

## **BY THE NUMBERS: EARLY CHILDHOOD IN NEBRASKA**

**Updated March 2025**

### **The Need for High-Quality Early Care and Education**

- Early childhood is regarded as the period of time in a young child’s life from birth through age 8. The brain is developing more rapidly during these early years of life than at any other time.<sup>1</sup>
- Parents are children’s first teachers, but most young children are not with their parents for many hours of the day. In Nebraska, more than 74.6% of children under age 6 live in homes where all adults work, which is higher than the national average of 69%.<sup>2</sup>
- Who is caring for children and how they are doing it matters greatly. The safety, relationships, and interactions between young children and their parents, caregivers, and teachers are the most important elements of a high-quality experience.<sup>3</sup>
- In Nebraska, nearly 111,000 children under 6 need child care.<sup>4</sup>
- Ninety percent of counties in Nebraska do not have enough available licensed child care slots to meet the current demand.<sup>5</sup>
- Eighty percent of mothers with children under the age of 6 are in the labor force in Nebraska.<sup>5</sup>
- Teacher turnover is as high as 26% in some early care and education settings.<sup>6</sup>
- Forty-one percent of children in Nebraska age 5 and younger are considered at risk of failure in school (62,729 children).<sup>7</sup>
- Approximately 35% (76,000) of the state’s children 0-8 live in households below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (2022).<sup>8</sup>
- Black, Hispanic/Latino, and/or Native children aged 0-8 are significantly more likely to be living in households below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level than are Asian and non-Hispanic White children.<sup>9</sup>
- Ten counties in Nebraska have no licensed child care facilities.<sup>10</sup>
- The gap between the potential need of enrollment spaces in child care and the actual capacity is over 17,500 spaces.<sup>10</sup>

### **Nebraskans’ Views on Early Care and Education**

- Nebraska voters see a child care crisis and want major, long-term state investment in quality child care and early learning.<sup>11</sup>
- Almost 90% of Nebraskans believe that ensuring affordable, quality child care for working families should be a priority in the state.<sup>11</sup>
- Eighty-three percent of Nebraska voters say that access to quality, affordable child care is very important to strengthening the economy and helping workers provide for their families.<sup>11</sup>
- The majority of Nebraska voters support making public investments in guaranteeing access to quality, affordable child care and early learning. This sentiment is high across the state and demographics – among parents and nonparents, cities, suburbs, small towns and rural areas, across income levels, and political parties.<sup>11</sup>

- 80% of Nebraska voters believe the state has the resources to help communities meet the need for affordable child care for working families and should dedicate significant funding to increase the availability of child care.<sup>11</sup>
- Three-quarters (74%) of Nebraska voters believe that the lack of quality, affordable child care and early learning is a serious problem in Nebraska.<sup>12</sup>
- Over 80% of Nebraskans believe Nebraska should support child care and early learning like it does K–12 schools and higher education.<sup>12</sup>
- The lack of quality, affordable child care and early learning is deemed to be a serious problem by nearly three-quarters (74%) of Nebraskans and is on par with housing and crime.<sup>12</sup>
- Most Nebraskans (92%) believe affordable, quality child care and early learning is an important part of keeping Nebraska a great place to live and raise a family.<sup>12</sup>
- 84% of Nebraska voters say that low wages for child care workers, early childhood teachers, and preschool teachers is a serious problem.<sup>12</sup>
- Nearly one-third (31%) of parents with children 5 and under said that they have left the workforce because they couldn't find affordable child care, and 34% said they refused a job opportunity, promotion, or change because it would increase child care expenses.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Status and Compensation of Nebraska's Early Childhood Workforce**

- Nearly half of Nebraskans (48%) believe that teachers and caregivers are paid too little.<sup>12</sup>
- In 2015, the median annual salary for early childhood professionals was \$25,980 for those providing in-home early care and education, \$18,706 for center-based teachers, \$36,000 for PreKindergarten teachers, and \$41,000 for Kindergarten–Grade 3 teachers.<sup>13</sup>
- The median annual pay for center-based teachers is half that of school-based PreKindergarten teachers, even though the age and developmental needs of children being served are the same.<sup>13</sup>
- The median annual pay for center-based teachers falls below the poverty line by almost \$1,400 for a family of three.<sup>13</sup>
- More than 11% of home-based providers have a second job and nearly 20% of center-based teachers, public PreK teachers, and K–3 teachers report holding a second job.<sup>13</sup>
- One in four (24%) home-based providers and center-based teachers depend on some form of public assistance. For home-based providers alone, that segment is nearly 30% and for center-based teachers alone, 20%.<sup>13</sup>
- More than 13% of home-based and center-based child care providers report that their own school-aged children qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.<sup>13</sup>
- The early childhood workforce is 6.3 times more likely to live in poverty than elementary and middle school teachers.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Return on Investment**

- Ensuring all families and children have equitable access to affordable high-quality care is key not only to the healthy growth and development of Nebraska's children but also to the economic vitality and prosperity of the state.<sup>15</sup>
- Nebraska's lack of sufficient child care is a burden on working parents, employers, and state revenues, resulting in "nearly \$745 million annually in direct losses."<sup>16</sup>
- A dollar spent for high-quality early care and education yields an average return of \$4; in circumstances where children are extremely vulnerable, the return can be as high as \$13.<sup>17</sup>

- Return on investment (ROI) includes money saved on special education, health care, social services, and the criminal justice system, as well as money earned from greater educational attainment, increased earnings, and improved productivity.<sup>17</sup>

### COVID-19 Impact on Nebraska’s Early Care and Education Providers (2020–22)

- One in four providers reported their income reduced by over 50%.<sup>18</sup>
- Most providers experienced symptoms of stress, such as changes in sleep, difficulty concentrating, social isolation, and anxiety about the future.<sup>18</sup>
- Nine in 10 providers employing staff had difficulty hiring for open positions, citing a lack of applicants and inability to offer sufficient pay.<sup>19</sup>
- Two-thirds of child care employers experienced staff turnover, with nearly 7 in 10 providers saying staff were leaving the field of early childhood entirely.<sup>19</sup>
- From February 2021 to February 2022, more than half of providers had to close their program due to COVID exposure and/or infection.<sup>19</sup>

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