


Buffett
Early Childhood
Institute

at the University of Nebraska

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan

A BIRTH – GRADE 3 APPROACH TO
CLOSING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP



The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan is made possible by the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, the 11 school district superintendents of the Learning Community, and the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska.

Expanding Children's Opportunities During the Earliest Years of Life

In the nation's heartland, an innovative, groundbreaking approach to closing achievement gaps and opening opportunities for young children is well underway.

Its goals are:

- Helping school districts to re-imagine their role in early learning systems
- Assisting schools in building relationships with families long before their child's first day of Kindergarten

- Supporting families as they nurture their children's strengths and advocate for their futures
- Helping teachers, principals, home visitors, child care providers, and community partners work side by side with parents and families to equitably aid in children's growth

Because this is what all children deserve—the opportunity to develop, learn, and succeed in life.

“The achievement gap we are all familiar with is a symptom of systemic barriers for families, which create opportunity gaps for their children from birth onwards. Examples of these systemic inequalities are chronic stress impacting birth weight and lack of access to high-quality learning opportunities based on income. Nebraska wants to be the best place to be a baby . . . for all babies. The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan sets the stage for making this possible.”

Lisa R. Roy
Director of Program Development
Buffett Early Childhood Institute

Need in Nebraska

Like other states across the country, reducing or eliminating opportunity gaps that confront children or families is a high priority for Nebraska.

According to First Five Nebraska, nearly 40 percent of children age 5 and younger across the state are considered at risk for school failure due to poverty alone. This is a staggering statistic. But all the more staggering are statistics about the disproportionate representation of children of color among groups placed at risk.

Differences in children's learning can show up as early as 9 months and can be persistent and pervasive throughout childhood. Educational gaps for children in low-income families and children of color often continue to grow so that by Kindergarten, many children are a year or more behind their more economically advantaged peers, with these gaps further widening across the early grades.

Opportunity and achievement gaps limit children's success in school and life and can diminish communities' health and well-being, workforce productivity, wealth, and quality of life.

Clearly, reducing these gaps benefits everyone. What's more, after decades of research, we know what needs to be done.

The Early Years

Our best opportunity to prevent or reduce achievement and opportunity gaps is to start early, when children's brains are developing rapidly.

The early years are "prime time" for emotional, intellectual, and social growth. Synapses, the connections between brain cells, undergo more change during the first five years of life than at any other time. During the early years, children make their greatest gains in learning, problem-solving, language, and emotional regulation.

The experiences of children's early years form the foundation for the individuals they will become later in life.

"There are no easy solutions for eliminating opportunity gaps based on income or racism. But we're here to do something about it and we'll do it together. Our children deserve nothing less."

Samuel J. Meisels
Founding Executive Director
Buffett Early Childhood Institute





Building the Plan

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan was launched in Omaha and surrounding communities in fall 2014. It was created in response to state legislation directing metro Omaha area superintendents to develop and enact a plan to reduce achievement gaps for young children living in high concentrations of poverty.

It is an initiative of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska that was developed by the Buffett Institute in partnership with the 11 school districts of the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, which also provides the majority of the program's funding.

This collaboration has helped to create one of the most comprehensive birth-through-third-grade initiatives in the nation.

It is a systematic approach that relies upon the best of what child development research has taught us. It is built around intensive, continuous, and research-based services for children living in poverty.

“It’s a game-changer. This is good for the city of Omaha. We can become a beacon for early childhood, and the power of that can flow through our entire state.”

Jim Sutfin
Superintendent
Millard Public Schools

Six Big Ideas

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan reflects what research tells us about young children's development and learning. Our work revolves around six research-based ideas:

1

BIRTH THROUGH GRADE 3

Although intervention at any point during the first eight years of life is helpful for children placed at risk, research teaches us that we must go beyond a single year of PreK, or even birth – 3 or birth – 5 programs, for the benefits of intervention to endure. The foundations for building children's brain architecture, language and skill acquisition, and relationships with others are established early on but take time to reach their full potential. If we can maintain continuity through the end of third grade, children are more likely to achieve lasting success in school and beyond.

2

SCHOOL AS HUB

At the core of our plan is the idea that schools can serve as the "hub" for complex learning systems, connecting children and families to resources within and beyond school walls. Schools have the potential to span conventional silos, overcome traditional barriers, and become connectors across communities and different age groupings. They can help families navigate and access early education services and community resources and become a source of long-term continuity for children and families.

3

DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGE

We are committed to helping children negotiate the ongoing biological, neurological, psychological, and social pathways of development, through which they evolve from newborn infants to competent and confident third-graders. Sustained learning doesn't occur in isolated fragments. Only when skills and emerging capabilities are followed up, supported, and extended is it likely that new skills and new capacities will be acquired and become reliably present over time.

4

PARENT AND FAMILY SUPPORT

Parents and families are key to children's success and our most powerful allies in supporting and enhancing their children's strengths and abilities. Families know too well the personal stress and toxicity that can accompany poverty and social inequality. Whether in home visiting, preschool, or K – Grade 3, active family engagement and support are central to our work and to children's growth.

