

BUFFETT EARLY CHILDHOOD INSTITUTE

Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan Annual Report: 2022-23

EIGHTH YEAR REPORT



Buffett
Early Childhood
Institute

at the University of Nebraska



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Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan Overview

We know from more than 60 years of early childhood research what quality early care and education looks like and how it benefits children throughout their lifetime. The Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan is designed to translate this knowledge into practice to close opportunity gaps for young children facing persistent economic and social disparities across the Omaha metro area—because all children deserve the opportunity to succeed.

WHY THE PLAN WAS CREATED

The Superintendents’ Plan was launched in Omaha and surrounding communities in fall 2015. It was created in response to state legislation directing metro Omaha area superintendents to develop and enact a plan to ensure young children living in neighborhoods impacted by high concentrations of poverty have equitable access to the quality early care and education opportunities they need to succeed in life. The plan was developed by the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska in partnership with the 11 school districts of the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties. School district and Institute partners work together to implement the plan.

The plan is grounded in the understanding that local elementary schools can serve as community hubs that connect young children, birth–Grade 3, and their families to quality early learning experiences. It draws from decades of research showing that quality early childhood programming—that is, programming that incorporates home visiting, builds connections between families and schools, and facilitates children’s transitions from early childhood programs into the primary grades—provides significant benefits to children.ⁱ For example, children who experience quality in their early care and education are more likely to:

- Develop the cognitive skills they need to succeed
- Obtain a college degree and have full-time employment in adulthood
- Experience positive lifetime health outcomes

The Superintendents’ Plan is designed to translate this knowledge into practice by engaging people across all levels of a school district community in collaborative efforts to improve birth–Grade 3 policies and practices. Research shows that this type of collaborative, behind-the-scenes work—involving district and school leaders, early childhood educators, community partners, and families—is necessary to ensure that every adult who works with young children can access the professional resources and

support they need to provide quality early learning opportunities to each child who walks through their door.ⁱⁱⁱ

This systemic, community-based, and evidence-based framework—known as the “School as Hub Birth–Grade 3 Approach”—guides everything that school district and Institute partners do as we work together to help Omaha metro school districts build their capacity to provide quality early learning opportunities to all children, from birth through Grade 3.^{iv}

WHAT THE PLAN PROVIDES

The plan provides three levels of support—to school districts, elementary schools, and early childhood professionals in the Omaha metro—as follows:

- Customized Assistance to School Districts. All 11 school districts in the Learning Community have access to consultation services through the Superintendents’ Plan. These services are tailored to the unique strengths and needs of each district and are designed to help them build their organizational infrastructure and capacity for providing quality early childhood programming to all young children in their district. Consultation services are provided by Institute staff in collaboration with other state and national consultants.

In 2022–23, leaders in nine of the 11 Learning Community districts participated in Customized Assistance consultation services to develop and implement district action plans that specify what they are doing to close opportunity gaps for young children.

- School as Hub Programming in Selected Elementary Schools. The plan provides more intensive support to selected elementary schools in neighborhoods impacted by high concentrations of poverty to promote equitable early learning opportunities for young children living in those neighborhoods. These schools implement programming designed to establish the school as a “hub” that connects young children and their families with quality early childhood services and resources. Each of these “School as Hub” schools employs family and community engagement staff (a home visitor, family facilitator, and/or a community facilitator), funded by the plan and supported by the Institute, to provide early parenting supports, connect schools to community child care centers, and promote family-school-community partnerships.

