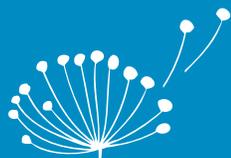


Elevating Nebraska's Early Care and Education System: Building Capacity for Equitable Early Childhood Systems

PRESCHOOL DEVELOPMENT GRANT BIRTH TO FIVE
YEAR 3 PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

AUGUST 2023



Buffett
Early Childhood
Institute
at the University of Nebraska



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Executive Summary

Elevating Nebraska's Early Care and Education System, funded by the Preschool Development Grant Birth-to-Five (NE-PDG) was built on the premise that for Nebraska to address the complex issue of access to quality care, actions needed to focus on alignment across sectors that are integrated into the strategic plan goals through a process of collaboration across programs and organizations. The Performance Evaluation (PE) supports NE-PDG-funded efforts through two goals: 1) Build capacity at state and local levels to evaluate early childhood investments using an equitable systems lens and 2) Evaluate the degree to which funded projects advance the goals of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan. Twenty-six projects were continued or initiated in the context of the NE-PDG continuation grant funding from May 1, 2022, through April 30, 2023. Cumulatively, the funded projects were designed to help realize the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan goals: Access, Quality, Collaboration and Alignment.

METHODS

Two primary data sources informed the evaluation in Year 3:

1. Monthly Project Progress Reports: The PE team collected data monthly from funded projects related to advancing Strategic Plan goals, successes and barriers, sustainability, project evaluation findings, and incorporating equity/family engagement into the evaluation process
2. Key Informant Interviews: A total of 18 key informants were interviewed using a guide based off the six conditions of systems change¹

ACTIVITIES AND FINDINGS

Goal 1: Capacity Building

In year 3, the performance evaluation team implemented six efforts to increase project and state capacity for equitable systems evaluation:

- Provided training in community based participatory (CBPR) methods (Photovoice),
- Convened three cross-system partner progress walk meetings that facilitated conversations to review and reflect on statewide data,
- Provided technical assistance for evaluation methods and logic model development,
- Developed and launched of a web-based resource repository,
- Convened equitable evaluation advisory council,
- Piloted a community-based evaluation engagement

The question that guided the evaluation of capacity building was:

How is increased capacity to evaluate using a systems lens reflected in progress reports and key informant interviews?

Most projects reported they had increased their capacity to adopt a systems equity lens and use and interpret data. A key theme that emerged from the key informant interviews was the perceived value of using data to make informed decisions.

Goal 2: Advancing The Strategic Plan

Two questions guided understanding of how funded efforts are increasing progress relative to the Strategic Plan:

To what extent are perceptions of systems shifts among key informants aligned with the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan goals to increase Access, Quality, Collaboration, and Alignment?

How are processes of systems change evident in project lead perspectives on the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan progress?

Access. Most projects reported that families' access to early childhood programs was directly or indirectly supported through their project activities. Access was facilitated through system processes of enhanced practices, increased resources and policy shifts:

- Practices
 - Projects reported connecting more families to services.
- Resources
 - A collective impact approach was expanded to more communities.
 - Scholarships leveraged grant resources and supported working families to meet the high cost of quality care for children.
 - Child care directors received training in business practices.
 - Licensing materials and training were enhanced to include Spanish speaking
- Policies
 - Nebraska subsidy income eligibility guidelines were modified, resulting in more families accessing child care affordably.

Quality. As a result of strategic planning for systems change, NE-PDG partners gained enhanced perspectives of the importance of caregiver-child interactions, improving knowledge and skills and well-being of providers, and enhancing family partnerships. Quality shifts occurred in the context of enhanced practices and strengthened relationships:

- Practices
 - Projects reported an increased focus on provider well-being, parent partnerships, and family engagement, and provided quality services for children.
- Relationships
 - Connections were strengthened to build a strong system of early childhood coaching support in the state.

Collaboration. Much of the work in this area focused on enhancing the organizational and community member relationships to improve access to quality early childhood services. Collaboration shifts occurred in the context of increased attention to system relationships:

- Relationships
 - New relationships across organizations and programs resulted in expanded or enhanced services.
 - Intentional inclusion of family representation and voice increased at program and state system levels.
 - Communities increased local infrastructure to support leadership, including diverse networks from business, economic development, community organizations, child care providers, and family members.
 - Convening structures (Nebraska Leadership Team, Nebraska Early Childhood Connections) connected state leaders with early childhood professionals.

Alignment. Projects whose primary role was related to cross-system activities reported that their primary responsibilities were intentional planning to inform alignment of services, funding, data sources and evaluation. Increased system alignment is reflected in enhanced practices, increased resources, and policy changes:

- Practice
 - Efforts have increased for non-duplication of services,
 - Funded projects focused on alignment with the Strategic Plan in their logic model and evaluation development,
 - Campaign messaging has increased public awareness.
- Resources
 - NE-PDG has helped build a better understanding of how funding/resources flow through the state early childhood mixed delivery system.
- Policies
 - Development of the integrated data system (ECIDS) is installed in the Nebraska Department of Education, with funding and support across agencies

CHALLENGES

Project leaders identified four primary challenges to realizing transformative system shifts.

- While engaging in more frequent and intense collaboration, formal and informal **feedback loops** did not effectively support information sharing, problem-solving, and decision-making.
- At the project and grant leadership levels, **dissemination** of information and learning was incomplete and slow, often impairing ability to rapidly engage in sense-making, problem-solving, making decisions, and recommending changes.

- The simultaneous implementation of many projects placed high **demands on relationships**, grant monitoring, and intentional engagement.
- An **emphasis on grant monitoring and accountability** sometimes led to attending to grant requirements rather than focusing on the vision for system transformation.

KEY LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Project leaders and key system informants reported many system shifts, particularly for enhanced relationships, practices, and resources. System transformation will rely on continued learning and commitment to progress across system organizations and partners.

Key Learning: Building evaluation capacity supports data use at state and local levels.

Recommendation: *In future grant efforts, require funded early childhood projects to establish an equitable evaluation plan that includes an equity action agenda, logic models, data collection, and annual reporting to inform continuous improvement, ongoing funding and decision-making.*

Key Learning: Building an integrated data system is crucial to an effective early childhood system.

Recommendation: *Continue to build agency and system partner capacity to align data by developing practices and policies supporting data use agreements and data stewardship.*

Key Learning: Shifts in systems take time.

Recommendation: *Recognizing that systems transformation requires considerable time and efforts, build time for collaborative strategic planning, shared learning, decision-making, and dissemination into future grant planning efforts.*

Key Learning: Collaboration is core to success.

Recommendation: *As new system funding opportunities emerge, include diverse cross-sector voices in the planning of the application, incorporating shared values and principles as well as learning from needs assessment and evaluation data.*

Key Learning: Broadening the diversity of family and provider engagement provides essential perspectives.

Recommendation: *Identify strategies to expand family engagement in the planning, implementation, evaluation, and dissemination of all early childhood efforts.*

Key Learning: Building equitable practices increases family access to quality services.

Recommendation: *To support equitable representation of linguistically diverse families and providers in early childhood programs and services, continue to expand the number of bilingual staff in agencies and service organizations serving young children and families.*

Develop a plan that addresses practices and policies necessary for equity and full inclusion of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse families and providers in the ECCE system.

Key Learning: Centralized referral system is a foundational early childhood system component.

Recommendation: *Continue to expand family and provider access to a comprehensive early childhood resource and referral system.*

Key Learning: Aligned systems of support benefit the ECCE workforce.

Recommendation: *Continue to offer resources and opportunities to support the knowledge, competencies, and well-being of the early childhood workforce across the mixed delivery system. Enhance the existing workforce data system (NECPRS) to support and advocate for ECCE workforce needs and quality early care and education services.*

Key Learning: Implementation of evidenced-based models resulted in expansion of quality services.

Recommendation: *Explore ways to embed proven ECCE models and strategies for children, families, and the workforce into ongoing service delivery, using existing mixed delivery funding streams.*

Key Learning: A strong public awareness campaign helps to build public will for system transformation.

Recommendation: *Continue to expand reach and strength of public awareness regarding early care and education to help identify necessary practice and policy priorities for Nebraska's ECCE system.*

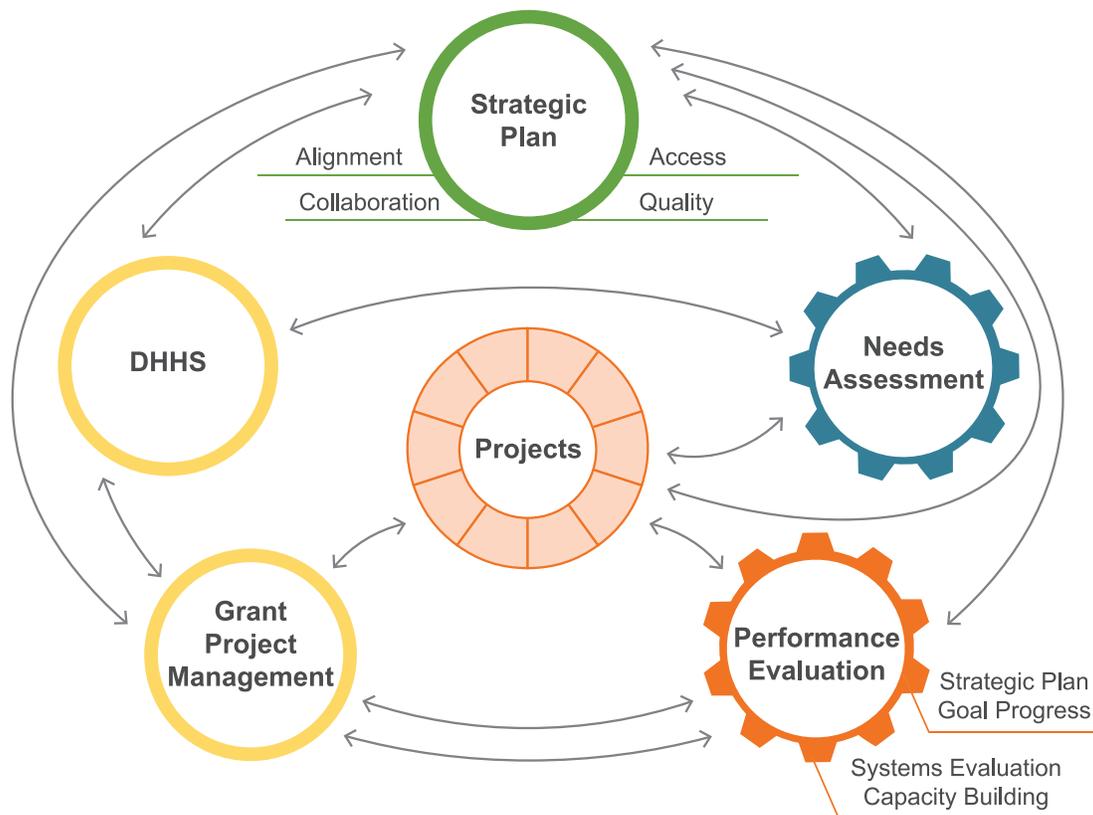
Key Learning: Leadership that includes accountability is essential for system change and sustainability.

Recommendation: *Identify a structure for governance for the early childhood system with formalized feedback loops, accountability, financial oversight, and designated decision-making responsibility.*

Overview

Elevating Nebraska's Early Care and Education System, funded by the Preschool Development Grant Birth-to-Five (NE-PDG) was built on the premise that for Nebraska to address the complex issue of access to quality care, actions needed to focus on alignment across sectors. Through collaboration across programs and organizations, those actions are then integrated into the strategic plan goals. The Performance Evaluation (PE) supports NE-PDG-funded efforts through two goals: 1) building capacity at state and local levels to evaluate early childhood investments using an equitable systems lens and 2) evaluating the degree to which funded projects advance the goals of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan. Accomplishing these goals has required intensive collaboration and alignment of efforts. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships and anticipated feedback loops across the needs assessment, strategic plan, performance evaluation and the NE-PDG projects.

FIGURE 1. | PERFORMANCE EVALUATION ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PLAN



An Evaluation Network Team (ENT) developed guiding values and principles in Year 1 of the grant. These values are equity, alignment, community voice, community investment, integration, and effectiveness. Principles are guidelines for action based on our values.

We believe that principles will drive our actions as evaluators and evaluation stakeholders and will subsequently yield both quality and equity for Nebraska’s young children and their families. Please refer to Appendix A for a full explanation of the ENT values and principles.

Three approaches guided the implementation of the performance evaluation.

1. A systems lens was applied for capacity building and evaluation^{2,3}
2. An equity action agenda developed in Year 1 of the grant served as a leading and cross-cutting value (see Appendix B)
3. A cyclical model of improvement was employed

Embedded in each of these approaches were principles and values developed by the PE Evaluation Network Team (ENT) (See Appendix A). Each of these approaches is outlined below.

