

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office  
Education Committee March 18, 2025

**MURMAN:** Welcome to the Education Committee. I'm Senator Dave Murman from Glenvil. Represent the 38th District. I serve as chair of the committee. This public hearing is your opportunity to be part of the legislative process and to express your position on the proposed legislation before us. The committee will take up agenda items in the order posted. If you wish to testify on the mic today, please fill out a green testifier sheet. The forms can be found at the entrances to the hearing room. Be sure to print clearly and provide all requested information. If you will testify on more than one agenda item, you will need a new green testifying sheet each time you come forward to speak on the mic. When it is your turn to come forward, please give the testifier sheet and any handouts you might have to the page as you are seated. If you have handouts, we request that you provide 12 copies for distribution. If you do not have 12 copies, please alert the page when you come forward. At the microphone, please begin stating-- by stating your name and spelling both your first and last names to ensure we get an accurate record. Observers, if you do not wish to testify but would like to indicate your position on an agenda item, there are yellow sign-in sheets in notebooks at the entrances. The sign-in sheets will be included in the official hearing record. We will begin with the introducer giving an opening statement at the mic, followed by proponents, opponents, and those wanting to speak in a neutral capacity. The introducer will then have an opportunity to give a closing statement if they wish. We will be using a three-minute time limit system for all testifiers. When you begin your testimony, the light will-- on the table will be green. When the yellow light comes on, you'll have one minute to wrap up your thoughts. And the red light indicates that you have reached the end of your time limit. Questions from the committee may follow off the clock. A few final items to, items to facilitate today's hearing. Please mute your cell phones or any other electronic devices. Verbal outburst or applause are not permitted. Such behavior may be cause for you to be asked to leave the hearing room. Know that committee members may need to come and go during the afternoon for other hearings. I will now, now ask the committee members with us today to introduce themselves, starting at my right.

**SANDERS:** Good afternoon. I'm Rita Sanders, District 45: the Bellevue-Offutt community.

**HUGHES:** Jana Hughes, District 24: Seward, York, Polk, and a little bit of Butler County.

**MEYER:** Glen Meyer, District 17: Dakota, Thurston, Wayne, and the southern part of Dixon County.

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**LONOWSKI:** Good afternoon. Dan Lonowski, District 33. That is Adams County, Kearney County, and rural Phelps County.

**JUAREZ:** Margo Juarez, south Omaha, District 5.

**MURMAN:** And staff with us today are, to my immediate right, legal counsel Kevin Langevin; and to my far right is committee clerk Diane Johnson. The pages who serve with-- today can stand up and introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about yourselves.

**SYDNEY COCHRAN:** I'm Sydney Cochran. I'm a first-year student at UNL. And I study business administration and U.S. history.

**ARNAV RISHI:** Hey, I'm Arnav. I'm a junior biology and political science major.

**WESLEY EARHART:** My name is Wesley. I'm a senior political science major.

**MURMAN:** Thank you very much for your help today. And with that, we'll begin the hearing for gubenor-- gubernatorial appointment, Duane Kime, to the Bureau of Educational Lands and Funds. Welcome, Duane.

**DUANE KIME:** Well, thank you. Appreciate you having time for me today. What do you want, just a little bit about me?

**MURMAN:** Yeah. Just tell us a little bit about yourself and why you're running for the board and, and what--

**DUANE KIME:** Well--

**MURMAN:** --what you think the board does and so forth.

**DUANE KIME:** I'm from Cherry County. Lived in Cherry County all my life. Married for 48.5 years. Got two kids. Daughter works at the youth rehabilitation center in Kearney, and grandson there. And son in Valentine with the-- has a bu-- welding business there. I've been a-- had cattle ever since I was nine years old. Been ranching all my life. And we-- one time, we had a family operation with what we owned and leased. We run about 45,000 acres with 2,000 cows all over [INAUDIBLE]. And then we split that up. But I've been on a lot of boards. I was on the school board for 35 years between a Class I, Class VI, and a Class III. All of them land that we owned and leased, there was five school sections on it. So I know the leased part of it. And leased ground basically all of my life. Been on the, the school board. Been on the Sandhills Area Foundation Board, Valentine High School Foundation

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Board. Presently, I'm on the, the Cherry County Zoning Board. I guess I've been interested in education all my life. My grandfather was on the school board, my uncle. Got a cousin now that is-- the-- I don't know what qualifies me for it. I mean, you know what-- what you're looking, looking for on, on that part. But I feel I understand the education part of it, the money that comes from the BELF and the Education Committee. It's a great help to the school districts.

**MURMAN:** OK. Thank you. So you're from around Mullen or Valentine?

**DUANE KIME:** Valentine. Lived in Cherry County. I've lived in Cherry County all my life, about 26 miles north of, of Mullen or 50 miles south of Valentine.

**MURMAN:** Are you leaving as soon as the hearings over to ca-- for calving?

**DUANE KIME:** I, I, I have some [INAUDIBLE] calving cows. I, I have-- just have a small operation anymore. Did some land trading with Ted Turner to-- had a piece of ground out in the middle of theirs. And they-- I didn't really have access to it. So my ground starts right along the Highway 97 now, so I got access into it. But sounds like a pretty good storm coming, so I should be able to get home before.

**MURMAN:** Yeah. Well, the main thing's getting home then, not so much the-- you, you got the cattle taken care of--

**DUANE KIME:** Yeah. Yeah. We aren't supposed to have that bad, I mean--

**MURMAN:** Oh, good.

**DUANE KIME:** Yeah.

**MURMAN:** Good. So you've served on a couple of different school boards, you, you mentioned?

**DUANE KIME:** Yeah, it was a Class I, which was just a little rural board for-- I'm not sure on these-- I think 18 years. And then I got elected on to the-- at that time, it was Cherry County Rural Schools, which is-- was a Class VI board, and was on it until the-- Senator Raikes and I didn't agree, but we had to become a-- we had to do away with the Class-- Class VI, become a Class III. And, and I was on it the last four years that, that I was on the board.

**MURMAN:** Yeah.

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**DUANE KIME:** Served as the president of the board for six years on that.

**MURMAN:** Do remember that. The-- so now you're on the Valentine School Board, is that right?

**DUANE KIME:** Not-- no. No, I, I haven't been on it for about 12 years, but.

**MURMAN:** OK. But that's where you finished up, in--

**DUANE KIME:** Yeah.

**MURMAN:** OK. So on those smaller school boards, did you feel-- apparently you felt that the kids got a good education on this--

**DUANE KIME:** Yeah. Well--

**MURMAN:** --of those small schools.

**DUANE KIME:** I feel I did. You know. I never [INAUDIBLE] I never went to college, so.

**MURMAN:** Was the schools about the same size when you went to school as, as when you served on the school board, or did they get smaller?

