

Buffett Early Childhood Institute: Selected Milestones

July 2021



2011

JANUARY

The University of Nebraska (NU) announces that Susie Buffett, Omaha philanthropist and longtime champion of early childhood development, has made a gift to the NU Foundation to help establish a generous endowment and create the Buffett Early Childhood Institute. The university commits to matching the founding gift, signaling the largest commitment to early childhood made by any university in the nation.

2012

OCTOBER

NU President J.B. Milliken announces the hiring of Samuel J. Meisels as the Institute's founding executive director.

2013

JUNE

Institute operations begin when Meisels starts work in Nebraska and appoints Renee Wessels as associate executive director. The Institute office is housed on the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) campus.

OCTOBER

First annual meeting of the Institute's Board of Advisors, a distinguished national panel of highly respected educators and researchers.

DECEMBER

Meisels and the Institute's Strategic Planning Commission (composed of stakeholders from within the NU system and throughout the state) complete a strategic master plan, establishing the vision, guiding principles, and key strategies for the Institute's work.

2014

JANUARY

Meisels and the Institute are invited by the 11 superintendents of the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties to develop an early childhood plan for children living in poverty. Meisels requests the superintendents designate senior staff to work with him and the Institute to create the "Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan." The plan is an initiative of the Opportunity Gap Challenge, one of the Institute's two signature programs.

APRIL

The Institute administrative offices are established at the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center at UNO, a new facility dedicated to collaboration and fostering partnerships between UNO students, faculty, and staff and nonprofit or governmental organizations.

JUNE

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan is unanimously approved by the superintendents of the 11 school districts in the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties and goes to the Learning Community Coordinating Council, where it receives unanimous approval as well.

SEPTEMBER

The Institute leadership team begins work. Directors are hired to lead Institute efforts in program development, workforce planning and development, research and evaluation, communications, and fund development. They include Chris Maxwell, Susan Sarver, Iheoma Iruka, Shannon Sherman, and Rosemary Edzie.

2015

JANUARY

Details of the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan for reducing or eliminating achievement gaps in the Omaha metro area are announced. Millard Public Schools Superintendent Jim Sutfin calls the plan a "game-changer" for early childhood.

MAY

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan inaugural "Professional Development for All" institute draws 250 early childhood professionals.

Sam Meisels and others from the Institute travel to Scottsbluff and Sidney to meet with educators and learn more about early childhood education in the Nebraska Panhandle. The trip kicks off a series of visits to communities across the state.

JUNE

The Buffett Institute Collaboratorium opens in the College of Education and Human Sciences at University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), providing collaboration and meeting space for the Institute and those working on early childhood issues.

SEPTEMBER

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan begins implementation in 12 schools. A complement of 29 professionals—including 25 working on-site at the schools—begin working with schools, districts, families, and communities.

The Buffett Institute and Aspen Institute partner for an early childhood education symposium in Omaha. "50 Years After Head Start: Making an Investment in Early Childhood Education in America" features some of the nation's leading thinkers and philanthropists.

OCTOBER

The Institute convenes a conference at UNL to examine critical early childhood workforce needs across Nebraska. Attending "Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce in Nebraska" are representatives from 22 of the state's 24 higher education institutions, the Nebraska Department of Education, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, and other agencies.

NOVEMBER

The Institute announces creation of four endowed community professorships that will be established by the Institute on University of Nebraska campuses to deepen campus focus on early care and education. The Community Chairs will apply early childhood research in ways that benefit families, early childhood professionals, and communities.

DECEMBER

The 2015-16 Professional Development for All series begins with "Social and Emotional Foundations for Whole Child Development and Learning."

2016

JANUARY

The Buffett Institute Graduate Scholars Program is launched to support multidisciplinary early childhood research by advanced doctoral students at NU.

Meisels is appointed by Governor Pete Ricketts to the Governor's Education and Workforce Roundtable to identify critical early childhood issues, discuss needed reforms, and advise the governor.

MARCH

Results of the Buffett Institute/Gallup survey on early childhood care and education are announced at UNL. The survey is the largest public opinion poll ever conducted about early childhood in Nebraska.

