



Nebraska
Improvement
Grant Program

ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT
December 2025

Nebraska Department of Education
500 So. 84th Street, 2nd Floor
Lincoln, NE 68510-2611



Executive Summary

The Nebraska Department of Education Innovation Fund and Improvement Grant Programs were created with the passage of Legislative Bill (LB) 519, effective August 30, 2015. This bill was codified in the Nebraska Revised Statute 79-1054. This grant program provides resources and opportunities to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to support the development, expansion, and investment in innovative best practices that improve (1) education outcomes for early childhood, elementary, middle school, or high school students, (2) transitions between any successive stages of education, or (3) transitions between education and the workforce.

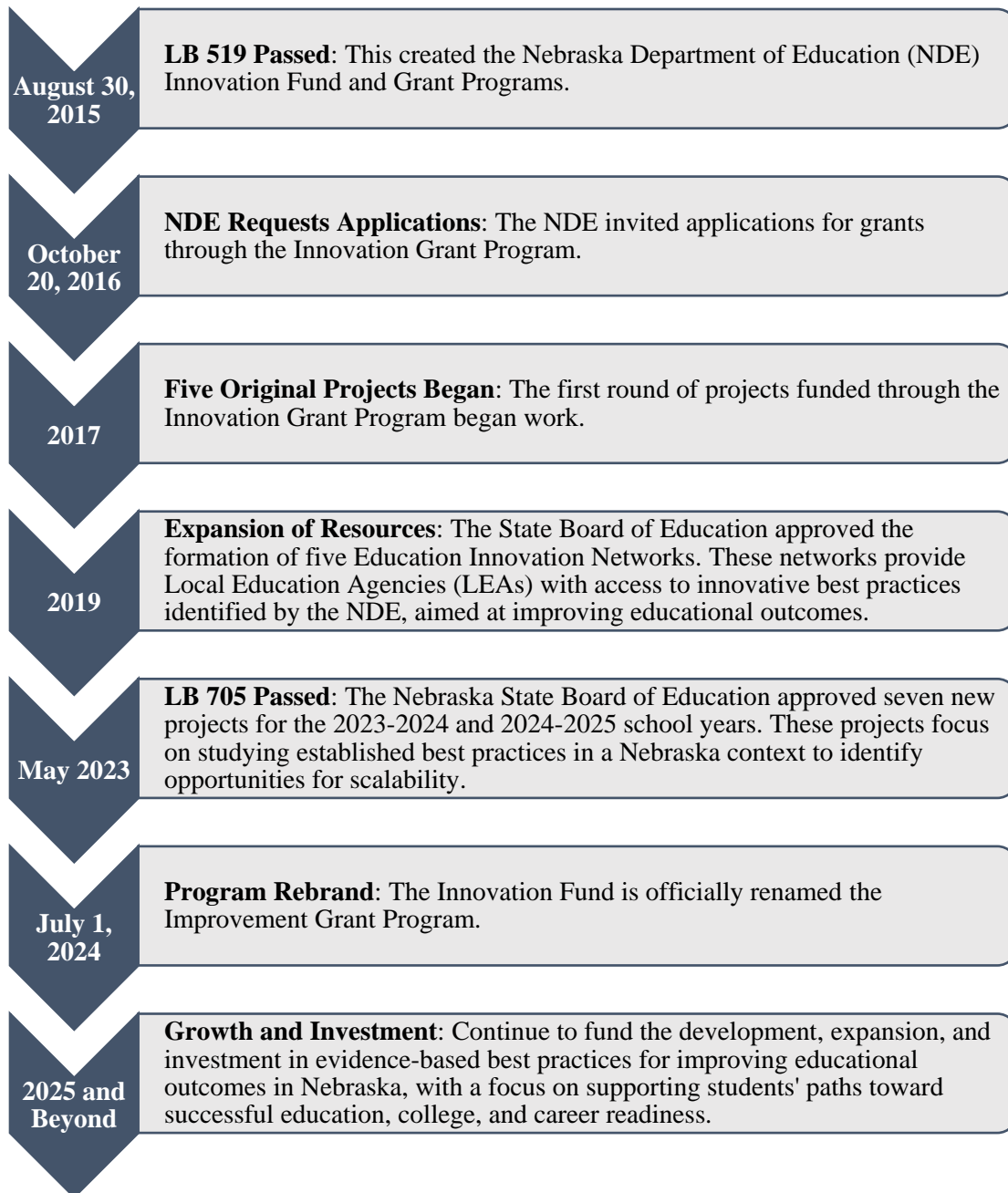
In 2019, to expand access to the resources and opportunities available through the Innovation Grant Program, the Nebraska State Board of Education approved five Education Innovation Networks. Through the networks, LEAs gained access to innovative best practices, as determined by the NDE, that were replicable,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

With the passage of LB705, the Nebraska State Board of Education approved seven new projects in May 2023 for the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years. Starting July 1, 2024, this fund is now known as the Improvement Grant Program. These projects represent established best practices which will be studied further within the Nebraska context to determine opportunities to scale up.

