

TRANSFORMING THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE IN NEBRASKA: A CONFERENCE AND THINK TANK FOR HIGHER EDUCATION FACULTY

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute convened a statewide conference entitled “Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce in Nebraska” on October 5 and 6, 2015. The conference brought together educators from throughout the state to begin building a consensus around how to address Nebraska’s early childhood workforce needs. National consultants joined Nebraska experts to discuss strategies to ensure that all children will be served by highly trained early childhood educators. More than 120 people from higher education institutions, the Nebraska Department of Education, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, and other agencies attended the conference. Twenty-two of the state’s 24 higher education institutions were represented. Immediately following the conference, deans from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and University of Nebraska at Kearney met with senior NU faculty and consultants in a facilitated think tank to discuss specific action steps.

CONFERENCE SESSIONS

Challenges Facing Nebraska’s Early Childhood Workforce

Opening the conference, Dr. Samuel J. Meisels, founding executive director of the Buffett Institute, outlined the challenges facing Nebraska’s early childhood workforce. Based on state and national information, Meisels identified three pressing needs. First, and foremost, Nebraska has a shortage of highly qualified early childhood educators, particularly for infant/toddler classrooms and those serving English language learners. This need is well-documented within the state and across the nation. Second, Nebraska’s system of licensing, certification, and higher educational preparation is fragmented and poses barriers to increasing the number of highly qualified early childhood educators. Finally, early childhood educators in Nebraska and across the nation do not have a cohesive, publicly recognized, and valued professional identity. ([View Dr. Meisels’ conference presentation.](#))

A Unifying Foundation for Early Childhood

Describing the need for a unified foundation for early childhood, Dr. Jacqueline Jones, president and CEO of the Foundation for Child Development, provided an overview of the new Institute of Medicine report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*, on which she served. This comprehensive volume offers guidance for creating systems change to improve early childhood professional learning and workforce development. All conference attendees received a copy of the report, which outlines 13 recommendations for improving the early childhood workforce. Dr. Jones’ presentation focused on the first two recommendations regarding professional competencies and pathways to the baccalaureate. ([View Dr. Jones’ conference presentation.](#))

Landscape of Higher Education Early Childhood Degree Programs

To provide an overview of the landscape of early childhood higher education programs, Dr. Marcy Whitebook, founding director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) at the University of California-Berkeley, presented findings from *The Nebraska Higher Education Inventory*, a study conducted by CSCCE in conjunction with the Buffett Institute. CSCCE has conducted surveys of higher education programs in seven states; Nebraska was its most recent. Focusing on variations in program content, age-group focus, student field-based learning, and faculty characteristics, the *Nebraska Higher Education Inventory* provides the most complete picture to date of the state's early childhood-related offerings and degree programs. The data collected in Nebraska permitted Whitebook to place Nebraska's programs into a national context. ([View Dr. Whitebook's conference presentation.](#))

Nebraska's Pathways to Becoming an Early Childhood Educator

Dr. Susan Sarver, director of workforce planning and development at the Buffett Institute, presented an overview of the opportunities and challenges that prospective early childhood educators encounter in Nebraska. She noted that in order to increase the number of highly qualified early childhood educators, effective certification and licensing requirements must be established, a cohesive and publicly recognized professional identity has to be created, and adequate compensation with sustainable career trajectories for educators needs to be possible. Sarver argued that such changes call for a public commitment to early childhood education, integration across systems of higher education, and informed regulatory oversight. ([View Dr. Sarver's conference presentation.](#))

From Fragmentation to Integration in Higher Education

Dr. Marjorie Kostelnik, dean of the College of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and a member of the IOM report commission, discussed the role of higher education in workforce development. Dr. Kostelnik highlighted the role of higher education in the IOM report, noting particularly the need for an interdisciplinary foundation for early care and education professionals. She identified institutional challenges, professional challenges, and academic constraints that pose barriers to the creation of a cohesive foundation for early childhood. She offered several strategies to meet these challenges and encouraged higher education to understand the urgency of issues and the need to move more quickly toward solutions. ([View Dr. Kostelnik's conference presentation.](#))

Strategic Planning for Sustainable Change

Two working group sessions enabled attendees to develop specific recommendations for how to advance the state in this area of critical importance. National consultants Laura Bornfreund, deputy director of the New America Foundation, Diane Horm, founding director of the Early Childhood Education Institute at University of Oklahoma at Tulsa, and Sherry Cleary, executive director at the New York Early Childhood Professional Development Institute, served as moderators. Participants were encouraged to formulate questions that served as the basis for a panel discussion at the close of the conference. ([View the panel session.](#))

EMERGENT THEMES FROM THE CONFERENCE

Shared Vision

Several themes emerged from the conference and think tank, foremost a need for a shared vision and vocabulary about early childhood educators. The need for a shared vision cut across all the thematic areas, including statewide competencies, higher education preparation, wages, and family child care. In

addition to a shared vision, participants also emphasized the need to develop strategic communication efforts spanning these areas.

