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Education Committee October 27, 2020
Rough Draft

GROENE: [RECORDER MALFUNCTION] because, of course, some people want to leave about 3:30 today to go to Omaha, not me, but a lot do. The focus of this hearing will be to gather input from parents on how COVID-19 has affected their family's home life and incomes as their children have had to learn from home. Testimony will be from individuals discussing how they have adapted, the cost and options they have chosen to educate their children, from organizations who offer parents options on learning from home, and from public school organizations reporting on the effect COVID-19 has had on in-school enrollment. At the end of the testimony, committee researcher Nicole Barrett will be giving a recap of the research she did on this issue in preparation of this hearing. Our list of testifiers has continually changed due to who's in quarantine and who isn't and-- but-- and also, like I said, we're gonna try to move it along. I'm having the clerk, committee clerk, put a ten-minute timer on it. We're gonna try to get everybody, questions and testimony, within a ten-minute period. So when you're testifying, it depends how long-- we'll put the yellow light on at five minutes, all right, so that you know-- if you've got a lot to say, testify. The members of the committee can talk to you later if you want to stay around for questions, because some of them are gonna have to leave, but I wanted them to be able to hear-- you guys came from a long distance. I wanted many members of the committee to be able to hear your testimony, so we're gonna try to push everybody through. So let's get started. Commissioner Matt Blomstedt, who has a busy schedule, is gonna-- he should have the most updated numbers on enrollment. I think they were reported the first of October. So, Matt, do you want to come forward? Yes. Say-- you still have to say your name and spell it.

MATT BLOMSTEDT: If I can. I mean, it's a [INAUDIBLE]. Good afternoon. My name's Matt Blomstedt. Last name is B-l-o-m-s-t-e-d-t, and I'm the Commissioner of Education for the State of Nebraska. So it's-- it's a pleasure to be with you. I actually gave you a little bit of kind of outline of some of the-- kind of the most recent numbers. And I appreciate Nicole's-- like I kind of asked. I said, what types of things would you like to hear from? So I tried to keep this in alignment there. I just will say that, obviously, even since the spring, it's been a-- been quite a challenging time for schools. I'm very proud of what schools have been able to do. You know, keeping kids in school actually pretty quickly became our-- our push and our thought and our interest, and trying to find a way that we could do that and do that safely has been absolutely critical. So when you look at the spring, we roughly had 45-- 45 days of where kids went remote

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almost completely. Right? And so-- and I think that was kind of with a set of mixed results on how folks were organized to be able to do that work. And then as we entered into the-- into the fall, I have some preliminary numbers about kind of where enrollments are, were. They're not exactly perfect yet, so I'll kind of put that caveat. We'll kind of-- got some updating and cleaning on the-- on the data that we'll have to do. But you can kind of see the-- where the public school enrollment in 2019-2020 compared to 2021, that you actually can see that there was a re-- a reduction in overall reported enrollment. Again, we'll double check all those different numbers, but they probably do correlate, and actually nonpublic as well, so non-- nonpublic also went down and I suspect they don't have an absolute correlation, but I-- I suspect again, in part, because of-- of folks choosing to do some type of homeschooling or exempt school numbers. And you can see there the exempt school Rule 13 filings-- boy, my-- I'm gonna have to get bifocals someday, I can tell. Sorry about that. My aging is hitting me now. But we had-- there's kind of filings and then number of students. So actually what happens is a school might-- exempt school might file so you might have a-- a parent with three kids, for instance, so that's why you might have a discrepancy between filings and the number of students. And so you can see, I mean, pretty substantial increase in the number of folks who chose-- chose to do some level of homeschooling, really an increase from-- from prior year, of number of students anyway, from about 8,800 to about almost 14,000. I checked with our team just yesterday a little bit. We have people that are going back and forth, by the way, so, you know, that maybe they chose to do exempt school status and chose to go back to school and vice versa, probably some of those, those scenarios as well. And so we'll keep tracking that data, so I think it will kind of fluctuate. But overall, I expect that we'll see that. Certainly, as schools entered remote learning and even just the challenges of what the school year might look like, we're really concerned about several different areas that there was a lot of un-- what we called unfinished learning. There was-- really, the opportunity to learn was actually kind of diminished for a period of time. And we continue to have some students that are-- is-- if they're not in school and are taking some type of remote option, we're trying to track what that-- those impacts might be overall. Certainly, as we looked at-- looking at our data, our interim assessment, our-- it's our-- the measures of academic progress that most schools across the state use. We can at least start to begin to measure that and understand what the impacts were and-- and have been throughout the pandemic time frame. We are, you know, I think, appropriately concerned about social/emotional impacts of the

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pandemic time frame. You know, when-- and beyond even just the students, I think, obviously, with parents and those that have had a lot of uncertainty and impacts on jobs and-- and other services and their availability to kind of stay in-- kind of in those routines that I think are so important for families has been a challenge and so we-- we definitely see that. A lot was done obviously in the spring and continues to be done around feeding and ensuring that-- that meals were being provided. So I provided you some rough numbers here for that-- that particular work. If you have some interest in that, we can surely get-- get you some more. And then we had done kind of a needs analysis in where schools were at with technology and devices and certainly saw that, again, depending on situations, but around the state where students and families might not have had access to broadband and for different reasons. Some of them may be financial, others just for technology purposes, didn't have access, and so continue to manage and watch for-- for that and have used a lot of the-- the funding from the-- the GEER funds, which are the government-- Governor's Education-- Emergency Education resource funding, as well as some of the CARES Act funds that schools might have used, so. Also on-- on here, probably getting to a little bit of the money on the second page here, you can see where we focus some energy and attention on-- on those various funds and, you know, overall, the big numbers, I guess, are how the ESSER allocation, and I'm probably not gonna remember exactly what ESSER stands for, for you, but I'll-- that's the CARES Act funds that went directly to schools, about \$58.6 million that went to LEAs. We'll have a better sense as we get more reports back on-- on the types of things that those funds were used for. But they were permissible to be used for a lot of-- a lot of COVID relief emergency types of scenarios, including-- including also covering contracts that might have otherwise been canceled. Busing was a big one at that time and other things that were dedicated in the-- in the spring. But many schools obviously used that to try to upgrade technology in the-- in the moment as-- as they could. And-- and same thing with the GEER funds, and so there's a bit of a breakdown of-- of where those are at from what we know right now. And again, we'll have-- we'll have some more numbers, I think, as-- as we go further into the fall. You know, certainly we've had quite a few federal waivers on different programs and-- and have applied for and administered those. Another big challenge, I think, for schools was just needed some flexibility around rules and regs as they-- as they tried to deal with instructional hours and other things, and we continue to try to work with our schools. I-- I think I-- I started meeting pretty much weekly

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with all of the superintendents and-- and private school administrators statewide. I think on March-- I want to say 13 was the first time. That seems like two decades ago now, but really great communication back and forth and have appreciated kind of everyone's willingness to kind of engage in that. You know, we-- I-- I think there's probably, and I'll kind of end on this so I can take any questions you have, but I think the reality for the moment for us is you kind of look at where we're at and the types of things that we might need to address or impact, I think, going forward as a state, probably across the nation, are setting up some of those large-scale systems that are gonna actually help-- help in the-- in the moment, just like we've done on broadband, and I think we've worked really well with the Office of the Chief Information Officer for the-- for the state to think about strategies to make those-- those types of investments, to make sure that's there. We've tried and I put, I think, in your packet-- I don't know if I've got a copy myself, but I-- I-- this hierarchy of digital learning needs, I think, I put in there and I'll kind of end on this. You know, the types of things that I think are gonna be important for us to kind of sustain remote learning, actually provide access to-- to students, regardless of where they're at in-- in their learning environment, making sure that we have infrastructure and devices, obviously, has been part of that strategy, but then software systems, like we've-- we've scaled some of those up where schools were having to go out and buy them individually. I think it makes sense to have them kind of collectively purchase. And we've worked with the ESU Coordinating Council and others to try to help-- help manage this. Certainly, thinking about digital content, that becomes an important kind of-- I want to call it a safety net of content and-- and availability of that is really important and then continuing to work with-- and I'm gonna say professional development, but even in kind of the work with parents themselves, like understanding where they can be most helpful at any moment in time in a-- in a student's learning experience, regardless of the environment that they're in, is actually kind of a future need, I think, for-- for us as well. So, Senator--

GROENE: I'm gonna interrupt you and ask a question.

MATT BLOMSTEDT: Sure.

GROENE: Of the public school enrollment, or even the nonpublic schools, do you know how many are distance learning? I-- I ate out last night. I always visit with the waitress or the waiter-- waiter and ask them what they're doing. This was a student teacher in LPS and

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she said three out of her class were distance learning. Do you know how many parents are home with distance learners in the public school system?

MATT BLOMSTEDT: So like in a-- in a Lincoln scenario where you have certain percentage of their students that that's become their routine because they're in that kind of three/two portion, so I don't have the exact count in front of me. It's something we can kind of work on. But we have-- at one point I was looking across the state, we had maybe about 15 to 17 percent of our students that were in some type of remote learning. And I'll have to verify that-- that for you.

GROENE: Across the state?

MATT BLOMSTEDT: Yeah, across the state, at least for a part of their time. And maybe it was 100 percent.

GROENE: The parents have made decisions because of mask or because of their health situations--

MATT BLOMSTEDT: Yeah.

GROENE: --or whatever they-- they've decided to keep their children home, but going through the public schools.

MATT BLOMSTEDT: Yeah. Yeah. In many cases that was the case. In fact, I-- I even saw folks bring in homeschool applications that say, well, we don't really want to homeschool, and I said, well, you put some expectations on your school to provide some of those resources. And-- and some chose to be homeschooled and some didn't but, again, really trying to encourage that they're working with their schools. Some school districts were probably set up better to be able to provide that re-- that kind of remote instruction based on the model that they had. And then many other places have been pretty comfortable at nearly-- I would say nearly 100 percent of their students in school.

GROENE: Thank you. Appreciate it. Any other questions? Senator Brewer.

BREWER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. All right. I have been in the middle of a number of these battles between the schools and, I guess, the parents in some cases. But it also kind of bleeds over into whatever health district and some of the social workers. And the issue is that I have so much diversity within the district. For example, Gordon-Rushville made the decision, 100 percent masks, no questions asked, no use of the lockers. I mean, they-- they kind of went to one

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edge. And then I've got others that are on the other end of the spectrum. So I get calls from both, get from parents on one saying, listen, you've got to-- got to make them back off. And, and I said, well, you understand, that's not really my job. That's a school board. That's an administration. You know, that's why you elect people to your school board. If we micromanage everything from Lincoln, it's not gonna be very pretty. And they said, well, if you don't, if you don't do anything, then we're gonna go see Matt. Well, do you get--

MATT BLOMSTEDT: I get a lot of those, I suppose.

BREWER: Do you end up having to referee some of this or do you referee it and what do you say?

MATT BLOMSTEDT: Yeah. Well, a lot of it-- and when we started again, you know, we probably learned a lot along the way about what's really working in schools and keeping, you know, kind of the spread down. You know, right now, you know, I can't guarantee there's no spread in the schools that are following all those protocols, but it-- we see very limited amount of spread in places that are following those various protocols. We were also very hopeful, I think, is maybe the best word, that we-- when we set up these risk dials with local public health, that those places that would have been in green and have very low incidents could have run without masks. Right? As-- as you kind of go up, the concern is that the risk gets higher and higher and-- and that-- that's it. And I think for the most part, when you start having those conversations, we got a few instances where that's become tougher from a conversation standpoint. But-- but, yeah, I'm refereeing a few of those, definitely.

BREWER: Well, and some-- some of them felt strong enough that they pulled kids out of school and would rather homeschool them than to have them do the masks, which I didn't necessarily think is probably the right way to go. Some of them actually pulled them out of school and moved them to Hay Springs or other places because they felt that strongly about it. So, you know, if you're getting any of that kind of feedback and rumbling that I'm getting, you must have pretty long days because it's--

MATT BLOMSTEDT: About-- about as soon as I wake up, usually around 4:30, until about 10:30 at night. Yep, that's kind of how it's going.

BREWER: All right. Well, it's good to know it's not just in my district, but--

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MATT BLOMSTEDT: Yeah. Yeah. No, I appreciate you taking some of those calls though. I know it's tough.

BREWER: I don't know if I did much to help, but thank you.

MATT BLOMSTEDT: Yep.

GROENE: Any other questions? Senator Linehan.

LINEHAN: Thank you, Chairman Groene. And thank you, Commissioner, for being here. So on the front page of your handout, it-- there's-- down here at the bottom it says 31,472 students were chronically absent before the move to virtual learning.

MATT BLOMSTEDT: Yeah.

LINEHAN: So that's 10 percent-- well, a little less than 10 percent. But is that normal? Is that gone up over the years, gone down?

MATT BLOMSTEDT: Yeah, we really-- we actually really started to take an aggressive look at chronic absenteeism, so kind of included here because we believe that's probably one of the best data points that we would have around student engagement. And so we really started just tracking that over the last two or three years. So I don't know that I have a long-term. We obviously-- it's actually the-- one of the lowest in the nation, if I remember a data report on that at one point, but-- but it's still too high for me. Right? So--

LINEHAN: Right, 10 percent--

GROENE: Can I inject something? Is this-- that number before COVID or after COVID?

MATT BLOMSTEDT: I think that one is actually-- again, I've got to use my-- oh, I'm looking at a different one here.

LINEHAN: It says before.

MATT BLOMSTEDT: Yeah, this is before. This is the prior to, yeah. And we're-- we're worried because that-- my line, I think, with superintendents when they call and say, hey, look, we're having a hard time reaching X student because, you know, they're not responding in this environment, I-- and my first question is, well, was that a student that was responding before? Right? I mean, I-- I think that

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some of these disengagement issues certainly predate the-- the-- the virus, so.

LINEHAN: So do-- are you tracking how many-- I was on a conference call with a bunch of people from all over the country. And one of the individuals is in a big school district in Florida. And I think they said in Tampa there was like 7,200 kids that no one has heard from since March. Do we have that kind of issue here in Nebraska?

MATT BLOMSTEDT: No, we're actually-- I-- I was surprised. I also heard from a colleague in Michigan where they didn't know where 150,000 students were. And we're-- I think we're fortunate in-- and I-- I would say this one good thing on our requirements around students have to be accounted for either in a public school or private school or an exempt school, and-- and so we have a pretty good grasp of that. I'm not saying there's not a student who might disappear out of the state. We see that sometimes and-- and maybe can't track down. But-- but I-- I feel like we have a pretty good grasp on that.

LINEHAN: OK. Thank you very much.

MATT BLOMSTEDT: You're welcome.

GROENE: Any other-- Senator Murman.

MURMAN: Just a little follow-up on that 31,000 students that were chronically absent. That-- so that was before the move to virtual learning but after COVID was in the country--

MATT BLOMSTEDT: Yeah.

MURMAN: --so that was part of the factor?

MATT BLOMSTEDT: Yeah. I-- I think what we're really worried about when we look at that is if we weren't doing a-- if those students weren't being really well engaged in that setting, imagine how much more difficult that might be in a remote setting. So in-- in simplest terms, that's what we're-- I'm trying to highlight.

GROENE: So that-- that's a truancy number.

MATT BLOMSTEDT: Yeah. Well, it's not-- it-- it's not necessarily a truancy number because they actually-- truancy would be there wouldn't be excused-- it's the number of days that they miss per quarter or-- or semester a year, yeah.

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MURMAN: And then another question about homeschooling, the big increase in homeschooling. Do you have any-- did they ask for materials from the school when they're homeschooling--

MATT BLOMSTEDT: Oh, in--

MURMAN: --or do they go to an alternative type of homeschool
[INAUDIBLE]

MATT BLOMSTEDT: What they-- what they-- what we require is that they actually kind of submit what their education program is gonna look like. And, you know, they just have to submit to us the application and then we review that. And we're out-- we'll admit we're a little bit backlogged in reviewing their applicat-- what their exact materials are. But I do then always encourage homeschool folks to work with their schools for materials and other things, too, because I-- I feel like that's really important, especially in this moment in time where people are taking up exempt school status that had never-- never done it before. And-- and then the-- like I said, by the time the dust kind of settles on-- on this year, I think we'll see that quite a few started as homeschool and we've had quite a few stories of them returning to school because they felt more comfortable eventually.

MURMAN: OK. And so do you have any indication or a view, do they typically request a lot of materials from the school district or do they go to like a homeschool curriculum?

MATT BLOMSTEDT: I-- I think they use like other forms of curriculum. And we've been trying to kind of point folks towards-- and we've got a few good kind of contacts for people to make if they're entering that for the first time and-- and different groups that-- that kind of-- at least we can steer them towards some-- some materials. And if they ask, then we certainly do that.

MURMAN: Thank you.

WALZ: I have a quick question.

GROENE: One more and then we've got to move on.

WALZ: Thank you. I was just curious, do all public and private schools in Nebraska, do they send you a report on their plan? Do they send you a report on their immediate plan regarding the pandemic and the future?

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MATT BLOMSTEDT: We've done a couple-- a couple different things. So actually in the spring, if you remember how suddenly that-- that came about, we asked schools to file with-- with us a continuity of learning plan. And so we didn't-- kind of necessitated letting people be as creative as they could, so we didn't put a lot of format to that, necessarily. We just said, send us what you're gonna do to accomplish that and how you're gonna get through that, that school year. Then in-- in June, we laid out kind of what our guidance or our expectations for the school year would look like. And, in fact, I had one of those statewide calls with superintendents today and we outlined by November 1, they need to file with us just their assurances of what they're meeting within the accreditation rule already. And we're really encouraging them, as like if you're-- if there's something you're not meeting still, tell us that you're meeting-- it's not to penalize them. It's actually to get a better sense of what's more of a challenge and otherwise. And so we'll continue to kind of evaluate where that's at. Most schools are really trying to meet the requirements that are within accreditation, but they are worried about the number of hours. And so, for instance, you know, teachers are under quite a bit of pressure right now, so we actually provided specific guidance that allows schools to use some of the instruction hours to allow for professional development or planning time or a way to balance kind of that-- that immediate need. And so we'll see how that gets reported back to us over-- you know, over the weeks and months ahead, I guess. But-- but I think for the most part, schools are looking to hit the requirements underneath the rule.

WALZ: Thank you.

GROENE: Thank you, sir.

MATT BLOMSTEDT: Yeah. Thank you.

GROENE: Like I said, we want the committee to hear as many as they possibly can because folks have driven here and prepared for this. So Brynna Luke, from L-- an LPS parent who has taken options for her students, for her children.

