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BRIEFING REPORT

2

NEBRASKA LEGISLATIVE ISSUES SYMPOSIUM

INFORMATION NEEDED TO PROMOTE EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

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Overview

If Nebraska policymakers assume that an excellent public education system is a strong contributor to economic development, they must also assume that change in the state's educational system cannot be left to chance. In other words, the state must exercise its authority to formulate policy for local school districts.

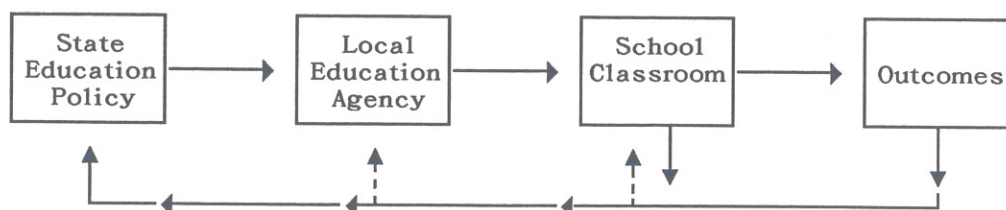
In order to know whether action taken at the state level influences what happens in the classroom and, thus, produces improved educational outcomes, state policymakers need information (figure 1).

Information Requirements for State Policymakers

For state policymakers to gain knowledge about school classrooms and about educational outcomes the following questions need to be considered:

- Who gathers the information?
- What gets gathered?
- How is it gathered?
- To whom is it given?

Figure 1



Who

For information about education in Nebraska to be useful to policymakers, it must be perceived as unbiased.

What

For information to be useful to policymakers, it must shed some light on the impact of state policy on children in school classrooms and on the educational outputs that follow children out of the classroom.

How

For information to be useful to policymakers, it must be gathered systematically, and in the same way year after year.

Whom

For information to be useful, it must be made available to a diverse audience, including state policymakers, school officials, and parents.

The Information Problem

Nebraska policymakers have not required the collection of information about local school conditions and school outcomes. Thus, it is difficult to know what impact state actions have in local schools. For example, Nebraska's educational reform legislation, LB 994, changed high school graduation requirements. How have students altered their course enrollments as a result of this legislation? Data on course enrollments exist for each school year, but it is difficult to capture change over time. In order to assess the impact of state policy, information must be collected at the school level.

Policymakers do not have ready access to longitudinal educational trends that are taking place in Nebraska. Again, much data exists, however, it is difficult to aggregate this information in a form that is useful to policymakers. The data are difficult to aggregate because local schools are not uniform in the way they report data, because data formatting makes asking "what if" questions difficult, because the Management Information Services is not staffed sufficiently to provide special programming, and because state policymakers have not agreed on the type of information that would be useful to them annually.

Information Needs

State policymakers need objective, systematic, and usable information about the following aspects of Nebraska's public schools:

- Enrollment and student characteristics,
- Fiscal resources,
- Human resources,
- Organization and control,
- Curriculum and special programs,
- Student performance, and
- Preparation programs.

Nebraska policymakers also need information about the public school systems in other states and throughout the nation. Comparison data are a useful mechanism for measuring the economic advantages of one state against another. Nebraska policymakers operate at a disadvantage if they do not know how Nebraska compares with other states. For example, table 1 illustrates a case where Nebraska compares favorably. It should be recognized, however, that inter- and intrastate comparisons are crude guidelines and indicators; no two states necessarily compare the same data within their respective boundaries.

Table 1
High School Graduates as a Percentage
of 17 Year Olds, California, Nebraska,
and United States, 1976-84

Year	California	Nebraska ¹	Nation
	Percent		
1984	67	86	74
1983	68	87	74
1982	64	85	73
1981	64	77	73
1980	62	76	72
1979	64	76	71
1978	65	74	72
1977	68	75	73
1976	70	73	74

¹Nebraska's population of 17 year olds was estimated using live birth statistics.

Sources: *Conditions of Education in California, 1986-87*; *Statistics and Facts About Nebraska Schools 1984-85*; *1984 Annual Statistical Report of the Bureau of Vital Statistics*.

What Is Gathered and What Is Not Gathered

State level data about the public school system are gathered by many agencies. Table 2

provides an abbreviated list of the information available and needed.

Table 2
Types of Public School Data Required

What is collected?	What is needed?
Enrollment and student characteristics:	
Enrollment by grade and age	Family characteristics
Number of students by age	Economic characteristics
Private school enrollment	Work patterns of students
Ethnicity	Substance abuse
Special education	
Vocational education	
Fiscal resources:	
Expenditures by district	School comparisons
Expenditures by student	Condition of buildings
Revenues by source	Distribution of resources
Valuation by district	District comparisons
Valuation by pupil	Cost of education comparisons
Human resources:	
Class assignments	Age characteristics
Teacher pupil ratio	Statewide salary analyses
Teacher qualifications	Teacher supply and demand
Average annual salary	Patterns in credentialing
	Performance on tests
Organization and control:	
District characteristics	School board characteristics
School class	Private school enrollments
	Impact of court decisions
Student performance:	
Graduation rates	SAT/ACT test scores
Promotion rates	Standardized tests
	College attendance
	Dropout rates

This *Briefing Report* was developed by the Center for Applied Urban Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha for the Legislative Council Executive Board, to provide background information for the 1987 Nebraska Legislative Issues Symposium. The *Briefing Report* is intended to provide an overview,

pose important questions, and identify alternative policies and strategies for a specific issue. The views and opinions expressed are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent those of the University of Nebraska at Omaha.