

BUFFETT EARLY CHILDHOOD INSTITUTE

Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan Evaluation: 2021-22

SEVENTH YEAR REPORT



Buffett
Early Childhood
Institute

at the University of Nebraska



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Executive Summary

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan was launched in Omaha and surrounding communities in fall 2015. It was created in response to state legislation directing metro Omaha area superintendents to develop and enact a plan to reduce opportunity gaps for young children living in high concentrations of poverty. It was developed by the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska in partnership with the 11 school districts of the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, which also provides the majority of the funding.

Translating research into practice, the plan uses a comprehensive systems approach that is grounded in an understanding that local elementary schools can serve as community hubs that connect young children, birth to Grade 3, and their families to a pathway of continuous, high-quality, and equitable learning experiences. This systemic and community-based School as Hub programming and the Birth Through Grade 3 Approach is intended to elevate the capacity of the Omaha metro school districts to provide the opportunities all young children need to thrive and succeed.

TRANSITION YEAR 2021–2022: UPDATING THE PLAN TO MEET EXISTING AND EMERGENT NEEDS

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan entered its seventh year of implementation and evaluation across 11 school districts in the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties in the fall of 2021. Amid continued staffing shortages and other challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, Institute staff continued to work closely with partners in Omaha area schools and communities to adapt the plan's programming and services to meet the changing needs of children, families, and school staff.

At the same time, Institute staff began to adapt the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan in response to feedback from the superintendents that called for greater flexibility and responsiveness to individual district needs and resources. The 2021–2022 school year served as a transition year—providing an opportunity to integrate feedback from the superintendents and stakeholders, lessons learned from current research in the field, and evidence from the first seven years of the project. Throughout the year, district and school leaders, school staff, and Institute staff worked to enhance efforts and maximize the impact of the Superintendents' Plan.

As part of this process, the Institute revised the guiding framework for implementing the School as Hub programming and Birth Through Grade 3 Approach. The updated framework maintains a systems focus, with a continued commitment to promoting quality, continuity, and equity in early learning. In addition, the framework identifies three domains for ongoing and future efforts: Leadership Effectiveness, Instructional

Excellence, and Family and Community Partnership Engagement. The updated framework is intended to be flexible and can be used in ways that respond to each district's current and evolving plans related to supporting the Birth Through Grade 3 Approach.

TRANSITION YEAR IMPLEMENTATION

During the 2021–2022 transition year, the implementation continued to include three types of engagement that are hallmarks of the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan, with some adaptations:

- Customized Assistance to School Districts. Each year, school districts are offered technical assistance and consultation tailored to their specific needs in Birth Through Grade 3 policies and programming. During the transition year, Customized Assistance took on a more prominent role than in previous years, with district leaders from all 11 school districts being invited to investigate their current district infrastructure and capacity for providing effective and accessible early childhood programming through a guided landscape assessment in conjunction with the P-3 Center at the University of Colorado Denver.
- School as Hub Programming for Birth Through Grade 3 in Selected Elementary Schools. In previous years, 10 elementary schools across six districts fully implemented three integrated components of the School as Hub programming—home visiting for children birth to age 3, family facilitation for 3- and 4-year-olds, and aligned Kindergarten through Grade 3 educational experiences for 5- through 8-year-olds; these schools are often referred to as “full implementation” schools. In 2021–2022, school districts continued to implement the School as Hub programming in selected schools, with some adaptations. For example, some districts adjusted the number of schools participating and how the program was staffed. In this report, participating schools are referred to as “School as Hub” schools.
- Professional Development for All. Each year, Professional Development (PD) for All provides a connected series of professional development institutes open to all school and community-based program leaders, educators, and early childhood professionals who work with children from birth through Grade 3 and parents in the Omaha metro area. During the pandemic, PD for All programming switched from in-person to virtual formats, and this continued in the transition year. Two online webinar series were provided during the 2021–2022 school year in addition to expanded opportunities for early childhood professionals to engage with one another virtually through communities of practice and a book study.

TRANSITION YEAR EVALUATION

In the 2021–2022 transition year, evaluation efforts were focused on understanding how school districts, schools, families, and early childhood professionals engaged in creating

environments that support children’s learning and development and how schools can be supported in leading that engagement. The evaluation findings reflect processes and outcomes related to district-level landscape assessments; the three domains of the updated School as Hub programming and Birth Through Grade 3 Approach, including Leadership Effectiveness, Instructional Excellence, and Family and Community Partnership Engagement; and the 2021–2022 PD for All offerings. Key findings are highlighted below.

- **Landscape assessment** participation was negatively impacted by the pandemic, making it difficult for local school district leaders to attend regular meetings. While meetings were recorded for district leaders to review and engage on their own time schedules, districts varied in their ability to participate in landscape assessment activities.
- **Focus groups with district workgroup members** indicated that leaders valued resources offered in the context of the landscape assessment. Those that were able to actively participate in the landscape assessment process felt prepared to refocus on early childhood and the planning process.
- **Interviews with principals** reflected an appreciation for support offered by the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan. In particular, principals reported that participation in the School as Hub programming contributed to their increased value of creating partnerships with parents.
- **Home visitation and family facilitation enrollment** numbers were lower during the 2021–2022 school year due to district staffing challenges. However, Institute and school staff worked creatively to meet the needs of families, and success was evident in the increased number of parent-child socializations families attended during the program year.
- **Surveys and interviews with families enrolled in School as Hub programming** revealed program strengths including support with school and family life transitions, and positive experiences with home visiting. Some families also noted that they did not enjoy the transition in services when children turned 3, and they expressed a need for more access to community resources and services.
- **Interviews with district and school staff** highlighted the importance of engaging families often and early and partnering with community agencies to provide the services and support families need. Respondents noted that districts generally did not have sufficiently diverse staff to best support families belonging to historically marginalized groups. School and district staff emphasized the need to establish positive relationships to support transitions to Kindergarten.
- **Family perceptions of school engagement**, assessed using an adapted survey version of the Family Engagement Survey, reflected overall positive assessment of school’s engagement with families. Highest ratings were in how

schools communicate with families, while lowest ratings were related to families’ opportunities to influence school decisions.

- **School and community-based program leaders, educators, early childhood professionals, and caregivers who participated in Professional Development for All** demonstrated increased understanding of how to establish workplace conditions that support educators’ well-being. They also credited PD for All with increasing their knowledge of assets and resources that families bring to children’s learning experiences in and out of school.

CONCLUSION

This year’s evaluation reflects a year of continued success in implementing programmatic activities. Institute staff working to support School as Hub programming continued to partner with school leadership, home visitors, and family facilitators to provide families and staff with needed support. In addition, the Institute prioritized engaging district partners in transition year activities in preparation for the next phase of the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan in the fall of 2022.

The 2021-2022 transition year presented significant challenges to schools and school districts related to ongoing disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Challenges identified by school leaders and staff included a decrease in academic progress, a need to intentionally support children’s social and emotional learning, and an increase in challenging classroom behaviors. Institute staff responded with flexibility and empathy, partnering with school leaders and staff to meet the unique needs of schools, children, and families. At the same time, Institute staff continued efforts to build district, school, and educator capacity to implement the School as Hub program.

In 2021-2022, the Institute also engaged district leaders in a landscape assessment to establish a solid foundation for effective efforts in the years ahead. We look forward to advancing this work in the coming years, through district-Institute partnership efforts aimed at goals and action plans devised by the school districts connecting a focus on early childhood birth through Grade 3 efforts to strategic goals and plans for the broader K-12 district.

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan: Overview

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan offers an innovative, comprehensive approach to reducing opportunity gaps for children from birth through Grade 3 in the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties. The plan was developed in response to legislation (LB 585) passed by the Nebraska Legislature in 2013 that directed the Learning Community Coordinating Council to enact an early childhood program created by the metro Omaha superintendents for young children living in neighborhoods impacted by high concentrations of poverty. The plan is financed by a half-cent levy, resulting in annual funding of approximately \$2.9 million to be used for this purpose.

In 2013, the superintendents of the 11 school districts in Douglas and Sarpy Counties invited the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska to partner with them to prepare a plan for their review and, after approval by the Learning Community Coordinating Council, to facilitate the plan's implementation. The plan was adopted unanimously by the 11 superintendents in June 2014 and approved by the Learning Community Coordinating Council in August 2014. In-depth planning and initial implementation within the districts occurred throughout 2014–2015. Full implementation of the plan was initiated in summer 2015 and continues.

As a developer, partner, and major participant in the Superintendents' Plan, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute is committed to supporting schools and districts in Douglas and Sarpy Counties to engage in continuous cycles of improvement and innovation that will enhance quality, expand continuity, and strengthen equity for all children and families from birth through Grade 3. The plan is focused on increasing opportunities for children and families who experience persistent disparities and gaps in opportunity in order to overcome those disparities and realize success in school and life.

The plan serves children and families during the first eight to nine years of life. This is the time when the foundations for building children's brain architecture, language and skill acquisition, and relationships with others are established. Research shows that if we can sustain quality, continuity, and equity through the end of third grade, children are more likely to achieve lasting school success.

TRANSITION YEAR UPDATES TO THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE BIRTH THROUGH GRADE 3 APPROACH

Since the earliest disruptions of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, Institute staff have been working closely with partners in Omaha area schools and communities to adapt

the plan's programming and services to meet the needs of children, families, and staff. In the spring of 2021, feedback collected from the superintendents and other stakeholders emphasized the importance of creating a plan for the 2021–2022 school year that would prioritize flexibility, responsiveness to individual district needs and resources, and meeting children, families, and school staff members where they are.

In response, the Institute proposed an adaptation of the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan, in which the 2021–2022 school year served as a transition year—providing an opportunity to integrate feedback from the superintendents and stakeholders, lessons learned from current research in the field, and evidence from the first seven years of the project. Throughout the year, district leaders, school leaders, school staff, and Institute staff worked to enhance efforts and maximize the impact of the Superintendents' Plan. This included two central goals: (1) be more responsive to the needs and interests of the local context of each individual school district and (2) take a more systemic approach to programming by expanding partnership efforts and engagement at both the district level and within the broader Omaha community.

As part of this process, the Institute revised the guiding framework for implementing the Birth Through Grade 3 Approach—a leading-edge approach in which strong links between school, home, and community open new opportunities to engage with families and help them access supports and resources as they navigate their children's learning experiences. Implementation and evaluation of the Superintendents' Plan is guided through attention to this conceptual framework for closing the learning opportunity gap. The updated framework involves four areas—Guiding Values, Systems Focus, Domains, and Initiatives—and provides a flexible resource that can be used in ways that respond to each district's current and evolving work related to the Birth Through Grade 3 Approach (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. | BIRTH THROUGH GRADE 3 APPROACH



Guiding Values

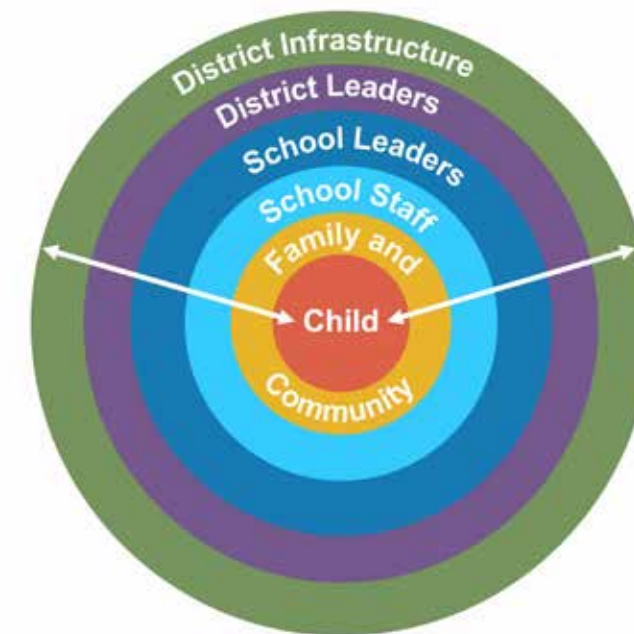
While the ultimate purpose of the Superintendents’ Plan is to reduce or close gaps in opportunities and improve child outcomes experienced by children and families facing persistent disparities, three primary goals shape our work:

- Enhance program and instructional **quality** for children beginning at birth and continuing through the early primary grades. Quality refers to the degree to which children experience interactions that support their learning and development. For young children, interactions that are warm, language-rich, and extend knowledge are essential, and need to occur in family home, child care, and educational settings. Children who experience quality have better learning outcomes and success throughout their lifespan.
- Connect children and their families to school and community-based programs and services that build instructional **continuity**, learning pathways, and access to continuous family supports across settings as children age and develop. Continuity refers to the degree to which children and families experience sustained access to aligned quality learning experiences, services, and resources beginning at birth and continuing through Grade 3.
- Promote **equity** in birth through Grade 3 care and education by explicitly addressing disparities in learning opportunities, family supports, and child outcomes across individuals and groups from racial, cultural, economic, and/or linguistic backgrounds that have been historically marginalized. Equity refers to the degree to which each child and family can access quality and continuity through a school district’s intentional efforts to disaggregate data, examine disparities, and take action to eliminate disparities in ways that are responsive to the needs and interests of families, communities, and schools.

Systems Focus

According to the Birth Through Grade 3 conceptual framework, quality, continuity, and equity for children are the lens through which practices and policies are shaped and evaluated at all levels of educational systems, including school districts, elementary schools, birth through Grade 3 classrooms, and community programs (Figure 2). Only by addressing all levels of the system can this approach be effective in reducing or eliminating disparities in opportunity and achievement based on systemic and structural inequities.

FIGURE 2. | SYSTEMS FOCUS



Domains and Initiatives

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute staff partners with school district leaders, principals, and staff to enhance the Birth Through Grade 3 Approach and supports. In the updated framework, the domains represent high-leverage areas for continuous improvement. These include (1) Leadership Effectiveness, (2) Instructional Excellence, and (3) Family and Community Partnership Engagement (Figure 3).

Beneath each domain, corresponding initiatives identify relevant focus areas for changing policies and practices to support the School as Hub programming for birth through Grade 3. While changes in practices to enhance child and family supports are at the forefront, school organizational environments and professional capacity are equally influential dimensions that must be intentionally cultivated as part of the transformation

from traditional elementary school to School as Hub for Birth Through Grade 3 (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2013; Sebring et al., 2006). For this reason, in addition to guiding implementation of quality, continuity, and equity in instructional and family partnership practices, the Superintendents’ Plan also provides guidance for the district and school leaders whose efforts are central to its effectiveness and sustainability.

FIGURE 3. | DOMAINS AND INITIATIVES

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

The Superintendents’ Plan addresses each domain of the Birth Through Grade 3 Approach and related initiatives through three interrelated levels of programming, as described in the following section.

SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND INSTITUTE PARTNERSHIPS

As part of the Superintendents’ Plan, the school districts and Institute partnership efforts are rooted in a conceptual framework and organized in three types of engagement:

- 1. Customized Assistance to School Districts** involves a focus on building strong and effective school systems that are equipped to provide quality, continuity, and equity in children’s learning and family supports beginning at birth and continuing through Grade 3.
- 2. School as Hub Programming for Birth through Grade 3** involves guiding programming for birth through Grade 3 in selected School as Hub schools.
- 3. PD for All** involves professional learning experiences accessible to all early childhood leaders and professionals across Douglas and Sarpy Counties. Through these three interrelated types of engagement, school districts, elementary schools, and community-based programs and professionals can better strengthen efforts targeted to reduce opportunity gaps among young children. A shared goal across all three types of engagement is the prevention and reduction of disparities in opportunity and achievement based on systemic and structural inequities.

Customized Assistance to School Districts

In response to a demand for a more systemic approach in the Superintendents’ Plan, the role of Customized Assistance to School Districts has been elevated as an explicit partnership between the Institute and school district leaders to develop the capacity of their district infrastructure to provide stronger systems of support for early childhood, birth through Grade 3. It is intended to strengthen organizational environments and build professional capacity within school districts. It is provided to districts in the Learning Community that request assistance and consultation tailored to specific needs in birth through Grade 3 policies and programming. Customized assistance provides school districts with opportunities to partner with Institute staff, as well as access to state and national consultation as they engage in strategic planning and improvement efforts that will impact districtwide early childhood education and services.

Implementation of the School as Hub Programming for Birth Through Grade 3 in Selected Schools

The Superintendents’ Plan engages 10 elementary schools across six districts in School as Hub programming designed to implement in birth through Grade 3. This type of programming addresses all domains and initiatives of the Birth Through Grade 3 conceptual framework within specific school contexts. It is designed to support schools in becoming hubs that connect young children and their families with high-quality, comprehensive, and continuous early childhood education and services across the birth through Grade 3 continuum. Educators, families, and communities work together in the School as Hub schools to attain new levels of excellence in children’s early learning experiences, from birth through Grade 3. In most of these schools, more than half of the students enrolled are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Several of these schools also serve student populations that are predominantly composed of students of color. Table 1 describes the characteristics of the children enrolled in the districts and schools that are implementing School as Hub programming.

TABLE 1. | SCHOOL AND DISTRICT CHARACTERISTICS FOR SCHOOL AS HUB SCHOOLS: 2021– 2022

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

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

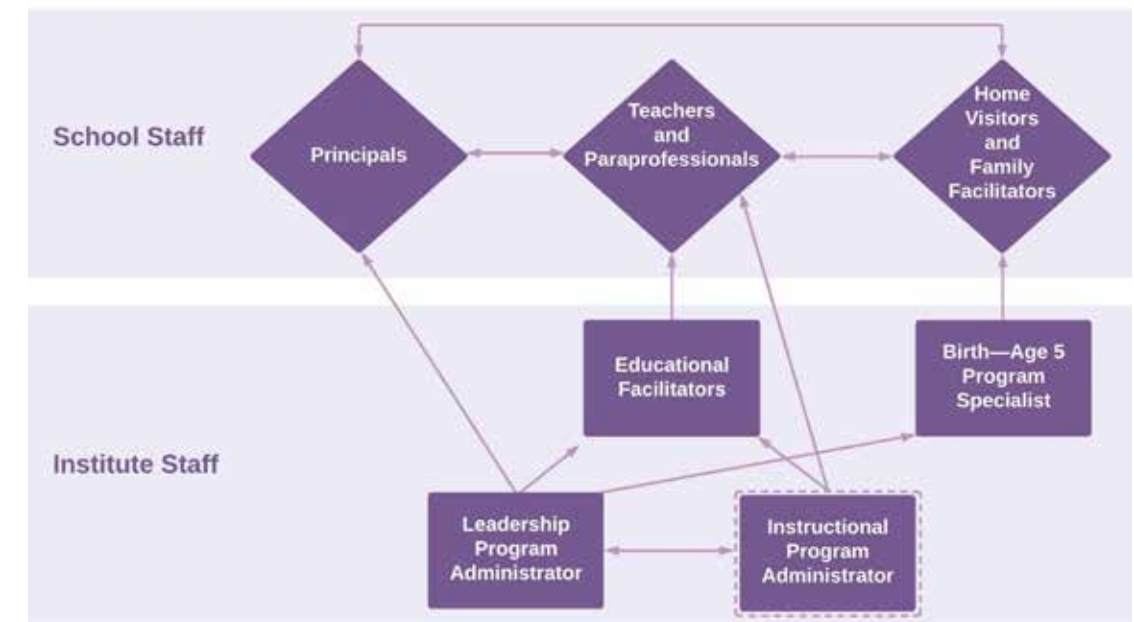
†These values are from the 2020–2021 school year. At the time of publication, updated information was not available.

