

NEBRASKA EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE COMMISSION

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

COMMISSION

1. What is the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission and why was it formed?

The Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission is a group of more than 40 public- and private-sector leaders convened by the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska to develop a comprehensive plan for strengthening and expanding the state's early childhood workforce. The commission's goal is to ensure that a skilled, informed, and diverse workforce is available to meet the needs of all Nebraska children from birth through age 8.

2. Who is on the commission?

Commission membership draws from state government, higher education, public schools, child care, philanthropy, practitioners, and the business community. A full list of the members can be found at earlyyearsmatter.org/workforce. The commission is co-chaired by Dr. Marjorie J. Kostelnik, professor, Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and former dean of the College of Education and Human Sciences at UNL, and Dr. Samuel J. Meisels, founding executive director of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute.

3. What did the commission find during its three years of operation?

The commission's report contains a wide range of findings about the state of the early childhood workforce in Nebraska, including:

- **Early care and education settings** where the expertise and requirements for professional practices differ based on setting and funding.
- **Inconsistent regulations** across early care and education settings.
- **Low wages** for early childhood professionals providing care and teaching that are often near or below the poverty line for a family of three.
- **High turnover** caused by low wages, lack of benefits, and lack of supportive professional environments.
- **Accessibility and availability** to early care and education that is dependent on where families live.
- **Shortage of affordable options** with many families unable to pay for the quality of care they want for their children.
- **Economic vitality of communities** and employers that are affected by the child care needs of working parents and the absence of high-quality early childhood programs that can attract and retain businesses and jobs.

- **Importance to the prosperity of the state** recognizing that when all families have equitable access to affordable high-quality care and education it contributes to the economic vitality and prosperity of the state.

4. What is the commission recommending?

The commission's vision—that Nebraskans elevate the early childhood workforce to a priority profession benefitting all children from birth through Grade 3—centers on four key goals:

- Nebraska's early childhood workforce will be highly qualified and will reflect the diversity of the children and families they serve.
- Early care and education in Nebraska will be fully funded by 2030.
- Nebraskans will champion high-quality early care and education and the critical role of the workforce in young children's learning and development.
- Nebraskans will implement the commission's recommendations to achieve a highly qualified and diverse workforce on behalf of all young children and their families.

5. Who is the early childhood workforce?

The early childhood workforce includes those who are paid to provide care and education for young children (birth through Grade 3) on a daily or near-daily basis, as well as home visitors who partner with families, and coaches and others who work directly with early childhood educators. Members of the workforce are part of the early childhood profession and are referred to in the commission's report as early childhood professionals, educators, teachers, or caregivers.

6. Why must the early childhood workforce be elevated as a priority?

The science of early childhood development makes clear that the early years, from birth through age 8, are a time of unparalleled human growth and development—and that healthy development during these pivotal early years requires reliable, positive, and consistent interactions between the developing child and familiar, caring adults. Because of today's economy, in which most parents of young children work outside the home, families often rely on early childhood professionals to provide positive interactions and experiences that young children need to thrive. These combined factors—the physical and developmental needs of children, parents in the workforce, and business and industry's needs for a stable workforce—demand a highly qualified early childhood workforce be the cornerstone of high-quality early care and education.

7. Do the commission's recommendations apply to all children and families? To all child care providers and teachers?

The commission's report was written for all Nebraska children as well as for all paid early childhood professionals in the multiple settings where children receive their care and education. These settings include homes, child care centers (public and private), and schools.

QUALIFICATIONS

1. Isn't Nebraska's early childhood workforce already qualified? Why is this a problem?

Nebraska is working hard to close the gap between what we know our young children need and what we currently provide. Nebraskans value early care and education, yet we fall short of providing the level of sustained investment needed to support a diverse early childhood workforce that can provide high-quality care and education.

We are confident that increasing the number of skilled early childhood professionals and quality child care and learning environments in the state is key to the healthy growth and development of Nebraska's young children. Currently, Nebraska's early childhood professionals are undervalued and underpaid, making it difficult to retain highly qualified professionals and recruit the additional professionals needed to meet the demand and fulfill families' expectations for quality.

