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Ed secretary hears concerns in Nebraska Arne Duncan defends a federal program targeting low-achieving schools during his visit with officials.

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LINCOLN - Top Nebraska education officials unloaded their policy concerns on U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan on Friday during a two-hour meeting that Gov. Dave Heineman described as "positive, frank and constructive." "I think the secretary really appreciated the candor he heard," Heineman said after the meeting at the Governor's Mansion in Lincoln.

Speaking afterward, Duncan defended a controversial federal program calling on states to list persistently lowest-achieving **schools**. He also renewed his call for Congress to rewrite the 2001 No Child Left Behind federal education law.

The gathering of higher education and K-12 officials, superintendents and teachers covered a range of topics.

Officials said they discussed the importance of early childhood education, maintaining federal Pell grants for needy college-bound students and making sure **schools** don't overtest kids.

Duncan described the 23 people at the meeting as an "extraordinarily thoughtful group." Among them were University of Nebraska President J.B. Milliken; the Legislature's Education Committee chairman, State Sen. Greg Adams; University of Nebraska Board of Regents Chairman Bob Whitehouse; Nebraska State Education Association President Jess Wolf; **Omaha school** board member Freddie Gray; and several local **school** superintendents.

"I've got a couple of pages of notes I'm going to go through on the plane ride back," Duncan said.

Outside the mansion, Duncan renewed his call for Congress to rewrite the controversial No Child Left Behind law before kids return to **school** in the fall.

The current law is too punitive, and it dumbed down academic standards, he said.

He said he wants to provide **schools** with more flexibility than the current law allows, as long as states hold students to high standards and track student progress against those standards.

The rewrite should include provisions to reward excellent **schools**, he said.

"Right now there are no rewards for excellence in the current law," he said.

Duncan also fended off criticism from some Nebraska educators of his reform program requiring that states receiving stimulus money must create a list of their persistently lowest-achieving **schools** to qualify those **schools** for federal improvement grants.

Listed **schools** must decide whether to remove principals and teachers or take even more aggressive steps in return for the federal money. Last October, Nebraska listed 42 **schools** based on math and reading test scores or for having graduation rates lower than 75 percent.

The listing of four **Omaha** high **schools** for graduation rates stirred resentment from officials in the **Omaha Public Schools**, who saw the label as an unfair stigma and called the federal policy misguided.

Rural educators have said that sweeping out teachers and principals isn't always practical, given the challenge of recruiting teachers to rural areas. U.S. Sen. Ben Nelson echoed those concerns this week.

"Those are real concerns," he said. "I've heard them, and I continue to hear them, and we're really thinking about it."

Duncan said the program's intent is to challenge the country to deal with chronically underperforming **schools** - what he calls the bottom 5 percent.

"In far too many places we've had dropout factories where 40, 50, 60 even 70 percent of students drop out. We, as educators in those situations, we're perpetuating poverty. We're perpetuating social failure," he said.

He said the country's rural **schools** constitute 19 percent of listed **schools** but have received 23 percent of the money.

"Many, many rural communities have more than stepped up to the plate," he said.

Duncan said the country has to improve its **schools** faster than ever before so American children can compete with children in China, Singapore, South Korea and India.

Milliken said that during the meeting he and representatives of the state's community colleges raised with Duncan the issue of a new federal regulation that could hamper distance education.

Sen. Nelson sent a letter to Duncan this week asking him to abandon enforcement of the distance learning rule that takes effect July 1. It will require education institutions that offer online or correspondence courses to students in any other state to seek authorization from that state.

Milliken said he was "encouraged" that Duncan was open to their concerns.

He said he believes Duncan does not want to hurt the university, which has a long history of offering high quality distance education.

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