



Efforts in Nebraska to Address the Achievement Gap

By EducationQuest Foundation

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As a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing access to higher education in Nebraska, EducationQuest Foundation closely monitors education-related statistics in our state, stays updated on statewide efforts that impact college access, and continually analyzes our own programs and services to find more ways to help Nebraska students make college possible.

In reviewing statistics released over the past year, it's evident that Nebraska has made great gains in its high school graduation and college-going rates. But the statistics aren't all positive – especially for Nebraska's low-income and minority students. This document provides those statistics and highlights a sampling of statewide efforts that are opening more doors to higher education for Nebraska's underrepresented students.

A look at Nebraska's education landscape

Following are statistics for Nebraska State Accountability (NeSA) test results, high school graduation rate, college preparedness, and college-going rate. These statistics demonstrate achievement gaps for minority students and, in the case of college-going rate, low-income students.

NeSA Test Results¹:

Percent Proficient

Student Groups	Reading	Math	Writing	Science
All students	77%	69%	68%	70%
Hispanic	63%	52%	55%	47%
American Indian/Alaska Native	49%	37%	45%	41%
Asian	76%	73%	72%	65%
Black or African American	54%	38%	45%	37%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	68%	56%	64%	56%
White	83%	77%	74%	79%

High School Graduation Rate

Nebraska's high school graduation rate for 2012-13² is 88.5 percent ranking our state second in the nation. The rate by race/ethnicity is:

- White (non-Hispanic) – 92.2 percent
- Asian – 76.5 percent
- Hispanic – 76.5 percent
- Native American – 72.4 percent
- Black (non-Hispanic) – 76.9 percent

¹ Source: Nebraska Department of Education - <http://reportcard.education.ne.gov/>

² Source: http://www.ccpe.state.ne.us/PublicDoc/Ccpe/Reports/progressReport/14_PR-Full_Report.pdf, p. 34

College Preparedness

The ACT College Readiness Percentages³ show that only 28% of Nebraska's high school graduates in the class of 2013 met or exceeded the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks in all four subject areas included in the ACT Assessment. The numbers by race/ethnicity are even lower:

- Hispanic – 10 percent
- Native American – 6 percent
- Black (non-Hispanic) – 5 percent
- Comparably, 33 percent of White (non-Hispanic) and 32 percent of Asian students met or exceeded the benchmarks.

College-Going Rate⁴

Nebraska received positive publicity in 2013 when it was announced that the state's college-continuation rate was 69.5 percent ranking us seventh in the nation. However, the college-going rate for low-income students is only 57.2 percent. No study has been conducted to estimate Nebraska's college-going rate by race/ethnicity.

Statewide Efforts that are Addressing the Achievement Gap

Every day, EducationQuest monitors statewide news outlets for education-related news stories. Through this process, we learn about efforts that are addressing the achievement gap for Nebraska's low-income and minority students. This document provides a summary of news stories we found from January 2013 through April 2014 that showcase these efforts. While we realize there are many more efforts happening around the state, it is our hope that this sampling will serve as an inspiration or catalyst for communities, schools or organizations that wish to seek out or develop similar solutions.

Federal and National Initiatives

- (February 2014) - President Obama announced the formation of a \$200 million, five-year private initiative known as **My Brother's Keeper** that will search for solutions to problems young black and Hispanic men face with early-childhood development, school readiness, educational opportunity, parenting, and the criminal justice system. *Read news story...*
- (April 2014) - President Obama announced the distribution of 24 **Youth CareerConnect Grants** totaling \$100 million that will better prepare high school students for college or careers. Omaha Westside High School is among the 24 recipients and will receive \$2.6 million. The grant will allow the district to hire a K-12 career coordinator as part of an ongoing effort to build partnerships with businesses in the community. *Read news story.*
- (February 2014) - Nebraska will receive \$2.45 million from the U.S. Department of Education as part of ongoing efforts to turn around low-performing schools. Nebraska schools identified as persistently low-achieving were eligible to apply for federal **School Improvement Grants** through the Nebraska Department of Education. *Read news story.*
- (April 2014) - Norfolk Public Schools announced that it will receive a \$1.2 million **21st Century Learning Community Grant** that will be spent on youth programs. The plan is to use two school-based sites and one off-campus, satellite location. The programs will emphasize career readiness and academic skills. *Read news story.*

³ Source: http://www.ccpe.state.ne.us/PublicDoc/Ccpe/Reports/progressReport/14_PR-Full_Report.pdf, p. 48

⁴ Source: http://www.ccpe.state.ne.us/PublicDoc/Ccpe/Reports/progressReport/14_PR-Full_Report.pdf, p. 65