**DUANE KIME:** No-- well, when I went to school-- one-room schoolhouse. It was 20 kids, 1 teacher for a few years. And now it's down to whether schools closed on it. There's a school that kind of-- our area joined with, and I think there's only five kids in it, which-- that used to be 20 kids. So the rural area is, is changing.

**MURMAN:** Getting small.

**DUANE KIME:** Yeah. There isn't much. High school was 280 students when I was first on the school board in Valentine. And I-- gonna say down to 100-- well, went from a Class B to a, to a class C-II school.

**MURMAN:** Getting smaller too. The educational lands and funds out there, so do you lease quite a few acres from the, the bureau?

**DUANE KIME:** I, I can't, being on the--

**MURMAN:** Oh. Oh, you, you can't--

**DUANE KIME:** No, I, I can't, being on the-- but we used to have-- we used to have-- that's it-- used to have school land and, and bought a chunk-- Ted Turner, when he bought a piece of ground, we had to split a

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school section with that. And we had to buy our half of-- or, he would have been-- they wouldn't let him by seven or eight sections. And so we, we did, but.

**MURMAN:** OK. Let's see if there's any other questions. Senator Hughes.

**HUGHES:** Thank you, Chairman Murman. Thanks for coming in. Thank you for all your volunteerism. That's impressive that you did all the-- and then now you are asked to--

**DUANE KIME:** I didn't, I didn't give you all of it, but.

**HUGHES:** Well, but-- you know. You've learned that from your family. Clearly it's been passed down. My, my mom had been on school board and then I got on school board. I mean, it's just kind of something you grow up and learning. And, and it's nice that you're serving on this board too when you were asked, so appreciate that. I have a couple-- just a couple questions. Just-- because I don't know if anybody-- like, how often does your board meet and how many people are on it?

**DUANE KIME:** The-- meets the second Friday of every month.

**HUGHES:** So 12 times a year.

**DUANE KIME:** Yeah.

**HUGHES:** OK.

**DUANE KIME:** And there's-- should be five on the board. We had a gentleman that resigned in December for medical reasons and hasn't been--

**HUGHES:** Get replaced.

**DUANE KIME:** --filled. Yeah. Hadn't been filled.

**HUGHES:** And then are-- is most of your work kind of approving different land lease issues if you're going to sell or-- I mean-- and then appropriations out for the school's year-- is that kind of the--

**DUANE KIME:** That's-- yeah, the--

**HUGHES:** --typical things you handle?

**DUANE KIME:** Yeah. The main thing is, yeah, going over the leases.

**HUGHES:** Yeah.

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**DUANE KIME:** There's a lot of conditional use permits, you know, that-- on that, that go over-- especially on the farm, farm ground. One of the main thing is a lot of the school land hadn't-- had the cedar trees removed off of them for years and-- all of the area that--

**HUGHES:** Kind of land management.

**DUANE KIME:** [INAUDIBLE] that, but fences and stuff, but, yeah.

**HUGHES:** And then just my last question. In your opinion, what is the mission-- the top mission for the Bureau of Educational Lands Fund?

**DUANE KIME:** To provide funding for the schools [INAUDIBLE].

**HUGHES:** It's to maximize profit going to the schools? Yeah. Thank you. I agree. Thank-- I, I think that should be the mission too. Thank you. Thanks for your service.

**MURMAN:** Yep. Senator, Senator Sanders.

**DUANE KIME:** Yes.

**SANDERS:** Thank you, Chair Murman. I don't have a question for you. I just have a comment.

**DUANE KIME:** OK.

**SANDERS:** And I want to thank you for going through the appointment process. You have certainly already served your community. And I also wanted to give you fair warning. I was appointed to a couple commissions and then I ended up here as a legislator. So--

**HUGHES:** Beware.

**SANDERS:** This could be your path as well.

**DUANE KIME:** I got to-- I got to be-- I haven't told many people this, but I was asked to run for the Legislature, and I talked Senator Storer into doing it, so.

**HUGHES:** Deflected.

**SANDERS:** Thank you for driving out here today. It's, it's a long trip.

**DUANE KIME:** Thank you. No, it's-- I-- back-- daughter lives in Kearney. So I spent the night there last night, didn't come home, but.

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**SANDERS:** Thank you, Mr. Kime.

**DUANE KIME:** Yup. Any other questions for me?

**MURMAN:** Any other questions? Senator Juarez.

**JUAREZ:** Thank you very much for coming and being willing to serve. I just have a, a general question for you about our educational lands. What do you think about the idea of selling them?

**DUANE KIME:** At, at this time, I don't feel it makes sense. But if, if it does, get rid it. It's up to-- I guess it's up to the Legislature to make that determination. Or the voters. I don't know how that process works. But that money has to stay in a fund for education no matter what. And that's, that's one reason I'd like to see it at this time especially stay in land, is it-- you legislators are not-- have anything against any of you-- you can't get ahold of it to-- for other purposes.

**JUAREZ:** Well, I'm wi-- I'm with you. I'd like to keep the lands also. And my reason is because I think it's nice to have our portfolio diversified. So having some land besides the stocks and bonds and whatever investments that our officer makes-- I just like the variety.

**DUANE KIME:** If you don't mind, I got, got this from the meeting we had last Friday.

**MURMAN:** Sure.

**DUANE KIME:** That-- of the portfolio, the investment in the land, the BELF is going to-- has about 60% of it. It's like-- I think it's on that paper that's handed out. But-- of it-- and about 40% is in the Investment Council. The payout per the schools this last year was 70% of it come out of the, the BELF land part and 30% out of the investment. So at this time, I don't feel that it makes any sense to, to sell the land. And if it keeps appreciating, it keeps getting worth, worth more all the time.

**JUAREZ:** Thank you for serving us.

**MURMAN:** Just kind of a related question. Do you think the land and the funds, the, the way they're invested-- everything's invested now is the best we can do, the maximum return we can get for-- from both sources? Or do you think there's maybe a way we can improve that somehow?

**DUANE KIME:** I, I'm not a-- I'm not a banker or investment guy. I, I just know what the-- land is always going to be, be worth more and-- but it always costs more to, to-- run it too, and that. And I do know that leasing round is-- I mean, I'm leasing 700 acres through Ted Turner's Sandhills Ranch property-- they call it-- right now because they didn't want to change the fence when-- and it's cheaper than, than I can afford to buy it. [INAUDIBLE] sell it to me, but. That-- this does give the, you know, young people a chance to-- when the lease comes up to, to bid on it to-- my-- probably saying stuff here-- maybe getting a little long-winded-- if you want me to be quiet, but. My feeling is or fear is that if they ever decide to sell it, especially the farm ground, then you'll have big guys, many people come in and buy it all up because they can run them up. Now, the rural ground, which I'm familiar-- that's main reason I'm on the board, is I'm the only one that knows-- involved in cattle grazing and stuff. Well, the-- a lot of them parcels are scattered out to big places. No access, no easements to them. You know, that ground, you'd only have one bidder on if it comes up for sale. So you, so you kind of got two, two things to look at, at there. But it's always going to be worth more than it is now.

