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Elevating Nebraska's Early Care and Education System: Leadership Perspectives on Progress in the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five 2023

EVALUATION BRIEF



Buffett
Early Childhood
Institute

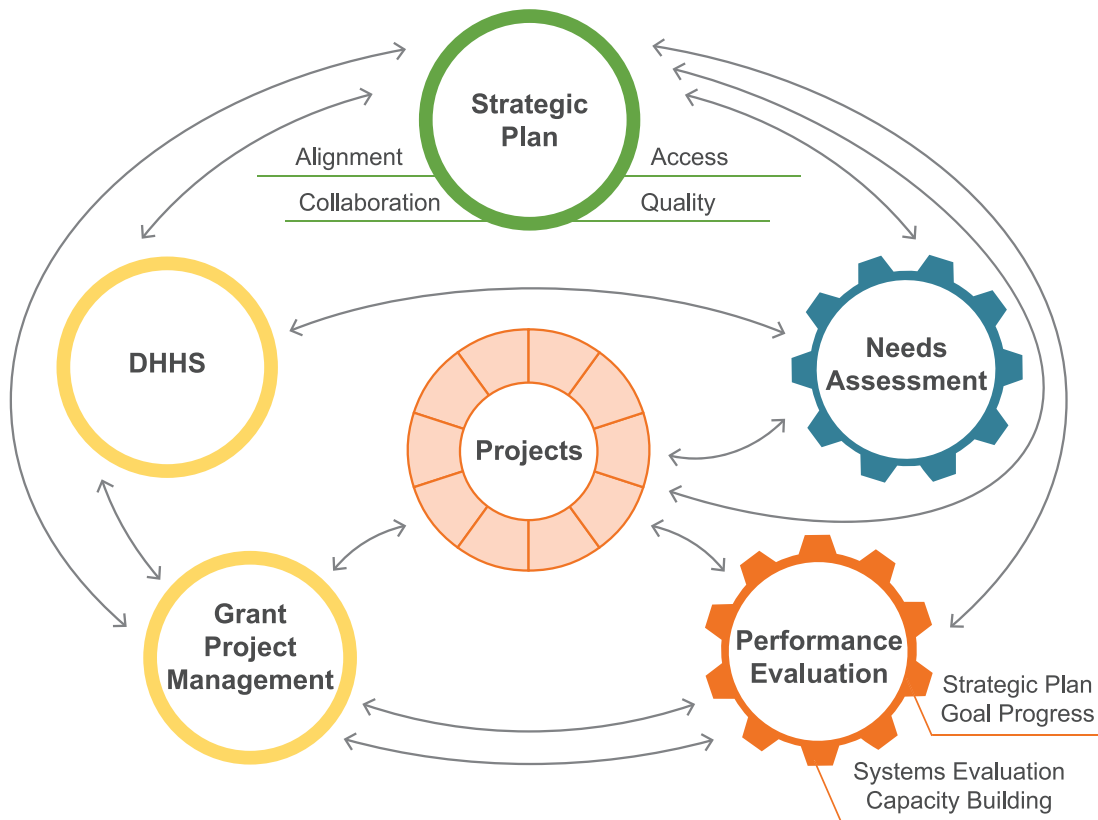
at the University of Nebraska

Introduction

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) was one of 46 states/territories to receive a Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG) initial award from the Administration for Children and Families in December 2018. The purpose of the grant is to support alignment of Nebraska’s early childhood mixed delivery system and equip communities to deliver quality services, supporting families and children’s healthy development. Over 20 projects were funded to realize this purpose, including a statewide needs assessment to inform a strategic plan.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships and anticipated feedback loops among the agencies and organizations leading the grant, the needs assessment, strategic plan, performance evaluation and the PDG-funded projects in Nebraska. The Strategic Plan, drawn from a comprehensive and ongoing Needs Assessment, established four primary goals of alignment, collaboration, quality, and access. These are detailed in the following section. The dual purpose of the Performance Evaluation was to evaluate progress relative to Strategic Plan goals and to build systems capacity to evaluate early childhood efforts using an equitable systems lens.

