

NEBRASKA EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE COMMISSION MEMBER BIOGRAPHIES

Co-chairs

Marjorie Kostelnik

Dr. Marjorie J. Kostelnik is senior associate to the president of the University of Nebraska and former dean of the College of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. She came to UNL in 2000 as dean of the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences. In 2004, Human Resources and Family Sciences merged with Teachers College to become one of the first colleges of Education and Human Sciences. Kostelnik was on faculty at Michigan State University for 22 years, serving first as program supervisor of the Child Development Laboratories and then as chair of the department of Family and Child Ecology. She has taught a variety of classes at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and her research focuses on early childhood education and community coalition building. She previously served as vice president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, treasurer of the Board on Human Sciences, and chair for the Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance, a consortium of universities engaged in distance education. She has recently been elected to the newly formed Board on Human Sciences Board of Directors. Kostelnik received a bachelor of science in child development from the University of Pittsburgh and began her career working with Head Start, before receiving her master's and doctoral degrees in human development and family studies from Pennsylvania State University.

Samuel J. Meisels

Dr. Samuel J. Meisels, the founding executive director of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute, is one of the nation's leading authorities on the assessment of young children and early childhood development. He came to the Buffett Institute in 2013 to launch the Institute and form its programs. In 2017, he received the Richard D. Holland Presidential Chair in Early Childhood Development. The presidential chair represents the highest academic award and recognition the university can bestow on a faculty member. He is also professor of Child, Youth, and Family Studies at UNL, with courtesy appointments as professor of public health (College of Public Health, UNMC), education (College of Education, UNK), and public administration (College of Public Affairs, UNO). A former preschool, Kindergarten and first grade teacher, Meisels formerly served as president of Erikson Institute in Chicago, one of the country's premier graduate schools in child development. Prior to leading Erikson Institute, Meisels had a distinguished 21-year tenure at the University of Michigan, where he remains professor emeritus and research scientist emeritus. Meisels was also a faculty member at Tufts University for eight years and director of the Eliot-Pearson Children's School at Tufts. He graduated *magna cum laude* from the University of Rochester and received master's and doctoral degrees from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Members

Amy Bornemeier

Amy Bornemeier is the associate vice president for early childhood programs at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NC) and has been with the organization since August 2013. In her role at NC, Bornemeier has been responsible for administering the Sixpence Early Learning Fund grants to 34 communities to offer, in partnership with local entities, programs for infants and toddlers who are at risk. These Sixpence public-private partnership programs operate through three models: center-based early care and education, home-based family engagement, and child care partnerships. In addition to providing grant administration and technical assistance to these grantees, Bornemeier also supports the Sixpence Board of Trustees. Previously she worked at the Nebraska Department of Education, Office of Early Childhood, on a school readiness initiative and has administered early care and education programs and child welfare services in Lincoln. She holds a bachelor's degree in human resources and family sciences with an emphasis in child development from UNL and is working toward her master's in management and leadership from Doane University.

Lynne Brehm

Lynne Brehm is the associate vice president for early childhood mental health at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation and has been with the organization since April 2013. In her role at NC, Brehm has been responsible for developing the early childhood mental health initiative, Rooted in Relationships, which includes working with state and community partners to ensure systems' support for the social and emotional well-being of Nebraska's youngest citizens. Previously she coordinated the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) Initiative, Together for Kids and Families, at the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services since the grant project began in 2003. Additionally, she has worked in the area of child welfare, specifically coordinating a program designed to reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect through provision of supportive services such as home visitation and respite. Brehm holds a master's degree in human development and the family with an emphasis in marriage and family therapy from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and has worked to support families in a variety of capacities for more than 30 years.

Amy Bunnell

Amy Bunnell is the early childhood special education director for the Nebraska Department of Education. In this role she also serves as the IDEA Part C (early intervention) coordinator and has been the state co-coordinator for early intervention since 2007. She is responsible for administering grants to agencies in support of improving outcomes for infants/toddlers with disabilities and their families. Additionally, Bunnell provides consultation, training, and technical assistance to birth-age 5 early intervention/special education providers/services coordinators, administrators, public/private agencies, and family members regarding early intervention and special education regulations, policies, and procedures. She is involved with and co-chairs many state and national projects, committees, and task forces in areas that promote children's development, healthy families, community involvement, and best outcomes for infants and toddlers with disabilities. She has four years' experience as a corrections case manager in both Kansas and Nebraska and has worked for over 11 years in Nebraska Child Protective Services, five of those years as a supervisor. She earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Nebraska at Kearney and is married with four children.