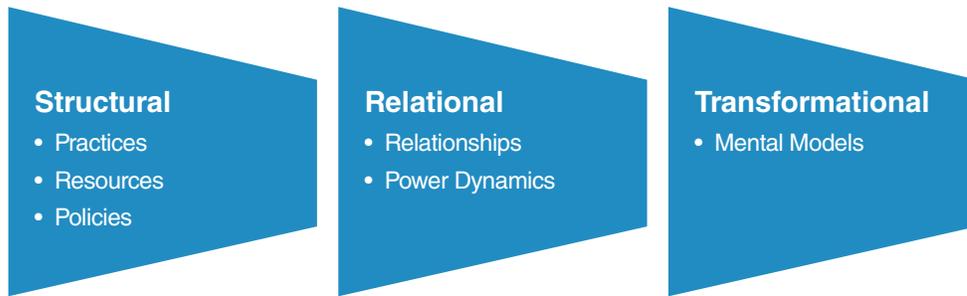
APPROACH

Systems Lens

Adopting a systems approach to early care and education, Nebraska is examining conditions under which change can occur. The PE team adopted a systems evaluation, examining the NE-PDG programmatic outcomes and the extent of system changes within the Nebraska early childhood system. These processes will lead to deeper understanding of program needs and effects. As the PE management team reviewed and analyzed the project monthly data, a systems lens was used to monitor progress in transforming Nebraska’s early childhood system to determine the degree there were changes in the continuum of system transformation. The ENT helped stakeholders engage in reflection and problem-solving to generate learning that drives the system toward improved practices and shifts in the Nebraska early childhood system of services and supports. The emergence of this new system will then be better suited to address the identified issue and result in sustained positive results for children and families. It is a process that embraces ongoing reflection that guides informed decision-making. The evaluation will help to monitor the degree that the NE-PDG work is supporting system change, which falls along a continuum from small system shifts to a reconfigured system to one that is transformed.

The Waters of Systems Change framework was employed to understand and reflect on the data.¹ This use of the framework, which included examining six conditions contributing to systems changes (policy, practices, resources, relationships, power dynamics, and mental models) and three levels of system change (structural, relational, and transformational) (see Figure 2), the framework helped the performance evaluation reflect on where the systemic conditions are shifting and the degree to which the desired outcomes are obtained.

FIGURE 2. | ADAPTED FROM WATER OF SYSTEMS CHANGE FRAMEWORK¹



In Year 1 of the grant the Nebraska Evaluation Team (ENT) established six guiding values to ground the evaluation process in collaboration with evaluators and stakeholders. These values informed the performance evaluation process.

FIGURE 3. | EVALUATION VALUES



Equity Action Agenda

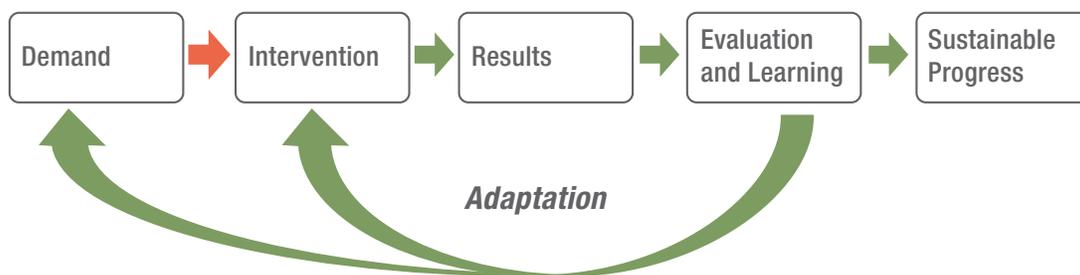
The value of equity led evaluation efforts. The Evaluation Network Team Key Learnings document states: “ We believe that every child in Nebraska should have access to quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and that access and quality should not vary due to race, ethnicity, geographic location, ability status, home language, culture, participation in special education and/or mental health resources, or families’ preferred hours, location, and types of care.” (see Appendix A.) The performance evaluation centered equity in the incorporation of stakeholder input, the choice of evaluation methods and instruments, and the interpretation and dissemination of evaluation findings. An Equity Action Agenda framework was

developed as part of the Evaluation Network Team process (see Appendix A.) Using this approach, program and evaluation partners work with interested parties before the program and evaluation are implemented. They articulate an equity action agenda to identify diverse perspectives related to whose voices need to be elevated, fair and meaningful methods, priorities, and plans for applying new learning.

Cyclical Model of Improvement

A cyclical model of improvement (see Figure 4) was adopted to support a reflective evaluative process. Information from the Needs Assessment (**Demand**) and the funded projects' logic model evaluations and monthly progress reports (**Results**) provided data about the extent that the system efforts were implemented, and the outcomes (both intended and unintended) were achieved. Ideally, program improvement occurred when project staff and stakeholders reviewed and discussed the data and interpreted the results, determining what does and does not work (**Evaluation and Learning**). Part of this discussion included reflection on both contributing factors to their success and/or restricting factors to progress, engaging stakeholders in a process of “evaluative thinking.” Though formal feedback loops were not always in place, PE staff authentically engaged community members and stakeholders, (e.g., partnering agencies and individuals who lived the experience) to be stakeholders in this process. Taking time to engage in this review and reflection process has been critical to maintaining and improving the quality of the early childhood system in Nebraska.

FIGURE 4. | CYCLICAL MODEL OF IMPROVEMENT PROCESS



EVALUATION PARTNERS

Performance Evaluation Team. The performance evaluation team was based at the Buffett Early Childhood Institute (BECI) and Munroe-Meyer Institute (MMI). Faculty partners at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) and two consultants also contributed. The performance evaluation team partnered with NE-PDG grant management, NE-PDG workgroups (see next section), and state agencies to implement the work.

Equitable Evaluation Advisory Council. A group of advisors supported efforts to build equitable evaluation capacity across stakeholders and efforts. BIPOC system leaders in various roles and Nebraska organizations met quarterly with the Performance Evaluation team to advise development of an equitable evaluation framework for all stakeholders, including families, providers, and evaluators. In Year 3, the council provided feedback on the design and content of the equitable evaluation resource repository, identified guiding values for the website resource repository, made recommendations for marketing and sharing the repository, and identified examples of program evaluation for piloting equity-driven evaluations.

Race Equity Work Group. Grants management formed a Race Equity Work Group in March 2021 to review and edit the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan using a race equity lens. Consisting of diverse, multiracial PDG partners, parent advisors, and ECCE system stakeholders the work group created an open and safe place to explore implicit biases as well as the concepts of power, privilege, and oppression within the ECCE and the professional environment.

Family Engagement Work Group. Convened to intentionally and methodically assure that authentic family voice is integrated across every level/component of the system and strategic plan, this partners and parents group met monthly over the course of the grant and sponsored a conference for parents, created a logic model, participated in performance evaluation Progress Walks, Strategic Plan updates, Nebraska Leadership Team meetings, and other partner meetings.

NE-PDG FUNDED PROJECTS

Twenty-six projects continued or were initiated in the context of the Year 3 NE-PDG continuation grant funding from May 1, 2022, through April 30, 2023. Each project was funded to address grant objectives and state needs; however, cumulatively, the projects were funded to advance the goals of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan. Brief descriptions of each of the projects are outlined below, in the context of their primary strategic plan goal.

Strategic Plan Goal 1 – Access: Each child and their family can access the quality ECCE services and the essential services they need to support each child’s healthy development.

Learning Begins at Birth: First Five Nebraska redeveloped a material resource called Learning Begins at Birth in Year 1 of the grant, with information about child development and how to nurture it; parent-child interactions that build social-emotional mental health; what quality child care is, and how to find it; children’s health; and services available to children and parents. PDG Year 3 Implementation Grant funds were used to finalize a transition plan and details for the long-term

sustainability of the project and ship tens of thousands of additional guides to community partners and birthing hospitals.

Coordinated Enrollment Pilot Expansion: The Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative expanded a coordinated child care application, eligibility, and enrollment pilot used in Omaha to ten additional sites serving vulnerable populations. The pilot used shared services principles to increase high-quality early learning opportunities by providing coordinated application, eligibility, and enrollment for three high-quality early learning centers serving at-risk infants and toddlers through an Early Head Start-child care partnership.

Help Me Grow: Help Me Grow implemented universal early screening, linking expectant mothers and children 0-5 with essential health, developmental, and social-emotional services. It included outreach to families and providers, a centralized point of communication using phone technologies, trained Care Coordinators, and a self-care referral platform that ECCE and other health and human services professionals use to improve family connection to needed services. Funds facilitated the expansion of the model in Year 3 to include child care resource and referral services, including the Nebraska Child Care Referral Network, with the potential to reach 37,426 0-5-year-old children in Lincoln and Lancaster County. PDG funds also supported expanding community awareness of Help Me Grow.

All Our Kin: Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative implemented a business training series to support the business operations and sustainability of child care programs. The Business Training Series developed by All Our Kin is a nationally recognized training model for family child care providers to improve their business practices and helps them to sustain operations, maintain necessary licenses, and focus on teaching and learning.

Wonderschool Launch: Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative implemented Wonderschool to provide access to technology, business training, and mentorship for child care providers. The platform helps providers set rates, market their program, manage billing, and communicate with families. The intent is to continue to support existing programs and expand the model to additional communities, with an emphasis on reaching providers in rural areas that have limited access to support services.

Communities for Kids Bilingual Consultants: Communities for Kids' (C4K) deployed bilingual consultants with ECCE experience to partner with communities with large Spanish-speaking populations, providing resources to bring information to family, friend, and neighbor care providers. Specific supports include content related to early childhood development, business practices for family-home child care, and understanding licensing regulations. In Year 3 C4K expanded outreach to Latinx family informal care providers and additional communities.

Strategic Plan Goal 2 – Quality: All ECCE settings provide quality experiences for children.

Getting Ready: Getting Ready is an evidence-based initiative focused on interaction among children, their families, and early childhood professionals to promote parental warmth, sensitivity, and active participation in supporting children’s early learning. Getting Ready promotes Kindergarten transition by helping parents become more confident in working with educational systems. Its strong evidence base developed through randomized controlled trials shows positive effects on child development and parenting skills. In Year 3, Getting Ready focused on expansion and infrastructure supports.

Workforce Commission Implementation: Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission Implementation aimed to develop and implement an infrastructure to support continued collaboration and communication across sectors and to build on existing relationships and efforts statewide to fulfill the vision of elevating early childhood professionals to a priority profession. Nebraska’s initial PDG accelerated this work, and PDG renewal funds continued expansion of successful initiatives.

Step Up to Quality: Step Up to Quality offers early childhood education providers support and resources necessary to provide quality child care and connects families to providers. Revisions implemented in 2022 focused on improving family child care provider access and implementation of high-leverage strategies to improve the lives of children and families. The new materials, including the website, will be translated into five languages.

Ready Rosie: An evidence-based, birth-elementary age family engagement resource, Ready Rosie offers 1,000+ “Modeled Moment” English and Spanish videos to families via text, email, and website, supporting educators to target specific skills and individualize videos to be shared with families. It can also provide interactive family workshops for professional development and support a cohesive family engagement plan.

CHIME: Cultivating Healthy Intentional Mindful Educators (CHIME), created by the University of Nebraska Extension, aims to enhance the well-being of early childhood educators. The program provides education and guidance on how to incorporate mindfulness and reflective practice into daily routines, teaching, and caregiving. Benefits for the providers included reduced stress, improved emotion management, better sleep quality, increased focus and attention, and enhanced relationships. Extension educators provided this training to teachers across the state.

Parent Education Campaign: “We Care for Kids” supports public awareness to educate families about quality child care and education programs and services in ways

that are accessible, digitally driven, culturally and linguistically appropriate, and responsive to how today's parents receive information and make decisions. Working to ensure that all Nebraska families have access to quality early childhood education for their children, We Care for Kids provides information on the importance of quality early childhood education and what families should look for when seeking quality services. It also builds support for early childhood educators.

Social-Emotional Support Infrastructure: Gathering information to align current efforts and identify opportunities to address early childhood social-emotional community needs, this effort assisted the communities in identifying priorities and gaps in their systems of care. Communities begin the process of identifying structures and implementing evidence-based models through collaboration and partnership.

Coaching Collaboration: Two Coach Consultants aim to improve early child care education quality and reduce staff turnover by providing technical assistance and training for coaching and reflective practice. A Coaching Collaboration Team Manager in the Office of Early Learning in the Department of Education provides multiagency coaching coordination and brings leaders and funders together for joint planning and implementation.

Nebraska Center on Reflective Practice: The Center on Reflective Practice assists in mitigating the effects of the emotionally intrusive nature of human service and early childhood education work by helping individuals examine their current and past actions, emotions, experiences, and responses to evaluate their work performance and learn to improve in the future. In Year 3 funds were used to build training capacity and facilitate the expansion of reflective practice training for three cohorts.

Circle of Security Parenting Classroom (COSP-C) Expansion in Nebraska: This training prepares registered COSP-C facilitators who are interested in helping early childhood educators apply knowledge, practice, and skills of young children's social-emotional developmental needs into group care settings. The COSP-C approach is designed to enhance teachers' abilities to form secure relationships and offers critical organizing principles from attachment theory to improve teacher confidence and competence in relationship building. This, in turn, fosters strong, secure teacher-student relationships and student well-being and learning.

Nebraska Association for Infant Mental Health Accreditation: Nebraska joined the Alliance for the Advancement of Infant Mental Health to enable endorsement processes to expand the support and professionalization of the field of early childhood mental health across Nebraska. Individuals from various disciplines across the state applied for an infant mental health endorsement, realizing an NAIMH goal.

Strategic Plan Goal 3 – Collaboration: Communities coordinate a locally designed mixed delivery system that provides continuous care and meets the needs of families.

Nebraska Association of Elementary School Principals Leadership Academy:

Launched in 2019 in partnership with the National Association of Elementary School Principals, this initiative provides training and ongoing assistance to support effective transitions. Utilizing funds from the Preschool Development Grant, the academy was expanded to include early childhood program leaders.

