

reform models "and other evidence based strategies identified by the state." There has been significant thought given to the programs and councils and structures that will support those involved in the reform of the lowest-achieving schools, including the school reform leadership academy and school reform training academy. The approach Nebraska takes to the improvement of its lowest performing schools is both reflective and respectful of its decentralized approach to education, even if it does not strictly meet the criterion of RTTT. In reading this section, it appears that there is no history of stepping in to turn around low achieving schools. While early in the application there is a description of schools successfully coming out of improvement status, according to this section no low achieving schools have been turned around in the last five years. Given this history, the fact that schools are not yet (and will not yet be) identified based on state data, and the need to start from the beginning - in a state of local control - it is perhaps unrealistic to target four schools to initiate one of the reform models by the end of 2010-2011.

Total	50	12
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F. General

	Available	Tier 1
(F)(1) Making education funding a priority	10	7

(F)(1) Reviewer Comments:

The State has managed to increase education funding over this difficult period, and total revenues used to support education have increased as a percentage of total revenues by 1.16%. If construction is not included, the percentage increase would be 2.07%. While the state asserts that there are budget allowances that provide some additional funding to schools responsible for educating students in poverty, those in ELL programs and special education, there is no evidence provided about the extent to which district budgets are actually equalized or impacted. Most of the allowances and adjustments are responses to small schools, rural districts and high transportation requirements, not necessarily in response to whether an LEA is high-need. One of the reasons to create the Douglas-Sarpy County Learning Community was to share resources and direct resources to districts within the community with greater need; however, there is no discussion about whether there are policies that otherwise lead to equitable funding within LEAs, between high-poverty and other schools.

(F)(2) Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools

40 0

(F)(2) Reviewer Comments:

There is no law regarding charter schools in Nebraska. According to the application narrative, charter schools are not an applicable model in states of rural and small districts. While Nebraska makes clear that there are many opportunities for school choice for students (families) and for districts to create innovative schools (and several examples are provided with respect to curriculum, teaching, focus areas, magnets, etc.), the descriptions of the schools make clear that they do not have the kind of flexibility and increased autonomy necessary to be considered "innovative autonomous public schools" as defined in the RTTT Application.

(F)(3) Demonstrating other significant reform conditions

5 2

(F)(3) Reviewer Comments:

The only reform condition which is not otherwise addressed in the application, and which is deserving of credit, is the state's emphasis on early childhood and school readiness. While there are not other significant reform conditions such as laws, policies, or regulations further supporting education reform, Nebraska's commitment to high standards has been demonstrated, both in the assessment of its own standards and its participation in the Common Core program. The recent implementation of college and career readiness graduation requirements aligns with its commitment to high standards.

Nebraska's commitment to local assessment has led to educators who are assessment literate and will support successful implementation of the new standards and assessments.		
Total	55	9

Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM

	Available	Tier 1
Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM	15	15
<p>Competitive Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>The state's STEM Academy and NVS plan has high potential for adding significant rigor to STEM education, particularly as additional courses are added, based on competitive process. It is also reflected in high (and new) standards, as well as college readiness requirements. Most of the partnership appears to be with the universities, though there is some discussion of bringing other partners within the state into collaboration on this project. Nebraska's plan will prepare more students for advanced study and career in sciences, technology, math, including under-represented groups. It will provide coursework and activities not otherwise available in many, if not most, schools. There's a particular emphasis on reaching the under-represented groups; and the provision of a coach in each school with NVS students is making individual suggestions for participation. The professional development proposals throughout the application also include and specifically reflect the need to improve teaching in STEM areas.</p>		
Total	15	15

Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform

	Available	Tier 1
Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform		Yes
<p>Absolute Reviewer Comments:</p> <p>Nebraska has put forward a comprehensive and coherent application, addressing all four of the education reform areas specified in the ARRA as well as the State Success Factors Criteria. The lack of commitment to the four school intervention models is problematic; however, the application does succeed in presenting a coherent approach to turning around the lowest achieving schools. The state has garnered substantial support from its school districts, as well as its teachers union. While the union and school board president support is not as strong as the superintendent support, it is nonetheless impressive, particularly in a state with as pronounced a history and tradition of local control. Nebraska makes clear that there is broad leadership supporting its application and its education reform work, and that a state-wide network of support will be available to support LEAs as they implement all aspects of the work.</p>		
Total		0

