



Race to the Top

Technical Review Form - Tier 1

Nebraska Application #4200NE-1



A. State Success Factors

	Available	Tier 1
(A)(1) Articulating State's education reform agenda and LEA's participation in it	65	37
(i) Articulating comprehensive, coherent reform agenda	5	3
(ii) Securing LEA commitment	45	25
(iii) Translating LEA participation into statewide impact	15	9
<p>(A)(1) Reviewer Comments: The agenda is both comprehensive and coherent; however, in many places it lacks specificity, such as turning around the lowest achieving schools. The goals are clear and cover all four ARRA areas, but the path is a little less clear. The clearest examples of the lack of specificity are in regard to actually moving the standards and evaluation work to the school level and turning around the lowest achieving schools, where all four potential models are listed as possibilities with no suggestion as to which models will be used, or why. In addition, there is essentially no support for charter schools. The state has impressively succeeded in gaining the commitment of a significant majority of school districts (86%), representing almost all students (95%) (including 93% of students in poverty). While 74-85% districts are committed to implementing the core programs, all are in 92%+ range except using evaluation to inform compensation and promotion, which is at 88%. 100% of superintendents, 71% of school board presidents and 64% of unions have signed on. This indicates that there is very broad participation, but that the elements of the program impacting most directly on teachers will be much more difficult to implement. It is noteworthy that all districts are using the standard terms and conditions. The completed summary table shows a likelihood of broad impact, in terms of numbers and percentages of participating LEAs, schools, K-12 students and students in poverty; though it is noteworthy and perhaps problematic that the impact (or implementation) may be somewhat limited, given that only 71% of school board presidents and 64% of the unions signed on. There are no tables or graphs that show the state's goals, overall and by subgroup. In addition, there is no description of what the goals would look like were the state not to receive an award under the program -- an important point which should be addressed.</p>		
(A)(2) Building strong statewide capacity to implement, scale up, and sustain proposed plans	30	13
(i) Ensuring the capacity to implement	20	8
(ii) Using broad stakeholder support	10	5
<p>(A)(2) Reviewer Comments: There is no evidence or real plan described for how the state will build the capacity to implement, scale up and sustain the plan. The leadership is described, but their roles are at a very high level, there's no explanation or real detail around implementation and support for the LEAs. While there is a great deal of detail in the program budgets, there is no meaningful narrative around how the state will use the funds (with the exception of the STEM and Early Learning initiatives, for which there is much more detail) or how it connects to the state's plan. Most groups are scheduled to meet only two times per year; particularly in the early years, this will not likely provide sufficient support to participating LEAs.</p>		

There is not enough detail in any narrative to understand how the work will take place (for example, how the work around turnaround of lowest achieving schools) to see if there is a meaningful connection to the proposed project budget. Although the narrative describes how the proposed funding is aligned with current efforts around the creation of standards and assessments, it does not otherwise reflect coordination, reallocation or repurposing of education funds from other federal, state and local sources. The only explanation about how the state will work toward these goals without the grant is a single statement that they will maintain the goals but the time-line will be longer, poorest performing schools won't get enough support, gaps will remain and some will drop out. This lacks sufficient detail and determination. It is noteworthy that most of the letters of support all follow a form, presumably provided by the State Department of Education, and are both broad-based and non-specific. They do not communicate real dedication to the agenda and initiatives making up the state's application. Several of the letters (including those from legislators, school boards, supervisors, teachers, universities, civil rights organizations, and education interest groups) do not include even the broad-based support in the form letter. With the exception of the State University, none of the letters describes how they will support the work. And all of the letters that refer to the turn-around of low performing schools mention their support for providing a support system, Professional development, expertise, resources and incentives - this is not reflective of a commitment to any of the four turnaround models.

(A)(3) Demonstrating significant progress in raising achievement and closing gaps	30	16
(i) Making progress in each reform area	5	4
(ii) Improving student outcomes	25	12
(A)(3) Reviewer Comments: There is strong evidence that Nebraska has made a commitment to and progress in each of the reform areas - particularly standards and assessment and data systems. Efforts within "great teachers and great leaders" are significant, but only for teachers, not leaders. And turnaround of low achieving schools has been a priority, but without as much progress and rigor as is evident in standards, assessment and data. Like in many states, data indicates improvements in student achievement as measured by state assessment, but a lack of progress (and slipping, relative to other states) on NAEP. The same is true for reducing the achievement gaps -- and, in some cases, worse results have been seen in gap differentials over the 2003 - 2008 period. High school graduation rates have improved, but there remains a significant gap between the rate for whites and other subgroups. There is only slight explanation of the connections between the data and the actions that have contributed to changes in student achievement, decreasing achievement gaps and increasing high school graduation rates. While there is a little explanation of a connection between the efforts to increase high school graduation rates and to reduce the achievement gap, it is not very complete; and there is no explanation generally of the state's work toward increasing student achievement as reflected on the state assessments.		
Total	125	66

B. Standards and Assessments

	Available	Tier 1
(B)(1) Developing and adopting common standards	40	40
(i) Participating in consortium developing high-quality standards	20	20
(ii) Adopting standards	20	20
(B)(1) Reviewer Comments:		

<p>In 1997 legislation required the revision of state standards; some standards appear, at least in part, to be internationally benchmarked. Nebraska is participating in CCSSO Common Core Initiative, with 51 states. Nebraska will adopt the standards in Spring 2010, or whenever final. Legal process for adoption, as well as logistics for the plan of implementation (including the virtual STEM school for additional access to the mathematics and science content) is explained.</p>		
(B)(2) Developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments	10	10
<p>(B)(2) Reviewer Comments: Nebraska is planning to propose being a lead in the consortium of 26 states in MOSAIC assessment, a second consortium to build an adaptive on-line summative assessment system, and a consortium of 36 states building an early warning and interim benchmark assessment system. The MOU describes the state's intent to apply for the RTT Assessment Program.</p>		
(B)(3) Supporting the transition to enhanced standards and high-quality assessments	20	11
<p>(B)(3) Reviewer Comments: Nebraska has a plan for transition to and implementation of Common Core standards, reaching from the state house to teachers in the classroom, through the use of in-person and on-line professional development. However, there is either a lack of recognition of the extent of the effort it will take to enable this sea change to take effect at the classroom level, or a lack of specificity about the elements of the plan and how it will work at the school level. It appears that the plan allows for one day of training per teacher; this is not likely realistic. Collaboration with universities is described, however, changing content in university teacher and leader preparation programs (leader preparation programs are not mentioned) is more difficult than the slight description of the process provided. There is no discussion of aligning high school exit criteria and college entrance requirements with new standards. The plan for implementing the new assessments is more robust.</p>		
Total	70	61

C. Data Systems to Support Instruction

	Available	Tier 1
(C)(1) Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system	24	8
<p>(C)(1) Reviewer Comments: Nebraska says it has four of 12 elements of American COMPETES Act - but it's not clear, when reading the chart, which elements it is counting and which it is not.</p>		
(C)(2) Accessing and using State data	5	4
<p>(C)(2) Reviewer Comments: A coordinated approach to building and improving data systems is presented. However, while the plan speaks of improving access to and use of data by some stakeholders (including teachers, LEAs and state researchers), it does not reflect any effort to reach other key stakeholders, including parents and students. There is very little detail of what roles will be played by various players and how they will use RTTT funds to carry out their responsibilities -- the state, the LEAs, the schools. Significantly more detail is required to really evaluate whether the plan is feasible. The P-16 Initiative organizational members and the Data Advisory Committee, if they remain active in this effort, should add significant strength to the possibility of really engaging a broad range of stakeholders.</p>		
(C)(3) Using data to improve instruction	18	11
<p>(C)(3) Reviewer Comments:</p>		

Hiring four geographically-based data specialists and hiring an additional person for the help desk will support schools and teachers to access the data; however, it is unlikely that four people will be sufficient support to service all the teachers in the more than 200 districts throughout the state. It is not clear how much help will they actually be able to provide the districts in supporting their meaningful use of the data - both because they are only four people and because there is no real detail included that describes their actual plan. The state does a good job in leveraging off their already existing program to support districts and educators to use the new and improved data systems. In particular; it is noteworthy how well this part of the plan is supported by and aligned with the MOSAIC and Common Core programs in which Nebraska is participating. It sounds like data is accessible to researchers and that access, with RTTT funding, will be enhanced. However, there is no evidence presented to support the assertion that the data is accessible to researchers. In addition, a more complete explanation of how access will be improved with RTTT funding should be provided.

Total	47	23
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D. Great Teachers and Leaders

	Available	Tier 1
(D)(1) Providing high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals	21	6

(D)(1) Reviewer Comments:

Information provided about these programs is very light and not very clear. It appears that alternate certification programs are all provided by institutions of higher education, though it is not clear whether the programs run through the Tribal Council also are provided by institutions of higher education. Although the programs are operating at capacity, the total number of educators served is very small. In addition, there is no discussion about how selective the alternate certifications are; it appears that some of the programs include supervised, school-based experiences, but not all; and some of them limit the amount of coursework, but not necessarily significantly. Most provide participants with a provisional certificate, from which they work toward permanent certification. The alternate certification program for administrators allows participants to act as an administrator before completing their program/credits, but all credits must be completed without a significant reduction in coursework. The programs are in use, and although the numbers are not terribly high, they are already operating at capacity. The application provides evidence that there is some process for monitoring and identifying areas of teacher shortage, though it does not provide all the required information. The Excellence in Teaching Act is used to identify shortage areas and to provide loan forgiveness to incent teachers to shortage areas and high poverty districts. There does not appear to be any system for monitoring or identifying areas of principal shortage.

(D)(2) Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance	58	29
(i) Measuring student growth	5	4
(ii) Developing evaluation systems	15	10
(iii) Conducting annual evaluations	10	7
(iv) Using evaluations to inform key decisions	28	8

(D)(2) Reviewer Comments:

Nebraska is in the midst of a transition from local accountability to a system of statewide assessment. While the program appears to be well thought-out, and is already in process, the narrative does not provide any information about how the state is collaborating with LEAs and it provides only slight information about its approach to measuring student growth. A strong plan is presented for the development of a teacher evaluation system, based on the Omaha Public Schools' assessment system (created with broad input, and based on Charlotte Danielson's work) with a new addition of student growth. There is a plan for working with a stakeholder group to make critical modification of the

system to reflect student growth as the majority determinant, with three levels of performance indicated. All participating districts will be required to use this new system, which assures statewide impact. The plan for creating a similar assessment program for the evaluation of principals has much less detail and does not appear to be particularly far along. The required results (e.g., taking student growth into account as a significant factor) are set forth, as is the thought that the state will use ISLLC standards as a starting point, but there is very little supporting evidence to indicate real pieces of a plan (like there is for teachers) to put this into effect. There is a goal that annual evaluations with timely and constructive feedback will be required, and there is a recognition that this will take a great deal of effort, collaboration and time to implement. However, there is insufficient detail in the plan to demonstrate how the state will actually begin to ensure the system is used, that teachers understand it (and accept it), that it is used properly, etc. In addition, the small amount of funding supporting this effort indicates that there is not a realistic acknowledgement of the extent of the effort (and capacity) that will be required. The discussion about the feedback that will be given to teachers through the new evaluation refers to results of observations required for both beginning and veteran educators, but it does not refer to ensuring that the feedback include data on student growth. There is one sentence stating that the evaluation system will be used to inform promotion, tenure decisions, compensation, retention and improvement/contract discontinuance for ineffective teachers. However, there is no detail as to how this part of the plan will be implemented. Given that many of the local unions did not sign on to the State's RTTT application, it is assumed that this will be difficult to obtain and implement. The targets, which indicate a jump from 25% to 75% in one year, are most definitely ambitious. Given the percentage of participating LEAs where the union did not sign the MOU, it may not be realistic to assert that 100% will be using this system as contemplated by the end of 2013-14. It should be noted that this one important sentence about using the evaluation to inform promotion, etc. refers only to teachers, and not to administrators. It is assumed that this is a typographical error since the rest of the discussion refers to both teachers and administrators, but this must be clarified.