FIGURE 1. | PERFORMANCE EVALUATION ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PLAN



In Year 3 of the grant (2023), the Performance Evaluation team conducted interviews with key informants (project and system leaders) to understand how funded efforts were advancing the goals of the strategic plan. Key informants were also asked to reflect on the degree to which efforts related to priorities of advancing equity and increasing family engagement were observed.

Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan Goals

The *Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan*¹ is 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.”¹ The goals established for the strategic plan are as follows:

ALIGNMENT

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

COLLABORATION

Communities coordinate a locally designed mixed delivery system that provides continuous care and meets the needs of families.

QUALITY

All early care and education settings provide quality experiences for children.

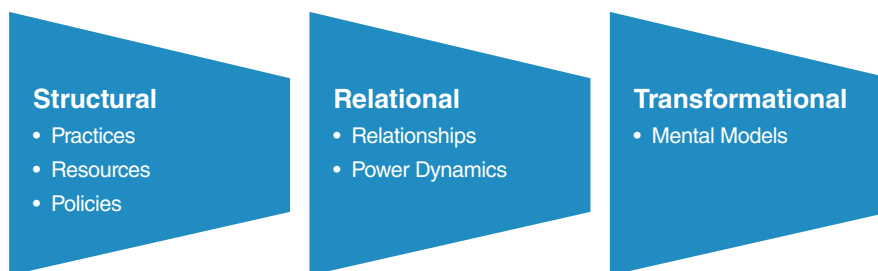
ACCESS

Each child and their family can access the quality early care, education, and other essential services they need to support each child’s healthy development.

Evaluation Methods

Evaluation team members at Munroe-Meyer Institute (MMI) conducted interviews with 18 project and early childhood system leaders working in state human service and education agencies, nonprofit organizations, and universities. Using a protocol focused on six conditions of systems change² (see Fig. 2), the participants described system shifts relative to PDG efforts. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed for coding and analysis. Three evaluators coded transcripts related to strategic plan goals. Participant narratives are quoted below to illustrate the coded goals and themes that emerged from each goal.

FIGURE 2. | ADAPTED FROM WATER OF SYSTEMS CHANGE FRAMEWORK²



Findings

State-Level ALIGNMENT focuses on creating an aligned vision for Nebraska’s early childhood mixed delivery system that will shape funding and policy decisions and will facilitate coordination and assessment. Participants discussed the following system shifts related to:

Data Availability. Participants recognized that PDG funding facilitated unprecedented data-sharing agreements in which organizations can share data without legislative or regulation change. The creation of the Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS), efforts around data governance, and memoranda of understandings (MOUs) were lauded as landmarks.

Using data to make decisions. Participants shared that people and organizations have increased their understanding of the value of collecting and sharing data and its importance for making informed decisions to benefit children and families.

“We’ve been very intentional at making sure we have data available that drives practices or drives the activities that we’re doing under PDG... I think modeling the use of that data under the PDG ... has positively impacted local-level providers and organizations and professionals in understanding how data can be used.”

Public Awareness. Participants reported a mental shift around the shared understanding of the importance of early care and education, as well as understanding funding needed to support it. As communities and entities not

traditionally involved in funding ECCE have engaged in efforts, they have shown an increased appreciation for their role in enhancing ECCE.

“... It certainly has brought the issue of lack of child care, the issue of quality, and accessing supports for quality, paying for the cost of quality—all those things. It’s brought those conversations to folks who weren’t having those conversations before. It wasn’t on their radar. I do think the general population perception of early care and education has changed.”

Effective use of funds. Participants reported seeing an increased awareness of resource and collaboration alignment and misalignment, crediting an increased understanding of what resources are available and how they flow through the system.

“One of the things that I continue trying to elevate, in terms of understanding with partners in the system, especially our state partners, is that depending on which setting a provider practices in that setting actually determines or impacts which funding they have access to, and not all providers in our early care and education system have access to the same amount of funding. So, people are starting to become more aware of that.”

