

# Start Early. Start Well.

10 YEAR REPORT  
2013–2023



Buffett  
Early Childhood  
Institute

*at the University of Nebraska*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report represents the collective work of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska over its first 10 years. Every member of the Institute team and its many partners contributed to this work and to the story that we are telling about how we achieved our goals, fulfilled our promises, and made an impact on the lives of children and families. Just as our work has been collective, so too has the writing of this report. While no individual writer or author can be given sole credit for this document, it could not have been completed without the brilliant and inspired efforts of our editor, Sarah Moulton, and our creative and brand manager, Rebecca Elder. We are grateful to the two of them and all who made this possible.

Photo Credits: Ashia Aubrey, Rebecca Elder, Rebecca Gratz, Nancy Hammel, Tom Kessler, Smeeta Mahanti, Malone & Company, David Radler, Duane Retzlaff, University of Nebraska at Kearney Communications, VanKat & Co.

---

Suggested Citation: Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. (2023). *Start Early. Start Well: 10 Year Report, 2013–2023*. Retrieved from <http://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/resources/reports-publications>

Copyright © 2023 Buffett Early Childhood Institute.

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska does not discriminate based on race, color, ethnicity, national origin, sex, pregnancy, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, disability, age, genetic information, veteran status, marital status, and/or political affiliation in its programs, activities, or employment.

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute promotes the development and learning of children from birth through age 8. Our vision is to make Nebraska the best place in the nation to be a baby.

Visit [buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu](http://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu) for more information.

# Start Early. Start Well.

## 10 Year Report

2013–2023



## Science and common sense tell us that children are born learning.

Investing in the early years makes sense in order to create a more level playing field for all our children. This is an ambitious goal that will require a statewide collaborative effort. Nebraska's only public university, charged with serving the state through teaching, research, and outreach, is the right institution to take the lead.

**Susie Buffett**

**Gift announcement creating the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska**  
Feb. 1, 2011

Friends:

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska began as a public-private partnership with an audacious plan: to make Nebraska the best place in the nation to be a baby. It was made possible by a generous gift from Susie Buffett and a commitment from the university to put our strengths in early childhood to work to transform the lives of young children in Nebraska and beyond.



In the decade since, the Institute's reach has touched almost every corner of Nebraska, from Omaha to Scottsbluff, and beyond.

Early childhood education continues to be a core priority for our university. The need to ensure quality early care and education for all children from birth through age 8 has only grown over the past 10 years, particularly in the wake of COVID-19. Not only did the pandemic upend school districts and children's learning trajectories, it also laid bare how much families and employers rely on early childhood educators to provide a safe and stimulating learning environment for our youngest citizens.

The university and the Buffett Institute are working to meet the challenge. We engage faculty, staff, and students across the four University of Nebraska campuses and partners across the state to bring research and ideas to life. We convene Nebraskans in conversations about improving the quality of, and access to, early care and education in our communities. We build on Nebraska's rich history and expertise to close the opportunity gap and help all children—especially our most vulnerable—reach their full potential.

Our work has only just begun. Thanks to the founding leadership of Dr. Samuel J. Meisels at the Buffett Institute, we are well-positioned to continue our pursuit of that bold goal laid out 10 years ago.

That success is possible because of each of you—our friends, colleagues, and partners who are fighting every day to make a difference in the lives of children, families, and the professionals who serve them.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for all you do. And please join me in celebrating 10 years of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ted Carter". The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a white background.

Ted Carter  
President, University of Nebraska System

# Contents

<b>Chapter 1: Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>8</b>	<b>Chapter 6: Aligning Statewide Early Childhood Systems</b> .....	<b>116</b>
Key Accomplishments of Our First Decade .....	10	Statewide Assessment, Planning, and Evaluation .....	118
Early Childhood in Nebraska.....	16	Data Utilization .....	126
<b>Chapter 2: About the Institute</b> .....	<b>18</b>	<b>Chapter 7: Raising Awareness and Increasing Engagement</b> .....	<b>128</b>
How We Started and Why .....	20	Strategic Communications.....	130
Who We Are.....	21	Conferences, Convenings, and Awards.....	133
Our Priorities.....	28	We Care for Kids/Por todos los niños Campaign.....	142
Our Beliefs and Aspirations.....	36	<b>Chapter 8: Financial and Organizational Management</b> .....	<b>146</b>
What We Do and How We Work.....	41	Project and Portfolio Management.....	148
<b>Chapter 3: Responding to Nebraska’s Early Childhood Landscape</b> .....	<b>46</b>	Finances.....	151
Statewide Community Visits, 2013–15.....	48	<b>Chapter 9: Concluding Thoughts From the Founding Executive Director</b> .....	<b>154</b>
Buffett Early Childhood Institute/Gallup Survey on Early Childhood Care and		<b>Appendices</b> .....	<b>163</b>
Education in Nebraska .....	49	Appendix A. Buffett Early Childhood Institute Staff .....	164
Collaboration in the Nebraska Panhandle .....	53	Appendix B. Campus-Based Community Chairs.....	166
Coping With COVID-19 .....	55	Appendix C. Graduate Scholars and Research Assistants.....	167
Responses to Issues of Racial Justice.....	58	Appendix D. Board of Advisors.....	173
<b>Chapter 4: Closing the Opportunity Gap</b> .....	<b>60</b>	<b>References</b> .....	<b>177</b>
Where We Started .....	62		
What We Accomplished .....	65		
What We’re Learning .....	72		
Where We’re Going.....	81		
<b>Chapter 5: Elevating the Early Childhood Workforce</b> .....	<b>88</b>		
Where We Started .....	90		
What We Accomplished .....	97		
What We’re Learning .....	106		
Where We’re Going.....	111		

# Contents

## FIGURES

<b>FIGURE 1</b>	BUFFETT EARLY CHILDHOOD INSTITUTE ORGANIZATION.....	<b>24</b>
<b>FIGURE 2</b>	FAMILY INCOME AND THE SCHOOL-READINESS GAP .....	<b>31</b>
<b>FIGURE 3</b>	AN ECOLOGICAL VIEW OF POVERTY AND CHILDREN'S ACHIEVEMENT .....	<b>32</b>
<b>FIGURE 4</b>	AVERAGE ANNUAL SALARIES FOR U.S. LABOR FORCE PARTICIPANTS WITH BACHELOR'S DEGREES OR HIGHER, 2012.....	<b>34</b>
<b>FIGURE 5</b>	AREAS WHERE INSTITUTE LEADERSHIP AND STAFF WORKED IN INITIAL PLANNING PHASE, 2013–15.....	<b>48</b>
<b>FIGURE 6</b>	SCHOOL AS HUB FOR BIRTH–GRADE 3: FULL IMPLEMENTATION SITES, 2015–16.....	<b>66</b>
<b>FIGURE 7</b>	GUIDING FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOL AS HUB BIRTH–GRADE 3 APPROACH.....	<b>79</b>
<b>FIGURE 8</b>	DOMAINS AND INITIATIVES OF THE SUPERINTENDENTS' EARLY CHILDHOOD PLAN .....	<b>80</b>
<b>FIGURE 9</b>	BLUEPRINT FOR TRANSFORMING NEBRASKA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE.....	<b>96</b>
<b>FIGURE 10</b>	NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES THAT HOSTED SCREENINGS OF NO SMALL MATTER IN 2019.....	<b>98</b>
<b>FIGURE 11</b>	PUBLIC-SECTOR FUNDING FLOW .....	<b>100</b>
<b>FIGURE 12</b>	10-YEAR PHASED APPROACH TO FULL FUNDING (IN MILLIONS).....	<b>103</b>
<b>FIGURE 13</b>	ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL WELL-BEING .....	<b>111</b>
<b>FIGURE 14</b>	SYSTEMS ALIGNMENT IN THE NEBRASKA EARLY CHILDHOOD STRATEGIC PLAN .....	<b>122</b>
<b>FIGURE 15</b>	EQUITY ACTION AGENDA: CORE AREAS OF INQUIRY UNDERLYING EQUITABLE EVALUATION .....	<b>124</b>
<b>FIGURE 16</b>	WE CARE FOR KIDS/POR TODOS LOS NIÑOS CAMPAIGN LOGO .....	<b>142</b>
<b>FIGURE 17</b>	BUFFETT EARLY CHILDHOOD INSTITUTE ANNUAL BUDGET AND FUNDING DISTRIBUTION, 2013–23 .....	<b>151</b>

## TABLES

<b>TABLE 1</b>	SCHOOL AND DISTRICT CHARACTERISTICS: FULL IMPLEMENTATION SCHOOLS, 2020–21.....	<b>67</b>
<b>TABLE 2</b>	PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL EVENTS, 2015–22 .....	<b>70</b>
<b>TABLE 3</b>	AGGREGATE PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN, BIRTH–GRADE 3, IN FULL IMPLEMENTATION SCHOOL AS HUB SCHOOLS, 2015–22 .....	<b>72</b>
<b>TABLE 4</b>	CHANGING HOW SCHOOLS DO SCHOOL: TRANSITION IN PRACTICE FROM A TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO THE SCHOOL AS HUB BIRTH–GRADE 3 APPROACH.....	<b>82</b>
<b>TABLE 5</b>	GRANTS, CONTRACTS, FOUNDATION FUNDS, AND GIFTS, 2013–23.....	<b>152</b>

## CHAPTER 1

# Executive Summary

When the Buffett Early Childhood Institute was established at the University of Nebraska in 2013, it was presented with a remarkable challenge—to transform the lives of Nebraska’s young children and their families based on the best research available.

In our first decade, the Institute met this challenge and capitalized on the opportunity by convening and building relationships with diverse partners across the university, the state, and the nation. Together, we began to establish a common understanding and shared agenda for transforming early care and education in Nebraska. Today, we are pursuing a variety of collaborative initiatives designed to improve alignment across systems with responsibility for ensuring the healthy development and learning of young children.

We continue to learn from what we do—discovering new ways of working together and new directions for the work ahead. This commitment to learning, which is evident in all our work, is highlighted in this executive summary. Detailed information about our key accomplishments is described in the chapters that follow.

## Key Accomplishments of Our First Decade

**We built a four-campus, multi-disciplinary Institute at the University of Nebraska from the ground up—and established ourselves as a state voice and national leader in early childhood.**

Reflecting the vision and commitment of the University of Nebraska leadership and the inspiration and generosity of Omaha philanthropist Susie Buffett, the Institute was mandated to operate across all four campuses in the University of Nebraska system—maximizing opportunities for multi-disciplinary cross-campus collaborations and statewide partnerships. Under the leadership of our founding executive director, our staff grew to more than 50 professionals who collaborate across six organizational units—combining interests in basic and applied research with professional development, policy analysis, and outreach to all corners of the state. Our external sources of funding mirrored our growth in size and activity—increasing from 0% of our budget in 2013 to 47% of the Institute’s \$12 million annual budget today. From the outset, we relied on focused and strategic communications strategies to share what we are learning in Nebraska with colleagues and partners across the state and nation, and to engage in collaborative efforts to transform systems of early care and education.

**We created a bold vision and mission that galvanized a focus on early childhood in the state.**

Our vision is that Nebraska will become the best place in the nation to be a baby. Our mission is to transform the lives of young children by improving their learning and development. Throughout, we have recognized that parents are children’s first teachers. At the same time, we have elevated an understanding that in Nebraska, as across the nation, most young children spend many hours of their day in the care of those who are not their parents. Where and with whom children spend this time is of immense concern and priority.



**We raised awareness and understanding about the importance of ensuring quality, continuity, and equity in early care and education.**

In all our work, we emphasize that ensuring access to early care and education is only a first step. The healthy growth and development of Nebraska’s children, and the economic vitality and prosperity of the state, depend on ensuring quality and continuity in early care and education for all children from birth through age 8. This includes those with disabilities, living in poverty, experiencing familial challenges, or facing bias and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or other personal characteristics.

**We developed signature programs that focus on two of the most challenging areas in early childhood: Closing the Opportunity Gap and Elevating the Early Childhood Workforce.**

Both are central to achieving our vision and mission. They represent an unwavering commitment to reducing or eliminating income- and race-based opportunity and achievement gaps among young children birth through age 8, and to elevating the early childhood workforce, recognizing that early childhood professionals are essential to providing quality early care and education.

We pursue these signature programs through four areas of focus aligned with the university's land-grant tradition—research, practice, policy, and outreach. In our first decade, we:

- Conducted community visits and surveys to learn about Nebraskans' beliefs and attitudes concerning early childhood education and to better understand the strengths, needs, and differences within Nebraska's early childhood workforce—before, during, and after the lockdowns necessitated by COVID-19.
- Designed the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan—an initiative to change how “schools do school” in the 11 school districts in Douglas and Sarpy Counties; this initiative established and evaluated schools as hubs that connect young children and their families with quality early childhood education and services from birth onwards, and it helps educators translate research into practice in ways that are responsive to the strengths and needs of specific schools, districts, and communities.
- Convened a 40-person Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission to tackle the problems responsible for the state's growing shortage in the early childhood workforce, which led to far-reaching recommendations that address workforce preparation and support and a path towards fully funding the state's early childhood system.
- Elevated the voices of early childhood professionals across the state by coordinating screenings of the film *No Small Matter*; more than 35 events were held across the state, and nearly 2,000 Nebraskans in more than 200 communities viewed the film, participated in post-screening discussions, and shared their concerns and ideas.
- Developed a funding model to estimate the gap between Nebraska's current investment and the full cost of funding quality early care and education and created an interactive web-based tool that permits users to view individual funding streams within the overall context of Nebraska's complex early childhood fiscal situation.
- Developed an Ecological Framework for Early Childhood Professional Well-Being to promote a more comprehensive approach to investigating and understanding the factors that influence the well-being of early childhood professionals.

## We developed trusting relationships, partnerships, and collaborations across all sectors of the early childhood preparation and delivery system in communities across Nebraska.

Understanding that how we work is as important as what we do, we seek to be collaborative and integrative in all we do. We engage with diverse communities of researchers, early care and education providers, public school personnel, policymakers, business leaders, families, and the public to effectively apply what we know to improve early childhood practices, policies, and systems. Our commitment to working in this way is rooted in the understanding that for young children to grow and thrive and families and communities to prosper, it is

necessary to attend to the multiplicity of connections among them. This commitment is evident in our approach to structuring responsive professional learning. In our first decade, we:

- Collaborated with university colleagues and early childhood professionals to provide professional development to thousands of early care and education providers, with a focus on building capacity in the areas of teaching, learning, leadership, family partnerships, and community connections.
- Partnered with university faculty to support the development of future early childhood educators, with a focus on cultivating and promoting equity-minded early childhood professionals.
- Convened the Nebraska Early Childhood Leadership Cadre—a 26-member group of early childhood professionals representing diverse communities across the state who engage in ongoing professional learning that both elevates their teaching skills and increases their capacity to create change in the communities where they work and live.
- Led efforts to design and launch Responsive Equitable Systems for Preparing Early Childhood Teachers (RESPECT) across Nebraska—a privately funded initiative designed to transform Nebraska's system of preparing early childhood educators that represents a collaboration across the University of Nebraska, all six community colleges, and Nebraska's two tribal colleges.



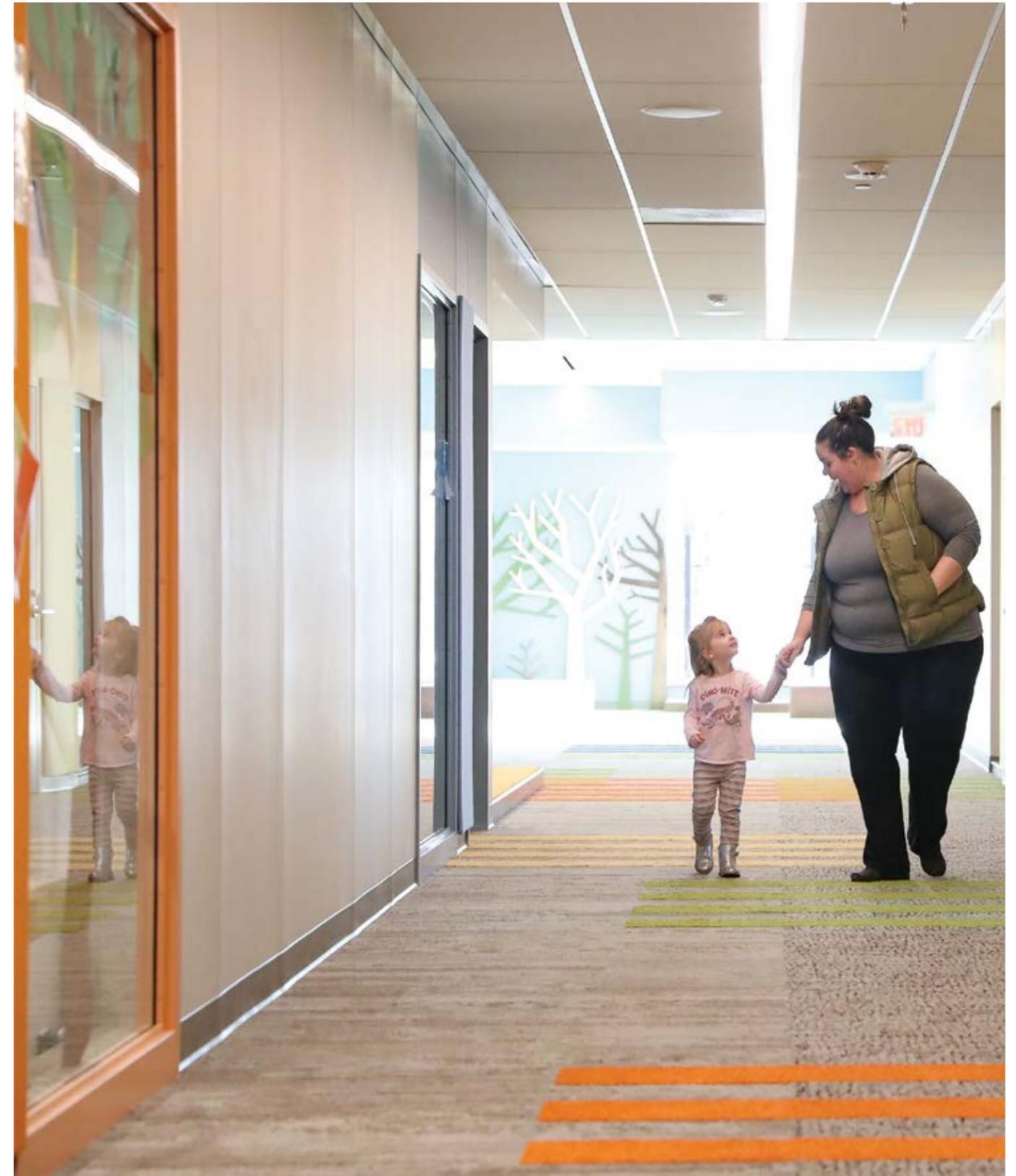
## We inspired and helped lead a growing movement to ensure that all children have access to quality early childhood education.

From the beginning, outreach has been an integral part of the Institute's research, practice, and policy efforts. By using planned outreach and strategic communications, the Institute helped establish and connect statewide networks of individuals who believe in and support quality early care and education for every child. These networks form the conduits of innovation and collaboration that are needed to transform systems of early care and education in Nebraska and beyond. In our first decade, we:

- Published dozens of reports, briefs, and articles that document the importance, value, and effectiveness of early childhood programs.
- Promoted university faculty and graduate student research through the creation of endowed faculty positions and provided funding for more than 20 graduate scholars devoted to multidisciplinary research on early development.
- Held dozens of convenings and conferences that brought thousands of Nebraskans together, helping to build a foundation of shared understanding and cooperation that supports strong statewide partnerships focused on bringing about broad systemic changes.
- Led efforts to develop and launch We Care for Kids/Por todos los niños, a multi-year, collaborative statewide campaign to build support for quality early childhood education for all Nebraska families and raise awareness concerning the important role of early childhood educators in ensuring that children, families, and communities thrive.

In the pages that follow, we describe these accomplishments, and many more, in detail—reflecting on how and why the Institute was founded and the growth, learning, collaboration, challenge, and change that characterize our accomplishments thus far. We also look ahead to new opportunities that are emerging from our increasingly collaborative and reciprocal partnerships across the Institute, the university, the state, and the nation.

For our partners and stakeholders, we hope you see yourselves reflected here in the many ways we are collectively contributing to the immensely important work of ensuring quality early care and education for Nebraska's children. Much remains to be done in the years ahead, and clearly the stakes have never been higher for our state's children, families, and communities. We remain committed to working together to make Nebraska the best place in the nation to be a baby.



## Early Childhood in Nebraska

### In Nebraska, more than 72% of children under age 6 live in homes where all adults work.

The brain is developing more rapidly from birth through age 8 than at any other time in life. Healthy, trusting, and consistent relationships with caregivers throughout the first eight years of life have a profound impact on young children's long-term success. While parents are children's first teachers, most young children are not with their parents for many hours of the day.

### The vast majority of Nebraskans express support for early care and education.

More than two-thirds (68%) of Nebraskans say that early care and education has a significant impact on the long-term success of children, and 67% believe the state should make early care and education a higher priority than it is today.

### In overwhelming numbers, residents say that quality early care and education is not available or affordable for all families in Nebraska.

Ninety-one percent of counties in Nebraska do not have enough available licensed child care slots to meet the current demand, and 11 counties in Nebraska have no licensed child care facilities. Few Nebraskans (11%) strongly agree that quality early care and education is available to every family in the state. Even fewer (6%) strongly believe it is affordable.

### Ensuring all families and children have equitable access to affordable 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.

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. 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.

### The early childhood workforce is the cornerstone of quality early care and education, yet all too often, early childhood professionals are undervalued and underpaid.

Nearly half of Nebraskans (48%) believe that teachers and caregivers are paid too little. The median annual pay for center-based teachers in Nebraska falls below the poverty line by almost \$7,800 for a family of four. In the early days of COVID-19, 1 in 4 providers saw their income reduced by over 50%.

Citations for all Nebraska data presented in the executive summary are available in the full report.





CHAPTER 2

# About the Institute

Omaha is the epicenter for reform in early childhood education.

**Robert Putnam**  
Professor of Public Policy  
John F. Kennedy School of Government  
Harvard University

## How We Started and Why

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute became operational at the University of Nebraska in 2013. At the time, a half-century of research demonstrated that quality early learning experiences during the first eight years of life set a child on a trajectory for success in school and life. Yet, despite the best efforts of many dedicated people and organizations across the state, Nebraska, like other states across the nation, was struggling to close the gap between what we know our young children need and what we provide.

To address this gap, leaders at the University of Nebraska and Susie Buffett, a leading philanthropist and champion of early childhood education and development, conceived a bold vision—establishing a university-wide multidisciplinary institute that would leverage the resources of the four campuses of the University of Nebraska and apply the best of what is known about the science and benefits of early childhood intervention in Nebraska and across the nation. In support of this vision, Buffett made a generous gift that was financially matched by the university, amounting to the largest commitment any university in the U.S.—public or private—has ever made on behalf of the field of early childhood development and education.

Susie Buffett’s gift to the university was premised on three broad challenges to the Institute:

- First, the Institute’s highest priority—its emphasis on young children, especially those living in poverty, living with disabilities, experiencing familial challenges, or facing bias and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or other characteristics—had to guide everything the Institute did.
- Second, the Institute must demonstrate value-added gains, rather than duplicating what already existed at the University of Nebraska or elsewhere.
- Third, the Institute’s mission must exert a powerful effect on the lives of children and families in Nebraska.

These three challenges are foundational to the Institute’s commitments throughout its first decade.

## Who We Are

The conditions of the Institute’s founding placed it in a unique position. As a totally new entity of the University of Nebraska, the Institute did not have any previous achievements to live up to or any potentially negative history to overcome. Rather, by working with early childhood researchers, faculty, policy stakeholders of the university, and the early education and K–12 communities of the state, along with policymakers and others committed to enhancing the lives of young children, it became evident that the Institute could set a course for Nebraska and the field that would only be strengthened by history, not encumbered by it.

From the outset, the Buffett Institute possessed what it required to meet its initial goals. It had philanthropic support; university backing; strong research expertise; committed public- and private-sector advocates; highly qualified practitioners in the community; impassioned leaders, colleagues, and students at the university; the applied research tradition of a land-grant institution; and tremendous public goodwill.

Within this supportive and committed context, the Institute was structured to operate across all four campuses of the University of Nebraska—including the land-grant flagship campus in Lincoln (UNL), academic medical center (UNMC) and metropolitan campus in Omaha (UNO), and primarily undergraduate campus in Kearney (UNK). This structure is designed to maximize opportunities for cross-campus collaborations and statewide partnerships, establishing a new model for how higher education is engaged in the first years of life.

In my view, Nebraska's public university can't afford not to be engaged in early childhood. When children have a healthy and happy start to life, they are set up to succeed down the road in high school, in college, in the workforce. This was the thinking behind the creation of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska, and it has become one of our shining beacons of light here at the university.

– Ted Carter, President, University of Nebraska System

## Four-Campus Institute of the University of Nebraska

As the Institute completes its first decade of operation, the university continues to prioritize early childhood education as an area of expertise, investment, and focus for cultivating partnerships across Nebraska. Today, the Institute employs more than 50 people who work collaboratively across six organizational units at the Institute’s administrative office in Aksarben Village, which is adjacent to UNO’s Scott Campus and UNMC’s Munroe-Meyer Institute in Omaha. Institute staff collaborate with faculty and students across the university’s four campuses—working closely with campus-based endowed community chairs and supporting graduate students through fellowships and research assistantships. The Institute’s organizational structure is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Six Organizational Units.** The Institute is organized into six units—Program Development, Research and Evaluation, Workforce Planning and Development, Professional Learning, Communications, and Operations. Across these six units, Institute staff representing diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise work collaboratively, combining interests in basic and applied research with professional development, policy development, and outreach to the four corners of the state—all focused on changing early childhood systems to ensure all children birth–Grade 3 have equitable opportunities for healthy development and learning. A list of current staff is provided as Appendix A.

**Campus-Based Endowed Community Chairs.** The Buffett Institute established four endowed community chairs on the University of Nebraska campuses. Each of these professorships is intended to focus on different dimensions or sectors of early childhood development. Overall, the community chairs reflect the interdisciplinary commitment of the Institute. The Institute seeks to reflect the strengths of each campus, and the community chair represents a new role for faculty that goes well beyond teaching, research, and service to include campus leadership and responsiveness to the local community through translational and applied research. More information about the community chairs is provided as Appendix B.

**Graduate Scholars.** The Institute offers fellowships for advanced doctoral students conducting research concerning early development. The overriding goal of the program is to increase the diversity and skills of doctoral scholars conducting innovative research with implications for early childhood, with particular attention to children placed at risk as a consequence of economic, social, and environmental circumstances. In addition, the Institute seeks to support quality research from such diverse fields as health, education, social work, engineering, music, art, psychology, physiology, and others. Multidisciplinary research and new methodologies are encouraged.

The fellowship program provides financial support for students admitted to doctoral candidacy in the University of Nebraska system. Each year, a maximum of four students receive awards up to \$25,000 to explore issues relevant to early development while completing their doctoral

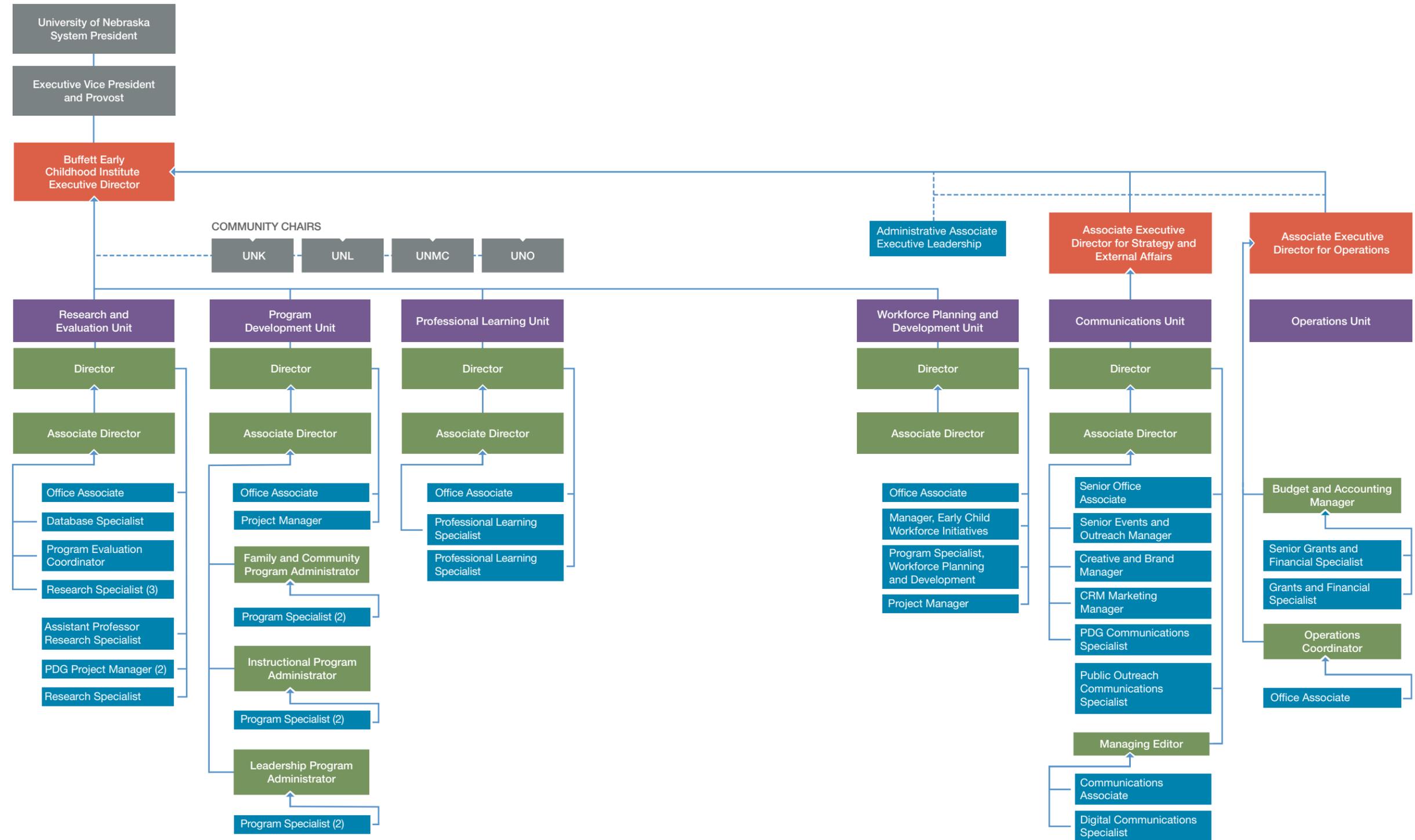
dissertations. To date, the Institute has supported 21 scholars across the University of Nebraska System totaling an investment of \$525,000, including the four scholars who were awarded fellowships for the 2022–23 year. More detailed information on the scholars and their projects is provided in Appendix C and can be found on the Institute website.<sup>1</sup>

**Graduate Research Assistants.** The Institute has supported students as graduate research assistants (GRAs) every year since 2015. Graduate students who serve as assistants contribute to the processes and products of the Institute while receiving experience and mentoring that will support their studies and career paths. GRAs support the Institute’s ongoing work by compiling and writing literature reviews, contributing to the development of surveys, assisting with the recruitment of participants, performing statistical analyses, conducting and analyzing data from focus groups and interviews, and supporting work with community partners. In addition, GRAs receive mentoring and support related to their personal and professional goals.

To date, the Institute has supported 22 graduate research assistants with mentoring and funding, including 13 from UNL and nine from UNO. In alignment with the Institute’s interdisciplinary commitment, the GRAs represent diverse academic disciplines and departments and have contributed to a number of Institute projects; for details, see Appendix C.

**Buffett Institute Collaboratorium.** Located on the UNL campus in Teachers College Hall, the Collaboratorium serves as a setting for multidisciplinary conversations about early childhood development that draw faculty and students from a range of different colleges and areas of interest on the UNL and other campuses, as well as early childhood practitioners. It is equipped with state-of-the-art communications equipment to facilitate meetings between early childhood researchers and practitioners across the state, the nation, and the globe. Additionally, the Collaboratorium provides space for advanced graduate students and postdoctoral appointees to study and work together.

FIGURE 1. BUFFETT EARLY CHILDHOOD INSTITUTE ORGANIZATION



## National Leader in the Early Childhood Field

The incredible opportunity represented by the Institute's founding brought with it significant responsibility. From the outset, our goal was to collaborate with partners and stakeholders across the state—leveraging our collective resources, strengths, and partnerships in pursuit of high-quality and rigorous standards of research, practice, policy, and outreach—to transform early childhood systems in Nebraska and advance understanding in the early childhood field. Using focused and strategic communications strategies, we share what we are learning in Nebraska with colleagues and partners across the state and nation—and we are increasingly recognized as a national leader in collaborative efforts to transform systems of early care and education.

**Board of Advisors.** Assisting us in these efforts is our national Board of Advisors—a distinguished panel of 10 researchers, educators, and practitioners, including a representative of the principal donor, who are experts in the fields of early childhood education and development, and who contribute their time, expertise, and experience to help guide our work. Appointed by the president of the university upon the recommendation of the executive director, the board meets each year with the Institute executive director and senior staff to offer their insights and recommendations. The list of board members is provided as Appendix D.



## Our Priorities

When the Institute was founded, the research literature of the day demonstrated that we knew far more about the impact of the first eight years of life on children’s social, intellectual, and emotional development than we had ever known in the past. Nonetheless, there was clearly a disconnect between what we knew and our ability as a society to translate this research into practice and reduce or eliminate income- and race-based opportunity and achievement gaps among children birth–Grade 3. Researchers described how failures of understanding, will, effort, and imagination were at the root of these persistent gaps, and some proposed methodologies for correcting them—ranging from long-term studies of systematic preschool intervention to quickly debunked myths about the teaching profession.<sup>2</sup>

Some researchers also emphasized the importance of increasing supports for the early childhood workforce, recognizing that well-prepared and -supported early childhood professionals are indispensable for providing quality early care and education.<sup>3</sup>

At the Institute, our intention was to apply these research findings to problems of policy and practice in Nebraska—in collaboration with researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and other stakeholders across the university and the state—and to communicate findings widely in order to transform early care and education in Nebraska and beyond. Drawing from the research, we began a careful process of determining how to reduce or eliminate the barriers facing children and families living in poverty, with disabilities, or facing bias and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or other characteristics. We identified three crucial constructs we consider essential to effective early care and education—quality, continuity, and equity—and established two signature programs that form the core of our work: Closing the Opportunity Gap and Elevating the Early Childhood Workforce.

### Quality, Continuity, and Equity in Early Childhood

**Quality refers to experiences of children, families, and educators that produce developmentally and educationally meaningful outcomes for children. It is based on warm, one-to-one, language-rich, cognitively challenging, socially engaging, and culturally responsive interactions between children and caring adults.**

This understanding of quality reflects a commitment that all practices used with children, families, and educators will seek to produce meaningful outcomes. The practices that lead to these outcomes must be research-based and open to continuous improvement. Our intention is to enhance the impact of programs and instruction for young children by improving the skills, pedagogy, and support of teachers and practitioners across the early childhood continuum and by refining and enriching the way teachers and caregivers interact with children and families.<sup>4,5</sup>

**Continuity involves creating opportunities for children to experience a related set of learning and educational experiences from birth through Grade 3. What is learned at one age or grade level builds upon the learning that came before, even though that learning may appear qualitatively or quantitatively different from one age, grade, or setting to another. Continuity includes families as key participants and partners with school and community-based services.<sup>6,7</sup>**

Continuity in programs and classrooms is grounded in a shared understanding of child development and a critical recognition of progression and transition in early learning. Skills acquired early on lead to achievements demonstrated later in life. Teachers, caregivers, and family members are the purveyors of this kind of progress. Continuity is only possible when expectations about pedagogical knowledge and adult-child relationships are shared across ages and settings of early learning. Ensuring continuity across early care and education settings requires a wide range of occupational supports, such as professional recognition and parity in compensation, that reflect the complexity of the work carried out by each early childhood professional, regardless of setting or age of the children in care. Meaningful connections between families, schools, and community-based services are also essential for establishing continuity in children’s learning and providing opportunities for ongoing family and community engagement.

**Equity involves promoting the development of all children by addressing disparities in learning opportunities, family supports, and child outcomes. Equitable teaching and learning reduces or eliminates the predictability of who succeeds and who fails by making systemic changes in how children are cared for, taught, and treated.**

Achieving equity requires prioritizing policies and practices that effectively reduce or eliminate the root causes of institutionalized racism, classism, sexism, and other types of prejudice and bias through fundamental systemic changes in how children are taught, treated, and cared for and how families and communities are perceived. This outlook applies to the classroom as well as to the preparation of, support for, and demographics of the teachers who interact with children and families. In our view, equity is essential for achieving both quality and continuity. It is crucial in our work as well as in our day-to-day interactions with our own colleagues at the Institute and the university.<sup>7–10</sup>

## Signature Programs

From the beginning, the Institute has been guided by an unwavering commitment to address two of the most important and longstanding issues in the field of early childhood education and development—the need to reduce or eliminate income- and race-based opportunity and achievement gaps among young children, and the importance of elevating the early childhood workforce, recognizing that early childhood professionals are essential to providing quality early care and education. In this section we will introduce the Institute’s signature programs and explain the rationale for their selection as the core content of the Institute’s work.