BRYNNA LUKE: Thank you. Yeah, my name's Brynna Luke. I have-- currently I have three children in LPS. My oldest graduated two years ago. I have a 10th grader, an 11th grader, and a 1st grader. And when school was canceled back in March, we all just brought them home. I work as a real estate agent, and I was doing that full time, pretty

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much 12-hour days back before COVID hit. My husband works as a molecular biologist here for a biotech company. And so when March hit, it was-- it was tough. I'll just say it was really tricky to-- to balance everything out. My kids were home all of a sudden. To cut it short, my daughter, my six-year-old daughter, who is really the extrovert of our family, she's-- we're five introverts and then her. She kind of fell into a deep depression. It was hard. A kid who never cried, cried every single day. As a mom, it was hard to watch and to try to fill the roles with remote learning, which was failing, honestly, in March, because I understand it was brand new, no one really knew what was going on, but it was failing, for the most part, for Ella [PHONETIC], for her. My older kids, they're pretty self-motivated. I'm blessed to have good kids who do the work every day. They've been identified as gifted. They're in the AP classes, "diff," since they were in elementary, so they just kind of fought, you know, fought through it and got it done. But it was nice when summer came. We didn't have to worry about that whole "what are we gonna do?" So as summer came, we just listened to the news, waited to just hear what was gonna happen. We didn't know what was gonna happen. And every day it seemed to change. You know, we understood that everyone was trying to do what was best for 40,000 kids in Lincoln. We just watched the news every day and see what the decision was. At one point, it was late July, I think, they decided that everyone was gonna go back 100 percent. And I said, great, that's what we're gonna do. And my daughter, my littlest, was really excited. My oldest kid-- my-- I call them my big kids. So my big kids were just like, OK, fine. We're a very predictable and organized family. We eat dinner at the same time every night. We know everyone-- where everyone's gonna be any given day. We just are an organized, predictable family. And so to have this constant question of what was gonna happen for the school year was really taking its toll on us emotionally and mentally. We just didn't know. My work had been completely gone by then with COVID hitting, so we took a little loss there, but fortunately we were-- my husband was still at work. His work actually doubled because he is one of the companies doing the research for all the vaccines. So-- so we've been blessed to still have income. I will say that hasn't been a huge trial, but my husband's gray right now. He's just gray. He doesn't sleep. He goes to work at 2:00 in the morning and gets home at 4:00. He's just tired. So anyway, it came time to register the kids for school. We registered the big kids for high school. It was that very same day that Steve Joel came and announced that they were gonna do 50 percent remote learning. And that kind of was like a punch to the gut because, again, we like predictability. And I understand we're

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all in the same boat and we weren't acting very special or anything, but it was like, oh, now what are we gonna do, you know, because we've had this plan and we're gonna go forward with this plan and we're gonna do it. So I gave the kids the option. I said, OK, guys, you can do this 50 percent plan or we can homeschool. A little bit of premise, I have a daughter who has Crohn's ulcerative colitis, asthma, and arthritis, so she is kind of in that category of immunocompromised. We weren't terribly worried about her, but I do have to keep her in mind, you know, and so-- but I ultimately said, you guys are old enough to make this decision on your own, you're 15, 16, what do you want to do? Whatever you want to do, we'll make it work. My daughter immediately said she wants to homeschool. And I kind of just took a sigh and said, OK. I've never homeschooled before. I have-- I have several friends who what I would call professional homeschoolers. They've been doing it. They come from families who were homeschooled. It's just-- it's in their blood, basically. And I was never one of those. I never wanted to be a homeschooling parent. I liked the break. All right? And I also understand and support and admire and respect teachers who are so good at what they do. And I speak very specifically for elementary school teachers since I've had three go through and I have one now. They just know how to relate to these kids. They're good at what they do. And I just have-- never have been. So my youngest-- my son was-- my 10th grader was like, no, we'll go, I'll do 50 percent. But then he realized that all of his friends were on a different track or plan than he was based on their last names, so he just said, we're gonna homeschool, and so we had nine days until school started and I started making calls to all my friends who homeschool. And I say, what do I do? What do I do? What do I do? What I do? I met with a couple of them. One of them gave me a stack of books, said, here's what you do for history, here's what you do for math, here's what you do for chemistry, for precalculus, for physics, topics I have no idea how to teach. I don't know anything about them. I had another friend who said, if you want to homeschool your littlest, then just let me know and I'll help you and-- but we had decided to send my littlest to school, because they were 100 percent and because of having gone through six months of a little girl who cried every day because she just wanted to be near kids her own age. I said she needs to go back to school. If they offer it, she has to go back just for her emotional well-being. So she currently is in, 100 percent. My two kids are home, my big kids. We had to adjust our schedules dramatically, so they do-- we still haven't even received our confirmation level from-- letter from the state yet. We-- we have-- I think it was back in the very beginning of August we applied to be homeschooling, and then we still

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haven't gotten it back. But we just keep caring for it because we know that they're completely swamped. So basically, I-- I teach my kids finance and classic literature every day. We spend about two hours doing that, then I go to work for about four hours. During that four hours, they are home and they do their hard classes, what I call them: chemistry, physics, precalculus. And we have online programs and supplemental materials for that. So I ordered textbooks. I ordered things. My husband's a chemist, so-- or a microbiologist, but-- so he can help my son with his chemistry. It's not perfect. I'll say it's not perfect. And I'm very, very tired. I'm just mentally tired. I feel like I'm barely treading water above level every day. I just-- trying to manage everything, trying to-- and it's not just physically, it's just emotionally it's a toll-- it's taking a toll on us. Right? But we know it's the best thing that we could have done because we needed the routine. We needed to know what to expect. And the second we said we're gonna homeschool, it just felt great just to know what we were going to do. We didn't have to listen to the news. We didn't have to listen to the radio to see what they were going to decide for us. We just had control over it and said, here's what we're gonna do. The goal would be hopefully everything is-- not back to normal, but hopefully everything's kind of normalized, as well as normal can be, by next school year. And then we'll put them back in LPS because my daughter really wants to graduate from Southeast High School next year and my son really wants to go to woodshop. So-- so we'll-- hopefully we only have to do it a year, but we're just kind of making it work in the moment. And we're all very tired and we have really bad days, honestly.

GROENE: Could we-- could we ask you some questions?

BRYNNA LUKE: Yes, go ahead.

GROENE: You say your daughter and son want to-- want to go back to public school.

BRYNNA LUKE: Yeah.

GROENE: How do you know what class they'll be put into?

BRYNNA LUKE: So that's a good question. That was some research I had to do before we started homeschooling of how to keep a transcript so you can have a homeschool transcript. And as long as you keep record of what courses you teach, the sources you teach them from, and as long as you grade them, which I have to spend every evening grading

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things, we can provide the schools with the transcript, and then hopefully everything will kind of transfer over. We do have a backup plan to put them in dual credit courses at Southeast Community College next semester for some science and math classes. We're kind of just playing it by ear at this point but--

GROENE: Do you-- do know if you wanted to switch to just for a-- you know, just for a backup to test, that you want to know you're doing something, your-- your kids are learning the-- can you go to the public school and say, I want my kids to-- when you're having your testing in the 11th grade level, the 10th grade level, the 1st grade level, can my child come in and take that test?

BRYNNA LUKE: I would hope they could.

GROENE: I would-- I--

BRYNNA LUKE: With the courses we're providing them right now, we have very--

GROENE: Well, we just had, for example--

BRYNNA LUKE: That's kind of our goal is to make sure they can take those tests and they can take the ACT and the SAT.

GROENE: The MAP Growth administrator indicated, and Senator [SIC] Blomstedt--

BRYNNA LUKE: Yeah.

GROENE: I just wondered if homeschoolers can take those tests.

BRYNNA LUKE: That's our goal. That's my goal this year.

GROENE: OK.

BRYNNA LUKE: And again, I do have-- my daughter is worried about that, honestly, because she has to take the ACT in the spring. So we're actually doing an ACT prep course this coming spring. And my soph-- my sophomore son is taking it, as well, just because we're together.

GROENE: It's supposed to be offered by the public schools, I believe, at the end of the junior year. But I didn't know if the homeschool kid could show up and take that test. I think they should be able to.

BRYNNA LUKE: They should be able to. Yeah.

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GROENE: And take [INAUDIBLE] too.

BRYNNA LUKE: And I-- I plan-- my children are taking the ACT-- or my daughter, she's a junior, will be taking the ACT in April. That's our plan. And if we--

GROENE: And you're gonna pay for it--

BRYNNA LUKE: --do everything right, she'll be ready to do it and--

GROENE: You're gonna pay for it yourself. You're not gonna [INAUDIBLE]

BRYNNA LUKE: Yep. We'll pay for it ourselves and we'll pay for it as many times as she needs, you know, because she wants to get a 32 so she can get a Regents at UNL. So that's-- I mean, that's our goal. I mean, that's-- that's what she wants to do. My oldest son got it. My youngest son wants it. And we're gonna do whatever it takes at home with online courses, with tutors, if we need to, which we have at our disposal. We have friends who are willing to tutor our children to make sure they can take those tests to get into college.

GROENE: For the scholarships?

BRYNNA LUKE: Yep, for scholarships.

GROENE: Thank you. Any other questions? Senator Walz.

WALZ: And maybe I missed it. And if I did, I'm sorry, but was there-- is there-- or was there an option for full-time virtual online learning at LPS?

BRYNNA LUKE: There was. We wanted nothing to do with that--

WALZ: OK, I was just curious.

BRYNNA LUKE: --just based on our spring experience. And my daughter specific-- my daughter is an anxious kid. She the one with all the health problems. She's an anxious kid. She was the one that said, Mom, I just cannot sit in front of a computer for six hours a day. And my son, who is a very hands-on kid, he-- he really can't sit that long. He is as smart as a whip. He's-- he's got an engineer brain. He creates-- he create-- designs and builds motorbikes for fun. That's his hobby. So he's a smart, math-oriented kid, but he just can't sit in front of a computer.

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WALZ: OK.

BRYNNA LUKE: And, honestly, I didn't want them to for that long.

WALZ: Yeah, I just was curious if there was another option.

BRYNNA LUKE: No, there was. There still is an option.

WALZ: OK.

BRYNNA LUKE: There still is an option. And, honestly, every month for the past three months, I've looked at them and said, OK, guys, how are we doing? You still have the option. Do you want to go back for second quarter? Do you want to go back for third quarter? What you want to do? And they both say, no, we just want to keep doing what we're doing.

WALZ: Yeah.

BRYNNA LUKE: So we put a lot of it into their hands. And my husband and I just kind of are making it work for them and we're making sure they're ready for those tests and stuff.

GROENE: Senator Linehan.

LINEHAN: If they-- if you have them signed up for dual credit at Southeast, will they be able to go in person to class?

BRYNNA LUKE: To Southeast, I'm not sure.

LINEHAN: OK.

BRYNNA LUKE: I'm not sure. I do know that the courses we were looking into offer the classes during the day. So it's like 11:00 to 12:00, 11:00 to 1:00, somewhere around there. So it'd be part of our daily curriculum, wouldn't have to take any night classes or anything.

LINEHAN: OK. But you don't know if they're virtual or in person?

BRYNNA LUKE: I don't know. I don't know.

LINEHAN: OK.

GROENE: Thank you. Thank you. You didn't spell your name for the transcribers.

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BRYNNA LUKE: Oh, B-r-y-n-n-a L-u-k-e.

GROENE: Thank you. Thank you. That was very good testimony. Learned a lot. Jennifer Ziemer from-- an LPS parent, Lincoln Public Schools. Just say your name, spell your name, and then--

JENNIFER ZIEMER: Jennifer, J-e-n-n-i-f-e-r, Ziemer, Z-i-e-m-e-r.

GROENE: And just tell us your story.

JENNIFER ZIEMER: I guess I'm one of the rare ones. I pulled my children out due to the mask requirement. I felt that it should have been a choice just given the information with how children are affected by COVID. I have a kindergartner and a second grader. My kindergartner comes home-- he-- I had enrolled them originally. They spent two months in LPS trying out the mask thing, seeing how it worked, mask breaks, how they adjusted to it. My son came home every day, mask soaking wet from his tongue licking it. Sorry. It-- my second grader-- you know, I really relate to that other mom because in the spring my second grader developed depression, an eight-year-old girl, depression and anxiety from her whole world being interrupted. Thank you. And it's sad to see. And so I was looking forward, just like her, to when school resumed normally, and it didn't. I wanted to try it out and see how it went. And my daughter was miserable. And, you know, her anxiety still is high because seeing all the changes, which I understand, you know, we're-- we're in unprecedented times. But, you know, I'm having to choose between her mental health and her education at this point. And it's not just her. There's other children that it's affecting the same way. Clearly, you polled from lots of homeschooling parents and you polled two in the same room whose children have been affected mental health-wise from this. And so I opted to pull them out. And remote learning was not an option. To have a child sit six days on Zoom just-- that's unreasonable for a child that's eight and a child that's six without a dedicated teacher to actively teach them. Just for them to have to keep up in a classroom, I mean, what I heard from my eight year old in the classroom setting seeing the teacher, OK, I have to stop, work on this, and direct her attention to the Zoom briefly and the transition back and forth. Both sets of children are-- are being failed. So we opted to, a week ago, homeschool. And that creates a burden in and of itself. I don't work now. I stay home with them to teach them, throwing myself into something that I wasn't equipped for. I mean, I'm not an idiot. I did two two years of college, so teaching a second grader and kindergartner, you know, not the most difficult. I really sympathize

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with her, high school. I have a 17-year-old. She moved to go live with her father because that pull in spring of trying to help her with her work and trying to help my first grader at the time, it was just too much. Neither one of them was getting any sort of real dedicated education. And so she opted to move with her dad where she could have that. So we're doing the homeschool thing and we're using free resources online. There's a great homeschool community here, so they guided us in the direction of what's free. But, you know, if my children were older, that age, we don't have the re-- the resources to go out and buy whole new curriculum just to teach my children because of this, you know, this time-- certain time frame that hopefully someday soon is gonna be just a distant memory. I couldn't pour \$400 or \$500 into curriculum, or more, to teach them. So we're using free resources. Luckily, seven-- second and kindergarten, it's fairly easy to do. It's a lot of review. You can print out worksheets and buy workbooks. But, you know, I-- I just wish that there was more options out there. It really feels like my children's education, through no fault of, you know, anybody else's, but it's kind of being held hostage by this virus. And-- and lots of parents feel that way. That's why you've seen over 800 new homeschool applications, because the Zoom is not working. I mean, you can watch a board meeting and see the parents pour in there that the Zoom is not working. So, you know, what this means for the future, second grader and a-- and a kindergartner, you know, it probably will move forward. I-- I just pray to God that it has less of an impact on my children's mental health being disrupted in their lives, being-- having to be pulled out of that setting through no fault of their own, no-- no fault of anybody's. But, you know, it-- it's--

GROENE: Thank you. Assume you're ready for questions? You made a very passionate-- did you happen to go to the public school and ask them if you could get some-- some of the same textbook material and stuff that they would have there to take home if you were-- if they were-- stayed in the public school?

JENNIFER ZIEMER: I did not ask that specific question. I did when I went to the school to notify them that I was withdrawing them. I was provided some packets that we actually use. They're very helpful. They were packets that were put together for the Zoom students, and the principal was very kind and gave us those, but she didn't imply or mention that there was any other kind of extra work or textbooks that could be borrowed or whatnot. So I didn't think to ask that. Nobody's ever mentioned that. It doesn't say that anywhere that that's an option. So it wasn't even something--

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GROENE: Is a-- did you contact-- I'm sure there's-- I think we're gonna hear from some homeschool networks that--

JENNIFER ZIEMER: Um-hum.

GROENE: --they have a swap. I mean, your kid's done with second grade, you don't need those books anymore. Is there kind of a swap system out there where you can contact people whose--

JENNIFER ZIEMER: There might be a swap--

GROENE: --resources are-- continue to be used?

JENNIFER ZIEMER: There might be a swap. What I've come across is mostly people selling curriculum. You know, it is something you invest in. A lot of these parents invest in it, and so they do want to sell it back to, you know, recoup their money when they're done with it. But I'm sure that is a possibility if you ask the right people or know the right people, so for-- in my particular case, we're-- we're new to Lincoln. We've been in Lincoln a year. So this is-- you know, we don't have a huge network of people to go to so far. I'm-- I'm reaching out and they're very kind in responding, but that wasn't something that's easily to come by.

GROENE: Thank you. Any other questions? Thank you.

JENNIFER ZIEMER: OK. Thank you.

GROENE: The next testifier is Zach Harsin from Action [SIC] Academy, Lincoln, if he would come up. Now you're a parent, right, who's gotten involved in this academy?

ZACH HARSIN: Yes and no.

GROENE: All right.

ZACH HARSIN: I'm a parent that decided to start this academy, so--

GROENE: Yeah, if you could say your name and spell it.

ZACH HARSIN: Yep. Zach, Z-a-c-h, Harsin, H-a-r-s-i-n.

GROENE: You can roll right into it.

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah. So for a myriad of reasons, my wife and I had decided to open and start our own exempt school here in Lincoln,

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Nebraska, called Acton Academy, and this all started before COVID. My wife and I had both followed the notion of going to school to get good grades, to get into the good school, to get a good job. But what we found was that this path left us \$110,000 in debt between the two of us. That's not a very good return on your investment. And I'm in the real estate business, and so I-- I understand return on investment. And where we find ourselves today, before COVID, is that I feel that we needed choice already. COVID has only sped those things up. And so that's why I wanted to start Acton, is because we need that choice. We need alternatives, whether it's the piles of homework that our children come home with, sitting at a desk all day, now sitting behind a computer screen at home every single day for six to eight hours behind a screen, with their eyes watching these screens, and really only learning how to be good test takers and be students in classrooms, not how to be productive citizens in our city and in our state. So we knew that this traditional path wasn't for us and-- but we-- what we didn't know was where to turn. We started by turning to where most families turned, looking to all the small schools around Lincoln and possibly moving to one of those cities. But then we found Acton, and Acton was everything that a traditional school isn't. There's no tests, there's no homework, no teachers to answer questions, only guides to ask Socratic questions. And Acton, there's 250 of them around the world and they're outperforming pretty much every single public school there is in every single way. We actually planned to open next fall, so 2021. But then COVID hit and I saw, like many families here that have testified, everyone scrambling, for lack of a better word, to find the fit that-- that was best for their family and-- and trying to find what to do for their family. So like any good entrepreneur, we decided to adapt and speed that up and speed that process and timeline up. So as I mentioned, I firmly believe that all the changes that you're seeing here, school choice coming to the forefront, parents fighting for their children, all of those things-- for their child's education, all of those things were coming. Change was coming to education. It's only that COVID has accelerated that and acted as that accelerator. So since July, and this is part of the reason why I was asked to come talk, I've spoken with at least 100 families here in Lincoln who are seeking alternative education options to the public school system, whether that be the private or the homeschool co-ops, looking at private Christian schools, or us in Acton. Some are leaving because of the mask requirements, like you just heard, some due to the chaos over the split Zoom/virtual/in-person chaos that goes on in the classroom and at home, and some that have tried homeschooling and just can't do it all.