2. What is meant by competencies for the early childhood workforce?

Competencies refer to the skills, knowledge, and dispositions required to work effectively with young children and families. In 2019, the Nebraska Department of Education published *Nebraska's Core Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals* which define what adults who work with young children need to know, understand, and be able to do. These competencies are not universally applied and only pertain to some settings prior to Kindergarten. In addition, the competencies do not address children in Kindergarten-Grade 3, and professional preparation programs do not consistently address them.

3. Why does Nebraska need a shared set of competencies for the early childhood workforce? Do those caring for infants need to be as skilled or educated as those teaching Kindergarten or first grade?

Nebraska needs a common set of competencies for the early childhood workforce because children's developmental and learning needs do not differ based on the setting where they receive their care. Applying a common understanding and framework will allow more consistency across settings and improve quality. The commission proposes doing so while honoring the strengths of the current workforce and the choices available to families in our current mixed-delivery system. The skills required to care for the developmental and learning needs of infants and toddlers are just as complex as the skills required to teach elementary school; the skill set is just different.

4. Doesn't the State of Nebraska already require a common set of skills or competencies for those caring for young children?

Yes and no, depending on where the care and education is provided. Expectations and requirements for professional practice vary based on setting and funding, and Nebraska's early childhood professionals work in a variety of different settings (homes, for-profit and nonprofit child care centers, and schools).

This mixed-delivery system of care and education is accompanied by various regulatory standards and monitoring requirements that are poorly coordinated across settings and funding sources. As a result, no shared understanding exists of what constitutes high-quality early care and education across settings. Yet the needs of children do not differ based on where they are receiving their care and education.

Rather than focusing on the place, or setting, in which an individual works, we must focus on the

needs of the children and families served—and on ensuring that the early childhood workforce has the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively meet those needs.

5. How can we ensure that the early childhood workforce is adequately prepared for the work it does?

To ensure that early childhood professionals are adequately prepared for the work they do, we must:

- Clarify professional roles for those serving children from birth through Grade 3, based on professional responsibilities rather than on where the work occurs (e.g., homes, centers, schools).
- Define the skills and knowledge required to do the work—the professional competencies that early childhood professionals need to fulfill their roles effectively.
- Ensure the professional competencies that are defined are incorporated into the professional preparation of the early childhood workforce, and inform policies and practices related to licensure and certification of the workforce.
- Formally acknowledge the strengths and experience of Nebraska’s existing early childhood workforce and build on those strengths.

FUNDING

1. What is Nebraska’s current investment in early care and education?

In 2017, an estimated \$460 million was spent on early care and education in Nebraska, of which 17 percent came from state funds, 29 percent came from federal funds, 52 percent from families, and 2 percent from business and philanthropy.

2. What will it cost to implement the commission’s recommendation to fully fund high-quality early care and education in Nebraska? Who will pay for this?

The commission estimates that a fully funded early childhood system in Nebraska requires a total annual investment of \$912 million—an amount that is the equivalent of three-quarters of 1 percent of the state’s GDP. Given that Nebraska currently invests \$460 million from all sources, this leaves a gap of \$452 million, an amount we propose be shared between state and federal governments (public sector) and families, businesses, and philanthropy (private sector). The increase the commission estimates from state funding alone is \$109 million. Once full funding is reached, public- and private-sector contributions would be maintained at three quarters of 1 percent of the state’s GDP.

3. How did the commission determine its cost figures?

The commission relied on two sets of reports from the National Academies of Science, developed by early childhood and finance experts, to inform its recommendations.

The examination of Nebraska’s current investment in early care and education and the estimate of the funding gap between the current investment and a fully funded early care and education system were guided by recommendations laid out in the *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education* report. Written by a committee of experts convened by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine and subjected to a rigorous and independent peer-review process, the report tackled the challenge of presenting a funding strategy that would provide reliable, accessible, high-

quality early care and education for young children from birth to Kindergarten entry, including a highly qualified and adequately compensated workforce consistent with the vision outlined in the 2015 Institute of Medicine and National Research Council report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*.

4. What does “full funding” mean? Is it any different than increasing wages and benefits to the early childhood workforce?

