

ANNUAL REPORT  
FY 2024-25



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 during Fiscal Year 2024–25 (July 1, 2024–June 30, 2025). Every member of the Institute team and its many partners contributed to this work and to the story told throughout these pages.

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Dear Friends,

This past year has been one of growth, progress, and renewed purpose for the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska. It also marks the release of our first-ever annual report, a milestone that offers both a reflection on this past year and a blueprint for where we're heading next.

This year, our work grew in depth and reach, driving impact across research, policy, practice, and outreach—the Institute's four-part strategy since our very beginning. The addition of Native American researcher Michelle Sarche strengthened our national research presence in early childhood Tribal systems, while federal policy expert Linda Smith and her team advanced policy efforts on Capitol Hill and in statehouses throughout the country. We also celebrated the first-ever unanimous renewal vote from the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties for the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan contract, ensuring that our flagship practice initiative will continue reaching thousands of children and school leaders here in Omaha for at least four more years.

Within the University of Nebraska System, partnerships have remained central to our mission. Our Community Chairs, professors at the University of Nebraska campuses in Lincoln and Omaha, continued their important efforts advancing early childhood education across the state. Our Graduate Scholars program cultivates the next generation of early childhood researchers—scholars whose insights are already attracting headlines and shaping both local and national research conversations.

I am deeply grateful to the University of Nebraska, philanthropist Susie Buffett, our partners, and the educators, families, and policymakers we are privileged to work alongside. Their collective partnership and vision make this work possible. The impact of our progress is reflected in the stories, milestones, and numbers in this report, which is organized by our four-part strategy, along with partnerships and stewardship. We invite you to read, reflect, and grow with us.

The future is bright, horizons are expanding, and we are humbled to engage in this essential work alongside you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Walter S. Gilliam". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Walter Gilliam, Ph.D.

Executive Director

Richard D. Holland Presidential Chair in Early Childhood Development



# About the Institute

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska is devoted to improving the development and learning of children from birth through age 8 through research, practice, policy, and outreach.

The Institute was established in 2013, reflecting the shared vision and commitment of university leadership and Omaha philanthropist Susie Buffett. We partner with colleagues across the University of Nebraska, the state, and the nation to ensure that all children and families have access to the quality early learning experiences they need to grow and thrive. Together, we are transforming early care and education in Nebraska and across the nation.



*“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*

*“The Buffett Early Childhood Institute brings together experts from across fields and campuses, and we do that because the challenges we face are complex—and so therefore are the solutions.”*

*– Jeffrey P. Gold, M.D., President, University of Nebraska System*



# Our Year in Numbers



**4,624**

PreK through Grade 3 Nebraska students directly impacted through the Institute's School as Hub programming



**2,016**

total attendees—including early childhood educators, policymakers, and community leaders—engaged through 58 Institute events and workshops



**36**

Institute publications, including 14 peer-reviewed articles and other academic works and 16 policy and research reports and briefs



**279**

earned media mentions in high-profile news outlets, including People Magazine, Yahoo! News, The Hechinger Report, and Early Learning Nation



**61**

presentations at national, state, and local events



**7**

national keynote presentations delivered by Institute experts



**\$75,000**

awarded to three doctoral students across University of Nebraska campuses to support their early childhood research



**25**

early educators developed into local leaders statewide through the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Leadership Cadre



**3**

national awards honoring our research, Tribal, and policy work



**\$25.2 million**

in new grants and contracts awarded for current and later years



# Connecting Early Childhood Research and Policy

The Institute made waves in the policy space over the past year, elevating Nebraska's voice in the national policy conversation by using research to build early childhood policy momentum and expand relationships on Capitol Hill and in statehouses across the United States.

From Connecticut to Montana, Executive Director Walter Gilliam and Senior Director of Policy Linda Smith brought the Institute's research and policy expertise to critical conversations happening across the country. In the spring, Gilliam provided key data and guidance to support Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont's winning proposal for a historic \$300 million universal preschool endowment. Smith supported the development of the Montana Early Childhood Account, a \$10 million state trust fund for child care.



