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Trump indicted, denies wrongdoing

The former president is expected to surrender to authorities next week.

MICHAEL R. SISAK, ERIC TUCKER, COLLEEN LONG AND JENNIFER PELTZ
Associated Press

NEW YORK — A Manhattan grand jury indicted Donald Trump, prosecutors and defense lawyers said Thursday, making him the first former U.S. president to face a criminal charge and jolting his bid to retake the White House next year.

The charges center on payments made during the 2016 presidential campaign to silence claims of extramarital sexual encounters. They mark an extraordinary de-

velopment after years of investigations into Trump's business, political and personal dealings.

Trump, who denies wrongdoing and has repeatedly assailed the investigation, called the indictment "political persecution" and predicted it would damage Democrats in 2024. In a statement confirming the charges, defense lawyers Susan Necheles and Joseph Tacopina said Trump "did not commit any crime. We will vigorously fight this political prosecution in court."

A spokesman for the Manhattan District Attorney's Office confirmed the indictment Thursday and said prosecutors reached out to Trump's defense team to arrange a surrender.

A person familiar with the matter, who was not authorized to discuss sealed proceedings, said the surrender was expected to happen next week. For security reasons, his booking is expected to be carefully choreographed to avoid crowds inside or outside the courthouse.

District Attorney Alvin Bragg left his office Thursday evening without commenting.

The case centers on well-chronicled allegations from a period in 2016 when Trump's celebrity past collided with his political ambitions. Prosecutors scrutinized money paid to porn actor Stormy Daniels and former Playboy model



EVAN VUCCI, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Donald Trump is the first former U.S. president to face a criminal charge. He called the indictment "political persecution."

Please see **TRUMP**, Page A3

Ed chief finalists tell board their plans

The three candidates discuss school choice, assessments and local control

LAUREN WAGNER
World-Herald Staff Writer

All of the candidates vying to lead Nebraska's education system want to improve communication, explore academic assessment options and be cautious about school choice.

These were some of the priorities three finalists laid out for State Board of Education members Thursday as they interviewed to become the next education commissioner.

The board is in the final stages of its search process following the January resignation of Matthew Blomstedt, who was commissioner for nine years.

Through months of discussion and working with search firm

Please see **FINALISTS**, Page A2

Are kids with dyslexia getting the help they need?



CHRIS MACHIAN, THE WORLD-HERALD

When Norah Schmidt, left, was having trouble reading as a young child, her mom, Heather, right, wondered whether she had dyslexia. Norah eventually received interventions for dyslexia, but she found them ineffective.

LAUREN WAGNER
World-Herald Staff Writer

Heather Schmidt knew something was off when her daughter, Norah, was making gains in every subject — except reading — by the time she was in first grade.

"I asked her teacher, 'Do you think she has dyslexia?' And she said, 'I don't know, we don't do that here,'" Schmidt said.

Norah, who is now a sophomore at Lincoln Southeast High School, eventually received interventions. But she deemed them ineffective,

such as when a teacher would pull her out of the classroom with a stopwatch to time her reading.

"It's hard, because when I was in fifth grade, I finally got through my first chapter book that a first grader would have read," Norah said. This was before a key piece of legislation was passed in 2018, introduced by then-State Sen. Patty Pansing Brooks. It created a step-by-step framework for Nebraska schools to increase support and services for students with dyslexia.

Five years later, it's not clear whether all schools have been following the bill's parameters. That's why Sen. Lou Ann Linehan of the Omaha area says she introduced Legislative Bill 298 this year — because she doesn't know whether schools are making progress.

"Schools don't have to report to the Department of Education about how many kids they have with dyslexia, how many children

Please see **DYSLEXIA**, Page A2

Income tax bill

A bill cutting Nebraska's top income tax rate clears first-round debate.

Midlands

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Dyslexia

From A1

they feel are having reading issues,” Linehan said. “They haven’t had to report any of it.”

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that refers to a cluster of symptoms which result in people having difficulties with language skills, particularly reading, but also spelling, writing and pronouncing words. About 20% of students in the U.S. have dyslexia, according to the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity.

It’s one part of the overall reading issues that students face in Nebraska and across the nation.

Roughly two-thirds of fourth grade students score below the proficient level in reading, both in Nebraska and nationwide, according to national assessment data released last year. The results also indicate that more than one-third of all fourth graders in Nebraska and the U.S. have below even a basic level of reading skills.

Linehan’s bill would require all school districts to collect and report information regarding dyslexia to the Nebraska Department of Education, which would in turn report to the Legislature.

The information would include the number of students in each school district who were tested for dyslexia, those identified as exhibiting characteristics of dyslexia and those diagnosed with dyslexia who have improved their reading skills as a result of that diagnosis.

LB 298 became a speaker priority bill in mid-March.

Schools already have been required to help dyslexic students under LB 1052, the bill that passed in 2018. It also directed the Nebraska Department of Education to produce a technical assistance document on dyslexia as a statewide resource, which it has done.

