

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan

1. What is the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan?

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan is a groundbreaking initiative in the metro Omaha area representing an innovative, comprehensive approach to reducing opportunity gaps for children from birth through Grade 3 who live in the 11 school districts of the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties. The plan was mandated in 2013 by LB 585 of the Nebraska Legislature. This legislation directed the Learning Community Council to enact a program created by the metro Omaha superintendents "to establish early childhood programs for children in poverty."

The Superintendents' Plan is the first initiative of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute's Closing the Opportunity Gap program, one of two signature programs at the Institute. The goal is to reduce or eliminate opportunity and achievement gaps, with a focus on children growing up in poverty or other conditions of high stress and familial challenge.

2. How was the plan developed?

The superintendents invited the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska to prepare a plan for their review and, after approval by the Learning Community Coordinating Council, implement it in Douglas and Sarpy Counties. The Buffett Institute collaborated with the superintendents and a workgroup of district representatives to develop the draft plan. It was adopted unanimously by the 11 superintendents in June 2014 and approved by the Learning Community Coordinating Council in August 2014. The Buffett Institute continues to provide leadership and support for the implementation of the plan.

3. Who does the plan serve?

The plan is intended to serve young children, birth through Grade 3, and their families who are most impacted by systemic inequities in their communities. This includes children living in poverty, children of color, and those growing up under conditions of high stress and significant familial challenge.

While emphasizing programs to support the development and education of young children put at risk, the initiative will elevate the capacity of the metro Omaha school districts to serve all young children well. The type of educational practices that are essential for the healthy development and learning of vulnerable children can promote new levels of excellence in the learning experiences of all young children.

4. Why is this the time to implement this plan?

Research and economic analyses confirm that the first eight years of a child's life are critical for building a strong foundation for success in school and life. Evidence from developmental science documents that

high-quality, coordinated early learning services from birth through Grade 3 help level the playing field for children who live in low-income communities. Economically, research shows a return of up to \$13 for every dollar invested in quality early childhood education through reducing the need for remedial and special education, coupled with increased productivity in adulthood.

Although the evidence about the impact of early childhood services from birth through Grade 3 is clear, access to a full continuum of high-quality, continuous programming is not yet in place in most communities. Without this continuum, differences in children's learning by family income show up as early as nine months. Gaps continue to widen so that by Kindergarten many children of color and children living in low-income communities are a year or more behind their more economically advantaged peers of the same age, with these gaps further widening across the early grades.

These devastating achievement gaps not only limit children's opportunities to realize their full potential, but also limit the viability and productivity of our future workforce. We know how to reduce or eliminate these gaps through high-quality early childhood programming, and the time to do so is now.

5. Why does the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan focus on birth through Grade 3?

Scientific research shows that birth through age 8 is a unique period of life. The development and learning that takes place during this time impacts the child's entire life course. Key brain circuits are built, language is learned, and ways of interacting with others are established. If this essential foundation is in place by Grade 3, children have the "tool kit" they need to engage in increasingly complex learning, to problem-solve, and to sustain productive and caring relationships. If not, the pathways through school and life are likely to be uphill challenges, often too steep to surmount.

6. What does the plan make possible?

The plan provides three interconnected opportunities for school districts, elementary schools, and community-based professionals to strengthen birth through Grade 3 efforts:

- **Professional Development for All.** A connected series of institutes open to all school leaders, teachers, early childhood professionals, and caregivers who work with 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 opportunity to come together and learn from one another.
- **Customized Technical Assistance.** School districts receive intensive assistance and consultation tailored to specific needs. This professional development addresses such topics as social-emotional development, family engagement, and assessment and accountability. Technical assistance provides district with access to state and national consultation as they engage in strategic planning and improvement efforts that will impact systemwide early childhood education and services.
- **Full Implementation of School as Hub for Birth – Grade 3 approach.** Ten elementary schools, most with more than half of their students eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch, serve as hubs that connect young children and their families with high-quality, comprehensive, and continuous early childhood education and services. The birth through Grade 3 continuum includes three integrated components: weekly home visiting for children birth to age 3; high-quality preschool experiences for 3- and 4-year-olds; strong intentional connections to the elementary school; and aligned Kindergarten through Grade 3 curriculum, instruction, and assessment for 5- through 8-year-olds.