*Linda Smith receives the CDA Advocate Award from the Council for Professional Recognition, October 2024.*



*Walter Gilliam presented with Connecticut Gov. Lamont announcing the \$300 million endowment, April 2025.*

The Institute also strengthened collaboration across sectors. In partnership with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation and the Bipartisan Policy Center, the Buffett Institute leads the Early Childhood and Business Advisory Council (ECBAC), a national initiative connecting early childhood and business leaders. During the last year, four new states—Nebraska, New Hampshire, Georgia, and South Carolina—joined the Council, for a total of 19 participating states.

In October 2024, the Institute convened in Omaha the nation's leading experts on the economics of child care, bringing together top scholars for a roundtable working group to assess what is known and identify critical gaps in the evidence. This work informed the nation's first consensus report explicitly linking child care and economic outcomes, and laid the groundwork for a fall 2025 congressional briefing in Washington, D.C.

The Institute continues to lead Nebraska's biennial market rate survey and accompanying report through a contract with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. Led by Director of Applied Research Alexandra Daro, this project surveys licensed child care providers across Nebraska to gauge the prices or rates they charge for child care and collects other enrollment data, directly impacting state child care subsidy rates.



*Alexandra Daro leads the Institute's applied research efforts, including the Nebraska Market Rate Survey.*

## Institute Policy Reports Inform Critical Early Childhood Debates

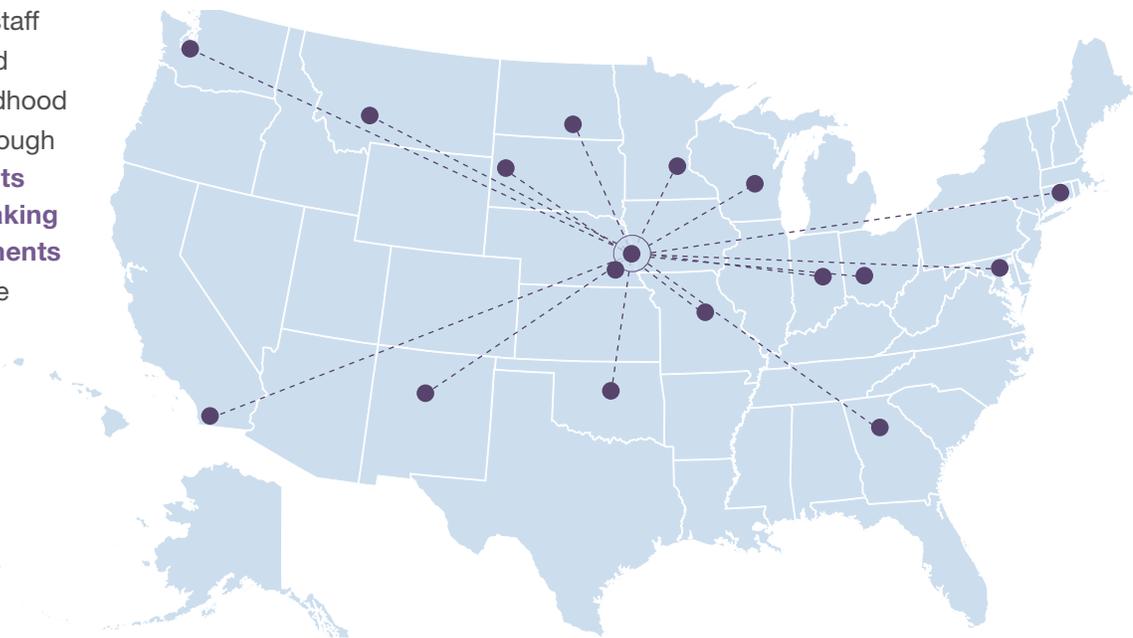
### Reports highlighted

Opportunity Zones and child care, unanticipated risks of child care deregulation, promising state models for workforce recruitment and retention, early educator tax deductions, child care gap data, and more



