



Nebraska Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on K-12 Education

During Spring 2020, K-12 public education in Nebraska was deeply impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, as were most aspects of society. Schools closed for in-person learning and switched, with little time for preparation, to online formats. For the 2020-2021 school year, districts implemented varying processes and many schools operated in a hybrid model, returning to a normal routine statewide for the 2022-2023 school year. During this time, there were detrimental and lasting effects on academic progress and mental health among youth which are still being addressed today. The pandemic increased the education gap for students based on race, ethnicity, poverty, and special education and has pushed the state to explore ways to better support teacher training and recruitment, as well as expanded broadband access throughout Nebraska.

How has youth mental health been affected by the pandemic and what has been done to address these outcomes?

As of June 2021, more than 140,000 young people throughout the country had lost a parent or grandparent caregiver to the virus. In addition to navigating grief, the shift to remote learning posted heightened challenges for students with disabilities, those with housing instability, LGBTQ+ youth, and those from racial and ethnic minorities. Young people had among the highest rates of reported loneliness among various social groups, at 38% during December 2020. Young people's daily routines and support networks, which are critical to their healthy development and well-being, were disrupted. In response to the mental health crisis, \$546 million were allocated to Nebraska's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief state plan as part of the federal government's American Rescue Plan and the state planned to prioritize funding for mental health services for students, staff, and communities.

What mental health challenges did students from marginalized communities face?

English language learners, who made up over 9% of the public-school student population in Nebraska in the 2023-2024 school year, experienced decreased enrollment and grades, and increased absenteeism. Remote learning further isolated these students, as many districts did not have capacity to provide high-quality English instruction in this format, further affecting their mental health. Students in Asian households faced an increase in hate

Key Points:

- Children and youth in Nebraska academically lost ground because of the pandemic with certain populations proving more impacted than others (notably students with special needs).
- Youth mental health challenges were exacerbated by the pandemic and still linger at higher levels than pre-pandemic.
- The educator shortage had a negative impact throughout the state, especially on special education students. The state continues to address this through recruitment and incentives.
- Nebraska educators and other care providers together engaged in both emergency and long-term new practices that make pandemic consequences in Nebraska smaller than in most other states. A state-level push for expanded broadband access is also expected to address challenges faced by impacted communities.

crimes towards their community, with hate crimes based on race, ethnicity, or ancestry reaching 70% in Nebraska in 2022, higher than the national average.

Per the 2022 U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 11.2% of Nebraska's population – many of them children – lived in poverty. Students living in poverty are more likely to be chronically absent and are vulnerable to facing lifelong academic, economic, and health disparities. In the 2022-2023 school year alone, 22% of Nebraska students were chronically absent.

Students in rural areas and smaller school districts lack sufficient qualified mental health professionals. The Committee heard from a panelist who was the only mental health provider within 45 miles and could not meet the community's needs in providing crisis care, after-hours care, or family services.

How did the pandemic exacerbate the digital divide in Nebraska and what has the state done to address it?

Over 14,000 K-12 students in Nebraska, many from marginalized communities, do not have internet access or a computer. When the shift to remote learning occurred,

school districts in Nebraska had to adjust quickly and many were able to address the student home internet access gap by issuing devices. For example, Wakefield Community Schools' School Board quickly approved an emergency purchase of \$250,000 of tablet computers to allow elementary students in this rural, half-Latino district to connect to their online lessons.

Students from rural areas or low-income households were less likely to expect real-time instruction, which complicated their transition to remote learning. Furthermore, students from Limited English-speaking households did not have the needed support in adapting to the new remote learning systems and oftentimes were already relied upon by their parents for support with technology. The Nebraska State Education Association led efforts to implement Teacher TV, which intentionally provided educational opportunities over television for students in rural areas and those lacking additional support at home.

In 2023, the state established the Nebraska Broadband Office to address the lack of quality broadband internet access statewide. Since then, the state has received federal approval for a \$405M investment to secure access to high-speed reliable Internet for every Nebraskan through the BEAD program. Additionally, the Nebraska Indian Community College, which serves the Omaha and Santee reservations, received \$1.2M in federal funds to expand broadband access to these reservations from 30% to 90% and will be a vital resource for these household, which tend to primarily rely on mobile devices for internet connection.

How did the Covid-19 pandemic affect special education students?

During the 2023-2024 school year, nearly 17% of the student population in Nebraska public schools were students with disabilities, almost a 9% increase since the 2019-2020 school year. Students with disabilities likely experienced the most disruption in their learning due to the pandemic. They were the least likely to benefit from remote learning due to difficulties in behavior or capacity, and many school districts were not prepared to provide special education services virtually. This was further complicated by an educator shortage of over 200 positions in the special education sector in Nebraska during the 2023-2024 school year, forcing schools to either close special education classrooms or have general education professionals stand in without proper training in addressing the needs of students with special needs or behavior issues. In Omaha, a district with one of the largest special needs student populations, three schools were left entirely without a special education instructor for the 2023-2024 school year.

