

Good Life | Great Schools | Excellent Education

The Nebraska Department of Education Strategic Plan for 2026 - 2030

The Nebraska Department of Education engaged in a strategic planning process beginning in January 2025. After rigorous engagement with citizens, partners, clients, and staff, this document outlines our roadmap for the statewide education system in Nebraska. Through this process, members of the state board of education and agency staff members received input and feedback from over 2,500 Nebraskans who represent students, families, and schools in our public, nonpublic, and exempt schools, as well as vocational rehabilitation clients. This roadmap, titled **Good Life | Great Schools | Excellent Education** embodies a vision to ensure that all Nebraskans receive high quality educational opportunities for success in learning and life.

Good Life is a nod to our state’s longtime state slogan, “The Good Life.” The slogan first appeared in the 1970s and has been widely used in marketing, on highway signs, and in tourism campaigns. Often when referring to “The Good Life,” Nebraskans are referring to the quality of life in the state, deep connections to our communities, the natural environment, as well as agriculture, industry, and employment opportunities.

Great Schools highlights the importance we place on our local schools, public and nonpublic, as well as the educational opportunities afforded to students through exempt (home) school settings. Nebraskans are proud of their local schools and the learning that takes place in those spaces. Schools also provide learning opportunities outside the classroom through activities and athletics, and in many ways serve as a hub of community life for many people.

Excellent Education promotes the desire for all Nebraskans to have access to high quality educational opportunities and resources. Ultimately, the Nebraska Department of Education exists to serve students and our clients. While the NDE provides some direct services to students and clients, much of the work we do is dependent on our partners, such as teachers and school leaders. We aim to hold up the Nebraska education system as a beacon for educational excellence in our country and the world.

Good Life | Great Schools | Excellent Education is organized in four major areas:

- Who we are
- Who we serve
- What we do
- Where we are going

Key findings from the strategic planning process are embedded throughout this document, highlighting what we heard from people across the state. Additional information about the strategic planning process is found in Appendix A.

Who We Are

The Nebraska Department of Education is a state constitutional agency operating under the authority of an elected, non-partisan board of education. The State Board appoints the commissioner of education, who oversees the administration of the state school system. The state constitution provides an overarching description of the authority of the NDE.

Article VII, Section I

The Legislature shall provide for the free instruction in the common schools of this state of all persons between the ages of five and twenty-one years. The Legislature may provide for the education of other persons in educational institutions owned and controlled by the state or a political subdivision thereof.

Article VII, Section II

The State Department of Education shall be comprised of a State Board of Education and a Commissioner of Education. The State Department of Education shall have general supervision and administration of the school system of the state and of such other activities as the Legislature may direct.

Article VII, Section III

The State Board of Education shall be composed of eight members, who shall be elected from eight districts of substantially equal population as provided by the Legislature. Their term of office shall be for four years each. Their duties and powers shall be prescribed by the Legislature, and they shall receive no compensation, but shall be reimbursed their actual expense incurred in the performance of their duties. The members of the State Board of Education shall not be actively engaged in the educational profession and they shall be elected on a nonpartisan ballot.

Article VII, Section IV

The State Board of Education shall appoint and fix the compensation of the Commissioner of Education, who shall be the executive officer of the State Board of Education and the administrative head of the State Department of Education, and who shall have such powers and duties as the Legislature may direct. The board shall appoint all employees of the State Department of Education on the recommendation of the Commissioner of Education.

The NDE employees carry out the mission of the agency on behalf of Nebraska students and clients in public and nonpublic schools, as well as exempt school settings. The NDE staff interact with schools and institutions of higher education to develop, coordinate, and improve educational programs.

Over 500 employees carry out the myriad duties assigned by state and federal statutes and the policy direction of the State Board of Education. In broad terms, the work of NDE may be categorized into four main areas:

1. Education programs and services – serving public and nonpublic schools, educators, and students
2. Vocational Rehabilitation - assisting people with disabilities to join the workforce
3. Disability Determination Services - adjudication of claims for disability benefits under Social Security or Supplemental Security Income
4. Agency operations – areas like human resources, accounting, legal services, and information technology

[Key Finding: Vocational Rehabilitation is a critical, somewhat forgotten (or unknown) part of the work of the NDE.]