### Policy Impact in Action

Institute staff influenced early childhood policy through **20+ events and speaking engagements** across the country



### Looking Ahead

- Launching a first-of-its-kind mapping tool highlighting child care gaps and their economic implications
- Releasing new reports on timely topics such as the Tri-Share child care financing model
- Hosting U.S. congressional briefings on key topics related to early childhood
- Expanding our work with military child care systems by leveraging established partnerships and the expertise of Gilliam and Smith

# Innovating Early Childhood Practice

Ten years into the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan, the 11 Omaha metro-area school districts are demonstrating what’s possible when sustained early childhood practice is embedded in birth to Grade 3 curriculum, professional learning, and community partnerships.

This year, the plan, led by Director of Educational Practice Amy Schmidtke, advanced collective efforts to close opportunity gaps and support children and families across the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties.

Building on the demonstrated impact of the Superintendents’ Plan, Omaha Public Schools (OPS) also chose to work directly with the

Institute starting in 2024 to support its Intensive Early Childhood Program. This new investment enabled OPS to scale the School as Hub approach to six additional schools. These combined efforts serve 4,624 students directly through 16 School as Hub sites and 11,000 more through additional programming.

In June 2025, the Learning Community Coordinating Council unanimously approved a four-year contract renewal for the plan. It was the first-ever unanimous renewal vote of the Superintendents’ Plan, reaffirming support for the Buffett Institute’s leadership of the program and allowing the Institute to expand its efforts in Omaha and beyond.

## The Plan Defined

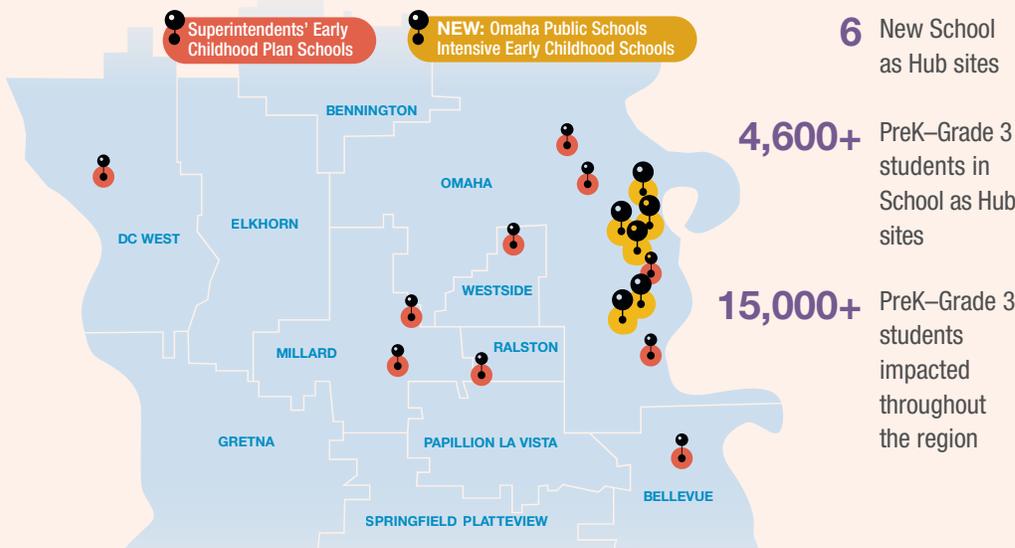
### Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan

A collaborative initiative among 11 Omaha metro-area school districts to implement the School as Hub approach through aligned early childhood programming, professional learning, and customized technical assistance for each district. The work is funded by the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties.

### School as Hub Approach

A research-informed approach that positions schools as central hubs that connect children and their families to quality learning experiences, supports, and community resources within and beyond school walls.