### Closing the Opportunity Gap

For decades, researchers have studied disparities in educational and social outcomes among children from different backgrounds, considering such factors as family income, race and ethnicity, gender, home language, ability status, and other characteristics. The persistent disparities in resources and opportunities available to children from different backgrounds—especially disparities associated with family income and social attitudes toward race and ethnicity—contribute to the origin of the “achievement gap” and are now being explored in broader terms as the “opportunity gap.” In 2019 we changed the signature program’s name from the Achievement Gap Challenge to Closing the Opportunity Gap to better reflect our understanding that children’s capacity for achievement is directly affected by the early care and education opportunities that are available to them through their families, schools, and communities.<sup>11,12</sup>

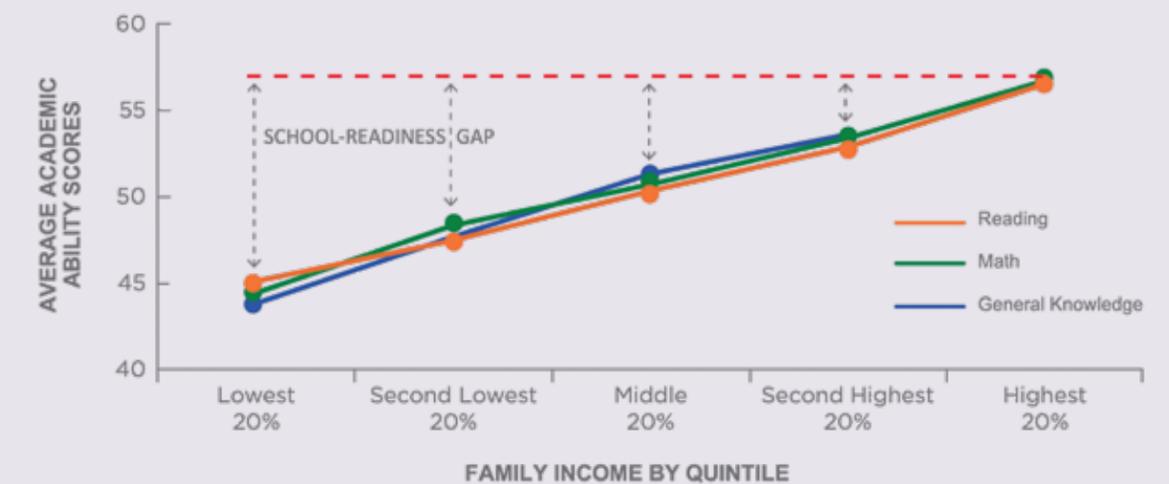
Most national data on children’s school success focuses primarily on children’s achievement and, at that, those enrolled in the fourth grade or higher. But research demonstrates that disparities take shape very early, with indications that they are underway as early as infancy. Using data from the U.S. Department of Education Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort, Halle and colleagues found that children from low-income households compared to higher-income households scored lower on cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes at 9 months of age.<sup>13,14</sup>

In addition, because of the life opportunities offered them and generations of family members,<sup>15</sup> Black and Native American children and children from low-income households are more likely to be born prematurely and at low birth weight when compared with white children and those from higher-income households.<sup>16-18</sup> Children from low-income households and those from non-white racial and ethnic groups, especially Black and Native American children, are also likely to face other significant health challenges such as asthma and respiratory disorders.<sup>19,20</sup>

Other studies provide additional information that links risk factors and children’s outcomes.<sup>21-24</sup> This is seen dramatically in findings from the nationally representative sample of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS).<sup>25</sup> Figure 2

provides data from more than 23,000 nationally representative kindergartners enrolled in ECLS. This figure dramatizes the achievement gap associated with family income. It shows the relationship of average academic ability to socioeconomic status (SES). “Even before they entered Kindergarten, children in the highest SES-quintile group had scores that were 60% above those in the lowest group ... Moreover, the disparities in children’s cognitive performance at Kindergarten entry attributable to SES were significantly greater than those associated with race or ethnicity.”<sup>26(p.236)</sup> These results tell us that when children from lower income families enter Kindergarten, they are, on average, far behind their wealthier peers in areas that are critical to school success. As some say, the circumstances in which these children have been raised put them “behind at the starting gate.”<sup>27</sup>

FIGURE 2. FAMILY INCOME AND THE SCHOOL-READINESS GAP



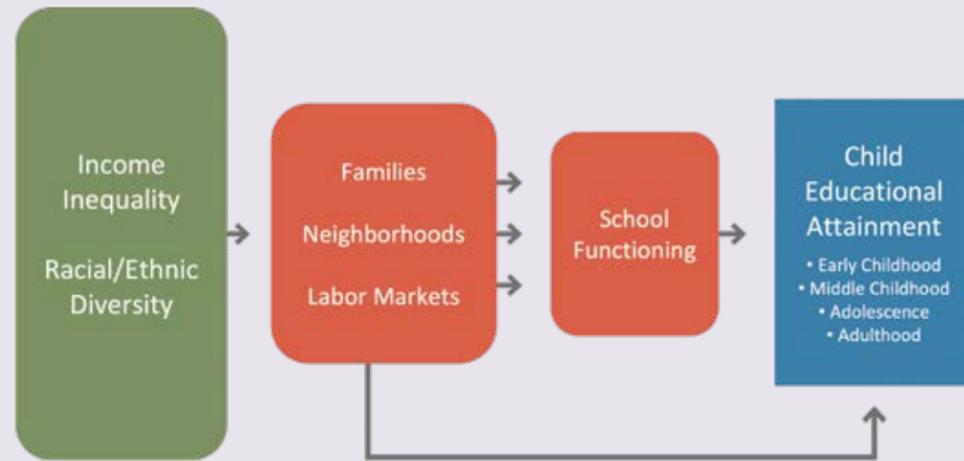
Source: Analysis of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten class of 1998-99. (See [nces.ed.gov/ecls/childergarten.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/ecls/childergarten.asp)) By W. Steven Barnett and Milagros Nores for The National Institute for Early Education Research

The reason poverty appears to carry so much predictive power is because it interacts with so many other risk and opportunity factors and is clustered with a wide range of other social variables that are potentially hazardous to health and development. This suggests the need to look at poverty comprehensively, specifically from an ecological point of view. By highlighting the relationship between children and their environments we can better understand the role poverty plays in shaping children’s lives, their development, and their school success.

Poverty affects not just individuals, but families, neighborhoods, and local labor markets as well. As seen in Figure 3,<sup>28</sup> disruption and dissolution of any of these social contexts can directly affect children’s skill acquisition, educational opportunities, and attainments, and can also indirectly influence how schools operate. Low family income makes it more difficult for parents to afford high-quality child care that prepares their children for Kindergarten.

It can also lead to classrooms with high proportions of low-achieving classmates with limited executive function and self-control. In this way, a child's educational attainment and opportunity can begin to be depressed from early childhood through adulthood.

FIGURE 3. AN ECOLOGICAL VIEW OF POVERTY AND CHILDREN'S ACHIEVEMENT



Source: Duncan, G. J., & Murnane, R. J. (Eds.) (2012). *Whither opportunity? Rising inequality, schools, and children's life chances*. Russell Sage Foundation.

In short, the achievement gap and the opportunity gap are closely bound together and they, in turn, are deeply influenced by the familial and social environments in which children are raised, the attitudes of those with greater resources and attendant advantages toward those with less,<sup>29,30</sup> and the availability of programs of intervention, beginning at birth, designed to help those with more limited resources. It is to respond to this set of circumstances that we created the Closing the Opportunity Gap signature program and the one described below.

### Elevating the Early Childhood Workforce

When the Institute began operations in 2013, it created an additional signature program to explore how a high-quality early childhood workforce can fulfill a critical role in children's growth and development and the well-being of families and communities. All too often, early childhood professionals are underpaid, undertrained, and typically underappreciated. Through its Early Childhood Workforce Development Program, later renamed Elevating the Early Childhood Workforce, the Institute made a commitment to improving the skills and well-being of those working with children from birth through Grade 3 by embedding them in a system of supports that nourish their strengths and enable them to grow personally and professionally. This includes a focus on workforce well-being, professional preparation and qualifications, workforce compensation, funding, and public commitment to quality early care and education.<sup>31,32</sup>

The skills and knowledge of caregivers, teachers, and others who have professional responsibility for young children while their parents work or are unavailable has long been underestimated in the United States. In 2021, 72% of Nebraska children under age 6 were in households where all adults were in the labor force.<sup>33</sup> When all the adults in a family who are responsible for children are working outside the home, early childhood professionals must play a crucial role in supporting families by providing infants and young children with vital, positive interactions that help them feel secure and contribute to healthy brain development.

Skilled, informed, and supported professionals are the cornerstone of quality early care and education. Providing developmentally appropriate care and education for children from birth through Grade 3 requires specialized knowledge and skills. This includes an understanding of early childhood development across cognitive, social-emotional, and physical domains; the ability to facilitate children's learning in the context of play through nurturing relationships and intentional interactions; and the capacity to work effectively with children and families from diverse backgrounds and with diverse learning needs.<sup>34-37</sup>

In stark contrast to K–12 education, most states (including Nebraska) do not require a postsecondary degree to teach young children. Although a 4-year-old may be cared for by a certified teacher who holds a bachelor's degree in early childhood during their morning preschool at their local elementary school, in the afternoon that same child may transition to a community child care center with a lead teacher who holds a high school diploma. Both teachers play pivotal roles in the child's experience of quality, yet the systems for preparing them to become lead teachers are vastly different.

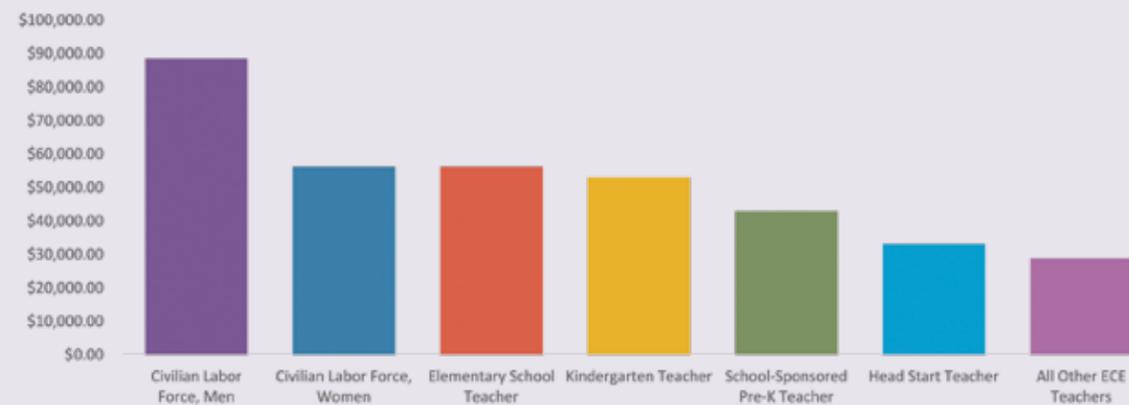
Even teachers who have identical degrees are often prepared in vastly different ways. Training programs for early childhood educators embody a wide range of quality that leads to the same state and national credentials.<sup>34,38</sup> In Nebraska, researchers found dramatic differences in early childhood teacher preparation programs.<sup>39</sup> Yet, a bachelor's degree and teacher certification are often considered the hallmarks of quality for early childhood teachers, regardless of the requirements of the preparation program. Institutions of higher education provide an appearance of accountability that allows communities to assume that all degreed professionals have the skills and knowledge required to perform at a high level.

Moreover, no system permits experienced early childhood professionals who do not hold postsecondary degrees, but who have developed professional expertise outside of conventional higher education, to demonstrate their competence. The existing system of fragmented workforce regulations and credentialing requirements creates significant structural, cultural, and interpersonal barriers, some of which prevent professionals from communities and groups that face socioeconomic and/or educational-opportunity barriers from enrolling in higher education.<sup>40</sup>

The early childhood workforce is composed primarily of women. Women of color are disproportionately represented in the lowest-paying, least-supported roles and settings within the profession. Too often, these inequities are reinforced by commonly held perceptions of the early childhood workforce that reflect an outdated understanding of early childhood development and the concomitant role of caregivers.<sup>34, 35</sup>

Despite increased public investments in early care and education, early childhood professionals must survive on low wages, few benefits, and limited professional support.<sup>35, 41, 42</sup> The average U.S. annual salary for a bachelor's-prepared teacher in a community-based early childhood setting in 2012 was \$28,912 (see Figure 4),<sup>43</sup> which is about a third lower than the average salary for school-based PreK teachers and almost half the salary of Kindergarten and elementary school teachers. Analyzed more specifically for Nebraska, the median 2016 salary for center-based early childhood teachers (not just those with a bachelor's degree) was \$18,706. This is below the poverty level for a family of three. In still another survey, approximately 27% of home-based and 20% of center-based teachers in Nebraska were on public assistance.<sup>44</sup>

FIGURE 4. AVERAGE ANNUAL SALARIES FOR U.S. LABOR FORCE PARTICIPANTS WITH BACHELOR'S DEGREES OR HIGHER, 2012



Source: Whitebook, M. (2014). *Building a skilled teacher workforce*. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Several studies have examined aspects of professionals' personal well-being and their associations with health outcomes,<sup>45</sup> turnover,<sup>46</sup> interaction with children,<sup>47</sup> and child outcomes.<sup>48</sup> A small and growing body of work has examined how specific features of certain contexts, such as working conditions, wages and benefits, and workplace climate, relate to well-being.<sup>49-51</sup> Previous research has identified the presence of clinically depressive symptoms, financial hardship, chronic health concerns, and high stress in early childhood professionals.<sup>52,53</sup>

The well-being of professionals is intimately related to decisions to remain with or leave a place of employment or the field altogether; the turnover in some Nebraska early childhood settings is as high as 26%.<sup>54</sup> Turnover is particularly problematic because experiencing continuity with the same teacher over time is an important part of a child's experience of quality. Children thrive when they establish relationships with teachers and experience predictable classroom routines.<sup>55</sup> The relationship between a child and teacher can also serve as a protective factor for children exposed to trauma.<sup>56</sup>

Inherent in these issues of early childhood teacher preparation and professional well-being are questions of how best to ensure equity for both early childhood professionals and the children and families they serve. Achieving equity requires changing system-level policies and practices related to teacher preparation, professional development, pathways to higher education, and financing and compensation. These types of systemic changes depend on shifting public perceptions to ensure everyone understands that a skilled, informed, and supported early childhood workforce is essential for the healthy development of children, families, and communities.

Since the founding of the Institute, each of our signature programs has remained central to our work and remains so today, with a number of changes and evolutions. These developments are described in Chapters 4 and 5 of this report.

# Our Beliefs and Aspirations

From the outset our goal was to be strategic, focused, and collaborative. To accomplish this, we created and put into practice two five-year strategic plans over our first decade. The first plan, initiated during our first year of operations, was produced with the assistance of more than 30 university faculty and staff from across all four campuses, as well as other stakeholders from public education, early childhood, and community organizations. This plan defined our vision and mission, which remain identical today, as well as five overarching strategies that guided our work from 2014–19. The second plan, largely written and developed by the Institute staff with assistance of consultants and based on what we learned over our first five years of work, was released in 2020 to guide us through 2025. This plan includes updated statements about the values that shape our work, as well as four strategic goals with corresponding objectives. Collectively, our vision, mission, values, and strategic goals describe what we believe and seek to accomplish.

## Vision and Mission

The Institute’s vision and mission were first embraced by the Institute’s Strategic Planning Commission in 2013 and, 10 years later, they continue to serve as the basis for the daily work of the Institute. Both are grounded in research and best practice concerning early childhood learning and development—research that is as relevant today as it was in 2013.

**Our vision is to make Nebraska the best place in the nation to be a baby.** Research demonstrates that high-quality early learning experiences are linked to long-term progress in school, increased earnings, reduction in anti-social behavior, lowered welfare participation, reduced adolescent pregnancy, and less trouble with the law. In making Nebraska the best place to be a baby, we believe that we hold in our hands the potential to transform the trajectory of life for children in greatest need—both here and beyond Nebraska. Given what we know, there is no justification for ignoring the impact of quality early care and education.<sup>57-63</sup>

**Our mission is to transform the lives of young children by improving their learning and development.** We seek to accomplish this by harnessing the interdisciplinary resources and research of the four University of Nebraska campuses and developing collaborations with schools, child care programs, agencies, community partners, and policymakers across the state to implement and support high-quality, evidence-based services, programs, and policies for young children and their families.<sup>64-68</sup>

## Values

Fundamental to realizing our vision and mission is a parallel understanding of the values and beliefs that permeate our efforts. These values reflect our conviction that how we work is as important as the work we do. Over the past 10 years, we have refined our values as follows:

**Equity.** We believe that all children must have the opportunity to reach their full potential, and we recognize that the predictability of who succeeds or fails based on race, class, or ethnicity is incompatible with healthy development. We are committed to promoting diverse perspectives, increasing our understanding of how to work with one another, and becoming sensitive to the diverse ways in which children, families, and communities can thrive.

**Excellence.** We believe in leveraging our collective resources, strengths, and partnerships in pursuit of high-quality and rigorous standards of research, practice, policy, and outreach. We have the extraordinary distinction of being one of only three institutes at the University of Nebraska with responsibilities and access to all four of its campuses. This collection of talent, experience, and knowledge has the potential to strengthen and magnify all our research and programs.

**Impact.** We believe in taking bold and courageous steps to improve the lives of children and families in Nebraska and beyond. Moreover, our work is not finished until we have begun to strategically inform people of what we have accomplished so they can learn from our experience and adapt it to their own settings.

**Innovation.** We believe in embracing change, growth, creativity, diversity of thought, and new solutions that will enable us to achieve our vision. We see ourselves as a “learning organization” that respects the history of our field and profession while simultaneously asking whether current and accepted solutions—including our own—should undergo change based on data and interactions with our partners and constituents.

**Relationships.** We believe in putting people first. We recognize the inherent dignity of children, families, teachers, and other colleagues we work with and serve. We acknowledge and celebrate our differences and strive to be honest, compassionate, ethical, and caring while remaining rigorous and committed to scientific principles of inquiry.

**Collaboration.** We believe that working together as a team, rather than as individual investigators, enables us to experience the nearly incomparable gains that accrue from exposure to multiple perspectives. By sharing knowledge and effort, we can achieve greater success more efficiently and comprehensively and enrich and empower one another in the process. We seek to be cross-cutting, cross-unit, and cross-disciplinary.

## Strategic Planning

The Institute’s first strategic plan guided our activities from 2014 through 2019. This plan was developed in early 2013 before there was an Institute. It took shape while we were still deciding what we wanted the Institute to become, what its goals should be, and how to be effective and efficient in achieving our goals (some said we were “building the airplane while flying it”). More of a “strategic master plan” than a set of goals with tactics and specific initiatives, the plan identified five major strategies that were intended to highlight the essential roles the Institute could play in bringing people together to transform early childhood care, education, and practice in Nebraska, the nation, and beyond. In addition to the five strategies, the plan included suggested activities—many of which were implemented over the course of our first five years, as reflected in the work described in Chapters 3–7.

As a new organization, we understood that our strategies could only be refined over time. We also noted that available funding would play a significant part in what we chose to devote our energies to. Although the Institute had a historic endowment, no additional funding from the university over and above the match to the donor’s initial gift was promised or expected. Thus, all programs of the Institute not covered by earnings on the endowment were dependent on securing adequate public and private financial support (see Chapter 8). As our work progressed and additional funding support was acquired over time to meet our goals, our activities and commitments became more finely demarcated, as reflected in the objectives of our second strategic plan.

In 2020 we published a five-year strategic plan to guide our work through 2025. Building on what we learned since becoming operational, the current plan includes four goals, each encompassing several distinct objectives. These goals reflect what we want to be known for and what we are committed to, while also identifying new challenges for the future. They give definition to our vision, mission, and values, and they reflect our understanding that achieving our goals is dependent in part on our day-to-day organizational health. All our current activities are aligned with one or more of these goals through processes of project and portfolio management, as described in Chapter 8.

## Strategic Plan, 2014–19

### FIVE GUIDING STRATEGIES

#### 1. Convening

The Buffett Institute will convene stakeholders from the NU system, public policymaking arenas, public and private education, child health, mental health, families of young children, and Nebraska’s early care and education community.

#### 2. Bridging

The Buffett Institute will bridge the issues, concerns, and problems that place the potential of young children and their families at risk by making available and accessible research-based, developmentally meaningful resources and knowledge already existing in the NU system and elsewhere that can help address these concerns.

#### 3. Partnering

The Buffett Institute will actively partner with local and state agencies, mental health providers, school districts, and others to implement and evaluate meaningful interventions that are responsive to child, family, and community needs and resources.

#### 4. Innovating

The Buffett Institute will innovate and create potential solutions to issues and problems confronting Nebraska’s young children placed in circumstances of risk and their families in collaboration with others.

#### 5. Communicating

The Buffett Institute will communicate information about the Institute and its work to the broader community of parents, providers, policymakers, researchers, and the general public and will actively engage in social marketing efforts to inform and support positive social change for young, vulnerable children and their families.

## Strategic Plan, 2020–25

### FOUR STRATEGIC GOALS

#### 1. Support High-Quality Early Care and Education for All Children

Ensure that the professionals, organizations, and systems that serve young children and their families are as effective, supportive, and equitable as possible.

- Support and develop the knowledge, skills, and well-being of those who care for and educate children, birth–Grade 3.
- Build the capacity of organizations to be responsive and effective in serving young children and families.
- Promote the alignment of systems to support quality, continuity, and equity.

#### 2. Promote Expertise in Early Childhood Research, Practice, Policy, and Outreach

Use research, practice, policy, and outreach to positively impact young children, families, and the early childhood field.

- Engage in rigorous research and evaluation.
- Recommend effective public policies that improve the lives of young children and their families.
- Use strategic communications and outreach to build support for high-quality early care and education.

#### 3. Build Powerful Partnerships

Engage in collaborative partnerships to improve early learning opportunities and outcomes for all children.

- Identify, support, and sustain partnerships within the University of Nebraska system.
- Build and sustain early childhood partnerships in Nebraska.
- Build and sustain early childhood partnerships in the United States and beyond.

#### 4. Be an Effective, Efficient, and Healthy Organization

Help the Institute become one of the best places to work as it seeks to fulfill its mission.

- Recruit and support mission-oriented team members who reflect diverse experiences and backgrounds.
- Support the development and well-being of Institute team members.
- Foster and grow an engaged, collaborative, and inclusive culture.
- Ensure that appropriate standards, procedures, and systems are in place to support institutional quality and effectiveness.

## What We Do and How We Work

In all we do, we aspire to fulfill the promise of our vision, mission, values, and goals by pursuing our signature programs through four areas of focus aligned with the university's land-grant heritage—research, practice, policy, and outreach. From the outset, we understood our role in bringing people together to transform early childhood care and education. We know that fulfilling our mission is dependent on collaborating with others and being a catalyst that brings about broad systemic changes. In the early years of the Institute, this aspiration was constrained by a tendency to view our work in conventional academic terms—as a collection of related but ultimately separate endeavors. Not only did we struggle internally to integrate our work across our four focus areas, but the fragmentation of the early childhood field—across diverse academic disciplines, early care and education settings, policy and economic infrastructures, and cultural and community contexts—was evident in the systems of early care and education we were working with at local, state, and national levels.

Over time and with experience, we learned collectively to adopt more integrative and systems-based approaches to our work. Our commitment to working this way is rooted in the understanding that for young children to grow and thrive and families and communities to prosper, it is necessary to attend to the multiplicity of connections among them. We seek to accomplish this by nurturing relationships, partnerships, and collaborations across multiple, diverse sectors—including early care and education, K–12, higher education, public policymakers, state regulatory agencies, businesses, philanthropic organizations, and families in communities across the urban to rural continuum.

Our goal is to be collaborative, cooperative, open, and responsive to one another and those outside of the Institute. We understand that individually our expertise has limits. Over our first decade, we learned to rely on colleagues across the university and nation, as well as those in our partner organizations, including the children, families, early childhood professionals, schools, and communities we engage with who bring their own strengths, challenges, experiences, and expertise to the work. We are focused on strengthening, expanding, and nurturing relationships—through consulting, coaching, facilitating professional learning, monitoring and assessing progress, jointly discovering opportunities for continuous improvement, and enlisting new thought partners from communities across the state who continue to teach us how to look at issues in new ways.<sup>69-71</sup>

We believe that it is only through collective efforts of this kind that we can hope to successfully confront the challenges we have committed ourselves to. Our commitment to working this way is reflected in how we approach research, practice, policy, and outreach.

## Research: Applied and Partnership-Based

The Buffett Institute is committed to ensuring that its work is informed by and informs the evidence base of the early childhood field. In partnership with university, national, and international colleagues, state agencies, nonprofit organizations, early childhood professionals, and other diverse stakeholders in communities across the state and nation, the Institute conducts applied research to identify and promote changes in early childhood practices and policies that support its mission—to transform the lives of young children by improving their learning and development. Unlike basic research, which seeks to make contributions to knowledge without necessarily expecting that knowledge to have an impact on practice, applied research is intended to advance what we know about a problem in order to create solutions to that problem.<sup>72</sup>

To apply research findings to problems of practice ethically and equitably, researchers must engage with partners within the impacted communities. From the outset, we sought to better understand the strengths and challenges of diverse communities across Nebraska relative to early care and education. To accomplish this, we collaborate with professional colleagues and community partners to conduct surveys, interviews, and focus groups—collecting quantitative and qualitative data from individual children and families, early childhood professionals, administrators, and community leaders. We analyze the data and share our findings with partners and stakeholders to inform improvements in early childhood practice and policy. The data are also used to evaluate existing programs and to inform the development of new applied research projects.

We particularly value and pursue partnership-based research. Often referred to as research-practice partnerships,<sup>73,74</sup> this approach ranges from investigator-driven research in community contexts to collaborative partnerships in which the researcher and practitioners jointly identify and investigate problems of practice. These partnerships may include extensive community involvement and are often designed to actively engage all partners in existing or newly implemented strategies to improve practice.

Over our first decade, the Institute’s engagement in research-practice partnerships has evolved, and continues to evolve, to be increasingly collaborative and responsive to the strengths and needs of Nebraska’s children, families, and early childhood professionals. Examples of this are described throughout this report.

## Practice: Collaborative Partnerships With Early Childhood Professionals

The Institute partners with early childhood professionals in multiple ways—through research-practice partnerships described above and through a variety of mentoring, coaching, and professional development activities. These partnerships and professional learning opportunities

are designed to help practitioners develop new skills, solve everyday classroom problems, and form relationships across schools, districts, communities, and settings—all with the intent of promoting quality, continuity, and equity in early care and education. In addition to considering teaching strategies and curriculum, these activities address such issues as how to strengthen capacity for birth–Grade 3 programming at the school and district levels, engage with community partners to ensure continuous care for young children, systematically engage families in their children’s growth and development, and help children from historically marginalized backgrounds overcome the negative impacts of poverty, racial stigmatizing, and isolation in their educational experience.

The Institute’s role in these activities is to convene and collaborate with early childhood professionals to help them implement evidence-based practices that improve young children’s learning and development.





## Policy: Evidence- and Systems-Based

By virtue of being applied, rather than theoretical, all our efforts in research and practice are intended to deepen our understanding of problems and develop innovative evidence-based solutions. This also entails addressing the policy implications of our work. Because we endeavor to tackle challenges that are systemic, our efforts must attend to interdependencies occurring across the early childhood ecosystem.

From an ecological systems perspective, child development occurs within a complex system of relationships that are affected at multiple levels by the surrounding environment.<sup>75-77</sup> Arranged from most proximate to least, systems levels differentiate from the most immediate settings of family or school to less immediate settings of policy structures and laws, with the most distal settings made up of broad cultural values and beliefs. For change at any one level of the system to be sustained, alignment is needed across the entire ecosystem.

For this reason, our efforts to create opportunities for optimal learning not only address the professional preparedness of school staff and the pedagogical goals and intentions of curriculum, but also intentionally reach beyond the immediate classroom setting to partnerships with school building principals, school district administrators, and the broader community. Similarly, our work to elevate the early childhood workforce strategically integrates efforts

across the entire early childhood ecosystem. This includes co-creating leadership development opportunities with individual workforce members and ensuring early childhood governance and finance decisions are informed by rigorous research. As members of a public university, we are committed to providing research that is useful to policymakers as they make decisions and spend public resources on behalf of all children and families.

Recognizing and attending to the mutual influence across all levels of the early childhood ecosystem is integral to improving the learning and development of young children. In keeping with this understanding, we dedicate a concerted effort to the broadest early childhood ecosystem level through intentional outreach grounded in a comprehensive strategic communications approach.

## Outreach: Strategic and Community-Engaged

From the beginning, outreach has been an integral part of the Institute's research, practice, and policy efforts. We understand that if we are to achieve our goal of enhancing the lives of all children in Nebraska, as well as children across the country and beyond, we must communicate effectively about what we know, what we are learning, what lies ahead, and how we intend to fulfill our goals. We must also engage with diverse communities of researchers, early care and education providers, policymakers, business leaders, families, and the public to effectively apply what we know to improve early childhood practices, policies, and systems. Intentional outreach is key to all of this. We believe intentional outreach can lead to establishing and connecting statewide networks of individuals who believe in and support quality early care and education for every child. These networks form the conduits of innovation and collaboration that are needed to transform systems of early care and education.

Our outreach efforts are grounded in a commitment to strategic communications—an essential approach and set of strategies that enable us to achieve our organizational vision, mission, and goals.<sup>78</sup> We link a strategic focus on desired outcomes with specific communications strategies that help us achieve those outcomes. Our approach borrows heavily from related disciplines of mass communications, integrated marketing communications, social marketing, and public will-building. As in our ecological models of intervention, we intentionally address multiple levels of early childhood systems,<sup>79</sup> and our commitment to and use of strategic communications gives voice to our understanding of its value and importance in supporting social change.

In practical terms, we deploy strategic communications to raise awareness, change attitudes, and motivate people to act on behalf of young children and their families based on the science of early childhood development and education. We insist on clarity of message and explicit identification of audiences, and we make extensive use of digital channels, public events, media relations, dissemination of publications, and partnerships and sponsorships. We also ensure that strategic communications has a role to play from the outset of any project or undertaking at the Institute.

CHAPTER 3

# Responding to Nebraska's Early Childhood Landscape

Young families, people in their late 20s and early 30s, people who have young children and are thinking about coming back to their hometown ... Early child care and education is the primary thing those families are looking for when they are looking at where to move.

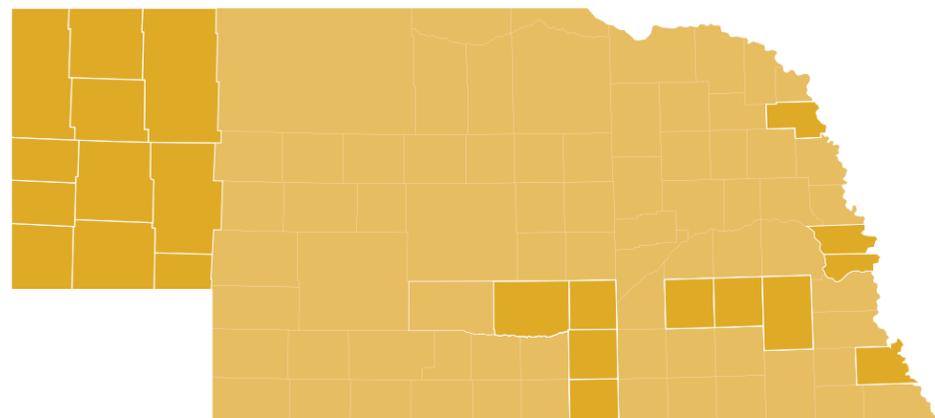
Gabriel Steinmeyer  
Director of Workforce Development  
Norfolk Chamber of Commerce  
Norfolk, Nebraska



## Statewide Community Visits, 2013–15

In the Institute's initial two years of operation, members of the Buffett Institute's leadership team and staff visited communities across Nebraska to learn about early childhood programs and the needs of young children (Figure 5). We traveled to dozens of cities and towns, meeting with school district superintendents, early childhood professionals, elected officials, representatives from Educational Service Units, two- and four-year higher education institutions, health care and social service agencies, community organizations, and others who work with young children placed at risk and their families. These conversations informed our plans to expand and enhance early childhood systems to meet the needs of young children across Nebraska—and made it clear to us that replication and scaling of our programs must always be based on a thorough knowledge of the specific resources and needs of the communities we are seeking to partner with.

FIGURE 5. AREAS WHERE INSTITUTE LEADERSHIP AND STAFF WORKED IN INITIAL PLANNING PHASE, 2013–15



Counties		Communities and School Districts	
Adams	Nemaha	<b>Omaha Metro:</b>	<b>Other:</b>
Banner	Sarpy	Bellevue	Alliance
Box Butte	Scotts Bluff	Bennington	Grand Island
Buffalo	Seward	Elkhorn	Hastings
Cheyenne	Sheridan	Gretna	Kearney
Dawes	Sioux	La Vista	Lexington
Deuel	Thurston	Millard	Lincoln
Douglas	Webster	Omaha	Peru
Garden	York	Papillion	Red Cloud
Hall		Ralston	Scottsbluff
Kimball		Springfield Platteview	Seward
Lancaster		Valley	Sidney
Morrill			Winnebago
			York

## Buffett Early Childhood Institute/Gallup Survey on Early Childhood Care and Education in Nebraska

From the outset, the opinions and needs of Nebraska's citizens and its early childhood workforce were central to our work. Because we wanted to know what Nebraskans know, think, and believe about early care and education, in 2015 we partnered with Gallup to find answers to these questions, administering the largest public survey on this subject ever conducted in the state. A random sample of 7,191 Nebraskans aged 18 and older participated; data were weighted to match Nebraska's demographics by gender, age, education, and race and were collected by means of address-based sampling. The results, published in four reports in 2016 and 2017, underscore the relevance of our mission.

The first report, *Nebraskans Speak About Early Care and Education*, gave an overview of the “big picture” findings from the study.<sup>80</sup> It showed that the vast majority (68%) of Nebraskans recognize the importance of high-quality early care and education and understand that it has long-term impact on student success. Only 11%, however, believe that quality care is available for every family in the state, and even fewer believe it is affordable (6%). Ten percent strongly believe that most of the state's young children are prepared to be successful in school when they enter Kindergarten. Not surprisingly, 67% agree or strongly agree that the state should make early care and education a higher priority than it is today.

### NEBRASKANS SPEAK ABOUT EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Report presented in Lincoln, March 29, 2016

The presentation was followed by a panel discussion about implications for Nebraska. Panelists included:

- **Hank Bounds**, president, University of Nebraska
- **Matt Blomstedt**, commissioner of education, Nebraska Department of Education
- **Barry Kennedy**, president, Nebraska Chamber of Commerce & Industry
- **Samuel J. Meisels**, founding executive director, Buffett Early Childhood Institute
- **Iheoma Iruka**, director of research and evaluation, Buffett Early Childhood Institute

Highlights from the second report, *Nebraskans Speak About the Early Care and Education Workforce*,<sup>81</sup> included:

- Nebraskans recognize and value the early care and education workforce. A strong majority (66%) of residents say an early care and education program or home-based center is best when families cannot care for their children during the day. Almost half (46%) have turned to schools or teachers and many (37%) have turned to child care providers for information about child care.
- Nebraskans believe that postsecondary education is needed for those who want to work in the care and education field. At least half of Nebraskans say that some higher education is needed and that the level of education varies with the age of the child.
- Nebraskans want greater support for the early care and education workforce. Nearly half (48%) of Nebraskans believe that teachers and caregivers are paid too little, and 55% of parents with children in programs feel this way. In 2015 the average salary for child care professionals was \$19,620.

### NEBRASKANS SPEAK ABOUT THE EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION WORKFORCE

*Report presented in Kearney, Oct. 24, 2016*

The presentation was followed by a panel discussion about implications for Nebraska.

Panelists included:

- **Molly O'Holleran**, member, Nebraska State Board of Education
- **Carol Renner**, associate superintendent, Kearney Public Schools
- **Susan Sarver**, director of workforce planning and development, Buffett Early Childhood Institute
- **Mike Schnieders**, CEO and president, CHI Health Good Samaritan

Highlights from the third report, *Urban and Rural Nebraskans Speak About the Early Care and Education*,<sup>82</sup> included:

- Though majorities of Nebraskans from urban and rural areas share a belief that Nebraska is one of the best states to be a young child, they worry about their children's future. Only 30% of rural-area Nebraska residents and 39% of urban-area residents think that children's lives will be better 10 years from now. Only 10% of Nebraskans (8% of urban-area and 11% of rural-area residents) strongly agree that most young children in the state are prepared to be successful in school when they start Kindergarten.
- Urban-area residents are significantly more likely than rural-area residents (44% vs. 23%) to say that the cost of early care and education programs is the greatest challenge for families in obtaining high-quality care. Conversely, more rural-area residents than urban-

area residents say the availability of programs is their biggest challenge. (According to Voices for Children in Nebraska, 11 counties statewide had no licensed child care facilities in 2021, and 91% of counties in Nebraska do not have enough available licensed child care slots to meet the current demand.)<sup>83</sup>

- There is consensus among residents across the state about the need for greater investment in early care and education. Two-thirds of all Nebraskans strongly agree or agree that the state should make early care and education a higher priority. Majorities of urban-area (61%) and rural-area (55%) Nebraskans say the state is investing too little in these programs.