Melissa Comine

Melissa Comine is the chief academic officer in the Curriculum and Instruction Support Department at Omaha Public Schools. She also served as a teacher, instructional facilitator, assistant principal, principal, and executive director at OPS. Comine is passionate about implementing best practices in a large urban district to ensure that all students succeed. She earned her bachelor's degree in education and her master's degree in administration and supervision, both from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and is working on her doctorate of education at Doane University.

Fabiola Dimas

Fabiola Dimas is program coordinator of the Sixpence program in Crete. She was born in Mexico and moved to the United States in 2000 and has lived in Crete for the past nine years. She worked with the Crete Migrant Program as a home visitor from 2002 to 2013. She began working with the Sixpence program in 2013 and became the program coordinator in 2015. She said her passion for working with young children motivates her to make a positive impact on the lives of the families she works with. She is married and has two girls, who are 13 and 12 years old, and a 5-year-old son.

Beth Doll

Dr. Beth Doll is associate dean for academic affairs and interim dean and professor of school psychology in the College of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Her expertise is in models of school mental health that foster resilience and enhance the well-being of children from early childhood through high school. She is especially interested in assessing and intervening to enhance the caretaking systems that support children and adolescents, and has focused much of her attention on the emotional and social aspects of classroom systems, and their contributions to children's psychological health and well-being. This interest evolved out of a program of research that she conducted on children without friends in the 1980s and work on school-based programs to increase students' self-determination in the 1990s. These experiences led her to focus on the classroom environments that support friendships, self-determination and four other indices of academic and social competence. Doll received a Ph.D. in school psychology from the University of Kentucky, a master's degree in clinical psychology from Eastern Michigan University, and a bachelor's degree in psychology from Michigan State University.

Nancy Edick

Dr. Nancy Edick is the dean of the College of Education at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. She has also served as executive director of the Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium, was the founding director of the nationally recognized CADRE Project, and an associate professor of teacher education. Prior to joining the UNO faculty, Edick enjoyed a 12-year career as a classroom teacher with the Omaha Public Schools. Edick's research and publication agenda has been primarily devoted to assessing teacher quality with special emphasis in three areas: mentoring, teacher dispositions, and culturally responsive teaching. She received her Ed.D. in educational administration and supervision from the University of Nebraska Omaha-Lincoln joint program. She earned a master's degree in supervision and administration and a bachelor's degree in elementary education, both from UNO.

Sheryl Feinstein

Dr. Sheryl Feinstein started her career as a preschool director and then Kindergarten teacher, "so early childhood has a place in my heart and in my career," she said. In 2014, she was named dean of the College of Education at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, where she advocates for increasing the quality and quantity of early childhood educators. Prior to that, she was a professor and chair of the Education Department at Augustana College (now Augustana University) in Sioux Falls, S.D., where she

had been since 1999. Feinstein’s professional experience also includes work in public school systems in Aberdeen, S.D., and Luverne, Minn., as well as at the University of South Dakota. Feinstein has had Fulbright Scholar awards to Tanzania and Moldova, and is widely published, with numerous books and journal articles to her credit. Her work—which includes the book “The Brain and Strength Based School Leadership”—integrates elements of leadership and cognitive processes. She has a bachelor’s degree in elementary education from the University of Northern Iowa, a master’s degree in elementary education from Northern State University and doctor of education in curriculum and instruction from the University of South Dakota.

Maddie Fennell

Maddie Fennell is the executive director of the Nebraska State Education Association. She is a National Board Certified teacher, the 2007 Nebraska Teacher of the Year, and a 27-year educator. Fennell spent three years on special assignment to the U.S. Department of Education as a Teacher Leader in Residence in the Office of the Secretary, and as a Teaching Ambassador Fellow. She is currently serving as the Board Chairperson of the National Network of State Teachers of the Year, as a representative on the Education Reimagined Project, and on the Board of the Jefferson Education Exchange. Fennell earned her undergraduate degree from Creighton University, a Master of Science in Elementary Education and a Certificate in Urban Education from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and an endorsement in assessment from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