Community Subgrants: Communities for Kids (C4K+) builds local infrastructure for early childhood care and education by focusing on increased quality, availability, and family access to quality early learning programs. Communities for Kids collaborates with communities to establish early childhood community coordinators, build quality and capacity in the early learning system, offer early learning scholarships, and provide bilingual child care support. NE-PDG funds were used to hire and train a C4K+ assistant vice president, contract early childhood community coordinators in 25 communities, and develop and implement early learning scholarships and capacity/quality grants with 25 communities.

Strategic Plan Goal 4 – Alignment: Statewide systems align to support communities in creating an integrated and comprehensive mixed delivery system for all children.

Grant Project Management: The Facilitated Program Management team and Nebraska Leadership Team managed grant contracts activities, and collaborated with the Performance Evaluation team to summarize project progress for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

Needs Assessment: Building on the initial start, the state will develop sustainable new systems for keeping information updated over time. The Buffett Institute worked with the state leadership team to design and begin implementing an ECCE ongoing assessment process and tools that address gaps in knowledge, incorporate needs of the mixed delivery system, and build on work to improve the state’s data linkages. To leverage staff and infrastructure and facilitate connections between the projects, the Buffett Institute integrated the Performance Evaluation (PE) and Needs Assessment teams. Needs Assessment activities included a social network analysis focused on collaboration within the mixed delivery system, consolidating findings from 15 family focus groups conducted in Year 2 of the continuation grant, disseminating findings from the second COVID-19 provider survey, conducting a third COVID-19 provider survey and disseminating findings, and targeted provider focus groups. Two projects were added to the Needs Assessment scope of work in response to the Dear Colleagues letter: a project assessing the impact of funding distributed by NDHHS and a project looking at the well-being of Head Start staff and administrators across Nebraska. Questions addressing needs assessment issues were added to key informant interviews and the Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey.

Strategic Plan: Building on the initial Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan through statewide stakeholder engagement, and in coordination with the Needs Assessment and Performance Evaluation activities, Year 3 strategic planning efforts refined the Strategic Plan to reflect the voices of more communities and partners across the state. In conversations with stakeholders across the early childhood system, leaders learned how the pandemic has highlighted the challenges and strengths of the system; identified gaps in the current plan's strategies; expanded the number and range of partners engaged in strategic planning; and identified new strategies.

Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) Buildout: In Year 3 the first version of the ECIDS dashboard (1.0) was internally released for stakeholders to test/review and provide feedback. The ECIDS team held some initial User Acceptance Testing (UAT) sessions. While the work for ECIDS 1.0 wrapped up, planning is underway for ECIDS Phase 2.0, which includes strategic planning, additional stakeholder outreach and engagement, the addition of data sources, refinement of the dashboard and tools, and efforts related to data governance and sustainability.

Shared Leadership and Financing: The aim of this cross-system effort is to achieve a fully funded and aligned system to ensure access to full-day, year-round, high-quality early care and education for children regardless of the setting and experiences parents choose. Activities included gathering stakeholder feedback, implementing a funding stream analysis and a cost of quality study, resulting in an implementation plan for a shared leadership and financing structure for the early childhood system, aligned with the goals of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan. The shared leadership structure seeks to enhance approaches to systems building that address the historic marginalization and structural exclusion of children and families of color and/or those experiencing poverty.

Performance Evaluation: The Buffett Early Childhood Institute and the Munroe-Meyer Institute implemented monthly progress reports, key informant interviews, training and technical assistance to: 1) build capacity at state and local levels to evaluate early childhood investments using a systems equity lens and 2) evaluate the degree to which funded projects are advancing the goals of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan.

Communication and Dissemination: Nebraska Children and Families Foundation aimed to increase the visibility, reach, and impact of the initiatives supported by PDG B-5 funding by publicly representing the PDG as a coordinated, cohesive effort of systems, services, and initiatives to address the needs of Nebraska's children and families. PDG funds supported the promotion of PDG activities to stakeholders through a website, social media, and an e-newsletter.

Evaluation Methods

Two primary data sources informed this report and are detailed below: monthly project progress reports and key informant interviews. When available, 2021–2022 project annual reports were used.

MONTHLY PROGRESS REPORTS

The PE team collected data monthly via Qualtrics from funded projects related to advancing Strategic Plan goals, successes and barriers, sustainability, project evaluation findings, and incorporating equity/family engagement into the evaluation process.⁴ In Year 3 additional data collection included how projects' efforts shifted the state early childhood system across conditions of system change (i.e., practices, resources, policies, relationships, power dynamics, and mental models). The Grant Management team had direct access to the performance evaluation data for accountability and reporting purposes. Results were shared monthly at the Nebraska Leadership Team (NLT) meetings. Thus, Project Management and project leadership had the opportunity to reflect and learn from the performance evaluation and needs assessment data, for the purpose of understanding whether NE-PDG efforts were meeting their proposed strategic goals. The PE Team provided summaries of project outputs and data collected to inform the Annual Program Performance Report (APPR) support understanding for grant leadership and decision-making. In the ongoing NE-PDG planning year, efforts to strengthen informal and formal feedback loops to support learning and enhance decision-making are underway.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Interviews were completed virtually by the evaluation team from the Munroe-Meyer Institute with project and system leadership. The interviews followed a guide developed by the evaluation team that was based off the six conditions of systems change including structural (policies, practices, and resource flows); relational (relationships and connections, power dynamics); and transformative (mental models).³ Interviewees were asked to describe changes occurring in each of the domains as a result of PDG-funded activities. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded, and later transcribed for analysis.⁵ A total of 18 key informants, with nine of them also being project leads, were interviewed. Due to the goals of the performance evaluation, transcripts were coded (a priori) by three PE coding team members for systems shifts related to access, quality, collaboration, and alignment. More details on methodology will be available in the Key Informant Brief.

Evaluation Questions

Acknowledging that the NE-PDG B-5 performance evaluation could not evaluate the effectiveness of twenty-six distinct projects, an emphasis was placed on evaluating

capacity building and system transformation. Evaluation questions were designed to address the performance evaluation goals:

Goal 1: Build capacity at state and local levels to evaluate early childhood investments using an equitable systems lens

How is increased capacity to evaluate using a systems lens reflected in progress reports and key informant interviews?

Goal 2: Evaluate the degree to which funded projects advance the goals of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan.

How are key informants' perceptions of systems shifts aligned with the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan goals to increase Access, Quality, Collaboration, and Alignment?

How are processes of systems change evident in project leaders' perspectives on the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan progress?

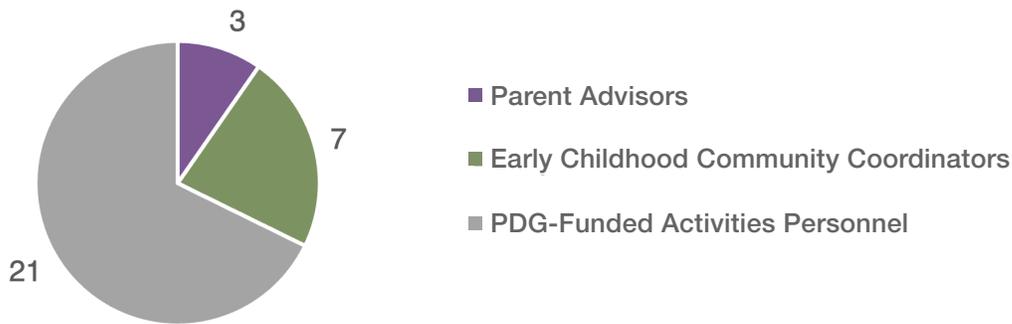
Evaluation Efforts and Findings

CAPACITY BUILDING EFFORTS (GOAL 1)

NE-PDG funding supported the Performance Evaluation teams at the Buffett Institute and Munroe-Meyer Institute to engage with state programs and PDG projects to enhance evaluation capacity with a focus on using a systems lens, prioritizing equity, and family empowerment. In Year 3, six capacity-building efforts were implemented.

Community based participatory methods (photovoice). In 2020, NE PDG B-5 partners and projects realized the need to act upon our commitments to focus on equity, family empowerment, and elevating the lived experiences and voices of underserved families and providers. To leverage that interest and support capacity building to use community-based participatory approaches, Photovoice training was offered to PDG project leads, Nebraska Leadership Team members, and other early childhood state partners and stakeholders in April 2022. Photovoice is a learning tool that uses photography to promote positive social change, and it can be used for community engagement, program planning, evaluation, and research. Due to a high level of engagement in Year 2 and requests for additional training opportunities, both the introductory course for learning and advocacy and a series of advanced trainings (related to data interpretation, evaluation, and creative methods) were offered in February 2023. PDG project leads, parent advisors from Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFF), and all Early Childhood Community Coordinators across the state were invited to participate in these trainings as an opportunity to learn about the Photovoice tool in February 2023. The 24 individuals who completed the Introductory and the 20 who attended the Advanced were composed of three parent advisors, seven of the Early Childhood Community Coordinators, and 21 individuals who are associated with PDG-funded activities, representing 11 projects. In the post-training evaluation one participant explained how they may use Photovoice to “bridge cultural gaps and bring ‘walk in someone else’s shoes’ to life.” Several projects are planning to utilize Photovoice for their efforts and/or have already implemented Photovoice in their work. On the post-training evaluation participants were asked how they may use the tool in the future, responses included “Exploring community perspectives on what they desire from early childhood care,” “Capture ways that child care providers support their wellness – or things that interfere with their wellness,” “Evaluate the pre/post effect of projects and interventions,” and “Gain a deeper understanding of what the students who attend after-school programming and summer programs experience: What brings them there every day or possibly keeps them from participating.”

FIGURE 5. | PHOTOVOICE PARTICIPANTS



Progress Walk Convenings. The PE team sponsored three cross-system partner progress walk meetings during Year 3. Invitees included members of the PE Evaluation Network Team, Nebraska Leadership Team (NLT), PE Advisory Council, Race Equity and Family Engagement work group members, and NE-PDG project leads. The convenings facilitated conversations to 1) review and reflect on statewide data (e.g., updated statewide needs assessment data); 2) provide feedback on the ECIDS state data system and on their data dashboard; and 3) explore new, innovative data sources (e.g., Nebraska Early Childhood Population Study). Anecdotes shared at the most recent meeting demonstrated the state's progress toward accomplishing its systems' goals. These meetings served to increase recognition of the value of data and to connect interested partners for the purpose of gathering and using evidence to evaluate progress. The following are all examples of statewide projects' expanded use of data including: 1) data conversations led to new partnerships for assessing state needs; 2) spurred interest in needs assessment partnerships as a result of the "Dear Colleagues" letter that led to the Head Start State Collaboration Office request for support in implementing a workforce Needs Assessment for their program; and 3) Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (NDHHS) requested assistance to develop a survey to obtain client input on the implementation of the distribution of DHHS stabilization funds.

Evaluation Methods Technical Assistance. The program evaluation team at Munroe-Meyer Institute (MMI) at the University of Nebraska Medical Center offered customized technical assistance (TA) for funded projects to develop logic models and evaluation plans. In April 2021, 10 of 28 projects had developed and submitted a logic model or a theory of change. By the end of the grant term (April 2023), 23 of 26 projects had a logic model or a theory of change for their project. In Year 3 Grant Management, Family Engagement Workgroup, Governance and Finance (Shared Leadership), and Communities for Kids participated in customized technical assistance.

Evaluators worked with program leads over email and met by Zoom to support their evaluation plans. Services included reviewing or creating logic models, discussing evaluation plans, and monitoring progress. Each project had two to five points of contact with MMI. Technical assistance concluded once project leads felt they had what they needed to continue the evaluation work on their own.

This work directly increased the evaluation capacity for early childhood projects. Through the conversations with evaluators, projects gained a deeper understanding of the role evaluations played to support their projects. In addition, projects that received TA developed or refined a logic model for their specific outcomes, many of which included equity focus aspects.

Specifically, the UNMC team provided TA and facilitation for the Family Engagement group, which included parent advisors. Through the process, parents learned about logic models and their purpose in program evaluation. Throughout the conversations, the members discussed the role of their group, what they hoped to achieve, and how they could work toward those outcomes. After months of meeting, they reached a consensus, and the MMI evaluator drafted their logic model. Parents expressed gratitude for the supported learning and the work of the evaluators. They were excited to have the logic model and began using it to track their work and stay focused on their outcomes.

Resource Repository. Evaluators at the Munroe-Meyer Institute created an online resource repository focused on equitable evaluation. This platform is for all audiences working in the early childhood care and education (ECCE) system, including evaluators, families, providers, program staff, leadership, and funders.

Resources were gathered from various groups, including the Evaluation Network Team, the Advisory Council of the PDG Performance Evaluation, and individuals involved in ECCE across the state. Members of the Advisory Council also provided feedback on the design and content. They recommended the creation of an original video to increase engagement. The site, shared with stakeholders in April 2023, includes a positionality statement detailing the importance of defining positionality and a guide for people to create their statements. In addition, guiding values were identified as the foundation of equitable evaluation. The Resource Repository focused on shifting evaluations in early childhood care and education to advance equity. Selected resources provide opportunities for self-reflection and learning.