**MURMAN:** Do you run buffalo on that land you lease or do you have to keep the buffalo out?

**DUANE KIME:** No. But they're-- they-- house is about 1/4 of a mile from where they-- they run by there once a year about 5,000 [INAUDIBLE], so. We've got--

**MURMAN:** Of buffalo?

**DUANE KIME:** Yeah.

**MURMAN:** OK.

**DUANE KIME:** Yeah. They-- next to me, the Turner's got 150,000 acres all in one chunk. So.

**MURMAN:** OK. Any other questions for Mr. Kime? If not, we appreciate you running for reappointment, correct?

**DUANE KIME:** Well, thank you. And I guess-- like to be reappointed. I enjoy it. Probably'd be my-- my age, probably'd be my last, last time [INAUDIBLE] maybe, but. Like I told the gentleman on the board a couple years ago, been on the board two years and didn't know anything about farming. Well, I got here and I still don't know anything about farming. That's different than what I'm used to.



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**MURMAN:** You're a rancher, is that what you're saying?

**DUANE KIME:** Yeah. I don't, don't have any use for a plow.

**MURMAN:** OK. Well, that, that's probably good if you're in the Sandhills.

**DUANE KIME:** Yeah. Yeah, there's no-- it's--

**MURMAN:** So-- well, we'll see if we can advance your appointment on to the floor, and hope-- hopefully you can get on the board--

**DUANE KIME:** Thank you.

**MURMAN:** --back on the board.

**DUANE KIME:** Thank you guys for your time.

**MURMAN:** Yep. Thank you.

**HUGHES:** Safe driving.

**MURMAN:** And that'll close our hearing for the gubernatorial appointment. And I will turn the committee over to Vice Chair Hughes.

**HUGHES:** Got you. OK. Are you ready, Senator Murman?

**MURMAN:** Yes, I am.

**HUGHES:** Fantastic. LB671. Senator Murman, go ahead.

**MURMAN:** OK. Good afternoon, Vice Chair Hughes and members of the Education Committee. My name is Dave Murman from Glenvil. D-a-v-e M-u-r-m-a-n. Represent the-- Nebraska's 38th District. Today, today, I have the privilege to introduce LB671. LB671 was brought on behalf of the Department of Education to identify various pieces in statute they thought could be simplified or cleaned up. Because of that, I'll be brief, as some individuals behind me should be able to go into detail on why the department feels these changes are necessary. This would make a change in the option enrollment reporting data. Adding the number of applications approved cleans up a variety of statute language, simplifies the dyslexia reporting statutes, and clarifies some statutes whether a task is desi-- delegated to the state board or to the Commissioner of Education. To be clear, I'm happy to consider any modifications the committee sees that are necessary to this bill. This is a bill that I brought on behalf of the Department of Education

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so they can have that discussion. And they are welcome to explain the importance of these changes. And I'll take any questions, but you can--

**HUGHES:** Does anybody have questions for Senator Murman?

**MURMAN:** --hold them too.

**HUGHES:** Nope. I think we're ready for the first proponent, please.  
Hello.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** Good afternoon, Senator Hughes, members of the Education Committee. For the record, my name is Brian Halstead, B-r-i-a-n H-a-l-s-t-e-a-d. With the Department of Education. This is the usual cleanup or technical amendment bill. We at the department collect this from various sources and entities. Most of the changes in here are repealing statute language that's outdated. Several sections that dealt with solar wind and solar energy off of school lands that went to fund teacher effectiveness that ended several years ago. So we're just having you strike all that out of statute because it doesn't exist anymore. We certainly heard at the interim hearing you held last fall on the enrollment option program how the data you asked us to collect on just the rejections and the causes didn't incl-- well, how many were approved. And it was clear to us-- well, I think they probably wanted to know about approvals too and left the word out. So that's all that's going on there. We are also aligning it with a statute where the year end report from schools collects enormous amount of information. The way it was originally drafted says on or before July 1, which means you must have intended an entirely different report. We're just trying to simplify the reporting site and how that's all done in that regard. Most of the rest of the changes, I'd be more than happy to answer any question. It is not the intent of the department by putting-- to change anything about what the Legislature wanted done, its intent or purposes. It's merely harmonizing or clarifying language.

**HUGHES:** All right. Thank you. Do we have any questions for Mr. Halstead? And thanks for coming in today. Yes. Go ahead, Senator Conrad.

**CONRAD:** Thank you, Senator Hughes. Thank you, Brian. Good to see you. Quick question if you might be willing to do so, since this is just second nature to you because of your policy expertise and looking at the statutes and looking at the legislation. One thing that I noticed when we took up a somewhat related kind of HHS cleanup bill in, in, in the body this year and it's still pending on the floor is, I think we

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perhaps could have saved a lot of confusion if we said, yes, this is a technical cleanup bill, and this section relates to this is-- which is outdated or this section relates to this which is redundant. And they had a great description of what each section was doing in the bill, but they didn't have the corresponding, this is the redundancy or this is why it's antiquated or what have you. And I think if you by chance have something like that available if and when-- I'm guessing this bill quickly flies out of committee, goes the General File-- just that we can have it handy. I think it might be beneficial to, to not only the committee but our, our colleagues on the floor so that we can easily get through debate, hopefully, if that's possible.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** We can certainly produce a simple one-pager--

**CONRAD:** That would do it.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** --for each ten sections in the bill that are being tweaked here. That's not hard, no.

**CONRAD:** All right. Thank you, Brian. Thank you.

**HUGHES:** I-- no-- so full disclosure, I did not read through word for word. Did you say we-- in this bill we are adding the IEPs that were approved if they were an opt-in--

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** No.

**HUGHES:** No. That's not in here? OK. I didn't--

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** The statute, the statute that the Legislature enacted called for us at the department to collect from the school districts--

**HUGHES:** Yes.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** --the num-- the applications in a given school year that were rejected.

**HUGHES:** Right.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** And then the reasons why they were jerec--

**HUGHES:** But we want--

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** --rejected.

**HUGHES:** --also the ones accepted.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** So when we-- when you had the hearing last fall, there were numerous testifiers who came up and made conclusions about, well, that meant everyone in this group got denied.

**HUGHES:** Right.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** Oh, they don't know how many actually got approved.