The NDE provides a broad range of consultative and support services for Nebraska public, nonpublic, and exempt schools. Services are provided in areas such as:

- Adult education and GED®
- After-school programs
- Career and technical education
- Data management
- Early childhood
- Family and community engagement
- Federal programs
- Student support services
- School accreditation
- School improvement
- Special education
- School finance
- Teaching, learning, and assessment

[Key Findings: The greatest strengths of Nebraska’s education system are high-quality teachers, support for the different needs of learners, safe environments, academic expectations, standards, and curriculum. Additionally, schools are seeing increased student needs, including mental and behavioral health.]

While the above list relates mostly to the statewide education system, most of the agency employees work in vocational rehabilitation and disability determination services. In many ways, the NDE ensures success for all learners from cradle to career.

Mission Statement

The **mission** of the Nebraska Department of Education is *to lead and support the preparation of all Nebraskans for learning, earning, and living.*

[Key Finding: The NDE’s mission resonated with survey respondents who recommended no changes be made.]

Values

The NDE grounds its work in the following core values:

- **Communication:** The NDE prioritizes accessible, consistent, transparent communication that informs the public and our partners of key priorities and activities and allows our partners to have a voice in the work of the state agency. Valuing communication enables the NDE and its stakeholders to implement best practices at scale with efficiency, thereby accelerating learners’ achievement and outcomes.
- **Accountability:** The NDE is accountable to our partners when we use resources wisely, follow through and show integrity, take responsibility for our actions and outcomes, and uphold high standards. Valuing accountability will lead the NDE to support our partners, thereby improving outcomes and opportunities for all learners.
- **Respect:** Nebraska is a state with diverse geographies, demographics, languages, backgrounds, cultures, and needs, and the NDE will engage in open-minded, intentional, and consistent listening and decision-making processes. Valuing respect, the NDE will operate similarly to Nebraska’s classrooms where respect builds a positive learning environment; the NDE will model respect in all processes, allowing partners to contribute to the statewide education system.
- **Excellence:** The NDE will be a model for educational and workplace excellence in Nebraska, guided by evidence-based, data-informed research. The NDE will strive for operational excellence in our services, serving as a model for actively identifying problems, implementing solutions, and evaluating impact. Similarly, the NDE will expect excellence of external partners serving learners throughout Nebraska. Valuing excellence will elevate the level of performance across the education system.
- **Service:** The work of the NDE depends upon the service we provide to students, educators, families, communities, and external partners. A service mindset recognizes that we, as an entity of state government, serve the citizens of Nebraska. Valuing service will allow the NDE to strengthen partnerships and achieve greater results.

[Key Finding: These five values were identified and defined throughout the strategic planning process with partners, the public, and NDE staff.]

These five values form an acronym, CARES. This acronym serves as an easy-to-remember structure for communicating about our core values, and implementing the values in decision-making processes, as well as providing a common set of expectations for employees.

Who We Serve

Nebraska schools educate over 365,000 students in public and nonpublic school districts and systems. There are nearly 330,000 students who attend public schools in the state. School districts range in size from serving 50 to 60 students to the largest district serving over 51,000 students. Nonpublic schools serve over 36,000 students in schools that range with student counts from three to over 1,000. Additionally, there are nearly 14,000 students educated through exempt (home) schools. Our schools are served by over 41,000 certificated staff, of which, 26,000 are teachers. In terms of vocational rehabilitation, nearly 3000 individuals are served by Nebraska VR.

The state laws of Nebraska further detail the responsibilities of the Nebraska Department of Education. Nebraska Revised Statute § 79-301 provides a general, overall view of the statutory duties of the NDE:

- (1) The State Department of Education provided for in Article VII, section 2, of the Constitution of Nebraska shall consist of a State Board of Education and a Commissioner of Education. The State Department of Education shall have general supervision and administration of the school system of the state and of such other activities as the Legislature may direct.
- (2) The State Board of Education, acting as a unit, shall be the policy-forming, planning, and evaluative body for the state school program. Except in the appointment of a Commissioner of Education, the board shall deliberate and take action with the professional advice and counsel of the Commissioner of Education.
- (3) The Commissioner of Education shall be the executive officer of the State Board of Education and the administrative head of the professional, technical, and clerical staff of the State Department of Education. The commissioner shall act under the authority of the State Board of Education. The commissioner shall have the responsibility for carrying out the requirements of law and of board policies, standards, rules, and regulations and for providing the educational leadership and services deemed necessary by the board for the proper conduct of the state school program. In the event of vacancy in office or the absence or incapacity of the Commissioner of Education, a deputy commissioner shall carry out any duties imposed by law upon the commissioner.