Equitable Evaluation Advisory Council (EEAC). An outgrowth of the two-year stakeholder Evaluation Network Team, the EEAC guides capacity-building efforts, with a focus on equitable content and processes. Composed of diverse thought leaders in the

early childhood care and education system, including funders, program directors, and evaluators, the EEAC advised the PE teams. Throughout the 2022–2023 program year, the team met four times (October, December, January, and April) to:

- Provide feedback on the design and content of the equitable evaluation resource repository
- Contribute resources to include in the resource repository
- Identify guiding values for the resource repository
- Make recommendations for marketing and sharing the repository
- Identify examples of program evaluation piloting equity-driven evaluations

The Advisory Council highlighted the shift needed in evaluations to advance equity. The council called for evaluators to focus on guiding values (cultural humility, reflexivity, reciprocity, holistic view, responsibility, and trust through self-examination) to drive decision-making. The council also highlighted the inclusion of families in evaluation design, implementation, and analysis to fully represent what success looks like for the child and family and the steps to achieve it.

Evaluation Engagement Pilot. The University of Nebraska Medical Center-Munroe Meyer Institute (UNMC-MMI) worked with Little Priest Tribal College to implement a program to train community members to serve on the UNMC-MMI evaluation team at Educare Winnebago, an early childhood center on the Winnebago Indian Reservation. The school combines Educare’s practices with activities that honor local culture and traditions and incorporates the native Ho-Chunk language into the curriculum.

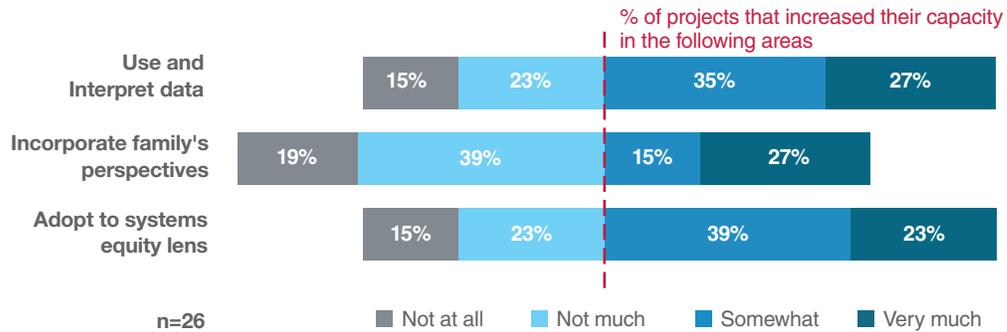
The evaluation course was developed during the spring and summer of 2022. Modules included: Intro to Evaluation, Child Assessments, Classroom Observations, and Data Use & Feedback. Each module discussed the importance of representation and culturally appropriate measures/observations in evaluation. Community members in this course (n = 6) discussed the importance of representation and culturally appropriate measures/observations in evaluation. They administered child assessments and conducted classroom observations with a mentor and independently. Engaging community members in the evaluation process creates the opportunity to honor the school’s culture, foster a sense of ownership, and create opportunities for meaningful collaboration. The first semester of this pilot project has laid the groundwork to keep working toward these goals.

CAPACITY BUILDING FINDINGS (GOAL 1)

How is increased capacity to evaluate using a systems lens reflected in progress reports and key informant interviews?

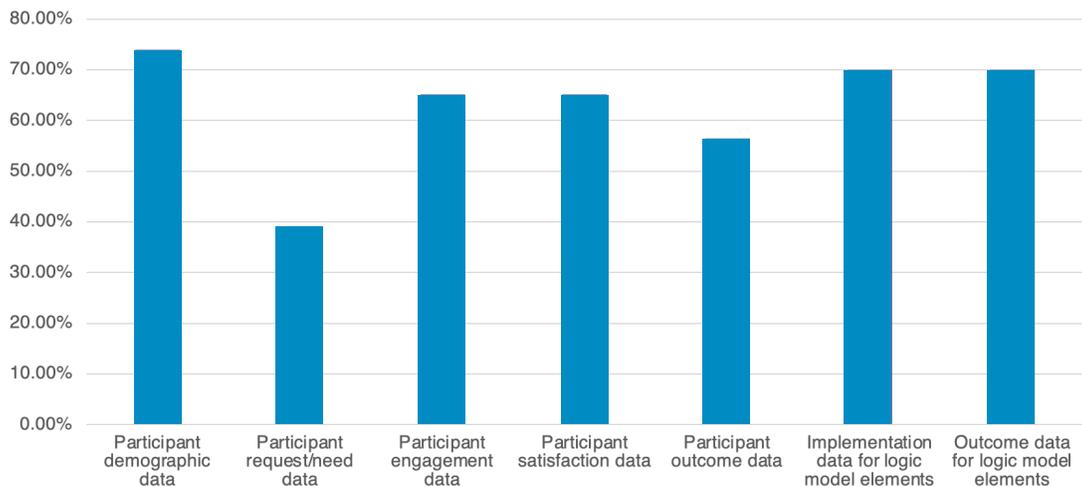
In January 2023, project leads reported on whether they had increased capacity to adopt a systems equity lens, incorporate family’s perspectives, and use and interpret data. Most of the projects reported they had increased their capacity to adopt a systems equity lens and use and interpret data. The results found that the highest rating of (very much) was in the area of adopting an equitable systems lens.

FIGURE 6. | HIGH PERCENTAGES OF NE-PDG PROJECTS REPORTED INCREASING THEIR CAPACITY TO EVALUATE USING SYSTEM EQUITY LENS



At the end of Year 3, PDG-funded projects were asked about project data collection. Twenty-three of 26 projects reported “yes” while three projects reported “no.” The most common type of collected data is “participant demographic data,” “implementation data for logic model elements,” and “outcome data for logic model elements.” **In Year 1 (March 2021), 50% of projects were collecting participant demographic data compared to 74% in Year 3.**

FIGURE 7. | TYPES OF DATA COLLECTED BY PROJECTS



Key informant interviews provided enhanced perspectives of system shifts, direct quotes from their interviews are included below. A key theme that emerged from the key informant interviews was a perceived value of using data to make informed decisions. Key informants noted that stakeholders have increased their understanding of the value of data to inform decisions and also to advocate for policy improvements.

“I think people appreciate it more. I think they see how important data is to decision-making. From a policy point of perspective, ... being able to make decisions and being able to make the case to policymakers. ...”

STRATEGIC PLAN PROGRESS FINDINGS (GOAL 2)

Two questions guided understanding of how funded efforts are increasing progress relative to the Strategic Plan:

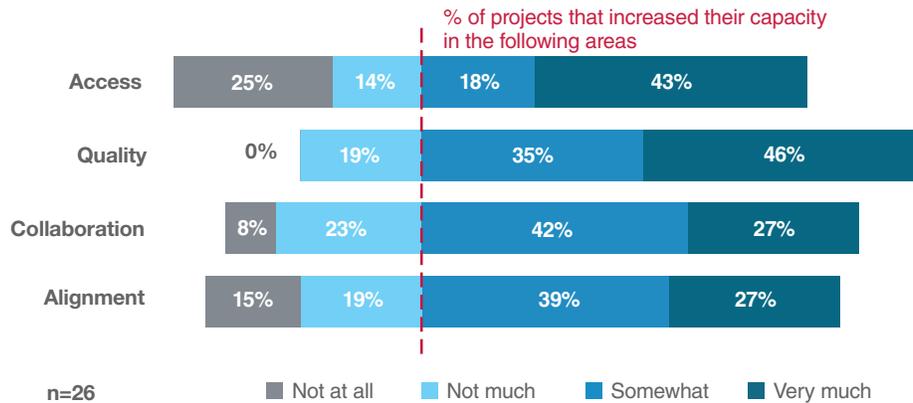
To what extent are perceptions of systems shifts among key informants aligned with the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan goals to increase Access, Quality, Collaboration, and Alignment?

How are processes of systems change evident in project lead perspectives on the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan progress?

The overarching vision of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan is to provide all Nebraska children and their families with equitable access to quality early childhood services. The plan defines four interrelated goals (access, quality, collaboration, and alignment), each with corresponding objectives (see Appendix C). The PE team implemented three key strategies (e.g., monitoring NE-PDG Project Activities, progress walks, and leadership perspective interviews) to address its goal of evaluating the degree to which NE-PDG projects are advancing the goals of the Strategic Plan.

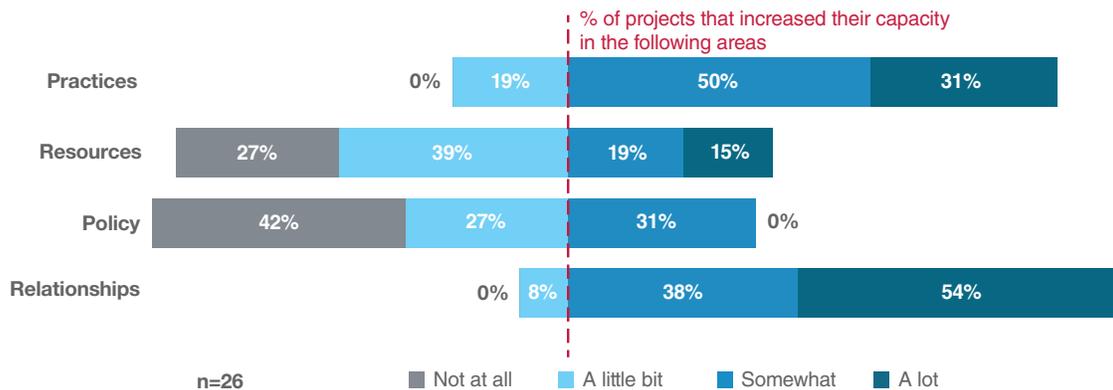
Program Level Progress. PDG funded projects were asked to rate the extent to which their projects were advancing the strategic plan goals (e.g., access, quality, collaboration, and alignment). The highest ratings (very much progress) were reported for the goals of access and quality.

FIGURE 8. | HIGH PERCENTAGES OF NE-PDG PROJECTS REPORTED THEIR WORK HELPED ADVANCE THE STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS.



Systems Level Progress. Projects reported on the rate the degree they felt their projects were contributing to state level systems’ change at the structural and relational system change level. Many projects attributed system change to practices and relationships. Fewer gains were attributed to policies or resources. Qualitative findings in the next section provide support for the projects’ ratings.

FIGURE 9. | HIGH PERCENTAGES OF NE-PDG PROJECTS REPORTED THEY HAD THE GREATEST IMPACT ON SYSTEM CHANGE IN THE CONDITIONS OF PRACTICES AND RELATIONSHIPS



Strategic Plan Progress. Monthly progress reporting and key informant interviews provided additional perspectives for progress related to the strategic plan goals and conditions for the system shifts.

“There are obviously still things to work on, but I do truly think that it (NE-PDG) has moved us forward as a field in Nebraska and a transformative way and built the foundation for continuing to work.”

- NE-PDG Stakeholder

Increasing Access

Most projects reported they supported families’ access to early childhood programs directly or indirectly through their project’s NE-PDG activities. Collectively, these projects’ efforts were geared at the structural level of system change that focused on practices, resources, and policies.

Practices

Connecting Families to Services. The ECIDS system will provide the infrastructure to support this referral system in its design to provide accurate and timely data about Nebraska’s early childhood mixed delivery system. This data will provide parents with valuable information about the availability of programs and services. Projects saw the importance of “sharing resources with families about how/where to access quality early services.” Many projects developed materials for families including educational materials and information on community resources and how to access services.

Projects worked to disseminate these resources to a broad spectrum of families (including having materials available in Spanish) by distributing print resources and using social media. **Across projects over 170 different brochures were translated into Spanish.** However, the distribution of information was not sufficient. As one project lead commented,

“There are lots of resources, but new parents and young parents don’t know about them or how to navigate services.”

Several projects, including Coordinated Enrollment and Help Me Grow, supported families who encountered barriers accessing services and helped them advocate for themselves to get all the services that they need. These projects collectively were making progress in implementing a “coordinated and aligned resource, referral and enrollment system that made it easier for families to find, enroll, and pay for quality services.”

Resources

Collective Impact Approach. One statewide project, Communities for Kids Plus (C4K+), described their use of a collective impact approach to improve the quality and capacity of early childhood programs in their communities. C4K+ leveraged grant

funding to establish paid early childhood coordinators in communities across the state. They found that a paid coordinator “can really be the secret sauce to keeping early childhood efforts moving.” They connect and align with other community efforts and with early childhood stakeholders across the state. The C4K+ communities were using funding to increase availability of quality care, helping to make it more affordable or helping to create new programs in areas where there were not enough services available.

Child Care Scholarships. C4K+ Early Learning Scholarships leveraged grant resources and supported working families to meet the high cost of quality care for children, increasing access to quality services. Tuition assistance was provided to families whose income was at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. A total of 164 children were supported with access to quality care through the distribution of \$254,205 of scholarship funds. **Over 90% of the families surveyed indicated that these funds “made a difference for their families and reduced financial stress.”** Survey results found that 54% of the families indicated that the scholarships allowed them to increase their work hours, demonstrating an economic benefit for the community.

Building Business Practices. It is essential for child care to be economically stable to be sustained and available to provide services for families. The Nebraska Early Childhood Coalition Quality Childcare Partners (NECC-QCP) addressed this need by providing training and consultation to child care directors, helping them gain skills that increase their revenues through improved business practices and higher-quality services. As one project lead concluded, many of the providers they worked with “begin to think about themselves differently.... they have an aha moment” and see themselves a professional and as a business and “not just a daycare.” The project evaluation results also found that the training and consultation with child care providers “helped to maximize family providers’ revenue, modernize their business and create business efficiencies that save time and money.” Results of a survey of **directors (n=182) who engaged in program activities found that 93% agreed that they had increased their business practices and 72% indicated this resulted in increased revenue.**

Building Equitable Processes. At the start of Nebraska’s PDG efforts, child care licensing materials and training resources were only published in English. Most Spanish-speaking providers were not licensed and cited the language barrier in the system as a primary reason. Recognizing that linguistically diverse families in the state experience considerable barriers to accessing resources, NE-PDG resources were leveraged to expand Spanish-speaking providers access to training and licensing materials in Spanish.