**HUGHES:** Right.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** It's like, we can fix that.

**HUGHES:** I guess-- so-- but is that going to be in this, or will that be in the--

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** It's in this-- it's in the very first section of this bill. Section 1 makes that tweak to the statute under enrollment option.

**HUGHES:** Oh. On-- just on the bottom of page 2 then.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** Yeah.

**HUGHES:** OK.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** Absolutely. And right up on the top of page 3 is where-- applications approved and rejected.

**HUGHES:** Sorry. I missed the underlined approve. Thank you. That's the one I was looking for. Because you were talking about putting it in a different bill, but it's included in this.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** I-- well, you can-- if you want to put this-- that language in a different bill, that's absolutely fine.

**HUGHES:** Other questions?

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** Like we said, we're-- this is really more for your consideration, if you find merit to this. We don't care where you put them. We're just trying to help you keep track of and better harmonize and clean up language that's not consistent or no longer needed.

**HUGHES:** Thank you. Questions? Yes, Senator Juarez.

**JUAREZ:** Thank you. I'm just quickly trying to take a look here about the program for expelled students. Was there actually changes that were

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made? Just-- look, looks like accreditation of the schools. Is that right?

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** No. So the section of statute in here that de-- comes from the student disciplinary code got put back. It was inserted back in the 1990s, and it mandated at that point in time that every school district had to have an alternative schools and that the department had to promulgate a rule and regulation as to what that school had to do and how it had to be staffed and everything else. All we're doing in this statute is just making it part of the accreditation rule of the department because an alternative school is part of a school district. All we're trying to do is just put it into a single rule at the Department of Education. So you go one place to look for accreditation of schools. And if you have an alternative schools, here's the criteria you have to meet if you're running an alternative school. That's all that statute's trying to do. Not adding anything new or changing. It's just making the reference to the rules and regs to be the accreditation rules and regs that all school districts have to meet to be approved every year.

**JUAREZ:** OK. I have a couple other general questions, please. I'd like to know, how big is your department, the Department of Education?

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** So the Department of Education in totality has about 550 employees.

**JUAREZ:** 550?

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** About. At any given time, there's-- below that most likely because we have vacancies that go on continuously. Of the 550, almost 230 are in the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation.

**JUAREZ:** OK.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** Nebraska VR works with individuals in Nebraska who have disabilities and are seeking further education or employment. So we serve children in VR, beginning when they're 14 years of age in school, as they're moving to transition out of secondary school, whether that be helping them set up their plan for going on to college or getting a job. And also recruiting employers to employ individuals who have disabilities because they can make meaningful contribution. So that's 230 right there. The Department of Education also does disability benets-- benefits determination for the Social Security Amer-- Associ-- the Social Security Administration of the U.S. Department Health and Human Services. They employ about 70 people. They review claims and

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process information about medical injuries, all of those things according to SSA requirements. So those two offices right there make up almost 300 of that 550. The other about 70 are the administrative staff, the central accounting staff, the legal staff, the human resources staff, the technology services staff because the agency has to have all of that done. And then the remainder, those would be what you all think of as the K-12 education people, the ones who are doing approval and accreditation of school districts, the ones that are doing continuous school improvement, the ones who are doing educator certification. So that's a breakout. I know we've given a handout, I think, last November to this committee. I can certainly make that available again to you, Senator Juarez. And we gave one to the Appropriations Committee and then-- even when-- Senator Murman thankfully held a morning session for those who wanted to come and learn. We did that for everybody there. They get a handout. So that would be how many people approximately.

**JUAREZ:** Thank you. I appreciate that information. And I would like the handout.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** Sure.

**JUAREZ:** Because I was just sworn in in January. Feels like a lot longer already. But it was January. Now, my next question for you is, what if next week Trump did away with Education Department at the federal level? Are you guys prepared to take on what he wants to pass on to the states? And how would you go about making decisions on that stuff?

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** Well, that's a, that's a great question that I can't answer what the current president of the United States may do and everything. Clearly, the U.S. Department of Education was created by Congress. So it exists because Congress enacted laws to create it. There are a number of funds that come from the U.S. Department of Education that flow through the Department of Education that go directly to school districts. All of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act funds, Title I, Title II, Title III funds, those are flow-through aid. We also receive from the U.S. Department of Education funds for vocational rehabilitation. We also receive funds for special education under IDEA. So I understand there's been a lot of talk about what the president might do. They have certainly recently restructured the office of the U.S. Department of Education. They've eliminated a number of units in many of the offices. So in a sense of condensing and reorganizing, every communication we've received, whether it's come from the U.S. Department of Education or others at the federal level,

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they still intend to fund Title I, IDEA. There's no changes going on there at the moment, so.

**JUAREZ:** Well, I guess the reason that I wanted to bring this up-- and I don't want to take up a long time. I just want to say to you that, you know, I hope that you guys are having discussions because I don't want-- you know, in my opinion, I think it's going to happen. So I don't want you to be caught off guard and unprepared. I would just appreciate some preliminary discussion in your department. Thank you.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** Well, I can share with you, Senator Juarez, and everybody on the Education Committee, the Commissioner of Education is at Washington, D.C. today. He went to D.C. with others to meet with officials at the U.S. Department of Education. So I'll, I'll wait for him to come home and have him tell me what he heard, then all of the rest of what I can read or hear elsewhere. But we are constantly monitoring what's going on. And when we have reliable information that says this is or isn't happening, we share it with schools. We'll share it with you.

**JUAREZ:** Thank you.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** Absolutely.

**HUGHES:** Thank you, Senator Juarez. Anybody else? No. All right. Thank you for coming in. Better day today than tomorrow, maybe. Next.

**BRIAN HALSTEAD:** [INAUDIBLE].

**HUGHES:** Yeah. Right. Next proponent. OK. Any opponents? OK. Go ahead.

**HEATHER SCHMIDT:** Hello. My name is Heather Schmidt, H-e-a-t-h-e-r S-c-h-m-i-d-t. I'm here today in opposition to this bill as specifically removing the detailed reporting requirements in relation to reading and dyslexia that were included in LB298 that was passed in 2023. It was a funded bill, so it was not a unfunded mandate. However, the information was-- the detailed information was only provided after a public records request from the senator who brought the bill. Changes suggested by the NDE at the time-- which, this is taken from an article in, in the Nebraska Examiner-- the Education Department suggested various ways to improve data collection, such as adding clear language to specify the total number of students evaluated for any form of a specific learning disability, including reevaluation; implementing clear guidelines for categorizing students with a SLD, the total number of which is broken into number of students with a primary disability in reading in two brackets: age 3 to third grade; fourth to age 21; number