This report summarizes the progress of the Improvement Grant and highlights important developments that have occurred in the past year while shedding light on future opportunities for expansion, investment, and growth for Nebraska's students.



Timeline of Nebraska Department of Education Innovation Fund and Improvement Grant Programs



2025 Projects



Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Innovation Network

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.

The 2023-2024 Partners Grant Program included 11 communities across Nebraska. Each ELO program worked with Beyond School Bells (BSB) to create a grant package that fit their local context needs and capacity. Excerpts from Beyond School Bells' Annual Report follow.



“

The impact of BSB's grant extends beyond just providing activities. It has opened doors for our community's youth to experience new things, develop new skills, and stay active and engaged during the summer. Without this support, many of these children would have had a more limited summer experience, missing out on the enriching and memorable opportunities that BSB's funding has made possible.

We were able to provide a community-wide event in partnership with local downtown businesses as well as the Nebraska Farm Bureau, and several other Ag related businesses which focused on Ag in Nebraska, career exposure, hands-on learning, and lunch all for zero cost. We served around 300 people at this event. Without BSB funding this would not have been possible.

– Summer of Discovery Grantee Program Directors

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 Beyond School Bells 2023-2024 Annual Report | Page 5



Overview of ELO Innovation Network Grants



BSB PARTNERS GRANT PROGRAM AND INTRODUCTORY GRANTS

\$383,786 AWARDED IN 2023-2024

The Beyond School Bells Partners Grant supports schools and districts in creating engaging, inspiring ELO programs for children and families. Introductory Grants serve as an entry point for new programs. In total, BSB awarded \$337,801 in Partners Grants and \$45,985 in Introductory Grants.



SUMMER OF DISCOVERY

\$162,898 AWARDED IN 2024

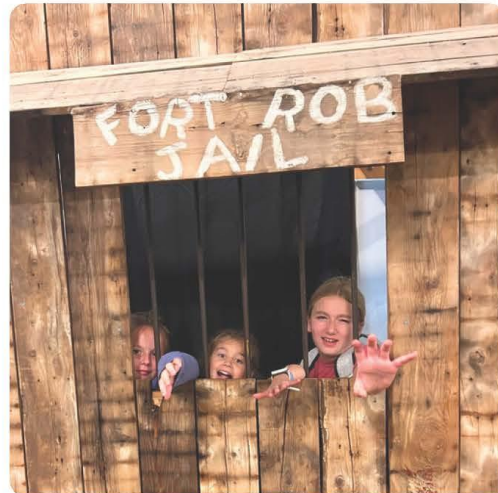
The Summer of Discovery 2024 Grant provided opportunities for programs across Nebraska to create enriching, impactful, and lasting summer learning experiences for students.



ESSER III

\$10,925,714 AWARDED FOR 2022-2024

While not the grantor, BSB partnered with the Nebraska Department of Education to administer ESSER III COVID-relief funds, supporting new and expanded afterschool programs. BSB provided technical assistance, coaching, and coordinated compliance and evaluation to new programs.



CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE (COE)

\$165,841 AWARDED FOR 2023-2024

These grants support established organizations with expertise in their fields in developing high-quality resources that can be shared statewide.



PROJECT-BASED GRANTS

\$495,223 AWARDED FOR 2023-2024

BSB provides a range of project specific grants including Family Engagement, Youth Videography, Engineering, Environmental Education, and more.

Total BSB Grants awarded for 2023-2024: \$1,207,748

Students Served in 2023-2024

Beyond School Bells' funding and programming initiatives sometimes provide multiple opportunities for the same youth at a site. The figures below show both the number of youth served by each project and the total number of unique youth served across all projects, ensuring no duplication in the overall count.

8,430 Students Served Directly

20,408 Students Served Indirectly

STUDENTS SERVED BY BSB FUNDING, GRANT ADMINISTRATION, AND AFTERSCHOOL & SUMMER PROGRAMMING SUPPORT

Beyond School Bell's funding, programming initiatives, and targeted technical assistance served a total of **12,974 unique Nebraska students** at **42 afterschool and summer programs** during the 2023-2024 reporting period. BSB provided **direct grant support to 36 programs**, serving the **8,430 unique students** who attended those programs.*

BSB PARTNERS GRANT

4222 STUDENTS SERVED DURING THE
2023-2024 SCHOOL YEAR

ENGINEERING PATHWAYS

320 STUDENTS SERVED DURING THE
2023-2024 SCHOOL YEAR

SUMMER OF DISCOVERY

1043 STUDENTS SERVED IN SUMMER 2024

STEM FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

2618 STUDENTS SERVED IN 2023-2024**

ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY SCHOOL EMERGENCY RELIEF (ESSER III)

Incubator sites: Newly developed programs and/or sites that did not receive 21st Century Community Learning Center funds.

