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COMMUNITY LEADERS FROM ACROSS THE STATE TO LEARN ABOUT ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Nationally Known Early Education Expert Helen Raikes to Deliver Keynote Address

Kearney, Neb. — More than 400 civic, business, and education leaders from 92 Nebraska communities are attending the 2019 Thriving Children, Families and Communities Conference today to learn more about how providing high-quality early childhood education can support a town's children, its families, and its economy.

Early childhood programs play a key role 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, better employees, and more productive citizens.

The conference is being held in response to statewide calls to better understand how communities can provide high-quality early childhood education. It will offer an opportunity for attendees to share success stories and challenges, learn from each other, and develop action plans for implementing high-quality birth – Grade 3 care and education. Nearly 300 civic, business, and education leaders from 74 Nebraska communities attended the 2018 inaugural conference.

“Much has been done and learned about the importance of early education but so much more still needs to be accomplished,” said Helen Raikes, who is delivering the keynote address at the conference. Raikes, Willa Cather Professor of Child, Youth and Family Studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, has been a consistent voice for early childhood education in Nebraska and is a nationally known advocate and researcher in the field. “We need to continue to work to remove barriers, like child abuse, substance abuse and parental stressors, that can often hamper the brain development of young children and set our sights high—focusing on what it takes for every child to thrive in our communities. And we need to pay the early childhood workforce better so early childhood providers can thrive as well,” said Raikes. She is addressing some of these challenges, and offering possible solutions, in her keynote address.

During the all-day conference, panel discussions and workshops will feature community leaders from

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across the state who are sharing how they built high-quality early childhood programs and discussing why high-quality early childhood care and education is an economic development tool that can attract and retain a quality workforce and grow the state's economy.

In opening remarks, Samuel Meisels, founding executive director of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute, reminded attendees that the challenges faced by Nebraska are common to other states as well as countries around the world.

“The critical difference here is what we as Nebraskans choose to do in response to the urgent challenge of providing high-quality early childhood education so that parents are able to work and communities are able to thrive,” said Meisels. “Clearly there is momentum in the state to come together on behalf of children, families, and communities. Nebraska businesses and economic development agencies are important partners to our getting this right and are with us here today.”

Conference workshops include no-cost/low-cost ways employers can help working parents, building school-community partnerships, creating a community fundraising plan, communicating effectively with policymakers about early childhood, and using state economic development funds for early childhood projects.

Leaders from a wide range of diverse communities, including Scottsbluff, McCook, Gothenburg, Wayne, and Omaha, are among the presenters for the 16 community-level sessions. Learning from each other's experiences is a critical component of the conference.

K.C. Belitz, chief operating officer at the Nebraska Community Foundation, will lead a panel discussion of leaders who have had success building high-quality early childhood programs.

“I am excited to help share these success stories at today's conference,” said Belitz, former president of the Columbus Area Chamber of Commerce and a presenter at last year's conference. “The research is very clear about the economic impact of early childhood education. In addition to getting our kids off to a good start in life, high-quality early childhood education pays economic benefits immediately in the community, helping employers attract and keep a highly qualified workforce.”

This year's event is sponsored by the Nebraska Department of Education, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, First Five Nebraska, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, Nebraska Community Foundation, Nebraska Extension, Buffett Early Childhood Fund, and the Buffett Early Childhood Institute.

Partnering organizations are the Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children, Nebraska Association of School Boards, Nebraska Business Development Center, Nebraska Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Nebraska Council of School Administrators, Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative, Nebraska ESU Coordinating Council, Nebraska Head Start Association, Nebraska Hospital Association, Nebraska State Education Association, Panhandle Partnership, Inc., and the Rural Futures Institute.

For more information, visit <https://tinyurl.com/2019ThrivingChildren>.

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