



Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan

A dynamic plan developed by and for Nebraskans to provide all Nebraska children and their families with access to quality early childhood services that support children's healthy development from birth through age 8.

SEPTEMBER 2023

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Introduction

The 2023 Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan provides clear direction for building on Nebraska’s strengths to unlock the hidden potential of children, families, and communities across the state—building a healthier and more prosperous future for all Nebraskans.

WHY DO WE NEED A NEBRASKA EARLY CHILDHOOD STRATEGIC PLAN?

This plan draws on what we know—from the science of early childhood development, needs assessment data, ongoing collaborative initiatives, and the lived experiences of families and early childhood professionals across the state—to identify what we can do to build the well-being of Nebraska’s children, families, and communities.

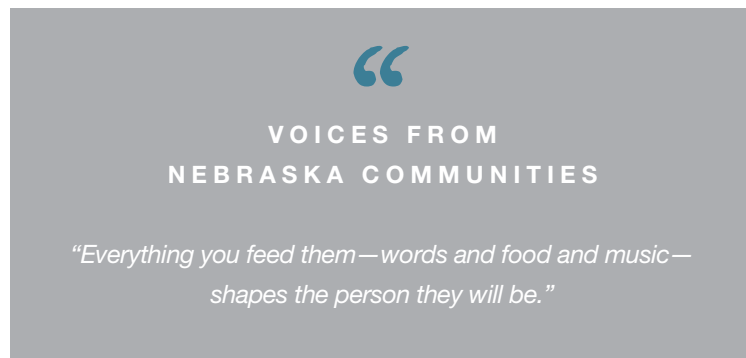
WHAT DO WE KNOW?

- **The brains of children who thrive are not born, they are formed.**

We know from neurobiological research that children’s early experiences have

lasting effects across the lifetime—and that healthy development during these pivotal early years requires reliable, positive, and consistent interactions between the developing child and familiar, caring adults. As children grow, the degree to which they reach their potential is shaped by the experiences they have with adults in their families, child care settings, schools, and communities.

- **Children’s learning and education begins at home with their parents and families—and all families rely on a network of people and resources to build stable, healthy homes.** Research and common sense tell us that helping children thrive means ensuring families can access the resources and services they need to establish and maintain a healthy and stable home.
- **The building blocks of family stability and children’s well-being are reflected in the resources and services of Nebraska’s early childhood system.** The basic building blocks of family well-being and stability include meaningful employment with adequate wages, safe homes and nutritious food, reliable transportation, a full range of physical and mental health services, social support networks, quality early care and education, and crisis services for when life’s challenges become overwhelming. In Nebraska’s early childhood mixed delivery system (see Figure 1), service providers, programs, organizations, and agencies in our communities and across the state are working hard to help families access the services and resources they need.



- **For families with young children, quality early care and education is a cornerstone of building well-being.** In Nebraska, more than 72% of children under age 6 live in homes where all adults work—meaning families often rely on professionals in early care and education settings to partner with them in providing the quality experiences young children need to thrive. And just like families, early childhood professionals rely on a wide range of resources and professional supports to build the skills, knowledge, and well-being they need to consistently provide quality care to the children and families they serve.

FIGURE 1 | RESOURCES AND SERVICES IN NEBRASKA’S EARLY CHILDHOOD MIXED DELIVERY SYSTEM.



- **As the COVID-19 pandemic made clear, maintaining a robust early care and education infrastructure is essential to maintaining the economic vitality of our communities, state, and nation.** When pandemic restrictions forced early childhood providers to close their doors, many parents were forced to quit their jobs due to lack of available appropriate care, and our communities and businesses suffered from losing valued employees. As Nebraska and the nation continue to recover from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring availability of and equitable access to quality early care and education will be an essential component of restoring and building well-being in communities.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Many ongoing efforts involving a combination of state, local, university-based, and philanthropically funded initiatives demonstrate Nebraskans' willingness to work together to build the well-being of young children and their families. Increasing collaboration among a broader range of partners will maximize the impact of ongoing early childhood initiatives—and will promote the development and implementation of new initiatives. These efforts are necessary to ensure that the doors to quality early care and education are open to all families.

This plan was developed to help guide and advance our collaborative efforts to ensure that every child has the quality early experiences they need to thrive. Because when children thrive, so do our families and communities.

WHO DEVELOPED THE PLAN?

The Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan is a collaborative plan developed by and for Nebraskans that invites people across the state to work together to ensure equitable access to quality early childhood services for every child in Nebraska. Early childhood collaborators across Nebraska have undertaken a collaborative, inclusive, and statewide approach to assessing early childhood strengths and needs and identifying system-wide improvements that will ensure equitable access to quality early care and education for all children. The result is this, the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan.

The plan was first released in 2020 and was based on findings from a statewide needs assessment conducted in 2019. The original plan was developed prior to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nebraska and before the summer of 2020, when events on the national stage shined a spotlight on persistent race-related disparities that must be addressed across the nation and in our communities to ensure equity for all. These events exposed the ongoing challenges, inefficiencies, and inequities within early childhood systems across the country.

The plan has been updated for 2023 based on new input from more Nebraskans. In Nebraska, events of the past few years highlighted the urgent need to strengthen our early childhood infrastructure to ensure equitable access to quality services for all children and families. This sense of urgency was echoed by Nebraskans from diverse communities across the state who participated in the following efforts to improve and refine the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan from 2021 to 2023:

- **Focus groups with families.** In 2021, focus groups were conducted with families who have been historically under-resourced to learn about their needs and priorities for providing quality early care to their children. Also, multiple surveys were conducted with early care and education providers statewide, including a survey in Spanish.
- **SPEAQ Up! Nebraska events.** In 2022, families and early childhood providers were invited to participate in Strategic Planning for Equitable Access to Quality early care and education in Nebraska (SPEAQ Up! Nebraska) events. To encourage open and meaningful discussions about participants' concerns and suggestions for change, these events were hosted by facilitators based within each community. The SPEAQ

Up! Nebraska events intentionally reached out to and captured more voices from diverse communities across the state than were reflected in the 2020 plan—including people living in rural areas, people of color, families of children with disabilities, people in Spanish-speaking communities, and more. (See Appendix A for details about the community engagement process and Appendix B for a summary of participant demographics.)

By listening to Nebraskans and updating this plan based on their suggestions, we can be more confident that any adjustments in the early childhood system will work well for far more families and many more communities.

WHAT ARE THE PLAN'S VISION AND GOALS?

VISION

The vision of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan is to provide all Nebraska children and their families with access to quality early childhood services that support children's healthy development from birth through age 8. All children means each child—in every town, county, and city; of every color and ethnicity; of every ability level; from every family, inclusive of language, religion, or family structure; and in every child care setting. Access to quality care and education for each child, no exceptions.

GOALS

To achieve this ambitious vision, the strategic plan identifies four strategic goals. Each goal includes specific objectives and strategies that identify changes to programs, policies, and processes—across state-level systems and across communities—that will increase equitable access to quality early care and education.

**ACCESS TO QUALITY CARE AND
EDUCATION FOR EACH CHILD,
NO EXCEPTIONS.**

- **State-Level Alignment.** Statewide systems align to support communities in creating an integrated and comprehensive mixed delivery system for all children.
- **Community Collaboration.** Communities collaborate to create locally designed mixed delivery systems that provide equitable access to quality early childhood care and education and other essential services for all families.
- **Supporting Professionals in Providing Quality.** Collaborators support early childhood professionals to provide quality experiences for children in all early care and education settings.
- **Increasing Access to Quality Early Childhood Services.** Collaborators remove barriers and increase families' access to the quality early care, education, and other essential services they need to support each child's healthy development.

HOW WILL THE PLAN ENSURE EQUITY FOR ALL CHILDREN, FAMILIES, EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS, AND COMMUNITIES?

Together, the vision and goals reflect an **integrated system-wide and family-informed approach to increasing equitable access to early childhood services**. In this approach, state systems align and communities collaborate to support early childhood professionals in all settings and to ensure all children and families have equitable access to the quality early childhood services they need to thrive (Figure 2). When the system works well, the doors to quality care are open to all families, and children’s well-being grows.

FIGURE 2 | INTEGRATED, SYSTEM-WIDE, AND FAMILY-INFORMED APPROACH TO INCREASE ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES



The programs and services in Nebraska’s early childhood system have been developed over time by different agencies and organizations in response to a wide variety of needs and using multiple distinct sources of funding. As a result, the policies, processes, and programs have not been designed to work together—and a close examination reveals some complicated operations that are sometimes inefficient or conflicting. This makes the system difficult to navigate for the families, early childhood professionals, and communities who are trying to access the resources and services they need to help children thrive.

In this approach, state-level leaders have primary responsibility for identifying and fixing problems in the system, with the help of community collaborators across the state. The goals of the plan are designed to work together to identify and remove administrative and policy barriers that prevent families from accessing the services and resources they need to ensure their children’s well-being:

- State-level collaborators are in the best position to design next-level systems changes that can create equitable access to quality early care and education for all children

in Nebraska. Working together toward shared priorities, these partners can continue their work to align policies and programs across multiple agencies and organizations, supported by data-informed decision-making.

- Communities have a role and stake in ensuring that the building blocks of family stability and children’s well-being are available to all families in the community, not just some. When communities collaborate to develop customized early childhood plans, they increase availability and accessibility of quality early childhood services. An essential element of community collaboration is creating networks and relationships to support early childhood professionals in providing quality early care and education to all children.
- Creating situations in which children can develop optimally takes a team. The professionals in early care and education settings are team members in a uniquely influential position to shape each child’s experience and nourish their potential. Ensuring a quality experience for each child in Nebraska will take an abundant supply of skilled and experienced early childhood professionals who are equitably compensated and supported by their workplace and their community.
- When families have access to essential services, they can create the stability they need to build their child’s well-being. Ensuring equitable access will require identifying and removing policy-related, infrastructure, and other barriers, particularly for families of children with special needs.

GOOD STRATEGIC PLANNING AND LEADERSHIP FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE IS CREATED WITH, BY, AND FOR THE PEOPLE WHO WILL BE IMPACTED.

Families and early childhood professionals contribute by sharing their perspectives and recommending solutions. Our integrated approach includes listening to Nebraska families and early childhood professionals at every stage of the process.

We know that good strategic planning and leadership for change is created with, by, and for the people who will be impacted. Going forward, we call on early childhood collaborators and community leaders to continue listening to the voices and perspectives of Nebraskans from diverse communities and groups at every stage of the process—from planning and design to implementation and evaluation. Because we know that solutions created without their input may not meet their needs.

WHO WILL IMPLEMENT THE PLAN?

For Nebraska to realize the full potential of families and communities, we invite all early childhood collaborators across Nebraska to use this plan to complement, guide, and enhance their work. This plan reflects what Nebraskans have said is important to change to increase families’ access to quality early childhood services and to maximize early childhood professionals’ capacity to provide quality early care and education to all children. While no commitments have been made and funding has not been allocated to execute all the objectives and strategies defined here, this plan can serve as a guide for making programmatic changes

and bringing in resources and funding to support these efforts. The plan is already informing and enhancing the work of early childhood collaborators across the state.

Everything in this plan advances the cause of building children’s well-being, increasing family stability, supporting the early childhood workforce, and therefore building prosperous communities. No single organization can make the needed changes happen. But together, working as early childhood collaborators, significant change is possible.

We invite all readers to see themselves and their work in the plan, including:

- **State-level agency and organization leaders.** State-level partners are invited to use this plan to identify operational improvements and opportunities to collaborate with partners that will improve alignment and increase equitable access to quality early childhood services. For state-level partners and community leaders, this plan can serve as a guide for making programmatic changes and bringing in resources and funding to support these efforts.
- **Community Collaborators.** Designing collaborative early childhood plans customized to a community’s (or region’s) specific needs, assets, and barriers will result in effective early childhood systems. Effective community-based planning will involve bringing diverse partners to the table as well as assessing needs, identifying barriers, and choosing priorities for action.
- **Early Childhood Professionals.** Early childhood professionals can improve the early childhood system by choosing strategies in the plan relevant to them and reaching out to others in their field or community that are ready to build a network and share resources. By getting involved with community planning efforts, early childhood professionals can shape how other caregivers, teachers, and providers access the resources they need and how families access the early education their children need.
- **Families with Young Children.** Including family voice in changing early childhood systems is essential to ensuring the changes really work for families. Families can let their voices be heard in different ways: some will become advocates to policymakers; some will attend community planning meetings; others will organize an event for families in their child care setting. Not all parents will be able to participate in the same way, but any involvement will help improve the situations of many families.

NEBRASKA RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITY ADVOCATES

The [Parent Ambassador Program](#) is a yearlong leadership and advocacy program for parents of early learners in Nebraska. The goal of this program is to develop parent leaders and support them in advocating for their children, themselves, and their communities.

The [Policy Leadership Academy](#) is a leadership development program focused on creating momentum to influence policy issues that affect the care, education, and healthy development of young children. Graduates of the program serve as a valued resource to their communities and the public officials who represent them.

WHAT'S NEW IN THE 2023 PLAN?

In 2023, the strategic plan was updated based on analyses of the SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants' input. In short, Nebraskans affirmed the vision of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan and the overarching intent of the plan's goals and objectives, while sharing new insights and recommending changes to improve and clarify the plan. These updates are reflected throughout the plan, which is organized into the following sections:

- **Updates and Clarifications to Key Concepts and Terms.** Nebraskans helped clarify the plan's approach to equity. They agreed that changes are needed at the state and community levels to ensure that all children and families can access the services they need, when and where they need them. Similarly, they agreed that changes are necessary to promote equitable access to professional resources and supports for all early childhood professionals. Nebraskans also agreed that quality in early care and education is best understood by focusing on the child's experiences, and they clarified how people, settings, and systems work together to provide experiences that support children's healthy development. (Appendix C provides a full description of the conversations with Nebraskans that led to changes in the definition of quality early care and education.)
- **Updates for the Goals and Objectives.** Nebraskans' input on community-level priorities led to reorganized and refined objectives under the four goals. Input from stakeholders also made it clear that improving equitable access to quality early care and education for all children and families depends on more alignment across state-level programs, organizations, and policies, as well as increased community collaboration. This section provides more information about what we know and what early childhood collaborators can do.
- **Plan Summary Listing Updated Goals, Objectives, and Strategies.** For each goal and objective, Nebraskans helped to define specific strategies that will inform statewide alignment efforts and will help guide community collaborators as they develop local plans to support early childhood professionals and build access to quality early childhood services for all children and families.
- **Action Agenda Priorities for 2024–27.** Nebraska's early childhood collaborators have identified priorities for action, based on the plan's goals and objectives. These priorities frame the action agenda that will guide the state's efforts to align statewide systems over the next three years.

Updates and Clarifications to Key Concepts and Terms

CLARIFYING OUR APPROACH TO EQUITY

SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants directly informed this plan’s approach to addressing equity in Nebraska’s early childhood system. In listening to families, early childhood professionals, and other community collaborators, we learned about the barriers that families and children face in accessing quality care. And, importantly, we learned about barriers that early childhood professionals face when trying to access the resources they need to provide quality care for all children.

EQUITY EXPERIENCES AND BARRIERS TO ACCESS

Nebraskans shared stories about how children and the people who care for them experience equity, or do not, in moments every day, across time in their daily living. Both parents and providers talked about how their experiences of equity happen in the moments when they are trying to access a resource or service. They described experiences of hitting a block in a process, of being excluded from an early care setting, of not finding what they needed, of not feeling safe or accepted, of not being able to understand what they were being asked to do to meet a state requirement, and more. They also described what it looks like to experience equity:

- Families told us that they experience equity when they receive what they need to support their child’s healthy growth, learning, and development.
- Early childhood professionals experience equity when they can readily navigate licensing, find education opportunities, pay for their education, and pursue professional development.
- Early childhood professionals experience equity when they receive a living wage, when their physical and mental health care needs are met, and when they pay for housing and food for their own families.

Community collaborators also described issues that serve as barriers to equitable access to quality early childhood services for some families and early childhood providers in their communities. Some people face barriers to well-being that others do not. Some families are on shaky foundations and need help to build stability. Others may have overcome hard times and now need support to rebuild their well-being.

Families often face barriers to equitable access when they:

- **Have children with special needs.** One of the most common concerns raised throughout the SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings was how to meet the needs of children with special needs. Whether they lived in urban or rural areas, these children and their families face significant barriers in accessing the full range of services they need to promote their child’s healthy development and well-being.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC DELAYED CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT AND DESTABILIZED FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

When asked about what has changed in their community since the pandemic, SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants frequently mentioned the learning, social, emotional, and communication delays they observe in children returning to early learning settings. When families were locked down at home, it was nearly impossible for them to provide the full range of learning and development opportunities that are available in a quality early childhood setting. For example, many children missed out on the types of peer interactions that help them build the relationship skills they need to succeed in school settings.

In the lifelong process of building well-being, a global event like the pandemic shakes children's foundations, and repairs are needed—for the children and for everyone involved in caring for them. State and community organizations must now work to ensure that the building materials for mental and emotional well-being are available to early childhood professionals, families, and children. By leveling the foundation with aligned and coordinated resources, we can help children return to a healthy growth trajectory.

- **Live in rural communities.** People living in rural communities have more limited access to early care and education and other essential services for children's healthy development. In many communities, local economies cannot provide access to medical and mental health care or enough quality early child care settings to meet all families' needs.
- **Have low income.** Nebraskans living with low income are faced with difficult choices as they try to balance finding a job with wages that can meet their family's needs while also paying for the child care that is necessary for them to go to work. Repetitive or conflicting administrative processes and policies that offer financial support to families often create challenges for parents of young children.