The 2015-16 PD for All series continues with “Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness for Whole Child Development and Learning.”

MAY

The first of four Buffett Institute Community Chairs is selected. The University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) and the Institute announce Kathleen Gallagher as the recipient of the Cille and Ron Williams Community Chair for Early Childhood Education.

The inaugural class of Buffett Institute Graduate Scholars is selected.

Meisels reports to the Board of Regents on the Institute’s first three years and shares successes and challenges.

The 2015-16 PD for All series concludes with “Family Partnerships for Whole Child Development and Learning.”

OCTOBER

The second of four Buffett Institute Community Chairs is selected. David Dzewaltowski is announced as the recipient of the Community Chair for Activity, Nutrition, and Obesity Prevention at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, beginning in January 2017.

The second Buffett Institute/Gallup survey report, “Nebraskans Speak About the Early Care and Education Workforce,” is released at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

NOVEMBER

The Institute publishes a report on its first three years.

DECEMBER

The 2016-17 PD for All series begins with “Engaging and Nurturing Young Children as Active Thinkers.”

2017

JANUARY

The first meeting of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission, a group of approximately 40 public- and private-sector leaders working to develop a comprehensive plan for expanding and strengthening the state’s early childhood workforce, takes place.

The 2016-17 PD for All series continues with “It’s More Than Words: Young Children’s Language, Thinking, and Learning.”

FEBRUARY

A study on factors impacting black boys’ early learning conducted by Iheoma Iruka, the Institute’s director of research and evaluation, is released.

The Institute hosts a national symposium in Omaha, “The Importance of Well-Being for Early Care and Education Providers,” hosted in cooperation with the National Academy of Medicine’s Innovation to Incubation Program.

MARCH

The third Buffett Institute/Gallup survey report, “Urban and Rural Nebraskans Speak About Early Care and Education,” is released in Scottsbluff.

The Institute relocates from the CEC building on UNO’s campus to new offices in Aksarben Village, adjacent to UNO’s Scott campus.

The 2016-17 PD for All series concludes with “Young Children as Active Learners and Thinkers: Integrated Learning Matters.”

JUNE

The Institute, in collaboration with the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, holds “Parenting Matters: A National Symposium,” focusing on strategies to support and help parents. The presentations and discussions highlighted several critical issues raised in “Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8,” a landmark report from the National Academies.

The Institute released the fourth and final Buffett Institute/Gallup survey report, “Nebraska Parents Speak About Early Care and Education.”

AUGUST

Meisels is awarded the Richard D. Holland Presidential Chair in Early Childhood Development. The chair, which represents the highest academic award and recognition the University of Nebraska can bestow on a faculty member, was established with a \$2 million gift from the Holland Foundation to honor the legacy of Richard “Dick” Holland, a highly respected community leader and philanthropist who died in 2016.

SEPTEMBER

The Institute releases the *Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Survey*, the largest, most comprehensive survey of the state’s early childhood workforce. Findings of the report, authored by Amy Roberts, Iheoma Iruka, and Susan Sarver, are announced at an event on the UNL campus.

OCTOBER

The 2017-18 PD for All series begins with “Children as Scientists: Scientific Inquiry for Every Child.”

NOVEMBER

The 2017-18 PD for All series continues with “Children as Authors: Guiding Children on Pathways Toward Strong Writing.”

DECEMBER

The Institute appoints Kate Gallagher as director of research and evaluation.

2018

JANUARY

The 2017-18 PD for All series continues with “Children as Mathematicians: Early Math That Matters the Most.”

FEBRUARY

The Institute releases the *Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan Evaluation: 2016-17*, which demonstrated progress for children, families, and schools in metro Omaha. The report focused on the second year implementation of the Superintendents’ Plan, the nation’s largest, most comprehensive birth – Grade 3 initiative.

MARCH

The Institute releases a report suggesting ways technology can be used to provide more access to effective professional development for early child care providers in the state. *Technology-Supported Early Childhood Professional Development in Nebraska* was authored for the Institute by Jan Esterach, a doctoral student in the Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies (CYAF) at UNL.

