

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### CONTACT:

Russ Reno, Communications and Legislative Services, (office) 402-471-8287 or (cell) 402-450-7318, or [russ.reno@nebraska.gov](mailto:russ.reno@nebraska.gov)

## Education Plan for State Wards Implemented

**Lincoln** – Several initiatives addressing the educational needs of state wards have begun as part of a five-year plan recently completed by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), said Children and Family Services (CFS) Director Thomas Pristow.

The plan calls for ongoing collaboration and coordination between CFS and the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) to improve the educational outcomes and well-being of students in the child welfare system, he said.

“State wards face numerous challenges in their education that are brought on by their situation,” Pristow said. “It’s incumbent on CFS to identify and reduce the issues that block their path to a good education. This plan addresses their needs so CFS and our schools work more closely together to meet their needs so they have a better chance to become successful.”

The plan includes strategies to address positive outcomes for state wards, including: education stability, education advocacy, prompt enrollment in school and expedited transfer of records.

“A child involved in the child welfare system who is experiencing a traumatic family situation is naturally distracted and unlikely to perform well in school,” Pristow said. “That’s why it’s necessary for us to make sure we work closely with schools so the educational side of their lives are positive with as little disruption as possible.”

Pristow said that already four strategies have been implemented:

- An Education Court Report prepared by case managers, aids judges in making inquiries pertinent to the student’s education.
- Case managers have increased communication with schools on changes in wards’ living situation, legal status, and identification of the level of parental involvement in the child's educational services.
- Development of an Education Guide for CFS workers and providers that offers helpful hints and definitions for case managers, trainings related to education and a comprehensive overview of special education.
- Created an education program specialist position to provide consultation and technical assistance statewide.

The need for the 2015-2019 plan was reinforced by the results of research commissioned by DHHS and conducted by NDE. Pristow pointed to the difference in graduation rates that showed while 84.1 percent of non-ward students graduated in 2012-13, only 43.5 percent of wards received a diploma.

“As Nebraska educators and policymakers continue to work to fulfill their goal of focusing on every child every day to better ensure student success, sound and reliable data are critical,” Commissioner Blomstedt said. “Equally important is the cooperation and collaboration among agencies to better ensure a successful future for all students and especially students who struggle with significant challenges. This report

will provide ongoing needed guidance as we further develop and refine a system of support for the education of state wards.”

Other findings of the study included state wards absent from school 11.7 days compared to 7.2 days for other students. State wards also are more likely to change schools. The study found that 23.6 percent of state wards enroll in two or more schools during the academic year, but only 4.1 percent of non-ward students face that number of school changes.

A greater percentage of state wards, 35.1 percent, are identified for special education compared to 15.8 percent of non-wards.

Additional indications of the challenges facing state wards were apparent as they consistently perform below their non-ward counterparts on the Nebraska State Accountability (NeSA) Tests. On the 2012-2013 NeSA math test, 64.9 percent of state wards performed below standards compared to 30.3 percent of non-wards. In reading, 52 percent performed below standards compared to 22.8 percent of non-wards. In science, 61.5 percent performed below the standards compared to 29.2 percent of non-wards. The writing test showed that 65.3 percent performed below the standards compared to 30 percent of non-wards.

Pristow said he has appreciated NDE’s collaboration to build systems that enable CFS and the schools to work together to provide for the educational needs of state wards.

“NDE is a critical partner in our plan,” Pristow said. “Thanks to their commitment and the work of CFS staff for the benefit of state wards, inroads can be made in providing them a more positive educational experience.”

The 2015-19 Education Operations Plan and the Nebraska State Ward Statistical Snapshot Project are available on the DHHS website at: [http://dhhs.ne.gov/children\\_family\\_services/Pages/jus\\_reports.aspx](http://dhhs.ne.gov/children_family_services/Pages/jus_reports.aspx) .