Common goals. Increased inclusion of organizations (e.g., Head Start grantees) and individuals (e.g., parents and child care providers) who have not been collaborating in decision-making or whose voices were not considered

has expanded perceptions of Nebraska's early childhood mixed delivery system. Participants reported that PDG has created new partnerships and working relationships to increase coordination of services.

"It's been impactful because allowing families, allowing others from different agencies to feel that they belong... That's why people continue to show up."

COLLABORATION focuses on supporting local community leaders, early childhood providers, and school personnel to build collaborative relationships and develop their capacity to coordinate local resources for families and their children. Participants discussed system shifts related to collaboration, focusing on project and state-level collaboration, more than the priority of community-based collaboration. Many noted that state-level collaboration had increased and still needed to improve. Their perspectives included the following:

Inclusionary practices of diverse voices.

Participants noted practice changes as people and organizations have become more intentional regarding inclusivity and equity. Examples included increased inclusion of individuals from different geographical locations, tribes, races, and languages to increase the representation of diverse voices. This effort was seen to enhance collaboration with families who had historically not been included and led to learning that can inform decision-making.

"...The way that the state thinks about and values different voices. Family voice has really risen to the top with PDG, which I

so appreciate because that's always been something that we struggle with."

Increases in inclusive collaboration served were also noted at levels of community leadership:

"...Leaders who were members of communities that are underserved are being heard more now and people have closer relationships with people across these different organizations and power levels than they used to."

Shared power and responsibility. Participants shared that while in the past projects and services were seen as "owned" by one group or another, perspectives have shifted to thinking of ownership as the entire mixed delivery system. Collaboration facilitated by PDG efforts was credited with helping people, organizations, agencies, and communities understand the importance of working together.

"I think again it goes back to just seeing our work as part of a bigger whole. So, everybody has their own project and program that they work on, but we can't look at that in isolation. I think the PDG from a transformative change standpoint has really brought that to the forefront."

Connecting the leadership team across the state. Participants reported that efforts funded by PDG, such as the Nebraska Leadership Team and Early Childhood Connections, have brought partners together and built relationships to change the system.

“I think there’s a meta thing here on relationships and patterns of connection. Being clear that PDG funding facilitated more convening and back-and-forth communication ... than anything we had had in the past. This facilitated way more collaboration than we ever had the capacity to do.”

Elevating QUALITY occurs when “a child experiences quality early care and education as physical and emotional safety in the context of frequent, warm, one-on-one interactions with a caring adult who engages the child in language-rich and educational activities.”¹ While quality was the least-referenced system shift, participants discussed the following system shifts related to quality:

Importance of relationships for young children’s development. The Nebraska PDG reignited the shared understanding that children’s quality experiences in early care and education are largely dependent on how caregivers interact with children and engage with families.

“As far as other assumptions, values, or beliefs that have changed, I think just putting the emphasis back on how important relationships are and a young child’s first few years of life, and how critical that is to everything else...”

Adopting a child-centered perspective. Some key informants noted shifts in perspectives regarding the importance of providing children with more individualized and timely learning support, a supportive learning environment characterized by responsiveness, warmth, and enthusiasm.

“The adults are realizing that they don’t have to have that control and power over a child’s emotions or their behaviors. It’s not about controlling the atmosphere, it’s about understanding and empathizing and being in that moment and that relationship with them instead of controlling it and manipulating it.”

Increased awareness of quality among agency leadership. The understanding that the early childhood workforce is the source of quality for children has also led to increased investments in child care providers.

Increased awareness of challenges to providing quality. There has been an increased push to ensure child care programs are licensed to meet minimum quality requirements. Perceived barriers to quality included the need for more coaching to support quality, and the need for more licensed providers, especially in rural communities.

ACCESS focuses on ensuring equitable access to quality early childhood services for every child and every family in the state. Participants discussed the following system shifts related to access:

Licensing support. Through the PDG efforts, supports for licensing were put in place to make the process easier for many providers. Specifically, the grant facilitated the creation of licensing and training materials translated in Spanish and provided access to bilingual coaches.

Translation of materials. According to participants, due to translation of licensing, subsidy, and training materials, more providers and families have access to necessary information and support.