2753 STUDENTS SERVED DURING THE
2023-2024 SCHOOL YEAR & SUMMER 2024

Accelerator sites: Established programs and/or sites that received 21st Century Community Learning Center funds in addition to ESSER funding.

9290 STUDENTS SERVED DURING THE
2023-2024 SCHOOL YEAR & SUMMER 2024

Beyond School Bells and Nebraska 21st Century Learning Centers: Through its partnership with the Nebraska Department of Education, BSB provides technical assistance, coaching, and a suite of programming and professional development resources that are made available to all Nebraska 21st CCLC sites. Supporting 21st CCLC indirectly served **17,655 students at 142 sites** during the 2023-2024 school year and **6,346 students** in Summer 2024.

* While BSB supported both Accelerator and Incubator sites, established Accelerator programs received less intensive guidance. As a result, students enrolled at Accelerator sites are not included in the direct support count.

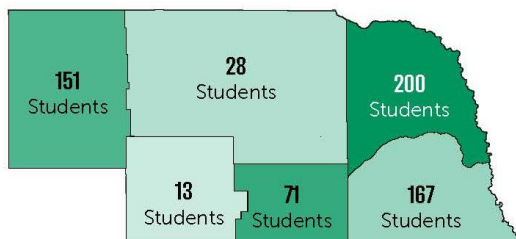
** Six of ten programs receiving the STEM Family Engagement Grant reported student participation for 2023-2024.





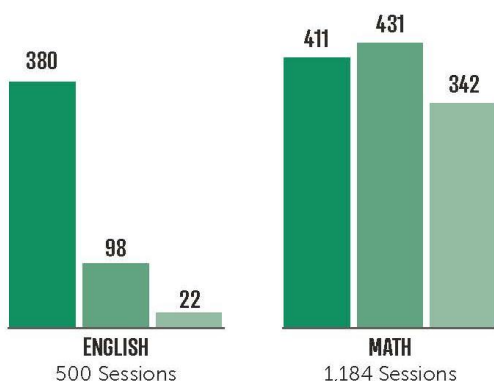
630 STUDENTS SERVED

Since February 2024, 630 students have registered for free online tutoring with Nebraska SMART. The map shows the number of students registered by NRCSA member district. Notably, 74% of the registered students attend a NRCSA member school district.



TEACHER EDUCATION PIPELINE

More than 50 SMART tutors—teacher education candidates—have gained real-world experience, with over 13 already hired as classroom teachers during or after their student teaching.



1,765 TUTORING SESSIONS COMPLETED

The Tutors have conducted 1,765 tutoring sessions, providing over 965 hours of tutoring to K-12 students across rural Nebraska. The graph shows a breakdown of tutoring by subject and grade level.



WHAT STUDENTS AND PARENTS ARE SAYING ABOUT NEBRASKA SMART

"It was really fun. Now I know what to do and how to do it. I was very lost and now I [am] able to do my schoolwork without a calculator. So now I am very happy, and I am very confident."

— 6th grade student, attended 25 sessions

"My son **scored 49 points higher** on his NSCAS test for the spring. He's started working with [a Tutor] right around Christmas time! He was so proud of that growth and so am I!!!!"

— Parent of 8th grade student

"I learned so much tonight. She was so sweet and took her time to help me understand and explain."

— 9th grade student, attended 17 sessions

"It encourages [my daughter] to be more involved, interested, and motivated."

— Parent of a 7th grade student who attended 9 sessions

"[The Tutor] was incredible! She was extremely kind and patient. [My son] said he definitely wants to continue sessions with [this Tutor] as time allows. I have never seen him so happy after doing math homework. This Program has been an absolute blessing. Thank you!!!!"

— Parent of a 6th grade student who attended 6 sessions

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NEBRASKA SMART IS A FREE VIRTUAL TUTORING PROGRAM FOR STUDENTS IN GRADES K-12.



Teacher education candidates from Chadron State, Peru State, and Wayne State Colleges remotely tutor students in rural Nebraska. This program is currently offering services to:

- All NRCSA member school districts
- Educational Service Unit 1
- Educational Service Unit 4
- Educational Service Unit 13
- Other select smaller rural school districts

Visit our website for the full list of school districts served.

HOW IT WORKS

Nebraska students in grades K-12 have free access to online tutoring with a qualified Tutor in English, math, science, and social studies. Parents must first register their child. Once registered, students can request pre-scheduled appointments with a Tutor or log in and request on-demand tutoring to be connected with the next Tutor available in the queue. Students should provide homework for which they wish to receive help or topics that they would like to cover.



TUTORING HOURS



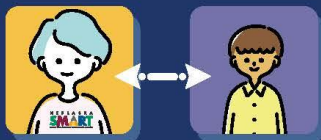
OUR PARTNERS

The Nebraska Department of Education has awarded a grant to the Nebraska State Colleges to develop a program that provides free online tutoring to K-12 students in rural Nebraska.