Early childhood professionals often face barriers to accessing the resources, training, and support they need to provide quality experiences for children when they:

- **Are not paid a living wage.** Most of the people working in the early childhood field are paid less than minimum wage and many are themselves dependent on government programs to meet their own and their family's needs.
- **Have no health insurance or other benefits.** Without adequate wages and benefits, early childhood professionals struggle to access the supports they need to maintain their physical and emotional well-being.
- **Work in a setting with limited professional supports.** Many early childhood professionals face barriers to accessing the training and professional development support they need to improve the quality of care they provide and advance their careers. Home-based providers are often disproportionately impacted by these barriers.

For people who do not speak English or are learning English, navigating the early childhood system to find the essential services for their family—or to establish and run an early childhood business—presents significant difficulties. The

American systems for child care, government programs, and health care all function differently than systems in immigrants' home countries.

This means that immigrant

families and providers face a steep learning curve to understanding how to access the services and resources they need to build well-being for children. The process is made even more difficult if information is not available in a language they understand.

In SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings, people talked about specific issues faced by immigrant families:

- Many people, in addition to not finding printed or online information in an accessible language, could also not find people who speak their language to ask for help.
- When they did approach English speakers, they often faced unhelpful attitudes and responses.
- People with undocumented status often do not feel safe to ask for help or speak up when they have a problem, for fear of being treated badly.

SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants described a need to provide immigrants with information about their rights to ensure their access to services for which they are eligible and to ensure fair treatment with employers and service providers.

Some SPEAQ Up! participants described experiences of discrimination that limit their children's access to quality early childhood services. When people face more than one of the challenges listed above, their well-being and stability are compromised. In addition, the intersecting and compounding complexity of the factors described above significantly affects people who experience discrimination—including people of color, immigrants, LGBTQIA+ families, single-parent families, and others who are unfairly judged based on stereotypes. For example, some Nebraskans described how these intersecting factors significantly affect the ability of Black, Hispanic, indigenous, and other people of color to gain the social capital, the economic assets, and the access to quality early childhood education services they need to stabilize their families and build well-being for their children and their communities.



VOICES FROM
NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES

“There are times when one does not understand... So, if the page or what I am wanting to understand cannot be translated, then I have to wait for my children to get here or until they are available. And well, it would be better if you could do everything yourself, because well, you also should not just give up and say I can't, but there are cases where you do. I've had to say that I better not do it.”

Translated from Spanish

OVERARCHING COMMITMENT TO EQUITY

Many of the barriers described above are addressed in the goals, objectives, and strategies of this strategic plan. Given the importance of equity in providing quality early care and education to all children, the plan calls on all agencies, partners, and individuals to review their own programs and processes to determine if equitable access is being provided to all of Nebraska's families and children. In addition, across all goals, objective and strategies, the plan calls on collaborators to:

- **Include the voices and perspectives of those who will be most impacted by changes in Nebraska's early childhood system.** Those who will be most impacted include:
 - **Families, early childhood professionals, and community leaders from diverse communities and backgrounds across Nebraska, including:**
 - Families of children with disabilities
 - In-home family care providers
 - Families and early childhood professionals across all settings who:
 - Live in rural areas
 - Have low income
 - Have limited education
 - Are immigrants and/or speak a native language other than English
 - Experience discrimination based on perceptions of their race (including Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and other people of color)
 - Experience discrimination based on perceptions of their family structure, sexual orientation, or gender identity
 - **People from all sectors of the early childhood system, including representatives from:**
 - Public, private, and nonprofit early childhood organizations
 - Philanthropic organizations
 - Businesses
- **Consistently use culturally relevant communication strategies in multiple languages to promote engagement and understanding in non-English-speaking communities.** To promote inclusion and understanding among Nebraskans whose primary language is not English, the plan calls for translating all planning materials, communications, public-facing resources and tools into multiple languages, ensuring interpretations and translations are culturally relevant and readily understood by native speakers.

UPDATING NEBRASKA'S DEFINITION OF QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

A shared understanding of what it means to provide quality early childhood care and education is essential to ensuring that partners and collaborators across the system are working toward the same aim. The 2020 Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan introduced a new definition of quality early care and education that is grounded in the science of early childhood development and describes practices that promote the well-being of young children (Meisels & Gallagher, 2020). Through the SPEAQ Up! Nebraska process, community facilitators

invited families and early childhood professionals in communities across the state to review and provide feedback on the definition.

SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants who reviewed the quality definition overwhelmingly supported the original definition's two main components, including (1) its focus on defining quality in terms of each child's experience and (2) its identification of ways in which people, settings, and systems contribute to a child's experience of quality. SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants also suggested revisions and additions to improve the definition's clarity and to ensure that it will


**VOICES FROM
NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES**

"I absolutely love [the definition of quality]. I just want to bottle it up... You know what progress you've made in defining what quality care looks like? I love it!"

promote the well-being of all children and families by ensuring equitable access to quality early care and education across all settings. Their input resulted in the updated quality definition presented here. (Details about changes and additions to the definition are provided in Appendix C.)

Having ensured that it reflects the priorities of the families and early childhood professionals who will be most impacted by its use, the definition is ready to be incorporated across all components of Nebraska's early care and education system—from local early childhood programs to professional development programs, community-level collaboration plans, and state-level programs, policies, and operations.

NEBRASKA'S DEFINITION OF QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Definition: Children experience quality early care and education when they experience:

- Frequent one-on-one interactions with a caring adult
- Interactions that are warm, educational, and facilitate language development
- Physical and emotional safety in an inclusive environment

Adults promote a child's experience of quality by:

- Being aware of each child's emotional, physical, behavioral, and cultural needs and responding appropriately

NEBRASKA RESOURCES FOR QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION. Other resources in Nebraska that help families and professionals understand quality early care and education include [Child Care Essentials: Choosing Quality Child Care in Nebraska](#) and [Nebraska Early Learning Guidelines](#). These resources align with one another and with Nebraska's definition of quality early care and education.

- Consistently offering unconditional love, support, and encouragement to help children process and cope with any physical, emotional, or psychological traumas
- Building trusting relationships with families and partnering with them in the care and education of their children and in learning about their child's development
- Embracing the families' and children's cultural customs and practices, language, and background in daily activities and with the families in the care community
- Providing instruction that engages children physically, emotionally, cognitively, and socially, and individualizing instruction to each child's unique skills and needs
- Ensuring access, participation, and support for children with disabilities in ways that create a sense of belonging, promote positive social relationships, and help children reach their developmental potential (i.e., inclusive practices)

Early childhood settings promote a child's experience of quality by:

- Providing a developmentally appropriate, play-based learning environment with opportunities for physical activity, freedom to explore, time outdoors, and developing peer relationships
- Providing spaces and equipment that are clean, safe, and designed to foster children's healthy development and learning
- Employing caregivers and educators who have the qualifications, training, and/or experience they need to build positive relationships with the children and families they serve
- Promoting the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of caregivers and educators by providing appropriate compensation and professional supports
- Providing learning resources and structures, including classroom materials, routines, and adult-child ratios, that are designed to meet the developmental needs of the children being served
- Developing and implementing plans for inclusion to avoid expulsions by accommodating child-specific needs with appropriate resources and support

Local, state, and federal agencies and organizations promote quality experiences by:

- Designing and implementing economic, social, regulatory, and funding policies that enable early care and education providers to cover the costs of quality programs delivered by qualified professionals
- Developing and implementing continuous quality improvement practices that include observations of the child's experiences of quality in addition to observations of the structure and facilities of the care setting

OTHER KEY TERMS USED IN THE NEBRASKA EARLY CHILDHOOD STRATEGIC PLAN

Early Childhood Professionals. The term “early childhood professionals” is used broadly to refer to people in a variety of roles who provide and promote quality early care and education. Early childhood professionals are people in these roles:

- Early childhood providers—those who run a child care business, hire staff, and work with children
- Early caregivers and educators—those who work directly with children

- Home visitors and coaches—those who support families, caregivers, educators, and providers

Early Care and Education. The term early care and education is used to refer to a variety of settings in which children’s needs are met by adults other than their own parents. Children are constantly learning, therefore any care is educational, whether it is called child care, day care, babysitting, or a licensed early education setting. And that is why a child’s experience of early quality care and education is emphasized so strongly in this plan.

Children With Special Needs. This includes children with medical or mental health needs, physical or cognitive disabilities, learning differences, and behaviors of concern.

Goal and Objectives: What We Know and What We Can Do

For each of the four goals, the plan identifies specific objectives and strategies based on what we have learned about early childhood opportunities and needs across the state and what collaborators can do to promote equitable access to quality early childhood services for all children and families. In this chapter, we summarize what we know and what we can do by goal and objective. (Detailed strategies can be found in the following chapter.)

State-Level Alignment

GOAL: Statewide systems align to support communities in creating an integrated and comprehensive mixed delivery system for all children.

Alignment Objective 1: Shared Leadership Across State Organizations. Establish a shared leadership approach across state organizations to implement changes in Nebraska’s early childhood systems that will improve equitable access to quality early childhood care and education for all children in Nebraska.

Alignment Objective 2: Data-Informed Decision-Making. Expand the state’s capacity to support coordination and alignment of early childhood programs and services through integrated data systems that allows for data-driven decision-making at all levels.

Alignment Objective 3: Collaborative Statewide Partnerships. Continue building collaborative and inclusive statewide partnerships that will improve equitable access to quality early care, education, and other essential services.

Alignment Objective 4: Continued Public Education and Outreach. Increase statewide understanding of the importance of quality early care and education.

ALIGNMENT OBJECTIVE 1: SHARED LEADERSHIP ACROSS STATE ORGANIZATIONS

ESTABLISH A SHARED LEADERSHIP APPROACH ACROSS STATE ORGANIZATIONS TO IMPLEMENT CHANGES IN NEBRASKA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS THAT WILL IMPROVE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION FOR ALL CHILDREN IN NEBRASKA.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Work is underway to establish a new collaborative leadership structure for Nebraska’s early childhood system. By working as a team across state-level agencies and organizations, early childhood collaborators can continue their efforts to identify, prioritize, and implement the changes in policies, programs, and funding that will increase equitable access to quality early care and education for all children and families in Nebraska.

In response to the 2020 Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan, early childhood collaborators in Nebraska convened the Governance and Financing Task Force. For two years, this group brought together a broad range of experts from state agencies, economic development, higher education, the legal field, philanthropy, and public policy to develop initial recommendations for an early childhood governance and financing system that would ensure access to full-day, year-round, high-quality care for children 0–5 across the state.

Many of the same partners are continuing that work through the Shared Leadership and Finance workgroup. This workgroup is exploring options for a new collaborative leadership structure in which organizations from across sectors will work together to improve alignment in Nebraska’s early childhood system, while maintaining their independent responsibilities and obligations. A new leadership structure would ideally include representatives from a wide variety of early childhood organizations and stakeholders in Nebraska, including multiple state agencies, Early Head Start/Head Start, Sixpence, early childhood professionals, families, the business community, and philanthropic organizations.

Nebraska’s definition of quality early care and education is ready to be integrated systemwide. Nebraska’s definition of quality early childhood care and education now reflects best practices informed by early childhood research and the voices of families and early childhood professionals across the state. Using this definition across programs and services can lead to systemwide improvements that increase the likelihood that all children will experience quality early care and education. Effective integration of the definition will include helping parents identify quality care, training early childhood professionals to focus on the child’s experience, and changing how we measure and report quality outcomes in all settings.

Despite recent improvements, more work is needed to further simplify administrative processes. Families, early childhood professionals, and whole communities report difficulty in accessing early childhood services and other resources due to complex administrative policies and procedures. State agencies and programs have created application processes that meet their own requirements and obligations—but some of these processes unintentionally create repeated work for the people trying to access the resources. In recent years, progress has been made to improve some of these inefficiencies, but more work is needed in the following areas:

- **Eligibility requirements for families.** Families experience barriers to accessing essential services when eligibility criteria are defined differently for different programs. Misalignment of eligibility requirements limits access to public assistance programs (including the child care subsidy) that provide essential services that increase family stability and child well-being.
- **Access to funding for early childhood providers.** The complicated network of resources that early childhood providers must navigate to keep their business afloat contains standards and requirements that are not coordinated or may even conflict. As a result, providers spend time and energy navigating the policy and regulatory requirements necessary to receive funds from different sources. The administrative effort required to

braid funding draws their time and energy away from the children in their care.

- **Access to information for parents, providers, and community leaders. In SPEAQ Up!** Nebraska meetings, parents, providers, and community leaders spoke frequently of not knowing how to find the information about how to access services, of not knowing which services they may be eligible for (particularly true for immigrants), and of not understanding the information if they find it, particularly if it is only available in English.
- **Administrative support for community leaders in small towns.** Community leaders in small, rural towns said they cannot successfully access the resources that should be available to them because the administrative processes are so burdensome, and they lack the administrative infrastructure to efficiently navigate the state systems and processes.
- **Coordination of inspections.** Early childhood providers shared that if one inspector could come and check all aspects of their facility in one visit it would increase their efficiency and create fewer interruptions for staff in the early education setting.
- **Administrative support for family home care providers.** The uncoordinated inspections and administrative processes create nearly prohibitive burdens on many family home care providers, which prevents them from pursuing licensure.
- **Sharing resources across program types.** SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants indicated that several successful strategies built into the Head Start and Early Head Start programs are often inaccessible to providers in the communities served by Head Start. These community collaborators called for an evaluation of policies or regulations that would make sharing resources, funding, and materials across program types easier at the local level.



VOICES FROM NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES

"I think that they should bring to light Wood River's efforts. They do have a board. They do have a committee. They do have fundraising. They do all that. And they have some board members that are from Wood River, and some that aren't, because they didn't have the expertise for people within the community to do [certain things]. They do all of that, but it still has its hiccups. All the state requirements are draining on them too. Because you know, they have so much training and I think they've raised like half a million dollars when they opened. And they are already out of money. That child care facility gets everything. They get all the state funding, which we all know that you guys do not get out there. You know all the grants, all of that, they get all of that poured into that and it still isn't making it."

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO? Building on the progress that has been made in recent years, Nebraska’s early childhood leaders can prioritize, implement, and monitor changes to continue improving Nebraska’s early childhood system. Together, leaders can provide focus and direction to:

- Establish a shared leadership group to define and oversee priorities for change and improvement.
- Integrate the new definition of quality into processes across the state so that all Nebraska children experience quality.
- Identify the funding strategies that will maximize access to the varied resources that build families’ and young children’s well-being.
- Simplify administrative processes in the state’s network of programs and services.
- Successful implementation depends on including the people who will be impacted by these policy and systems changes in the planning and implementation processes. To support their participation, all information and engagement processes should be translated and accessible to all groups who will be impacted.

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**VOICES FROM
NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES**

"Because every government agency and agency that we participate in, they all say that their paperwork is the 'end all be all'—you have to do this for subsidy, this for food program—and we don't have about 20 hours to spend on each one. And I get that it's government funds so they have to be accounted for, but there's only so much a person can do in addition to all the things she's already doing."

ALIGNMENT OBJECTIVE 2: DATA-INFORMED DECISION-MAKING
CONTINUE BUILDING NEBRASKA'S CAPACITY TO MAKE DATA-INFORMED DECISIONS AND TRACK PROGRESS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM CHANGES.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Nebraska is building capacity for using data to inform improvements in early childhood services and programs across the state. Data-informed decision-making is essential to creating aligned systems. In a coordinated approach to systems change focused on shared priorities, documenting the progress made means knowing where you started, how far you’ve come, and whether the changes implemented are having the intended impact. To do that, reliable data must be available. In Nebraska’s complex early childhood system, data that can provide answers to complex questions will be generated based on long-standing partnerships and shared agreements to gather, integrate, and use data owned by different organizations and programs.

Key initiatives include the following:

- **Statewide Needs Assessment.** Several efforts in recent years have described needs and gaps in Nebraska’s early childhood system that are experienced by early childhood professionals and families in communities across the state. In 2019–2022, needs assessment efforts included statewide surveys and focus groups with families and early childhood professionals. During the pandemic, early childhood providers were surveyed in English and Spanish about the impact of COVID-specific restrictions on their businesses and their well-being. In all these efforts, intentional steps were taken to reach historically marginalized populations to ensure that their voices and perspectives were represented. Needs assessment findings have informed this strategic plan and have also been shared widely through reports, presentations, and briefings with organizations who are best positioned to act on the data and advocate for policies and practices that benefit children, families, providers, and communities.
- **Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS).** State agencies and other organizations gather data about the families they serve to inform their planning. These data are gathered under specific authority related to each program and funding source. Each set of data serves a specific purpose for the program that collected it. For many years, early childhood collaborators have been working to develop mechanisms for sharing data to create a more complete picture of how families and children are being served and to track children’s outcomes. In recent years, the Nebraska Department of Education made significant progress in developing the Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS), including progress in technology development, data governance, and data sharing and coordination. In 2023, the initial version of Nebraska’s ECIDS was deployed internally as a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) to demonstrate the capability of using data from partner organizations to address questions that can inform decision-making related to policies and program improvement. In the coming years, ECIDS’s capacity will be expanded to utilize data from more data sources to support other program improvement, research, and planning efforts by early childhood collaborators across the state.

NEBRASKA RESOURCES FOR QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION.

To inform decision-making related to policies and program improvement, [Nebraska’s Early Childhood Integrated Data System](#) can help answer questions like these:

- How many children are being served simultaneously by two or more Nebraska B-5 mixed delivery system programs? What are the combinations of those services?
- What proportion of children have access to full-day, year-round, high-quality early care and education? Does access differ by age, income, geography, disability, or race/ethnicity?
- What are the patterns of progress for Head Start/ Early Head Start enrollees? How are children served in their program doing as they move to Kindergarten and beyond?