Partners

To meet these responsibilities, the NDE serves our partners differently in both direct and indirect ways. The individuals and entities in the direct service list represent those partners with whom the NDE has direct and regular interactions. The individuals and entities in the indirect service list represent those partners with whom the NDE serves by working with the partners in the direct service list. Note that the NDE staff are not teaching in the classrooms, rather they are supporting the teachers, school leaders, and schools who have direct interactions with students every day in classrooms. This distinction is important, as it highlights the scope and reach of the work of the NDE and it serves as a reminder that the NDE exists to serve students through partnership with our schools. In another example, NDE vocational rehabilitation staff are, in many cases, working directly with students in schools.

<i>Direct Service Partners</i>	<i>Indirect Service Partners</i>
<i>PK-12 schools</i>	<i>Students</i>
<i>Early childhood education programs</i>	<i>Families</i>
<i>Vocational Rehabilitation clients</i>	<i>Businesses - the current and future workforce</i>
<i>Business partners</i>	
<i>Educators (e.g., school leaders, teachers)</i>	
<i>Applicants for certifications</i>	
<i>Postsecondary educational institutions</i>	
<i>Educational Service Units</i>	
<i>Students (e.g. students participating in career and technical student organization)</i>	
<i>Families and citizens (e.g., families seeking exempt school opportunities)</i>	
<i>Nonprofit organizations serving the education system</i>	

What We Do

Services

The services describe the work of the NDE and are derived from state and federal statutory authority, as well as initiatives and priorities set by the state board of education. In order to set a strategic roadmap, the “work” of the NDE must be clear. This list of 10 services provides a relatively comprehensive description of the work of the Nebraska Department of Education, cutting across all of its component offices. These services are rooted in quality assurance.

- **Certification, e.g., educators:** The NDE is tasked, by statute, to set the rules and regulations that dictate requirements for teacher certification.
- **Coordination with other government/non-governmental agencies:** The NDE is the state education agency and, as such, represents the educational system in cross-agency collaborations such as the Governor’s efforts to decrease the teacher shortage with other state agencies. Additionally, the NDE is responsible for administrative management of several statewide commissions and councils.
- **Direct services to students/learners/clients:** Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) provides direct services to clients and the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education provides learning opportunities for students in career and technical student organizations.
- **Grant funding opportunities to education entities and third parties:** The NDE plays a role in pass-through funding made available from the United States federal government. Additionally, the NDE stewards state and non-governmental funds, when available, to advance the priorities of the state board of education.
- **Program and fiscal compliance and monitoring:** The NDE is statutorily required to regulate schools and school districts and direct compliance activities.
- **Program accreditation and approval:** The NDE is required, by statute, to serve as the accreditation and approval authority for public and nonpublic schools, educational service units, and educator preparation programs.
- **Professional development:** The NDE provides high-quality professional development activities for educators that align with the content area standards of the state, and other programmatic activities.
- **School and continuous improvement:** Through a required evaluation process, Nebraska’s schools and districts report leading and lagging indicators of success. The NDE responds to these evaluations with hands-on support to ensure that each student is afforded the opportunities and support necessary to achieve success.
- **School accountability, e.g., content standards and assessment:** The NDE is statutorily required to lead the state school accountability system, including setting statewide content standards for and administering statewide proficiency assessments. The agency is

also responsible for determining state classifications and federal designations of public schools and districts.

- **Technical assistance:** The NDE provides resources for all schools, public and nonpublic, as well as parents, families, and citizens in support of the education system.

Strategic Levers

The Nebraska Department of Education, as the state education agency, has the opportunity to create change, drive improvement, and cultivate innovation through several strategic levers. Strategic levers are tools and frameworks used to drive transformation and improve learning outcomes. These seven strategic levers are designed to address specific challenges and goals within the education system. The purpose of these strategic levers is to create a more effective and efficient educational system that meets the needs of all students and contributes to the overall development of society.

- Boldly set the vision for the statewide education system
- Consistently promote evidence-based practices
- Continuously assess school systems
- Effectively implement policy
- Intentionally monitor for compliance
- Responsibly report and messaging data
- Strategically allocate state and federal funding

[Key Finding: Political change and uncertainty at the federal level specifically seem to be on the minds of stakeholders. NDE could be an important “leveler” to help manage and stabilize the disruption.]

Where We Are Going

In response to what we heard from citizens, educators, school leaders, clients, students, parents, and others, as well as examining statewide data, the Nebraska Department of Education is committed to four strategic priorities. *Strategic priorities* are the clearly defined areas of focus for the NDE as essential to achieving our long term mission; they act as guiding principles for decision-making, resource allocation, and daily actions. These are the top-level goals of the strategic plan; in other words, what we focus on.

