

NEWS RELEASE

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NEW REPORT AND VISION ON STATE OF EARLY EDUCATION IN THE PANHANDLE RELEASED

Child Care, Preschool, and Parent Education and Support Seen as Top Priorities

Gering, Neb. — A new collaborative report entitled *The Nebraska Panhandle: An Assessment of Birth-Grade 3 Care and Education* was released today at a special luncheon and panel discussion in Gering. Nebraska Commissioner of Education Matt Blomstedt provided opening remarks at the event, which was attended by more than 100 community and education leaders from across the Panhandle.

The report was produced by Educational Service Unit (ESU) 13, the Panhandle Partnership, Inc., and the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. The three organizations came together to better understand and improve early learning and developmental outcomes for children in the Panhandle.

The report details key findings based on extensive community mapping work and information obtained from four months of focus groups with more than 200 Panhandle residents across 15 communities. Participating school district communities included Alliance, Banner County, Bayard, Chadron, Hay Springs, Hemingford, Garden County, Gering, Gordon-Rushville, Kimball, Mitchell, Morrill, Potter-Dix, Scottsbluff, and Sidney.

Thirty-nine percent of children from birth to age 5 in Nebraska are considered at risk for school failure, and census data indicate that these numbers are growing faster in rural counties than urban areas.

“The need for high-quality early childhood programs and services is urgent and growing,” said Jeff West, ESU 13 superintendent. “The collaborative report we are releasing today summarizes information gathered from community members, parents, and educators across the Panhandle about children, families, and programs in each of the 15 participating communities and school districts. It also includes our new vision statement describing the bright future we imagine for young children.”

Key findings from the community conversations include:

- Community members take great pride in existing programs that support children and families.
- Basic needs, the economy, and access to affordable, high-quality child care and preschool are areas of greatest concern.
- Community members identified funding and sustainability of child care, preschool, and parent education and support as top priorities.

The report includes personalized resources for communities and counties including 15 “school-community snapshots” that provide a view of the uniqueness of individual communities as well as their strengths, challenges, and priorities, and nine county “early childhood program inventories” that detail licensed child care and preschool programs, capacities, and quality ratings.

During a panel discussion at the event, community and education leaders from Bayard, Chadron, and Sidney spoke to the strengths of their communities as well as the challenges facing young children and families. Featured speakers included Matt McLaughlin, principal, Bayard Public Schools; Lori Retzlaff, owner, Lori’s Daycare, Chadron; Caroline Winchester, superintendent, Chadron Public Schools; Whitney Hurt, special education coordinator and lead teacher, Sidney Public Schools; and Tiffany Jones, director, Kid’s Korner Child Development Center, Sidney.

“The collaborative work between ESU 13, the Panhandle Partnership, and the Buffett Early Childhood Institute supports many outcomes and priorities of the strategic vision and direction of the State Board of Education and Nebraska Department of Education,” said Dr. Blomstedt, Nebraska’s Commissioner of Education. “The work in the Panhandle is poised to provide a model for school-community partnerships to serve young children and families throughout the state.”

Along with the report, organizers presented *A Vision for the Panhandle*, aimed at improving the learning and development of young children in the Panhandle. The vision statement articulated by a Panhandle leadership team will serve as a guiding principle as ESU 13, the Panhandle Partnership, Inc., and the Buffett Institute continue to work collaboratively to develop a strategic plan for a sustainable, school-based early childhood initiative in the Panhandle.

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*The Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska promotes the development and learning of children from birth through age 8. Our vision is to make Nebraska the best place in the nation to be a baby. Visit buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu for more information and to read *The Nebraska Panhandle: An Assessment of Birth-Grade 3 Care and Education*.*