of students evaluated but not identified as having a disability and reading; number of students identified with having a disability in another area. And a quote: without early support, the gap between dyslexic students and their peers can widen, making it harder to catch up later. So I am concerned that this bill is walking further away from the detailed requirements that we clearly need because we are in a freefall in literacy achievement in Nebraska. I handed you all the report. If you look at the graph to the right, in the mid, we're yellow and the nation is the black line. I've seen a lot of bills come before this Legislature that I believe are addressing the symptoms of the reading crisis we have in Nebraska, and we need to focus on-- I would urge you to please just focus on the root cause, which I do believe is the reading. We have heard that it's terrible to be a teacher, students are unruly, out of control, parents are uncooperative and negligent. But I truly believe a lot of this trauma stems from reading. And I'm going to read you if I have time an-- paragraph from an article published by Diane Proctor in October of 2020. Don Meichenbaum, one of the world's leading experts on trauma and violence and one of the most influential mental health professionals of the last century, said one thing is more important to traumatized children than anything else, more important than therapy, more important than social programs, more important than anything else. The research shows that the single most powerful predictor of their ability to overcome the trauma and survive their circumstances is the ability to read. If they can read, they have a chance to find success in school and overcome all those terrible things in their lives. If they can't, school will only be another source of pain and failure added to all the other sources of pain and failure. If they can read, they can benefit from therapy and everything else we may try to do for them. If they can't read, all of that is a waste of time.

**HUGHES:** OK. Anything else to add quick or--

**HEATHER SCHMIDT:** Well, I have lots, but there's-- I'm-- see I'm out of time. If you have any questions, maybe, about--

**HUGHES:** OK.

**HEATHER SCHMIDT:** We were here in '23 to testify for this bill, so if--

**HUGHES:** OK. Thanks for coming in, Ms. Schmidt. Do we have questions for-- yes. Go ahead, Senator Conrad.

**CONRAD:** Thank you, Senator Hughes. Thank you. Good to see you, Heather. And good to see your daughter in attendance today as well. I know she



has been a great advocate for literacy and dyslexia, as have you. And I know you all worked really, really closely with Senator Linehan and this committee to make sure that we could get data available on the statewide level about different components of where we are with reading and literacy and dyslexia in our schools. So it is no surprise to me to see you here today to make sure to guard against any changes that would undermine those hard-fought wins. And I just wanted to acknowledge that for the record. And then, you know, definitely feel free to share more information or update the committee on where you are with, with your story in case new committee members aren't familiar with that. But we don't have a heavy, a heavy agenda today. So if you, if you want to, to share more information about your work with Senator Linehan on dyslexia components or how important it is that we have the data available, I just wanted to, to open up some space.

**HEATHER SCHMIDT:** Well, thank you. I appreciate that. I first came here when I was pregnant with our youngest, who's almost seven, because Norah, who is here today, was in fifth grade and not reading. She has dyslexia. She wasn't getting her needs met. Dyslexia was a word not spoken in Nebraska at that time. And over the years since then, it's become a little bit better. At least now we talk about it. Patty Pansing Brooks and Lou Ann Linehan both worked together decades now probably because, what? Patty's been gone and then Lin-- Lou Ann's gone-- just to do the right thing for these kids. It's the most common reading disability. It affects everybody. It doesn't matter their gender, their economic situation, their race, anything. It's genetic, so that kind of plays into things. It can be caught early and it can be addressed. Norah's here today. She can tell you a little bit about where she's at. And it really should never be this hard for her to find the success she's had. Not everybody's gonna have a pit bull for a mom and a, you know, a-- the stars-aligned Legislature with things happening at the same time. And if you guys don't have access to these reports when departments come to you and say, we need, we need, we need, we need. This is the fix, this is the fix, this is the fix-- how, how can you know what's worked? What hasn't worked? Where are the resources? I just-- we just-- we need more, and I feel like this bill is--

**CONRAD:** Yeah.

**HEATHER SCHMIDT:** --is taking us backwards is my--

**CONRAD:** No, I, I really appreciate that. And we can definitely touch base with Brian and the department to make sure that we're not undercutting any of the policy objectives that prior Legislatures have

committed to and make sure if there are technical things that need to be changed, we can take those up from a technical perspective, but really keeping the North Star on, on the policy gains that we've made thanks to your advocacy and other senators' advocacy. I think it's-- is hopefully, I think, where everybody wants to get--

**HEATHER SCHMIDT:** I think everybody--

**CONRAD:** --wants to end up.

**HEATHER SCHMIDT:** --the end goal. We just--

**CONRAD:** Yeah. You got it. Thank you.

**HUGHES:** So I, I have just like a, a quick question. So they did line through some of the specifics. But they do-- the, the cleanup, if you will, says such report shall include but not be limited to the number of students who display deficiencies in reading including but not limited to characteristics of the-- characteristics of dyslexia by grade level in each, in each school of the school district unless such information may be withheld for section-- you just feel like that's paring it down too much versus--

**HEATHER SCHMIDT:** Well, before, it says, you know, how much-- we need to test students. If-- all the students. Find out if they have it. Find out where they are. Find out what tests are working, what tests aren't working. Maybe there's a school that's found some success. How? And I think that that-- what's been taken out are those detailed asks. And when-- there's only been one report submitted since this was passed, and it did not include the information that I think was intended.

**HUGHES:** So maybe it's almost like it needs to be even-- a diff-- like, fleshed out differently or more specifically. Is that--

**HEATHER SCHMIDT:** Yes. Well, the article with the quote from the NDE on cleaning, you know, the specific language, that had some pretty good points in it that I had read to you. And I think that's in-- the Nebraska Examiner article I can send to you or-- I mean, I'm sure they have-- it was their quote, so they probably have better ideas on what-- but we have to find out-- there are schools that are having successes. There are. Maybe there's teachers-- maybe there's a way to find something, maybe some, you know-- we have just found this with our youngest. Her speech language pathologist, she has an IEP. She has an IEP for speech, and she has an IEP for language and phonemic awareness. She has dyslexia. They were able to find a way to test her to find that one little piece of data they needed to say, oh, there. Now we know

where to go, what to fix. Well, that's the kind of information and the testing information that I think would be helpful moving forward as you're collecting data and NDE's collecting data to ho-- make a better blueprint so we're not just shooting in the dark or, you know, the, the norm tests that they would have used didn't work, wouldn't have caught her. Most kids with dyslexia, most people with dyslexia are, are really, really brilliant. And they won't get caught unless they fall outside the margins of normal and average. And if you've seen that bell curve of normal and average, it's, it's pretty huge. So if they're anywhere in that, they're not going to get caught. Now, that doesn't mean it's not going to catch up to them later. It doesn't mean that they're going to find as much success as they could in life. And so--

**HUGHES:** Well, thanks for coming in and spending time today. Other questions for Ms. Schmidt? All right. Appreciate it very much.