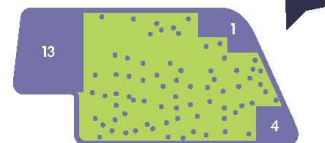
OUR TUTORS

Tutors are full-time students at Chadron, Peru, and Wayne State Colleges who have been admitted to the teacher education program, have completed background checks, and received training through their teacher education program coursework.



PLEASE VISIT

nscs.edu/NebraskaSMART



FOR THE FULL LIST OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS SERVED.



Learning Platform Program

2024 saw the implementation of the Learning Platform Program. The Legislature amended statutes with respect to the use of lottery funds for education in 2023 and 2024 to include the use of improvement grant funds for a grant program that uses a statewide learning platform(s), which took effect on July 19, 2024.

Previous Action:

- State Board approved criteria and priority areas at the August 2024 meeting.

First Application Process:

- The NDE created a request for information and request for application. Two proposals were submitted and reviewed by the NDE staff. The NDE staff recommended neither application for grant funding. The State Board took no action at their December 6, 2024, meeting.

Second Application Process:

- Statutory changes took effect September 1, 2025, prompting the NDE to revisit the improvement grant program. NDE posted a Request for Application (RFA) which closed on November 3, 2025.
- Proposals in response to the RFA were reviewed by the NDE evaluators. As of the time of submitting this report, December 1, 2025, the State Board of Education has taken no action.



MOEC Chronic Absenteeism Grant Initiative: Two-Year Summary

Introduction

The Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium (MOEC), in partnership with the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) and Attendance Works, launched a two-year grant-funded initiative aimed at addressing chronic absenteeism across elementary and middle schools in the Omaha metro area. When the grant began, chronic absenteeism rates in participating MOEC schools were significantly higher than the state average. Through focused, collaborative efforts, schools reported reductions in chronic absenteeism ranging from 5% to 25%, with several schools reporting double-digit percentage drops in student absences.

Program Overview

The initiative engaged 33 schools across seven districts—21 elementary and 12 middle schools—organized into two-year attendance improvement cohorts. Each participating school formed a dedicated attendance team, engaged in three large-group collaborative sessions and two coaching sessions annually, and received up to \$8,000 in grant funding over two years. These funds supported attendance incentives, professional learning, and targeted strategies. The initiative was grounded in a research-based framework from Attendance Works and emphasized Tier I, II, and III intervention planning, data use, and systemic school improvement.

Outcomes

Quantitative and qualitative outcomes reflect strong success:

- **100%** of participating schools reported their teams were more effective, informed, organized, and better at using data by the end of the two years.
- **98%** of respondents agreed the cohort helped prioritize attendance within their schools.



- **89%** of respondents rated collaboration with peer schools as a valuable component of the program, helping fulfill the objective of creating a community of practice **78%** of .
- participants found mini-grants critical to their work, and **66.7%** said they enabled implementation of new strategies.
- Chronic absenteeism, as reported by individual schools in April 2025, was reduced by more than **5% in multiple schools, with some even reporting a reduction of more than 20%.**
 - Carriage Hill Elementary reported that the dropped from 23.4% to 8.8%.
 - Franklin Elementary reported a reduction in chronic absenteeism by 14%.
 - Bryan Elementary reported that they reduced the number of chronically absent students from 63 to 15.
 - Minne Lusa Elementary reported a decrease from 51% to 31% over three years.
 - Marrs Middle School reported a 10% decrease in chronic absenteeism.
 - LaVista Middle School reported a drop in chronic absenteeism from 21.1% to 14.3%.

Teachers and principals consistently noted improved relationships with families and students as a major driver of success. Students responded positively to consistent incentives, recognition, and personalized support.

Reflections and Comments

Participants in the MOEC/NDE Attendance Cohort consistently reported that the program had a meaningful and lasting impact on their attendance practices. The **mini-grants** were widely appreciated for enabling schools to implement strategies and incentives that would not have been



possible without the extra funding. These efforts supported student engagement and helped build a stronger attendance culture. While some found the reimbursement process and restrictions on purchases challenging, the overall feedback emphasized the grants' importance in achieving progress.

The **coaching sessions** led by Attendance Works were widely appreciated for offering guidance, collaborative planning time, and opportunities to reflect on school-specific data and strategies. The sessions supported professional growth, helped refine attendance goals, and encouraged schools to think critically about intervention layering and long-term planning. Participants noted that the sessions strengthened internal collaboration, built confidence in addressing chronic absenteeism, and contributed meaningfully to the development of more focused, reflective, and empowered attendance teams.

Participants found the **collaborative structure** of the program especially powerful, noting that cross-district learning fostered innovation and normalized shared challenges. In a survey of participants, 94% of respondents reported they would like to continue this collaboration, with future sessions focused on sustainability, data tools, family engagement, and support for specific student populations.

