

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Education Committee January 28, 2025
Rough Draft

MURMAN: I'm Senator Dave Murman. I'm from Glenvil, Nebraska. I represent 38th District. And 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 testifier sheet each time you come forward to speak on the mic. When it's 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 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 you wish. We will be using a five-minute light system for all testifiers. When you begin your testimony, the light 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 facilitate today's hearing. Please mute your cell phones or any other electronic devices. Verbal outbursts or applause are not permitted. Such behavior may be cause for you to be asked to leave the hearing room. Knowing that committee members may need to come and go during the afternoon-- know that the committee members may need to come and go during the afternoon for other hearings. I will now ask the committee members with us today to introduce themselves, starting at my far right.

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

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CONRAD: Hello. Good afternoon. Danielle Conrad, north Lincoln.

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

MEYER: Senator Glen Meyer, northeast Nebraska, District 17.

HUNT: Megan Hunt, and I represent the northern part of midtown Omaha.

LONOWSKI: Senator Dan Lonowski. I'm from Hastings. Represent District 33, which is Adams County, Kearney County, and rural Phelps County.

JUAREZ: Margo Juarez, south Omaha, District 5.

MURMAN: Staff with us today are, to my immediate right, legal counsel Kevin Langevin; and to my far right, committee clerk Diane Johnson. The pages who serve our committee are Ruby Kinz-- Kinzie from Wayne, Nebraska, a junior at UNL studying political science. Hi, Ruby. And Jessica Vinstadt [SIC] from Omaha, a sophomore at UN-- UNL studying political science and criminal justice. Hello, Jessica. And Sydney Cochran from Lincoln, a freshman at UNL studying business administration and U.S. history. Glad you're with us also, Sydney. With that will begin to-- today's hearing beginning with LB249. And Senator Sanders.

SANDERS: Thank you, Chairman Murman. Good afternoon, Chairman Murman and members of the Education Committee. I am Rita Sanders, R-i-t-a S-a-n-d-e-r-s. And I represent District 45, which encompasses much of Bellevue and the Offutt community. LB249 addresses a gap in funding and directly impacts the children of military families in the Bellevue Public School. I want to highlight the challenges faced by school districts like Bellevue Public School, where a significant portion of the student body consists of military-connected children, many of whom live on federally owned property. As you know, the federal government owns a large portion of land across our country. And in our district, Offutt Air Force Base is located right in the heart of our community. This means that approximately 25% to 30% of the property tax in our district is exempt from local property tax, and it is federal property. While it is necessary provision for national security, it places a significant burden on our local schools, which rely heavily on property tax revenue to fund resources and services. Without the tax revenue, our schools face a shortfall that directly affects the quality of education we provide. That's why our-- why military impact

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aid is so important. This funding helps school district like ours that serve military families to make up the revenue lost due to federal-exempt land. It ensures that even through-- even though we don't have the same level of property tax income as other school districts, our schools remain fully equipped to serve our students. It allows us to keep class size manageable, support extracurricular programs, and provide the opportunities that all children need to grow academically and personally. However, I understand that there are fiscal concerns attached to this issue. Given the financial implications, I believe it would be wise to introduce this bill at a later date when we can have more thorough discussion about the best path forward. We must ensure fiscal notes are fully understood and that we are making decisions that are both sustainable and beneficial to our schools, students, and military families. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to continuing this important conversation and working together to support our future of our children. Thank you.

MURMAN: Thank you, Senator Sanders. Are there any questions for Senator Sanders at this time? If not, thank you very much.

SANDERS: Thank you. I do want to say this is discussion only so we all have the awareness of what impact aid does. Following me is Dr. Rippe from the Bellevue Public School, superintendent. Together, we have been fighting our federal government for impact aid, as impact aid is reduced by our federal government to help Bellevue Public School. And he can give you a little bit more insight on that.

MURMAN: Thank you. I, I could ask you one question, I guess. And it's more of a comment also. The school district I represent, the original Glenvil Public Schools, the Navy Ammunition Depot in our area took about half of that school district. And Sandy Creek School's now-- I'm not sure what the percentage is, but I'm guessing it's 25% to 30% of that district is not taxed because it's owned by-- still owned by the federal government. It's Meat Animal Research Center now. And there's several other school districts around that are impacted, not quite as much as Sandy Creek, but I know exactly what you're talking about. So thanks for bringing this bill.

SANDERS: Thank you, Senator Murman. Thank you.

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MURMAN: First testifier-- first proponent testifier.

JEFF RIPPE: Didn't want to jump the gun on you there. All right. Good afternoon, Chairman Murman and committee members of the Education Committee. My name is Jeff Rippe, J-e-f-f R-i-p-p-e. And I am the Superintendent at Bellevue Public Schools. I'd like to first thank Senator Sanders for introducing LB249 and for giving us the opportunity to have this discussion regarding the uniqueness of Bellevue Public Schools. Just a little history on Bellevue Public Schools. Doc-- or, Senator Sanders touched it on a little bit, but we have just over 9-- 9,500 students, and about 27% of those students are military connected. We are very proud as-- it's an honor to serve military students. So this conversation is no way a negative towards Offutt Air Force Base. We embrace them. We have a great relationship with them. But, but we feel we are unique because of serving military students and because of the federal property. We do qualify for impact aid at the federal level. Several years ago, that-- we, we received over \$15 million in impact aid. We are down to-- between \$2 and \$3 million right now. The reason that dropped is our percentage of students dropped below 35%. That's kind of the fe-- federal threshold to receive highly impacted money from the federal government. Even though our enrollment dropped-- not our overall enrollment, but the percentage of military students, the makeup of Bellevue did not change. No federal property was put back on the tax rolls. In fact, it's really just the opposite. More land in Bellevue is being purchased to protect the security of the base to look for future missions. Any time land is purchased, that's just more land that comes off the tax rolls that impacts our school district. We also had the AICUZ zone, which is not federal property, but it is land that cannot be developed. So the value of that land is a lot less, and that's for the, the Air Force needs. So, so that impacts us as well. It's not just base proper that impacts Bellevue. It's also base housing. And so when you look at the base, you might think that's only federal property. All of the base housing, a lot of property around that is also federal property. So, so that's kind of the concern when we talk about all the federal property. Offutt-- their mission brings individuals to Offutt, which means they bring children to our-- you know. So I, I, I understand what you're saying about different school districts that have federal property, but those-- the, the, the purpose of that property is not bringing a lot of kids into those school districts. Indian lands are another federal property, big