Statewide Competencies

The recommendations from the IOM/NRC report in combination with National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) standards were viewed as an excellent starting point for establishing statewide competencies. However, the absence of strategies for measurement of competencies and their link to current course content, degrees, and certifications were seen as barriers. Additionally, participants stressed the importance of ensuring that competencies were culturally appropriate and tied meaningfully to wages and/or qualifications of educators. It became clear that successful development of statewide competencies will require involvement from multiple stakeholder groups, including practitioners.

Bachelor's Degree Requirement

The IOM/NRC report recommends a bachelor's degree with specialized knowledge in early childhood and competencies for all lead educators of children from birth through age 8. This recommendation echoes the recommendation of other NRC reports from the past two decades. Regarding practitioners, concerns were raised about how this recommendation would affect family child care, home visitors, and caregivers from such related fields as social work and nursing. Overall, participants supported a phased implementation process in which higher educational requirements are put in place over time. Moreover, concern was expressed about how a bachelor's degree requirement would affect A.A. degree programs offered by community colleges.

Articulation between 2- and 4-year colleges was also identified as a primary concern. Other issues included the lack of coherence between coursework and field experiences and the near absence of high-quality field placement options. Participants identified a need for practitioner professional development as well as of the importance of recruiting high-quality pre-service students. Additionally, the basic skills PRAXIS test required for entry into teacher certification programs was seen as a potential barrier to recruiting students with diverse backgrounds. To be explored is the potential for developing multiple processes/pathways to the bachelor's degree and promoting flexibility within the certification and licensing systems.

Inadequate Compensation

Poor wages and low status of the early childhood profession reinforces the false belief that working in early childhood does not require specialized skills and knowledge. Conference participants overwhelmingly agreed that the lack of adequate compensation for practitioners is a significant challenge to recruiting and retaining high-quality early childhood educators. Low pay not only contributes to practitioners leaving the field for better-paying employment but affects migration within the field as well. Among highly qualified practitioners, inadequate compensation in certain settings (such as infant-toddler classrooms) contributes to movement to public school settings where these educators work with older children, in effect leaving our youngest children with less-qualified educators. Additionally, inadequate compensation hampers recruitment of high-quality student candidates and serves as a disincentive for current practitioners who might otherwise consider additional training.

Family Child Care

In Nebraska, as in most states, family child care—most of it unlicensed—is the predominant system of care for infants and toddlers. State licensing requirements for this type of care are the least restrictive of all settings, and providers vary dramatically in their qualifications and competencies, ranging from a high

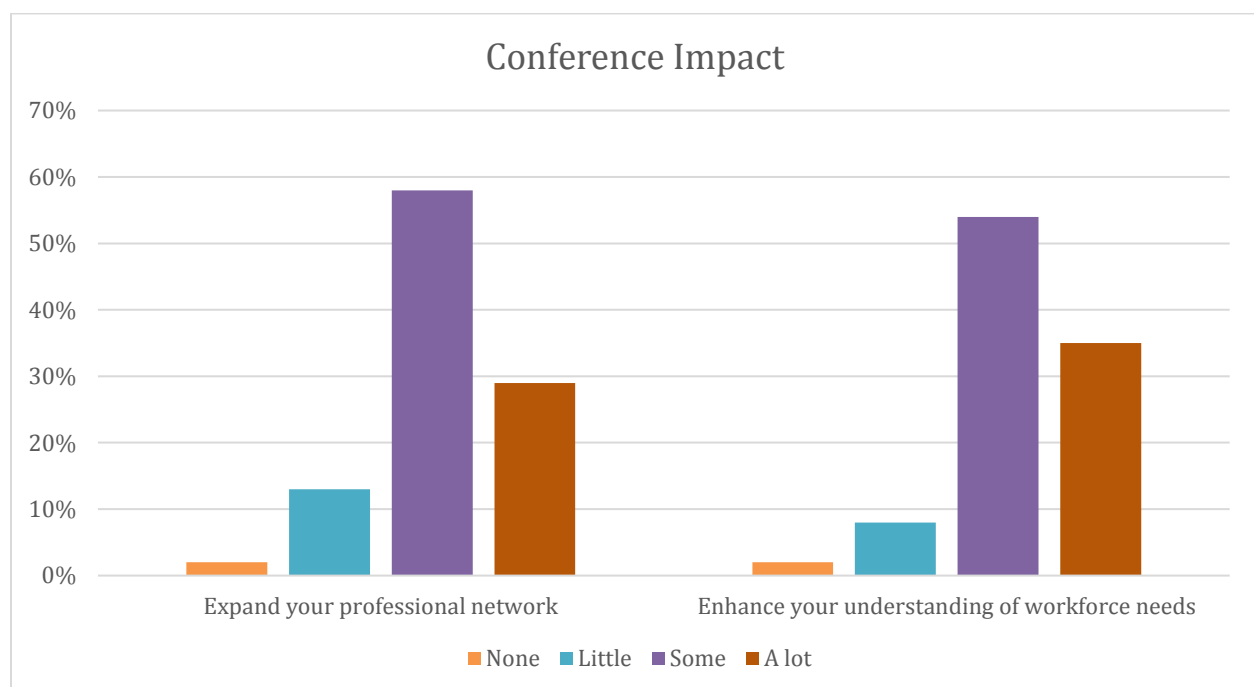
school diploma to graduate degrees. Participants agreed that determining how competency requirements apply to the complex system of family child care must be addressed. However, they were clear that before recommendations are made on their behalf, family child care providers must be included in discussions.