(D)(3) Ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals	25	13
(i) Ensuring equitable distribution in high-poverty or high-minority schools	15	8
(ii) Ensuring equitable distribution in hard-to-staff subjects and specialty areas	10	5

(D)(3) Reviewer Comments:

A plan to ensure equitable distribution of teachers in high-poverty or high-minority schools, including delineation of who will participate in the process, is built around current evaluation and the future evaluation system which will provide data permitting the state to identify highly effective educators as defined in the application. It is noteworthy that the plan makes use of a pilot group of educators to define the state's permanent approach to selecting participating educators. There are incentives built into the program, however, there are no specifics regarding the financial incentives. The plan does not speak to how the state will ensure that students in high poverty and/or high minority schools are not served by ineffective teachers and principals at higher rates than other students. There is a well thought-out plan to increase number of ELL and Special Education teachers, which leverages current employees, includes district support and collaboration, makes use of State's significant distance learning capabilities, and provides significant support and incentives to participants. State's STEM proposal aims to increase the number of teachers and students receiving support and training, and is designed to increase number of STEM teachers even though science and math are not current shortage area. The proposal demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the use, distribution and need for math and science teachers.

(D)(4) Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs	14	8
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(D)(4) Reviewer Comments:

The plan to link student achievement and growth data to in-state institutions where teachers and principals were prepared is robust. Based on improved and connected data system, the plan aims to create publicly available report cards - informing the public and fostering assessment by educator preparation institutions - and is detailed and realistic. While the discussion makes clear that Nebraska

is familiar with the research on what makes for effective teacher and principal preparation program, holding an annual summit and encouraging institutions of higher education and districts to make the suggested changes (e.g., expanding field-based experiences and increasing supports for beginning educators) is not a sufficiently formed plan. There is no suggestion as to how the State will ensure that educator preparation programs make these changes; there is no time line; there are no lines of responsibility drawn. In addition, there is virtually no discussion (other than field testing of University of Nebraska-Kearney partnership with Grand Island Public Schools) of plans to expand preparation and credentialing options and programs that are successful at producing effective teachers and principals. A plan could be based on expanding/diversifying credentialing institutions or on learning from those that are most successful; however, again, the only real proposal is to have an annual summit to focus efforts on improving current programs.

(D)(5) Providing effective support to teachers and principals	20	14
<p>(D)(5) Reviewer Comments: The plan for improving/ensuring the quality of professional development delivered by ESUs focuses on several areas critical for improving student achievement and explains how the program of enhanced professional development will provide support in response to data identifying ineffective teachers and as part of a new regional mentoring and induction system. The plan is multi-layered and detailed, with good description of where the work will be supervised, what training will be provided, what professional development strategies may be used, and what supports will be provided to teachers. Although the state is proud of how effectively its educators use data, it is noteworthy that the professional development includes a focus on the effective use of data as newly available data will clearly indicate where improvement is necessary. It should be noted, however, that there is very little mention of professional development specific to principals. There is also no real discussion about a plan to measure, evaluate and continuously improve the effectiveness of the supports in order to improve student achievement.</p>		
Total	138	70

E. Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools

	Available	Tier 1
(E)(1) Intervening in the lowest-achieving schools and LEAs	10	0
<p>(E)(1) Reviewer Comments: Because it is likely that using the authority that exists to intervene in low performing schools would be "contentious" and the state feels it's necessary to ask the legislature to consider legislation giving the Commissioner additional specific authority to intervene in schools and LEAs, the state effectively does not now have sufficient authority.</p>		
(E)(2) Turning around the lowest-achieving schools	40	12
(i) Identifying the persistently lowest-achieving schools	5	3
(ii) Turning around the persistently lowest-achieving schools	35	9
<p>(E)(2) Reviewer Comments: A plan to identify the lowest achieving schools has been submitted, and relies upon successful creation of new assessment system. The political aspect of identifying schools that will undergo an intervention should be addressed, particularly in a state like Nebraska with a long, proud history of local accountability and control. The state is forward thinking in creating a higher level of accountability to identify schools that would not be so identified under US Department of Education's 60% graduation benchmark. The application does not reflect any preference among the school intervention models, and in fact does not appear committed to the four school intervention models: there is frequent reference to intervening to improve the persistently lowest-achieving schools using one of the four</p>		

reform models "and other evidence based strategies identified by the state." There has been significant thought given to the programs and councils and structures that will support those involved in the reform of the lowest-achieving schools, including the school reform leadership academy and school reform training academy. The approach Nebraska takes to the improvement of its lowest performing schools is both reflective and respectful of its decentralized approach to education, even if it does not strictly meet the criterion of RTTT. In reading this section, it appears that there is no history of stepping in to turn around low achieving schools. While early in the application there is a description of schools successfully coming out of improvement status, according to this section no low achieving schools have been turned around in the last five years. Given this history, the fact that schools are not yet (and will not yet be) identified based on state data, and the need to start from the beginning - in a state of local control - it is perhaps unrealistic to target four schools to initiate one of the reform models by the end of 2010-2011.

Total	50	12
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F. General

	Available	Tier 1
(F)(1) Making education funding a priority	10	7

(F)(1) Reviewer Comments:

The State has managed to increase education funding over this difficult period, and total revenues used to support education have increased as a percentage of total revenues by 1.16%. If construction is not included, the percentage increase would be 2.07%. While the state asserts that there are budget allowances that provide some additional funding to schools responsible for educating students in poverty, those in ELL programs and special education, there is no evidence provided about the extent to which district budgets are actually equalized or impacted. Most of the allowances and adjustments are responses to small schools, rural districts and high transportation requirements, not necessarily in response to whether an LEA is high-need. One of the reasons to create the Douglas-Sarpy County Learning Community was to share resources and direct resources to districts within the community with greater need; however, there is no discussion about whether there are policies that otherwise lead to equitable funding within LEAs, between high-poverty and other schools.

(F)(2) Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools

40 0

(F)(2) Reviewer Comments:

There is no law regarding charter schools in Nebraska. According to the application narrative, charter schools are not an applicable model in states of rural and small districts. While Nebraska makes clear that there are many opportunities for school choice for students (families) and for districts to create innovative schools (and several examples are provided with respect to curriculum, teaching, focus areas, magnets, etc.), the descriptions of the schools make clear that they do not have the kind of flexibility and increased autonomy necessary to be considered "innovative autonomous public schools" as defined in the RTTT Application.

(F)(3) Demonstrating other significant reform conditions

5 2

(F)(3) Reviewer Comments:

The only reform condition which is not otherwise addressed in the application, and which is deserving of credit, is the state's emphasis on early childhood and school readiness. While there are not other significant reform conditions such as laws, policies, or regulations further supporting education reform, Nebraska's commitment to high standards has been demonstrated, both in the assessment of its own standards and its participation in the Common Core program. The recent implementation of college and career readiness graduation requirements aligns with its commitment to high standards.

Nebraska's commitment to local assessment has led to educators who are assessment literate and will support successful implementation of the new standards and assessments.		
Total	55	9

Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM

	Available	Tier 1
Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM	15	15
<p>Competitive Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The state's STEM Academy and NVS plan has high potential for adding significant rigor to STEM education, particularly as additional courses are added, based on competitive process. It is also reflected in high (and new) standards, as well as college readiness requirements. Most of the partnership appears to be with the universities, though there is some discussion of bringing other partners within the state into collaboration on this project. Nebraska's plan will prepare more students for advanced study and career in sciences, technology, math, including under-represented groups. It will provide coursework and activities not otherwise available in many, if not most, schools. There's a particular emphasis on reaching the under-represented groups; and the provision of a coach in each school with NVS students is making individual suggestions for participation. The professional development proposals throughout the application also include and specifically reflect the need to improve teaching in STEM areas.</p>		
Total	15	15

Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform

	Available	Tier 1
Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform		Yes
<p>Absolute Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>Nebraska has put forward a comprehensive and coherent application, addressing all four of the education reform areas specified in the ARRA as well as the State Success Factors Criteria. The lack of commitment to the four school intervention models is problematic; however, the application does succeed in presenting a coherent approach to turning around the lowest achieving schools. The state has garnered substantial support from its school districts, as well as its teachers union. While the union and school board president support is not as strong as the superintendent support, it is nonetheless impressive, particularly in a state with as pronounced a history and tradition of local control. Nebraska makes clear that there is broad leadership supporting its application and its education reform work, and that a state-wide network of support will be available to support LEAs as they implement all aspects of the work.</p>		
Total		0

Grand Total	500	256
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Race to the Top

Technical Review Form - Tier 1

Nebraska Application #4200NE-2



A. State Success Factors

	Available	Tier 1
(A)(1) Articulating State's education reform agenda and LEA's participation in it	65	44
(i) Articulating comprehensive, coherent reform agenda	5	3
(ii) Securing LEA commitment	45	30
(iii) Translating LEA participation into statewide impact	15	11
<p>(A)(1) Reviewer Comments: The state's reform agenda articulates its goals consistent with the key ARRA reform areas, and the path to achieving them is reasonably clear. The plan with respect to turning around the lowest achieving schools is more a smorgasbord than a plan, and seems to focus on student support programs rather than the school level interventions. There is broad support for the state's plan among LEAs, although a significant portion of school boards and teachers' union leaders did not sign on; there is also broad support for all the elements of the scope of work (especially among the larger LEAs). [The text states that the supporting LEAs represent 93% of students in poverty but the Summary Table for (A)(1)(iii) states 95%.] Consequently the potential for statewide impact is reasonably high despite the state's inconsistent recent performance in achieving goals related to subgroup performance as acknowledged in the proposal.</p>		
(A)(2) Building strong statewide capacity to implement, scale up, and sustain proposed plans	30	19
(i) Ensuring the capacity to implement	20	12
(ii) Using broad stakeholder support	10	7
<p>(A)(2) Reviewer Comments: The state's approach to building capacity is reasonable but somewhat "boilerplate". That is, oversight by the state commissioner and board, leadership by a steering committee, and teams of state education department and LEA staff are all appropriate; the state does not, however, describe any mechanisms for interim evaluation, dissemination, replication, and discontinuation of ineffective practices. The state proposes adequate grant oversight mechanisms, and does plan to coordinate Race to the Top funding with other funding streams that are already committed to many of the initiatives already underway (e.g., common core standards, longitudinal data systems). There is a range of support from critical stakeholders who are invested in the success of the grant program. The state's plan will, however, be challenged because of the large number of school districts in the state relative to the low student population -- this structure makes high quality dissemination of the reform initiatives difficult.</p>		
(A)(3) Demonstrating significant progress in raising achievement and closing gaps	30	13
(i) Making progress in each reform area	5	3

(ii) Improving student outcomes	25	10
<p>(A)(3) Reviewer Comments: The state has made progress in each of the key reform areas, although the specific reforms implemented in the areas of human capital and school turnarounds are not as strong as those in data systems. The state's overall performance in improving student outcomes is mixed at best. It has demonstrated an ability to increase student achievement and reduce the achievement gap as measured by AYP, but not on the NAEP (with the exception of some Hispanic subgroups). In the narrative, the strategies identified to reduce the achievement gap are not very consistent with the RTTT framework -- e.g., a new approach to the human capital challenge and school turnarounds is not included. There has been improvement in the state's graduation rate by its own measure, but not by the definition in the application.</p>		
Total	125	76

B. Standards and Assessments

	Available	Tier 1
(B)(1) Developing and adopting common standards	40	40
(i) Participating in consortium developing high-quality standards	20	20
(ii) Adopting standards	20	20
<p>(B)(1) Reviewer Comments: The state meets the criteria for participation in a consortium that includes a significant number of states, and for having a high-quality plan for timely implementation of the standards.</p>		
(B)(2) Developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments	10	10
<p>(B)(2) Reviewer Comments: The state is leading the MOSAIC consortium of 26 states and is also participating in a consortium to develop an adaptive online summative assessment.</p>		
(B)(3) Supporting the transition to enhanced standards and high-quality assessments	20	12
<p>(B)(3) Reviewer Comments: The state's plan addresses the requirements of the criterion, but the budget assumptions of 3 FTE and one day of teacher training are likely to be insufficient resources for a successful transition. The plan to serve rural districts through the NVHS is good. The implementation plan is insufficiently detailed and does not reflect the challenges the state is likely to face, especially because of its large number of small districts.</p>		
Total	70	62