Full funding means that all of the necessary components of high-quality care and education are being provided, including onsite costs of providing early care and education; system-level workforce development costs of recruiting, preparing, and retaining a highly qualified early childhood workforce; system-level quality assurance and improvement costs to maintain the integrity of the early care and education system; and stabilizing family participation. Simply adding up what it costs for all children currently enrolled in early care and education programs statewide does not represent the total cost of providing early care and education for all families in Nebraska.

In Nebraska, the amount for full funding is estimated to be \$912 million per year based on the framework and analysis laid out in the *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education* report. It is important to note that this figure is a broad, conceptual estimate intended to orient policymakers and others to what is needed in Nebraska for all families to have access to affordable, high-quality care and education. The next step is for Nebraskans to determine how this would be approached in our state. The commission’s recommendations propose that this work be done under the auspices of a statewide coalition that will be involved in implementation. Clearly, this work will need to be a collaborative undertaking with many state agencies and departments involved.

5. Will families pay more than they do now for a fully funded early childhood system?

Most families will not, but it depends on the family’s income level. Families who struggle to pay for child care will not pay more; they will pay less.

The commission’s estimates are made on the basis of the *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education* report, which recommends achieving affordability family-by-family with a sliding fee scale to ensure family payments, as a share of family income, are affordable across all income levels. Using this approach reverses the current pattern in which lower-income families pay a larger share of household income than do higher-income families for early care and education. For example, families currently living below the federal poverty level pay on average 35 percent of their income for child care, whereas families who are five times above the federal poverty level pay only 13 percent. The analysis also assumes a dynamic estimate over time, meaning that more families will access early care and education as it becomes affordable, which will increase total funding coming into the system.

6. Can Nebraska afford this?

Yes. In fact, we can’t afford not to.

Ensuring equitable access to affordable, high-quality care for all families and children is key not only to the healthy growth and development of Nebraska’s children, but also to the economic vitality and prosperity of the state. A dollar spent for high-quality early care and education yields an average return of \$4; in circumstances where children are extremely vulnerable, the return can be as high as \$13. This

return includes money saved on special education, health care, social services, and the criminal justice system, as well as money earned from greater educational attainment, increased earnings, and improved productivity. At the end of the day, the question is whether Nebraska wants to make smart, sound investments focused on the future or continue to spend funds that do little to take advantage of the potential of our state.

7. What are the costs of not doing this?

The cost of not implementing a fully funded high-quality early childhood system means that Nebraska continues down the same path of continued and unnecessarily high spending for special education, health care, social services, and the criminal justice system, and loses the opportunity for increased contributions to its tax base from children who grow up to be more productive, contributing citizens of our state. The obvious other cost is the immense loss of human potential that occurs.

8. Have state officials been involved in the development of these recommendations?

Numerous state officials serve on the commission and have contributed to its recommendations, including representatives from the Nebraska Department of Education and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, as well as the chair of the Legislature's Appropriations Committee. All have been supportive throughout the life of the commission and are working to share the commission's recommendations with fellow policymakers in the legislative and executive branches of government.

Several high-ranking state officials will speak at the public event on Jan. 30, 2020, to launch the commission's report, including Nebraska Commissioner of Education Matthew Blomstedt, Chief Executive Officer of Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services Dannette Smith, and Senator John Stinner, commission member and chair of the Legislature's Appropriations Committee.

ENGAGED PUBLIC

1. What is known about the current level of public support for early childhood programs?

According to statewide survey research, Nebraskans express overwhelming support (68 percent) for early care and education but have serious concerns about access, affordability, and quality. Only 15 percent of Nebraskans report being very satisfied with the quality of the early care and education programs where they live. Two-thirds of Nebraskans said the state should make early care and education a higher priority than it is today.

2. Why is public support important to the commission's recommendations?

Elevating Nebraska's early childhood workforce to a priority profession requires that we engage the public in conversation about how to strengthen early care and education in our state and support Nebraskans who want to take action to improve early childhood programs in their communities. If we are to secure sustained support for Nebraska's early childhood workforce in communities across the state and the recommendations outlined in the report, we must help to ensure that the public is familiar with the research and evidence surrounding the role of the workforce in early childhood development.

