

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### **Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan**

#### **1. What is the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan?**

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan is an innovative, comprehensive approach to reducing achievement gaps among young children at risk 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 Achievement Gap Challenge, one of two signature programs at the Institute. The goal is to reduce or eliminate learning 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.

#### **3. Who does the plan serve?**

The plan is intended to serve young children, birth through third grade, who are most at risk in their communities. This includes children living in poverty and those growing up under conditions of high stress and significant familial challenge.

While emphasizing programs to support the development and early education of children at risk, the initiative will elevate the capacity of the metro Omaha school districts to serve all young children well. The type of early education 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 third grade help level the developmental and educational playing field for children from low-income families. Economically,

research documents a return of at least \$7 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 third grade 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 for low-income children then continue to widen 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.

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 third grade?**

Scientific research documents 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 third grade, 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 interrelated opportunities for early childhood programming and capacity-building by school districts and their community partners. The first option is a comprehensive birth through third grade approach, with schools serving as the hub for this programming.

The second option provides additional opportunities for intensive professional development related to high-quality, effective practices in order to improve outcomes for children birth through third grade, with an emphasis on children at risk. This option takes advantage of leading-edge research that informs early childhood services and education. Professional development will address such broad topics as what matters most for young children’s learning and development, family engagement, and assessment and accountability in early education. Participants will receive extended support in applying this content to their current practice and local settings.

A third option enables districts to receive customized technical assistance to advance birth through third grade programming. The technical assistance provides districts with access to state and national consultation as they engage in strategic planning and improvement efforts that will impact system-wide early childhood education and services.

### **7. What are the components of the full birth – third grade implementation option?**

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

- **Home visiting for birth – age 3:** Children and their families will be served through a “two-generation” home visiting model. Regular home visiting activities will support the development of strong parent/child relationships, child development skills, parenting education, and connections between parents and community resources. The home visiting program will have 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 for 3 – 4-year-olds:** When children reach age 3, their families will be supported in transitioning their children into a school-based prekindergarten or community-based preschool. Ongoing professional development will help ensure quality preschool learning experiences that build on the home visiting program. A family facilitator will continue the family support and education activities initiated during the 0 – 3 home visiting.
- **Aligned Kindergarten through third grade for 5 – 8-year-olds:** As children complete preschool, they transition into a coordinated and rigorous Kindergarten through third grade educational continuum. In this way their early elementary education will build upon their preschool experiences to promote academic, intellectual, and social-emotional competence. Strong home-school partnerships and family support will continue to be combined with a high-quality, rigorous educational approach. A hallmark of the approach to early elementary education will be 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 10 sites serving a total of 12 elementary schools. At all 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, and Westside school districts have one site. Ralston serves three elementary schools at one “cluster” site.

Professional development is offered to all districts through a *Professional Development for All* series. Seven districts (Bellevue, Bennington, Elkhorn, Gretna, Papillion La Vista, Ralston, and Westside) are receiving customized technical assistance.

**9. How many staff will be added?**

The plan provides for a complement of 29 professionals to work with schools, districts, communities, and families to advance children’s learning experiences and strengthen families’ connections to the schools. Twenty-five of these positions will work on-site at the 12 schools that are implementing the birth through third grade approach. These school-based staff will include home visitors to work with families of children birth to age 3, family facilitators to extend strong family-school connections through third grade, and educational coaches to provide teachers with professional development and support.

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

We estimate approximately 4,250 children (birth through third grade) and 500 teachers at 12 schools are participating in the initiative at the full implementation sites. Of those children, about 150, birth through age 3, receive home visiting. Additionally, seven school districts (Bellevue, Bennington, Elkhorn, Gretna, Papillion La Vista, Ralston, and Westside) are participating in customized technical assistance around early childhood programs and services. Those districts serve more than 15,000 students across PreK – third grade.

**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 2016-17.

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

The budget for 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 birth through third grade approach be sustained and taken to scale after three years?**

All implementation activities undertaken through the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan will be 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 birth through third grade approach to scale. This information will be 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 third grade?**

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 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 third grade.

**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 placed at risk. 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.