



Hub State Spotlight: Nebraska

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The NCIT Newsletter offers Spotlights, a regular monthly feature that provides an ongoing opportunity to share the work happening at the state or community level, and foster connections among grantees. This document highlights the work of the Nebraska coalition.

Nebraska Prenatal-to-Three Goals

Nebraska's early childhood partners are fully committed to ensuring more of our state's most frequently underserved families have access to systems and resources necessary for the healthy development of our youngest children, beginning with supports in the prenatal period.

1. Improved referral and prevention services

Currently, our state's early childhood partners are focused on improving screening, referral, and enrollment processes so we can connect parents more rapidly to early intervention support and strengthen coordination with providers. This work is moving forward through multiple efforts including Help Me Grow, a national initiative that is being piloted in Nebraska through the Children's Hospital and Medical Center. Plans are also underway to secure additional funding to expand the Nebraska Perinatal Quality Improvement Collaborative, with specific emphasis on maternal and paternal depression screening. Other efforts address improving access to early intervention services through the state's child welfare system.

Because parent and family engagement are particularly important in rural states like Nebraska, our partnership is striving to strengthen our home visiting program infrastructure through the Family First Prevention Services Act, and by protecting continued public funding for the Sixpence Early Learning Fund, which supports 24 home visiting grantees statewide. Sixpence supports a mix of services to address the prenatal needs of expectant mothers, as well as the needs of infants and toddlers in families facing common factors known to affect child development. These include low-income, single-parent and teen-parent households, parents with limited educational attainment, and households in which English is not the primary language.

2. Child care quality, availability, and affordability

Like many states, Nebraska struggles to ensure availability and affordability of quality child care, especially for infants and toddlers from families with low incomes. Part of addressing these challenges involves creating incentives and improving systems that support quality in child care. Nebraska is pursuing efforts to strengthen resources available to providers through Step Up to Quality, the state's child care Quality and Ratings Improvement System. Work is underway to revise and translate Step Up to Quality resources for child care centers and home-based programs serving non-English speaking families. On the policy front, the Nebraska Legislature passed an important revision to the School Readiness Tax Credit Act in early August.

The revised law allows self-employed child care providers and those who are classified as S-corporations to access tiered child care subsidy reimbursements based on their quality level. Broader efforts are also underway to restructure the state's child care reimbursement rates to make it financially practical for more providers to serve families of low income.

Access the 2020 legislative update on Step Up to Quality [here](#).

3. Sustainability, accountability, and effectiveness in early childhood systems

This work is complemented by ongoing progress toward developing an Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) that will connect and maintain information from a variety of early childhood programs and services, allowing stakeholders to answer key questions about the effectiveness of our publicly funded efforts. This includes how well these efforts reach the families of infants and toddlers, as well as pregnant women, who face significant barriers to vital supports and services. A fully functioning ECIDS connects data both horizontally (a child receiving multiple services simultaneously), and vertically (integrating data from early childhood programs to K-12 systems). Doing so will allow Nebraska to provide distinct counts of various services children and families receive and identify any racial, economic, and/or geographic inequities.

Efforts to bring greater efficiency and accountability to our state's public and private investments in early childhood extend beyond the ECIDS project. Under the leadership of First Five Nebraska, the Early Childhood Governance and Financing Task Force is about to begin a broad-scale examination of how early childhood programs are funded in the state, and explore potential opportunities to enhance the effectiveness and coordination of those programs. This groundbreaking project brings together key stakeholders in legislative policy, state agencies, education, philanthropy, and economic development based on a common interest in improving Nebraska's early childhood infrastructure.

Finally, Nebraska lawmakers have approved a legislative resolution to study in detail the broad impact of COVID-19 on the state's early childhood workforce and systems, review current state and federal investments in early childhood in Nebraska, assess the funding gap between those investments and the need for services, and investigate strategies for closing that funding gap. This project was set in motion by the reported outcomes of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission earlier this year.

