

“Today’s Kindergarteners will judge the education system of the future based on the way it is for them now,” muses Commissioner of Education Matt Blomstedt, four months into his tenure as the chief executive of education in Nebraska. With this long view, it is clear Blomstedt takes the helm quite seriously. *NCSA Today* spoke with the new Commissioner in late April to get an in-depth look at his vision for the Nebraska Department of Education’s role in the state’s education community.

Blomstedt, 41, comes to NDE with a strong background in education policy. He left his position as the executive director of the ESU Coordination Commission, and prior to that, he spent time as a research analyst for the Education Committee of the Legislature. Without the traditional ladder ascension to the Commissioner’s office, Blomstedt acknowledges his path is different from past commissioners. “I’m not sure who’d ever be prepared to become Commissioner – the past ones make it look easy!” he joked. “This is an agency with 500 employees with diminished resources. Just like school districts, we’re faced with the same economic trends,” including multiple years of budget cuts. With limited resources, Blomstedt stressed the need for making what he refers to as “key investments.” Among these, he prioritized data, knowledge around technology, P-16 bridging, and a shift in the way interactions with the Legislature are shaped.

In terms of data, Blomstedt focused on the practical. “The way we currently organize data collection is full of opportunities to build leadership systems,” he said. “We need to make sure it’s not just a burden, and we need to build efficacy and efficiency,” he added. At this point, he said, “we’re using data and data analysts at

their lowest level – we need to move to a place where we’re building the data we’re collecting into information that’s useful at all levels.” He added that while some teachers, principals, and other administrators have taken to data analysis with excitement, not all want to or should have to. Furthermore, he added, “we need to be prepared for the next level – student data tracking,” as students who track their own progress and analyze their own data can be very powerful as a learning tool. Fundamentally, he stressed that the state’s education community as a whole needs to start taking a broader view of data – one that is not about accountability alone, but about myriad possible and positive uses of information being collected.

More than once, Blomstedt wanted to remind readers that “this agency [NDE] is part of a system,” not the top of a hierarchy. A recurring theme in Blomstedt’s vision is an emphasis on systems thinking. With a Masters degree in Community and Regional Planning among his credentials, this way of looking at complex challenges certainly makes sense. He made a clear distinction between what role the Department has according to statute and what roles it is allowed to or can reasonably play in a state system of education. “There is a lot we *have* to do, but there is more we *get* to do,” he said, “and that – what we get to do – that’s where we get to make a difference.” Rather than focusing on what’s mandated, Blomstedt wants the department to take a different approach. “Regulation and compliance is the easy path for NDE – and as Commissioner, that’s not what I want the agency to do,” he said. “If we focus only on compliance, this can diminish our focus on resources.”

For many at NDE, this will be a mindset shift. “We are in the process of building systems of support,” Blomstedt said, adding that ideally, the state education agency’s contribution to a system of education should focus on answering the question: “What support is needed across the state that’s better done at the state level?” In many ways, he said, the conversation surrounding LB 1103, Senator Kate Sullivan’s priority bill on education visioning, has “freed us up to think bigger by creating permission to be creative.” As this process moves forward, Blomstedt urged all sub-entities in education – including the members of NCSA – to bring their voices forward.

Further emphasizing this move toward viewing NDE as part of a system, Blomstedt talked about the impact of LB 438 and the development of a state accountability model. As the State Board of Education works to develop accountability systems, he emphasized that all layers of the system play a role in ensuring student success. “As the state education agency, we too are accountable for student success,” he said. “We have to witness what is happening in schools, and help in finding solutions. We can’t intervene without taking responsibility.” Blomstedt added that it is tantamount for administrators to take an active role in communicating their concerns and successes with the department. Noting challenges with NeSA and the assessment system, he stressed that “there are so many resources in districts to be tapped instead of making top-down decisions – we need you to tell us what is and isn’t working.” Finally, Blomstedt would like the state’s education system to work in such a way that agencies like NDE free up time so that educators can do things they know make a difference. “If you as a principal

know that standing outside your school every morning and giving high fives as the students walk in makes a difference, we need to find ways to support that,” he said. “What policymakers want is the end result – we want students to succeed. It’s up to all of us to figure out how we do it.”