- **Equitable Evaluation.** Nebraska is working to ensure that the full range of early childhood collaborators are empowered to access and use data to inform change in their community; this includes groups not typically included (families, early childhood professionals, community collaborators) as well as the groups typically involved (early childhood program leaders and evaluators, policymakers, state program administrators, advisory groups, and researchers). Creating ongoing conversations with all these partners through the repeating cycles of program design, implementation, and evaluation is a critical element of equitable evaluation.

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO?

State and community partners can continue collaborating to build capacity for ongoing needs assessment, data-informed decision-making, and equitable evaluation at all levels.

Access to robust data about people’s needs, service delivery, and effectiveness of programs will be essential to tracking progress toward shared goals and priorities. Establishing formal feedback loops to report on progress and reset priorities for change must include and be informed by the voices of people impacted by planned changes.

ALIGNMENT OBJECTIVE 3: COLLABORATIVE STATEWIDE PARTNERSHIPS

CONTINUE BUILDING COLLABORATIVE AND INCLUSIVE STATEWIDE PARTNERSHIPS THAT WILL IMPROVE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY CARE, EDUCATION, AND OTHER ESSENTIAL SERVICES.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Nebraska has a strong history of leveraging collaborative statewide partnerships to improve outcomes for young children. Nebraska has many programs and initiatives managed through collaborative statewide partnerships focused on improving outcomes for young children, including the following:

- The [Sixpence Early Learning Fund](#) was established in 2006 when state agencies and private philanthropy came together to create an endowment providing sustainable funding for high-quality early learning opportunities targeting Nebraska's youngest children at risk.
- The [Rooted in Relationships](#) program is a positive behavioral intervention and support framework early childhood educators and caregivers can use to promote young children’s social and emotional development and prevent and address challenging behavior. Partners include the Nebraska Department of Education, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, Nebraska Head Start-State Collaboration Office, University of Nebraska Medical Center-Munroe-Meyer Institute, and University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension.
- When the COVID-19 global pandemic hit Nebraska’s early childhood providers in profound ways, state-level early childhood partners gathered at weekly briefings to focus on meeting the immediate needs of children, families, schools, and professionals. They shared information, pooled resources, strategized policy solutions, and delivered much-needed supplies.

- In 2020, the Nebraska early childhood collaborators worked together with the State Legislature to change the child care subsidy eligibility and increased the payments to providers, which created more access for families.

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO?

Building on existing models of collaboration, early childhood partners can continue their work together to increase coordination and alignment of early childhood resources and services across Nebraska. To be most effective, these statewide collaborative partnerships should include representatives from across public, private, nonprofit, philanthropic, and business sectors. In addition, they should proactively include the people who will be impacted by their work in identifying needs and designing and implementing solutions.

ALIGNMENT OBJECTIVE 4: CONTINUED PUBLIC EDUCATION AND OUTREACH INCREASE STATEWIDE UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Statewide efforts are underway to increase public awareness about the importance of quality early care and education. In 2019, stakeholders involved in strategic planning emphasized that everyone—including parents, families, early childhood providers, schools, businesses, community leaders, state agencies, elected officials, and nonprofit organizations—needs to understand the value and impact of quality early care and education on children, families, the community, the economy, and the nation.

In response, the [We Care for Kids Campaign](#) was created to:

- Increase the understanding and appreciation of the role of the early childhood workforce in providing quality early care and education in Nebraska
- Expand recognition of the economic importance of quality early care and education and the workforce in Nebraska
- Increase communications capacity among campaign partners to sustain and continue community engagement efforts

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**VOICES FROM
NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES**

“Hopefully the community understands what the community needs—without child care, who can go to work, you know? And then, if we’re not educating our youngest people, what kind of a community are we going to have?”

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO? Ongoing communication efforts are needed at local, regional, and state levels to continue building support for quality early care and education for all Nebraska families. The pandemic shined a spotlight on the critical role that early

care and education plays in keeping parents in the workforce and ensuring economic stability for families, businesses, and communities across Nebraska. Capitalizing on this heightened awareness, early childhood collaborators at all levels can continue building awareness that everyone—including parents, families, early childhood providers, schools, businesses, community leaders, state agencies, elected officials, and nonprofit organizations—has a vested interest in supporting the healthy development and learning of each child.

Community Collaboration

GOAL: Communities collaborate to create locally designed mixed delivery systems that provide equitable access to quality early childhood care and education and other essential services for all families.

Collaboration Objective 1: Community-Based Planning Teams. Establish collaborative and inclusive planning teams within communities and across regions to build customized plans that increase equitable access to quality early care and education and other essential services.

Collaboration Objective 2: Inclusive Professional Networks. Establish collaborative and inclusive professional networks within communities and across regions to facilitate sharing of resources and coordination of services among early childhood professionals and essential service providers.

COLLABORATION OBJECTIVE 1: COMMUNITY-BASED PLANNING TEAMS

ESTABLISH COLLABORATIVE AND INCLUSIVE PLANNING TEAMS WITHIN COMMUNITIES AND ACROSS REGIONS TO BUILD CUSTOMIZED PLANS THAT INCREASE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION AND OTHER ESSENTIAL SERVICES.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Given the diversity of communities across Nebraska, and the socioeconomic and cultural diversity of people within those communities, no single plan for improving early childhood services will meet the needs of every community in the state. Instead, people with a vested interest in healthy outcomes for children and stability for families in each community (which is everyone in the community!) will need to come together at collaborative planning tables. Together they will decide how to pull in necessary resources and name priorities for action to ensure that all families and children can access the services they need.

At the state level, early childhood partners have developed longstanding and effective programs to support collaborative planning at local and regional levels. Examples include:

- **The Communities for Kids (C4K) initiative**, which partners with public and private entities in selected communities to support and coordinate planning for access to high-quality early care and education for all children birth through age 5. Through partnerships developed within each community, a customized plan is created to address each community's unique assets and needs with the aim of helping each community grow and prosper well into the future.

- **The Sixpence program,** which funds locally designed and managed partnerships that bring together community collaborators (school districts and other organizations, agencies and service providers) to develop strategies that address the early learning needs of families where they live. Each Sixpence-funded partnership matches their grant award through local funds and resources.



These programs serve as excellent models for community planning that is customized to meet local or regional needs. In larger towns with several large companies, plans will look very different than a plan created across several very small towns in a region.

Some smaller communities in Nebraska have worked together to develop their own strategies for increasing the availability of quality early care and education in their region.

In recent years, partly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, some communities worked together to develop their own strategies for addressing the demand for quality early care and education. For example, in southeast Nebraska, early care and education providers created a Facebook group to share ideas and resources for how best to stay in business and continue serving children and families during and after the pandemic.

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO?

Building on the success of existing efforts, communities across Nebraska can continue developing and implementing collaborative plans to increase equitable access to quality early care and education. These plans should also seek to create networks of essential services that build children’s well-being and support thriving communities. SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants made several recommendations for consideration in community-based planning, including:

- Use available data about families, children, and available services to inform the planning process.
- Communicate the mutually beneficial outcomes for businesses, communities, and families when quality early care and education is consistently available.
- Create a coalition of business leaders to strategize ways to strengthen their own workforce by ensuring that their employees have consistent access to quality early care and education.

- Work with local businesses and nonprofits to create agreements for funding and capacity building to increase availability of quality early care and education.
- Establish incentives for businesses implementing solutions that improve access to quality early childhood education.
- Identify and address barriers faced by children with special needs in the community.
- Create training collaboratives to ensure all early childhood professionals, especially home-based early care and education providers, can access training and professional development resources.
- Develop plans for supporting children’s transition to Kindergarten as a community-wide initiative.
- Consider creating community coordinator positions charged with ensuring all cultural groups within the community receive information and are represented in the plan development process.

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**VOICES FROM
NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES**

“[The key] was getting the community and business leaders and just people who have a voice in their community to speak out—how important the child care is, and early childhood. I think that’s made a huge difference for people to look at it a little bit differently. They care. They want to be here. They know how it’s important and how we can move it forward.”

To ensure that all cultural groups in the community are ready to engage, SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants recommended taking steps to build trust between English-speaking early childhood providers and community leaders and non-English-speaking communities. Some key steps in building that trust are listening to the concerns of people in non-English-speaking communities, asking which methods work best to engage with them, and translating all materials used in community planning and other collaboration into all languages represented in the community.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION SUCCESS STORY

When we bought the church building in Laurel, within a week we got comments that “You’re going to put the other ones out of business. And this other [center name] just opened up, they just raised their money, and you’re going to close them up because you’re providing another center.” And it couldn’t be more the opposite.

Matter of fact, we’ve met with their board and said, “Hey, maybe we can make this more favorable for both of us. Somebody might want more faith-based care. We’re going to provide a center. By the way, you are already set up to handle up to 10–11 kids right now, [and you] just need a director. How about if we try to work together and hire one director for both?” ... And all of a sudden, the dialogue started to change. And then when we brought the providers together for some meetings, a lot of them showed up. And they figured out—no, we’re not competing with you. We’re trying to help provide resources, okay? As a center maybe we can provide the technology and materials and things that you’re having to pay for out of pocket.

COLLABORATION OBJECTIVE 2: INCLUSIVE PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

ESTABLISH COLLABORATIVE AND INCLUSIVE PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS WITHIN COMMUNITIES AND ACROSS REGIONS TO FACILITATE SHARING OF RESOURCES AND COORDINATION OF SERVICES AMONG EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS AND ESSENTIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Some early childhood professionals in Nebraska have limited access to professional networks—and to the professional development resources available through those networks. In the 2019

needs assessment survey, early care and education providers were asked to describe

how they engage with other providers and schools. Their responses suggest that while there was some cooperation between schools and early care providers at that time, there was little true collaboration. Less than a third of early childhood providers described participating in locally coordinated efforts to access professional development resources with other early care providers, and home-based providers were particularly disadvantaged in this type of resource sharing.



VOICES FROM NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES

“What we are missing as well is empathy. Like to get rid of that egoism. Well, I know that others matter to me, but if we are in a community instead, and we all support each other, in other words, it can be more secure, there can be more healthy children.”

Translated from Spanish

The early childhood professionals who participated in SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings gave examples of situations prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in which school districts invited early childhood professionals to join the professional development opportunities offered to school staff. Although the challenges of the 2020 lockdown suspended many of those collaborations, SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants reported that efforts to restore the programs have begun.

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO?

Nebraska can continue building inclusive professional networks at the local, regional, and state levels to ensure that all early childhood providers can access the resources they need to provide quality early care and education. Sharing professional development resources and information among all providers—including those providing home-based child care, those in immigrant communities, and people speaking languages other than English—is a forward-thinking strategy that will better prepare more early childhood professionals and promote quality experiences for all young children. SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants described the need to consider the whole child’s needs, and the needs of the family, in forming relationships and gathering information from across many types of professionals, including early care and education providers, school personnel, health care and mental health professionals, social services organizations, and businesses. They also emphasized that authentic collaboration begins with building relationships that are based on mutual understanding and trust. Taking intentional steps to build relationships with early childhood providers and leaders in non-English-speaking neighborhoods begins with listening to their concerns and asking how best to engage with them.

Supporting Professionals in Providing Quality Early Care and Education

GOAL: Collaborators support early childhood professionals to provide quality experiences for children in all early care and education settings.

Quality Objective 1: Diverse and Skilled Workforce. Develop a diverse and skilled workforce by creating system-wide tools and processes that support career advancement and continuing education for early childhood professionals in all settings.

Quality Objective 2: Professional Supports. Enhance the well-being of early childhood professionals, emphasizing efforts to recruit and retain a robust and resilient early childhood workforce.

Quality Objective 3: Professional Supports for Home-Based Providers. Expand access to the full range of training, professional development, career advancement, and collaboration opportunities to home-based providers.

Quality Objective 4: Family Engagement. Promote the provision of quality early care and education through improved family engagement practices.

Quality Objective 5: Transition to Kindergarten. Increase children's experience of quality in their transition to Kindergarten.

Quality Objective 6: Step Up to Quality. Increase the provision of quality early care and education throughout the state using the Step Up to Quality system.

QUALITY OBJECTIVE 1: DIVERSE AND SKILLED WORKFORCE

CULTIVATE A DIVERSE AND SKILLED WORKFORCE BY CREATING SYSTEM-WIDE TOOLS AND PROCESSES THAT SUPPORT CAREER ADVANCEMENT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS IN ALL SETTINGS.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Efforts are underway to develop clear, accessible professional pathways for all members of Nebraska's early childhood workforce—with a focus on acknowledging skills and knowledge acquired through both education and work experience. Recent surveys of Nebraska's early childhood workforce show that many of the caregivers and educators not only have degrees in education-related fields, but also have considerable experience in their roles—12 years or more on average.¹ That length of service demonstrates a deep commitment to Nebraska's children and families. Many of the SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants expressed that same dedication and voiced the merits of what 10, 15, or 20+ years in the field bring to providing quality experiences for children. These professionals are seeking a credentialing system that formally recognizes the value of that experience.

PROFESSIONAL PATHWAY SUCCESS STORY

Career and Technical Education Project is a grant-funded program that supports low-income Native American participants in the Winnebago community who plan to fill jobs in high-demand fields like early childhood education in Winnebago, Nebraska. The program pays students an hourly rate to attend school and covers the cost of child care and mileage to and from school.

In addition, while they may have different titles and credentials, early childhood caregivers and educators in different settings have a very similar role—building relationships that effectively support children’s cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. Inconsistent titles and credentialing expectations make it difficult for early childhood professionals to identify and pursue clear career-development pathways. Meeting these expectations depends on access to higher education programs, and many aspiring early childhood professionals may have limited access depending on where the program is offered, how much it costs, and program flexibility and length.

Nebraska partners have undertaken several efforts intended to create clearer, more unified, and competency-based professional pathways. Examples include:

- [Nebraska’s Early Childhood Core Competencies](#) define the information about young children’s development that adults working with children ages birth to 5 need to know and understand about providing quality care and education. The competencies also articulate how that knowledge should be applied in practice. A complementary resource, Nebraska’s Early Learning Guidelines, was created to guide decisions about planning developmentally appropriate activities for young children birth to age 5.
- [Responsive Equitable Systems for Preparing Early Childhood Teachers \(RESPECT\) Across Nebraska](#) is a collaborative partnership representing five institutions of higher education engaged in early childhood teacher preparation in Nebraska and three core partner organizations that lead efforts to advance early care and learning in the state. The RESPECT initiative is designed to ensure equitable access to education and certification, using a competency-based curriculum and accessible pathways.

Nebraska’s early childhood professionals continue to face a variety of challenges that make it difficult for them to access ongoing professional development. Patterns of access to training and professional development reported in the 2019 Needs Assessment remain true after the pandemic. School-based providers have the most access to training, mentoring, and professional development resources. Compared to center- or school-based providers, home-based providers have the least access to professional development resources.

During the pandemic, early childhood professionals had far more access to training and professional development in virtual formats—which allowed them to attend trainings on more flexible schedules and spend less time driving to in-person events. The positive reception likely



VOICES FROM NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES

“I feel that it is also important that the teachers have more meetings where they can talk... In my job, the social workers have a meeting with the school counselors... Likewise, teachers will do that amongst teachers. I think it is important because, just like we talk here, we support each other, and we learn from each other.”

means that online resources will remain widely available to more providers. SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants shared one caution. Trainers and professionals alike recognized that moving to only virtual meetings meant losing the connections that are made between the trainers and participants, as well as among the early childhood professionals attending the course.

Interactions between trainers and participants during and after the event provide valuable opportunities to integrate the new knowledge into practice.

A frequent theme expressed by SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants was that not enough training materials are available in languages other than English and few of the trainers speak other languages. The result is inequitable access to the resources many early childhood professionals need to continue their knowledge and skill development. SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants recognized that progress has been made in making materials and training available in Spanish; they also recognized that more work is needed to reach other non-English-speaking communities.

Many of Nebraska’s early childhood professionals need additional training, resources, and support to consistently provide quality care to children with special health care needs. In the U.S. and in Nebraska, more than 15% of children have formally diagnosed special health needs or disabilities, and many more children have learning differences. Since 2020, a generation of children has experienced a worldwide traumatic event. The Nebraska early childhood workforce needs training, resources, and materials that prepare them to:

- Assist in identifying those children who need specialized help
- Customize care plans for each child
- Communicate with parents and families and paraprofessionals
- Provide individualized care that meets each child’s needs

In addition to the extraordinary stresses of the pandemic, many children face other challenging and traumatic experiences (abuse, discrimination, injuries, etc.) for which an intentional approach to early care and education is required. Providing training so that early caregivers and educators use a trauma-informed approach will allow them to acknowledge past events and use appropriate methods to respond to children’s needs and restore well-being.

Many of Nebraska’s informal care providers need additional training, resources, and support to become licensed. Many people in communities across the state are providing informal or not licensed child care in their homes (for Nebraska’s definition of License Exempt care providers, see [Types of Child Care in Nebraska](#)). They may be friends, families, or neighbors who “watch someone’s child” while they work, or they may be running an informal child care business with several families’ children. Multiple factors influence a family’s decision to choose a family home care setting. Among immigrant communities, the choice is often based in the desire to have their child(ren) receive care from someone who speaks their language, provides familiar food, observes similar cultural practices, and simply looks like them. Some of these reasons also apply to people from different racial or ethnic groups who are not immigrants. All these factors contribute to the child’s experience of quality. They also contribute to parents’ confidence that their child will receive quality care. For many of the providers in these situations, the barriers to

finding the training pathway or having the funding to get trained are complicated by language differences, cultural expectations about how training and licensing work, and whether the individual feels safe when seeking guidance from local or state officials.