Attendance Works consultants praised the model's unique approach of working with multiple districts, which led to remarkable growth. They noted a shift in mindset, increased capacity building, and a greater reliance on teachers for positive interventions. The team also observed a change in culture, with more principal participation and a sense of all hands-on deck. They highlighted the growth and recognition of good and improved attendance, as well as the



acknowledgment of areas that need improvement. The team expressed pride in the schools' ability to learn from each other and apply systemic approaches.

Overall, schools credited the program with helping them strengthen team dynamics, build more effective systems, and make attendance a top priority. Many described the experience as motivating, practical, and transformative for both school culture and student support.

Conclusion

The MOEC Attendance Cohort initiative has had a measurable and meaningful impact on attendance practices and outcomes in metro Omaha schools. With chronic absenteeism rates falling and school teams reporting increased confidence and capability, the program offers a promising model for other districts in Nebraska and beyond. Continued investment in data-driven strategies, community partnerships, and professional learning will be essential to sustaining this progress.

Grand Island Chronic Absenteeism Grant Initiative

Results:

- Teams **reduced chronic absenteeism for students by 2 points**(approximately 11 fewer chronically absent students) compared to the same ten school weeks in the previous year (SY23-24), making progress toward the 2.5 point goal.
- Three out of four 9th-grade teams **achieved a 3 to 5 point reduction in chronic absenteeism** year over year, with Island 1 seeing the largest improvement at 5 points (approximately 7 fewer chronically absent students). Results were variable across Islands.



- While **progress was made with students chronically absent** at the start of the cycle, it was **countered by new students becoming chronically absent** over the course of the 10 weeks.

Grand Island's Breakthrough Results (BTR) Program

5th & 6th Grade Attendance Program



Student-Level Gains

- **Grade 5 BTR students** reduced Chronic Absenteeism by **~8 points** vs. SY23-24 during the BTR cycle.
- **Grade 6 BTR students** improved as well, widening absenteeism gap by **~1 point**.
- **Fewer students chronically absent:**
 - **Grade 5: 5 fewer vs. +5** in SY23-24
 - **Grade 6: 16 fewer vs. 10 fewer** in SY23-24