C. Data Systems to Support Instruction

	Available	Tier 1
(C)(1) Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system	24	6
<p>(C)(1) Reviewer Comments: The state claims credit for meeting four elements of the America COMPETES Act, but it is not clear which four are met, and only three elements could be clearly identified.</p>		

(C)(2) Accessing and using State data	5	3
<p>(C)(2) Reviewer Comments: The state's plan is reasonable in that it builds on the existing State of the Schools Report and Data Reporting System. But there is no emphasis on how the unique longitudinal nature of the data will be used, especially with respect to all of the key stakeholders. There is insufficient and unconvincing detail on how the state plans to ensure that the data will be used to support decision-makers in continuous improvement as described in the criterion. Mechanisms such as the Data Advisory Committee are relatively passive.</p>		
(C)(3) Using data to improve instruction	18	10
<p>(C)(3) Reviewer Comments: The state addresses the criteria with a reasonable, but not exceptional, level of detail. In general it does not focus on the examples of instructional improvement systems as defined in the application, but rather its emphasis is on generically making the data available for use. The concepts of an expanded help desk, additional data trainers, expansion of the Leadership for Continuous Improvement workshops, and the hiring of data stewards (although it is not clear how) are all good steps, but the total budget for these efforts of \$5 million over four years may not provide sufficient resources for the plan to be successful. Some comments in the plan are particularly vague, e.g., "NDE has a longstanding partnership with researchers", which reflects more of the spirit of the response than a specific action.</p>		
Total	47	19

D. Great Teachers and Leaders

	Available	Tier 1
(D)(1) Providing high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals	21	10
<p>(D)(1) Reviewer Comments: The state appears to have regulatory provisions in place to provide for alternative routes to certification that are independent of IHEs, and there is use of these pathways in practice. But the alternative pathways for teachers described in the proposal do not meet all the requirements of the definition of alternative routes to certification in the application, specifically with respect to selectivity (except in the Omaha program). The state does not describe a process by which principals and teachers are prepared to fill the areas of shortage as required by criterion (iii).</p>		
(D)(2) Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance	58	47
(i) Measuring student growth	5	5
(ii) Developing evaluation systems	15	13
(iii) Conducting annual evaluations	10	8
(iv) Using evaluations to inform key decisions	28	21
<p>(D)(2) Reviewer Comments: The state is committed to performance-based evaluations for teachers and principals using student achievement data, as required by criterion (i). The state adequately plans to involve teachers and principals in the design of the evaluation system. The evaluation models that provide the initial frameworks for the evaluation systems in criterion (ii), such as ISLLC, did not previously include outcomes rather than inputs, so it is not clear how compatible (and therefore successful) they will be. The state appropriately acknowledges the challenges it will face in "moving to a performance model" of evaluations but is committed to doing so, especially as evidenced by its intention to make student</p>		

achievement outcomes the largest factor in the principal and teacher evaluation systems. The system will have multiple ratings as required by the criterion and is planned to be performed annually. It is not clear against criterion (iv) how significant student outcomes will factor into decisions about ineffective principals (it does address ineffective teachers). The performance models described in (iii) and (iv) in general are reasonable. The total proposed budget of \$1.7MM for (D)(2) over four years includes a small number of FTEs that may not provide sufficient resources to develop and implement the system successfully over the state's large number of LEAs.

(D)(3) Ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals	25	9
(i) Ensuring equitable distribution in high-poverty or high-minority schools	15	4
(ii) Ensuring equitable distribution in hard-to-staff subjects and specialty areas	10	5
<p>(D)(3) Reviewer Comments: The plan is not sufficiently detailed with respect to how equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals will be achieved (e.g., what kind of incentives) in either the interim or the ultimate plan. The state claims it does not have a serious content area teaching shortage problem, but it does acknowledge a rural and small district teacher shortage. The state does not, however, propose a reasonable solution to that latter problem. The plan does not address how the effective teachers and principals, as defined in the application, are distributed or will be redistributed. The portion of the plan that addresses the statewide model for ELL and special education staffing is creative and appropriate. With the exception of the training stipends for those ELL and SPED participants, the proposed project budget does not likely provide sufficient resources to sufficiently meet the requirements of the criteria.</p>		
(D)(4) Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs	14	6
<p>(D)(4) Reviewer Comments: The state's report card concept is novel and will likely result in significantly greater public awareness of the performance of the state's credentialing programs. The state uses "educators" to cover both teachers and principals but does not propose any unique programs for each group. The state's goals of 30% of the teacher and principal preparation programs for which the public can access data on student achievement and growth is not ambitious. The state's plan is weak with respect to criterion (ii), expanding preparation and credentialing options that are successful.</p>		
(D)(5) Providing effective support to teachers and principals	20	10
<p>(D)(5) Reviewer Comments: The state's professional development plan is reasonable -- it addresses key content areas and features appropriate implementation mechanisms (e.g., Educational Service Units, the National Center for Research on Rural Education, Focus Area Steering Committees, Professional Learning Networks), as required under criterion (i). The state does not adequately address its plan for continuous improvement of those supports as required in criterion (ii).</p>		
Total	138	82

E. Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools

	Available	Tier 1
(E)(1) Intervening in the lowest-achieving schools and LEAs	10	0
<p>(E)(1) Reviewer Comments: The state does not have appropriate authority to intervene directly in persistently low-performing schools and LEAs.</p>		
(E)(2) Turning around the lowest-achieving schools	40	7

(i) Identifying the persistently lowest-achieving schools	5	2
(ii) Turning around the persistently lowest-achieving schools	35	5
(E)(2) Reviewer Comments: The state has good intentions with respect to identifying the lowest-achieving schools, but the plan is insufficiently developed. The state's plan for intervention does not demonstrate commitment to the intervention models, but rather provides relatively "soft" supporting mechanisms that do no harm, but are not likely to result in school and district turnaround success. There is a disconnect between the \$14.2 million project budget for criterion (E) -- of which the largest line item is \$6.7 million for contractual services that are listed but not prioritized or aligned with the intervention models -- and the number of persistently low-achieving schools. The state's targets are not ambitious: the project budget includes approximately \$100,000 grants for only nine schools per year in the entire state that are identified as persistently low-performing, and the performance measures table projects that only four schools per year will be subject to one of the intervention models.		
Total	50	7

F. General

	Available	Tier 1
(F)(1) Making education funding a priority	10	7
(F)(1) Reviewer Comments: The state increased the percentage of funding to education in FY09. The state funds only a small portion of education spending, and the funding formula does appear to allow for some equalization of funding in low-income LEAs and schools. But it is not clear from the proposal what effect this equalization measure has on equity in practice. There is no mention of whether the state's policies lead to equitable funding within LEAs.		
(F)(2) Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools	40	0
(F)(2) Reviewer Comments: The state does not have a charter school law. The state does have examples of school districts that have created innovative schools and programs, but they do not appear to meet the definition of innovative, autonomous public schools with respect to instructional models, staffing and budgets. Overall the state does not ensure successful conditions exist for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools.		
(F)(3) Demonstrating other significant reform conditions	5	3
(F)(3) Reviewer Comments: The state has a few programs that provide positive reform and innovation conditions. The percentage of students that participate in the Enrollment Option Program is meaningful. The specialized intra-district schools, the new Learning Community, and magnet schools represent only modest state conditions supporting reform and innovation, and it is not clear whether they have resulted in material reforms that are manifested in improved student outcomes.		
Total	55	10

Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM

	Available	Tier 1
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Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM	15	15
Competitive Reviewer Comments: The state's plan for a virtual STEM academy is one of the highlights of its proposal. It is likely to increase the rigor of STEM education in the state, engages community partners in the education of many students that would not otherwise benefit from their engagement, and is likely to prepare more students for advanced study and careers in STEM. The plan could be more specific about how it will address the needs of underrepresented groups in STEM. The budget and implementation plan are detailed and well-developed.		
Total	15	15

Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform

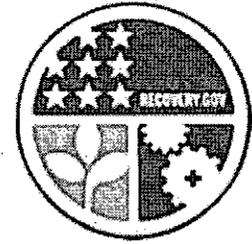
	Available	Tier 1
Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform		Yes
Absolute Reviewer Comments: The state's proposal, while weak on certain criteria (e.g., some elements of the human capital plan, school turnarounds, and reform conditions), sufficiently addresses the key education reform parameters, and sufficiently represents a coherent strategy to effect improved student achievement and outcomes. The challenges for this state to successfully implement and achieve the goals in its plans are significant, and the danger of the plan is that it simply supplements NDE's resources without having a material positive impact on student achievement. Nevertheless, the state's proposal sufficiently meets the priority.		
Total		0
Grand Total	500	271



Race to the Top

Technical Review Form - Tier 1

Nebraska Application #4200NE-3



A. State Success Factors

	Available	Tier 1
(A)(1) Articulating State's education reform agenda and LEA's participation in it	65	40
(i) Articulating comprehensive, coherent reform agenda	5	4
(ii) Securing LEA commitment	45	27
(iii) Translating LEA participation into statewide impact	15	9
<p>(A)(1) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>(i) The plan addresses all elements, but is less credible given the current status, and capacity of the state. For example, plan relies on a new statewide assessment system, progress on most key data elements, influencing the history of local control of some teacher policies presented in several sections of the application, new legislation in 2010 on state intervention in local schools, and a new virtual academy. State success is extremely uncertain, risky, and speculative. Given the current state policy base, there is no natural, future progression of state policy to implement the plan. (ii) More discussion needed on depth of local commitment. 100% of superintendents are participating, but only 71% of school boards and 64% of teachers. Largest district Omaha has all three signatures. 12% of LEA's participating will not use teacher evaluations to inform compensation, promotion, and retention. LEA's participating include 95% of students in poverty. (It is unclear what percent of low income students are in LEA's where teachers did not sign.) (iii) Letters of endorsement from state teacher and school board associations are vague and general on the many specific initiatives in the proposal. NEA agrees only to discuss the issues and plans proposed. Letter from administrator association is very short and does not commit to anything specific.</p>		
(A)(2) Building strong statewide capacity to implement, scale up, and sustain proposed plans	30	13
(i) Ensuring the capacity to implement	20	8
(ii) Using broad stakeholder support	10	5
<p>(A)(2) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>(i) Details on the prior effectiveness and capacity of key units for implementation are missing-eg. (NDE and ESU). The plan proposes to transform ESUs from primarily a local service agency to a larger role in state policy implementation for numerous, unprecedented state policies. More details would strengthen the application concerning the past EUS success, and the elements and process for ESUS to become a brand new entity. Bright Futures initiative was formulated before RTT, and was not designed with specific orientation and elements of RTT in mind. Consequently, more analysis would be helpful concerning how Bright Futures will help make the overall new initiatives feasible and effective. Governors' steering committee is impressive in scope of officials involved. Budget matches the specific personnel and activities mentioned in the proposal, except for ESU regional delivery system. ESU will need to be strengthened for a new role, and needs more resources than in the budget presented here. New state and local personnel are allocated with sufficient justification including projections for years beyond 2010. ii Overall, Nebraska's existing policies and history of local control, presented in several sections of the application, indicate some proposed major changes will be challenging to implement in</p>		

so many LEAs. There is little state experience with a statewide policy for: core curriculum, assessment, college readiness, most key data elements, teacher evaluation, alternative routes for teachers not tightly linked to universities, principal preparation, charters, aggressive intervention in failing schools, or STEM. All of these policies must begin largely de novo, and the risk of accomplishing all this is high. Many stakeholders at the local level and state political leaders will need to modify their prior roles and actions, and follow through on a much stronger state role.