Cristina Fernandez

Dr. Cristina Fernandez is the medical director of the HEROES Program at Children’s Hospital and Medical Center, a professor of pediatrics at Creighton University’s School of Medicine, and associate director of a joint pediatric residency program by Creighton, the University of Nebraska Medical Center and Children’s Hospital. She also works at Children’s Physicians clinic. A native of Colombia, she earned her M.D. from Libre University in Cali, and came to Omaha for her residency in the Creighton-Nebraska Universities Joint Training Program. Fernandez has helped to lead the fight against childhood obesity across the state of Nebraska and dedicates her time to the underserved community. She is responsible for the creation of programs including Healthy Families in South Omaha, the PHIT (Putting Health Into Today) project from the Creighton University School of Medicine, and the Fit for Life Program, which improves the attitudes, behaviors, and physical health of fourth- and fifth-graders. She is working closely with the Maya community as a director of the collaborative with the Creighton medical school students at their annual health fairs.

Jane Franklin

Jane Franklin is dean of social sciences at Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, where she has served in that role for 18 years. Prior to coming to Nebraska, she was an educator for 20 years with the Durham Board of Education, Ontario, as a teacher, instructional facilitator and consultant. One of the highlights of her career was taking a leadership role in the implementation of Junior Kindergarten (3- and 4-year-olds) that encompassed more than 3,000 elementary schools in the province of Ontario. Franklin earned a master’s degree in education from Iowa State University and bachelor’s degrees in education and physical education from Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario.

Kelly Wells Gewecke

Kelly Wells Gewecke has been the Central Field Service business development consultant for the Nebraska Department of Economic Development (NDED) since 2014. She covers 18 counties for the department. Gewecke was formerly employed at the department as the Central Field Service representative from 1989 to 1993, when she quit to devote more time to raising her children.

Throughout her career, she has acquired a wealth of economic and community development experience. She has taught business classes at the University of Nebraska at Kearney and was the assistant director of the Nebraska Business Development Center in Kearney. She has had her own tourism business and farmed with her husband. Prior to returning to NDED she was the self-employment team leader at Easter Seals of Nebraska. She received her bachelor's degree and an MBA from UNK. She has worked with numerous communities and private individuals to start child care centers in central Nebraska, and understands firsthand the needs of rural Nebraska. Gewecke farms with her husband, Dennis, in rural Buffalo County and together they have five children and four grandchildren.

Tawana Grover

Dr. Tawana Grover is superintendent of Grand Island Public Schools, which serves more than 9,800 students from diverse backgrounds. Her career began as a classroom teacher before she was appointed school principal in Alabama, at the age of 25. In 2003, Grover became a school administrator for the DeSoto Independent School District south of Dallas, where she eventually became a high-level district administrator. With her experience in human resources, curriculum and instruction as well as federal programs, she was instrumental in implementing full-day and dual-language PreK programs. She believes educating the whole child while being a positive partner with families and communities is a powerful force to eliminating barriers to sustained success. Grover holds a Ph.D. from the University of North Texas and bachelor's, master's and education specialist degrees from Auburn University at Montgomery.

Kristen Hasebrook

Kristen Hasebrook is executive vice president of legislation and policy at the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce & Industry. Before coming to the chamber in December 2018, she was executive director of the Alliance for the Future of Agriculture in Nebraska and earlier served as director of development at the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska Foundation. Prior to that, she was director and then vice president of legal and regulatory affairs for the Nebraska Cattlemen, serving as the association's general counsel. Hasebrook earned a bachelor's degree in political science at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and her law degree from the University of Nebraska.

Melody Hobson

Melody Hobson is the administrator of the Office of Early Childhood at the Nebraska Department of Education. Activities of the Office of Early Childhood include the development and implementation of policy, data collection and evaluation, leadership for systems development of early childhood initiatives, and collaboration among programs and agencies. Hobson has experience as a teacher and director in community-based early childhood education and care programs where she collaborated with school district early childhood and Head Start programs. She also has more than a decade of experience working with state-level policies and programs at the Nebraska Department of Education. Hobson earned a master's degree in special education from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and a bachelor's degree in elementary education from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. She holds a Nebraska teaching certificate with endorsements in elementary and early childhood special education.

Nicole Johnson

Nicole Johnson is a leader in community and school-based early learning programs throughout the Nebraska Panhandle. In her current position, she oversees Head Start/Early Head Start programs, Early Development Network Part C services coordination and several community initiatives funded through public/private dollars. Johnson is a current board member and past chair of the community

collaborative, the Panhandle Partnership and facilitates System of Care: Birth to Eight, a workgroup of that collaborative. She is also a member of the First Five Nebraska Policy Leadership Academy. Johnson received a bachelor of arts degree in both English and special education communicative disorders from Augustana University.