### URBAN AND RURAL NEBRASKANS SPEAK ABOUT EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

*Report presented in Scottsbluff, March 24, 2017*

The presentation was followed by a panel discussion focusing on opportunities and challenges to serving young children in the Nebraska Panhandle. Featured speakers included:

- **Senator John Stinner**, Nebraska Legislature
- **Kim Engel**, director, Panhandle Public Health District
- **Kathleen Gallagher**, Cille and Ron Williams Community Chair for Early Childhood Education, University of Nebraska at Kearney and the Buffett Early Childhood Institute
- **Jeff West**, administrator, Educational Service Unit 13; chair, Scottsbluff/Gering United Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors
- **Caroline Winchester**, superintendent, Chadron Public Schools

Finally, the fourth analysis, *Nebraska Parents Speak About Early Care and Education*, included findings about parental attitudes.<sup>84</sup> We learned that:

- Parents of young children and Nebraskans without children believe that the state should make a greater investment in early care and education. As expected, parents with young children feel this most strongly, with nearly two-thirds stating that Nebraska's investment is too low. Moreover, six in 10 respondents without children say there is too little investment in early care and education.
- An overwhelming majority of parents with young children (78%) and Nebraskans without children (72%) agree or strongly agree that the state should make public programs available for 4-year-olds from families who choose to use them. Majorities of parents with young children (59%) and Nebraskans without children (55%) recognize the need for programs for 3-year-olds.

**NEBRASKA PARENTS SPEAK ABOUT EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION***Report presented in Omaha, June 6, 2017*

The Institute announced the findings of the fourth report at a national symposium on strategies to support and help parents. More than 200 researchers, practitioners, philanthropists, and advocates participated in the event, hosted by the Buffett Institute in collaboration with the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

In summary, this extensive study revealed that the vast majority of Nebraskans value and support early care and education and believe more needs to be done to prepare young children for success in school and life. In overwhelming numbers, residents say that high-quality early care and education is not available or affordable for all families in Nebraska. The findings from this series of reports provided a strong framework on which to base future actions and programs.



## Collaboration in the Nebraska Panhandle

In May 2015, leadership from the Buffett Institute began working with colleagues in the Nebraska Panhandle. More than 400 miles from Omaha, the Panhandle enjoys a rich tradition of collaboration and working as a region to build on strengths and address challenges of those who live in the area. Institute leadership began meeting with representatives from early learning organizations and school districts, as well as Educational Service Unit (ESU) 13 and the Panhandle Partnership, Inc., a nonprofit that serves as a catalyst for enhancing and sustaining family and community life.

It was quickly apparent that there was an interest in adapting the Institute's "School as Hub" approach from the Omaha area Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan (described in Chapter 4) to a rural context. Over the ensuing months, and based on collaborative discussion, the following priorities for early childhood development in the region were highlighted:

- Map regional early childhood resources, and conduct a needs and capacity assessment.
- Develop a Panhandle vision and strategic plan for a sustainable, school-based early childhood initiative.
- Create and implement a regional professional development plan for educators and professionals who provide services and resources to young children and their families.
- Develop a long-term early childhood sustainability plan that aligns local resources and leverages new resources through public-private partnerships and other means.

The first two strategies, which involved compiling school and community data, have been completed. Local facilitators conducted 15 community-based focus groups that attracted more than 200 stakeholders who described community strengths, challenges for families with young children, and priorities for early care and education. These findings contributed to a vision statement describing guiding principles and aims for improving the learning and development of young children and their families.

The Buffett Institute, ESU 13, and the Panhandle Partnership produced a summary report of this early work, *The Nebraska Panhandle: An Assessment of Birth–Grade 3 Care and Education*, and released it on April 17, 2019, at a public forum in the Panhandle. State Commissioner of Education Matthew Blomstedt gave opening remarks, with more than 100 local stakeholders in attendance. Extensive media coverage across the state highlighted what the commissioner called a model for how rural schools and communities can and should work together.

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic brought much of the Institute's work in the Panhandle to a halt, though relationships and connections continue. The Institute remains interested and committed to determining how to work most effectively in this part of the state, where communities come together in unique and vital ways to support and care for each other.

***The Nebraska Panhandle: An Assessment of Birth–Grade 3 Care and Education Report presented in Gering, April 17, 2019***

During a panel discussion at the event, community and education leaders from Bayard, Chadron, and Sidney spoke to the strengths of their communities as well as the challenges facing young children and families. Featured speakers included:

- **Matt McLaughlin**, principal, Bayard Public Schools
- **Lori Retzlaff**, owner, Lori's Daycare, Chadron
- **Caroline Winchester**, superintendent, Chadron Public Schools
- **Whitney Hurt**, special education coordinator and lead teacher, Sidney Public Schools
- **Tiffany Jones**, director, Kid's Korner Child Development Center, Sidney

## Coping With COVID-19

The COVID-19 global pandemic affected the Institute and our work in ways that were immediate and profound, shifting our attention to how we could be of greatest service to Nebraska's children, families, and communities. We asked ourselves—and our partners—how we could be most useful and how to focus our energies in ways that best supported children, families, schools, and professionals. We also modified our research to concentrate on the caregivers and teachers who were on the front line of a once-in-a-century pandemic.

**COVID-19 Surveys.** Within the first month of the COVID-19 lockdown—before the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, or CARES Act, was passed by Congress in March 2020—the Institute conducted the first of three surveys to assess the impact of the pandemic on early care and education providers in Nebraska. The Institute collaborated with state agencies, University of Nebraska faculty and staff, and organization partners to develop and distribute the first survey in March 2020 and two subsequent surveys—one in June 2020 and another in February 2022. Survey questions examined the impact of the pandemic on child care professionals in Nebraska to inform potential policy and practice interventions. These survey results were widely disseminated in Nebraska and in the national press and were cited in several national studies of COVID-19 effects on the early care and education workforce. More information about the COVID-19 surveys is provided in Chapter 5 (pp. 108–109).

**Nebraska Child Care Referral Network.** While conducting the first COVID-19 survey, it became clear that Nebraska parents were struggling to find available providers and that child care businesses were struggling to connect with parents. We joined with other early childhood organizations in the state to create a new statewide, searchable database of licensed providers to help parents find child care. The purpose of the Nebraska Child Care Referral Network is to enable families to locate licensed child care providers in communities across the state. Providers include both family child care and center-based child care that are available for children from birth through age 12.

COVID highlighted the vital contribution [early childhood educators] make every single day. These are the first responders who stepped up so the first responders could go out and do their jobs.

– Betty Medinger, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation



During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was particularly urgent that medical providers, emergency responders, and other essential personnel be able to quickly and easily locate child care options. While many child care programs were temporarily closed due to the health risks of the coronavirus, many remained open and had capacity to accept children. The referral website was designed to help those in need of emergency child care to find it easily.

**COVID-19 Response in the Schools.** When school buildings closed in March 2020, we worked closely with partners in Omaha-area schools and communities to adapt programming and services to meet the needs of children and families. From the outset, home visitors and family facilitators, who are part of our Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan (described in

Chapter 4), adapted their work to be responsive to families' and schools' changing needs. In addition to working with teachers and families remotely, Institute staff supported families in accessing basic needs, securing iPads and other electronic devices for children's learning, working through challenges with internet connectivity, and facilitating conversations between schools and child care centers for out-of-school learning supports for school-age children. As children returned for a full year of in-person schooling in 2021–22, new challenges arose, including staffing shortages. In partnership with school staff, the Institute took an "all hands on deck" approach to the day-to-day needs of schools experiencing staffing shortages. Our staff substituted for teachers in classrooms, stepped into the roles of paraprofessionals, served lunch duty, covered administrative tasks for principals, and fulfilled many other tasks requested by principals and staff. More information about these adaptations and others that were made to support children and families in the schools is provided in Chapter 4.

**Responsive Professional Development.** With school closings and statewide directives limiting public gatherings, the Institute quickly shifted its Professional Development (PD) for All series to virtual formats. In addition, PD for All topics were adapted to address new and emerging issues of concern. More information about these adaptations is provided in Chapter 4.

In addition to the PD for All series, the Institute contracted with Chip Donohue, a leading national consultant on technology in the early years, to help support early childhood educators in adopting technology-mediated strategies for reaching young children during the pandemic. In the late summer and fall of 2020, Donohue facilitated 11 professional development sessions and provided consultation and support in a variety of ways, including:

- Direct assistance consisting of one-hour synchronous sessions on technology for all Omaha Public Schools (OPS) elementary supervisors
- A webinar for all PreK–6 teachers in OPS on technology integration in the early and elementary years
- A seminar on digital storytelling in preschool for all OPS PreK teachers, plus other webinars for other districts
- Three additional webinars that were part of a PD for All series for all districts and three internal learning sessions for Institute staff

Videos of these sessions and accompanying professional learning guides continue to be available to early educators on the Institute website.

# Responses to Issues of Racial Justice

As the nation grappled with the shock of COVID-19, another seismic issue made world news—systemic racism. The reverberations of the widely reported racialized murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery ignited global attention and provoked protests against racial injustice across America. In a letter sent at that time to members and friends of the Institute, Samuel J. Meisels, the Institute’s founding executive director, asserted,

*We cannot allow this to happen. We can no longer tolerate inequities and injustice. We must become reliable allies—allies whom those in need can turn to and trust. We must also be ready to step back, listen, and learn to show our support by recognizing the leadership of those who bear the heaviest burden of discrimination, inequity, and abuse.*

Standing in solidarity with those who bear the physical, mental, and emotional scars of racism and oppression, the Institute formally recommitted itself to supporting racial justice and increasing equity in all its work. In Meisels’s words,

*The Institute is deeply committed to justice for all. Our mission revolves around helping children and families and strengthening the societies in which they live. Children and families cannot thrive when individuals or groups are unfairly treated and denied opportunity based on race, culture, language, or religion. We are committed to change. Our children deserve no less.*

Issues of inequity based on bias and discrimination related to race, ethnicity, gender identity, class, and other perceived differences permeate our society and reach into the Institute as well. In the Institute’s first few years, we learned that we needed to build a common understanding about these issues and work toward common experiences in order to effectively undertake equity work on behalf of young children. As a result, the Institute created a diversity committee, enlisted consultants, and scheduled diversity and equity workshops to help us navigate internal race-related conversations. Despite our best intentions, the Institute’s response fell into what has been called a “dysfunctional cycle of equity work.”<sup>85</sup> The passion of the diversity team faded, required workshops did not result in material changes, and internal conversations shifted to other matters.<sup>85,86</sup>

The racialized events of 2020 brought a renewed sense of urgency to the Institute. We felt the need to go beyond the optics of promoting equity to disrupting the dysfunctional cycle of equity work we had undertaken previously. Our approach included establishing an internal equity program that moved us from performative to sustained action.

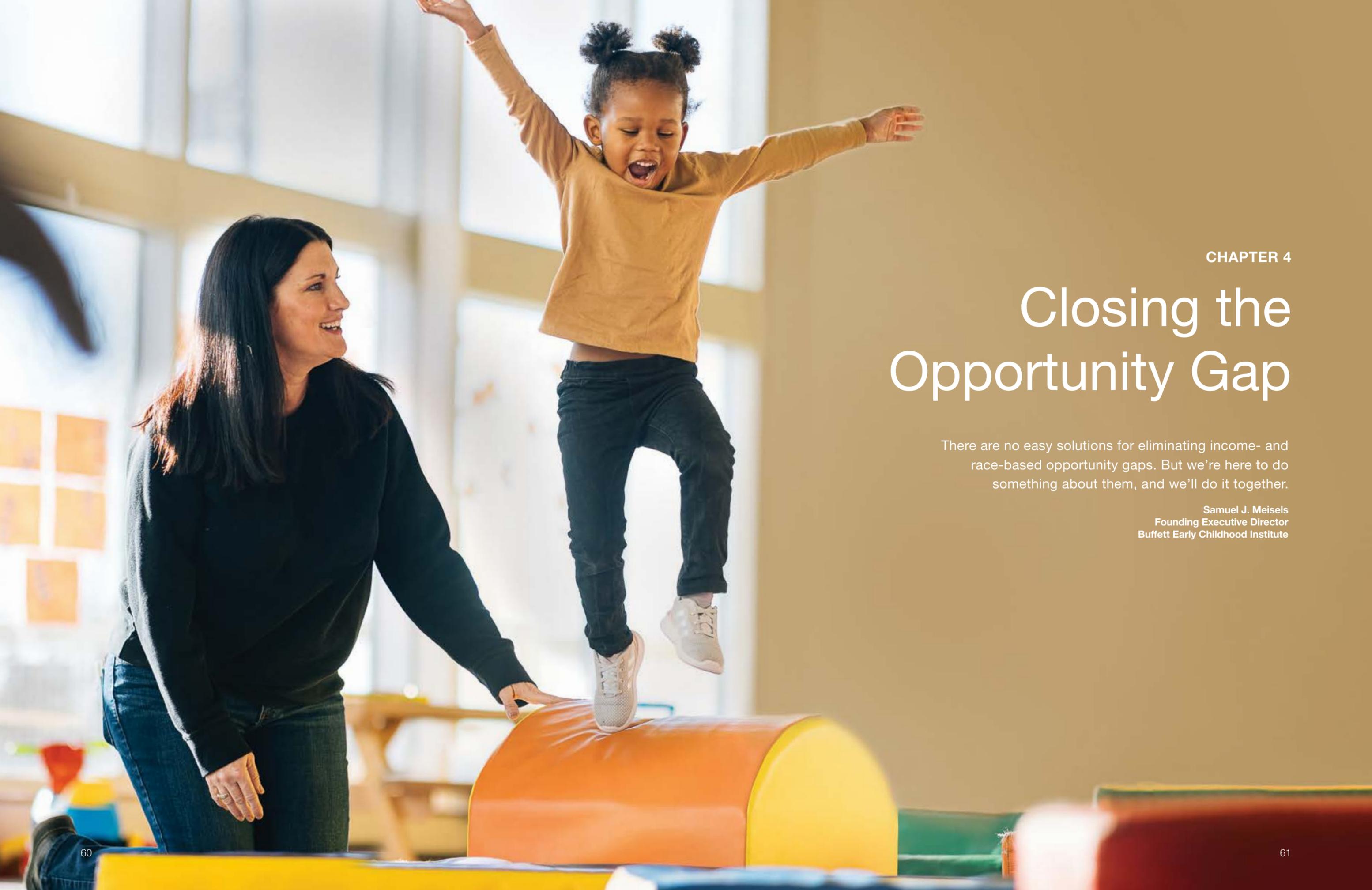
In this approach we recognize that issues of inequity permeate nearly everything in our society, including the Institute, and we understand that overcoming inequities requires an active willingness to challenge and dismantle systemic bias. Our internal equity program moves us beyond the optics of promoting equality to making equity an intentional foundation and perspective in our daily work. We are guided by the following principles:

- Individuals will understand how their own identities and positions impact how we understand and relate to one another and how we interact with our partners and the communities we serve.
- We will acquire skills, strategies, and tools necessary for engaging in equity-centered conversations.
- We will gain a better understanding of how historical and present-day inequities contribute to persistent systemic biases.

The Institute’s equity program is sponsored by Institute executive leaders, led by the director of professional learning, managed within the Professional Learning unit’s portfolio of work, and executed in collaboration with Institute team members and partners throughout the university system. Furthermore, reaching our goal of building a strong, equitable, inclusive, and diverse organization is understood to be the responsibility of the Institute as a whole.

We intend to live, work and raise our children in a world where diversity is celebrated, where opportunity is extended to all, and where every individual is treated equitably, regardless of the color of their skin.

– Joint statement of the student regents of the University of Nebraska (2020)



CHAPTER 4

# Closing the Opportunity Gap

There are no easy solutions for eliminating income- and race-based opportunity gaps. But we're here to do something about them, and we'll do it together.

Samuel J. Meisels  
Founding Executive Director  
Buffett Early Childhood Institute

## Where We Started

In Closing the Opportunity Gap, one of the Institute's two signature programs, we aim to increase opportunities to learn for all children, with a focus on reducing or eliminating opportunity gaps for children growing up in poverty or other conditions of high stress and familial challenge. Although many of our efforts in research, practice, policy, and outreach contribute to this goal, the central initiative of this signature program is the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan.

### Capitalizing on a Unique Opportunity: The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan

The Superintendents' Plan was designed to offer an innovative, comprehensive approach to reducing gaps based on inequitable opportunities for children birth–Grade 3 in the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties. The Learning Community is a formal confederation enacted by the Nebraska Legislature in 2009 of the 11 public school districts in these two metro Omaha counties. The Learning Community Coordinating Council is composed of 12 individuals elected from representative subdivisions of Douglas and Sarpy Counties to four-year terms.

Originally intended to create a “common levy” to equalize school funding across the Omaha metro area and support children living in poverty, over time the Learning Community became actively involved with developing early childhood programs, supporting parents, and reducing truancy and absenteeism, among other efforts. The Superintendents' Plan was specifically developed in response to legislation (LB 585) passed by the Legislature in 2013 that directed the Learning Community Coordinating Council to establish an early childhood program designed by the metro Omaha superintendents for young children living in neighborhoods impacted by high concentrations of poverty. The plan, which is unique in Nebraska and has few exemplars nationally, is financed by a half-cent levy on property values, resulting in annual funding of nearly \$3.5 million to be used for this purpose. The funds are shared roughly equally between the Institute and the participating school districts.

In 2013, the superintendents of the 11 school districts in Douglas and Sarpy Counties invited the Buffett Institute to join with them to prepare a plan for their review and, after approval by the Learning Community Council, to facilitate the plan's implementation. The plan was adopted unanimously by the 11 superintendents in June 2014 and approved by the Learning Community Council in August 2014. In-depth planning, including multiple visits to school districts with high proportions of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, in-person observations in schools recommended by district administrators, development of criteria for participation, applications from potential volunteer schools, and decisions about which schools would best fulfill the goals of the Superintendents' Plan, took place. School-by-school, weeklong summer institutes were conducted in 2015, and initial implementation within the districts occurred in 2015–16. Full implementation of the plan continues to the present day.

## Translating Research Into Practice: The Six Big Ideas

The Superintendents' Plan relies upon the best of what child development research has taught us and revolves around six research-based “Big Ideas”:

- 1. Birth Through Grade 3.** Although intervention at any point during the first eight years of life is helpful for children placed at risk, research teaches us that we must go beyond a single year of PreK, or even birth–3 or birth–5 programs, for the benefits of intervention to endure. The foundations for building children's brain architecture, language and skill acquisition, and relationships with others are established early but take time to reach their full potential. If we can maintain continuity through the end of third grade, children are more likely to achieve lasting success in school and beyond.<sup>87-89</sup>
- 2. School as Hub.** At the core of our plan is the idea that schools can serve as the “hub” for complex learning systems, connecting children and families to resources within and beyond school walls. Schools have the potential to span conventional silos, overcome traditional barriers, and become connectors across communities and different age groupings. They can help families navigate and access early education services and community resources and become a source of long-term continuity for children and families.<sup>90,91</sup>
- 3. Developmental Change.** We are committed to helping children negotiate the ongoing biological, neurological, psychological, and social pathways of development through which they evolve from newborn infants to competent and confident third graders. Sustained learning does not occur in isolated fragments. Only when skills and emerging capabilities are followed up, supported, and extended is it likely that new skills and new capacities will be acquired and become reliably present over time.<sup>88,92,93</sup>
- 4. Parent, Family, and Community Engagement.** Parents and families are key to children's success and our most powerful allies in supporting and enhancing their children's strengths and abilities. Families know too well the personal stress and toxicity that can accompany poverty and social inequality. Whether in home visiting, preschool, or Kindergarten through Grade 3, active family engagement and support are central to our work and to children's growth.<sup>63,94-96</sup>
- 5. Professional Growth and Support.** Enhancing the skills of teachers and caregivers and those supervising and directing them is crucial. Educators equipped with research-based knowledge about children's development and early learning can maximize their effectiveness.<sup>34,97</sup>
- 6. Persistence.** Evidence assures us that the earlier we begin working with children and families placed at risk, and the more persistent, consistent, and well-designed our efforts, educational experiences for children with diverse learning needs will be greatly enhanced. When the ability of caregivers, teachers, and administrators to translate child development research into practice is strengthened, children thrive and are more likely to be launched on a path toward life success. This is a long-term commitment that can lead to a lifetime of accomplishment and fulfillment. Our central hypothesis is that persistence of effort yields persistence of effect.<sup>98-100</sup>

These six Big Ideas are foundational to the systemic, research- and community-based approach used in the Superintendents' Plan. Referred to as the "School as Hub for Birth–Grade 3 Approach," or simply "School as Hub," this approach is intended to elevate the capacity of the Omaha metro school districts to provide the opportunities all young children need to thrive and succeed.



## What We Accomplished

In the Superintendents' Plan, the School as Hub approach is facilitated through three interrelated efforts: (1) implementing School as Hub for birth–Grade 3 programming in selected elementary schools, (2) providing customized assistance to districts to help them build organizational capacity to support School as Hub policies and programming, and (3) providing professional development focused on evidence-based practices. Each of these efforts is described in more detail below.

### Implementing School as Hub Programming in Selected Elementary Schools

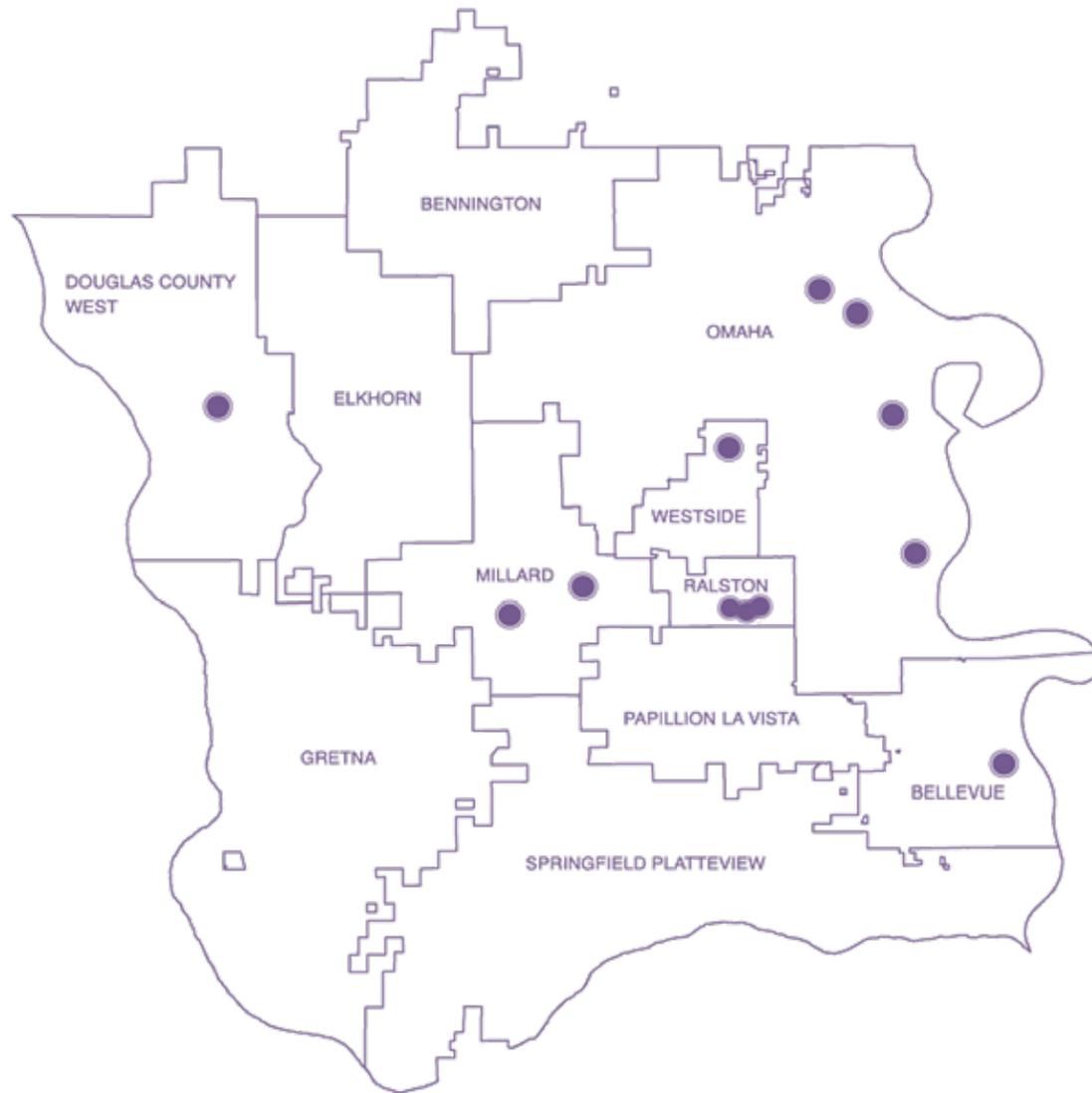
The plan's comprehensive School as Hub programming for birth–Grade 3 is designed to establish schools as hubs that connect young children and their families with high-quality, comprehensive, and continuous early childhood education and services. This programming includes three integrated components:

- **Home visiting for children birth to age 3.** In this component, a home visitor who is employed at the local school conducts three one-hour visits per month with each participating family in the given school. Visits are conducted throughout the school year and summer months. Group socialization opportunities for participants also take place at each school once per month.
- **Family facilitation in the context of transitions to high-quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds.** As children age out of home visiting as they turn 3, a family facilitator who is employed at the local school continues to perform personal visits with participating families once per month to provide continuity of educational experiences for children until they enter school-based PreK or Kindergarten.
- **Aligned Kindergarten through Grade 3 educational experiences for 5- through 8-year-olds.** As children complete preschool, they transition into a coordinated and rigorous Kindergarten through Grade 3 educational continuum. Educational facilitators who are employed at the Institute work with principals and educators in the School as Hub schools to support academic instruction in PreK–3 classrooms. In this way, children's early elementary education builds upon their preschool experiences to promote academic, intellectual, and social-emotional competence. Strong home-school partnerships and family support continue to be combined with a high-quality, rigorous educational program. A hallmark of this approach to early elementary education is a focus on pedagogical principles related to child development (see p. 82).

When the Superintendents' Plan was launched in fall 2015, comprehensive School as Hub programming was implemented in 12 elementary schools across six districts. Prior to being selected, these schools—referred to as "full implementation" or "School as Hub" schools—went through a careful process of review and observation by Institute staff, and each

school’s principal and staff agreed to participate. Initially 12 schools, all of which had half or more of their students eligible for free or reduced lunch, committed to full implementation. Figure 6 shows the distribution of the full implementation sites in 2015–16.

FIGURE 6. SCHOOL AS HUB FOR BIRTH–GRADE 3: FULL IMPLEMENTATION SITES, 2015–16



The number of full implementation sites was reduced to 10 schools as consolidation of effort took place in the Ralston school district. Table 1 shows the school and district characteristics of full implementation School as Hub schools in 2020–21.

TABLE 1. SCHOOL AND DISTRICT CHARACTERISTICS: FULL IMPLEMENTATION SCHOOLS, 2020–21

District and Schools	Student Enrollment	Free/Reduced Lunch	%Students of Color	%English Language Learners
<b>Bellevue</b>	<b>9,485</b>	<b>42%†</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>3%†</b>
Belleaire	299	62%	47%	12%†
<b>DC West</b>	<b>1,039</b>	<b>35%†</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>* †</b>
DC West	491	32%	12%	* †
<b>Millard</b>	<b>23,762</b>	<b>24%†</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>3%†</b>
Cody	309	49%	39%	* †
Sandoz	356	45%	40%	15%†
<b>Omaha</b>	<b>51,626</b>	<b>78%†</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>30%</b>
Gomez Heritage	761	78%	94%	63%
Liberty	661	80%	90%	52%
Mount View	286	81%	90%	24%
Pinewood	245	71%	84%	28%
<b>Ralston</b>	<b>3,304</b>	<b>61%†</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>12%†</b>
Mockingbird	387	58%	73%	25%†
<b>Westside</b>	<b>6,221</b>	<b>38%†</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>3%†</b>
Westbrook	549	42%	48%	6%†
<b>Total school enrollment</b>	<b>4,344</b>			
<b>Total district enrollment</b>	<b>95,437</b>			

\*This table masks or hides data for groups with fewer than 10 students to protect confidential information about individual students as required by federal law.

†These values are from the 2020–21 school year. At the time of publication, updated information was not available.

A shared goal across all aspects of the School as Hub approach is the prevention and reduction of disparities in opportunity and achievement based on systemic and structural inequities—inequities that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. When school buildings quickly closed in March 2020 or combined remote and in-person instruction, Institute staff worked closely with partners in Omaha-area schools and communities to adapt School as Hub programming and services to meet the needs of children and families. Collaborative efforts continued in the 2021–22 school year to provide ongoing support based on the unique and specific needs of each school and community.

The pandemic exposed and increased existing disparities that disproportionately affected children of color and those from non-English speaking homes in the full implementation School as Hub neighborhoods; this was seen predominantly in decreased access to health care, child care, and internet connectivity. When Omaha area children were brought back to daily in-person schooling in the 2021–22 school year, new challenges were presented as educators and principals reported an increased need to support children’s social and emotional learning and adopt new strategies to enhance classroom management and reduce challenging student behavior.

As schools and communities grappled with these issues, we collaborated to modify School as Hub programming to meet the more urgent needs with a focus on maintaining health and safety while simultaneously promoting quality, continuity, and equity. In 2022–23 School as Hub operates in eight full implementation schools across six districts.

My grandma always told me, ‘It takes a village.’ Well, my baby is 3, she’s coming to school, and it feels like the whole school is helping her out. It’s our village. It’s our big family.

– Parent of child enrolled in School as Hub programming at local elementary school

## Providing Customized Assistance to School Districts

In addition to supporting School as Hub programming in selected schools, the Institute provides Customized Assistance to School Districts, upon request, as part of the Superintendents’ Plan. These efforts focus on building specific aspects of strong and effective school systems that provide quality, continuity, and equity in children’s learning and family support. School districts receive intensive assistance and consultation tailored to their needs. This assistance provides access to state and national consultation as the districts engage in efforts to advance system-wide early childhood education and services. Since 2015, customized assistance projects have addressed such topics as social-emotional development, family engagement, effective early childhood curriculum and instruction, assessment of social-emotional learning, and district-level strategic planning.

In spring 2021, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, feedback collected from the superintendents and other stakeholders emphasized the importance of providing more customized assistance in all aspects of the Superintendents’ Plan—to prioritize flexibility, responsiveness to individual district needs and resources, and meeting the more immediate needs of children, families, and school staff members. In response, the Institute proposed an update to the Superintendents’ Plan, in which 2021–22 served as a transition year. The

transition year provided an opportunity for school district leaders to work with Institute staff and the P-3 Center from the University of Colorado Denver to complete a district landscape assessment while simultaneously prioritizing efforts to respond to the demands schools faced due to the ongoing pandemic. Engagement in the landscape assessment prompted district leaders to investigate current district systems and infrastructure related to supporting quality, continuity, and equity in early childhood programming and services. This included inquiry into the extent to which each district’s mission, strategic plan, central office, organizational culture, decision-making practices, investments in professional learning, engagement with community partners, and focus on equity are explicitly linked to and supportive of birth through Grade 3 goals. Based on the landscape assessment, district leaders set goals and formulated action plans to guide their involvement in the Superintendents’ Plan during the 2022–23 school year.

## Delivering Professional Development for All

As part of the Superintendents’ Plan, the Institute also offers professional learning experiences to all early childhood leaders and educators across Douglas and Sarpy Counties through Professional Development for All. This connected series of professional development institutes is open to all school leaders, teachers, early childhood professionals, and caregivers who work with young children from birth through Grade 3 in the Omaha metro area. “PD for All” introduces leading-edge research and innovative practices to those who work with young children and families, while providing early childhood professionals the opportunity to come together and learn from one another.

Over the past seven years, we collaborated with our university colleagues and local school districts to offer timely and relevant professional learning opportunities through PD for All. Each year as many as 1,000 individuals attend PD for All events. A list of PD for All events from 2015–22 is provided in Table 2.



TABLE 2. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL EVENTS, 2015–22

<b>2015–16</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social and Emotional Foundations for Whole Child Development and Learning</li> <li>• Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness for Whole Child Development and Learning</li> <li>• Family Partnerships for Whole Child Development and Learning</li> </ul>
<b>2016–17</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young Children as Active Learners and Thinkers: Integrated Learning Matters</li> <li>• It's More Than Words: Young Children's Language, Thinking, and Learning</li> <li>• Engaging and Nurturing Young Children as Active Thinkers</li> </ul>
<b>2017 Leadership Institute: School as Hub for Birth–Grade 3</b>	
<b>2017–18: Practices to Provide Content-Rich Learning Experiences for Children</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children as Researchers: Reading to Learn Can Start Early/Los Niños como Investigadores: Leer para Aprender Puede Comenzar Temprano</li> <li>• Children as Mathematicians: Early Math That Matters the Most</li> <li>• Children as Authors: Guiding Children on Pathways Toward Strong Writing</li> <li>• Children as Scientists: Scientific Inquiry for Every Child</li> </ul>
<b>2018–19: Harnessing the Power of Language and Communication to Build Children's Literacy Success</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children as Expressive Artists/Los niños como artistas expresivos</li> <li>• The Art of Communication in Classrooms: Helping Children Find, Develop, and Use Their Voices for Learning</li> <li>• Harnessing the Power of Language and Communication to Build Children's Literacy Success</li> </ul>
<b>2019–20: Executive Function and Self-Regulation</b>	
<b>Summer 2020: Fostering Positive Relationships, and Equity and Racial and Cultural Awareness*</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Voices: Supporting Children and Families During Challenging Times</li> <li>• Fostering Supportive Relationships for Social-Emotional Learning in Early Childhood</li> <li>• Helping Young Children Cope With Strong Emotions</li> </ul>
<b>Fall 2020: Explore More: Using Technology in Early Childhood Education*</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning for Virtual and Blended Learning Experiences</li> <li>• Digital Storytelling</li> <li>• Technology in the Early Years</li> </ul>
<b>Spring 2021: Anti-Racism in Early Childhood Education*</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intensive learning cohort of 15 early childhood professionals, selected from a pool of 72 applicants, met seven times over four months for learning, discussion, and reflection</li> <li>• What Is Anti-Racist Education? (webinar and discussion group)</li> <li>• Racial Socialization as Resistance to Racism (webinar and discussion group)</li> </ul>

**Fall 2021: Early Childhood Workforce Well-Being\***

- Promoting Early Childhood Workforce Well-Being Through Reflection and Connection
- Happy Teachers, Happy Kids

**Spring 2022: Bringing Children's Backgrounds to the Foreground in Their Learning**

- Tapping Into Children's Funds of Knowledge\*
- Shifting From Teacher to Learner: Transforming Teacher-Family Relationships\*
- Why Cultural, Linguistic, and Personal Relevance Matters\*
- Community of Practice for Early Childhood Educators: Funds of Knowledge in Children's Learning\*
- "Funds of Knowledge" workshops facilitated by Mariana Souto-Manning, president, Erikson Institute, including focused audiences for (1) leadership, (2) instruction, and (3) family partnerships

\*denotes webinars/online

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, PD for All offerings were adapted to better meet the needs of early childhood professionals. With the lockdowns necessitated by the pandemic, in-person professional learning events were no longer an option. Instead, the Institute worked quickly to develop and deliver relevant and accessible professional development opportunities for local early childhood professionals. This involved changing PD for All events to a completely virtual format as well as adapting the content of the series to help the early childhood workforce deal with the dramatic effects of the pandemic on their day-to-day work and the early childhood field. To identify their needs, we distributed an online survey in May 2020 to potential PD for All participants (229 early childhood professionals responded), reviewed results of the Educational Service Unit 3 needs assessment, and received feedback from the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan workgroup, principals at the 10 School as Hub full implementation sites, and the Learning Community Coordinating Council. Based on this collective input, new PD for All topics were identified including how best to support children's social-emotional development during challenging times, technology in the early years, promoting equity in early childhood work, connecting with families, and supporting peer-to-peer relationships.

We also expanded opportunities for early childhood professionals to engage with one another virtually through communities of practice and a book study. In addition, educators and leaders from schools and community child care programs in Douglas and Sarpy Counties were invited to become part of a collaborative workgroup to develop the Essential Child Experiences Instructional Toolkit. This ongoing workgroup provides members with opportunities to enhance their own classroom practices while working with us to create a toolkit that will support their colleagues to do the same.

# What We're Learning

As a developer, partner, and major participant in the Superintendents' Plan, we are committed to supporting schools and districts in Douglas and Sarpy Counties as they engage in continuous cycles of improvement and innovation designed to enhance quality, expand continuity, and strengthen equity for all children and families from birth through Grade 3.