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Still others that I've talked to are actually public schoolteachers in the system saying how much they envy what we are doing and what we're starting, because what they see in Acton is the reason that they became a schoolteacher in the first place and are unable to perform to the level that they want to in the current system. Needless to say, options are needed. Of that 100, I would say it's safe to say that 99 of them were-- one of their top concern was being able to pay for alternative education. And because of this, many choose to stick with the public school route simply because it's the only free option out there. But that doesn't mean that it's the best place for their child to learn. So I say all of this today and more in the letter that I shared with you guys, knowing that my grandfather, my father, three aunts, and three cousins are public school educators with over 175 years of combined experience. I have the utmost respect for our public schoolteachers, administrators, coaches, and everyone that's doing the best that they can in the current system. This isn't about public versus private for me. It's about the future of our state and what's best for my children and children across the state. From cars to contractors, doctors to dentists, us as consumers benefit when we have choice. And I believe that school choice is needed now more than ever.

GROENE: Question for you, could you give us a kind of a concept of how this school works--

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah.

GROENE: --or how many kids or-- is it limited to the number of kids, students that one of these alternate schools can have without a license?

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah. So we're doing-- we're doing a soft launch this fall, really opening for those families that needed it most. At full capacity, we'll be a-- in a K-12 exempt school here in the state of Nebraska because there's only so many buckets that we can fall into, so we'll be a K-12 school. As I mentioned, there's over 250 of them around the world that follow this model, originally founded in Austin, Texas. And really, it's a modern-day, one-room schoolhouse. So it's mixed-age classrooms with kids helping teach other kids. At full capacity, you have about three to four grades per studio or per room with two guides in that-- in that studio space.

GROENE: That's the school I went to--

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah. Yep.

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GROENE: --in the country.

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah.

GROENE: Yes, thank you. So that's-- and how many teachers then? One per--

ZACH HARSIN: Basically two guides for about 30 to 35 students in a-- in one classroom with that, you know being--

GROENE: And you have the traditional grades, first, second, third?

ZACH HARSIN: Yes and no. We're not so much concerned with the grades. It's more, how are they performing? They can move at their own pace. So if they are a math whiz and they want to blow through three years of-- of math, they can. An Acton opened in Omaha last fall. They had a kindergartner complete kindergarten math in four weeks. It's-- it's amazing what, you know, a child can do when they're given the keys and said run.

GROENE: So how do you take that from there to entering med school or-- or getting a Regents, as we heard earlier--

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah.

GROENE: --and the testing? How do you-- and some young individual, a lady before might have a son that's 16 years old and doesn't need to be classified as a junior or senior. They're done and need to be challenged.

ZACH HARSIN: Yep. Yep, absolutely. Yeah, so by the time--

GROENE: Does that-- does that happen?

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah. By the time an Acton student graduates, they've completed about 15 to 20 internships. Middle school and high school, half the time is spent off campus in real-world internships. The other half is spent doing what takes our public school a full four years, eight hours a day, to teach. So they're doing that in about three hours a day and then they're off in the real world, getting real-world experience. If they want to go on to be a doctor, a lawyer, or something that requires a four-year, they absolutely can. But they've completed all of those necessary things usually by the time they're, you know, 16 years old and-- and are ready to do that. As far as state-- or standardized testing, they use-- in the network, they used

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to utilize the Stanford Test. But what they found was they were maxing that out by about ninth grade. And so they moved to the-- to a-- one out of Iowa and utilized that to be able to compare to national and they find coming in to Acton, it's not that they're getting the best and the brightest; they're getting kids that test below grade levels coming in, but on the back end of that, pretty much everybody, you know, is-- is pretty much maxing out that-- that test. And on average, every student completes about two and a half grade levels per year in-- in Acton.

GROENE: Thank you. Any questions from the committee? Senator Brewer.

BREWER: Well, first off, I'm assuming that Darren's your dad?

ZACH HARSIN: Yes.

BREWER: Did you know that him and I went to college together and ran track together?

ZACH HARSIN: Yep.

BREWER: He was probably one of the finest athletes in Nebraska.

ZACH HARSIN: Thank you.

BREWER: And your uncle was too.

ZACH HARSIN: Yep, not far behind, actually--

BREWER: Darren--

ZACH HARSIN: --in front of him sometimes.

BREWER: Well, where did you go to college?

ZACH HARSIN: I went to Wesleyan, so I went to the opposite.

BREWER: Wow.

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah.

BREWER: You went to the dark side.

ZACH HARSIN: I did, the brown side.

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BREWER: Yeah, that's scary. OK. This is-- this is really interesting in that for those of us that are somewhat dated and went to a one-room school, depending on your teacher, it was similar to that in that you were kind of allowed to move at your own pace.

ZACH HARSIN: Yep.

BREWER: The problem is sometimes at the fourth grade, you'd kind of hit the sixth grade and you twiddled your thumbs for two years because you were trapped in that one-room school. So I-- I find this fascinating. So I'm anxious to learn more. Thank you.

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah. Yeah. So on-- to speak to that point, once they've completed a year of coursework, say fourth grade, they've completed what they need to for fourth grade, they're given the option. They can either do a fast forward and move forward in years. They can do a deep dive where they have something that they absolutely love. Maybe it's space X, maybe it's coding, whatever they want, and they can go all in on that for the rest of the year. Or maybe they don't know what they want to do and they're not sure. And they can just go over and just do surface-level investigation of tons of different subjects.

BREWER: Well, you-- you will definitely up-- upset the apple basket here. But if it works, I can't help but think it doesn't have potential in-- in different situations so that those that have potential to, you know, to learn at a faster level can actually get there without being held up just because of a system.

ZACH HARSIN: Yep. That's the goal. And that's what they're finding all over the world with their 250 Actons. They've been around for a little over ten years now, so the data's there to-- to show that.

BREWER: And where did this actually, the-- the core work on designing this, start from?

ZACH HARSIN: Austin, Texas, and Brad and Laura Sandefer were the original founders-- or, I'm sorry, Jeff and Laura Sandefer. And Jeff is revered as one of the top business professors in the entire United States, and so he was-- they started it for their children because they basically came home one day and said, we're done with the public school system, we're gonna find something else that works.

BREWER: All right. Thank you.

ZACH HARSIN: Yes.

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GROENE: Senator Pansing Brooks.

PANSING BROOKS: Thank you. Thank you for coming today, Mr. Harsin.

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah.

PANSING BROOKS: So I'm just interested, who-- so do you have any oversight from the public schools or from anybody that does certification of teachers and what-- what is all that, that we require?

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah. So, as I mentioned, we're-- we're considered an exempt school from the state. So currently it's-- it's viewed just the same as a-- a homeschool co-op. It's just probably the most formalized homeschool co-op that you're gonna find.

PANSING BROOKS: OK. And are-- are there certain tenets and-- and requirement-- religious requirements of-- of the teachers or how-- how's that?

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah, it's-- there's actually four Actons operating in-- in Nebraska. There's another one here in-- in Lincoln, one in Beatrice, and one in Omaha. Ours, and then the one in Omaha, are not necessarily religiously affiliated. The Beatrice one and the other one here in town are affiliated with-- with some type of religion.

PANSING BROOKS: And how do children get into your school?

ZACH HARSIN: Through an audition process, so it's really trying to align and make sure that-- because we are kind of handing the keys over to the child a little bit, and to the family, it's making sure that they align with what we're doing, make sure that we're a good fit for their family, and-- and, honestly, make sure that they are going to be able to handle, you know, kind of that responsibility of-- of being in charge of-- of their own education.

PANSING BROOKS: So it's not available for every child?

ZACH HARSIN: No, nope.

PANSING BROOKS: OK, it would be--

ZACH HARSIN: But, well, here's what I would say. It's a education and an opportunity for anyone, but it's not gonna be for everyone.

PANSING BROOKS: And you determine who would best fit?

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah, through an audition process and kind of a self-selection process as well. We are gonna be for those that-- that are most willing to kind of work their way through it and not necessarily be handed the answers, because that's how life works.

PANSING BROOKS: So I'm trying to also figure out-- with-- with COVID we've heard some distressing stories, which, of course, aren't the fault of anyone but the-- but the virus and the fact that we have schools that are working really hard in our state to try to be as accessible as possible and to deal with as many types of learners as possible. I'm trying to figure out what it is-- what is it that you think that you could provide that LPS is not doing or that the public schools are not doing?

ZACH HARSIN: Specifically pertaining to the virus or--

PANSING BROOKS: Yes, because that's what we're--

_____ : Right.

PANSING BROOKS: That's part of what this hearing is about--

ZACH HARSIN: Sure, sure.

PANSING BROOKS: --a good part of it.

ZACH HARSIN: Sure. I think one is just a small, static group of learners who are not gonna-- you know, we're not a-- a group of, you know, 1,500 in-- in one building. We're gonna be much smaller than that. So from a, you know, slowing the spread or stopping the spread, whatever the-- the phrase is that we need to use, you know, that would be-- would be part of it. And then just being a-- an alternative option for folks, you know, really, and I share this in that letter and there's a quote from my dad at the end of it, but really what I see Acton being is a disruptor. And-- and our life is being disrupted right now, right? Education is being disrupted. Everything is being disrupted. But that's a good thing, and it can be a good thing if we allow it to be. And I share in the letter, just the way I look at it is Airbnb to the hotels. Airbnb has forced hotels to innovate. It's forced them to modernize how they're doing business. And even if you've never used Airbnb or care to ever use Airbnb, you've benefited from Airbnb being around because we're showing that a different model can work. And it might not be immediately right now showing benefit or

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being an option for thousands of students, but showing that another model can work and there's other ways to do things, I think, is very, very beneficial in the long run.

PANSING BROOKS: I agree and I understand that in today's world, we're talking about disruptors and that the companies that are-- are thriving right now, many of them are disruptors. Lyft and Uber clearly are disruptors for the old-model taxi service, so--

ZACH HARSIN: Yep.

PANSING BROOKS: --I get that and that all sounds good. The issue is children. And so while your company sounds really positive and beneficial, what happens when there's a-- there's a group that is not good at teaching children, that is not good at making sure that they are keeping up to the standards required by the state? That's my problem with how to go forward on this. You know, the-- everybody's-- there are a number of people whose goal is to-- to pay for private education, even though, you know, that is a choice. That's a choice that people make. And I chose to send my schools-- my kids to private colleges, and I'm still paying for that choice. That's--

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah, I paid for it myself--

PANSING BROOKS: Yeah.

ZACH HARSIN: --as I mentioned, \$110,000--

PANSING BROOKS: Right.

ZACH HARSIN: --that my wife and I had to pay off. We actually sold our home to do so. It's choices. And life is all about choices.

PANSING BROOKS: Yes.

ZACH HARSIN: I'm not saying it's not.

PANSING BROOKS: I understand.

ZACH HARSIN: I think that in this time, giving families the resources and allowing them to make the choice that they feel is best for their family is the best thing that we can do. And I also believe that every child that we maybe take away from the public school, a private school, might-- it's taking strain off of an already very, very

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strapped public system right now. And so I think that that can be a very helpful thing as well right now.

PANSING BROOKS: So the goal-- is-- is your goal to have the state pay for private entities that are now attempting to grow and educate children?

ZACH HARSIN: My goal is to provide as many options and choices to families as possible.

PANSING BROOKS: OK. Well, how are you funded?

ZACH HARSIN: Through the tuition that the families are paying us.

PANSING BROOKS: OK.

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah.

PANSING BROOKS: So solely from that and not from--

ZACH HARSIN: One hundred percent through tuition that's paid, yep.

PANSING BROOKS: OK.

ZACH HARSIN: And yeah-- and I-- like I said, I-- I believe in this model so much that I was willing to-- to go to all the work and the money and everything to put this, you know, in place for families in Lincoln and for my family. And, yeah, I'm not-- I'm not as-- I'm not here asking for handouts and a free ride. I'm here advocating for families that have said this is what-- this is the most amazing thing we've ever seen, but we can't afford to pay for that ourselves.

PANSING BROOKS: All right.

ZACH HARSIN: And so getting creative and finding ways that that could be an option would be great.

PANSING BROOKS: So-- so are you thinking that it should be all the way from pre-K to through college? Because we're also dealing with some of the same questions about college loans and how people are-- are having to pay so much money. You know, you went to Wesleyan, so clearly you paid a significant sum of money. That was your choice not to go to Nebraska for a lesser amount. So how-- how do you weigh all of that?

ZACH HARSIN: Yeah, again, choices, right? And I think that post-- you know, post-undergrad is a choice, and I paid for that. And

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personally-- this is me, personally speaking-- I don't think that as a taxpayer, I need to pay for someone's post-- you know, upper college degrees and everything. I would have never wanted anyone to step in and pay for those. It's-- you know, I paid for that myself, and it makes it that much more beneficial. But I also, going through that, know that I will not automatically default to my children following the same path that I did, because that was fed to us very hard that you must go to a four-year college to survive and to be successful. And I don't think that that's going to be the case for 95 percent of the kids that are in kindergarten today.

GROENE: Thank you.

ZACH HARSIN: Yep.

PANSING BROOKS: Thank you.

GROENE: Appreciate it. That was very-- your kids are very lucky.

ZACH HARSIN: Thank you.

GROENE: Now we have Theresa Thibodeau, from Primrose School of La Vista, to tell us about how it's affected her preschool option.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Thank you.

GROENE: You look familiar around here.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Yeah. Hello. Good to see you all again. I'm Theresa Thibodeau, T-h-e-r-e-s-a T-h-i-b-o-d-e-a-u. And just to start off with, a lot of the attention is on K-12 right now. And quite honestly, with the testifiers before me, I have over 200 families enrolled in the Primrose School who all have children of many different ages. And I could echo several, several more times what you have already heard today. And it's very sad. And I've had several parents in my office crying, not knowing what to do. As far as preschool goes, we are affected in many different ways. One, doing e-Learning for somebody who is between the ages of three and five-- and quite honestly, I would even say up until third grade-- is not an effective way of learning. They do not learn. We've all heard that electronics are not good for developing children's brains, and 80 percent of brain development is before age five. The other issue is when we're having to mask people up, children learn how to talk, how to read, how to interact by facial expressions. And so since we have put masks on our teachers, we have actually seen an increase in behavior issues. One,

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the children have a hard time hearing and understanding the teachers. And two, they're not getting those wonderful-- you know, they don't feel the kind smile and-- and those types of things when you're interacting with the children. And granted, technically, my school isn't under a mask mandate. However, we do understand that we need to keep people safe. But I can tell you that in our school, we have done everything possible to keep people safe. Since March, we have only had three confirmed cases, and only one child, and it is because of the things that we have put in place. It's because we are doing extra cleaning. We don't allow the parents into the classroom anymore, which actually is-- is not good for those parents either because they don't really get that one-on-one communication with a teacher. When you're working with preschool in pre-K, a teacher can't step out of the classroom and go talk to the parents because then you're leaving that classroom out of ratio and you're only leaving one other teacher in there to supervise all the children, so that cannot happen. So it's putting a stress on the-- even more of a stress on parents who are trying to manage their-- their older children and whether or not those children are e-learning or in person. It's putting a stress on the teachers because they can't talk to parents. They can only talk to parents through an app with regards to how their child is doing and developing. And that is-- that's just heartbreaking. The only time you're actually going to get to talk with the parents is by our Zoom parent-teacher conferences. And again, we can do things by Zoom. We have come across. But there's no better meeting when you're talking to a worried mom or a worried dad about how their child is developing-- developing-- you know, children who aren't speaking when they're supposed to or they're not understanding or they're not at the level they should be-- those parents, they really need that face-to-face interaction. And it's also becoming a hardship on actual preschools because we do need to meet those ratios, which are good, therefore, the students' safety; however, we're losing our workforce because we're having a ton of people decide to leave the workforce to stay home because of their other children are e-learning. And so what do they do on the days that their children are at home? They can't just leave them at home to teach themselves. We had that experience just in my own family in March. I have three kids. They're all of the age to where they stay home. But if I wasn't able to-- I'd go into Primrose at 6:00 in the morning. I'd get back home at 8:30. I would start the e-learning with my 12- and 15-year-old. We'd work until 3:00 and I'd go back to Primrose till 6:30 because I can't just say, hey, guys, you're 15 and 12, all of a sudden, teach yourselves. It doesn't work that way. And I'm lucky enough and I am blessed enough that I had the

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ability to do that. I've talked to so many OPS parents that don't know what to do. And I know that there have been a lot of parents interested in trying to do the pod learning. And I have been in contact and have spoken to a few different organizations that would love to see that happen, so that way, you can have people there that can help the children go through those Zoom classes. It was nice that every child received an iPad, but not everybody knows technology. And so you may have an iPad in your hand, but if you don't know how to use it, how are you going to learn? And then not only the technology, but I still have issues every time I log on to Zoom. I always have my microphone muted and I start talking, you know, and it's-- yeah, how long does it take you to learn? So there's just so many different things there. And-- and the depression I've seen, it has hit my kids. My youngest, her gymnastics gym shut down shortly after school shut down. It never reopened. Right after it reopened, the-- one of the owners committed suicide. So she not only dealt with not being able to go back with her best friends that she spent 16 hours a week with; one of the-- the men that's been a very big part of her life since she was five years old committed suicide. And that's really hard to tell your 12-year-old about suicide and why that might have happened. And she also has a friend that had to be sent away to Ohio. She's in a mental hospital in Ohio because these children cannot-- they just cannot handle the amount of stress that is being put on them and then on top of it, the requirements of school and getting everything done. I am so worried that we are leaving an entire generation of children behind and we're going to have kindergartners that will not be able to meet those third-grade reading standards because they're just not-- they don't have the effective ways of learning. So with that, I will open it up to any questions. And I know I got a little emotional, but it's-- as a parent and a-- and a business owner, it's-- it's hit everybody very hard.

GROENE: Thank you. Any questions? So how has your enrollment been affected?

THERESA THIBODEAU: Well, it was-- it was pretty bad in-- in March. Obviously, we-- we had to cut down 50 percent and just gave it to-- to families of essential workers. And we've grown a little bit, but not enough to cover the expenses.

GROENE: That was by choice for-- for distancing that you-- you cut down--

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THERESA THIBODEAU: So-- well, it was kind of in, yeah, in conjunction with the DHMs of what we had to limit and for distancing.

GROENE: So do you try to make three- and four-year-olds wear a mask?

THERESA THIBODEAU: Right now, our four- and five-year-olds are wearing masks. It doesn't go very well.

GROENE: Cause depression a little bit?