School as Hub for Birth Through Grade 3 Implementation Support from Both School and Institute Staff

The School as Hub programming is designed to bring about significant shifts in how “schools do school” over time. Shifts include sustained and connected engagement of children and their families in the school community beginning at birth and continuing through Grade 3. Principals, educators, school staff, children, and families participate in the program. In addition to principals and educators, school staff include a home visitor and/or family facilitator employed by each school (and funded by the levy

associated with LB 585) to provide early parenting supports and promote family-school-community partnerships. Program administrators, program specialists, and educational facilitators, employed by the Institute, work with principals and staff to enhance leadership effectiveness, instructional excellence, and family and community partnership engagement as articulated in the School as Hub for Birth Through Grade 3 conceptual framework. Figure 4 shows the organizational structure of key positions involved in the School as Hub programming.

FIGURE 4. | ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT STRUCTURE FOR THE 2021–2022 SCHOOL YEAR



Note: Dashed line indicates position was added partway through the school year.

School as Hub for Birth Through Grade 3 Program Components

In the Superintendents’ Plan, the School as Hub programming for birth through Grade 3 includes three integrated components:

- **Home visiting for children birth to age 3.** In this component, a home visitor who is employed at the local school conducts three one-hour visits per month with each participating family in the given school. Visits are conducted throughout the school year and summer months.
- **Family facilitation in the context of transitions to high-quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds.** As children age out of home visiting when they are 3 years old, a family facilitator who is employed at the local school continues to perform personal visits with participating families once per month to provide continuity of educational experiences for children until they enter school-based PreK or Kindergarten.

- **Aligned Kindergarten through Grade 3 educational experiences for 5- through 8-year-olds.** As children complete preschool, they transition into a coordinated and rigorous Kindergarten through Grade 3 educational continuum. Educational facilitators who are employed at the Institute work with principals and educators in the School as Hub schools to support academic instruction in PreK–Grade 3 classrooms. In this way, children’s early elementary education builds upon their preschool experiences to promote academic, intellectual, and social-emotional competence. Strong home-school partnerships and family support continue to be combined with a high-quality, rigorous educational program. A hallmark of the approach to early elementary education is a focus on child development.

Professional Development for All

Professional Development (PD) for All builds professional capacity by providing a connected series of professional development experiences open to all school and community-based program leaders, educators, and early childhood professionals who work with children from birth through Grade 3, and parents in the Omaha metro area. PD for All introduces leading-edge research and innovative practices while promoting collaborative connections and shared commitments to strong early learning and family support systems.

PROGRAMMING ADAPTATIONS IN 2021–2022

When school buildings were closed in March 2020, Institute staff worked closely with partners in Omaha area schools and communities to adapt programming and services to meet the needs of children and families. Collaborative efforts continued in the 2021–2022 school year to provide ongoing support based on the needs of each school and community. The pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing disparities that disproportionately affect people of color in the School as Hub neighborhoods, such as disparities in access to health care, child care, and internet connectivity. The positive development of being able to bring children back to a full year of in-person schooling in 2021–2022 presented new challenges as educators and principals reported increased needs to support children’s social and emotional learning and learn new strategies to enhance classroom management and reduce challenging student behavior. As schools and communities grappled with these issues, Institute staff collaborated with school and community partners to adapt programming to meet emerging needs in each school, with a focus on maintaining safety while simultaneously promoting quality, continuity, and equity. Notable adaptations and innovations are summarized below.

Adaptations in Customized Assistance

Since the Superintendents’ Plan was first implemented, Customized Assistance has been available to all districts in the Learning Community by request. Customized

Assistance efforts have included special projects tailored to specific district needs in birth through Grade 3 policies and programming. Customized Assistance efforts were temporarily suspended in 2020–2021 as Institute staff focused on meeting the immediate needs of children, families, and school staff. In the 2021–2022 school year, the Superintendents’ Plan partners elevated the role of Customized Assistance by inviting district leaders from all 11 school districts to investigate their current district infrastructure and capacity for providing effective and accessible early childhood programming through a guided landscape assessment with the P-3 Center at the University of Colorado Denver. Upon completion of seven monthly sessions, district leaders engaged in an action planning process with Institute staff. Through this effort, district staff were supported to engage in strategic planning and begin improvement efforts designed to impact districtwide early childhood systems to enhance early learning opportunities and services. Going forward, these Customized Assistance efforts will be ongoing, with continued investigation, quarterly check-ins, and annual updates to action plans.

In 2021–2022, landscape assessment meeting attendance was also impacted by the pandemic, making it difficult for local school district leaders to attend regular meetings. All meetings were recorded for district leaders to review and engage on their own time schedules. Institute staff met regularly with district leaders upon request to supplement the monthly whole-group meeting times with the P-3 Center team and will provide continued support during the 2022–2023 school year.

Adaptations in School as Hub Programming

The pandemic impacted and disrupted all aspects of school building and district life, and consequently all aspects of the School as Hub programming.

Leadership Effectiveness

Principal coaching and community of practice engagement. Principals had limited availability to attend meetings in comparison to years past. Institute staff worked closely with principals to identify meeting times and locations that were most convenient. During one-on-one coaching sessions and community of practice meetings, Institute staff collected input from principals to identify their preferred professional learning opportunities. Institute staff demonstrated empathy based on awareness of the requirements and requests being made of principals and worked to align their individual and/or group times with principals’ priorities and availability.

Instructional Excellence

Children’s heightened instructional needs. During the 2021–2022 school year, educators were challenged to balance attention to an increase in children’s social-

emotional needs that emerged with the increased demand to effectively utilize instructional technology tools (such as iPads and laptops) in early childhood classrooms. The instructional program administrator and educational facilitators stepped in to model social-emotional, behavioral support, and technology use strategies.

Support for educator morale. When observing and engaging with educators and paraprofessionals in classrooms, Institute staff supported educators by leaving notes and giving words of encouragement. They provided specific praise, letting the educators know what they saw them doing well and that their hard work was making a difference for children and greatly appreciated. Additionally, Institute staff created materials for students to support learning goals. This was due in part to educators frequently losing their time to plan and create materials because they were called to substitute in classrooms that needed coverage due to absences. Institute staff stepped in to assist educators by completing necessary organizational tasks they did not have time to complete.

Coaching and support for individual educators. Educators were less available to attend meetings and one-on-one coaching sessions than in years past. Educators requested support for student behavior from Institute staff and guidance for effectively supporting children's social and emotional development. Because educators were not available to meet as frequently as in prior years, Institute staff adapted by increasing their time modeling and guiding the implementation of effective strategies in classrooms.

Teamwork for classroom support in School as Hub schools. Staffing in schools was a challenge in the 2021–2022 school year. There were frequently not enough substitutes to cover classrooms. Other staffing needs such as office help, lunch staff, and other operational positions were also often unfilled. In the spirit of partnership with school staff, educational facilitators and program administrators committed their time to cover classroom staffing needs by filling in for educators and paraprofessionals. They also helped during lunch and performed other duties as assigned to meet the needs of the school to ensure children's learning experiences were effective.

Teacher-led creation of an instructional toolkit. Educators and leaders from schools and community child care programs also engaged in the Essential Child Experiences Instructional Toolkit workgroup to enhance their own practices while working with Institute staff to create a toolkit to support their colleagues to do the same.

Family and Community Partnership Engagement

Home visitors and family facilitators helped identify and support basic needs. In keeping with the School as Hub Approach, home visitors and family facilitators were

quick to identify families who needed additional support to meet basic needs, including those facing food insecurity, unemployment, loss of child care, and other stressors.

Utilizing multiple strategies to connect with families. Over time, in-person visits became more frequent during the 2021–2022 school year than in the early days of the pandemic. In addition to returning to in-person home visits and group socializations, home visitors and family facilitators continued to utilize various strategies to connect with enrolled families via phone calls, text messaging, and video conferencing to help support the individual needs of each family in the program.

Targeted supports for social-emotional development. Home visitors and family facilitators highlighted the need for more support in addressing children's social and emotional challenges. The Institute prioritized family and community partnership engagement to connect families with community resources. By adding new staff positions with this expertise concerning relationships within the community, we now have strengthened support to build district capacity in this area. Efforts are in motion to link community resources and organizations to districts in order to provide essential services for children and families.

Adaptations in Professional Development for All

From the beginning of the Superintendents' Plan, PD for All has offered a series of in-person events to engage educators in learning around exemplary practices and pedagogy for young children. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted new, innovative professional learning structures because the in-person events of the past were not an option due to health and safety concerns. In response to these challenges, Institute staff and partners shifted to providing virtual professional learning experiences. Two online webinar series were developed and facilitated during the 2020–2021 school year. Two online webinar series were again provided during the 2021–2022 school year in addition to expanded opportunities for early childhood professionals to engage with one another virtually through communities of practice and a book study.

EVALUATING THE SCHOOL AS HUB PROGRAMMING FOR BIRTH THROUGH GRADE 3

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan evaluation aims to capture the degree to which the School as Hub programming for birth through Grade 3 is being implemented and observed across a range of districts and schools. The evaluation was designed to document, measure, and support implementation of the Superintendents' Plan, and to provide information about shifts in practices and progress in school systems, leadership practices, instructional practices, and family processes and engagement. Findings from the evaluation are used to improve programming over time.

In 2021–2022, some of the evaluation methods were adapted to align with the adaptations in programming. In addition, the evaluation was designed to further inform the adaptation of the Superintendents’ Plan and support district-level planning for birth through Grade 3 policies and programming. Thus, some of the school-level evaluation data collected in previous years was not collected this year. Instead, the evaluation data includes administrative data shared by districts as well as survey, focus group, and interview data collected from families and district/school staff. In future years, data collection and evaluation will be responsive to the district-level action plans that are currently under development as part of the landscape assessment process.

New data collection efforts were implemented to help researchers and Institute staff better understand processes and outcomes related to the district-level landscape assessments; the three domains of the updated Birth Through Grade 3 framework, including Leadership Effectiveness, Instructional Excellence, and Family and Community Partnership Engagement; and the 2021–2022 PD for All offerings. These data collection efforts are outlined below.

Landscape Assessments Evaluation

- School and district workgroup teams who engaged in the landscape assessment process participated in **focus groups** to provide feedback about their participation and to assess the impact the work had on their districts’ Birth Through Grade 3 Approach.

Leadership Effectiveness Evaluation

- **Qualitative analyses** were used to summarize data logged by the leadership program administrator.
- Principals participated in **interviews** designed to learn more about how being a part of the Superintendents’ Plan has impacted them and their schools.

Instructional Excellence Evaluation

- **Qualitative analyses** were used to summarize data logged by educational facilitators and the instructional program administrator.
- **Qualitative analyses** were used to assess learning that occurred in workshops associated with the Essential Child Experiences Instructional Toolkit.

Family and Community Partnership Engagement Evaluation

- **Descriptive analyses** of home visiting enrollment revealed decreased enrollment numbers, which could be attributed to staffing changes. However, the data demonstrate success in socialization activities.

- **Qualitative analyses** were used to summarize data logged by the birth–age 5 program specialist.
- Families enrolled in the early childhood home visitation and family facilitation programs participated in **interviews** and completed **surveys** about their experiences with the program.
- District and school staff participated in **interviews** focused on what programs were offered, how decisions were made by schools and districts about program offerings, and barriers and challenges faced by participating families.
- **The Family Engagement Survey** was used to assess families’ perceptions about collaboration among families, communities, and schools.

Professional Development for All Evaluation

- **Surveys** were used to gain an understanding of participants’ backgrounds, whether the opportunity resulted in learning, and whether the information was useful.

Landscape Assessment

Improving the educational experiences of children from birth through Grade 3 by eliminating gaps in children's opportunities and learning outcomes demands district-level organization, commitment, and system-level reform. One significant lesson learned during the first seven years of the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan involved the need to expand efforts to strengthen school systems to support School as Hub and other early childhood initiatives. In the 2021–2022 school year, school district teams from the 11 districts were provided an opportunity to engage in a guided landscape assessment with the P-3 Center at the University of Colorado Denver.

A landscape assessment is an inquiry process designed to help school leaders identify the strengths, resources, and needs of their school district. The purpose of engaging in a landscape assessment is to guide district leaders by:

1. Promoting self-reflection and interaction among senior district leaders about how current district systems, practices, and policies are systemically aligned to support a birth through Grade 3 continuum
2. Offering research-based guidance for districts as they plan their birth through Grade 3 capacity-building efforts
3. Strategically focusing the Institute's future consultation and customized assistance for the districts
4. Providing a basis for assessing change in district systems over time and making strategic course corrections to ensure continuous progress toward equity, quality, and continuity, birth through Grade 3
5. Creating a shared framework for collaboration and shared learning between and among districts

GOAL STATEMENT

During the 2021–2022 school year, district leaders will engage in a landscape assessment process to identify, prioritize, and develop district infrastructure and systems of support for effective birth through Grade 3 programs and services in the areas* of:

- Mission and Strategic Plan with Explicit Birth Through Grade 3 Goals
- Central Office Organization and Culture
- Decision-Making Practices Supported by Aligned Data
- Investments in Professional Learning
- External Relations and Cross-Sector Strategies
- Equitable Access

*This initiative uses the six focus areas of the National P-3 Center's District P-3 Audit®.

TRANSITION YEAR 2021–2022 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- During the 2021–2022 Transition Year, the Institute and district partners participated in a landscape assessment process supported by a district audit tool designed by

the P-3 Center at the University of Colorado Denver to identify opportunities for birth through Grade 3 district organization and system-level reform. The Institute invited all 11 school districts to participate in a landscape assessment to identify their strengths, resources, and opportunities for improvement regarding equity, quality, and continuity in children and families' experiences.

- Senior leaders from 10 districts engaged in self-reflection and discussion about the extent to which current district systems, practices, and policies are systemically aligned to support a birth through Grade 3 continuum. Staff from 10 of the 11 districts attended at least one session. Staff from six districts sustained engagement throughout the seven-month process.
- Research-based guidance for districts was facilitated by the P-3 Center to guide planning for these birth through Grade 3 capacity-building efforts.
- School district leaders were assisted in engaging in strategic decision-making about future partnerships, consultation, and customized assistance with the Institute.
- The School as Hub programming for birth through Grade 3 was updated based on discussions with school leaders. This framework will continue to be used in goal setting, planning, action steps, assessing change in district systems over time, and making strategic course corrections to ensure continuous progress toward enhanced equity, quality, and continuity.
- District staff collaborated and engaged in shared learning in monthly meetings and retreats.
- Staff from nine of the 11 districts attended an action planning retreat to complete the landscape assessment process, set goals, and establish plans for the 2022–2023 school year.

LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT WORKGROUP FOCUS GROUPS

In June 2022, evaluation partners at the Munroe-Meyer Institute (MMI) conducted five focus groups with school district workgroup teams that had participated in the year-long landscape assessment process as part of the Superintendents' Plan.

The purpose of the focus groups was to gather feedback from district leaders about their participation in the plan and the landscape assessment and to assess the impact this work has had on their districts' Birth to Grade 3 Approach.

The School District Workgroups

Of the seven school districts that participated in the landscape assessment, workgroup members from five school districts agreed to attend an hour-long focus group. The district workgroup teams varied in size, but all included at least one central office administrator who has responsibility for early childhood programming. Other participants included directors of elementary education, directors of special education, associate superintendents, and student services administrators. Focus groups ranged from one to four participants.

The Impact of the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan

Focus group participants shared multiple ways that being a part of the Superintendents' Plan has impacted their school districts' birth through Grade 3 efforts.

Professional Development

Nearly every participant expressed how valuable the professional development provided through the Superintendents' Plan has been to them and to their staff. They appreciated the quality of the offerings and how they were made accessible to certified and classified employees. Several district leaders noted that the professional development went beyond what their district could typically offer, and they liked that it focused directly on birth through Grade 3. When challenges serving children and families emerged in the contexts of school closings, one district especially appreciated the trainings around using "technology in the early years."

The opportunity to attend the national P-3 conference in Colorado was particularly powerful. One district leader noted that "this was probably the biggest thing, at least in my world." Their team was able to develop a P-3 plan that will help drive their School as Hub efforts for several years.

Working closely with the leadership at the Buffett Early Childhood Institute has been a form of professional development in its own right. Members from multiple workgroups mentioned how much they value the expertise the Institute staff brings to this work. One district leader has appreciated working with "really smart people" who have a clear vision for early childhood, comparing the experience to being in a "master's class" in educational research and evidence-based practices.

School as Hub

The Superintendents' Plan has given districts a guiding concept, School as Hub, that has helped them align district initiatives and their strategic plan to a vision for early childhood education. They appreciate how the School as Hub programming builds awareness across the district of how early childhood and family engagement need to be central to their mission. They view the participating elementary schools as "models" for how the district can build strong relationships with families with young children, so families are part of the school community well before their children enter Kindergarten.

Resources

Participating in the Superintendents' Plan has given district staff needed resources to support the Birth Through Grade 3 Approach. Having the staff to create a home visiting program for birth to age 3 and activities for families with preschoolers has been essential to making progress on their goals.

Collaborating

District leaders have appreciated the opportunity to work with other educators from across the metro area. They enjoy building new relationships with other administrators and learning how other districts have implemented early childhood services. One participant described it as "powerful."