## Highlights From Evaluating the Superintendents' Plan

To support continuous improvement and learning, the Buffett Institute conducts annual evaluations of the plan in collaboration with colleagues at the Munroe-Meyer Institute at the University of Nebraska Medical Center and the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families, and Schools at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. These evaluations are designed to document, measure, and support implementation of the Superintendents' Plan and to provide information about shifts in practices and progress in school systems, leadership, instructional practices, and family processes and engagement. Findings from the evaluation are used to improve programming over time.

**School as Hub Programming in Full Implementation Schools.** Table 3 outlines the enrollment numbers for children birth–Grade 3 in the full implementation School as Hub schools by program or grade level. The totals listed at the bottom of each column illustrate the total number of children on which evaluation data were collected each year. (As shown in Table 1, the number of children affected by all components of the Superintendents' Plan is much higher.)

**TABLE 3. AGGREGATE PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN, BIRTH–GRADE 3, IN FULL IMPLEMENTATION SCHOOL AS HUB SCHOOLS, 2015–22**

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19**	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22***
Home Visiting/Family Facilitation Enrollment (Birth–Age 5)*	33	63	114	171	178	187	111
Full Implementation School Enrollment (PreK)	606	680	722	688	697	612	701
Full Implementation School Enrollment (K–3)	3,165	2,905	2,804	2,531	2,453	2,383	2,396
<b>Total Number Served</b>	<b>3,804</b>	<b>3,648</b>	<b>3,640</b>	<b>3,390</b>	<b>3,328</b>	<b>3,128</b>	<b>3,208</b>

\*Data represent the number of infants and toddlers enrolled in the home visiting program.

\*\*The number of full implementation schools decreased from 12 to 10.

\*\*\*Home visiting numbers decreased as a result of birth–Grade 3 staffing shortages and programmatic review by school districts during the transition year.

Despite the diversity of district curricula and instructional approaches, annual evaluation activities taught us many important lessons about specific components of the School as Hub programming in full implementation schools:

- Over the years, children’s development and learning improved, particularly for children enrolled in home visiting.
- Likewise, improvement in classroom quality was observed over the first five years of implementation—prior to limitations in data collection because of COVID-19.
- Home visitors and family facilitators played a key role in helping families experience consistently high levels of support and engagement in their schools and communities. Families also valued and embraced home visiting and family facilitation services.
- School leadership was identified as an essential component for welcoming and engaging families in meaningful and inclusive ways. District and school leadership reported a shift in their perception of the importance of integrating a birth–Grade 3 approach to learning with more emphasis placed on family engagement and community partnerships.
- Schools are advancing School as Hub values (quality, continuity, and equity) through coaching and professional learning and by bringing an equity lens to practices and policies.

**Professional Development for All.** Yearly evaluation reports indicate that PD for All participants advance their understanding of how to support quality, continuity, and equity in their schools and classrooms. In surveys, participants consistently report high levels of satisfaction with the quality of the presentations, increased knowledge about the given topic, and the intent to integrate what they learned into their work with children. For example, in the Spring 2021 webinar series on equity-focused practices in early education, over 97% of participants reported that they understood new information and planned to use what they learned; notably, over 93% reported a significant increase in knowledge about how to support equitable practices in their teaching. For the webinars on technology-mediated learning in early childhood, over 90% of participants reported that they understood new information, planned to use what they learned, and knew what actions to take to successfully use technology to enhance their teaching and support children’s learning.

With the change to online delivery during the pandemic, we learned the value of using virtual events to expand the reach of PD for All to professionals who were previously unable to attend in-person events. Many professionals were eager to participate in online webinars addressing pressing issues in the field. Even among those who had previously attended in-person events, there was clear value in shifting to remote professional learning during the pandemic. Convenience and the ability to safely connect with others made webinars attractive. By the 2021–22 school year, however, early childhood professionals were no longer logging into webinars in the same numbers, perhaps due to “Zoom fatigue.”<sup>101</sup> We also learned that early childhood professionals value opportunities for sustained collaboration and reflection—and we responded with new learning opportunities, including communities of practice, a book study, and a collaborative workgroup to develop the Essential Child Experiences Instructional Toolkit.

## ANNUAL EVALUATION HIGHLIGHTS

## 2016–17

- Gains in vocabulary and general academic skills were observed in children across preschool through Grade 1 even when data were disaggregated by race/ethnicity, home language, and free or reduced lunch status. In general, the largest gains were made by minority children and those whose home language was other than English.
- Teachers showed improvement across three categories measured by an assessment of the quality of teacher-child interactions supportive of children's learning and development. PreK teachers made the greatest gains in providing emotional support; K–3 teachers made a 20% gain in the area of instructional support.
- Families reported positive experiences and collaborative relationships with teachers and schools. Sixty-two percent of parents participating in home visiting reported receiving high levels of social supports (informal support that helps provide for emotional needs), and 53% said they receive high levels of practical supports (goods and services to help families cope with stress).
- Implementation of home visiting, parent-child interaction groups, and other programming for families with very young children changed how most schools approach family partnerships. Through site visits, retrospective interviews, and focus groups, administrators and staff reported a heightened awareness of the importance of early childhood beginning at birth and extending through Grade 3. Administrators noted that staff and families increasingly view the school as a place for the “whole family.”

*“The school-as-hub approach is so unique because it starts at birth. As we build relationships with families from day one, we are reinforcing the child’s support system at a critical time for learning and development. It is about making the world open up for children.”*

—Jim Sutfin, superintendent of Millard Public Schools

## 2017–18

- Classroom interactions and instruction continued to improve.
- Children in home visiting whose home language is Spanish showed increases in language development (with greater gains associated with more home visits).
- Language development improved for children in PreK through Grade 3, with higher gains for low-income and Hispanic children.
- Early educational achievement increased over time, with greater gains for children who are Black and children whose home language is Spanish.
- Families reported increasing their access to support that helps reduce stress.
- Schools reported that they are learning to welcome and engage families in new and more inclusive ways.

*“What we are learning is that when schools work hand in hand with families, there are positive results inside and outside of the classroom. After another year of implementation, we are seeing gains for all children, improved classroom instruction and interaction with families, and families who now see schools as a positive and welcoming force in their lives. These are all meaningful and powerful results.”*

—Kevin Riley, superintendent of Gretna Public Schools

## 2018–19

- Classroom quality increased significantly over the course of four years.
- Family partnerships increased as schools continued to shift their perspectives related to engaging families from birth.
- Implementation insights showed that principals recognize the importance of building relationships one family at a time and that family-school partnership work is valued and evolving.

*“I just received a holiday card from the mother of one of our students, and she included a photo of a sonogram to share the good news that she is expecting another baby. I called the mom to congratulate her and to offer our home visiting services. We have already begun to work with our future student prenatally. Among other successes, the Superintendents’ Plan has helped our school build even stronger relationships with our families, and it’s a two-way street. We see more engagement with families at school, and that has a powerful outcome: students who have a parent and school partnership working to support them.”*

—Tyler Hottovy, principal of Westbrook Elementary in the Westside Community Schools

## 2019–20

- Efforts to engage families increased, although the pandemic shifted our efforts to virtual home visiting in the spring of 2020.
- Parent-child interaction showed that most parents involved in the home visiting evaluation were interacting with children in ways that supported early learning.
- Families reported relatively high levels of engagement with schools.
- Classroom quality improved over the first five years of full implementation and was significantly higher in 2019–20 relative to 2015–16 for classroom organization, instructional quality, and emotional support.
- On average, children’s reading and math achievement status was slightly below expected levels and varied by family and child demographics related to income, race, and ethnicity.
- School and district leadership showed increased ownership of School as Hub, greater engagement with families, and a growing value on community partnership.

## 2020–21

- Home visiting remained stable, despite the pandemic. Many of the visits took place virtually.
- Family engagement, as connected to interaction with the home visitor, was rated in the “good” range in both the fall and spring.
- Most parents involved in the home visiting evaluation interacted with their children in ways that supported early learning and were positive about home visiting and family facilitation services to the family.
- Families’ assessment of school engagement decreased during the pandemic.
- On average, children’s reading and math achievement status were slightly below expected levels and varied by family and child demographics related to income, race, and ethnicity.
- Executive functioning in PreK through Grade 3 was in the average range.
- Schools continued to advance School as Hub principles (quality, continuity, and equity) through coaching and professional learning, by strengthening and building relationships with families and parents, and by bringing an equity lens to practices and policies.

*“We are very grateful to be part of the Superintendent’s Early Childhood Plan. This partnership helps us to increase the levels of support we are providing to our students and families. The collaborative relationship has allowed us to better serve our school community.”*

—Joseph Vonderhaar, principal of Sandoz Elementary in Millard Public Schools

## 2021–22

As a result of feedback collected from superintendents and other partners, 2021–22 served as a transition year in preparation for the next phase of the Superintendents’ Plan, allowing school leaders to analyze their early childhood needs and plan for the future. To support district-level planning efforts, evaluation metrics were altered from previous years:

- **Landscape assessments** were conducted by district leaders from 10 out of 11 Learning Community school districts, each one assessing their district’s ability to provide effective early childhood programming. All 11 districts were invited to participate.
- **Interviews with principals** reflected an appreciation for support offered by the Superintendents’ Plan. Principals reported that participation in the School as Hub programming contributed to their increased emphasis on creating partnerships with parents.
- **Home visitation and family facilitation** enrollment numbers were lower during the 2021–22 school year due to district staffing challenges associated with the pandemic and overall reconsideration by districts of their priorities during the transition year. However, Institute and school staff sought to meet the needs of families, and success was evident in the increased number of socialization events families attended during the program year.
- **Surveys and interviews with families** enrolled in School as Hub programming revealed increased support for school and family life transitions and positive experiences with home visiting.
- **Interviews with district and school staff** highlighted the importance of engaging families often and early and partnering with community agencies to provide the services and support families need, particularly when transitioning to Kindergarten.
- **Family perceptions of school engagement** reflected an overall positive assessment of schools’ engagement with families. Highest ratings were in how schools communicate with families, while lowest ratings were families’ opportunities to influence school decisions.
- **School and community-based program leaders, educators, early childhood professionals, and caregivers** who participated in Professional Development for All demonstrated increased understanding for how to establish workplace conditions that support educators’ well-being. They also credited PD for All with increasing their knowledge of assets and resources that families bring to children’s learning experiences in and out of school.



## Increased Focus on Customized Assistance to School Districts

Although the first years of implementation of the Superintendents’ Plan pointed to evidence of success, it became clear that each school and district had differing strengths and needs, and that more customized approaches were needed to build districts’ infrastructure and capacity for implementing and sustaining School as Hub programming. Like others engaged in interventions of this kind, we learned from implementing the birth–Grade 3 approach that “teachers weren’t going to thrive and children’s outcomes weren’t going to improve unless we built more-effective organizations for teaching by developing more-effective leaders and instilling cultures of collaboration.”<sup>102(p.1)</sup> In short, one of the lessons found in evidence concerning both research and practice is that success in the birth–Grade 3 approach is dependent upon the extent to which district and school leaders create conditions for effective collaborative efforts among adults in various roles, including families and communities.

Important lessons also emerged about processes related to evaluating the Superintendents’ Plan. Evaluation efforts initially focused heavily on quantitative measures used to assess changes in child learning and development. Over time, the evaluation processes evolved to ensure that the data collection activities included a more balanced use of quantitative and qualitative data that both captured outcome data and provided important information about implementation of programmatic components. These changes were made to better meet the evaluation needs of district partners and resulted from adopting a more collaborative approach to designing the evaluation—an approach where district partners are part of the decision-making process concerning areas of focus and data to be collected.

This approach is evident in the 2021–22 transition year, in which the Institute focused on responding to evolving district-level planning and evaluation needs by providing more customized assistance to school districts. During the transition year, district leaders, school leaders, school staff, and Institute staff worked to enhance efforts to maximize the impact of the Superintendents’ Plan. This resulted in the identification of two central goals: (1) be more responsive to the needs and interests of each individual school district, and (2) take a more systemic approach to programming by expanding partnership efforts and engagement at both the district level and within the broader Omaha community.

To accomplish this, the Institute revised the guiding framework for implementing the School as Hub Birth–Grade 3 Approach to better illustrate the district-level involvement and systems focus. The updated framework involves four areas—Guiding Values, Systems Focus, Domains, and Initiatives—and provides a flexible resource that can be used in ways that respond to each district’s current and evolving work related to the School as Hub Birth–Grade 3 Approach (Figure 7). Ongoing implementation and evaluation of the Superintendents’ Plan is guided through attention to this conceptual framework for closing the opportunity gap.

FIGURE 7. GUIDING FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOL AS HUB BIRTH–GRADE 3 APPROACH



**Guiding Values.** The School as Hub Birth–Grade 3 Approach is rooted in the understanding that quality, continuity, and equity are essential to effective early care and education. Adapting these constructs as guiding values, the approach focuses on:

- Enhancing program and instructional **quality** for children beginning at birth and continuing through the early primary grades.

- Connecting children and their families to school and community-based programs and services that build instructional **continuity**, learning pathways, and access to continuous family supports across settings as children age and develop.
- Promoting **equity** in birth through Grade 3 care and education by explicitly addressing disparities in learning opportunities, family supports, and child outcomes across individuals and groups from racial, cultural, economic, and/or linguistic backgrounds that have been historically marginalized.

**Systems Focus.** According to the School as Hub Birth–Grade 3 Approach, quality, continuity, and equity for children are the lens through which practices and policies are shaped and evaluated at all levels of educational systems, including school districts, elementary schools, birth–Grade 3 classrooms, and community programs. Only by addressing all levels of the system can this approach be effective in reducing or eliminating disparities in opportunity and achievement based on systemic and structural inequities.

**Domains and Initiatives.** In order to achieve this systemic focus, Institute staff partner with school district leaders, principals, and staff to enhance the School as Hub approach and supports. In the updated framework, three domains are identified that represent high leverage areas for systemic support. These include (1) Leadership Effectiveness, (2) Instructional Excellence, and (3) Family and Community Partnership Engagement (Figure 8).

Each domain includes initiatives that identify relevant focus areas for changing policies and practices to support School as Hub programming. Although changes in practices to enhance child and family supports are at the forefront, school organizational environments and professional capacity are equally influential dimensions that must be cultivated if the School as Hub for Birth–Grade 3 Approach is to succeed.<sup>103,104</sup> For this reason, the Superintendents’ Plan also seeks to provide assistance to district and school leaders whose efforts are central to the plan’s effectiveness and sustainability.

FIGURE 8. DOMAINS AND INITIATIVES OF THE SUPERINTENDENTS’ EARLY CHILDHOOD PLAN

DOMAINS	Leadership Effectiveness	Instructional Excellence	Family and Community Partnership Engagement
INITIATIVES	District Organization and Capacity	Foundations for Early Learning	Family Focus
	School Leadership	Essential Child Experiences	Community-School Connections



## Where We’re Going

### Increased Collaboration in Program Planning and Evaluation

The School as Hub Birth–Grade 3 Approach supports districts, schools, and programs as they transition from traditional, accepted educational practices to an approach focused on quality, continuity, and equity for young children and their families. This change represents an iterative, developmental process. Districts, schools, and programs will find themselves at various stages of this process throughout their journey. During the initial years of implementation, it became clear that, for the Superintendents’ Plan to achieve its desired level of impact on closing the opportunity gap for children birth–Grade 3, specific tools and resources were needed to make the “Six Big Ideas” of the approach concrete and actionable. As part of this effort, Institute staff facilitated an intensive review of the literature and evidence from the first years of implementation. This resulted in the development of the guiding framework (Figure 7), an action planning guide, and the principles highlighted in Table 4.

TABLE 4. CHANGING HOW SCHOOLS DO SCHOOL: TRANSITION IN PRACTICE FROM A TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO THE SCHOOL AS HUB BIRTH–GRADE 3 APPROACH

Principles of Practice	From: Traditional Approach	To: School as Hub Approach
<b>1. Connected System</b>	Early childhood and elementary education are viewed as separate and isolated from one another.	Early childhood and elementary education are viewed as unified across the birth through Grade 3 continuum.
<b>2. Developmental Progression</b>	Children’s learning and development are viewed narrowly within discrete ages and grade levels.	Children’s learning and development at specific age and grade levels are viewed within a continuum of learning and development.
<b>3. Child-Centered Priorities</b>	Social-emotional development is prioritized for children birth through 5; academic achievement is prioritized in the elementary years.	Content-rich, intellectually rigorous learning experiences integrated with support for social-emotional development is a priority at every age level, birth onward.
<b>4. Family-School Partnerships</b>	Family engagement consists of a series of isolated activities and events built on school perspectives about family interests and needs.	Families engage with schools in reciprocal, ongoing partnerships. Collaboration and communication are responsive to their interests and values. Families are empowered to act as advocates and decision-makers in their children’s learning.
<b>5. Engaged Communities</b>	Schools engage with community-based organizations around specific activities or events.	Schools honor community context by partnering with families to establish and maintain relevant community partnerships. Community partnerships are linked to goals and provide opportunities for family supports that promote learning and development.
<b>6. Professional Growth</b>	Staff professional development is viewed primarily as disseminating information and knowledge about educational practice.	Professional development is viewed as continuous learning and support for practice embedded within the day-to-day work of staff, including collaborative learning interactions among colleagues.
<b>7. Equity</b>	Policies, procedures, curriculum, instruction, and assessment choices are made without consideration of children’s race, culture, home language, or ability.	Schools act as agents of change for equity by prioritizing culturally responsive practices and focusing on disaggregated data to ensure each child has access to the educational resources they need at the right time, at the right level, and with the right intensity. This involves challenging and replacing existing inequities within policies, procedures, curriculum, and assessments.
<b>8. Strengths as the Starting Point</b>	Identifying and remediating deficits in how children and families function is often the starting place for action.	Identifying and building upon strengths of each child and family is viewed as the starting place for action. Economic, linguistic, and racial disparities are scrutinized as a function of the system, rather than the children and families served.

Translating the broad School as Hub goals related to quality, continuity, and equity—and the Six Big Ideas—into strategic action takes place gradually, based on careful planning, mentoring, and the ability and willingness to adapt to changes as they unfold. The principles of practice presented here emphasize starting early, persisting across time, and strengthening learning opportunities and support not only for children but also for the adults who are critical to fostering children’s school success. Each of the principles shown in Table 4 is grounded in research on effective early care and education, as summarized here:

- 1. Connected System.** Aligning preschool with the early grades has become a priority in several efforts across the nation, including Ritchie and Gutman’s First School<sup>105</sup> and Takanishi’s New American Primary School.<sup>106</sup> It is based on the recognition that even when preschool and elementary programs are in the same physical location, their policies and procedures may be disconnected. Results from a recent review of quality in early childhood publicly funded programs demonstrated positive results in connecting early care and education to the public school system, including providing better access for families and more integrated learning systems for young children.<sup>107</sup>
- 2. Developmental Progression.** Educators’ knowledge of child development is critical for helping children reach a variety of learning goals.<sup>105,106,108</sup> Relying on learning standards and developmental trajectories provides an effective framework for instruction, as well as insights from which to individualize support for each child’s learning needs.<sup>109-112</sup>
- 3. Child-Centered Priorities.** A child’s social and emotional competence is foundational to overall well-being and is a key predictor of academic achievement.<sup>113</sup> Strong supports for social-emotional and language development are integrated into intellectually challenging learning experiences, including play, at every age level and for every child in the School as Hub approach.<sup>114-116</sup> Integration of academic learning with social and emotional learning promotes engagement, positive behavior, collaboration and support of peers, resilience, and a sense of success.<sup>117,118</sup>
- 4. Family-School Partnerships.** An ecological lens illuminates the critical understanding that young children learn and develop within a set of embedded systems from home to society. Learning potential is enhanced when children can make relevant connections between these systems. Schools must actively seek information from families to build understanding, expand opportunities for collaborative decision-making, and learn how well things are working and what can be improved. Family engagement activities that are effective at promoting academic achievement include communication between parents and children regarding the school experience, parental encouragement and support for learning, reading at home, and parents holding high expectations/aspirations for their children’s academic achievement and schooling.<sup>119,120</sup>
- 5. Engaged Communities.** Quality, continuity, and equity are advanced when schools prioritize building bridges between school and community.<sup>121</sup> School as Hub creates, facilitates, and institutionalizes home-school-community collaborative values, norms,

and interactions.<sup>122</sup> Meaningful connections with child care and after school care providers support children's transitions to elementary school. They also support higher academic and developmental outcomes, increased respect for and shared understanding among educators, development of responsive teaching practices, and stronger family partnerships.<sup>123</sup>

6. **Professional Growth.** Strong birth through Grade 3 systems are brought to fruition by educators who possess the knowledge, attitude, skills, aspirations, and behavior needed for advancing quality, continuity, and equity in children's learning and family engagement.<sup>124</sup> Professional learning in a School as Hub setting is based on a paradigm shift in elementary schools. Research demonstrates four explicit dimensions of effective professional learning that guide this paradigm shift: cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, social engagement with students, and social engagement with colleagues.<sup>115</sup>
7. **Equity Focus.** At the core of what sets a School as Hub school apart from traditional elementary schools is a commitment to tackle systemic challenges that serve as barriers to high quality and continuous early learning experiences and opportunities.<sup>125</sup> An equity focus involves explicitly addressing disparities in learning opportunities and experiences, family supports, and child outcomes for children from under-resourced families and groups that have been historically marginalized.<sup>126</sup> Equitable practice and policy reflect increasing vigilance about including and responding to the perspectives of all children and families in the school, particularly those facing income- and race-based social inequities, as well as those with home language and cultural differences.<sup>127</sup>
8. **Strengths as the Starting Point.** Children's learning and developmental outcomes are advanced when educators reject a deficit perspective and invest in building children's strengths.<sup>128</sup> Schools that take a strengths-based approach foster feelings of inclusiveness and belonging among children and increase opportunities for both academic and personal success.<sup>85,129,130</sup> Evidence exists that teaching becomes more fully grounded in caring and responsive relationships when teachers come to know each child well and build upon each child's personal strengths, interests, and culture.<sup>129</sup> Positive teacher-child relationships are particularly impactful for the language development and learning of boys of color.<sup>131</sup>

Together, these principles of practice are meant to guide practitioners in closing gaps in opportunity. They are based on making specific changes that help schools become inclusive of all children beginning at birth, more actively engaged in partnerships with children's families and their surrounding communities, and aligned with what is known from the child development and research literature about fostering effective learning experiences for young children.



## Expanding Our Reach Through Professional Learning

From the outset, the Institute prioritized efforts that seek to support and develop the knowledge, skills, and well-being of those who care for and educate young children. The activities of the Superintendents' Plan, including PD for All, are an important part of these efforts, but they represent only a fraction of the work the Institute does to support professional learning among the early childhood workforce. Ongoing efforts in research, practice, policy, and outreach across the Institute, including several initiatives of the Institute's signature program, Elevating the Early Childhood Workforce (see Chapter 5), are designed to support the professional development of the workforce. To facilitate a cross-unit, cross-disciplinary approach to professional learning, the Institute established a new unit, Professional Learning, in 2019. The goals of the unit are threefold:

- To collaborate across the Institute by focusing on strategies used to implement evidence-based practices and enhancing cross-disciplinary use of applied research and experience to change practice and build professional capacity.
- To develop, disseminate, and support the implementation of multi-modal methods of professional development designed to increase the capacities of schools and community-based programs to reduce and/or eliminate income- and race-based disparities in opportunity and social, cognitive, and academic outcomes among young children.
- Working with university, state, and national partners, collaboratively lead initiatives that will increase the knowledge, skills, and well-being of the early childhood workforce and other professionals in Nebraska and beyond. Develop strategic, capacity-building competence in the workforce in areas of teaching, learning, leadership, family partnerships, and community connections.

To address these goals, the Institute is developing a variety of new professional learning opportunities. Key areas of focus include:

- **Diversifying delivery methods for professional learning.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, Nebraska early childhood professionals made clear that they were interested in a 21st-century approach to quality professional learning in formats that more effectively support their learning and development. In response, the Institute is increasingly using social media (e.g., Twitter chats, infographics, short videos) to implement a microlearning strategy. Microlearning is the use of “bite-sized (chunked), well-planned modules and short-term learning activities.”<sup>132(p. 385)</sup> Using social media for microlearning provides flexible and self-paced learning opportunities that fit teachers' daily demands and leverage local expertise. Furthermore, the Institute will offer and support cohorts or communities of practice for educators who would like to extend topics of interest by coming together to engage in reciprocal learning, both in the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties and beyond.

- **Supporting the development of future early childhood educators.** In addition to offering professional learning to those who are in the early childhood workforce, the Institute will partner with university faculty to support the development of future early childhood educators, with a focus on cultivating and promoting equity-minded early childhood professionals. This work is taking place in conjunction with UNL's Racial Literacy Roundtable, which plans and delivers virtual professional learning sessions for pre-service teachers to help them develop their “racial literacy” skills and strengthen their sociocultural interactions in PreK–3 classrooms.
- **Supporting professional learning within the Institute.** The learning and development of Buffett Institute staff is critical to advancing and enhancing our skill sets and knowledge as we pursue this work together. The Professional Learning unit will continue to design and facilitate learning opportunities for Institute colleagues that support the priorities articulated in the Institute's strategic plan. These learning experiences will include lunch and learn presentations to share staff expertise and project updates, book studies linked to strategic plan values and goals, and presentations from experts and partners.
- **Expanding the role of the early childhood workforce in improving Nebraska's early childhood systems.** The Institute helps create the conditions necessary for early childhood professionals from across settings to learn and grow from and with each other, in the classroom and beyond. A primary example of this is the Nebraska Early Childhood Leadership Cadre—which represents increased collaboration within the Institute and authentic engagement with the early childhood workforce. More information about the cadre is provided in the next chapter (see p. 114), which focuses on Elevating the Early Childhood Workforce.

# Elevating the Early Childhood Workforce

I think the pandemic has really shined a light on how this industry is part of the infrastructure of our economy. There has to be more investment made in it ... The supply of workers has taken such a beating for years and years, and we have to figure out a way to make this a prestigious thing to do with your life and career path.

**Adrienne Agulla**  
Owner and Executive Director  
Hamilton Heights Child Development Centers  
Omaha, Nebraska

## Where We Started

In *Elevating the Early Childhood Workforce*, we seek to improve the skills and well-being of Nebraska’s early childhood workforce and to ensure that their work is widely recognized as essential to the social and economic future of our children, families, communities, state, and nation. In the Institute’s first years, we focused on learning more about the opportunities and challenges facing the workforce—we inventoried the state’s higher education programs about how they prepared early childhood educators, convened higher education faculty and state agency partners, surveyed Nebraska’s early childhood workforce, and developed a theory of change to guide our work.

### Early Childhood Higher Education Inventory

One of the first questions we asked ourselves as we began implementing this signature program was how does higher education prepare those who want to work with or for the benefit of young children? What do we expect them to know and be able to do? During the 2014–15 academic year, the Institute commissioned the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley to conduct a survey—the *Early Childhood Higher Education Inventory*. The Inventory consists of three modules: (1) a mapping of the population of higher education programs within a state; (2) an online program survey completed by the degree program leader; and (3) an online faculty survey completed by individual faculty members. The sample consisted of 30 preparation programs—nine associate, 15 bachelor’s, and six master’s. The faculty sample consisted of 109 participants. They included 26 community college faculty, 45 bachelor’s, 26 master’s, and 12 doctoral degree faculty members.<sup>39</sup>

Reflecting the lack of uniformity prevalent in the service-delivery sector, the Inventory uncovered considerable differences in both curricula and degree requirements among higher education programs. Infant and toddler content, for example, varied by topic and degree level; it was also less likely to be offered than preschool or elementary content. Associate and master’s degree programs were more likely than bachelor’s degree programs to offer their programs in formats other than, or in addition to, a traditional on-campus, in-person program.

More than half of associate and one-third of master’s degree programs offered an online/remote learning degree program, as did a quarter of bachelor’s degree programs. More than three-quarters of associate and master’s degree programs offered a blended degree program. Although all degree programs required at least one supervised practicum, the hours of the practica varied widely from as few as nine to as many as 150. Nearly all bachelor’s degree programs require a student teaching experience, and all also require at least one practicum. In contrast, only one-third of associate and less than one-quarter

of master’s degree programs required student teaching, although both types of degree programs required at least one practicum.

Four general recommendations emerged from the Inventory data. The recommendations included the need to unify pathways and expectations across institutions, strengthen content and equity across the early childhood age span, build a leadership pipeline, and increase support for faculty. Within Nebraska at the time, we were compiling evidence of the need to address fragmentation in early childhood education overall. We identified fragmentation in the regulatory oversight of early childhood settings as well as in required teacher qualifications across settings. The Inventory data provided evidence that early childhood teacher preparation in Nebraska was fragmented as well. The Inventory recommendations were presented to the early childhood higher education community and discussed at a two-day conference, entitled *Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce in Nebraska*, held in Lincoln in October 2015. The recommendations were also shared in a written report to the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission after it was convened in 2017 (see p. 97).



## Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce in Nebraska

In addition to considering the Inventory recommendations, the Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce in Nebraska conference also included presentations and discussions about a report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*. Released in 2015 by the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council, this report offers guidance for systems change intended to improve professional learning and workforce development for early childhood professionals.<sup>35</sup> The Transforming report contained 13 recommendations for local, state, and federal action, which, if adopted, could have a significant impact on the field.

Nearly all the state’s higher education institutions that offered elementary or early childhood education programs (22 of 24) were represented at the conference, along with members of Nebraska’s Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and other agencies. National consultants joined state experts to discuss strategies to ensure that all children will be served by highly trained early childhood educators.

The Institute facilitated follow-up conversations through focused think tank sessions conducted in the spring of 2016. Shortly afterward, Nebraska convened a statewide team of practitioners, administrators, and policymakers that accepted an invitation to participate in the National Academy of Medicine’s Innovation to Incubation Program. The team reviewed the recommendations in the Transforming report for their relevance to Nebraska and their potential for implementation. The team also compiled successful strategies used in other states, evaluating their applicability within the Nebraska context, and assembling information and tools to share with colleagues across the state.

### TRANSFORMING THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE IN NEBRASKA

*Conference held in Lincoln, Oct. 5-6, 2015*

Speakers included:

- **Hank Bounds**, president, University of Nebraska
- **Samuel J. Meisels**, founding executive director, Buffett Early Childhood Institute
- **Jacqueline Jones**, president and CEO, Foundation for Child Development
- **Marcy Whitebook**, co-director, Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley
- **Susan Sarver**, director of workforce planning and development, Buffett Early Childhood Institute
- **Matt Blomstedt**, commissioner of education, Nebraska Department of Education
- **Marjorie Kostelnik**, dean, College of Education and Human Sciences, University of Nebraska–Lincoln



## Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Survey

Throughout these discussions, one challenge repeatedly surfaced: how to accurately identify, quantify, and assess the needs of the early childhood workforce in Nebraska. Estimates of the number of early childhood professionals in Nebraska were based primarily on census data, Bureau of Labor Statistics, or national surveys—all of which had inherent problems, particularly for rural Nebraska areas. For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics defines early childhood professionals as either child care workers, preschool teachers, or Kindergarten teachers. These roles not only overlap, but in many cases they omit home-based providers. Therefore, the Institute, in partnership with the Bureau of Sociological Research at UNL, conducted the largest, most comprehensive survey to date of the state’s early childhood workforce. Participants represented licensed home- and center-based child care programs, public PreK programs, and elementary schools serving children in Kindergarten through Grade 3.<sup>44</sup>

This survey of more than 1,600 respondents demonstrated that Nebraska’s early childhood professionals faced similar challenges to those in the national workforce. Poor compensation, lack of health and retirement benefits, uneven professional preparation, and stress were among the most common challenges early childhood educators faced (and still endure). For example, approximately 20% of PreK and K–3 teachers hold second jobs, and more than 13% of home- and center-based providers report that their own children qualify for free or reduced-price lunches at school.

Amid the challenges, however, the survey findings also pointed to areas of promise. Among teachers with degrees, most majored in education-related fields. And teachers of young children tend to have considerable experience—12 years or more on average. Under the circumstances, that length of service demonstrates a deep commitment to Nebraska’s children and families.

The Institute presented findings from the survey report, entitled *Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Survey: A Focus on Providers and Teachers*,<sup>44</sup> in September 2017 on the UNL campus before an audience of nearly 200 community and education leaders, public officials, early childhood professionals, and others; the event was also livestreamed to additional viewers across Nebraska. A statewide panel of members of the early childhood workforce brought additional richness to the data through a discussion of how the findings were representative of their lived experiences as early childhood professionals. Key findings included the following:

- **Lack of Livable Wages and Benefits for Child Care Providers and Teachers.** Home-based providers and center-based teachers earn a median wage of \$11/hour, roughly half as much as PreK (\$21/hour) and K–3 teachers (\$23/hour.) Center-based teachers’ median annual salary of \$18,706 is nearly \$1,400 below the federal poverty line for a family of three and nearly \$7,800 below the poverty line for a family of four. Less than half of all center-based teachers receive health insurance, paid maternity leave, and retirement benefits.
- **Reliance on Second Jobs and Public Assistance.** In differing ways and to differing degrees, both child care providers and K–3 teachers were forced to supplement their salaries. Second jobs are more common among teachers, and public assistance occurs more frequently among child care providers. Approximately 20% of PreK and K–3 teachers hold second jobs, and 27% of home-based providers and 20% of center-based teachers use public assistance.
- **Uneven and Often Insufficient Education and Preparation.** Preparation to enter the workforce is uneven across settings. Nearly all PreK and K–3 teachers have bachelor’s degrees, but less than half of home-based providers and center-based teachers hold a bachelor’s degree. Teachers living in urban areas more commonly have advanced degrees than teachers in rural areas. Less than half of the K–3 teachers surveyed felt well-prepared to work with families at the start of their careers, and between 27% and 50% of teachers and child care providers did not feel well-prepared to teach at the beginning of their careers.

- **Lack of Diversity.** An overwhelming majority of Nebraska’s early childhood workforce is white. In contrast, classrooms on average are composed of 10% to 22% of students who are from other racial or ethnic groups.
- **Stress and Well-Being.** Between 8% and 11% of all early childhood educators report clinically significant depressive symptoms. Some teachers in all settings experience high levels of stress and low levels of support.

Institute researchers also released two research briefs based on analysis of the survey data—*Early Childhood Teacher Turnover in Nebraska*<sup>54</sup> and *Risk Factors for Depression Among Early Childhood Teachers*.<sup>133</sup>

#### WORKFORCE SURVEY RESULTS RELEASED AT STATEWIDE EVENT Report presented in Lincoln, Sept. 6, 2017

Speakers included:

- **Samuel J. Meisels**, founding executive director, Buffett Early Childhood Institute
- **Bill Fulton**, founder and executive director, The Civic Canopy
- **Jennifer Baumann**, owner, Little Angel Day Care, Chadron
- **Lisa Carlson**, early elementary teacher, Norris Elementary School, Firth
- **Lisa Mathewson**, PreK teacher, Pawnee City Public Schools
- **Thelma Sims**, owner and director, Element Learning Center, Omaha

## Blueprint for Transforming Nebraska’s Early Childhood Workforce

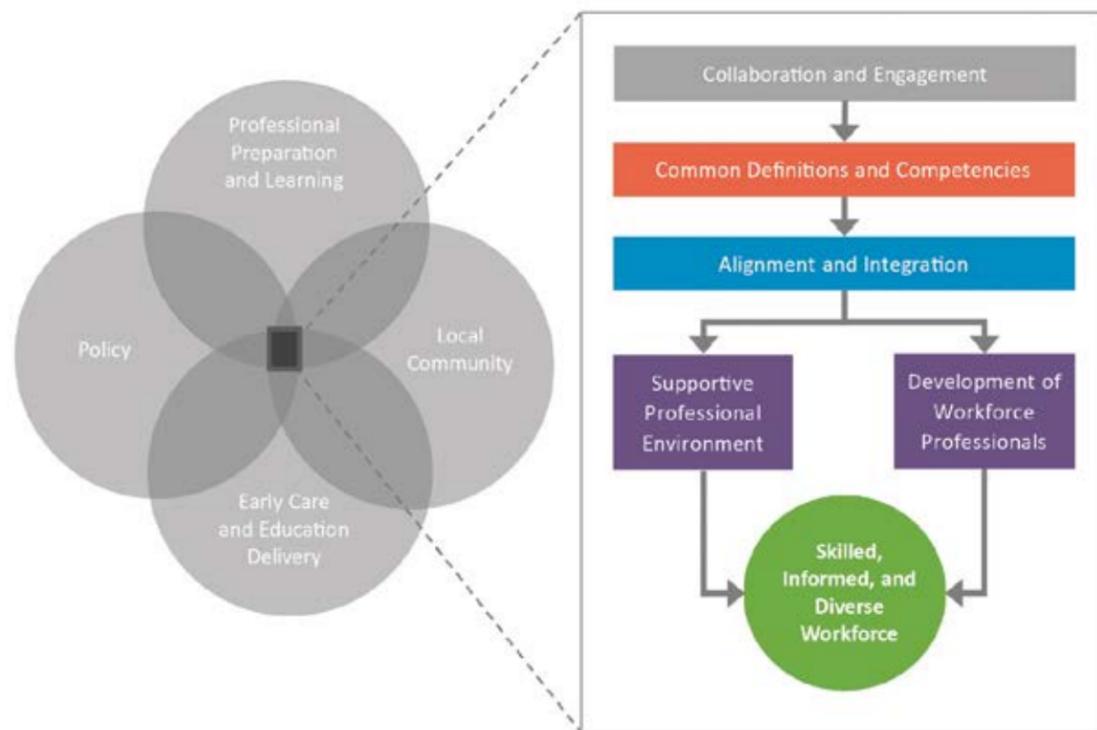
Drawing on the foundational work described above, knowledge of large-scale systems change, empirical research, and the input of experts and stakeholders over our first two years, the Institute developed a theory of change to guide the work of creating the early childhood workforce of tomorrow. This Blueprint for Transforming Nebraska’s Early Childhood Workforce was based on principles of equity, collaboration, evidence-based practice, responsiveness to local needs, and sustainability.