“there's an assumption that people have the right to see things in their own language...I'd say that's new for Nebraska.”

Community and project leaders “kept saying that they need access to more training and materials and resources in their first language, so I definitely see that as being something that’s changed in the system.” **Stakeholders reported that new relationships and new connections have resulted, which opened the door for opportunities for Spanish-speaking providers.** There have been increased efforts to make licensing more inclusive, increasing the number of materials translated and making the licensure test available in Spanish.

NE-PDG funds were leveraged for communities to hire local Spanish-speaking or bilingual coordinators to support providers through the licensing process. The changes in policy and licensure processes have led to more Spanish-speaking providers getting licensed. In one rural community, 20 Spanish-speaking providers received support to complete all the training and licensure requirements. Two recommendations emerged from this work. First, now that bilingual providers have gone through the process of licensure, it is important that the evaluation be expanded to hear and learn from their experiences. Secondly, next steps should be focused on expanding the number of languages into which materials are translated, so they can serve all their partners effectively.

Policy

Child Care Policies. This year the Nebraska subsidy income eligibility guidelines were modified, resulting in more families accessing child care affordably.

“I see DHHS embracing and wanting quality settings for children who are receiving the child care subsidy.... you know, they really pulled in their administration to the child care subsidy program.”

Connections established in the context of NE-PDG, reaching across state organizations and local community leaders has resulted in policy changes at the local level that may not have happened prior to NE-PDG. For example, in one community there was a zoning ordinance that prohibited a type of family child care home (FCC II) in their neighborhood. Community leaders partnered with First Five Nebraska (FFN) and economic development directors to pass a zoning ordinance allowing the FCC II to open.

QUALITY

As a result of strategic planning for systems change, NE-PDG partners gained enhanced perspectives of the importance of caregiver-child interactions for children to experience quality, and experienced increased understanding for the importance of improving the knowledge and skills of the providers, enhancing the family and provider partnerships, and supporting providers’ well-being. Most of the work in this area focused on the system change conditions of practices and relationships.

“We’re recognizing that the children bring their own set of diverse viewpoints, ways of viewing the world, ways of being in the moment with people, and ways of sharing who they are and how they are feeling, what’s important to them.”

-NE-PDG Stakeholder

Practices

Quality Services for Children. Projects provided training, coaching, materials, and curricula, increasing resources and professional development statewide to increase the quality of services in Nebraska’s early childhood mixed delivery system. Several NE-PDG included goals to support adoption of evidence-based strategies to improve the quality of early childhood settings, provider-child interactions, and ultimately improved child outcomes. In the Pyramid and Getting Ready models, coach consultants supported early childhood programs and teachers. Evaluation outcome data reported “higher quality care” for those providers. **Evaluation of the Pyramid model found that providers demonstrated significantly increased quality practices in their classrooms. 95% of the teachers trained in the Pyramid model reported higher confidence in supporting children’s social-emotional skills.**

Several projects included goals to build the capacity of early childhood leaders and providers to expand the number of quality early childhood programs available for children across the state, especially for Spanish-speaking child care providers. Coaching was established on Pyramid Model and Step Up to Quality for Spanish-speaking providers. Other projects targeted improving provider skills and knowledge by enhancing their credentials such as completion of Child Development Associate (CDA), program licensing, or enrollment in Step Up to Quality. **Data from 31 C4K+ projects across the state found a 38% increase in the number of child care providers enrolled in Step Up to Quality in their communities.**

Provider Well-Being. Several NE-PDG projects established goals to support the well-being of early childhood professionals, to increase their capacity to care for and educate young children. Two statewide training projects focused specifically on this aspect of quality. Cultivating Healthy Intentional Mindful Educators (CHIME), supported early childhood providers’ practice of self-care through mindfulness, and found that participating providers reported decreased psychological distress, and increased mindfulness and self-compassion. As one participant indicated, there were not only benefits to them, but the children they served.

“I have become less stressed in my classroom. I have brought tools from CHIME into my classroom for the kids to also use.”

A goal for Reflective Practice Facilitating Attuned Interactions (FAN) training is to build a cadre of individuals through training and mentoring who can support supervisors, supervisees, directors, staff, families, mental providers, and college students by providing a context to reflect on their practices, relationships, and their well-being. Their evaluation found that FAN training participants reported decreased burnout, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and an increased sense of personal accomplishment. **Follow-up data after six months found that participants found the FAN training highly beneficial (4.85 out of 5).**

Family Engagement. The family engagement systems work focused on three components, increasing family knowledge of “What is Quality,” development of family provider partnerships, and supporting parent-child interaction. Family-provider partnerships are viewed as key to quality services. Getting Ready has developed a sustainable structure that can be used by a broad range of initiatives to support parent partnerships and family engagement. By enhancing partnerships and collaboration between educators and families through the intentional use of the Getting Ready strategies, the quality of care is improved. Parents and educators work together to increase quality experiences for children to promote their healthy development.

The Circle of Security Parenting™ (COSP) is an 8-week parenting program designed to help parents learn how to respond to their child’s needs in a way that enhances the attachment between parent and child. This project provided a statewide system of support with 346 trained facilitators and over 770 participants who live across 25 Nebraska counties. The results of their evaluation found that parents significantly improved their parent-child interactions and relationships and decreased their stress related to parenting.

The final strategy that has been implemented is supporting parents to understand “what quality services” are for their children and provide them strategies to advocate for their children to receive quality services. Several projects helped to disseminate information to families (both in English and Spanish) on what to look for in quality services for the children. Obtaining this information will help families enroll their children in quality early childhood programs and advocate for their children to obtain the highest quality services possible.

Relationships

Network Development. A statewide network of coaches was established that provided access to providers across the state using a consistent framework to promote quality services and provided a system where coaches connect and support each other. Relationships and connections continue to build a strong system of coaching support in the state. The Coach Development Network work group has updated the Nebraska Early

Childhood Coaching Guidebook and created the Coach Development Network website as a landing page for coaches across the state.

“I think that was one of the most useful things that came out of some of the NE-PDG work that I was aware of was our coach competencies.”

COLLABORATION

Much of the work in this area focused on enhancing the organizational and community member relationships to improve access to quality early childhood services. Collaboration strategies were at the core of many of the NE-PDG projects and NE-PDG leadership as they implemented both local and statewide early childhood community-based efforts. New relationships across organizations and programs resulted in expanded or enhanced services. Most of the work in this area focused on the system change condition of relationships.

“I think there’s relationships that have come together that will live long past the PDG dollars.”

-NE-PDG Stakeholder

Relationships

Family Engagement. NE-PDG equity work has resulted in expanded family voice not only at the local programmatic level, but also at the statewide system level. There was intentionality in engaging parents, which was viewed as transformative. “There are now parents that are contracted to advise, to be at the table to co-create and co-lead when opportunities are afforded to them.” Family participation has been formalized in the Family Engagement and the Race Equity work groups. They provided input regarding service processes, evaluation, and policies. They were called on to provide more than initial input, but rather are part of the ongoing feedback loop and decision-making process. Their perspectives were welcomed and valued on the ongoing development and review of the strategic plan. The state has also had its first family-led leadership conference as described by one interviewee, “It has been an incredible opportunity for them (parents) to really have that opportunity to voice their personal experience. Parents were able to connect with the professional but also between themselves.”

There was a shift in leaders’ mental model from the assumption that parents volunteering their time to compensating parents for what their time’s worth. Funding for this support needs to continue post NE-PDG funds. Although many reported many positive steps forward regarding family engagement, another commented that “The integration of family engagement in Nebraska’s service delivery system has been a modest structural change at best.”

Provider Engagement. The provider’s voice was valued and became an integral process at both the community and state level. “Providers have been invited to share their thoughts more, more than I’ve ever seen in the last 25 years.” PDG leadership promotes this and are frequently asking, “what are providers saying.... have we co-created with them?” For example, the CEO at DHHS suggested that prior to the stabilization grants going out that DHHS staff conduct listening sessions or town hall meetings to hear what families and providers needed.

Local Community Engagement. From the local community lens, NE-PDG helped to build local infrastructure and leadership around early childhood. This infrastructure has focused on building diverse networks that include businesspeople, economic development leaders, community organization leaders, providers, and family members. These networks brought diverse perspectives to address the issues of access and quality in their communities. At the community level, traditionally more powerful community members have started to realize the value of traditionally less powerful community members’ perspectives. This illustrates a shift to a shared power network model.

Community engagement and partnerships were the building block for the C4K+ initiative as communities engaged in a collective impact approach to plan, implement, and prioritize outcomes. A broad spectrum of sectors was represented (e.g., early care and education providers, higher education, business, foundations, etc.). Reported benefits of the collaboration included sharing effective ideas and strategies to guide work and connecting about questions and concerns.

The SPEAQ Up! Nebraska meetings, which are part of the Strategic Plan process, were built on the notion that the people in communities who are in relationship together have the greatest chance of making effective systems change for early childhood care and education. From July 2022 – January 2023, 22 community facilitators hosted 56 meetings with over 300 people across Nebraska to identify strategies. Participants included parents, early childhood professionals and providers, coaches, trainers, program leaders, community leaders, business owners, and local elected officials. These conversations helped to shape the community’s coordinated planning efforts and provide potential solutions to implementation barriers, while strengthening relationships among community members.

“We have more data than Nebraska has ever had, and we have been able to leverage it for some specific projects.”

Structures

Three structures formed in the context of NE-PDG facilitated state-level collaboration, connecting state leaders with early childhood service personnel: the Program Management Team, the Nebraska Leadership Team (NLT), and Nebraska Early Childhood Connections.

“This opportunity across several formats to have Nebraska leaders come together and plan and share information has really made a big difference in just how the early childhood system works in Nebraska.”

The NLT was intended as the structure to regularly convene project management, funded projects, state agencies, and philanthropy, serving as a formal feedback loop for systemic engagement. While this format allowed for project presentations, discussion, and group work, the meetings often failed to lead to discussion of system issues and decision-making. However, many felt that relationships had improved as a result of these meetings. In Year 4 there have been more efforts to not only share on progress of individual projects, but there are also “more regular discussions thinking on a systems level.”

Examples of collaboration focused on a systems lens include:

- In 2023, the CEO and staff from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services convened a series of Child Care Roundtables focused on problem-solving around increasing the availability, accessibility, and quality of child care in Nebraska. These discussions allowed for deep discussion and the emergence of action items for the state early care and education system.
- Getting Ready established relationships with other early childhood delivery programs (e.g., Head Start, Early Head Start, Family Child Care Centers, Nebraska Department of Education, Early Learning Connections, Early Development Network, Sixpence, and Step Up to Quality, among many more) in their coaching work. This resulted in multiple professionals adopting evidence-based approaches to parent engagement.
- Rooted in Relationships aims to strengthen the state system of care through cross-system collaboration and partnerships, establishing alignment across initiatives and building infrastructure and capacity. Coordinating across 16 hubs, collaboration was expanded through a variety of statewide initiatives working toward similar goals.

Alignment

Projects whose primary role was related to cross-system activities (i.e., NE-PDG grant management team, Shared Leadership and Financing, Performance Evaluation, and ECIDS) reported their primary responsibilities were intentional planning to inform alignment of services, funding, data sources and evaluation. A majority of project and

system leaders surveyed (n=13) reported Nebraska Early Childhood Services were coordinated across models and funding streams (e.g., Head Start, community child care, and Sixpence, etc.) to a moderate (54%) or large extent (15%). System change conditions supporting alignment were found for practices, resources, policies, and relationships.

“We’re changing the tide of assumptions, values, and beliefs around the importance of Early Childhood.”

-NE-PDG Stakeholder

Practices

Efforts Toward Non-Duplication of Services. Due to the diverse representation of partners who have participated in NE-PDG, the mixed service delivery system is more coordinated, with services and activities being available for multiple groups of families, children, and providers in early childhood.

“As far as the funding ... and intentionality of braiding and blending funds ... looking at public dollars available and how we make sure we're not duplicating efforts, that we're getting resources in front of people. It has given us an opportunity to build upon what is happening versus duplication...”

Alignment with Strategic Plan. Individual projects aligned their activities to the strategic plan as part of monthly performance evaluation activities.

“There’s been some real intentionality around alignment and resource awareness. We are trying hard to see ourselves and others fitting into the strategic plan and how we can work together to achieve the goals of the strategic plan.”

Building on the Evaluation System Community of Practice in Years 1 and 2, the performance evaluation team held several progress walks to increase understanding of data use for systems improvement and enhance relational networks. NE-PDG partners, community members, child care providers, state agency leaders, university faculty, and philanthropy leaders met three times in Year 3 to examine system progress. The PE evaluation team provided an integrated logic model and monthly data collection to support grant leadership to 1) identify facilitators and barriers across projects; 2) facilitate partner conversations around sustainability and alignment; and 3) disseminate learning through briefs and reports.

Projects Activities. Several individual projects' activities addressed state-level system alignment.