federal property in, in Nebraska. They are under a different umbrella under the federal impact aid, and they are highly reimbursed, almost at 100%. And so I think that's why you probably don't hear from a lot of school districts that represent the Indian lands because of the impact aid that they are receiving. So the goal of LB49 [SIC] is to recognize that Bellevue has a large amount of property within the district, and that is not taxable because it's owned by the federal government. This is not a new concept across the country. Other states, other school district-- military school districts have experienced the same thing. They have fallen out of the highly impacted aid money. And so they have gone back to their states to address that. New Jersey's a great example, where New Jersey passed language very similar to this language to help support their, their local school districts because of the loss of the federal money and to help educate the military students, but also to help the taxpayers as well. These additional resources would not only help our military students, but also provide property tax relief for those citizens who live within our boundaries. Most likely, our levy is always going to be at the maximum allowed, and that's because of the amount we can produce locally. And one example of this is that we can all-- if you take one penny of valuation in Bellevue, it generates about \$450,000. Our neighbor right next door, Papillion-- which has no federal property-- one penny generates about \$950,000. So almost double. OK? That, that puts a burden on our taxpayers that-- again, we have to raise our taxes more locally to support our system, our military students, and all students. So again, this is not only to help military students, but also to provide the needed tax-- property tax relief that our taxpayers-- just like all of your taxpayers and taxpayers in Nebraska-- are asking for. With the passage of a bill like this, it would lower our levy and provide the needed property tax relief for our citizens. We hope to work with the committee and Senator Sanders on language that recognizes the unique need of Bellevue. I thank you for your time. And happy to answer any questions.

MURMAN: Any questions for Mr. Rippe? Yes.

HUGHES: Thank you, Chairman Murman.

MURMAN: Senator Hughes.

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HUGHES: Yeah. Thanks for coming. And is it Mr. Ricky, Dr. Ricky?

JEFF RIPPE: Dr. Rippe. Yup.

HUGHES: Doc-- Rippe?

JEFF RIPPE: Rippe. R-i-p-p-e. Correct.

HUGHES: Just-- I'm just curious-- and this is for my own-- how does federal impact aid work? Is it an amount per student if you're over a certain percent--

JEFF RIPPE: Yeah--

HUGHES: --or is it, like, varying-- like--

JEFF RIPPE: Yeah, it's amount--

HUGHES: --30% is X-- if you wouldn't mind.

JEFF RIPPE: Yeah. Sorry to interrupt. It's amount per student. It's also based off if you-- if your parents live on base, if there-- there's different classifications of military, and so there's a different formula that works for each one. But we have to do a first count form every year with every one-- single one of our parents, which is not a real popular process. But every parent has to fill out a form indicating whether they're military and then where they reside, where they work. And then based off of that, we submit an application and then receive funds from the federal government. I, I will tell you it's not a 100% lot either, meaning we don't get 100% of what we should get. So that's a whole nother issue.

HUGHES: Is it a federal rate that all-- like-- or do they do something-- they're like, oh, well, Bellevue, we run X amount per student, so we'll pay 8-- 90% of that or something.

JEFF RIPPE: Well, it-- that, that'd be across the-- it, it's not just by district, but everybody submits an application. But because the federal government doesn't have the money to support 100% across the board, then they prorate everybody to say you only get a certain percentage.

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HUGHES: So they have a pot of money. They wait and see how many kids are out there and then they kind of--

JEFF RIPPE: Correct. Yeah.

HUGHES: Can you just give me a range of what you've gotten-- when you were-- like, when you were hitting that \$15 million amount, what were you getting per student then versus-- now you're at \$3 to \$4 million.

JEFF RIPPE: It, it really hasn't dropped a whole lot per student.

HUGHES: OK.

JEFF RIPPE: So I-- I'd have to do the math, but we, we haven't really reduced a lot of students. I mean, we dropped from 35% to 27%. And our enrollment has dropped a little bit since then, but not a whole lot. So-- and again, it's a different amount per classification of whether you're in uniform, whether you're a contracted employee, whether you work o-- you're, you're military but work off base. So it's kind of hard to give you an exact amount per student.

HUGHES: OK. And then-- this-- if I can continue.

MURMAN: Sure.

HUGHES: This bill kind of would help that gap of, OK. We're getting this from the feds, but it's really costing-- I saw you compare to the district beside you and then you kind of fill that gap, if you will, from state funds is what--

JEFF RIPPE: Right. Yeah. And, and, and this bill, it-- there's a formula. And, and to be honest, we, we looked at the New Jersey bill. They have a formula where they looked at only uniformed military. And so we look at that. This would not only benefit Bellevue. This would benefit any school district that receives federal funds for military students. Like, Papillion probably has half the students we have. They would also receive additional funds through this bill. The difference is-- and, and not picking on Papillion-- they don't have any federal property in their district. They have military kids. We, we get kind of the, the double whammy if we have--

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HUGHES: Because if they have military kids, their families are not living on medil-- military housing. They bought a house in Papillion--

JEFF RIPPE: Correct. But they might be a uniform officer--

HUGHES: Yeah. Right.

JEFF RIPPE: --on base. Correct.

HUGHES: Right. OK.

JEFF RIPPE: Yeah.

HUGHES: Yeah, I, I, I see how-- because we have federal lands, parks and things like that, but that-- yours are directly having children with them because it's housing--

JEFF RIPPE: Correct. Yeah.

HUGHES: --which is a little different than a federal land that's, you know, a park or whatever--

JEFF RIPPE: Correct.