It reflected a commitment to ground the work in collaboration and engagement with stakeholders across four key sectors of the early childhood system, with a focus on addressing four essential components: (1) common definitions and specific skills and competencies tied to these definitions across all professional training programs and systems of certification or regulation, (2) alignment and integration of competencies within and across systems of practice and regulation, (3) a supportive professional environment that

compensates workers fairly and offers career advancement opportunities, and (4) development of workforce professionals through induction, mentoring, and professional development programs—all intended to support a skilled, informed, and diverse workforce. Figure 9 illustrates this theory of change.

The foundational work represented by the Blueprint led to the formation of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission and subsequent initiatives.

FIGURE 9. BLUEPRINT FOR TRANSFORMING NEBRASKA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE



## What We Accomplished

### Convening the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission, 2017–20

The Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission convened in January 2017, with the intent of determining how best to strengthen and expand Nebraska’s early childhood workforce. This collaborative group of more than 40 public- and private-sector leaders from across Nebraska met from 2017 to 2020. The commission was co-chaired by Founding Executive Director Samuel J. Meisels and the dean emeritus of the College of Education and Human Sciences at UNL, Marjorie Kostelnik. The Institute provided supports, resources, and coordination for the commission’s quarterly meetings, which were facilitated by a consultant from The Civic Canopy, a Denver-based nonprofit that works to promote collaborative processes that help communities thrive. The Institute also supported the commission’s work through several related efforts, as summarized below.

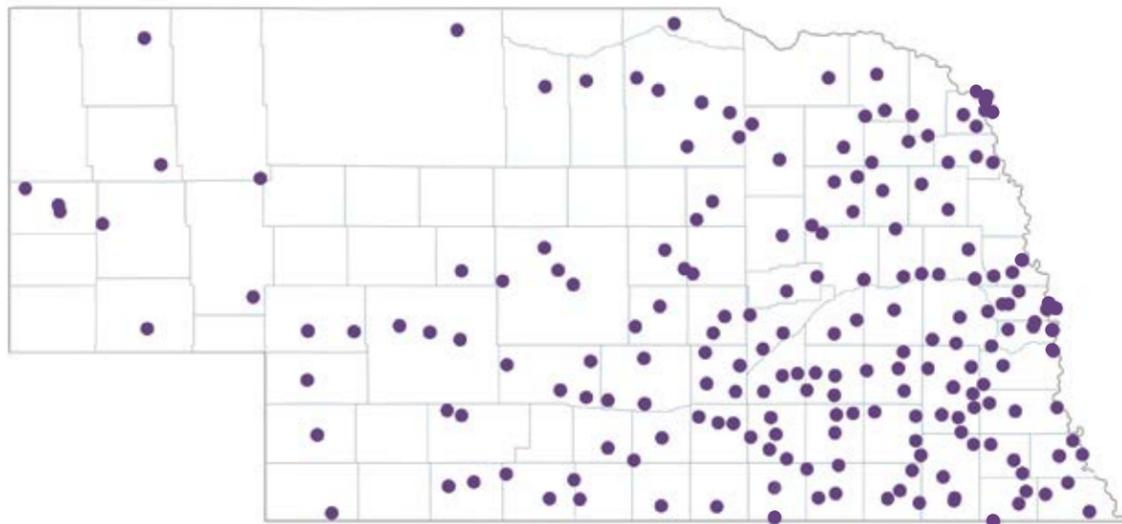
### Promoting Shared Understanding of Quality Early Care and Education

The commission was formed with a goal of ensuring a skilled, informed, and diverse workforce for all children in all early childhood settings. In our work with the commission, the Institute began to emphasize more explicitly that affordability and access for families was only a first step, and that the relationships formed between early childhood educators and the children in their care constitute a crucial role in the delivery of quality early care and education across settings. A key turning point in commission members’ understanding of the importance of ensuring quality early care and education was their participation in the experiential-based Brain Architecture Game.<sup>134</sup> The facilitators emphasized the workforce in discussions, and each group included an experienced early childhood professional at the table. The Brain Architecture Game illuminated the issues and connections that had been presented in previous meetings and provided a common understanding and platform for the commission’s subsequent work and deliberations. The experiential exercise of the Brain Architecture Game began to bring home to the participants the cumulative impact of risk factors and adverse childhood experiences on brain development in ways that hearing or reading about these cumulative risks could not fully communicate. Witnessing fellow commission members attest to the authenticity of the Brain Architecture Game scenarios had a profound effect on participants, who realized that the seemingly unrealistic set of challenges described in the scenarios was not simply hypothetical but highly plausible. All participants reported that the Brain Architecture Game changed their outlook on the importance of assuring quality early childhood experiences. Sacrificing quality for affordability was no longer a tenable option.

## Listening to the Workforce: *No Small Matter* Film Screening and Discussion

From the outset, commission members asked to hear directly from those who work with children from birth through Grade 3 in communities across Nebraska. Building on the success of the Workforce Survey panel discussion held in September 2017, which elevated the voices of early childhood professionals, the Institute added representatives from the early childhood workforce to the commission. Next, to accelerate the conversation with early childhood professionals across the state, the Institute partnered with the Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children, Nebraska Extension Learning Child team, and Nebraska Department of Education Early Learning Connection Coordinators to host screenings of the film *No Small Matter*, beginning in early 2019. The feature-length documentary explores the “overwhelming evidence for the importance of the first five years and reveals how our failure to act on that evidence has resulted in an everyday crisis for American families and a slow-motion catastrophe for the country.”<sup>135</sup> Following the film’s screening, local event organizers facilitated discussions with early childhood professionals. Intended to be an entry point to deeper discussions about the issues facing early care and education professionals every day, the screening events were a tremendous success. Over 35 events were held across the state and nearly 2,000 Nebraskans in more than 200 communities watched the film and participated in discussions that took place afterward (Figure 10).

FIGURE 10. NEBRASKA COMMUNITIES THAT HOSTED SCREENINGS OF NO SMALL MATTER IN 2019



## Defining Nebraska’s Investment in Early Care and Education

Feedback from Nebraska’s early childhood workforce made clear that we cannot recruit and retain the number of qualified early childhood professionals we need in Nebraska without ensuring adequate compensation and support for the workforce. But we cannot raise wages for the early childhood workforce without considering the impact this may have on other sources of funding for early care and education. The question of how to cover the costs of ensuring adequate compensation for the early childhood workforce without raising the already heavy burden of cost for parents is dependent on addressing several other challenges related to funding quality early care and education across the state.

For example, until recently, we had not fully recognized the total cost of early care and education, let alone the total cost of quality programs staffed by qualified professionals. Confounding this problem, there is a significant difference between the sources of funding for the care and education of children from birth to Kindergarten entry and the sources of funding for children in Kindergarten through Grade 3.<sup>136</sup> In the United States, families pay most of the care and education costs for children under age 5. By comparison, public K–12 education is delivered with few or no fees charged for families; instead, the costs are shared by all Nebraska citizens. Because of this distinction, there is tremendous urgency to addressing gaps in funding for service delivery to children from birth to Kindergarten entry.

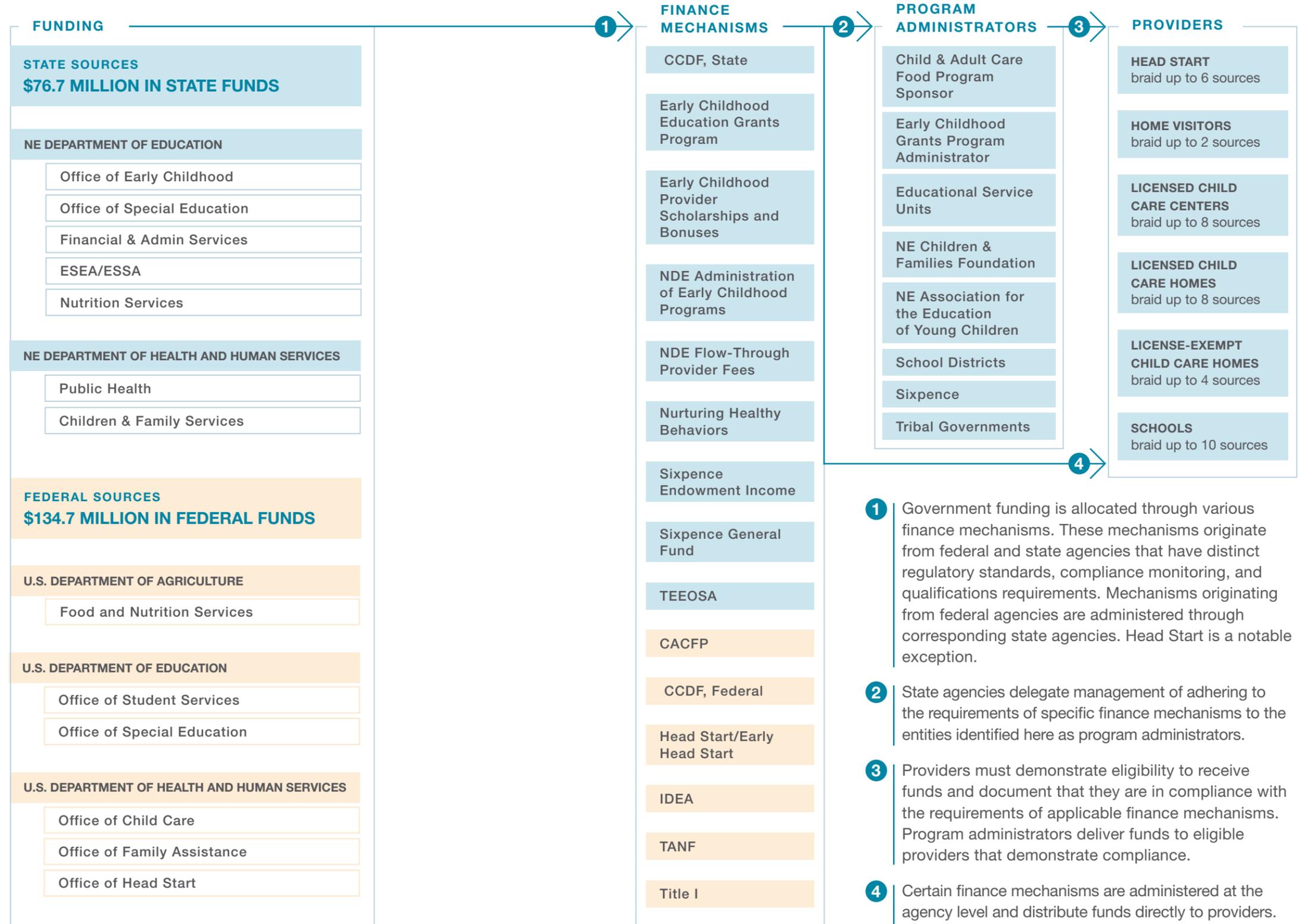
To better understand these challenges, commission members asked for more information about Nebraska’s investment in early care and education. Working with partners, the Institute:

- **Estimated Nebraska’s public investment in early care and education.** The money that finances early care and education comes from both the public and private sectors. Public-sector contributions include federal, state, and local government funds. To establish estimates of Nebraska’s total investment in early childhood education, we conducted a detailed study examining federal- and state-level sources of public funds for Nebraska’s early care and education system. This study, *Nebraska’s Public Investment in Early Childhood Care and Education, Fiscal Year 2017*,<sup>137</sup> was led by the associate director of workforce planning and development at the Institute and a Nebraska early childhood policy consultant, with assistance from the Nebraska Departments of Health and Human Services and Education and the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. The FY 2017 report—the first in a series—outlines the flow of public dollars through Nebraska’s early care and education system. The purpose of this research was twofold: to describe the methods used to establish an estimate of the federal- and state-level public-sector contributions to Nebraska’s total investment in early care and education and to establish a baseline so we could follow change in public investments over time. Figure 11 shows a simplified version of the funding flows, demonstrating the complex system of finance mechanisms that early childhood professionals must comply with to maintain stable revenue and successful businesses.

FIGURE 11. PUBLIC-SECTOR FUNDING FLOW

This figure presents a simplified illustration of what is actually a complex patchwork that stitches together federal and state funds allocated for early care and education. Mechanisms to fund early care and education have emerged through incremental policy changes targeted at specific goals. The resulting funding structures are often inflexible, siloed, and inefficient.

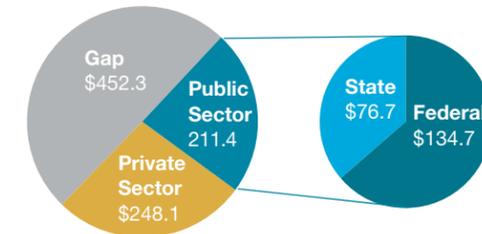
Access to as many funding sources as possible is a lifeline to keeping early childhood program doors open and lights on, but the process of acquiring and braiding funds is burdensome to maintain and complex to master. Time and energy that professionals would otherwise make available to children and families must be devoted to the administrative task of securing and combining separate sources of funding to generate enough revenue to cover the cost of providing early care and education.



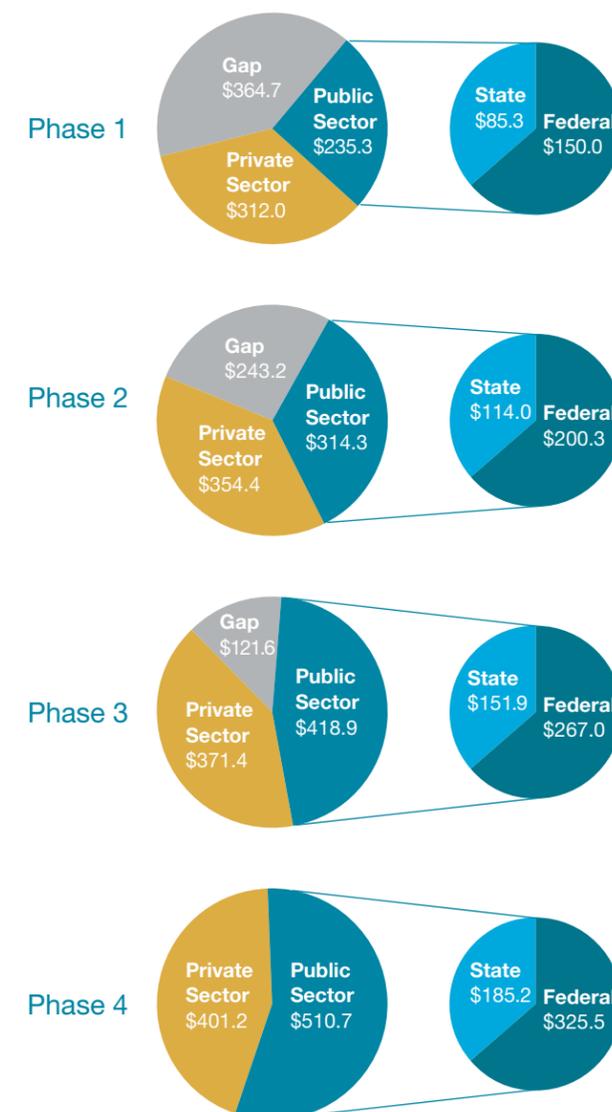
- Estimated Nebraska’s total investment in early care and education, including private-sector contributions.** Private-sector contributions to early care and education are primarily made up of the tuition and fees charged to families for services rendered but also include funds from business and philanthropic communities. Once we estimated the public-sector contribution to early care and education in Nebraska, we applied evidence-based assumptions to our public-sector data to derive figures for the total investment, including contributions from the private sector. From this, our research showed that Nebraska’s total investment in early care and education is estimated to be \$459.6 million annually, with 46% (\$211.4 million) coming from the public sector and 54% (\$248.1 million) from the private sector. The public-sector contribution is less than half the total contribution in Nebraska. As a proportion of the total investment, the proportion contributed by the State of Nebraska makes up just 17% of the total costs, assuming that the state/federal split shown in 2017 data would be maintained over time. The federal government and families carry the largest share of the fiscal burden in Nebraska by far.
- Estimated the total cost of funding quality early care and education in Nebraska.** Following recommendations outlined in the Transforming report,<sup>35</sup> the commission elected to examine funding needs with the goal of understanding what is required to cover all costs associated with quality early childhood education. This approach, referred to as a quality-oriented, cost-based approach, places the emphasis on developing funding levels to cover the cost of quality for all children instead of determining quality and access solely by available funding. According to the National Academy of Sciences’ report, *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education*,<sup>136</sup> the cost of fully funding early care and education in the United States is three-quarters of 1% of the nation’s gross domestic product (GDP). To arrive at an estimate for Nebraska, we applied this multiplier to the state’s GDP. Based on the size of Nebraska’s 2017 economy of \$110.5 billion, the estimated total cost of high-quality early care and education approximates to \$911.9 million annually.
- Estimated the gap between Nebraska’s current investment and the full cost of funding quality early care and education.** Given the total annual investment in Nebraska of \$459.6 million, Nebraska is not quite halfway toward a fully funded quality early childhood system (\$911.9 million). The commission called for Nebraska to pursue a fully funded system over the next 10 years and provided illustrations for a phased approach to achieving this goal as suggested by the National Academy of Sciences report (Figure 12).

FIGURE 12. 10-YEAR PHASED APPROACH TO FULL FUNDING (IN MILLIONS)

**CURRENT**  
(FY 2017)



**PROPOSED**



## Publication and Dissemination of the Workforce Commission Report

At the conclusion of their three-year appointment, commission members developed a set of recommendations to strengthen and expand Nebraska’s early childhood workforce. The Institute led the development, publication, launch, and dissemination of the report, *Elevating Nebraska’s Early Childhood Workforce: Report and Recommendations of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission*.<sup>138</sup> The commission’s report articulates its vision, which is to elevate the early childhood workforce to a priority profession benefiting all children from birth through Grade 3. The report defines a priority profession as one that is essential to the social and economic well-being of the state. The report’s recommendations focus on four key goals:

1. **Qualified workforce.** Ensure the early childhood workforce is highly qualified and reflects the diversity of the children and families they serve.
2. **Full funding.** Fully fund high-quality care and education by 2030.
3. **Informed, engaged, and committed public.** Nebraskans champion the critical role of the early childhood workforce in young children’s learning and development.
4. **Implementation and accountability infrastructure.** Implement the commission’s recommendations through the formation of a statewide coalition.

### WORKFORCE COMMISSION REPORT LAUNCH EVENT

*Report presented in Lincoln, Jan. 30, 2020*

Speakers included:

- **Matthew Blomstedt**, commissioner, Nebraska Department of Education
- **Marjorie Kostelnik**, commission co-chair and dean emeritus, College of Education and Human Sciences, University of Nebraska–Lincoln
- **Susan Sarver**, director of workforce planning and development, Buffett Early Childhood Institute
- **Senator John Stinner**, commission member and Nebraska Legislature, Appropriations Committee chair

Panelists included:

- **Samuel J. Meisels** (moderator), commission co-chair and founding executive director, Buffett Early Childhood Institute
- **Nancy Edick**, dean, College of Education, University of Nebraska at Omaha
- **Tawana Grover**, superintendent, Grand Island Public Schools
- **Catherine Lang**, state director, Nebraska Business Development Center at the University of Nebraska at Omaha
- **John Spatz**, executive director, Nebraska Association of School Boards
- **Mariah Stowe**, owner-operator, Splash of Color Child Care, Lincoln

On Jan. 30, 2020, the commission launched its report and proposed its recommendations at an event in Lincoln that was also transmitted live to watch parties across the state; hundreds joined for the event that included a presentation of commission recommendations and a panel discussion with experts. As part of the dissemination strategy, the report was mailed to more than 2,700 homes or offices, with many other copies distributed by commission members across their organizations and networks. The commission report informed the Nebraska Legislature’s Legislative Resolution 390 interim study report and continues to be referenced nationally.

## Engaging the Nebraska Legislature Through Legislative Resolution 390

When the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted plans to conduct a statewide tour to share the commission report and recommendations, Senator John Stinner, chair of the Legislature’s Appropriations Committee and a member of the commission, recommended undertaking a legislative study to keep the spotlight on the early childhood workforce, especially considering the pandemic. The Legislative Resolution 390 (LR 390) interim study sought to assess the fiscal and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Nebraska’s early childhood workforce and the early care and education system. The commission report was named in the legislative resolution as foundational to the study, and other workforce-related efforts contributed to the LR 390 report.

A public hearing was held on Sept. 29, 2020. The hearing provided a valuable opportunity to brief members of the Appropriations Committee on the commission’s report and recommendations, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the early childhood workforce, and the ways in which the commission estimated the requirements for a fully funded early care and education system in Nebraska. The hearing was well attended by the committee, and Nebraska Public Media broadcast the hearing live on its website. University of Nebraska System President Ted Carter was among those who testified, and he noted that early childhood education remains one of the university’s top strategic priorities. The resulting press and social media coverage continued to communicate the importance of the issues and the Legislature’s growing concern for the early childhood workforce. In addition to the Sept. 29 hearing, a separate briefing was held with the Health and Human Services Committee on Dec. 15, 2020, to share comparable information and assist members in understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the early childhood workforce.

# What We're Learning

## Findings of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission

Key findings that emerged from our work with the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission are summarized in the commission's report and include the following:<sup>138</sup>

- **Varied Early Care and Education Settings.** Nebraska's early childhood professionals work in various settings—including homes, child care centers, and schools—and expectations and requirements for their professional practice vary based on setting and funding. Although formally there is no shared understanding of what constitutes high-quality early care and education across settings, the needs of children do not differ based on where they receive their care and education.
- **Inconsistent Regulations.** Regulatory inconsistency across early care and education settings has significant implications for the early childhood workforce, affecting such qualification indicators as teacher licensure and credentialing. Members of Nebraska's early childhood workforce confront contradictory expectations based on where they work rather than consistent professional standards based on what their day-to-day work with children entails.
- **Low Wages.** In 2016, the median wage in our state for early childhood professionals teaching in community-based child care centers was \$18,706 per year—nearly \$1,400 below the federal poverty line for a family of three. Because of this, 27% of home-based early childhood professionals and 20% of center-based professionals in Nebraska rely on some form of public assistance just to make ends meet.<sup>44</sup>
- **High Turnover.** Low wages and lack of supportive professional environments create significant hardships for many early childhood professionals, resulting in high turnover and high rates of depression. In a statewide survey conducted by the Institute, more than three-quarters of center-based care providers reported that they experienced turnover of lead teachers or assistant teachers during the prior year.<sup>54</sup>
- **Varied Accessibility.** In Nebraska, a family's ability to access early care and education varies based on where they live. Statewide, 11 counties have no licensed child care facilities.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, most Nebraska counties that do have child care facilities lack sufficient child care slots to meet the needs of local families, with many providers reporting chronic difficulty finding qualified staff to work in early care settings and the primary grades.
- **Shortage of Affordable Options.** A family's ability to access high-quality early care and education is often dependent on how much they can afford to pay. Many communities do not have the resources to provide families with a variety of early care and education options—particularly high-quality options. Even when high-quality options are available, many families do not have the financial resources they need to pay for the quality of care they want for their child.<sup>80</sup>

- **Implications for Economic Vitality of Our Communities.** Investment in early care and education also plays an important role in the economic vitality of Nebraska communities. A community's ability to attract business investment is dependent upon the size and qualifications of the labor supply available, and labor supply is dependent in part upon access to affordable early care and education opportunities for the children of potential employees. Employees who are unable to meet the daily care and education needs of their children are forced to abandon their jobs and communities. Employers across the country, including those in Nebraska, are keenly affected by the high costs associated with employee turnover and are beginning to recognize the economic value of addressing early care and education as a critical means of stabilizing their workforce and their communities.
- **Importance to Prosperity of the State.** Ensuring all families and children have equitable access to affordable high-quality care is key not only to the healthy growth and development of Nebraska's children but also to the economic vitality and prosperity of the state. A dollar spent for high-quality early care and education yields an average return of \$3–\$4.<sup>139</sup> In circumstances where children are extremely vulnerable, the return can be as high as \$13.<sup>140</sup> This return includes money saved on special education, health care, social services, and the criminal justice system, as well as money earned from greater educational attainment, increased earnings, and improved productivity. A study released by First Five Nebraska in August 2020 found that Nebraska's lack of sufficient child care results in nearly \$745 million annually in direct losses.<sup>143</sup>

These findings inform the goals and recommendations defined in the commission's report, which are foundational to the Institute's ongoing work to elevate the early childhood workforce.



## Findings From COVID-19 Surveys of Early Childhood Professionals

Just weeks after the commission report was released, Nebraska issued its first Directed Health Measure, closing schools and businesses to limit the spread of COVID-19. Very quickly, the pandemic lockdown made it abundantly clear that Nebraska's early childhood workforce was indeed a priority profession. The pandemic both exposed and exacerbated funding problems in the system and elevated the urgent need for quality services for children and families in communities across the state.

Building on the collaborative relationships and shared understandings established through the commission, the Institute began to develop and distribute surveys to examine the early and ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child care professionals across the state:

- The first survey was distributed through multiple channels, including local network partners and social media. Intended to quickly assess the concerns and immediate needs of the workforce in the context of a looming pandemic, rapid research methods were employed,<sup>142</sup> and the survey was conducted before the CARES Act was passed by Congress in March 2020. More than 2,100 providers responded to the survey. The survey data showed that child care providers were encountering very high stress linked to economic insecurity, threat of health problems, and lack of reliable information.<sup>143</sup>
- The second survey, conducted in late June 2020 among a more focused sample of child care owners, operators, and administrators, received more than 1,000 responses. Findings showed that the economic, health, and personal stressors reported from the first survey remained extremely high. The majority of responding providers said that without additional financial assistance they would likely close their doors if the pandemic were to continue.<sup>144</sup>
- The third survey, conducted in February 2022, again focused on owners, operators, and administrators of licensed care and education programs. More than 750 licensed providers responded to the survey, roughly a quarter of all licensed providers in the state. The survey found that two-thirds of providers had experienced income reductions in the previous year and that staff turnover among center-based providers was very high. Among the nearly 240 early childhood center directors who responded to the survey, 92% reported having difficulty hiring staff.<sup>145</sup>

Findings from these three surveys confirmed that the pandemic had significant impacts on the well-being of the early childhood workforce in Nebraska. Although three-fourths of responding providers had been vaccinated against the coronavirus by 2022, providers had contracted COVID-19 at twice the rate of Nebraska's general population. Most licensed providers (87%) received some COVID-19 relief funding, yet two-thirds still experienced a reduction in income. Center-based programs faced difficulty hiring staff and reported high levels of turnover.

Providers continue 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. These findings are consistent with a national survey that found rates of depression and stress among early childhood professionals were higher than rates among other U.S. adults overall during the pandemic.<sup>146</sup>

Societal tensions related to racial equity also increased during the pandemic.<sup>147</sup> Because of the potential impact on the well-being of providers of color, we wanted to know if providers were experiencing an increase in discrimination in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among all providers who identified as a person of color (American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian or Asian American; Black or African American; Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish Origin; or Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander), 1 in 3 indicated they had experienced increased discrimination over the course of the pandemic. Providers identifying as Black or African American reported higher rates (41%) of increased discrimination.

Nebraska's early care and education workforce continues to experience incredible stress in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. This COVID-related stress intensifies existing challenges, including poor funding and compensation, high job stress, and policies that do not support small businesses. Child care providers are essential to Nebraska's communities and economy, and many are struggling physically, emotionally, and financially. As is often said these days, they are "the workforce behind the workforce."

Among early childhood organizations across the state, responses to findings from the COVID-19 surveys included calls for new funding, state policy changes, and increased resources for providers and families seeking child care. Government agencies mobilized to shift subsidy reimbursements for child care businesses so they would receive payment based on enrollment rather than attendance. In addition, legislative efforts were made to support the workforce, as previously described (see p. 105). Informed by the COVID-19 provider surveys and an increased appreciation for elevating the voice of providers, state agencies and organizations initiated listening efforts and are incorporating provider perspectives into the ongoing funding and policy efforts to support Nebraska's child care system.

## Increasing Integration of Workforce Well-Being

From the outset, our work included a focus on ensuring the presence of a qualified early childhood workforce in Nebraska. In addition, we understood from the growing body of research that early childhood professionals need to be well to do well. Over our first decade, we began to prioritize workforce well-being as a critical factor in ensuring that early childhood professionals can provide the nurturing one-on-one interactions that are the hallmark of quality early care and education.

Our commitment to promoting a qualified and well-supported workforce is reflected in the following principles. They are based on what we have learned over the past 10 years and serve to guide our ongoing efforts to elevate the early childhood workforce:

- **Quality early childhood education is not negotiable, and workforce well-being drives quality.** We know that the well-being of early childhood professionals is influenced by multiple factors and mediates the relationship between those factors and the quality of relationships with children, families, and other professionals. We also know that those relationships drive quality.<sup>35,136</sup> Our commitment to promoting workforce well-being is foundational to our commitment to ensuring equitable access to quality experiences for all children birth through age 8.
- **Successful and sustainable investment in the early childhood workforce is contingent on purposeful coordination of effort and resources across the system.** Recruitment and retention of teachers and caregivers has reached a crisis point nationally,<sup>148</sup> and we know that additional funding and compensation supported retention of teachers in the context of a pandemic.<sup>149</sup> In our third survey of providers in the context of COVID-19, center-based programs that received larger amounts of pandemic-related financial assistance reported less difficulty recruiting and retaining staff.<sup>145</sup> Yet, this temporary financial assistance has not resolved the underlying challenges associated with funding quality early care and education. As we seek sustainable solutions, it is essential to consider changes and impacts across the system.
- **Continued strategic outreach is essential to building public will and commitment around elevating the early childhood workforce and ensuring quality early care and education for all children birth through age 8.** Over the past 10 years, the Institute, in collaboration with many partners and stakeholders across the state, has helped to increase awareness and understanding about quality early care and education, the critical role that early childhood professionals play in delivering such care and education, and the importance of ensuring access to quality early care and education for all children birth through age 8. Despite this progress, promoting understanding about the importance of ensuring not just access, but access to quality early care and education for all children across the continuum from birth through Grade 3, remains challenging. Depending on various needs and resources, a narrow focus still sometimes emerges, such as focusing on access without attending to quality, or focusing on children from only one age group (birth through age 5 vs. Kindergarten through age 8).
- **Continued collaboration, collective leadership, and authentic engagement of the early childhood workforce is necessary for success.** Developing and implementing the systems-level changes that are needed to ensure the well-being of Nebraska’s early childhood workforce requires ongoing coordination, collaboration, and communication. As we continue to build on existing relationships and create new partnerships—both within the Institute and across the state—we also commit ourselves to consistently and authentically engaging early childhood professionals in the work of elevating the profession. This means that early childhood professionals create solutions, rather than just identifying problems or reacting to proposed solutions.

## Where We’re Going

The principles outlined above align with and build upon the vision, goals, and recommendations defined in the commission report, are informed by our work to promote workforce well-being, and guide the work of the Institute’s signature workforce program. Selected projects related to these principles are presented below, and additional examples are provided in Chapters 6 and 7.

### Research on Early Childhood Workforce Well-Being

To ensure that Nebraska’s early childhood professionals are well prepared and equitably compensated and supported in their work, the Institute conducts research related to elevating the well-being of the early childhood workforce. This work is informed by the Ecological Framework for Early Childhood Professional Well-Being (Figure 13), which is designed to promote a more comprehensive approach to investigating and understanding the factors that influence the well-being of early childhood professionals.<sup>150</sup> Although the framework is most applicable to professionals who work in formal, group-based settings (e.g., centers and schools), we anticipate that it can be adapted to fit a range of early care and education settings, including home-based settings.

FIGURE 13. ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL WELL-BEING



Current and future research using the framework will examine how the various contextual and individual elements contribute to professional well-being; how relationships with children, families, and other professionals are enhanced; and the degree to which these features of the model are associated with increasing the likelihood that children experience quality care and education. We anticipate that the framework will aid us in examining how policies, characteristics of the early childhood settings, and professional preparation, among others, drive well-being and support teacher retention. We are addressing questions related to how leaders contribute to well-being in schools and programs and what leaders need to know and do in order to care for themselves and support the well-being of staff. Beginning with relying on input from the early childhood professionals themselves, the framework will be refined to aid in more precise articulation of workforce needs and inform interventions that support the individual and contextual needs of early childhood professionals. Finally, we are examining how the framework may guide the development of indicators of progress, beyond recruitment and retention, by supporting the well-being of the workforce.



## Quality-Oriented, Cost-Based Approach to Funding Early Care and Education

Knowing that the well-being of the workforce depends on adequate compensation and professional supports—and that our current funding structure does not cover the full cost of supporting a qualified workforce—we must rethink our approach to funding early care and education. At the Institute, a commitment to pursuing a quality-oriented, cost-based approach drives all our funding research and policy recommendations. A quality-oriented, cost-based approach to financing early care and education sets funding targets to levels that meet the total cost of quality early care and education, including a qualified, adequately compensated early childhood workforce.

By centering our funding research and policy recommendations on a quality-oriented, cost-based approach, the Institute is expanding the focus of fully funding the early childhood system beyond the costs associated with direct service delivery. Though direct service delivery is the most visible part of the early care and education system, its capacity to function is dependent upon workforce support systems as well as quality assurance and improvement systems. From a quality-oriented, cost-based perspective, there is no utility in trying to break down the funding needed for onsite direct service delivery costs separately from the funding needed to cover the costs of system-level workforce development or system-level quality assurance and improvement. The cost of any one of these investments is dependent upon investment in the others.

Building on the public-sector investment baseline established in the fiscal year 2017 technical report,<sup>137</sup> we are tracking investments across the entire early childhood education system of direct service delivery, workforce supports, and quality assurance and improvement for each biennial budget of the Nebraska Legislature, leading to technical reports for fiscal years 2019<sup>151</sup> and 2021.<sup>152</sup> Following how public-sector funding provided via 15 finance mechanisms changes over time will serve as an indicator of how allocation and distribution of investments in quality early care and education reflect efforts to align policy and regulations across the mixed-delivery system.

In 2023, we launched the Nebraska Early Childhood Funding Map, an interactive web-based tool that enables users to highlight individual funding streams while still viewing the overall complexity of the fiscal situation.<sup>153</sup> Data from three fiscal years, 2017, 2019, and 2021, are available in this tool. Approaching the funding of the system from a holistic, yet granular, view allows policymakers and researchers to visualize inequities as well as opportunities for policy and budget corrections. For example, the funding map makes immediately apparent that home-based professionals do not have access to as many funding streams as center-based professionals, which presents a striking policy dilemma given the very high percentage of children who are in home-based care in Nebraska.

## Building Public Support for the Early Childhood Workforce

From the beginning of the commission’s work, members were clear about the need for public engagement and commitment to support and sustain the improvements needed in Nebraska’s early childhood system. The commission’s interest and insistence further fueled the Institute’s own pledge to build support for quality early childhood education in the state, with a special focus on the role of the early childhood workforce itself. The Institute subsequently led efforts to secure public and private funding to develop a statewide public engagement campaign, now known as We Care for Kids,<sup>154</sup> which is detailed more fully in Chapter 7.

## Engaging the Workforce in Implementing the Commission’s Recommendations

The Institute is collaborating with partners on several initiatives designed to build the statewide infrastructure needed to fulfill the vision and goals of the commission report. A key part of this effort is the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Leadership Cadre. As previously introduced (p. 87), the cadre represents increasing integration of work across the Institute’s two signature programs. In addition, the cadre reflects an imperative expressed by the members of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission—that early childhood professionals must be authentically engaged in the implementation of the commission’s recommendations. Any effort to strengthen and expand the workforce requires leadership from the workforce itself.

The cadre was first convened in February 2022 and continues to meet quarterly. Twenty-six cadre members were chosen from a pool of more than 250 applicants. These early childhood educators are highly skilled professionals and innovative leaders in their field, representing diverse communities across the state.

Thank you for giving us a voice, a place where we can learn and collaborate to be the voice for ourselves and connect with so many amazing people from all around Nebraska. This has been life-changing for me already.

– Tara Beye, family home provider, Chadron, Nebraska

The Institute’s role in convening the cadre is to provide the supports, resources, and coordination necessary to help cadre members engage with one another in ongoing professional learning that elevates their teaching skills and increases their capacity to create change at the systems level in the communities where they work and live. This approach is informed by such approaches as collective impact, human-centered design, and design thinking. Members of the cadre play a central role in designing meeting agendas and cadre activities, with facilitation and support provided by the Institute. The current needs of the early

childhood workforce, including such topics as limited staffing and funding, also inform both meeting content and processes.

