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World-Herald Exclusive

Heineman, Mackiel engage in war of words

The governor and the OPS chief do battle over the labeling of schools as low achieving.

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Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman defended the state's naming of four high schools in the Omaha school district as "persistently lowest-achieving," saying the listing will open the door to funding that Omaha Public Schools officials have repeatedly said they need. "In the 5½ years that I've been the governor of this state, I've only heard one issue from the Omaha Public Schools: How do we get more money? That money will solve all of our problems," Heineman said in a recent interview with The World-Herald. "Well, here was an opportunity to get money, so why are they objecting?"

OPS Superintendent John Mackiel, who has sharply criticized the listing as bad education policy that needlessly stigmatizes schools, said on Monday, in response to the governor: "If that's all he's heard, he hasn't been listening.

"As long as we keep the conversation at this level," Mackiel said, "the legitimate needs of our young people go unaddressed.

"If we don't want to talk about lead contamination, drug or alcohol abuse or the mental health services or the foster care services that have all but imploded in this state and are impacting student attendance, then keep the conversation at this level of disregard for the work of a school district," he said.

Mackiel told the Omaha school board Monday that the district is unlikely to receive any of the \$17 million in federal stimulus money available to Nebraska schools, though it may be eligible for teacher-training funds.

Fifty-two Nebraska and 130 Iowa schools were listed as "persistently lowest achieving." Education officials in both states were required to develop the lists to receive their final installments of federal stimulus money.

The minimum grant available to a school is \$500,000 a year for three years. Because **OPS** schools were not listed as the highest priority, the money could run out before the schools are funded.

Mackiel said, however, that each of the Omaha high schools listed - Benson, North, South and Central - plus an Omaha elementary school could get up to \$17,333 in teacher-training funds.

He plans to talk with the principals of those schools this week about their training plans for summer and whether it makes sense to use the grant money. The district must decide by late July whether to accept the teacher-training funds, he said.

If the money is turned down, Mackiel said, Susie Buffett's Sherwood Foundation has pledged the same amount for teacher training. Foundation representatives listened in on the board's 90-minute discussion Monday.

Mackiel called the list another example of "the belittling, the blaming and the labeling of urban education."

Nebraska obtained a federal waiver to use a 75 percent **graduation rate** when making its list, rather than the 60 percent **graduation rate** used by federal officials. As a result, four **OPS** high schools made the list.

Heineman said it was appropriate for Nebraska officials to seek the waiver.

"Do they think 60 percent is the standard we ought to have? Sixty percent is an F. That's unacceptable," he said.

Mackiel said that's not the case.

"It's never good enough until 100 percent of students graduate," he said.

But using a four-year **graduation rate** as the sole measure of success, he said, doesn't recognize reality.

The **rate** doesn't take into account students who need five years to graduate, Mackiel said, citing the example of a North High student who graduated last week after taking a year off to undergo chemotherapy treatment.

Nebraska Education Commissioner Roger Breed, also interviewed recently, said state officials decided on a threshold of 75 percent to make more high schools eligible for funding.

The average **graduation rate** at Nebraska high schools is about 90 percent, according to the Nebraska Department of Education.

"It wasn't to stigmatize or mar anybody's reputation or to impugn any students' efforts," Breed said.

He said that there's "every possibility" Congress will rewrite federal education law to direct additional money to listed schools.

Mackiel, however, said federal education mandates have historically been underfunded.

School board members expressed frustration Monday at the schools' labeling. They pointed out that each of the high schools listed has seen its **graduation rate** improve over the past five years.

Board members said the move reinforces negative stereotypes about urban education.

"I don't believe we should play the manipulation-by-the-state-for-more-money game," board President Sandra Jensen said.

"It continues discriminatory perceptions about the children in the inner city - that they cannot learn and the teachers cannot teach. That is absolutely false."

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