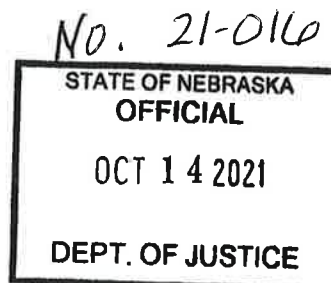




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ATTORNEY GENERAL



SUBJECT: Interpretation of the Phrase “Actively Engaged in the Teaching Profession” in Neb. Rev. Stat. § 79-313 (2014).

REQUESTED BY: Senator Steve Erdman
Nebraska Legislature

WRITTEN BY: Douglas J. Peterson, Attorney General
L. Jay Bartel, Assistant Attorney General

INTRODUCTION

Persons who are “actively engaged in the teaching profession” are ineligible for membership on the State Board of Education [“State Board”]. Neb. Rev. Stat. § 79-313(1) (2014). You have asked our opinion on “two gray areas” concerning the meaning of this phrase. Restated, your specific questions are:

1. Does tutoring K-12 students for a stipend while serving on the State Board violate § 79-313(1)?
2. Does concurrently teaching high school students in a dual credit course offered at a community college, college, or university while serving on the State Board violate § 79-313(1)?

It is our long-standing policy not to provide opinions to members of the Legislature on the interpretation or constitutionality of existing statutes. Op. Att’y Gen. No. 157 (Dec. 24, 1985). Rather, we only issue opinions to state legislators which pertain “to pending or proposed legislation.” *Id.* at 1. Although you reference no pending or

proposed legislation, your request letter states you are considering introducing legislation to “clarify” the meaning of § 79-313. Accordingly, we will proceed to consider your questions.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND STATUTORY PROVISIONS

Neb. Const. art. VII, § 3, provides:

The State Board of Education shall be composed of eight members, who shall be elected from eight districts of substantially equal population as provided by the Legislature. Their term of office shall be for four years each. Their duties and powers shall be prescribed by the Legislature, and they shall receive no compensation, but shall be reimbursed their actual expense incurred in the performance of their duties. The members of the State Board of Education shall not be actively engaged in the educational profession and they shall be elected on a nonpartisan ballot. (emphasis added).

In addition, Neb. Rev. Stat. § 79-313 (2014) provides:

No person shall be eligible to membership on the State Board of Education (1) who is actively engaged in the teaching profession, (2) who is a holder of any state office or a member of a state board or commission unless the board or commission is limited to an advisory capacity, or (3) unless he or she is a citizen of the United States, a resident of the state for a period of at least six months, and a resident of the district from which he or she is elected for a period of at least six months immediately preceding his or her election. (emphasis added).

In Op. Att’y Gen. No. 02013 (April 11, 2002), we concluded that “educational profession” and “teaching profession” have the same meaning. The legislative history of § 79-313 indicates the statute was enacted in accordance with the constitutional amendment creating the State Board. We reasoned that construing “teaching profession” and “educational profession” to have the same meaning was consistent with Op. Att’y Gen. No. 95004 (January 18, 1995) and *State ex rel. Brazda v. Marsh*, 141 Neb. 817, 830, 5 N.W.2d 206, 214 (1942) [*Brazda*], holding that “when a state Constitution creates an office and names the qualifications of the incumbent, the legislature has no authority to prescribe additional qualifications or to remove any of the requirements provided for by the Constitution.” Op. Att’y Gen. No. 02013 at 7. We concluded that if the terms had different meanings, § 79-313 could be construed to impose an additional eligibility requirement for membership on the State Board contrary to the rule in *Brazda*. *Id.* at 8.

We also “conclude[d] that ‘teaching profession’ and ‘educational profession’ include positions in a school setting other than teaching.” Op. Att’y Gen. No. 02013 at 8. In reaching this conclusion, we noted an earlier opinion construing the prohibition in Neb. Rev. Stat. § 72-201(2) against a member of the Board of Educational Lands and Funds being actively engaged in the “teaching profession.” We relied on the legislative intent

language in Neb. Rev. Stat. § 79-1280, now codified as § 79-859, which “declares teaching in public schools in this state and the related services, including administrative and supervisory services, to be a profession, with all of the rights, responsibilities, and privileges accorded other recognized professions.” *Id.* (citing Op. Att’y Gen. No. 33 at 2 (February 25, 1983)). Accordingly, “‘educational profession’ as used in Neb. Const. art. VII, § 3 and ‘teaching profession’ as used in § 79-313 have the same meaning and that definition includes not only teaching but also services related to teaching, such as administrative and supervisory services.” Op. Att’y Gen. No. 02013 at 9.