- The school district leaders who participated in the NAESP Leadership academy through their capstone projects are working toward alignment with their programs and communities.
- The Coaching Collaboration project helped align state systems support of coaching efforts, resulting in better understanding of initiative parameters and preventing duplication of efforts.
- Circle of Security Parenting (COSPTM) collaborated with other statewide professional development systems such as the Early Childhood Training Center (ECTC) to provide an integrated approach to communicating professional development offerings, e.g., a single professional development calendar, the COSPTM website and Nebraska Early Childhood Professional Record System (NECPRS).

Public Awareness Messaging. We Care for Kids Campaign, a statewide public awareness campaign funded through NE-PDG, is “building public will for access to quality early education for all families” using consistent messaging across the state. Development and dissemination of campaign toolkits, shared materials, and co-branded materials provided resources for partnering communities to spread the word about the importance of quality early childhood education and early childhood educators. We Care for Kids collaborated with partners at the state and at community levels to design and disseminate the campaign. In Year 3 they have increased the number of partners from 21 to 61 with more than half of the new partners representing new sectors. Using the relationships in these existing networks and aligning activities across partners, they helped to reach early childhood system and policymaker stakeholders. Over 7500 people participated in live web streamed presentations on early childhood and education. This campaign also expanded “recognition of the economic importance of quality ECCE and providers in Nebraska with influencer and workforce audiences” to 4,000 thousand community and business leaders. **In a survey to 500 registered voters, 84% agreed that Nebraska should support child care and early learning programs in similar ways as Kindergarten to Grade 12 education is approached.**

“This work has “brought the issue of lack of child care, the issue of quality, and accessing support for quality, paying for the cost of quality, all of those things.”

Resources

Integrated Resources. NE-PDG has helped build a better understanding of how funding/resources flow through the state system. Initially, stakeholders believed that there was not flexibility in how federal funds are distributed, and that this served as barriers to integrating funding streams. NE-PDG funds have helped broaden the infrastructure, improving effectiveness of the use of funds such as blending of social-emotional resources as part of workforce development or expanding the coaching collaboration network, which is now integrated in the NDE funding streams.

“Not all providers in our early care and education system have access to the same amount of funding, the same ... types of funding streams.”

Policy

Integrated Data. The primary goal of the ECIDS project is to align data across agencies (DHHS, NDE and Head Start) to create an integrated data system that is available to early childhood leaders and providers who work with families. Collaboration among state agencies, providers, and communities was essential for this effort of alignment to be successful. A strong relationship was built between NDE and DHHS through the development of ECIDS use cases and data sharing agreements. Data sharing agreements, which would identify the scope, what data is to be included or not, and data-driven policies, were central elements of that work.

“This is really a new kind of policy perspective between the two agencies (NDE and DHHS) because it’s an ongoing relationship and a system that we expect to live into perpetuity.”

One of the major shifts is that organizations viewing data for their sole use is being replaced with the view of a shared data system. Stakeholders, including families and service providers, have elevated the importance of equity, inclusiveness, and access to services to better improve the state’s ability to make data-informed decisions. Barriers that have delayed the process in Phase 1 included governance challenges, slow processing of data use agreements across agencies, and the creation of policies. As ECIDS Phase 2.0 is implemented there will be additional outreach and engagement of partners as part of the process.

“We’ve made a lot of progress. We’re not quite to where we want to be yet, but we definitely built a kind of the foundation (both the technical and governance piece) for getting there.”

Resource Support of the Early Childhood System. NE-PDG efforts have resulted in a mental shift where a broader base of individuals has an increased understanding about the importance of ECCE. A primary responsibility of the Nebraska Early Childhood Shared Leadership and Financing project is to create an integrated, comprehensive mixed delivery system for early childhood and address the current disjointed system that has disparate programs with different regulations that are dictated by various funding sources. The goal is to establish authority structures to oversee a fully funded and aligned system providing full-day, year-round, high-quality early care and education for children regardless of the setting and experiences parents choose. The shared leadership structure will enhance approaches to systems building that address the historic marginalization and structural exclusion of children and families of color and/or those experiencing poverty. This structure will take into consideration the recommendations from the cost of quality study and the funding analysis studies in Year 4, as well as stakeholder feedback from various sources, to create an implementation plan aligned with the relative Goals, Objectives, and Strategies of Nebraska’s Early Childhood Strategic Plan.

“The state partners are beginning to orient themselves on how to use a cost model approach.”

“You know, I definitely think that there’s been a shift in thinking about the importance of early care and education, so I think that will make a difference in communities.”

Sustaining Systems

PERSPECTIVES ON SUSTAINABILITY

As NE-PDG is completing its final year of funding, it is important to determine the core program components that are successful in advancing the goals of the Strategic Plan and identify funding alternatives needed to sustain their efforts. Priority will also be given to sustain project- and system-level activities that have elevated equity, and family, provider, and community voice. Lessons learned about contributing factors to successful sustainability, as well as barriers, were documented by projects and PE leadership teams. Relationships with funders, state agencies, and local community stakeholders can support this process of sustainability at both the state and project level. Several examples of promising sustainability are described below.

“So that’s been probably as far as the funding and then I think also just that intentionality of branding and blending funds, you know, really looking at all the public dollars available and how can we best make sure we’re not duplicating efforts, that we’re getting resources in front of people. But then also that unsustainability of long term. You know, we know PDG doesn’t last forever. And you know, just thinking about that from day one, we started those conversations with communities about, you know, what is this going to look like in three years, who’s going to pay for this?”

System Level Evaluation

It is Nebraska’s goal that evaluators and stakeholders across the state will have increased ability to evaluate early childhood efforts using a systems lens. Multiple strategies (e.g., training, progress walks, technical assistance) were implemented this year to continue to build stakeholders’ core knowledge and skills to implement program evaluation through a systems lens. The PE team developed products (e.g., Resource Repository, Evaluation Briefs) whose dissemination will help sustain efforts beyond the funding period. As a result of this work, the articulated grant values of equity, family engagement, community leadership, and governance will be sustained.

Strategic Plan. To continue to make progress toward a comprehensive early childhood delivery system, continued implementation of a Strategic Plan is essential. Having an agreed-upon Strategic Plan with indicators of progress and a plan for action will help Nebraska to move closer to a fully funded and aligned system via a shared leadership structure that will ensure access to high-quality early care and education for all children regardless of the settings and experience of their parents. The importance of having state agency (NDE, DHHS) leadership engaged will be essential for the long-term adoption of the Strategic Plan as a guiding document for change in the early childhood mixed delivery system in Nebraska.

Network Relationships. System leader and stakeholder relationships continued to develop and are enhanced through Nebraska Leadership Team, work group, and community meetings. These leadership and community relationships have been established, and there is strong commitment and interest to sustain these relationships as they work together to advance the work at the state and local levels.

Coaching Infrastructure. The social-emotional support infrastructure that was enhanced through NE-PDG funding has strengthened Nebraska's system of care and is sustainable due to provider participation in train-the-trainer models that were adopted across multiple programs, Getting Ready, Coaching Collaboration, FAN, and Pyramid coaching projects. This model will allow program staff to continue to train and support providers in their programs after funding is concluded.

Projects were asked their perspectives on sustaining their efforts after PDG funding ends. **Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the projects indicated that they are likely or very likely to continue their project once NE-PDG funding has ended.**

Need for Core Funding. Several projects noted that the projects could only be continued with core baseline funding that is augmented with funding they have from partnering organizations. Other programs indicated that without NE-PDG funding, they may be limited to a reduced scope of work or with fewer recipients of the service.

Braiding Funding Sources. Continuation of projects is most likely to occur where their funding support has come through the braiding of federal, state, and private funding.

“We've had several communities as well that have put their city or county ARPA funds towards child care. And I'm not sure that had we not had this work through PDG, and these efforts and you know parent engagement and just public awareness that would have happened.”

PERSPECTIVES ON CHALLENGES

Feedback loops and decision-making processes. NE-PDG funding facilitated increased opportunities for feedback loops in the ECCE mixed delivery system. However, many opportunities for system shifts were missed due to the lack of formal feedback and decision-making structure. No clear governance structure currently guides decision-making and streams funding in Nebraska's ECCE system. Multiple organizations and system and agency leaders have worked to align and address governance needs, led by the Financing and Shared Leadership Task Force, funded in part by NE-PDG.

Dissemination of Information. The NE-PDG Grant Management Team at NCFF has served as the designated entity for dissemination of resources, products, and learning in the context of grant activities. The monthly Nebraska Leadership Team meetings were leveraged for sharing, as well as regular newsletters, and the bi-weekly Early Childhood Connection (huddle) meeting with system partners and service providers. However, much dissemination remained the responsibility of the many individual projects and was not shared widely or in a central location.

“How to disseminate information to partners across the state, you know, we've got this dissemination problem.”

There is a need for a more intentional plan for dissemination of all NE-PDG learning, including strategies to integrate the vast amount of data and information shared. A continuous improvement process including reflection, feedback, and action would be helpful to support dissemination.

Multiple Demands on Relationships. Many of the same organizations and providers were asked to meet the demands of supporting families during the pandemic, while trying to implement NE-PDG at the same time.

“The strain of having a multi-million-dollar grant and trying to deliver on those outcomes at the same time, we were all trying to balance the expectations that came with COVID.”

Furthermore, many community-based partners were serving in many roles to deliver on NE-PDG projects and meet other needs in their communities. Child care providers were especially overwhelmed during this time. These demands often strained relationships and the system.

Grant Demands versus Pursuing the System Vision. The NE-PDG grant funding is designed to support that larger vision of transformational change in the early childhood system. However, the intense work of the grant often drove prioritizing grant deliverables and under-attending to needed system shifts. There is a need to continually reflect on the system progress and identify how grant activities are advancing the goals of the state's early childhood strategic plan.

“Grant activities and deliverables sometimes actually distracted. (We) really want stakeholders to understand where it is they want to get to and to be driving toward that.”

Key Learnings and Recommendations

BUILDING CAPACITY TO USE DATA TO INFORM DECISION-MAKING

Building Evaluation Capacity Supports Data use at State and Local Levels. NE-PDG funding has helped build Nebraska’s capacity to understand and appreciate the importance of using multiple data sources to support practice and decision-making for system transformation. It will be important to expand community capacity to complete equitable evaluation practices.

Recommendation: *In future grant efforts, require funded early childhood projects to establish an equitable evaluation plan that includes an equity action agenda, logic models, data collection, and annual reporting to inform continuous improvement, ongoing funding, and decision-making.*

Building an Integrated Data System is Crucial to an Effective Early Childhood System. Cross-system and cross-agency data alignment are essential components of an integrated statewide data system. State implementation of Nebraska’s ECIDS will enable early childhood leaders and providers to better understand and monitor the success of increasing equitable access to quality ECCE services, determine the gaps in services, and understand how the system is meeting the needs of diverse populations of children and families.

Recommendation: *Continue to build agency and system partner capacity to align data by developing practices and policies supporting data use agreements and data stewardship.*

ADVANCING THE STRATEGIC PLAN AND NEBRASKA EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

Shifts in Systems Take Time. Even in the context of committed partners, stakeholders, and agencies, there is an increased understanding that transformational system change takes time and requires ongoing intensive needs assessment and strategic planning.

“We have a lot of work to do in the state, as an EC system, but also we’ve made some great headway/progress and should celebrate that.”

Recommendation: *Recognizing that systems transformation requires considerable time and efforts, build time for collaborative strategic planning, shared learning, decision-making, and dissemination into future grant planning efforts.*

Collaboration is Core to Success. Fostering the development of diverse relationships at the community and state level has been a principal factor in the successful aspects

of NE-PDG. Project and system impacts have been supported by fostering relationships across agencies, roles, organizations, programs, and communities. The focus on relationship-building and community engagement and collective impact approaches has increased capacity to create inclusive learning environments that support and enhance the lives of young children and families.

“...It has convened a broader group of stakeholders within that early childhood system to come together and think about things at the system level, both in terms of how decisions are made, how financing works, how are we accounting for the cost of quality, just to name a few things as to all the different component pieces that come into play here.”

Recommendation: *As new system funding opportunities emerge, include diverse cross-sector voices in the planning of the application, incorporating shared values and principles as well as learning from needs assessment and evaluation data.*

Broadening the Diversity of Family and Provider Engagement Provides Essential Perspectives. There were intentional efforts to build a broader base of input from a diverse representation of providers and family and community members, with a special focus on including and elevating the voices of families and providers who have been underrepresented in building ECCE systems. As a result, Nebraska’s ECCE system partners are building a richer understanding of family and provider assets and needs, and how to address challenges in the early childhood system.

“The way that the state thinks about and values different voices.... whether that be diverse voices and bringing more diversity into the conversation, making sure that we're incorporating families into how we look at systems and how they function.”

Recommendation: *Identify strategies to expand family engagement in the planning, implementation, evaluation, and dissemination of all early childhood efforts.*

Building Equitable Practices Increases Family Access to Quality Services.

Expanding access to services for Spanish-speaking families has been a priority for the NE-PDG. Translating materials, supporting Spanish-speaking providers, and providing family scholarships were central to these efforts.

“...There has been an understanding that a lot of families in the state don't typically have easy access to the system, especially those who speak other languages. And so specifically for Hispanic, Latinx families and a few other languages. As a touch point, but not as a real and deep engagement, there have been real efforts to engage the practice of translation, interpretation and family inclusion in all of the projects done throughout PDG. That's probably been the largest change funded by PDG efforts.”