## Impact and Reach: School as Hub Across 11 Metro Omaha School Districts



*“We are honored to participate in an innovative program helping children learn long before they enter our school doors. These early years matter so much. Let’s continue to make the most of this crucial time so all children have the opportunity to succeed.”*

*- Op-ed signed by all 11 Omaha metro-area district superintendents, published in the Nebraska Examiner, June 2025*

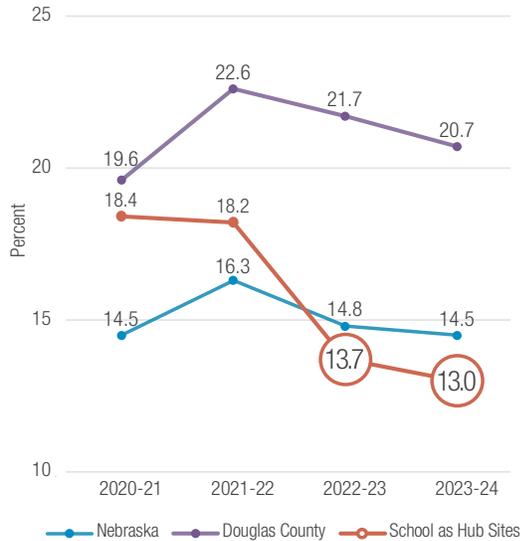
## School as Hub Approach in Action

### STORY SPOTLIGHT

#### Chronic Absenteeism Plummets at School as Hub Sites

Schools implementing the School as Hub approach have reduced chronic absenteeism to levels far below the rest of Douglas County schools and, for the last two years, to levels notably below Nebraska.

Percentage of School as Hub Students With 20+ Absences Per Year Compared to County and State Trends



Scan to read the full story.



### STORY SPOTLIGHT

#### Omaha School Builds Community and Inspires Lifelong Learners



Pinewood Elementary fourth grader Maxton Clark hugs his mother, Erin Clark, in the school's family room.

Scan to read the full story.



#### Events bring hundreds together to engage and learn

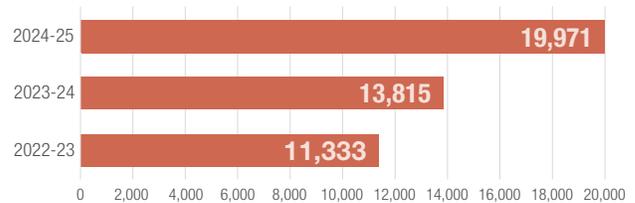


Amy Schmidtke (far left) moderates a panel of district leaders at the Superintendents' Plan convening, March 2025.



Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan Collaboration Summit, June 2025.

#### Increased number of children and adults supported through family engagement opportunities



### Looking Ahead

- Continuing to scale the School as Hub approach to new sites in Nebraska and select partner districts beyond the state, building on what we have learned through sustained implementation
- Creating a coordinated set of School as Hub implementation products that support district leaders, school teams, and educators
- Exploring how AI and extended reality (XR) can strengthen early childhood professional learning efforts

# Committing to Tribal Early Childhood Research

With the hiring of nationally recognized scholar Michelle Sarche as a professor and senior director of Tribal research, policy, and partnerships, the Institute expanded its work to include research and policy that address priorities for Native American child and family health, wellbeing, and development. This strengths-based work honors Tribal ways of knowing, and is culturally informed, community-led, and respectful of Tribal sovereignty. Sarche partners with child development scholars, early childhood practitioners, and early childhood programs in Native American communities and Tribal nations across the country, including Alaska and Hawaii.

