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**Statement of Matthew L. Blomstedt
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Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss Nebraska's implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Nebraskans are proud of the education system in our state; we typically rank among the top 15 in student achievement in all subjects and grades, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Further, in 2014-2015 we had a four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate of 89 percent, well above the national average. As with other states, Nebraska faces long-standing gaps in achievement outcomes for students in certain student subgroups, like African American students and Native American students compared to those for our students as a whole. ESSA complements our work to address those disparities head-on to reach the state's vision of all students receiving the preparation they need for learning, earning, and living.

Thank you, Sen. Alexander, Sen. Murray, and Members of the HELP Committee for leading the effort to enact ESSA in 2015. It replaced a federal structure under the No Child Left Behind Act that dictated top-down goals and a nationally determined accountability system. ESSA, by contrast, has given states the opportunity to better align federal accountability requirements with their own education policy objectives in a manner sensitive to state and local needs and circumstances. Toward that effort, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE), with substantial input from stakeholders, embarked on a process of integrating ESSA with the state's educational accountability system that was implemented with the 2014 enactment of major education legislation in our state, Legislative Bill (LB) 438. That state law resulted in Nebraska developing a new vision for educational improvement, along with an educational accountability system that we call Accountability for a Quality Education System, Today and Tomorrow (AQuESTT).

At the passage of LB 438 in early 2014 in the first few months of my tenure as Commissioner, and while beginning the development of our state ESSA plan in December 2015, the State Board of Education and I led significant stakeholder engagement efforts across Nebraska. We received input from a diverse array of voices including school board members, parents, private non-profit leaders, and community leaders among others. In Nebraska, we are fortunate to have an elected State Board of Education as a constitutional body that has a positive working relationship with the state legislature, governor, and other policy makers across the state. As such, we have regular opportunities to engage with all of state and local government in a productive manner. We also used the NDE webpage as

a mechanism for contact with stakeholders broadly, and thousands of individuals and groups provided input on our strategic plan, on AQuESTT, and on our ESSA plan. In addition to input through the website, specifically with respect to our ESSA plan, we embarked on a listening tour at seven locations around the state, conducted engagement sessions with other stakeholders, and carried out a number of other activities to ensure that many groups of individuals and perspectives were part of the planning process. While it may be difficult to include every voice effectively, I believe we heard the voices of varying stakeholder groups and incorporated their input and feedback when relevant. We will continue to work with stakeholders throughout the duration of the period covered by the plan and beyond ESSA. While we sought stakeholder engagement before ESSA, ESSA inspired us to improve our stakeholder engagement processes.

The education of Native American students and communication with tribal governments continue to be an important focus of our work. ESSA contains new requirements to consult with American Indian tribes in the development and implementation our state plan and we continue to embrace the importance of that requirement. State tribal consultation is personally very important as we have identified our areas of focus on equity and believe there is a need to expand capacity to assist in the successes of state and local tribal consultation. I recognize that schools on tribal lands must serve the important needs of the local school district community as well as that of the sovereign tribal governance. The rich and open conversations I have had throughout our state with tribal leaders have personally opened my eyes about the importance of culturally relevant practices, tribal governance, and efforts to re-establish a Nebraska Indian Education Association. Those conversations were made priorities with the passage of ESSA and for that I am personally grateful and deeply committed.