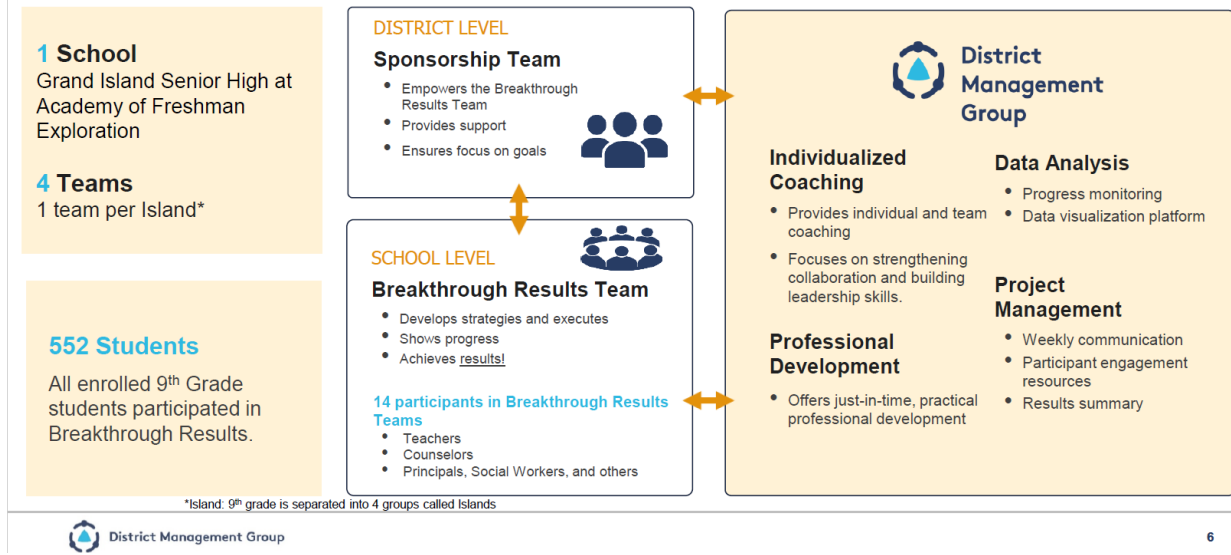


Reclaimed Instructional Time

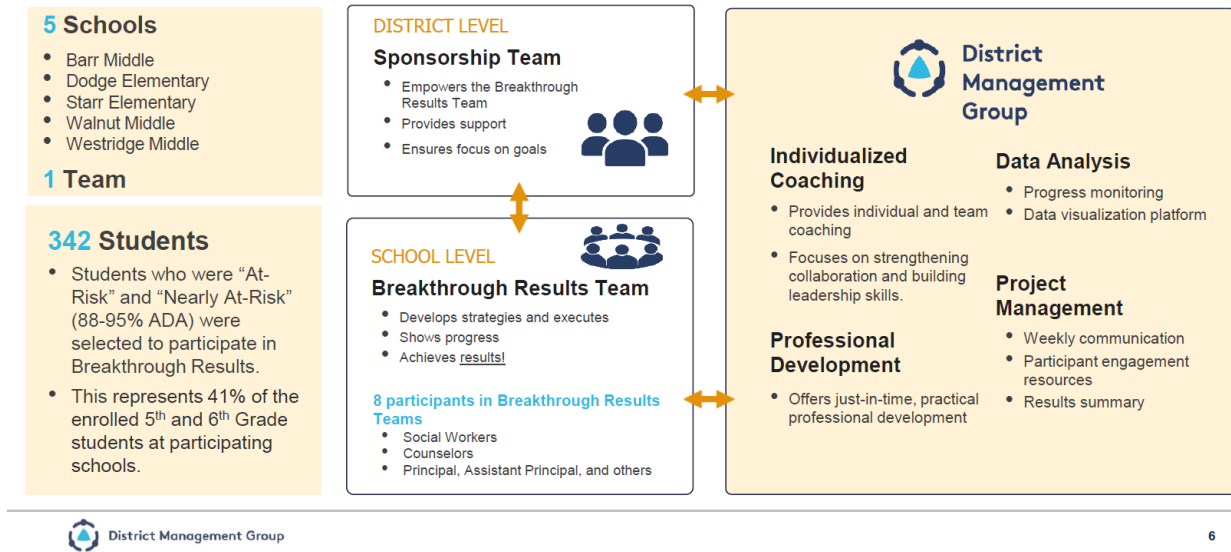
- **Grade 5: +30 vs. -8** instructional days recaptured in SY24-25 vs. SY23-24
- **Grade 6: +65 vs. -48** instructional days recaptured in SY24-25 vs. SY23-24



Grand Island - Breakthrough Results Program: Attendance Fall 2024



Grand Island - Breakthrough Results Program: Attendance Spring 2025

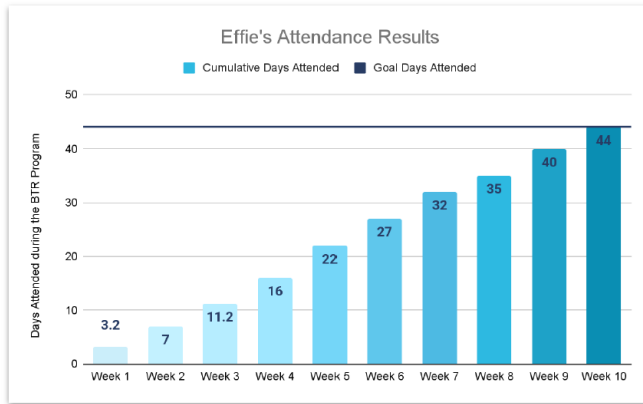


Student Impact Story



Effie, 9th grader

Effie attended 44 of 48 days of the BTR program, meeting her goal!

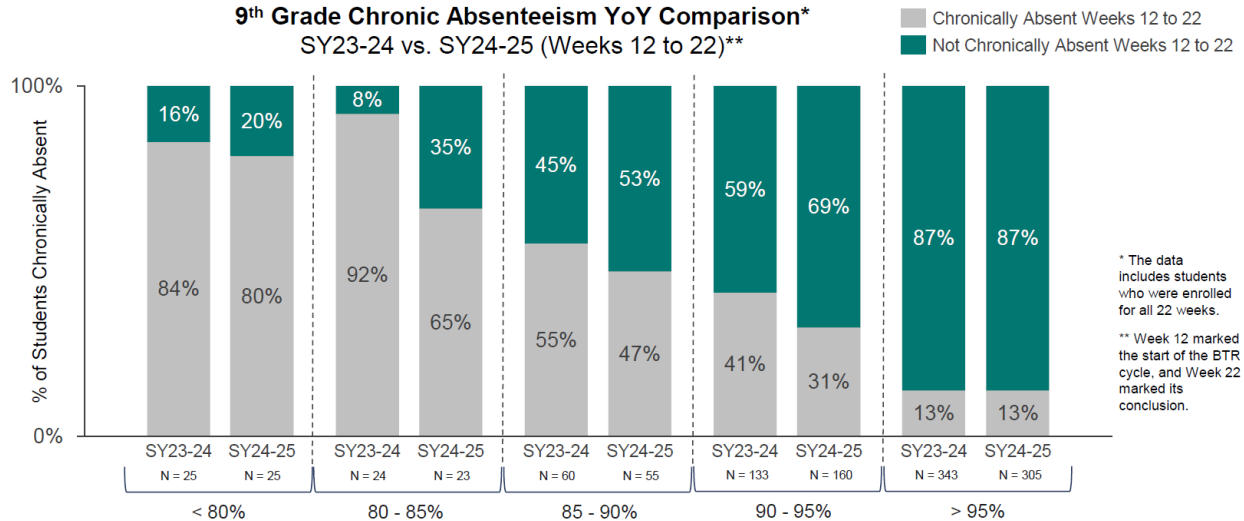


"By mid-fall, this student had missed enough school to be chronically absent ... I started to connect with her to build a relationship and encourage her to be in school consistently. Since then she has had perfect or near-perfect attendance each week. She also is proactively communicating more, including asking about missed assignments she needs to make up. **She is working hard to get her grades back up and is much more present in school.**"

- Breakthrough Team Member, Teacher

Chronic absenteeism numbers reduced for 9th Grade BTR Students in SY24-25 compared to the same time period in the prior school year.