Schools must provide each student identified with dyslexia with reading and writing instruction using an evidence-based, multi-sensory approach backed by dyslexia

experts. The bill required that the technical assistance document be distributed to all teacher education programs, educational service units and school districts across Nebraska and incorporated into rules and regulations for school accreditation, teacher education and special education.

LB 1052 also said that schools can’t require a student to get a medical diagnosis before receiving interventions for dyslexia.

And finally, it required that all teacher education programs include instruction in dyslexia.

Linehan, who helped Pansing Brooks with the 2018 legislation and also has dyslexia herself, said the bill was supposed to ensure that students at risk of having the language disability are tested when they are in kindergarten and first grade, so that they can get help immediately.

“A lot of parents were getting told when their first and second grader couldn’t read, ‘Oh, it’s OK. They’ll get better.’ Well, they don’t,” Linehan said. “(The bill) was a compromise in that the schools need to pay more attention and teachers need to be able to diagnose and recognize the signs of dyslexia, which are pretty basic.”

Linehan said she introduced her current legislation, LB 298, because she was hearing from parents that dyslexia still is not being handled properly in some Nebraska schools.

One parent told her last year that when their son wasn’t reading at grade level, their school assured them he would catch up. Not only did he never gain ground in reading, he also didn’t get a dyslexia diagnosis until third grade and the school still gave him the wrong interventions at that point, Linehan said.

“The issue of kids reading by the end of third grade is one of the most important things,” Linehan said. “If you teach a child to read, they are much less likely to drop out of high school and much more likely to go to college and be successful. You are robbing them of their future

if you do not teach them how to read.”

Amy Rhone, the state’s special education director, said that if parents feel that a school is delaying or outright denying evaluation of a student, the state encourages them to reach out to the Nebraska Department of Education.

The state department also conducts complaint investigations if parents think a federal or state law was violated in their child’s education.

It’s also not normal for dyslexic students to run into delays in Nebraska schools, Rhone said.

Still, a shortage of staff, increase in student needs and lack of funding has led to delays in services and other issues in special education in Nebraska.

Rhone said state education officials, in partnership with local organizations, have “worked hard to create more knowledge around the identification of characteristics of dyslexia to ensure best supports for students.”

“Students may exhibit characteristics of dyslexia without having received a diagnosis,” Rhone said in an email.

“If a student exhibits these characteristics, and performs below threshold levels on approved reading assessments, the Nebraska Reading Improvement Act requires individualized, supplemental reading interventions in addition to regularly scheduled reading instruction.”

The Nebraska Reading Improvement Act, another measure that Linehan pushed for in 2018, outlines state regulations for reading assessments and interventions to help improve student reading proficiency.

Kailey Barry is a speech language pathologist who used to work in the Omaha Public Schools until last year. She said students who might be dyslexic are evaluated to see if they have a specific learning disability and are verified for special education services.

“Even when students are verified, very rarely does the term dyslexia ever come up,” she said. “I just don’t think that it’s

something that a lot of people are comfortable with.”

Michelle Holbeck, an OPS early literacy coordinator, said the district doesn’t diagnose dyslexia. All students in kindergarten through third grade take a universal screener and if they score below the threshold, interventions are started.

“Whether or not a K-3rd grade student has a dyslexia diagnosis, if they have a demonstrated reading difficulty, they will receive additional intervention support in reading,” Holbeck said. “The Omaha Public Schools is committed to a vision of all students being able to read on grade level by third grade.”

During the 2021-22 school year, 27% of OPS students in third through eighth grade scored proficient in English language arts in state testing. That was 20 percentage points lower than the Nebraska average.

Barry resigned from OPS to work on launching her own nonprofit to help dyslexic students — especially those in South Omaha — get additional services and supports they can’t get in school.

“Just knowing that being able to affect one person, one student, would make it all worth it,” she said.

Clarice Jackson created an Omaha nonprofit, the Voice Advocacy Center, nearly two decades ago after she found out her daughter, Latecia, couldn’t read simple two- or three-letter words in the second grade. Latecia died in 2015, and Jackson now helps children who struggle to read in honor of her.

While people are more aware of the term dyslexia, Jackson said, she believes that students with the disability are still not getting the services they need.

“It’s gotten the notoriety and the name recognition that it deserves,” she said. “However, the manifestation and the actual process of addressing it in our school system is still decades behind.”

One way to improve how dyslexic students are served in schools is to increase education about dyslexia to teachers

— something the University of Nebraska at Omaha is focusing on this year with a new program.

Educators can earn a dyslexia specialist certificate through the one-year online program at UNO. Amanda Kern, the UNO professor that advises the program, said it was created after the 2018 legislation was passed. Its first cohort of 14 teachers began the program this past fall.

“Many of them already have advanced training in reading — they’re reading specialists, reading coaches, interventionists — but they don’t know enough about dyslexia,” Kern said. “We have a school psychologist in our cohort and they were saying, ‘I didn’t know about this. I don’t know about dyslexia.’”

Kern said dyslexic students have historically struggled because teachers don’t get the advanced training that is required to effectively intervene. She does think that since the 2018 legislation that required it, teacher colleges have been trying to incorporate more education around the disability.