4. Public-facing information and resources for parents and families

While policy and systems-level changes are crucial to improving the outlook for infants and toddlers, much of the state's current activity also focuses on education, awareness, and public-facing information resources. Earlier this spring, the state launched the Nebraska Child Care Referral Network (nechildcarerefferral.org), a public/private project that allows working parents to seek out child care options based on children's ages, program type, geographical location, and participation in the child care subsidy and Step Up to Quality program. The network was enthusiastically embraced by providers, working parents, and employers alike and plans are currently underway to expand and add functionality to this online resource in the months ahead.

Resources such as the Nebraska Child Care Referral Network build upon other parent education efforts such as Learning Begins at Birth (learningbeginsatbirth.org). This resource is an easy-to-use, comprehensive resource for parents of young children, offering guidance on supporting healthy development, wellness, and cognitive development, as well as information on how to identify quality child care options and more. The project is the result of a collaboration between Nebraska's leading experts on child development, education, and parenting practice and is being distributed free-of-charge through

community collaboratives, birthing hospitals, pediatricians, clinics, and other programs that provide direct services to families, especially those representing frequently underserved populations. Print and electronic editions of Learning Begins at Birth are available in English and Spanish. Downloadable versions are also available in Vietnamese and Arabic.

In addition, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska is pursuing a parent education campaign that centers on public education about quality child care and early learning programs. The campaign emphasizes messaging strategies that are accessible, digitally driven, and culturally and linguistically appropriate to the target audiences. The messaging is designed to be responsive to how parents receive information and make decisions. The parent education campaign overlays other programmatic activities focused on family engagement.

5. Expanded strategic engagement

Nonprofits, direct service providers, philanthropy, and policymakers have long been recognized as leading the charge on behalf of our state's youngest and most vulnerable children. However, our state partnership is also moving forward on strategic messaging to involve business and economic leaders more actively in strengthening quality early childhood programming as a key strategy for economic development and workforce productivity. Last month, First Five Nebraska launched My Nebraska Story (MyNEstory.org), a statewide messaging campaign that represents the perspectives of working parents, employers, economic developers, and child care providers to represent quality child care as a key factor in our state's growth and sustainability.

Challenges to Achieving Our Goals

Like other states, many of the most urgent challenges to our ability to sustain and improve early childhood services revolve around the shifting social and economic realities of the pandemic. Publicly funded early childhood programs will inevitably face budget cuts as state lawmakers attempt to find ways to absorb the ongoing economic fallout affecting state revenues. Our efforts to limit public funding reductions at the policy level will be complicated by the fact that a sizable number of early childhood champions are about to exit the Nebraska Legislature due to term limits, including leadership in key legislative committees. Our task is to replace those outgoing supporters with new champions, whom we must identify and educate on our key policy issues. This is likely to be a major challenge since we will be competing with other highly visible and contentious issues such as property tax relief and prison reform.

Our Stakeholders

Nebraska's early childhood partnership brings together a broad array of leaders representing state agency, nonprofit, public policy, higher education, and philanthropic organizations. These include the Administrator of the Office of Early Childhood in the Nebraska Department of Education, the Child Care and Development Fund Administrator of the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, the Director of Strategic Initiatives of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, the Executive Director of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska, the Chief Executive Officer of the Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative, the Senior Vice President of Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, and the Director of First Five Nebraska.

These leaders and entities are complemented by a growing number of advocates at the community level who have participated in First Five Nebraska's Early Childhood Policy Leadership Academy, a grassroots policy project that involves early childhood and K-12 educators, economic development officials, nonprofit administrators, and other influencers and decision makers.

Nebraska's work on the Needs Assessment phase of the state's Preschool Development Grant (PDG) drew heavily upon extensive parent and provider focus group feedback, which was then used to inform the Nebraska PN-3 policy plan. Moving forward, we will continue to align ongoing PDG work with Nebraska's PN-3 efforts.