Kelly Kiihne

Kelly Kiihne is the director of Kelly's Kids Learning & Development Center in Lincoln. She began working in child care centers while she was in college studying to be a nurse, and found working with children to be her calling. The Lincoln native transferred from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln to Southeast Community College, where she earned an associate's degree in early childhood education. During her school years she continued to work at local child care centers, and after completing her studies at SCC in 2006, she worked as a nanny for two families as she began preparations to open her own child care business.

Sarah Ann Kotchian

Sarah Ann Kotchian is the chief operating officer for the Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative, which operates as the central hub of a shared services network composed of early childhood organizational partners and other industry leaders. In this role she serves as an internal leader, managing growth and ensuring sustainable operational excellence. Prior to this role, Kotchian worked extensively over the past 20 years for nonprofits to drive program, practice, and policy improvements as a registered lobbyist, researcher, author, speaker, grant writer and reviewer, and in leadership roles on a number of commissions, task forces, and boards of directors. She is a graduate of Creighton University and the University of Nebraska College of Law.

Catherine Lang

Catherine Lang is the state director for the Nebraska Business Development Center, a cooperative program of the U.S. Small Business Administration and the College of Business Administration at the University of Nebraska Omaha. NBDC provides consulting services to anyone interested in starting or building a small business in Nebraska. Before joining NBDC, Lang was the vice president for Accelerate Nebraska, a nonprofit that connected educational institutions with business and community efforts to support workplace development and improve the state's education and economic systems. Lang earned her J.D. from the University of Nebraska's College of Law and has served in a number of governmental roles, including property tax administrator for the State of Nebraska, deputy tax commissioner for the Nebraska Department of Revenue, commissioner of labor for the Nebraska Department of Labor, and director of the Nebraska Department of Economic Development. Lang is also a board member for Nebraska's AIM Institute, the chair for Humanities Nebraska Foundation, and a member of the Nebraska State Bar Association.

Kathleen Lodi

Dr. Kathleen Lodi has worked in the field of youth development for the past 25 years. Currently serving in the role of State 4-H Program Administrator and Associate Dean of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension, Lodi has responsibility for leading the Nebraska 4-H program that reaches over 140,000 youth, one out of three who are age-eligible. To date, Lodi has secured over \$10 million in grant funding to develop programming that improves the lives of young people and their families. Lodi is the co-author of two books, has 28 refereed journal publications in print, and given has numerous presentations on her work in youth development as well as applied research. She earned her bachelor's, masters, and doctorate degrees in home economics, all from UNL.

David Ludwig

David Ludwig has been executive director of the Nebraska ESU Coordinating Council since 2014. Prior to that, he was chief administrator of Educational Service Unit 2 for four years. An educator for 34 years, he spent four years as a special education teacher and 30 years as an administrator in several capacities. He worked 19 years in Wisner-Pilger Public Schools, where he was the district's special education director as well as an elementary and middle school principal. He began his administrative career in 1987 as special education director at West Point Public Schools.

Joan Luebbers

Joan Luebbers is Head Start State Collaboration Office director in Nebraska. In her work, she facilitates partnerships between Head Start agencies and other state programs that provide services to low-income children and their families. She also has worked in Southern rural public schools, managed a Title XX child care center and university child development lab preschool, helped create a regional child care resource and referral, and assisted in developing a state early intervention program. Luebbers received a bachelor of science degree with honors in speech and audiology from Brescia University.

Kim Madsen

Dr. Kim A. Madsen is a professor at Chadron State College, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in family and consumer sciences, early childhood education, and career and technical education. For over 35 years, she has been an advocate for children and families focusing on teaching, training, supervision, mentoring, consulting, professional development, and research primarily in early childhood education. For 25 years, she was an educator and director for the Chadron State Child Development Center laboratory, which is one of two nationally accredited early childhood laboratories in Nebraska in higher education and was one of the first nature explore outdoor learning laboratories in the country to be certified. Madsen was recognized as Director of the Year in 2010 by the National Coalition of Campus Child Centers and received the Nebraska State College System Teaching Excellence award in 2018. She continues to be active in leadership roles at the local, regional, state, and national levels including serving on the Governor's Task Force for ECE (ECICC) and the Nebraska AEYC board, and serving as a member of numerous task force initiatives supporting professional development, including the Nebraska Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services. Her research focuses on learning styles, multiple intelligence, and play-based and nature-based learning. Over 30 years ago, Madsen organized the first Excellence in Early Childhood Conference held in western Nebraska and continues to help coordinate the annual conference. She received her bachelor's and master's degrees from Chadron State College and her doctorate from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, and she holds a certification in family and consumer sciences.