THERESA THIBODEAU: I can tell you that. I mean, like the woman who spoke earlier, coming home with it full, I mean, they sneeze in their masks, they cough, then they take them off and they rub it on their friend's face. I'm going, this is gonna spread. This is going to be worse. And so then you worry about, obviously, you don't want to take it home to grandma and grandpa. But if we're-- I mean, if we're doing that, I-- I think my teachers spend more time worried about if the mask is clean or if they have Joey's mask on as versus, you know, Andrew's mask, and so it's taking away from-- from learning.

GROENE: So when you say you've had cases, those cases in your school, those were cases where somebody came from-- probably got it at home or at a restaurant?

THERESA THIBODEAU: They came from the outside. Yep.

GROENE: And then they were caught. And you caught it before it spread within your community.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Correct. And we actually had no internal spread with-- with any cases. Yep.

GROENE: [INAUDIBLE] Thank you.

THERESA THIBODEAU: In addition to that, though, we had to shut-- in July, we-- we shut the whole school down for an entire week. So obviously there was no income for a week, but we did still pay our staff their full salaries. And a couple of weeks ago, we had to shut-- we did shut three classrooms down for two weeks in which we received no income, because, obviously, I don't think it's fair to charge a family tuition when they can't send their child and they have to go out and find other care, but we paid those teachers, so.

GROENE: But what are you hearing from your parents? I mean--

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THERESA THIBODEAU: Well, my parents are, one, they're--

GROENE: I mean, are they giving up jobs and-- because--

THERESA THIBODEAU: Yes, they are. In fact, I just-- I just had a parent contemplate giving up their job because actually they're both physicians. But we shut down for two weeks. They're both physicians. They obviously have to be at the hospital taking care of patients, but they couldn't find somebody at last-minute notice to come in for two weeks. I had a family--

GROENE: So what we've been-- have here-- maybe I'm telling-- I'll-- we hear from the public schools that they get offered Zoom. But there has to be a para in every single home called a parent.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Correct.

GROENE: Right?

THERESA THIBODEAU: Correct. Yes, you can't-- you--

GROENE: I mean, you just don't magically have an eight-year-old sitting in front of a computer.

THERESA THIBODEAU: No. No. Well, and I would imagine they might get in trouble with Child Protective Services if they left their eight-year-old home alone all day to learn by Zoom, but that's a whole different issue.

GROENE: Thank you.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Um-hum.

GROENE: Any other questions? Senator Linehan.

LINEHAN: Well, I think she was first.

GROENE: Senator Walz.

WALZ: Oh, how are you?

THERESA THIBODEAU: I'm good, thank you. How are you?

WALZ: Good. I'm good. I was just curious. I mean, you know, being in this position, that we hear what the problems are. Do you have any recommendations?

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THERESA THIBODEAU: Well, it's-- yes, I do. I think it would take a long time because if you just go through them off the top, some of them could sound not as good. But we-- we really all need to come together. One, it doesn't seem like there is any great place for preschool owners to actually be able to have their-- their opinions viewed. There's the ESUs, but honestly, whatever I've gotten from them has just been offers of training that we pay for. There hasn't been a good place. I've tried to reach out to Buffett Early Childhood when I first opened and they were-- they were not interested in-- in having us a part of it. So the private preschools and pre-Ks really don't have anywhere to go. We're all kind of on our own. I've heard from La Petite schools, Montessoris, Goddards, they, they all just kind of call me and we-- we sort of go, well, let's try this. We'll check with state licensing to see if it will work, and we get a different answer from every different person. And then we have to balance state licensing with DHMs and all those types of things. So if there was actually a-- a great way for everybody to get on the same page, it would be very helpful.

WALZ: And then just-- I'm just curious, because mental health, as you've heard, has been a common theme already. And I think you're number four out of the testifiers, so have you had any-- have you been able to offer any resources to the kids that you're serving?

THERESA THIBODEAU: So-- so we have-- they-- Papillion La Vista School District will not come in for mental health. If a child at my school lives in that district, they'll have children come in for developmental things. The only other things that we've been able to do is to give parents resources that they can contact. So they have contacted therapists through Boys Town. And I do allow those therapists to come into the school, if they so wish, to-- to help the children through things and-- but again, that's another expense for those parents.

WALZ: Um-hum. Yeah.

GROENE: So what I'm hearing, the theme here is it's-- it's depression.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Absolutely.

GROENE: But it's environmental depression--

THERESA THIBODEAU: Yep.

GROENE: --caused by the environment.

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THERESA THIBODEAU: Yep.

GROENE: I mean, you're sticking them in front of a computer. You're locking them up in a room-- at a home. They can't even go outside. They got to be in front of a computer.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Yep.

GROENE: If their brother makes-- does something behind them, Child Services contacts them.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Yeah.

GROENE: It's kind of a paranoid environmental depression--

THERESA THIBODEAU: It really is.

GROENE: --for these kids.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Yeah. Yeah.

GROENE: It's not a--

THERESA THIBODEAU: And I've seen it firsthand with my own children and in the--

GROENE: It's not a biological depression.

THERESA THIBODEAU: No.

GROENE: It's-- it's a-- an environment.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Yeah. And actually, just to-- to make your point, my 15-year-old son, since prep has gone back to full-time learning, he's no longer depressed. I-- I wasn't sure what we were going to do with him.

GROENE: He went back to school?

THERESA THIBODEAU: Yeah. So first semester he had B average as a freshman. Second semester-- he'll probably get mad at me for putting this on record. Second semester he finished with a 1.7, and that was with me being around him all the time. But it turned into a relationship, not a mother-son relationship. It turned into a "she's nagging me again" relationship.

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GROENE: Clarify, 1.7 through--

THERESA THIBODEAU: GPA.

GROENE: --Zoom through the public school.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Yeah.

_____ : No, prep.

THERESA THIBODEAU: No, this is through prep, so he's in--

GROENE: Through prep.

THERESA THIBODEAU: He's in a private school. So I actually was going to pull him and opt in to-- to Millard, but I couldn't get him-- I missed the opt-in date. But using my choice, and knowing that Millard was going back full time, I-- I was going to opt him into Millard, but I could not.

GROENE: Because of the full time?

THERESA THIBODEAU: Um-hum.

GROENE: Yeah.

THERESA THIBODEAU: And now that prep is back, his GPA is back up. I think his lowest grade right now is an 86 percent.

GROENE: Thank you.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Um-hum.

GROENE: Any other questions? Senator Linehan.

LINEHAN: Just since we're doing this for the record, there's a number of different schools that are-- never-- this fall, went back full time. They've been full time the whole time, five days. There are some that are doing the two/three. There are some that have been open-- do we know-- OPS just now started going back on a two/three.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Correct.

LINEHAN: Every-- Westside started out with a two/three. Right?

THERESA THIBODEAU: They started out with a two/three.

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LINEHAN: Prep Catholic School started out with two/three?

THERESA THIBODEAU: Yes.

LINEHAN: Is everybody but OPS back down to five days?

THERESA THIBODEAU: I believe so. Yes. I know for-- I know prep is. All of the-- the private K-8 schools went back full time. Papillion La Vista went back full time and Millard did. And so as far as I know, I believe that OPS is the only one.

LINEHAN: OK. Thank you. Thank you for being here.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Um-hum.

GROENE: Senator Morfeld.

MORFELD: Welcome back.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Thanks.

MORFELD: So I know yours is pre-K. That's your--

THERESA THIBODEAU: Preschool and pre-K. Yes.

MORFELD: Preschool and pre-K?

THERESA THIBODEAU: Um-hum.

MORFELD: Does-- does your facility, or any of the other private facilities that are pre-K and preschool, do they provide counseling of any sort, social workers, anything like that? Do they have wraparound services?

THERESA THIBODEAU: There-- there's-- there wouldn't be a way for-- for us to actually do that.

MORFELD: OK, just from a funding perspective?

THERESA THIBODEAU: Correct. Yeah.

MORFELD: OK. I just-- yeah.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Yeah. So, I mean, there's certain-- there's people that come in and-- and work with children, but--

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MORFELD: Yeah.

THERESA THIBODEAU: --those are privately done by parents. Yeah.

MORFELD: OK. I-- I know-- I don't know how it is in Omaha Public Schools. I know in Lincoln Public Schools, there are social workers and also counselors for the-- for the students. And I know that I've referred many of my parents to some of those services. But are you aware if that's the case in Omaha Public Schools?

THERESA THIBODEAU: Yes. Well, so a lot of my children-- I have a few from OPS. We are-- my school is located in La Vista.

MORFELD: OK.

THERESA THIBODEAU: So-- but like I said earlier, Papillion La Vista, with their early childhood, they have a lot of services for developmental delays--

MORFELD: OK.

THERESA THIBODEAU: --within that. They'll-- you know, they will look for mental as well, but mainly they're helping with speech or if there's physical therapy and-- and those types of things.

MORFELD: OK.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Excuse me.

MORFELD: Thank you very much.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Um-hum.

GROENE: Any-- Senator Pansing Brooks.

PANSING BROOKS: Welcome, Senator Thibodeau.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Thank you. And I'm not sick. I just have a dry throat.

PANSING BROOKS: Do you need some water or something?

THERESA THIBODEAU: Yes. Thank you.

PANSING BROOKS: OK. Thank-- I'm glad to see you again. So I'm just trying to figure out-- I'm-- I'm a little bit confused by what this

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tes-- some of this testimony is leading towards, or maybe I'm not. But are-- are you-- I know that there are gaps and concerns because of COVID in the public schools. So are you-- are you here to talk about that what you-- what you and the other homeschooling schools provide would be better and more appropriate for kids than what's going on in the public schools? I'm-- I'm sort of confused about--

THERESA THIBODEAU: No, I'm not saying that. Well, first of all, I-- I don't provide any homeschooling or--

PANSING BROOKS: OK, you're private school?

THERESA THIBODEAU: We're a private preschool, yeah--

PANSING BROOKS: Yeah. Sorry.

THERESA THIBODEAU: --and then childcare. What I am saying, though, is that for the parents in which this e-learning and three/two things is not working for them, they need to have other options.

PANSING BROOKS: OK. And it's my understanding that-- that even since last spring, things have completely shifted in the e-learning and the remote access and-- I mean, nobody was prepared for this pandemic, clearly.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Correct.

PANSING BROOKS: And so to assume that we would be in a perfect spot six months after this virus arose, I-- I think is-- is difficult. And that's what I'm sort of hearing from people. I don't really understand, because we all know that this was out of the blue. And, you know, I do think that the schools are attempting to be as fleet-- fleet-- as fleet of foot as possible. And so I guess I'm-- that's what I'm just trying to understand that with your school, do people-- how do people pay for your school, for the pre-K school? Is it private and so it's private dollars?

THERESA THIBODEAU: They-- there's some private dollars. And then I do have a contract with Child Care Aware for military families.

PANSING BROOKS: OK.

THERESA THIBODEAU: So there's a subsidy there for military families.

PANSING BROOKS: Yeah, that's good. So why did you feel it necessary to come today, because you don't feel that the state is doing a good enough job with private institutions to provide extra options for children, or why-- why is it that you felt--

THERESA THIBODEAU: I just think that the state really needs to be aware that what is happening to children right now is way worse on them than the virus is on them. And I understand that this virus is very serious, especially for immunocompromised and older adults. But we have a whole generation of children. They're going to be affected a lot longer than just this six to nine months. They are going to be affected for years. And so I would like the state to-- to recognize that and recognize that if parents want to go join a pod so that their children can learn, they should be able to do that.

PANSING BROOKS: Um-hum. And so there's-- there's been, I don't know, decades and decades of work to attempt to make sure that public education is the most appropriate for the greatest number of children possible. And this has happened within six months. So what I'm hearing is it's time to defund the public schools, to start trying to figure out new methods of teaching while we're in the middle of this crisis that-- that no one has expected or could have foreseen. Yes, it's very difficult on these kids right now. It's difficult on-- on workers. It's difficult on people being able to feed their families. It's difficult on people trying to pay their rent. The-- there are so many issues that we're dealing with. Having a-- having children living in a home where they're evicted because their parents can't pay the rent has to be as significantly demoralizing as the fact that they are having to sit in front of a computer and the-- and the public schools are trying to figure out the best method to teach everybody during this very serious time.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Well, I don't think I ever said we should defund the public schools. That would actually be ridiculous.

PANSING BROOKS: Good.

THERESA THIBODEAU: What I am saying-- and if you think about that family who could have just been evicted because they can't pay rent, how in the world is that child going to e-learn when they're sitting on-- wherever they are, in their homeless shelter? Or unfortunately, some families are actually sleeping in the streets. Sometimes the-- the school is the only place that they can go to get a hot meal. Some of the high schools in Omaha, I've known there have been principals

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there that have washed students' clothes for them. So, no, public schools are very important. But if they're not working out for a family who has no other means to do something so these families can hopefully be reemployed and have gainful employment, why can't there be another option? Otherwise--

PANSING BROOKS: How-- how many other options?

GROENE: Many as possible.

THERESA THIBODEAU: As-- yeah, as many as-- as possible. I mean, these are our children.

PANSING BROOKS: Exactly, and--

THERESA THIBODEAU: So we need to do whatever we can to give these children any opportunity that works best for them.

PANSING BROOKS: So no-- no matter--

THERESA THIBODEAU: And I don't expect it to be perfect. But what's happening right now isn't working.

PANSING BROOKS: It isn't perfect. You're right.

GROENE: Thank you.

PANSING BROOKS: And this is not perfect right now. And it-- it is very difficult because everybody is trying. But my concern is we start react-- overreacting and saying, OK, the schools are having issues with all of this, so now all of a sudden we're just going to start giving money to all sorts of other entities who are not over-- there's no oversight by the Department of Education. There's no oversight by people to make sure that it's accessible to all children. It's only accessible to the chosen-- the ones that are chosen. Is that--

THERESA THIBODEAU: Well, if you look at the pod learning and how it's gone in other states and school districts, actually, those pods are-- are designed to be accessible to the most economically disadvantaged children. And they actually are all overseen by the-- by the state schools. So that would be the model that I-- I know a lot of people in Omaha are looking at and a lot of parents that I have talked to would like to see.

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PANSING BROOKS: OK, but we just heard Mr. Harsin talk about Acton does not allow oversight of-- of what's going on--

THERESA THIBODEAU: OK. But that's-- that's Acton. So, I mean, these are different-- different entities.

PANSING BROOKS: OK. So you just said that they should be quick to the-- that the school should be quick to embrace all these different options for all sorts of children. How do we determine-- I mean, you're saying-- yes, OK, so that's fine. It sounds like the pod model is something positive. But then you've also got Acton. Why isn't that positive? How are we to determine-- if somebody says, oh, well, that's really positive for our child, are we to just open the gates and let anybody teach any child?

THERESA THIBODEAU: Well, Senator Pansing Brooks, if I ever get back to the Legislature, I would love to be on that committee to help you figure that out.

GROENE: Thank you. Thank you.

THERESA THIBODEAU: And, no, that is not announcement. I'm just being silly.

GROENE: Thank you.

PANSING BROOKS: Thank you.

GROENE: We got to get on to the next--

THERESA THIBODEAU: And I need to get back, so--

GROENE: --and we've had enough lectures, so--

THERESA THIBODEAU: Thank you.

GROENE: All right, so thank you, Theresa.

THERESA THIBODEAU: Thank you.

GROENE: The next one is Kathleen Lenzen and David Lostroh, from the Nebraska Christian Home Educators. And I'd like to remind everybody, we're trying to figure-- to present what we haven't heard in the press or anything, what is happening in the home, the individuals who are responsible for the children, not the government school. All right? That is what this hearing is about.

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PANSING BROOKS: Doesn't say that here.

GROENE: My introduction did.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Thank you.

PANSING BROOKS: It doesn't say that.

GROENE: Make sure you say your names and spell them and we can get everybody testified because some senators are going to be leaving here pretty soon.

DAVID LOSTROH: Senator Groene, members of the Education Committee, my name is David Lostroh, D-a-v-i-d L-o-s-t-r-o-h. I serve as a board member and legislative liaison for the Nebraska Christian Home Educators Association. Thanks for the opportunity to come here and speak today about the COVID situation regarding home education in Nebraska. And with me is Kathleen Lenzen, the wife of our-- the president of our organization, and she coordinates our conferences and takes lots of phone calls from people wanting to know about home education. And she could spell her own name for you.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Kathleen Lenzen, K-a-t-h-l-e-e-n, Lenzen, L-e-n-z-e-n.

DAVID LOSTROH: Since the passage of LB928 in 1984, homeschooling has proven to be very effective in spite of the fact that these schools operate under 79-1601, rather than a large number of statutes governing approved and accredited schools. The homeschool educators across the country appreciate the freedom to tailor the education of their children as they see fit and the results have been fantastic. Many studies have demonstrated the high educational, social, and civic skills of homeschool graduates and the NCHEA has provided each senator with a red NCHEA file folder that contains copies of many of these studies. So if you're interested, you can check your file folder. And if you can't find it, let me know and I'll, I'll get you one. COVID-19 has broadened home education in Nebraska if you have the 72 percent increase in Rule 13 filings and about 57 percent increase in students for the '20-'21 school year. Some new homeschool families and existing homeschool families are homeschooling while the family breadwinner or breadwinners have lost their jobs due to COVID-19, due to their employer's downturns in the business. So this is a hardship and we've, you know, heard that from others today. So the homeschoolers are experiencing this, too. Some of these families, especially the new

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homeschool families, have little money to pay for the computers, books, education-related travels, and, and so on. I think it's, it's a difficult-- especially for new homeschool families who have decided to start homeschooling last-- early-- you know, last spring and then those that are-- decided to homeschool this fall, especially if they have an-- quite a few number of children or-- like, like Lorraine and I, we had nine children, but we only started to homeschool them in a sequence, so it was not as drastic as somebody who has four or five children and decides to homeschool. So, you know, they're going to experience a learning curve and so on in trying to decide, can I do this or not? So that's been a difficult thing for, I think, for homeschool parents who really weren't planning on doing it. And then all-- once they decided, they've got the hardship that goes along with that, trying to make that all work. As far as a homeschool that had already existed, even there, there is some effect. Now these children and, and the teachers are at-- in their home and, you know, they don't need to wear masks because you're in your house, so that part of it goes away. And if they've got books and the computers, nothing has changed on that regard, but there is still some. Kathleen was mentioning some families use the library a lot, you know, and maybe you don't go to the library now and, and friends and that kind of thing. So even there, there is some effects in the homeschooling community, but I think generally, not to the same degree as what we've heard from other testifiers today. So with that-- and Kathleen, I don't know if you have anything you'd like to--

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Yes, I-- you know, I guess I could-- in, in talking with some of the veteran homeschoolers, some of the things that they experienced during COVID was the, the Internet, the lack of Internet. They had to-- they felt they had to use the Internet more just because of lack of library services that-- homeschoolers traditionally use the library a lot and probably use the library a lot for research and probably use the Internet at the library a lot and found that they were using-- and that-- because they were use-- had to rely on Internet more at home, didn't have enough Internet service, so-- or in parts of Nebraska where the Internet isn't as readily accessible. So the Internet was a problem, lack of library services. Several families said that the schools did not allow them special-- for their special need services for their children-- for the special needs children-- their services that-- their children that were receiving special needs services. And, and, and of course, the biggest thing was-- well, one of the big things was activities-- what-- for, for the kids, you know, all of this-- all the activities their kids were involved in as, as

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with, of course, kids that are, are in public or private schools. They didn't have, they didn't have the face-to-face contact with, with their, with their social group, neighborhood friends, and kids. We receive-- NCHEA-- the NCHEA phone is in our home and I would say that we received probably-- we-- I-- my husband estimated the other day, we receive about 600 emails and phone calls a year. So they were significantly up this year with phone calls from new homeschoolers. And we kind of condensed some of the, some of the questions or problems people had and, and the question has been out there also about, about schools and access to books from schools, and in the 30 years I've been taking calls or, taking calls or responding, I've never known of a school to offer or honor a request from a family to use the, the school's-- from the books-- the used books from the schools. And parents have asked, but I've never known of a school to do that. And there is a-- there is something in the statute about schools letting homeschool parent-- families use books, but to my knowledge, that-- I don't know that-- no, no parent I know has ever-- or no school has ever done that. The-- so new, new parents that have started this year, received lots of calls about that. And, you know, many parents have called saying-- calling themselves COVID homeschoolers, interestingly. And many of the problems were associated with they were unhappy about their children wearing masks in school or being required to sit in front of a computer for six hours a day. And so their choice was to-- they felt their alternative was to homeschool. Many of these parents-- I got a lot of-- so, you know, gave information--

GROENE: You're-- you've been ten minutes, so--

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Oh, done?

