

One Connected System: 2026 Nebraska IDEA Part B and Part C State of the State

Nebraska has strong foundations. Our next responsibility is to connect those systems to stronger, more consistent outcomes for every child and family.

Opening and Purpose

Good morning, everyone, and thank you for being here. It is a privilege to open our State of the State presentation and to spend this time reflecting on where special education stands in Nebraska, what we are learning, and where we are going together.

In a few moments, our Part B and Part C teams will walk us through the specific indicators in Nebraska's State Performance Plans and Annual Performance Reports - the SPP/APRs we submit each year to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, or OSEP. They will examine the data, highlight our progress, and identify the areas that require continued attention.

My role is to step back from the individual numbers and frame the larger story they tell. The State of the State is more than a collection of percentages. It tells us whether Nebraska's systems are helping infants, toddlers, children, students, and young adults with disabilities learn, grow, belong, and thrive. It also reflects the families, educators, service providers, and leaders who make that work possible every day.

What the SPP APR Tells Us

The SPP/APR is IDEA's statewide accountability framework. Part C examines early intervention for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families. Part B examines special education and related services for children and youth ages 3 through 21.

Together, the reports ask two essential questions. First, are we fulfilling IDEA's requirements and protections through timely evaluations, appropriate services, effective transitions, family participation, and correction of noncompliance? Second, are children and students experiencing better outcomes - developing essential skills, learning with their peers, progressing academically, graduating, and preparing for adult life?

Both questions matter. Compliance without improved outcomes is not enough, but sustainable outcomes are difficult to achieve when the foundational protections for children and families are not consistently in place. That is why OSEP's Results-Driven Accountability approach considers compliance and results together. The SPP/APR should not be viewed simply as an annual federal report. It is both a mirror that helps us see our system honestly and a compass that helps us focus our collective effort.

The headline in Nebraska's 2026 determinations is important: OSEP determined that Nebraska meets the requirements and purposes of IDEA under both Part B and Part C. We

should recognize and celebrate that accomplishment. It reflects strong work across the state and shows that Nebraska has sound foundations for oversight, data collection, general supervision, correction of noncompliance, and technical assistance.

At the same time, Meets Requirements does not mean every target was achieved or every child is having the experience we envision. It means we have a strong platform from which to improve - and a responsibility to use it well.

One Connected Birth Through 21 System

Although we submit separate reports for Part B and Part C, children and families do not experience their lives as separate programs or indicators. A family may first connect with Nebraska's Early Development Network when a concern arises about an infant or toddler. That child may later transition to preschool, elementary school, secondary school, and preparation for adult life. The programs, professionals, and legal requirements may change, but the child remains the same child and the family remains an essential partner.

That is why we must view Nebraska's work as one connected birth-through-21 system. Strong child find leads to earlier support. High-quality early intervention contributes to school readiness. Thoughtful transition from Part C to preschool creates continuity. Inclusive early-childhood experiences build belonging. Strong core instruction, timely intervention, and specially designed instruction influence literacy and academic progress. Meaningful secondary transition planning affects graduation, employment, education, independence, and community participation.

The indicators allow us to examine individual points along that pathway, but our responsibility is to understand the relationships among them. We must look beyond whether a required activity occurred and ask about the quality of instruction, services, family partnership, leadership, implementation, and the child's actual experience.

The Larger Nebraska Story

At the broadest level, Nebraska's results tell us three things.

First, our statewide foundations are strong. Nebraska has reliable systems for oversight, data, monitoring, correction, and technical assistance. Improvement depends on these clear expectations, accurate information, and timely responses.

Second, we see meaningful signs of progress in literacy, graduation, post-school engagement, early-childhood outcomes, family outcomes, services in natural environments, inclusive opportunities, and districts' use of data to organize support.

Third, that progress is not yet consistent enough. Outcomes vary across ages, regions, schools, disability categories, and student groups. Academic gaps remain, particularly as students move into secondary grades. We must continue focusing on dropout prevention, meaningful transition planning, inclusion, family partnership, and timely implementation. In Part C, children's social relationships, communication, learning, and ability to meet their needs remain central.

Statewide averages tell us whether Nebraska is moving, but not who is benefiting or where support is needed. We must disaggregate the information and distinguish activity from impact. Beyond counting training and participation, we must ask whether support changed systems and practice, whether practices were implemented well, and whether those changes improved outcomes for children and families.

How Nebraska Is Supporting Improvement

The encouraging part of Nebraska's story is that we are not responding to every indicator with a separate initiative. We are building a more aligned system of improvement.

For school-age services, NeMTSS is a major part of that infrastructure. It brings together shared leadership, strong core instruction, layered supports, data-based decision-making, and collaboration. It helps districts connect continuous improvement, literacy, behavior, social-emotional learning, inclusion, and special education. The goal is not another program. It is a system that notices needs early, responds effectively, measures whether supports are working, and adjusts when they are not.

Our statewide literacy work, regional coaches, WORDS, evidence-based materials, and implementation support build educator knowledge and the district conditions needed to sustain effective practice. Our Targeted Improvement Plan process reinforces this approach through measurable goals, evidence-based strategies, and attention to implementation and outcomes. Special education cannot operate as a parallel system; students with disabilities must be part of the district's central instructional agenda.

Nebraska is also continuing its Journey to Inclusion. Inclusion is more than a placement or a percentage of time. It means access, participation, belonging, high expectations, and meaningful learning. It requires collaboration between general and special educators, accessible materials, effective instruction, individualized supports, and leadership that sees every student as a shared responsibility.