"So, I sit on the superintendents' workgroup. And for me, the most valuable thing in my six years of doing this work is the collaboration with other school districts. It's where I get a chance to hear what they're doing in the world of early childhood. And I don't think that there would be any other venue through which I could learn what's happening in other districts if it weren't through this ... That collaboration has been the best part for me."

—school district leader

Barriers and Challenges

Focus group participants noted a few areas where the Superintendents' Plan did not meet expectations. Ultimately, public schools look at student progress as the most important metric of success. Several shared that they did not see the impact on student achievement, student outcomes, or classroom instruction that they had hoped. One district leader noted, "I think unfortunately, the impact, in terms of return on investment, is not as significant or as quantifiable as we wish it were." Another described it as a "big letdown." The leader had hoped that participating in the plan would lead to significant changes in how educators understand child development and early education and they wanted to see meaningful shifts in pedagogy for preschool to Grade 3 that would reflect best practices. Unfortunately, from this leader's point of view, participating in the Superintendents' Plan has not been able to deliver these changes.

One district leader shared a concern that the plan has felt like an "add-on." The leader has appreciated the "tools" the district has been given to support the School as Hub program but fears their district has not capitalized on the opportunities as much as they could have because it has not aligned with their strategic plan. They described this as a barrier at the "10,000-foot" level. Since the Superintendents' Plan work sits outside of the strategic plan, it is difficult to make it a priority. There were other barriers at the "ground level" that limited how the schools participating in the plan could use the funding and staff to support their individual building goals.

Another challenge participants identified was staff turnover, especially educational facilitators who work closely with educators at the school level. Some positions remained vacant for months at a time, which stymied progress. District decisions about staffing

could also impact the Superintendents' Plan work. Several schools have had principal changes after the plan was well-established in the school. It then took time to educate the new leader on the School as Hub program and get their buy-in for home visiting, family facilitation, and educational facilitation.

The Superintendents' Plan and System-Level Change

The workgroup members were asked to reflect on how participating in the Superintendents' Plan has resulted in system-level changes within their district. Leaders from several districts noted that home visiting has had a major impact on how they operate. Home visiting has changed the way they think about, connect with, and serve young families. Building positive relationships with families well before their children enter preschool is a new value. One district leader explained, "I think that as a district we recognize that as soon as a mom is pregnant, if we can partner with that mom, and as soon as a child is born, if we can partner with that family, that impacts outcomes once they come to school."

"Now when we think about providing access to families, we think about starting early, starting at birth, starting with infants and toddlers in the home."

—district leader

Some districts have expanded home visiting to multiple schools, based on the success they observed in the original Superintendents' Plan site(s) within their district. Expansion has required significant material resources. One district leader described how they closed an outdated and under-utilized parent resource center so they could redeploy those funds to expand home visiting and family facilitation programs to more of their schools.

Other changes include adding information about child development for new staff from PreK to Grade 3 that includes reflection on social-emotional development. A few workgroup members felt that they have not made systemic changes yet. They are poised to do so but explained that large districts can be hard to shift, so it will take more time. They do feel that they are seeing a change of mindset around early childhood. One district leader noted, "I think that for a lot of us, including elementary principals, we really didn't think we owned the kids until they were in Kindergarten, even if they were our own preschool students that were in our building. They weren't really ours until they got to Kindergarten. And I think that that has absolutely changed."

The Superintendents' Plan and Principal Leadership

A total of nine elementary schools across the five workgroups participate in the Superintendents' Plan. District leaders have noticed that these school leaders have an increased appreciation for the importance of family engagement. Building authentic

relationships with families and making sure they feel welcome and connected to their schools has become a core value for some of these leaders.

Examples of principal initiatives in birth to Grade 3 include:

- Hosting "pre-school" parent-teacher conferences so parents can get to know their children's educators before school even begins. This initiative was so successful that the district will be expanding it to every elementary school.
- Adding parents to district boards such as the special education advisory board.
- Collecting family input before planning family events.
- Hosting focus groups for early childhood parents to learn more about their needs and how they perceive their school.
- Requesting funding for training on best practices in family engagement.
- Adding culturally relevant materials to early childhood classrooms to honor the diverse cultures in the community and to promote equity and inclusion.
- Taking a deeper dive into early childhood development and the impact trauma can have on young children's academic success and social-emotional well-being.

Overall, district leaders describe principals as knowledgeable and effective proponents for the School as Hub programming.

"The principal is "a really strong advocate. [They] really want to make sure that all those babies that were in the home visitation are enrolled into preschool. [They are] really a driving force behind that. We don't always have a lot of principals that are that committed to making sure their children get a placement in preschool. [They were] really a strong voice for that. [They were] really invested."

—school district leader

Engaging Community Partners

The School as Hub programming promotes engagement with community partners to support birth through Grade 3 efforts. Members of several district workgroups reported connecting with local child care providers to build positive relationships and to provide professional development. Staff from one district launched monthly meetings with these providers that cover a variety of topics in early care and education. The purpose of these partnerships is to increase quality experiences for young children and to ensure that the child care providers see the school district as a trusted resource for their children and families. Other community partners include social service agencies such as the Boys and Girls Club, public libraries, and the Omaha Children's Museum.

Members from a few workgroups noted that they had increased their school board’s awareness and interest in early childhood education and brought community leaders into the conversation. One district leader said, “I think that this is one of the strengths of the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan and the work with the Buffett [Early Childhood] Institute, because I think community leaders were not very engaged in the world of early childhood unless it happened to be what they did for a living. So, I think this has opened conversations with community leaders that we weren’t having before around early childhood.”

One workgroup member shared that while they are effective in engaging community leaders in their school district, they rarely focus on School as Hub. They reported having 87 community partners to support special education, but they could only name one partner engaged in the School as Hub program.

Institute Support During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Most focus group participants noted that Institute staff had been helpful in supporting district staff as they unexpectedly pivoted to online learning. They served as “good thought partners” as they assisted district leaders in figuring out how to engage students and support educators in remote schooling. They were flexible, adaptable, and adjusted the Superintendents’ Plan to accommodate district needs. They implemented a virtual home visiting model that helped families with young children stay connected to the school and to the supports home visitors and family facilitators provide.

“Through the pandemic, if there was a question about something, they were always right there and ready to help out ... Some of the staff even helped cover the principal’s office.”

—district leader

Several district leaders mentioned that they had received funding for iPads from the Superintendents’ Plan, which became a critical tool to ensure that all students had equitable access to online learning. The professional development offered to district staff by Institute staff about remote learning was particularly helpful. One district leader recalled that one member of the Institute staff worked specifically “with us and with one of our IT providers to create a really meaningful, powerful presentation about how to use tablets or iPads in a very developmentally appropriate way in the classroom ... That was invaluable. We had never had iPads before.”

One frustration that members from multiple workgroups mentioned was that the Institute staff did not return to in-person work when the districts brought their educators and students back into the school buildings. A district leader explained,

“One struggle we had was that the Institute made the choice to have their employees working from home for longer than we did as a school district ... So, we had the people who were partnering with us in our schools who were working remotely when we were in the building, and that was a challenge.” With educational facilitators working from home, there were fewer opportunities to make progress on the School as Hub goals. This was particularly hard on the new principals who took the helm of their schools just prior to the school building closings. Being new leaders, they were juggling many priorities including getting to know their staff and families and learning about the School as Hub model. With all the challenges wrought by the pandemic, having Institute staff working remotely made it that much more difficult to prioritize the School as Hub work.

Participating in the Landscape Assessment

At their regular monthly superintendents’ workgroup meetings, participants utilized the *District Audit Tool* as to assess their birth through Grade 3 efforts across six domains. At the conclusion of this process, members of each district workgroup created an action plan based on the goals they have set.

Workgroup members reflected on how their district’s strategic plan aligns with the School as Hub programming. For some, it is a natural fit. One district leader explained that early childhood is already in their strategic plan and that it has strong school board approval. Another participant appreciated that the landscape assessment process helped their district increase its focus on early childhood and highlighted what they would need to do to elevate birth to PreK as a key component of their district initiatives.

Several workgroup members expressed enthusiasm for the landscape assessment process. They appreciate how it has helped their district move the work forward in a variety of ways. One district has been working on a diversity, equity, and inclusion plan for the district and added a birth to age 3 component. Another workgroup member shared that the District Audit Tool helped them refine their P-3 plan and that they have prioritized new items to work on that emerged through the process.

Other workgroup members were less enthusiastic. One district leader felt the timing for the landscape assessment was not ideal. They noted, “We’re coming off of COVID right now and the staff are so focused on so many different things, that to really even just get our team together to meet was challenging at times.” Another felt that although the audit was “a good exercise to go through,” it was “very, very repetitive” and could have been completed more efficiently. An additional critique was that a large school district has many competing priorities, and the landscape assessment positions early childhood as the most important one. Realistically, it is not always at the core. He went

on to explain, “There are some things that are in the landscape assessment that are really pie in the sky. And they just aren’t going to happen.”

Looking Ahead

In general, focus group participants seemed energized and optimistic about the future of the Superintendents’ Plan. Several noted that the plans for the upcoming year are promising. They appreciate a clear articulation of where the work is headed. Some shared specific plans to further promote the School as Hub program. One district will have its elementary school principals add early childhood as a standing agenda item at monthly all-staff meetings. They will also increase training for principals about early childhood.

Workgroup members articulated their vision for becoming a Birth Through Grade 3 school district. One district leader noted their goal is “universal access.” Using the elementary school that participates in School as Hub as an exemplar, they want to ensure “that every baby who was born into that community, that parent knows where the resources are and they know that school is a place that they can go to for learning and for security, and for resources and support.” Other members shared that their goal is to have early childhood be even more at the forefront of their work because “we know it’s important for future outcomes.” Another district will focus on integrating birth to Grade 3 so that transitions are “seamless” from home visiting to PreK to Kindergarten.

One district leader summarized the district’s vision in the following way:

“...we want our district to be the best place to be a learner starting with birth through third grade, so that all of our students get what they need to be wildly successful. And that...anyone who works with our students feels prepared to provide the best experience for our kids.”

SUMMARY OF LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT EFFORTS

Through the landscape assessment, district leaders were able to investigate their district’s infrastructure and organizational needs for implementing effective early childhood programming and services. This process was an essential component of the transitional year so that each district could establish a solid foundation in their early childhood system to support effective capacity-building as part of the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan efforts beginning in the 2022-2023 school year. District leaders’ insights from their landscape assessments served as an essential element to guide decision-making and collective action moving forward. Data from focus groups indicated that leaders valued resources provided by the P-3 Center and looked forward to following the plans outlined by the Superintendents’ Plan.

Leadership Effectiveness

During the 2021–2022 school year, ongoing efforts continued to support the work of principals in the School as Hub schools, providing opportunities for them to deepen their learning around birth through Grade 3 leadership through coaching, consultation, and connection with each other. The principal plays an essential role in the success of the school. Creating and fostering an inclusive school mission, prioritizing instructional leadership, and promoting a positive learning climate and culture are critical to ensuring that students, families, staff, and the school community are successful in experiencing high-quality learning opportunities. This is especially critical for members of communities that are historically marginalized.

GOAL STATEMENT

Principals in the School as Hub schools will develop proficiency and skills for leading the Birth Through Grade 3 Approach. The Institute staff will guide principals to build capacity in the areas of:

- Birth Through Grade 3 Learning
- Continuous Improvement
- Prioritizing Relationships
- Clear Vision
- Focus on Equity
- Shared Leadership

TRANSITION YEAR 2021–2022 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- The impact of the pandemic continues to be felt by principals. Their daily challenges include shortage of staff; social-emotional needs of students, staff, and families; and the demands (state and district) of meeting the educational (and social-emotional) needs of each student while achieving required benchmarks (state and district). To support the principals, Institute staff:
 - Covered for administrators and fulfilled school building management tasks, allowing principals and/or assistant principals to step away and participate in meetings, complete work, and/or engage in their own professional learning.
 - Served as educators and took the role of paraprofessionals in classrooms when schools were short of staff.
- Despite increased stress and responsibilities, principals continued to actively participate in coaching sessions and monthly principal meetings, and they supported one another. Highlights included:
 - Ten principals met with the leadership program administrator an average of seven times each (from August 2021 to May 2022).
 - Four principals held monthly joint Buffett Early Childhood Institute and school team meetings to focus on the School as Hub program.

- Monthly principal meetings provided opportunities to learn about and collaborate around enhancing leadership effectiveness, instructional excellence, and parent and community partnership engagement. An additional focus was on how to increase access and opportunities for summer learning.
- One district administrator, three principals, two home visitors, and one parent participated in local and/or national panels, presentations, and attended conferences to share their experiences as part of the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan.
- Principals gained insights and ideas for effective implementation of the Birth Through Grade 3 Approach through a study of the recent publication, *Leading Learning Communities: A Principal’s Guide to Early Learning and the Early Grades (Pre-K–3rd Grade)*, from the 2021 edition of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), (Kauerz et al, 2021).

LEADERSHIP SUPPORTS

The Buffett Early Childhood Institute’s leadership program administrator worked closely with each participating school principal in creating an inclusive environment within the school community that honors the rich cultural, racial, and linguistic background and experiences of every birth through Grade 3 child and family. The administrator supports school principals in seeking out reciprocal partnerships with families and the community by using high-yield strategies to meet the needs of children and families focusing on equity, continuity, and quality. Throughout the year, she provided individual coaching, worked closely with school teams, and facilitated monthly community practice meetings. Her consultations along with other functions of her role were logged using detailed notes. Through a qualitative analysis, support themes were uncovered. The following section provides a summary of these themes.

Reflective Practices

The leadership program administrator often reported utilizing reflective practices with the principals she worked with. She noted that she would provide direct opportunities for reflection, but she also provided more indirect methods, such as opportunities for debriefing. The administrator also often noted that she spent time discussing the principals’ leadership skills and goals for future growth with them. She provided encouragement, as well as ideas and opportunities for future professional growth.

Reviewing Data

In the information provided by the leadership program administrator she often reported spending time with the principals, reviewing data they provided. Data that was reviewed included instructional strategies, disciplinary strategies, and offered programs, as well as data from surveys that were administered at the schools, such as the Family

Engagement Survey. The leadership program administrator guided data review conversations about how the data would be best utilized to make improvements in the future instruction and/or programming.

Planning

The leadership program administrator often reported preparing and planning for upcoming visits with principals. Like much of the support provided by the Institute, the type of planning varied based on the needs of the principal and school. She often provided support for instructional planning, discussing plans for instruction and family engagement during the summer, and how to best support the goals of the principal and school. Frequently noted by the administrator was how she provided support when planning for improved family inclusion and community outreach. Planning support was also noted after reviewing data, showing that she often reviewed data, then provided support for proper utilization.

Other Supports

The leadership program administrator often reported that she collaborated with principals regarding how to utilize Institute staff, such as the educational facilitator. The principals often shared with her that the additional support benefits their schools and families and expressed concern when the educational facilitators would not be present. Additional points of interest are found below in Table 2.

TABLE 2. | ADDITIONAL POINTS OF INTEREST

Goals	The leadership program administrator reported spending time with principals discussing goals. She often spent time facilitating the discussion of the principal’s individual goals, as well as goals for the whole school.
Relationship building	The leadership program administrator often spent time building positive relationships with the principals she worked with.
Barriers and challenges	The leadership program administrator also reported discussing the barriers and challenges principals face at their schools. Most notably, principals often shared that challenging student behaviors provided additional stress during the school year.

PRINCIPAL PERSPECTIVES

In the spring of 2022, evaluation partners at MMI conducted interviews with five principals from four school districts who have participated in the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan for a minimum of three years. The purpose of the interviews was to

learn more about how being a part of School as Hub programming has impacted the principals and their schools.

The Principals

The interview sample represents half of the principals who lead School as Hub schools and 67% of the school districts. Of the five principals who consented to be interviewed, two have been a part of the Superintendents' Plan for three years, starting in the fall of 2019. Most of their experience with the plan occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in March 2020. The remaining three participants have been a part of the plan since its inception seven years ago.

General Reflections on the Superintendents' Plan

The principals described the Superintendents' Plan as a multi-layered set of interventions and supports to build a School as Hub program that creates partnerships with families from birth to Grade 3. The Superintendents' Plan includes the following programmatic elements: home visitation services for families with children up to age 3, family facilitation services for families when their children turn age 3, and an educational facilitator who works directly with educators in PreK through third grade to strengthen instructional practices and provide professional development. In addition, principals have multiple opportunities for professional development and collaboration. These include monthly in-person meetings with the participating principals and Institute staff and quarterly one-on-one coaching sessions with the Institute's leadership program administrator.

The Value of Networking

Principals described the value of building relationships with school leaders across the metro area. They appreciated hearing various perspectives and learning how other schools engage parents. One principal shared that they borrowed an idea from another school to improve parent-teacher conferences that are held prior to the start of the school year. Families now bring an "artifact" that tells something about them to share with their child's educator. This has been an effective way for educators to learn more about their families and build more meaningful relationships.

One-on-One Support

Working one-on-one with the leadership program administrator has been a vital source of support. Principals have appreciated the rich conversations, the opportunity to problem solve, and the insightful questions that have helped them stay focused on the big picture. They expressed deep respect for the expertise that Institute staff bring to this work.

Impact of New Staff at the School Level

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan added two new staff to each school—the home visitor and the family facilitator—with additional support provided by the educational facilitators housed at the Institute. Several principals noted how important these additional staff have been to their School as Hub efforts. The home visitor in particular has been essential to expand the school's outreach in the community. One principal noted, "I love the home visitor program. I wish all of our schools had that in our district. I know we've extended it to our Title 1 buildings ... which I think is really important for giving families resources and getting them engaged."

While one principal touted that, until this year, they had the same staff in these positions from the plan's inception, others have not been so fortunate. Staff turnover as well as the elimination of some Superintendents' Plan positions at certain schools have been a challenge. Principals noted that some hires were more effective than others and that losing an excellent team member had a big impact on program quality. In addition, for Institute staff to have the most impact, they need to have strong, trusting relationships with educators and administrators. This was most evident for educational facilitators because they worked closely with educators to help them reflect on and improve their instructional practices. Turnover in this position meant a new hire had to start the relationship-building process all over again, which took time. Moreover, some educational facilitator positions, at various times, have remained vacant for many months. This has caused considerable disruption to that aspect of the Superintendents' Plan.

