



NEBRASKA  
INNOVATION  

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GRANT PROGRAM

ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT  
December 2023

Nebraska Department of Education  
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## **Executive Summary**

The Nebraska Department of Education Innovation Fund and Innovation Grant Programs were created with the passage of LB 519, effective August 30, 2015. On October 20, 2016, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) requested applications for grants through the Innovation Grant Program. There were five original projects funded, which began work in 2017.

This program provides funding to support the development, expansion, and investment in innovative best practices to improve educational outcomes for students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, while helping them pave their paths toward successful education and college and career readiness.

In 2019, to expand access to the resources and opportunities available through the Innovation Grant Program, the State Board of Education approved five Education Innovation Networks. Through the networks, LEAs gained access to innovative best practices, as determined by the NDE, that were replicable, scalable, and have the potential to improve education outcomes.

In 2023, as originally drafted, LB 705 would have completely restructured lottery-funded projects. As such, the Department of Education paused any new projects until the legislature signaled their intention to continue Innovative Grant programs. With the passage of LB705, the State Board approved seven new projects in May 2023. These projects represent established best practices which will be studied further in a Nebraska context to determine opportunities to scale up.

This report summarizes the progress of the Innovation Grant and highlights important developments that have occurred in the past year while shedding light on future endeavors of the Innovation Grant.

## **2023 Projects**

### *Nebraska Career Connections*

About:

Nebraska Career Connections (NCC) was developed through a research project seeking to determine how to best address the career planning needs of Nebraska students and adult job seekers. The NDE currently holds a contract with Kuder to provide this service to all Nebraska schools. NCC provides career interest inventories, work value assessments, and information on careers and postsecondary education in Nebraska.

Most Nebraska school districts count on Career Connections as the career development site used in the school counseling programs and career education classrooms. A unique aspect of NCC not available from other career information services is the 24 hours a day/7 days a week access for students and parents. Students can access the site away from the school building, unlike other career information systems that require the student to be at the school site. Nebraska Career Connections has gone through a major revision that allows the site to be used from any mobile



device, in addition to other significant upgrades. In addition to Nebraska schools, NCC is used by Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation, the Nebraska Department of Labor, and Corrections.

**Progress/Impact:**

- 89% of Nebraska’s public schools (217 districts) utilized NCC.
- Over 25,000 registered users and over 140,000 unique logins in 2022, a 12% increase from last academic year.
- Over 45,000 assessments were completed.

*Innovative Tutoring Network*

**About:**

The unfinished teaching and learning because of COVID-19 have created an increased need to focus on instructional time. In collaboration with the Nebraska State College System, the NDE will establish an innovative network focused on tutoring to increase exposure to rich, on-grade level content, and provide more time for students to re-learn, to learn for the first time, or to master content. While eventually having a statewide reach, this program will leverage regional support from the Educational Service Units (ESUs) and state colleges to target school districts with significant numbers of schools classified as Needs Support to Improve. Costs include funding for the tutors, support for a digital platform to connect the tutors with students, marketing, and evaluation.

**Progress/Impact:**

- The NDE entered a contract with the Nebraska State College System, which hired a statewide coordinator for the program.
- Each State College has begun the process of identifying regional schools that may benefit from participation.

*Future Ready Digital Learning Collaborative*

**About:**

This multi-year project will build upon learnings from the Asynchronous Professional Learning and the Software Innovation projects done from 2019 – 2022. This innovation network will utilize the existing FRDLC leadership team along with the network director. The network’s main goals are to expand Canvas’ reach and use it both in the classroom and for professional development. Increased focus on creating high-quality learning materials for professional and classroom benefits will be applied using skills learned in the first project. A second goal will be to expand into the creation of synchronous learning along with growing our efforts in the asynchronous space started in the previous network. Initiatives started in the software innovation network will continue to be supported and further developed in greater coordination with the networks main goals. The work of the network includes:

- Opportunities for institutions that are adopting Canvas to grow staff expertise in creating high-quality learning experiences for staff and students.
- For participants to earn Canvas Certified Educator certifications through completion of Canvas certification courses.