Our ESUs and statewide networks extend this capacity through specialized supports and help translate statewide priorities to local circumstances, including Nebraska's rural and geographically isolated communities.

For Part C, Routines-Based Early Intervention connects the interview, functional IFSP outcomes, and home visits through the Getting Ready Approach to families' everyday lives. Young children learn throughout the day. Our system is strongest when professionals listen to family priorities and build caregivers' capacity to support development between visits.

All 27 Planning Region Teams have been trained in these practices. Coaching, fidelity checks, outcome reviews, self-assessment, and technical assistance move the work beyond one-time training and build sustainable local capacity.

Across Parts B and C, family and stakeholder partnership remains essential. Families are experts on their children, and their experience is an important measure of system quality. Educators, providers, district leaders, ESUs, higher education, advocates, agencies, and

community partners also help us interpret data and shape improvement. Sustainable change is built with people, not delivered to them.

Who We Are as the Office of Special Education

With that broader picture in mind, it is important to ground today's presentation in who we are as the Office of Special Education and how we view our responsibility to Nebraska's children, families, schools, and communities.

At our core, we are stewards of Nebraska's special education system. We work to ensure that IDEA's rights and protections are upheld, public resources are used responsibly, and children and students with disabilities receive the services and opportunities they need.

That responsibility includes monitoring and compliance, but it does not end there. We are also your partners. Our goal is not simply to identify when requirements have not been met. It is to help districts understand those requirements, solve problems, strengthen systems, and build the capacity needed to improve outcomes.

We are connectors, bringing together districts, ESUs, families, educators, providers, agencies, and partners so that expertise reaches schools across Nebraska. We connect special education with literacy, NeMTSS, early childhood, behavior, assessment, transition, workforce development, and family engagement.

And we are advocates. We carry Nebraska's experiences and needs into state and federal conversations while keeping children, students, families, and educators at the center of our decisions.

This is also how we approach general supervision. IDEA requires the state to monitor implementation, identify noncompliance, ensure correction, and use enforcement when necessary. We take that obligation seriously. But effective general supervision should do more than identify errors. It should help us recognize patterns, understand root causes, target resources, and help local systems prevent problems from recurring.

Our data, determinations, monitoring, dispute resolution, fiscal oversight, and technical assistance provide different windows into the system. Connecting them gives districts clearer information and more coherent support. We ask not only whether a file was corrected, but what caused the issue, what system change is needed, and how we will know it lasts.

Ultimately, we are working to create conditions in which compliance supports quality, quality strengthens systems, and stronger systems lead to better outcomes. The Office does not stand apart from districts and communities. We are part of the same statewide system, and we share responsibility for making it work for every learner.

The Realities and the Promise

We are doing this work in a challenging environment. Nebraska schools and early-intervention programs face workforce shortages, fiscal pressures, changing expectations, and increasingly complex needs. Our geography requires supports that work

for both large systems and small rural communities, while the federal policy and funding environment continues to evolve.

We should acknowledge those realities without allowing uncertainty to become our organizing principle. Our organizing principle must remain IDEA's promise: disability will not determine a person's opportunity to learn, participate, belong, and prepare for a meaningful future.

That promise is delivered locally: when a service coordinator listens to a family's priorities; when a teacher sees a student as capable; when a special educator provides explicit, evidence-based instruction; when an administrator protects time for collaboration and coaching; and when an IEP or IFSP team makes decisions based on individual need rather than habit, convenience, or available labels.

The state's role is to make that local work more possible by setting clear expectations, providing useful guidance, connecting people with expertise, reducing fragmentation, monitoring implementation, and directing support where the evidence shows it is needed most.

What Success Should Look Like

Our measure of success must be larger than a federal determination. Success means children are found and supported early; families understand their rights and are heard; students receive strong core and truly individualized instruction; and educators have the knowledge, materials, coaching, and leadership support to implement effective practices well.

Success means students with disabilities do more than occupy inclusive settings; they belong, participate, contribute, and learn. Behavior is understood and addressed through supportive, evidence-based systems. Transition planning begins with the student's strengths, preferences, interests, and vision for adult life. More students graduate, fewer drop out, and more young adults leave school connected to education, employment, and community.

Success also means we can demonstrate how our investments contribute to those results - tracing a line from state support to regional capacity, from regional capacity to district systems, from district systems to educator practice, and from practice to improved experiences and outcomes for children and families. That is more difficult than counting activities, but it is the accountability that matters most.

Closing

As you hear from our Part B and Part C teams today, I encourage you to listen for three things: the strengths we can build upon; the places where performance is not yet producing the outcomes we want for every child and family; and the connections among early intervention, instruction, inclusion, literacy, behavior, family partnership, transition, professional learning, data, and general supervision.

The most important message from this year's SPP/APRs is not that Nebraska has arrived. It is that we have a strong platform, clearer evidence, and a shared responsibility to keep moving. We can be proud that Nebraska meets the requirements and purposes of IDEA under both Part B and Part C. We can celebrate the remarkable work happening across the state while remaining honest that our responsibility extends far beyond the determination itself.

Our work is ultimately about people, not indicators: an infant discovering a new way to communicate; a family gaining confidence; a student learning to read; a young adult entering college, employment, or community life; and the educators and providers who continue to believe in what is possible.

That is the Nebraska we are working to build - one in which every infant, toddler, child, student, and individual with a disability can learn, grow, belong, and thrive.

Thank you for the work you do, the partnerships you build, and your willingness to keep learning and improving together. It is through this lens - as stewards, partners, connectors, and advocates - that our Part B and Part C teams will now take us more deeply into what the individual indicators tell us and how they will guide our shared priorities in the year ahead.