The 2017-18 PD for All series concludes with “Children as Researchers: Reading to Learn Can Start Early.”

JUNE

About 200 researchers, practitioners, community leaders, philanthropists, and policymakers gather in Omaha for a national symposium where national and local experts discussed ways to support the educational success of young children learning English. “Promoting the Success of Young Children Learning English: Nebraska and National Perspectives” is hosted by the Institute in collaboration with the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

AUGUST

The Institute appoints Erin Owen as director of communications and marketing.

SEPTEMBER

Civic, business, and education leaders from 74 communities across Nebraska gather in Kearney for the inaugural Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference focused on high-quality early childhood education and its connection to economic development and community vitality. The conference was sponsored by the Institute and seven other statewide organizations.

The 2018-19 PD for All series begins with “Harnessing the Power of Language and Communication to Build Children’s Literacy Success.”

OCTOBER

The Institute appoints Kimberly Harper as associate executive director for operations.

DECEMBER

The Institute’s Five Year Report is published.

2019

JANUARY

The Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission, with the Institute and the Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children, hosts a series of 20 screenings of the early childhood education documentary “No Small Matter” and forums with early childhood providers and teachers across the state in January, February, and March.

The Institute publishes a research brief, *Early Childhood Teacher Turnover in Nebraska*, based on an analysis of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Survey. The report was authored by Amy Roberts, Kate Gallagher, Susan Sarver, and Alexandra Daro.

The 2018-19 PD for All series continues with “The Art of Communication in Classrooms: Helping Children Find, Develop, and Use Their Voices for Learning.”

MARCH

The Institute releases the *Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan Evaluation: 2017-18*, which showed that the groundbreaking Birth-Grade 3 initiative is making positive gains in closing opportunity gaps for hundreds of children in metro Omaha.

Nebraska is awarded a federal Preschool Development Grant, a one-year, \$4.1 million grant. The Institute, in collaboration with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, the Nebraska Department of Education, and several partner organizations across the state, is selected to conduct two activities: a statewide needs assessment and a statewide early childhood strategic plan.

APRIL

The Institute publishes a research brief, *Risk Factors for Depression Among Early Childhood Teachers*, based on a study, “Workforce well-being: Personal and workplace contributions to early educators’ depression across settings,” which appeared in the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*. The report was authored by Amy Roberts, Kate Gallagher, Iheoma Iruka, Susan Sarver, and Alexandra Daro.

The Nebraska Panhandle: An Assessment of Birth-Grade 3 Care and Education, is released. The collaborative report was produced by Educational Service Unit 13, the Panhandle Partnership, Inc., and the Buffett Institute, to better understand and improve early learning and developmental outcomes for children in the Panhandle. A luncheon and panel discussion in Gering marking the report’s release was attended by more than 100 community and education leaders from across the Panhandle.

The 2018-19 PD for All series continues with “Children as Expressive Artists.”

JUNE

Julia Torquati, a professor, graduate director, and interim department chair of Child, Youth and Family Studies (CYAF) in the College of Education and Human Sciences, is named the inaugural recipient of the Community Chair in Infant and Child Mental Health at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

The 2018-19 PD for All series concludes with “Children as Expressive Artists”/“Los niños como artistas expresivos,” offered to Spanish-speaking early childhood professionals in the metro area.

AUGUST

Susan Catapano, a professor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, is named the Cille and Ron Williams Community Chair for Early Childhood Education at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

Lisa Roy is appointed director of program development, replacing Chris Maxwell, who retired in May. The Buffett Institute also announces the appointment of Amy Mart as director of professional learning, a new position created to fulfill an integrative role at the Institute.

SEPTEMBER

More than 415 civic, business, and education leaders from 92 communities gather in Kearney for the 2019 Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference. The conference was sponsored by the Buffett Institute and 19 other statewide organizations.

OCTOBER

The Buffett Institute releases the *Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan Evaluation: 2018-19*, which examined the fourth year of full implementation of the plan.

NOVEMBER

The 2019-20 PD for All series begins with “Executive Function and Self-Regulation.”

