

AQuESTT: Building Stronger School-Community Partnerships to Expand Learning in Nebraska

BY JEFF COLE, Assistant Vice President at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation



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Nebbraska's public education system is once again leading the nation. Record high graduation rates and ACT scores, narrowing achievement gaps and near full employment suggest Nebraska's long-term investments in a quality public education system are yielding substantial benefits. Importantly, while other states are juggling regulation of competing public and charter systems along with unworkable mandates and assessment regimes imposed by the recently replaced (and reviled) No Child Left Behind law, Nebraska educators have the opportunity to develop and refine a next generation assessment system—AQuESTT—that can serve as model for other states.

Created by the Nebraska Department of Education in response to LB 438, AQuESTT stands for Accountability for a Quality Education System, Today and Tomorrow. In a departure from other state level accountability systems, AQuESTT uses input from a variety of measures—not just test scores and graduation rates—to promote and reward continuous improvement for schools and progress for children in every corner of our state.

As Nebraska's education leaders, you are all familiar with last year's roll out of AQuESTT and the role that it plays in classifying all Nebraska schools and supporting continuous school improvement. What is less well known is that this new accountability framework also creates pathways encouraging more and deeper community involvement in perhaps our most important collective re-

sponsibility—educating the next generation of citizens.

By identifying six key tenants of a quality education, AQuESTT highlights multiple pathways to support a well-rounded education. These six tenants are:

- Positive Partnerships, Relationships and Student success
- Transitions
- Education Opportunities and Access
- College and Career ready
- Assessment
- Educator Effectiveness

How do these six tenants open up schools for greater community collaboration? Through AQuESTT's evidence-based analysis, or EBA, community partners have the opportunity to contribute to a school's final classification—alongside test scores and graduation rates. Based on responses to surveys and interviews measuring the depth of work around these six key tenants, the EBA creates an opportunity for community partners to work with school leaders to support progress, and continuous school improvement around key areas critical to educational excellence.

For example within the tenant of Transitions, school-community partners can offer school-based and community-driven summer programs that support learning during the important transitions between grades. Indeed these same school-community partnerships can and are providing expanded learning opportunities during the afterschool hours to help bridge the out of school time educational opportunity gap that so closely mirrors socio-economic status.

In the tenant of Education Opportunities and Access, the role of school-community partnerships in providing expanded learning opportunities is clear. A similar case can be made for the role that outside groups can play in supporting Positive Partnership tenant, through internships, mentorships, adult led club activities and other opportunities for community members to show that they value their community's youth and are investing in their growth.

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Beyond School Bells worked with education leaders to develop a video explaining how AQuESTT provides opportunities for businesses to work with schools and extend learning into the community. You can check out the video in the following:

<http://beyondschoolbells.org/videos/>

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Often the traditional school day is so packed with activities and learning that it is difficult for community partners to meaningfully support student growth. However, by broadening the time frame when supports that directly impact student learning occur, the six tenants of AQuESTT create meaningful opportunities to validate a community’s contribution to non-school learning which plays such a crucial role in youth development. By expanding the focus to the learning outcomes such as Positive Partnerships or College and Career Ready, AQuESTT validates partnerships that can and are leading to innovative out of school time learning opportunities that support a robust and positive educational environment across every Nebraska community.

Much of our work at Beyond School Bells, Nebraska’s statewide afterschool network housed at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, is aimed at supporting state and community efforts to develop and sustain these vital partnerships enhancing and expanding student learning and providing engaging, hands-on learning experiences during those critical hours when young people are out of school and their parents are still at work. AQuESTT gives these fertile, non-school “hours of opportunity” for community partnerships a much deserved validation and extends an invitation to community partners to support a rich educational environment for all Nebraska youth.

Looking into the future, as this new system takes hold, we see AQuESTT incentivizing and validating creative partnerships broad-

ening our communities’ education zones. For example in the College and Career Ready tenet, we see new opportunities emerging for businesses to work with schools to develop clubs, internships, and field experiences that expose youth to the career opportunities, and relevant academic preparation required, available in their communities. These out of school time activities can provide young people with engaging, hands-on experiences complementing classroom instruction and extend learning into the community. Similarly, in an evolving Assessment tenant, AQuESTT creates new opportunities for communities to develop measurement tools including portfolios capturing the impact of community-supported learning, learning which directly supports and enhances classroom instruction.

Beyond School Bells embrace of AQuESTT is based on our understanding that in today’s society, with all its complexity, challenges and inequities, we simply cannot expect schools to meet all youth development and educational needs alone. On their own, schools never have and certainly can’t today. When we see AQuESTT rolling out across the state, we see a new invitation, a new opportunity for communities and schools to work together to provide ALL of the supports, that ALL children need to be successful in school and become the productive citizens Nebraska needs. It is an invitation to help shape the future that none of us can afford to refuse. ■

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

MARCH

31-Apr. 1	NASES Spring Conference	Harms Center	Scottsbluff
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APRIL

14-15	NASBO State Convention	Holiday Inn	Kearney
18-19	AQuESTT	Younes Conf Center	Kearney

JUNE

3	NSTA Summer Conference	Holiday Inn Conf Center	Kearney
16-17	NASPA Summer Retreat	Lied Lodge	Nebraska City
20	Student Discipline Workshop	TBD	
21	NCSA/TRANE Golf Tournament	Yankee Hill Golf Course	Lincoln
23	NASCD Summer Conference	Berean Church	Lincoln

JULY

27-29	Administrators’ Days	Younes Conf Center	Kearney
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Region Meeting dates can be found on the NCSA mobile app and NCSA website.