**JUAREZ:** Thank you for coming in.

**HUGHES:** Next opponent.

**NORAH SCHMIDT:** Hi. My name is Norah Schmidt, N-o-r-a-h S-c-h-m-i-d-t. I am an opponent for the bill. I would also like to advocate for the need to keep the rec-- requirement to record for students who have dyslexia. Right now, I am graduating at-- in May. I'm going to Bryan Health of Nursing to get my nursing degree. They have recognized me as a dyslexic advocate. I am beta testing Dyslexico for my school, which has helped me a lot. And I am on National Honor Society. Now, I wouldn't have been here without my mom and her help.

**HUGHES:** It's OK. Take your time.

**CONRAD:** Can you get Norah a glass of water?

**HUGHES:** And there is-- if you want to grab a Kleenex, honey.

**NORAH SCHMIDT:** I feel like that it should be-- like every student should be tested for the opportunity to get the help that they need, because I didn't have that. We had to try and go outside of schools to get the help, and they wouldn't help me because it was a school problem. But the schools wouldn't help me for it either. Fifth grade, I was at a third-grade reading level. I was very behind in all my classes. Teachers didn't think I was smart enough or strong enough to be in the [INAUDIBLE] level classes, but I am as a student. I was in AP English all year last year. I was in AP English first semester this year. But-- and I love to advocate for it and help students who do-- may have it, but other people who I know who have it are too scared to

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share because it makes them feel different. But I feel like it's something that needs to happen to help students grow and be stronger and more self-confident so they don't feel like they're stupid or have their mental health be hurt by it. So.

**HUGHES:** Well, Norah, thank you for coming in and sharing your story. It sounds like you have made quite a success of yourself. Congratulations on what's next. I have a daughter that's an, an RN, so I think that's a great field to go into. And we need good, good nurses out there too, so. Questions for Ms. Norah? Go ahead.

**LONOWSKI:** Thank you, Vice Chair.

**HUGHES:** Senator Lonowski.

**LONOWSKI:** Thank you for coming in. Congratulations on getting to May. You're almost there. So I'm, I'm somewhat ignorant about dyslexia. Do you overcome it? Does it depend on-- how, how do you approach that?

**NORAH SCHMIDT:** So it's-- I still struggle with it strongly, but you will always have it in your life. It's reading and writing. Sometimes I don't know how to spell certain words that are normal for other people to spell. It impacts grammar too a little bit because you don't understand what the words mean or what the words are. I feel like-- if you get help earlier, it helps you later on more so you know how to deal with it earlier on-- so you don't struggle as far. But if you don't get the help that you need right away, it's a big problem and people don't know how to deal with it.

**LONOWSKI:** OK. I'm a former Spanish teacher. Did you take any languages and did that--

**NORAH SCHMIDT:** I did take Spanish. It was a strong-- it was a hard struggle for me since--

**LONOWSKI:** Imagine.

**NORAH SCHMIDT:** Yeah. But I did enjoy it. It was a fun class.

**LONOWSKI:** Thank you for coming in.

**NORAH SCHMIDT:** Thank you.

**HUGHES:** Other questions for Ms. Norah? Yes. Go ahead, Senator Conrad.

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**CONRAD:** Thank you. Good to see you, Norah. Congratulations. And do you guys have a countdown going till graduation day? How far are we away?

**NORAH SCHMIDT:** Like, 48 days.

**CONRAD:** 48 days. OK. That's awesome. Well-- and I'm really excited to hear that you're staying in Nebraska. So that's good news for our future. But I know you and your mom's work has been, you know, really highlighted for being consistent, strong advocates for reading and literacy and dyslexia and on so many different issues that relate to that before this committee and before this Legislature. So congratulations on years of hard-fought, incredible advocacy and on your academic achievements. I know one thing that the committee heard about in recent years as well was testing this new technology that's coming out of the University of Nebraska to help people with dyslexia. And you mentioned being a part of some of those test trials. And I think we actually committed some state funds to helping move that in the right direction as well. But can you just give us an update about, like, what the technology is, kind of what your impressions are of it? Do you think it holds promise or still needs some work? As with any scientific advancement, there's kind of a maybe step forward two steps back sometimes. Or-- just can you give us an update on the-- is it called Lexapro? No, that's-- that is a different thing. Wait. Right.

**NORAH SCHMIDT:** It's called Dyslexico.

**CONRAD:** Dyslexico. Sorry. Right.

**NORAH SCHMIDT:** Like a spelling and grammar app for students who have dyslexia. It's-- if you don't-- what I do is I-- if I don't know how to spell a word and spell check on the computers doesn't help-- OK. Sometimes I try and spell one word, but it thinks I'm spelling another word. So I type out the word into the app and it gives me a list of options that think it is. And you-- and they're are always right. And it gives me, like, a definition of it. It verbalizes how to say it. Like, I can click a button and it tells me how to say it. A new update that I found is helpful is I can select a paragraph for, like, if I'm writing a paper. I can put it into the app and it can help with my grammar and my spelling to make it readable for people who don't have it. Because sometimes the dyslexia-- I-- it looks right to me, it looks fine, but to other people it looks all jumbled up.

**CONRAD:** Right. Right. And they developed that at the Raikes School, is that right? And it went through, like, a pitch competition with the business community and generated a lot of headlines. But it sounds like

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it holds great promise. So it's, it's neat to hear that it's maybe helping you as you complete this phase of your study. So thank you for updating us. And, and thank you for, for being here again. And I, I'm hopeful that the committee will work really hard to protect the intent of that legislation so that we can get good data to know where we are and where we need to go. And if there are technical things we need to fix, we can, we can fix those. But we don't want to, to undercut an opportunity to have more information so that we can do right by more kids. Thank you.

**NORAH SCHMIDT:** Thank you.

**HUGHES:** All right. Anybody else? All right. Again, thanks for coming in today. Any other opponents to LB76-- LB671? Any neutral? All right. Senator Murman.

**MURMAN:** Yes. We-- as myself and as a committee, I think we need to continue to work with the department, to work with improving dyslexia in reading and whatever we need to do to improve this legislation. We'll definitely get that done before we would advance it, so.

**HUGHES:** All right. Sounds good. Any questions for Senator Murman? All right. That will close LB671. And then I believe the next bill is LB681, which is an Education Committee bill. Oh, I should say this. Sorry. We had 1 proponent and 1 opponent and 2 neutral on LB671.

**JUAREZ:** I'm sorry. Could you repeat that, please?

**HUGHES:** Yeah. 1 proponent, 1 opponent, and 2 neutral.

**JUAREZ:** Thank you.

**HUGHES:** You're welcome. OK. Now we can start LB681.

**MURMAN:** Good afternoon, Vice Chair Hughes and members of the Education Committee. My name is still Dave Murman, D-a-v-e M-u-r-m-a-n.