GROENE: --but finish up.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: OK. One of, one of the complaints I had was the school-- they were getting robocalls from the schools or the schools continued to call them daily that they did not get-- they-- that the school wanted their child in school because they had not gotten that letter of acknowledgment from the Department of Education. And obviously, many of those parents still haven't received that letter of acknowledgement.

GROENE: I think we heard that from Commissioner Blomstedt. They're way behind.

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KATHLEEN LENZEN: Right.

GROENE: Has that been clarified with the school districts that, that it's not the parents' fault, it's just the overwhelming--

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Well--

GROENE: --application process?

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Well, they won't take, they won't take that from the parent. They're-- they still continue to call the parent. And I've told the parent-- I tell the parent that they can inform the school. They can-- that the school can look it up on the, the school-- on the Department of Education portal and find the information.

GROENE: Can they find that they have applied-- all-- even-- that the application is in?

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Their application is on the Department of Education portal, but the school continues to call the parent.

GROENE: All right, thank you.

DAVID LOSTROH: The, the statute says that the exempt-- exemption is effective when the Commissioner receives it. There's not a requirement to wait for a letter coming back. So it would be nice if this somehow could be, could be fixed.

GROENE: And we'll convey that to them.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Could be--

DAVID LOSTROH: Yeah.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Yeah, but the school continues to call the parents.

GROENE: I understand. We've--

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Yeah.

GROENE: So do, do these numbers match what you hear out there that there's about 3,900 families, historically, that's homeschooled and it's up to 6,800 this year?

KATHLEEN LENZEN: That's--

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GROENE: It sounds low to me because every time I turn around, I meet a homeschooler in my neighborhood.

DAVID LOSTROH: Well, it's-- as far as, as filings go--

GROENE: Is that annually or do you have to file each year?

DAVID LOSTROH: You have to file each year.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Yeah, you have to file each year.

DAVID LOSTROH: Yeah, so the, the filings have been up and--

GROENE: Yeah, we have it here from--

DAVID LOSTROH: OK.

GROENE: ---Commissioner Blomstedt. It was 3,915 last year and 6,802 this year-- of families, not students. Thank you.

DAVID LOSTROH: OK.

GROENE: So how many of your homeschoolers-- we, we-- in this committee and in the Legislature, we passed that a student can take up to two classes or something in a high school and take activities. So you're-- it's a quasi-- half homeschool, half public school. Do most-- do a lot of your families do that, like take chemistry or algebra--

DAVID LOSTROH: Sure.

GROENE: --or something, where the family does--

KATHLEEN LENZEN: There are a lot. Yeah, a lot of, a lot of parents do do a dual enrollment. Even in elementary school, a lot of families do that. However, not all schools-- many schools still do not abide by that. Many schools still require four classes for-- to play sports. Not all schools--

GROENE: I think we changed that law to two.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: No, no, there's, there's--

GROENE: All right. I'm going to-- we're going to cut you-- well, we're-- I'm going to start cutting--

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Yeah.

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GROENE: --answer-- after we get our answer. I'm not being rude, we just have gotten our answer--

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Yeah, right, right.

GROENE: --so, so we can use our time more wisely.

LINEHAN: So--

GROENE: Senator Linehan.

LINEHAN: So if you have a school that's not abiding by statute, do you report that to somebody? Do you write Chairman Groene a letter? Do you write-- call the--

KATHLEEN LENZEN: That's--

DAVID LOSTROH: There, there was a law-- or there was a bill to, to change that to-- the NSAA changed their policy from four classes to two classes. And so the bill stopped at that point because the NSAA did change that and I think the bulk of the schools actually abide by that. There, there may be a few that have not.

LINEHAN: OK, so what happens when you have those few that don't? What, what is the next step if you've got--

DAVID LOSTROH: I mean, well--

LINEHAN: --somebody who's not abiding by rules?

KATHLEEN LENZEN: It, it needs to be into statute, then. It--

DAVID LOSTROH: Yeah.

LINEHAN: Well, we can pass a law, but if they don't--

GROENE: Nobody told us.

LINEHAN: -- follow the law-- we, we have to know they're not following the law. They have to be reported.

DAVID LOSTROH: OK, well, we will dig into that and, and, and, and provide that for you. I think there is a, a thing in the NSAA bylaws that says that the--

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Yes.

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DAVID LOSTROH: --schools can exceed that. So the two--

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Yeah.

DAVID LOSTROH: So there's been a couple of cases, I think, where they've chosen to, to exceed that. I had heard in some cases that they backed off and I haven't heard anything recently that any new cases like that have come up.

GROENE: Thank you. Could you get us-- instead of hearsay, could you get me the names of those school districts?

DAVID LOSTROH: If this comes up again, you will hear about it, Senator.

GROENE: All right. Thank you.

DAVID LOSTROH: So I'd be happy to do that.

GROENE: Any other questions?

WALZ: I have a question, just--

GROENE: Senator Walz.

WALZ: Thank you. I'm just curious-- I don't know much about homeschooling. I have a couple of friends who, who have done it, but I have not asked these questions. So when you decide to homeschool, what's the process, like, how-- what's the process? Who do you contact or how do you have questions answered-- I mean, I'm sure that, you know, up front, they have to know that you'll need Internet services, that there-- you know-- how do they know--

DAVID LOSTROH: They, they should go to the NCHCA website.

WALZ: OK.

DAVID LOSTROH: We have lots of information there about how to, how to start. It refers you to the state's Department of Education's websites to fill out forms. There's requirements that children take five different subjects every year that they're doing this, mathematics and so on. So and then you do report what curriculum you're using. And if you're generating your own curriculum, then the department will want to know more about it. And then you turn that in and it's basically up to the, to the parents to actually carry this out.

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WALZ: Right.

DAVID LOSTROH: And across the country, there are various states who control-- have more regulation and less. But the statistics for student performance are the same, whether you're in a heavily regulated state or not. And I think this has to do with-- most of the parents who want to homeschool are very concerned about their children. And whether there's regulations or not, they're going to do it. And that's historically been proven out for all these years that we've been doing this.

WALZ: So up front, they know what it takes to homeschool. They know what technology they have to have. They understand the books that they have to have up front before you would say, yeah, go ahead and homeschool? I mean, they, they understand everything that they need to know before they jump into this?

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Usually someone will call for information.

WALZ: Right.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: And they've done some research, but you don't have to have Internet. Dave homeschooled without Internet, as did I.

WALZ: OK. Well, there-- one of the things that you were talking about is that--

KATHLEEN LENZEN: But, you know--

WALZ: --lack of Internet.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Yes.

WALZ: They aren't able to-- so--

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Now, now people rely on the Internet.

WALZ: Right, OK.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: We, we homeschooled in the dark ages.

DAVID LOSTROH: Most people have friends now that help them, too.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Yes.

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DAVID LOSTROH: Kind of say, well, there's a lot of curriculum out there, but I've been using this and that's really helpful.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Yes.

DAVID LOSTROH: Because there's a lot of great curriculum out there now than it used to be, but a good friend who's doing it is probably a really good resource.

WALZ: Yeah, yeah.

GROENE: These parents all are doing it because they want the best for their kids and they also want to make sure their kids are progressing. Can a homeschooler walk into a public school and say, I want my child to take the testing that's required of a public school, so I see if they are progressing in their studies?

DAVID LOSTROH: I think the bulk of the parents do use some form of standardized testing. I know we did. We, we gave our--

GROENE: Is it required?

DAVID LOSTROH: It's not required, but nearly-- most parents actually do that because they want to know that they're doing it. Also--

GROENE: But can they go-- walk into a public school and say I-- when, when you're testing the first graders, can my child come in here because I want to see how my first grader is progressing compared to the public-- to the average child of her age or his age, can they do that?

DAVID LOSTROH: Well, that's a good question. I'm not sure I'm giving you an answer. I'm not sure that that can be done.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Doubt it.

DAVID LOSTROH: I don't know. I kind of doubt it, too, I-- you know, if you're-- you're talking about if, if the school is giving--

GROENE: They have to, by law, test first and third graders.

DAVID LOSTROH: --a standardized test for a second-- at the end of second grade--

GROENE: Yeah.

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DAVID LOSTROH: --can a homeschool parent put their second grader in there and have them take the standard-- the standardized test?

GROENE: Or get a copy of the test and give it at home and then--

DAVID LOSTROH: Yeah, I kind of don't think that would happen.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: No, most--

GROENE: Would it be "inadvantageous" to the parents if they chose that?

KATHLEEN LENZEN: Most, most parents in support groups will do testing. Here in Lincoln, the support group does Iowa testing--

GROENE: Basics.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: --and they will do the Iowa tests. Support groups will get together.

GROENE: Do they-- as part of your-- we've heard that you are regulated and, and the state of Nebraska, through our Department of Education, wants to make sure that homeschooler is taught, not just taken out of school. So there is some-- is there follow-up by the state after curriculum is approved for that homeschooler to make sure that child is progressing?

DAVID LOSTROH: There is not a, a-- required information. And so Nebraska is one of-- is in the lower to moderate regulation state because there are states where you can homeschool by simply-- you don't even have to tell anybody and-- in some states. Other states, you just let them know we're going to homeschool and that's it. Nebraska is considered low to moderate because they want to know who-- the names of the children, what the curriculum is, and all that. But as far as having anything-- monitoring during school year, no.

GROENE: All right. Thank you. Any other questions?

WALZ: I just have one more question.

GROENE: Senator Walz.

WALZ: Just-- because I'm not familiar with NCHCA, can you-- again, just kind of tell me what, what it is that--

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KATHLEEN LENZEN: Nebraska, Nebraska Christian Home Educators Association.

WALZ: OK.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: And, and if you go to the-- it, it's, it's been in-- it's an organization, been in effect since 1986. And if you go to the website, there's lots of information on there about how to start homeschooling. And there's-- we have a yearly conference and curriculum fair. There-- we also sponsor a legislative day that homeschoolers-- we teach about. It's for families and, and Senator Groene has spoken at our legislative day, as has Senator Brewer, talks about-- teaches families about our, our legislative system, our form of government in Nebraska. And we have-- all branches of government have spoken at, at the legislative day.

DAVID LOSTROH: And we testify on bills that, that affect home education, pro, pro and-- or con.

WALZ: OK. I'll go on the website and look at it. Thank you.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: www.nchea.org

WALZ: Got it, thank you.

GROENE: Senator Pansing Brooks.

PANSING BROOKS: Thank you. Do you-- is there a Nebraska association of non-Christian home educators?

DAVID LOSTROH: Well, I don't know--

PANSING BROOKS: And do you work with them if--

DAVID LOSTROH: There's nothing-- official organization, a non-Christian-- there are homeschoolers that are not coming at it from a religious perspective. Generally, when there's a homeschooling issue, we're the ones that show up to, to testify and what we testify, generally, is going to help all homeschoolers, whether they're Christian or not. So, you know, we're looking at trying to defend home education with a, you know, primary concern with, with Christians, but with others, too. And so I, I-- at this point, none of the others have felt the need to have to come in and testify. I guess they're happy with what we're doing.

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PANSING BROOKS: OK, thank you.

GROENE: Thank you. Thank you.

KATHLEEN LENZEN: And I, I help anyone that calls, doesn't, doesn't matter-- you know, I do not do any kind of a religious test. Somebody calls, wants to know about a home education, doesn't matter to me what, what-- you know, if they want to know about home education, I give information.

PANSING BROOKS: Well, I appreciate that. Thank you.

GROENE: Thank you. Now we have-- thank you for your testimony. Now we have Zach Eckert from the-- oh, I've, I've skipped over somebody, I'm sorry. Jeremy Ekeler from Nebraska Catholic Conference.

JEREMY EKELER: So yeah, my name is Jeremy Ekeler, it's spelled J-e-r-e-m-y and Ekeler is E-k-e-l-e-r, and I want to thank you for this opportunity. I'm really excited to talk about our schools. I'm the education policy director for the Nebraska Catholic Conference. The Nebraska Catholic Conference advocates for the public policy interests of the Catholic Church by engaging, educating, and empowering public officials, Catholic laity, and the general public. I am here today to provide information about the impact of the pandemic on Catholic schools in Nebraska. I do so on behalf of the Catholic Conference. A lot of what I have prepared today has been said and I'm not going to read off of the script, but I'm going to hit the, the salient points because I realize we want to keep this moving, so-- Senator Groene, thank you for the opportunity. The Education Committee members, thank you as well. There are 26,000-- roughly 26,000 Catholic school students in Nebraska and a lot of what I share today is also on behalf of another 14,000 non-Catholic private school children. And today, I'm going to wear two hats. So one, obviously, is the education policy person for the Nebraska Catholic Conference and-- thank you. The second, though, is as a principal. So I've only been on this job for about three months. And I don't know if you want to take it easy on me or if you beat me up, but prior to this, I was a principal and I just, I just left my job and started at the Catholic Conference here in late July. So a lot of what I'm going to talk to you about today is informed-- isn't much by the policy work I've done recently, it's about my experience, especially my experience at Cathedral of the Risen Christ school here in Lincoln, where I helped reopen that school during the pandemic, prepared for this year. All right. Early estimates state that there are 3 million of the most educationally

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marginalized students in America falling through the cracks. In Nebraska, that would translate to roughly 19,000 students. Studies like this are instructive, but things are very fluid right now. But it definitely validates what we're seeing on the ground with the Catholic schools. We've talked a little bit about the widening equity gap in education is caused by COVID. But the widening equity gap also underscores the vital work of the Catholic schools. Historically, Catholic schools have been the most-- have been the best educators of students with lesser means. This dates back to their full embrace of poor, unwanted immigrants, of which many Catholics were. American Catholic schools have stabilized communities, addressed inequities, and helped break cycles of poverty. So if you take nothing else away from what I'm saying today, the very purpose, the very mission of our schools, that efficacy is being threatened right now by COVID. I'd like to discuss the eminent threats as well as what I see on the horizon happening in our schools. And this, again, comes from 18 years in education, a master's at-- work in Chicago, and my work recently as a principal. I am from Lincoln originally, but did spend time in Chicago. So across the state, we'll talk enrollment. Catholic schools have lost 1,400 students. That's like losing a high school. That's just this year and the stats are staggering when you look at where those numbers are coming from. Higher poverty, higher diversity schools are losing more kids. And these are the mission-- this is the mission of Catholic schools and that mission is being threatened. As you may know, the Archdiocese of Omaha has two special cohorts specifically set up to help low-income students: one is called the consortium, one is called the CUES Schools. While Omaha has lost 5 percent overall, these schools have lost 14 percent of their enrollment, with the biggest strikes coming against low income and especially minority. The Spanish-speaking students seem to be hit the hardest right now, where we're seeing drops by as much as 18 percent in these schools. Here in Lincoln-- we'll get a little more local. Our diocese here in Lincoln has also lost 5 percent of their schools. You have Blessed Sacrament, which is 51 percent minority with 6 nationalities represented, they've lost a fifth of their student population. And I want to connect these dots. When St. Mary's and Sacred Heart closed, those students were transferred-- many of those students were transferred into Blessed Sacrament. So now you're talking about students who are in their third learning environment and three years and they're the most at risk. This is the mission of the church of the Catholic school to serve the least of these. This is a major concern, a grave concern for the Catholic Conference and for Catholic educators all over the country. I do want to talk a little

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bit about North Platte, too. We talked to my friends out, out west and St. Patrick's school system is down 16 students, grades K-12. Well you could say, well, that's, that's not a huge amount. That's a vital amount to that school, which boasts like, 300 students. But most troubling, 20 kindergarten-- 20-- a fifth of their kindergartners did not show up this year. So this is a generational impact we're seeing, too. I'd also like to talk a little bit about-- I'm going to move through this a little bit quickly. I see my light already went off. You can cut me off whenever, Senator. A little bit about scholarship and fundraising as well: we talked about the low-income students and the impact. We all know now COVID is starting to reach into middle class and upper class-- upper income, I should say. In Omaha, the diocese-- archdiocese has already given away \$2.3 million in scholarships. That's 15 percent above the 21-year average. That's not sustainable; \$2 million in scholarships have been given away in Lincoln. Last year, it was \$1.2 for the entire year. That's not sustainable. On a smaller but less no [SIC] impactful scale, North Platte has seen \$20,000 in fundraising opportunities lost to COVID. Blessed Sacrament has lost \$75,000. It's important for you to check the chart on here because what \$75,000 means to a Catholic school is, is huge. It's two teachers. It's custodial staff. It's just vital workers, especially during COVID, when we're trying to keep people in, in work. To close, I want to put on my principal jacket again. I spent five years in Chicago in all sorts of different schools all over the South Side. I told you a little bit about my experience at cathedral for six years. Here's my experience: disruptors impact the vulnerable. We know this. What comes-- and we all see this widening equity gap. We're right in it now; we've talked about it all day. People have spoken really eloquently about it. What comes next? It's a very difficult thing because the most proven and impactful change on urban and minority populations happens in Catholic schools historically and there's the resources for you there to check out, if you would like. The momentum of this financial ruin is impacting these schools. We've already seen two that couldn't hold on. Those school-- those students merged at another school that is now threatened. You all have a unique-- we all have a unique and singular opportunity to move towards a different course. We've got to nudge this thing. Catholic schools have done more with less for centuries and we've done it on our own in Nebraska. We've held on, but it's getting tough and I'm here to, to articulate that on behalf for our schools. Your leadership is necessary and I really thank you for the opportunity to be part of this conversation and talk about-- a little bit about our schools.