Sara Morgan

Sara Morgan is the unit administrator for the Lifespan Health Services Unit within the Division of Public Health at the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, providing general direction and leadership for multiple grant programs that provide a wide range of public health services to Nebraskans within a life course health development framework. She also serves as the Nebraska Title V Maternal Child Health Director, setting priorities, planning, and assisting with policy development for state-level public health efforts targeted for the MCH population. In these roles she confers with senior leadership and other management staff to monitor metrics, benchmarks, and outcomes of program initiatives. Morgan earned her bachelor's degree in environmental studies from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and her master's degree in biology from the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Jessie Rasmussen

Jessie Rasmussen is president of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund. For more than 40 years, she has been a leader in making sure more vulnerable young children and their families benefit from a better start in life. As president, she directs and oversees the fund's investments, which are designed to transform early education across the country. Rasmussen began her career as a preschool teacher working with children with special needs on Omaha's north side. She then dedicated 12 years of service to state government, as a Nebraska state senator from Omaha's 20th District and as director of Health and Human Services for the States of Nebraska and Iowa. Rasmussen served as early childhood education policy director at the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation before joining the Buffett Early Childhood Fund in January 2007. She earned her BS and MS degrees in human development and family relations from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

Sara Renken

Sara Renken is a first grade teacher at Eagle Elementary for Waverly/Eagle Public Schools (District 145), where she has been for three years. Previously, she taught for Lincoln Public Schools for eight years, in Kindergarten, first and third grades. She earned a master's degree in learning and curriculum from Peru State College and bachelor's degrees in elementary education and early childhood unified education from the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

Carol Renner

Dr. Carol Renner has been the associate superintendent for Kearney Public Schools for more than 20 years. In other districts, Renner has served as a classroom teacher, resource teacher, substitute teacher, director of special education and director of curriculum/staff development in California, Missouri, Hawaii, and Nebraska. Renner has a doctorate of philosophy in curriculum, administration, and instruction and a specialist of education from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, a master of education in learning disabilities from the University of Missouri-Columbia, and a bachelor of education from Fontbonne University in St. Louis. She has served on many local and state educational boards, and was elected to the International Committee for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). Renner has been named Business Woman of the Year in two Nebraska communities. Community involvement and parent inclusion in the educational process are critical to her work.

John Spatz

John Spatz has served as executive director of the Nebraska Association of School Boards (NASB) since 2012. He joined NASB as its legal counsel in 2003. He also serves as the chief administrator for ALICAP (property/casualty school insurance pool), is the CEO of Sparq Data Solutions (a software development company), is the administrator of the Nebraska Whole Child Project (which promotes physical/behavioral health in schools), and serves as the chief administrator for NJUMP and CJUMP (natural gas purchasing pools for schools).

John Stinner

In January 2015, John Stinner began his first term with the Nebraska State Legislature. As a freshman senator, he was selected for the Appropriations Committee and Vice Chair of the Building Maintenance Committee. He continued his work on the Appropriations Committee and Building Maintenance Committee, as well as various task forces and interim committees, in his second year in office. Stinner's interest in early childhood education started when he was a member of the Gering Public School Board. When he was elected to the Legislature, his interest rekindled and he has been an advocate for early childhood education ever since. Stinner was selected through the National Conference of State Legislators to be a Fellow in the Early Learning Fellows Program. This program builds knowledge among

legislators about new research and policy; promotes an exchange of ideas and solutions related to early learning, the early achievement gap, and many other issues; provides Fellows with a practical early learning plan they can use in their state; and facilitates access to leading researchers and policy experts. In recent years, with the help of First Five Nebraska, he held listening sessions around the state gathering data from Nebraska superintendents in order to produce possible legislation that would fund permanent financing for early childhood education through Nebraska's state funding formula.