## Ongoing partnerships include:

- Tribal Early Childhood Research Center (TRC):** funded by the Administration for Children and Families to grow the field of early childhood research in partnership with Tribal Head Start, home visiting, Child Care Development Fund, and TANF program leaders. The TRC is a collaboration with the University of Colorado Anschutz, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Michigan State University, Child Trends, and the Brazelton Touchpoints Center.
- Native Children's Research Exchange (NCRE) Scholars program:** funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse since 2012, the NCRE Scholars program has supported 41 early-career Indigenous scholars to date in their pursuit of NIH-funded child development and substance use research. NCRE Scholars is a partnership with the University of Colorado Anschutz, Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health.
- NCRE Conference and Network:** hosted biennially in partnership with the University of Colorado Anschutz. NCRE conferences convene researchers, practitioners, federal partners, and Tribal community and program research partners to share in an exchange of ideas that support Native children's development through research.
- Center for Indigenous Research Collaborations and Learning for Home Visiting (CIRCLE HV):** a partnership with James Bell Associates and the University of Colorado Anschutz. It supports three Indigenous home visiting research practice partnerships and a national cross-site study involving eight Indigenous home visiting programs.
- Center for Innovative Research, Capacity Building and Leadership Development to End Substance Use Harms (CIRCLE Center):** funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse in partnership with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. The CIRCLE Center drives innovations in research and policy to address substance use harms in American Indian and Alaska Native communities.



*Michelle Sarche moderated a plenary discussion with Indigenous home visiting leaders at the Start Early Home Visiting Summit in Washington, D.C., February 2025*



*Sarche spoke on a panel at the National Institutes of Health, Tribal Health Research Office, Boarding School Healing Summit, as part of a national effort to support healing from the historic and intergenerational harms of boarding schools on Native American communities, December 2024*

STORY SPOTLIGHT

### Early Childhood Tribal Experts Convene for Historic Native Nations Event

In June 2025, the Institute and the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska hosted leaders from more than 40 sovereign Tribal Nations and communities for the largest-ever gathering on Tribal early childhood issues. Attendees at the *Native Nations: Honoring Culture and Shaping Futures for Children and Families* event included the former president and first lady of the Navajo Nation.



Scan to read the full story.



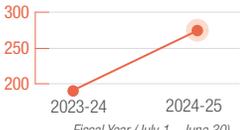
## Looking Ahead

- Hosting more than 100 research, practice, and community partners at the biennial gathering of the Native Children’s Research Exchange Conference
- Continuing to build the Native Children’s Research Exchange Scholars program by launching its 14th and 15th cohorts, hosting grant writing retreats, and supporting early-career researchers

# Driving Outreach and Engagement

## Expanding the Institute's National Visibility

The Institute continues to raise public awareness around the importance of early childhood. Through a robust communications strategy, the Institute translated new research, policy, and practice into accessible, high-quality content, expanding the reach of its work through strategic communications and earned media and growing audiences among policymakers, practitioners, and the public.

<p><b>560</b> leaders representing 145 Nebraska communities attended the Thriving Children conference</p>	<p><b>21</b> Early Years Matter blogs</p>	<p><b>1,664</b> new followers on LinkedIn ▲ <b>32.5%</b></p>	<p><b>24,436</b> visitors to a redesigned Institute website</p>
<p><b>13</b> awards from Nebraska Public Relations Society of America and American Marketing Association chapters</p>	<p><b>+44%</b> increase in earned media mentions</p>  <p>Fiscal Year (July 1 - June 30)</p>		<p> <b>New Brief Recommends Extending Tax Breaks to Early Childhood Educators</b></p> <hr/> <p> <b>Twin 3-Year-Olds Have Been Kicked Out of 2 Preschools. Their Parents Say They Just Needed a 'Chance' (Exclusive)</b></p> <hr/> <p> <b>Head Start is turning 60. Will the federal child care program make it 61?</b></p> <hr/> <p> <b>Omaha child care providers feel strain of what some call a 'crisis' in Nebraska</b></p>

## Leading the Way: Strengthening Nebraska's Early Childhood Workforce

The Institute invested in growing the leadership and capacity of the early childhood workforce through the first-of-its-kind Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Leadership Cadre, which recently completed its third and final year. This statewide cohort convened early childhood educators to share insights and develop their capacity as thought leaders.

Under Director of Digital Education Dalhia Lloyd, the Institute partnered with the Nebraska Department of Education to create a video library of resources to support professional development for early childhood educators. This curated collection of more than 2,000 classroom-based videos shares effective instructional strategies to improve quality teaching practices.