2020

JANUARY

The Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission releases its groundbreaking report addressing the challenges facing the early childhood workforce. More than 500 people attend the event in person in Lincoln or via livestream. The report receives significant media coverage including front page stories in the Omaha World-Herald and Lincoln Journal Star with national coverage from the Associated Press. More than 20 senators attend a special legislative briefing on the commission’s report. Newly arrived NU President Ted Carter offers welcoming remarks.

The 2019-20 PD for All series continues with “Executive Function and Self-Regulation,” building on the themes of the November PD for All institute.

MARCH

The Institute transitions to remote work arrangements in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, continuing all operations and assuming new challenges caused by the virus.

The Buffett Institute conducts a survey to assess the impact of COVID-19 on early childhood providers in Nebraska. More than 2,100 providers respond to the survey. Findings, which were released in April, show that child care providers are facing unbearable stress linked to economic insecurity, threat of health problems, and lack of reliable information. The survey findings tell a story of need and challenges facing child care providers across the state.

The Institute collaborates with colleagues at UNL to develop a website to support children and families during the pandemic and beyond. A Beautiful Day is a virtual early childhood space designed to share ideas, foster learning and play, and support caregivers experiencing physical distancing.

The Institute launches a new webpage devoted to the COVID-19 pandemic. The page includes information about the Institute’s work, as well as links to early childhood partners’ efforts in this area.

APRIL

Early childhood partners in Nebraska, including the Institute, form the “Nebraska Early Childhood COVID-19 Response Team.” The group meets by Zoom to share updates, discuss survey data, understand child care providers’ needs, and highlight funding needs and resources. Along with partners, the Institute supports the creation of an online Nebraska Child Care Referral Network to help connect licensed providers to families seeking child care.

MAY

The Institute partners with the University of Nebraska Foundation to host a webinar, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Early Care and Education,” featuring analysis from the Institute’s child care provider surveys.

The 2019-20 Buffett Institute Graduate Scholars present their research findings at an online symposium. The doctoral students are Alethea Chiappone and Elizabeth Preas, at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, and Yinbo Wu, in the Department of Psychology at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

JUNE

The Institute releases child development guidelines to help early care and education programs reopen as safely and effectively as possible.

The Institute conducts a second survey to assess the impact of COVID-19 on early childhood providers in Nebraska. More than 1,000 providers respond to the survey and findings are released in August. Economic, health, and personal stressors reported from the Institute’s first provider survey in March 2020 continue and are increasing. Findings show that child care providers need more support to continue operating. If the COVID-19 pandemic continues or worsens, Nebraska could lose many of its licensed child care providers unless financial assistance is provided.

In response to the tragic police killing of George Floyd and the ensuing nationwide protests, the Institute offers guidance to parents struggling to talk about race, racism, and injustice with their children. Two special Early Years Matter online conversations with staff at the Institute explore these important challenges and opportunities.

The federal government awards Nebraska a second Preschool Development Grant for \$8.9 million a year for three years. In collaboration with organizations across the state, the Buffett Institute is selected to coordinate six of the grant’s 24 projects, including conducting a statewide needs assessment, collaborating on a statewide early childhood strategic plan, developing a parent education campaign, implementing the goals of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission, and conducting a performance evaluation.

JULY

The Institute launches summer Professional Development for All webinar series with “Community Voices: Supporting Children and Families During Challenging Times” and “Fostering Supportive Relationships for Social-Emotional Learning in Early Childhood.”

Sen. John Stinner, a member of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission and chair of the Legislature’s Appropriations Committee, introduces Legislative Resolution 390 to authorize the study of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the early childhood workforce and the financing requirements needed to ensure a quality early childhood system in the state.

AUGUST

Two 2020-21 Buffett Institute Graduate Scholars are announced. The scholars, Keting Chen and Erin Hamel, are both human sciences students in the Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

“Helping Children Cope with Strong Emotions,” the third and final webinar in the summer Professional Development for All series, is held.

SEPTEMBER

More than 700 community leaders from across Nebraska and 20 other states, including the District of Columbia, register for the 2020 Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference. Attendance is triple that of the inaugural conference in 2018. Originally planned as an in-person event in Kearney, the event transitions to a virtual conference to maintain the momentum of the growing Thriving Children community and to come together to share and learn during the continued COVID-19 pandemic. Sen. John Stinner offers the welcome and announces an online survey of Nebraska parents and business owners as a part of the Legislative Resolution 390 study.