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**VOICES FROM
NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES**

“In fact, I also started working without a license... I did not know what steps to follow. Then my co-workers started giving me their children, and a friend told me I'm going to tell my daughter to send you my grandchildren, and she brought me her grandchildren. Then she said to me, you know what? I was paid by the government. Then, Title 20 started paying me without me having a license... And they motivated me by paying me a little bit more, and they told me, if you get the license, you're going to earn more too.”

Translated from Spanish

Nebraska has developed resources to support the professional development of early childhood professionals, and additional support is needed to ensure all professionals can access

those resources. [Nebraska’s Early Learning Connection](#) provides a range of training and coaching resources to support the career and professional development of early childhood professionals providing programs and services for young children birth through age 8. The Early Learning Connection has a statewide hub at the [Early Childhood Training Center](#) and seven [Early Learning Connection Professional Development Regions](#) that connect to other local and regional partners. These resources are important examples of what early childhood professionals (especially those new to the field) need to help them navigate the educational options and requirements for progressing toward career goals.

SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants described the varying requirements for different educational and credentialing pathways as overwhelming. An important part of rebuilding the workforce will include ensuring that people can readily find the resources and training they need to pursue their

professional goals. For many, working with a navigator or professional mentor may be the key to successfully completing the required programs and processes, particularly regarding licensing requirements. To support caregivers and educators in non-English-speaking communities, having bilingual mentors available will be important.

NEBRASKA RESOURCES FOR LICENSING. The [Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative’s Tool Kit Program](#) offers materials, guidance, and support to help unlicensed and potential providers fulfill state licensing requirements, meet health and safety standards, and become part of a professional network for family child care business owners.

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO?

Nebraska can continue expanding efforts to ensure that early childhood professionals in all settings can access the education and professional development resources they need to advance their careers and provide quality experiences for all children. To recruit the early childhood workforce Nebraska needs, early childhood professionals must be able to navigate education and professional development pathways that are affordable, accessible, and equitable. Ideally, the foundation of these pathways will be based on unified expectations across educational institutions that align to the core competencies that lead to quality experiences and build well-being. Success in creating clearer and more unified professional pathways will mean:

BILINGUAL TRAINERS SUCCESS STORY

Hastings, through United Way there are bilingual staff who are helping child care providers, encouraging them to be trained and providing information in their language. I think that's huge to be able to have someone who can go in to those child service providers and educate them and provide the resources that they need. I feel like a lot is just not being able to have the resources available or someone who can provide that information in the language of the child's providers. And, we have a group of child care providers that are primarily Spanish-speaking. They have a group that they get together, and they take classes together and they are a huge support system for each other.

- Simplifying regulatory requirements to focus on the delivery of quality early care and education
- Establishing consistent expectations across institutions
- Strengthening content by aligning courses to core frameworks that define quality
- Increasing equitable access to training and education for people entering the workforce with systemwide changes creating financial support for education
- Providing education opportunities in multiple languages

We also need to provide more options for training that is designed to meet the needs of early childhood professionals in all setting types and to enhance the workforce’s capacity to meet the needs of children with special needs.

In addition, Nebraska needs culturally relevant training materials, particularly for outreach to informal care providers in refugee and immigrant populations. To help ensure the materials are meaningful and accessible to all providers, people from different cultural groups and Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and other people of color should be included in creating and reviewing training materials. Many caregivers and educators will benefit from having bilingual mentors available to guide them through the education, certification, and licensing processes.

QUALITY OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL SUPPORTS

ELEVATE AND SUPPORT EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS, EMPHASIZING EFFORTS TO MAINTAIN A ROBUST WORKFORCE THAT IS PREPARED TO MEET ALL CHILDREN’S NEEDS AND TO ENSURE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Ensuring that early childhood professionals receive the wages and benefits they need to perform their job well will be a critical part of community and state efforts to build a prosperous future for Nebraska. Nebraska’s early childhood professionals are passionate about providing quality early care and education to the children in their communities. But all too often, they are underpaid, have no health benefits, and often must enroll in government assistance programs to meet their own families’ basic needs.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average wage of child care workers in 2022 was \$13 per hour (\$26,500/year).² In 2023, the annual federal poverty level for a family of three is \$24,860, or \$2,072 per month. In SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings, early childhood providers talked about how difficult it is to hire staff at an hourly rate they can afford because job candidates can turn to a fast-food chain or coffee shop and earn \$3–5 more per hour. Not surprisingly, low wages and lack of professional benefits, like health insurance, create significant hardships for many early childhood professionals, resulting in high turnover.³

Surveys of early childhood providers about the impact of COVID-19 restrictions showed a devastating effect on the early childhood workforce. Nine in 10 early childhood providers that employ staff had difficulty hiring for open positions, citing a lack of applicants and inability to offer sufficient pay. Two-thirds of child care employers experienced staff turnover, with nearly 50% of providers saying staff were leaving the field of early childhood entirely.

Working in a setting that lacks personal and professional supports takes its toll on early childhood professionals, limiting their ability to provide high-quality care. The daily stress of working in the early education field can lead to emotional exhaustion, physical illness, burnout, and loss of interest in teaching.⁴ The mental and physical well-being of professionals is also directly related to their decisions to leave a place of employment or the field altogether. The

NEBRASKA RESOURCES FOR THE EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS.

Cultivating Healthy Intentional Mindful Educators: The CHIME program provides education and guidance on how to incorporate mindfulness and reflective practice into daily routines, teaching, and caregiving.

Reflective Practice FAN Training: Reflective practice helps develop self-awareness and increase awareness of others, allowing professionals to better regulate, make more thoughtful decisions, and have better interactions with children and families.

turnover in some Nebraska early childhood settings is as high as 26%. Turnover is particularly problematic because experiencing continuity with the same teacher over time is an important part of a child's experience of quality.

Early childhood professionals in SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings reported feeling extraordinary levels of mental stress, exhaustion, and burnout when trying to provide care for young children during the pandemic. Most of these caregivers and educators worked through the pandemic with young children (affectionately known as “super spreaders” in public health) without health care or mental health benefits to support them. They were aware of how the numerous stressors of the lockdown, safety protocols, and their own health were affecting the quality of care they could provide.

In surveys of licensed providers in 2022, providers continued to experience high rates of stress and mental health symptoms. And, despite reporting relatively high adoption of self-care practices, 45% reported experiencing some level of burnout.⁵ The pandemic and its aftermath have both exposed and exacerbated funding problems in the early childhood system and elevated the urgent need to create financial and professional stability for the early childhood workforce in communities across the state.

Early childhood coaches play an important role in enhancing and supporting the practice of early childhood professionals across Nebraska—and increased coordination is needed to maximize the effectiveness of existing coaching programs. One-on-one interactions between coaches and early childhood professionals promote growth in the professionals' skills and knowledge, enhancing their capacity to provide quality experiences for children. Nebraska has several coaching programs, including the Nebraska Department of Education's program, [Early Childhood Coaching](#), which focuses on observation, discussion, and reflection aimed at encouraging personal and professional growth. [The Coach Development Network](#) is designed to support coaches as they support early childhood educators. Other coaching programs in Nebraska include those offered through Sixpence Child Care Partnerships, Step Up to Quality, Rooted in Relationships, the Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children, Kid



VOICES FROM
NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES

“I have three coaches. That's the problem. I have a Step Up coach. I have a Rooted coach. And I have a Sixpence coach. Were they cross-trained? No. There's no time for my people who have three coaches to come out of their classroom three times to get three different coaching experiences. No time.”

Squad, Getting Ready, and more. Access to these coaching programs varies by the setting or credentials of the early childhood professional.

SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants appreciated the value that coaches add to their practice. Especially during the extraordinary stress of the pandemic, having a trusted mentor

provide guidance was a meaningful support. At the same time, participants expressed interest in coordinating coach training and services across programs. When coaches from different programs provide different guidance at multiple meetings, it introduces added stressors both to the caregivers and to the directors of the early care setting. Participants also expressed interest in training bilingual coaches to support caregivers and educators in non-English-speaking communities.

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO?

If we are to retain the qualified and healthy early childhood workforce that Nebraska's children need, we must continue and expand efforts to support the well-being of the workforce through adequate wages and professional supports. Systemic changes are necessary to ensure that adequate wages and professional supports, including health benefits, are consistently available to all early childhood providers, regardless of the setting in which they work. Enhancing coordination and training of the state's coaching workforce to better meet the needs of early childhood professionals in different settings, including in non-English-speaking communities, will expand professionals' capacity to provide quality care and education to all children and families they serve.

QUALITY OBJECTIVE 3: PROFESSIONAL SUPPORTS FOR HOME-BASED PROVIDERS

INCREASE ALL PROFESSIONAL SUPPORTS AVAILABLE TO FOR HOME-BASED PROVIDERS

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

In Nebraska, two-thirds of young children who are in child care are cared for in home-based settings—and home-based providers face unique barriers to accessing professional development resources and supports. In the 2019 Survey of Nebraska Households, 81.5% of families in the survey reported that their child was cared for by someone other than a primary caregiver in the preceding week. The majority of families in that survey (66%) reported using a home-based provider as their primary source of care and education. In the surveys and focus

CONNECTING RESOURCES FOR ALL PROVIDERS SUCCESS STORY

In Chadron, home-based providers said, “We'd love to do more engaging and enriching activities, but we just would love to have a resource center.” Providers were asked what they would like to have available in a community-wide resource. And the community created a community resource room so all of the providers can come and check out materials and have more enriching engagement activities with the children they care for.

This created the opportunity to connect with many providers and teach them about resources available in the community. When needed, there's the chance to help providers connect parents in their programs with other important resources, like the [Early Development Network](#).

groups with stakeholders through needs assessment and strategic planning from 2019–2022, the increased and complex barriers that home-based providers face in accessing resources that providers in other settings do not was a frequent theme.

SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants spoke frequently about prioritizing strategies that expand options for increasing access to professional development and other support systems for home-based providers, including most of the strategies articulated across the four goals of this strategic plan.

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO?

Across all initiatives intended to support early childhood professionals in delivering quality early care and education, explicitly include, and consider how best to support, home-based providers. Home-based providers of early care and education should be considered a priority population in implementing Quality Objectives 1 and 2, as well as when planning systems change to address other objectives of this plan.

QUALITY OBJECTIVE 4: FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

PROMOTE THE PROVISION OF QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION THROUGH IMPROVED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

When parents have clear information about their child's development and needs, and when they are engaged in their child's care setting, they are better able to support their child's development and learning. In the 2019 survey of Nebraska families, 93% of parents reported that they value providers who communicate with them frequently about their child's development. During the COVID-19 restrictions, the need to prevent face-to-face contact for the sake of safety disrupted the close connections between families and their children's caregivers and educators. As a result, less information was exchanged about each child's daily experience, and parents had significantly fewer opportunities to engage in the community of the early care setting.



VOICES FROM NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES

“Having a person speaking more than one language at the time of pickup would help the parents, because they would know what’s going on. Sometimes they get frustrated because they don’t know if their child bit or fought or if they ate or not because of the language.”

In SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings, providers reflected on how much they value the relationships with the families of the children in their care. They described not just enrolling the child in their program but also enrolling the whole family into the care community. To these professionals, providing quality experiences to children

means embracing multiple generations of the child’s family, as well as their language and culture, to ensure that the child feels welcome, safe, and seen.

SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants strongly emphasized the need to support families with information about their child’s development and with opportunities to connect with other families and key support providers. SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants also spoke about the need to ensure that information is communicated in a variety of ways—such as through gatherings of families, support groups, trainings, and written material—and is provided in the languages that families speak. These informational resources were highlighted as a priority for parents of children with special needs.

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO?

Early childhood collaborators can continue to support early childhood professionals in using family communication and engagement strategies to connect all families of young children with the information and resources they need to help their children thrive.

Providing quality experiences to children in early care and education settings includes building caring and trusting relationships with their families. Essential elements of family engagement are (1) providing educational materials to parents, particularly parents of children with special needs, in multiple languages and in accessible formats and (2) creating family engagement strategies that allow families to connect with providers, caregivers, and educators in meaningful and culturally relevant ways.

NEBRASKA RESOURCE FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

[Statewide Family Engagement Center](#) provides resources on family engagement and family literacy for Nebraska educators, families, administrators, and all educational stakeholders.

[Nebraska Department of Education’s Active Family Engagement](#) provides resources including family engagement practices as part of a larger School, Family, and Community Engagement Framework.

QUALITY OBJECTIVE 5: TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN

INCREASE CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCE OF QUALITY IN THEIR TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Nebraska has developed a toolkit and resource guide to promote continuity for children transitioning into Kindergarten—and additional support is needed to ensure smooth transitions for all children. Smooth transitions from one education setting to the next contribute to a child’s sense of stability and promote positive developmental and learning outcomes. An important transition young children go through is leaving home, a child care setting, or a PreK environment for the more formal education setting of Kindergarten. In response to the 2019 needs assessment, Nebraska developed the [Nebraska Transition to Kindergarten Toolkit](#) and Resource, which describes developmentally appropriate expectations and practices to support continuity in transitions for young children. The families, schools, and early childhood providers who are guiding young children in the transition into Kindergarten will find research-based activities, strategies, and resources in the toolkit.



VOICES FROM NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES

“We keep saying we get our kids ready for Kindergarten. And the shift needs to be – “We don’t get our kids ready for Kindergarten. We get Kindergarten ready for kids.”

In SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings, participants in many communities talked about the limited opportunity for communication between the educators on both sides of the transition. They reiterated a priority that emerged in 2019—that schools must commit to ensuring that Kindergarten

classrooms will be fully equipped and ready for each child that enrolls, rather than focusing on making children ready for Kindergarten. Participants recommended that additional tools be created so early childhood providers can consistently share the knowledge they have about children in their care with the Kindergarten teachers. They emphasized that parents would need to be active participants in co-creating the information packet about their child for the school.

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO?

Expanding on existing resources and partnerships, early childhood collaborators can develop additional tools to ensure teachers have the information and resources they need to provide smooth transitions for all children entering Kindergarten. Preparing Kindergarten classrooms to build the well-being of each year’s new group of learners is a team effort. If Kindergarten teachers have key information about the children in their classroom, they can better prepare their classroom to meet the needs of those children. By developing standardized forms or tools to accompany a child in the transition to Kindergarten, the child’s educators, caregivers, and parents will be better able to objectively share valuable information that supports

a quality experience, while limiting the impact of subjectivity based on personal beliefs or implicit biases. In the case of children with special needs, the need to communicate between settings with engaged parents is even more critical to the success of the transition to ensure that the classroom is prepared with appropriate accommodations. To ensure that children from all cultural backgrounds in a community benefit from these efforts, the resources used in the transition process should be provided in multiple languages.

TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN SUCCESS STORY

The ESU serves the rural communities around Columbus. And for kids that are on the spectrum or kids that have significant special needs, as they're transitioning to Kindergarten, I feel like there's a lot of communication that happens between the early childhood team and the families and the new incoming staff. [It is] a program that developed several years ago that was pretty solid, and that was locally done. I thought it was really good to get everybody on board. They have that current preschool teacher, the Kindergarten teacher, and then the parents and the special ed people that have been working with them. We were all on board as a team to find out what it was going to look like and what they would need to make that transition, like visits.

QUALITY OBJECTIVE 6: STEP UP TO QUALITY

INCREASE THE PROVISION OF QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION THROUGHOUT THE STATE USING THE STEP UP TO QUALITY SYSTEM.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Nebraska's quality rating improvement system, Step Up to Quality, promotes quality by providing a path for early childhood providers to improve the quality of early care and education in all settings. Step Up to Quality is designed to improve child development and school readiness outcomes, provide families with a tool to evaluate the quality of child care and early childhood education providers, and provide accountability for public funds invested in early care and education. Since 2019, Step Up to Quality has seen an increase in the number of early childhood programs participating in the five-step journey to higher quality.

Step Up to Quality 2.0 was launched in February 2023 after an extensive review and stakeholder-guided redesign process. The updated system aligns with new science and best practices in the early childhood field that have emerged since the system was first released in 2014. Step Up to Quality 2.0 continues to focus on supporting and training early childhood professionals so young children across the state benefit from growing and learning in high-quality environments. Improvements now available include simplified processes, continued incentives for advancing, expanded resources for family home care providers, more coaching, and new quality indicators. (Learn more about [Step Up to Quality 2.0](#).)

TABLE 2 NUMBER OF PROGRAMS ENROLLED IN STEP UP TO QUALITY		
	2019	2023
Step 1	183	289
Step 2	125	274
Step 3	54	87
Step 4	41	48
Step 5	19	35
	422	733

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO?

Nebraska will continue to evaluate and improve the Step Up to Quality system to ensure it meets the needs of early childhood providers and families across the state. Nebraska values continuous quality improvement and has set growth targets for the new Step Up to Quality system. The first target is to increase the number of providers who are making the commitment to improve the quality of the education and care they provide to children and their families across the state. [The Step Up to Quality Provider Search Tool](#) is designed to help families find quality early care and education in their community, with a target of 3,000 users each quarter.

Increasing Access to Quality Early Childhood Services

GOAL: Collaborators remove barriers and increase families' access to the quality early care, education, and other essential services they need to support each child's healthy development.

Access Objective 1: Availability and Access to Quality Early Care and Education. Increase availability of and access to quality early care and education.