This year, in partnership with Boys Town, the Institute began developing two early-stage professional learning prototypes designed to better support the early childhood workforce. The prototypes use immersive virtual reality and innovative technology to give educators opportunities to practice responding to challenging behavior and receiving feedback and reflection opportunities based on real classroom experiences.



Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Leadership Cadre members Martina Lucius (left) and Jessica Dutton (right), October 2025.



Scan to read the full story.



Dalhia Lloyd (right) shares her work at the Institute Board of Advisors annual meeting, July 2025.

## Engaging Nebraskans Through Campaigns and Convenings

Major engagement initiatives spearheaded by the Institute include the statewide We Care for Kids/*Por todos los niños* public awareness campaign and the seventh annual Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference.

This year, the campaign celebrated its third anniversary with expanded reach and deeper engagement, mobilizing thousands of Nebraskans who believe in the importance of early childhood education. More than 150 organizations across 65 counties now partner in this effort, and since its inception, the campaign has reached nearly 155,000 people, or one in five Nebraska families.

Milestones included a policy summit for Nebraska legislators and the third We Care for Kids Week proclamation signing by a Nebraska governor. Additionally, Linda Smith headlined the final Institute-led Thriving Children conference, which had record-breaking attendance.



*(Above) Linda Smith keynotes the Thriving Children conference, September 2024.*

*(Left) We Care for Kids Week proclamation by Gov. Jim Pillen at the Nebraska State Capitol, September 2024.*

## Looking Ahead

- Working with the City of Omaha and UNO partners to co-lead the Early Childhood Working Group for Mayor Ewing's Poverty Elimination Action Plan, by assessing child care needs and potential solutions
- Launching new external newsletters and webinars to increase accessibility and reach, with a focus on tailored content for specific audience interests
- Partnering with Nebraska Extension to position an early childhood specialist in central Nebraska
- Transitioning the We Care for Kids campaign to Early Futures Partnership in order to mobilize Nebraskans to achieve long-term policy gains for children and families

# Deepening University Partnerships

The Institute embraces its role as a part of the University of Nebraska System, engaging in meaningful cross-campus partnerships that support early childhood efforts.

## 2024–25 Buffett Institute Community Chairs



**Julia Torquati**  
*Community Chair in Infant  
and Child Mental Health,  
University of Nebraska–Lincoln*



**Debora Wisneski**  
*John T. Langan Community Chair  
in Early Childhood Education,  
University of Nebraska at Omaha*

At the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) and the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), two Community Chairs continue to collaborate with the Institute to deepen engagement across Nebraska with work focusing on infant mental health, community-engaged research, nature-based learning environments, play-based learning, and systems change.

The chairs reflect the strengths of each campus related to early learning and development. In addition to fulfilling the traditional faculty roles of teaching, research, and service, Community Chairs provide campus leadership and are responsive to the local community.

Institute staff also continue to work with the Munroe-Meyer Institute (MMI) at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) on the Superintendents' Plan evaluation, while Walter Gilliam, Michelle Sarche, and Linda Smith each have faculty appointments at MMI.

## 2024–25 Buffett Institute Graduate Scholars

**Matthew Brooks** **N**

*Department of Educational Psychology*

Examining whether nature can alleviate stress in early childhood professionals

**Kaitlin Fraser** **O**

*Department of Biomechanics*

Researching how children with upper limb loss feel about their prosthesis

**Weiman Xu** **N**

*Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies*

Analyzing intergenerational caregiving, specifically the role of grandparents in China

The Buffett Institute Graduate Scholars Program continued to support emerging researchers by adding three new scholars. Since the program's inception, the Institute has invested \$675,000 to support 27 scholars across the system campuses and fund groundbreaking projects that will inform the future of early childhood policy and practice.

Also, three graduate assistants from UNO and the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) contributed to Institute research, gaining hands-on experience and mentorship from faculty and staff.



STORY SPOTLIGHT

### Meet Three Emerging Early Childhood Scholars and Apply for Next Round of Funding



2024-25 Graduate Scholars—Kaitlin Fraser (left), Weiman Xu (center), and Matt Brooks (right)—presenting their work.