Panelists spoke about how schools lack the infrastructure to support students with socioemotional needs and invisible disabilities, students who are truant with undiagnosed disabilities, and those who developed disabilities during the

pandemic. In Nebraska, schools are required to identify and evaluate all children in need of special education services per the requirement imposed by Child Find, a provision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which adds to the responsibilities schools face.

The Nebraska Department of Education has been implementing laws that focus on behavioral health training and resources for school staff and families, and in 2023, the state legislature approved over \$1B toward educational support, including paying the state's portion of special education and allocating grants aimed at retaining licensed teachers in the state.

In what other ways were Nebraska school communities and families impacted by the pandemic?

At the height of the pandemic, the reduction of school bus routes and bus driver shortage exposed the challenges that families from marginalized communities, especially those from rural and tribal communities, had in getting to school. While 82 out of 93 counties have some form of public transportation, the Nebraska Department of Transportation acknowledged that it can be a struggle to get to a bus stop. Limited transportation was also a barrier for students who needed to attend mental health appointments and for those from immigrant communities who have further difficulties in accessing reliable transportation.

During the shift to remote learning, parents and caregivers struggled to support students due to factors like maintaining their jobs as essential workers, language barriers, or being unfamiliar with the technology and academic content. A panelist who works as a healthcare professional spoke about her own difficulty navigating the various applications, passwords, and websites needed to complete a single school day's work, and showed how this can easily lead to feelings of anxiety and avoidance for any family. Families in smaller school districts were affected by limited Internet access and having to find alternative ways for students to complete school tasks, such as driving to Wal-Mart parking lots so their children could attend school virtually.

Additionally, the worsening of the educator shortage had a negative impact on student learning and development. Both urban and rural educators in Nebraska reported increased work stress and mental health issues and began retiring at the minimum age due to these challenges. Another reason for the shortage has been low pay for educators; in 2021, the average starting salary in Nebraska was \$37,187. In addition to prioritizing increased pay, balanced workloads, and easing certification requirements, panelists stated there needs to be a focus on teacher recruitment and retention, especially of a diverse workforce that reflects the student population. The state has been working to address this through apprenticeship programs and financial incentives for teacher recruitment.

Recommendations for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights to Issue (*selected*):

- The President and Congress should continue the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) which earmarks resources, specifically for mental health resources, to address the increase in demand post Covid-19.
- The President of the United States should direct the U.S. Department of Education to advance an agenda of strategic national investment in educator recruitment, leveraging a variety of effective strategies such as expanding support for Grow Your Own initiatives, student loan forgiveness and/or signing bonuses for high-need certification areas, residency-based teacher preparation programs, tuition-free pathways for paraprofessionals, paid mentorship and induction programs, and/or national service scholarships tied to teaching commitments.
- The Nebraska Legislature, the Nebraska Department of Education, and the Nebraska State Board of Education should develop a budget for and maintain side by side systems of equipment, personnel, and training for physical as well as virtual education, with the goal of being preparing for any future national health emergency analogous to COVID-19 and potentially mitigating negative impacts associated with any need to rapidly shift from one form of delivery of education to another on socially marginalized and disadvantaged groups that are part of its charge.
- The Nebraska Legislature, the Nebraska Department of Education, and the Nebraska State Board of Education should enhance emergency plans for more remote, rural, and disadvantaged communities include school support centers that would include internet facilities, mental health support, transportations hubs. These facilities would be centrally located in such communities and function when traditional school facilities must be closed or functionally is curtailed for an emergency. The Committee acknowledges the role local and regional collaborations played in a positive way during the pandemic for the continuity of education and the potential which such “centers” might offer for similar and greater collaboration in the event of a future similar emergency or other need for such “pooling” of resources and personnel.

The United States Commission on Civil Rights maintains 56 Advisory Committees. Each committee is composed of citizen volunteers familiar with local and state civil rights issues. The members assist the Commission with its fact-finding, investigative, and information dissemination functions.

This product is part of the Nebraska Advisory Committee’s study on The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on K-12 Education in the State. This policy-oriented summary of the published report is intended to aid stakeholders seeking solutions to this complex issue. You can find the full report here <https://www.usccr.gov/files/2025-09/ne-report-2025.pdf>.

The brief may rely on testimony, studies, and data generated from third parties. The views, findings, and recommendations expressed in this report are those of a majority of the North Carolina Advisory Committee, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Commission, nor do they represent the policies of the U.S. Government. For more information, please contact Victoria Moreno at vmoreno@usccr.gov.