HUGHES: --so. OK. Thanks for coming in. Thanks for that clarification.

JEFF RIPPE: You're welcome.

MURMAN: Any other questions for Dr. Rippe? Yes, Senator Lonowski.

LONOWSKI: Thank you, Chair. Sir-- so can you tell me, like, the overall amount you're short, like an average or an estimate? Is that possible?

JEFF RIPPE: Well, I, I, I mean, in, in, in the glory days, it-- we were getting \$15-plus million. Now we're down to \$2 to \$3 million.

LONOWSKI: Yeah.

JEFF RIPPE: The, the, the-- this bill, I think, would produce \$5 to \$7 million for Bellevue Public Schools based off the formula. Again, some of that would be used towards programming and supporting military students. A lot of it would be used to lower our levy to give back to

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our taxpayers as property tax relief. Not all \$7 million by any means would be used to, to support military students.

LONOWSKI: OK. Thank you.

JEFF RIPPE: Hopefully that answered your question.

LONOWSKI: Yup. More than answer. Thanks.

MURMAN: Senator Meyer.

MEYER: Thank you, Chairman Murman. Appreciate you coming in today. What is your current levy?

JEFF RIPPE: We are \$1.03 at the General Fund. And then we have a bond on top of that. And, and, and we have tried to drop it. The problem is-- again, any time we have to rely on the local taxpayers, there, there, there's more of a burden on our local taxpayers because of the federal property. So-- you know, we, we have to ma-- basically levy at the maximum we can.

MEYER: I'm very familiar, being from Thurston County. We have two Native American tribes. And-- not that I'll take issue with your statement about-- I, I know there's a differentiation between Native American tribes and military. But until very recently, in order to receive impact aid, the schools, certainly that have a great deal of the trust land and the-- had to levy very close to \$1.05 in order to receive the impact aid. And so there was a-- quite a disparity-- certainly in the tax base. And, and trust me, I've, I've been to pink card meetings and that type of thing in the--

JEFF RIPPE: Right.

MEYER: --courthouse, so. Recently, Winnebago had dropped the levy. I don't know the basis on that. I do have TEEOSA formulas and levies and everything back in my office in a drawer just, just to look at all the schools in my district. But I realize that you have to levy essentially maxed out of allowable in order to get the impact aid in generalities. So-- but not that I'll take issue with you, but yes, we are still levied quite high on the reservation.

JEFF RIPPE: Yeah. And, and, and my point wasn't about the levy. It was about how they are-- the-- their impact aid is funded differently than

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military for whatever reason. And if, if, if we were getting 100% of our lot in what we expected, I probably wouldn't be sitting here asking for additional money for Bellevue.

MEYER: I guess my point was, are taxpayers are impacted negatively--

JEFF RIPPE: Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah.

MEYER: --also in comparison to Bellevue, so. [INAUDIBLE] more clear on that. Thank you.

MURMAN: I also mention that we've got kind of the opposite problem, I think, at Sandy Creek. We'd like to have more students and taking away all this valuation and then no students produced on that land. Either-- and being in a fairly sparse part of the state, it does take away from the school--

JEFF RIPPE: Sure.

MURMAN: --from, from that. But my specific question is-- you, you mentioned Papillion. I assume both Papillion and Bellevue are equalized districts.

JEFF RIPPE: Correct.

MURMAN: Could you explain a little bit about how the difference in valuation that you mentioned between the two districts, how that affects the TEEOSA formula and, and the amount of state aid you receive?

JEFF RIPPE: Well-- I mean-- obviously the-- there's the resource side; there's the needs side. And, and the needs side has lots of different variables. Military students are not, I don't think, one of those var-- variables that's included in that. So, you know, we, we do get a big portion of, of state aid, and we appreciate that the more state aid we could get, the less reliance on our local property taxpayers, the better for Bellevue, in my opinion. But we're always going to have that, I, I, I think-- unless you tell me differently, that the state's going to fund us at 100%-- we're always going to have that reliance on local taxes. So my point is what we can produce because of the federal property, because of our tax base, is going to be different than what Papillion and other school districts can levy as well. I'm not sure if

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I'm answering your question, but there's just a difference between the two school districts.

MURMAN: Sure. Any other questions for Dr. Rippe?

JUAREZ: I have a question.

MURMAN: Yes, Senator Juarez.

JUAREZ: OK. I wanted to know, as far as the military count that you do of your students, is that something that you do yearly-- or how often does that happen?

JEFF RIPPE: Yeah. That happens once a year, and that's required by the federal government for us to receive the impact aid dollars.

JUAREZ: OK. And then I wanted to know, could you give me an example of how the military aid is actually used for the students? I mean, you mentioned about how you like it to reduce the property tax for the homeowners, but how do you use it for the students?

JEFF RIPPE: Well, it, it, it, it just comes-- part of our general fund. And, and, you know, again, we have 27% military, but we also then have to fund all the other students as well. So we, we try not to, to single out military students.

JUAREZ: OK. So it just is part of the general budget.

JEFF RIPPE: It, it's just part of the overall budget. It flows through that. And there's also some additional special education money, and I-- that's-- would be a whole different topic of special education and military because of Offutt. But we receive a little additional special education money from the federal government as well because of high-need students.

JUAREZ: OK. Thank you.

MURMAN: Any other questions for Dr. Rippe? If not, thank you for-- or-- yes, Senator Meyer.

MEYER: Something just occurred to me. Do you-- is there any structure for pil-- payment in lieu of taxes? Are you receiving anything? Given the fact that much of your property inside your school district is, is government owned. And, and in some cases, there was a payment in lieu

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of taxes offered-- not offered-- available. Much limited, but are you receiving any--

JEFF RIPPE: I'm not aware of any money that we're receiving from that.

MEYER: Thank you.

JEFF RIPPE: Yeah.

MURMAN: Thank you. No further questions. Thanks for--

JEFF RIPPE: Thank you for your time.