Strategic priorities are further defined by strategic outcomes. *Strategic outcomes* are the specific results or impacts the NDE aims to achieve by pursuing our strategic priorities. Strategic outcomes are the measurable results or changes that demonstrate progress toward our long-term mission. Strategic outcomes tell us what success looks like; they are our desired results.

Metrics are the specific measures or indicators used to track our progress toward achieving our strategic outcomes. Metrics turn broad goals into observable, quantifiable evidence of success. Metrics demonstrate whether strategic priorities are being achieved, in other words, the evidence.

All of the strategic levers identified above may be used to some degree to effect change with each strategic priority. Potential strategies are identified as suggested actions with each strategic priority for implementation of the plan.

[Key Finding: Respondents made clear that the success of any strategic plan is a lean focus. In response, the NDE proposes only four priorities that provide actionable changes that will contribute to the success of all of Nebraska’s learners and the system that supports them.]

Three of the strategic priorities are outward facing in their impact. In other words, they set goals for students, schools, and clients. The fourth strategic priority is inward facing and focused on the operations of the NDE.

Strategic Priority 1: Accelerate Student Achievement

Students and clients thrive when they are met with high expectations and gain the knowledge, skills, and mindsets to engage and contribute to their communities. While all content areas are important to prepare students, the NDE will focus this plan on English language arts and mathematics, recognizing the immediate achievement needs of students in these two areas.

Strategic Outcome 1.1: Improved Student Achievement

Metrics:

1.1.1. 75% of 3rd grade students will score proficient in English language arts as measured by the NSCAS statewide assessment by 2030.
(2023-24 baseline: 59% of 3rd grade students are proficient.)

1.1.2. 80% of 8th grade students will score proficient in mathematics as measured by the NSCAS statewide assessment by 2030.

(2023-24 baseline: 56.5% of 8th grade students are proficient.)

1.1.3. 71% of 11th grade students will score proficient in math and 73% will score proficient in ELA as measured by the ACT assessment by 2030.

(2023-24 baseline: ACT scores for Math and ELA are 42.1% and 45.5% proficient respectively.)

Strategic Outcome 1.2: Reduced chronic absenteeism

Metric:

1.2.1. Reduce chronic absenteeism by 50% by 2030

(2023-24 baseline: Current rate of chronic absenteeism is 22% of students)

[Key Finding: Students noted concerns with a focus on college entrance exams, and called for deeper engagement with course content “rather than test prep.”]

Potential Strategies:

- Focus discretionary or unrestricted funds to ELA and mathematics achievement, and chronic absenteeism efforts.
- Support schools through targeted school improvement and continuous improvement activities leading to increased student achievement.
- Provide statewide resources supporting ELA and mathematics achievement, and student engagement strategies.

[Key Findings: There is a strong call for better support for students with disabilities, English learners, and those in poverty. Respondents of the NDE’s survey emphasized the importance of early intervention and access to resources. Additionally, chronic absenteeism is seen as a growing issue, especially post-COVID. Survey respondents and public focus groups linked attendance to broader social issues like poverty, mental health, and family engagement.]

Strategic Priority 2: Grow the Educator Pipeline

The single most important in-school factor associated with student achievement is the quality of the educator a student engages with daily. Every child deserves access to high-quality educators, supported by high-quality leaders and support staff. (Note: The NDE recognizes the importance of all educators and school personnel; this plan focuses squarely on teachers, recognizing the current classroom teacher needs in the state.)

Strategic Outcome 2.1: Increased supply of teachers

Metrics:

2.1.1. 1,100 students per year will concentrate in the education and training program of study by 2030.

(2023-24 baseline: 552 student concentrators in the education and training program of study)

2.1.2. Decrease by half the number of vacant teacher positions by 2030.

(2023-24 baseline: 200 vacant teacher positions)

2.1.3. Decrease by half the number of unfilled teacher positions by 2030.

(2023-24 baseline: 669 unfilled teacher positions)

[Key Finding: Throughout the NDE’s strategic planning process, stakeholders escalated teacher shortages and retention as one of the state’s most significant challenges in education. Survey respondents and focus group participants cited low pay, lack of respect, and burnout as major factors.]