(A)(3) Demonstrating significant progress in raising achievement and closing gaps	30	10
(i) Making progress in each reform area	5	2
(ii) Improving student outcomes	25	8
(A)(3) Reviewer Comments:		
<p>NAEP trend analysis is provided with considerable detail. (i) Nebraska has begun a major shift in its state policies towards a statewide curriculum, assessment, and data. New legislation has passed with many provisions, but it will not be fully implemented for several years. ii So, it is difficult to assess state progress on many key reform elements such as a new assessment, Bright Futures, and professional development. Moreover, it is difficult to attribute any prior gains in student achievement (or decline in graduation rates) to state policies that exist. The college readiness core courses are not specific enough in terms of the course content that needs to be taught. Wide ranges of math content can be taught in 3 years of math. Proposal needs to include many more elements to attain college readiness including curriculum alignment with college placement exams, first year college courses, counseling, etc.</p>		
Total	125	63

B. Standards and Assessments

	Available	Tier 1
(B)(1) Developing and adopting common standards	40	30
(i) Participating in consortium developing high-quality standards	20	15
(ii) Adopting standards	20	15
(B)(1) Reviewer Comments:		
<p>(i) Nebraska participates in a 48 state consortium for common standards. Plan is specific and complete concerning Common Core adoption and implementation. Because of rural setting, relies appropriately on virtual delivery system that is an interesting vision, but does not currently exist. Consequently, some crucial components of common core implementation system are speculative. ii Procedure for curriculum adoption by 2010 is specific. State began a process for new statewide curriculum in 2008 that included external reviewers. This provides support for judgement that they can meet 2010 timeline in application for formal state adoption. However, the application provides very little prior experience to judge probability of local acceptance of state curriculum specification and leadership.</p>		
(B)(2) Developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments	10	8
(B)(2) Reviewer Comments:		
<p>Nebraska is part of a large (36 state) and promising consortium to build new state assessments, but has no experience in administering a statewide assessment. The existing local assessment system gives local educators experience in working with assessments, but no details on whether this experience has led to good or bad teaching practice. Section mentions college readiness but this is not linked to college retention or completion anywhere in the proposal. New law on college readiness does not get any deeper than specifying number of years of math, science, etc., and other course titles.</p>		

Process for K-12 state adoption of common core is sufficient, and 2008 law demonstrates commitment to a new assessment system. Much more detail needed on the content, approach, and validity of the online reading test (NeSA-R) and the math test that is "ready for operational use." Application needs to provide more detail on how these new state assessments relate to the concepts and details of prior local assessments. For example, it is unclear what testing concepts and approaches included in NeSA-R, and how it relates to planned state assessment. This is needed because there is no other specific evidence of state assessment implementation in the history of the state. Proposal states Nebraska teachers have become "assessment literate". This term is unclear and needs to be developed for its implications on the design and teacher implementation of a new planned assessment. Perhaps Nebraska is thinking about curriculum-embedded performance based tasks scored by teachers throughout the year. But plan lacks specifics on how assessment will guide instruction. The terms formative and summative are not linked in enough depth to the MOSAIC concepts and approach. Proposal says "all districts in state will be required to participate in assessments". No clarity provided on the law that requires this local action. As the application demonstrates concerning local teacher assessment literacy, local districts have controlled key components of assessment in the past. Since Nebraska has joined two state consortiums (MOSAIC and Smarter), but the proposal needs more clarity and detail on how these two consortium systems will fit together.

(B)(3) Supporting the transition to enhanced standards and high-quality assessments	20	10
<p>(B)(3) Reviewer Comments: There is no data provided on past effectiveness of ESUs for implementing the transition to standards. More information is needed because the ESUs have never carried out a strong state requirement for specified assessment. The virtual high school may not be able to reach all 253 districts with in depth Professional Development. More specifics need to be provided for phrases "quality professional development" and "high quality classroom instruction". Application needs to specify the transition in local operational and classroom teaching practices that will result from the phrases in italics. Budget does not contain sufficient resources for widespread in depth teacher training.</p>		
Total	70	48

C. Data Systems to Support Instruction

	Available	Tier 1
(C)(1) Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system	24	6
<p>(C)(1) Reviewer Comments: State complies with 1,2, and 5 of America Competes Act. All other data elements are missing now, and insufficient detail on what will be added in terms of data categories.</p>		
(C)(2) Accessing and using State data	5	2
<p>(C)(2) Reviewer Comments: Plans for implementing a future data system are presented, but no prior experience with this kind of implementation. Insufficient depth is provided for a step by step process to accomplish this task from a zero base. The plan of action is incomplete and needs more specificity.</p>		
(C)(3) Using data to improve instruction	18	13
<p>(C)(3) Reviewer Comments: No comprehensive and linked theory of action presented. MOSAIC interstate project will be very helpful but MOSAIC MOU has considerable state discretion for how much a state will decide to utilize or specifically implement the various components of MOSAIC. The state plan of action is specific and related to elements of instruction. Improving instruction has been based on local data in the past, so a strong state role will be a huge change. State will pay for a "data steward" in each LEA, but no plans</p>		

for budget sustainability exists after RTT ends. Workforce data integration is a good idea. It is not clear whether assessment will use grade by grade benchmarks at the local level. Timeline is carefully done with sensible phase in.

Total	47	21
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D. Great Teachers and Leaders

	Available	Tier 1
(D)(1) Providing high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals	21	6
<p>(D)(1) Reviewer Comments: The plan needs teacher alternative paths that do not go through IHE in order to expand alternatives. There are some alternate routes that are nontraditional, but need to provide specifics on how they are nontraditional. Presentation is unclear on how different they really are. Nontraditional teacher routes are elaborated in appendix, but need data on evaluating effectiveness of each approach (e.g. UNU-TAP). The alternative routes are just described. Administrator route provides traditional provisional certification, but that is not an alternative route. Clarification needed on how this qualifies as an alternative route. State has an analysis of teacher shortages, but it is not very extensive</p>		
(D)(2) Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance	58	24
(i) Measuring student growth	5	4
(ii) Developing evaluation systems	15	8
(iii) Conducting annual evaluations	10	4
(iv) Using evaluations to inform key decisions	28	8
<p>(D)(2) Reviewer Comments: i There is no experience with a statewide pupil growth system, so proposal is not convincing that time lines for proposed growth level can be met. State board will set teacher growth targets under a new system that is still being developed. Consequently, there are no performance measures presented to provide back up to claims made in the application. ii Evaluation system at state level must be built on extending the Danielson system but linkages to pupil achievement from adapting Danielson concepts not specified adequately. The plan does not have an evaluation system that meets all criteria in RTT notice. The plan has no data system to link teachers or principals to student outcomes, so state cannot complete two performance measures tables. iii The plan is based on a very traditional system of where educators submit goals and then a professional growth plan is developed. But there is no clear plan for feed back on pupil growth. iv Key decisions are not adequately defined A model will be used to "inform" decisions like tenure, with no specification beyond the word inform. "Student learning" needs to be defined and specified concerning how it will be implemented. Teacher plan does have many elements like PD, tenure, and 3 level rating system that can be useful.</p>		
(D)(3) Ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals	25	9
(i) Ensuring equitable distribution in high-poverty or high-minority schools	15	4
(ii) Ensuring equitable distribution in hard-to-staff subjects and specialty areas	10	5
<p>(D)(3) Reviewer Comments: i Financial incentives for teachers to locate in high poverty or hard to staff schools are not specified. The plan is unclear where the teacher shortages are now in the state. There is not enough in the plan for how to equitably distribute principals. There is not enough focus on poverty and minority schools in terms of staffing shortages ii ii There is insufficient detail concerning ELL certification program. STEM</p>		

is included in an adequate manner. There is no performance progress projected until the late date of 2013-14.

(D)(4) Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs	14	6
<p>(D)(4) Reviewer Comments: The state has an adequate plan to provide data links by 2013-14, but it is uncertain because the state data system is just beginning to develop this plan. There is no past history of data with higher education linkages that can evaluate effectiveness of college prep programs related to secondary school performance and growth. The plan is not convincing that reaching its goals can be accomplished. There are no performance measure increases until 2013-14. Principal improvement is addressed through ISLIC, but this consortium design has limited linkage to pupil achievement and covers many broad categories. ISLIC model needs to be expanded in proposal to describe how it meets RTT criteria for pupil progress measures.</p>		
(D)(5) Providing effective support to teachers and principals	20	11
<p>(D)(5) Reviewer Comments: ESU is key delivery mechanism but there are no prior measures presented of their quality and effectiveness to meet task. The plan needs more details on how ESU will be transformed to implement new state policies given its past orientation to local control. However, there are some useful specific plans to improve ESU. More focus in the plan on high need students would improve the application. This plan has a number of good ideas concerning professional development of teachers, but less depth for principals.</p>		
Total	138	56

E. Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools

	Available	Tier 1
(E)(1) Intervening in the lowest-achieving schools and LEAs	10	0
<p>(E)(1) Reviewer Comments: The state does not have sufficient legal authority for intervention in either schools or districts.</p>		
(E)(2) Turning around the lowest-achieving schools	40	10
(i) Identifying the persistently lowest-achieving schools	5	2
(ii) Turning around the persistently lowest-achieving schools	35	8
<p>(E)(2) Reviewer Comments: (i) The state uses local assessment data for this task now, but plans to use statewide standards and assessment in future. The state cannot identify low performing schools now, and the plan presented in the application on identification would be improved if more details were provided. (ii) Nebraska has no charter law or a tradition of state takeover and school closure. Consequently, state policy options are very limited. Many parts of plan are vague with no details e.g. "this will require the development of an effective framework," "culture of continuous improvement". Most of their plan relies on adapting the transformation model, and not convincing that this model alone can turn around all schools in all future local contexts. For example, local contexts may inhibit change and require more drastic state interventions. There are very few schools that are included in Performance Measures.</p>		
Total	50	10

F. General

	Available	Tier 1
(F)(1) Making education funding a priority	10	6
<p>(F)(1) Reviewer Comments: State revenue and budget allocations meet RTT criteria. It is difficult to calculate equalization of funding from details in appendix. Plan merely outlines the state formulas for funding LEA's. Plan would benefit from data comparing high versus low spending school districts, and should include finance status for demographic factors like low income and minority students. The basic measures of LEA spending disparities need to be included, and what causes any disparities.</p>		
(F)(2) Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools	40	2
<p>(F)(2) Reviewer Comments: Nebraska has no charter school law. The Douglas Sarpy Option has potential but focuses on students (not schools). There is insufficient evidence that the state has used strategies other than transformation, and more data would help here to provide assurance that any other turnaround strategy can be implemented.</p>		
(F)(3) Demonstrating other significant reform conditions	5	2
<p>(F)(3) Reviewer Comments: The plan repeats earlier plans and projects, and is not specific on what will be the content of the courses required for college. There are not enough other initiatives presented in this section of the application.</p>		
Total	55	10

Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM

	Available	Tier 1
Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM	15	15
<p>Competitive Reviewer Comments: New Virtual School Academy is key element and plan is expansive, explicit, and promising. Virtual approach makes sense in rural context, and detailed design for this presented in appendix. STEM is a thread in many parts of the proposal. Potentially useful collaborations with universities are provided in other sections. But the overwhelming reliance is on a yet to be developed state virtual academy proposal that includes rigorous courses of study, community partners, and preparation for advanced STEM careers. It is encouraging that the state plans to sustain the virtual academy after RTT ends.</p>		
Total	15	15

Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform

	Available	Tier 1
Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform		Yes
<p>Absolute Reviewer Comments: Overall, proposal does meet absolute priority. There is a combination of gaps in some policies proposed, and plan is high risk because of the prior limited state role presented in several parts of the application. The content, details, plans, and implementation strategies need more development.</p>		

Comments in A1 and A2 summarize some of this and end up with doubts about local commitment to implement unknown state curriculum, assessment, data systems, teacher policies, and school turnaround strategies. In sum, there is little existing state policy base to build up a large new super-structure in a few years. State and regional administrative capacity needs to be transformed but new EUS structure and operations not described sufficiently. The state data system is starting to be built, but it has not been used much to influence local change. Turnaround strategies are very limited and there is no charter school law. The plan is comprehensive but there are many unprecedented systems to be constructed to judge whether it is coherent.