7. What are the components of the full School as Hub birth – Grade 3 implementation option?

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan highlights the central role that schools can undertake as hubs that connect young children, birth through Grade 3, and their families with high-quality, comprehensive, and continuous early childhood services and education. Three components are implemented within each school pursuing full implementation. These components include:

- **Home visiting for birth – age 3:** Children and their families are served through a “two-generation” home visiting model. Regular home visiting activities support the development of strong parent/child relationships, child development skills, parenting education, and connections between parents and community resources. The voluntary home visiting program has a strong link to the goals of elementary school programs so that home-school partnerships can be shaped from the beginning of a child’s life.
- **High-quality preschool experiences for 3- and 4-year-olds:** When children reach age 3, their families are supported in transitioning their children into a school-based or community-based preschool. Ongoing professional development for staff helps ensure quality preschool learning experiences that build on the home visiting program. A family facilitator continues the family support and education activities initiated during the 0 – 3 home visiting.
- **Aligned Kindergarten through Grade 3 for 5- through 8-year-olds:** As children complete preschool, they transition into a coordinated and rigorous Kindergarten through Grade 3 educational continuum. In this way their early elementary education builds upon their preschool experiences to promote academic, intellectual, and social-emotional competence. Strong home-school partnerships and family support continue to be combined with a high-quality, rigorous educational approach. A hallmark of the approach to early elementary education is a focus on child development.

8. Which districts are participating in each of the plan’s components?

Working with the Buffett Institute, the school districts chose how they wanted to participate in the plan. Six districts are engaging in full implementation, with a total of 10 elementary schools. At nine of the schools, at least 50 percent of children are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Omaha Public Schools has four elementary sites, Millard Public Schools has two sites, and Bellevue, Douglas County West, Ralston, and Westside school districts each have one site.

Professional development is offered to all districts through a Professional Development for All series. Several districts have or are currently receiving customized technical assistance.

9. How many staff were added?

The plan provides for a complement of up to 31 professionals to work with schools, districts, communities, and families to advance children’s learning experiences and strengthen families’ connections to the schools. Approximately 20 of these positions work on-site at the 10 schools that are implementing the birth through Grade 3 approach. These school-based staff include home visitors to work with families of children birth to age 3, family facilitators to extend strong family-school connections through Grade 3, and five educational coaches to provide teachers with professional development and support. The Institute has six staff in leadership roles to support the overall work.

10. How many children will be directly impacted by the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan?

We estimate approximately 3,500 children (birth through Grade 3) and 500 teachers at 10 schools are participating in the initiative at the full implementation sites. Of those children, about 150, birth through age 3, receive voluntary home visiting. Additionally, seven school districts (Bellevue, Bennington, Elkhorn, Gretna, Papillion La Vista, Ralston, and Westside) have or are currently participating in customized assistance around early childhood programs and services. Those districts serve more than 15,000 students across PreK – Grade 3.

11. What is the timeline for implementation?

Intensive site-specific planning, staff orientation, and initial professional development took place during spring and summer 2015. Full implementation of all district activities got underway for the 2015-16 school year and is continuing in 2020-21.

12. What is the budget for the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan? How is it funded?

The Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan is \$2.5 million per year for three years, for a total of \$7.5 million. This funding comes from levy power granted to the Learning Community by the Nebraska Legislature in 2013.

13. How will the School as Hub birth through Grade 3 approach be sustained and taken to scale?

All implementation activities undertaken through the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan are carefully documented and evaluated. This documentation will yield important proof points for clarifying the strategies, policies, and resources that will provide the greatest efficiency and the strongest leverage in taking the School as Hub birth through Grade 3 approach to scale. This information is shared with the Learning Community, Nebraska Legislature, and the private philanthropic community. We will work with these groups and others to identify sources of continued funding.

14. Will the positive effects for children fade out after Grade 3?

High-quality preschool education yields important benefits for children, increasing the cognitive and social skills needed for later achievement. Yet preschool alone does not inoculate children against ongoing opportunity and achievement gaps. The evidence tells us that if benefits are to endure into adulthood, early childhood programming should span children’s first eight years of life and provide smooth transitions across services from one age to the next. The comprehensive approach described in the Superintendents’ Plan applies best evidence practices to create safeguards against fade-out of effects after Grade 3.

15. Why will the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan be effective?

The plan is built upon research-based practices that have been shown to be effective with children living in low-income communities. The Buffett Institute has consulted with nationally renowned experts in all dimensions of the first eight years of life to construct a high-quality design and implementation plan. The long-term professional learning support and technical assistance that is planned will ensure the ongoing development of local capacity and leadership. All adults in the child’s world—parents, teachers, and caregivers—will work together to support the child. We believe this is a recipe for success.