**HUGHES:** It is?

**MURMAN:** Still represent 38th District. And today, I'm introducing LB681. LB681 is a placeholder bill that I brought for procedural purposes in case an unexpected problem arose in the committee. At this time, I'm not considering taking any action on this bill.

**HUGHES:** All right. Any questions on this one?

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**CONRAD:** Great hearing.

**HUGHES:** And I'm guessing-- yeah. Quickest one yet. One minute. OK. And then-- hey, guess what? There was no online comments on that, thankfully. How about LB680?

**SANDERS:** Don't we need [INAUDIBLE]?

**HUGHES:** Or what? Do you want me to go proponents of-- OK. Sorry. Proponents for LB681. Opponents for LB681. Neutral for LB681. OK. Now we can close that one. And there was nothing online either, so. Now we can do LB680.

**MURMAN:** We're doing LB681, right?

**HUGHES:** That wa-- we just did LB681.

**MURMAN:** Oh. We're on LB680.

**HUGHES:** Now you're on LB680. The numbers are too close together.

**MURMAN:** Yes. Good afternoon, Vice Chair Hughes and members of the Education Committee. My name is still Dave Murman, D-a-v-e M-u-r-m-a-n. And I still represent Nebraska's 38th District. Today, I have the privilege to introduce LB680, which is a placeholder related to ESUs. I want to bring this bill both for procedural purposes but also to give the opportunity for leaders and educators in our ESU system to share their importance-- the importance of their work. At this time, I am not considering taking any action on this bill, but I brought it for those purposes.

**HUGHES:** OK. Any questions for Senator Murman on this? No. OK. We will have our first proponents. Nothing? Nobody-- OK. Opponents. And neutral. Good afternoon.

**LARIANNE POLK:** Good afternoon. Good afternoon, members of the Education Committee. My name is Larianne Polk, L-a-r-i-a-n-n-e P-o-l-k. And I am the CEO of the ESU Coordinating Council. I'm here today to provide a brief overview of the role ESUs play in Nebraska's education system. So I'm going to give you a little history and some details. We were created in 1965 by the passage of LB301 during a pretty critical time in our educational history. This was a time when IDEA got started, when Elementary and Secondary Education Act got started. So we were able to provide equitable support to students of any kind across the state of Nebraska. Since then, we've continued to evolve to meet the needs of all students. Today, there are 17 ESUs in Nebraska designed to ensure

that services are localized, reflecting the diverse needs of districts across the state, whether they're urban or rural or anywhere in between. In 1997, our Legislature then passed LB806, which directed the ESUs to provide core services. Core services are teacher training, staff development, which are utilized to help classroom teachers improve their instruction, teacher effectiveness, and ultimately improve student outcomes. Number two, instructional support. ESUs assist with a selection of high-quality textbooks, digital resources, instructional materials, ensuring that schools have the best tools available for student learning. Number three, technology infrastructure and distance learning. We help establish and maintain internet connectivity in schools. We provide advice on classroom design and efficiency when they're building new classrooms. And we help schools save money through group purchasing opportunities. Our statewide distance learning network is critical for combating the teacher shortage that we are all very aware of right now. The funding model for ESUs is in line with your, the Legislature's, intent of funding education with a three-legged stool. Our three legs are contracts and grants that make up about 2/3 of an ESU's budget. The other 1/3 is split between our levy, which is a cent and a half, and what we call core services, which is the state aid from, from the state budget. Our levy makes up about 1.7% of the total K-12 taxing revenue that the state brings in for education. Last year, we brought in about \$20 million in federal funds from-- in grants last year. So we try to utilize every little bit that we can. Each ESU operates with an elected board of directors ranging from 6 to 12 members, representing areas based on population and census information. ESUs have no governing authority over their schools. ESU Coordinating Council has no governing authority over ESUs, and we like it that way. We're a pull-through service from the school districts. What they ask us to provide to them, we do the best we can. And we operate at the pleasure of the Legislature. So what you tell us that you would like us to do, we then take care of for you. The ESUs play a vital role in supporting Nebraska's education system through a lot of the services that we're providing. We are proud to continue our work on behalf of Nebraska's students and educators and communities, and we're grateful for the support that all of you give to us. And I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.

**HUGHES:** Thank you for coming in, Ms. Polk. I just-- one stuck out to me. The con-- contracts and grants are 2/3 of the ESU bu-- budgets. Those contracts are typically with the different school districts, right?

**LARIANNE POLK:** Correct. Contracts to school districts.



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**HUGHES:** So-- and I'm assuming these grants are typically mostly federal money.

**LARIANNE POLK:** I wouldn't say mostly. I would say there's a good combination of federal and state grants.

**HUGHES:** Oh, OK. And then between the contracts and, and grants of that 2/3, is that kind of split in half, or would-- what's the--

**LARIANNE POLK:** I can speak from ESU 7, where I came most recently. So at ESU 7, we had about-- 1/4 of our budget was the levy, 1/4 of the budget was-- or, the other remaining was split pretty much between those two. ESU 7 did not get any state aid, so we relied only on the other two--

**HUGHES:** Gotcha.

**LARIANNE POLK:** --resources.

**HUGHES:** OK. Thank you. Questions for Ms. Polk?

**LARIANNE POLK:** Yes.

**HUGHES:** Oh. Yes, Senator Juarez.

**JUAREZ:** Thank you.

**HUGHES:** Sure.

**JUAREZ:** So I would like to know, since it's been in existence since 1965-- which is impressive. I didn't know that. But are there any changes that you would like to see that the Legislature consider for the future of ESUs? Do you see any gaps? What do you think about how it operates right now?

**LARIANNE POLK:** Yeah. Thank you for that question. Boy, that's, that's a big question. The ESUs have evolved since 1965. When we started in 1965, our two biggest services we provided was school nursing and some professional development. So over time, I would say less than 1/3 of our ESUs provide nursing, and all of them provide staff development. So in terms of, of how nimble we are to reacting to the needs that our districts have, that's just what we do. My colleague behind me will talk a little bit about some of the other services that we've been able to adapt over time. But, you know, I-- cybersecurity is a, an area of support that our schools are in desperate need of help in, protecting their students, protecting their students' data, protecting their

teachers' data. And we're desperately trying to help figure out how we can do that in the most efficient and effective way from a statewide lens. And by doing it that way, we can do it efficiently. Each school district, all 245 of them, could do their own thing, or each of the 17 ESUs could do their-- each of their own thing. But if we could figure out a statewide process, it would just become more efficient and would provide more statewide, consistent support in that area. Mental health is an area that isn't in one of those criteria, those core service areas that I mentioned before. I know that the testifier in one of the, the earlier hearing here talked about how, you know, the, the varying struggles that students have can lead to some mental health concerns and challenges. While ESUs can provide student support through contracts to the school districts for special education, we can do the same thing for, for mental health. That is not necessarily a special education issue. But there's no funding around that. So we typically-- a lot of the ESUs who are doing the mental health support are either doing so under a contract with the school district, where we bill the district for the services, or they're doing it with a federal grant. And when the federal grants expire or run out or not renewed, then we have some other opportunities we need to investigate how we can continue that vital support to our students in Nebraska.