The state accountability law mentioned earlier, (LB 438) required NDE to classify the state's public schools. The State Board of Education approved four classification levels and identified the schools in the lowest level as Needs Improvement. Additionally, state law required that we select no more than three schools as "priority schools" with the opportunity to provide substantial and state directed interventions toward improvement. ESSA allowed us to better align federal programs into our state system, which would not have been possible under NCLB without significant waivers of the law. In fact, in 2015 Nebraska submitted a significant application for waiver in advance of the passage of ESSA. However, the passage of ESSA allowed the significant state direction to be realized without such a waiver. As a result, consistent with ESSA requirements, and building from our state's own strategic plan, we have established long-term goals of reducing the percentage of students (including students in each subgroup) who are not proficient in math, reading, and science by 50 percent over a ten-year time period, from a baseline established in 2014-2015. Our performance indicators and interim measures of progress under ESSA are aligned with that objective, which we believe to be ambitious but achievable. Similarly, we have set an objective of reducing the percentage of students who do not graduate (using the four-year adjusted cohort rate and an extended seven-year rate) by 50 percent over a ten-year period and of reducing, again by 50 percent and over 10 years, the percentage of our English learners who do not reach the state's growth targets for English language proficiency.

Importantly, our state has also established *challenge* (or stretch) goals calling for higher performance in some of these areas. The inclusion of these additional goals resulted from conversations with Nebraska Governor, Pete Ricketts and I directly. Although Governor Ricketts did not sign our plan specifically, he did submit a letter in support of the plan to Secretary DeVos. The Governor also worked closely with me to identify areas that could be enhanced for the future and to identify areas of statute and rule that might be amended to maintain a high expectation. For example, our challenge goal for academic achievement is a 70 percent (rather than 50 percent) reduction in the rate of non-proficiency. We will carefully monitor our schools' performance against the initial goals to see if, in a later year, we should transition to the more ambitious stretch goals instead.

Equally important to the work with Governor Ricketts on ideas in the ESSA plan have been conversations and partnership with the state legislature in making small but important changes in the state accountability law. This past spring the legislature passed LB 1081, an omnibus bill on behalf of the Nebraska Department of Education that included important provisions, which enhanced the ability of our then submitted ESSA plan to better align with state statute. For instance, the legislature passed and the governor approved provisions that included assuring annual classification of school districts and buildings, expanding the number of state priority schools from "no more than three" to "no less than three" and adding important language for a Nebraska Reading Improvement Act. All such changes assist the alignment of ESSA goals with the state accountability system. Most significantly, the powers of state governance still make up the bulk of the authority, funding, and responsibility for education of Nebraska's students. The benefit of ESSA is that it will fully support those powers of the state to benefit and direct resources to schools that are most in need of support for improvement. The ability to align federal supports established in comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) and targeted support and improvement (TSI) schools is strengthened by the powers of the state through accreditation and accountability. For instance, the ability to use our priority school status with additional schools is a much stronger power than CSI or TSI alone. Public schools are compelled under state law to meet the requirements of accreditation and now under the accountability provisions that allow intervention in priority schools. Nebraska still has work to do in establishing the most effective alignment of these supports and powers, but I believe this is a major step forward in the proper alignment of federal, state, and local governments for the improvement of schools, student experiences, and student achievement.

Additionally and with a particular attention to student achievement, Nebraska includes performance indicators for academic achievement and growth, high school graduation, and English language proficiency; ESSA requires that a state accountability system include one or more indicators of school quality and student success. In Nebraska, we included measures of chronic absenteeism (a student missing at least 10 percent of school days), science achievement (measured using our state assessments), and the, *Evidence-Based Analysis*, or EBA. The EBA is a measure of school quality based on the extent to which schools implement certain policies, practices, and procedures, such as practices that support on-time grade completion and provide educational opportunities and access. These indicators arose from our work on AQuESTI, reflected what our stakeholders believe are key indicators of school performance, and meet the ESSA requirement that

school quality and student success indicators be valid and reliable across the state, and produce data that can be disaggregated by subgroups.

Taken together, our performance indicators present a multi-dimensional and holistic picture of what our schools are accomplishing; one that I believe is far superior to the situation we had under NCLB that had a unidimensional focus on the percentage of students testing proficient in reading and math. Our accountability system incorporates these various indicators in a manner that reflects our state's judgment on the appropriate weighing and meets the ESSA requirements. Most of all, I continue to be encouraged by Secretary DeVos and those at the USDE who challenge states to continue to evolve and innovate through this accountability system. Plans of this magnitude must adapt and change in order to remain a positive force for improvement. I believe we can always be improving, and the flexibility afforded under ESSA lives up to that vital aspiration.