9th Grade Chronic Absenteeism YoY Comparison*
SY23-24 vs. SY24-25 (Weeks 12 to 22)**



* The data includes students who were enrolled for all 22 weeks.

** Week 12 marked the start of the BTR cycle, and Week 22 marked its conclusion.

Source: Grand Island Academy of Freshman Exploration SY23-24 and SY24-25 attendance data



Each team used their school's baseline data to set an ambitious but achievable SMART Goal to guide their Breakthrough Results work

Example SMART Goal: From March 24th to May 22nd, 77 of 82 at-risk and nearly at-risk students (88-95%), at each school, will attend at least 36 of 40 remaining school days.

School	Goal Number of BTR Students	Total Number of BTR Students	Baseline	Growth Goal	Goal Status
Dodge Grade 5	22	24	At-risk or nearly at-risk (88-95% ADA)	Attend ≥36* school days *35.1 days for Grade 6 teams.	Not Met
Starr Grade 5	29	33			Met
Barr Grade 6	77	82			Not Met
Walnut Grade 6	92	101			Not Met
Westridge Grade 6	93	102			Not Met

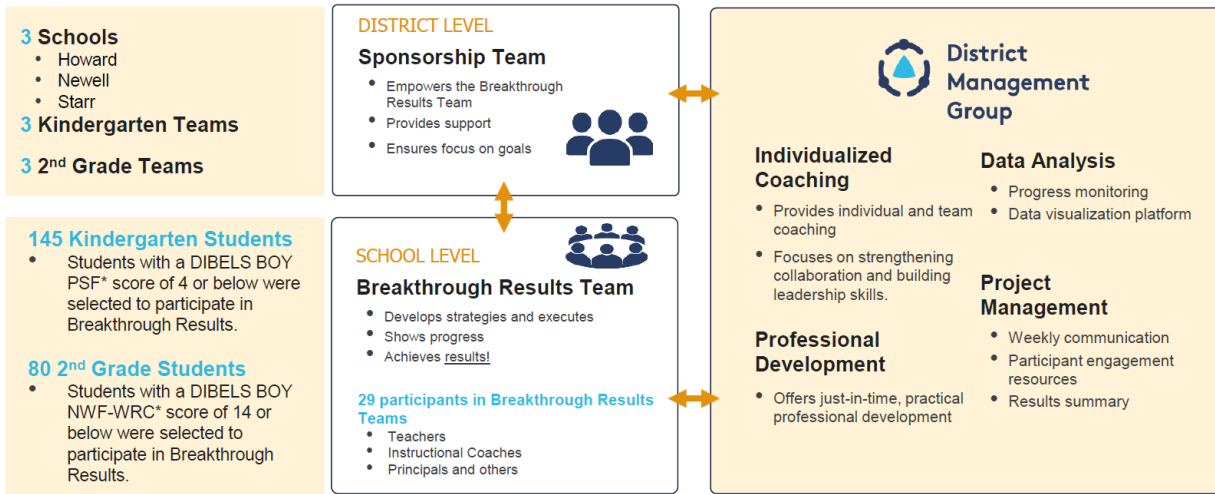
Grand Island Early Literacy Grant Initiative

Schools Participating in BTR are Driving Significant Literacy Gains and Both BTR Kindergarten and BTR 2nd-grade students showed **double-digit improvements in reading benchmarks and consistently outperforming non-BTR Schools.**

- Kindergarten BTR students showed significant improvements in Phonemic Segmentation Fluency (PSF), with a **14-point year-over-year (YoY) increase** from the **DIBELS BOY to DIBELS MOY assessment**, and a **9-point higher increase** in the number of students scoring at or above benchmark compared to non-BTR schools.
- 2nd-grade BTR students demonstrated higher reading proficiency, achieving a 14-point year-over-year (YoY) gain** in Word Reading (NWF-WRC) from the **DIBELS BOY to DIBELS MOY assessment**, along with an **8-point greater increase** in the number of students scoring at or above benchmark compared to non-BTR schools.



