

NORTH DAKOTA LEGISLATORS RETREAT

Key Takeaways /December 4, 2020



NORTH DAKOTA LEGISLATORS RETREAT KEY TAKEAWAYS

Opening Remarks | Setting the Vision

MODERATOR

- [Dr. Javaid Siddiqi](#), *President & CEO, The Hunt Institute*

RESOURCE EXPERTS

- [Superintendent Kirsten Baesler](#), *State Superintendent of Public Instruction, North Dakota*
- [Director Chris Jones](#), *Executive Director of Human Services, North Dakota*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Over the last year, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and the Department of Human Services (DHS) have strengthened their relationship as departments. In doing so they have increasingly found areas of duplication and inefficiencies across agencies.
 - If these duplications exist across agencies, it is likely they exist across committees as well. It is crucial to also have conversations within the legislatures to determine how to work more effectively together.
- Neither department can grow or expand their services without working with other agencies on comprehensive service delivery.
- Children are the most vulnerable citizens in the state, particularly among the ages of zero to five, because they have no one advocating for them at the state level.
 - The state is not entirely making investments in this group, and as a result, children are not ready for school.
 - The right investments in early childhood can save the state money and improve lives.
- To create change, we cannot be territorial - there is plenty of glory and work to go around. Tackling these challenges is a shared responsibility between education, health, appropriations, and judiciary.
- Agencies need to figure out how to work together. For example, DHS is responsible for ages zero to three, but then as soon as students turn four, they are entirely moved to DPI. There needs to be more clarity on how these pieces fit together.
 - Structural and strategic investments for families can make sure that resources are not wasted across agencies.
- When it comes to kindergarten readiness and assessments, it is not just about making sure that students meet a certain benchmark for entering kindergarten—it is also about making sure that kindergarten is ready for kids. There is not a set, objective level of readiness for students, because all students are different.
 - Generally, it is about students being able to self-regulate and show curiosity.
- The state's starting to do a better job of defining a state assessment for readiness.
 - The K-12 Achievement Council started looking at what schools in the state are using, since there is not a standard assessment for understanding where to start learning for individual students.
 - So much of the readiness question also centers around the socioemotional perspective.
- Historically in North Dakota, early childhood has been considered a family responsibility, and as such, it is not traditionally considered a legislative issue. However, other issues considered non-legislative, such as behavioral health, were possible because there was broad support and true understanding of the issue.
 - The question becomes, how does North Dakota do the same for early childhood?
- The state should operate from the assumption that parents are trying to do what is best for children, and do not necessarily have the tools to do so. They do not know how to advocate for themselves, which is how the cycle of poverty becomes so pervasive.
 - If the legislature wants to humanely reduce departmental size and responsibility, then it must reduce two-gen poverty or there will be a constant need for more services.

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- Making investments at age five is too late to truly address breaking the cycle. The state must provide parents with the resources and education to know how to best serve their children as well as the autonomy to make healthy and fully informed decisions.
- Some of the areas that the state is already doing early childhood services work are:
 - [Zero to Five Special Needs Program](#)
 - [Head Start](#)
 - [State Program for Free/Reduced Lunch](#)
 - [Preschool of Choice](#)
- [The NDSU Rural Extension Program](#) also has services for children and families, but has lost certain funding, including GEAR Up for Kindergarten.
 - Director Jones pointed out the Extension Program as an example of how there can be funding for various programs, however there is not necessarily a statewide strategy of how that funding is being used to support students.
- [The Waterford Upstart Program](#) is in its final year of grant funding and is currently teaching around 700 four-year-olds. This leaves approximately 10,000 four-year-olds who are not covered by this program.
- If the current early childhood structures the state is implementing were working effectively, there would not be the number of behavior problems they are seeing down the road. DHS, DPI, and the legislature need to work together to determine what can be done better and what the next step is.

RESOURCES

- [North Dakota Department of Public Instruction | Early Childhood Education](#)
- [North Dakota Department of Human Services | Early Childhood Services](#)
- [Waterford Upstart Program](#)
- [The Hunt Institute | Early Childhood Resources](#)
- [The Hunt Institute | North Dakota Legislators Retreat Education Issue Brief](#)

Supporting Equity for Birth – Age Five

Research points to early childhood development as one of the crucial factors for determining student success and well-being. This session will discuss why the early years are formative and how the inequity of access and quality to early childhood experiences can exacerbate gaps in learning, health, and social development. This conversation will consider the state's Choice Ready rubric to develop the "soft skills" students need to be prepared for North Dakota's workforce, including creativity, problem solving, and teamwork.