Total		0
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Grand Total	500	223
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Race to the Top

Technical Review Form - Tier 1

Nebraska Application #4200NE4



A. State Success Factors

	Available	Tier 1
(A)(1) Articulating State's education reform agenda and LEA's participation in it	65	51
(i) Articulating comprehensive, coherent reform agenda	5	5
(ii) Securing LEA commitment	45	35
(iii) Translating LEA participation into statewide impact	15	11
<p>(A)(1) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>Nebraska presents a "comprehensive and coherent reform agenda, and clearly articulates its goals for implementing reforms in the four education areas described in the ARRA and improving student outcomes statewide" [(A)(1)(i)]. The state clearly has a "big picture" understanding and strategy for its RTTT initiative. Entitled "Bright Future for Nebraska Students Initiative," the proposal shines a bright light on the state's strengths and weaknesses. The plan takes aim at four goals: "higher levels of achievement for Nebraska public schools students; dramatic reduction of learning gaps; increased high school graduation rates; and increased college going rates." The featured mechanisms to achieve these goals are the four reform areas required by RTTT, and each is introduced in this section of the proposal as a linked piece of a larger reform plan. Nebraska rightly flags that RTTT represents a sea change in how education is organized and directed in the state. "Historically, Nebraska has relied on its individual districts to prepare public schools students for their future." This definite decentralization of authority to the LEA level makes the adoption of state-wide reform extra challenging. The opportunity, however, is that the state has made good education investments at the LEA level, providing a solid foundation for the RTTT process. For example, in 2002, a standards-based, teacher-developed assessment and reporting system was developed across the state. Nebraska's systemic thinking is underscored by three core principles that the proposal features as guiding the transformation of the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) and 253 school districts. "First, all work will be anchored in research and evidence-based practice. Second, all work will be coherent, P-16, and focused on student learning. Third, all work will be sustainable... to support continuous improvement beyond the grant period." Impressive in these principles is Nebraska's commitment to sound, proven knowledge about education; a "stem to stern," start to finish attention to children's education path; and the recognition that the uncommon RTTT investment must be used to spark permanent change. RTTT's aim to launch state-wide reform would be well armed in Nebraska: the state has secured strong LEA commitment for the RTTT initiative [(A)(1)(ii)(iii)]. Signed MOUs were obtained from 86 percent of all districts, representing 95 percent of all students, and 93 percent of students in poverty. Interestingly, while 71 percent of school board presidents did sign the MOU, this left nearly one-third in essence not supportive of RTTT. No explanation is provided for this potential challenge, but it likely is rooted in Nebraska's historic decentralization of education authority. Teacher union participation was at a lower rate (64 percent), but represents a strong majority of locals, which later may prove valuable for influencing those union presidents who did not sign the agreement.</p>		
(A)(2) Building strong statewide capacity to implement, scale up, and sustain proposed plans	30	12
(i) Ensuring the capacity to implement	20	10

(ii) Using broad stakeholder support	10	2
<p>(A)(2) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>Nebraska's treatment of the criteria for "building strong statewide capacity to implement, scale up and sustain proposed plans" [(A)(2)(i)(ii)] starts well but closes in a weak manner. The state does an excellent job of designating responsibilities and leadership teams for the RTTT initiative. Notable are the proposed joint teams from the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) and LEAs that will be formed to lead work in priority areas. The inclusion of LEA leaders in these teams ensures that the work goes deeper than the state level. The proposal also spells out clearly four main functions for the teams, ranging from reviewing current practice, to oversight, to public reporting, to evaluating success. [(A)(2)(i)]. A major issue not addressed regarding the leadership teams is how their work will be connected across teams. Since each team will be responsible for a major priority, each of which is to be integrated with the other major priorities, highly distinct teams could prove detrimental to Nebraska's hope for coherent reform. From the proposal it appears that the Bright Future for Nebraska Students Initiative Steering Committee is intended to be the oversight body that connects the work of the varied committees. Unfortunately, the proposal gives short thrift to the Steering Committee, not explaining such essentials as how the group will work, how often it will meet, the authority it will have, and the communications it will provide. Nebraska handles well plans for resource acquisition and deployment. Budget management and accountability is clearly presented in the proposal. Efforts also will be made to have RTTT funds compliment, and be bolstered by, other public funding sources. An additional strength of the budget is that each project includes clear narratives and assignments of responsibility. Nevertheless, the budget presentation falls short in three regards. First, despite the noted clarity of the separate project narratives, there is not a single overarching narrative that weaves the distinct project budgets together to show how they advance the proposal's goals and action plans. The multiple projects can be grouped to line-up with the RTTT's four major reform elements, but the resulting actions are not clearly explained. Second, the proposal does not explain how the work started with RTTT funds will be continued. As noted earlier, Nebraska wisely talks about making the work "sustainable," but no explanation is provided as to how future investments will be secured to keep deep reform moving. Third, Nebraska does not show much evidence that it will reach into other sectors for resources, namely philanthropy and business [(A)(2)(ii)].</p>		
(A)(3) Demonstrating significant progress in raising achievement and closing gaps	30	11
(i) Making progress in each reform area	5	2
(ii) Improving student outcomes	25	9
<p>(A)(3) Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>As conveyed in the proposal, Nebraska is working comprehensively to "demonstrate significant progress in raising achievement and closing gaps" in student learning [(A)(3)]. However, as the proposal honestly shows, the state's record is mixed. In terms of state-level leadership and action, Nebraska is a relative new-comer to several of the four areas essential to RTTT. As a state with notable decentralized authority, the modest role of state-level leadership is understandable. Nevertheless, it means that Nebraska struggles to achieve strong scores relative to this particular criteria [(A)(3)(i)] and others that will be discussed later in the review. To be fair, Nebraska earns high regard for its path-breaking P-16 initiative, which dates back to 1998. This initiative reportedly sparked movement toward a common core curriculum, development of a longitudinal data system, and improvements in achievement, high school graduation rates and college attendance rates. The proposal states clearly that Nebraska will use the P-16 initiative as a foundation for RTTT, ensuring that new work draws efficiently on lessons from the past. Nevertheless, Nebraska scores only at the low-end of the medium range on this criterion because it is still a "work in progress" at the state-wide level relative to RTTT's four reform areas. Standards and assessments have existed at the local level thanks to impressive local leadership, but a strong statewide system is not yet fully implemented. Similarly, a statewide data system became operational in '07-'08, but is still in a preliminary stage in terms of value and usage. Teacher and principal capacity is a forte of Nebraska's, at least in terms of</p>		

percentages of professionals with certifications, but the explanation in this section of the proposal is limited as to the support, development and training for these key roles. School turn-around is an area where Nebraska has had to give relatively minor attention, primarily because of the apparent good standing of most schools. "Since 2004," the proposal states, "nine schools and two districts have successfully transitioned out of the ESEA school improvement pipeline." Nebraska's results in changing student outcomes are mixed. A strict reading of RTTT's criteria in this area [(A)(3)(ii)] results in a low "medium score" for Nebraska. Students have made progress on the assessments required and approved under ESEA, and the AYP levels are up in all areas. In contrast, the state's results on NAEP have been flat or down for nearly all grades and sub-groups. Similarly, Nebraska saw the achievement gap narrow among sub-groups on ESEA approved tests, but the gaps did not narrow on NAEP, other than with the important exception of the gap narrowing between 8th grade Hispanic and white students in mathematics and reading from 2003-2007. Even so, the NAEP notes indicate that these changes are not statistically significant. Nebraska does score well for maintaining high school graduation rates as a signature piece for the state: from 2003-2008, the high school graduation rate rose 4.3 percent, to 89 percent overall. The state rightly flags discrepancies across sub-groups as troubling (although each group has been improving): Whites, at 93 percent, are trailed by Hispanics at 74 percent, African Americans at 69 percent and Native Americans at 67 percent. Nebraska intends to take aim at these graduation rate gaps through its RTTT initiative. Lastly, the state fails to describe in sufficient detail how results on any of the measures of achievement tie back to specific policies or practices at the state, regional, LEA or school level. The criterion for this section of the application asked that states draw connections between actions and outcome results.

Total	125	74
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B. Standards and Assessments

	Available	Tier 1
(B)(1) Developing and adopting common standards	40	35
(i) Participating in consortium developing high-quality standards	20	20
(ii) Adopting standards	20	15

(B)(1) Reviewer Comments:

"Developing and adopting common standards" [(B)(1)] is a strong area for Nebraska's RTTT proposal. This conclusion may seem to contradict the marginal rating in the preceding criterion [(A)(3)(i)], but that score speaks to what Nebraska has done to date; this section and scoring speak to what Nebraska plans to do with RTTT funding. Nebraska enacted state legislation in 2007 that required the revisions of state academic standards. This move has placed the state in a good position, despite its heavy decentralization, to transition to common core standards state-wide. As part of the RTTT proposal process, Nebraska has become one of the 48 states and three territories participating in the NGA/CCSSO Common Core Initiative. Nebraska also is wise to be drawing on the talents of such agencies as Achieve in analyzing any newly revised standards relative to nationally and internationally recognized standards, the American Diploma Benchmark Project, the ACT standards and the Common Core. Nebraska presents a solid plan for adopting standards [(A)(3)(ii)]. The state delineates the roles and responsibilities for work on developing, implementing and evaluating common core standards. RTTT evaluators and commentators will be able to use the proposal as the start of a checklist on what proposed work was accomplished and who did or did not do their job. Another plus in this section of the proposal, one that will loom large for Nebraska's STEM initiative, is the proposed Nebraska Virtual High School (NVS). This on-line academy for 7th-12th graders is envisioned as one way a large rural state--with students dispersed across many small schools--can provide curriculum and instruction that adhere to state-of-the-art standards and assessments. Not only will it provide rigorous learning opportunities for students, it is proposed as a vehicle for disseminating instructional materials and professional development to faculty in remote areas of the state. A problem in this

section, which reappears throughout the proposal, is the limited explanation of how the work to adopt core standards will directly touch schools and classrooms in a sustained way. The proposal explains well how the state's Educational Service Units (regionally located across Nebraska) will work with teams from LEAs. Similarly, the value of NVS to dissemination also is highlighted. Unfortunately, the next critical steps in implementation—the ones that bring new knowledge into schools and classrooms and ensure that it is applied in effective ways—are not mentioned.

(B)(2) Developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments	10	8
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(B)(2) Reviewer Comments:

Nebraska is striving to have core standards operate “hand-in-glove” with high-quality assessments. “Developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments” [(B)(2)] clearly is a priority for Nebraska. Indeed, the state has been shifting resources over the past couple of years from locally developed assessments to the creation of state-wide assessments. The state claims to have led the nation for the past decade in building a local assessment system where teachers have taken major leadership roles. Given the current locally created and owned assessment system, and the state’s strong tradition of local control, shifting attention and resources to a state-wide assessment system is a sea change. Nebraska is taking the opportunity of the RTTT proposal to join with other states to advance this complicated work. It has joined with Wisconsin to lead the MOSAIC consortium, which includes 26 states. Nebraska also will join at least two other consortia, each of which have as many as 36 states as members. Echoing other parts of the proposal, Nebraska lists definite roles and responsibilities for the design and implementation of new assessment systems. Nebraska scores high on this criterion, even though the proposal leaves unclear the state’s particular role with the consortiums beyond MOSAIC and the ultimate quality of the assessments to be adopted and implemented.

(B)(3) Supporting the transition to enhanced standards and high-quality assessments	20	8
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(B)(3) Reviewer Comments:

Unfortunately, Nebraska gets only mid-range ratings relative to the criterion for “supporting the transition to enhanced standards and high-quality assessments” [(B)(3)]. The reason for the drop in scores from the previous criterion related to standards and assessments [(B)(2)] is that Nebraska does not adequately explain how the implementation and monitoring of new standards and assessments will be an active process at the LEA, school and classroom levels. As noted earlier, the work of the regional Educational Service Units is well stated, as is the anticipated dissemination value of NVS. However, there is no explanation about how change will be systematically forced or fostered deeper in the system to ensure improved practices, student achievement and student growth. Nebraska is good to feature proposed changes—aligned changes—in pre-service programs, as well as similar changes in graduate programs for educators. And, once again, Nebraska is strong on listing roles and responsibilities. However, these attributes still sit a layer or two away from the ground level of educational change and improvement—schools and classrooms.