As cadre participants move from the learning phase into the design, prototyping, and implementation of impact projects, Institute staff will continue to play a supportive role. In this way, we are providing early childhood professionals with the resources, skills, and knowledge to narrow opportunity gaps through high-quality teaching and learning, while also amplifying their voices as change leaders in their field.

## Responsive Equitable System for Preparing Early Childhood Teachers

From the Transforming the Early Childhood Workforce in Nebraska conference held in 2015 to convening the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission, the Institute has worked with colleagues across the university and the state to establish a set of collaborative partnerships among institutions of higher education engaged in early childhood teacher preparation. In spring 2022, the Institute convened more than 70 higher education faculty from 15 colleges and universities across Nebraska for a full-day event, Transforming Early Childhood Preparation with Respect: Opportunities to Challenge Our Problems of Practice. Facilitated workshops throughout the day focused on problems of practice, as identified in a 2021 survey of higher education faculty, and the recommendations of the commission.

The convening also served as a first step in launching Responsive Equitable Systems for Preparing Early Childhood Teachers (RESPECT) across Nebraska. Funded by a grant from the Early Educator Investment Collaborative and the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, RESPECT is a collaborative effort led by Julia Torquati, professor in the Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies and Buffett Institute Community Chair at UNL. In addition to UNL, the partnership includes representatives from UNO and UNK, all six public community colleges, and Nebraska’s two tribal colleges. Other core partners include the Institute, the Nebraska Department of Education, Nebraska Council on Teacher Education, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, and the Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children.

The RESPECT initiative is designed to transform Nebraska’s system for preparing early childhood educators and ensuring access to education and certification. The project aims to dramatically affect the structure of early childhood teacher preparation by (1) building a competency-based framework that defines common expectations for educator preparation, credentialing, and licensing across all early childhood settings; (2) collaborating with local communities to ensure the competency-based curriculum and accessible pathways are implemented in ways that are contextually grounded and culturally relevant; and (3) developing accessible pathways and support mechanisms to ensure all members of Nebraska’s early childhood workforce have equitable opportunities to earn a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education and teaching certification.

# Aligning Statewide Early Childhood Systems

If we don't have the kind of child care we need across the state—and enough of it—working parents will have a hard time staying productively employed. Businesses won't have the workforce they need, and our state and local economies won't be able to fully recover. Sufficient, high-quality child care is a critical piece of infrastructure that Nebraska needs to run smoothly.

Senator John Stinner  
Nebraska Legislature

# Statewide Assessment, Planning, and Evaluation

Over its first decade, the Institute played an important role in bringing people together to transform early care and education in Nebraska. In collaboration with many partners, the Institute helped build a foundation of shared understanding and cooperation that supports strong statewide partnerships focused on bringing about broad systemic changes.

Much of this work was made possible by two consecutive awards (2019–20 and 2020–23) from the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) Birth through Five initiative administered by the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In 2020, Nebraska was awarded \$8.9 million per year for a three-year PDG Renewal Grant, and together, contributing partners pledged \$2.7 million per year in matching funds. The PDG Renewal Grant provided funding to implement the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan, which was developed under the previous PDG award and is based on the comprehensive statewide needs assessment that was conducted in 2019.

The PDG Renewal Grant offers an unprecedented opportunity for Nebraska to assess and improve its early childhood systems. It also provides a framework to bring together the combined resources and expertise of state agencies, early childhood and K–12 educators, community leaders, nonprofits, and private-sector interests for a common goal—to improve the developmental outcomes of our state’s youngest children. The work is led by Nebraska’s Department of Health and Human Services, with support from the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation and in partnership with the Nebraska Department of Education.

The Buffett Institute collaborated with these organizations to support several PDG-funded activities, including three interrelated efforts—(1) needs assessment, (2) strategic planning, and (3) performance evaluation—that are intended to build Nebraska’s infrastructure and capacity for making continuous, data-informed improvements in the state’s early childhood system.

## Nebraska Early Childhood Needs Assessment

In 2019, the Institute conducted a comprehensive needs assessment concerning early care and education across Nebraska as part of the PDG work. Throughout the process, the Institute and its partners built upon past analyses and actively engaged stakeholders across the state, with a focus on including the voices of families and communities. Two large-scale statewide surveys, conducted in partnership with the Bureau of Sociological Research at UNL, served as the foundation for the needs assessment. The Focus on Nebraska Families survey was mailed to over 90,000 households across the state, yielding responses from 3,541 families with children birth through age 5. The Early Childhood Program and Leadership survey was mailed to a total of 4,002 leaders from all licensed child care center and family child care homes, Head Start and

Early Head Start programs, license-exempt providers, and public PreK programs in Nebraska, yielding 1,337 responses. In addition, the needs assessment team conducted focus groups with parents in diverse communities across the state to gather more nuanced information about families’ perspectives and needs. This included focus groups with families experiencing poverty or homelessness, Black and African American families, Hispanic and Latinx families, immigrant and refugee families, families of children with disabilities, and families providing foster care.

Interviews were conducted with key informants from all levels of the state’s early childhood system to identify system-wide needs. Finally, the needs assessment team analyzed recent existing reports and ongoing needs assessment efforts at local levels, with a focus on identifying strengths and challenges in existing early childhood programs and services.

Strengths of the current system included local pride in Head Start and Sixpence programs, community-based initiatives, and provision of quality developmental screening and early intervention.

## COMMUNITY SUCCESS STORIES

- **Gothenburg, population 3,400**

The Gothenburg Early Childhood Learning Coalition is a volunteer group of early childhood providers, educators, and community members committed to addressing community-wide issues impacting early childhood. With support from the Communities for Kids initiative, a survey was conducted to identify early childhood priorities in Gothenburg, which led to the coalition receiving a \$25,000 grant to conduct further study and planning. Because of this work, Gothenburg was selected to be a part of a Nebraska cohort in the National League of Cities’ City Leadership for Building an Early Learning Nation Initiative. This initiative was part of a national effort to identify and support communities that prioritize programs and policies to improve outcomes for young children. Other participating Nebraska communities in the cohort included Grand Island, Norfolk, Red Cloud, Schuyler, and Wood River.

- **Red Cloud, population 980**

A group of committed citizens, together with the Red Cloud Community Foundation Fund and Nebraska Community Foundation, raised \$2.2 million to construct The Valley Child Development Center—a 7,300-square-foot facility that provides high-quality, year-round early care and education, before- and after-school care, and summer enrichment programs for children in and around Red Cloud. The project, which was developed over a six-year period, now serves as a model for other towns across Nebraska and across the country.

Key findings related to challenges in the system included the following:

- **Many Nebraska families lack access to quality early care and education.** In the family survey conducted in 2019, Nebraska families in all parts of the state reported a lack of available early care and education options in their communities. Of those who responded to the survey, nearly half (48%) of those living in metropolitan areas to just over three-quarters (76%) of those living in remote rural areas reported a lack of options.
- **Even when quality options are available, many families do not have the financial resources they need to pay for the quality of care they want for their child.** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 62% of Nebraska families reported at least one condition that might negatively impact their children’s learning and development—and these families were nearly four times more likely to report difficulty in paying for their child’s early care and education. These families also face other barriers to accessing the quality of care and education their children need. For example, families of children with disabilities face unique barriers related to transportation, flexibility of hours, and additional costs.
- **Most Nebraska families do not have the information they need to make informed decisions about early care and education options.** More than 90% of the families surveyed would like to have a list of early care and education providers in their area with information about cost, quality ratings, availability, and user reviews.
- **Family engagement is a critical component of quality early care and education.** When parents are more engaged and empowered in support of children’s learning, they are better able to support their children’s development. However, many Nebraska parents reported that they had rarely or never talked to providers about parenting issues (77%), improved educational opportunities for their children (71%), or their child’s development (43%).
- **Nebraska families reported significant challenges related to continuity across their children’s early care and education settings.** Families experiencing poverty or other conditions of high stress and familial challenge reported having more care arrangements and more frequent changes in settings than families who were not experiencing such challenges.
- **Regulatory inconsistencies in Nebraska’s early childhood mixed-delivery system create challenges for stakeholders at all levels.** Families experience barriers to accessing essential services when eligibility criteria are defined differently for different programs. Members of Nebraska’s early childhood workforce confront contradictory licensing and credentialing expectations based on where they work rather than consistent professional standards based on what their day-to-day work with children entails. And providers of early childhood programs often must apply for and combine funding from multiple sources to cover operating expenses—an administrative burden that takes time and energy away from serving children and their families.

These findings were shared with stakeholders across the state who gave recommendations for actions to improve access to quality care. This process informed the values, goals, and objectives of the first *Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan*. Since then, the Institute and partner organizations across Nebraska have continued to gather information from families and providers to identify needs facing families and providers and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early childhood services.

## Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan

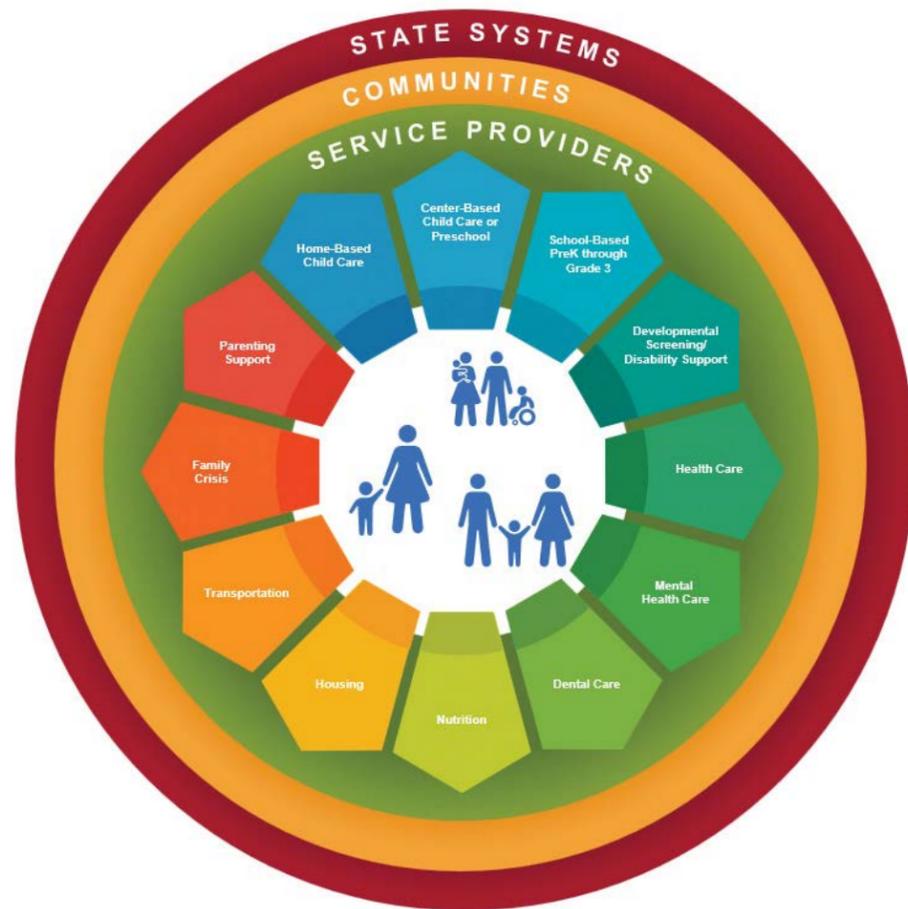
The ongoing integration of needs assessment with strategic planning makes the *Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan* a dynamic plan by and for Nebraskans.<sup>155</sup> The plan is based on specific Nebraska data, and all goals and objectives were suggested by child care professionals and families. It describes an integrated set of goals and objectives for improving the early childhood experience of the more than 235,000 children birth through age 8 who live in Nebraska, with special emphasis on addressing significant disparities that exist across the state.

### GOALS OF THE NEBRASKA EARLY CHILDHOOD STRATEGIC PLAN

- **Access**  
Each child and their family can access the quality early childhood care, education, and other essential services they need to support each child’s healthy development.
- **Quality**  
All early care and education settings provide quality experiences for children.
- **Collaboration**  
Communities coordinate a locally designed mixed-delivery system that provides continuous care and meets the needs of families.
- **Alignment**  
Statewide systems align to support communities in creating an integrated and comprehensive mixed-delivery system for all children.

The overarching vision of the plan is that all Nebraska children and their families have access to quality early childhood services that support children’s healthy development. The plan defines four interrelated goals that are intended to create a more integrated early childhood system. The four goals, which focus on access, quality, collaboration, and alignment, are intended to address change at all levels of Nebraska’s early childhood system, which is illustrated in Figure 14.

FIGURE 14. SYSTEMS ALIGNMENT IN THE NEBRASKA EARLY CHILDHOOD STRATEGIC PLAN



Throughout 2022, the Institute convened stakeholder meetings across the state to ensure that the strategic plan aligned to communities’ priorities and to identify additional strategies and action plans to accomplish the plan’s goals. These meetings reflect a commitment to elevate the voices of people across the state—including those living in rural areas, people of color, Indigenous people, families of children with disabilities, and more—and to include their perspectives and priorities in the revised *Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan*, which will be released in 2023.

## Performance Evaluation: A Focus on Equity

The *Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan* integrates results through process-oriented inquiry. Ongoing conversations with collaborators and stakeholders include discussions about what success looks like and how changes can be measured. The intent is to help ensure that Nebraska has the capacity to evaluate progress, make data-informed decisions about how to improve early childhood services, and support sustainable change at the community and state levels. Information gathered from stakeholders is shared with the performance evaluation team—a cross-campus partnership that is led by the Institute with colleagues from the Munroe-Meyer Institute at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

Funded as part of the Nebraska Preschool Development Grant Birth–Five initiative, the performance evaluation team collaborates with state agencies and other partners to address two goals:

- **Progress evaluation.** Evaluate the degree to which projects of the Preschool Development Grant are advancing the goals of the *Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan*.
- **Capacity building.** Build capacity at state and local levels to evaluate early childhood investments using an equitable systems lens.

To address these goals, the Institute convened an Evaluation Network Team composed of statewide evaluation stakeholders, defined as program and evaluation professionals for early childhood efforts. Over the course of two years, from fall 2020 to fall 2022, the team met online 13 times, with 25–55 stakeholders attending each meeting. Stakeholders from more than 20 state partners and agencies participated. Organizations included Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, Nebraska Department of Education, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative, Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, Sherwood Foundation, Munroe-Meyer Institute, the four University of Nebraska campuses, Voices for Children in Nebraska, Nebraska Educational Service Units, First Five Nebraska, Omaha Educare, and the Buffett Early Childhood Fund.

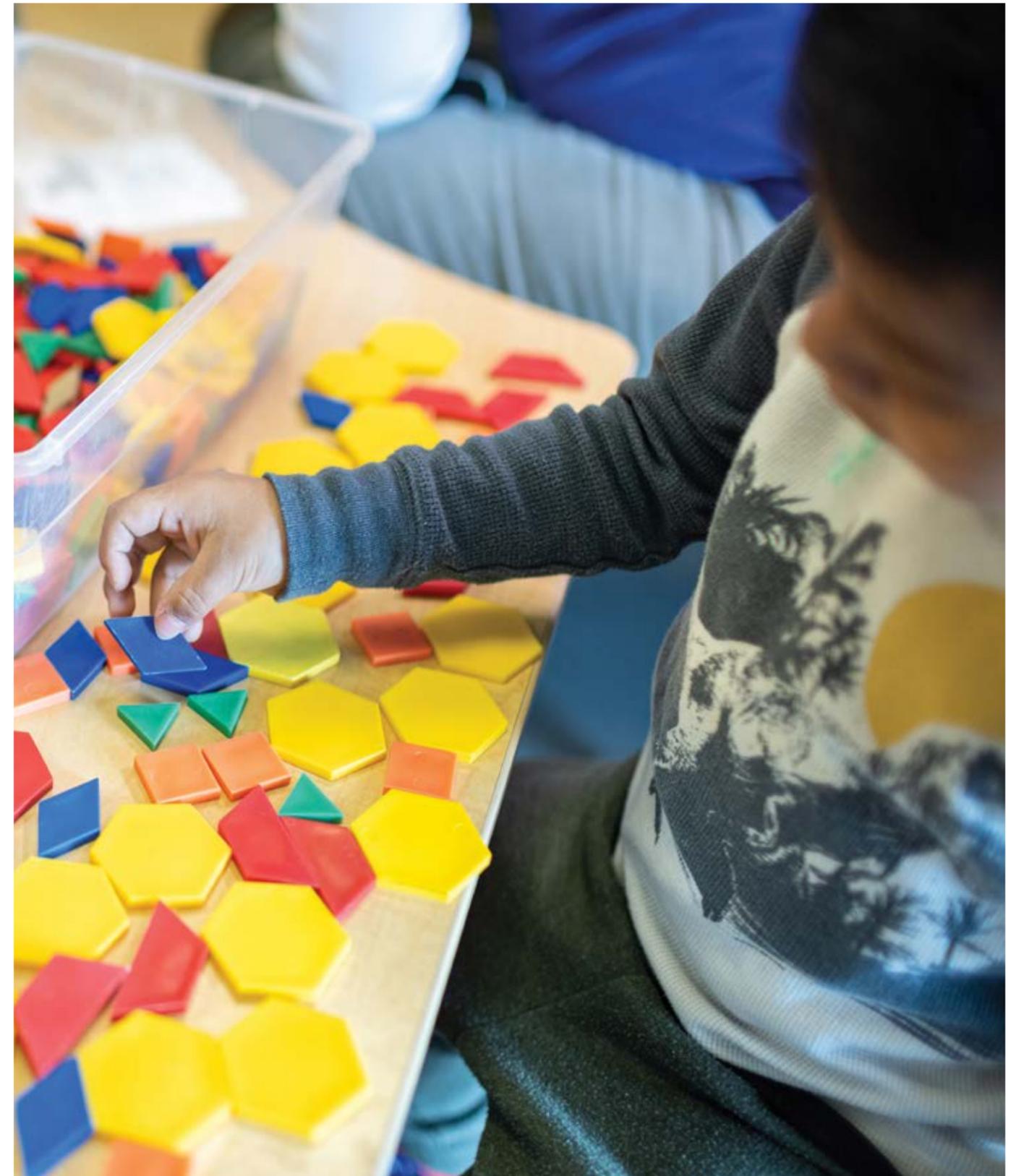
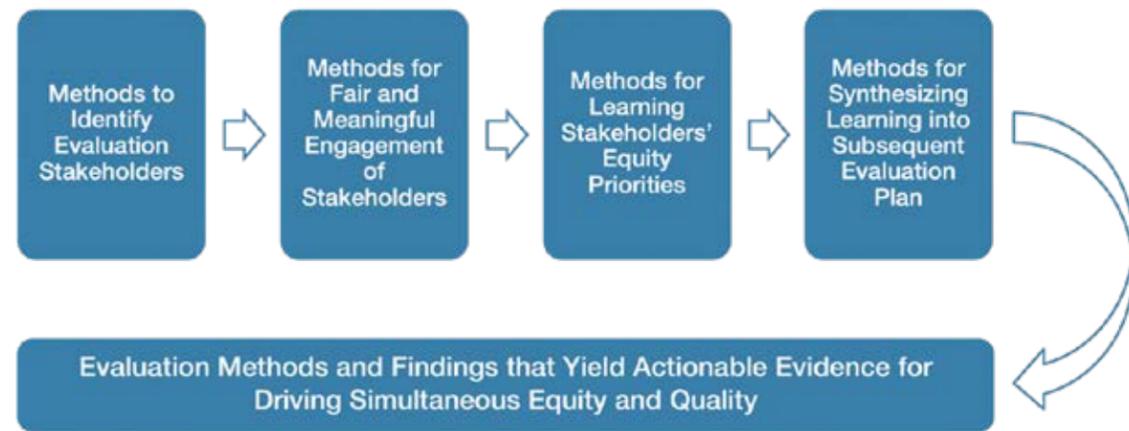
Together, these partners developed principles for systemic evaluation design and practice based on the values defined in the *Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan*. These principles are intended to inform evaluation design and implementation, with a focus on addressing quality and equity simultaneously.

In small group activities and discussion at the Evaluation Network Team meetings, stakeholders helped to co-create the “Equity Action Agenda,” a tool designed to help evaluators embed equity into their projects from the outset, and a way to propose this type of evaluation to funders, state agencies, and other stakeholders. The Equity Action Agenda assumes that evaluators and communities undertake a six-month process of evaluation

planning using methods that explore core questions underlying equitable evaluation  
The core questions are organized around four elements of the agenda: stakeholder identification, meaningful and fair engagement, equity priorities, and synthesis (Figure 15).

The Equity Action Agenda continues to be refined and operationalized to ensure that families and diverse stakeholders are fully included in the planning of programs and their evaluation. Team members from the Munroe-Meyer Institute developed a pilot project using the agenda in partnership with the Little Priest Tribal College in Winnebago, Nebraska. Ongoing meetings of the Evaluation Network Team are focused on “Progress Walks,” in which community members and stakeholders involved in evaluation, needs assessment, and strategic planning meet to review available data and consider strengths and needs in the context of equitable evaluation for early childhood programs and services.

FIGURE 15. EQUITY ACTION AGENDA: CORE AREAS OF INQUIRY UNDERLYING EQUITABLE EVALUATION



# Data Utilization

## Nebraska Early Childhood Integrated Data System

To help policymakers make informed decisions about how to improve the state's early childhood systems equitably, the Institute leads efforts to address research and evaluation questions using integrated early childhood data. As a leader of the Nebraska Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) team and the Nebraska Early Childhood Data Coalition (ECDC), the Institute is in a strong position to partner with stakeholders to pursue critical research questions using administrative data systems. The Institute is also engaged in numerous activities involving the collection of data via surveys and other means, including direct observations, focus groups, and interviews. These data can be combined with administrative data to conduct applied research. Going forward, the Institute seeks to link data sources of various types to create richer data sets for addressing questions of interest. Currently, Institute researchers are building capacity to use integrated data through efforts related to the PDG Birth–5 initiative and the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan. In service of these efforts, data management, analytic, and reporting systems have been developed and are being used to inform research and evaluation questions.

## Nebraska Child Care Market Rate Survey

As the lead agency for administering Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) programs, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is required to use a market rate survey, or an alternative methodology such as a cost model, to ensure that all families have equal access to a full range of child care services. By means of a market rate survey, DHHS can obtain important information on the prices and fees providers charge to provide child care services in an open market where the relationship between the provider and the parent does not affect the price charged for child care services. This information is used to set subsidy reimbursement rates that allow all families access to child care services that meet the health, safety, and educational needs of their children while parents experience a pathway to economic stability.

The Institute has conducted the Nebraska Child Care Market Rate Survey since 2019. Consistent with CCDF regulations, the Nebraska survey is designed to collect and analyze information from Nebraska's licensed child care providers that reflects the variations in the price of child care by geographic region, type of provider, and age of child. In addition, the survey collects information on such topics as barriers and challenges to participating in the child care subsidy program, the cost of providing mandatory health and safety training, and more. The survey has primarily been delivered to participants electronically.

The Institute relies on the collective expertise of a steering committee consisting of early childhood providers and local and state early childhood leaders in designing and administering

the survey. The steering committee was instrumental in shaping the 2023 survey to include information related to the cost of providing quality care. This information will contribute to a study on the cost of quality child care that DHHS will use with the survey in setting rates. Supplementing the survey with a cost study is an important step for Nebraska in understanding the true cost of providing child care as well as the prices providers charge.

Because of the Institute's role in producing the Nebraska Child Care Market Rate Survey, two members of the Institute's Research and Evaluation unit were invited to testify at a hearing on a legislative resolution related to child care subsidy in Nebraska. In response to the hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic, a bill (LB 865) was introduced to the Nebraska Legislature in early 2022 proposing a change in the cutoff that providers can use to be reimbursed for providing care to children receiving child care subsidy.

In previous years, the child care subsidy rate was set at the 60th percentile, meaning 60% of providers who responded to the survey charged that price or less for child care. Using the 2021 survey as an example, the hourly rate representing the 60th percentile for rural family child care home providers providing care for infants was \$3 per hour. Sixty percent of rural family child care home providers charged \$3 per hour or less to provide care for infants. That \$3 per hour fee was the maximum amount a rural family child care home provider could be reimbursed to provide care for infants receiving child care subsidy. In 2021, legislation increased the reimbursement rate from the 60th percentile to the 75th percentile. At the 75th percentile, for the same group of providers providing care for the same age of children, the rate is \$3.43 per hour. It is important to note that the change from \$3 per hour to \$3.43 per hour does not represent a 15% increase in the rate. Rather, the rate increased just over 14%. In this example the price increase would include 15% more providers charging this price or less, but not receiving 15% more in fees. A further example illustrates this point. For urban family child care home providers caring for toddlers, the rate at 60% is \$31 per day. The rate at the 75th percentile is \$34 per day. This increase accounts for an additional 15% of providers but represents only just under a 10% increase in the rate itself.

The reports for these surveys are included on the DHHS website along with further information about the market rate survey. The Institute is contracted to conduct the 2025 and 2027 market rate surveys.

A young girl with dark hair in two pigtails, wearing a white shirt with red hearts and a ruffled collar, is being held by a woman with long dark hair and glasses. The background is a brightly lit, colorful room, possibly a classroom or play area.

## CHAPTER 7

# Raising Awareness and Increasing Engagement

Common sense will tell you this. The data will tell you this. The highest rate of return for our money is in early childhood. Everyone wins when we invest in early childhood.

**John Spatz**  
Executive Director  
Nebraska Association of School Boards

# Strategic Communications

The Institute has the privilege of reaching and communicating with millions of Americans about the deep value and lasting benefits of early care and education. We use a wide-ranging set of strategies, methods, and tools to inform, motivate, and inspire others to begin to care as deeply about early care and learning as we do.

## Integrated and Comprehensive Approach

Starting with the statewide survey we did with Gallup in 2015 and continuing through to the statewide public engagement campaign we launched in 2022, the Institute's use of strategic communications has been a guiding force for our work in engaging with Nebraskans. With both the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan and the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission, the Institute stressed the importance of working with stakeholders, creating a unifying vision, and using strategic communications to guide and support programmatic goals. In the case of the commission, members determined that one of their goals would focus specifically on building public will and commitment in the state as a critical strategy for mobilizing resources and ensuring public policy change to better support the professionals who are so essential to quality early childhood education. This work established the foundation for the collaborative statewide public campaign described later in this chapter.

## Adapting to the Changing Media Landscape

The last decade has seen a dramatic shift in the media landscape. As a result, the Institute's communications team has adapted and evolved a set of strategies to meet the ever-changing needs of how the public consumes information. Core to these efforts is a heightened focus on digital media and our own communications channels, an emphasis on measurement and analytics, and increased storytelling with a concerted shift to ensure the voices of the individuals and communities at the center of our work are highlighted in the stories we tell, and that they are also considered a primary audience as we think strategically about how, when, and where we communicate our work.

### Creation of Early Years Matter

There are currently no news outlets in Nebraska—and a dwindling number nationwide—with a dedicated early childhood education reporter. To help fill this void, the Institute created its own early childhood news beat in summer 2019 by hiring former career reporters to help launch Early Years Matter, a storytelling platform dedicated to sharing early childhood news from across Nebraska and highlighting the work of the Institute and its school district and university partners. The goal of Early Years Matter is to become a regional and national voice advancing news about, and providing evidence and support for, early childhood education. Story ideas strive to educate key constituencies, including policymakers, about early

childhood education; feature outstanding work done by the Institute, its partners, and the wider early childhood community; and cover events that are key to the mission of the Institute and the early care and education community.

With the formation of Early Years Matter, the Buffett Institute has been able to amplify early childhood issues, interview leaders in the field, and give a richer, more contextual view of our work. Since its inception, we have published more than 50 columns and recorded eight video interviews. We have held conversations on talking to young children about racism; reported about the brain science behind early childhood development; interviewed early educators, school administrators, and University of Nebraska faculty; and profiled Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference speakers. We have also written stories detailing strategies that have helped children academically and emotionally after the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, shared recommendations by our Workforce Planning and Development team for using federal American Rescue Plan Act dollars, told the story of how Nebraska employers re-evaluated child care and family-friendly work policies during the pandemic, detailed Nebraska Preschool Development Grant activities, and much more.

Additionally, through a contract with the Nebraska Press Association, our columns and stories are distributed to a network of roughly 150 weekly and daily newspapers in Nebraska. Buffett Institute stories have been picked up and published by major statewide publications, including the Omaha World-Herald and Lincoln Journal Star, and smaller, rural community outlets like the Falls City Journal and the Aurora News-Register.

### The Digital Landscape and Social Media

The Institute uses social media as a tool to amplify the Institute's voice and reach diverse groups that include educators, parents and families, academics, employers, policymakers, and members of the general public. We also use social media as one part of a coordinated, multi-channel outreach campaign for major Institute events, including the launch of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission report, COVID-19 survey reports, and the annual Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference.

Since its beginning, the Institute has worked to develop its primary digital channels—Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube—but the creation of a digital communications role within the unit in 2020 provided new and needed capacity to think more strategically about the Institute's use of social media, expand our online audience and reach, and experiment with digital tools to showcase the Institute's work and partnerships. We now have more than 8,000 followers and subscribers across all our channels, allowing our posts to reach thousands of people each month. Metrics show that in fiscal year 2020–21, posts on the Institute's three primary social media channels—Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter—were seen 1.5 million times. More than 28,000 users accessed the Buffett Institute website in 2021–22, resulting in nearly 84,000 pageviews. There was a 134% increase in users during

the July 1, 2018–June 30, 2021, period compared to the three years prior. Social media gives our followers a vital glimpse into the work we do—the school leaders who meet with Program Development staff, data highlights from our latest research brief—and is yet another means to share our own story directly with the public.

### Highlighting the Voice of Community and Workforce

Through traditional and digital storytelling, the Institute can tell not only its own story but can also share the voices and experiences of the early educators, families, and community leaders across Nebraska who participate in our programs or are seeking to expand and improve child care options in their own communities. Our commitment to Elevating the Early Childhood Workforce includes ensuring that early childhood educators are represented in our work and respected as subject-matter experts. We have given voice to early educators hobbled by COVID-19 and hiring struggles, amplified the voices of our own early childhood experts at the Institute, and built stronger relationships by working on stories with school, university, and community partners.

Early Years Matter columns have highlighted a new child development center in Red Cloud; a tribal language program at an Educare program in Winnebago; the cattle rancher, lawyer, and teacher who combined forces in Boone County to fundraise and build an early childhood center; and an Omaha mother and her toddler daughter who have benefited from home visiting services and PreK through the Superintendents' Plan.



## Conferences, Convenings, and Awards

Public events and recognition are also integral to our strategic communications approach. In alignment with the university's commitment to early childhood and public service, and in collaboration with university colleagues and state partners, we bring Nebraskans together for conferences and events—to share information and research, to develop a shared vision and goals, and to work in partnership to achieve lasting change for young children and their families. We also convene and participate in national symposia and conferences to raise the visibility of early childhood issues, address topical concerns, and advance the science and knowledge base in early care and education. By sharing our work through strategic communications, we also support opportunities for the Institute and our staff to be recognized for their contributions to the field through state and national awards.

### University-Sponsored Early Childhood Conferences and Events

In our first decade, the Institute co-sponsored a variety of conferences and special events with university colleagues, including:

- **Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools Biennial Summits on Research in Early Childhood.** Since 2014, the Institute has collaborated with the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools (CYFS) at UNL under Professor Susan Sheridan's leadership and First Five Nebraska to host biennial CYFS Summits on Research in Early Childhood. Each summit is a daylong event focused on the research and practices that are improving the developmental trajectories of young children.
- **Celebrating Young Children Annual Conferences.** In 2015–19, the Institute collaborated with Debora Wisneski, professor of teacher education and John T. Langan Community Chair of Early Childhood Education at UNO, and the Omaha chapter of the Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children to host an annual Celebrating Young Children conference to recognize the positive impact of early childhood educators in the lives of young children in the Omaha metropolitan area.
- **University of Nebraska at Kearney Early Childhood Annual Conferences.** This annual event is sponsored by the College of Education and Plambeck Center at UNK, the Nebraska Early Learning Connection, the Kearney chapter of the Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, and the Buffett Institute.
- **Goldstein Lecture on Human Rights with Temple Grandin (2016).** Beginning in 1999, The Goldstein Lecture on Human Rights brings a distinguished scholar or leading expert on human rights to UNO each year. In 2016, the Institute co-hosted the visiting lecturer from Colorado State University, Temple Grandin, professor of animal sciences.

- **Conference on Bullying Prevention in Early Childhood (2016).** This all-day event was sponsored by UNL’s College of Education and Human Sciences, CYFS, the Bullying Research Network, and the Buffett Institute. The conference featured three nationally and internationally renowned speakers, including: Cynthia Germanotta, president of Born This Way Foundation, which she co-founded with daughter Stefani (Lady Gaga); Marjorie Kostelnik, dean of College of Education and Human Sciences and interim senior vice chancellor for academic affairs at UNL; and Dan Olweus, researcher and founding father in the field of bullying prevention and intervention.

## Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference

In collaboration with early childhood partners and state agencies, the Institute helped create the Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference, which is designed to inform, engage, and motivate Nebraskans to support and implement quality early childhood programs and services in their communities. Conceived in 2018, this annual conference is a direct response to the many Nebraska communities asking for assistance in responding to the growing demand for early care and education programs in their communities. According to the Nebraska Community Foundation, child care and housing top the list of priority concerns for communities across the state.

The conference is held annually in Kearney, providing a central Nebraska location to help make the daylong event more accessible to communities across the state. Participants include community leaders from a variety of backgrounds, including education, business, health care, economic development, government, and philanthropy.

The conference emphasizes partnerships, elevates local voices, and provides much-needed time and space for community leaders to collaborate and learn from each other, share success stories, and offer solutions to common challenges such as workforce retention and child care shortages.

Communities thrive when children and families thrive. And children and families thrive when communities thrive. The question is what can we do to build on the momentum that exists in the state to ensure that more children, families, and communities benefit from quality early care and education?

– Senator Matt Williams, Nebraska Legislature



The Institute’s leadership in creating and facilitating the conference is a good example of using a “big tent strategy” to join with more than 25 statewide and regional organizations to sponsor a powerful day of shared learning and planning for hundreds of community leaders each year. Throughout, we use state-of-the-art communication techniques to engage Nebraskans and livestream keynote presentations for those unable to attend in person, seeking every opportunity to underscore the vital connections between early childhood education and community vitality.

Since its inception, the Thriving Children conference has grown dramatically, including during the COVID-19 pandemic when the conference was forced online for two years. The fifth annual conference, held in September 2022, attracted 670 registrants from 108 Nebraska communities, 30 states, and six countries.

In each of the five years of the conference, the Institute has partnered with Communities for Kids, an initiative of the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, to host a second day of learning and planning with a smaller number of communities that are working more intensively on community-driven strategies for improving early childhood. In 2022, more than 250 leaders from 49 communities participated in this “Day Two” experience.

**THRIVING CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES CONFERENCE****Kearney, Nebraska**

Speakers by year:

**2018**

- **Senator Matt Williams**, Nebraska Legislature
- **Kathleen Gallagher**, director of research and evaluation, Buffett Early Childhood Institute
- **Marjorie Kostelnik**, dean emeritus and professor, College of Education and Human Sciences, University of Nebraska–Lincoln
- **Joan Lombardi**, director, Early Opportunities, LLC

**2019**

- **Senator Tom Briese**, Nebraska Legislature
- **Helen Raikes**, Willa Cather Professor emeritus, Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

**2020 (online)**

- **Senator John Stinner**, Nebraska Legislature
- **Linda Smith**, director, Early Childhood Initiative, Bipartisan Policy Center

**2021 (online)**

- **Senator Brett Lindstrom**, Nebraska Legislature
- **Rosemarie Allen**, founder, president, and CEO, Center for Equity and Excellence
- **Bina Patel Shrimali**, community development research team manager, Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco

**2022**

- **Senator Myron Dorn**, Nebraska Legislature
- **Dana Suskind**, co-founder, TMW Center for Early Learning + Public Health
- **Barry Ford**, president and CEO, Council for a Strong America

**National Convenings and Engagement**

The Institute also convenes and engages in national symposia and events. Whether multi-day conferences or guest lectures, each of the events we host raises the visibility of early childhood issues, addresses topical concerns, and advances the science and knowledge base.

**50 Years After Head Start: Making an Investment in Early Childhood Education in America**

The Buffett Institute and the Aspen Institute brought together some of the nation's leading early childhood experts and philanthropists in September 2015 for a public discussion about the future of early care and education. The event included a panel discussion on topics including the impact of Head Start and other significant early childhood initiatives, philanthropic and policy support for early childhood programs, continued research on young children's brain development, and the future of early childhood education in America. More than 300 community leaders, educators, early childhood professionals, policymakers, and others attended the event at the Strauss Performing Arts Center on the UNO campus.