Potential Strategies:

- Support schools in the implementation of education and training programs of study
- Direct resources to incentivize teaching as a career
- Explore rules and regulations revisions related to teacher certification

Strategic Priority 3: Equip the Workforce

Nebraskans are best prepared to participate in the workforce when they are ready for what is next after high school, whether a career or postsecondary training or education. Students and clients must have the foundational knowledge to earn a family-sustaining wage. The NDE will support the preparation of life-long learners who are engaged, productive members of their communities, state, and nation. Learners will have transferable, career-readiness skills like critical thinking, communication, and empathy.

Strategic Outcome 3.1: Increased postsecondary access and attainment

Metrics:

3.1.1: 94% of students will graduate by 2030.

(2023-24 baseline: 88% graduation rate)

3.1.2: 50% of students will engage in dual enrollment by 2030.

(2023-24 baseline: 33% of students are engaged in dual enrollment)

3.1.3. 77% of students will concentrate in a CTE career cluster by 2030.

(2023-24 baseline: 54% of students are CTE concentrators)

3.1.4. Partner in the creation of a system to capture the number of industry-recognized credentials obtained by Nebraska graduates.

Strategic Outcome 3.2: Improved skill attainment for clients and learners

Metrics:

3.2.1. 47.2% of VR clients will receive a credential of value by 2030

(2023-24 baseline: 42% of clients receive a credential of value)

3.2.2. 63.6% of VR clients will be employed in quarter four after exit from services by 2030

(2023-24 baseline: 56.7% of clients are employed in quarter four)

3.2.3. 1000 students per year will achieve the Seal of Biliteracy by 2030

(2023-24 Baseline: 384 students achieve the Seal of Biliteracy)

[Key Finding: Workforce shortages across the state are especially evident in education, and even more acute in specific areas.]

Potential Strategies:

- Coordinate with schools and other education partners to provide resources and support to attain each metric
- Coordinate with partner state agencies and the business community to ensure workforce needs are addressed
- Direct financial and human resources to support the strategic outcomes

[Key Finding: Students expressed a desire to learn and experience greater opportunities to problem-solve and develop a sense of lifelong learning.]

Strategic Priority 4: Provide Exceptional Service

The NDE will improve efficiencies and systems to serve our agency and the state with a high-quality, exceptional service mindset, while upholding our constitutional and statutory duties.

(Note: For this strategic priority, example metrics are offered for illustration, as each office within the NDE will be responsible for operationalizing how the respective office reports on each strategic outcome.)

Strategic Outcome 4.1: Improved agency-wide efficiency

Example metrics: average number of days for invoice processing; average number of days to complete the contract routing process; average number of days for educator certification approvals.

Strategic Outcome 4.2: Increased responsiveness and communication

Example metrics: average number of hours/days to respond to emails and calls; average number of days to respond to help desk tickets.

Strategic Outcome 4.3: Improved capacity building

Example metrics: number of cross training opportunities; number of identified succession planning opportunities.

Potential Strategies:

- Implement a customer service model based on the organizational values
- Implement an employee goal model based on the organizational values
- Provide training and support for employees based on the organizational values

Implementing the Plan

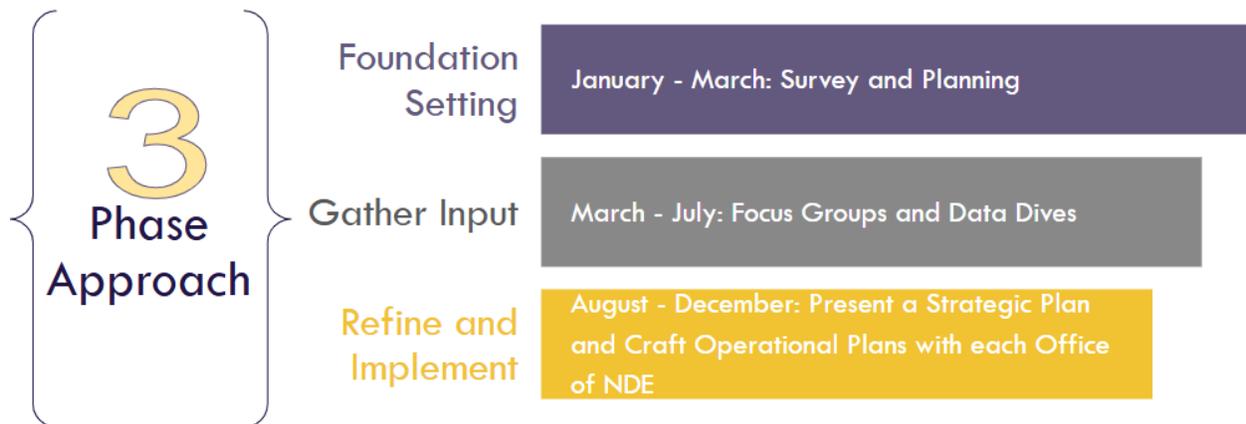
Upon approval of the plan by the state board of education, the commissioner of education is charged with implementation and reporting on achievement, leading to measurable success.