Mariah Stowe

Mariah Stowe is the owner of Splash of Color Child Care in Lincoln. She has always had a passion for working with children and worked at a couple of child care centers before finding her calling working as an assistant at a Licensed Family Child Care II. The mixed ages, small group numbers, and continuity of care made Family Child Care call to her. She continued to work as an assistant for two years before opening up her own family child care home in 2016. Since opening her Licensed Family Child Care Home II, she has continued to learn more about quality child care and has taken many steps to better her program so that all of the children who attend are given a quality environment to learn and grow. Stowe received an associate's degree in early childhood education from the Southeast Community College in 2017.

Michelle Suarez

As Prosper Lincoln's Early Childhood Developer, Michelle Suarez is a lifelong educator whose career has been spent serving our most vulnerable children and families. Suarez retired as a 19-year Lincoln Public Schools elementary principal (Calvert and Everett). Before becoming an administrator, she taught preschool-age children, Kindergarten, and first and sixth grades over 15 years in three school districts. Throughout her public school career, Suarez specialized in parent engagement and community partnership to support strong schools. She earned her bachelor's degree in elementary education and her master's degree in educational administration from the University of Nebraska—Lincoln. Suarez and her husband, John, are the proud parents of two daughters who are both elementary school teachers.

Drew Theophilus

Drew Theophilus is director of Dividends Nebraska, formerly the Nebraska Early Childhood Business Roundtable. Dividends Nebraska is a statewide organization made up of businesses all over Nebraska with the sole mission of engaging the broader business community, policymakers, and the media to promote high-quality early childhood development as a key strategy for strengthening Nebraska's workforce and growing our state's economy. Theophilus also is president of Whiteboard, a company that provides consulting and advocacy solutions to clients in the commercial and nonprofit industries. Theophilus founded Whiteboard in 2016 after working in the legal industry and corporate world for 15 years, first in private practice with a regionally recognized law firm and later as the general counsel for a national media company. His work with Whiteboard has led him to be actively involved in supporting policies in the early childhood education area.

Patricia Timm

Patricia Timm serves on the State Board of Education; she has been a board member since 2004. She graduated from Kearney State College (now UNK) in 1969 with a bachelor's degree in elementary education and taught Kindergarten and K-12 art classes for over 5 years. She was executive director of the Family Resource Center in Beatrice, supervising children's and family programs such as "Parents as Teachers" and "Even Start." She served on the Beatrice Board of Education from 1988 to 2004 and has done volunteer work with community organizations including the Beatrice Children's Theatre,

Community Players, Southeast NE Early Childhood Professional Development Committee, Personal Safety Awareness Committee, Region V Behavioral Health Advisory Committee, and others.

Becky Veak

Becky Veak is the director of First Five Nebraska, a policy and communications organization that works with state and private partners on shaping effective early childhood policies based on best practices. Veak brings more than 25 years of experience working as an aide in the Nebraska Legislature and the U.S. Senate, lobbying for the long-term care industry, and developing and administering a statewide program for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. She worked in a multi-agency effort during restructuring and redesign of Nebraska's Health and Human Services System, and has also spent time fundraising and working in the area of strategic planning. Veak has a bachelor of science degree in family and consumer sciences from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

Matt Wallen

Matt Wallen is director of Children and Family Services for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. He was named by Gov. Pete Ricketts to replace Doug Weinberg. Wallen was chief of staff to former HHS CEO Courtney Phillips. In his role with HHS, Wallen oversaw the implementation of the department's first business plan, led efforts to stabilize the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center at Kearney and worked with the executive team to establish performance measures for HHS. Wallen previously worked as director of constituent services for Sen. Ben Sasse of Nebraska, as well as chief of staff to the late Rep. Steven LaTourette of Ohio. He also worked as director of market and resource planning for Union Pacific.

Stacie Williams

Stacie Williams is a first grade teacher at Central Elementary in Kearney Public Schools. She earlier taught Kindergarten for five years. She also has taught Kindergarten, one year in Houston with the Alief School System (Outley Elementary-Title 1) and four years with Grand Island Public Schools (Jefferson Elementary-Title 1). Williams earned a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from Doane University and her bachelor's degree in elementary education and early childhood unified from the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