**50 YEARS AFTER HEAD START****Panel discussion held in Omaha, Sept. 11, 2015**

Speakers included:

- **Samuel J. Meisels**, founding executive director, Buffett Early Childhood Institute
- **Walter Isaacson**, president and CEO, Aspen Institute
- **Jackie Bezos**, president and co-founder, Bezos Family Foundation
- **George Kaiser**, chairman, BOK Financial Corporation
- **Deval Patrick**, managing director, Bain Capital LLC; former governor of Massachusetts
- **J.B. Pritzker**, co-founder and managing partner, Pritzker Group

**Parenting Matters National Symposium**

Practitioners and administrators from across Nebraska and around the nation joined us to examine the issues raised in *Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8*, a report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. The conference, co-sponsored by the National Academies, was held in June 2017. After an overview of evidence-based practices that parents and other caregivers can use to help children realize their potential, plenary sessions led by local and national experts focused on the impact of poverty on parents and families, the Family Medical Leave Act, and the implications of adverse childhood experiences. The symposium was presented in collaboration with the American Educational Research Association and the National Academies.

## PARENTING MATTERS

*National symposium held in Omaha, June 6, 2017*

Speakers included:

- **Samuel J. Meisels**, founding executive director, Buffett Early Childhood Institute
- **Vivian L. Gadsden**, chair, national Parenting Matters study committee; professor of child development and education, University of Pennsylvania
- **Kim Boller**, senior policy and research fellow, Mathematica Policy Research
- **Paul Chung**, professor of pediatrics and health policy and chief of general pediatrics, University of California, Los Angeles
- **Brenda Jones Harden**, professor, Department of Human Development and Quantitative Methodology, University of Maryland
- **Iheoma Iruka**, director of research and evaluation, Buffett Early Childhood Institute; chief research innovation director, HighScope Educational Research Foundation
- **Sarah Ann Kotchian**, vice president of education and early childhood policy, Holland Children's Institute
- **Melissa Tibbits**, associate professor, College of Public Health, University of Nebraska Medical Center
- **Senator Tony Vargas**, Nebraska Legislature

## Promoting the Success of Young Children Learning English: Nebraska and National Perspectives

Nearly 230 researchers, practitioners, community leaders, philanthropists, and policymakers took part in this national symposium on critical issues raised in the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's report, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*. The event included an overview of the report, which examines the research evidence about learning English from early childhood through high school, identifies effective practices for educators to use, and recommends steps policymakers can take to support high-quality educational outcomes for children and youth whose first language is not English. The event also featured plenary sessions led by national and local experts. The symposium was presented in collaboration with the National Academies and was held in June 2018.

## PROMOTING THE SUCCESS OF YOUNG CHILDREN LEARNING ENGLISH

*National symposium held in Omaha, June 20, 2018*

Speakers included:

- **Ruby Takanishi**, senior research fellow, Education Policy Program at New America
- **Eugene Garcia**, professor of education emeritus, Mary Lou Fulton College of Education, Arizona State University
- **Cristina Gillanders**, associate professor, School of Education and Human Development, University of Colorado, Denver
- **Delia Pompa**, senior fellow for education policy, Migration Policy Institute, Washington, D.C.
- **Marlene Zepeda**, professor emeritus, Department of Child and Family Studies, College of Health and Human Services, California State University, Los Angeles
- **Linda Hix**, director of federal programs, Lincoln Public Schools
- **Cheryl Logan**, incoming superintendent, Omaha Public Schools
- **Dekow Sagar**, coordinator of the International Center of the Heartland, Lutheran Family Services
- **Michelle Suarez**, early childhood developer, Prosper Lincoln
- **Stephanie Wessels**, associate professor, College of Education and Human Sciences, University of Nebraska–Lincoln



## Participation and Engagement With National Organizations

In addition to hosting national events, Institute staff have presented to policymakers in Washington, D.C., and at national conferences and symposia hosted by:

- Abt Associates
- Administration for Children and Families
- Alliance for Early Success
- American Educational Research Association
- Aspen Institute
- Bank Street College of Education
- Boston University
- Butler Institute for Families, University of Denver
- Campaign for Grade-Level Reading
- Center for Human Growth and Development at the University of Michigan
- Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University
- Child Trends
- Clayton Early Learning
- College of Charleston
- Council of Chief State School Officers
- Early Childhood Education Institute, University of Oklahoma–Tulsa
- Early EdU Alliance
- Educare Learning Network
- Education Development Center: First 10
- First Children’s Finance
- Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- Head Start National Research Conference
- James Bell Associates, Home Visiting Well-Being Framework
- John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine
- National Academy of Medicine
- National Association for the Education of Young Children
- National Association of Elementary School Principals
- National Association of State Leaders in Early Education
- National Black Child Development Institute
- National Conference of State Legislatures
- National Early Childhood Inclusion Institute
- National Governors Association
- National Infant-Toddler Research Network
- National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers University
- National League of Cities
- National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, National Survey of Early Childhood Education
- New America
- New Brunswick Education Summit
- Society for Research in Child Development
- The Network of Infant/Toddler Researchers
- The School Superintendents Association (AASA)
- UCLA Center X
- University-Based Child and Family Policy Consortium
- University of Delaware
- University of Minnesota
- University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
- University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education
- Zero to Three

## Awards and Recognitions

In recognition of excellence in a variety of capacities, the Institute and several members of our staff have received awards at the national and state levels, including:

### National

- **Visionary Leadership Award from the Simms/Mann Institute.** Samuel J. Meisels, founding executive director of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute, was named the 2019 winner of the visionary leadership award by the Simms/Mann Institute—one of the highest career honors given to early childhood experts.
- **National Association of State Boards of Education Friend of Education Award.** The Buffett Institute was honored as the 2020 Friend of Education by the National Association of State Boards of Education. This national award is given annually to an individual or organization whose contributions to PreK–12 education are significant and enduring.

### State

- **Richard D. Holland Presidential Chair in Early Childhood Development.** The University of Nebraska awarded an endowed presidential chair to Samuel J. Meisels in 2017. This award is the highest academic honor the university can confer on its faculty and recognizes those who are leading scholars within a discipline. Recipients of the award are selected based on outstanding teaching and research ability, academic promise, and career accomplishments.
- **Nebraska State Education Association Friend of Education Award.** The Buffett Institute was honored as the 2018 Friend of Education by the Nebraska State Education Association. This state award is given annually to an individual or organization that has made a statewide contribution to education or educators.
- **Nebraska Head Start State Children’s Champion Award.** Kathleen Gallagher, director of research and evaluation at the Buffett Institute, received the 2021 Nebraska Head Start State Children’s Champion Award, which celebrates the important contributions of an individual or organization to Head Start children and families.
- **University of Nebraska 2022 President’s Excellence Award.** Dalhia Lloyd, director of professional learning at the Buffett Institute, serves on UNL’s Racial Literacy Roundtables leadership team, which plans and delivers virtual professional learning sessions for pre-service teachers to help them develop racial literacy skills. This team received the university’s 2022 President’s Excellence Award.
- **Plambeck Early Childhood Pioneer Award.** Samuel J. Meisels received the 2022 Plambeck Early Childhood Pioneer Award honoring his 50-year career and dedication to children and families. Named for LaVonne Plambeck, a champion for early childhood education in Nebraska, the award is given annually to individuals who are deeply invested in early childhood education.

# We Care for Kids/Por todos los niños Campaign

We Care for Kids/Por todos los niños is a collaborative statewide campaign to build support for quality early childhood education for all Nebraska families and raise awareness concerning the important role of early childhood educators in ensuring that children, families, and communities thrive.<sup>154</sup>

Although We Care for Kids/Por todos los niños is a relatively recent effort, the concept of a large-scale effort to build public will has been discussed since the Institute's inception. Susie Buffett knew that the work of the Institute had to extend beyond its four walls—across Nebraska and beyond—and from our earliest days, outreach was highlighted as one of the Institute's four main areas of focus. Additionally, the release of *Elevating Nebraska's Early Childhood Workforce: Report and Recommendations of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission* in 2020 called for “building public will and commitment” and further emphasized the need for a statewide public engagement effort.

FIGURE 16. WE CARE FOR KIDS/POR TODOS LOS NIÑOS CAMPAIGN LOGO



Research and planning for We Care for Kids/Por todos los niños occurred in 2020–21, and a Campaign Advisory Group that includes 25 Nebraskans was formed in January 2022. The advisory group provides important feedback and counsel to the campaign and serves as ambassadors for the effort, helping to share, amplify, and encourage engagement across the state.

We Care for Kids/Por todos los niños launched publicly in June 2022 with a statewide virtual event kicked off by University of Nebraska System President Ted Carter that featured a panel of state and community leaders who are involved with the campaign. Notably, the campaign is offered in two languages, and Por todos los niños provides Spanish-language materials and

resources to reach Nebraska's growing Latino population. The campaign features websites in English and Spanish that provide information on the importance of quality early childhood education, the essential role it plays in helping families work while raising young children, and what families should look for when seeking quality services. Information is easy to find and is intended to empower parents and families to make informed decisions about quality early care and education for their children. Links to state agency and nonprofit resources and websites are popular, including Nebraska's new Child Care Referral Network, where families can search for available programs close to where they live or work.



The campaign shines a light on the thousands of early childhood educators who help Nebraska's economy thrive, providing a platform for them to tell their stories while offering resources and ideas to help Nebraskans support quality early education in their local communities. In addition to the websites, the campaign has developed print, radio, and video ads and public service announcements as part of a robust paid, statewide media plan, and it focuses extensively on digital communications to reach families in ways that are most effective for them.

Campaign staff work across the state to build relationships with key organizations in the field and employ grassroots efforts to engage and organize Nebraska parents, families, educators, and leaders. Virtual town hall meetings highlight local and state voices; the inaugural town hall meeting that was held during We Care for Kids Week in September 2022 attracted nearly 7,500 Nebraskans who logged on to hear from a panel of education, community, and parent leaders and have their questions answered in an engaging

hourlong session. The week culminated with the governor designating We Care for Kids Week in a proclamation signing at the state capitol. In the campaign's first six months, We Care for Kids has reached more than 100,000 households across the state through post cards, text messages, phone calls, community events and outreach, and media.

Conceptualized as a partnership effort, the Buffett Institute coordinates the campaign in association with external communications and media firms, and dozens of organizations from across the state participate as campaign partners. The campaign is research-based and includes a comprehensive evaluation being conducted by UNMC's College of Public Health that is designed help us learn from our efforts and to inform subsequent phases of the campaign. We want to share our experience in Nebraska with others who are interested in this type of public engagement effort.

Funding for the campaign is provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Preschool Development Grant, which is administered by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services in partnership with the Nebraska Department of Education and the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. Additional funding is provided by the Holland Foundation and the Buffett Institute.

The We Care for Kids campaign ... is a commitment of hope that the work of early childhood advocacy continues to rise to the top for all communities, big and small, urban and rural, to be able to solve these issues and work together collaboratively and address the early childhood shortage that we're all facing.

– Lindsey Jarecki, Boone Beginnings Early Childhood Community Coordinator, Albion, Nebraska





CHAPTER 8

# Financial and Organizational Management

The University of Nebraska is in a remarkable position of strength as we look to the future, thanks to private and public partners whose investment in their university truly makes all things possible.

**Ted Carter**  
University of Nebraska System President

# Project and Portfolio Management

Beginning in 2019, the Institute sought to transform its administrative methods in order to manage its expanding portfolio of work and resources. Two critical changes in the management landscape of the Institute took place: (1) developing the second Buffett Early Childhood Institute Strategic Plan (described in Chapter 2) and (2) adopting a collaborative portfolio management tool to guide projects, resources, and practices.

The Institute's second strategic plan provided the foundation for the Institute to align its investments and efforts, implement project and portfolio management practices, and collaboratively, systematically, purposefully, and consistently oversee its work. In addition to ensuring that our investments were consistent with our strategic goals, new project and portfolio management practices realized three additional purposes:

- A higher degree of collaboration between internal and external team members and partners
- Increased visibility and clarity about the Institute's program and project investments and concomitant efforts among the Institute's directors, project managers, and team members
- Enhanced and effective planning and decision-making based on information about detailed project scope and resource requirements

To assist and support the Institute's project and portfolio management practices, a new software system was adopted. The Institute began implementing multiple modules within the software to promote effective and efficient execution of work and realization of Institute goals. These included:

- **Project management.** The collection, documentation, and tracking of such key project information as activities, timelines, resources, budget, project progress, risks/issues, and outcomes/deliverables
- **Resource management.** Planning, scheduling, and allocation of personnel to Institute projects and efforts, providing information that enables informed decisions about prioritizing efforts within and across the Institute's and units' portfolios, including decisions about the implications of committing the Institute to new programs and projects
- **Service management.** A means for service-focused units (Communications and Operations) to receive and track requests for support
- **Portfolio management support.** A holistic view of the Institute's investments that leverages reports and dashboards to identify potential roadblocks before they occur and establish a framework to keep projects on track, on time, and on budget

In addition to implementing a project management system, the Institute made other significant changes to increase its effectiveness and efficiency. We created project manager positions to address our growing workload. This was particularly necessitated by the award of the PDG



Renewal Grant, a large multi-year, multi-project federal grant obtained in March 2020. The project manager positions assist principal investigators in planning and executing key grant activities. Additional project manager positions and roles were subsequently added or defined to ensure that Institute work is planned and monitored in a transparent and systematic manner across all aspects of the organization.

A second major change was conversion from unit independence to Institute-wide collaboration. As our staff size increased and the Institute's portfolio of work expanded, it became increasingly evident that our work would benefit from cooperative engagement of all Institute units. Several changes were made to clarify authority and decision-making as

well as to encourage and foster collaboration across the organization. These included:

- Creating program steering committees to assist with monitoring and governance of large projects
- Adopting new project request and approval processes to engage the Institute’s leadership team in discussion and planning of Institute investments
- Developing a new leadership meeting framework to create opportunities for administrative, portfolio, program, and project-related discussions, decisions, and updates to take place
- Developing cross-unit program director roles to assist in the management of large multi-unit projects

Strategic planning and portfolio management are ongoing tasks. As resources and challenges grow or decline, planning and management must change as well. We have sought to create a management system that is fluid, dynamic, and responsive to the needs and goals of the Institute.

We will hold ourselves to a high standard of transparency, recognizing that we have a responsibility to demonstrate accountability to those who invest their resources in us.

— University of Nebraska Five-Year Strategy (2022)

## Finances

The Buffett Institute was born of a remarkable public-private partnership on behalf of young children and families. With a founding endowment gift from philanthropist Susie Buffett, and the University of Nebraska and the University of Nebraska Foundation matching her gift, our endowment income supports our core operations and represents an unrivaled commitment to our goals and the field.

Other resources provide essential support for the Institute’s growing body of work. Foundations and private donors contribute generously to all aspects of the Institute’s activity. State, local, and federal contracts continue to make up an increasing percentage of our income, all of which are directed by Institute investigators, often in collaboration with university partners and other key stakeholders.

In all, the Institute has committed itself to diversifying its funding base. As depicted in Figure 17, external sources of funding now constitute 47% of the Institute’s \$12 million annual budget. Over the course of the Institute’s first 10 years, grants and contracts total more than \$30.6 million, foundation funds account for \$6.5 million, and private gifts total more than \$114,000 (see Table 5).

The Institute strives to be accountable for every dollar that is spent and to be responsible stewards of all its resources. We recognize the responsibility that accompanies the financial support we have received and remain deeply grateful for the trust that is placed in us to work on behalf of young children and families.

FIGURE 17. BUFFETT EARLY CHILDHOOD INSTITUTE ANNUAL BUDGET AND FUNDING DISTRIBUTION, 2013–23



\*Endowed includes obligated contributions and matches from the university and private sources.

TABLE 5. GRANTS, CONTRACTS, FOUNDATION FUNDS, AND GIFTS, 2013–23\*

Grants and Contracts - Local, State, and Federal Sources			
Name	Award Dates	Amount	Fund Source
Superintendents' Plan - 1	2014–17	\$ 3,932,200	Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties
Superintendents' Plan Evaluation - 1	2014–17	616,758	Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties
Thresholds II	2015–19	149,924	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services
Superintendents' Plan - 2	2017–21	5,464,086	Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties
Superintendents' Plan Evaluation - 2	2018–21	1,046,000	Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties
Preschool Development Grant (PDG 1)	2019	2,728,685	HHS, ACF; Nebraska Children and Families Foundation Sub-Award
Market Rate Survey 1	2019–20	76,973	Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services
Preschool Development Grant (PDG 2)	2020–23	7,250,830	HHS, ACF; Nebraska Children and Families Foundation Sub-Award
The Role of Quality Early Care and Education as Economic Infrastructure for Community Economic Development	2020–21	20,000	University of Nebraska Office of the President
Market Rate Survey 2	2021–22	82,655	Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services
CHIME - Cultivating Healthy Intentional Mindful Educators: Evaluating the Use of Mindfulness and Compassion to Promote Early Head Start/Head Start Education Staff's Well-Being	2021–25	31,952	HHS, ACF; UNL Sub-Award
Superintendents' Plan - 3	2021–25	8,326,803	Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties
Superintendents' Plan Evaluation - 3	2021–25	900,000	Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties
<b>Total Grants and Contracts - Local, State, and Federal Sources</b>		<b>\$30,626,866</b>	

Foundation Funds			
Name	Award Dates	Amount	Fund Source
Early Childhood Workforce Development	2014–19	\$ 1,250,000	Holland Foundation
Superintendents' Plan Evaluation	2014–19	500,000	Lozier Foundation
Buffett Institute/Gallup Statewide Survey	2014–15	165,000	Buffett Early Childhood Fund
Early Childhood Workforce Development	2015–16	50,000	Montessori Foundation
Richard D. Holland Presidential Chair in Early Childhood Development at the Buffett Early Childhood Institute	2016–17	2,000,000	Holland Foundation
Superintendents' Plan Evaluation	2016–17	500,000	Kellogg Foundation
Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference	2019–23	367,952	Buffett Early Childhood Fund
Superintendents' Plan Evaluation	2019–20	420,000	Weitz Family Foundation
Educare Wages Survey	2019–20	125,978	Buffett Early Childhood Fund
Elevating Nebraska's Early Childhood Workforce: Implementation Support and Outreach	2020–21	1,000,000	Holland Foundation
Responsive Equitable System for Preparing Early Childhood Teachers (RESPECT) across Nebraska	2022–23	107,688	Early Educator Investment Collaborative and Buffett Early Childhood Fund; UNL Sub-Award
<b>Total Foundation Funds</b>		<b>\$ 6,486,618</b>	
Gifts			
<b>Total Gifts</b>		<b>\$ 114,624</b>	
Grand Total			
<b>Grand Total: Grants, Contracts, Foundation Funds, and Gifts</b>		<b>\$37,228,108</b>	

\*As of Feb. 1, 2023

CHAPTER 9

# Concluding Thoughts From the Founding Executive Director



## The Buffett Early Childhood Institute was born of an inspired vision—making Nebraska the best place in the nation to be a baby—and devoted its first decade to translating that vision into reality.

From the outset we identified two signature programs that define our work: Closing the Opportunity Gap and Elevating the Early Childhood Workforce. We knew that the selection of these ambitious programs was aspirational. They were intended to set a path, a target, a desired destination—a North Star. As we make clear in this report, we never wavered in our commitment to solve the perennial problems associated with these issues. They define how we started and explain what we did.

In our third-year report we noted that the Buffett Institute was, in fact, a start-up, though not a classic start-up. As a start-up we were situated in America’s heartland, not in Silicon Valley. Moreover, we were located within a major public university, not someone’s garage. Further, we were a start-up with resources devoted to children and families placed at risk, motivated by the passion of our founding donor and all those who came to work here, not simply by a few entrepreneurs with a good idea. Finally, this was a start-up that gained immeasurably from being immersed in the Midwest values of doing the right thing for the right reason. Today, we are no longer a start-up, but from an institutional perspective, 10 years is barely the blink of an eye. Much remains ahead.

As a university entity, the circumstances of our creation afforded us freedom, independence, opportunity, and room for risk-taking, all taking place within the context of those responsibilities and obligations set forth by our university and the public it is intended to serve. Few academic start-ups have advantages of this kind. Nor do they have the challenges we faced. Starting *de novo*, we had to learn many things quickly: how to work with multiple school districts that differed greatly from one another not only in metro Omaha but all across the state; how to engage with large numbers of early care and education organizations, many of whom had little formal contact with one another previously; how to gain trust with parents and children living in high-risk situations who sometimes had few alternatives to hold onto; how to help an often deeply disparaged and demoralized workforce, who, despite being “the workforce behind the workforce,” were leaving the field in droves because of lack of support after COVID-19; and how to interact with scores of other nonprofit organizations, each trying their best but often with overlapping mandates and little or no means of regular communication. In addition, we quickly had to familiarize ourselves with four university campuses, a wide range of graduate students, faculty, and administrators from many departments, colleges, campuses, and disciplines, as well as university administrators and advisors who challenged us and taught us ground rules we



were unaware existed, but in so doing helped us strengthen our mission and enhance our work. We took on all of this. All at once. Before COVID, during COVID, and after COVID.

As noted in these pages, many efforts during this decade give evidence of our accomplishments. This is reflected in empirical evidence available from evaluation data and survey results; attendance at convenings; alignments with organizations across the state and nation; testimony from teachers, principals, directors, superintendents, and colleagues; publications, honors, and awards; increased mentions in local and national publications; enhanced awareness of the critical importance of the early years by policymakers; and campaigns intended to engage the general populace in adopting our vision as their own.

To guide our actions and decision-making, we defined a set of broad long-term outcomes that we understood would require more time and effort than any single organization could give. For generations they had remained virtually fixed points on the horizon of researchers and practitioners.

Yet, they influenced our work from the outset and continue to clarify our mission today:

1. All children will have opportunities to experience equity and excellence in their early learning and development.
2. Public support for the importance of the early years will markedly increase.
3. Access to aligned, high-quality early care and education systems for all children and families will grow.
4. Families will receive needed support in caring for their children.
5. The early childhood workforce will be viewed as a priority profession whose expertise is recognized, valued, and appropriately compensated.
6. Public policies will support children and their families and the early care and education organizations they interact with.
7. The Institute's collaborative work with practitioners, scholars, and policymakers will advance and increase our impact on research, practice, and policy.

We believe that we added value to these objectives and helped move each of them forward. Today, more children have greater opportunities to learn than ever before. Some have more equitable school experiences. And despite the impact of COVID-19, many are in a position to realize the pedagogic excellence we desire for all. Gathering quantitative data to demonstrate unequivocal gains for the children and families enrolled in the extremely varied programs we were associated with proved challenging, largely because no single curriculum or set of practices could be implemented across the multiple classrooms, schools, and districts in which we worked. As is common across the nation, our districts prioritized independent decision-making about how, what, and when children are taught. But over time we were able to demonstrate that our School as Hub Birth–Grade 3 Approach—involving leadership support, instructional direction, and family and community engagement—had a foundational impact on “how schools do school” and was of value in a range of diverse educational settings.

Over the years we also moved forward on building increased public will and commitment about the importance of the early years. One correctly hears from politicians all over the country that up to 90% of brain development occurs in the first five years of life, and this statistic is often used to justify increased funding for PreK programming and support for families. In Nebraska, findings from our initial statewide survey conducted with Gallup confirmed that Nebraskans held similar views and demonstrated a strong sense of commitment to educating young children and their families. But further surveys have taught us that more must be done. Missing is a sense of urgency around the early years. Without understanding how indispensable quality experiences in the first years of life are, without understanding how imperative it is to increase opportunity and ensure equitable access to care and education early on, change on the order described in this report may falter and fail to come to pass. Such change is dependent on recognizing that a well-prepared,

compensated, and supported early childhood workforce is not only essential to children and families, but to the vitality and prosperity—if not survival—of small cities and towns across Nebraska and other states. More must be done to close the opportunity gap for all children and to elevate the expertise, status, and well-being of the early childhood workforce. As this report attests, we have created a foundation for our two signature programs—one that can and must be built upon and learned from.

In addition to building the foundation for our two signature programs, we also engaged in a substantial amount of self-reflection. Given our vision and mission, we asked, how best can we work, not only as a team, but as an organization keenly aware that its success is dependent on engaging others in achieving its purposes? How can we build a multi-disciplinary four-campus institute that complements, expands, and accelerates ongoing efforts to transform systems of early care and education in Nebraska? How can we create an institute that achieves its goals across multiple sectors of the early childhood field both here and beyond Nebraska? In seeking answers to these questions, we learned a great deal.



Foremost among the lessons of the past decade is our deepening and increasingly nuanced understanding of the following:

- 1. “Birth–age 8” must become one of the leading policy objectives of our field.** Working with all those responsible for the growth and development of young children—parents and families, teachers, principals, superintendents, child care directors and educators, teachers in the primary grades, policymakers, researchers, and the general public—we must make a commitment to children and families from birth onwards. It is critical that we advance both the public’s and professionals’ understanding of the importance of the entire span of early development if we hope to change how we think about early childhood, what we do, and how we can instruct, influence, and nourish generations to come.
- 2. “One size does not fit all” applies in virtually everything we do.** This axiom applies not only to our research methodologies but to the instructional practices we recommend, our leadership goals, and our interactions with families, community organizations, media, and the general public. Analogously, evidence of “impact” has many shapes and forms and cannot be captured by a single metric or methodology. Evidence of effect must conform to the phenomenon being measured or studied.
- 3. How we work is as important as the work we do.** Credibility and distrust are often separated by a very fine line. Building authentic relationships is a two-way street and can be difficult to achieve—but is the first step in successful collaborative endeavors.
- 4. Partnerships between researchers or evaluators and those who are impacted by the research present rich opportunities for mutual learning.** In research–practice partnerships, all parties—including researchers, evaluators, parents, teachers, and community members—are called upon to learn from others whose life experiences and expertise may differ sharply from their own. Based on efforts to appreciate and acknowledge what each party did not previously know about the other, the partners are asked to recognize the unique contributions of each participant—and to facilitate decision-making that is respectful of differing areas of expertise.
- 5. Quality, continuity, and equity must never be taken for granted.** These constructs set challenges that are not “one and done.” They must be confronted, planned for, and implemented time and again. Defined and described throughout this report, they are fundamental to every aspect of the early childhood enterprise. They are ignored at our children’s peril.
- 6. Race, culture, gender, income, home language, and ability represent issues that can serve as sources of learning and insight.** Among families, practitioners, and communities, authentic engagement and active listening are the initial steps in developing effective instructional programs, mutual respect, and the ability to overcome fear, suspicion, and a sense of distrust among people from diverse backgrounds.
- 7. “Place” matters.** What works in Omaha may not work in the smaller towns of Red Cloud, Ogallala, or Scottsbluff. Urban and rural differences exist on a continuum, and strengths and needs in these varied locations are not identical. This is as true in Nebraska and

Kansas as in New York and California. The importance of place, culture, and tradition cannot be overlooked.

- 8. The early childhood workforce is the cornerstone of quality early care and education.** Other than health care professionals, the early childhood workforce is the single most important partner that most families will rely on to ensure their child’s lifelong success. For want of this partnership, opportunities are lost and children’s development and potential may be constrained or impaired.
- 9. Interconnectivity is an essential characteristic of organizational effectiveness.** Each unit of the Buffett Institute has something of value to contribute to every other component of the Institute. When we design research studies, we include communications staff in the initial planning so we can begin to think about how to share the work in ways that will have a higher probability of affecting policy and being understood and adopted by others. When we plan professional development, we seek contributions from colleagues in every unit of the Institute. We also consult with university colleagues and early childhood providers. In this way we gain confidence that our efforts will have an impact on those who need it most. When we develop action plans with child care programs, schools, or community-based organizations, we attend to issues of leadership, voice, and respect in order to optimize our efforts and demonstrate that we are reliable allies. This may not be the most efficient way to work, but it is a highly productive way to gain insight from others and foster authentic long-term relationships, which are among our core values.
- 10. Collaboration is key to achieving the success of our mission.** Collaborating includes working together with staff at the Institute and between Institute staff and parents, professionals, policymakers, university colleagues, nonprofit organizations, and the general public whom we hope to influence. We are stronger together, and we owe a great deal of gratitude to those partners who have given so generously of themselves these past 10 years.

What I hope is clear from the content and structure of this report is that the Buffett Institute is a learning organization—it is dynamic and changing, evolving with time, discovery, research, insight, opinion, the views of new personnel, and increased ability to listen and respond. Illustrations of what we’ve learned are provided throughout this report. Yet, we know there is always more we can learn and more we can do. Making Nebraska and every other state in the nation the best place to be a baby is both a commitment and a reward. I encourage you to join us in this extraordinary endeavor. Truly, our future depends on it.



**Dr. Samuel J. Meisels**  
Founding Executive Director, Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska  
Richard D. Holland Presidential Chair in Early Childhood Development

# Appendices

# Appendix A. Buffett Early Childhood Institute Staff

## Executive Leadership

Samuel J. Meisels, Founding Executive Director  
Kimberly Harper, Associate Executive Director for Operations  
Renee Wessels, Associate Executive Director for Strategy and External Affairs

## Community Chairs

Marisa Macy, Community Chair UNK  
Julia Torquati, Community Chair UNL

## Professional Learning Unit

Dalhia Lloyd, Director of Professional Learning  
Cama Charlet, Associate Director of Professional Learning  
Melissa Cleaver, Professional Learning Specialist  
Keshia Partridge-Nelson, Professional Learning Specialist

## Program Development Unit

Amy Schmittke, Director of Program Development  
Susan Aguilera-Robles, Associate Director of Program Development  
Alyssa Anson, Program Specialist  
Essie Beason, Office Associate for Program Development  
Molly Colling, Program Specialist  
Tonya Jolley, Instructional Program Administrator  
Tracy Jones, Program Specialist  
Cris Lopez Anderson, Leadership Program Administrator  
Jacob Murphree, Project Manager  
Mary Beth Pistillo, Program Specialist  
Kimberlee Telford, Program Specialist  
Ashley True, Program Specialist  
Monica Wells, Family and Community Program Administrator

## Research & Evaluation Unit

Kathleen Gallagher, Director of Research and Evaluation  
Greg Welch, Associate Director of Research and Evaluation  
Melissa Boyer, Project Manager  
Venessa Bryant, Database Specialist  
Kristen Cunningham, Research Specialist  
Alexandra Daro, Research Specialist

Anne Peterson, Office Associate for Research and Evaluation  
Traci Roberts, PDG Project Manager  
Kate Sutton, Research Specialist

## Workforce Planning and Development Unit

Susan Sarver, Director of Workforce Planning and Development  
Cathey Huddleston-Casas, Associate Director of Workforce Planning and Development  
Holly Hickson, Program Specialist  
Vera Valtier, Office Associate for Workforce Planning and Development

## Communications Unit

Allyson Freeman, Director of Communications  
Erica Sesay, Associate Director of Communications  
Ashia Aubrey, Digital Communications Specialist  
Lisa Caudle, Senior Events and Outreach Manager  
Erin Duffy, Managing Editor  
Rebecca Elder, Creative and Brand Manager  
Duane Retzlaff, Communications Associate  
Cecely Schieffer, Senior Office Associate for Communications

## Operations Unit

Maria Guerrero, Administrative Associate for Executive Leadership  
Lee Manns, Senior Grants and Financial Specialist  
Nataliya Nareyko, Grants and Financial Specialist  
Sue Walker, Budget and Accounting Manager  
Salina Wallace, Operations Coordinator  
Lois Zeigler, Office Associate for Operations

## IT Support

Connor Thierstein, IT Support Associate  
Matthew Ware, IT Support Associate

## Graduate Assistants

Jamlick Bosire, Graduate Assistant UNL  
Amanda Crawford, Graduate Assistant UNO  
Molly Goldberg, Graduate Assistant UNL  
Lucy Okrasinski, Graduate Assistant UNL  
Jesutomilola Olayemi, Graduate Assistant UNL  
Hannah Randolph, Graduate Assistant UNO

## Appendix B. Campus-Based Community Chairs

### Current Community Chairs

Community chairs at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) and the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) are currently filled by Julia Torquati and Marisa Macy, respectively.

**Julia Torquati, Community Chair in Infant and Child Mental Health, UNL.** Julia Torquati is a professor in the Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies in the College of Education and Human Sciences. As the inaugural recipient of the Community Chair in Infant and Child Mental Health in 2019, she contributes expertise in the areas of infant and child mental health and socio-emotional development. As chair, she also helps educate families and other care providers to support mental and emotional development in young children. Torquati is an award-winning faculty member with 25 years of experience in child development, child care, and nature-based environmental education. Her work integrates mental health into the full ecological system of very young children including their families, caregivers, teachers, and communities. Torquati has written publications related to temperament, self-regulation, caregiving, peer relationships, adult-child relationships, and executive functioning. She holds her Ph.D. and M.S. from the University of Arizona and her B.A. from Marquette University.

**Marisa Macy, Community Chair in Early Childhood Education, UNK.** Marisa Macy is an associate professor in the College of Education. She holds the Cille and Ron Williams Chair of Early Childhood Education and in 2022 became the Buffett Early Childhood Institute Community Chair, focusing on early childhood education. Macy has more than 25 years of experience as an educator. She started her career as a special education teacher in Washington, and she has served in teaching and research roles at higher education institutions including the University of Oregon, Penn State University, and the University of Texas, El Paso. Before coming to Nebraska, she was a lecturer in the School of Teacher Education at the University of Central Florida and was principal investigator for early childhood special education training and technical assistance for the Florida Department of Education. Macy, a Seattle native, earned a bachelor's degree in English at the University of Washington and a post baccalaureate in K–12 special education from St. Martin's College in Olympia, Washington. She received master's and doctoral degrees in special education with early childhood special education and early intervention from the University of Oregon.

### Open Community Chairs

The inaugural community chair at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC), David Dzewaltowski, completed his appointment in 2019, and the UNMC community chair is currently open. In addition, the community chair at the University of Nebraska at Omaha remains to be filled.