Access Objective 2: Access to Quality for Children With Special Needs. Improve equitable access to quality early care and education for families and children with special needs (those with physical and cognitive disabilities, learning differences, medical and mental health needs, and behaviors of concern).

Access Objective 3: Resource and Referral Systems. Make it easier for families to find and enroll in quality early care, education, and other essential services through coordinated and culturally relevant resource and referral systems and information.

Access Objective 4: Essential Services. Expand access to essential services for all children and families.

ACCESS OBJECTIVE 1: AVAILABILITY AND ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

INCREASE AVAILABILITY OF AND ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

The COVID-19 pandemic created a crisis in early care and education that continues to impact families and early childhood providers, even as other parts of the economy recover from the pandemic. In surveys during the pandemic and in SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings, providers described several problems they faced during and after pandemic-related lockdowns and restrictions:

- In late 2020, almost all providers surveyed about the impact of the pandemic reported reduced enrollment, with the greatest reduction happening in child care centers. Also, 51% of providers reported that without financial assistance they would likely close if the pandemic worsened or continued.
- In SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings, parents spoke of the difficulty they had in finding any care setting for their child, because so many providers had closed their doors or because they could not find the few providers that were still open.
- Many people working in the early childhood field left and did not return, either due to stress or the opportunity to make more money working somewhere else.

NEBRASKA RESOURCE FOR BUSINESS TRAINING

Business Training Series: This 10-week series supports sustainable family child care businesses with help to build contracts, understand Nebraska's policies and codes, and create marketing tools.

Roadmap to Quality Care: This guide to business development provides resources to start and sustain a successful family child care business.

Stabilizing early childhood providers' businesses will create more available child care slots. Tuition paid by parents does not cover the costs of providing quality experiences and running a profitable child care business. Therefore, most providers depend on multiple government or private programs that offer grants or incentives. Even with additional funds, they must often choose between making investments in quality or meeting basic expenses and keeping the doors open.

Across the state, both directors of centers with multiple classrooms and family home care providers report barely breaking even or operating their business at a loss. Early childhood providers in SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings spoke often about the difficulties of meeting the administrative demands of running their business while finding and paying qualified staff to provide quality care to the children enrolled in their program.

Although several business training programs are available to help early childhood providers develop and manage business plans and navigate requirements for licensing, SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants reported that most of the educational materials and required forms for getting a license and running or establishing a business are available in English only. This creates an additional barrier for early childhood providers in immigrant communities who are striving to reach licensure and provide quality care in their community.

Many Nebraska families do not have the financial resources to pay for the quality of care they want for their child. Child care costs represent a significant percentage of the monthly budget for Nebraska families with young children. Table 2 provides a summary of how the average child care costs for children under 4 impact the budgets of families at different income levels in Nebraska. Families with lower incomes face paying a much higher percentage of their budget for child care, which makes it very difficult to cover other necessary expenses.

TABLE 2 AVERAGE CHILD CARE COSTS IN NEBRASKA AND CHILD CARE COSTS AS PERCENT OF INCOME		1 Child Infant/toddler	1 Child Preschool-age child	2 Children Toddler and preschool-age child
	<i>Average annual costs</i>	\$13,200	\$10,404	\$23,604
	<i>Average monthly costs⁶</i>	\$1,000	\$876	\$1,967
	MONTHLY INCOME	CHILD CARE COST AS % OF MONTHLY INCOME		
Median income of a two-parent household in NE (\$63,015/yr) ⁷	\$5,251	21%	17%	37%
Two adults with income at 130% of FPL ⁸	\$2,693	41%	32%	73%
Two adults with income at 185% of FPL	\$3,833	29%	23%	51%
Median income of a one-parent household (\$33,127/year)	\$2,761	40%	31%	71%
Single parent with income at 130% of FPL	\$2,136	51%	41%	92%
Single parent with income at 185% of FPL	\$3,040	36%	29%	65%

The child care subsidy program is designed to help cover the cost of child care for working families with low income—but eligibility criteria limit access for many families who need support. In 2021, the Nebraska Legislature temporarily increased the income eligibility requirement for the child care subsidy so more families were eligible to receive the benefit. In addition, they expanded access to the transitional child care subsidy for families whose financial situation was improving, to help build family stability. Early childhood professionals in SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings frequently mentioned the significant positive impact that these changes and COVID relief funds had on their ability to keep their doors open, acquire necessary supplies, and pay their staff. The federal relief funds will expire and the state’s changes to eligibility will also end

without further legislative action.



VOICES FROM NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES

“I think [affordability is] definitely a problem. I mean, as of last week, there’s only two licensed providers in Franklin – and that’s us – and we can only care for 25 children due to the size of our building. But the problem is neither of us take subsidies. So right now at the center we have three open infant spots and we have six openings for PreK and up, and we’ve had those openings since July and no one wants them because they just can’t afford it.”

In addition to the challenges of availability and affordability of quality care, many Nebraska families face other barriers to accessing care—including those related to transportation and scheduling. Barriers that were identified in the 2019 needs assessment continue to impact families

in a very different post-pandemic economic and employment landscape. In rural communities, particularly small towns, families often face long drives to child care before heading to their own jobs or education setting. Many families are also challenged to find early care and education arrangements that accommodate their scheduling needs. Families face situations where, due to the cost of child care, their work schedule, or shifting employment opportunities, they must arrange their schedules so that they do not need full-time child care. This not only creates additional stressors on the family, but it also creates a need for part-time or irregular care arrangements that are not offered by most early childhood care providers. SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants recommended engaging businesses and employers who hire people on shift schedules to participate in co-creating the solutions that will ensure they have a reliable workforce with stable families.

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO?

Early childhood collaborators can continue efforts to expand funding sources, help providers build and maintain stable revenue, and remove barriers to accessing quality early care and education for all families. Increasing availability of affordable quality early care and education for all Nebraskans requires investment. As active collaborators, the public sector and the business and philanthropic communities can work together to ensure that no family seeking quality early care and education services is priced out of participation by developing strategies to fully fund the total cost of quality early care and education. Collaborators can also expand efforts to ensure all early childhood providers have access to the training they need to achieve licensure and run their businesses effectively. This will include providing information and training materials in multiple languages and accessible formats. Finally, collaborators can promote efforts to establish long-term policy solutions for ensuring the state's resources are used effectively to create more consistent access to quality child care for children across the state.

ACCESS OBJECTIVE 2: ACCESS TO QUALITY FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

IMPROVE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS (THOSE WITH PHYSICAL AND COGNITIVE DISABILITIES, LEARNING DIFFERENCES, MEDICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS, AND BEHAVIORS OF CONCERN).

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Families of children with special needs face numerous challenges to finding and consistently accessing quality early care and education, and these challenges were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many families face barriers related to transportation, flexibility of hours, and additional costs associated with the child's disability or medical condition. Another unique challenge for these families is finding child care settings with staff who have the training and skills they need to provide individualized care to meet the unique needs of each child.

During and since the pandemic, SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants described the dramatic increase in the impact of these barriers on children and their families. Some children could not safely participate in a child care setting because their underlying health conditions put them at higher risk of poor outcomes in case of a COVID exposure. Because many child care settings faced staffing shortages, and some staff were not properly trained, providers could not enroll children whose needs were more than the staff could handle. In many cases, parents in these families were forced to quit their jobs due to lack of available appropriate care.

Since the pandemic, many more families and children are experiencing mental health concerns and related behavioral challenges. In addition, due to the extreme stressors of lockdown, unemployment, loss of loved ones, and other societal pressures that happened between 2020 and 2022, many more families and children are now facing mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression, and related behavioral problems. This has created a much higher number of children whose special needs have not yet been identified or treated. In SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings, providers asked for help in learning how to identify children's special needs and for the resources to meet those needs.

Caring for children with special needs creates a greater demand on caregivers and educators. In many cases, when a child care setting determines that they can no longer meet a child's special needs, their parents are asked to remove them from the program. These actions are called suspension or expulsion practices in early care and education. They represent non-equitable access to quality care for the children impacted by these decisions.

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO?

Across all initiatives intended to remove barriers for families, early childhood collaborators can explicitly include, and consider how best to support, families of children with special needs. Just as houses can't be built by themselves, children with special needs and their families cannot build their well-being on their own. Policy changes that remove barriers unique to these families are needed. System-wide change is needed, from state and community leaders and collaborators, to support early childhood providers with the training and resources needed to ensure children with special needs have consistent access to quality experiences, and therefore to the experiences that will help them realize their full potential.

ACCESS OBJECTIVE 3: RESOURCE AND REFERRAL SYSTEMS

MAKE IT EASIER FOR FAMILIES TO FIND AND ENROLL IN QUALITY EARLY CARE, EDUCATION, AND OTHER ESSENTIAL SERVICES THROUGH COORDINATED RESOURCE AND REFERRAL SYSTEMS.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

The Nebraska Child Care Referral Network is helping families find quality care, and additional work is needed to reach more families. A concern that emerged from the 2019 needs assessment was that Nebraska lacked a widely known, reliable source of information to help families find available early care and education programs. This left families relying on

informal and less reliable sources of information. During the earliest phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, providers were forced to close their doors and families were desperate to find child care. A partnership quickly formed among early childhood organizations and agencies to create the Nebraska Child Care Referral Network. Participation in this online tool by providers and parents has grown significantly since it was launched, helping thousands of working parents find child care in their area for children from birth to age 12.

RESOURCE AND REFERRAL SUCCESS STORY

The collaborative design and implementation of the [Nebraska Child Care Referral Network](#) is an excellent example of how partnership across organizations and alignment of state resources (including data from state agencies) leads to improved access to quality care in Nebraska's communities.

- *During the design phase, focus groups were held with early childhood providers and with families to ensure the system being built would address their information needs.*
- *CCRN is available in Spanish, which reflects steps taken to ensure equitable access to information and more providers for Spanish-speaking Nebraskans.*
- *As the system grows, input from the end-users continues to inform the modifications being made.*

SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants recommended making information about the Nebraska Child Care Referral Network and other resource and referral tools more widely available.

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO?

Early childhood collaborators can continue and expand efforts to help families find and navigate early childhood resources and services. SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants recommended promoting resource and referral information through different formats and contexts—such as social media, houses of worship, employers and businesses, and local family engagement programs, among others. Publicizing these resources effectively will mean customizing strategies to fit the unique needs of each community. For example, in smaller and rural communities, the best way to make key information available to families and early childhood providers will vary depending on where they are in the state and their local resources. Ensuring equitable access to the information will require translating all resource and referral systems and promotional materials into multiple languages, using culturally relevant language and appropriate reading level.

SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants also recommended establishing “central navigator” positions to help connect families with the resources and services they need. Knowledgeable local navigators would be well-positioned to get to know all families within a community, particularly immigrant populations, and guide them to the resources that will best support both family stability and children’s health development. Many people in SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings mentioned the role of the family advocate in Head Start programs as an excellent model.

ACCESS OBJECTIVE 4: ESSENTIAL SERVICES

EXPAND ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL SERVICES FOR ALL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants frequently highlighted the importance of ensuring equitable access to more essential services than quality early care and education to ensure children have what they need for healthy development. The building materials that families need for stability include access to physical and mental health services, safe homes and nutritious food, equitable

access to quality early care and education, and other support services. Some families have the resources to provide those things to their children directly. Other families must access programs and services to meet their children’s needs. Families whose children have high medical needs and families who live in rural areas often need additional building materials for well-being, and many face challenges in accessing them. Information about these essential services is not available on a centralized website, and availability of the services varies across communities. Like the stakeholders involved in strategic planning in 2019, participants in SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings emphasized the need for someone in the community to partner with families to help them find the materials and programs they need to build family stability.

WHAT CAN COLLABORATORS DO?

Early childhood collaborators can continue efforts to expand access to the full range of services families and children need to thrive. The strategic plan calls for expanding access to social and health care services for all children in Nebraska’s communities. While state-level partners and community collaborators are developing plans to increase equitable access to early care and education, they are asked to identify solutions that will also expand access to the full range of services in the mixed delivery system.



VOICES FROM NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES

“I think the most important part about that is that mothers and single moms get help with like housing, child care and whatever. I think that's probably the most important because having staff in my room who have dealt with having to take classes and being the moms and working—like that's the first thing; they're really struggling, you know, like having someone watch [their] kids when they go to class, you know, making sure their house is paid for, their utilities.”

Plan Summary with Updated Goals, Objectives, and Strategies

For Nebraska to realize the full potential of families and communities, we invite all early childhood collaborators across Nebraska to use this plan to complement, guide, and enhance their work. This plan reflects what Nebraskans have said is important to change to increase families' access to quality early childhood services and to maximize early childhood professionals' capacity to provide quality early care and education to all children. While no commitments have been made and funding has not been allocated to execute all the objectives and strategies defined here, this plan can serve as a guide for making programmatic changes and bringing in resources and funding to support these efforts.

Everything in this plan advances the cause of building children's well-being, increasing family stability, supporting the early childhood workforce, and therefore building prosperous communities. No single organization can make the needed changes happen. But together, working as early childhood collaborators, significant change is possible.

STATE-LEVEL ALIGNMENT GOAL

STATEWIDE SYSTEMS ALIGN TO SUPPORT COMMUNITIES IN CREATING AN INTEGRATED AND COMPREHENSIVE MIXED DELIVERY SYSTEM FOR ALL CHILDREN.

Alignment Objective 1: Establish a shared leadership approach across state organizations to implement changes in Nebraska's early childhood systems that will improve equitable access to quality early childhood care and education for all children in Nebraska.

- Align 1.1 Establish a shared leadership group across state agencies and early childhood organizations. Establish a shared leadership group across state agencies and state-level early childhood organizations that will assume responsibility for overseeing statewide early childhood systems change.
- Align 1.2 Include diverse voices in state-level planning and decision-making processes. Include the voices and perspectives of those who will be most impacted by changes to Nebraska's early childhood systems in the shared leadership group's planning and decision-making processes.
- Align 1.3 Operationalize the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan by identifying priorities, implementing changes, and monitoring progress. Prioritize, implement, and monitor changes in Nebraska's early childhood mixed delivery system to improve equitable access to quality early care and education for all children in Nebraska.
- Align 1.4 Incorporate the Nebraska definition of quality early care and education into

state programs, policies, and operations. Incorporate the Nebraska definition of quality into systems that shape the provision of early care and education, including parenting education materials, the curricula of early childhood education professional qualifications, professional development materials, and state-level organizations' programs, policies, and operations.

Align 1.5 Align funding policies and processes across state agencies and programs. Revise funding policies and processes to make it easier for providers to secure and combine funding from distinct state and federal sources so they can generate enough revenue to cover the cost of providing quality early care and education to all children.

Align 1.6 Identify state-level administrative and policy barriers that limit access to quality early childhood services and make changes to increase access. Review state-level programmatic and funding policies, rules, and administrative procedures and identify those that limit access to quality early childhood services. Revise, align, and simplify policies, tools, applications, and processes across state agencies and other programs to make accessing services easier for families and early childhood professionals in all settings.

Align 1.7 Identify and remove state-level administrative and policy barriers that limit collaboration among early childhood providers in different settings. Identify regulatory, reporting, and funding barriers across early care and education settings and programs (private, public, Head Start, and nonprofit programs) and make policy changes to eliminate the barriers to collaboration.

Align 1.8 Translate all state-level early childhood resources and tools into multiple languages. Translate all state-level program materials, processes, and applications used by families of young children and by early childhood professionals into multiple languages, ensuring that the translations are culturally relevant and readily understood by native speakers.

Alignment Objective 2: Continue building Nebraska's capacity to make data-informed decisions and track progress in early childhood systems changes.

Align 2.1 Engage partners in data-informed planning and implementation. Build capacity in state- and community-level partnerships to use data to drive decision-making regarding changes to practice and policy and to support continuous quality improvement.

Align 2.2 Continue assessing the needs in communities. Sustain periodic assessment of the needs of children, families, and early childhood professionals in Nebraska's early childhood mixed delivery system.

Align 2.3 Continue building Nebraska's early childhood integrated data system (ECIDS). Building on success deploying the prototype, complete construction of ECIDS by including integrating additional data sources; building in additional use cases; refining and enhancing the analysis and reporting tools; establishing a robust data governance structure, council, and formal data policies and guidelines; and ensuring sustainability, privacy, and security.

- Align 2.4 Evaluate and communicate progress toward systems change priorities through formal feedback loops. Working in partnerships in support of a shared leadership approach, create and implement formal feedback loops to report on progress toward achieving shared priorities and establish new priorities and targets for change.
- Align 2.5 Integrate strategies to promote equity in the gathering and reporting of data to support systems change. Take intentional steps in all phases of data gathering and reporting (a) to include the people impacted by system-wide data use, (b) to collect and provide disaggregated data to highlight disparities or disproportionate impact of systems change where it exists, and (c) to make information derived from data analysis and decision-making available in the languages of all impacted communities.

Alignment Objective 3: Continue building collaborative and inclusive statewide partnerships that will improve equitable access to quality early care, education, and other essential services.

- Align 3.1 Continue collaborative state-level early childhood partnerships across sectors. Strengthen existing partnerships, and establish new partnerships, in which people from multiple sectors (public, private, nonprofit, and philanthropic organizations and the business community) commit to achieving shared priorities to improve equitable access to quality early care, education, and other essential services.
- Align 3.2 Include diverse voices in state-level collaborative partnerships. Include the voices and perspectives of those who will be most impacted by changes to Nebraska’s early childhood systems in statewide collaborative partnership efforts, including planning and decision-making processes. Translate materials developed for community collaboration into all languages represented in the community or region.
- Align 3.3 Continue building state-level programs that support collaborative planning at community and regional levels. Create, continue, or expand programs that support developing collaborative plans at the community and regional levels to increase access to quality early care, education, and other essential services.