University of Nebraska President Ted Carter and members from the Institute testify at a hearing of the Appropriations Committee of the Nebraska Legislature studying the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the early childhood workforce.

OCTOBER

After being nominated by the Nebraska Board of Education, the Institute is honored as the “2020 Friend of Education” by the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE). This national award is given annually to an individual or organization whose contributions to PreK – Grade 12 education are significant and enduring.

The Institute begins a series of webinars to support families, early childhood professionals, and community members in navigating the “new normal” of digital technology in early childhood. The first webinar, “Technology in the Early Years,” features Dr. Chip Donohue, founding director of the Technology in Early Childhood Center at Erikson Institute and senior fellow at the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media.

The Institute releases the *Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan Evaluation: 2019-20*, which examined the fifth year of full implementation across six school districts in the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties.

NOVEMBER

The fall Professional Development for All series, which focused on technology in the early years, concludes with two webinars, “Digital Storytelling” and “Planning for Virtual and Blended Learning Experiences.”

DECEMBER

The Institute publishes two professional learning guides for PreK through third grade teachers with a focus on building their foundational knowledge about using technology to support young children’s learning and development.

The Institute publishes its 2020-25 strategic plan, which builds upon the work of the Institute since its founding in 2013 and represents future goals, strategies, and initiatives to help make Nebraska the best place in the nation to be a baby.

2021

FEBRUARY

The Appropriations Committee of the Nebraska Legislature releases the LR 390 interim study report examining the fiscal and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Nebraska’s early childhood workforce—with a focus on what is needed to properly fund the early childhood care and education system. At the request of Sen. John Stinner, the Buffett Institute and First Five Nebraska provide information and support to the committee during the study. The report gains national attention through an Associated Press story.

The Institute publishes the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan, made possible by the federal Preschool Development Grant. This statewide plan seeks to ensure that all children have access to quality early childhood services and describes an integrated set of goals and objectives for improving the early childhood experiences of the more than 235,000 children, birth through age 8, who live in Nebraska.

MARCH

The Institute launches its spring 2021 Professional Development for All webinar series focusing on equity and opportunity. Teachers and providers request information about anti-racist early childhood education.

APRIL

The second webinar in the spring 2021 PD for All series is held and examines racial socialization in young children and ways in which children and families can respond to racism.

Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission co-chairs Marjorie J. Kostelnik and Samuel J. Meisels release an 11-page report that details progress made across the state over the past year. The report outlines work done by commission members and the organizations they represent as they pursue the report’s vision, goals, and recommendations.

MAY

The 2020-21 Buffett Institute Graduate Scholars present their research findings at an online symposium. The doctoral students are Keting Chen and Erin Hamel, both human sciences students in the Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Nebraska’s Public Investment in Early Childhood Care and Education, Fiscal Year 2017 Technical Report is released, illustrating the complexity of financing early care and education and highlighting the opportunity for strategically aligning funding streams to better serve child care providers and families.

JUNE

With the availability of the COVID-19 vaccine, the Institute team transitions back to the office.

The Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan 2.0 is approved by the superintendents of the 11 school districts in the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties for four years and subsequently approved by the Learning Community Coordinating Council.

JULY

PBS NewsHour airs a weeklong series on child care in America; two segments feature Nebraska and include an interview with Kate Gallagher, director of research and evaluation at the Institute, and experts in McCook and Shickley, which are singled out for their innovative approaches to solving child care shortages in their communities.

Three 2021-22 Buffett Institute Graduate Scholars are announced. They are Saima Hasnin, Anna Johnson, and Morgan Staver. Hasnin is a student in the Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, while Johnson is in the clinical psychology training program at UNL. Staver is a graduate student in nursing at UNMC.

The Institute submits the Preschool Development Grant Performance Evaluation Report, which evaluates the degree to which PDG-funded projects are advancing the goals of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan and enhances capacity for evaluating early childhood programs using a systems lens.