The first three Strategic Priorities will be implemented through **Action Teams**, appointed by the commissioner of education. Each action team will have a designated leader and will consist of cross-agency representatives, given the task of addressing one of the identified strategic priorities. Each action team will inherit the metrics identified in the strategic plan and will set strategies and timelines necessary to accomplish the outcomes by way of a commissioner approved **Action Plan**. Action teams will ensure alignment of agency resources and engage with external stakeholders. Additional responsibilities will include data management, reporting, and regular updates to the commissioner, who will in turn, report to the state board of education. The Commissioner's Office and Office of Policy and Strategic Initiatives will provide administrative support and coordination to the action teams.

The fourth Strategic Priority will be implemented through **Operational Plans** with assigned responsibility to each office administrator within the agency. Each office administrator in the agency will be tasked to lead their respective staff teams in identifying relevant metrics and strategies in support of the strategic outcomes. The Commissioner's Office and Office of Policy and Strategic Initiatives will provide administrative support and coordination to office administrators in the development of their respective operational plans. Office administrators will report on key metrics to the commissioner, who in turn, will report summary highlights to the state board of education.

Appendix A Summary of the Strategic Planning Process

The Nebraska Department of Education followed a three-phase approach to strategic planning: Phase I Foundation Setting, Phase II Gather Input, and Phase III Refine and Implement. Among these three phases, the staff of the NDE gathered data from five sources to inform the future strategic plan. These three phases and five data sources are summarized below with additional information available at www.education.ne.gov/commissioner/2026-strategic-plan/.



Phase I: Foundation Setting occurred between January and March 2025. During this time, NDE staff created and distributed surveys. While open to the public, the NDE coordinated the logistics needed to meet citizens and partners in a regional approach. Phase I ended with the closing of the public survey and nearly 2,000 responses from staff, teachers, administrators, community partners, and citizens of Nebraska. This **survey** is the first of five data sources that guide the work of the strategic plan, and is summarized at this link:

https://www.education.ne.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Strat-Plan-Survey-Summary_4.14.25.pdf.

Phase II: Gather Input through regional and public focus groups, and analyze the data collected during Phase I. Between March and July 2025, the NDE staff studied the data collected from the public survey and used the gaps to solicit future feedback opportunities. For example, the public reached near consensus that the education system should have these three values: communication, respect, and accountability. With additional time and modes of communication, the NDE was able to ask for standard definitions of those values as they relate to our state, our students, and our work.

Phase II also allowed the NDE staff to meet with more than 200 partners in 10 communities. These **community focus groups**, the second of five data sources, allowed public input on the NDE's strategic planning process. Additionally, the NDE staff and commissioner were able to secure valuable time with and feedback with students in four communities during **student focus groups**, the third of five data sources. The NDE staff then met with partners of the education system to discuss the work currently underway at the NDE through SWOT analyses. SWOT analysis includes examining the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the work of the NDE and our partners. First, the NDE staff leading these efforts met with each of the 16 offices of the NDE. These **Internal SWOT Analyses** were the fourth of five data sources. Next, NDE staff asked for feedback from partners. These **External SWOT Analyses** were the final of five data sources.

Phase III: Refine and Implement is the final phase of work, executed from August to December 2025. The NDE's staff drafted the outline of the strategic plan under the guidance of Commissioner Maher. This framework was taken to the State Board of Education at an August work session. Feedback was collected from board members with additional insight from employers, philanthropic partners, and school leaders. With additional context from these partners and the feedback collected in Phases I and II, the NDE staff drafted a strategic plan.

Final approval is expected from the State Board of Education prior to implementation. In preparation for implementation, staff began creating operational plan templates that will be utilized by each office of the NDE and cross-agency teams. These templates are being developed to address each strategic priority and are intended to aid each NDE employee to see their work tied to the mission of the organization and the strategic priorities of Nebraska's education system. The public can expect to see the results of this work online at www.education.ne.gov/commissioner/2026-strategic-plan/ and during State Board of Education meetings.