Grand Total	500	256
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(i) Identifying the persistently lowest-achieving schools	5	2
(ii) Turning around the persistently lowest-achieving schools	35	5
(E)(2) Reviewer Comments: The state has good intentions with respect to identifying the lowest-achieving schools, but the plan is insufficiently developed. The state's plan for intervention does not demonstrate commitment to the intervention models, but rather provides relatively "soft" supporting mechanisms that do no harm, but are not likely to result in school and district turnaround success. There is a disconnect between the \$14.2 million project budget for criterion (E) -- of which the largest line item is \$6.7 million for contractual services that are listed but not prioritized or aligned with the intervention models -- and the number of persistently low-achieving schools. The state's targets are not ambitious: the project budget includes approximately \$100,000 grants for only nine schools per year in the entire state that are identified as persistently low-performing, and the performance measures table projects that only four schools per year will be subject to one of the intervention models.		
Total	50	7

F. General

	Available	Tier 1
(F)(1) Making education funding a priority	10	7
(F)(1) Reviewer Comments: The state increased the percentage of funding to education in FY09. The state funds only a small portion of education spending, and the funding formula does appear to allow for some equalization of funding in low-income LEAs and schools. But it is not clear from the proposal what effect this equalization measure has on equity in practice. There is no mention of whether the state's policies lead to equitable funding within LEAs.		
(F)(2) Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools	40	0
(F)(2) Reviewer Comments: The state does not have a charter school law. The state does have examples of school districts that have created innovative schools and programs, but they do not appear to meet the definition of innovative, autonomous public schools with respect to instructional models, staffing and budgets. Overall the state does not ensure successful conditions exist for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools.		
(F)(3) Demonstrating other significant reform conditions	5	3
(F)(3) Reviewer Comments: The state has a few programs that provide positive reform and innovation conditions. The percentage of students that participate in the Enrollment Option Program is meaningful. The specialized intra-district schools, the new Learning Community, and magnet schools represent only modest state conditions supporting reform and innovation, and it is not clear whether they have resulted in material reforms that are manifested in improved student outcomes.		
Total	55	10

Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM

	Available	Tier 1

Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM	15	15
Competitive Reviewer Comments: The state's plan for a virtual STEM academy is one of the highlights of its proposal. It is likely to increase the rigor of STEM education in the state, engages community partners in the education of many students that would not otherwise benefit from their engagement, and is likely to prepare more students for advanced study and careers in STEM. The plan could be more specific about how it will address the needs of underrepresented groups in STEM. The budget and implementation plan are detailed and well-developed.		
Total	15	15

Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform

	Available	Tier 1
Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform		Yes
Absolute Reviewer Comments: The state's proposal, while weak on certain criteria (e.g., some elements of the human capital plan, school turnarounds, and reform conditions), sufficiently addresses the key education reform parameters, and sufficiently represents a coherent strategy to effect improved student achievement and outcomes. The challenges for this state to successfully implement and achieve the goals in its plans are significant, and the danger of the plan is that it simply supplements NDE's resources without having a material positive impact on student achievement. Nevertheless, the state's proposal sufficiently meets the priority.		
Total		0
Grand Total	500	271

F. General

	Available	Tier 1
(F)(1) Making education funding a priority	10	6
<p>(F)(1) Reviewer Comments: State revenue and budget allocations meet RTT criteria. It is difficult to calculate equalization of funding from details in appendix. Plan merely outlines the state formulas for funding LEA's. Plan would benefit from data comparing high versus low spending school districts, and should include finance status for demographic factors like low income and minority students. The basic measures of LEA spending disparities need to be included, and what causes any disparities.</p>		
(F)(2) Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools	40	2
<p>(F)(2) Reviewer Comments: Nebraska has no charter school law. The Douglas Sarpy Option has potential but focuses on students (not schools). There is insufficient evidence that the state has used strategies other than transformation, and more data would help here to provide assurance that any other turnaround strategy can be implemented.</p>		
(F)(3) Demonstrating other significant reform conditions	5	2
<p>(F)(3) Reviewer Comments: The plan repeats earlier plans and projects, and is not specific on what will be the content of the courses required for college. There are not enough other initiatives presented in this section of the application.</p>		
Total	55	10

Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM

	Available	Tier 1
Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM	15	15
<p>Competitive Reviewer Comments: New Virtual School Academy is key element and plan is expansive, explicit, and promising. Virtual approach makes sense in rural context, and detailed design for this presented in appendix. STEM is a thread in many parts of the proposal. Potentially useful collaborations with universities are provided in other sections. But the overwhelming reliance is on a yet to be developed state virtual academy proposal that includes rigorous courses of study, community partners, and preparation for advanced STEM careers. It is encouraging that the state plans to sustain the virtual academy after RTT ends.</p>		
Total	15	15

Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform

	Available	Tier 1
Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform		Yes
<p>Absolute Reviewer Comments: Overall, proposal does meet absolute priority. There is a combination of gaps in some policies proposed, and plan is high risk because of the prior limited state role presented in several parts of the application. The content, details, plans, and implementation strategies need more development.</p>		

Comments in A1 and A2 summarize some of this and end up with doubts about local commitment to implement unknown state curriculum, assessment, data systems, teacher policies, and school turnaround strategies. In sum, there is little existing state policy base to build up a large new super-structure in a few years. State and regional administrative capacity needs to be transformed but new EUS structure and operations not described sufficiently. The state data system is starting to be built, but it has not been used much to influence local change. Turnaround strategies are very limited and there is no charter school law. The plan is comprehensive but there are many unprecedented systems to be constructed to judge whether it is coherent.

Total		0
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Grand Total	500	223
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legal, statutory or regulatory authority exists at present. As a result, Nebraska earns zero points for this criterion.

(E)(2) Turning around the lowest-achieving schools	40	11
(i) Identifying the persistently lowest-achieving schools	5	2
(ii) Turning around the persistently lowest-achieving schools	35	9
(E)(2) Reviewer Comments:		
<p>Nebraska intends to pursue robust ways to intervene in low-achieving schools and LEAs [(E)(2)]. The state is seeking permission to have stricter requirements than Federal law stipulates for what is considered a persistently low-achieving school. For instance, using the 60 percent graduation benchmark set by the USDOE, only four Nebraska high schools would be counted as persistently low-achieving. Nebraska wants to bump the cut level up to 75 percent, requiring a larger number of schools to take serious looks at their performance. Beyond this evidence of commitment, Nebraska offers little new information as to how it would identify low-achieving schools. The briefly shared plans for identifying low-achieving schools tie back to the state's larger intentions to create a new state accountability system rooted in student growth results. [(E)(2)(i)]. Nebraska lays out a wide-ranging plan for "turning around persistently lowest-achieving schools" [(E)(2)(ii)]. Nevertheless, the plan fails to show in a convincing fashion that LEAs will be implementing any of the four school intervention models called for in the RTTT application. As a result, Nebraska scores low on this sub-criterion. To its credit, Nebraska will create an entirely new intervention system, complete with support and information systems, multiple measures and eight reform initiatives. The lead initiative speaks to the increased role of the Nebraska Department of Education through the creation of a "school reform office." The eight reform initiatives touch on many relevant aspects of comprehensive school turnaround, and even go into student leadership and student engagement, areas not always considered in school improvement efforts. The obvious challenge in this design will be ensuring that the eight initiatives operate with coherence. For instance, care must be taken not to create "Christmas tree" reform scenarios in LEAs and schools, where the entity is loaded with different interventions, all of which look nice, but do not relate to one another and certainly do not have more than surface value. Similarly, the proposal does not speak to how these initiatives will tie back to teacher and leader preparation, beyond a general description of a new "school reform leadership academy" and a "school reform training program."</p>		
Total	50	11