Recommendation: *To support equitable representation of linguistically diverse families and providers in early childhood programs and services, continue to expand the number of bilingual staff in agencies and service organizations serving young children and families.*

Recommendation: *Develop a plan that addresses practices and policies necessary for equity and full inclusion of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse families and providers in the ECCE system.*

Centralized Referral System is a Foundational Early Childhood System

Component. A coordinated and aligned resource, referral, and enrollment system is a vital component of a quality, financially stable ECCE system. Several NE-PDG efforts have worked to connect and support families in finding culturally relevant, quality services, which have empowered more families to expect and access quality services for their children.

Recommendation: *Continue to expand family and provider access to a comprehensive early childhood resource and referral system.*

Aligned Systems of Support Benefit the ECCE Workforce. NE-PDG projects expanded the infrastructure needed to align some training and coaching opportunities across sectors for early childhood professionals. However, aligned data systems to support communication, career pathways, and ongoing professional development fail to capture all the ECCE workforce.

Recommendations: *Continue to offer resources and opportunities to support the knowledge, competencies, and well-being of the early childhood workforce across the mixed delivery system. Enhance the existing workforce data system (NECPRS) to support and advocate for ECCE workforce needs and quality early care and education services.*

Implementation of Evidenced-Based Models Resulted in Expansion of Quality Services. By funding existing evidence-based strategies designed to support providers

in their interactions and relationships with children and families NE-PDG created the potential for more families to have access to quality care. Across the state, many providers gained skills to interact more effectively with children and families and to enhance their own well-being. Increased access to these programs provided an avenue for building continuity of care at the community level.

Recommendation: *Explore ways to embed proven ECCE models and strategies for children, families, and the workforce into ongoing service delivery, using existing mixed delivery funding streams.*

A Strong Public Awareness Campaign Helps to Build Public Will for System

Transformation. The We Care for Kids public campaign funded a messaging infrastructure and processes for building public awareness and demand for quality early education for all children, families, and communities. The campaign has also expanded awareness of economic benefits, which will be essential for garnering public will to address policy issues of quality and cost of care.

Recommendation: Continue to expand reach and strength of public awareness regarding early care and education to help identify necessary practice and policy priorities for Nebraska's ECCE system.

“We have people talking about the importance of early care and education that weren't before.”

Leadership that Includes Accountability is Essential for System Change and

Sustainability. The breadth of system transformation that Nebraska aspires to for its young children and families, articulated in the Strategic Plan, will require having a designated entity with the power to receive and provide feedback and make decisions for change.

Recommendation: *Identify a structure for governance for the early childhood system with formalized feedback loops, accountability, financial oversight, and designated decision-making responsibility.*

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Appendices

APPENDIX A. EVALUATION NETWORK TEAM VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

The ultimate purpose of the Evaluation Network Team (ENT) was to engage in reflection and problem solving to generate learning that drives systemic approaches to early childhood evaluation throughout Nebraska.

The ENT developed the following core tenants:

1. We lead with our values
2. We aim for simultaneous quality and equity
3. We use evaluation as a driver of simultaneous quality and equity
4. We recognize, engage with, and co-create with evaluation stakeholders to enhance quality and equity through evaluation

We Lead With our Values

The original Nebraska Early Child Values appeared in the Early Childhood Strategic Planning report in 2020. Beginning in November 2020, members of the ENT reviewed and revised the original value statements and created action statements in the form of principles. Values are qualities that we espouse and desire. Our values are equity, alignment, community voice, community investment, integration, and effectiveness. Principles are guidelines for action based on our values. We believe that principles will drive our actions as evaluators and evaluation stakeholders and subsequently yield simultaneous quality and equity for Nebraska's young children and their families.

ENT members consider our values and principles to be simultaneously aspirational and action-oriented. The detail provided in the value statements and principles clarifies our collective commitment to quality and equity. ENT members centered children and their families in the values and principles so that the definitions of equity, community voice, community investment, alignment, integration, and effectiveness revolve around the perspectives and experiences of young children and their families.

NEBRASKA EARLY CHILDHOOD VALUES

EVALUATION PRINCIPLES

EQUITY: We believe that every child in Nebraska should have access to quality ECCE, and that access and quality should not vary due to race, ethnicity, geographic location, ability status, home language, culture, participation in special education and/or mental health resources, or families' preferred hours, location, and types of care.

Evaluators work with stakeholders before evaluation begins to identify equity action agendas that reveal and address the individuals, perspectives, and dimensions of ECCE that have been frequently omitted, overlooked, or misunderstood in ways that constrain equity in program development, implementation, and evaluation.

Evaluators incorporate stakeholder input on equity action agendas throughout the evaluation process to address equity during the formation of evaluation questions, the choice of evaluation methods and instruments, and the interpretation and dissemination of evaluation findings.

ALIGNMENT: We believe that effective alignment among multiple systems and standards is required to support whole-child development (physical, social, emotional, language, cognitive, and academic) as well as to prepare families, professionals, and communities to enhance children's development.

Evaluators investigate how children's ECCE experiences are related to multiple systems - health, education, social service, and local agency systems.

Evaluators investigate how the interaction of ECCE with multi-system influences is related to whole-child development.

COMMUNITY INVESTMENT: We believe that everyone in Nebraska benefits from positive and equitable development for all young children, and we believe that communities are actively invested in their children's development.

Evaluators investigate community models for ECCE investment and explore the rationales for and local and state correlates of community models.

Evaluators use methods that allow for studying variation of investments across communities as well as following change and improvement of investments within communities.

COMMUNITY VOICE: We believe that communities, and especially families and child and family service providers within communities, are the experts on how to meet the needs of their young children.

Evaluators engage with stakeholders before evaluation begins to identify local goals for incorporating community voice in the evaluation design and process.

Evaluators use methods to engage community voice that address known barriers to meaningful participation (such as time, compensation, access to information), while simultaneously investigating ongoing barriers to participation especially for families and providers throughout the evaluation process.

Evaluators engage with local stakeholders, especially those with lived experience of the ECCE system, to make sense of evaluation findings and incorporate community sense-making into final reports.

INTEGRATION: We believe that new initiatives to improve ECCE should harmonize with existing systems in ways that promote positive and equitable child development.

Evaluators define the benefits of integrating existing systems in terms of the outcomes experienced by children and their families.

Evaluators use methods that allow for identification of population and subgroup outcomes and experiences to trace equity in relation to systems integration.

EFFECTIVENESS: We believe that children and families will benefit when we work from clear understandings of effective programs and policies based on research, based on awareness of community values and capacities, and based on families' perceptions of value.

Evaluators use methods that generate sufficient information about ECCE research evidence, community values and capacities, and family perceptions of ECCE value.

Evaluators investigate the congruence of research evidence, community values and capacities, and family perceptions of quality and benefit related to Nebraska ECCE efforts.

APPENDIX B. EQUITY ACTION AGENDA

Equity Action Agenda: An Equitable Evaluation Tool for Building Quality and Equity in Early Care and Education Systems

What is an equity action agenda?

A tool to co-create evaluations that drive simultaneous quality and equity.

Why use an equity action agenda?

To ensure those closest to the work inform how to design and evaluate quality and equity.

Who uses an equity action agenda?

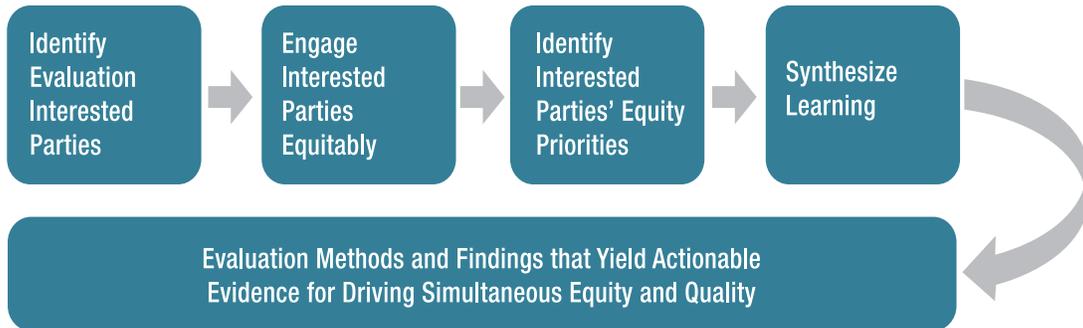
All interested parties: Program Implementation Partners, Evaluators, Community Members, Participants, Funders

How is an equity action agenda created?

Before program selection and evaluation begin, interested parties will work together to identify priorities for understanding and increasing quality and equity through implementation and evaluation.

Process for Increasing Quality and Equity Using Equity Action Agenda

Core questions guide discussion and decisions at each step in the process.



CORE Questions to Identify Evaluation Stakeholders

Identify Interested Parties

- Who are the interested parties?
 - Funders
 - Designers
 - Implementers
 - Participants
 - Evaluators
 - Community members
- Whose relevant voices might be missing from the groups and individuals named above?

Engage Interested Parties Equitably

- When are interested parties available to engage?
- What supports and resources are needed?
- What methods of engagement are acceptable and feasible to them?
- What steps will you take to make sure all interested parties engage?
- How will the methods proposed in response to the core questions above lead to meaningful and fair engagement of stakeholders?

Identify Interested Parties' Priorities

- How do interested parties define quality and equity related to the intervention?
- Do they perceive any tensions in the pursuit of simultaneous quality and equity?
- What current inequities in access to quality do they perceive?
- What role do they believe the intervention has for addressing current inequities?
- What do they believe will be sufficient evidence that the intervention has reduced inequities in access to quality? That is, what has to change or be different as a sign that the intervention is reducing current inequities?

Synthesize Learning

- What did the evaluators learn during the identification, engagement, and priority processes?
- How will learning from the identification, engagement, and priority processes drive the final evaluation methods?
- How will the elements of the evaluation plan yield actionable evidence to improve simultaneous quality and equity?



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan

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

OCTOBER 2020

Facilitation of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan is provided by the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska as part of a broad collaborative effort of the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, the Nebraska Department of Education, the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, and a number of other organizations.

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A Dynamic Plan by and for Nebraskans

The science of early childhood development makes clear that providing quality early care and education is essential not only for the healthy development of our children and families but also for the economic vitality of our communities, our state, and our nation. Yet in communities across Nebraska, many families lack access to quality early childhood services. As Nebraskans, we seek to close this gap between what we know is good for our children, families, and communities and what we currently provide. The Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan describes an intentional and dynamic plan for improving the early childhood experiences of the more than 235,000 children, birth through age 8, who live in Nebraska today.

The strategic plan is based on findings from a comprehensive needs assessment conducted in 2019. Throughout the needs assessment and strategic planning process, Nebraska built upon past analyses and actively engaged stakeholders across the state, with a focus on ensuring that the voices of families and communities shape the work ahead. Thousands of Nebraska families, early care and education providers, and other professionals provided information through statewide surveys and interviews. Using that information, hundreds more Nebraskans participated in discussions to develop a strategic plan that provides a framework for how our state can improve early childhood services. These efforts have been made possible through grants from the federal and state government and have been augmented by state and local organizations working on behalf of young children and their families.

Stakeholder engagement in needs assessment and strategic planning:

- Two surveys captured the needs and concerns of families and early care and education providers in communities across the state.
- Focus groups with parents gathered more nuanced information about families' perspectives and needs.
- Interviews and surveys with key informants from all levels of the state's early childhood system identified system-wide needs.
- Using needs assessment findings, stakeholders from communities across the state and from all sectors of the early childhood system contributed to the development of the strategic plan.
- The plan is intentionally inclusive, holistic, and dynamic—and it will continue to evolve through ongoing engagement with stakeholders across Nebraska.



The Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan contains a set of interrelated goals and objectives that are designed to better align state and local systems that serve young children and their families, improve collaboration, and ensure families greater choice in selecting the early care and education setting that best meets the needs of their children. In particular, the strategic plan focuses on ensuring that children have quality early childhood experiences because of all that is known about the importance of the early years to children’s growth and development.

By creating a more integrated system of early childhood services for children and their families, more families can access quality early care and education and other essential services to help their young children thrive.

Moving forward, elements of the strategic plan will continue to evolve based on Nebraska’s needs and opportunities. We invite all Nebraskans to learn more and become involved in this growing effort to support young children and families.

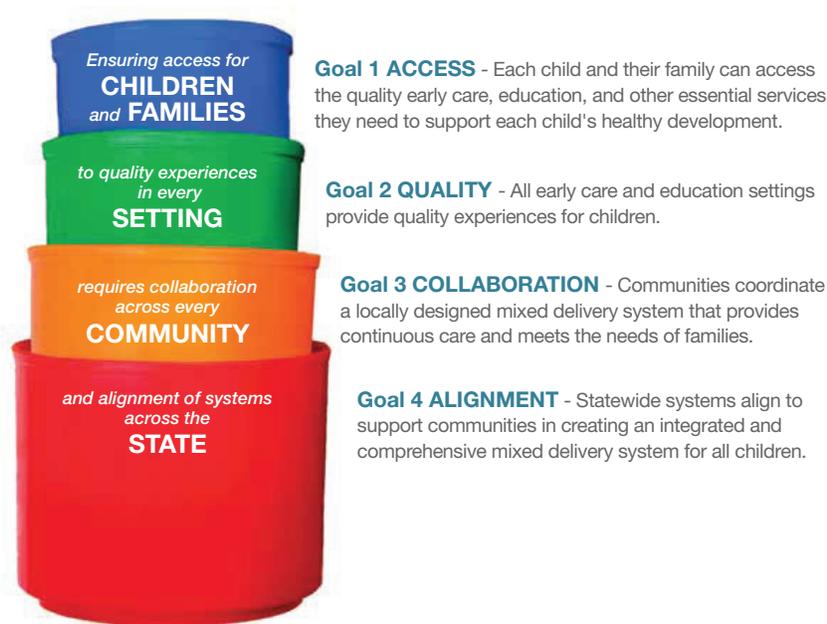
Learn more at NEearlychildhoodplan.org.

