

REPORT HIGHLIGHT

Elevating Nebraska's Early Childhood Workforce

Report and Recommendations
of the Nebraska Early Childhood
Workforce Commission

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JANUARY 2020



Buffett
Early Childhood
Institute
at the University of Nebraska

Executive Summary

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. Yet, despite what we know about the critical role of early childhood professionals in young children’s development, the early childhood workforce in our nation and in our state is undervalued and underpaid—which makes it difficult to retain the highly qualified professionals currently in the workforce as well as recruit those needed to meet the growing demand for early care and education. In Nebraska, 75 percent of children under the age of 6 live in homes where all adults in their family work outside the home. Increasing the number of highly qualified early childhood professionals is essential if we are to meet the growing demand across the state for learning environments where children can thrive and begin to meet their potential—and where Nebraska’s working parents can feel confident placing their children while they work and support their families. Viewed through the prism of the state’s alarming shortage of 58,000 workers, the need for high-quality early care and education takes on additional urgency. If we are to meet Nebraska’s workforce needs now and in the future, we must ensure all children and families in the state have equitable access to affordable, high-quality early care and education.

In 2017, the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission came together to address how best to strengthen and expand Nebraska’s early childhood workforce. The commission was a collaborative group of more than 40 public- and private-sector leaders representing systems that influence the overall quality and delivery of early care and education—including those involved in professional preparation and learning, early care and education delivery, and policymaking, as well as local business, philanthropic, and community leaders. The commission worked for the past three years in collaboration with others from across the state to identify the strengths and challenges of Nebraska’s early childhood workforce and examine the potential of early care and education in the state. The commission’s key findings include the following:

- **Varied Early Care and Education Settings.** Nebraska’s early childhood professionals work in various settings—including homes, child care centers,

and schools—and expectations and requirements for their professional practice vary based on setting and funding. Although there is no shared understanding of what constitutes high-quality early care and education across settings, the needs of children do not differ based on where they receive their care and education.

- **Inconsistent Regulations.** Regulatory inconsistency across early care and education settings has significant implications for the early childhood workforce, affecting such qualification indicators as teacher licensure and credentialing. Members of Nebraska’s early childhood workforce confront contradictory expectations based on where they work rather than consistent professional standards based on what their day-to-day work with children entails.
- **Low Wages.** In 2016, the median wage in our state for early childhood professionals teaching in community-based child care centers was \$18,706 per year—nearly \$1,400 below the federal poverty line for a family of three. Because of this, 27 percent of home-based early childhood professionals and 20 percent of center-based professionals in Nebraska rely on some form of public assistance just to make ends meet.
- **High Turnover.** Low wages and lack of supportive professional environments create significant hardships for many early childhood professionals, resulting in high turnover and high rates of depression. In a statewide survey conducted by the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska, more than three-quarters of child care centers reported that they experienced turnover of lead teachers or assistant teachers during the prior year.
- **Varied Accessibility.** In Nebraska, a family’s ability to access early care and education varies based on where they live. Statewide, 11 counties have no licensed child care facilities. Furthermore, 84 percent of Nebraska counties that have child care facilities lack sufficient child care slots to meet the needs of families living in the county, with many providers reporting chronic difficulty finding qualified staff to work in early care settings and the primary grades.
- **Shortage of Affordable Options.** A family’s ability to access high-quality early care and education is often dependent on how much they can afford to pay. Many communities do not have the resources to provide families with a variety of early care and education options—particularly high-quality options. Even when high-quality options are available, many families do not have the financial resources they need to pay for the quality of care they want for their child.
- **Implications for Economic Vitality of Our Communities.** Investment in early care and education also plays an important role in the economic vitality of Nebraska communities. A community’s ability to attract business investment is

dependent upon the size and qualifications of the labor supply available, and labor supply is dependent in part upon access to affordable early care and education opportunities for the children of potential employees. Employees who are unable to meet the daily care and education needs of their children are forced to abandon their jobs and communities. Employers across the country, including those in Nebraska, are keenly affected by the high costs associated with employee turnover and are coming to recognize the economic value of addressing early care and education as a critical means of stabilizing their workforce and their communities.

