



July 11, 2021

Dear Nebraska School Administrators and Leaders,

I am extremely proud of the work across the Nebraska education system and especially the work you have all led to ensure students and communities were well served during the course of the Covid pandemic. Nebraska led the way in the dedication to return to schools safely and managed through the darkest times of the pandemic with a clear focus on local leadership and local decision making to manage in the midst of crisis. I know I can speak for the State Board of Education members and the whole of the Nebraska Department of Education in congratulating you on this impressive work.

Over the past year we have also experienced other forms of crisis including a deep concern about the health and well-being of students in the midst of the pandemic. Schools play a critical role in the services to students in partnership with parents, caregivers, communities, extended families, and many others. This sense of community around each of our schools established by boards, teachers, and all employees in schools is a unique and unwritten function and often forgotten part of the fabric of Nebraska.

Unfortunately, over the past few months, we've experienced a crisis of confidence as we try to resume normal expectations of system leadership. I regret that concerns over the proposed health education standards are fueling part of that crisis of confidence in the Department and across the education system in Nebraska. The State Board of Education has taken hours of comment and early on asked that we proceed to a second draft that addresses the concerns heard from parents, grandparents, schools and elected leaders. Perhaps lost in the other information available, but important for you to know, the State Board discussed in the June Board meeting creating a second draft with parameters that would remove many of the explicit examples and reframe sensitive topics as important process for local schools with the intentional inclusion of parents and families at the local level.

During the June State Board meeting, I outlined an intention to review the standards drafting process to better engage stakeholders, engage school leaders, and engage others. Though the health education standards were drafted in a similar process as other content areas, it clearly did not serve us well in this instance. This is unfortunate as it has created a still escalating concern and the Board and I are committed to bringing that to a resolution.

Over the last week, I have spoken with the Governor and many superintendents about the concerns and the next steps of the Board. I can share that before August we will be vetting a 2nd draft for public release. This second draft will also make clear that managing sensitive health related topics be thoughtfully conducted with parental input at a local level as I know is already a regular process across the state.

I remain dedicated to addressing equity and diversity in our schools, but I am not interested in basing that work on anything divisive. Our focus at NDE has always been on ALL Nebraskans and we continue to be driven by our mission. I, like most of you, was not familiar with Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the concerns that are now becoming a significant distraction to the necessary education work ahead. Without doubt, our nation has been gripped by concerns about race and equal treatment of people, but we will not heal through divisive rhetoric on any issue. Instead, we must focus on those things that unite us to ensure that every student across Nebraska can achieve the American dream of setting and accomplishing goals that make them successful and productive in their future and ensure that Nebraska is well served by a college, career and civic ready future generation.

I will share more with you in the coming weeks and also address the intentional slowdown of a pace of proposing changes in rules and regulations. Though there are many things we cannot control, I do hope to support all of you in your critical mission more effectively as we continue to manage in this challenging time.

I end this letter as I started it. I am extremely proud of the education system in Nebraska as it is established with strong local leadership and strong sense of community and family involvement in public and non-public schools. We remain focused on our shared mission in educating the next generations of Nebraskans to ensure a bright future for all. Each year is an opportunity of a lifetime for our students and for each of us. We can be confident to begin the 2021-22 school year with a great sense energy and excitement for our future.

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to education in Nebraska.

Sincerely,



Matthew L. Blomstedt, Ph.D.
Commissioner of Education

cc. State Board of Education