

COLLEGE FACULTY THINK TANKS ON THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

The Workforce Planning and Development Program of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute recently convened two think tanks with faculty from Nebraska's community colleges and four-year colleges and universities. Similar to the think tank with faculty and administrators from the University of Nebraska system that followed the *Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce in Nebraska* conference in October 2015, participants were invited to discuss statewide competencies for Nebraska early childhood educators.

The goals of the discussions were to develop a shared understanding of the challenges and barriers facing the early childhood workforce, identify key competencies essential to a highly qualified early childhood educator, recognize commonalities and unique characteristics across institutions, and explore opportunities for innovation and collaboration. Both half-day meetings took place at the Buffett Early Childhood Institute Collaboratorium in Lincoln. The community college group met Friday, March 11, and the four-year colleges and universities met Tuesday, March 15. Colleagues unable to attend in person were connected remotely.

Each discussion focused on gaining an understanding of the essential competencies of a highly qualified early childhood educator. Many valuable ideas and insights from participants were solicited. Highlights include:

- Raising public awareness of the importance of the quality of early childhood educators in early childhood education.
- Understanding competency and quality as a continuum of abilities or a progression of levels.
- Attending to the need for educators to have supportive environments that encourage use of best practices.
- Finding language that communicates high-quality competencies to a broad audience.
- Addressing barriers to career ladder opportunities for educators.
- Exploring partnerships within the community to elevate perception of early childhood educators as teaching professionals.
- Recognizing the value of educators across multiple settings.
- Acknowledging the impact of low wages on educator recruitment and retention and the need to increase compensation to achieve better working conditions.

The Buffett Institute thanks the community college and four-year college and university faculty for their contributions to these important discussions. The Workforce Planning and Development Program will continue to host opportunities for input as we endeavor to develop a statewide understanding of these significant issues.