F. General

	Available	Tier 1
(F)(1) Making education funding a priority	10	5
(F)(1) Reviewer Comments:		
<p>Nebraska appears to "make education funding a priority" [(F)(1)]. Based solely on the proposal, the evidence is clear that Nebraska has held strong on the share of funding dedicated to K-12 education in the state budget. The percentage of the budget allocated to K-12 education rose from 34 percent to 36 percent between the last two fiscal years [(F)(1)(ii)]. Unfortunately, Nebraska did not present clear evidence on the extent to which "the state's policies lead to equitable funding between high-need LEAs and other LEAs, and within LEAs, between high poverty schools and other schools" [(F)(1)(ii)]. Equitable funding may be a reality in Nebraska, based on the various mechanisms summarized in the proposal, but no examples are provided of actual equalization effects. The application required specific examples of how equitable funding policies are actually working among and within LEAs.</p>		
(F)(2) Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools	40	0
(F)(2) Reviewer Comments:		

Nebraska does not earn any points for the criterion, "ensuring successful conditions for high performing charter schools and other innovative schools" [(F)(2)]. As the proposal states, Nebraska law "is silent" on charter schools, neither encouraging nor dissuading them. Holding strictly to the RTTT criteria, Nebraska is a state "without a Charter school law," which requires awarding zero points. Nebraska presents evidence that it "enables LEAs to operate innovative, autonomous public schools other than charter schools" [(F)(2)(v)]. However, none of the examples Nebraska list meet any of the following definition elements: "have the flexibility and authority to define their instructional models and associated curriculum; select and replace staff; implement new structures and formats for the school day or year; and control their budget" (Source: Definitions in the RTTT Application).

(F)(3) Demonstrating other significant reform conditions	5	2
(F)(3) Reviewer Comments: Nebraska also falls short in "demonstrating other significant reform conditions" [(F)(3)]. All of the examples provided, save one, already are major aspects of the proposed RTTT initiative. The only new element is early childhood education, which certainly is an essential focus. Nebraska is wise to pay attention to "school readiness" for its children as part of its comprehensive reforms.		
Total	55	7

Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM

	Available	Tier 1
Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM	15	15
Competitive Reviewer Comments: Nebraska earns the full set of points (15) available for the Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM. The centerpiece is the proposed Nebraska Virtual High School (NVS), which will be designed to serve students in grades 7-12 across the state and to provide professional development and instructional support to teachers and principals state-wide. The concept is powerful, especially considering the challenge of implementing an internationally competitive standards and assessment system in a largely rural state with many schools too small to offer a complete set of rigorous courses in math and science. NVS will draw on the STEM expertise of Nebraska's higher education institutions and make that resource available across the state's schools. Clinching NVS's larger value is that it will be tightly woven with Nebraska's plans to establish common core standards, aligned statewide assessments, and new approaches to developing and supporting teachers and principals. Specialty high schools often become isolated examples of excellence, with little replication or policy value. Without the framework of Nebraska's RTTT initiative, NVS likely would be no more than another specialty high school. Instead, it is likely to be a signature element in Nebraska's comprehensive reform effort.		
Total	15	15

Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform

	Available	Tier 1
Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform		Yes
Absolute Reviewer Comments: Yes, Nebraska's "Bright Future for Nebraska Students Initiative" meets the "Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform." Nebraska makes the case that its RTTT initiative will connect three of the four major reform priorities: standards and assessments, data systems, and human capital. Unfortunately, the fourth RTTT reform priority, turning-around low-achieving schools, is weakly addressed. Despite this inconsistency, Nebraska has a "big picture" understanding and		