Alignment Objective 4: Increase statewide understanding of the importance of quality early care and education.

- Align 4.1 Design and implement public education campaigns. Building on existing efforts, design and implement public education campaigns to increase understanding among all Nebraskans about the importance of quality early care and education for the well-being and economic stability of our children, families, and communities.
- Align 4.2 Include diverse voices in the planning and implementation of public education campaigns. Include the voices of people most impacted by education efforts in the design and implementation of those campaigns.

- Align 4.3 Translate public education materials into multiple languages. Translate all education campaign materials targeting families of young children and early childhood professionals into multiple languages, ensuring that the translations are culturally relevant and readily understood by native speakers.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION GOAL

COMMUNITIES COLLABORATE TO CREATE LOCALLY DESIGNED MIXED DELIVERY SYSTEMS THAT PROVIDE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION AND OTHER ESSENTIAL SERVICES FOR ALL FAMILIES.

Collaboration Objective 1: Establish collaborative and inclusive planning teams within communities and across regions to build customized plans that increase equitable access to quality early care and education and other essential services.

- Collaborate 1.1 Establish local teams to design community- or region-specific early childhood plans. Building on existing relationships and partnerships within communities and across regions, establish collaborative and inclusive planning teams.
- Collaborate 1.2 Include diverse perspectives in local planning teams. Include the voices and perspectives of those who will be most impacted by changes to local and regional early childhood systems in collaborative planning efforts. Translate materials developed for community collaboration into all languages represented in the community or region, ensuring translations are culturally relevant and readily understood by native speakers.
- Collaborate 1.3 Identify early care and education needs in the community or region and develop action plans to meet those needs. In each community, develop action plans that meet community-specific needs to increase access to quality early care and education and other essential services.
- Collaborate 1.4 Identify city- or county-level policies and procedures that limit access to quality early childhood services and make changes to increase access. Review city- and county-level programmatic and funding policies, rules, and administrative procedures and identify those that limit access to quality early childhood services. Revise, align, and simplify policies, tools, applications, and processes across city and county agencies and other programs to make accessing services easier for families and early childhood professionals in all settings.

Collaboration Objective 2: Establish collaborative and inclusive professional networks within communities and across regions to facilitate sharing of resources and coordination of services among early childhood professionals and other essential service providers.

- Collaborate 2.1 Establish collaborative and inclusive early childhood professional networks. Build collaborative relationships among professionals in all early childhood settings and essential service providers who work with young children and their families.
- Collaborate 2.2 Include diverse perspectives in early childhood professional networks. Include the early childhood professionals and essential service providers from all cultures in the community or region in professional networks.

Collaborate 2.3 Share information and resources across early childhood professional networks to promote equitable access to training, professional development, and information. Share professional development resources and early childhood information across early childhood settings and with all types of essential services providers. Translate materials developed for professional networking into all languages represented in the community or region, ensuring translations are culturally relevant and readily understood by native speakers.

SUPPORTING PROFESSIONALS IN PROVIDING QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION GOAL

COLLABORATORS SUPPORT EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS TO PROVIDE QUALITY EXPERIENCES FOR CHILDREN IN ALL EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION SETTINGS.

Quality Objective 1: Cultivate a diverse and skilled workforce by creating system-wide tools and processes that support career advancement and continuing education for early childhood professionals in all settings.

- Quality 1.1 Utilize a competency framework to inform education and professional development for the early childhood workforce. Expand use of Nebraska’s early childhood competency framework to support skill development and career advancement for early childhood professionals in every setting.
- Quality 1.2 Continue creating affordable, accessible, and equitable early childhood professional pathways. Building on current efforts, develop professional education and career advancement pathways that are affordable, accessible, and equitable.
- Quality 1.3 Expand access to training and professional development for all early care and education professionals. Increase availability of and access to training and professional development opportunities across all setting types and cultural groups. Translate professional development resources into multiple languages, ensuring translations are culturally relevant and readily understood by native speakers.
- Quality 1.4 Enhance the capacity of early childhood professionals to provide quality care to children with special needs in every setting. Provide professional development and training as well as programmatic resources and support to enhance the capacity of early childhood professionals to provide quality care to children with special needs in every setting. Ensure resources are available in multiple languages.
- Quality 1.5 Provide outreach, training, and professional development to informal early care providers and support them in becoming licensed. Increase the number of licensed providers by providing culturally relevant outreach, training, and support to informal care providers, including those from refugee and immigrant populations as well as ‘friends, family, and neighbor’ caregivers.

- Quality 1.6 Expand available professional development navigators for the workforce. Increase the number of people working in “workforce navigator” positions to help professionals in all settings find the resources they need to increase their skills and knowledge and to advance their career. Resources should be available in multiple languages and formats.
- Quality 1.7 Recruit bilingual early childhood trainers, coaches, and navigators. Recruit bilingual trainers, coaches, and navigators to provide professional development and support to members of the workforce whose primary language is not English.

Quality Objective 2: Enhance the well-being of early childhood professionals, emphasizing efforts to recruit and retain a robust and resilient early childhood workforce.

- Quality 2.1 Increase wages and benefits for early childhood professionals. Enhance the well-being of the early childhood workforce through adequate wages, benefits, and other supports that increase their capacity to provide quality care.
- Quality 2.2 Enhance the capacity of coaches to support the early childhood workforce in providing quality experiences for all children. Streamline regional and state-level coaching infrastructure and train coaches to effectively support the learning goals of early childhood professionals in different settings.

Quality Objective 3: Expand access to the full range of training, professional development, career advancement, and collaboration opportunities to home-based providers.

- Quality 3.1 Deliberately expand support to home-based providers. While implementing all strategies in the strategic plan, particularly those under Quality Objectives 1 and 2, focus those efforts on assessing and addressing the needs of home-based providers with coordinated access to resources in multiple languages.

Quality Objective 4: Improve family engagement.

- Quality 4.1 Inform parents about their child’s developmental and educational needs. Provide parents with information and tools to support them in nurturing their children’s growth, development, and education.
- Quality 4.2 Engage parents as partners in each early childhood care and education setting. Increase the informational resources and tools available to support early childhood professionals in engaging parents as partners to ensure children have quality early care and education experiences.
- Quality 4.3 Include diverse voices in the development of family engagement efforts. Include the voices of people most impacted by family engagement efforts in the design and implementation of engagement resources and activities.
- Quality 4.4 Translate family engagement resources into multiple languages. Translate all family engagement materials into multiple languages, ensuring interpretations and translations are culturally relevant and readily understood by native speakers.

Quality Objective 5: Increase children’s experience of quality in their transition to Kindergarten.

- Quality 5.1 Prepare Kindergarten classrooms for each enrolled child. Ensure Kindergarten classes are ready to meet the educational and developmental needs of all enrolling students, inclusive of children of all abilities and families speaking multiple languages.
- Quality 5.2 Use child-specific information sharing tools to support the transition to Kindergarten. Develop and use child-specific information sharing tools to facilitate communication among families, early childhood providers, and school personnel during the transition to Kindergarten, including tools tailored to children with special needs and available in the language spoken at home.
- Quality 5.3 Promote available resources that inform transition to Kindergarten practices. Expand distribution of resources in multiple languages that support early childhood providers, school personnel, and families in implementing effective transition practices.

Quality Objective 6: Increase the provision of quality early care and education throughout the state using the Step Up to Quality system.

- Quality 6.1 Increase usage of Step Up to Quality among families. Launch a public education effort to increase awareness and usage of the Step Up to Quality provider search tool among families looking for quality early care and education professionals in their community.
- Quality 6.2 Increase participation in Step Up to Quality among early childhood professionals. Increase the number of early childhood professionals who commit to using Step Up to Quality to improve the quality of care and education they provide.

INCREASING ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES GOAL
COLLABORATORS REMOVE BARRIERS AND INCREASE FAMILIES’ ACCESS TO THE QUALITY EARLY CARE, EDUCATION, AND OTHER ESSENTIAL SERVICES THEY NEED TO SUPPORT EACH CHILD’S HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT.

Access Objective 1: Increase availability of and access to quality early care and education.

- Access 1.1 Increase available funding to cover the full cost of providing quality early care and education. Expand funding across multiple sources that pay providers for the full cost of quality care, including the expansion of child care subsidy, other public funds, and public-private collaborative investments.
- Access 1.2 Increase available child care slots by building business management capacity among all early childhood providers. Support early care and education providers as business owners by ensuring they have the training and resources they need to run their businesses effectively and to access all available funding,

- thereby expanding their capacity to provide quality care to more children.
- Access 1.3 Permanently change eligibility criteria for the child care subsidy. Make quality care affordable by permanently changing eligibility criteria so more families can access the child care subsidy.
- Access 1.4 Remove community-level infrastructure barriers. Increase access to quality early care and education by addressing barriers that limit access, including but not limited to those related to transportation and flexibility of early education settings' operating hours.

Access Objective 2: Improve equitable access to quality early care and education for families and children with special needs (those with physical and cognitive disabilities, learning differences, medical and mental health needs, and behaviors of concern).

- Access 2.1 Remove barriers specific to children with special needs. Make policy, programmatic, funding, and infrastructure changes that eliminate unique barriers related to transportation, flexibility of child care schedules, and additional costs faced by families of children with special needs.
- Access 2.2 Enhance capacity of early childhood professionals and families to identify children with special needs. Increase awareness among early childhood caregivers, educators, and families about how to identify children with special needs and direct them to appropriate services. Translate all education materials into multiple languages, ensuring translations are culturally relevant and readily understood by native speakers.
- Access 2.3 Eliminate the use of suspension and expulsion practices. Provide early childhood professionals with the programmatic resources and supports they need to eliminate the use of suspension and expulsion practices for children with special needs.

Access Objective 3: Make it easier for families to find and enroll in quality early care, education, and other essential services through coordinated and culturally relevant resource and referral systems and information.

- Access 3.1 Create early childhood system navigators for families. Expand the roles of current resource and referral personnel or create new positions to serve as “central navigators” in communities to help families find quality early care and education and other essential services.
- Access 3.2 Publicize the currently available resource and referral tools. Make finding information about available early care and education and other essential services easier for families by promoting current resource and referral tools across state and community programs. Provide information in multiple languages, ensuring translations are culturally relevant and readily understood by native speakers.

Access Objective 4: Expand access to essential services for all children and families.

Access 4.1 Assess the essential service needs of families and children. Assess gaps in availability of the full range of essential services that build well-being for children and families.

Access 4.2 Expand access to essential services for all children. Expand access to the full range of essential services needed for children and families to build well-being and reach their full potential.

Nebraska Early Childhood System Action Agenda Priorities for 2024-27

Nebraska is ready for bold and innovative solutions for expanding equitable access to early childhood care and education. Nebraska’s early childhood system is in a unique position to make innovative and bold system-wide improvements for its young children and families based on the comprehensive and inclusive work of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan. Through creative financing strategies, programmatic improvements based on lessons learned, and taking bold steps to address quality, accountability, and equity, Nebraska’s past efforts have set the stage for innovative and meaningful solutions to reshape the future for all Nebraskans for generations to come.

This Action Agenda aims to help Nebraska stakeholders pursue a shared vision with implementation in mind. It builds off the thorough and representative work completed to date with thousands of voices across the state, ranging from parents, providers, administrators, advocates, and funders. In addition to the updated Strategic Plan, there are several organizations and bodies of work represented in the Action Agenda with the hope that their collective feedback to date can be harnessed for targeted action beginning in 2024.

The purpose of the Action Agenda is to elevate priorities that refine and elevate past efforts that have proven effective for building children’s well-being, while working to better align efforts across the state agencies to better leverage available state and federal dollars. This will position Nebraska to build a stable early education and care system that provides access to quality care for all families and be a bedrock for Nebraska’s economy.

The Action Agenda has six priorities for implementation. The Action Agenda elevates six priorities for implementation in 2024–2027. All six priorities are linked directly to the goals and strategies of the 2023 Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan and serve to advance the plan’s emphasis on achieving equitable access to quality early care and education statewide. These priorities are meant to be complementary to one another, not mutually exclusive.

1. More equitably address service gaps for Nebraska’s working families based on parent needs and preferences, while also meeting the developmental needs of children 0–5.
2. Identify priority populations composed of children and families with the greatest need and the least access to inclusive, quality early childhood programming, especially children with developmental delays or disabilities and English Language Learners.
3. Address the early childhood workforce crisis by effective, innovative, and sustainable solutions that also align to the Strategic Plan’s Definition of Quality and Nebraska’s Early Learning Guidelines.

4. Ensure data-driven decisions at all levels by continuing to integrate and use data across all early childhood stakeholders, including parents and community members.
5. Strengthen government coordination to operationalize innovative solutions for systems change that are implementable, sustainable, and ultimately better for families and children, regardless of the setting they are in.
6. Elevate parent, provider, and community agency through well-resourced community collaboratives to inform both local and system-wide decision-making by examining both quantitative and qualitative data.

The full Action Agenda is being developed in a collaborative engagement process with a variety of early childhood collaborators. These partners are designing implementation plans for each priority with input from the people who will be impacted by the action plans, families, and early childhood professionals. The implementation plans will articulate actions to be taken, clear ownership by partnering organizations, and measures for progress.

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Appendices

Appendix A: SPEAQ Up! Nebraska Stakeholder Engagement Process

The stakeholder engagement process for the 2023 strategic plan was called Strategic Planning for Equitable Access to Quality early care and education in Nebraska—or SPEAQ Up! Nebraska. Facilitators were recruited from across the state to host stakeholder meetings in their own communities. This approach was taken to help participants feel comfortable in sharing their thoughts, concerns, and suggestions for change.

Facilitators were directed to invite a wide range of childhood collaborators to their SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings to achieve diverse representation, including:

- Families, including parents and guardians of children ages birth–8
- Early childhood professionals, including caregivers, coaches, trainers, schoolteachers and administrators, and owners and directors of early childhood programs from all types of settings
- Community leaders, including representatives from nonprofit organizations that support early childhood professionals and families, family advocates in leadership roles, and other local and regional professionals working in government, schools, business, etc.
- Early childhood system partners, including representatives from state agencies and programs that support children, families, and early childhood professionals; policymakers; and university personnel

In addition, facilitators were encouraged to include people representing diverse demographic groups, including people of color; people for whom English is not their first language; members of native tribes; families of, and people serving, children with disabilities; immigrants or people working with immigrant families; people living or working in rural communities; families or people working with families who are experiencing homelessness or food insecurity; and more. SPEAQ Up! Nebraska facilitators chose one of two focus areas for discussion for each meeting they hosted—either 1) strategies to improve access to quality early care and education or 2) Nebraska’s draft definition of quality early care and education.

From July 2022 to January 2023, 22 community facilitators hosted 56 meetings with over 300 people across Nebraska. In 44 of those meetings, participants discussed strategies for improving access to quality early care and education in their communities; eight of those meetings were held in Spanish with Spanish-speaking facilitators. In the 12 other meetings, participants discussed Nebraska’s definition of quality early care and education. (For a summary of SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participant demographics, see Appendix B.)

DISCUSSION OF STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Twelve scenarios were developed for use in the SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings that focused on discussing strategies for improving access to quality early care and education. The scenarios presented information about the early childhood system in a more relatable method than citing statistics or strategies from the 2020 strategic plan. The scenarios included three sections:

- The “story” that established the fictional character and their general life situation
- The “current experience,” which described challenges that were limiting the character’s access to quality early care and education for their child or children in their community
- A “hoped-for future” that recast the situation in a future in which the strategies across the four goals of the 2020 Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan had been fully implemented

Each scenario was based on findings from Nebraska’s 2019 Needs Assessment, and all essential elements of the scenario, especially in the “current experience” section, were tied to a finding from the needs assessment. The relevant needs assessment findings were included on page 2 of each scenario. Supplemental statistics from other sources relevant to the scenario were also included with the needs assessment findings.

The “hoped-for future” section of the scenario was based on strategies identified in the 2020 Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan and was written as if the strategies were implemented, describing the new experiences families and early childhood professionals would have. The relevant strategies from the strategic plan were also listed on page 2 of each scenario.

All scenarios included a mix of strategies across the four goals of the 2020 Strategic Plan. To ensure that the scenarios were relatable to a wide range of Nebraskans, the fictional characters in the scenarios were written to reflect families and early childhood professionals from different racial or ethnic groups and the challenges they face in accessing essential services. Prior to their use, the scenarios were screened by parent advisors or members of the early childhood workforce to ensure that they were accurate in their representation of the challenges people face accessing or providing quality care and that they were also respectful to the communities they represented. All SPEAQ Up! Nebraska materials were available in Spanish, and had facilitators requested it, translations into other languages were available. SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings were held in person, in a virtual format, or as a hybrid of in-person and virtual formats. The meetings were recorded and transcribed.

In the meetings, after reading the scenario together, facilitators led participants through a standard set of discussion questions intended to elicit ideas and recommendations for how to make quality early care and education more accessible for all families, as follows:

- Does this description of a hoped-for future ring true for you? What are the best aspects of these changes? What is missing?
- What needs to happen in your community to get from the current experience to the hoped-for future?
- Has anything about living through the pandemic changed how your community handles these issues?

- What needs to happen for everyone in your community to experience the hoped-for future?

The conversations with the SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants were a test of the validity of the 2020 strategic plan objectives and strategies. By discussing whether the hoped-for future represented changes that would or would not work in their community, these Nebraskans were indicating which strategies would work, and which would not. Participants also expressed ideas that were missing from the scenario, which indicated new concepts that could be added to the 2023 strategic plan.