IMPLEMENTATION

1. What will be different in Nebraska if these recommendations are implemented? What will change?

There will be many positive changes in Nebraska, including:

- Every Nebraska family will have access to high-quality early care and education, no matter the setting they choose for their children.
- The qualifications to be an early childhood professional will be based on the developmental needs of children and be consistent across all early care and education settings.
- Wages and benefits will reflect the professional expertise required of the early childhood workforce.
- Improved wages, benefits, and professional supports will strengthen the early childhood workforce, contributing to professional well-being, continuity of care for children, and stability for families and communities.
- The total cost of high-quality early care and education will be funded by combining public and private investments that ensure every child in Nebraska has access to high-quality care and education regardless of setting.
- Nebraska will maximize public-sector investments in early care and education by reducing the administrative burden of pursuing multiple funding sources, increasing coordination across government agencies, and linking the receipt of funds to high-quality standards.

2. How will these recommendations be implemented?

The commission is calling for the creation of a statewide, diverse, and multi-sector coalition of leaders that will be convened and become active over several years, as well as dedicated staff to coordinate and support the coalition's work. The vision, goals, and recommendations outlined in this report will guide the coalition's efforts, serving as a framework from which a detailed implementation plan can be developed and executed.

3. How will the statewide coalition be involved with implementation?

The commission proposes creating a coalition of Nebraskans to implement the recommendations using a collective impact approach. Leading scholars on collaborative approaches to social change suggest that large-scale change comes from effective cross-sector coordination, rather than from the isolated intervention of individual organizations. Evidence of the effectiveness of this collaborative approach suggests that substantially greater progress can be made in alleviating many of our serious and complex social problems if nonprofits, governments, businesses, and the public are brought together around a common agenda to create collective impact. This will require ongoing coordination, collaboration, and communication across all sectors that impact early care and education and among Nebraskans from communities spanning the state. Such complex work will not occur without a supportive infrastructure to facilitate coordination and ensure accountability.

4. Who must approve the recommendations?

In Nebraska, no single entity or authority governs the early childhood workforce. Many state agencies and departments have policy authority over different components of the workforce.

5. Will these recommendations require that every child be enrolled in early childhood programs?

No, absolutely not. Nebraska parents and guardians will always be in the best position to decide what is best for their child. But currently a family's ability to choose the early care and education environment that is best for their child varies based on where they live and what they can afford. The commission supports all parents having access to affordable, high-quality settings for their children.

6. What distinguishes this report from other commission reports that do little more than sit on shelves?

Two critical elements differentiate the commission's report from other reform-minded efforts. They are represented in Goals 3 and 4 of the report. Goal 3 calls for the active engagement of Nebraskans in championing high-quality early care and education and the workforce through a series of communications and outreach initiatives, focusing especially at the community level where leaders from dozens of Nebraska communities are already stepping forward to build on local efforts. Goal 4 calls for the creation of a statewide coalition and supportive infrastructure to ensure that the commission recommendations are implemented.

7. How long will it take to implement the recommendations?

Undertaking systems-level change of the magnitude called for by the commission is no easy task. The commission proposes getting underway immediately. Funding increases phased in over 10 years would enable Nebraska to have a fully funded system by 2030.

8. What does the commission want Nebraskans to do as a result of its findings?

The commission wants Nebraskans to do two things. First, we want Nebraskans to become involved in their own local community to support high-quality early childhood education and the early childhood workforce. Dozens of communities across the state are already mobilizing to improve and expand local programs and to more effectively support the caregivers and teachers who are educating young children. For example, last year more than 400 community leaders from 92 Nebraska communities gathered at the annual Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference to share their locally developed strategies and to learn from others.

Second, we want Nebraskans to become part of the collective effort to ensure that Nebraska has a highly qualified early childhood workforce—one that can support the development and learning of all young children from birth through age 8. Nebraskans can join this effort by going to earlyyearsmatter.org/workforce to learn more about the commission's recommendations and to sign up to receive updates, including information about the formation of the statewide coalition to implement the report recommendations.