Total	70	51
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C. Data Systems to Support Instruction

	Available	Tier 1
(C)(1) Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system	24	8

(C)(1) Reviewer Comments:

Nebraska opens this section noting that it currently meets only four of the 12 America COMPETES Act elements, which are central to “fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system” [(C)(1)]. However, the submitted evidence (a chart listing current status on the 12 elements) does not clearly

indicate which of the four have been met. The score of "8" on this criterion reflects Nebraska's self-reported statement that four of the elements have been achieved.

(C)(2) Accessing and using State data	5	3
<p>(C)(2) Reviewer Comments: Nebraska spells out clear goals to advance its work on "accessing and using state data" [(C)(2)]. The state smartly focuses on completing the 12 elements of the America COMPETES Act, expanding and improving stakeholder's access to the data through new web-based systems, and improving stakeholder awareness and understanding of the data systems capacity. Nebraska also is smart to consult closely in this work with its "Data Advisory Committee," which includes schools administrators, teachers and data experts. Impressively, the work of this Committee will be supplemented by tapping the data and assessment experts in the state's higher education institutions. Two shortcomings keep the score on this criterion at the medium level. First, the proposal does not explain what will happen to the plan if Nebraska's December 2009 application to the USDOE State Longitudinal Data program is denied funding. Second, the proposed workshops, which are listed as key vehicles for advancing Nebraska's goals, are not well explained in terms of the sustained benefits they will have at the local level and with key LEA and school decision makers.</p>		
(C)(3) Using data to improve instruction	18	8
<p>(C)(3) Reviewer Comments: "Using data to improve instruction" [(C)(3)] is the final measure of the merits of any data system. As noted frequently in the review, Nebraska does not adequately explain how its emerging data system will make a difference in schools and classrooms. The primary proposed mechanisms are: expanding a variety of existing support and training structures; hiring four new state-wide trainers on data systems and use; hiring "Data Stewards" in each participating LEA; and, hiring two more trainers for "Leadership in Continuous Improvement." In part, these mechanisms will help disseminate and implement new teacher resources, curriculum tools and professional development. Ultimately, however, these mechanisms and new resources are not described in a way that provides evidence for how they will make a difference at the school and classroom level with instruction. In addition, there is no explanation for how the multiple new positions will be funded after RTTT support expires. Lastly, Nebraska emphasizes that it will make data available to researchers, but it does present a plan for how that process will be markedly different than it is now. Nebraska's project management strength continues in this section—a detailed project timeline is shared, with clear actions and responsibilities—but not such that actual changes in instruction are understood as a likely outcome.</p>		
Total	47	19

D. Great Teachers and Leaders

	Available	Tier 1
(D)(1) Providing high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals	21	5
<p>(D)(1) Reviewer Comments: Nebraska presents weak evidence in the proposal that it is "providing high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals" [(D)(1)]. RTTT's requisite legal, statutory and regulatory provisions for alternative routes seem to be largely a non-factor in Nebraska. The state offers several alternative pathways for teachers, but none of the listed programs fit the definition RTTT advocates for alternative approaches: there is not a clear path independent from higher education; there is not clear evidence about the selectivity of the alternative programs; there is no explanation of the level of supervised school-based experiences and ongoing support through mentoring and coaching; and there is no discussion of options to waive or test out of coursework. The proposal also does not address alternative pathways in any significant way for principals or other schools leaders. [(D)(1)(i)(ii)] No doubt, given Nebraska's reportedly high level of certified and strong teachers and principals, a low</p>		

rating on this criterion is painful. However, the score is based on a strict reading of the RTTT criteria and the definitions it holds for effective alternative pathways into the education profession. Nebraska indicates its overall supply of teachers is adequate, with only minor shortages in specific content areas and certain geographic areas of the state [(D)(1)(iii)]. While monitoring is in place, especially for teachers, Nebraska does not report a robust system for tracking the status of educator labor markets and it does not provide evidence that it "actively uses information to address inequitable distribution and help fill shortages." The state acknowledges that it must do better, and that some of the apparent lack of shortage is primarily because in many of its smaller schools certain courses (such as in the sciences) are not offered, masking what becomes a problematic educational gap (not just a teacher gap) for Nebraska's rural students. Unfortunately, the proposal does not offer a strong plan for improving its systems for tracking the labor market for principals and school leaders.

(D)(2) Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance	58	26
(i) Measuring student growth	5	4
(ii) Developing evaluation systems	15	8
(iii) Conducting annual evaluations	10	7
(iv) Using evaluations to inform key decisions	28	7

(D)(2) Reviewer Comments:

Nebraska scored in the mid-range in its proposed plan for "improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance" [(D)(2)]. Nebraska has worked this territory to a degree; in 2001 it started holding school districts accountable as to their local assessment processes and the performance of their students on reading and mathematics as measured on locally developed assessments. Although a long way from state-wide performance systems based on common standards and assessments, this work of nearly 10 years gives Nebraska a starting place for judging educator effectiveness based on student performance. Besides having to build a coherent statewide system, a major step will be for Nebraska to begin looking at performance from a student growth perspective, rather than solely student achievement (as both terms are defined in the RTTT application). So far, that move is proposed with no apparent implementation yet of a "growth model" for assessing student performance or the impact of teachers and principals. [(D)(2)(i)] In terms of developing evaluation systems [(D)(2)(ii)], Nebraska is wise to build on what has worked well for its largest LEA, the Omaha Public Schools. Not only will this move give the state a local model that has worked, but it may help overcome some of the barriers to state-led changes in a policy environment that has been locally driven for so long. Nebraska rightly notes that the change "will be dramatic," adding both more state authority and more rigor to the entire system. The rigor will come from wide-scale application of the work of Charlotte Danielson and focusing evaluation of professional practice on the four domains she sees as essential. The proposed plan also will be strong on providing multiple performance based tracks or levels for teachers. Regarding principals and school leaders, Nebraska's plans are light, despite the wise adoption of the ISLLC standards. Nebraska underscores well the challenges the state will face in moving to annual evaluations of teachers and principals [(D)(2)(iii)]. In a state so rooted in local control, designing and implementing a high-stakes system of performance-based evaluation will require technical and political deftness. Nebraska lays out a reasonable annual sequence for the evaluations, with results due to teachers in April, allowing time for major changes prior to the coming year. The sequence also proposes interim interventions during the year through coaching and mentoring. Left silent are details on who will conduct the evaluations and the process of training and supporting evaluators, especially given the wise opening comment in this section about the political challenge of instituting performance based evaluations. Nebraska's score falls way off for "using evaluations to inform key decisions [(D)(2)(iv)]." The state offers no evidence of plans for how the evaluations will be used to inform decision makers at any point in the educational system. For instance, in explaining the annual evaluation sequence, the proposal states, "... a final summary conference will be conducted by April 15 and will be used to inform promotion, tenure decisions, compensation, retention, and improvement/contract discontinuance for ineffective teachers." No

explanation is provided for how these high stakes decisions would be approached, what type of training would be provided, and what oversight would occur to ensure that they actually occur as proposed. Stated differently, Nebraska's weakness at the end of this section relates most to implementation at the LEA and schools level. Details are not well stated for how the plan will be transformed into practice. Especially troubling is the lack of attention to the implementation role teacher unions may play, since this is a part of the RTTT process where their involvement will be pivotal.

(D)(3) Ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals	25	10
(i) Ensuring equitable distribution in high-poverty or high-minority schools	15	6
(ii) Ensuring equitable distribution in hard-to-staff subjects and specialty areas	10	4

(D)(3) Reviewer Comments:

Nebraska clearly addresses its history and current policies and practices in "ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals" [(D)(3)]. Honesty is a valued aspect of the proposal, with the state expressing how it must improve at making sure all students, regardless of LEA or socio-economic standing, benefit from high quality teachers and principals. Nebraska also is to be commended for recognizing that it must base a new system on the ability to link teachers and principals to data on student performance. Fortunately, Nebraska will not wait on that data capacity, which it anticipates will be achieved by 2012-13. Instead, it will develop an "Interim Model" to begin improving the distribution of talented teachers across high-poverty or high-minority schools. Subjectivity may be a major challenge in the interim model, as candidates will be nominated based on existing evaluation systems. In addition, it is not clear that the proposed incentives will be enough to convince more talented teachers to work in more challenging environments (i.e., the incentives entail increased access to professional knowledge, networks and resources). A plus is that any teachers that take on more challenging assignments in the interim model will be part of the group designing the permanent model for the state. [(D)(3)(i)] Nebraska, as noted earlier, does not have "an acute shortage of highly effective teachers in math and science" [(D)(3)(ii)]. Fortunately, the state acknowledges that this apparent lack of shortage is actually because many of the state's schools are too small to offer the types of subjects that typically experience shortages. Thus, Nebraska's problem is not only a teacher supply gap, it is a standards and rigor gap. While committed to addressing this problem, Nebraska's plans are not well conveyed in the proposal. Placing too much emphasis on one solution, Nebraska intends to address the math and science distribution issue largely through the Nebraska Virtual High School. Similarly, regarding special education and ELL staffing shortfalls, Nebraska offers only brief plans on the use of paraprofessionals to increase the pool of candidates. In general, the plans regarding this criteria are not coherent and do not hold together systematically. Rightly so, they focus on creating a pool of talent, but they are light on how any increase in the supply of teachers will connect to gaps and shortages. Lastly, this section is nearly silent on the equitable distribution of principals and other school leaders.

(D)(4) Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs	14	8
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(D)(4) Reviewer Comments:

Nebraska scores in the medium range for "improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs" [(D)(4)]. Nebraska evidences solid commitment to the goals for improving preparation programs and recognizes that this will be a big change, requiring a major infrastructure (data system) change. An essential step will be establishing linkages with postsecondary data systems, an effort the state hopes to accomplish through funding from its December 2009 SLDS application to the USDOE. If successful, Nebraska intends to establish an annual Teachers Preparation Institution Report Card, linking teacher effectiveness to student growth data. The plan is a good one, but the apparent dependency on the results of the SLDS application raises some concern for plans relative to this criterion. The proposal is not clear on back-up plans if the SLDS application fails. Regardless, Nebraska scores in the high range in this criterion because of the state's definite commitment to change. [(D)(4)(i)] Nebraska's plans for actually expanding effective preparation and

credentialing programs are not strong [(D)(4)(ii)]. Attention is paid nearly entirely to teachers, with little attention given in this section of the proposal to preparation programs for principals. Influenced in part by an impressive 2009 white paper, "Teacher Preparation," written by administrators seeking improvements in teacher preparation programs, Nebraska settles on the concept of annual Teacher Preparation Summits. These gatherings would look to advance work in three strategic areas: expanding field experiences; increasing collaboration among schools, districts and teacher preparation institutions; and increasing support for beginning educators. While the annual energy created by the summits is a likely positive, and the focus on the three goals is well considered, the proposal provides little evidence on how the summits will lead to changes in preparation programs and ultimately better teachers and principals. That is, the case is not made that these summits will have more success changing practices than what typically results from conferences and time delimited gatherings. More attention was needed in the proposal to how the recommendations of these summits would be turned into improved preparation programs. The hope, although not discussed in the proposal, is that the combination of public reporting and the annual summits would be a good "1-2 punch" to raise market pressure for change and provide a common arena for key actors to work together on sustained, multi-level change.