In the transcripts of the recordings of each meeting, key phrases were highlighted any time a participant referenced what they would like to see happen to improve access to quality early care and education and when they said something was missing. Each phrase was coded regarding whether it aligned to an existing objective and strategy, whether it introduced a new idea, and whether it was related to barriers or to promoting equity in the early childhood system. These statements were then analyzed to identify trends, and findings were used to update objectives and strategies within each of the four goals.

The results of the analysis led to creating new objectives based on priority populations discussed across meetings, reorganizing some strategies to provide more clarity about how the goals work together, and identifying specific strategies to address barriers to equity in the early childhood system, for families and for early childhood professionals.

DISCUSSION OF NEBRASKA'S DEFINITION OF QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Some SPEAQ Up! Nebraska facilitators chose to discuss Nebraska's draft definition of quality early care and education with people in their community. In these meetings, the discussion questions were intended to elicit what the definition got right, in participants' opinion, and what changes were needed to reflect participants' lived experience, knowledge, and values. The questions included the following:

- Does this definition of quality ring true for you? What did it get right? If not, what is missing?
- How would you know a child is experiencing quality early care and education? What do you see when quality care is happening?
- The definition lists ways that adults and child care settings can promote a quality experience for children. Will these things work? Is anything missing that would promote quality?
- Does this definition describe how adults will ensure a quality experience for each child, regardless of a child's race, ethnicity, first language, family income, physical or mental ability, or any other personal, social, or cultural characteristic? What would you add or change to the definition to be sure that it promotes equity?

These discussions informed changes and additions to Nebraska's definition of quality early care and education, as detailed in Appendix C.

Appendix B: SPEAQ Up! Nebraska Demographic Summary



SPEAQ Up! Nebraska Participant Demographic Summary

Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan:
A Dynamic Plan by and for Nebraskans

1

The Vision of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan is ...
...to provide all Nebraska children and their families with access to quality early childhood services that support children's healthy development from birth through age 8.

The goal of **SPEAQ** Up! Nebraska meetings was to support **Strategic Planning for Equitable Access to Quality** early care and education for **ALL** Nebraskans.

2

SPEAQ Up! Nebraska Priority: Include More Diverse Voices

In the 2022 SPEAQ Up! Nebraska process, we prioritized raising family voices and reaching people in more diverse communities across the state—including rural areas, people of color, families of children with disabilities, and more.

We extended the time frame for the meetings to ensure that we could include the perspectives and priorities from these communities in the 2023 Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan.

We are grateful for the amazing work of the 22 facilitators who hosted 56 meetings that reached parents, families, early childhood professionals and providers, and other early childhood collaborators across the state.

Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan

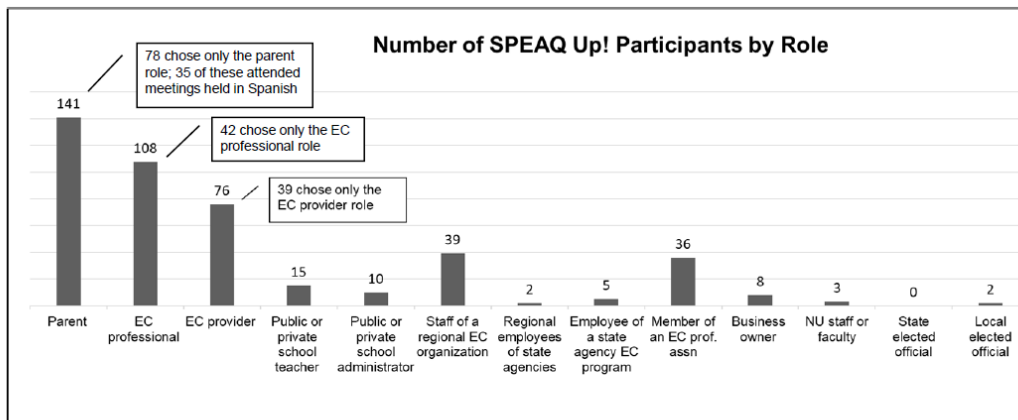
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Who Participated in SPEAQ Up! Nebraska Meetings?

4

The largest group of people represented in SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings were parents.

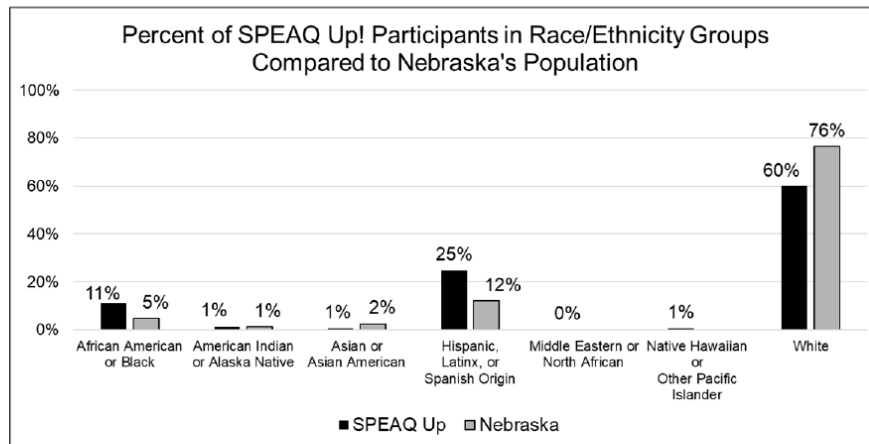


Participants could identify with more than one role; 78 people identified only as a *parent*.

Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan

5

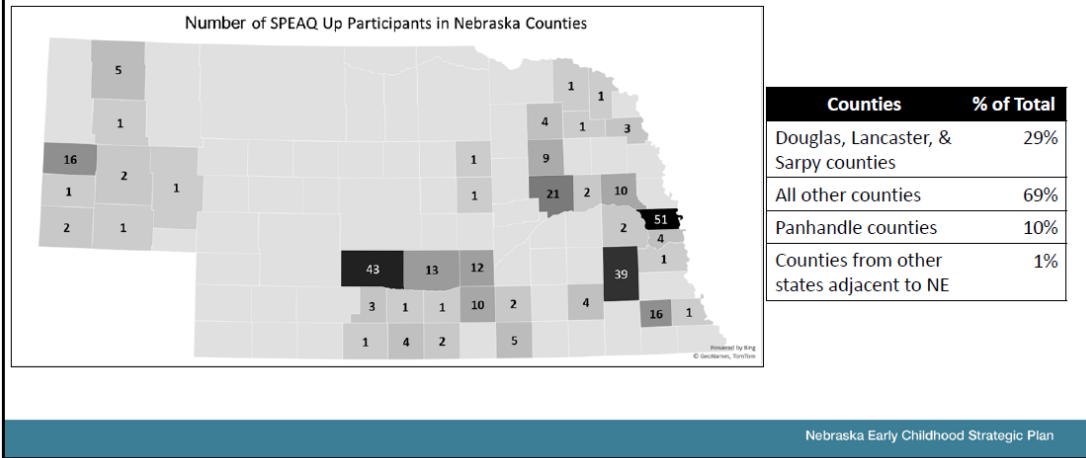
People of color were overrepresented at SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings compared to the state's population.



Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan

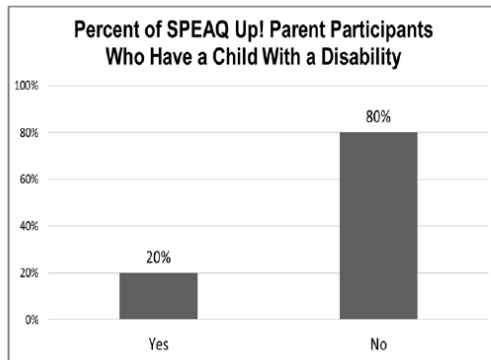
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Most people attending SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings lived in counties outside of the major metro areas.

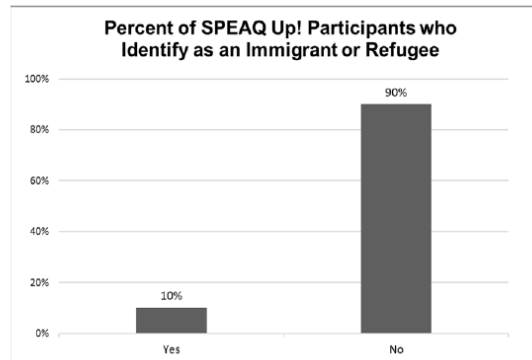


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Among the parents who participated, 20% reported having a child with a disability.

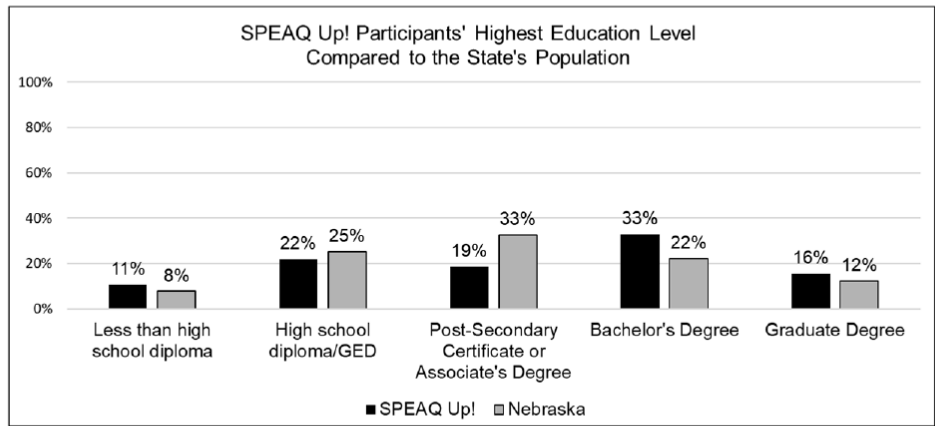


Ten percent of the SPEAQ Up! participants were immigrants or refugees.



8

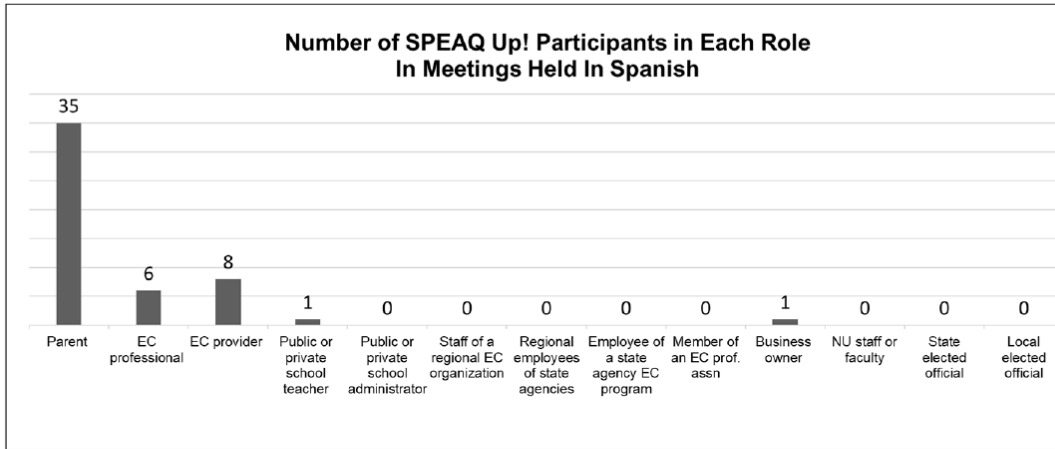
Nearly half of the participants had a college degree or higher, which is a higher proportion than the state as a whole.



Who Participated in the Eight SPEAQ Up! Nebraska Meetings Held in Spanish?

A total of 45 people participated in these meetings.

More parents participated in Spanish-only SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings than people in other roles.



Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan

11

Of the participants in SPEAQ Up! meetings held in Spanish ...

91% identified as Hispanic.

- 2% identified as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- 7% indicated a preference to not answer

87% reported speaking Spanish at home.

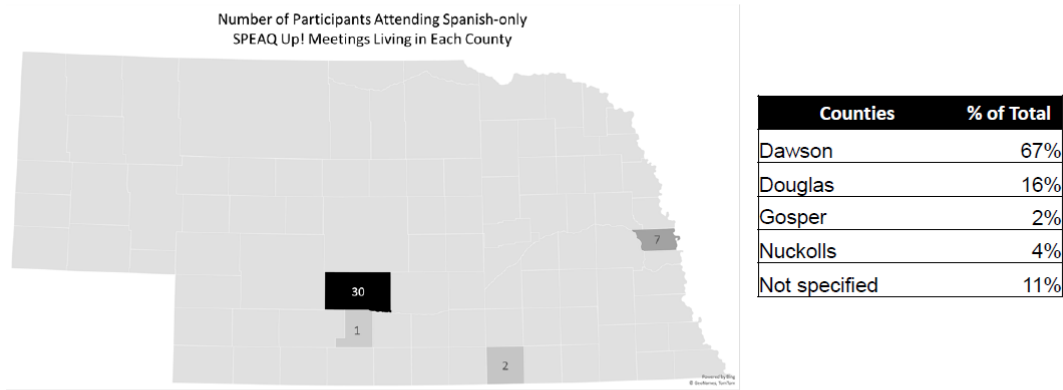
- 9% reported speaking English at home

90% had education level of high school or lower.

Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan

12

Most people attending Spanish-only SPEAQ Up! meetings lived in central Nebraska.



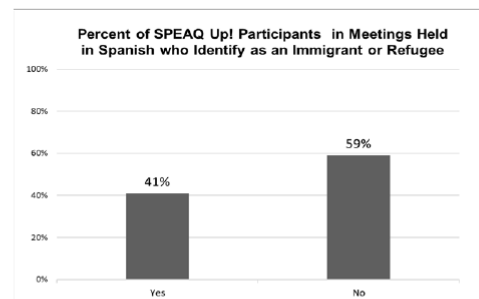
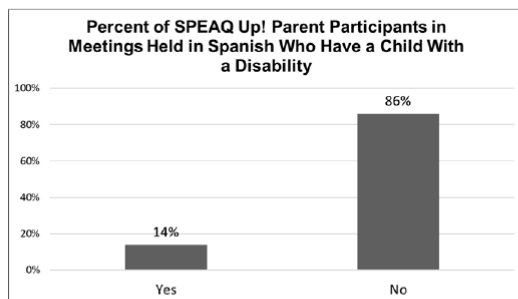
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In SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings held in Spanish...

... among the parents who participated, 14% reported having a child with a disability.

... 41% of the SPEAQ Up! participants were immigrants or refugees.



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Who Participated in SPEAQ Up! Nebraska Meetings Focused on the Definition of Quality?

A total of 72 people participated in these meetings.

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SPEAQ Up! Nebraska Priority: The Definition of Quality

The 2020 Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan introduced a shared definition of *quality early childhood care and education*. The draft definition was based on early childhood research and evidence-based practices.

It was suggested that this definition should be used across the early childhood system in Nebraska. This would mean using a single definition for quality in:

- Policies
- Training and education of the workforce
- Family education materials
- Child assessments
- Provider evaluation tools

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SPEAQ Up! Nebraska Priority: The Definition of Quality

Twelve of the SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings focused on the draft definition of quality with parents and other early childhood collaborators.

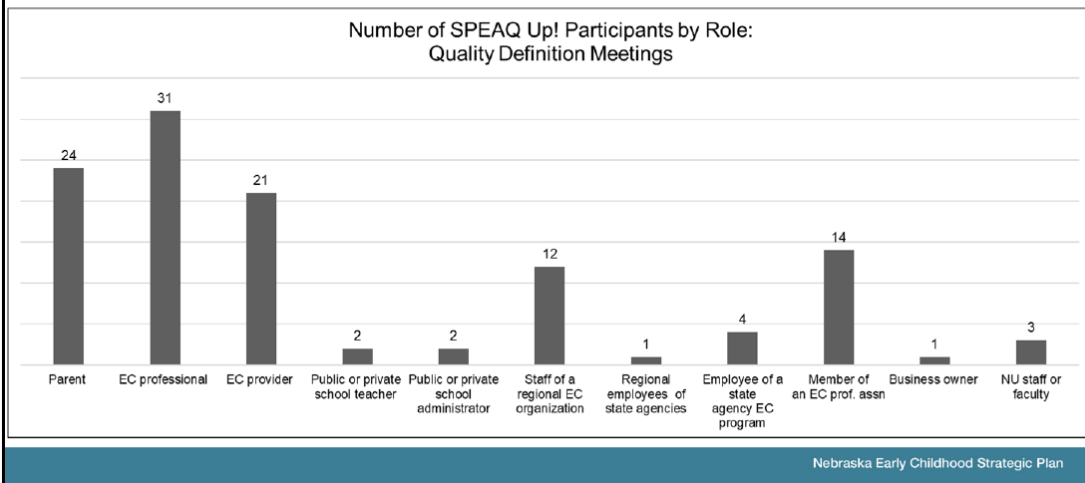
The purpose of these conversations was to ask parents and early childhood professionals to give their feedback on the definition based on their own experiences. They discussed questions like these:

- Does the definition sound like quality early care and education to you?
- Are the ways adults can promote a quality experience described the right ones?
- Can you see any unintended consequences of using this definition widely in Nebraska?

Based on their input, the definition of quality to be included in the 2023 Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan will better reflect the experiences and expectations of families and early childhood professionals across the state.