The Evolution of the School as Hub Programming

All three principals who have been a part of the School as Hub programming since its inception seven years ago mentioned that in the early years, the intervention and expectations were fairly uniform across all schools. They felt the intervention was prescriptive and top-down. As one principal described it, "I think at the beginning, it felt like there wasn't much wiggle room and that every school had to do the same thing." Over time, the key focus on School as Hub and parent engagement has remained consistent, but principals have gained greater autonomy in making decisions about how to implement the program. Principals have welcomed this change. One principal noted that each school and district has unique needs. They expressed gratitude that the Superintendents' Plan has increased its focus "on building a community of practice, around how we each use the resources given to us through the Superintendents' Plan." The leadership program administrator has supported principals to identify ways they can leverage strengths and identify where they need more help. Principals have found this process to be a more powerful experience in impacting school change.

“We started out thinking that ‘one size fits all.’ And that changed as we went along, to realize that each individual site, even if we were in the same district, had some commonalities but also had some individual needs.”

—a principal

Despite the ways School as Hub programming has become more responsive to individual school contexts, one principal who is newer to the program noted that they still find that “some of it just doesn’t fit.” The principal explained that their district already provides extensive professional learning and that their school has a “learning plan” that fits within the goals of the district. This principal finds with the time constraints they face and the needs of their staff to use their planning time to collaborate with each other, it is not always feasible to implement the recommendations and opportunities the School as Hub programming promotes.

Creating a “School as Hub”

Every principal emphasized how much they value creating a true partnership with parents. Several described how their approach has changed because of their participation in the program. Before, they may not have recognized the many strengths families bring to the school community. In addition, they may not have been aware of which families were not engaged or how their parent activities may have excluded some parents because of the schedule, language barriers, or failure to plan for families who might need child care to attend. Principals noted the following ways they now operate differently:

- Increase their visibility at school in greeting families and at events in the community
- Make their schools more welcoming by inviting parents to come into classrooms
- Encourage educators to regularly tell parents something positive about each student
- Engage parents in the decision-making process rather than simply tell them about changes after the fact
- Offer unique opportunities for parents who are traditionally under-represented to participate in school activities and to partner on school issues
- Ensure that school events include activities for babies, toddlers, and teens so the whole family can attend
- Provide Kindergarten families a 15-minute “getting to know you” conference with their educator before school begins (these pre-school conferences were so successful that they expanded them to all grades)
- Install diaper changing tables in the school bathrooms to accommodate families with young children

Another facet of the School as Hub programming for birth through Grade 3 is to connect families to the school before their children are school-aged in order to build trusting relationships and meaningful partnerships early on. The most visible evidence of this effort was building home visiting and family facilitation programs at each school. Principals noted that the success of this depended on the effectiveness of the home visitor and the buy-in of the school staff. One principal explained that having their entire staff go through training on early childhood development from birth through age 3 increased their support for home visitation, and more educators referred families to the program. Another principal shared that their educators have become active recruiters for home visiting. At pre-school conferences, educators note who has a toddler in tow or who is pregnant and then pass along their contact information to the home visitor.

“We’ve really invested a lot of time developing a committee of parents to help us really reflect on what it means to be engaged. Do they feel that they belong to our community? We’ve asked some hard questions of ourselves and asked for some really good feedback from them. We’re thinking about how we make our school meet the needs of our families, as opposed to asking our families to change and try to adapt to what we’re offering. We’ve been much more intentional about that and seen some really good gains, both from parents, but also from our staff just in their ability to connect and collaborate and partner with families more effectively.”

—a principal

Overall, principals spoke highly about home visitation. They were glad to have young families more connected to their school and appreciate the positive impacts a home visitor can have on their school’s culture. One school now has two home visitors and has seen the program spread to all the elementary schools in the district.

“I didn’t know much about home visiting before I got involved in this plan and now I’m a huge proponent of it. I don’t want it to go away because I think it’s priceless.”

—a principal

The Superintendents’ Plan and Leadership Development

Principals were asked to reflect on how participating in the School as Hub programming has helped develop them as a leader. During the interviews, while participants did not directly point to specific ways they have changed as a leader, they all noted positive experiences that have shaped how they have implemented the School as Hub model.

Professional Development

Principals have appreciated the formal professional development that has been offered within their schools and across the metro area. They also have embraced the opportunities to go to national conferences they might not otherwise be able to attend. One noted that they were a conference presenter where they shared how they have implemented School as Hub practices at their school.

Superintendents' Plan Program Administrator Support

Principals mentioned that their regular conversations with the leadership program administrator helped them grow in ways that were important to them. The support and insights gleaned from these conversations helped one principal stay focused on family engagement. Another appreciated that the administrator supported their interest in focusing on equity issues at his school. A third principal shared that they had been encouraged to focus more on students' social-emotional learning and how their school could be more culturally proficient. They welcomed this feedback as it has helped them appreciate families' funds of knowledge and value the strengths families bring to the school community.

Collaborating With Other Principals

Regular meetings with other principals also contributed to leadership development. Principals have learned from each other and have helped each other stay focused on the big picture. Nearly every interviewee shared how much they appreciate the time they spend with their peers.

One principal noted:

"It's about creating the space to have those important conversations with other colleagues around the metro who are also engaged in similar type[s] of work at their building. I would say that is the biggest thing for me as a leader is just making sure that I create the space to have the conversation about family engagement, for example."

Focusing on Birth Through Grade 3

Several principals emphasized that their approach to their work has shifted. They have an expanded view of their responsibilities and are no longer just focused on the current students enrolled in their school. As one explained, "I now think of myself as a birth through sixth grade principal, as opposed to a PreK through sixth principal." They went on to say that every decision they make includes a reflection on the families and their youngest children: "How can we get infants involved? How can we get prenatal moms involved?...It's changed my way of thinking."

The Superintendents' Plan During the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Institute staff adjusted the programming to meet the schools' evolving needs. They reduced the number of meetings and switched to online meeting formats. They collaborated closely with principals to see how they could customize their support. Principals noted that it was helpful to have Institute staff continue to meet regularly with them to assist with problem-solving.

As schools faced staff absences due to illness, Institute and school staff, including family facilitators and educational facilitators, stepped in to provide support in classrooms. One principal shared that they had three PreKindergarten classrooms that needed paraprofessionals to meet required student-teacher ratios. With vacancies and illnesses, these classrooms were often out of ratio. They were glad to have two extra staff to "share the load." Often, they would cover classrooms in the morning and have the family or educational facilitator cover in the afternoons. They noted, "That's not the intended focus of their work. However, since we're all a team, we just kind of work together."

Having the educational and family facilitators step in was a tremendous help but also disheartening. Several principals shared that it was disappointing to have to set aside their plans to further their School as Hub efforts. With school leaders and Institute staff serving as substitutes and paraprofessionals, they could no longer work on long-range planning, improving educator practices, or increasing family outreach. One principal explained, "Our community of practice kind of shifted from those gap-closing practices ...to how can we support you right now?"

An additional challenge was that the Institute staff continued to work remotely after schools reopened for in-person instruction. Principals felt their absence and noted that this situation was not ideal.

Looking Ahead

Principals expressed hope that the School as Hub programming will get back on track, post-pandemic, and that they can continue to make progress on their goals. Several principals emphasized the importance of continuing the home visitation and family facilitation programs. Another highly valued aspect of the program is the monthly principal meetings. Principals have missed networking with each other and look forward to getting together in person.

A few principals expressed some uncertainty about where the Superintendents' Plan is headed. One principal explained that in the past they felt there was a "very clear vision for the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan and for our School as Hub program." But now, "it's a little bit fuzzier and disjointed." They had heard about the

landscape assessment that was conducted this year but felt there has not been strong communication about its purpose or findings. They remain hopeful “that we’ll get back to that really clear direction of ‘this is what we’re going after, and this is why we’re doing these things.’” Another principal shared that they were “excited about the [2022–2023] plan and hopefully ... it will find ways to develop me as a principal and make me better in my role.”

The following reflection demonstrates how much a principal has valued the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan:

“...I think that the impact is massive on our building...Allowing the family to learn and grow and get the resources they need to do what they need to do and feel important for their family is immeasurable. I can name countless families that rely heavily on the support that they receive through their home visitor or family facilitator...”

SUMMARY OF LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS EFFORTS

During the 2021–2022 transition year, Institute staff responded by substituting for principals and providing school support so principals could attend to the various needs of their school buildings and staff due to the increased demands and stress presented by the pandemic. Institute staff continued to provide one-on-one coaching and facilitated community of practice meetings so principals could support each other and share ideas focused on supporting children’s recovery of learning and development of social-emotional skills. Institute staff also guided school leaders to utilize data to make decisions about children’s learning and ensure equity for children and families most impacted.

Instructional Excellence

Instructional excellence is essential to establishing a connected and aligned continuum of high-quality early learning experiences for children from birth through Grade 3. The Superintendents’ Plan includes targeted efforts to help educators and instructional leaders develop capacity and utilize high leverage strategies that promote young children’s learning and development, academic achievement, and lifelong success. As a result of their experiences during the pandemic, educators have confronted formidable challenges, leading to increased levels of stress and exhaustion. They have reported learning loss among their students, as well as more frequent interruptions due to behavior challenges. As part of the Superintendents’ Plan, Institute staff is positioned to support and guide educators to provide quality, continuity, and equity in their instructional practices. To meet this responsibility during the 2021–2022 school year required flexibility and strategic action to balance support for educators’ well-being while ensuring children had access to necessary instructional supports.

GOAL STATEMENT

Educators will engage in coaching, modeling, and professional learning opportunities that guide effective instruction with a focus on children’s access and opportunities. Institute staff will be responsive and adaptive to the requests of educators and school leaders with an intentional focus on quality, continuity, and equity in children’s learning and development. They will provide guidance for fostering children’s social-emotional development and providing support for challenging behaviors. During coaching, modeling, and professional learning opportunities with school staff, Institute staff will guide effective instruction with a focus on children’s access and opportunities to experience:

- Cultural, Linguistic, and Personal Relevance
- Language-Rich Communication
- Cognitive Challenge
- Collaboration Among Peers
- Child Decision-Making and Planning
- Child-Initiated Exploration and Innovation

TRANSITION YEAR 2021–2022 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Institute staff:

- Worked alongside the district and school administrators, instructional coaches, leaders, educators, and paraprofessionals/teacher assistants supporting the needs of school districts.
- Worked closely with school leaders to support staffing. Specifically, due to substitute shortages in November through January, Institute staff substituted and covered classes daily to help support the school staff. In addition, the team was on call and willing to support in other ways as needed. They substituted and covered

for paraprofessionals and educators, and they handled recess duty, lunchroom responsibilities, and other spaces that required support. They were highly flexible and available to support coverage needs in the school.

- Maximized coaching and support efforts by distributing Institute staff time in School as Hub schools to achieve desired teaching and learning outcomes. Educators engaged in coaching cycles with Institute staff around developmentally appropriate, intellectually rigorous, and culturally responsive instructional practices.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT FOR INSTRUCTIONAL EXCELLENCE

Institute staff provided opportunities for educators to develop understanding and capacity for intellectually rigorous, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive teaching and learning birth through Grade 3, including:

- Designed and facilitated on-site professional learning by request focused on Technology in the Early Years, The Brain Architecture Game, Taking a Developmental Approach to Academic and Socio-Emotional Learning, and Rethinking Circle Time for Bellevue Public Schools (two sessions, 80 educators), Educational Service Unit 3 (two sessions, 30 educators), Omaha Public Schools (three sessions, more than 200 educators), and Westside Early Childhood Centers (two sessions, 125 educators)
- Provided individualized coaching, modeling, and guiding instructional strategies for educators in classrooms
- Provided intensive tutoring and/or small group instruction at one School as Hub school
- Delivered behavior support for small intervention reading groups for 21 educational assistants/paraprofessionals at one School as Hub school
- Suggested strategies and assisted with planning for students with autism spectrum disorders to support all abilities for educators at one School as Hub school
- Designed and provided materials to each School as Hub school to support and coach educators on how to support instruction through various strategies
- Facilitated on-site staff professional development opportunities focused on equity for School as Hub schools in two districts
- Provided weekly community of practice sessions with educators focused on integrating children's funds of knowledge into classroom practices beginning in June 2022
- Continuing to co-plan and will co-facilitate equity professional development in collaboration with staff in one district

Institute staff provided opportunities for educators to develop understanding and capacity for supporting their own well-being, integrating social-emotional and academic learning, and providing support for behavior, including:

- Continued coaching by educational facilitators to help educators support children's

social and emotional learning (ongoing)

- District-requested professional learning session, "Developmental Approach to Academic and SEL" workshop (Four sessions: 540 educators)
- District-requested professional learning session, "Increasing Appropriate Behavior: Strategies to Help Support Teachers and Staff in the Classroom" workshop (Four sessions; 540 educators)
- District-requested professional learning session, "Behavior Supports and Strategies to Support Teacher Assistants and Staff in Small Reading Groups" (Virtual; 21 teacher assistants)
- Educational facilitator and instructional program administrator coaching in classrooms for behavioral supports to foster positive child interactions and behavior
- Coaching by the instructional program administrator to help educators identify strategies and develop individual education plans for special education students

INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT

Throughout 2021–2022, educational facilitators and the instructional program administrator documented support provided to the schools. Qualitative analysis was used to reveal themes of support.

Educational Facilitators

In the Superintendent's Early Childhood Plan, educational facilitators bring an outside perspective to each school community, with a focus on promoting instruction and developing parent and community partnerships that are founded on the School as Hub principles of quality, continuity, and equity for all children birth through Grade 3. Their role includes emphasizing leadership for preschool through Grade 3, educator professional development, promoting and supporting educator self-reflection, creating meaningful relationships with students and their families, and expanding the use of culturally responsive practices that honor all children and families. In addition, they model the use of information gathered from data to promote the use of high-yield strategies for engaging children and families. The educational facilitators continue to deepen their knowledge and skills around facilitating reciprocal conversations to promote high levels of educator reflection.

Family Inclusion

Family-school partnership is a key component of the Superintendent's Plan, and educational facilitators often reported that they help support the inclusion of families in various ways. They helped coordinate programs that would provide material resources to families, like a winter coat drive and a summer book exchange. They also planned additional events for families to come and learn more about fostering social-emotional learning, executive functioning, and literacy skills. These events were held during the

summer and coincided with times when parents would already be at school in order to be as accessible as possible. Educational facilitators often spent time creating flyers advertising these events and distributing them to families and throughout the community. If they felt it was necessary to provide additional resources to families, educational facilitators would spend time looking for additional resources and distributing them.

Reflective Practices

Educational facilitators encouraged the use of reflective practices—a relationship-focused approach—for themselves and the school staff they worked with. Reflective practices were used in a variety of areas in reference to individual and programmatic goals. Educational facilitators often described meetings where they reflected on the implementation of programs, instruction, and overarching goals their team may have had. They also encouraged reflective practices when working with school staff individually. Educational facilitators shared that when they had moments alone, they often encouraged educators to engage in reflective practices and provided opportunities for discussion. Educational facilitators themselves also reported that they engaged in reflective practices. They reported moments where they were able to expand their learning and reflect on how they could use their knowledge in future practice.

Equity

Educational facilitators described their efforts to support equitable practices in schools. They had discussions with school staff regarding each school's process to become more equitable, and they provided opportunities for discussion and growth. Educational facilitators often read materials discussing the importance of equitable education and shared those materials with their peers. The sharing of resources supported positive discussion and understanding. Educational facilitators also assisted school staff with promoting equity and positive discussion with the students.

Planning

When working in schools, educational facilitators reported their involvement in various types of planning, including:

- **General Planning.** Educational facilitators noted that they spent time assisting in the planning of various activities during their time at school. Educational facilitators described planning school-wide events, planning and organizing classrooms, and assisting in the planning of school-wide programs, such as Positive Behavior Intervention Support. They also described planning professional development workshops for staff and summer activities for children and their families.
- **Instructional Planning.** Aside from general planning, educational facilitators also reported that they participated in the planning of instructional materials and

programs. They stated that they often met with school staff to discuss instructional lessons they planned on executing at their school, as well as instructional plans for the next school year. During their instructional planning, educational facilitators often discussed the logistics of program implementation with other school staff.

- **Student Planning.** Educational facilitators also noted being involved in the planning for individual students. Educational facilitators noted that they often discussed student progress and worked with school staff to develop the appropriate next steps for the student. For example, an educational facilitator described a meeting with school staff to discuss the successful transition back to school after spring break for students who may struggle with returning to school.

Providing Material Support

Educational facilitators played a large part in supporting the material resources for school staff. Materials included physical resources such as books, articles, flyers, and learning supplies. Educational facilitators often spent their time organizing and preparing, creating, and distributing materials:

- **Organizing and Preparing Materials.** Educational facilitators spent time arranging a wide range of materials for different purposes. They spent time organizing physical resources, like replenishing classroom materials and preparing them for future use. They also noted frequently that they spent time researching and developing a variety of resources for school staff, such as instructional materials and small-group support materials. When supplemental resources were provided to educational facilitators, they also noted that they spent time organizing and preparing those resources for use in the classroom.
- **Creating Materials.** Educational facilitators also spent time creating materials for different school purposes. They reported developing school events and then creating the necessary materials for them. The materials created for supporting school events were often used to advertise the event or provide resources for parents following the event.

Observation and Consultation

Educational facilitators often spent their time observing students. The observations provided the opportunity to examine classrooms, educators, and students. The educational facilitators observed various activities, such as small-group work and whole-class educator instruction. They were even tasked with observing the implementation of school-wide programs, such as Positive Behavior Intervention Support. Educators could also utilize observations by the educational facilitators. They could request that the educational facilitator come in and observe curriculum implementation or educator performance. Following their observations, educational facilitators sometimes provided consultation. Depending on what was observed, the

educational facilitators often provided time to discuss the observation and provided debriefing and resources as needed.

Student Interaction and Support

During their time at school, educational facilitators reported a variety of different interactions with students. Educational facilitators most frequently reported working with students individually or in small groups, but sometimes they were asked to provide support during unstructured activities like lunch and recess. They also reported that they frequently engaged in conversations with school staff regarding how to best support specific groups of students, such as students who were behind in certain subjects and students who are English Language Learners. Educational facilitators also noted that they often spent time providing support to individual students. They would often work one-on-one with students who required additional assistance. Educational facilitators were often called in to provide support to students with specific behavioral needs.