Strategic Communications

Conference participants were asked to reflect on ways to integrate efforts across three groups with critical interests in early childhood education in Nebraska: institutions of higher education that provide personnel preparation, state agencies and employers that oversee the process of regulation and certification, and practitioners who work directly with children in a variety of settings. The need for a clear communication strategy across all three of these groups emerged as a central recommendation. Suggestions included ensuring broad participation across stakeholder groups with a specific emphasis on including families and providers, attending to differences in the professional languages used by various stakeholder groups, assuring that messaging is coordinated and consistent, and leveraging technology for both professional networking and information dissemination. *Step up to Quality*, the state's QRIS program, should be approached as an important partner in communication efforts and as a means to make information from the IOM report widely accessible.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONNAIRE

Approximately three weeks after the conference, participants received a web-based questionnaire intended to assess the conference's success in building consensus. Specifically, participants were asked about the impact of the conference on their professional networks, their understanding of issues surrounding professional preparation, and what they might do in the future in this arena. More than half of the participants responded to the emailed questionnaire. The figure below details responses to two of these questions.



More than eight in 10 respondents said they were likely to plan discussion or future activities at their institutions or programs based on the content of the conference. Future activities included informing other faculty about the Buffett Institute, sharing knowledge gained at the conference, and planning revisions of current programs. Several respondents described specific action items already being implemented. Examples include the formation of an early childhood task force, proposal for a new online program, and discussion of practicum placements with local community providers.

When asked what information they would like to obtain from the Buffett Institute, respondents requested research, white papers, web-based resources, and contacts across programs and institutions. The responses demonstrated that participants view the Buffett Institute as a resource for best practices and a transformative [SS1]organization designed to encourage cross-sector conversation and collaborations among a wide range of stakeholders.

NEXT STEPS

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute is committed to ensuring that a skilled, informed, and diverse early childhood workforce is available to all children and recognizes that this requires a collaborative effort across many stakeholder groups. To achieve its goals, the Institute's Early Childhood Workforce Development Program will focus on a variety of immediate, intermediate, and long-term needs. These projects, programs, and proposals will be developed through strategic partnerships intended to build consensus on what Nebraska needs as well as generating, translating, and disseminating research about best practices. Our objective is to bring about needed change by mobilizing collaborative action across stakeholder groups. Examples include:

- Lead the process of creating a shared vision and generating strategies to achieve the vision by convening think tank sessions with targeted stakeholder groups in order to:
 - Establish statewide guidelines for practicum requirements in early childhood.
 - Strengthen articulation between 2- and 4-year institutions.
 - Describe competencies demonstrated by highly qualified early childhood educators.
- Mount strategic communication campaigns designed to increase public understanding of the importance of high-quality early childhood education that elevate the profession and increase commitment from state and local decision makers.
- Establish research-based strategies through a series of white papers that address a unified vision for Nebraska's early childhood profession. For example:
 - Shifting the policy paradigm in early childhood from employment support for parents to education for children.
 - Best practices in early childhood higher education preparation programs.
- Provide stakeholders with current data through targeted research reports. For example:
 - Infant/toddler early childhood preparation programs.
 - Nebraska's early childhood workforce and the settings in which they work.
 - Public attitudes of Nebraska's population toward early childhood and its workforce.
- Provide assistance to IHEs in establishing evidence-based, innovative practices for early childhood preparation as cohort programs or intensive summer study.
- Provide statewide professional development for faculty in areas identified by the *Nebraska Higher Education Inventory*.
- Create and maintain infrastructure and support needed for inter-institutional collaboration that

addresses the identification of strengths unique to institutions and facilitates resource-sharing agreements.

- Promote the leadership pipeline of early childhood professionals through graduate programs and the recruitment of high-quality, diverse students.

Conclusions

Nebraska's system of licensing, certification, and higher educational preparation is fragmented and poses barriers to increasing the number of highly qualified early childhood educators. Nebraska has many people, systems, and institutions that are invested in helping children and families. Yet, the lack of cross-sector communication and common goals creates unnecessary barriers to the current and future workforce. Early childhood educators in Nebraska and across the nation lack a cohesive, publicly recognized, and valued professional identity. As a field, early childhood educators must define who is highly qualified and help create a professional identity and professional preparation that leads to public commitment for improving the salaries, employment status, and working conditions of early childhood educators. Anything less than this will shortchange our children and their future.

Videos of the presentations can be seen on the Buffett Institute's YouTube page and handouts can be accessed at the Institute's website: buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/workforce-conference.