MURMAN: --your testimony. Other proponents for LB249? Any opponents for LB249? Neutral testifiers for LB249? If not, Senator Sanders, you're welcome close if you would like. And she waives clothing-- closing. And electronically, we had 0 proponents, 1 opponent, and 0 neutral testifiers. And with that, we will close the hearing on the LB249 and open the hearing on I believe it's LB296.

CONRAD: Good afternoon.

MURMAN: Good afternoon, Speaker Arch.

ARCH: Good afternoon, Senator Murman, members of the Executive-- excuse me-- Executive-- Education Committee. For the record, my name is John Arch, J-o-h-n A-r-c-h. And I represent the 14th Legislative District in Sarpy County. I'm here today to introduce LB296. Well, I'm going to use a term not generally associated with me, but I'm really excited about this bill. I believe LB296 represents the type of good government legislation for which I advocated and is a perfect example of what can be accomplished when all three branches of government work together for a common goal. In this case, the common goal is to improve the educational outcomes for students who, for whatever reason, have come under the jurisdiction of a juvenile court. Briefly, this bill attempts to address the barriers to communication and information sharing that tend to negatively impact this group of youth from succeeding academically. The bill establishes a centralized database for more efficient data sharing, provides for the awarding of academic credits, provides for registrars of the Department of Education to ensure the proper transfer of records and credits, and allows for the granting of a state-issued high school diploma. This bill has literally been years in the making. I can argue that the

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seeds for this legislation were first planted in 2019 with a multi-system breakdown at the then-girls YRTC in Geneva. It was at that time that Department of Education, DHHS, courts, others got into the room-- and, and there was, there was no arm twisting involved. It was clear that we needed to do something more with the education system at the YRTC. But then as we started exploring that, we also recognized that, in particular, foster care kids that perhaps are moved across the state can become very discouraged with their academic progress. They may be-- they may move into a district and have-- and, and have started Algebra I and, and have gone through the-- that whole process and actually had probably completed Algebra I. But then it was time to move to another school district. And the records weren't following. Sometimes they were, sometimes they weren't. It was a bit anecdotal. And we realized that there was, there was a need here. So one study was LR438, introduced in 2022 by the Health and Human Services Committee. While I served as the chair for that committee, LR438 involved a series of roundtable discussions which included members of the Legislature, the former Education Commissioner, Representative of Department of Education, former CEO of DHHS, representatives from that agency, current State Court Administrator Corey Steel, represented from the Courts and Probation. Well, from those discussions came LB708 that I introduced in 2023. Under that bill, which was eventually amended into LB705 and passed, Department of Education, HHS, Office of Probation Administration, State Court Administrators were required to enter into a memorandum of understanding for the sharing of data relevant to students who are under the jurisdiction of a juvenile court, which includes those in foster care and those in our YRTC system. Included in the MOU was a direction for the Department of Education to contract with an outside consultant with expertise in the education of court-involved students. So the Department of Education contracted with Bellwether, which, as a consultant, I think did an amazingly thorough job of visiting facilities, conducting interviews with students and families, bringing the participating agencies together to form working groups, finally issuing a report that provided recommendations on policy issues as defined in the enabling legislation. And if anyone wanted a full copy of that report, would be happy to send you a link. Many of the recommendations did not require legislation, but the centralized education records system called for in LB296 is key to ensure educational records for students under the jurisdiction of a juvenile court are properly timely transferred while adhering to strict

confidentiality standards. Many students who fall under the jurisdiction of a juvenile court move between multiple school districts and education systems. And unsurprisingly, the Bellwether Group found that some student failure can be attributed to a lag in record transfers or loss of records altogether, which-- I mean, we, we know it's just totally demoralizing to a student that's working to try to get-- and advance. And then-- they moved and they have to start over and all of these things. Missing credit hours necessitates students retaking all or portions of classes, causing them to become frustrated, disillusioned, eventually unmotivated to succeed academically. So LB296 aims to change that by making sure these students who are already facing plenty of challenges are not put in an, an additional disadvantage by inaccurate and in-- inaccessible education records. So there are some provisions in the bill I'm going to let those following me address, but I wanted to give you some background and bring to your awareness that this isn't an idea that was just dreamed up overnight. The proposals put forth in LB296 have been a lengthy and collaborative effort by all three branches of government, by multiple individuals within those branches, and with the common goal of giving every Nebraska student the opportunity to succeed. So I encourage you to advance LB296. I'd be happy to answer any questions. There will be testimony behind me from individuals directly involved in the Bellwether study and development of, of this bill. Three, three just quick, additional points. One, if we're successful in doing this, Bellwether has indicated that we would honestly be the first state to, to, to tackle this. Other states have talked about it. Other states have tried to do it. The, the problem has always been, right, the cooperation between the three branches of government necessary to get this done. We have not had any of that problem here in Nebraska. And so I think we've got a real opportunity to, to show a model to other states how to do this. Second, there's no General Fund impact. If you, if you read the bill carefully, it is to be funded by the State Department of Ed Improvement Grant Fund. And the dollars are there and they can use those dollars for that. And the State Board of Education have act-- has actually identified it as one of their legislative priorities this year, so. With that, I'll conclude and answer any questions. But I've got, I've got Probation, DHHS, and the courts and Department of Education coming up behind me here, so. Any, any questions?

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MURMAN: Any questions for Senator Arch this time? Yes, Senator Lonowski.

LONOWSKI: Tha-- thank you, Chair Murman. Senator Arch, does it affect in any way help or hinder intrastate records being passed back and forth?

ARCH: Not, not that I'm aware of, but that would be a good question for the Department of Education.

LONOWSKI: OK. OK.

ARCH: They're the ones that will have the database and, and they'll explain-- I mean, the database actually exists now. Schools are already feeding information. It's a matter of flagging those students that we really need to track and, and, and keep track of those credits.

LONOWSKI: Thank you.

MURMAN: Any other questions?

JUAREZ: Yes, I do, please. I just wanted to state that I would like you to send me the link to that report because--

ARCH: Sure.