LEGISLATIVE INTRODUCTION

- [Senator Howard Stephenson](#), Former State Senator, Utah

MODERATOR

- [Dr. Joshua Wynne](#), Dean, University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences | VicePresident of Health Affairs, University of North Dakota | Chief Health Strategist, State of North Dakota

RESOURCE EXPERTS

- [Kristin Bernhard](#), Senior Vice President, Advocacy and Policy, Start Early
- [Secretary Jeana Ross](#), Former Secretary of Early Childhood, Alabama
- [Senator Howard Stephenson](#), Former State Senator, Utah

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Senator Stephenson spoke of his experience opposing early childhood services at the state level, as he saw it to be the family's responsibility. When he began volunteering at a program for incarcerated youth, he realized that the only difference between students who were in the justice system and his own children were the vastly different environments they grew up with, which, in his words, he was blind to.
 - According to Senator Stephenson, he felt guilt for denying students early childhood experiences, afterschool programs, supports to get them through challenges at home, and school nutrition that they needed to learn effectively.
 - This led to Senator Stephenson sponsoring bills for breakfast funding, afterschool programs, and elementary school psychologists for those that needed them.
- Spending small amounts in the early years of life can save millions in spending on adults later on.
- Utah granted 55,000 licenses for an early ready intervention software and 200,000 for math licenses. Scores have soared as a result.
- The most crucial point in a child's life to set them up for success is prenatally and from ages zero-to-three, when children become hardwired for life success. Opportunity gaps are evident as early as 18 months.
- The return of investment on early learning is significant. James Heckman found that every one dollar invested yields three to 15 dollars in saved costs for remediation, special education, and incarceration.
 - Additionally, there are immediate effects for parents in terms of their parenting and workforce needs.
- Alabama was one of the first states to create a dedicated cabinet-level position for early childhood, with their Secretary of Early Childhood Education, which was a grassroots effort. This led to the creation of the [First Class Pre-K](#) program.
 - 60 percent of program participants were not where they were supposed to be in terms of literacy and math, but the program was able to close that achievement gap by getting 90 percent of students where they needed to be.
- An evaluation of the program found that the results did not fade through grade seven.
- First Class Pre-K has a diverse delivery system and the excellence grants for Head Start pay parity prioritized those with higher poverty, more rurality, and fed into struggling schools.
- The program covers around 1,200 classrooms and about 40 percent of four-year-olds.
- To create these programs, the message was around the importance of brain development, and how it is not only an issue of academic preparation, but socioemotional as well.
 - [The Born Ready Initiative](#) seeks to support parents so that they are cognizant of the importance of early brain development and have the needed tools to be their child's first teacher.
- The Waterfront Upstart Program, which is used in North Dakota and Utah, prepares students for kindergarten at a first-grade level, and is focused on minority, low-income, and immigrant families.
- The impact of COVID-19 risks putting the progress states have made in early childhood in jeopardy. States need to work to preserve the existing infrastructure.
 - [Illinois coordinated intake](#) for home visiting is one example of how to do so.
 - A lot can be happening in this space and not only does it not maximize resources, but it can be overwhelming for parents.
 - Illinois developed regional hubs to coordinate delivery and developed [tools](#) that can be scaled up anywhere.
- In North Dakota in 2017 the legislature allocated \$20 million for the biennium to allow DPI to disburse funds to districts that need support beyond their special education cap. In 2019, the state added \$4 million to that, and they are now asking for an additional \$3 million. There are better ways to spend that \$7 million, and that's by investing it earlier.

RESOURCES

- [National Conference of State Legislatures | A Fair Shot](#): Provides a bipartisan framework to guide and assist state policymakers as they work towards the goal of ensuring that every child is ready to learn.