If LB 298 passes, Kern said Nebraska could drastically improve the way it serves students with dyslexia.

“When I talk to schools and districts, I say, ‘How confident are you in not having the data?’” Kern said.

“Data will give you power and you’ll be able to really show change and make informed choices in your planning and in your resource allocation.”

For Norah, things are a bit easier now that she’s in high school, but she still needs accommodations, such as taking tests in a separate office with a couple of hours to complete them.

“I think it is really important for teachers to understand that some students have dyslexia and that it’s going to be harder for them to accomplish some of the goals they’re given,” she said.

“They just need to understand and try and help out that student the best way they could, so they can learn in the best way possible.”

Finalists

From A1

McPherson and Jacobson, the board ended up with three finalists, all with Nebraska ties.

The candidates interviewed Thursday were Melissa Poloncić, superintendent of the Douglas County West Community Schools; Brian Maher, executive director of the South Dakota Board of Regents; and Summer Stephens, superintendent for the Churchill County School District in Fallon, Nevada.

The state board originally had a fourth finalist, Lisa Coons, the chief academic officer for the Tennessee Department of Education. In late March, she was appointed by Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin as that state’s superintendent of public instruction.

The board asked more than a dozen questions revolving around problem solving, experience, local control and issues such as assessment and school choice.

Some current issues schools are facing, such as staff shortages, weren’t mentioned by the board. Each candidate was interviewed for one hour and 45 minutes.

The board plans to select its education commissioner at its meeting Friday.

Brian Maher

Maher, who has worked in Nebraska districts including Kearney, Waverly and Centennial,



Maher

said he decided to apply for the job because he wants the opportunity to make an impact and be a leader for schools. He said he also wants to be a credible face for Nebraska education.

“I see this position as an opportunity to help teachers teach,” he said. “I want to break down barriers so teachers can do what teachers do best.”

Maher said he thinks the state’s main strengths include its passion for education, its financing and the efficiency of its federal programs department.

One challenge Maher has noticed is the lack of systemic communication plan for statewide and local education officials.

“What I found in communication is, generally speaking, there is plenty of info going out. The question is, do you listen?” he said.

Maher said he would distribute a memo each Friday to help boost transparency and communication with the state board.

Asked to weigh in on Nebraska’s assessment system, Maher said he would improve the NSCAS Growth assessment. The effectiveness and design of the state test has been criticized by school officials.

“It’s falling short in a couple of areas. NSCAS is based on growth,

but the growth is grade-level only, so it doesn’t allow it to go below or above,” Maher said.

Maher, along with the other two candidates, cautioned against creating more school choice, a move that is currently under consideration by the Nebraska Legislature with a private school scholarship tax bill.

“If I want my kids to have an education that isn’t public, I don’t know if my kids should get money that is intended for a common good,” he said.

Summer Stephens

Stephens, who has worked for the Bellevue and Norris school districts in Nebraska, said she has spent her entire career thinking about this position.

“I believe that many people have extreme integrity and honesty, but that is the cornerstone of who I am,” she said. “This is where I can help the most staff and students.”

Stephens said Nebraska’s education system is supreme to other locations. She said the State Department of Education has a solid delivery structure to implement initiatives, laws and policies in districts, while also allowing input and ideas “coming from boots on the ground.”

One improvement Stephens



Stephens

favours would be to change the state’s accountability system, which measures the performance of school districts.

“If an accountability system and assessments within it are not seen as useful within the schools, then we are not going to improve,” she said.

Stephens said she’s afraid that if Nebraska creates more school choice, it will take opportunities away from students who need them.

“This state, I believe, has done the right thing in not having charter schools,” she said. “In (Nevada), charter school staff do not have to have teaching licenses.”

Stephens differed from the other candidates with her goal of moving Nebraska students to a more personalized, competency-based learning environment. Competency-based education is a method of instruction and evaluation based upon students demonstrating their mastery of a subject, usually at their own pace.

Melissa Poloncić

Satisfied with her job as Douglas County West superintendent, Poloncić said she hadn’t been thinking about moving on to the education commissioner position.

“My journey in education has led me to this point,” she said.

Poloncić said Nebraska’s main strength is its passion to educate



Poloncić

children. Some issues she’s heard of include lower student achievement, more student misbehavior, lack of communication and a contentious political climate that bleeds into

education.

For communication, Poloncić said she would introduce weekly updates to all education department staff and the state board. She also wants to create routine statewide updates.

“I believe schools need a routine of knowing when they will hear from the Department of Education,” she said.

On the topic of school choice, Poloncić said students already have a lot of education options. She said “it gets messy” when funding is involved.

“When you talk about the funding following the child, then you have to (ask), is the accountability the same? Where do the funds go?” Poloncić said. “How do the funds flow to the children or the intention of the legislation? Who is monitoring that?”

Poloncić’s comments about state assessments like NSCAS were similar to those of the other candidates. She said Nebraska is going to have to find a different way to assess students.

“It’s not working really well, so now we have to change course,” she said.

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