

LB641 Educational Support Staff Pandemic Pay

State law¹ directs school districts to pay teachers their usual salary in the event of pandemic related school closures. However, educational support staff, which make up nearly half of school staff², are not included in this statute. Following last spring's Directed Health Measure that closed all Nebraska school districts, schools were able to pay teachers their full salaries, but the decision whether and how to pay educational support specialists was done on a district-by-district basis.

Current law ensures that teachers receive their full salary during a pandemic, but no protection exists for educational support staff, who are critical to the functioning of schools

Educational support staff are non-certificated school employees who are not part of the teachers' bargaining unit. This includes secretaries, custodians, para-educators, school security, bus drivers, cooks, sign language & bilingual interpreters, information technology staff, and social workers. Many in these positions work hourly rather than on salary or on contract³.

Educational support staff play an essential role in students' educational experience, both in direct student interaction, and the operational functioning of the schools themselves⁴. Despite the lack of salary protection in this circumstance, these positions are often specialized and require training, and districts lose institutional knowledge when these employees leave for other opportunities. Providing salary protection to support staff is crucial to the continuity of our schools during pandemic related closures.

Most school districts paid educational support staff during closures, but the lack of state guidance in this area meant a patchwork of different methods to ensure support staff were paid

As LB641's fiscal note shows, since most districts already pay educational support staff, the fiscal impact to schools is minimal. However, the lack of existing uniform procedure meant that schools had to create a patchwork of different methods to pay educational support staff during the 2020 closures, such as finding non-job related work or signing retention agreements, which increased turnover. Because of this, LB641's fiscal note suggests that districts may save money in the long run by reducing turnover, as well as new employee recruitment and training costs.

LB641 has minimal financial impact on school districts, reduces uncertainty for educational support staff, and ensures schools retain valuable employees during a pandemic closure

Especially with the resumption of in-person instruction, educational support staff have faced the same challenges and risks that many frontline workers have experienced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. They should not be penalized when the state or individual districts make the tough decision to close for student safety. LB641 reduces economic stability for educational support staff, while simplifying the process for school districts.

¹ NRS 79-8,106

² <https://www.the74million.org/article/half-of-all-school-employees-arent-teachers-this-recession-will-endanger-their-jobs/>

³ <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/paying-school-employees-during-prolonged-shutdowns-is-a-major-dilemma/2020/03>

⁴ <https://www.the74million.org/article/half-of-all-school-employees-arent-teachers-this-recession-will-endanger-their-jobs/>