- For participants to have access to Canvas provided coaches, trainers, technical support, and resources with opportunities for learning in multiple modalities.
- Participants will continue to receive access and training to Articulate 360, Canvas, other digital design tools and applications introduced in the first project and to be further developed in this innovation network.
- For participant institution leadership to receive training on how to support staff in adopting Canvas across the district, ESU and NDE for the purposes of developing experts who can provide high quality instructional materials tied to standards across the state in multiple content areas.
- For participants to gain expertise in teaching in both high quality synchronous and asynchronous environments.
- For participants to build out stronger infrastructure and technology supports needed to facilitate synchronous and asynchronous learning environments and enhance student learning.
- The network will organize cooperative purchases and assist in the development of sustainable solutions to meet participants needs for long-term support of the project goals.
- Organic development of districts content leads to provide district support to future teachers and teachers without Canvas experience.

#### Progress/Impact:

- Currently 190 public and non-public districts have Canvas with several planning to join this Spring.
- Hosted a two-day state conference with over 100 attendees, representing 13 districts from 4 ESUs.
- Planned a 2-day retreat for December 6-7 with Canvas staff for planning next year's activities and mapping forward progress of the training initiatives and expansion of the program to more public and non-public districts and schools.
- Working with Canvas to build a better log-in page for the Canvas Catalog site, which should be finished in December 2023.
- Distributed a course content needs survey to gauge which content should be prioritized for development and distribution.
- Created a new ESUCC website with information about the Canvas Consortium and how to join as well as professional learning opportunities and other vital information.
- Moved the Consortium from ESU 2 to the ESUCC and hired 1.5 FTE Canvas Specialists for support and training; established a help ticketing system for the Consortium.
- Current evaluations being collected, and others will be implemented when project components are completed and data can be collected and reviewed.
- Both the Catalog and the Canvas LMS have very robust Data analytic tools embedded; we currently pull the following data:
  - Course and site use data
  - User data



- Certificates earned
- Courses published
- Institution usage
- Student participation
- Educator participation
- A Design User Group has been established and is meeting to discuss tools they are piloting, current needs and improvements to the programs and training as well as other important information for improvements.

### Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Innovation Network

#### About:

The goal of this network is to provide additional opportunities for state-level partners to work closely with new and established ELO programs to expand access to high quality, locally sustainable ELO programs designed to serve Nebraska youth, including youth from urban and rural educational environments. The network will also identify and cultivate characteristics of high-quality programming that can be shared with other communities across the state through a variety of in-person and online platforms.

#### Progress/Impact:

- The ELO Innovation Network is currently partnering with NDE to utilize ESSER III funding to facilitate the development of new ELO programs in 14 communities and expansion of ELO programs in 21 more communities identified by the NDE as high need and disproportionately impacted by COVID.
- A partnering organization, Beyond School Bells, has successfully raised almost \$3 million in private resources to facilitate growth in these and other ELO programs across the state. These investments have included targeted funding for Centers of Excellence, organizations that have the potential to support ELO programs statewide, and individual communities offering ELO innovations
- As part of the ELO Innovation Network, Beyond School Bells developed and refined a free, on-line Toolkit <https://bsbtoolkit.com/>, to help Nebraska communities that are involved in starting, growing, and seeking to sustain high-quality afterschool and summer programs.
- Beyond School Bells partnered with the NDE and Extension to host a statewide afterschool professionals conference, GetConnected 2023, in Omaha in September.
- Partners are currently planning to host the second ELO Innovation Invitational conference on March 5-6, 2024 at the UNL Innovation Campus. This gathering will bring together both new and established ELO programs to share best practices including strategies for long term sustainability.
- All these initiatives are being thoroughly evaluated by a combination of a team of seasoned evaluators at the Munroe Meyer Institute and consultants associated with the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFF).