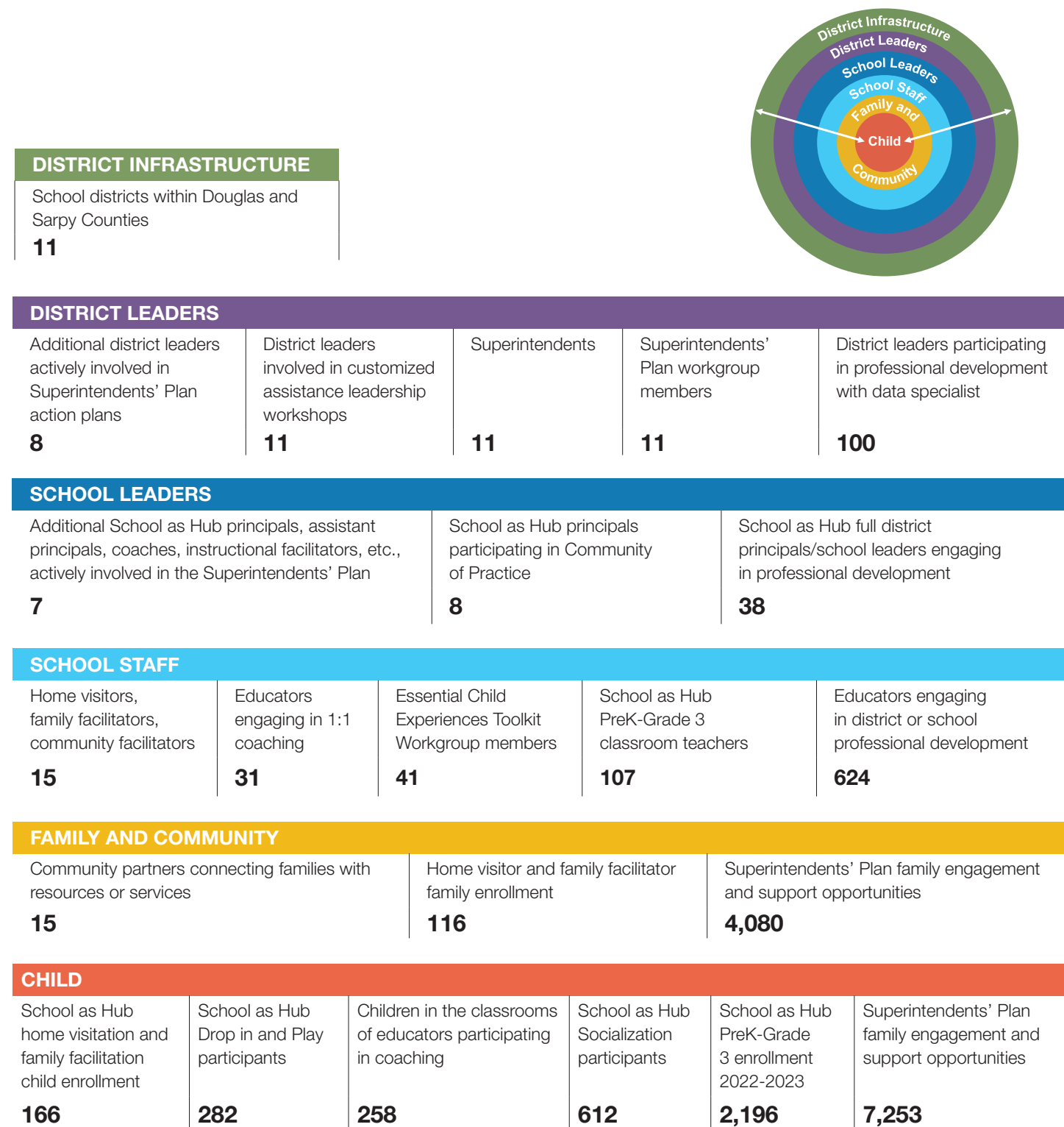
In the 2022–23 academic year, eight schools across six districts received support to implement School as Hub programming.

- Professional Development for All. Professional Development for All, or “PD for All,” is an annual series of free learning opportunities available to early childhood professionals who work with children from birth through Grade 3 in Douglas and Sarpy Counties. These opportunities introduce evidence-based instructional practices while creating a space for early childhood professionals to gather and learn from one another. Each series is designed in response to the emerging needs of metro-area early childhood educators, who help shape both the content and format of PD for All.

In 2022–23, PD for All was provided in three “bite-sized” learning sessions—a type of digital learning that is delivered in small pieces to meet the needs of 21st-century professionals who are seeking quality instruction in easily accessible formats.

A summary of the consultation and support services available at each level of support is provided in Appendix A, and Figure 1 summarizes participation numbers for 2022–23.

FIGURE 1. | SUPERINTENDENTS' EARLY CHILDHOOD PLAN 2022-2023 SCHOOL YEAR PARTICIPATION NUMBERS



Evaluation of the Plan

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan is evaluated annually, with a focus on identifying the extent to which the plan is advancing birth–Grade 3 practices and programming in participating districts and schools. The third-party evaluation is conducted by the Munroe-Meyer Institute at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, and Institute and school district partners use evaluation findings to refine and improve their collaborative efforts.

Since the plan was initiated in 2015, annual evaluation findings have shown increasing awareness, understanding, and commitment to implementing birth–Grade 3 programming among educators and staff in participating districts and schools. School as Hub schools report a growing commitment and capacity to engage families of young children in new and more inclusive ways. These schools also report improvements in teacher-child interactions and instruction in PreK–Grade 3 classrooms. Families that participate in home visiting, family facilitation, and parent-child socialization opportunities report many positive experiences, including increased connection with school leaders and teachers and reduced familial stress.