Based on the requirements of ESSA, Nebraska's system will identify schools in need of comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) and targeted support and improvement (TSI) and hold them accountable for making improvements in the achievement of all students or, as appropriate, of the student subgroups in which the performance has triggered a TSI identification. The NDE will work with individual districts in turning around those schools. Beginning this school year, we are awarding the Section 1003 school improvement funds competitively, with the competition structured so that local educational agencies (LEAs) with the greatest need for assistance to improve will have the most likelihood of receiving funding. Further, NDE and intermediate education agency staff are being trained to work with CSI schools, including training on the monitoring the uses of school improvement funds. Consistent with the law, our staff will also provide technical assistance (to each LEA in the state that has a significant number of CSI or TSI schools) on the use of evidence-based educational interventions. This effort will begin with completion of a needs analysis for each targeted LEA. Further, we will provide tailored assistance to schools falling within certain categories: small community schools, urban and metro schools, demographically shifting schools, and Native American schools.

It is important to note that valid and reliable assessment is essential if we are to hold schools accountable for the achievement of their students, and if we are to give parents and other community members accurate information on how their children are progressing. Accordingly, we recently announced the creation of our Nebraska Student-Centered Assessment System (NSCAS). NSCAS is comprised of multiple measures of student learning, including formative assessments that enable educators to monitor student understanding and adjust instruction in the moment; interim assessments that track academic growth and target learning needs over time; and summative assessments that provide final measures of student achievement in English language arts, reading and science. The system also includes professional development opportunities that help teachers use assessment data to strengthen their instruction and effectiveness. In addition, we are providing LEAs and schools with information on how to engage parents in assessment, such as on test-taking strategies, what questions to ask teachers about assessment results, and guidance on how results are best used to support student learning. We are confident this new system will enable Nebraska to test more efficiently and

effectively, and provide a foundation for our efforts to improve education for all our students.

Finally, an effective and engaged educator workforce is an essential component of any effective system of public education. ESSA gave Nebraska new tools and opportunities for supporting our teachers and school leaders. We have worked with stakeholders to develop activities under Title II that align with initiatives already underway in the state on improving educator effectiveness and increasing equal access to effective educators. This work resulted in the creation of an Educator Workforce Index that measures the quality of a district's educator performance assessment system, and the extent to which students are exposed to inexperienced, out-of-field, or unqualified teachers and school leaders. We expect to continue to improve that effort and anticipate the approach will drive ongoing conversations and efforts on educator quality and equity. In particular, it should support attainment of our strategic plan goal that, by 2020, all Nebraska districts have a research-based evaluation system for all certificated staff.

We will also take advantage of the optional three percent set-aside available under Title II for strengthening school leadership, and use it for activities that increase the capacity of school leaders to attract, recruit, develop, and retain effective educators. This action, which directly focuses on a critical need as identified by our stakeholders, is another example of how ESSA has given us new tools with which to tackle our particular needs and challenges in K-12 education.

In summary, Nebraska is committed to addressing inequities of the past by focusing on opportunities to learn for all students and by adopting a relentless focus on outcomes that ensure all stakeholders deliver on the promise of equity. We have asked all Nebraskans to join us in this commitment and the historic principles of equity embedded in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as reauthorized by ESSA. This unmatched opportunity to lead a state-level approach to equity with a strong federal and local partnership is not one Nebraska takes lightly. Instead, we continue to champion commitments to equity, build capacities to improve supports for schools and students, and enhance our efforts to be change agents for the good of all of Nebraska's students.

This concludes my brief overview of Nebraska's implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act. I look forward to sharing more of Nebraska's progress under ESSA with you, and am pleased to take your questions.