Grand Island - Breakthrough Results Program: Literacy Fall 2024



*PSF = Phoneme Segmentation Fluency, NWF-WRC = Nonsense Word Fluency-wait
inWords Recorded Correctly



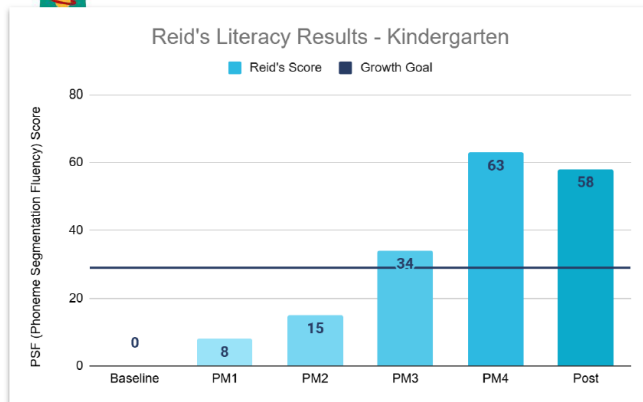
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Student Impact Story



Reid, Kindergartener

Reid grew by 58 points from Baseline to Post!



"[Reid] made steady growth every week... now he's above the end of the year benchmark and now you can see it just clicking for him.

It was the small group that seemed to make the difference and he was only in it for a few weeks before he just took off. And now when he comes up to me, he's ready to rock."

- Breakthrough Team Member, Teacher



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Each Kindergarten team used their school's baseline data to set an ambitious but achievable SMART Goal to guide their Breakthrough Results work

Example Kindergarten SMART Goal: By January 24, 2025, 35 of 57 students with a DIBELS BOY PSF score 4 and below on the DIBELS BOY will increase their PSF Score at least 29 correct sound segments per minute on DIBELS MOY

Team	Goal Number of BTR Students	Total Number of BTR Students	DIBELS BOY PSF Score	Goal Growth on DIBELS MOY
Howard	35	57	≤ 4	+ ≥ 29 correct sounds segments
Newell	30	45		
Starr	30	43		



Each 2nd Grade team used their school's baseline data to set an ambitious but achievable SMART Goal to guide their Breakthrough Results work

Example 2nd Grade SMART Goal: By January 24, 2025, 22 of 33 students with a DIBELS BOY WRC score 14 and below on the DIBELS BOY will increase their WRC Score at least 8 words recoded correctly on DIBELS MOY

Team	Goal Number of BTR Students	Total Number of BTR Students	DIBELS BOY WRC Score	Goal Growth on DIBELS MOY
Howard	22	33	≤ 14	+ ≥ 8 words recoded correctly
Newell	14	23		
Starr	19	24		



FAFSA

As a result of the new requirement for all high school students to complete the FAFSA, Improvement Grant Funds were used to promote FAFSA completion in South Sioux City Community Schools (SSCCS). The schools' activities were vast and included:

- SSCCS set up a parent store for parents who completed the FAFSA could order South Sioux City gear.
- SSCCS set up a college going Amazon order site so students who completed the FAFSA could pick an item out.
- SSCCS had spreadsheets that were completed by the counseling team on when FAFSAs were complete, waivers complete, and items that were ordered and picked up by students. Parent items were mailed to their homes.
- SSCCS had seven help sessions. They were Open House style and we usually held them during basketball games or wrestling matches, so the school was already open.
- Northeast Community College came for a help session during fall conferences to help families create their FAFSA IDs.
- The counselors went into senior classes to help students create FSA IDs.
- EducationQuest came during fall conferences to help families create FAFSA IDs. They also came in January to help with FAFSA completion.
- In March, the counselors made individual appointments with families to complete the FAFSA.



- SSCCS created fliers and social media posts that we sent out to the community and students.
- At the end of each month, anyone who had completed the FAFSA was enrolled in an iPad drawing. SSCCS gave out one iPad every month until May.
- On the seniors' last day, SSCCS had a lunch for students who had completed the FAFSA or waiver.
- During FAFSA help session events, SSCCS had bilingual staff available to assist students and families.

These activities led to incredible results:

Class of 2025 final FAFSA totals		
	Count	Percentage
FAFSA Completers	168*	62%
FAFSA Waivers	105	38%
Class of 2025 Graduates	273	100%

*The website that we visit to see our totals has us listed at 165. This difference can occur when our students live with other parents in another state. Nebraska does not always count those students in our official count.



Nebraska Career Connections

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 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.

From Network Leader Katie Graham:

“Lottery funds support statewide access to Nebraska Career Connections, which profoundly impact both students and educators by providing a comprehensive platform for career and postsecondary exploration and planning. For students, it offers assessments and personalized guidance in identifying career paths aligned with their



interests, skills, and values, thus empowering them to make informed decisions about their educational and professional futures. Educators benefit from robust tools that support curriculum integration, enabling them to tailor instruction and advising to meet the diverse needs of their students. By fostering a deeper understanding of career options and the steps required to achieve them, Nebraska Career Connections helps to ensure that students are well-prepared to transition from secondary to postsecondary education and into meaningful employment.”

Progress/Impact:

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