Buffett Institute Graduate Scholars Welcome Reception, November 2024.

Scan to read the full story.



### The Institute expanded its reach, partnering with institutions of higher education across the country:



### Looking Ahead

- Launching two new Community Chairs at the University of Nebraska at Kearney to expand campus–community connections and statewide impact
- Engaging our alumni network of Graduate Scholars to amplify leadership and influence across the field
- Developing reports and briefs focused on improving Kindergarten transitions in partnership with staff and faculty from universities across the United States
- Partnering with UNK to use cutting-edge technology from Language Environment Analysis (LENA) to help early childhood educators in Nebraska Head Start programs develop language-rich learning environments as part of a new \$1.29 million, five-year early literacy grant from the Nebraska Department of Education

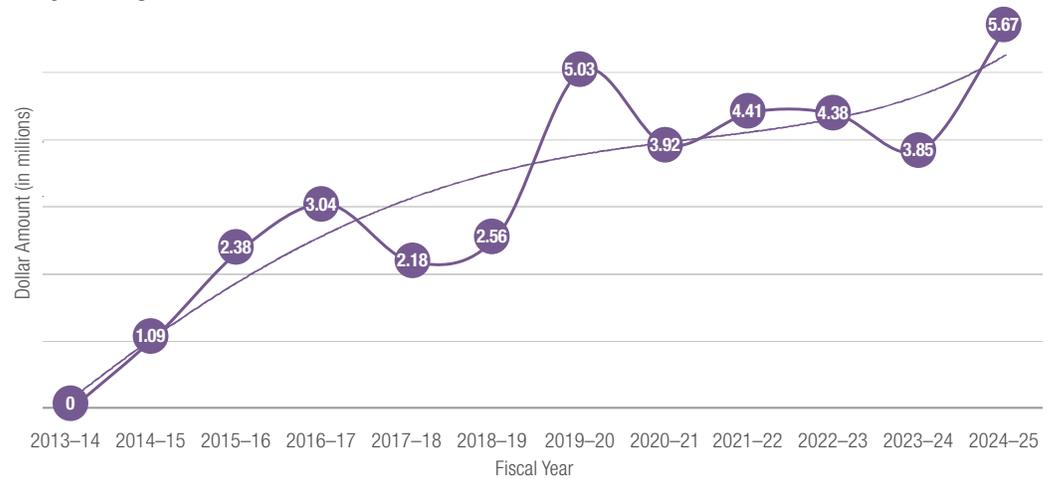
# Sharpening Financial Stewardship Through Expanded External Support

Our stewardship responsibilities span three essential areas, each guided by care and accountability: advancing our mission to serve young children in Nebraska and across the nation; honoring the commitment of philanthropist Susie Buffett and the University of Nebraska System; and responsibly managing the financial resources entrusted to advance our work.

In Fiscal Year 2024–25, the Institute strengthened its financial stewardship by diversifying external funding and reducing reliance on endowment and university sources—resulting in the highest level of outside funding in the Institute’s history.