Coaching

Educational facilitators often provided coaching to school staff in a variety of ways. Coaching was initiated by either the school staff member or the educational facilitator. Sometimes educators would approach the educational facilitator and ask for guidance on successfully implementing curriculum or how to support an individual student's behavioral needs. Other times, the educational facilitator would provide coaching based on an observation of the educator's instructional practices in the classroom. The coaching provided by the educational facilitators often began as a conversation with the staff member and then they were able to tailor guidance and resources to individuals' needs.

Reviewing Data

Educational facilitators also reported that they often collaborated with school staff and provided support when reviewing data. Sources of data included data related to the implementation of individualized interventions, student observations, staff surveys, and the Family Engagement Survey. Educational facilitators also noted that they utilized data in order to assist in planning for the following school year.

Barriers and Challenges: Substituting

Among the educational facilitators' records, a major challenge was identified. Educational facilitators were often substituting in classrooms. While different environments and circumstances were provided, it was found that educational facilitators most often substituted for a paraprofessional or provided additional support in a classroom due to a paraprofessional's absence. The responsibilities of the educational facilitators varied, but they often described working with students in small groups, supporting students with behavioral needs, or observing the educator while providing support.

Instructional Program Administrator

In the Superintendent's Early Childhood Plan, the instructional program administrator leads the development of educational facilitators in supporting several goals in instruction to achieve School as Hub principles of quality, continuity, and equity for all children from birth through Grade 3. In this role, there is a high-support coaching cycle, with the focus on effective professional development design and delivery that promotes the use of high-yield strategies with the implementation of curriculum and the use of varied assessments and data analysis. Lessons are modeled regularly through a community of practice to give perspective to each school community, with an emphasis on promoting effective instruction and developing parent and community partnerships. In addition, the instructional program administrator builds and maintains strong relationships with district and learning teams, including district coaches and school and district leaders.

Observation

Observation was noted as being frequently performed by the instructional program administrator. During visits to various schools, the administrator observed a variety of settings and operations. The observations ranged from general classroom observations to the observation of an intervention for a specific student. Many observations were accompanied by the opportunity to consult and debrief.

Material Support

The instructional program administrator played a key role in the organization, preparation, creation, and distribution of materials for those in the schools. While being involved in the organization, preparation, and distribution of materials, she most frequently reported creating materials for students. The materials created often supported students that required extra instruction or special accommodations.

Direct Interactions with Students

During visits, the instructional program administrator reported multiple individual interactions with students. During these interactions, she often described using resources that were specific to the child's needs and spending time helping the student develop additional skills through matching planning and programming that was tied to the student's learning goals. Sometimes the interactions with students were paired with observations of the student and their behavior, either before or after their individual interactions.

Barriers and Challenges: Substituting

The instructional program administrator also reported that she spent a notable amount of time substituting. Like the educational facilitators, the administrator did spend time substituting due to the lack of paraprofessionals in the classroom. She also provided

general classroom coverage when needed. When meeting with the administrator, schools also shared their concerns regarding their ability to have an adequate number of staff for the school year. Table 3 displays additional points of interest from the logged data.

TABLE 3. | ADDITIONAL POINTS OF INTEREST

Reflective Practices	When working with staff in schools, the instructional program administrator often encouraged reflective practices. She reported encouraging educators and educational facilitators to reflect on their current practices and how they could be modified to best support their students' needs.
Student Planning	The instructional program administrator also reported that she often spent time assisting in educational planning for individual students. She described assisting in the implementation of a token economy for a student and took steps to make sure other students were receiving the correct resources and accommodations.
Reviewing Data	After working on the creation of support programs for students, the instructional program administrator reported that she followed up with the implementation of the program and the student's progress.

ESSENTIAL CHILD EXPERIENCES INSTRUCTIONAL TOOLKIT

Thirty early childhood professionals and leaders representing family home care, child care, and school settings across Douglas and Sarpy Counties joined the staff at the Institute to guide the development of an Essential Child Experiences Instructional Toolkit.

Goal Statement

The toolkit will focus on enhancing quality, expanding equity, and strengthening continuity in classrooms serving children from birth through Grade 3. The early childhood professionals' insights will be used to develop resources that promote deeper understanding, enhanced usability, and increased clarity for implementing the six Essential Child Experiences successfully. The Essential Child Experiences include:

- Cultural, Linguistic, and Personal Relevance
- Cognitive Challenge
- Language-Rich Communication
- Collaboration Among Peers
- Child Decision-Making and Planning
- Child-Initiated Exploration and Innovation

Instructional Toolkit Workgroup Participation

Participation in the Instructional Toolkit workgroup consists of two phases. During the first phase, toolkit workgroup members participated in four virtual workshops that met in January and February 2022. The purpose of the workshops was to deepen workgroup members' learning about the six Essential Child Experiences before engaging in the second phase. The second phase includes monthly community of practice meetings. The community of practice meetings began in March 2022 and will end in December 2022. During the meetings, toolkit workgroup members have the opportunity to discuss, create, and try out "tools" to include in the toolkit. Toolkit workgroup members are eligible for a total of \$1,000 compensation for participation in 2022. The work of the community of practice is emergent; however, data from the completed workshop phase is presented below.

Institute staff provided opportunities for educators to develop understanding and capacity for intellectually rigorous, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive teaching and learning birth through Grade 3, including:

- Designed and facilitated Essential Child Experiences foundational workshops (participants included 15 educators and 15 school/child care leaders)
- Facilitated monthly engagement of an intensive learning cohort with the Instructional Toolkit Workgroup (15 educators and 15 school/child care leaders)

Instructional Toolkit Workgroup Survey

Toolkit workgroup members were asked to complete a survey before and after attending the four workshops to assess (1) their comfort level implementing the six Essential Child Experiences in their classrooms and (2) their understanding of each Essential Child Experience.

Findings

Comfort Level

Toolkit workgroup members were asked to rate their comfort level in implementing each of the six Essential Child Experiences in the classroom on a scale of 1 to 5. The average comfort across the six Essential Child Experiences was 3.97 before the workshops and 3.93 after the workshops. Survey results show that toolkit members indicated high comfort ratings for Cultural, Linguistic, and Personal Relevance, Cognitive Challenge, and Child-Initiated Exploration and Innovation after participating in the workgroups. However, the opposite was true for the other three Essential Child Experiences. Toolkit workgroup members indicated slightly lower comfort ratings for Language-Rich Communication, Collaboration Among Peers, and Child Decision-Making and Planning after participating in the workgroups. Although not major, the

slight changes in comfort scores could be primarily driven by toolkit workgroup members' shifts in understanding of the six Essential Child Experiences after participating in the workshops.

Understanding

Toolkit workgroup members were asked to describe their understanding of each of the six essential experiences in their own words before and after the workshops. To analyze responses, predetermined elements of each Essential Child Experience definition (as presented in the workshops) were identified and a qualitative approach was utilized to evaluate survey responses for use of the predetermined definition elements. Survey responses suggested a slight shift in how members thought about the six Essential Child Experiences. For example, toolkit workgroup members defined Cultural, Linguistic, and Personal Relevance as something related to language and identity prior to attending workshops; however, after the workshops, members provided a more in-depth definition by including additional terms, such as background information, in their definition. When asked to define Cognitive Challenge, most members defined it in terms of rigor before participating in the workshops. After the workshops, members expanded the definition to include the development of knowledge and thinking. The most noticeable shift was how toolkit workgroup members defined Language-Rich Communication. After the workshops, members included terms such as interaction, speaking, literacy, and discourse as part of the definition of Language-Rich Communication. These terms were not as prevalent in definitions before participating in the workshops.

Results of these surveys indicate that workshops had the most meaningful impact on how workgroup members defined the six Essential Child Experiences. While workgroup members indicated minimal change in their comfort levels implementing the essential experiences in their classroom, learning was evident in the expanded definitions of these terms following the workshops. Future assessments will continue to evaluate learning and documentation of the Essential Child Experiences Toolkit.

SUMMARY OF INSTRUCTIONAL EXCELLENCE EFFORTS

During the 2021–2022 transitional year, the Institute’s instructional staff supported the development of teaching and learning by stepping in to substitute in classrooms for educators and paraprofessionals; serving on lunch duty and other school-related tasks; and providing one-on-one attention to children to guide positive behavior and target academic needs. They continued to provide coaching, consultation, and modeling upon educator and principal request to build educators’ capacity to utilize effective instructional and classroom management strategies through evidence-based practices and data-informed decision-making.

Family and Community Partnerships Engagement

Meaningful connections among schools, families, and community are instrumental in ensuring that children have access to what they need from birth through Grade 3. Quality, continuity, and equity in children’s learning and development are advanced when educators prioritize building bridges between schools and resources in the community to coordinate family support. The work that school staff members do with community organizations, agencies, and other providers helps support children and families within the school setting. Improvements in children’s academic and developmental outcomes are tied to a school’s collaboration with its community. During the 2021–2022 transition year, the Institute’s staff intentionally built connections between schools and community organizations to support the needs and interests of families.

GOAL STATEMENT

School leaders and staff in the Superintendents’ Plan, including principals, educators, family facilitators, and home visitors, focus on being responsive to families, building meaningful connections, and providing access to needed resources. Institute staff provides coaching and professional learning to strengthen parent and child relationships and family well-being by focusing on:

- Family-school relationships
- Collaborative relationships
- Effective communication
- Families as advocates and decision-makers
- Family representation
- Family support for transitions
- Eliminating barriers to partnerships
- Early learning pathways
- Comprehensive child and family supports
- Culturally responsive connections

TRANSITION YEAR 2021–2022 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Institute staff provided opportunities for leaders, educators, and providers to develop understanding and capacity for school, family, and community partnerships. For example, Institute staff:

- Facilitated monthly community of practice meetings and conducted coaching sessions with home visitors and family facilitators that supported sharing of ideas and expanded thinking on how to partner with families both virtually and in person while sustaining responsiveness to needs. Topics discussed included:

- Children’s transitions from age to age and program to program
- Facilitating playgroups and socializations for children and families
- Social-emotional well-being of children, families, and practitioners
- Effective and equitable family engagement and communication, including virtual engagement strategies
- Community partnerships
- Collaboration efforts
- Parenting practices
- Black maternal health
- Supported school staff to expand family engagement experiences beyond home visitation with opportunities for families to bring their children to playgroups at school, connect with one another virtually, and authentically engage with other families of young children at the school.
- Focused on equity through guided discussion about who is benefiting from School as Hub programming, what barriers exist to participation, and how to include family input to influence the direction of family engagement opportunities. Ideas generated and put into practice included different forms of virtual engagement opportunities.
- Held discussions with district leaders at four school districts regarding expansion of services to more families via changing responsibilities of current school-based home visitors and family facilitators. Leaders from all four districts reviewed and modified their job descriptions and utilized data to determine next steps.
- Supported home visitors and family facilitators as they adjusted their services and interactions with families to meet individual family desires and needs. School partners have shared that, due to the pandemic, more families need access to community resources. Institute staff have worked with school staff to connect families to these resources.
- Fostered School as Hub programming by providing coaching and consultation for school leaders and staff to build knowledge and access to community resources for families. These include:
 - Programming offered by local libraries for children birth through Grade 3 and their families
 - Engagement in the local Raise Me to Read initiative focused on promoting literacy for children and families
- Provided opportunities for educators to learn how to tap into children’s funds of knowledge through partnerships with children’s families and a deepened understanding about the community in which children live (described in the Professional Development for All section).

HOME VISITING AND FAMILY FACILITATION, BIRTH THROUGH AGE 5

School-based, voluntary home visiting is a key program component for the School as

Hub programming. Consistent, high-quality home visiting in the early years has been shown to increase children’s outcomes over time by: (1) increasing parents’ capacity to support their child’s learning and development (Caldera et al., 2007) and (2) enhancing families’ relationships and engagement with their child’s school (Wessels, 2013). The home visiting program includes three one-hour visits per month with each participating family throughout the school year and summer months. As children age out of home visiting when they turn 3 years old, family facilitators continue to perform personal visits with most families once per month to provide continuity of educational experiences for children until they enter school-based PreK or Kindergarten.

In previous years, recruitment of families into home visiting and or family facilitation typically took place at social school events. Some of these events were canceled in 2021–2022, so classroom educators were called upon to recruit and reach out to families as they were interacting with families via their school’s online system. In addition to classroom educators, general staff within the school helped identify families that were expecting or had children in the home who were not yet enrolled in school. Evaluation activities in the 2021–2022 school year focused on capturing perspectives of enrolled families as well as perspectives of school and district staff.

In the 2021–2022 academic year, 111 children from 95 families enrolled in home visiting services in their school. Of the 95 enrolled families, 89 completed at least one home visit. The total number of home visits completed across all sites was 1,335. In addition, 157 participants engaged in 59 socialization events. Staffing the home visitor and family facilitator positions was a challenge for schools, which faced staffing shortages similar to those seen in schools and communities across the country. There were only two schools that did not experience staffing changes or shortages for home visitors and family facilitators. Many of the schools struggled to hire staff that met necessary qualifications. Some of the schools had only one staff member (or none) filling the roles of home visitor and family facilitator along with sporadic periods of time without staff in the school communities.

By the time their child turns 3, parents discuss their options for their child’s preschool experience with the home visitor and/or family facilitator—stating whether the child will be enrolling in school-based PreK or Head Start, community child care, or staying at home with family, friend, or neighbor. Parents who chose the pathway of community child care or staying at home with family, friend, or neighbor continued receiving personal visits from the home visitor and/or family facilitator at a minimum of once per month. As of May 31, 2022, 38 children turned 3 years old and transitioned from traditional home visiting into one of the pathways. Of this group, 18 children were accepted into school-based PreK or Head Start classrooms and transitioned out of the

program and 17 children stayed home and continued in the program. The remaining three children had other reasons for transitioning out of the program.

School-based home visitors and family facilitators implemented the Growing Great Kids curriculum (GGK; Elliot et al., 2012). All through the school year Growing Great Kids offered support to their users on how to implement the curriculum virtually. These additional resources were helpful to home visitors and family facilitators. Growing Great Kids focuses on understanding family assets, building secure attachments, and cultivating resilience. Home visitors and family facilitators engaged and empowered parents in their role as educators of their children.

Support for Home Visitors and Family Facilitators

In the Superintendent's Early Childhood Plan, the birth–age 5 program specialist plays an essential role in implementing the family and community component, birth through Grade 3. The role of the birth–age 5 program specialist includes field-based leadership and support for home visitors and family facilitators. The specialist trains, coaches, and provides technical assistance with a particular focus on outreach to parents, parent education groups in the schools, and activities that support parents, educator collaboration, parent-child referrals, and transitions across home visiting, child care, preschool, and Kindergarten programs. In addition, this role focuses on building a professional learning community with the parents and families who are working with the home visitors and family facilitators, supporting the implementation and monitoring of home visiting and family partnerships. Throughout 2021–2022, the birth–age 5 program specialist documented support provided to home visitors and family facilitators. Her consultations along with other functions of her role were logged using detailed notes. Qualitative analysis was used to reveal themes of support. The following section provides a summary of these themes.

Family Inclusion and Community Outreach

The birth–age 5 program specialist reflected with home visitors and family facilitators on their efforts regarding family inclusion and community outreach. Many home visitors and family facilitators described efforts to increase family-school partnership, discussing the planning and implementation of events and sharing success stories. Home visitors and family facilitators also described their community outreach efforts, noting that they would like to create more community partnerships and to expand their work across families, schools, and communities.

Recruitment and Enrollment

Recruitment and enrollment were identified as an important aspect of the home visitor's and family facilitator's role and were often discussed with the birth–age 5 program

specialist. Home visitors and family facilitators shared ideas on how to reach more families by recruiting at local schools and described activities designed to increase interest. They also discussed the family enrollment process.

Caseload

Home visitors and family facilitators often provided updates about their caseload to the birth–age 5 program specialist, describing the number of families they worked with and how they were able to partner with them. Home visitors and family facilitators also reflected on the needs of families and talked with the birth–age 5 program specialist about how to meet those needs. The birth–age 5 specialist also facilitated conversations about racial demographics within caseloads.

Socialization Opportunities

Both home visitors and family facilitators noted their involvement in planning and implementing socialization opportunities for the families enrolled in home visitation and/or family facilitation, and they discussed turnout at these events with the birth–age 5 program specialist. Home visitors and family facilitators also shared their hopes and goals for the socialization programs, especially in the context of moving from virtual to in-person events.

Transition Support

Support for families during periods of transition was a common topic of conversation between the birth–age 5 program specialist and home visitors and family facilitators. When a child was struggling, home visitors and family facilitators provided resources for the entire family based on their needs (e.g., those with children entering preschool and students who may struggle when transitioning to a new school). The birth–age 5 program specialist supported the home visitors and family facilitators in creating plans and providing activities for families to support them through transition periods.

FAMILY PERSPECTIVES

Evaluation partners at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) conducted interviews and surveys with parents to capture effectiveness of the home visiting and family facilitation programs across four districts that have active programs and granted district-level evaluation approval for 2022.

Interview Data

Participants and Procedures

For the interviews, questions included topics such as understanding families' experiences with home visiting and family facilitation—things they liked and disliked, as well as how they felt the program met their unique needs and the connections they had with their respective school. One parent from each of the current home visiting and family facilitation

caseloads was randomly selected to participate in the interviews. The interviews were completed via the online Zoom platform, and with the consent of the family were recorded while maintaining confidentiality. The recordings were then processed and analyzed. All parents who participated in interviews received a \$25 Amazon gift card as compensation. Nine interviews (seven in English and two in Spanish) were completed. The interviews were approximately one hour in length. The following section summarizes family perspectives as expressed in the interviews.

Findings

Families' Experience with Equity

During interviews, families were asked about their experiences related to equity and about the opportunities available to them. One parent shared that the program provided exposure to various cultures due to activities that were facilitated by the home visitor. Parents also described a variety of supports that were provided to all the families enrolled in the program.

"I appreciate that our family, through this program, has been exposed to a variety of other cultures. I know the books that they loaned to us they make sure that they represent different cultures, different types of families, and I appreciate that ... They make sure that every family is represented...They did a day where they had representations from different cultures...What foods we like to eat and what are some of our favorite traditions, and I thought that was a really neat thing for them to do as a school community."

While resources were provided to those enrolled in the home visiting or family facilitation program, concern about the overall accessibility of resources was discussed by families. Some parents felt that the program should be advertised more than it is currently. One person spoke on behalf of families with low incomes in her community. She suggested that more information regarding available supports should be provided, so that families in need are aware of events, such as food drives. Another person identified a need for more trust between families and schools, which may be a barrier to the accessibility of the program.