5

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND SUPPORT

Enhancing the skills of teachers and caregivers and those supervising and directing them is crucial. Educators equipped with research-based knowledge about children's development and early learning can maximize the effectiveness of educational experiences for children with diverse learning needs. When the ability of caregivers, teachers, and administrators to translate child development research into practice is enhanced, children thrive.

6

PERSISTENCE

Evidence assures us that the earlier we begin working with children and families placed at risk, and the more persistent, consistent, and well-designed our efforts are, the more likely it is that children will be launched on a path toward life success. It's a long-term commitment and one that can lead to a lifetime of accomplishment and fulfillment. Persistence of effort yields persistence of effect.

“We used to wish that we could impact children earlier, starting at birth and even prenatally. Now we are, through the birth-through-third-grade approach.”

Kristi Reinsch
Principal
Pinewood Elementary School
Omaha Public Schools

How It Works

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL

A connected series of professional development institutes is open to all school leaders, teachers, early childhood professionals, and caregivers who work with young children from birth through Grade 3 in the Omaha metro area. “PD for All” introduces leading-edge research and innovative practices to those who work with young children and families and gives early childhood professionals the chance to come together and learn from one another.

CUSTOMIZED ASSISTANCE

School districts receive intensive assistance and consultation tailored to specific district needs. This assistance provides districts with access to state and national consultation as they engage in efforts to advance system-wide early childhood education and services. Customized assistance has addressed such topics as social-emotional development, family engagement, effective early childhood curriculum and instruction, and district-level strategic planning.

FULL IMPLEMENTATION

Ten elementary schools serve as hubs that connect young children and their families with high-quality, comprehensive, and continuous early childhood education and services. The birth-through-third grade continuum includes three integrated components: regular home visiting for children birth to age 3, high-quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, and aligned PreK through third grade curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

School as Hub

The school’s role as the connector for early childhood services for children throughout the first eight years of life is at the heart of Full Implementation of the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan.

HOME VISITING

Once a baby is born—or even before—the school begins building a relationship with the family. A home visitor employed by the school visits the families three times per month in the home. During these sessions, district-based home visitors focus on sharing positive interactions with parents that are critical to the baby’s learning and healthy development. The home visitor demonstrates strategies to communicate with and engage babies and toddlers in ways that will impact social-emotional development, capacity to learn, and overall well-being. Families also learn how to access educational, health care, and community resources that can support their child’s progress from day to day and year to year.

HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL

A family facilitator, also employed by the school, continues the family support and educational activities initiated during the birth – age 3 home visiting program, building strong family-school partnerships. Families are supported in transitioning their children into a school-based PreKindergarten or community-based preschool. Monthly parent-child groups, hosted by the school, create community among families and strengthen their engagement in their children’s education.

ALIGNED PREK – GRADE 3

During the early elementary grades, schools focus on an aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment for 5- through 8-year-olds. This builds upon children’s preschool experiences and promotes academic, intellectual, and social-emotional success through third grade. As with home visiting and PreK, strong home-school partnerships and family support are combined with a high-quality, rigorous educational approach.

Throughout the first eight years, home visitors, family facilitators, teachers, principals, and others work as a team, helping to ensure quality, continuity, and equity in the learning experiences that build upon each stage of the School as Hub approach.





Quality, Continuity, and Equity

At the heart of the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan and School as Hub approach is a deep commitment to transforming the experiences and outcomes for young children and their families. This work takes place in partnership with early care and education programs and schools that are responsible for children's education through Grade 3. Community-based services and supports assist in these efforts.

Quality, continuity, and equity serve as cornerstones for this work.

QUALITY

Quality refers to a commitment that all practices used with children, families, and educators will be focused on producing developmentally and educationally meaningful outcomes. These practices are research-based and benefit from continuous improvement. The goal is to enhance the impact of programs and instruction for young children through third grade.

CONTINUITY

Continuity means that children will experience a nearly seamless set of learning and educational experiences from birth through Grade 3. What children learn at one age or grade level builds upon learning that came before. Continuity is grounded in a shared understanding of child development and the critical recognition of progression and transition in early learning. The School as Hub approach connects families to school and community-based services in order to build continuity in children's learning pathways and provide access to ongoing family supports.


EQUITY

Equity involves prioritizing policies and practices that effectively promote the learning of all children and seek to address disparities in learning opportunities, family supports, and child outcomes. Equitable teaching and learning reduces or eliminates the predictability of who succeeds and who fails. It is dependent on changing the root causes of institutionalized racism, classism, sexism, prejudice, and bias through fundamental systemic changes in how children are taught, treated, and cared for.

Quality, Continuity, and Equity in Action

Everyday practices in early care and education programs and elementary schools look different when viewed through the lens of quality, continuity, and equity. Schools participating in the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan report some of the ways that practices are changing "how schools do school." These early efforts are important and are helping to fuel transformative shifts in early childhood and elementary school policies and practices.