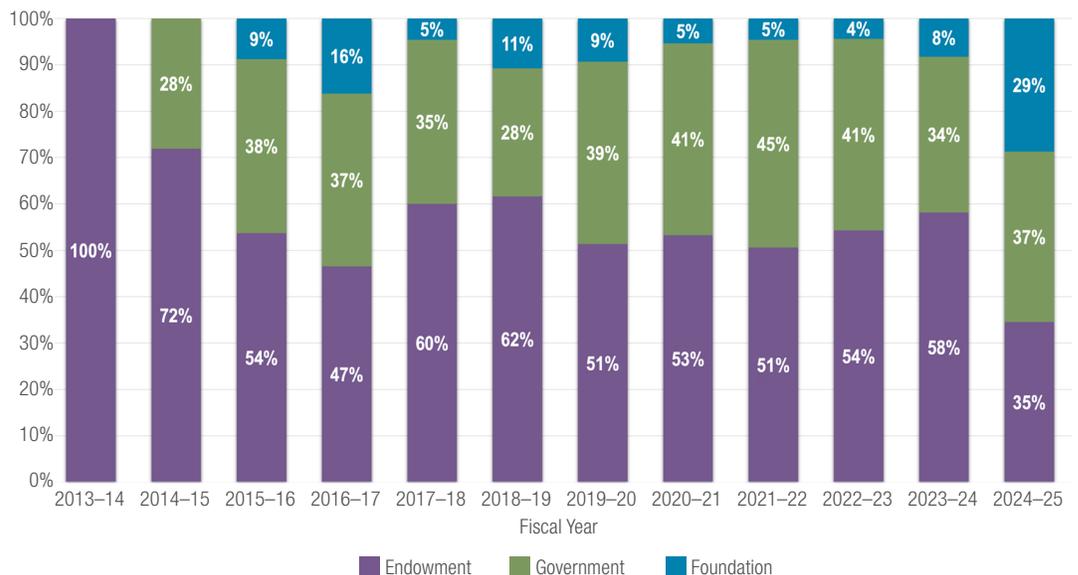
## External Funding for Projects by Fiscal Year

External funding for Institute projects reached the highest level in the Institute’s history in Fiscal Year 2024–25.



## Total Funding Sources by Fiscal Year

An increase in external funding, along with creating internal cost efficiencies, resulted in a record-low utilization of endowment funds. Only 35% of total expenditures were supported by endowment and university sources, creating a more balanced funding mix and strengthening the Institute’s long-term financial resilience.



# Our People

**Our staff, Community Chairs, and Board of Advisors represent a variety of backgrounds and expertise.**

## Staff

Cris López Anderson

Alyssa Anson

Ernest Audie

Essie Beason

Kimberlee Belcher-Badal, Ph.D.

Venessa Bryant

Laura Cady

Demetria Carman

Lisa Caudle

Cama Cole

Melissa Cleaver

Molly Colling

Jacqueline Cortez

Alexandra Daro, Ph.D.

Erin Duffy

Rebecca Elder

Ally Freeman

Kathleen Gallagher, Ph.D.

Walter S. Gilliam, Ph.D.

Maria Guerrero

Kimberly Harper

Caroline Hickey

Aimee Hoes

Katherine Hubbard

Tonya Jolley, Ed.D.

Tracy Jones

Hanna Junus

Dalhia Lloyd, Ph.D.

Lee Manns

Greta Morris

Sarah Moulton

Jacob Murphree

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Keshia Partridge-Nelson

Anne Peterson

Noah Pierson

Mary Beth Pistillo

Afrah Rasheed

Michelle Sarche, Ph.D.

Cecely Schieffer

Amy Schmidtke, Ed.D.

Erica Sesay

Linda Smith

JD Sorys

Kate Sutton

Kimberlee Telford

Ashley True

Sue Walker

Salina Wallace

Monica Wells

Renee Wessels

## Community Chairs

Julia Torquati, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Debora Wisneski, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska at Omaha

## Board of Advisors

Hiram Fitzgerald, Ph.D.

Michigan State University

Vivian Gadsden, Ed.D.

University of Pennsylvania

Eugene Garcia, Ph.D.

Arizona State University

Beth Graue, Ph.D.

University of Wisconsin–Madison

Sharon Lynn Kagan, Ed.D.

Columbia University/Yale University

Tammy Mann, Ph.D.

The Campagna Center (Retired)

Jessie Rasmussen

Buffett Early Childhood Fund

Arnold Sameroff, Ph.D.

University of Michigan

Ross Thompson, Ph.D.

University of California, Davis

Kathy Thornburg, Ph.D.

University of Missouri–Columbia

Staff members listed were employed during some or all of Fiscal Year 2024–25.

# Our Funders

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HOLLAND  
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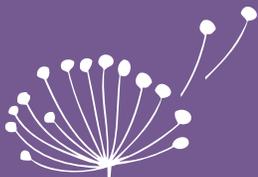
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