- (March 2014) - Educational Services Unit No. 16 received a \$400,000 **Distance Learning Fund Grant** from the United States Department of Agriculture to expand education for students statewide. ESU 16 offers 125 secondary courses to schools that participate in the program. Students can get dual credit for many courses. [Read news story.](#)
- (February 2013) - **Educare-Lincoln**, a research-based child care center for low-income and at-risk children, opened its doors adjacent to Belmont Elementary School. The center, part of the [national Educare initiative](#), is a joint venture of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, Lincoln Public Schools, the University of Nebraska Foundation and the Community Action Partnership of Lancaster and Saunders Counties. [Read news story.](#)
- (February 2013) - The Lincoln YMCA received two grants from **jcp cares**, JC Penney's charitable giving program. They were awarded to the YMCA-sponsored Community Learning Centers at Elliott Elementary and Lefler Middle schools. The grants provide children, who could otherwise not afford to participate, with access to the after-school programs. [Read news story.](#)

State Initiatives

- (August 2013) - Lincoln Public Schools (LPS) is one of eight Nebraska school districts selected to participate in a state-run, three-year **pilot program** that ensures every junior in the pilot high schools will take the ACT college entrance exam at no cost. LPS officials say giving the test to all students exposes the third who wouldn't have taken it to the possibilities of college and dual-credit courses. [Read news story.](#) [Read EducationQuest white paper](#)
- (December 2013) - Kearney Public Schools (KPS) was awarded a \$174,000 grant from the **Sixpence Early Learning Fund**, a statewide public-private initiative that serves children and pregnant mothers statewide who would not otherwise have access to high-quality, affordable early childhood education and parenting education. The grant will allow KPS to administer an early education program for children age 3 and younger. [Read news story.](#) Read related [Omaha World-Herald editorial.](#)

Community/Corporate Initiatives

- (May 2013) - Over 600 disadvantaged youth who participate in the [Avenue Scholars Program](#) were honored at a luncheon celebrating their achievements. The program places mentors in seven Omaha-area high schools to work daily with students. Nearly 99 percent of Avenue Scholars graduate from high school and nearly all attend college. [Read editorial.](#)
- (November 2013) - Construction began on a state-mandated \$4.6 million **Learning Community** in north Omaha that will provide programming aimed at raising the academic achievement of children living in poverty and facing language barriers. It is scheduled to open in September 2014. [Read news story.](#)
- (January 2013) - Grand Island Public Schools implemented **Sankofa** – a program that targets at-risk middle school students and provides programming that aims to improve their leadership and decision-making skills so they stay out of trouble. Funded by a Catholic Health Initiatives grant, the program is scheduled to run three years. [Read news story.](#)
- (February 2014) - Omaha's **NorthStar Foundation for Boys** is opening an after-school center for boys in May 2014 at the Omaha Home for Boys campus, an area plagued by gang violence. The center will focus on academic achievement, athletics, healthy lifestyles, arts, and employment readiness with boys in fifth through 12th grades. It will be the first all-male after-school facility in Omaha. [Read news story.](#)

- (July 2013) - The Center for People in Need in Lincoln expanded education services in Lancaster County through **Access to Computer Technology**, a program that provides laptops and Internet service to low-income students attending Southeast Community College and working toward college degrees. [Read news story.](#)

District and School-Based Initiatives

- (April 2014) - Omaha Public Schools (OPS) passed the district's first **strategic plan** in 10 years. The plan proposes seven core areas for OPS including improved engagement with families, higher graduation rates and state test scores, and less chronic absenteeism. [Read news story.](#)
- (June 2013) - Lincoln Public Schools (LPS) announced that it will replace the federal grants that have funded LPS's **Community Learning Centers**, thus allowing the centers to continue. The Community Learning Centers provide before- and after-school educational programs that serve more than 5,300 children at 25 sites in the most impoverished areas of the city. [Read news story.](#)
- (April 2014) - Scottsbluff High School is implementing a **Ninth Grade Transition Program** that aims to develop habits of mind and work ethic in students' daily performance, while creating, initiating and practicing rigor in academics. It will also allow students to establish quality working relationships with teachers, administrators and support staff. [Read news story.](#)
- (May 2013) - Scottsbluff High School implemented **Choices** and **ReConnect** programs to help students who prefer a smaller class size or those who need to catch up on their education [Read news story.](#)
- (September 2013) - **Columbus High School** implemented "**Midday Academic Time**" (MAT) to give students who need extra help and instruction time to meet with teachers. All teachers at the high school are made available at least once a week during the academic and advisement time. [Read news story.](#)
- (April 2014) - At **Gretna Public Schools**, students are required to complete every assignment, project, quiz, and test – and to get at least a passing grade of 70 percent. Students who don't meet these requirements must come in over lunch, during teacher planning periods, before or after school, or during breaks to get help and finish or redo the work. As a result, students rarely fail classes, and the district's four-year graduation rate in recent years has been 98 percent or higher. [Read news story.](#)
- (November 2013) - Efforts at **Lincoln Northeast High School** were highlighted as a contributing factor to an increase in Lincoln Public Schools' high school graduation rate. Every week, Northeast students who are failing at least three classes are put on a "watch" list. Counselors and administrators meet each week to talk about those students and get them the help they need. [Read news story.](#)
- (March 2013) - At **Miller Park Elementary School** in Omaha nearly all students are from low-income families and most are black. Typically these types of students have below-average test scores. But last year, 76 percent of black fourth-graders were proficient in math. This is an anomaly in Omaha where a vast achievement gap exists for black students. The school credits its success to high expectations, good teaching practices, smart use of data to refine instruction, and a **commitment to getting parents involved.** [Read news story.](#)