JUAREZ: --I would like to see it.

ARCH: We will do that.

JUAREZ: Thank you.

ARCH: Yep. It's a-- it's really a very good report. Very insightful.

MURMAN: Any other questions at this time? If not, thanks for the open. Proponents for LB296? Good afternoon.

KARI RUMBAUGH: Hi. Good afternoon. I want to start by saying good afternoon and thank you to Chairperson Murman and the Education Committee for allowing me to speak today. My name's Kari Rumbaugh, K-a-r-i R-u-m-b-a-u-g-h. And I really feel like my testimony is going to complement what Senator Arch just spoke to about in regards to the work that the three branches have been doing and-- me specifically

from the judicial branch. I am currently employed by the Nebraska Supreme Court-- it's Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation-- as the Deputy Administrator overseeing Juvenile Probation Services. And I'm before you today to provide testimony in support of LB296. LB296, as Senator Arch mentioned, is-- really builds on the passage of legislation from June of 2023, in which the Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation has partnered with three branches, but specifically in regards to the Nebraska Department of Education, in the hiring of the expert consultant-- as he mentioned, Bellwether-- to complete the focused eval-- evaluation or report in regards to education. The priorities of the report, as he mentioned, was real-- really to get together and create policies and practices to enhance educational data sharing, which is really an essential piece of information for youth that are in the court system, as well as that clarity around transfer of credits. And Probation and the Courts were both highly involved in leadership meetings as well as focus groups. Focus groups included range of-- from probation administration through field staff. So probation officers were involved in a focus group, as well as very specific interviews, one-on-one interviews with chief probation officers across the state, as well as court leadership and court administrative staff, including our data division within the Administrative Office. The recommendations from the final Bellwether report are essential, as they will have positive impact on court-involved youth in many ways, but here are several that I'd like to share with you. First, the centralized data system will ensure that information is accurate and transferred quickly so that educational progress is not disrupted. This includes correct and complete academic transcripts and also ensures that youth aren't repeating coursework-- we hear about that often-- as well as enrolling in inappropriate classes-- so possibly not understanding what classes they've completed. And then they're taking-- young people are taking them again, or maybe they're called a little something different, but really that clarity. Plus, if a youth is transitioned to another school, being able to have that essential information available immediately upon enrollment. So knowing right away what are they coming with and how can they successfully enroll in that new school. Next, the recommendations prioritize a youth- and family-focused effort, ensuring that their records are highly confidential and privacy policies are clear. Some of this will be done through stakeholders coming together in cross-training, as well as creating clear privacy prov-- policies for youth to ensure that they're having

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positive educational outcomes. And then the final is policies in regards to the graduation attainment is-- and their diploma is essential. So the ability for court-involved youth to receive their high school diploma will provide for opportunities for envy-- even increased rates of graduation, and that's something that the Bellwether, Bellwether report lifted up as a possibility through these changes, which would greatly impact court-involved youth. In closing, the Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation will continue to be an active partner with the Department of Health-- sorry-- the Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services and supports the passage of LB296, as this legislation is essential in taking necessary steps to create the policies and practices that will create this centralized education data records system, clear information regarding academic completion, and help youth attain their high school diplomas. Thank you for your time. And I am happy to answer any questions.

MURMAN: Thank you. Any questions for Kari Rumbaugh? Senator Juarez.

JUAREZ: Thank you. I just have a question here in regards to the high school diplomas that may be issued. It says here, if a student doesn't graduate from an approved or accredited one, they shall upon request get awarded a state high school diploma. So do you foresee or have you checked on whether or not-- let's say a student wants to go to college out of state. Is there going to be any problem with them having a generic high school diploma versus one from a particular high school? Do you think that schools across the country are not going to give these students any problem if they have something generic in that nature?

KARI RUMBAUGH: So-- I'm not an expert in high school diplomas. I think Department of Education could probably speak to that better than I can. But I do think that we-- part of the process is us continuing to evaluate this and, and ensure that when we take these steps that they are benefiting young people in the court system. So that is an essential piece of ensuring that these diplomas are accepted by universities and--

JUAREZ: Yeah, because I ju--

KARI RUMBAUGH: --and community colleges.

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JUAREZ: You know, you don't want to fru-- frustrate them then after they finally got this done, then to--

KARI RUMBAUGH: Correct.

JUAREZ: --be frustrated with a technicality like that--

KARI RUMBAUGH: Correct.

JUAREZ: --is what I'm concerned about.

KARI RUMBAUGH: Yes. Yes.

JUAREZ: OK. Thank you.

KARI RUMBAUGH: Thank you.

MURMAN: Any other questions? Senator Hughes.

HUGHES: Thank you, Chair Murman. Thanks for coming in, Ms. Rumbaugh. Do you happen to know what the graduation percentage for kids, like, in these kinds of situations?

KARI RUMBAUGH: So that is one-- that's a great question because that is one of the items that we're-- we talked about a lot with this work, is currently we don't have data sharing that allows me to be able to even tell you-- yeah-- how many probation youth successfully graduate from high school. So that is one of the great benefits of this work, will be not only those statewide data figures that we'll be able to get, but specific data for local probation officers. So if they want to get in and go, is something going on today with this young person, there would be a centralized data system for them to use. Right now, they're using something different for each of the school systems. So it'll really streamline that as well. But, yeah. We don't know right now. And so that's one of the most important pieces of the data sharing.

HUGHES: Thank you.

MURMAN: Any other questions? I have one. So the centralized system and, and education system does work with all foster care kids, is that correct or--

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KARI RUMBAUGH: Yes, yes, yes.

MURMAN: OK.

KARI RUMBAUGH: So youth that are enrolled in any school would be in that system. And again, I would want Department of Education to speak to that. What we are looking at in the-- really looking for in regards to the court system and probation is how can we quickly get information when a youth is court involved to the Department of Education so they could see that. And that would involve all youth, including those youth that are placed out of their homes. And especially when they're transitioning to a foster home and maybe changing schools, doing that quickly and making sure those transcripts are available right when they arrive.

