants emphasized the importance of transparency, responsibility, and measurable outcomes. They want the NDE and local school districts to be honest, responsive, and data-driven in their actions and decisions.

Key Themes:

- **Transparency:** Open reporting, public access to data, clear communication.
- **Responsibility:** Owning mistakes, following through on commitments.
- **Data-Driven:** Use of metrics and evaluations to guide decisions.
- **Equity:** Fair treatment and support for all students and schools.
- **Compliance:** Adherence to laws and educational standards.

Communication

Summary: Participants emphasized the desire for clear, timely, and accessible communication from the NDE. They value transparency and multiple channels and opportunities for engagement.

Key Themes:

- **Transparency:** Shared decision-making, accessible data, and clear rationales.
- **Accessibility:** Easy-to-navigate websites, multilingual communication, and public forums.
- **Two-Way Communication:** Listening to feedback and responding meaningfully.
- **Consistency:** Clear, regular updates and messaging across mediums.

Respect

Summary: Respect was framed as listening to all voices, valuing diversity, and maintaining professionalism. Many called for mutual respect between educators, families, and the state.

Key Themes:

- **Inclusivity:** Respect for diverse backgrounds and perspectives.
 - **Civility:** Professional and constructive dialogue.
 - **Listening:** Taking public input seriously and responding thoughtfully.
 - **Equity:** Fair treatment for all stakeholders.
-

Teacher Shortages and Retention

Summary: The shortage is seen as a crisis affecting education quality. Participants cited major factors such as: low pay, lack of respect, and burnout.

Key Themes:

- **Recruitment & Retention:** Need for improved incentives and working conditions.
- **Burnout:** Factors such as overwork and lack of support are driving teachers away.
- **Certification Flexibility:** Need for support for alternative pathways into teaching.
- **Respect & Autonomy:** Teachers want to be trusted professionals.

Impact of Politics and Policy Decisions on Education

Summary: Many expressed frustrations with political interference in education, especially around curriculum, DEI, and local control.

Key Themes:

- **Local Control:** Preference for decision-making at the district level.
- **Political Polarization:** Concerns about divisive issues overshadowing education.
- **Curriculum Censorship:** Pushback against book bans and ideological restrictions.
- **Unfunded Mandates:** Legislative decisions without financial support.

Funding & Budgetary Constraints

Summary: Concerns about how funds are allocated and the impact of unfunded mandates were common. Participants called for more equitable and efficient use of resources.

Key Themes:

- **Equity:** Fair distribution of funds, especially for high-need students.
- **Accountability:** Transparency in spending and outcomes.
- **Teacher Compensation:** Compensation is seen as a key factor in educator recruitment and retention.
- **Efficiency:** Criticism of administrative costs and non-academic spending.

Student Mental Health and Well-being

Summary: Mental health is seen as foundational to student success. Participants highlighted the need for additional resources, trained professionals, and reduced burden on teachers.

Key Themes:

- **Access to Services:** Shortage of counselors and mental health professionals.
- **Impact on Learning:** Mental health challenges hinder academic performance.
- **Role of families and communities:** Mental health support must extend beyond school.
- **Community Support:** Need for partnerships with external providers.

Support for Students with Disabilities, English Learners, and Those Living in Poverty

Summary: There's a strong call for better support for students with disabilities, English learners, and those living in poverty. Participants emphasized early intervention and equitable resources.

Key Themes:

- **Equity in Services:** Tailored support for high-need populations.
- **Teacher Training:** Better preparation to meet diverse student needs.
- **Resource Gaps:** Staffing shortages and lack of materials.
- **Community Involvement:** Wraparound services and partnerships.

Student Attendance and Chronic Absence

Summary: Chronic absenteeism is seen as a growing issue, especially post-COVID. Participants linked attendance to broader social issues including poverty, mental health, and family engagement.

Key Themes:

- **Parental Responsibility:** Holding parents accountable for student attendance.
- **Barriers to Attendance:** Transportation, safety, mental health, and family obligations.
- **Support Systems:** Need for community and school collaboration to address root causes.
- **Policy Enforcement:** Calls for stricter truancy laws and consistent enforcement.