



Buffett  
Early Childhood  
Institute

*at the University of Nebraska*

## The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan

A BIRTH - GRADE 3 APPROACH TO  
CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT 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.



## Building Opportunities During the Earliest Years of Life

In the nation's heartland, an innovative, groundbreaking approach to eliminating the achievement gap for young children is leading to opportunities.

Opportunities for school districts to re-imagine their role in early learning systems.

Opportunities for schools to build relationships with families long before a child's first day of Kindergarten.

Opportunities for families to nurture their children's strengths and abilities and advocate for their futures.

Opportunities for teachers, home visitors, child care providers, and community partners to work side by side in supporting children's growth.

Because there's one opportunity that all children deserve—the opportunity to develop, learn, and succeed in life.

*“It's not children and families who create the achievement gap. It's lack of access to learning opportunities. The question must be: what actions can we take together to improve that access ... to increase those opportunities, beginning in the earliest years of life?”*

**Christine Maxwell**  
Director of Program Development  
Buffett Early Childhood Institute

## Need in Nebraska

Like other states across the country, reducing or eliminating income- and race-based achievement gaps is a high priority for Nebraska.

More than 42 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.

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

Income- and race-based achievement gaps limit children's opportunities for school and life success and can diminish communities' health and well-being, workforce productivity, wealth, and quality of life.

Clearly, reducing achievement gaps benefits everyone. Better yet, 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.



*“There are no easy solutions for eliminating income- and race-based achievement gaps. 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 enact a plan to reduce achievement gaps for young children living in high concentrations of poverty.

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan is an initiative of the Achievement Gap Challenge, one of two signature programs of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. It 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 funding.

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

It's 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. But 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**

## 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**

Eight 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 addresses such topics as social-emotional development, family engagement, effective early childhood curriculum and instruction, and district-level strategic planning.

### **FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF BIRTH – GRADE 3 APPROACH**

Twelve elementary schools, all 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-third-grade continuum includes three integrated components: weekly home visiting for children birth to age 3, high-quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, and aligned Kindergarten through third-grade curriculum, instruction, and assessment for 5- through 8-year-olds.



## School as Hub

The school's role as the center of early childhood services for children throughout the first eight years of life is the heart of the 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 a month in the home. During these sessions, 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, 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 alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment for 5- through 8-year-olds. This builds upon children's preschool experiences to promote 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 eight years, home visitors, family facilitators, teachers, principals, and others work as a team, helping to ensure quality learning experiences that build upon each stage of the full implementation approach.



A close-up, slightly out-of-focus photograph of a young child's face, looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The child has dark hair and eyes. The background is a soft, blurred blue and green.

## By the Numbers

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

# 150

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

# 350

PreK – third grade educators are actively involved at 12 full implementation schools.

# 4k+

Children and families from PreK – third grade are enrolled at 12 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.

*“We are building something special with this plan that will have long-lasting effects on our communities. These things don’t happen overnight. This is a research-based initiative that will prove its value over time.”*

**Kevin Riley**  
Superintendent  
Gretna Public Schools

## Learning Through Evaluation

Evaluation is central to the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan. What we learn—both about the process of implementing this approach and the impact it is having on children, families, and schools—will help us know what parts of the plan are most effective and can be leveraged most successfully in a variety of settings across Nebraska and beyond.

Because this is one of the most comprehensive and, in fact, one of the few programs in the nation that seeks to address children’s development and learning across the entire birth – Grade 3 span through university, school district, and community partnerships, what we learn will be of great importance. Early childhood and education leaders, policymakers, philanthropists, and advocacy organizations have all signaled keen interest in learning about our evaluation results.

The evaluation plan relies on a two-phase, multi-method design that focuses on full implementation of the birth – Grade 3 approach. It has two purposes. It provides information about the implementation of core components of the plan and areas in need of improvement, and it gives

teachers, principals, directors, superintendents, Buffett Institute staff, and policymakers data about the impact of the plan on children, families, teachers/classrooms, and schools. Children will be followed through Grade 3 once they are enrolled in the evaluation study.

Over the next five years, a subsample of approximately 350 children and their families will be included in the evaluation. About 150 children, birth – age 3, and 200 randomly selected children in PreK and Kindergarten classrooms (3 – 4 children per classroom) will be assessed. Approximately 200 teachers in PreK – Grade 3 classrooms in participating schools will also be included.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools and the Interdisciplinary Center for Program Evaluation of the Munroe-Meyer Institute at the University of Nebraska Medical Center are conducting the evaluation in partnership with the Buffett Institute.



## 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

Karen Western Elementary School\*  
Ralston Public Schools

Meadows Elementary School\*  
Ralston Public Schools

Mockingbird Elementary School\*  
Ralston Public Schools

Westbrook Elementary School  
Westside Community Schools

\*Three elementary schools  
participating at one school site.

### CUSTOMIZED ASSISTANCE FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Bellevue Public Schools  
Bennington Public Schools  
Elkhorn Public Schools  
Gretna 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 and 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 income- and race-based achievement gaps to limit any child's opportunities. We need all of our children to reach their potential. The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan shows how this can become possible.

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—but especially children who can benefit most.

We believe what is learned through implementing this plan in 11 school districts, which serve approximately 15,000 children from birth through third grade, has the potential to change the national conversation about early childhood. The lessons of the Superintendents' Plan will lead to new collaborations, to shifts in thinking and practice in schools and early learning and care programs, and to 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 to be a baby, and to create a world where every child succeeds.

Learn more at  
[buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu](http://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](http://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu).

## About the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties

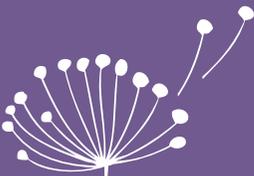
The Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties and its partners make a difference in the lives of children challenged by poverty. The Nebraska Legislature created the educational subdivision, calling for visionary resources to address poor educational outcomes in the Omaha metro area. Research-based 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](http://learningcommunityds.org).

### Acknowledgements

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan is made possible by the support of the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties and the 11 school district superintendents. 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 partners. The Buffett Institute facilitates implementation of the plan, which is largely funded by the Learning Community.





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