MURMAN: Well, that's great to hear because-- unfortunately, I know that some foster care kids unfortunately are moved around--

KARI RUMBAUGH: Yes. Mm-hmm.

MURMAN: --a lot, so.

KARI RUMBAUGH: Yes.

MURMAN: Thank you. Any other questions for Ms. Rumbaugh? If not, thank you for your testimony.

KARI RUMBAUGH: Thank you for your time.

MURMAN: Other proponents for LB296? Good afternoon.

ALYSSA BISH: Good afternoon, Chairman Murman and the members of the Education Committee. My name is Dr. Alyssa Bish, A-l-y-s-s-a B-i-s-h. And I am the Director of the Division of Children and Family Services in the Department of Health and Human Services, DHHS. I'm here to testify in support of LB296. At DHHS, we understand education is a key determinant of long-term success for youth. Youth in foster care and juvenile justice systems experience disruptions to their education when placed out of home. Unfortunately, many youths experience more than one placement and may have to move multiple times between foster homes or facilities, causing emotional trauma and frequent school changes. These transitions leave behind a trail of missing pieces, creating significant barriers and delays for court-involved youth

continuing their education and ultimately graduating. Not having consistent and readily accessible student records can keep our youth out of school for days, sometimes even weeks or months, putting them further behind and further behind. When youth move in the middle of a semester, they typically lose out on credits and their work is not captured in their transcripts. Without proper records, schools often place youth in classes with no information about their academic history or support needs. Youth may be forced to repeat coursework they've already completed or be placed in classes that are too advanced. Disjointed school transitions can exasperate feelings of instability and anxiety, further hindering academic performance and emotional well-being. Many grow frustrated and begin to withdraw from their educational services or behavioral needs continue to escalate. Some students in the foster care and juvenile justice system receive special education services. Behavioral support services are common and can be, can be a support to the youth, as well as a tool to ensure all students and teachers are safe in the classroom. When students with behavioral support needs transfer schools without proper information and services in place, the youth and others are left at risk. Ultimately, the lack of a streamlined data system makes it harder for educators to provide the individualized support youth need to be safe and to succeed academically. Given these circumstances, it's no surprise that nationally only half of youth who are-- who have experienced foster care graduate from high school. Moving homes and schools while navigating the many layers of trauma is incredibly difficult. Speaker Arch's bill proposes a solution tailored to these unique problems. Developing a centralized education records system is a great first step in ensuring that when youth move schools-- often through no fault of their own-- their record is available to assist in their new enrollment. Furthermore, the provisions authorizing the Commissioner of Education to award high school credit hours and to allow youth under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court to request their high school diploma further provides hope to youth to reach this important milestone. We owe it to the youth we serve to invest in solutions like LB296 to help kids-- to help keep them in school and to support their pathway to graduation. We respectfully request that the committee advance the bill to General File. And thank you for your time. I'd be happy to answer any questions about the bill.

MURMAN: Thank you. Any questions for Dr. Bish? If not, thank you for your testimony. Other proponents for LB296?

BRIAN HALSTEAD: Good afternoon, Senator Murman, 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. I'm Deputy Commissioner for the Nebraska Department of Education. And we are here in full support of LB296. You've heard from the prior testifier, Senator Arch. The department has been working with the judicial branch, the Department of Health and Human Services, and Probation as far back as 2009 trying to improve the quality of life for systems-involved youth. A number of the things that have gone in prior years that this Legislature has assisted with includes with the YTCAs, where they actually now have a superintendent for the-- all of their schools, which are accredited by the State Board of Education as special purpose schools. We also have a number of interim program schools. The Madison County Detention Center, Douglas County Detention, Lancaster County Detention are all interim program schools. Currently, the way the law's written in Nebraska, it's up to each one of those entities to transfer their education records to wherever the child goes, and the time lag and the quality of records or the inconsistency on that is what Bellwether clearly found in this study. And it's not because the people are trying to do harm; it's the fact that it's not well-coordinated or well-connected. The Nebraska Department of Education already has a centralized data se-- system for student information. We call it ADVISER. We are able at the department to connect with every school district's student information system and have immediately available, personally student-by-student information about that child. We know right now the courses they are actually enrolled in this year. This system that Bellwether's recommending for systems-involved youth is the hub-and-spoke method. Prior to this, it is just the line following the kid all around wherever it goes. So what-- using our hub-and-spoke system, we can build on this. We can actually get the education records of that student from the school they're in today and let the school tomorrow who has them know what it is, know exactly what that child was taking. The employment of registrars at the department will allow us to work with all of these education providers to make sure that, when kids move, there's a conversation going on about, all right, what did he finish? Did he complete algebra here? Did he do it here? And in that regard, the people who actually know the detail can talk directly to each other and compile a transcript that can be immediately available moving forward. I know there was a question about interstate. Our system is not currently connected to outside, but it is possible. An education provider in another state, we can get

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them access into that system for that education record. That's why we need the connection with the court system and that's why Probation or DHHS is going to have to tell us, where did the kid go if they're not in Nebraska anymore? So the system is capable of doing that. And I think, as Senator Arch indicated, I-- actually, I think it was the same bill for which the, the MOU and the study was done as the same bill this committee had for the future uses of lottery funds. And one of those is improvement grant funds the state board can use. And what better place to try to improve than with this system using those funds? So with that, I'll stop. I'll take any questions you might have. I just want you to know today there was a revision done to that MOU that Bellwether wanted. All of us have signed on to it. We're hoping you'll sign on with us so that all branches of government are working for the kids that we're all supposed to be caring for. Thank you.

MURMAN: Thank you. Any questions for Dr. Halstead? Yes, Senator Hughes.