"I'm not in this position, but I'm thinking about low-income families. So, I would say and maybe if they would ask, maybe they would have the information... just like different programs that help low-income families...Whenever the school had a food drive, they would give me a phone call...other than that, I would have known nothing, absolutely nothing."

Positive Experiences with Home Visiting and Family Facilitation

Many families shared positive experiences they had with the home visiting and family facilitation program.

"It's a great program. I feel like our home visitor has been very supportive. She knows our child pretty well in the short time that we've been there, and she gauges her activities to his likes and dislikes, and her activities have a purpose behind them. Whether it's a math base or some kind of literacy activity. She talks with him, she gets to know him. It just follows the goals of the school district, too, and preparing him for his future and learning and helps stimulate some of those loves...and helps parents learn how they can incorporate that thing at home."

Families also said the home visitors' and family facilitators' engagement with them in various activities and events was a positive experience.

"...The socialization groups that they host make it more comfortable for us to come to the school or feel more welcome like we know people, we know teachers, and we know staff because we get to see them when we come up for that..."

Continuity Barriers of Superintendents' Plan Home Visiting and Family Facilitation Programs
Some families expressed that they did not find it helpful to switch from working with a home visitor to a family facilitator as their children grew.

"I didn't like having to switch home facilitator for different age groups and then switching to meeting just once a month. I feel like meeting that little was not helpful. It didn't impact or affect the child's development or us really."

Some families also expressed that they wished that all ages of children were incorporated into their home visits—not just the youngest children in their family.

"I know we focus a lot on the younger kids and that's the purpose, but it would be nice to ... loop the big kids in a little bit so that they feel like they're part of it. They try to do that, but it would be [good] to do that a little bit more."

Family Experiences of Support for Life Transitions

Families had a variety of experiences related to transitions and how they felt supported during these transitions by the home visiting and family facilitation

program. Overall, families felt supported by their home visitor/family facilitator during transitions they experienced while in the program.

“We haven’t had many significant changes. But even when I do switch jobs, she’s great about being more flexible or changing her schedule or rearranging our schedule for home visits to work better. But yeah, I can’t say much because I don’t know if any of these changes were drastic to where I needed any support.”

Desired Early Childhood Programs

Several families said they would like more socialization activities made available to their family. Another common theme was that more activities are needed for working families and for families with older children.

“More socialization types of things for parents who do work, those evening hours would be nice. More access for working parents to be able to get their kids to interact with others and maybe get families together, too. More evening things would be nice.”

Survey Data

Participants and Procedures

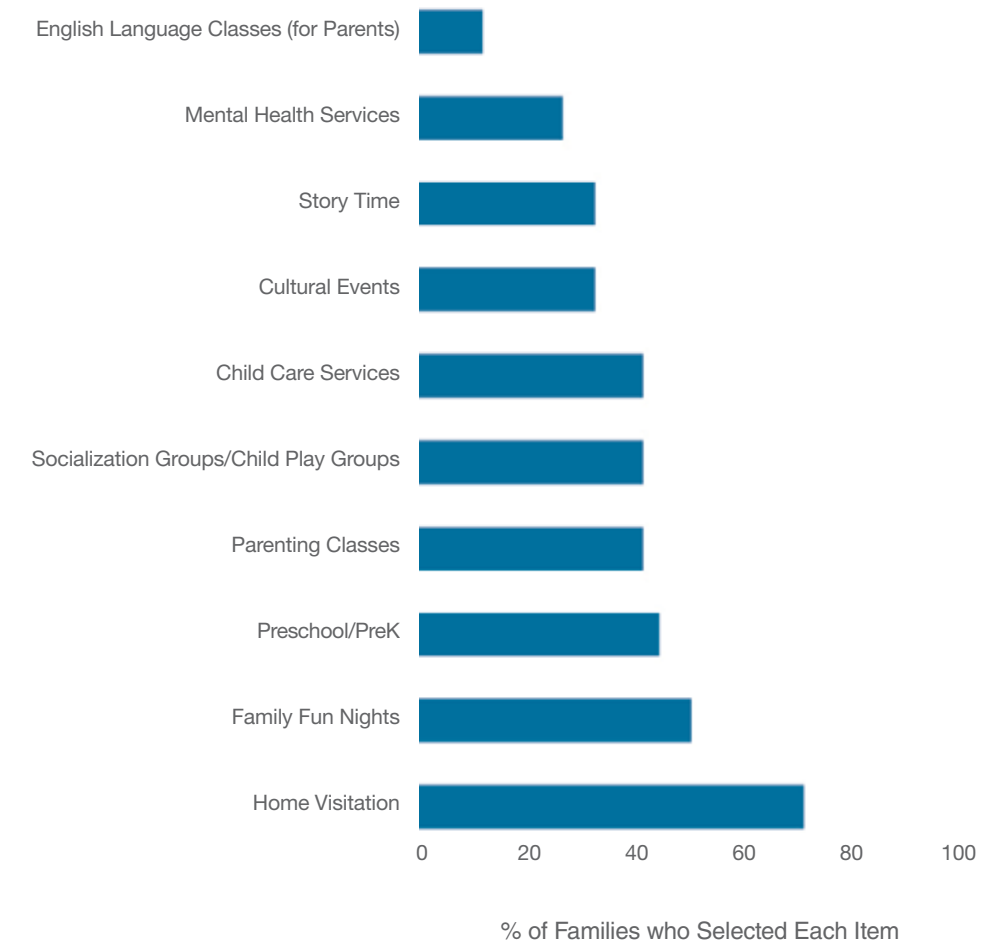
The survey was designed to receive input from families who are receiving home visits, and questions were similar to those included in the interviews. Evaluation partners at UNL distributed English and Spanish online surveys to a total of 48 parents through Qualtrics. The distribution resulted in the collection of 37 surveys, which is a 77% response rate. Families from five school-based programs responded. Thirty-seven families completed surveys and reported on race: 65.6% of families self-identified as White, 21.9% as Asian, 9.4% as Black, and 3.1% reported two or more races. Nearly a third of families reported an ethnicity of Hispanic-Latino/a.

Findings

Desired Programming

Nearly all families who completed surveys responded that current programs offered by the school met family needs (97.2%). Families provided information on the most helpful programs for their family. Those results are provided in Figure 5 with home visitation and family fun nights earning top ratings.

FIGURE 5. | FAMILY PRIORITIES OF PROGRAM OFFERINGS



Satisfaction

Families were asked to report on their satisfaction with their home visitor/family facilitator specifically and their satisfaction with the home visitation and family facilitation program in general. The response scale was from 1 to 4 with 4 being “Strongly Agree.” Average ratings were all above 3.0 for satisfaction with the home visitor or family facilitator and for satisfaction with the home visits, indicating a high degree of satisfaction with programming and endorsement of offerings. There were a few differences between English-speaking and multilingual participants across some items; however, all ratings were high. Families receiving visits in English had slightly lower ratings on home visitors and family facilitators helping family reach goals, level of organization and planning for visits, and providing interesting information for visits. The English-speaking respondents also reported slightly lower ratings on visits helping their child feel happy and secure, and helping parents take better care of the child in addition to helping the family meet goals.

Families also reported on their overall satisfaction with the school and school-related programming. Families were universally comfortable in reporting their family needs to school staff and were satisfied with the support they received from school staff; they were comfortable with transitions and felt their culture was valued by the school. All ratings were above 3.5 on a 4-point scale. Parents generally felt like they were better parents because of the program.

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL STAFF PERSPECTIVES REGARDING EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

District representatives, school principals, and school staff participated in interviews where they were asked about their experiences and opinions regarding early childhood programs. The focus was on what programs were offered, how decisions were made by schools and districts about what programs to offer, as well as barriers and challenges faced by families who were eligible to participate.

Participants and Procedures

Participants included staff from five school districts, representing six School as Hub schools. Evaluation partners at UNL conducted interviews at three levels: district representatives, principals, and school staff that currently provide early childhood programming (including home visitors/family facilitators). Twenty-seven hour-long interviews were conducted between February and May 2022 via the online platform Zoom. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded into themes to represent constructs of primary interest. Participants' perspectives are highlighted below.

Equity

Priorities and goals: Staff from all districts reported that families have similar needs and are supported regardless of their association or affiliation with a historically marginalized group (racially, culturally, linguistically, or financially diverse). Despite that understanding, one respondent specifically noted that racially, culturally, linguistically, and/or financially diverse families likely face greater challenges.

Needs, challenges, and barriers related to equity: A common challenge identified by district staff is the lack of a diverse workforce at the school and district level and how that diversity is needed to best support families. Related to this, district staff identified meeting families' diverse linguistic needs as a challenge. Staff from several districts discussed that members of the school and community are not aware of the early childhood programs available to them. This lack of knowledge creates inequitable access to services.

Strategies used to support equity: In particular, although language resources were identified as a barrier, all districts provide language support for families that do not speak English.

Family-School Engagement

Priorities and goals: District staff consistently indicated that engaging families in school culture frequently and as early as possible was a top priority. District staff also highlighted their goal to not only increase partnership between families and schools but to also increase connections among families.

Needs, challenges, and barriers related to family-school engagement: Staff from all schools and districts shared that the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically impacted their family engagement efforts. Despite the difficulties, the pandemic also provided schools with opportunities to reimagine how they involve families and to develop new strategies of family engagement.

Strategies used to support family-school engagement: School staff reported intentionality when it came to including students' entire families at school-sponsored events. School staff also reported trying to promote school-sponsored events to families whose children were not enrolled. District staff also mentioned their efforts to provide activities that are engaging to families. Districts prioritized events based on parent interest, such as providing tools to help manage children's behavior. They also worked to develop school-level programs that engage parents and families in unique ways. Some programs focused on encouraging parents to take on leadership roles.

Family and School Engagement with Community

Strategies used to support family and school engagement with the community: While school staff provide direct resources to families in need, they also consistently encourage families to engage in the activities, organizations, and events hosted by the community. Additionally, they actively encourage families to create connections with each other. District and school staff value strong, long-standing relationships with community partners, and they encourage family-community partnerships in a variety of ways. These reciprocal partnerships enhance program advertisement and accessibility. School staff can help connect families with community resources and can also bring in agencies to provide services and support to families in need. School staff have also partnered with community agencies to help address the mental health needs of their school communities.

Equity: School staff reported that they have connected with local agencies to support positive relationships between families and local law enforcement. Schools have also connected with early childhood community agencies; they have included them in professional development opportunities and have provided support when working with students and families with diverse linguistic backgrounds. To support recruitment for early intervention programs, schools have created connections with community agencies that provide relevant services to families in need of early intervention supports.

Continuity

Priorities and goals: Most district staff reported that they were effective in providing both streamlined and equitable experiences to children and families to provide the most effective supports. District staff worked to ensure that children and families have continuity in their experience with services connected to the school, including when children move between schools. Staff from one district felt that goals were aligned well across programs and that it was a fluid experience for families across interventions and programs.

Needs, challenges, and barriers related to continuity: District staff expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic presented barriers and challenges to creating continuities in their work with students and especially with families. Specifically, the pandemic made it challenging for families to maintain the same level of connection to their school, resulting in a more strained experience of continuity for families. Effects of the pandemic also resulted in limited social interaction opportunities for children, making social skills a significant need for students. Finally, one school's staff member described how they were not always able to work with families that wanted home visitation services simply because the family did not live specifically in the staff member's school district; this created an obstacle to continuity of programming.

Strategies used to support continuity: Many strategies were implemented across school districts related to supporting continuity for students. For example, in some districts when transitions occur (e.g., children entering Kindergarten), educators reach out to families to set up home visits to maintain a sense of continuity with that family. Staff from other districts shared similar strategies that support communication across teaching teams to ensure needs, strengths, and goals are shared, thus resulting in continuity of services for children and families.

Transitions (PreK to Kindergarten Transition)

Priorities and goals: Staff from all districts and schools reported similar philosophies and goals of having smooth transitions for children from PreK to Kindergarten. Priorities include establishing positive relationships with families, getting to know each child and their specific needs, and ensuring that incoming Kindergartners felt safe, comfortable, and ready for success when they entered the school for Kindergarten.

Needs, challenges, and barriers related to transitions: One barrier relates to children attending Kindergarten at a different school from where they attended preschool. Staff from one school shared how dividing children across classes is difficult for Kindergarten educators when they do not know much about the children that will be coming to Kindergarten; this can happen when children do not currently attend PreK at the same school. Additionally, if children have not attended preschool

programming in a school, parents might not feel comfortable with the transition to Kindergarten. Challenges related to the exchange of information between preschool and Kindergarten staff were mentioned. To be successful, both sides must be open to sharing information, but this is not always the case.

Strategies used to support transitions: Most schools still have a traditional "Kindergarten roundup" in the spring of the school year prior to students beginning Kindergarten, but other approaches are also used based upon the specific needs of the community. For example, some schools use "Getting to Know You Conferences" to help school staff build relationships with families and incoming Kindergartners, thereby helping educators better prepare for the students. One district started a transitional playgroup for incoming children during the summer ahead of Kindergarten, and another district offered the JumpStart program, which is designed to prepare incoming Kindergarten students for success by helping them be comfortable with the school environment and familiarizing them with specific academic areas.

Equity: Equity was mentioned as an important part of the transition experience for students entering Kindergarten. Staff from one school district near a military base made efforts to reach more families by adjusting the timing of their "Kindergarten roundup" to fit the specific needs of military families. Another district is expanding the JumpStart program to additional schools, allowing more equitable access to the program for families across the school district. Lastly, staff from another school shared how they accept each family and provide dignity to them wherever they are in their lives, including the time when children transition between preschool and Kindergarten.

Measurement

Priorities and goals: Staff from some schools shared that informal participation data (records of their preschool and home visiting programs being at capacity or good attendance at socialization events) demonstrated a level of success with their programs. Staff from another school mentioned that parents staying enrolled in a voluntary program such as home visiting/family facilitation was a significant indicator of the success of their program, in addition to families referring other families to the program. Staff from many schools talked about soliciting feedback from parents through engagement surveys. Others tended to be more hesitant about sending out too many surveys, and some shared how they get feedback from parents informally during times of pickup/drop-off. They also emphasized the importance of taking the feedback they get from parents and acting on it.

Needs, challenges, and barriers related to measurement: There were some barriers and challenges expressed by schools and district staff related to measurement, and

staff members expressed various levels of comfort with data. One school staff member shared their frustrations with gaining access to Teaching Strategies GOLD—access that would help them understand expectations for preschool. Though some data is being collected now, the true impact of programs will not be known for some time; a staff member indicated that they would not know for several years if the students were more successful or not after participating in the early childhood programming.

Strategies used to support measurement: A significant amount of data is collected in early childhood programs across districts and schools as reported by school and district staff. Many schools shared that Teaching Strategies GOLD was their primary assessment tool in addition to anecdotal records for their students in PreK programs. Other early childhood assessments included the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, and the Teaching Pyramid, in addition to Kindergarten transition data. A popular measurement strategy used with families across schools was the Ages and Stages Questionnaire. Parents seem to like the feedback and validation regarding their children’s development that they receive with this tool. It can also provide a conversation starter for parents to use with other professionals, such as their child’s primary doctor.

One home visitor shared that she has recorded home visits on her own as a strategy for improving her professional skills. She also shared how anecdotal feedback data she receives from families is often helpful in how she works with families. For example, if a family expresses that they have been doing things differently since the home visitor worked with them, she sees that as evidence of implementing effective programming. Other school and district staff shared how they have become much more focused over the last couple of years on using data for continuous improvement in early childhood programming.

Infrastructure

Needs, challenges, and barriers related to infrastructure: An effective curriculum is in place across schools to support school staff in the delivery of services to children in early childhood programs. However, unforeseen impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have presented new challenges, with a shortage of qualified staff to meet the ever-changing needs of students, including needs related to increased behavioral issues and negatively impacted social skills. All district and school staff expressed various challenges surrounding having sufficient staff on board to meet the needs of all the students and families. Staff from one school expressed frustration concerning the education requirements for non-licensed staff, which have created additional strains on staff and complicated finding individuals to fill open positions. Turnover in staff has implications for communication as well. Additionally, one staff member stated concerns

about inconsistent expectations and processes between multiple stakeholders involved in early childhood programming (e.g., school/district, Buffett Early Childhood Institute, Sixpence). Another common thread is the need for increased promotion and awareness of early childhood programming to families. Another challenge is an increased need for bilingual Spanish-speaking school staff to meet the needs of a growing English Language Learner student population across several schools.

Equity: The Growing Great Kids (GGK) and Growing Great Families (GGF) curriculums used by the home visiting and family facilitation programs seem to work well for families from a variety of unique backgrounds related to culture, race, and economics. The GGK curriculum includes a specific chapter on culture that can be used with families. The GGK curriculum focuses on best practices in child development, with a focus around areas of literacy, which is a strength of using this curriculum as reported by school staff.

Strategies used to support infrastructure: Various supports and resources are available to district and school staff, as well as for children and families, which is an infrastructure strength. One school staff member shared how they receive financial support for transportation and use of their phones for the delivery of early childhood programming. Staff from one school shared that they have the support of a mental health therapist who works in the school to support both staff and children.

BIRTH THROUGH GRADE 3 APPROACH TO FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

The Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan works with school staff to address support of families of young children, birth through Grade 3. Schools can support families by helping them connect with other families, school staff, and helpful community resources (Min et al., 2017). Research shows that welcoming, embracing, and supporting parents and other caregivers central to children’s lives supports the development of trusting relationships needed to promote true partnerships with families (McLennan & Howitt, 2018). Through intentional interactions with every family, school staff can provide information about child development and learning and promote healthy relationships. These trusting relationships often offer families an opportunity to ask questions, express opinions, and learn about school processes. School staff can listen and be responsive to families as a part of this partnership and shift their practices related to partnering with families, communication, school culture, and trust. Furthermore, when school staff engage meaningfully with families, children demonstrate better educational achievement and social outcomes (Fantuzzo et al., 2004). To learn about family processes in birth through Grade 3, in School as Hub schools, we surveyed families about their engagement with schools.