- (February 2014) - Nearly all students at **Wasmer Elementary School** in Grand Island are low-income, but last year the school had the highest math and reading proficiency of the 77 Nebraska public elementary schools in which 75 percent or more of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The school credits its success to efforts such as focusing on each child's needs, hiring experienced, highly educated teachers, teaching a solid math curriculum, holding students accountable for homework, and analyzing test data to target instruction. *Read Grand Island Independent news story.* *Read Omaha World-Herald news story.*

Mentoring Programs

- (May 2013) - The leaders of **Partnership 4 Kids**, an Omaha-based youth mentoring program, announced a new alliance with three other mentoring groups – *TeamMates*, *Avenue Scholars* and *College Possible*. The alliance is expected to eliminate duplication and provide a continuum of care that will take young people from kindergarten to careers. *Read news story.*
- (August 2013) - The **Midlands Mentoring Partnership**, based in Omaha, announced a campaign aimed at recruiting new mentors. Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert proclaimed August 2013 as mentoring month to help with the campaign. *Read news story.*

College-Based Efforts

- (April 2014) - Two students from the inaugural **Nebraska College Preparatory Academy (NCPA)** at Grand Island Senior High School graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) in May 2013. NCPA is a UNL program for low-income, first-generation students at Grand Island Senior High and Omaha North Magnet. It promises students who take rigorous college-prep courses and maintain a minimum grade point average in high school that they will have all direct college expenses paid as students at UNL. *Read news story.*
- (February 2014) - The **Learn to Dream Scholarship Program**, a partnership between Southeast Community College (SCC), Union Bank and Nelnet to make college possible for low-income students, marked its fifth year. Since 2008, SCC has awarded 2,856 scholarships, and 1,876 of those students, or 68 percent, have enrolled. *Read news story.* Other tuition assistance programs in Nebraska for low-income students include the University of Nebraska's *Collegebound* program and the Nebraska State College System's *Advantage* program.

Legislative Bills

- Following are bills passed by the 2014 Nebraska State Legislature that will support education-related initiatives.
 - *LB 438* will allow the State Board of Education to designate up to three “priority schools” that will receive an intervention team to help the school address issues. *Read news story.*
 - *LB 967* will provide \$2,000,000 from the Education Innovation Fund for school district reorganization support grants, and an intent for all children to have access to early childhood education programs in the year prior to kindergarten, and allow lottery funds allocated to reorganization support grants and early childhood education.
 - *LB 1103* forms a common vision for the future of education in Nebraska. Students, teachers and local business leaders would all be involved in the discussions-- taking place everywhere from board rooms to school lunch rooms across the state. *Read news story.*

How EducationQuest is addressing the achievement gap

EducationQuest provides several programs that target low-income, minority students.

- Through school-based services, EducationQuest places college-planning specialists at high schools with low college-going rates to help students with the college planning and financial aid process.
- The College Access Grants program provides funding to Nebraska schools with low college-going rates. The grants allow the schools to develop and enhance college access efforts – primarily for at-risk students. Since 2006, EducationQuest has awarded 51 grants totaling \$2.5 million.
- EducationQuest has two need-based scholarship programs. Each year, the EducationQuest Scholarship Program disburses \$1.4 million in scholarship funds to Nebraska's non-profit colleges for distribution to students who show need. The Reaching Your Potential Scholarship Program provides renewable need-based scholarships to students with obstacles to college.
- Through the Outreach Services program, EducationQuest works directly with Nebraska's community agencies providing college access services to clients who wish to build a better life through higher education.

For more information about EducationQuest's college access services – or to discuss ways your community, school or organization can find ways to improve college access, contact Tricia Dunn, EducationQuest Director of Media Relations, 800.303.3745, ext. 6666 or triciad@educationquest.org.