When the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools across the Omaha metro area in the spring of 2020, school district and Institute partners worked quickly to adapt the plan's programming and services to meet the immediate needs of children and families in School as Hub schools. In 2021–22, as schools returned to in-person learning full time, Institute staff took an "all hands on deck" approach to support the day-to-day needs of schools experiencing staffing shortages. At the same time, Institute staff facilitated district-level efforts to develop birth–Grade 3 action plans tailored to each district.

In 2022–23, Institute partners supported districts and schools as they began implementing district-level action plans. The evaluation was designed to assess the level of collaboration between the Institute and district partners, and the effect of the Superintendents' Plan on school districts' practices in three high-impact areas—leadership effectiveness, instructional excellence, and family and community partnership engagement. In addition, the evaluation assessed the impact of the plan's professional development opportunities, including PD for All and the Essential Child Experiences Instructional Toolkit workgroup, on participating early childhood educators.

Key takeaways from the 2022–23 evaluation report include:

- District leaders value consulting with local and national experts to establish early learning priorities that are responsive to the strengths and needs of children and families in their district.

- School districts with School as Hub sites see collaboration with the Institute team and their colleagues as a key support for reaching action plan goals, including gaining knowledge and resolving challenges.
- School as Hub leaders and staff appreciated having district leaders actively involved in school-based team meetings because it helped them connect their work to district goals—and vice versa.
- For district leaders, understanding the perspectives of those directly engaged in School as Hub work has informed their decision-making at the district level, generating new intentionality and momentum in advancing birth–Grade 3 priorities.

The following section summarizes key accomplishments and additional insights gleaned from implementing and evaluating the Superintendents’ Plan in 2022–23. Detailed evaluation findings are available in the 2022–23 Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan Evaluation Report.



Key Accomplishments in 2022–23

LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

In 2022–23, the Superintendents’ Plan partners provided more explicit support to district and school leaders—and asked more of them.

District Leaders

Members of the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan workgroup, which includes representatives from the 11 school districts in Douglas and Sarpy Counties, expanded their leadership roles in 2022–23. Workgroup members collaborated with others in their district—including fellow district leaders, school leaders, teachers, and family engagement staff—to develop action plans based on the unique interests and needs of their districts in early learning. Highlights from these efforts include the following:

- Across all districts, more district leaders engaged in the plan than ever before.
- Consultation opportunities were expanded for the five districts in the Learning Community that have access to Customized Assistance resources but do not have School as Hub schools.
- Eleven leaders from two districts engaged in a workshop series with a national expert in early learning leadership focused on how to enhance district-level infrastructure and capacity to effectively support quality, continuity, and equity in early childhood programming.
- Leaders from two districts with School as Hub sites worked with Institute staff to expand and enhance their data systems to facilitate the collection and use of data from all early childhood programs across their districts; these districts can now use the data to guide programmatic improvements districtwide.
- Asking more from district leaders was first met with reservations—but as progress became evident, momentum and commitment grew and continues to build.

“District leaders such as myself have benefited from our collaboration with local and national experts. We are provided the time we need to vision, create, and enact action plans to help us develop our school leaders, focus on high-leverage instructional practices, and engage our families. Our expertise and systems thinking have been greatly influenced, which has led to better alignment in our birth through Grade 3 curriculum and early childhood programming.”

- District administrator

“I appreciate what you guys are doing. Early on in the process it was like ‘oh, here’s another thing.’ But as you start seeing that momentum and start to see the change made, all of a sudden that thing that you thought you had to do, you kind of want to do. You appreciate that it’s occurring because you start to see that change. Having that plan and the consistency—you’re starting to see the benefits.”

- District administrator

School Leaders

The eight School as Hub principals participated in individualized coaching or consultation meetings with Institute staff and monthly community of practice meetings focused on developing capacity as leaders of early learning in their buildings. They also worked with Institute staff to provide leadership at monthly School as Hub team meetings, including district leaders, family facilitators, home visitors, and community facilitators. Highlights from the year include the following:

- School as Hub principals valued learning from each other during their monthly community of practice meetings about how to improve family engagement practices.
- Survey results show that principals increased their competency to engage intentionally with families, especially those who have been historically marginalized.
- Principals also showed growth in ensuring smooth transitions for students and families as they enter Kindergarten and change grade levels through Grade 3.

“It was great to connect with other principals on topics that are relevant to my daily work. I was able to connect with another principal regarding some strategies they have implemented at their building, and we have interest in exploring these strategies in our own building. We are working through our site planning process. I am going to ensure family engagement is represented within our plan and my hope is that our parent/staff Belonging Team plays a major role in development and implementation of the plan.”