Family Engagement Survey

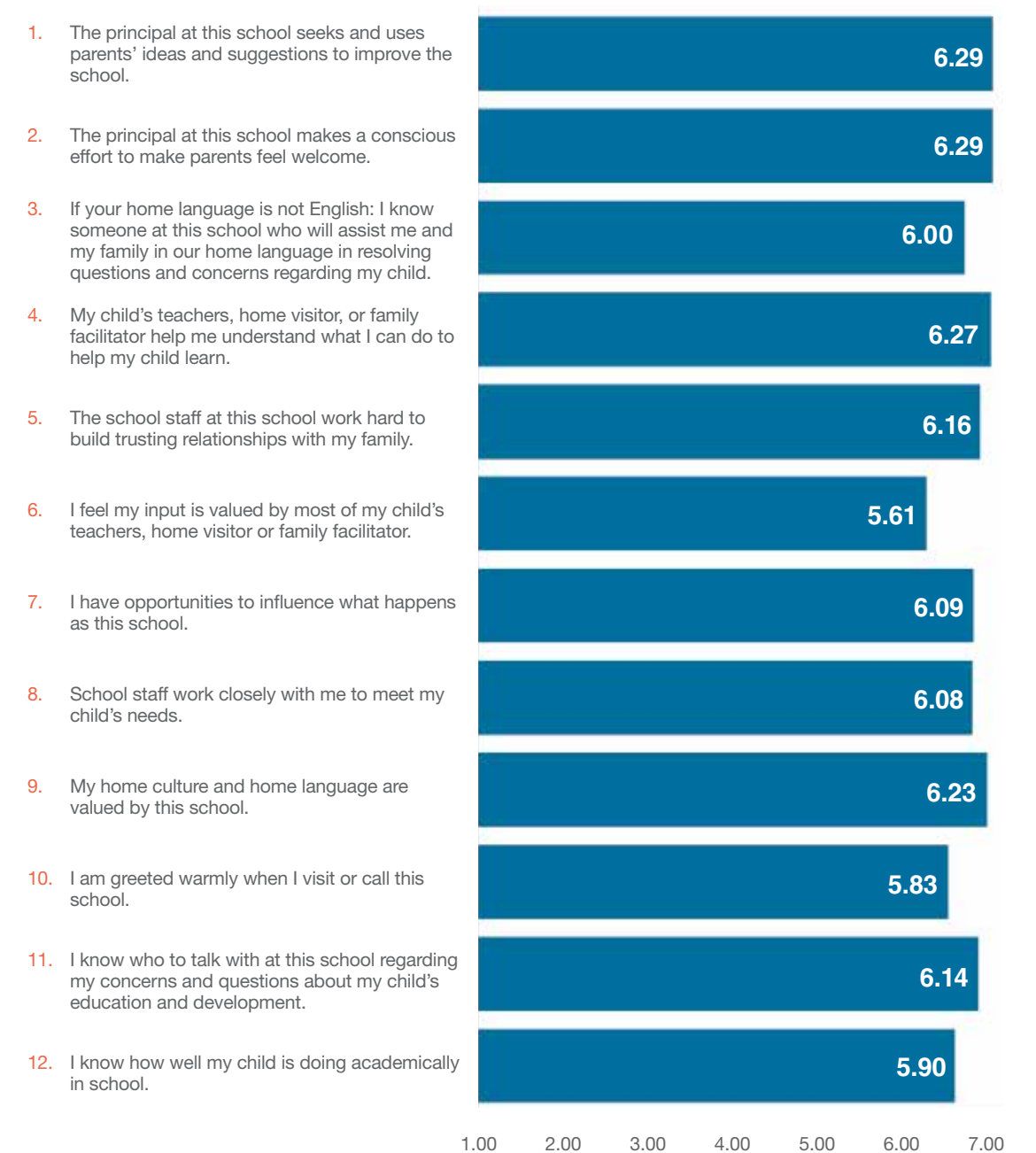
An adaptation of the Road Map Family Engagement Survey (Ishimaru & Lott, 2015) was used to assess families’ perceptions about collaboration among families, communities, and schools. Twelve items addressed six domains: Parent/Family Knowledge and Confidence, Welcoming and Culturally Responsive School Climate, Parent/Family Influence and Decision-Making, Family-Educator Trust, Family-Educator Communication, and Principal Leadership for Engagement. Parents rank items on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Surveys were distributed to families in nine of the School as Hub schools in an online format. Families enrolled in home visiting or family facilitation also received the surveys. The survey was available in 19 languages to accommodate the language needs of all the families at the participating schools.

A total of 679 families with at least one child age birth through Grade 3 responded to the survey across nine schools, with 243 (35.7%) of these families reporting speaking a language other than English in the home. The majority of the families reported their race as White (n=385; 56.7%) with the next largest race categories reported being “Two or more races” (n=99; 14.6%) or Black (n=41; 6.0%). Ninety-nine respondents (14.6%) preferred not to report their race. Almost half of the families (n=311; 45.8%) reported their ethnicity as Latinx. Over half of the families (n=409; 60.2%) reported qualifying for the free or reduced lunch program. Across the schools, the number of families responding to the survey ranged from 24 to 277 per school, with an average response rate of 30% across each of the nine schools. Response rates ranged from 9% to 60% across schools.

On a scale of 1 (low) to 7 (high), families rated schools positively, with item averages ranging from 5.61 (SD=1.73) to 6.29 (SD=1.49-1.53; two items achieved an average of 6.29) out of 7. The highest-rated items across the schools were “I know how well my child is doing academically in school” and “I know who to talk with regarding my concerns and questions about my child’s education and development.” The lowest-rated item, while still very positive, was “I have opportunities to influence what happens at (school).”

Figure 6 displays the families’ ratings for each item. It is important to note that COVID-19 may have had negative impacts on school-family connections during the 2021–2022 school year. Most elementary schools restricted visitors, switched from in-person to virtual parent-teacher conferences, and eliminated school-based events such as back-to-school nights. Some schools did not allow parents to walk their children to their classrooms to minimize staff and student exposure to COVID-19. These changes, while necessary for health and safety, made it more challenging for school staff to forge strong relationships with parents.

FIGURE 6. | RATINGS OF FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS



SUMMARY OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

During the 2021–2022 transition year, Institute staff continued to coach home visitors and family facilitators and facilitate community of practice meetings so staff could share ideas on how to effectively work with families in support of children’s learning and development. They focused explicitly on building connections with community-centered organizations near the neighborhoods in which families live and which represent families’ interests and values.

Professional Development for All

The Institute and its partners were able to provide a series of timely, relevant, and engaging learning opportunities for early childhood professionals through two online webinar series during the 2021–2022 academic year. In May 2020, the Institute sent out an online survey to learn more about the interests and preferences of early childhood professionals. Themes and topics for the webinar series were identified and refined based on their input, with the fall series focused on Workforce Well-Being and the spring series focused on Bringing Children’s Backgrounds to the Foreground in Their Learning. These webinars offered participants the opportunity to learn from a wide range of local and national experts.

Upon registering for the webinar and at the conclusion of each webinar, participants received a link via email to an online pre/post survey. Participants rated their pre/post understanding of key learnings, their ability to apply the key learnings to their work with students, and their satisfaction with the presentations. Survey findings are summarized below for each webinar.

In addition, PD for All efforts supported the three domains of the Birth Through Grade 3 framework, as outlined below.

LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

To support the Leadership Effectiveness domain, Institute staff facilitated the Professional Development for All webinar series, “Workforce Well-Being” (webinar 1.1: 66 attendees, webinar 1.2: 52 attendees). This series included two webinars, as described below.

Webinar 1.1: “Happy Teachers, Happy Kids”

In this webinar, participants learned about the essential connection between educator well-being and child well-being and explored the multiple factors that impact educators’ wellness. Dr. Kathleen Gallagher of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute shared the Institute’s newly developed workforce well-being framework, and Drs. Kyong-Ah Kwon, Ken Randall, and Adrien Malek-Lasater from the University of Oklahoma shared findings from the Happy Teacher Project. These experts shared insights on how to establish workplace conditions that support educators’ physical, psychological, and professional well-being. Early childhood leaders from a variety of settings participated in a panel discussion about how they have taken action to create environments that support educator and child well-being.

Findings

Where Participants Work

The webinar format allows for much broader geographic participation. Nearly half of survey respondents (47%) who attended the first webinar lived in Douglas/Sarpy

County. The remaining participants lived in other counties across Nebraska and as far away as Oklahoma.

Work Setting

Most survey respondents worked in school-based programs (42%). A subset of respondents worked in community-based programs (25%) and family child care homes (21%). The rest (13%) were from a variety of work settings, including Head Start.

Age Group Served

Most survey respondents worked with preschool-age children (43%). The next largest subset of survey participants were individuals working with infants and toddlers (29%). Twelve percent worked with Kindergartners, and those who worked with children in Grades 1 through 3 only represented 6% of survey respondents.

Job Title

Some respondents identified themselves as teachers/providers (29%). Other roles included director (19%), home visitor (13%), assistant teacher/paraeducator (6%), and principal/school administrator (6%). Some respondents identified as other, including university faculty/staff, instructional facilitator, and parent/guardian.

Do attendees report an increase in knowledge of ways to foster educator and well-being?

- 81% of respondents strongly agreed that after the webinar they understood the benefits of educator well-being in support of children’s learning and development, compared to 39% prior to the webinar.
- 96% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that after the webinar they knew what they could do to foster educator well-being, compared to 77% before the webinar.

Survey results show that 71% of respondents agreed with the statement “*I know what to do to foster teacher well-being*” prior to attending the first webinar. At post, an even split of respondents agreed (48%) and strongly agreed (48%) with the statement. Additionally, prior to attending the webinar, most respondents agreed (58%) with the statement “*I understand the benefits of teacher well-being in support of children’s learning and development.*” After attending the webinar, most respondents strongly agreed (81%) with the statement.

Did the attendees find the webinar useful?

- 97% of respondents thought the webinar had a good balance between the theory about the topic and practical information.
- 100% thought the webinar helped them understand new information and ideas.
- 100% plan to use what they learned in the webinar in their work with children.

Webinar 1.2: “Promoting Early Childhood Workforce Well-Being Through Reflection and Connection”

In this session, participants learned about three research-based approaches to promoting early childhood professionals’ social and emotional well-being. Presenters described three strategies that are being used to support the early childhood workforce in Nebraska. UNL’s Jamie Bahn shared work from the Nebraska Center for Reflective Practice, which aims to mitigate the stress of teaching by helping individuals reflect on their emotions, experience, and responses in a supportive community of colleagues. Holly Hatton Bowers from UNL discussed Cultivating Healthy Intentional Mindful Educators (CHIME), a program led by the University of Nebraska Extension that provides education and guidance for educators to incorporate mindfulness and reflective practice into their daily routines. Jolene Johnson from MMI shared lessons learned from implementation and evaluation of interventions that aim to promote educators’ social and emotional well-being.

Findings

Where Participants Work

Most survey respondents (68%) who attended the second webinar lived in Douglas/Sarpy County. The remaining participants lived in other counties across Nebraska.

Work Setting

Most survey respondents worked in school-based programs (48%). Other work settings included community-based programs (35%), family child care homes (5%), and university faculty/staff (5%). Nine percent worked in other types of settings, such as home visitation programs.

Age Group Served

Most survey respondents worked with preschool-age children (33%). The next largest subset of survey participants were individuals working with infants and toddlers (27%). Fifteen percent worked with Kindergartners, and 13% of respondents worked with children in Grades 1 through 3. Thirteen percent of respondents reported working with other age groups, such as middle and high school students.

Do attendees report an increase in knowledge of early childhood workforce well-being?

- 97% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that after the webinar they had an awareness that practices around mindfulness and reflection have a positive impact on educator well-being, compared to 90% before the webinar.
- 97% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that after the webinar they recognize strategies to mitigate the stress of teaching by reflecting on emotions, experiences,

and responses, compared to 93% prior to the webinar.

- 93% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that after the webinar they had an awareness of programs in Nebraska that provide education and guidance for educators to incorporate mindfulness and reflective practice into their daily routine, compared to 61% before the webinar.

Did the attendees find the webinar useful?

- 96% of respondents thought the webinar had a good balance between the theory about the topic and practical information.
- 96% thought the webinar helped them understand new information and ideas.
- 100% plan to use what they learned in the webinar in their work with children.
- One participant wrote that it was helpful “hearing from professionals about practices to implement in the classroom.” Another participant stated that the “provided resources and contacts to learn more about implementing a mindfulness program” was a helpful takeaway.

INSTRUCTIONAL EXCELLENCE

To support the Instructional Excellence domain, Institute staff provided opportunities for educators to develop understanding and capacity for intellectually rigorous, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive teaching and learning birth through Grade 3. For example, Institute staff facilitated the spring Professional Development for All webinar series, “Bringing Children’s Backgrounds to the Foreground in Their Learning.” This series included three webinars; the first focused on how to bring children’s experiences into their learning (webinar 2.1: 64 attendees); it is described below. The second and third webinars in the series focused on engaging families and communities (webinar 2.2: 32 attendees, webinar 2.3: 30 attendees); these are described in the next section on Family and Community Partnership Engagement. In addition, Institute staff facilitated a virtual book study, *Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity: Keys to Successful Equity Implementation* (59 registrants; session 1: 21 attendees, session 2: 13 attendees, session 3: seven attendees, session 4: five attendees).

Webinar 2.1: “Tapping Into Childrens’ Funds of Knowledge”

This webinar set the stage for learning throughout the series by defining funds of knowledge and how using this approach guides educators to bring children’s backgrounds to the foreground in their learning. Drs. Carla Amaro-Jimenez and Peggy Semingson from the University of Texas at Arlington shared practical strategies for drawing on the strengths and resources that families bring to learning experiences in and out of school, drawing on ideas from the funds of knowledge theoretical framework.

Findings**Where Participants Work**

Over half of the survey respondents (60%) who attended the second webinar lived in Douglas/Sarpy County. The remaining participants lived in other counties across Nebraska and as far away as Illinois and Virginia.

Ethnic/Racial and Gender Identity

A few respondents (13%) identified as Hispanic or Latino. Most respondents were White (63%), while 23% of respondents identified as African American/Black, 3% Asian, and 3% mixed race. Seven percent of respondents preferred not to answer. All respondents (100%) identified as female.

Work Setting

Many survey respondents worked in community-based programs (31%). Other work settings included family child care homes (27%), school-based programs (23%), and university faculty/staff (8%).

Age Group Served

Most survey respondents worked with preschool-age children (36%). The next largest subset of survey participants were individuals working with infants and toddlers (30%). Seventeen percent worked with Kindergartners, and 11% of respondents worked with children in Grades 1 through 3. Six percent of respondents reported working with other age groups, such as Grades 4 through 6.

Predominant Ethnic/Racial Background of Children/Community

More than a quarter of respondents (27%) indicated that the children/community they work with are/is predominantly of Hispanic or Latino background. Nearly half of the respondents (49%) indicated that the children/community they work with are/is predominantly White; 27% worked with predominantly African American/Black children/community. A smaller subset of respondents worked with predominantly Native American/American Indian (11%) and Asian children/community (8%).

Job Title

Most respondents identified themselves as teachers/providers (40%). Other roles included director (17%), assistant teacher/paraeducator (13%), and home visitor or family facilitator (7%). Some respondents identified as other, including university faculty/staff, instructional facilitator, and Nebraska Department of Education staff.

Do attendees report an increase in knowledge of children's funds of knowledge?

- 100% of respondents reported that after the webinar they could define the term

“funds of knowledge,” compared to 57% prior to the webinar.

- 100% of respondents indicated that after the webinar they recognize strategies to build understanding of the strengths and resources that families bring to children's learning experiences in and out of school, compared to 90% before the webinar.
- One participant wrote that it was helpful “when the presenters gave real-world examples of interactions they had with families.”

Did the attendees find the webinar useful?

- 93% of respondents thought the webinar had a good balance between the theory about the topic and practical information.
- 97% thought the webinar helped them understand new information and ideas.
- 97% plan to use what they learned in the webinar in their work with children.

Book Study for Early Childhood Educators: *Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity*

In this four-part series, participants explored the approach described by authors Floyd Cobb and John Krownapple in their book *Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity: The Keys to Successful Equity Implementation*. The series, facilitated by Institute staff, allowed participants to engage in meaningful conversations and collaborate to deepen their understanding about how to create a culture of dignity with the children and families they serve.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP ENGAGEMENT

The second and third webinars in the series, “Bringing Children's Backgrounds to the Foreground in Their Learning” (webinar 2.2: 32 attendees, webinar 2.3: 30 attendees) were offered to support Family and Community Partnership Engagement. A related community of practice was also offered.

Webinar 2.2: “Shifting From Teacher to Learner: Transforming Teacher-Family Relationships”

In this webinar, Dr. Anne Karabon from the University of Nebraska at Omaha shared research-based strategies to build deep, authentic partnerships with families to inform pedagogical decision-making, while Portia Kennel from the Buffett Early Childhood Fund shared lessons learned from her real-world experiences partnering with families and building community connections.

Findings**Where participants work**

Half of the survey respondents (50%) who attended the second webinar lived in Douglas/Sarpy County. The remaining half lived in other counties across Nebraska.

Ethnic/racial and gender identity

More than a quarter of respondents (27%) identified as Hispanic or Latino. A little over half of the respondents identified as White (52%), 24% of respondents preferred not to answer, and 20% of respondents identified as African American/Black.

All respondents (100%) identified as female.

Work setting

Over half of survey respondents (54%) worked in community-based programs. Other work settings included school-based programs (18%) and family child care (18%).

Age Group Served

Most survey respondents worked with preschool-age children (40%) or infants and toddlers (36%). The third-largest subset of survey participants were individuals working with Kindergartners (13%). Nine percent of respondents worked with children in Grades 1 through 3.

Predominant Ethnic/Racial Background of Children/Community

More than a quarter of respondents (27%) indicated that the children/community they work with are/is predominantly of Hispanic or Latino background. The largest percentage of respondents (45%) indicated that the children/community they work with are/is predominantly White, and 33% worked with predominantly African American/Black children/community.

Job Title

More than a third of respondents identified themselves as assistant teacher/paraeducator (35%). Other roles included teacher/provider (27%), director (12%), and home visitor or family facilitator (12%). Some respondents identified as “other,” including university faculty/staff, instructional facilitator, and community member.

Do attendees report an increase in knowledge of partnering with families?

- 100% of respondents reported that after the webinar they could define the role families play in teaching with a “funds of knowledge” approach, compared to 81% prior to the webinar.