(D)(5) Providing effective support to teachers and principals	20	11
(D)(5) Reviewer Comments:		
<p>Nebraska is notably honest in conveying its record of "providing effective support to teachers and principals" [(D)(5)]. The aforementioned Educational Service Units (ESU) have historically borne front-line responsibility for state-led or mandated professional development. As the proposal notes, however, this responsibility has not been matched with performance-based accountability, or even any significant requirements that LEAs or schools participate in the professional development. Using RTTT as impetus, Nebraska intends to create a new professional development and continuous improvement system. In a practical move, the new system will again be led by the ESUs. Wisely, ESUs will be reorganized and have expert personnel added in eight focus areas. The ESUs' expertise also will be bolstered by a well-considered move to align work with centers of expertise in Nebraska's higher education community. Nebraska's design for grounding the work is to create statewide steering committees for each of the eight focus areas. In turn, each of the steering committees would sponsor "professional learning networks" organized around common professional development needs, and could work at the regional, LEA or school level, depending on demand. [(D)(5)(i)]. The steering committee will bear responsibility for evaluating and continually improving professional development [(D)(5)(ii)]. The concept is intriguing and goes a long ways towards connecting state policy and initiative to school and classroom action and results. More than elsewhere in the proposal, Nebraska attempts to outline implementation plans at all critical levels of the education system. Still, the proposal leaves open the question of how teachers and principals will be connected to the professional learning networks, and how lessons from these networks will result in new practices in schools and classrooms and improvements in student growth. In addition, the proposal provides little explanation for how evaluation of the various professional development programs will occur beyond the assignment of responsibility to the steering committee.</p>		
Total	138	60

E. Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools

	Available	Tier 1
(E)(1) Intervening in the lowest-achieving schools and LEAs	10	0
(E)(1) Reviewer Comments:		
<p>Nebraska does not have any real system or structure for "intervening in the lowest-achieving schools and LEAs" [(E)(1)]. The proposal states that Nebraska's Department of Education currently has little ability to intervene in either LEAs or schools. Legislation is being proposed for such capacity, but no</p>		

legal, statutory or regulatory authority exists at present. As a result, Nebraska earns zero points for this criterion.

(E)(2) Turning around the lowest-achieving schools	40	11
(i) Identifying the persistently lowest-achieving schools	5	2
(ii) Turning around the persistently lowest-achieving schools	35	9

(E)(2) Reviewer Comments:

Nebraska intends to pursue robust ways to intervene in low-achieving schools and LEAs [(E)(2)]. The state is seeking permission to have stricter requirements than Federal law stipulates for what is considered a persistently low-achieving school. For instance, using the 60 percent graduation benchmark set by the USDOE, only four Nebraska high schools would be counted as persistently low-achieving. Nebraska wants to bump the cut level up to 75 percent, requiring a larger number of schools to take serious looks at their performance. Beyond this evidence of commitment, Nebraska offers little new information as to how it would identify low-achieving schools. The briefly shared plans for identifying low-achieving schools tie back to the state's larger intentions to create a new state accountability system rooted in student growth results. [(E)(2)(i)]. Nebraska lays out a wide-ranging plan for "turning around persistently lowest-achieving schools" [(E)(2)(ii)]. Nevertheless, the plan fails to show in a convincing fashion that LEAs will be implementing any of the four school intervention models called for in the RTTT application. As a result, Nebraska scores low on this sub-criterion. To its credit, Nebraska will create an entirely new intervention system, complete with support and information systems, multiple measures and eight reform initiatives. The lead initiative speaks to the increased role of the Nebraska Department of Education through the creation of a "school reform office." The eight reform initiatives touch on many relevant aspects of comprehensive school turnaround, and even go into student leadership and student engagement, areas not always considered in school improvement efforts. The obvious challenge in this design will be ensuring that the eight initiatives operate with coherence. For instance, care must be taken not to create "Christmas tree" reform scenarios in LEAs and schools, where the entity is loaded with different interventions, all of which look nice, but do not relate to one another and certainly do not have more than surface value. Similarly, the proposal does not speak to how these initiatives will tie back to teacher and leader preparation, beyond a general description of a new "school reform leadership academy" and a "school reform training program."

Total	50	11
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F. General

	Available	Tier 1
(F)(1) Making education funding a priority	10	5

(F)(1) Reviewer Comments:

Nebraska appears to "make education funding a priority" [(F)(1)]. Based solely on the proposal, the evidence is clear that Nebraska has held strong on the share of funding dedicated to K-12 education in the state budget. The percentage of the budget allocated to K-12 education rose from 34 percent to 36 percent between the last two fiscal years [(F)(1)(ii)]. Unfortunately, Nebraska did not present clear evidence on the extent to which "the state's policies lead to equitable funding between high-need LEAs and other LEAs, and within LEAs, between high poverty schools and other schools" [(F)(1)(ii)]. Equitable funding may be a reality in Nebraska, based on the various mechanisms summarized in the proposal, but no examples are provided of actual equalization effects. The application required specific examples of how equitable funding policies are actually working among and within LEAs.

(F)(2) Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools	40	0
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(F)(2) Reviewer Comments:

Nebraska does not earn any points for the criterion, "ensuring successful conditions for high performing charter schools and other innovative schools" [(F)(2)]. As the proposal states, Nebraska law "is silent" on charter schools, neither encouraging nor dissuading them. Holding strictly to the RTTT criteria, Nebraska is a state "without a Charter school law," which requires awarding zero points. Nebraska presents evidence that it "enables LEAs to operate innovative, autonomous public schools other than charter schools" [(F)(2)(v)]. However, none of the examples Nebraska list meet any of the following definition elements: "have the flexibility and authority to define their instructional models and associated curriculum; select and replace staff; implement new structures and formats for the school day or year; and control their budget" (Source: Definitions in the RTTT Application).

(F)(3) Demonstrating other significant reform conditions	5	2
(F)(3) Reviewer Comments: Nebraska also falls short in "demonstrating other significant reform conditions" [(F)(3)]. All of the examples provided, save one, already are major aspects of the proposed RTTT initiative. The only new element is early childhood education, which certainly is an essential focus. Nebraska is wise to pay attention to "school readiness" for its children as part of its comprehensive reforms.		
Total	55	7

Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM

	Available	Tier 1
Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM	15	15
Competitive Reviewer Comments: Nebraska earns the full set of points (15) available for the Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM. The centerpiece is the proposed Nebraska Virtual High School (NVS), which will be designed to serve students in grades 7-12 across the state and to provide professional development and instructional support to teachers and principals state-wide. The concept is powerful, especially considering the challenge of implementing an internationally competitive standards and assessment system in a largely rural state with many schools too small to offer a complete set of rigorous courses in math and science. NVS will draw on the STEM expertise of Nebraska's higher education institutions and make that resource available across the state's schools. Clinching NVS's larger value is that it will be tightly woven with Nebraska's plans to establish common core standards, aligned statewide assessments, and new approaches to developing and supporting teachers and principals. Specialty high schools often become isolated examples of excellence, with little replication or policy value. Without the framework of Nebraska's RTTT initiative, NVS likely would be no more than another specialty high school. Instead, it is likely to be a signature element in Nebraska's comprehensive reform effort.		
Total	15	15

Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform

	Available	Tier 1
Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform		Yes
Absolute Reviewer Comments: Yes, Nebraska's "Bright Future for Nebraska Students Initiative" meets the "Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform." Nebraska makes the case that its RTTT initiative will connect three of the four major reform priorities: standards and assessments, data systems, and human capital. Unfortunately, the fourth RTTT reform priority, turning-around low-achieving schools, is weakly addressed. Despite this inconsistency, Nebraska has a "big picture" understanding and		

strategy for its RTTT initiative. Nebraska is wise to underscore early in the proposal that its reform effort will go after four goals: "higher levels of achievement for Nebraska public schools students; dramatic reduction of learning gaps; increased high school graduation rates; and increased college going rates." Nebraska rightly flags that RTTT represents a sea change for how education will be organized and directed in the state. The state's decentralization of authority to the LEA level makes the adoption of state-wide reform extra challenging. Nebraska's systemic thinking is underscored by attention throughout the proposal to proven knowledge about effective policy and best practice, as well as a holistic, start-to-finish concern for all children's education path. On the downside, throughout the proposal Nebraska loses points for lack of implementation plans and details. Specific implementation details are impossible in a multi-million dollar proposal, but Nebraska could have struck a better balance between concept and action, strategy and tactics. Too much is at stake with a rare RTTT grant not to explain with more clarity how the impressive array of concepts and strategies would be implemented to advance policies and practices at the school and classroom level. In addition, while stating as a core principle the recognition that the uncommon RTTT investment must be used to spark permanent change, the proposal is nearly silent on how work started by RTTT will be sustained and deepened.

Total		0
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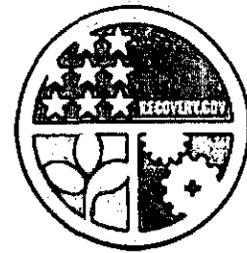
Grand Total	500	237
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Race to the Top

Technical Review Form - Tier 1

Nebraska Application #4200NE-5



A. State Success Factors

	Available	Tier 1
(A)(1) Articulating State's education reform agenda and LEA's participation in it	65	39
(i) Articulating comprehensive, coherent reform agenda	5	5
(ii) Securing LEA commitment	45	30
(iii) Translating LEA participation into statewide impact	15	4
<p>(A)(1) Reviewer Comments: Addressing (A)(1)(i), the state sets forth a comprehensive and coherent reform agenda that articulates its goals for implementing reforms in the four education areas. Their "Bright Future for Nebraska Students Initiative" is outlined clearly with a description of its core principles and the need for "transformation" in the state. In section (A)(1)(ii), the narrative and supporting documents show that 218 (of 253) LEAs signed Memoranda of Understanding. As required in subsection (b) and (c) of this section, they do not have commitment from all of those LEAs to implement, nor do they have signatures from all superintendents, board presidents and teachers' unions. This score would be strengthened both if those numbers were higher and if there were more rationale for the percentages, ranging from a low of 64% for teachers' union signatories to a high of 85% committed to "implementing the initiative's core programs." Further clarification of this range of LEAs committed (74% to 85%) would be helpful as that is unclear. Section (iii) does not show how this LEA participation (and gaps therein, as described above) will increase student achievement, decrease achievement gaps, increase high school graduation rates and increase college enrollment. It indicates that the state has these goals, but without a realistic and ambitious plan to get there.</p>		
(A)(2) Building strong statewide capacity to implement, scale up, and sustain proposed plans	30	14
(i) Ensuring the capacity to implement	20	10
(ii) Using broad stakeholder support	10	4
<p>(A)(2) Reviewer Comments: Section (A)(2)(i) states that the State Commissioner of Education will maintain "constant oversight." There is a plan to create teams "around each of the sustainable improvements," but more detail is needed to demonstrate how the current staffing structure will support and sustain the new and expanded initiatives they hope to create. It also states in the budget narrative that those teams will only meet 2 times per year, which would be insufficient to support implementation. Capacity to implement is, therefore, not substantiated with evidence of how this particular structure will support them to achieve their goals. The application is also missing narrative showing (i)(b) how they will support participating LEAs to implement and how they will (e) use the fiscal, political and human capital resources of the State to continue. In section (A)(2)(ii) broad stakeholder support is not demonstrated. The section speaks most to The Students Initiative Steering Committee and its role in ensuring "the involvement and ongoing support of all relevant parties." Missing from this section is more detail about how NE leaders will identify and include those critical stakeholders and how they will specifically</p>		

involve the State's teachers and principals, as well as the stakeholders listed in (ii)(b) of the application's instructions.

(A)(3) Demonstrating significant progress in raising achievement and closing gaps	30	15
(i) Making progress in each reform area	5	3
(ii) Improving student outcomes	25	12
<p>(A)(3) Reviewer Comments: In the descriptions of the four focus areas in section (i), it is difficult to tell what shows progress – what it was before and what now and, if there was progress, what accounts for that. For low-performing schools, there is some more detail that provides a more complete picture. Section (ii) shows incremental progress on ESEA and expresses concern about backsliding on the scores. "Clearly we must take action now to prevent further slippage." It doesn't, however, address the root causes, what specifically happened in this past cycle, and how their efforts are especially targeted to address the core challenges. More detail on why student outcomes did not improve significantly and/or worsened in some areas would strengthen this score. There is achievement gap progress at certain levels on ESEA, but not on NAEP, especially at the 4th grade level. Again, what is missing is a sense that the state's education leaders know why and are clear about the depth of the issues and how their reform efforts can be more than a quick fix.</p>		
Total	125	68

B. Standards and Assessments

	Available	Tier 1
(B)(1) Developing and adopting common standards	40	35
(i) Participating in consortium developing high-quality standards	20	20
(ii) Adopting standards	20	15
<p>(B)(1) Reviewer Comments: NE meets criteria (B)(1)(i) by substantiating its membership in the Common Core Initiative, which includes a significant number of states. Section (ii) thoughtfully details the state's particular attention to the needs of students in rural schools - who may lack access to these standards - in implementation. To meet this challenge the application offers the "Nebraska Virtual School," which sounds innovative and well suited for the state. The narrative does not, however, make a strong case to show how the virtual school links to this criteria and how it will provide sufficient access and feature high quality courses on-line that are equivalent to other students getting such courses in person. The Timeline for Implementation for B(1-3) does not unequivocally state that they will adopt standards by August 2, 2010 or later in 2010, but does state in the narrative for section (ii) that the State Board of Education will adopt them "in the spring of 2010 or whenever they become final," thus meeting that criteria in (ii).</p>		
(B)(2) Developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments	10	10
<p>(B)(2) Reviewer Comments: This section indicates that it is part of three consortia: the "Multiple Options (for) Student Assessment (and) Instruction Consortium" (MOSAIC), which includes 36 states; the "Summative Multi-State Assessment Resources for Teachers and Educational Researchers" (SMARTER); and a consortium of 36 states leading up to the Common Core Assessment. It is somewhat unclear that the third is separate from the second. In either case, they meet the criteria well. This section also demonstrates a commitment to a "local assessment system" with teachers at the classroom-level versed in using</p>		

assessment well in student measurement and development. In addition, moving forward, NE is part of several consortia for development and implementation.