- School as Hub principal

INSTRUCTIONAL EXCELLENCE

Following more than two years of pandemic-related disruptions, the 2022–23 school year began with a palpable sense of renewed energy among school district and Institute partners to rebuild connections and promote learning success for children across the birth–Grade 3 continuum and beyond. District action plans called for increased instructional support focused on foundations of early learning. Institute staff partnered with district staff to support their instructional goals by providing on-site professional development opportunities. In School as Hub schools, instructional coaching and facilitated workshops were provided to PreK–Grade 3 teachers, paraprofessionals, and school staff. Highlights include the following:

- In collaboration with district partners, Institute staff provided 46 professional development sessions across eight school districts.
- Across districts and schools, leaders and teachers valued the professional learning focused on helping children develop the social and emotional skills they need to succeed—including skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.
- Institute staff worked closely with staff in School as Hub schools to coordinate coaching schedules to help address persistent, post-pandemic staffing challenges.
- When surveyed, educators who received coaching indicated that they viewed the Institute as a supportive partner for resource dissemination and as a supportive network.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS ENGAGEMENT

Building authentic relationships and connections among schools, families, early care providers, and community leaders ensures that students have access to what they need from birth through Grade 3. In 2022–23, Institute staff partnered with School as Hub schools and districts to strengthen and expand partnerships with families and communities. The commitment to families in School as Hub schools was evident in several activities and developments across districts, including the following:

- Family and community partnership engagement staff indicated that their greatest accomplishments were associated with developing trusting relationships with parents and families as well as being seen as a source of support within schools and communities where they work.
- Districts updated family engagement staffing to address staffing shortages and increase family and community involvement. When staffing shortages forced some

schools to close preschool classrooms, one district created a community facilitator position to help bridge the gap by building capacity among local child care providers.

- School as Hub family engagement staff expanded recruitment efforts beyond the school walls and increased the number of “two generation” socialization opportunities for children and their families—engaging more families than ever before.
- Family engagement quarterly meetings provided a new opportunity for School as Hub family engagement teams to come together to train on data collection procedures, review their individual school data, and to collaborate on new initiatives.
- New data-collection efforts highlighted the importance of community partnerships, strengthening the awareness of community relationships that were already established and reflecting schools’ commitment to supporting children and families by embracing the communities they live in.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR EARLY EDUCATORS ACROSS THE OMAHA METRO AREA

In addition to offering instructional support to educators working in schools, the Superintendents’ Plan offers professional learning to early care and education professionals from all settings through PD for All and other opportunities, such as the Essential Child Experiences Instructional Toolkit workgroup. Highlights include the following:

- In response to educators’ requests, the Institute delivered three “bite-sized” PD for All sessions in 2022–23 on the theme of “Building and Sustaining Powerful Partnerships With Families.”
- The PD for All sessions included 10-minute videos featuring local educators and community members as content experts, talking about strategies that work for them in the communities they serve.
- Participants valued the diversity of perspectives, bite-sized approach, and the video delivery.
- Participants in the Essential Child Experiences Toolkit workgroup valued connecting with and learning from colleagues across the birth–Grade 3 continuum and from different care settings, including home-, community-, and school-based settings.



Looking Ahead to 2023–24

The school districts of Douglas and Sarpy Counties and the Buffett Early Childhood Institute are expanding the reach of the Superintendents’ Plan through new approaches to collaboration. In 2022–23, the plan engaged more leaders, more educators, more community partners, more families, and more children than ever before. In 2023–24, plan partners seek to build on this momentum. Together, they will:

- **Continue developing clear pathways for all 11 districts in the Learning Community to access consultation services and other resources available through the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan.** The clarity provided by the new action planning tools and resources introduced in 2022–23 allowed more districts to tap into the plan’s Customized Assistance services and resources. Through conversations and collaboration survey results, we know that districts appreciate this clarity and value the Institute’s support. Collaboration interview results indicated a desire for more concrete support translating the birth–Grade 3 approach into practical strategies. In 2023–24, the Institute will continue to develop partnerships and learn more about the needs of each district so we can provide customized assistance efforts that support the unique early childhood programming goals and community needs in each district.
- **Use data to identify specific, concrete ways for leaders and staff to apply their knowledge about quality early childhood instructional and family practices to close opportunity gaps for children and families.** District and school leaders have asked for support in identifying concrete examples and action steps to accomplish their goals and create more equitable early learning opportunities for children and families living in poverty and other conditions of familial stress. In the coming year, the Institute team will expand its focus on data during district and school-based team meetings to drive targeted action plan progress and data-driven decision-making. This will involve disaggregating data with school leaders and staff to study which children are achieving positive outcomes and accessing essential support and which children are not. This approach will help leaders better understand where to focus efforts and resources to close gaps in opportunities and achievement.
- **Provide more opportunities to facilitate learning at the school level, increasing the number of teachers and staff who understand and intentionally implement birth–Grade 3 instructional practices and family engagement strategies.** Districts and schools are promoting children’s early learning and development by providing professional development and curriculum resources designed to help children learn social and emotional skills, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Going forward, district, school, and Institute partners will identify and facilitate new opportunities for more teachers and staff to learn, apply, and lead the birth–Grade 3 approach in their school settings.