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GROENE: You didn't-- I guess I didn't catch it. I mean, I'm assuming this is the poverty situation, English second language immigrants. It's probably the same thing happening across the board, public schools and Catholic schools.

JEREMY EKELER: Right, so we--

GROENE: They're disappear-- why-- is it the money? Is it-- why did the-- why are-- is your enrollment down? The assumption was, the assumption was going in that your enrollment would boom--

JEREMY EKELER: Right.

GROENE: --because parents who didn't want to wear a mask-- who-- public schools were shutting down. You would be open and, and kids-- and parents would opt to put them into your schools or any private school, but apparently that hasn't happened. Can you explain that?

JEREMY EKELER: Yes. What we're seeing with the hits of, like, 14 to 18 percent in the lower income schools, many of those students are-- I guess I-- we see three things and it's-- you know, tracking a 118 schools is, is a little bit of anecdotal here, but I'll tell you what I'm hearing. One is a movement, movement to public schools, which has been heartbreaking for some families who are generationally at a Catholic school.

GROENE: Because of money?

JEREMY EKELER: Money. Another one that's interesting that keeps coming up has to do with families who are moving to live with extended families so that they can share income and take care of older relatives. And that's a really sad thing because a lot of those families are Spanish speaking. They're in the state of Nebraska, but we're losing them. And these are families we really want to keep in Nebraska.

GROENE: So they're moving out of the state?

JEREMY EKELER: Yes. And I don't have numbers on that. Those are just stories I keep hearing from different communities.

GROENE: But as far as the middle-class flight that-- from the school-- from OPS, where they had shut down and did distance learning, you didn't have an increase of, of applications from those parents to get-- because you were open or weren't you open?

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JEREMY EKELER: We were open, um-hum.

GROENE: But you did not have that--

JEREMY EKELER: Did we have an increase in any schools? We have, we have a handful of schools who have seen an increase. Those schools-- for the people who have the means or the wherewithal financially. And we've seen movements from public schools into a few of those schools, too. The growth has been minimal. It's basically stagnant in those schools that serve kind of upper-income families. The big hit has been low income in, in the decline in enrollment.

GROENE: All right. Thank you. Anybody else? Thank you, sir. Next, we will have from the national perspective of what's going on nationally, Zach Eckert from ExcelinEd in Action. And Dr. Cara Candal, she'll be on the phone, and Tim Abram will be on the phone. Kristina, the, the committee clerk, will get them on the phone while we prepare.

ZACH ECKERT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, members of the committee. My name is Zach Eckert with ExcelinEd in Action. That's Z-a-c-h and then Eckert, E-c-k-e-r-t. We are a (c)(4) group that is affiliated with the Foundation for Excellence in Education, where Cara and Tim are from. We're a national nonprofit that works on all sorts of education issues, anything from early literacy, which was-- which has been mentioned today, bridging the digital divide, ensuring that students' credentials are meaningful when they graduate, and also school choice that has been brought up here today. Cara and Tim can do their introductions when, when their turn is to go. But basically, we're here to talk a little bit about what we've seen at the national perspective.

_____ : [INAUDIBLE] has joined the conference.

ZACH ECKERT: Hey, Cara and Tim. We'll have you going here in a second. So like I said, we're going to talk about the national perspective. We've heard these stories about parents and families being stuck at home trying to figure it out. We've heard the struggles of returning to in-person schooling as well. And what we've seen is that there is likely going to be learning loss for students, so that's the point of this hearing. What's the impact? There's learning loss. There's also gonna be issues with equity. So, you know, these students that have means, they're probably going to get through these hard times. They're going to be able to form an education pod or something like that in their neighborhood. They're going to be able to provide that funding

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to go to the private school. Kids without that funding, they're going to be left behind. They're not going to be able to afford that laptop. They might not have a strong family helping them out. So that's what the impact on students will be. We're going to get into this a little bit more here in a second, but we are seeing some good through all these times, too. So we mentioned the education pods. Parents are figuring it out. We're also seeing school districts figure it out. They're-- you know, they're getting Wi-Fi and laptops to their students so that they can learn at home. There's a lot of different ways we can help students in these times, whether that's assessment, tutoring, whether that's extra attention from their teacher after school, but our testimony today will focus on how we can empower students. So I'm just gonna go really quickly at 30,000 foot and then Cara and Tim can get into more detail. But, you know, if, if these parents here at home are now in charge of their student's education, like we heard in testimony earlier today, it might make sense to give them some kind of grant funding. That could look like an education scholarship account, which you've probably heard of before. And that can be used to, you know, fund getting a laptop and Wi-Fi for tutoring services, for actual curriculum and textbooks. It could also be used for private choice, but it doesn't necessarily have to be to go to a private school. In terms of funding scholarships and grants like this, there's GEER funding from the federal level that could be utilized and there's also state dollars as well. In terms of education scholarship accounts, which I mentioned a second ago, there's six states that have them currently. And I believe over 25 states have filed bills on that, including neighboring North Dakota, Wyoming, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri. So, you know, Nebraska is kind of landlocked in terms of filing those kinds of bills and also having tax credit scholarships, which, again, we're not here just to talk about private choice, but that certainly is another option for families in terms of the vouchers and tax credit scholarships. South Dakota, Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, Illinois, those are all somewhat nearby states that have programs in place. So at the end of the day, what we're trying to tell you is that giving parents and families more options is a good way to try to address this pandemic. And honestly, you know, we're in hard times, but if there was a time to ever rethink education as a whole, it would probably be now. So with that, that is my introduction and Cara and Tim can jump on from there, unless there's any questions for me.

GROENE: Where, where's your home base? Did somebody have their hand up? No. Where is your home base?

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ZACH ECKERT: So we're located out of Tallahassee, Florida. Chairman Jeb Bush is our-- the chairman of our organization. I personally live in Indianapolis, Indiana, and travel across the Midwest.

GROENE: And I've been to conferences, everybody talks about Florida and what they do down there. What percentage of kids are, are in public schools versus other options down there? Do you know?

ZACH ECKERT: I can get that answer for you all. I'll, I'll put it on the mike, too, in case Cara couldn't hear you, in terms of the amount of students that are in-- was it in private-- I'm sorry, what was the question?

GROENE: Other options besides public school: homeschool, the pods, the--

ZACH ECKERT: Yeah, so Florida has education scholarship accounts. And, yeah, that's, that's just direct money to families, usually low income or special education and they can--

GROENE: Is there-- does homeschoolers also receive it?

ZACH ECKERT: Homeschoolers could receive it. What we have found across the country, for the most part, is that, and I'm not speaking for the homeschool parents or association here, that a lot of them don't want those perceived strings attached from the state getting in, in the way of their education. So with these accounts, a lot of time, you have to take a test at the end of the year or you have to prove to the state that the way you were using the funding was for a reasonable and legitimate educational expense, so--

GROENE: So of course, there's ties. If you're going to take the money, you better prove your child is being educated and then that's happening in some states?

ZACH ECKERT: Correct. I'm not aware of an ESA that doesn't have some kind of string attached in that sense, whether it's financial auditing, whether it's taking the test, whether it's reporting to the state to see what kind of outcomes the students had.

GROENE: Thank you. Any other questions?

ZACH ECKERT: All right.

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GROENE: The other folks who were going to give a presentation-- what was that? Go ahead.

ZACH ECKERT: Cara and Tim, you're up.

CARA CANDAL: Zach, can you hear us?

ZACH ECKERT: Yes, we can hear you.

CARA CANDAL: Can everybody hear us, Zach?

ZACH ECKERT: You're on.

CARA CANDAL: Wonderful. Thank you. Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Dr. Cara Candal and I'm the director of educational opportunity at the Foundation for Excellence in Education. I'm an education researcher and a policy analyst for the [INAUDIBLE], but I'm here to tell you that I care very much about expanding educational opportunities for families and that's what we do; equity and improve outcomes for kids. And as Zach has mentioned, this matters now more than ever. Across our country, privileged students have more entire--

GROENE: Excuse me, could you just--

ZACH ECKERT: Cara.

GROENE: Let's try slowing down and pausing between words. We're, we're getting--

CARA CANDAL: I am so sorry.

GROENE: It's all-- go ahead, try again.

CARA CANDAL: Is it echoing? OK. So when less privileged families have the resources to access more and better opportunities, then we know that children have better academic outcomes. So to the question just posed, the research on this point is both rigorous and very clear and that is where educational opportunities are more plentiful, students succeed no matter their background. And this applies to all types of school choice, including, as Zach mentioned, education scholarship accounts. These ESAs, education scholarship accounts, or if you want to call them grants or microgrants are-- of course, there's particular interest right now in, in advancing equity and opportunity. And that's precisely because they provide parents with so many options. So if we

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think about wealthy families, you could choose to move to a higher performing district to pay private school tuition, to enroll students in tutoring or test prep, maybe even music classes. And with flexible education accounts, which, to be clear, typically redirect state dollars, not federal dollars, not local dollars to parents, those with less money have the same option as those with more money. So for low and middle-income parents, these can be an absolute equalizer. And when these programs are soundly designed and well administered and we know how to do that, we also know that they have a positive impact not only on the outcomes of the students who participate in the program, but according to research, on outcomes of the students who stay in a typical district setting or do not take an education scholarship account. And I can talk to you more about what that sounds-- administration looks like, but Zach already talked about it. It includes transparency, some sort of accountability for [INAUDIBLE]. So we usually recommend, as Zach mentioned, that students who participate in this program take nationally norm-referenced tests. I want to emphasize that in this particular moment, as Zach said, a lot of other states are, are, are [INAUDIBLE].

GROENE: We're not, we're understanding you. You got--

ZACH ECKERT: Hey, Cara.

GROENE: Excuse me.

CARA CANDAL: --whether at this point in time-- excuse me?

GROENE: Your, your words are being mumbled again. It's not your fault, but the quality of the audio. So if you could slow down and pause between words, you've sped up again. I-- It seems to work better.

CARA CANDAL: I'm sorry. OK, so as I was saying, right now, ESAs are highly sought after. A lot of states are looking into them and that's precisely because of what the pandemic has revealed. So whether or not schools are open right now or closed right now, most were closed during the spring. And during that time, learning was lost, immense amount of learning lost. Parents also got a glimpse of what was happening in classrooms. And sometimes, they weren't happy with what they saw because it wasn't personalized enough or student needs were not being met. The other really important thing that I, as a mother of three, would like to highlight here is that so many parents suffered, for a lack of childcare, trying to balance school and work and they suffered, you know, that while watching the instruction that they

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might not have found satisfactory. ESAs are flexible enough that they can be designed or microgrants are flexible enough that they can be designed to solve any and all of these problems. So what does that mean? That means that you could [INAUDIBLE] at the ESA in your state [INAUDIBLE].

GROENE: We, we-- having audio problems again. Let's go to some questions. I think what, what you're saying, we understand, we, we-- that this is another option, these ESAs, but what have you seen--

CARA CANDAL: Sure.

GROENE: --let's say where, where they're widely used. Is there a conflict now after they've been in place between the public school establishment and, and the private school establishment over these-- I mean there's-- has there been wars over the-- who gets the students?

CARA CANDAL: No. In fact, the two most robust ESAs are in Arizona and Florida and what we see there is number one, that district schools [INAUDIBLE] money because people continue to pay local taxes and ESAs don't take advantage of that. So the district schools have fewer students and more money. So while it would be disingenuous to say that there aren't some folks who would rather not have students leaving districts to homeschool or go to private schools, for the most part, we have not seen huge wars or dissatisfaction. We've seen better outcomes and, and cost savings, quite frankly.

GROENE: You've seen better outcomes in the public schools and overall, they've seen better outcomes, is that what you're saying?

CARA CANDAL: That's correct. For the students who use the program and for the students surround-- in surrounding schools who do not use the program, better outcomes for both.

GROENE: Thank you. Any other questions? Senator Walz.

WALZ: Thank you. Thanks for being here today, Zach. I'm just kind of curious how-- what is the percentage of kids or-- are you able to serve kids who have disabilities or are on IEPs?

ZACH ECKERT: So Cara and Tim feel free--

CARA CANDAL: Absolutely, in fact, several-- oh, sorry.

ZACH ECKERT: Go ahead.

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CARA CANDAL: Several ESA programs are designed exclusively for students with special needs. And those that are not designed exclusively for students with special needs do not exclude them, so, yes.

WALZ: So physic-- I mean, how do you set up resources then for physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, mental health therapy?

CARA CANDAL: So the way it works with an ESA is once the rules and regulations are in place, the state-- the administrator will "pre-vet" proven providers, telehealth providers, therapists for students with special educational needs, etcetera. All of these become sort of a menu of services that parents can choose from. And then the parents choose the services that they need and that-- the amount of those services, the cost is deducted from the overall amount. If parents got \$6,000 and their special needs therapist costs \$1,000 for the year, then they're left with \$5,000 in their account. But the administrator vets providers to make sure that they are doing what they're supposed to do and then the parents choose that service.

WALZ: So-- I-- you were kind of breaking up again. So parents are paying for those services or who's paying for the services?

CARA CANDAL: So the money in an education scholarship account, the state's portion of per-pupil spending is deposited into account that the state and the parent jointly manage. So the parent is making the choice, but they're paying for those services with money provided to them by the state. To limit any sort of fraud or abuse, we don't just write parents a check. We-- it's like-- imagine you're shopping on Amazon and you see a little thing in the corner that says you have \$500 to spend here in your account. You choose the services that you need and you watch that amount go down according to what you have spent. That's how it works.

WALZ: And there's a total of \$6,000 that they have to spend in their account?

CARA CANDAL: In many cases, yes. I'm, I'm using that as an example. But I believe in Florida, for example, the amount of an ESA is about \$6,000. In a lot of states, that's the average state allocation for pupils. So again, this is just state money that follows-- state education dollars that follow children, not local tax dollars and not federal money.

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GROENE: Thank you. Any other questions? Senator Pansing Brooks.

PANSING BROOKS: Thank you both for being here today. I'm, I'm just interested-- in light of the fact that we've heard from different groups providing different kinds of private or pod or homeschool education, I, I understand that each group believes in-- fiercely believes in what you are doing and the value and the, the, the, the work that you are-- the value in the work that you are doing. So I just have a question, hypothetically. What-- where, where do you suggest that legislators finally draw the line? If 40 groups come in, privately want to educate children, should the state support any group because some parent wants it? How do we determine whether or not adequate and excellent education is being provided just because some group comes in and tells us we should?

CARA CANDAL: If I may answer that, I would say the state needs to have a clear definition, as I hope you do, of excellent and adequate education. And whatever program you choose, you need to have an appropriate accountability mechanism in place to show that that's being delivered. And beyond that, I personally believe, based on research and data, that it doesn't matter what type of education a parent chooses for his or her child as long as it is an excellent and adequate education, as long as it meets that student's needs. And that can happen in a variety of ways and the wealthy at this country have already figured that out. Unfortunately, it's those with fewer resources that don't have the privilege to access the kind of education that will provide equity and, and excellence for too many kids.

PANSING BROOKS: But you're talking about checking over and, and determining whether the program is of value. We've heard from people today with different programs and we have no true ability-- because as a government, we do not have the ability to provide oversight to private educational institutions, no matter whether or not the children or their parents think this is the best opportunity for that child. So I guess I'm just trying to figure out-- I mean, literally, under this theory of this hearing today, any group who comes forward and says we're going to provide excellent education, we have children who see its value and feel it important and so you must give us microgrants or vouchers or money to be able to support our important work. And at that point, where does that money come from, other than from the public schools who are open and transparent about what-- how they're teaching, how they're certifying their teachers, and the

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results of those-- of the, of the children as they go through and their testing and everything like that?

CARA CANDAL: Well, Senator, any time public money is provided for any type of education, then the state has a right to attach requirements to that, which is why I suggested norm-referenced testing, which is in fact, much higher quality than the vast majority of state tests that we have and provide the state with the ability to see how any child participating in any program, be it in a private school or a homeschool, etcetera, compares in reference to his or her peers on a nationally norm-referenced test. So here-- at ExcelinEd, we advocate for public money following the children and, and we believe that it does not actually belong to school districts, that it belongs to the taxpayers.

PANSING BROOKS: To the what?

_____ : Taxpayers.

PANSING BROOKS: OK. Thank you for your discussion today.

GROENE: I'm going to-- is it OK if we skip over Tim? Is he going to hit on the same issues and--

ZACH ECKERT: He was just going to talk about GEER funding and how that can be used. We can get that information to you to save time for you.

GROENE: Because we have other people and senators want to-- we're moving-- I didn't keep-- we didn't come close to our ten minutes per person, so-- so anyway, we're going to move on to-- now, now we're going to talk to some of the public school interests to find out how, how we, how--

_____ : The caller, Dr. Cara Candal, has left.

GROENE: --it has affected the, has affected the enrollment and what, what you're seeing and hearing from parents out there. So this is Stacie Higgins, president of Nebraska Association of School Boards.