HUGHES: Thank you, Chairman Murman. Thanks for coming in, Mr. Halstead. Yes, this clearly sounds like a really, really good thing. I think it was last year I had brought a bill that when kids age out of the foster system, that we were giving more information to them in terms of just anything that we can give them, because a lot of times these kids end up with almost nothing and they have no history. I'm curious if this is something upon aging out of that system they can get this transcript and they can know I was at Seward Public Schools for first and second grade and then I was in McCook for-- like, that history and just give them a little bit of a sense of that's where I was during that time. And I don't know if it has to be in statute, but I would think that would be a good thing. Do you see any--

BRIAN HALSTEAD: So the educational records of the kid?

HUGHES: Yeah.

BRIAN HALSTEAD: The kid can get a copy of that from us. Absolutely. It's, it's not just for others to look at-- the, the child or the family. And the reality is, five years from now, the kid has moved on and everything and would like to have the transcript.

HUGHES: Sure. They need it--

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BRIAN HALSTEAD: We can produce it.

HUGHES: --they signed up to go to college and now they--

BRIAN HALSTEAD: We can produce it out of the system for them in that regard. So it's-- again, it's centralizing that data instead of spreading it 245 school districts--

HUGHES: And I--

BRIAN HALSTEAD: --18 special purpose schools who are [INAUDIBLE]--

HUGHES: And I think that was part of the problem--

BRIAN HALSTEAD: Right.

HUGHES: --that they're having. It's, like, you had a case-- and their caseworkers change-- but you have a caseworker and they had transcripts from here, but then you switched caseworkers or you moved somewhere and-- that paperwork got lost in the shuffle. So this way it's all consolidated. That's really, really great. Thank you.

BRIAN HALSTEAD: Exactly.

MURMAN: Any other questions for Dr. Halstead? Yes, Senator Lonowski.

LONOWSKI: Thank you, Chair. So I'm, I'm a little concerned. There's no fiscal note, but there's going to be some extra work on someone's part. So-- I don't know how much, but we're not looking at an unfunded mandate is my concern, are we?

BRIAN HALSTEAD: No. Actually, the fiscal note, if you look at that, the-- we completed one for Legislative Fiscal, and it's going to be behind theirs in that regard. It will cost money. It's just under \$300,000, but it's coming out of lottery funds. It's a--

LONOWSKI: My bad. OK.

BRIAN HALSTEAD: --grant fund program that already exists in the department. I will tell you, however, for us to employ the registrars from that, the way the Legislature budgets, you're going to have to give us the authority to use those dollars to employ people at the department. Because if you give us-- you say we have X amount of dollars to use, you then subsequently say, but of that money, only

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this amount can you use for salaries. And-- so this bill, if it advances-- we'll need salary authority at the department out of those funds to pay for the registrars and the staff. So that, that will be a, quote, A bill, but it doesn't cost the state general funds to do it.

LONOWSKI: OK.

BRIAN HALSTEAD: It's a cash fund as the, the budget of the state is set up and everything. So, yeah, it's going to cost some money. It's going to take work by all of us in all three of these agencies. And it's part of the MOU that we just all signed about how we're working together and continually meeting to make sure this works for the kids.

LONOWSKI: Thank you.

BRIAN HALSTEAD: You're welcome.

MURMAN: Any other questions for Dr. Halstead? If not, thank you for testimony.

BRIAN HALSTEAD: Thank you.

MURMAN: Other proponents for LB296?

SCOTT THOMAS: Good afternoon, senators. My name's Scott Thomas, S-c-o-t-t T-h-o-m-a-s. I'm the Director of Village in Progress and Nebraska Director for U.S. Institute of Diplomacy and Human Rights. I believe it's important to consolidate the records to a centralized location for posterity's sake. And so I would testify in favor of the bill under Article 26 of the 1948 UDHR, which entitles children to proper education, and Article 28, which entitles the taxpayers to the most efficient form of government available to them, so. Any questions for the senators? Otherwise, I appreciate what you said, Senator Lonowski. That was sharp. Good catch.

MURMAN: Thank you for your testimony. Any questions? If not, appreciate your testimony.

SCOTT THOMAS: Thank you, gentlemen. Y'all have a good day.

MURMAN: Other proponents for LB296? Any opponents for LB296? Neutral testifiers for LB296? And Senator Arch, you're welcome to come up and

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close. And electronically, we had 11 proponents, 0 opponents, and 1 neutral.

ARCH: Thank you, Chairman and, and committee members. Thi-- this problem has been identified over the years, and there have been attempts to try to address this without the technology. So for instance, there was an individual embedded in OPS that-- their job was to, was to track. OPS has, obviously, a large number of kids that could enter the foster care program. So it was felt as though having somebody there-- and they would, they would become aware that somebody was being moved out to central Nebraska. There was a foster home that would accept them. They would then-- they would then contact that school directly and let them know that, hey, this chi-- and these, these kids sometimes are, are, are taken into the foster home and the next day they show up in school. And, and so, you know, having that immediately available-- really, technology has now enabled that versus an individual with faxing and all the rest that, that, that used to happen. So I, I think that this is an example of three-- our three branches working together. And by the way, I'll just let you know that there's probably going to be more discussion this session about three, three branches working together. And so I think it's just been a, a great example. This-- honestly, this, this situation worked because all-- everybody was focused on how to help the kids and not, like, my, my problems and my turf and all of that. It really was focused on how to help the kids. When we do that, we get a-- we get a lot done. So thank you. And I'd be happy to answer any questions. I certainly would encourage you to move this bill.

MURMAN: Thank you. Any questions for Senator Arch? Senator Lonowski.

LONOWSKI: I just have a comment. I'm surprised that we're in 2025 and we haven't had the technology or we haven't somehow put this together before this.

ARCH: Yeah. Well, and-- like I say, if you, if you read that full Bellwether report, you, you'll-- you will see that, that they said-- as a matter of fact, I'll, I'll quote it here for you because it was kind of eye-opening to me. At the-- at their end of the executive summary, it says, if enacted comprehensively, these reforms will make Nebraska a national model for education data sharing that will positively impact the educational experiences and outcomes of youth under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court, providing with-- them

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with a more cohesive educational experience. So it isn't just Nebraska.