## Appendix C. Graduate Scholars and Research Assistants

### Graduate Scholars, 2016–23

#### 2016–17 Graduate Scholars

##### Jon Cavanaugh

Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Project Title: Oxytocin's Effects on Social Motivation and Social Attractiveness in Early Development

Faculty Mentor: Jeffrey French, Varner Professor of Psychology and Biology, Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences, UNO

Current employment: Postdoctoral Fellow, Dartmouth University

##### Abbey Gregg

Department of Health Services Research, Administration and Policy, College of Public Health  
University of Nebraska Medical Center

Project Title: Correlates of Patient-Centered Medical Home Recognition in School-Based Health Centers

Faculty Mentor: Li-Wu Chen, Professor of Health Sciences, School of Health Professions, University of Missouri

Current employment: Assistant Professor, University of Alabama

##### Amanda Moen

Department of Educational Psychology, College of Education and Human Sciences

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Project Title: Evaluation of the Psychometric Properties of the Teacher Efficacy for Promoting Partnership Measure

Faculty Mentor: Sue Sheridan, George Holmes University Professor of School Psychology and Associate Dean for Research and Creative Activity, College of Education and Human Sciences, UNL

Current employment: Psychologist, Cook Children's Health Care System

#### 2017–18 Graduate Scholars

##### Sonya Bhatia

Department of Educational Psychology, College of Education and Human Sciences

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Project Title: Effects of Conjoint Behavioral Consultation on Student-Teacher Interactions

Faculty Mentor: Sue Sheridan, George Holmes University Professor of School Psychology and Associate Dean for Research and Creative Activity, College of Education and Human Sciences, UNL

Current employment: Psychologist, Behavioral Pediatric and Family Therapy Program

#### **Amy Colgrove**

Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Sciences  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Project Title: Just Be: A Mindfulness-Based Intervention Pilot Study for Preschool Teachers

Faculty Mentor: Victoria Molfese, Emerita Professor, Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Sciences, UNL

Current employment: Unknown

#### **Jordan Wickstrom**

School of Health and Kinesiology, College of Education, Health and Human Sciences  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Project Title: Investigating the Interaction Between Social and Motor Processes in Autism Spectral Disorder

Faculty Mentors: Anastasia Kyvelidou, Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Therapy, Creighton University, and Jennifer Yentes, Associate Professor in Kinesiology and Sport Management, Texas A&M University

Current employment: Researcher, National Institutes of Health

#### **2018–19 Graduate Scholars**

##### **Tuyen Huynh**

Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Sciences  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Project Title: Circle of Security Intervention Enhanced With Mindful Self-Compassion (COS-MS): A Mixed Methods Pilot Study

Faculty Mentor: Julia Torquati, Professor and Buffett Early Childhood Institute Community Chair in Infant and Mental Health, Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Sciences, UNL

Current employment: Postdoctoral Research Trainee, University of Wisconsin-Madison

##### **Andrew Riquier**

Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Project Title: Identifying a Target for the Prevention and Treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Faculty Mentor: Suzanne Sollars, Professor of Neuroscience, Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences, UNO

Current employment: Lecturer, UNO

##### **Shreya Roy**

Department of Health Services Research, Administration and Policy, College of Public Health  
University of Nebraska Medical Center

Project Title: Impact of Medicaid Expansions Under the Affordable Care Act on Children's Outcomes

Faculty Mentor: Fernando Wilson, Professor of Population Health Sciences, School of Medicine, University of Utah

Current employment: Program Evaluation Research Associate, Oregon Center for Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs

#### **2019–20 Graduate Scholars**

##### **Alethea Chiappone**

Department of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, College of Public Health  
University of Nebraska Medical Center

Project Title: The Development of a Mobile App to Measure the Adoption and Implementation of Healthy Eating and Active Living Policies and Practices in Family Child Care Homes

Faculty Mentor: Brandon Grimm, Associate Professor, Department of Health Promotion, College of Public Health, UNMC

Current employment: Unknown

##### **Elizabeth Preas**

Integrated Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders, Munroe-Meyer Institute  
University of Nebraska Medical Center

Project Title: Efficacy and Efficiency Evaluation of Real-Time Feedback for Caregiver Training

Faculty Mentor: Therese Mathews, Associate Professor, College of Nursing, UNMC

Current employment: Assistant Professor, Austin College (Texas)

##### **Yinbo Wu**

Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Project Title: Parenting, Attention and Working Memory in Early Childhood

Faculty Mentor: Anne Schutte, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences, UNL

Current employment: Postdoctoral Fellow, Florida International University

#### **2020–21 Graduate Scholars**

##### **Keting Chen**

Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Sciences  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Project Title: The Associations Between Early Numeracy Environments and Young Children's Early Numeracy Skills

Faculty Mentors: Amy Napoli, Assistant Professor, and Julia Torquati, Professor and Buffett Early Childhood Institute Community Chair in Infant and Mental Health, Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Sciences, UNL  
Current employment: Assistant Professor, California State University, San Bernardino

**Erin Hamel**

Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Sciences  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln  
Project Title: Exploring Non-Contact Time in Early Childhood Education  
Faculty Mentor: Rachel Schachter, Associate Professor, Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Sciences, UNL  
Current employment: Assistant Professor, University of Georgia

**2021–22 Graduate Scholars**

**Saima Hasnin**

Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Sciences  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln  
Project Title: Can Family Child Care Home Providers’ Preparation and Serving Practices Influence Children’s Vegetable Consumption?  
Faculty Mentor: Dipti Dev, Betti and Richard Robinson Associate Professor, Child, Youth and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Sciences, UNL  
Current employment: Graduate Research Assistant, UNL

**Anna Johnson**

Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln  
Project Title: Moderators of the Associations Between Early Childhood Sleep Problems and Elementary School Developmental Outcomes  
Faculty Mentor: Timothy Nelson, Professor, Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences, UNL  
Current employment: Pediatric Psychology Intern, National Children’s Hospital

**Morgan Staver**

College of Nursing  
University of Nebraska Medical Center  
Project Title: A Mixed Methods Examination of Maternal Distress in Mothers of Infants in the NICU  
Faculty Mentors: Kathleen Hanna, Professor, and Tiffany Moore, Associate Professor, College of Nursing, UNMC  
Current employment: Forensic Registered Nurse Examiner, Nebraska Methodist Health System

**2022–23 Graduate Scholars**

**Morgan Cade**

Department of Food Science and Technology, College of Biological Sciences  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln  
Project Title: Investigating the Effects of the Probiotic Bifidobacterium Infantis on Newborn Immune Development  
Faculty Mentor: Amanda Ramer-Tait, Maxcy Professor of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Associate Professor, Department of Food Science and Technology and Director of the Nebraska Gnotobiotic Mouse Program, UNL

**Kazi Albab Hussain**

Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, College of Engineering  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln  
Project Title: Estimating the Quantity of Microplastics and Nanoplastics Ingestion by a Baby From the Use of Plastic-Based Baby Products and Assessment of the Associated Health Risk  
Faculty Mentor: Yusong Li, Professor and Associate Dean of Faculty and Inclusion, Department of Civil Engineering, College of Engineering, UNL

**John P. Rech**

School of Health and Kinesiology, College of Education, Health and Human Sciences  
University of Nebraska at Omaha  
Project Title: Differences in the Effect of Classroom-Based Physical Activity Interventions on the Physical Activity of Young Children Based on Race/Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Status: A Systematic Review With Meta-Analysis  
Faculty Mentor: Danae Dinkel, Margaret Killion Diamond Associate Professor, School of Health and Kinesiology, College of Education, Health and Human Sciences, UNO

**Jasmin Smith**

Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Sciences  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln  
Project Title: The Development and Psychometric Testing of the Mealtime Emotional Climate in Childcare Observational Scales (MECCOS)  
Faculty Mentor: Dipti Dev, Betti and Richard Robinson Associate Professor, Child, Youth and Family Studies, College of Education and Human Sciences, UNL

## Graduate Research Assistants, 2015–23

### Graduate Research Assistants by Campus and Department, 2015–23

In 2015–23, the Institute supported 22 graduate research assistants (GRAs) with mentoring and funding, including 13 from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and nine from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. These GRAs represented diverse academic disciplines and departments as follows:

- UNL Departments of Child, Youth and Family Studies (7), Community and Regional Planning (1), Teacher, Learning and Teacher Education (1), Psychology (1), and Educational Psychology (3)
- UNO Departments of Psychology (7), Special Education (1), and Social Work (1)

Current graduate assistants are listed in Appendix A.

### Institute Projects Supported by Graduate Research Assistants, 2015–23

- Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan Evaluation
- Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Survey (2016)
- Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission report
- Assessing Classroom Sociocultural Equity Scale (ACSES) validation
- Nebraska Child Care Market Rate Survey
- Wages and Well-Being study
- Multiple efforts funded by the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five initiative

## Appendix D. Board of Advisors

**Hiram Fitzgerald, Ph.D., University Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the Department of Psychology, and Associate Provost for University Outreach and Engagement, Emeritus, Michigan State University.** Dr. Fitzgerald is past president and executive director of the Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health and the International Association for Infant Mental Health. He served as executive director of the World Association for Infant Mental Health for 16 years and has been associated with the Early Head Start National Research Consortium and the American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start Research Center. He is editor-in-chief of the *Infant Mental Health Journal*, associate editor of *Perspectives in Infant Mental Health*, and senior editor for the Mental Health and Child Development book series published by Praeger Press.

**Vivian Gadsden, Ed.D., William T. Carter Professor of Child Development and Education, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania.** Dr. Gadsden's research interests focus on cultural and social factors affecting learning and literacy across the life-course and within families, particularly those at greatest risk for academic and social vulnerability. Her writing focuses on intergenerational learning, particularly on the relationships between literacy in families and issues of culture, race, gender, and poverty in diverse learning contexts. Her research studies examine the intergenerational and cross-cultural nature of learning, literacy, and identity within families and the relationship between family members' beliefs and practices around learning, educational access, and educational persistence.

**Eugene Garcia, Ph.D., Professor of Education Emeritus, Arizona State University.** Dr. García was vice president for Education Partnerships and dean of the Mary Lou Fulton College of Education at Arizona State University. He was formerly dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley, and has served as an elected member of a local school board and a senior officer in the U.S. Department of Education. Dr. García has published extensively in areas of early learning, bilingual development, and equal educational opportunity.

**Beth Graue, Ph.D., Sorenson Professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Director of the Center for Research on Early Childhood Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison.** Dr. Graue, a former Kindergarten teacher, chairs the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She teaches courses in research methods and early childhood policy and is a fellow of the American Educational Research Association. Dr. Graue is known for her work on readiness for school and home-school relations. She studies PreK professional development for developmentally and culturally responsive early math and is engaged in a comparative study of PreK policy enactment in New Jersey and Wisconsin.

**Sharon Lynn Kagan, Ed.D., Virginia and Leonard Marx Professor of Early Childhood and Family Policy, Teachers College, Columbia University, and Adjunct Professor, Child Study Center, Yale University.** Dr. Kagan helps shape the design and quality of early childhood practice and policies in the United States and in over 75 countries around the world. She consults with the White House, numerous federal and state agencies, elected and appointed policymakers including governors, members of Congress and legislatures, foundations, and corporations. Dr. Kagan's research focuses on the institutions that impact child and family life. Acknowledged for her scholarship, she is a fellow of the American Educational Research Association and a member of the National Academy of Education.

**Tammy Mann, Ph.D., President and Chief Executive Officer, The Campagna Center.** Dr. Mann is president and CEO of The Campagna Center in Alexandria, Virginia, which provides a range of early childhood, school age, and youth and family development programs to more than 1,700 children. She was appointed commissioner of the city's Children, Youth, and Families Collaborative Commission and led the commission in completing its first comprehensive Children and Youth Master Plan. She currently serves as president of the Governing Board of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and is an affiliate associate professor appointment at George Mason University in the College of Education and Human Development.

**Jessie Rasmussen, President, Buffett Early Childhood Fund.** Jessie Rasmussen's career has focused on improving outcomes for children and families, first as an early childhood practitioner and administrator and later as a Nebraska state senator and state human services director in both Nebraska and Iowa. At the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, she played an instrumental role in the development and passage of legislation that established a \$60 million early childhood endowment funded through a public and private partnership. She is now president of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, where she manages early childhood investments.

**Arnold Sameroff, Ph.D., Emeritus Professor of Psychology and Emeritus Research Professor, Center for Human Growth and Development, University of Michigan.** Dr. Sameroff is a developmental psychologist and pioneer in the field of developmental psychopathology. He is best known for his influential transactional model of development, which describes the ways in which the child, parent, and environment affect each other and the child's development. His research on environmental risk and promotive factors has fostered a more comprehensive understanding of interventions to improve the emotional, social, and cognitive welfare of children. Dr. Sameroff is a former president of the Society for Research in Child Development, the Developmental Division of the American Psychological Association, and the International Society for Infant Studies.

**Ross Thompson, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of Psychology, University of California, Davis.** A developmental psychologist and former faculty member at UNL, Dr. Thompson studies early parent-child relationships, the development of emotion understanding and emotion regulation, conscience development, and the growth of self-understanding in young children. He also works on the applications of developmental research to public policy concerns, including school readiness and its development, early childhood investments, and early mental health. He is a founding member of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child and was a member of the Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development of the National Academy of Sciences.

**Kathy Thornburg, Ph.D., Emerita Professor of Education and Director of the Institute for Professional Development, University of Missouri-Columbia.** Dr. Thornburg is a former president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Her research and policy efforts relate to early childhood programs, teacher training, school readiness, and parenting education. Dr. Thornburg has taught third grade, been a professor at the Universities of Kentucky and Missouri, directed child development labs serving children ages six weeks to 10 years, directed the Center for Family Policy and Research at University of Missouri, and served as assistant commissioner for the Missouri Department of Education. She currently directs the Institute for Professional Development at the University of Missouri.

# References

# References

1. Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. (2022). Graduate scholars. Retrieved from <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/graduate-scholars>
2. Berry, B. (2013). Good schools and teachers for all students: Dispelling myths, facing evidence, and pursuing the right strategies. In P. L. Carter & K. G. Welner (Eds.), *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance* (pp. 181–192). Oxford University Press.
3. Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. (2015). *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/19401>.
4. Bassok, D., Fitzpatrick, M., Greenberg, E., Loeb, S. (2016). Within- and between-sector quality differences in early childhood education and care. *Child Development*, 87(5), 1627–1645.
5. Slot, P. (2018). Structural characteristics and process quality in early childhood education and care: A literature review. *OECD Education Working Paper*, No. 176.
6. Cunha, F. & Heckman, J. (2007). The technology of skill formation. *American Economic Review*, 97(2), 31–47.
7. Heckman, J. J. (2011). The economics of inequality: The value of early childhood education. *American Educator*, 35(1), 31–35.
8. Johnson-Staub, C. (2017). *Equity starts early: Addressing racial inequities in child care and early education policy*. Center for Law and Social Policy.
9. Nicholson, J., Kuhl, K., Maniates, B. L., & Bonetti, S. (2018). A review of the literature on leadership in early childhood: Examining epistemological foundations and considerations of social justice. *Early Child Development and Care*, 190(2), 91–122.
10. Souto-Manning, M. (2017). Is play a privilege or a right? And what's our responsibility? On the role of play for equity in early childhood education. *Early Child Development and Care*, 187(5-6), 785–787.
11. Darling-Hammond, L. (2013). Inequality and school resources: What it will take. In P. L. Carter & K. G. Welner (Eds.), *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance* (pp. 77–97). Oxford University Press.
12. Stipek, D., Franke, M., Clements, D., Farran, D., & Coburn, C. (2017). PK-3: What does it mean for instruction? *Social Policy Report*, 30(2), 1–23.
13. Halle, T., Forry, N., Hair, E., Perper, K., Wandner, L., Wessel, J., & Vick, J. (2009). *Disparities in early learning and development: Lessons from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B)*. Child Trends.
14. Henry, D. A., Betancur Cortes, L., & Vtruba-Drzal, E. (2020). Black-White achievement gaps differ by family socioeconomic status from early childhood through early adolescence. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 112(8), 1471–1489.
15. Gadsden, V. L., Ford, M., & Breiner, H. (2016). *Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0–8*. The National Academies Press.
16. Aber, J. L., Bennett, N. G., Conley, D. C., & Li, J. (1997). The effects of poverty on child health and development. *Annual Review of Public Health* 18(1), 463–483.
17. Curie, J. M. (2005). Health disparities and gaps in school readiness. *The Future of Children*, 15(1), 117–138.
18. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2020). *Connecting the Brain to the Rest of the Body: Early Childhood Development and Lifelong Health Are Deeply Intertwined*: Working Paper No. 15. Retrieved from [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)
19. McDaniel, M., Paxson, C., & Waldfogel, J. (2006). Racial disparities in childhood asthma in the United States: Evidence from the National Health Interview Survey, 1997–2003. *Pediatrics*, 117(5), 868–877.
20. Kinghorn, B., Fretts, A. M., O'Leary, R. A., Karr, C. J., Rosenfeld, M., & Best, L. G. (2019). Socioeconomic and environmental risk factors for pediatric asthma in an American Indian community. *Academic Pediatrics*, 19(6), 631–637. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2019.05.006>
21. Atkinson, A. B. (2015). *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* Harvard University Press.
22. Bauman, L. J., Silver, E. J., & Stein, R. E. K. (2006). Cumulative social disadvantage and child health. *Pediatrics*, 117(4), 1321–1328.
23. Duncan, G. J., & Sojourner, A. J. (2013). Can intensive early childhood intervention programs eliminate income-based cognitive and achievement gaps? *Journal of Human Resources*, 48(4), 945–968.
24. Walker S. P., Wachs, T. D., Grantham-McGregor, S., Black, M. M., Nelson, C. A., Huffman, S. L., Baker-Henningham, H., Chang, S. M., Hamadani, J. D., Lozoff, B., Gardner, J. M., Powell, C. A., Rahman, A., & Richter, L. (2011). Inequality in early childhood: risk and protective factors for early child development. *Lancet*, 378(9799), 1325–1338. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(11\)60555-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(11)60555-2)
25. West, J., Denton, K., & Germino-Hausken, E. (2000). *America's Kindergartners: Findings from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study*. Diane Publishing Co.
26. Fernald, A., Marchman, V. A., & Weislader, A. (2013). SES differences in language processing skill and vocabulary are evident at 18 months. *Developmental Science*, 16(2), 234–248.
27. Lee, V. E., & Burkam, D. (2002). *Inequality at the Starting Gate*. Economic Policy Institute.
28. Duncan, G. J., & Murnane, R. J. (Eds.) (2012). *Whither opportunity? Rising inequality, schools, and children's life chances*. Russell Sage Foundation.
29. National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine. (2021). *Measuring the opportunity gap for children from birth to age eight and understanding barriers to access. Proceedings of a workshop in brief*. The National Academies Press.
30. Valent, J., & Newark, D. A. (2016). The politics of achievement gaps: US Public opinion on race-based and wealth-based differences in test scores. *Educational Researcher*, 20(10), 1–16.
31. Simillie, S., & McCann, M. (2020). *Strengthening the early childhood education workforce*. Education Commission of the States.

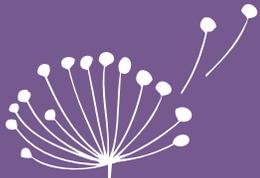
32. Stevens, K. G. (2017). *Workforce of today, workforce of tomorrow: The business case for high-quality childcare*. US Chamber of Commerce Foundation.
33. The Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center. (2022). Children under age 6 with all available parents in the labor force in the United States. [Data table]. Retrieved from <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/5057-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-the-labor-force?loc=1&loct=2#detailed/2/2-53/false/2048/any/11473>
34. National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020). *Unifying framework for the early childhood education profession*.
35. Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. (2015). *Transforming the workforce for children birth through age 8: A unifying foundation*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/19401>.
36. Kagan, S. L. (Ed.). (2019). *The early advantage 2: Building systems that work for young children*. Teachers College Press.
37. Kagan, S. L., Kauerz, K., & Tarrant, K. (2008). *The early care and education teaching workforce at the fulcrum: An agenda for reform*. Teachers College Press.
38. Whitebook, M., Gomby, D., Bellm, D., Sakai, L., & Kipnis, F. (2009). *Preparing teachers of young children: The current state of knowledge, and a blueprint for the future*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.
39. Austin, L. J. E., Sakai, L., Whitebook, M., Bloechliger, O., & Amanta, F. (2015). *Teaching the teachers of our youngest children: The state of early childhood higher education in Nebraska, 2015*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.
40. National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2019). *Advancing equity in early childhood education: A position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children*.
41. Whitebook, M., & Austin, L. J. (2015). *Early childhood higher education: Taking stock across the states*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.
42. Phillips, D., Austin, L. J. E., & Whitebook, M. (2016). The early care and education workforce. *Future of Children*, 26(2), 139–158.
43. Whitebook, M. (2014). *Building a skilled teacher workforce*. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
44. Roberts, A. M., Iruka, I. U., Sarver, S. L. (2017). *Nebraska early childhood workforce survey: A focus on providers and teachers*. Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska.
45. Whitaker, R. C., Dearth-Wesley, T., Gooze, R. A., Becker, B. D., Gallagher, K. C., & McEwen, B. S. (2014). Adverse childhood experiences, dispositional mindfulness, and adult health. *Preventive Medicine*, 67, 147–153. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2014.07.029>
46. Wells, M. B. (2015). Predicting preschool teacher retention and turnover in newly hired Head Start teachers across the first half of the school year. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 30, Part A, 152–159. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2014.10.003>
47. Cassidy, D. J. (2017). Teacher work environments are toddler learning environments: Teacher professional well-being, classroom emotional support, and toddlers' emotional expressions and behaviours. *Early Child Development and Care*, 187(11), 1666–1678. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1180516>
48. Roberts, A. M., LoCasale-Crouch, J., Hamre, B. K., & DeCoster, J. (2016) Exploring teachers' depressive symptoms, interaction quality, and children's social-emotional development in Head Start. *Early Education and Development*, 27(5), 642–654. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2016.1127088>
49. Jeon, L., & Ardeleanu, K. (2020). Work climate in early care and education and teachers' stress: Indirect associations through emotion regulation. *Early Education and Development*, 31(7), 1031–1051. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2020.1776809>
50. Kwon, K. A., Ford, T. G., Salvatore, A. L., Randall, K., Jeon, L., Malek-Lasater, A., Ellis, N., Kile, M., Horm, D., Geun Kim, S., & Han, M. (2020). Neglected elements of a high-quality early childhood workforce: Whole teacher well-being and working conditions. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 50, 157–168. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-01124-7>
51. Roberts, A. M., Gallagher, K. C., Daro, A. M., Iruka, I. U., & Sarver, S. L. (2019). Workforce well-being: Personal and workplace contributions to early educators' depression across settings. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 61(February), 4–12.
52. Whitaker, R. C., Becker, B. D., Herman, A. N., & Gooze, R. A. (2013). The physical and mental health of Head Start staff: The Pennsylvania Head Start staff wellness survey, 2012. *Preventing Chronic Disease*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd10.130171>
53. Whitebook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C. (2014). *Worthy work, STILL unlivable wages: The early childhood workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. <http://www.irl.berkeley.edu/cscce/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/ReportFINAL.pdf>
54. Roberts, A. M., Gallagher, K. C., Sarver, S. L., Daro, A. M. (December 2018). *Early childhood turnover in Nebraska: Research brief*. Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska.
55. Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2001). Early teacher–child relationships and the trajectory of children's school outcomes through eighth grade. *Child Development*, 72(2), 625–638. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00301>
56. Cryer, D., Hurwitz, S., & Wolery, M. (2000). Continuity of caregiver for infants and toddlers in center-based child care: Report on a survey of center practices. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 15(4), 497–514. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006\(01\)00069-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006(01)00069-2).
57. Heckman, J. J. (2006). Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science*, 312, (5782), 1900–1902.

58. Knudson, E. I., Heckman, J. J., Cameron, J. L., Shonkoff, J. P. (2006). Economic, neurobiological, and behavioral perspectives on building America's future workforce. *PNAS*, *103* (27), 10155–10162.
59. Thompson, R. A. (2001). Development in the first years of life. *The future of children*, *11* (1), 20–33.
60. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2007). *The timing and quality of early experiences combine to shape brain architecture: Working Paper #5*. <http://www.developingchild.net>
61. Nelson, C. (2000). The neurobiological bases of early intervention. In J. P. Shonkoff & S. J. Meisels (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood intervention* (2nd edition, pp. 204–227). Cambridge University Press.
62. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2007). *The science of early childhood development*. <http://www.developingchild.net>
63. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development. (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. J. P. Shonkoff & D. A. Phillips (Eds.). National Press.
64. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2004). *Children's emotional development is built into the architecture of their brains: Working Paper #2*. <http://www.developingchild.net>
65. National School Readiness Indicators Initiative. (2007, February). *Getting ready: Findings from a 17 state partnership*. Retrieved from <http://www.gettingready.com>
66. Engle, P. L., Fernald, L. C., Alderman, H., Behrman, J., O'Gara, C., Yousafzai, A., ... Global Child Development Steering Group. (2011). Strategies for reducing inequalities and improving developmental outcomes for young children in low-income and middle-income countries. *Lancet*, *378*(9799), 1339–1353.
67. Barnett, W. S. (2011). Effectiveness of early educational intervention. *Science*, *333* (6045), 975–978.
68. Duncan, G. J., & Sojourner, A. J. (2012). *Can intensive early childhood intervention programs eliminate income-based cognitive and achievement gaps?* Unpublished Discussion Paper No. 7087, Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA).
69. Halle, T., Banghart, P., Zaslow, M., Cook, M. Kane, M., & Bartlett, J. D. (2019). Implementation lessons from six Early Head Start-Child Care partnerships. *Early Education and Development*, *30*(8), 990–1008.
70. Reynolds, A. J., & Shlaffer, R. J. (2010). Parent involvement in early education. In S. A. Christensen & A. L. Reschly (Eds.), *Handbook of school-family partnerships* (pp. 158–174). Routledge.
71. Sheridan, S. M., Moen, A. L., Knoche, L. L. (2017). Family-school partnerships in early childhood. In E. Votruba-Drzal & E. Dearing (Eds.). *The Wiley handbook of early childhood development programs, practices, and policies* (pp. 287–309). Wiley.
72. Gennetian, L., Darling, M., & Aber, J. L. (2016). Behavioral economics and developmental science: A new framework to support early childhood interventions. *Journal of Applied Research on Children*, *7*(2) 1–31.
73. Coburn, C. E., & Penuel, W. R. (2016). Research-practice partnerships in education: Outcomes, dynamics, and open questions. *Educational Researcher*, *45*(1), 48–54.
74. Farrell, C. C., Penuel, W. R., Coburn, C. E., Daniel, J., & Steup, L. (2021). *Research-practice partnerships in education: The state of the field*. William T. Grant Foundation.
75. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1974). Developmental research, public policy, and the ecology of childhood. *Child development*, *45*(1), 1–5.
76. Guy-Evans, O. (2020, Nov 09). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Simply Psychology. [www.simplypsychology.org/Bronfenbrenner.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/Bronfenbrenner.html)
77. Kagan, S. L., & Kauerz, K. (2012). *Early Childhood Systems: Transforming Early Learning*. Teachers College Press.
78. Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, B., Vercic, D., & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining Strategic Communication, *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *1*(1):3–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15531180701285244>
79. Holtzhausen, D., Fullerton, J. A., Lewis, B. K., & Shipka, D. (2021). *Principles of Strategic Communication* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003002048>
80. Buffett Early Childhood Institute/Gallup. (2016). *Nebraskans speak about early care and education*. Retrieved from <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/gallup-survey>
81. Buffett Early Childhood Institute/Gallup. (2016). *Nebraskans speak about the early care and education workforce*. Retrieved from <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/gallup-survey>
82. Buffett Early Childhood Institute/Gallup. (2017). *Urban and rural Nebraskans speak about early care and education*. Retrieved from <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/gallup-survey>
83. Voices for Children. (2022). *2021 Kids Count in Nebraska Report*. Retrieved from <https://voicesforchildren.com/data-research/kids-count>
84. Buffett Early Childhood Institute/Gallup. (2017). *Nebraska Parents Speak About Early Care and Education*. Retrieved from <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/gallup-survey>
85. Cobb, F., & Krownapple, J. (2019). *Belonging through a culture of dignity: The keys to successful equity implementation*. Mimi & Todd Press.
86. Bowman Williams, J. (2022). *The social psychology of inclusion: How diversity framing shapes outcomes for racial-ethnic minorities*. Georgetown Law Faculty Publications and Other Works.
87. Garcia, J. L., Heckman, J. J., & Ronda, V. (2021). *The lasting effects of early childhood education on promoting the skills and social mobility of disadvantaged African Americans*. Working Paper 29057. National Bureau of Economic Research.
88. Shonkoff, J. P., Garner, A. S., Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care, & Section on Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*, *129*(1), e232–e246. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-2663>
89. Yoshikawa, H., Weiland, C., Brooks-Gunn, J., Burchinal, M., Espinosa, L., Gormley, W. T., ... & Zaslow, M. (2013). *Investing in our future: The evidence base on preschool education*. Society for Research in Child Development.

90. Ma, X., Shen, J., Yunn, J., & Hu, S. (2015). The role of system alignment in care and education of children from birth to Grade 3. *Early Child Development and Care, 185*(7), 1067–1087.
91. Reynolds, A., Magnuson, K., & Ou, S. (2006). *PK-3 education: Programs and practices that work in children's first decade*. Foundation for Child Development.
92. Reynolds, A., Temple, J. A., Ou, R., Arteaga, I. A., & White, B. A. B. (2011). School-based early childhood education and age-28 well-being: Effects by timing, dosage, and subgroups. *Science, 333*(6040), 360–364.
93. Shonkoff, J. P., & Meisels, S. J. (Eds.). (2000). *Handbook of early childhood intervention* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
94. Brooks-Gunn, J., Berlin, L. J., & Fuligni, A. S. (2000). Early childhood intervention programs: What about the family? In J. P. Shonkoff & S. J. Meisels (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood intervention* (2nd ed., pp. 549–588). Cambridge University Press.
95. Sheridan, S. M., Smith, T. E., Moorman Kim, E., Beretvas, S. N., & Park, S. (2019). A meta-analysis of family-school interventions and children's social-emotional functioning: Moderators and components of efficacy. *Review of Educational Research, 89*(2), 296–332.
96. Turnbull, A. P., Turbiville, V., & Turnbull, H. R. (2000). Evolution of family-professional partnerships: Collective empowerment as the model for the Twenty-First Century. In J. P. Shonkoff & S. J. Meisels (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood intervention* (2d ed., pp. 630-650). Cambridge University Press.
97. Klein, N. K., & Gilkerson, L. (2000). Personnel preparation for early childhood intervention programs. In J. P. Shonkoff & S. J. Meisels (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood intervention* (2nd ed., pp. 454–485). Cambridge University Press.
98. Bailey, M. J., Sun, S., & Timpe, B. (2021). Prep school for poor kids: The long-run impacts of Head Start on human capital and economic self-sufficiency. *American Economic Review, 111*(12), 3963–4001.
99. Carr, R. C. (2021). *The benefits of early childhood education can persist in the long run*. Duke University, Sanford School of Public Policy.
100. National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine. (2021). *Measuring the opportunity gap for children from birth to age eight and understanding barriers to access. Proceedings of a workshop in brief*. The National Academies Press.
101. Oducado, R. M., Robles, B. R., & Rosano, D. (2022). Determinants of Zoom fatigue among graduate students of teacher education program. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning, 17*(13), pp. 176–185. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v17i13.31511>
102. Pacchiano, D., Klein, R., & Shigeyo Hawley, M. (2016). *Reimagining instructional leadership and organizational conditions for improvement: Applied research transforming early education*. Ounce of Prevention Fund.
103. Fullan, M., & Hargreaves, A. (2013). The power of professional capital. *Learning Forward, 34*(3), 36–39. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aorn.2016.09.012>
104. Sebring, P., Allensworth, E., Bryk, A., Easton, J., & Luppescu, S. (2006). The essential supports for school improvement (Issue September). <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/essential-supports-school-improvement>
105. Ritchie, S., & Gutmann, L. (Eds.). (2014). *First school*. Teachers College Press.
106. Takanishi, R. (2016). *First things first! Creating the new American primary school*. Teachers College Press.
107. McLean, C., Mclsaac, J.-L. D., Mooney, O., Morris, S. B., & Turner, J. (2022). A scoping review of quality in early childhood publicly-funded programs. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01372-9>
108. Clements, D. H., & Sarama, J. (2016). Math, science, and technology in the early grades. *Future of Children, 26*(2), 75–94.
109. Calo, K. M. (2021). Supporting teacher candidates' use of early childhood formative assessment to promote positive outcomes for young children. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 43*(4), 588–599. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2021.1957045>
110. Clements, D., Sarama, J., Kutaka, T., Joswick, C., Baroody, A., Chernyavskiy, P., Cong, M., & Joseph, E. (2021). Comparing the efficacy of early arithmetic instruction based on a learning trajectory and teaching-to-a-target. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 113*(7), 1323–1337.
111. Clements, D. H., & Sarama, J. (2012). Mathematics learning, assessment, and curriculum. In *Handbook of early childhood education* (pp. 217–239). Guilford Press.
112. Clements, D. H., & Sarama, J. (2014). *Learning and teaching early math: The learning trajectories approach* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
113. Ashdown, D. M., & Bernard, M. E. (2012). Can explicit instruction in social and emotional learning skills benefit the social-emotional development, well-being, and academic achievement of young children? *Early Childhood Education Journal, 39*(6), 397–405. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-011-0481-x>
114. Brooks, J. L., Gayl, C. L., & Wernstedt-Lynch, C. (2022). *Measuring the quality of early learning environments: A guide to evaluating ideal learning environments for young children* (Issue February). Trust for Learning.
115. Schmidtke, A. (2022). A qualitative study of kindergarten teachers' perceptions about the influences of professional learning on their implementation of guided play. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2022.2064013>
116. Sliogeris, M., Almeida, S. C., & Almeida, C. (2019). Young children's development of scientific knowledge through the combination of teacher-guided play and child-guided play. *Research in Science Education, 49*(6), 1569–1593. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11165-017-9667-6>
117. Darling-Hammond, L., & Cook-Harvey, C. M. (2018). *Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support student success*. Learning Policy Institute.
118. Jones, S. M., & Bouffard, S. M. (2012). Social and emotional learning in schools: From programs to strategies and commentaries. *Social Policy Report, 26*, 1–33.

119. Boonk, L., Gijsselaers, H. J. M., Ritzen, H., & Brand-Gruwel, S. (2018). A review of the relationship between parental involvement indicators and academic achievement. *Educational Research Review*, 24, 10–30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.EDUREV.2018.02.001>
120. Caspe, M. (2022). *Family engagement core competencies: A body of knowledge, skills, and dispositions for family-facing professionals*. National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement.
121. Jacobson, D. (2018). A powerful convergence: Community schools and early childhood education. *Kappan*, 99(5), 19–24.
122. Raffaele, L. M., & Knoff, H. M. (1999). Improving home-school collaboration with disadvantaged families: Organizational principles, perspectives, and approaches. *School Psychology Review*, 28(3), 448–466.
123. Geiser, K. E., Horwitz, I. M., & Gerstein, A. (2012). *Early childhood education and community schools linkages project: Implementation study*. John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, Stanford Graduate School of Education.
124. Killion, J. (2017). Why evaluations fail. *The Learning Professional*, 38(2), 26–30.
125. National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2019). Leading with equity: Early childhood educators make it personal. [https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/initiatives/equity\\_summit\\_final.pdf](https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/initiatives/equity_summit_final.pdf)
126. Boykin, A. W., & Noguera, P. (2011). *Creating the opportunity to learn*. Pearson.
127. James, C., & Iruka, I. (2018, December). *Delivering on the promise of effective early childhood education*. National Black Child Development Institute.
128. Davis, B. M. (2007). *How to teach students who don't look like you: Culturally relevant teaching strategies*. Corwin.
129. Hammond, Z. (2018). Culturally responsive teaching puts rigor at the center. *The Learning Professional*, 39(5), 40–43.
130. Souto-Manning, M., Ghim, H., & Madu, N. K. (2021). Toward early literacy as a site of belonging. *Reading Teacher*, 74(5), 483–492. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1992>
131. Goldberg, M. J., & Iruka, I. U. (2022). The role of teacher-child relationship quality in Black and Latino boys' positive development. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01300-3>
132. Allela, M. A., Oganje, B. O., Junaid, M. I., & Charles, P. B. (2020). Effectiveness of multimodal microlearning for in-service teacher training. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 7(3), 384–398.
133. Roberts, A. M., Gallagher, K. C., Daro, A. M., Iruka, I. U., & Sarver, S. L. (2019). *Risk factors for depression among early childhood teachers: Research brief*. Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska.
134. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2022). The Brain Architecture Game. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/the-brain-architecture-game>
135. No Small Matter. (n.d.). Press kit. Retrieved from <https://www.nosmallmatter.com/about-the-film>
136. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). *Transforming the financing of early care and education*. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24984>.
137. Huddleston-Casas, C., & Goettemoeller, J. (2020). *Nebraska's public investment in early childhood care and education, Fiscal Year 2017: Technical report*. Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska.
138. Sarver, S. L., Huddleston-Casas, C., Charlet, C., & Wessels, R. (2020). *Elevating Nebraska's early childhood workforce: Report and recommendations of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission*. Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska.
139. Karoly, L. A. (2016). The economic returns to early childhood education. *Future of Children*, 26(2), 37–55.
140. Heckman, J. J. (2012). The case for investing in disadvantaged young children. In B. Falk (Ed.), *Defending Early Childhood* (pp. 235–242). Teachers College Press.
141. First Five Nebraska. (2020). *The bottom line: Economic impacts of inadequate child care access in Nebraska*.
142. Johnson, K., Gustafson, D., Ewigman, B., Provost, L., & Roper, R. (2015) *Using rapid-cycle research to reach goals: Awareness, assessment, adaptation, acceleration*. AHRQ Publication No. 15-0036. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.
143. Gallagher, K., & Huddleston-Casas, C. (2020). *The Nebraska COVID-19 Early Care and Education Provider Survey highlights: Perspectives of child care providers*. Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. Retrieved from <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/resources/covid-19>
144. Daro, A., & Gallagher, K. (2020). *The Nebraska COVID-19 Early Care and Education Provider Survey II: Experiences, economic impact, and ongoing needs—“Things are starting to take a toll.”* Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. Retrieved from <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/resources/covid-19>
145. Daro, A., Gallagher, K., & Cunningham, K. (2022). *The Nebraska COVID-19 Early Care and Education Provider Survey III: “Holding it together—and hanging by a thread.”* Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. Retrieved from <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/resources/covid-19>
146. Elharake, J. A., Shafiq, M., Cobanoglu, A., Malik, A. A., Klotz, M., Humphries, J. E., ... Gilliam, W. S. (2022). Prevalence of chronic diseases, depression, and stress among US childcare professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Preventing chronic disease*, 19, E61. <https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd19.220132>
147. United Nations. (2020). *COVID-19 and human rights: We are all in this together*. [Policy brief.]
148. Doromal, J. B., Bassok, D., Bellows, L., & Markowitz, A. J. (2022). Hard-to-staff centers: Exploring center-level variation in the persistence of child care teacher turnover. (EdWorkingPaper: 21–474). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/qre0-4661>

149. Bassock, D., Doromal, J. B., Michie, M., & Wong, V. C. (2021). *The effects of financial incentives on teacher turnover in early childhood settings: Experimental evidence from Virginia*. Report. EdPolicyWorks at the University of Virginia.
150. Gallagher, K. C., & Roberts, A. M. (2022). Early childhood professional well-being: An ecological framework. Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. Retrieved from [buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/research](https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/research)
151. Huddleston-Casas, C., & Goettemoeller Wendl, J. (2023). *Nebraska's public investment in early childhood care and education, Fiscal Year 2019: Technical Report*. Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska.
152. Huddleston-Casas, C., & Goettemoeller Wendl, J. (2023). *Nebraska's public investment in early childhood care and education, Fiscal Year 2021: Technical Report*. Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska.
153. Huddleston-Casas, C., & Goettemoeller Wendl, J. (n.d.). Nebraska early childhood funding map. Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/understanding-early-childhood-funding>
154. We Care for Kids. (2022). Home page. <https://nebraskacaresforkids.org>
155. Nebraska Preschool Development Grant. (2022). What we do: Strategic plan. <https://nebraskapdg.org/what-we-do/strategic-plan-landing-page.html>



Buffett  
Early Childhood  
Institute

*at the University of Nebraska*

2111 S. 67th St., Suite 350  
Omaha, NE 68106  
402.554.2924

**[buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu](http://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu)**

UNIVERSITY OF  
**Nebraska**  
System