STACIE HIGGINS: Yes, that-- I am Stacie Higgins, S-t-a-c-i-e, Higgins, H-i-g-g-i-n-s. I'm currently the president of the Nebraska Association of School Boards. In addition, I serve on the Nebraska City Public Schools Board of Education. I'm a parent and I also manage a nonprofit that is focused on helping people in my community break the cycle of poverty. So my goal today is to just talk to you about what's

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happening in public schools as it relates to the COVID response. So I, I think I'd like to start first by telling you I was the only kid in my third grade class and I've-- I'm still out there functioning well in society. So I think I'd like to start by telling you just a few things that have gone well in public education because sometimes, that doesn't always make the headlines. So last March, as you know, things kind of got disrupted-- and I do have my testimony in print. The local educator, administrators, support staff, everyone kind of met the challenge that was presented in March as true Nebraskans. We rolled up our sleeves, used the resources that public schools have access to, and delivered the exceptional prod-- product that we know as public education in Nebraska. Most of Nebraska educators in public schools are now educating in a variety of ways that were never considered before. That could be delivering instruction all day long, wearing a mask or doing live instruction and then preparing a virtual lesson because they're in a hybrid model or maybe they are just teaching remotely. Teachers are doing this with the grit and humility of a Nebraskan. And it's a task that if you would have told us in January we'd have to do, we would have said it's impossible. So our administrators have been put in problem-solving situations that they really don't have background in, things like virus mitigation, epidemiology, and contact tracing. In Nebraska City, we recently moved to a hybrid model. We've been face to face since the first day of school in August and due to rising numbers in our health department area, we have shifted to a hybrid model. There's a lot of factors that come into play to make that decision, but one of them is it allow-- our staff are the ones that have to do the contact tracing because cases are high and our local health department is overwhelmed. So we have 1,384 students in our system and when half of those are in a-- in the buildings in a day, it makes contact tracing much easier. That doesn't mean transmission is happening in the schools, but those exposures and all those things have to be traced back. If a staff member got exposed over the weekend, then we have to trace back and do all that contact tracing. So we have shifted to that hybrid model. It is to be determined how long we will be in that model. So that's a glimpse of what's happening in our own district. A superintendent described it to me that what we're doing right now is like an airline company moving from flight travel to taxi service. The goal is still transportation, but now the model of delivery is wildly different and the decision to switch models was made pretty rapidly. We have 244 school districts that have shifted their model. Some are doing it exceptionally well, some have struggled, but all or do-- have risen to the occasion or using it with the skills and knowledge they have

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access to. One of our challenges as a primary function of a school board is to evaluate their superintendent. We typically do that in December. We are now evaluating our superintendents. They're doing a job that was not part of their job description, so it just is one more thing that we are facing. From August-- from March until August, districts, administrators, board of eds, support staff, teachers, they came up with a reopening plan. These reopening plans had a lot of contingencies if you think about what we know about the virus today compared with July when we put those contingencies in place. This resulted in districts opening in a variety of fashions and they did what they thought was best with the information they had. Districts did all of this with unknown liability exposure lurking. We did not and we still do not have a mechanism in place to combat the unknown liability that exists. We work with local health departments to do what we can to mitigate risks, make decisions about epidemiology, and create learning environments that are safe, even though there's no consensus yet on what is a safe learning environment. School districts have created plans and these multiple contingencies and when the new information develops, we reverse-- we create a new plan. Just like when we hear local cases are rising, we might have to go hybrid. The school leaders, as I talked about, become the tracers when the health departments are overwhelmed. And districts, now we know would benefit from additional resources and training for our staff so we can do simple things like contract tracing and keep all our kids in schools. I should-- I, I need to tell you that districts are grateful-- we're grateful to the Department, Department of Education. We're grateful to our local leaders and our state leaders because they have led with the philosophy of local control and that is something that boards of education believe is vital to keeping public schools strong in Nebraska. But we also know this comes with challenges, some that we just really were not prepared for. We have found that mitigating risks in schools is a politically charged topic that makes the local board room the junction for community frustrations. We then find our boards and administrators making decisions that we do not have expertise in. It is an incredibly complicated environment to make public health and safety decisions in. Sometimes these decisions lack clarity, as there are so many opinions from local, state, and national sources about what is best for students. And sometimes decisions come down to really practical issues like workforce. Will we have enough teachers able to come to school tomorrow or are too many of them quarantining and waiting for test results? So what do school districts need now? We need flexibility, we need the continued support we always receive, and we need clarity. Specifically, clarity about liability would help us

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make some proper decisions with a proper lens. Clarity about how to operate under boundaries and systems that worked in the past, but were developed prepandemic. Clarity about how districts will be held accountable for instructional hours and test scores. We agree that accountability is important and knowing the accountability standards well in advance, districts can then prepare and make decisions accordingly. And clarity about who is making decisions; when schools are charged with making decisions based on recommendations of local health departments, we believe that system can work, but it can cause great confusion when the district ten miles down the road makes a different decision and it puts school districts on an island. Clarity about community risk dials and the metrics used to create them and how that impacts the school population, especially if you can prove transmission is not happening in the schools. School district leaders are not epidemiologists, they're not local health experts, and they've never created a risk dial prior to April. They do all those things now. Board meetings have become hotbeds of political discussions: mask, no mask, hybrid, no hybrid and not student achievement. And student achievement is what we ran to do, what we were elected to do. And the last thing I would say that during this pandemic, school boards, locally elected boards in general, would benefit greatly from some flexibility on the Open Meetings Act that would allow boards to meet virtual-- virtually when some members have to be quarantined. I think some of you may have seen a news report last night. Ralston Public Schools had to cancel a school board meeting for this very reason. And when we can't conduct monthly business, we can't, we can't pay the vendors on a monthly basis and just some of those things that we're seeing. So that's what's happening right now related to COVID in public schools. I'd love to come back another time and talk about other things happening in public schools, but I'm happy to answer any questions or deflect questions to my friend, Jack Moles.

GROENE: Thank you.

STACIE HIGGINS: He's going to speak next.

GROENE: Are the school boards association tracking how many children actually got sick or violently sick or have been hospitalized?

STACIE HIGGINS: I, I don't believe the school board association is tracking that. We run into some privacy issues. Some districts are releasing their own district-- school district dial that might say we have "X" number of kids, system wide, that tested positive.

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GROENE: That doesn't mean they're sick.

STACIE HIGGINS: Correct. So I, I will tell you that my own daughter one day had some allergies and I called the school and said, here's what she's got. It's not COVID. Keep her home. So it would be really hard to track that-- what is serious and what is not, so good question.

GROENE: And what-- I keep hearing that it seems to be the teachers who are coming-- testing positive or-- more than the kids even.

STACIE HIGGINS: Well, I think in general, statistically, we know it's more adults than kids. We do not get a breakdown in my district, again, privacy reasons, but I would say that we have more teachers that are getting exposed and having to quarantine and--

GROENE: They test positive.

STACIE HIGGINS: I, I don't know if they test positive.

GROENE: You'll quarantine somebody even though they didn't test positive?

STACIE HIGGINS: They're awaiting test results.

GROENE: All right.

STACIE HIGGINS: So they are unable to come to school. And, and that's just the nature of adult lifestyle of getting your kids to soccer practice and all of those-- going to the grocery store.

GROENE: How about substitute teachers? How's that situation with the schools?

STACIE HIGGINS: It's a little tricky. Primarily, our substitute teacher population is-- a lot of them are retired teachers and--

GROENE: More susceptible.

STACIE HIGGINS: --many of them do not feel it's a safe environment to substitute in right now. Going hybrid does allow us to float teachers a little bit more and so that does help with that. But my own superintendent in my district anticipates that we probably will not go back to the way we were in March in terms of a full remote, but we may have to go remote a day or a couple days because of staffing.

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GROENE: Do the school boards understand that this is that kid's only shot at playing basketball, only shot at being in the school play, only shot to-- as we heard earlier, that you cannot redo the third grade? You're set behind. And is that your ultimate goal, to keep them in the school so we don't have this, this environmental depression that's hitting our children?

STACIE HIGGINS: Well, our ultimate goal is to keep them in school because that is the role of the public school in Nebraska, is to educate a student. We do know that there's great ramifications to isolation for a kid not being in school. We, we just-- we have been charged with educating kids and we want to do that in school. We believe face-to-face education is best. In a hybrid model, our kids are still able to participate in after-school activities. My own kid had her district speech meet canceled last year and she was well on her way to what, what I think might have been a pretty fantastic state tournament. So we see it, we see it firsthand, but it's not about the basketball game or the speech meet. It's about the overall, whole child health of them, whether that's mental--

GROENE: But we've proven that the child isn't really affected by COVID. It's about grandma at home.

STACIE HIGGINS: I understand that and now you're getting a little bit of a taste of the political--

GROENE: What you're getting at the school board, I understand.

STACIE HIGGINS: --the political discussions that happen at a school board meeting.

GROENE: Do you have a mask mandate?

STACIE HIGGINS: We do. We have a mask mandate within our schools and our kids have been fantastic about it. Very few complaints are coming to the board, but we can't dictate how behaviors happen outside of the school.

GROENE: Could you-- how many, percentage wise or whatever, are students-- parents deciding to do remote just because they--

STACIE HIGGINS: So we--

GROENE: --don't want to wear a mask? They're afraid of--

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STACIE HIGGINS: Right.

GROENE: Grandma lives with them. They don't want their--

STACIE HIGGINS: Right.

GROENE: --child out there bringing something home.

STACIE HIGGINS: So we have-- we do not offer a remote option currently at Nebraska City Public Schools. If you are not comfortable with our protocols, homeschool is your best option. We also have a Catholic school in town, but their mask mandate-- everything is very similar to the public schools. So we have 30 students who have a homeschool option this year.

GROENE: So when you say you've got a split, what do you mean? Some come to school one day and some stay home, but they're not--

STACIE HIGGINS: So last week, last week we switched to the-- I, I believe someone called it the two-three model. For example, my, my daughter is a junior in high school. This week, she goes to school Tuesday, Thursday. Last week, it was Monday, Wednesday, Friday.

GROENE: They send them their curriculum and their, their homework home for the days they're at home--

STACIE HIGGINS: Yep.

GROENE: --ahead of time, the teacher prepares their--

STACIE HIGGINS: Yeah, our high school students are one-to-one with a Chromebook. We did receive GEER funding to ultimately get our district to one-to-one for K-12. Of course, everybody wants a laptop right now, so those are back-ordered. But we're really appreciative of that GEER funding opportunity.

GROENE: All right, thank you. Senator Linehan.

LINEHAN: I'm-- this-- not about Nebraska City, but about all the school boards association. Has there been any discussion-- because it seems to me-- you're a mom, I'm a mom. It's one thing to tell a seventh grader or sophomore in high school that they're going to be at home studying and this is your job and this is what you need to do before you get to do anything else, watch TV. It's a whole different thing to try and tell that to a kindergartner through fourth grade.

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STACIE HIGGINS: Um-hum.

LINEHAN: Has there been any discussions-- because I think I've read this where some-- it's happened in some states. They have the high school, junior high kids go the two-three model, but that leaves them enough room in the building to make sure the little kids are in school five days a week because the little kids, you can't-- anybody who's had a little kindergartner, you're not going to set them in front of a screen. That's not going to work.

STACIE HIGGINS: Right, we, we just did a quick survey of some of our school districts yesterday. I think we got responses from 131; 6 of those currently are in that two-three model. So those would be Lincoln, Omaha, Ralston, South Sioux, Nebraska City, and then Winnebago. So we also-- some of those responses coming back are looking at exactly what you said. So Nebraska City has not considered that, but the way that would look in Nebraska City, we have four attendance units: pre-K, second, third through fifth, junior, high. So you would be shifting kids to different buildings. So you, you would, you would say, OK, third grade, you're actually going to have third grade now in a different building to spread this out. So it is something that some districts are looking at. I think we all are pretty pleased with how this first quarter went, but we don't have control over these numbers that are spiking, so we're having to get pretty innovative.

LINEHAN: So 131 responded and said-- most of the schools you say that are the two-three are the ones who have the highest-risk kids, the largest--

STACIE HIGGINS: I'm sorry.

LINEHAN: So the schools, the six that you named--

STACIE HIGGINS: Yes, but--

LINEHAN: If I'm remembering the numbers right, those are the schools with the largest number of high-risk students.

STACIE HIGGINS: Well, they're our, they're our met-- they're metro schools, yes. I don't have, you know, the breakdown of what their--

LINEHAN: But it was Omaha, Lincoln--

STACIE HIGGINS: Ralston--

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LINEHAN: --South Sioux--

STACIE HIGGINS: --South Sioux, Winnebago, and Nebraska City. Most of those have been hybrids since the beginning. And we can always get you more data as-- because that number will be different next week.

LINEHAN: No, but there sure-- is there a consensus-- I would assume there-- I mean, I'm kind of embarrassed to ask this question. I'm assuming there's a consensus amongst all people involved in this that the kids who-- that were-- that the students that are at higher risk here are low-income students whose chances-- little kids. I don't know how they can possibly be making it. They may or may not have Internet. They may or may not have a parent at home, more likely a sibling. How, how-- it just seems like every effort possible ought to be made to get those youngsters, five, six, seven, eight, nine-year-olds back into school. And it doesn't mean everybody has to come back five days a week, but those little ones-- I don't know how you--

STACIE HIGGINS: Well, and I, I think we need to clarify some of these hybrid schools for you because I think in Lincoln-- I'm looking at my NASB people back there-- pre-K through fifth, sixth, eighth--

_____ : Through middle school.

STACIE HIGGINS: --through middle school are in the building every day. So when we say hybrid, it, it, it could mean a variety of different things, but we-- I'm, I'm just telling you that the NASB-- I'm, I'm not going-- they're going to do it--

LINEHAN: OK.

STACIE HIGGINS: --and they're going to email you--

LINEHAN: OK.

STACIE HIGGINS: --what that looks like for some-- because those are good questions. And I know when-- in March, we had classroom teachers delivering hot spots to school-- to, to families. We have paras that are delivering meals to families. Right now in our hybrid model, we're making sure those kiddos that need meals are taking that home on Monday and that they have enough food until they come back on Wednesday. So we're, we're trying to make sure all those needs are met because if those needs aren't met, the learning won't happen.

LINEHAN: Right. Thank you.

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STACIE HIGGINS: Yes.

LINEHAN: I appreciate it.

GROENE: I'm sure your staff has told you that--

STACIE HIGGINS: I'm going to call them that, my staff.

GROENE: --you're the president-- has told you that we had a bill ready to go during the short interim on the liability issue.

STACIE HIGGINS: Right, I thought that's what I was here for today.

GROENE: But, but anyway, of course, we were told the Feds were going to do something and we should never rely on the Feds. But anyway, we did have a-- in place and I understand we'll try to talk to the Governor, the Department of Ed--

STACIE HIGGINS: That, that would be helpful. That-- they're--

GROENE: --about the, the Zoom on, on your-- so that you can have a quorum to--

STACIE HIGGINS: Yeah--

GROENE: --approve payments.

STACIE HIGGINS: --and, and we had a call last week and the Governor was on that call and we-- we've shared that with him. That would just really help with some of the immediate things that are happening.

GROENE: I believe we're still under emergency.

STACIE HIGGINS: It expired.

GROENE: Oh, it expired.

STACIE HIGGINS: Yeah, the, the one issued in March did expire. And really, through this summer, we seemed to be doing well, but this spike in cases--

GROENE: I understand.

STACIE HIGGINS: --is, is impacting that.

GROENE: I think your school board meeting with the Governor--

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STACIE HIGGINS: So those, those individuals--

GROENE: --if there's another emergency, then he'll have a school board revolt, but anyway--

STACIE HIGGINS: Those individuals that are asking to attend virtually aren't necessarily sick--

GROENE: No.

STACIE HIGGINS: --they are just, for public good, staying home.

GROENE: And you can't social distance by having a meeting in the auditorium.

STACIE HIGGINS: We have moved where our meetings are, so we no longer meet in our boardroom because it's smaller. We now meet in the commons of the elementary school and we mask and we yell at each other because now we're really far apart. But if someone would-- had-- if a board member had been exposed the previous week, they would not attend because that would be a health risk. That is just not a protocol that we're going to allow to happen.

GROENE: But you could still have a quorum.

STACIE HIGGINS: We could, we have a nine-member board on-- but other boards, that would be a little bit of a challenge.

GROENE: All right, thank you. Any other questions? Thank you. Now we have Jack Moles from the Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association.

JACK MOLES: Good afternoon, Senator Groene and members of the committee. Thank you for having me. Kind of give you a little bit of-- first of all, I'm Jack Moles, J-a-c-k M-o-l-e-s. I'm the executive director of the Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association. What I did in preparation for this, Senator Groene, was a combination of some things that Nicole had talked to me about and then some things my, my members were wondering about. So I did a series of short surveys and so that's what I'm going to address here today, is kind of give you a little information on what's going on in the rural schools right now in regard to COVID. The first survey looked at the student's educational setting because of COVID issues. The second survey was a snapshot of how much staff and student time had been missed due to COVID issues. And then the survey-- third survey was a combination of two things: one is to look at the delivery of instruction and the

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other was to see what kind of decisions parents of prekindergarten and kindergarten students were making due to COVID issues. And when I, when I say COVID issues, I'm saying anything that somebody might think is an issue, whether it be they don't agree with what the school's doing as far as masked or anything or it might be underlying health concerns, it's just a, a variety of things. So the first survey was emailed to 197 school districts, with 96 responding. And what I wanted to look at was the movement of students due to COVID issues. And so what, what I asked-- first of all, looked at the, the number of students that NRCSA-size schools lost due to COVID issues, OK? And, and the options I gave them in the survey was the, the parent decided to homeschool, the parent decided to send the, the student to a private school, and then the third choice was to option to another school district. And what we saw was 419 students out of our responses decided to homeschool, 11 transferred to a private school, and 42 optioned to another public school. And just some kind of observations from the numbers I got and some of the responses, in, in each case, I gave them the chance to just re-- make some comments if they wanted to, so I'd share a little bit of that with you. But 30 of the 96 districts indicated they didn't lose any students due to COVID issues. The responding districts had a combined enrollment of 30 set-- 36,757 kids last year and they lost-- they had-- oh, what was it? Oh, about 450, 460 kids were lost due to COVID. So they lost 1.14 percent of their kids. The two main concerns cited in, in choosing to homeschool were concern over the health of the student or somebody in the family had an underlying health concern, so they felt it was better to keep the child at home. And the other was just in disagreement with the school protocols, especially in reference to face masks, the requirements they had with face masks. Another concern voiced by some parents was that they wanted their students in a more stable environment. They didn't want to start, then stop, then start, then stop, so they just decided to keep them at home so it would be more stable routine for their children. And the main concern cited for transferring enrollment to either a private school or another public school was disagreement over the protocols in the school district they were leaving. And then, then the other thing I looked at was how many students did they get-- did they receive because of COVID issues? And what we saw was we had-- there were 20 students in which the families discontinued the homeschool situation. We had 14 that transferred from a private school and then 70 optioned in from another public school. And some observations from that: 69 of the 96 districts said that they didn't gain any students as a result of COVID issues. By far, the largest reason for students entering the district from another