### Zearn Network

#### About:

In the Summer of 2021 and into the 2021-22 school year, the NDE used pandemic relief funding to provide all Nebraska districts access to Zearn Math. The original purchase gave full K-7 digital access for either core or supplementary instructional materials use. In partnership with the NDE, Zearn found:

- Across student groups and all proficiency levels, students who use Zearn consistently had 2.5 times the growth in their state assessment scores compared to students who did not use Zearn.
- Consistent Zearn usage led to double-digit increases in proficiency for Black and Latinx students, students eligible for free/reduced price lunch, and English learners, compared to declines in proficiency for matched students not using Zearn.

#### Progress/Impact:

- NDE expanded the partnership with Zearn and continues to evaluate the usage and impact of students in this network.
- During the 2023-24 school year, 25 districts with 183 schools use Zearn. Each week, roughly 8,000 students login to Zearn and use it regularly.
- Additional evaluations are planned to investigate the continued impact of Zearn math on students who use it regularly.

### School Transformation Network

#### About:

The School Transformation Network will leverage state and federal accountability results to create network improvement communities (NIC) of like-schools. In this network, participating school, district, and ESU staff will investigate multiple data sources and identify potential root causes for shared problems of practices. With support of expert facilitators, the network will focus on identifying and implementing evidence-based practices and follow an improvement science process to study results and make adjustments based on data. NICs focus on studying and impacting a clearly defined, measurable outcome – in this case, it would be determined based on participating schools and districts.

#### Progress/Impact:

- Assessment and accountability results released in November 2023 show improvements in student achievement across the state. However, gaps in achievement persist.
- Work with this network is expected to commence in January 2024. Schools most needing support will be prioritized.

### Every Day Counts: Addressing Chronic Absenteeism Across NE Schools

#### About:

During the 2021-2022 school year, nearly 77,000 students or 23% of Nebraska students were chronically absent. Chronic absence is defined as a student missing 10% or more of their time in



membership. As students and communities emerge from the pandemic, it is important to understand the multiple root causes for why students miss school. This network will focus on reviewing local attendance policies, current family and community engagement practices, and identify and implement evidence-based practices or interventions to increase student attendance and minimize the negative impact chronic absenteeism has on student learning. Costs include contracting with potential vendors to support facilitation, codify learning in shareable resources, and cover limited expenses of participating schools/districts.

#### Progress/Impact:

- The NDE has partnered with the Metro Omaha Education Consortium to create a cohort focused on decreasing chronic absenteeism. The work of this network includes exploring and piloting strategies, evaluating, and regularly reviewing data.
- Thirty-three schools (21 elementary and 12 middle) are participating in the network.
- Activities and work to date have included:
  - Development of Attendance Improvement Cohort fliers
  - Key partnership with Attendance Works
    - First large-group meeting of the 2023-24 MOEC Attendance Improvement Middle School Cohort was held on Tuesday, October 24 from 12:00 to 5:00 p.m. at Papillion La Vista Central Office. Approximately 50 individuals from 12 middle schools in 6 districts were part of this collaborative work.
    - The first large-group meeting of the 2023-24 MOEC Attendance Improvement Elementary School Cohort was held on Wednesday, October 25 from 12:00 to 5:00 p.m. on the UNO campus. Approximately 60 individuals from 21 elementary schools in 6 districts were part of this collaborative work.
  - Coaching sessions - This initial series of coaching sessions is scheduled through the end of the calendar year. During these 45-minute sessions, each attendance team, along with a MOEC representative, engages in conversation with the consultants who offer tailored and targeted guidance and strategies for enhancing specific attendance improvement practices and strategies and for moving the needle on improving attendance data.

#### Looking to the Future

The Nebraska Innovation Grant program transitions to Nebraska Improvement Grant program beginning July 1, 2024. Many of the projects detailed above may continue through these changes.