- Improved practices that promote children's social-emotional well-being and stimulate challenging learning and thinking
- Shifts in care and teaching that are culturally and linguistically affirming
- Aligned and developmentally informed educational practices
- More consistency in how programs and schools engage with families from birth through Grade 3
- Systematic support for children and families as they transition from one program or grade to the next
- Classroom materials that reflect the culture of students and families within the school, the community, and broadly within the nation
- Teachers and staff who use language that is inclusive and strength-based



By the Numbers

Participation in the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan impacts thousands of children, families, and teachers.

100+

Children, birth to age 3, receive three home visits each month.

500+

PreK – third grade educators are actively involved at 10 full implementation schools.

3,500+

Children and families from PreK – third grade are enrolled at 10 full implementation schools.

15k+

Children in PreK – third grade are in districts with administrators and/or teachers participating in sustained, customized professional development and technical assistance around early childhood programs and services.

“Among other successes, the Superintendents’ Plan has helped our school build even stronger relationships with our families, and it’s a two-way street. We see more engagement with families at school, and that has a powerful outcome: students who have a parent and school partnership working to support them.”

Tyler Hottovy
Principal
Westbrook Elementary
Westside Community Schools

Learning Through Evaluation

Evaluation is central to the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan for understanding program effectiveness and informing continuous improvement. By learning about the processes of implementing the School as Hub approach and how schools can enhance their impact with children, families, and staff, we can begin to understand practices and policies that are effective and how they can be leveraged in a variety of communities across Nebraska and beyond.

Evaluation provides information about the implementation of core components of the plan and areas needing improvement. It also provides information to stakeholders about the effectiveness of the Superintendents’ Plan from the perspectives of school staff and families.

Examining how schools are changing their ways of “doing school,” University of Nebraska partners at the Munroe-Meyer Institute at the University of Nebraska Medical Center and the Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln administer assessments focused

on program quality, caregiver-child support and engagement, family-school partnerships, and child development and learning. Families participating in home visiting can volunteer to enroll their children in the evaluation at birth. Other children can begin participating as they begin school.

Through partnerships with the university, school districts, and community stakeholders, we are learning how School as Hub can be adapted to other communities and contexts. Early childhood and education leaders, policymakers, philanthropists, and advocacy organizations have all shown a keen interest in learning about the implementation and outcomes of the evaluation as they consider scaling-up, disseminating, and/or adapting the Superintendents’ Plan to other settings in the future.



Schools and School Districts

FULL IMPLEMENTATION SCHOOLS

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

**SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN THE LEARNING
COMMUNITY OF DOUGLAS AND SARPY
COUNTIES**

- Bellevue Public Schools
- Bennington Public Schools
- Douglas County West Community Schools
- Elkhorn Public Schools
- Gretna Public Schools
- Millard Public Schools
- Omaha Public Schools
- Papillion La Vista Community Schools
- Ralston Public Schools
- Springfield Platteview Community Schools
- Westside Community Schools



Join Us

Improving opportunities to learn and closing achievement gaps are on the agenda for public officials and policymakers across the nation. They are also in the hearts and minds of parents, teachers, and the many professionals who work tirelessly to ensure that our children have what they need to succeed in school and life.

For our communities, states, and nation to grow and thrive, we cannot allow opportunity gaps to limit any child's future. We need all of our children to reach their potential. The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan shows how this can become a reality. The plan's comprehensive, birth-through-third-grade

approach creates opportunities for schools, community agencies, teachers, caregivers, families, and others to work together to strengthen the learning and development of all children.

We believe that what we learn through implementing this plan in 11 school districts has the potential to change the national conversation about early care and education. The lessons of the Superintendents' Plan are leading to new collaborations, shifts in thinking and practice in schools and early learning and care programs, and innovative policies that empower children and families.

Please join us on this journey and become part of our effort to make Nebraska the best place in the nation to be a baby, creating a world where every child succeeds.

Learn more at
buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu

*“Omaha is the epicenter for reform
in early childhood education.”*

Robert Putnam
Professor of Public Policy
John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University



About the Buffett Early Childhood Institute

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska is dedicated to promoting 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.

For more information, visit buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu

About the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties

The Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties and its partners make a difference in the lives of children challenged by poverty. The Nebraska Legislature created this educational subdivision, calling for visionary resources to address poor educational outcomes in the Omaha metro area. Research-based programs demonstrate innovative ways to improve student achievement. Priorities include the Learning Community Center of North Omaha (Early Childhood and Family Engagement), the Learning Community Center of South Omaha (Family Learning), and the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan.

For more information, visit learningcommunityds.org

Acknowledgments

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan is made possible by the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties and the 11 school district superintendents in the Learning Community. The plan continues to evolve and thrive because of the expertise and contributions of school district leaders, principals, teachers, home visitors, family engagement specialists, other early childhood professionals in the Omaha metro area, and University of Nebraska faculty and staff partners. The Buffett Institute facilitates implementation of the plan, which is largely funded by the Learning Community.





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