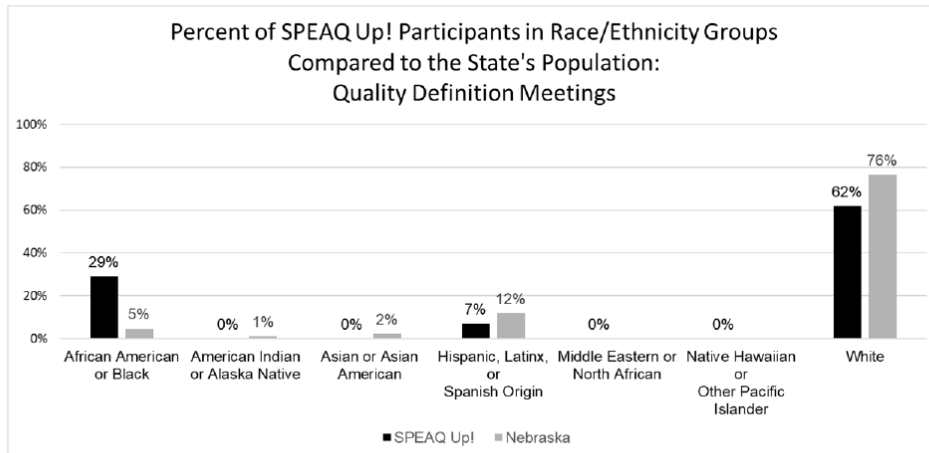
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EC professionals were the largest group in discussions of the definition of quality.



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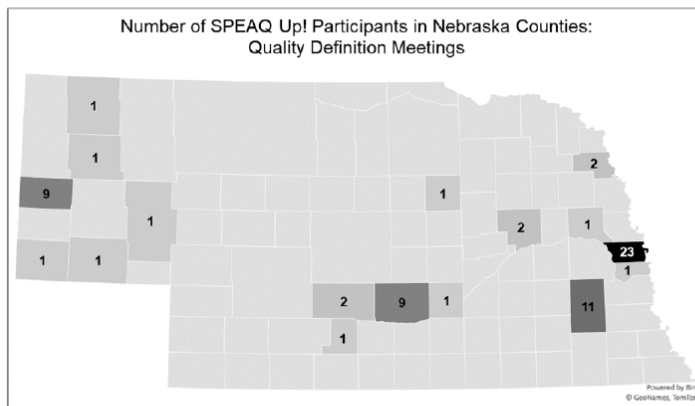
Nearly 30% of the SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants who discussed the definition of quality were African American or Black.



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Half of the participants of Quality Definition meetings lived in the three large metro counties in Nebraska.

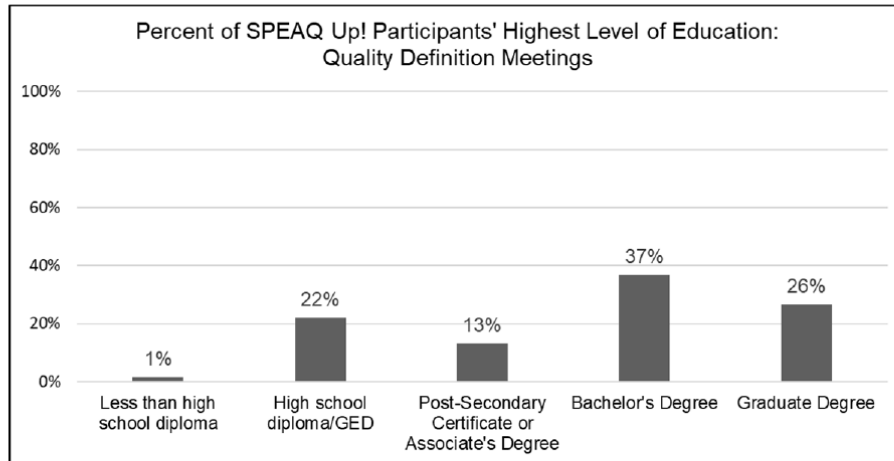


Counties	% of Total
Douglas, Lancaster, and Sarpy	50%
All others	47%
Panhandle area	20%
Counties from other states adjacent to NE	3%

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The majority of SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants who discussed the definition of quality had a college degree or higher.



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Of the participants in SPEAQ Up! meetings discussing the definition of quality ...

- Eighteen percent of the participants reported having a child with a disability.
- Three of the 72 participants identified themselves as an immigrants.

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Coming Next:

- Summaries of changes to the strategic plan and an opportunity to give feedback
- Links to resources for needs expressed

Learn more at NEarlychildhoodplan.org

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Thank You So Much!
Your voices have made the
2023 Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan
truly “by and for” all Nebraskans.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix C: Nebraskans Defining Quality Early Care and Education

The families and early childhood professionals who reviewed Nebraska’s definition of quality early care and education during the SPEAQ Up! Nebraska process (see Appendix A) overwhelmingly supported the original definition’s two main components, including (1) its focus



VOICES FROM NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES

“I really like [Nebraska’s definition of quality early care and education] because I think it hits the exact foundation. They have to feel safe physically and emotionally. If they don’t, they’re living in the trauma state. They can’t do, they can’t function. And, to me, so many times we’re focused on quality as the curriculum they’re using or the level that we’re teaching them at. But this has to be there first. And without this, there isn’t a quality, no matter what you’re doing, it’s not going to be there. So, I like this. And it’s simple, basic.”

on defining quality in terms of each child’s experience and (2) its identification of ways in which people, settings, and systems contribute to a child’s experience of quality. SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants also suggested revisions and additions to improve the definition’s clarity and to ensure that it will promote the well-being of all children and families by ensuring equitable access to quality early care and education across all settings. Their

input resulted in the updated quality definition presented in the 2023 Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan.

Nebraskans’ Perspective on the Definition. The SPEAQ Up! participants largely supported the definition of quality. They agreed that quality is best understood by focusing on the child’s experience and that the following aspects of early care are essential to providing quality early care and education:

- Physical and emotional safety
- Caring adults and positive relationships
- Individualized care tailored to each child’s abilities
- Partnering with families
- Including children’s language and culture
- Qualified and trained staff whose well-being and professional life are supported
- Clean and safe facilities and equipment



VOICES FROM
NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES

“When they come into the classroom, they know they are safe. In the morning when they are coming into school, you can see the smile on their face. They know where they’re going and they know they like the adults ... that’s where they can start learning.”

Several other concepts in the draft definition were supported, but SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants questioned the specific wording if they thought it could be interpreted in ways that could cause confusion or didn’t reflect the care provided in different settings, specifically in-home care. Participants also identified concepts

that are meaningful additions, either because the concept was not in the definition or because it addressed the discussion question regarding equitable access to quality.

Changes and Additions Made to the Definition. The parents, professionals, and community collaborators provided meaningful input on revisions and additions for each part of the definition. They agreed that, for the final definition to be most useful, the words and phrases must be clear and understandable to all potential readers, including readers for whom English is not their first language. The definition must also be brief enough that it will be used by as many people as possible. Revisions to the definition were made with these priorities in mind. The following table summarizes Nebraskans’ feedback on the definition, highlighting key words or phrases that were discussed, changed, or added to the definition.

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK ON NEBRASKA’S DEFINITION OF QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

From the Definition:

Children experience quality early care and education when they experience:

- Frequent one-on-one interactions with a caring adult
- Interactions that are warm, educational, and facilitate language development
- Physical and emotional safety in an inclusive environment

Nebraskans Supported:

- The focus on the child's experience
- The emphasis on physical and emotional safety
- The essential need for caring adults to create an environment of trust for each child and family

Nebraskans clarified or changed the use of the following terms:

One-on-one	<p>One-on-one interactions are an important part of creating caring relationships in which a child trusts the adult. Throughout the day, a caregiver or teacher intentionally makes a point to create back-and-forth interactions, to attend to the needs and interests of each child, and to model similar engagement and caring relationships with other children.</p>
Warm	<p>In warm interactions with caregivers, children receive hugs, friendly smiles, acceptance, and affection. These experiences are essential to a caring relationship based on physical and emotional safety and promote trust. All of these are necessary for a child to be able to learn.</p>
Educational	<p>Children are constantly learning, whether through play with peers, observing adults and other children, instructional activities, or through their connection to their caregivers. These are ways adults can facilitate educational experiences for each child.</p>
Facilitate language development	<p>Adults who work with young children are in a unique position to facilitate the language development of each child. The pattern of language development for children may include speaking, listening, reading, signing, translating or interpreting, or other modalities of communication. A child’s experience of quality includes facilitating their unique uses of language, consistent with their culture and their abilities, in support of social and emotional growth. This phrase replaced “language-rich” in the original definition.</p>

Inclusive environment

In an *inclusive environment*, every child is embraced and cared for in ways that meet all their physical, emotional, cognitive, and cultural needs. All children in a setting benefit from engagement with children of all abilities and cultures and from the opportunities to support and learn from their peers.

From the Definition:

Adults promote a child's experience of quality by:

- Being aware of each child's emotional, physical, behavioral, and cultural needs and responding appropriately
- Consistently offering unconditional love, support, and encouragement to help children process and cope with any physical, emotional, or psychological traumas
- Building trusting relationships with families and partnering with them in the care and education of their children and in learning about their child's development
- Embracing the families' and children's cultural customs and practices, language, and background in daily activities and with the families in the care community
- Providing instruction that engages children physically, emotionally, cognitively, and socially, and individualizing instruction to each child's unique skills and needs
- Ensuring access, participation, and support for children with disabilities in ways that create a sense of belonging, promote positive social relationships, and help children reach their developmental potential (i.e., inclusive practices)

Nebraskans Supported:

- Partnering with families
- Awareness of children's various needs
- Individualizing care for each child

Nebraskans clarified or changed the use of the following terms:

Awareness of children's behavioral and cultural needs

Adults who focus their attention on a child with curiosity and openness will learn about the unique interests and needs of that child. That *awareness* of what a child needs and what helps them thrive is essential to creating a safe, trusting relationship, and to providing quality care.

Trauma-informed care

Many children come into an early care and education setting with traumatic experiences in their past or in their current life. Having conscious awareness of each child's needs prepares early childhood professionals to offer the support needed to cope with or overcome those experiences. For maximum benefit to these children, early childhood professionals can get specialized training in *trauma-informed care*.

Individualized instruction and care

Adults who intentionally provide *individualized and engaging instruction*, partner with families, embrace the families' culture, and practice inclusion as described in this section of the definition are following many of the Developmentally Appropriate Practice guidelines.

Embrace the families' and children's culture

By approaching families with curiosity and respect about their culture, language, and background, adults in early care settings can build trust with families. In that context, families can feel safe to share their traditions and experiences because they know they will be accepted. Asking families, including grandparents, to participate in sharing their traditions regularly demonstrates that *their family's culture is embraced*.

Inclusion practices

Adults are practicing inclusion with a child with any physical, cognitive, or emotional abilities when:

- the adults offer individualized, flexible options for to access to learning and play opportunities
- these experiences result in participating in skills building and peer interactions
- the adults acquire the knowledge and skills needed to meet the unique needs of the children in their care

From the Definition:

Early childhood settings promote a child's experience of quality by:

- Providing a developmentally appropriate, play-based learning environment with opportunities for physical activity, freedom to explore, time outdoors, and developing peer relationships
- Providing spaces and equipment that are clean, safe, and designed to foster children's healthy development and learning
- Employing caregivers and teachers who have the qualifications, training, and/or experience they need to build positive relationships with the children and families they serve
- Promoting the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of caregivers and teachers by providing appropriate compensation and professional supports
- Providing learning resources and structures, including classroom materials, routines, and adult-child ratios, that are designed to meet the developmental needs of the children being served
- Developing and implementing plans for inclusion to avoid expulsions by accommodating child-specific needs with appropriate resources and support

Nebraskans Supported:

- Clean and safe facilities and equipment
- Qualifications and training
- Positive relationships
- Supporting physical and mental well-being of caregivers and teachers
- Appropriate compensation and professional supports
- Learning resources and structures

Nebraskans clarified or changed the use of the following terms:

Play-based learning	Through play, infants and children are studying the world and how it works. When a child leads their own play with options to engage with others or play alone, they are building the foundations of later learning and learning to relate to others. <i>Play-based learning</i> supports healthy development and self-expression.
Experience of early childhood professionals	Caregivers and educators need certain knowledge, skills, and abilities to provide quality experiences to young children. Formal education and training are effective ways to gain the necessary knowledge and skills, but not the only way. Professionals with <i>extensive experience</i> also provide quality experiences for children. All early child professionals, whether they hold degrees or not, can better provide quality care if they consistently pursue information about child development and best practices.
Emotional well-being of caregivers and educators	The <i>emotional well-being</i> of early childhood professionals directly shapes their engagement with children. When they are happier, healthier, less stressed, and experience less depression, they can engage in higher-quality interactions with children.
Professional supports	When the workforce is treated like the professionals that they are, they are supported with increased compensation that is appropriate for the importance of their work and with employee benefits such as health insurance, access to medical and mental health care, paid time off, and maternity leave.
Adult-child ratios	When this ratio is lower, each child has more opportunity to experience quality because the adults have more capacity to perform their work consistent with the description of quality above. This phrase replaces “teacher-student ratios” in the original definition.

From the Definition:

Local, state, and federal agencies and organizations promote quality experiences by:

- Designing and implementing economic, social, regulatory, and funding policies that enable early care and education providers to cover the costs of quality programs delivered by qualified professionals
- Developing and implementing continuous quality improvement practices that include observations of the child’s experiences of quality in addition to observations of the structure and facilities of the care setting

Nebraskans Supported:

- Shared state-level leadership for aligning systems and supporting community-level collaboration

Nebraskans did not clarify or change terms in this part of the definition.

What Quality Early Care and Education Looks Like.

Families and early childhood professionals were asked to describe what they would see when a child was experiencing quality. They talked about what the child’s experience looks like and what the educators and caregivers were doing to provide that quality experience. Some of the phrases that were frequently used to describe “quality observed” include the following:

A child experiencing quality early care and education:

- Is happy to go, excited, and wants to be there
- Talks about their experiences and teacher with their family
- Participates in child-led play and exploration
- Forms relationships with others
- Shows progress and growth
- Feels safe and loved

An adult promoting a child’s experience of quality early care and education:

- Is responsive to each child
- Communicates with families
- Meets the needs of individual children
- Manages or prevents meltdowns
- Models loving relationships
- Expresses empathy and compassion
- Maintains a calm classroom
- Makes learning fun

Key Concepts Behind the Definition. In SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings, families and early childhood professionals spoke about the importance of providing quality experiences in early care and education settings, because they know that these early experiences will have lifelong impact on children. Some of the concepts and principles that drive the work of Nebraska’s early childhood professionals, who bring passion and intense caring to their work, include the following:

- **Children develop basic life skills by watching and learning from the people closest to them, including their parents and families.** In the earliest years, some of children’s most important learning is about basic life skills—how to manage their emotions, engage with peers, and develop relationships. Children develop these skills by watching and learning from the people closest to them. Families who choose an out-of-home setting for an infant or young child are choosing to include more people in that child’s learning and development. It is a critical choice for families that will have lifelong effects.
- **In a safe and caring environment, children learn to build trusting relationships with caregivers and educators—and so do their parents.** When early childhood professionals build trust with the child, and with the family, they can partner effectively with families to help each child grow and develop. Building this trust requires early childhood professionals to meet the family where they are and to be genuinely curious about the family’s culture, language, religion, and background.

- **Early childhood professionals play a significant role in teaching the foundational life skills that make other types of learning possible.** Early childhood professionals who provide quality care are mindful that they are role models for how to treat to people, to act respectfully toward others, to manage emotions, to include with kindness and consideration children with different abilities, and to embrace children who look different or speak a different language.
- **Early childhood professionals have a unique opportunity to see each child’s potential and help individual talents blossom.** Regardless of the setting, quality early care and education is delivered by professionals who intentionally create spaces where, through instruction and play, children can explore their environment to discover what they are capable of and how to express themselves.
- **Family home care providers offer distinctive value to children and families in communities across Nebraska.** In Nebraska, a majority of young children are cared for in home-based settings. Many families choose this setting for their children specifically because of the trust they feel in the provider and the provider’s ability to nurture well-being and healthy development through the specific advantages of their setting.
- **Equitable access to quality early care and education is important for the well-being of Nebraska’s children, families, and communities.** The learning that takes place in a child’s earliest years builds a foundation for all other learning, for school-based education, and for life. Building the well-being of all children will help families and communities thrive, both economically and socially.

Using the Definition Across Nebraska’s Early Childhood System. Establishing a shared definition of quality early care and education provides a model for quality improvement and assessment efforts across all components of the early care and education system, including the following:

- Curricula for preparing early childhood professionals
- Professional development materials and programs
- Community-level collaboration plans for improving early care and education
- State programs, policies, and operations related to early care, education, and other essential services for early childhood development
- Early childhood assessment tools and programs
- Public and private programs that deliver early care and education

Using the Definition of Quality in Nebraska’s Communities. SPEAQ Up! Nebraska participants recommended that the new definition of quality be made widely available to inform people what they should be looking for and what they should be creating to promote well-being for all children.

For parents and families, the definition can inform what they think is most important to them in choosing care for their child(ren). Examples of where to share the definition with families include state program websites, the Child Care Referral Network, and other referral websites. For early childhood professionals, the definition can inform and support their journey in providing quality care, whether they are early in their career or have been in the field for many years. Examples of where to share the definition with the early childhood workforce include the child care licensing and Step Up to Quality webpages.

For communities, the definition can be considered and interpreted as part of collaborative planning to meet the unique needs of families and children in the given community.

Other resources in Nebraska that help families and professionals understand quality early care and education include Child Care Essentials: Choosing Quality Child Care in Nebraska and Nebraska Early Learning Guidelines. These resources align with one another and with Nebraska's definition of quality early care and education.

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