LONOWSKI: Yeah. Thank you for bringing this bill.

MURMAN: Any other questions? If not, thank you very much.

ARCH: Thank you.

MURMAN: And that will end the hearing for LB296 and the hearings for the day.

HUGHES: Doesn't Danielle have a bill?

MURMAN: Oh, sorry. No, we, we have more hearings today. Sorry about that.

HUGHES: I was like, wait.

CONRAD: Just move it by acclamation.

MURMAN: Don't everybody leave. So we will open on LB335. And welcome, Senator Conrad.

CONRAD: Thank you, Chair Murman. Thank you, members of the committee. My name's Danielle Conrad. It's D-a-n-i-e-l-l-e; Conrad, C-o-n-r-a-d. I proudly represent north Lincoln's 46th Legislative District in the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature. I am pleased to present and introduce LB335 today. LB335 amends the existing In the Line of Duty Education Act that was enacted initially in 2009 by a bill that I introduced during my previous period of service. And what that legislation did was establish for the first time under Nebraska law that we would provide an educational benefit, a waiver of tuition and fees to the children of first responders who lost their lives in the line of duty. We-- at that point, back in 2009, there were 44 other states that had similar state-level programs on the books. And there are related but different federal programs that exist to pay tribute to our brave first responders who give the ultimate sacrifice in protecting our communities, lives, and property. And then also recognize that when they make that sacrifice, their household takes quite a hit in terms of their overall income and can push educational attainment farther and farther out of reach for those kids. So this bo-- this law has been on the books for Nebraska public community colleges, state

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colleges, and the university for many years. During the interim period, a Nebraskan approached my office since I had carried the original legislation and asked if I would be amenable to doing a slight adjustment or expansion on the program. The program, as initially established, applies to children and adopted children of the first responder. This would be a slight expansion to stepchildren of the first responder as well, recognizing that families come in all different kinds of shapes and sizes, and the same policy goals remain for, for blended families. So this would be a small change that does not trigger a fiscal note but would be meaningful for more families. And I'm happy to answer any questions. And I know that there's a couple of folks here today to share some of their perspectives as well. Thank you.

MURMAN: Thank you. Any questions for Senator Conrad at this time? If not, thanks for--

CONRAD: OK. Thanks.

MURMAN: --open. And-- proponents for LB335?

GARY BRUNS: Good afternoon, Chair Murman and members of the Education Committee. My name is Gary Bruns. That is G-a-r-y B-r-u-n-s. I'm here today as the President of the Nebraska Professional Firefighters Association, advocating for 1,400 paid municipal firefighters, EMTs, paramedics across the state. We would like to thank Senator Conrad for introducing LB355. In recognition of the profound sacrifices made by fallen heroes in the line of duty, it's imperative that tuition waiver programs extended their support to include stepchildren. When a parent tragically loses their life while serving their community, the financial and emotional burdens of the surviving family members are immense. Stepchildren are integral parts of our families, experiencing the same loss and deserving the same opportunities for educational advancement. Denying stepchildren access to these vital benefits creates an inequitable system that can significantly hinder their educational pursuits. By including stepchildren as eligible dependents, we acknowledge the complexities-- complexities of modern families and ensure that all children impacted by the ultimate sacrifice of a parent receive the support they need to succeed. This inclusion demonstrates a commitment to honoring the memory of fallen heroes and providing a pathway to a brighter future for all children

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affected by their loss. I would like to thank the committee for their time and consideration, and would be happy to answer any questions.

MURMAN: Thank you. Any questions for Mr. Bruns? If not, thanks for your testimony.

GARY BRUNS: Thanks.

MURMAN: Other proponents for LB335?

MICHEAL DWYER: Good afternoon, Chairman Murman and members of the Education Committee. My name is Micheal Dwyer, M-i-c-h-e-a-l D-w-y-e-r. And I appreciate the opportunity to testify on LB335. I'm a member of the Nebraska Serious Injury and Line of Duty Death Response team and a 41-year active volunteer firefighter and EMT. Thank you, Senator Conrad, very much for bringing this bill that essentially-- I think she clarified that as a little tiny tweak to clarify that all of the children of a line of duty death, firefighter or first responder will be qualified. The situation is that mom and dad, two of them have kids, each from a previous marriage. Father dies in the line of duty. Two of the kids are eligible and two of the kids are not. Sometimes children aren't-- children-- and I know this from my own experience-- aren't adopted during that process. And so you have the difficulty of this firefighter-- and we'll assume for a minute-- just-- because that's the hat I wear-- that it's a firefighter-- going through an incredibly traumatic event and having to navigate everything else that comes with that. And then at some point, the kids are growing up, have the opportunity to go to college, and then you have two over here that are covered and are going to get virtually all of their college paid for. And somehow you have to explain to the other two that, sorry, you're just not regular kids, even though they've been part of a family for many, many, many years. There was a situation that I'm describing-- and the family-- for obvious reasons, I can't go into a whole lot of detail-- but this isn't just hypothetical. This is happening. It isn't-- certainly doesn't-- is common, but it's, it's, it's a tiny little clarification that would certainly save a significant amount of grief for the family. I did reach out to the PSOB Office-- I hope I have that term right-- as part of the Department of Justice nationally, and this matches their-- and I want to say this carefully-- this matches the federal statute, the federal guidelines for a line of duty death. But I didn't get confirmation of that before I came down for the hearing. [INAUDIBLE] be a little bit

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[INAUDIBLE]. But it's my understanding that, that this would match the federal guidelines. Thank you for listening. I appreciate your attention to this. And I would be happy to take any questions.

MURMAN: Thank you. Any questions for Mr. Dwyer? If not, appreciate your testimony. Other proponents for LB335? Any opponents for LB335? Neutral testifiers for LB335? If not, Senator Conrad, you're welcome-- she waives clothing-- closing. And electronically, we had 4 proponents, 0 opponents, 0 neutral testifiers. And with that, we will close the hearing on LB335 and now close the hearing for the day.