Strategic Plan Vision, Goals, and Objectives

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

To achieve this vision, we will pursue four interrelated goals. These four goals are intended to create a more integrated early childhood system—and work on any one of the goals will impact and inform the other goals.

Objectives provide clear targets for each goal. Together, the goals and objectives provide an organizing framework for the work ahead that is based on shared definitions of key concepts and responds to identified needs, as summarized on the following pages. Detailed strategies and action plans for how to implement the objectives will be developed through ongoing engagement with Nebraskans in 2020 and beyond.



Key Definitions

As part of the needs assessment process, new definitions were developed for key terms relevant to early childhood services in Nebraska. The following definitions serve as organizing concepts for the strategic plan.

Quality in early care and education. We define quality in early care and education in terms of each child's experience. A child experiences quality early care and education as physical and emotional safety in the context of frequent, warm, one-on-one interactions with a caring adult who engages the child in language-rich and educational activities. To increase the likelihood that a child experiences quality, early care and education settings are structured to promote the well-being of early childhood professionals and to foster the child's healthy development and learning. The delivery of quality care and education across settings is facilitated by policies and continuous quality improvement practices that prioritize the child's experiences.

Adults in all settings promote quality experiences through:

- Sensitive and responsive interactions with each child
- Developmentally appropriate instruction that engages the whole child (physical, emotional, cognitive, social) and is individualized to each child's unique skills and needs
- Engagement with families in the care and education of their children and in learning about their child's development
- Inclusion of the families' and children's culture and language

Early childhood settings promote quality experiences through:

- Caregivers and teachers who have the qualifications and training they need to build positive relationships with the children and families they serve
- A professional environment that promotes the physical and mental well-being of caregivers and teachers by providing appropriate compensation and professional supports
- Learning resources and structures—such as classroom materials, routines, and teacher-student ratios—that are designed to meet the developmental needs of the children being served
- Facilities and equipment that are clean, safe, and designed to foster children's healthy development and learning

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

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

Going forward, Nebraska will further develop this definition by describing characteristics of quality care and education across different settings. In addition, Nebraskans will work to expand the use of this new definition into as many contexts as possible so that the child's experience of quality is the focus of everyone's work.

Access to early care and education. We define access to quality early care and education in terms of availability and access. Availability refers to having enough early care and education options in a given community—in terms of capacity, quality, and types of services—to meet the needs of families living in the community. Access refers to a family's ability to actually enroll their child in the early care and education setting that best meets the child's and family's needs, without facing undue barriers. Potential barriers include those related to cost, transportation, or flexibility of hours as well as systemic barriers related to race, ethnicity, gender, language of origin, disability, or any other social or cultural characteristic. For children to receive quality early care and education, such services must be available in the communities in which they live and accessible to their families.

Vulnerability in early childhood. Children are considered vulnerable when they experience conditions that may have a negative impact on their development and learning. Poorer developmental outcomes are expected when children experience multiple conditions. A core assumption of the needs assessment and strategic planning efforts is that Nebraska's children, especially those who experience vulnerability, will thrive more in an integrated early childhood system that provides seamless access to all services needed to support the child's development and well-being.

Conditions that may contribute to children's vulnerability:

- Parent with mental illness (including maternal depression)
- Discrimination based on perceptions of a child's or family member's race and/or ethnicity
- Trauma, including adverse childhood experiences
- Poverty
- Low socioeconomic status
- Homelessness or housing insecurity
- Food insecurity
- Inadequate prenatal care
- Low birthweight
- Teen parents
- Parents without high school education
- Primary language at home is not English
- Special health needs or disability
- State care/foster care
- Immigration or refugee status
- Discrimination based on perceptions of a child's gender identity or of family members identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, or allied

Nebraska’s early childhood mixed delivery system. Nebraska has a “mixed delivery” early childhood system that encompasses early care and education services offered in a variety of settings (such as homes, child care centers, and schools), as well as an array of other services that are essential for early childhood development (such as health care, nutrition, housing, and parenting support services). These services are delivered through various providers, programs, organizations, and agencies that have traditionally functioned as distinct and independent entities. Changes in policies and procedures at the state level are needed to support better coordination and alignment across all levels of Nebraska’s early childhood system.

SERVICES IN NEBRASKA’S EARLY CHILDHOOD MIXED DELIVERY SYSTEM



GOAL 1

Access

Goal 1 focuses on ensuring equitable access to quality early childhood services for every child and every family in the state.

IDENTIFIED NEEDS

Today, many Nebraska families lack access to quality early care and education. In a 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.

Finding quality care for infants and toddlers is particularly challenging. In a survey of early care and education providers across Nebraska, the majority reported that they had no vacancies for infants and toddlers, and home-based providers reported having the fewest vacancies overall. Yet, most of the Nebraska families surveyed (66%) reported using a home-based provider as their primary source of care and education. Families who reported conditions that may contribute to vulnerability—such as poverty, trauma, or food insecurity—were much more likely than families without those conditions to use a home-based provider.

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.



GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

GOAL 1: ACCESS—Each child and their family can access the quality early care, education, and other essential services they need to support each child's healthy development.

- 1.1 Increase availability of quality early care and education services in communities across the state by creating funding strategies that pay providers for the full cost of quality services.
- 1.2 Increase families' access to quality early care and education services by improving continuity of care and removing barriers.
- 1.3 Create coordinated and aligned resource, referral, and enrollment systems across the state, regional, and local levels that make it easier for families to find and enroll in (or access) quality early care and education services.
- 1.4 Increase access to essential services especially for vulnerable families and families living in rural areas.

Throughout the strategic planning process, stakeholders emphasized the importance of listening to community voices and equitably serving every child and every family in the state, including those who:

- Live in remote rural communities
- Live in underserved urban communities
- Are people of color
- Are immigrants or refugees
- Have disabilities or special health needs
- Are experiencing any other condition that may contribute to vulnerability

We continue to listen to voices from these and other communities in our state, and we are committed to collaboratively seeking equity across all populations.

GOAL 2

Quality

Goal 2 focuses on ensuring that the care provided to each child in the state is quality care, consistent with the state's new definition of quality.

IDENTIFIED NEEDS

In Nebraska today, low wages and lack of supportive professional environments create significant hardships for many early childhood professionals, resulting in high turnover rates. Early childhood professionals play an important role in shaping the experiences of the children they serve. Yet, in our current system, Nebraska's early childhood professionals are undervalued and underpaid, making it difficult to retain the qualified professionals we have and recruit the additional professionals we need to meet the demand for quality early care and education in our communities. Many Nebraska families are frustrated with high rates of staff turnover and settings that are short-staffed because these conditions interfere with the caring, one-on-one interactions that families want for their children.

Many early childhood professionals cannot afford to pay for higher education or take the time off needed for professional development. Overall, compared to center- or school-based providers, home-based providers reported their caregivers had less access to professional development resources. Yet, there is a clear need for greater access to professional development, as nearly half of the early care and education providers surveyed indicated that it is difficult for them to hire staff with appropriate qualifications.

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%).



GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

GOAL 2: QUALITY—All early care and education settings provide quality experiences for children.

- 2.1 Establish shared, statewide definition of quality to shape and direct all early care and education systems change efforts.
- 2.2 Promote the provision of quality early care and education throughout the state by promoting, supporting, and training the early childhood workforce.
- 2.3 Promote the provision of quality early care and education through improved family engagement practices.
- 2.4 Promote the provision of quality early care and education by assessing the physical spaces and facilities where children receive care.

Quality in early care and education is defined by each child's experience. A child experiences quality early care and education as physical and emotional safety in the context of frequent, warm, one-on-one interactions with a caring adult who engages the child in language-rich and educational activities.

GOAL 3

Collaboration

Goal 3 focuses on supporting local community leaders, early childhood providers, and school personnel to build collaborative relationships and develop their capacity to coordinate local resources for families and their children.

IDENTIFIED NEEDS

Promoting quality early childhood services for all children and families requires collaboration. Success in building an integrated early childhood system that provides quality care, education, and other essential services to each child depends on coordination and alignment of community-level and statewide resources. This in turn requires strong relationships and effective communication among stakeholders representing all sectors of the early childhood system—including state and local government, private organizations, business leaders, philanthropists, families, new and emerging community leaders, and other stakeholders.

A survey of Nebraska providers suggests that while there is some cooperation between schools and early childhood providers, there is little true collaboration. The most common types of cooperation reported were providing before- and after-school care, transportation to and from school, and enrichment activities during school breaks.

The transition from home, preschool, or child care into Kindergarten is a key milestone in children's learning and development—and successful transitions require collaboration between community early childhood providers and school staff. In focus groups, many families expressed concerns that their children would not experience quality in the transition to Kindergarten, and some cited examples of challenges they had encountered with their older children. The survey of Nebraska's early childhood providers revealed that most providers do not engage in any practices to support children's transition to Kindergarten.

Nebraska families reported significant challenges related to continuity across their children's early care and education settings, with greater challenges for families experiencing conditions of vulnerability. Nebraska families who use school-based early care and education are much more likely to use two or more forms of care than families whose



primary form of care is home- or center-based, perhaps because school-based early childhood programs are only half-day programs. In addition, families who reported one or more conditions of vulnerability also reported having more care arrangements and more frequent changes in settings than families who did not report any conditions of vulnerability.

GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

GOAL 3: COLLABORATION—Communities coordinate a locally designed mixed delivery system that provides continuous care and meets the needs of families.

- 3.1 Create more collaboration among early care and education providers, schools, families, coaches, and businesses in communities and regions across the state.
- 3.2 Provide models for communities to build customized collaboration plans that meet the local families' needs.
- 3.3 Build or expand capacity within communities to support continuity of quality care for children making transitions across early care and education settings, including those from early care and education settings to Kindergarten.

The strategic plan builds on a strong foundation of existing and expanding collaborative relationships and ongoing initiatives across the state, providing a clear framework and targets for the shared work ahead. At the same time, the goals and objectives are broad enough to allow stakeholders across Nebraska to define, implement, and refine strategies and action plans that respond to the strengths and needs of specific communities and populations.

GOAL 4

Alignment

Goal 4 focuses on creating an aligned vision for Nebraska’s early childhood mixed delivery system that will shape funding and policy decisions and will facilitate coordination and assessment.

IDENTIFIED NEEDS

Regulatory inconsistencies in Nebraska’s early childhood mixed delivery system create challenges for stakeholders at all levels. For example, 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 in order to cover operating expenses—an administrative burden that takes time and energy away from serving children and their families.

Early care and education play 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. Stakeholders across the state consistently stated the importance of ensuring that all Nebraskans understand the value and impact of quality early childhood services—not only for the healthy development of our children and families but also for the economic vitality of our communities, our state, and our nation.

Increased coordination, collaboration, and communication are needed to ensure that individual initiatives complement rather than compete with each other. Organizations in Nebraska’s early childhood system are often not familiar with the work of other organizations and do not have an understanding of how their own work intersects with the work of others. Furthermore, Nebraska community leaders and policymakers do not have access to the full range of data needed to make fully informed decisions about policies, funding, and programs that would lead to greater alignment at all levels of the early childhood system.



GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

GOAL 4: ALIGNMENT—Statewide systems align to support communities in creating an integrated and comprehensive mixed delivery system for all children.

- 4.1 Create more alignment and integration of vision and planning across state-level organizations, including agencies, nonprofits, private and philanthropic organizations, and advocacy groups.
- 4.2 Promote the importance of early childhood and the value of quality early care and education to the community, state, and economy.
- 4.3 Expand the state's capacity to support coordination and alignment of early childhood programs and services through integrated data systems that track outcomes and support decision making at the state and community levels.
- 4.4 Conduct ongoing needs assessment and strategic planning efforts to expand the knowledge gained and to continue to inform the efforts to transform the early childhood system.

In Nebraska's early childhood mixed delivery system, services are delivered through various providers, programs, organizations, and agencies that have traditionally functioned as distinct and independent entities. Changes in policies and procedures at the state level are needed to support better coordination and alignment across all levels of Nebraska's early childhood system.



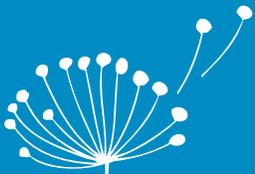
Learn More and Get Involved

The Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan is designed to create a more integrated system of early childhood services and to ensure that, no matter where a family lives or what challenges they face, each child in Nebraska has access to quality early childhood services. The goals and objectives build on a strong foundation of existing and expanding collaborative relationships and ongoing initiatives across the state, providing a clear framework and targets for the shared work ahead. At the same time, the goals and objectives are broad enough to allow stakeholders across Nebraska to define, implement, and refine strategies and action plans that respond to the strengths and needs of specific communities and populations.

The Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan is a dynamic plan by and for Nebraskans. As we develop detailed implementation strategies, we need the continued input and participation of people from across the state who share our commitment to providing equitable access to quality early childhood services that support children's healthy development from birth through age 8. Learn more about how you can get involved at NEearlychildhoodplan.org.

NEearlychildhoodplan.org

NEarlychildhoodplan.org



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