ANALYSIS

Recently, in *State ex rel. Peterson v. Shively*, 310 Neb. 1, 10-11, ___ N.W.2d ___, ___ (2021), the Nebraska Supreme Court recounted the following general rules governing the interpretation of constitutional provisions:

The words in a constitutional provision must be interpreted and understood in their most natural and obvious meaning unless the subject indicates or the text suggests that they are used in a technical sense. If the meaning of a constitutional provision is clear, the court will give to it the meaning that obviously would be accepted and understood by laypersons. Constitutional provisions are not subject to strict construction and receive a broader and more liberal construction than do statutes. It is the duty of courts to ascertain and to carry into effect the intent and purpose of the framers of the constitution or of an amendment thereto. (footnotes omitted).

“Educational” means “pertaining to education.” <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/educational>. “Education” is “the act or process of imparting or acquiring knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment, and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life.” <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/education>. “Teaching” is “the act or profession of a person who teaches.” <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/teaching>. “Profession” means “a vocation requiring knowledge or some department of learning or science; . . . the body of persons engaged in an occupation or calling.” <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/profession>.

Art. VII, § 3 and § 79-313(1) prohibit members of the State Board from being “actively engaged” in the educational or teaching profession. Construing the meaning of the term “actively engaged in the day to day labor and management of” a farm or ranch in Neb. Const. art. XII, § 8, the Nebraska Supreme Court found the “most natural and obvious meaning” of “actively” is “constantly engaged.” *Hall v. Progress Pig, Inc.*, 259 Neb. 407, 414, 610 N.W.2d 420, 427-28 (2000).

Your first scenario involves a person tutoring K-12 students for a stipend. While you do not further define this role, a “tutor” ordinarily means “a person employed to instruct another in some branch or branches of learning, especially a private instructor.” <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/tutor>. Teachers, as well as educational administrators and supervisors, are required to hold Nebraska certificates or permits. See Neb. Rev.

Stat. §§ 79-801 and 79-802 (2014). While a tutor may be certificated, there is no statute or rule imposing such a requirement or regulating persons engaged in tutoring. While tutors provide instruction to students, this type of assistance does not seem to fall within the common understanding of what constitutes the “educational” or “teaching” profession. That is particularly true if the tutoring is not performed on a constant and regular basis, which would be necessary to meet the “actively engaged” requirement.

Your second question concerns teaching a course at a community college, college, or university where high school students can participate and receive dual credit. In 2008, this office issued an informal opinion to a member of the State Board addressing whether he could teach a class at the University of Nebraska at Omaha [“UNO”] in light of the constitutional requirement that members not be actively engaged in the educational profession. Op. Att’y Gen. No. I08012 (July 1, 2008). We noted the underlying objective of the prohibition against State Board members being actively engaged in the educational profession was “to prevent conflicts of interest.” *Id.* at 3. The State Board, along with the Commissioner of Education, are “responsible for the general supervision and administration of the Nebraska school system, which encompasses grades Kindergarten through 12.” *Id.* (emphasis in original). The member’s proposed employment, however, involved teaching a class at UNO, which is not part of the Nebraska school system and not under the State Board’s supervision. Because the potential for any conflict of interest due to the member’s service on the State Board and teaching the class was “negligible,” we concluded that the member’s teaching of a class at UNO was likely permissible. *Id.* at 3-4.

Applying the reasoning of this opinion here, we find that a member’s teaching of a community college, college, or university course likely does not constitute actively engaging in the “educational profession” within the prohibition in art. VII, § 3. While high school students would participate in the class for dual credit, the instruction is still part of a post K-12 educational curriculum, which is outside the State Board’s general supervision. As there is no real potential conflict of interest posed by a member engaging in this activity, we doubt it would be construed as barred by the constitutional prohibition.

Finally we point out that, to the extent you contemplate legislation, bear in mind that the statutory prohibition against members of the State Board being “actively engaged in the teaching profession” in § 79-313(1) is based on, and has the same meaning as, the constitutional prohibition in art. VII, § 3, against members being “actively engaged in the educational profession.” “The Legislature’s power of definition may not be employed to nullify or circumvent the provisions of the Nebraska Constitution.” *MAPCO Ammonia Pipeline, Inc. v. State Bd. of Equalization & Assessment*, 238 Neb. 565, 571, 471 N.W.2d

Senator Steve Erdman
Page 5

734, 739 (1991). Any legislative attempt to amend the statutory prohibition in § 79-313 must be consistent with the intent and meaning of the constitutional requirement that State Board members not be actively engaged in the educational profession.

Very truly yours,

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Approved by:



Attorney General

pc Patrick J. O'Donnell
Clerk of the Nebraska Legislature

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