- **Continue expanding family engagement and community partnership efforts, with a focus on engaging more educators.** In 2022–23, leaders and staff in districts with School as Hub sites reported increased engagement with families and/or community partners. Next steps will involve expanded connections with community child care centers, increased connections to community partners as resources, and more professional learning offerings for educators focused on family and community partnership concepts.
- **Continue providing opportunities for professionals across the Omaha area to access bite-sized learning that is responsive to their needs.** Staffing challenges and lack of substitute teachers make it difficult for early childhood professionals to leave work for a day to participate in professional development opportunities. Bite-sized learning makes it possible for educators to consume learning when it is convenient for them, and in 2022–23, educators appreciated being able to learn in their own time and in small bites. Looking ahead, Institute staff will offer expanded opportunities for PD for All participants to access peer-to-peer learning, using Zoom-based webinars and video facilitator guides to deepen understanding, localize content for specific settings and communities, and translate new learning into practice.

Together, these initiatives are designed to build the capacity of everyone in the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties—including district and school leaders, early childhood educators, community partners, and families—to work together to ensure every child has access to the quality early learning experiences they need to succeed.

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APPENDIX A. SUMMARY OF SERVICES AVAILABLE THROUGH THE PLAN

TABLE 1. | CONSULTATION AND SUPPORT SERVICES AVAILABLE IN THE SUPERINTENDENTS' EARLY CHILDHOOD PLAN, INCLUDING NEW AND ENHANCED SERVICES IN 2022–23

Consultation and Support Services by Level of Support	No. of Districts Participating in 2022-23	New or Enhanced Service in 2022-23
Customized Assistance—Services available to all 11 districts in the Learning Community		
District-Level Action Planning		
Annual action plan facilitation	9*	✓
Action plan review and discussion	9*	✓
Recommended activities to reach action plan goals	6	✓
District-Level Project Management		
Co-creation of long-range plans: activities, milestones, timelines, responsibilities	6	✓
Quarterly progress checks	6	✓
Summative progress reflection and report	6	✓
Using Data for Continuous Improvement in District Early Childhood Efforts		
Data collection system design and support for district early childhood programs	2	✓
Data collection and analysis connected to action plan goals	1	✓
Professional Development, Including Consultation and Coaching		
Facilitated presentations and workshops for leaders, teachers, and staff	9*	
Ongoing consultation for district leaders	9*	
School as Hub—Additional services available to the six districts with School as Hub schools		
School-Level Project Management Tied to District-Level Plans		
Monthly district planning meetings	6	
Monthly school-based team meetings in School as Hub schools, expanded in 2022–23 to include district leaders	6	✓
Using Data for Continuous Improvement in Family Engagement Efforts		
Data collection system facilitation for family engagement staff	6	
Professional Development, including Consultation and Coaching, in School as Hub Schools		
Monthly Community of Practice meetings for principals	6	
Monthly Community of Practice meetings and quarterly planning meetings for family engagement staff	6	
Ongoing consultation for principals and other school leaders	6	
Coaching cycles for PreK–Grade 3 teachers, paraprofessionals, and family and community engagement staff	6	
Family and Community Engagement Staffing and Services		
Family and community engagement staffing (home visitors, family facilitators, and/or community facilitators) adapted to district and school needs	6	✓
Family engagement events (“two generation” events for children and families)	6	
PD for All—PD services available to early educators and instructional leaders in the Omaha area		
PD for All “Bite-Sized” Digital Learning Sessions		
Three 10-minute videos	–**	✓
Six hour-long Twitter chats	–**	✓
Infographics and emails with links to additional resources	–**	✓
Essential Child Experiences Instructional Toolkit Workgroup		
Monthly workgroup meetings	–**	

*This number includes all six districts with School as Hub schools.

**Participation in PD for All and the Essential Child Experiences Instructional Toolkit workgroup are not tracked by school district; these opportunities are available to birth–Grade 3 educators in all settings, including home-, community-, and school-based settings.



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