Did the attendees find the webinar useful?

- 96% of respondents thought the webinar had a good balance between the theory about the topic and practical information.
- 88% thought the webinar helped them understand new information and ideas.
- 92% plan to use what they learned in the webinar in their work with children.

Webinar 2.3: “Why Cultural, Linguistic, and Personal Relevance Matters”

This webinar explored the value of a comprehensive approach to providing what individual learners need to strengthen learning and development. Institute staff facilitated an engaging webinar to unpack why cultural, linguistic, and personal relevance matters. A panel discussion featuring local early childhood practitioners discussed how they have created environments and implemented activities that build upon children’s funds of knowledge.

Findings**Where participants work**

Most of the survey respondents (67%) who attended the second webinar lived in Douglas/Sarpy County. The remaining participants lived in other counties across Nebraska.

Ethnic/racial and gender identity

More than a quarter of respondents (27%) identified as Hispanic or Latino. Most respondents were White (60%), while 13% of respondents identified as African American/Black, and 13% identified as mixed race. Another 13% preferred not to answer. Most of the respondents (93%) identified as female.

Work Setting

Many survey respondents worked in community-based programs (38%). Other work settings included family child care homes (31%), school-based programs (15%), and university faculty/staff (8%).

Age Group Served

Most survey respondents worked with either infants and toddlers (33%) or preschool-age children (33%). Eighteen percent worked with Kindergartners, and 12% of respondents worked with children in Grades 1 through 3.

Predominant Ethnic/Racial Background of Children/Community

More than a third of respondents (36%) indicated that the children/community they work with is predominantly of Hispanic or Latino background. Almost half of the respondents (47%) indicated that the children/community they work with is predominantly White, and 29% worked with predominantly African American/Black children/community. A smaller subset of respondents (12%) worked with predominantly Asian children/community.

Job Title

The largest percentage of respondents identified as assistant teacher/paraeducator (36%). Other roles included director (29%), teacher/provider (21%), and home visitor or family facilitator (7%). A small percentage of respondents identified as teacher candidates.

Do attendees report an increase in knowledge of the importance cultural, linguistic, and personal relevance in a classroom environment?

- 93% of respondents reported that after the webinar they could define the term “funds of knowledge,” compared to 80% prior to the webinar.
- 100% of respondents indicated that after the webinar they are aware of how to create environments and implement activities that build upon children’s funds of knowledge, compared to 73% before the webinar.
- 93% of respondents indicated that after the webinar they are aware of how to create environments and implement activities that build upon children’s funds of knowledge, compared to 87% prior to the webinar.

Did the attendees find the webinar useful?

- 87% of respondents thought the webinar had a good balance between the theory about the topic and practical information.
- 81% thought the webinar helped them understand new information and ideas.
- 87% plan to use what they learned in the webinar in their work with children.

Community of Practice for Early Childhood Educators: Funds of Knowledge in Children’s Learning

Communities of practice provide opportunities for educators to share ideas and learn from one another about how to implement high-quality classroom practices. This four-part series, facilitated by two local early childhood professionals and Institute staff, engaged educators working with children from birth through Grade 3 to deepen their understanding of the funds of knowledge approach and to support one another as they bring this learning to life in their classrooms. Educators focused on how to learn from families, integrate community assets into the classroom, and help children connect meaningfully to the curriculum through what is personally relevant to them. A total of 25 individuals registered for this series.

SUMMARY OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL EFFORTS

The 2021–2022 PD for All series aligned with the promise and commitment to provide high-quality professional learning that emphasizes intellectually rigorous and developmentally appropriate teaching and learning, racial equity, social-emotional and academic learning, and family, community, and school partnerships. In pre/post surveys, participants rated their pre/post understanding of key learnings, their ability to apply the key learnings to their work with students, and their satisfaction with the presentations. Ratings in all areas were consistently positive across all webinars.

Achievement Scores

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT STATUS: PROJECTED GROWTH TO OBSERVED GROWTH COMPARISONS

The Northwest Evaluation Association’s Measures of Academic Progress Growth (NWEA MAP) was used to examine students’ academic achievement and growth. MAP Growth is a computer adaptive, multiple-choice norm-referenced assessment that measures student proficiency and growth in the areas of reading, mathematics, language usage, and science. Participating schools administer MAP Growth testing three times a year (fall, winter, and spring) in Kindergarten through Grade 3. Data obtained from participating schools were used to examine student growth for math and reading. NWEA MAP uses a proprietary RIT (Rasch UnIT) scale to measure student achievement status. The RIT scale is an equal-interval scale that is particularly useful for measuring student achievement in a variety of subject areas as well as tracking student achievement over time (Thum & Kuhfeld, 2020). Growth refers to how much the student progressed across multiple points in time (e.g., fall to spring). Data for nine of the 10 School as Hub schools were provided for Kindergarten and Grades 1 through 3.

NWEA MAP calculates a projected growth score that represents the change in RIT score that half the U.S. students will make over time, which are based on the student growth norms. An important analysis is to determine how the student’s actual change in RIT scores compared to the projected growth. The descriptive analyses were completed with students in Kindergarten through Grade 3 (2,001 reading scores and 1,988 math scores) across nine School as Hub schools. In reading, students’ observed growth was below their projected growth. Second graders came the closest to meeting projected growth with nearly half (49.6%) meeting expectations for growth. In math, Kindergarten had the largest proportion of students who met their projected growth (58.6%). Results of projected versus observed growth scores by grade are summarized in Figures 7 and 8. The data in the figures summarizes scores from eight School as Hub schools from which growth data were available. Note that one school was able to provide data on students who met projected growth but did not provide growth scores. These results are consistent with national findings that indicate student achievement is lower than expected due to the pandemic (Kuhfeld & Lewis, 2022).

FIGURE 7. | READING GROWTH FALL 2021 TO SPRING 2022 PROJECTED VS. OBSERVED GROWTH BY GRADE LEVEL

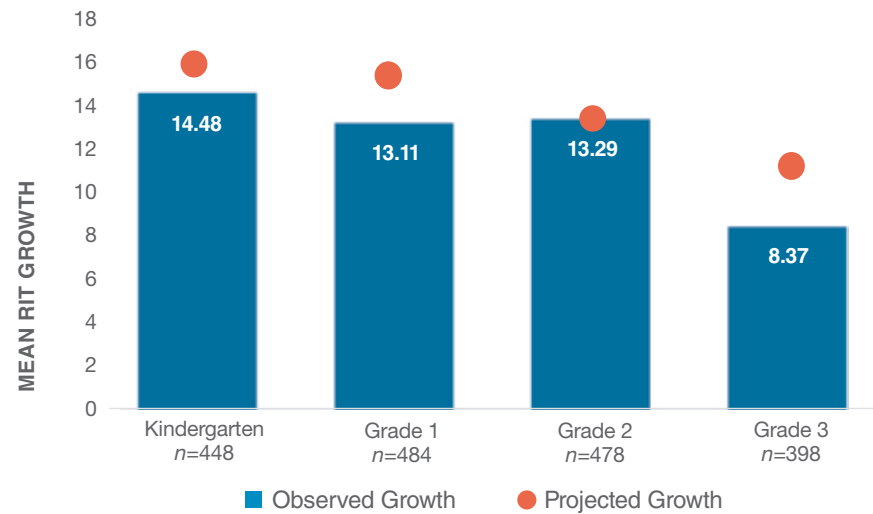
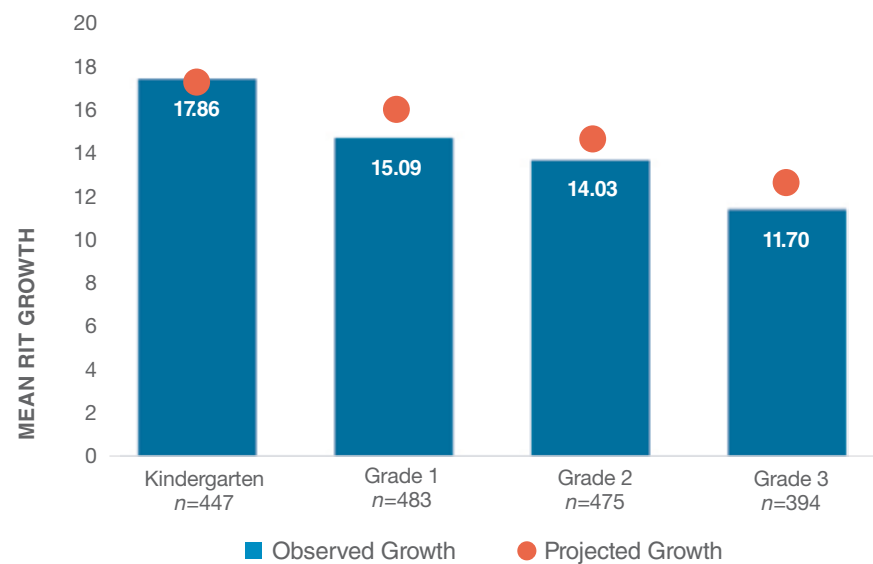


FIGURE 8. | MATH GROWTH FALL 2021 TO SPRING 2022 PROJECTED VS. OBSERVED GROWTH BY GRADE LEVEL



Conclusion and Looking Ahead

2021–2022 TRANSITION YEAR

The Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan’s 2021–2022 transition year served as an opportunity for school district leaders to work with Institute staff and the P-3 Center from the University of Colorado Denver to complete a landscape assessment while simultaneously prioritizing efforts to respond to the demands schools faced due to the ongoing pandemic. This involved an “all hands on deck” approach to the day-to-day needs of school buildings experiencing staffing shortages. Institute staff substituted for teachers in classrooms, stepped into the roles of paraprofessionals, served lunch duty, covered administrative tasks for principals, and accomplished many other tasks as requested by building principals and staff. For example, at the request of the school districts, Institute staff provided guidance on how to support children’s social and emotional development, how to build teachers’ capacity to utilize effective strategies to respond to perceived challenging student behaviors in the classroom, and how to connect families with resources and strategies to support their children’s learning beginning at birth. Engagement in the landscape assessment prompted district leaders to investigate current district systems and infrastructure related to creating strong pathways for the development of quality, continuity, and equity in early childhood birth through Grade 3 programming and services. Focused efforts in the landscape assessment involved inquiry into the extent to which the district’s mission, strategic plan, central office, organizational culture, decision-making practices, investments in professional learning, engagement with community partners, and focus on equity are explicitly linked to and supportive of birth through Grade 3 goals.

2022–2023 SUPERINTENDENTS’ EARLY CHILDHOOD PLAN

Based upon the landscape assessment, district leaders set goals and action plans to guide their involvement in the Superintendents’ Plan during the 2022-2023 school year. The action planning and goal-setting process prompted district leaders to connect their school district strategic plans and goals to the newly updated Birth Through Grade 3 conceptual framework, which articulates the guiding values, systems focus, domains, and initiatives of the Superintendents’ Plan. This conceptual framework was updated by Institute staff as part of an extensive review of literature in the field and evidence from the experiences of the first years of the plan.

Moving forward, partnership efforts between the Learning Community school districts and Institute staff will be responsive and targeted to the unique needs and interests of each school district, and the communities they serve, as they align with the priorities highlighted in the Birth Through Grade 3 conceptual framework. District-identified priorities include a focus on the guiding value of equity and targeted strategies within each domain—Leadership Effectiveness, Instructional Excellence, and Family and

Community Engagement. In addition, the Institute has reorganized its staffing to support increased engagement with school districts and communities.

Expanded Focus on Equity

Among the variety of priority topics that the district leaders identified, of great importance to all is a focus on the guiding value of equity. In the coming year, the Superintendents’ Plan will expand its focus on equity and continue identifying systemic barriers that lead to gaps in opportunities for children and families. Efforts with district, school, and community partners will include:

- Disaggregating data to guide continuous improvement for children and families experiencing persistent disparities
- Coaching aimed at enhancing reflective equity conversations
- Professional learning designed to show how children and families from historically marginalized groups can access quality and continuity in birth through Grade 3 programs and services
- Helping all students meet or exceed expectations for academic achievement

Leadership Effectiveness

Early childhood competencies for principals are a priority development for School as Hub schools. Efforts with district, school, and community partners include:

- Collaboration and consultation with school district leaders to embed early childhood expertise in ongoing principal meetings
- Professional learning for principals focused on early childhood competencies
- Co-creating early childhood guidance documents and other tools for principals to use to promote effective early childhood practices
- Expanding opportunities for more principals to engage with Institute staff in learning around birth through Grade 3 leadership
- Building the capacity of School as Hub teams to lead the Birth Through Grade 3 Approach in their schools and districts—these teams include principals, assistant principals, district leaders, family facilitators, home visitors, and other designated staff

Instructional Excellence

Essential Child Experiences are a high priority, ensuring that classroom instructional practices are both intellectually rigorous and developmentally appropriate to maximize learning experiences for children. Efforts with district, school, and community partners include:

- Partnering with teachers and instructional leaders to develop an Instructional Toolkit. The toolkit will serve as a systematic way to provide professional learning and resources for both teachers and leaders that will elevate quality, continuity, and

- equity in instruction in all areas, particularly literacy and mathematics.
- Professional learning and coaching will also carry out these instructional goals.

Social-emotional learning and responding to perceived challenging behaviors in the classroom also continue to be high priorities for the districts. Each district articulated a need to prioritize children’s social-emotional development and strategies to promote positive behavior in the classroom. Efforts with district, school, and community partners include:

- Deepening understanding of children’s behavior from a developmental and cultural perspective
- Connecting MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support) to preschool, home visiting, family facilitation, and community early childhood programs
- Implementing social-emotional learning curricula and parent support
- Building capacity around the Pyramid Model
- Enhancing classroom culture

Culturally responsive practices and viewing child development through a cultural lens remain a priority for school districts. This includes a deepened understanding of how partnerships with families and connection to the communities in which children live can enhance instruction and children’s learning. Efforts with district, school, and community partners include:

- Collaboration and consultation with school district leaders as part of curriculum review committees, literacy initiatives, and family engagement
- Professional learning aimed at diversity, equity, and inclusion in teaching practices and family engagement
- Coaching for educators and leaders to develop strategies for drawing on the strengths and resources that families bring to learning experiences in and out of school

Family and Community Partnership Engagement

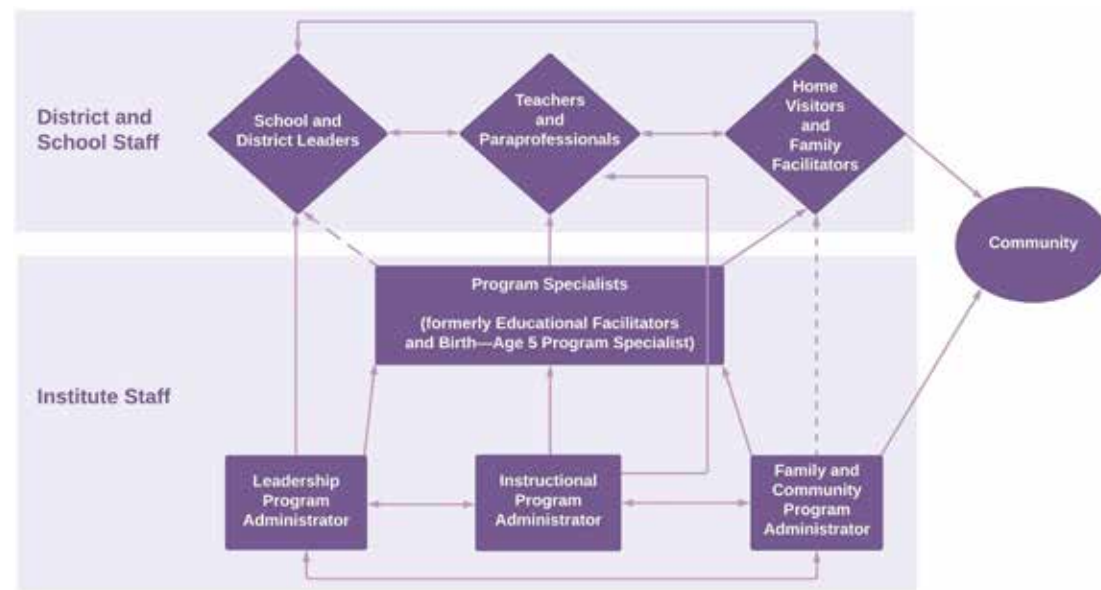
Relationships with families and family engagement emerge as a priority area for district leaders. Most districts set goals to build more culturally responsive communication and deepen relationships with the families in their school communities. Efforts with district, school, and community partners include:

- Collaboration and consultation with school district leaders as part of initiatives focused on quantity and quality of family engagement
- Partnership with school staff to develop strategies to increase participation and engagement at school-level family events, including playgroups and socializations for children and their families before they are old enough to enroll in school

Institute Staff Reorganized to Support Increased Engagement with Districts and Communities

To increase responsiveness to specific districts and communities and to elevate the plan’s systems focus, the Institute has reorganized its staff, as illustrated in Figure 9. The reorganization reflects the Institute’s commitment to more focused and strategic engagement at the district and community levels, in addition to continued engagement in schools.

FIGURE 9. | ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT STRUCTURE FOR THE 2022-2023 SCHOOL YEAR



Note: Dashed line indicates indirect support.

Going forward, Institute leaders will continue to work with each district’s Superintendents’ Plan workgroup member and district leaders to organize School as Hub efforts in selected schools. In addition, Institute staff will engage in district-level committees, meetings, and other opportunities to collaborate with school district leaders on efforts connected to the Superintendents’ Plan action plan established by each district.

In School as Hub schools, program administrators will work directly with principals through coaching, communication, monthly team meetings, and other supports focused on implementing the district-developed Superintendents’ Plan action plans. The leadership program administrator will continue facilitating monthly community of practice meetings connecting principals across districts. The family and community program administrator will provide guidance as schools build connections with community organizations, including child care programs.

Program specialists will provide coaching for family facilitators, home visitors, and other school staff, and they will also attend monthly school team meetings. In addition, program specialists will facilitate monthly community of practice meetings connecting family facilitators, home visitors, and other staff across districts.

District and school leaders will continue to work with Institute staff to design and facilitate district professional learning, coaching, and consultation to build the capacity of leaders and staff in support of the district-specific action plans. In addition, district leaders and Institute staff will continue to adjust School as Hub staffing in the schools as needed to align with the Birth Through Grade 3 Approach and to be responsive to district-specific strategic plans.

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