strategy for its RTTT initiative. Nebraska is wise to underscore early in the proposal that its reform effort will go after four goals: "higher levels of achievement for Nebraska public schools students; dramatic reduction of learning gaps; increased high school graduation rates; and increased college going rates." Nebraska rightly flags that RTTT represents a sea change for how education will be organized and directed in the state. The state's decentralization of authority to the LEA level makes the adoption of state-wide reform extra challenging. Nebraska's systemic thinking is underscored by attention throughout the proposal to proven knowledge about effective policy and best practice, as well as a holistic, start-to-finish concern for all children's education path. On the downside, throughout the proposal Nebraska loses points for lack of implementation plans and details. Specific implementation details are impossible in a multi-million dollar proposal, but Nebraska could have struck a better balance between concept and action, strategy and tactics. Too much is at stake with a rare RTTT grant not to explain with more clarity how the impressive array of concepts and strategies would be implemented to advance policies and practices at the school and classroom level. In addition, while stating as a core principle the recognition that the uncommon RTTT investment must be used to spark permanent change, the proposal is nearly silent on how work started by RTTT will be sustained and deepened.

Total		0
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Grand Total	500	237
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(i) Identifying the persistently lowest-achieving schools	5	4
(ii) Turning around the persistently lowest-achieving schools	35	9
(E)(2) Reviewer Comments: Section E2 (ii) offers a plan to turn around persistently low-achieving schools by focusing resources and time on the lowest-achieving schools, as the state defines them. While the sub-strategies demonstrate that the plan is wide-reaching, including efforts to target financial resources and school support specialists to these schools and to include youth in decision-making and in challenges they face in low-achieving schools, it does not meet (ii). There is no stated commitment to implement any of the four reform models. The activities listed are more foundational - like hiring and finalizing agreements. More detail about the implementation timeline of the larger strategy, including the four reform models in some way, would demonstrate if initiatives are both ambitious and achievable and strengthen this section.		
Total	50	13

F. General

	Available	Tier 1
(F)(1) Making education funding a priority	10	6
(F)(1) Reviewer Comments: The state shows that revenues increased from 2008 to 2009, in actual numbers and percentages of state appropriations, meeting the criteria for (F)(1)(i). For (ii), the application discussed the state's formulas for equalization, but does not provide data on the impact of these formulas.		
(F)(2) Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools	40	2
(F)(2) Reviewer Comments: The application states that the "statutes are silent" with regard to charter schools. Charter schools "are not an applicable model of public education in most areas of the state." If the state had laws, statutes, regulations and/or other legal documents to show how charters are funded, are held accountable and are supported, the score would be higher. In F2 (v), the narrative identifies innovative, autonomous public schools, but doesn't say how the state has enabled these to operate and with what authorizing conditions. The application doesn't show that these schools have either the flexibility or the autonomy to be considered innovative, autonomous public schools, as defined in this notice.		
(F)(3) Demonstrating other significant reform conditions	5	2
(F)(3) Reviewer Comments: There is some legislation to support reform with the passage of laws in 2008 and 2009 that support new standards and teacher loan forgiveness, respectively. This section details initiatives to demonstrate other significant reform conditions, but only the early childhood initiative is provided as a new reform in this section, as (F)(3) requires.		
Total	55	10

Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM

	Available	Tier 1
Competitive Preference Priority 2: Emphasis on STEM	15	15

Competitive Reviewer Comments:

This section offers a high-quality plan for STEM, including a rigorous course of study, cooperation with external partners, and preparation for more students in STEM careers. The proposed partnership with University of Nebraska, Lincoln shows thoughtful attention to addressing rural needs in the state. This section also effectively ties together numerous STEM initiatives from across the application. The Nebraska Virtual STEM Academy is especially promising in offering access to STEM curricula and to identifying a strategy for and steps to close the achievement gap in mathematics.

Total	15	15
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Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform

	Available	Tier 1
Absolute Priority - Comprehensive Approach to Education Reform		Yes

Absolute Reviewer Comments:

The application "comprehensively and coherently" addresses all of the four education reform areas as well as the State Success Factors Criteria, minimally. What this proposal does not do is make the links from the reform areas to a larger reform strategy grounding that strategy in moving them from current outcomes to their intended and needed outcomes for districts, schools and students. Some of the data to set these goals is missing historically, which is acknowledged, and therefore, data systems will be especially critical to the success of the state's agenda. In addition, developing the skills of a range of decision-makers to use this data well, is essential.

Total		0
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Grand Total	500	250
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