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educational setting was liking the protocols that the district had chosen to use, as compared to the previous setting. And, of course, the two most, the two most common reasons there: one was the face masks, whatever their protocols were with face masks, and then the other was that they like the, the face-to-face or the hybrid model that the school had developed. Kind of an interesting note on this was 6 respondents reported that the school district gained students as a result of students moving in with different family members, such as grandparents or another parent. And of those, 3 students came in from out of state because their parents didn't agree with the protocols being used in West Virginia and Texas. So we're better than West Virginia and Texas, I guess. The second survey was emailed to 210 rural districts and ESUs and with 125 responding. And this one looked at the, the amount of time missed by kids, teachers, and then support staff. I broke them up that way. And Senator Groene, you were asking some questions here of Stacie and I can kind of give you a-- from the rural school angle, 3,864 students-- and this is as of, I think, October 9, that's when the cutoff was. And the numbers would be bigger now, of course. We're almost a month later, but at that time, 3,864 students had missed time because of COVID issues; 269 of those had tested positive. So 269 out of 3,864 had tested positive, 2,510 were quarantined as a result of a possible contact somewhere. And of those, 490 were traced back to the school or a school activity. So some observations there: only about 7 percent of the students who missed time due to COVID issues had actually tested positive. About-- a little under 13 percent of the students who missed time were due to exposure traced to a school or a school activity, not a very high percentage. At the time, on October 9, almost half the districts responded that they had not had a student test positive. My guess is that number is quite a bit different today. One other thing that, that really jumped out to me, 8 of the responding superintendents-- so 8 out of 125 said that their district had had over 100 students miss time due to COVID issues. And these were in smaller school districts, remember, so a pretty large number. The 8 districts accounted for 1,726 students missing time due to COVID issues, which is almost half the kids that had been reported as missing time, came out of just those 8 school districts. Of, of the 1,726 students who missed time in those 8 districts, only 22 had tested positive, so 1.27 percent had tested positive. Responding superintendents indicated that a great many of the cases that resulted in students being quarantined were a result of contact with a family member who had tested positive, so it came out of the home, mainly. Several responding superintendents also expressed concern over the inconsistencies of contract testing or

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tracing. That's-- it's-- doesn't appear to be the same everywhere is what I'm saying. Also looked at the number of teachers who had lost time due to COVID issues; 330 teachers had lost time, 97 of them had tested positive, so a higher percent tested positive. Almost a third of the ones that missed time had tested positive and only 10 percent of those that were traced back to the school or a school activity, so it was outside of school again. Several responding superintendents cited the issue of students who missed time or missed multiple days while awaiting test results to come back and-- which they test-- ended up testing negative, but they missed a lot of time. And, of course, that affects the classroom also. The other thing I looked at that I won't go into detail on it was support staff members who missed time due to COVID issues. There were 208 support staff members. The issues there is, for example, in your-- bus drivers is one of the ones that really-- I heard a lot about is, you know, they've, they've only got maybe one or two substitute bus drivers and if they have a couple go down, then what do they do? And I know a lot of administrators drive buses right now, so-- to help out. The third survey, as I said, was kind of after two different sets of information: one is delivery of educational opportunities. For example, is it face to face, is it face to face with a remote option where they can Zoom in, or is it face to face, but families can opt to have the student do work at home? And of those, we found that-- what I, what I found was the overwhelming majority were face to face only. But they did say that if a student tested positive or had to quarantine because of close contact, that they, they are working with the families to provide a Zoom option or provide other work. They're working very closely with them on that. The other issue that I looked at was the, the decisions families of prekindergarten and kindergarten students are making on enrolling their kids this year. And of course, the reason there is prekindergarten, kindergarten kids under seven don't have to legally be in school. What I found was that in prekindergarten, 2,000-- what, what I looked at was how many kids did the school anticipate before the start of the school year, how many actually enrolled or started the school year, and then how many, how many did the, the parents say it's because of a COVID issue? And I think schools did a pretty good job of asking that question when parents made those decisions. So prekindergarten students-- out of the schools that serve-- were-- answered the survey, 2,460 students were anticipated, 2,163 actually started. Of those kids that didn't start, 116 were for COVID issues, so 87.92 percent of the students that the schools anticipated coming into, into preschool did actually start the school year. So we're really a pretty good number, I thought. I thought the number-- I-- my

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assumption was the number might be higher, but it was not. And then with kindergarten, what we-- what I found was 2,608 students were anticipated, 2,493 actually started. So about 95.5 percent of the students that were anticipated actually started the school year. And the two--

GROENE: Could we wrap it up?

JACK MOLES: OK. Yeah, I've just got one comment is all. The, the two main reasons for parents not having their prekindergarten or kindergarten students start the school year: one was the uncertainty over the delivery of instruction. And they especially were concerned about starting the school year and then going back to remote and then starting and going-- and then the other was just disagreement over the mask protocol used by the school, so--

GROENE: Question for you.

JACK MOLES: Yes, sir.

GROENE: On your testing of COVID, 269 tested. There's nobody out there doing a complete blanket test of all the kids in the schools, are they?

JACK MOLES: No, not that I know of.

GROENE: So a parent or a relative or somebody-- the contact tracers traced to the student that somebody had it, an adult, and then that child tested positive, probably was "asomatic." Do we know how many kids are sitting in a classroom, "asomatic," that have-- had a period of a 10-day or 14-day period, have, have the, the COVID but are "asomatic" and they pass through this-- through the period?

JACK MOLES: Yeah--

GROENE: Do you have any idea?

JACK MOLES: Yeah, I don't know that. I, I think it would be-- I think the same assumption you would have, that probably is, is higher than what we think.

GROENE: So when we hear these numbers about COVID and kids having to stay home, they don't have a disease. They have an exposure to a germ.

JACK MOLES: A lot--

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GROENE: I mean have you heard any reports from any of these superintendents where a child get violently sick from COVID?

JACK MOLES: I have not. The thing I'm hearing is, is that there are, there are kids missing time due to a possible contact, close contact.

GROENE: Mom or dad or grandma and grandpa got it?

JACK MOLES: And then they-- then they don't test positive--

GROENE: So they have--

JACK MOLES: --so they've missed a lot of time.

GROENE: So they have to stay home for 14 days--

JACK MOLES: Yeah.

GROENE: --or 10 days. So a lot of the absenteeism is a--

JACK MOLES: Right.

GROENE: --is an overreaction by adults. Thank you. Senator Linehan.

LINEHAN: I don't have kids in school, so I don't pay as much attention. Well, I-- my own grandkids, but didn't they change the, the quarantine, like, in the last 30 days or something? Didn't we decide-- didn't they lessen it a little bit?

JACK MOLES: That's the way, that's the way I understand it, that if a student had close contact, but they were, they were masked, they might not have to be quarantined.

LINEHAN: Right, because they were having to--

JACK MOLES: Right.

LINEHAN: --send whole classrooms home and then they decided that if the teacher had it, but the kids were all masked, they, they weren't in quaran-- they've just loosened that a little bit--

JACK MOLES: Right.

LINEHAN: --didn't they? I thought that they did, but I'm not--

JACK MOLES: That's the way I understand it, too.

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LINEHAN: OK, yeah.

JACK MOLES: I'm not in school either anymore, so--

LINEHAN: [INAUDIBLE], but I think that might be better.

GROENE: One more question. When you say exposure traced to school or school activity, so a football team played another football team and they heard that a kid on the other team tested positive, does that whole team have to stay home for ten days because they were exposed on the football field?

JACK MOLES: Not that I know of, it-- it's--

_____: Can I answer?

JACK MOLES: Yeah, if you can. That would be great.

_____: It, it honestly depends on the local health department and those protocols.

JACK MOLES: Yeah.

_____: And if you can go back to that district and prove certain measures were in place, that health department may give different directions for our district than the health department down the road might--

GROENE: That's-- thank you.

_____: --so it's all about approving those protocols.

JACK MOLES: And that's where I was talking about superintendents being concerned about the, the inconsistencies.

GROENE: What is the school board association or at least your association's understanding of the power of these local health districts? Can they dictate to you or is it always a recommendation?

JACK MOLES: Again, I think it's where, where you are. Some are maybe a little more aggressive than others. Some are, you know, some-- the school and the health department seem to be working better together than in other part-- places. It's, it's really all over the place, it appears to me. And that's just from hearing-- talking to superintendents.

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GROENE: So if you're a small school outlying an area of a big metropolis school district health department, you are under the same dictate as the highly densely populated school district, probably.

JACK MOLES: I would, I would understand it that way, wherever the health department is.

GROENE: But you have no clarification?

JACK MOLES: No.

GROENE: Do you think the state needs to-- the Legislature needs to clarify the mission and the power of these local health districts?

JACK MOLES: I, I haven't worked with them close enough to really be able to make that, that assessment myself.

GROENE: But it seems to affect your members from-- as it--

JACK MOLES: Yeah, I hear about it quite a bit, yeah.

GROENE: One team in a different conference is in a different health district and it's completely different rules. Thank you. Anything-- any other questions? Senator Pansing Brooks.

PANSING BROOKS: Thank you. Thank you very much for coming, Dr. Moles. This is really helpful. I think it's just amazing information. I also find it just amazing that only 1.14 percent loss of students due to COVID among the NRCSA groups. I wish GNSA and, and-- had been invited as well, because I would like to see this information as well from the bigger schools and know more of this. Thank you very much for doing all of this work.

JACK MOLES: You're welcome.

PANSING BROOKS: The-- it's pretty clear that you're all trying to be fleet of foot and respond to a crisis that no one expected. And I admire the work of the public schools across our state in this effort, so thank you.

JACK MOLES: I, I would echo that. I'm proud of all of our schools across the state. The private schools have done a great job also.

PANSING BROOKS: Yes, they have.

JACK MOLES: They've all done a great job.

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PANSING BROOKS: Yeah, everybody's taken, taken it and not knowing what to do and so I would agree with what the privates-- everybody who's taking care of our children have really done a great job of stepping up, so thanks to everybody testifying here today as well.

WALZ: Senator Linehan.

LINEHAN: Thank you. I just-- again, so it's, like, verbalized here, but-- and I'm not-- I always thought that being a school board would be the hardest political job in the whole world. And I'm sure, at this particular time, it's the worst job-- political job-- public service. But I think the health departments are different because I just know Douglas County Health Department, we have very different things going on in school districts in the same-- under the same county health--

JACK MOLES: Right.

LINEHAN: --so it's clearly a back and forth between-- because I know they told Elkhorn they weren't gonna play football and that lasted less than 48 hours. So there's clearly some give and take. It might be different when you've got one department over schools that are, like, miles and miles apart, but it probably does need-- I-- one of the things I think we should do, whenever we get through this, is the Legislature should have a group that goes back and works with the schools and everybody else to see what did we do well, what did we not do well, what could we improve on? So if this-- hopefully never happens again, but that's kind of, like-- hope is not a plan. We should go back and have some kind of review of what everybody did.

JACK MOLES: I think a lot of us have 20/20 hindsight right now.

LINEHAN: Right, right. It's easy to be smart, yeah. Thank you for being here, Jack.

WALZ: I have one question or maybe two.

JACK MOLES: OK.

WALZ: Actually, I'm just curious, do you know if any schools are taking temperatures?

JACK MOLES: Yeah, there, there are a lot of them. In fact, I've been going-- I've gone out-- I do six regional NRCSA meetings each year and I've gone out. And, and a few of the places-- I've stopped into schools to visit-- and talked to them ahead of time to see what the

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protocol was, and a few of them have, have been taking my temperature on the way in so, yeah.

WALZ: OK. And then my other question just has to do with the-- schools have spent so much money, so much money on just trying to get through COVID with technology, buying laptops, PPE. I know my district spent over \$900,000. Do you have any data or information that you want to share regarding the amount of money and resources that the schools had to use for COVID reasons?

JACK MOLES: Yeah, I, I don't have that, but it's, it's next-- you know, I've been doing these little surveys with my, my-- and I, and I told my membership this year, expect a lot of these in the next couple months because I-- it, it can help everybody really. But yeah, that's, that's one of the next things on the list--

WALZ: OK.

JACK MOLES: --is to kind of find out what's going on financially. And if they only spent \$900,000 in Fremont--

WALZ: Well, that's--

JACK MOLES: --they've done really well, I think, because--

WALZ: --that's--

JACK MOLES: -- I, I would expect it would be higher than that and so--

WALZ: And it, it could, it could be. And I know, you know, there is some reimbursement, but how in the world are they coming up with the resources that they need up front to pay for all of this?

JACK MOLES: Yeah, you know, some things I looked at in the fall and then in the, the-- early in the summer was, you know, schools that had already gone to a one-to-one initiative, for example, you know, some kind of a device per student, were usually quite-- I mean, obviously were quite a ways ahead of other districts that had not done that. Some had gone one-to-one, maybe only in the high school or junior high and high school and hadn't done it in the elementary. So those types of things were-- they were trying to play catch up there. But the connectivity issue is, is huge. And somehow, I was under the, under the assumption that was more of a remote area. But I know in Omaha-- they had trouble with that in Omaha, just connectivity with their students. But I know talking to a, a superintendent at Raymond

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Central, right outside of town here, they had students with connectivity issues there, too, and it-- which caught me off guard when I heard that--

WALZ: Yeah.

JACK MOLES: --so--

GROENE: Any other the questions? Senator Linehan.

LINEHAN: Wasn't a lot of the CARES Act money given to the schools for-- because they knew they were going to have these out-- very expensive catch-up? I mean, I don't know-- it was in the hundreds of millions of dollars, right?

JACK MOLES: It was, it was a huge amount of-- amount. Part of the problem, of course, is you can have all the money in the world, but if there's not devices available for you.

LINEHAN: Right, but I was just going back to how--

JACK MOLES: Yeah, yeah.

LINEHAN: --how they were going to pay-- some of the school districts--

JACK MOLES: Yeah.

LINEHAN: --how they're going to pay. I don't remember-- I can Google it, but it was--

JACK MOLES: Yeah.

LINEHAN: --and then it came to the Department of Ed and then they sent it out to the schools, right?

JACK MOLES: And then that's obviously a huge help, yes.

LINEHAN: Right, that's what I thought.

JACK MOLES: Yeah.

LINEHAN: OK, thank you.

GROENE: Does that-- and maybe I missed it, but doesn't make a difference if you have broadband in your town. If you can't afford \$150 a month--

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JACK MOLES: Right.

GROENE: --you're not going to have broadband.

JACK MOLES: Right.

GROENE: But some schools put them in their parking lots, remote receivers and stuff like--

JACK MOLES: Yeah--

GROENE: --in libraries and--

JACK MOLES: --I saw all sorts of things they did. Public libraries were used. I saw where they-- some put mobile devices on their buses and so kids could access-- at least to download their work to take, take home and work. Yeah, it's-- I know at Amherst, right outside of Kearney, I remember he, he told me that the day before-- day or two before they shut down, he went to Kearney and Grand Island and bought up-- went to Verizon and bought up all their mobile hotspot devices. And, and he didn't think there were any left in the-- either town after he got done, but just to get kids connectivity.

GROENE: But then again, if you don't have unlimited minutes, you--

JACK MOLES: Exactly.

GROENE: --run into problems, too.

JACK MOLES: Yeah.

GROENE: Any other questions? Thank you, that was very informative.

JACK MOLES: Thank you.

GROENE: I always like your numbers. Nicole Barrett is going to-- she's done a wonderful job trying to get-- as I said, it was a flux, I guess. I left it to her to get the people in here to testify, but we've had people who were under quarantine and, and couldn't make it or-- but you did get some parents in here. We were hoping for more parents, but the same situation-- why they had to stay home from their job, they had to stay home with their kids. So she's going to give a recap of some of the things. She said she's going to keep it short-- by her choice, not a dictate from me-- but on what-- some other information she has.

NICOLE BARRETT: Yeah, I'm actually just going to be really brief. And then if you have questions, I'll try to answer them. But I have some different testimony being handed out. The first one is from the Education Commission of the States. As you may be aware, we are a member state with them and three of you serve as commissioners to that organization. We invited them to testify today and unfortunately, they are not traveling because of COVID and we don't have the technology. They didn't want to do a phone-in. They would have done if we could have done virtual. So they have submitted some written research that they had done for us. And I did just email you that, too, so you can actually use the hyperlinks and look into some of the-- just things that other states are doing kind of in response to this, how they're supporting parents that need to make choices and then also kind of what's being done with some of the GEER funds. So some of the things-- and that's the money out of the CARES Act that went to the gubernatorial discretion on how to spend. So I have that research for you and then two letters from a couple parents that were going to testify today and then are both under quarantine from COVID exposures and so they both submitted some last-minute letters this morning. I have talked to a lot of parents around the state doing lots of different things to just support their kids. Most of them would have liked to have testified today, but juggling-- be-- you know, helping their kids with virtual options, with their current school situation or homeschooling or whatever they're doing, it just hasn't worked out. So I just really-- we've really heard about-- throughout the testimony today a lot of the different types of things that I found when I was researching and talking to parents, the different types of choices. So I just wanted to provide one last clarification because we've heard the term "learning pod" thrown out a couple times today and those are a trend in our state and nationwide, just like a lot of the things we've heard today. So those learning pods are happening in a couple different scenarios. They're generally small groups, typically maybe 3 to 10 student-- kids and they get together and they sort of form their own classroom. In some cases, these are kids-- and under the supervision of a parent, of course. In some kids-- cases, these are kids that are doing virtual learning for some reason. They're still enrolled in their school district, but either the school district hasn't been open, it's been a virtual option, or maybe they have, for health reasons, decided that it's best not to send their kids back into that environment. They're still enrolled in the school, but that allows some of the other parent-- so it's maybe two or three families getting together. So some of the parents are able to continue working and a parent or a rotation of parents are supervising the kids and

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helping them with the Zoom and all the things that they need to do. In other cases, they are parents that have now withdrawn their kids from the school situation-- or from school enrollment. They are an exempt school, so they are homeschooling, but they are forming these pods, again, for teaching purposes collaboratively, instead of doing it just right at their own home. So what-- I have heard some-- you know, varying degrees of things about it, a lot of positivity. And I've heard from some parents that would like to participate in a learning pod. But in some cases, it's a situation where the families are paying money to one person that maybe was a, a schoolteacher that's now staying home as a stay-at-home mom and now they're paying this person to teach. And so some families I've talked to would like to join that learning pod, but just don't have the means to actually do that. But that's kind of what we're talking about. It's a cooperative sort of education share scenario that can be with homeschooling or enrolled in public school. In theory, it could be enrolled in private school, but I didn't technically talk to any parents that were doing that. We do have parents that are also hiring tutors to help sort of supplement, again, with that virtual situation, to help, you know, bridge that gap that-- the kids that are maybe struggling a little bit when they're not in school full time. So those are kind of some of the things I learned. I'm not going to keep you any longer, but if you have some specific questions, I'm happy to answer them. Otherwise, I've been taking notes on some of the things that have come up today with additional information to get to all of you after-- in the next few days.

GROENE: Senator Linehan.

LINEHAN: I have a question and maybe it's not appropriate so don't get mad at me, but can you get us a breakdown from the Department of Ed on what happened to any CARES Act money that went to Department of Ed, how-- what schools it went to, just kind of a report?

NICOLE BARRETT: Yeah, I will request that. I don't think-- and others may correct me, but I don't think it has all been completely disseminated.

LINEHAN: Right.

NICOLE BARRETT: That's still happening, but I can get a current-- where we're at now. And then once it's fully disseminated, which is by the end of the year, I believe, then I will get you an updated report, yep.

LINEHAN: Thank you very much.

GROENE: That ends it-- the hearing. I hope there was some insight on the, the parents of-- what-- are up to.