Jeff Yost

Jeff Yost joined Nebraska Community Foundation (NCF) as vice president in 1998 and was appointed president and CEO in 2003. Under Yost's leadership NCF has grown every year. Yost has guided NCF's evolution as an institution that uses philanthropy as a tool for rural community capacity building and economic development. Yost is the author of numerous articles and provides lectures and consulting throughout the U.S. and internationally. In the past 10 years, Yost has worked in more than 25 states and internationally in Southeast Asia, Europe, Australia, and the former Soviet Union. Yost's other leadership positions include serving as a co-founder and chair of the HomeTown Competitiveness collaborative (an award-winning community economic development framework), Nebraska representative on the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City's Community Development Advisory Council, a member of the Council on Foundations' national task force on community leadership, adjunct faculty for the University of Nebraska-Department of Public Administration and a member of the Nebraska State Library Advisory Council. Yost was honored for his professional and volunteer work in 2002 by being selected one of the Lincoln Journal-Star's "20 under 40 – Lincoln's Emerging Leaders." Prior to joining NCF, he served as a policy and budget adviser to Nebraska Gov. Ben Nelson. Yost received bachelor's degrees in economics and agricultural business from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Staff

Susan Sarver

Dr. Susan Sarver is director of workforce planning and development at the Buffett Early Childhood Institute and also an associate professor in the Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies in the College of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Sarver previously served as assistant chair in the department, providing leadership for undergraduate programs, particularly in the area of early childhood education. Her research has focused on multi-state studies of rural families living in poverty and on children's play and access to outdoors and nature. Her work includes studies of continuity between parents and teachers, focusing on how teachers and parents rate children differently on temperament and other traits. Sarver previously worked with several Head Start populations in Georgia and was associated with the Transition Demonstration Project that followed Head Start children from Head Start to third grade. She has served on several state-level committees for revision of early childhood endorsements in Nebraska and collaborated with multiple disciplines within the College of Education and Human Sciences to advance early childhood education. She received her bachelor's degree in psychology from Washington & Lee University in Virginia, and a master's degree and Ph.D. in child and family development from the University of Georgia.

Cathey Huddleston-Casas

Dr. Cathey Huddleston-Casas is associate director of workforce planning and development at the Buffett Early Childhood Institute. Huddleston-Casas previously worked with the Buffett Institute as a consultant and senior associate in the workforce development program. She was a tenured faculty member in the Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies (CYAF) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln from 2001 to 2014. Her research and teaching focused on family economics and policy. Earlier in her career, she served as research coordinator for the HealthPartners Research Foundation (now HealthPartners Institute for Education and Research) in Bloomington, Minn., and spent a year as a congressional fellow in the office of U.S. Senator Paul D. Wellstone of Minnesota, helping craft policy protecting child witnesses of domestic violence. Huddleston-Casas earned her Ph.D. in family social science from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, and her master's degree in human development and family studies and bachelor's degree in psychology, both from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Cama Charlet

Cama Charlet is a program specialist for the Buffett Early Childhood Institute's Workforce Planning and Development staff. In her role, she works closely with the associate director of workforce planning and development on community-based projects and initiatives in rural and urban Nebraska. Charlet began working at the Institute in 2015 as an educational facilitator for the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan. The Southern California native graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2003 with a bachelor of science in education and a teaching endorsement in elementary education. She earned a master's degree in educational leadership from Doane College in 2011. She taught in Omaha Public Schools, in Illinois, and at Sandoz Elementary School in the Millard school district before joining the Buffett Institute in 2015 as an educational facilitator.

Consultant

Bill Fulton

Dr. Bill Fulton is founder and executive director of The Civic Canopy, a Denver-based nonprofit that

works to promote collaborative processes that help communities thrive. Fulton is a leader in the field of collaborative process design, small and large group facilitation, and applying research from multiple fields to the practical needs of improving communities. A Denver native who received his bachelor's degree in history from Brown University, Fulton began his career as a founding teacher at the Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning and went on to complete his master's in curriculum and instruction from the University of Colorado at Denver. He has also worked as a facilitator and coach to schools in the national Expeditionary Learning network, helping them develop strategic plans for whole-school change. He left the classroom to establish the Denver and Rocky Mountain States office for Facing History and Ourselves, an internationally acclaimed curriculum project that uses case studies from history to engage students, teachers, and communities in the process of creating a stronger civil society. He completed a doctoral program at the University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology as a way to lay the philosophical and research-based background for The Civic Canopy, focusing on public dialogue, civic engagement, and social movements. Prior to the founding The Civic Canopy, Fulton was a principal and founder of Civil Conversations, LLC, a consulting firm that provides facilitation and training for corporations, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations.