

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan

#### What is the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan?

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan is a collaborative initiative of the 11 school districts of Douglas and Sarpy Counties to develop early childhood programs for young children living in poverty. The focus of the plan is on closing opportunity gaps so that all children can reach their full potential. In partnership with the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute provides leadership and support for the plan, which is seen as one of the nation's most innovative and comprehensive approaches to ensure early learning opportunities for all children.

The plan was mandated in 2013 by LB 585 of the Nebraska Legislature, which directed the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties to enact a program created by the Omaha-area superintendents "to establish early childhood programs for children in poverty." The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan was developed by the Buffett Institute in collaboration with district superintendents and their staff and launched in 2015. Today, more than 2,100 children are served through the Superintendents' Plan.

Given the focus on children living in poverty and the disparities that exist for children of color, the Superintendents' Plan focuses on opportunity gaps. Working in partnership with school districts and the Learning Community, the Buffett Institute provides ongoing leadership and support for implementation of the plan.

#### What are the goals of the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan?

The **long-term goal** is to reduce or eliminate opportunity gaps for young children facing persistent economic and social disparities so that all children can reach their full potential. Short-term objectives focus on promoting positive outcomes for children and families by building the capacity of Omaha-metro school districts to provide quality early learning opportunities to all children, from birth through Grade 3.

#### How is the Superintendents' Plan implemented?

The implementation of the Superintendents' Plan aligns with the State Board of Education-approved Community Action Plan, a statutorily required document. The plan provides three levels of support to help school districts, elementary schools, and early childhood professionals enhance and expand evidence-based birth–Grade 3 practices, as follows:

- **Customized Assistance for School Districts.** All 11 school districts in the Learning Community have access to consultation services through the Superintendents' Plan. These services are tailored to the unique strengths and needs of each district and are designed to help them build their organizational infrastructure and capacity for providing quality early childhood programming to all young children in their district. Consultation services are provided by Institute staff in collaboration with other state and national consultants.
- **School as Hub Programming in Schools.** The plan provides more intensive support to selected elementary schools in neighborhoods impacted by high concentrations of poverty. These schools implement programming designed to establish the school as a "hub" that connects young children and their families with quality early childhood services and resources.
- **Professional Development for All.** Professional Development for All (PD for All) is an annual series of free learning opportunities available to early childhood professionals who work with children from birth through Grade 3 in Douglas and Sarpy Counties. These opportunities introduce evidence-based instructional practices while creating a space for early childhood professionals to gather and learn from one another. Each series is designed in response to the emerging needs of metro-area early childhood educators, who help shape both the content and format of PD for All.

### **What is an opportunity gap?**

“Opportunity gap” refers to the unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and prospects that students face throughout their educational careers. It places responsibility for gaps on an inequitable system that is not providing opportunities for all children to thrive and succeed. Children from low-income households, children of color, and those growing up under conditions of high stress and significant familial challenges are often the most affected.

### **How is an opportunity gap different from an achievement gap?**

“Achievement gap” refers to the unequal or inequitable distribution of educational results and benefits among populations who would otherwise not necessarily demonstrate disparities. “Opportunity gap” is used intentionally to articulate that gaps are caused by the systems that uphold barriers for children and families, and not the fault of the children and families themselves.

### **How was the Superintendents’ Plan developed—and how has it changed over time?**

The Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan was developed by the Buffett Early Childhood Institute in collaboration with district superintendents and their staff. It was adopted unanimously by the 11 superintendents in June 2014, approved by the Learning Community Coordinating Council in August 2014, and launched in 2015. In June 2021, the plan was extended for an additional four years by the Learning Community Coordinating Council.

The Buffett Institute continues to provide leadership and support for the implementation and evaluation of the plan and works to ensure that the plan meets districts’ and families’ needs, which have continued to evolve over time and were most significantly impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021–22, the Buffett Institute undertook a transition planning year in partnership with school districts and the Learning Community to learn more about districts’ individual needs and to continue to identify the ways in which the Superintendents’ Plan could be most helpful in reducing opportunity gaps. Those planning efforts continued into 2022–23 and have resulted in a series of District Action Plans that define efforts that are underway and focus on district-level implementation of the Superintendents’ Plan.

### **Who does the Superintendents’ Plan serve?**

The plan serves children from birth through Grade 3 and their families who are most impacted by opportunity gaps. The plan reinforces programs and educational practices that are essential for children’s healthy development and learning to reduce risk factors for school failure. While the plan is focused on children living in low-income households and English language learners, these efforts elevate the capacity of all school districts in Douglas and Sarpy Counties to provide the opportunities all children need to thrive and succeed.

### **Why is the Superintendents’ Plan important?**

Research confirms that the first eight years of a child’s life are critical for building a strong foundation for success in school and beyond. Eliminating opportunity gaps allows all Omaha-area children to reach their full potential.

Evidence from developmental science shows that high-quality, coordinated early learning services from birth through Grade 3 reduce educational obstacles for children who live in low-income households; however, continuous programming is not yet in place in most communities. Without this continuum, gaps in children’s learning based on family income show up as early as nine months and continue to widen. By Kindergarten, many children of color and children living in low-income households are a year or more behind their more economically advantaged peers of the same age—and this continues across early grades.

The Superintendents’ Plan is built upon research-proven practices for children living in low-income households. The Buffett Institute has consulted with nationally renowned experts in all areas of the first eight years of life to construct a high-quality plan, and the long-term professional learning support and technical assistance provided

to school districts ensure the ongoing development of local school (or district) capacity and leadership. In this plan, all adults in the child's world—parents, teachers, and caregivers—work together to support the child.

### **Why does the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan focus on birth through Grade 3?**

Scientific research shows that birth through age 8 (Grade 3) is the most important period of brain development. During this period, key brain circuits are built, language is learned, and ways of interacting with others are established. If this foundation is in place by Grade 3, children can engage in increasingly complex learning, problem-solve, and sustain productive and caring relationships—all essential skills to succeed in school, work, and life.

### **What are the components of School as Hub programming for children and families?**

School as Hub programming for children and families includes four interrelated components:

- **Home visiting and family facilitation from birth to school enrollment.** School-based family engagement staff provide regular, voluntary home visiting for individual families to support the development of strong parent-child relationships, child development skills, parenting education, and connections between parents and community resources. The home visiting programs have a strong link to the goals of elementary school programs so that home-school partnerships can be shaped from the beginning of a child's life.
- **High-quality preschool experiences for 3- and 4-year-olds.** Once children reach age 3, their families may choose to transition from home visiting into a school-based or community-based preschool. Family engagement staff continue the family support and education activities initiated during home visiting. In addition, ongoing professional development is provided for staff in School as Hub preschools to ensure high-quality learning experiences that build on the home visiting program.
- **Aligned Kindergarten through Grade 3 instruction.** As children transition into Kindergarten, the School as Hub approach works to ensure that their early elementary education builds upon their preschool experiences to promote academic, intellectual, and social-emotional competence.
- **Intentional family partnerships for children birth through Grade 3.** School as Hub schools collaborate with families and community partners to provide group activities and resources that are responsive to families' interests and values. Together they build authentic partnerships among schools, families, early care providers, and community leaders to ensure all students have access to what they need to thrive—and to empower families to act as advocates and decision-makers in their children's learning.

### **Do the positive effects of early childhood education fade out after Grade 3?**

High-quality preschool education increases children's cognitive and social skills needed for later achievement, but preschool alone does not protect children against systemic opportunity gaps. That's why early childhood programming should span children's first eight years of life and provide smooth transitions across services from one age to the next. The comprehensive approach described in the Superintendents' Plan applies best practices to create safeguards against these skills fading out after Grade 3.

### **Which districts participate in the Superintendents' Plan?**

Each of the 11 school districts within Douglas and Sarpy Counties participates in the Superintendents' Plan in various ways:

- **Customized Assistance is available to all 11 school districts in the Learning Community.** Each district has opportunities through Customized Assistance to utilize the birth through Grade 3 framework and action planning process to investigate their district needs, set goals, establish milestones, and work toward enhancing their early childhood programming with the support of

consultation with Institute staff. These districts include Bellevue Public Schools, Bennington Public Schools, Douglas County West Community Schools, Gretna Public Schools, Millard Public Schools, Omaha Public Schools, Ralston Public Schools, Papillion La Vista Community Schools, and Westside Community Schools.

- **School as Hub** programming is available to select schools in areas identified as having high concentrations of poverty. Six districts (Bellevue Public Schools, Douglas County West Community Schools, Millard Public Schools, Omaha Public Schools, Ralston Public Schools, and Westside Community Schools) participate in School as Hub.
- **Professional Development for All (PD for All)** is offered to all districts through a PD for All series.

### **Which schools participate in School as Hub?**

Currently, 10 elementary schools across six districts are implementing all components of School as Hub programming, most with more than half of their students eligible for free or reduced lunch. Schools include:

- Bellevue Public Schools: Belleaire Elementary School
- Douglas County West Community Schools: Douglas County West Elementary School
- Millard Public Schools: William Cody Elementary School, Mari Sandoz Elementary School
- Omaha Public Schools: Gomez Heritage Elementary School, Liberty Elementary School, Mount View Elementary School, Pinewood Elementary School
- Ralston Public Schools: Mockingbird Elementary School
- Westside Community Schools: Westbrook Elementary School

### **How many staff members support the implementation of the Superintendents' Plan?**

The Superintendents' Plan supports up to 31 professionals to work with schools, districts, and communities within Douglas and Sarpy Counties. A majority of these positions work at the School as Hub sites to implement programming. School-based staff includes home visitors who work with families of children from birth to school age, family facilitators who extend strong family-school connections through Grade 3, and community facilitators who connect the school to neighboring child care centers and in-home providers. The Buffett Institute provides early childhood specialists who train and coach teachers and staff, and program administrators who provide consultation and coaching for school leadership to strengthen their ability to coordinate and support the overall work of the plan.

### **How many children benefit from the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan?**

All students in the 11 school districts benefit annually from the Superintendents' Plan. This estimate includes those who are reached most directly through School as Hub programming (2,100+ children in 107 PreK through Grade 3 classrooms). Additional children reached through their district's Customized Assistance and PD for All depends on district action plans and engagement in the Superintendents' Plan.

### **What are the results to date of the Superintendents' Plan? Is it successful?**

Each year, the Superintendents' Plan is evaluated by a third-party consultant. An evaluation report with all results is produced and presented to the Learning Community Coordinating Council. The report is also publicly available. To view the most recent evaluation report, [click here](#).

### **What is the budget for the Superintendents' Plan? How is it funded?**

The contracted budget for the Superintendents' Plan is approximately \$3.4 million annually. Funding comes from levy authority granted to the Learning Community by the Nebraska Legislature in 2013 (LB 585). The budget is split between the Buffett Institute, which facilitates implementation of the plan, and the six districts implementing School as Hub programming.



**What can the Omaha-area community do to better support young children and their early learning and development?**

Everyone—from policymakers, to school staff, to families—can advocate for high-quality early childhood education. School and district leaders can take advantage of Customized Assistance and connect the plan to their district’s strategic planning efforts. Educators can attend Professional Development for All. Parents and guardians can see if they qualify for unique support, such as home visitation and socialization activities.

**Where can I learn more about the Superintendents’ Plan?**

For more information on the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan, visit [buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu](http://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu) or [learningcommunityds.org](http://learningcommunityds.org).