Societal factors have changed education in last 20 years

“The future ain’t what it used to be.”—Yogi Berra.

Education in Nebraska school has changed drastically in the last 20 years.

And because of those changes, teachers cannot educate students the same way they did in 1992 and before, according to Nebraska commissioner of education Dr. Roger Breed.

Breed spoke to District 20 teachers on Aug. 14 about “Educating Students for a Better Tomorrow: Doing the Impossible” during visits to several schools across the state.

On Friday, Breed shared highlights of his talk for this story.

For example, he said the number of children who receive free or reduced lunches has soared. More students receive special education services and many kids come to school with fewer supports.

A large number of students speak English as a second language.

Breed said District 20 has not seen as drastic a change as many schools but local teachers are still attuned to more kids with greater needs.

“For whatever reason, they’re not receiving the home support they need,” he said.

Nonetheless, Breed said teachers have a significant impact on student learning.

“And we can minimize the number of kids we lose to life’s challenges,” he said.

In the 1970s, Breed said the United States had the highest proportion of college graduates of any country.

Since then, many countries have surpassed that number—a trend President Obama would like to reverse by 2020, he said.

High school graduation rates are important, Breed said, but are immaterial if students don’t have the skills and capabilities needed to succeed in a post-graduate setting, such as a technical school or college or university.

Breed pointed to research from the U.S. Census Bureau showing that jobs created in the last 40 years require people with educations beyond high school.

“Kids need to be prepared to be college ready,” he said. “That’s far more important than just getting the graduation rate up there.”

To help students to succeed in college and beyond, Breed said high schools across Nebraska have increased graduation requirements in the past two years.

However students also need encouragement to take challenging courses their senior year.

Attendance important

Making sure kids get to school to learn is also important, he said, noting that 8% of the state's student population missed school more than 20 days two years ago.

Last year, that number dropped to 6.6%.

Kids miss out on important information when they miss school—much of which can't be made up by not being in the classroom, Breed said.

Particularly telling are NsEA test scores that show a dramatic drop in scores by students who miss more than 20 days of school as compared to students absent less than 10 days.

Breed said parents and the community can help schools convey the importance of being in school by making attendance an expectation.

He suggested that families not take vacations or take students out of class while school is in session and by the community having good access to health care.

ebarrett@gothenburgtimes.com

308-537-3636