(B)(3) Supporting the transition to enhanced standards and high-quality assessments	20	11
<p>(B)(3) Reviewer Comments: The proposal presents a clear sequence to effectuate their transition to new standards and assessments. The outstanding questions are about how they will effectively partner with school staff on achieving results. There is some mention of "standards integration workshops for teachers and administrators," but it is unclear how the LEAs and schools will be both supported and held to account for the integration. "Leading the Common Core" is a promising component of a high-quality plan, but would be strengthened by more information on who will participate, with what outcomes and with what funding over time. The Timeline for Implementation for (B)(1-3) has "Leading the Common Core" starting in 2012. It leaves an unanswered question about the timeliness of the support from the state, if this program is, in fact, an important part of professional development to support this transition.</p>		
Total	70	56

C. Data Systems to Support Instruction

	Available	Tier 1
(C)(1) Fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system	24	6
<p>(C)(1) Reviewer Comments: While the application states that four of the twelve data elements are currently part of the NE system, it only substantiates three of those -- E1, E2, and E3. The chart in this section is difficult to track and it is unclear where the state believes it does have these elements in place and which are not included. This would need to be clarified to raise this score.</p>		
(C)(2) Accessing and using State data	5	2
<p>(C)(2) Reviewer Comments: This section includes considerable detail about how officials intend to strengthen the technical elements of their longitudinal data system and to increase access. Though it goes on to indicate that stakeholders were involved in the proposal's development, it does not identify a strategy to ensure this data is accessed and used and how it would support decision-makers.</p>		
(C)(3) Using data to improve instruction	18	10
<p>(C)(3) Reviewer Comments: Overall, there is a strong statement of intent to use data to improve instruction. This is supported by details about some of the ways in which the state will address (C)(3)(i-iii). There is not, however, a clear link between this intent, the necessary technical changes to be made and the ensuing impact on improving instruction. For example, the main proposal for enabling districts and schools to use data to improve instruction is to hire four full-time data trainers. Defining the underlying strategy and rationale for this approach, would show the degree to which the support is intensive, responsive and available and would strengthen this score.</p>		
Total	47	18

D. Great Teachers and Leaders

	Available	Tier 1

(D)(1) Providing high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals	21	6
<p>(D)(1) Reviewer Comments: This section combines (i) and (ii). There is strong detail about a number of alternative routes, as required in (ii), that specifically address the state's interest in bringing in different groups to teaching, such as native speakers and those with experience in a trade. Those who may need additional credit to achieve certification are also addressed. That said, they don't describe alternate routes that include at least four of the five elements listed in the definition of alternative routes to certification and only one program, the Provisional Administrative Certificate for Administrators, is discussed for principals. More on the plan to offer more alternative routes for principals would strengthen this score. Section (iii) indicates that current teacher supply is "adequate," but doesn't provide a thorough plan that says how the state will monitor, evaluate and identify areas of need for teachers over time or for principal shortage in any measure. In neither case does the application address preparation for these shortage areas. Additionally, while section (iii) notes that current programs are "at capacity" and that "some expansion is necessary," it is difficult to discern what needs are being met by current programs and which are not and how new initiatives will address needs in this area.</p>		
(D)(2) Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance	58	33
(i) Measuring student growth	5	4
(ii) Developing evaluation systems	15	13
(iii) Conducting annual evaluations	10	8
(iv) Using evaluations to inform key decisions	28	8
<p>(D)(2) Reviewer Comments: This section demonstrates how NE plans to measure student growth – going from local to state as a major shift – and articulates a new accountability system, the Nebraska State Accountability System - NeSA. To support teachers and principals in this transition (ii), they intend to use the current Omaha Public Schools professional development model to serve teachers and principals statewide. While (D) (2) sections (i) and (ii) offer some ambitious and realistic plans to achieve their goals, more on how to design systems with principal and teacher involvement would strengthen this score. In addition, while they note that they are going to add student learning as a measure in this model, the application doesn't distinguish adequately how they will make that work, given what sounds like a model (Charlotte Danielson's "Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teachers") that is fully formed. Annual evaluations (iii) will be conducted for both principals and teachers. Detail on timely and constructive feedback would improve this score. There is a brief narrative on how evaluation (iv) will be used to inform decisions, especially around retaining and replacing teachers and principals. There is no other mention of how this data will be used fairly and well, especially given that this is such a major shift for the state.</p>		
(D)(3) Ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals	25	14
(i) Ensuring equitable distribution in high-poverty or high-minority schools	15	9
(ii) Ensuring equitable distribution in hard-to-staff subjects and specialty areas	10	5
<p>(D)(3) Reviewer Comments: To ensure the equitable distribution of teachers and principals in high-poverty or high-minority schools, as required in (i), the application offers a number of interventions and would be strengthened by more detail on how this is informed by reviews of prior actions and data. Some of the strengths of their efforts to increase teachers and principals are incentives for teachers going into high need schools and for high need subjects and the provision of additional professional development. This section suggests priority placements in "low performing as compared to low poverty/low minority schools." It is unclear how this distinction is helpful/important and to what end in the state's view. In high need content areas, the application suggests that distribution is not an issue in math and science with a thoughtful analysis</p>		

of at least part of the why – rural schools aren't offering as much in math and science subject and specialty areas. The program to move paraprofessionals to teachers also shows a localized and customized view of how to grow and use talent. This program addresses (ii) well by providing schools access to more highly effective teachers. Given missing baseline data, their proposal is to understand who is "highly effective" through this application and to advance from that knowledge. From this acknowledgment, it is clear that there is significant data collection to be done to get to a clear sense of what is and is not true – prerequisite for defining clear solutions. With this as the foundation of their plan, the application demonstrates the basis for their plan. Missing throughout (D)(3) is sufficient attention to principals in high-poverty and high-minority schools and in hard-to-staff subjects and specialty areas.

(D)(4) Improving the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs	14	8
<p>(D)(4) Reviewer Comments: The "flagship project" of NE's SLDS grant application links data from teachers to the institutions where they were educated and to expand student data collection beyond K-12. This meets the criteria for section (i) in giving leaders access to new data to understand how the state might improve these preparation programs. Articulating the larger strategy to use this data fairly and well for both teachers AND principals would strengthen this score. Offering an assessment of what conclusions they might draw and with what subsequent actions would also give more indication of how this information will be linked to in-State programs where those individuals were prepared. In addressing (ii) the strategies they expect to come from the Teacher Preparation Summit are strong. Articulating the broader strategy to expand preparation options that will produce both effective principals AND teachers, would strengthen this score.</p>		
(D)(5) Providing effective support to teachers and principals	20	9
<p>(D)(5) Reviewer Comments: To address (D)(5)(i), there is ample focus on content areas, the creation of a mentoring and induction program, and the kinds of PD to focus on particular areas of need in the state (technology, diverse learners, etc). In looking at how they will more effectively provide PD, number 5 of their eight focus areas, Educator Development and Support, gives some indication of supports, but leaves open the question about the provision of high-quality, targeted PD that really supports teachers and principals on the ground. The PLNs and the plan to deliver services that may cross ESU boundaries go a good part of the way there. The plan for the "beginning educator" experience is strong. Building on these would support a case for effective support over time, across the state. Evidence of how the state will measure, evaluate and continuously improve the effectiveness of support to improve student achievement, as required in (ii), is missing. While not stated, it would seem that Professional Learning Networks and a Statewide Steering Committee would serve these purposes. Making that connection and offering a comprehensive plan to achieve these goals would raise this score.</p>		
Total	138	70

E. Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools

	Available	Tier 1
(E)(1) Intervening in the lowest-achieving schools and LEAs	10	0
<p>(E)(1) Reviewer Comments: There is no current legislation that gives the state the authority to intervene at either the school or the LEA level. The application indicates that the state legislature will "be asked to consider" such legislation during the upcoming session.</p>		
(E)(2) Turning around the lowest-achieving schools	40	13

(i) Identifying the persistently lowest-achieving schools	5	4
(ii) Turning around the persistently lowest-achieving schools	35	9
(E)(2) Reviewer Comments: Section E2 (ii) offers a plan to turn around persistently low-achieving schools by focusing resources and time on the lowest-achieving schools, as the state defines them. While the sub-strategies demonstrate that the plan is wide-reaching, including efforts to target financial resources and school support specialists to these schools and to include youth in decision-making and in challenges they face in low-achieving schools, it does not meet (ii). There is no stated commitment to implement any of the four reform models. The activities listed are more foundational - like hiring and finalizing agreements. More detail about the implementation timeline of the larger strategy, including the four reform models in some way, would demonstrate if initiatives are both ambitious and achievable and strengthen this section.		
Total	50	13

F. General

	Available	Tier 1
(F)(1) Making education funding a priority	10	6
(F)(1) Reviewer Comments: The state shows that revenues increased from 2008 to 2009, in actual numbers and percentages of state appropriations, meeting the criteria for (F)(1)(i). For (ii), the application discussed the state's formulas for equalization, but does not provide data on the impact of these formulas.		
(F)(2) Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools	40	2
(F)(2) Reviewer Comments: The application states that the "statutes are silent" with regard to charter schools. Charter schools "are not an applicable model of public education in most areas of the state." If the state had laws, statutes, regulations and/or other legal documents to show how charters are funded, are held accountable and are supported, the score would be higher. In F2 (v), the narrative identifies innovative, autonomous public schools, but doesn't say how the state has enabled these to operate and with what authorizing conditions. The application doesn't show that these schools have either the flexibility or the autonomy to be considered innovative, autonomous public schools, as defined in this notice.		
(F)(3) Demonstrating other significant reform conditions	5	2
(F)(3) Reviewer Comments: There is some legislation to support reform with the passage of laws in 2008 and 2009 that support new standards and teacher loan forgiveness, respectively. This section details initiatives to demonstrate other significant reform conditions, but only the early childhood initiative is provided as a new reform in this section, as (F)(3) requires.		
Total	55	10

Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM

	Available	Tier 1
Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM	15	15

Competitive Reviewer Comments:

This section offers a high-quality plan for STEM, including a rigorous course of study, cooperation with external partners, and preparation for more students in STEM careers. The proposed partnership with University of Nebraska, Lincoln shows thoughtful attention to addressing rural needs in the state. This section also effectively ties together numerous STEM initiatives from across the application. The Nebraska Virtual STEM Academy is especially promising in offering access to STEM curricula and to identifying a strategy for and steps to close the achievement gap in mathematics.

Total	15	15
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Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform

	Available	Tier 1
Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform		Yes

Absolute Reviewer Comments:

The application "comprehensively and coherently" addresses all of the four education reform areas as well as the State Success Factors Criteria, minimally. What this proposal does not do is make the links from the reform areas to a larger reform strategy grounding that strategy in moving them from current outcomes to their intended and needed outcomes for districts, schools and students. Some of the data to set these goals is missing historically, which is acknowledged, and therefore, data systems will be especially critical to the success of the state's agenda. In addition, developing the skills of a range of decision-makers to use this data well, is essential.

Total		0
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Grand Total	500	250
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