- **Importance to Prosperity of the State.** Ensuring all families and children have equitable access to affordable high-quality care is key not only to the healthy growth and development of Nebraska's children but 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.

Based on these findings and discussions with colleagues, community members, and early childhood professionals across Nebraska, commission members came to the following conclusions:

- A highly qualified early childhood workforce is the cornerstone of high-quality early care and education.
- Adequate compensation and a supportive professional environment are critical to ensuring that the early childhood workforce is diverse and highly qualified.
- Supporting a highly qualified early childhood workforce requires long-term investment.
- Elevating Nebraska's early childhood workforce to a priority profession will require deepening the public's understanding of the issues, engaging them in conversations about how to improve early care and education in their communities, and equipping them to take action.
- Change requires action. Lasting change requires collective action. For sustainable change to occur, stakeholders and partners across Nebraska must work together, on behalf of all children and families, to coordinate the ongoing collaboration, communication, and accountability efforts essential to successful implementation.

Over the past year, commission members consolidated these key findings and conclusions in a comprehensive plan. This plan is summarized by the following vision, goals, and recommendations that are designed to guide statewide efforts to ensure high-quality early care and education from birth through Grade 3 for all children and families in Nebraska.

Vision: Nebraska will elevate the early childhood workforce to a priority profession benefitting all children from birth through Grade 3.

Goal 1: Nebraska's early childhood workforce will be highly qualified and will reflect the diversity of the children and families they serve.

- 1.1 Define and support high-quality practice across all early care and education settings.
- 1.2 Develop professional pathways that are affordable and accessible in order to recruit and retain a diverse early childhood workforce.

Goal 2: Early care and education in Nebraska will be fully funded by 2030.

- 2.1 Build on Nebraska's current investment in early care and education.
- 2.2 Develop locally informed cost estimates of high-quality early care and education with a highly qualified, adequately compensated workforce.
- 2.3 Close the funding gap between Nebraska's current investments and the total investments needed to fully fund high-quality early care and education.

Goal 3: Nebraska will champion high-quality early care and education and the critical role of the workforce in young children's learning and development.

- 3.1 Inform Nebraskans of the importance of the early childhood workforce to high-quality early care and education and what is at stake for Nebraska's future.
- 3.2 Engage Nebraskans in statewide efforts to support the early childhood workforce and high-quality early care and education.
- 3.3 Seek Nebraskans' commitment to support high-quality early care and education and the early childhood workforce.

Goal 4: Nebraskans will implement the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission's recommendations to achieve a highly qualified and diverse workforce on behalf of all young children and their families.

- 4.1 Develop and implement the infrastructure needed to support continued coordination, collaboration, and communication across sectors.
- 4.2 Authentically engage stakeholders within and across communities in order to broaden coalition participation.

As the commission completes its three-year appointment, its members are poised and ready to transition their focus from the formal life of the commission to an ongoing statewide coalition. This coalition will ensure implementation of the commission's recommendations for the well-being of our children and our families, and for the economic vitality of our communities and our state—now and in the future. Going forward, commission members are committed to working collectively to expand collaboration across the state—honoring ongoing efforts to improve early care and education in Nebraska, building on the trusting relationships commission members have developed, and inviting innovative thought partners to join this collective effort.

As Nebraskans, we know what it means to work hard, to work together, and to keep working until a job is done well. We appreciate common-sense solutions, innovation, and independent thinking. If there's a better road, we're not afraid to take it. Our task is to use the findings of research and what we've learned from everyday experience to elevate Nebraska's early childhood workforce.

"A priority profession is a profession whose work is essential to the social and economic well-being of communities and, therefore, critical to the state's future."

Visit EarlyYearsMatter.org/workforce for the full report.

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska does not discriminate based on race, color, ethnicity, national origin, sex, pregnancy, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, disability, age, genetic information, veteran status, marital status, and/or political affiliation in its programs, activities, or employment. For questions, accommodations, or assistance, please call/contact the University of Nebraska Chief Compliance Officer (phone: 402.472.8404). 073WKFCDOC0120