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- [Alabama First Class Pre-K Program](#)
- [Alabama Born Ready Initiative](#)
- [SXSU EDU 2018 | Utah Leads the Way for Tech Innovation in Early Education](#): Hear more of Senator Stephenson's story in his talk at the 2018 SXSU Educatoin conference.
- [Waterford Upstart Program](#)
- [Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education](#)
- [Developing Coordinated Intake for your Community | What is it and How to Start or Maintain a Strong System](#)

Student Behavioral Health & Wellbeing

Behavioral health concerns for students, families, and educators have become more prevalent in recent years, and with increased isolation and stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic, these concerns are more pressing than ever. These unmet needs have a direct impact on academic outcomes, behavior challenges, and social and emotional well-being. What are ways policymakers can encourage schools and districts in supporting the behavioral health continuum and in partnering with providers to increase access to quality interventions?

LEGISLATIVE INTRODUCTION

- **Representative Gretchen Dobervich**, House District 11 | Minority Caucus Leader

MODERATOR

- **Dr. Matt Biel**, Professor, Vice Chair and Division Chief of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Georgetown University School of Medicine and MedStar Georgetown University Hospital

RESOURCE EXPERTS

- **Lyndsi Engstrom**, Director of Research, Design, and Value, Central Region Education Association
- **Dr. Michelle Sarche**, Associate Professor, University of Colorado-Denver, Anschutz Medical Campus

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Challenges that children face are challenges families face—as families go, so goes society.
- North Dakota is 42nd in adolescent suicide with a rate almost double the national average.
- Schools provide more mental health services than any other place, and as a result are a de facto mental health system in the county.
- Behavioral health is key because:
 - Brain development happens early, and most jobs require healthy cognitive ability.
 - Four out of 10 children will suffer from a mental health condition before age 19. The country spends millions of dollars on supporting mental health challenges. It can either pay now, or later, when those challenges are more difficult to address.
 - Mental and behavioral health challenges take a toll on families and they require access to expert support when challenges arise.
- **SB 2048**, in 2015, was a monumental shift in thinking about well-being and the whole child and family approach.
 - The multi-tiered system of support it created required nimbleness and a skilled workforce, as well as a deep investigation of childhood trauma.
- There were three key lessons from this research:
 - The state cannot have siloed work. The connection between the issues is too strong, and it's impossible to leverage finite resources in a silo.
 - Socioemotional learning and competency are integral to community success.

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- Education cannot be everything to families, and we must ask for help. The state has to choose how to invest and where to collaborate.
- Cultural relevance and competency are also crucial to this work. In order for services to be reflective and responsive to the communities they serve, they must take into consideration the cultural and community values of the children they work with.
- In tribal nations, where there are Head Start and home visiting programs, the communities are very diverse and their cultural and language traditions are foundational to their health.
- Socioemotional systems can be integrated through the K-12 continuum with a healthy balance of content areas and socioemotional skills.
 - For example, the implementation of SB 2048 did not go as smoothly as planned because many educators felt ill-prepared as it was highly content specific. As a result, a service partnership with K-12 was used to investigate how to weave socioemotional learning into school life.
 - The best way to do this is for educators to model those skills.
 - It must be built into the fabric of the classroom environment, school environment, and instruction.
 - Any adult interacting with children should be trained on how to model healthy behavior, no matter what role they serve in the school.
- The US Department of Education is providing pilot funding for community school models, which partners with communities to make school a place of service by leveraging physical space and staffing infrastructure.
- We also cannot create the expectation that teachers are therapists and counselors. They already have a great deal on their plate.
 - There needs to be collaboration across sectors to provide schools with the resources they need to provide services without overburdening teachers.
- Cultural sensitivity is also an important aspect of this, which is about being willing to learn and recognize our own limits of understanding in order to make genuine cultural connections. Oftentimes, cultural practices that vary from the mainstream are seen as a deficit, and it is important to approach these conversations with an asset-based mindset.
- Remote learning will undoubtedly have effects on student behavioral and mental health and returning to school safely should be a priority. When students fully return to buildings, schools should emphasize the return to routine and expect that some students will struggle. The pandemic has highlighted how we cannot separate physical and mental health but can offer the opportunity for long term reforms.