**JUAREZ:** One more question, please.

**HUGHES:** Yeah. Go ahead.

**JUAREZ:** So I'd like to know, when you apply for the federal gla-- grants, were you getting them through the Department of Education? Is that who was providing the grant money?

**LARIANNE POLK:** Pardon me for interrupting. I-- sometimes. So ESUs can apply for federal grants on their own, depending on the criteria in the grant. So oftentimes, our ESUs will pra-- partner with another agency, school district. Maybe they're, they're a behavioral health agency in that area. And we'll partner together to apply for the grant from the federal government directly. We do, however, also have flow-through federal money that comes from the Department of Edu-- Education here in Nebraska to the ESUs through a different contract or a memorandum of understanding or some other arrangement so that we can perform those responsibilities of the grant.

**JUAREZ:** OK. I'm sorry. One more question, please.

**HUGHES:** Go ahead.

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**JUAREZ:** So like I stated earlier with another testifier, if the Department of Education were eliminated next week, do you think it would be a huge impact on the ESUs?

**LARIANNE POLK:** ESUs are designed to fill the gaps. So that's what we do. So should there be a need for us to help support the Department of Education to help them fill some gaps that these federal programs might cause for the department to fill in, we'll be there to help them. We have 1,700 employees in the ESUs across Nebraska. That's very different than what you heard earlier from the Department of Education. We have some ability to deploy and efficiency and, and staffing to our school districts different than what the NDE can. So I would believe that our role in that kind of situation, should that come to fruition, is we would evaluate the gaps that, that the elimination of the, the Department of Education at the national level would happen, and we'd help the NDE, we'd help our school districts. We would find ways to fill the gaps.

**JUAREZ:** OK. Thank you.

**HUGHES:** Great. Any other questions for Ms. Polk? All right. Thank you for coming in.

**LARIANNE POLK:** Thank you.

**HUGHES:** Next neutral testifier. Good afternoon.

**DREW HARRIS:** Good afternoon.

**HUGHES:** Go ahead.

**DREW HARRIS:** All right. Distinguished members of the Education Committee. My name is Drew Harris. I'm the administrator at ESU 9 in Hastings. And I'm here to provide information on the role of ESUs. While Dr. Polk shared some of the history and core service and funding information, I'd like to share about services provided by ESUs as we've adapted to meet the needs of our school districts. Most notable of those is in the area of special education. Many schools don't need full-time school psychologists or behavioral specialists or other specialty areas. ESUs serve as the cooperative for schools to share a wide variety of such services, making them accessible and more affordable. We provide mental health support for many of our schools with licensed practitioners. This is a service that didn't even exist ten years ago, which is a reflection on how ESUs are able to adapt and evolve to meet the needs of our districts and their students. We coordinate state and federal grants for schools. Often, smaller schools

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will form a consortium through their ESU. That allows them to pool their resources and have a bigger impact. In fact, just yesterday afternoon, we had a meeting regarding the new literacy grants that are coming out from the State Department this-- next month. All 15 of our school districts indicated they are interested in applying for the grant through a consortium with our ESU. They recognize the value that we bring to such a project. ESUs help provide equity and efficiency. For example, the Nebraska co-op market has products ranging from pencils to school roofs. And these programs saved Nebraska schools nearly \$10 million last year alone. Another function of ESUs that's often overlooked is the role that we play in supporting NDE. With only 250 employees that are not involved in voc rehab or disability, the department relies on ESUs to help support the district's 200-- the state's 245 school districts. We've also supported legislative mandates such as the Nonpublic School Textbook Loan Program, the Literacy Project, and Behavior In-- Intervention Training. ESUs provide many services to help school districts stay in compliance. As a recovering superintendent of 21 years, I'd have to say there are not a lot of places that schools can turn to for help. But ESUs are there to support schools and their students in difficult times. The superintendent at Adams Central, a district in our service region, shared this statement in a letter of testimony on LB389 earlier this year. Education is tough, and in some of our toughest situations ESUs are the strong right arm of education. Without ESUs, we simply couldn't handle some of our toughest challenges. Thank you. I'd be happy to answer any clarifying questions.

**HUGHES:** Thank you. Questions? Nope. Mr.-- oh. And this is your district, isn't it, Senator Lonowski?

**LONOWSKI:** Thank you, Vice Chair.

**HUGHES:** Uh-huh. Go ahead. The second best district.

**LONOWSKI:** Is that superintendent left-handed?

**DREW HARRIS:** He, he possibly could be.

**LONOWSKI:** And Mr. Harris, I want you to think carefully before you answer this. Would you say that schools in-- under ESU 9 are the best in the state because the ESU 9 is the best in the state? We've had some disagreement.

**DREW HARRIS:** I--

**HUGHES:** Oh, yeah. [INAUDIBLE] said that he's like a--

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**DREW HARRIS:** I don't know. Can I-- I-- Senator Lonowski--

**LONOWSKI:** Be honest, sir.

**DREW HARRIS:** --you're putting me on a real spot there. I would have to tell you we have some excellent teachers and educators and school districts in our region, and there are many throughout the entire state of Nebraska.

**HUGHES:** That's very politically correct. Well done.

**CONRAD:** Well said.

**LONOWSKI:** Thank you, Mr. Harris. You got my vote.

**HUGHES:** Any other questions for Mr. Harris? Are you driving back tonight?

**DREW HARRIS:** You bet.

**HUGHES:** Good.

**DREW HARRIS:** I get to go pick up trash with the rotary club this afternoon.

**HUGHES:** Ooh. It's going to be windy [INAUDIBLE].

**DREW HARRIS:** Yeah. I'm glad we're not doing it tomorrow.

**HUGHES:** Yeah. Yeah, that's probably wise. All right.

**DREW HARRIS:** Thank you very much.

**HUGHES:** Well, thank you. Thanks for spending your time. Other neutral testifiers. Dang. Thank you. All right. Senator Murman.

**MURMAN:** Yes. As I said in the opening, this is just a placeholder bill, and there in case we need it for anything this session.

**HUGHES:** All right. Very good. Any questions for Senator Murman? All right. That ends LB680. And I believe that's our last bill for today. So thank you, guys. Thanks for everybody that came in.

**CONRAD:** Is that our last bill-bill?

**LONOWSKI:** And the year.

**HUGHES:** And the year.