Supports/resources for families. Leaders cited two resources that have supported increased family engagement and access to early childhood services, including a publication families receive after the birth of a child that supports families' understanding of positive child development, and a web-based resource that helps families find and access child care.

Valuing diverse perspectives. PDG efforts have supported bringing geographically, racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse voices to the table, including parents. As a result, many families better understand and expect quality care for their children.

“...There’s so much more reaching out and inquiring about us and our tribe and being inclusive, making sure we’re comfortable. And when I think through family engagement, I think families are more empowered to ask for quality and have a better understanding of what that looks like.”

Family engagement to increase awareness. The parent conference, held in October 2022, and other events such as listening sessions and town hall meetings, have provided opportunities for families to connect with each other and with early childhood professionals. Parents have shared barriers they encounter in accessing ECCE and informed ways of enhancing access among the parents to serve them well.

“Bringing our parents as part of this table, it has been amazing... They have created a huge camaraderie ... and support system.”

Conclusion and Implications for Next Steps

In the context of a federal grant to enhance early care and education services, project and system leaders shared their perspectives on system shifts. Relative to the strategic plan established in Year 1 of the grant, they reported system shifts across the goals:

ALIGNMENT

Increased and improved collaboration facilitated enhanced value and understanding of how alignment could work, including data for decision-making, understanding resource flows, public awareness of the importance of ECCE, and understanding related to collective systems change.

COLLABORATION

Increased and improved organizational collaboration was the most frequently reported shift, defined by inclusion of diverse voices, statewide leadership connections, and efforts at power sharing.

QUALITY

Perspectives on quality shifted, with understanding focused on quality as centered in children’s experiences and relationships. However, system shifts related to quality practices or policies were not reported.

ACCESS

Spanish-speaking families and child care providers gained access to translated licensing and subsidy materials and bilingual coaching. Progress was reflected in greater inclusion of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse perspectives in early childhood efforts, even though few shifts in policies and practices have been realized.

Looking ahead at next steps in Nebraska’s early childhood systems transformation, the following efforts related to progress, family engagement, equitable systems, and community will be important:

Progress. Key informants identified several ways in which the PDG efforts were reflected in system shifts, and many reflected on progress relative to the state strategic plan goals, attributed to considerable collaboration among agencies, organizations, and partners. Increases in awareness of early care and educational system needs, resulting from increased collaboration, emerged as a dominant perspective of progress. While strides toward greater inclusion contributed to increased access for Spanish-speaking families and child care providers, it will be important to leverage ongoing collaboration to facilitate greater inclusion of families and providers from historically marginalized communities.

Family engagement. Key informants frequently shared examples related to the priority of family engagement, citing the broader recognition of families as partners, and efforts related to inclusion of diverse family perspectives across many funded projects. Ongoing and expanded inclusion of families in planning, implementing, and evaluating early childhood efforts will be essential to realizing family empowerment in Nebraska’s early childhood systems transformation.

Equity. While equity was implicit in the initial strategic plan goals, it was not explicitly identified in the leaders’ descriptions of system shifts. Efforts to create more equitable early care and education systems were seen in narratives related to translation and licensure and inclusion of racially, ethnically, linguistically, and

geographically diverse families and providers in PDG efforts. As the state strategic plan is revised with community efforts, it will be essential to more explicitly elevate the need for equitable experiences for families and providers.

Community. An important shift in the degree to which communities are benefiting from PDG overall efforts was noted in the context of the pandemic-related federal funding available to the state and how it was leveraged to support communities:

“We’re using ARPA dollars to fund community-based inputs for building infrastructures for expanding child care... A lot of infrastructure has been funded through ARPA as a result of the C4K and other investments, right? So absolutely changed those resource flows... I don’t really know how they would have spent ARPA dollars without having been informed by PDG.”

As most of the key informants’ engagement in PDG efforts were directed at state system levels, few discussed system shifts in communities. It will be important for future evaluation efforts to capture perspectives of progress from individuals and communities experiencing the activities in the PDG efforts.

References

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<https://nebraskapdg.org/>
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