RESOURCES

- [North Dakota Department of Public Instruction | Families & Communities](#)
- [Communities in Schools](#)
- [Central Regional Education Association | Full-Service Community Schools](#)
- [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning | Resources Page](#)

Spotlight | Valley City Rural Partner Program & Recruiting Rural Teachers

Educator recruitment and retention in rural areas is difficult nationwide. Universities, school districts, and communities have put their heads together to create solutions that will strengthen the educator pipeline by bringing high-quality professionals from diverse backgrounds into rural schools and supporting them in their careers. This session highlighted one such partnership in North Dakota, the Rural Partner School Benefit Program, between Valley City State University and Valley City Public Schools.

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LEGISLATIVE INTRODUCTION

- **Representative Cynthia Schreiber-Beck**, House District 25

MODERATOR

- **Josh Johnson**, Superintendent, Valley City Public Schools

RESOURCE EXPERTS

- **Dr. James Boe**, Dean of Graduate Studies and Extended Learners, Valley City State University
- **Diana Cournoyer**, Executive Director, National Indian Education Association

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- For school leaders, the teacher shortage is one of the most concerning issues in the state. COVID-19 is leading to burnout, exhaustion, and unexpected exits from the teaching profession.
- Already, North Dakota is working to lead in the area of collaborating on a community level to address teacher shortages. The National Indian Education Association (NIEA) uses North Dakota's ESSA state plan as a model for how to communicate with tribal leaders, which is about having a conversation that engenders trust.
- NIEA's [National Educator Initiative Project](#) works to recruit and retain effective teachers to fully realize the potential of Native students.
 - The program focuses on grow-your-own solutions at the local level as well as professional development that is culturally relevant not just for Native students, but for all of North Dakota's students.
- In this work, schools must also work to address trauma, particularly in our country's current circumstances. Teachers also need self-care and training on how to handle their own traumas and experiences.
- Within North Dakota, the [Rural Partner School Benefit Program](#) between Valley City State University and Valley City School District focuses on dual credit. Additionally, current college students provide paraprofessional supports to the school district, allowing them to further their educational experiences while providing a crucial service to the district.
- Students in the program are offered deliberate course pathways that allow students from any field the opportunity to be exposed to positive teaching experiences and explore becoming a teacher.
- There is never just one thing that is keeping teachers out of communities that need them. Some of the challenges include:
 - Housing
 - Compensation
 - Lack of Professional Development/Advancement Opportunities
 - Feeling overworked and stretched too thin
 - Lack of mentorship and coaching
- Additionally, a lot of this is a marketing concern. Communities can work to market themselves as a more welcoming climate and culture in an effort to recruit and retain more teachers.
- Districts can also partner with universities to make remote learning and licensure more of a possibility for rural teachers.

RESOURCES

- [The New York Times | "Teaching in the Pandemic: 'This is Not Sustainable'":](#) Teacher burnout could erode instructional quality, stymie working parents, and hinder the reopening of the economy.
- [National Indian Education Association | National Educator Initiative Project](#)
- [Rural Partner School Benefit Program](#)
- [Rural Schools Collaborative](#)

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Closing Remarks

MODERATOR

- **Patrick Sims**, Director of Policy & Research, The Hunt Institute

RESOURCE EXPERTS

- **Senator Don Schaible**, Senate District 31 | Chair, Education Committee
- **Senator Kyle Davison**, Senate District 41
- **Senator Erin Oban**, Senate District 35 | Minority Caucus Leader
- **Representative Robin Weisz**, House District 14 | Chair, Human Services Committee
- **Representative Jon Nelson**, House District 14 | Chair, Appropriations Human Services Division

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The state has so many silos that money is not well-coordinated across agencies, and a coordinated system can be difficult when it has to get approval from the legislature.
- There are local initiatives that are doing great work and are working across multiple silos that can be scaled.
- There should be systemic change to create more efficiency, which will result in more resources for students.
- Another area where there are significant silos is within the legislature itself. There is little collaboration between education committees and health committees, and they typically do not take each other's actions into account. The interconnection is critical.
- The goal of these conversations was to be as action-oriented as possible. In the next session, the hope is that legislators will use their learnings to create systemic change that crosses silos, creates efficiencies, and serves students better than ever.
- The actions taken next should not be reactionary, and instead should take into account how the decisions will make a difference for students in five years, 10 years, and in the next generation.