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LEADERS FROM MORE THAN 70 NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES MEET TO FOCUS ON QUALITY CARE AND EDUCATION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Early Childhood Programs Seen as Essential for Community Growth and Development

Kearney, Neb. — From Scottsbluff to Omaha and Albion to Ogallala, community leaders are asking for assistance to ensure that children and families have access to high-quality early childhood programs and services.

More than 250 civic, business, and education leaders—from over 70 communities across the state—will attend a daylong session in Kearney on Sept. 17 to learn more about how they can provide quality child care and early learning opportunities for young children and to share success stories from efforts already underway. Seven statewide organizations are sponsoring the event, “Thriving Children, Families, and Communities: The Role of Early Childhood Programs.”

Central to the day’s focus is the role that early childhood programs play in community economic development—both because working families seek reliable, quality care in choosing where to live and because research shows that children who have benefited from high-quality early childhood programs become better students and workers.

“Communities thrive when children and families thrive. And children and families thrive when communities thrive,” said Sen. Matt Williams of Gothenburg who will deliver opening remarks at the conference. “The question is what can we do to build on the momentum that exists in the state to ensure that more children, families and communities benefit from quality early care and education?”

During the all-day conference, attendees will hear from keynote and plenary speakers on the importance of ensuring high-quality learning experiences for young children and the role that community partnerships and the early childhood workforce plays in ensuring that quality.

“Fifty years of research tells us that a child’s early years are critically important,” said Kate Gallagher, who will deliver the keynote address and serves as director of research and evaluation at the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. “The rapid development of the brain and the quality of the experiences a child is exposed to during those early years set a child up for success in school and in life.”

Community leaders from Columbus, Falls City, Gothenburg, Lincoln, Millard, Ogallala, Omaha, Red Cloud, and Scottsbluff will be featured in sessions throughout the day and share with others the efforts being made in their communities to improve child care and early learning opportunities for children. Some of the topics to be addressed by community leaders and a variety of early childhood experts include: funding resources for quality programs, designing quality early care and education environments, bridging cultures and language for high-quality care and education, early childhood policy and systems development, engaging families in collaborative partnerships, and connecting schools with community child care.

The conference is also expected to focus on both the statewide and community need for high-quality care and education and the alarming number of young children who are at risk of failing in school. Data show that statewide nearly 40 percent of children, ages 0 – 5, are considered at risk, based on poverty as just one indicator. In many counties across the state, both urban and rural, the percentages are higher, including Buffalo (43 percent), Hall (53 percent), and Scotts Bluff (54 percent).

“Quality early care and education is critical to the vitality and future of communities and our state,” said Jeff Yost, who will offer closing remarks at the event and serves as president of the Nebraska Community Foundation. “Early childhood programs are no longer something we want to do, they are something we have to do. Our children and families need it, our schools benefit from it, and our current and prospective businesses are demanding it.”

The request by communities for the statewide conference is consistent with findings from a statewide Buffett Early Childhood Institute/Gallup survey that shows significant support for early care and education. More than two-thirds (68 percent) of Nebraskans said early care and education has a significant impact on the long-term success of students, but only 10 percent strongly felt that most young children are prepared to be successful in school when they start Kindergarten. An overwhelming majority (67 percent) said that the state should make early care and education a higher priority than it is today.

Conference sponsors include the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska, First Five Nebraska, Nebraska Association of School Boards, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, Nebraska Community Foundation, and Nebraska Extension at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. For more information, visit buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/thriving-children.

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