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Elevating Nebraska's Early Childhood Workforce

Report and Recommendations
of the Nebraska Early Childhood
Workforce Commission

ONE-YEAR UPDATE

APRIL 2021



ONE-YEAR IMPLEMENTATION UPDATE

Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission Report and Recommendations

On Jan. 30, 2020, the [Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission](#) released its report and recommendations, [Elevating Nebraska's Early Childhood Workforce](#). With a strong commitment to collaborative action, commission members vowed that the report would not just sit on the shelf—and they have been true to their word. Even the COVID-19 pandemic could not prevent commission members and the organizations they represent from engaging with partners in diverse communities across the state to pursue the report's vision, goals, and recommendations.

VISION. Nebraska will elevate the early childhood workforce to a priority profession benefiting all children from birth through Grade 3.

- **Goal 1.** Nebraska's early childhood workforce will be highly qualified and will reflect the diversity of the children and families they serve.
- **Goal 2.** Early care and education in Nebraska will be fully funded by 2030.
- **Goal 3.** Nebraska will champion high-quality early care and education and the critical role of the workforce in young children's learning and development.
- **Goal 4.** Nebraskans will implement the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission's recommendations to achieve a highly qualified and diverse workforce on behalf of all young children and their families.

In fact, the pandemic's dramatic impact on the early childhood workforce and the children and families they serve has only served to intensify and accelerate collaborative statewide efforts to begin addressing some of the most urgent needs of Nebraska's early childhood workforce. Many of these efforts were inspired or informed by the commission report, and several also involve the leadership or participation of commission members and the organizations they represent.

In this document, the following updates are provided:

- Highlights of selected collaborative early childhood initiatives from January 2020 to March 2021 that support the goals of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission
- A look ahead at what is yet to come in 2021
- An invitation to share your work and help us to shine the spotlight on collaborative efforts across the state that are helping elevate Nebraska's early childhood workforce

The work summarized here represents only a sample of the many efforts that are underway in communities across Nebraska to support the early childhood workforce. Future updates will include more stories about the work that commission members are involved in across the state.

SELECTED COLLABORATIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD INITIATIVES

JANUARY 2020 – MARCH 2021

Commission members and the organizations they represent continue to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to cultivating collaborative relationships and partnerships with colleagues across the state, as demonstrated by several initiatives that are contributing to one or more of the four goals.

Selected Collaborative Early Childhood Initiatives (January 2020 – March 2021) Supporting the Goals of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission

Collaborative Initiative	Commission Goals Supported			
	Goal 1: Highly Qualified Workforce	Goal 2: Full Funding by 2030	Goal 3: Informed, Engaged, and Committed Public	Goal 4: Implementation and Accountability Infrastructure
January 2020: Launch and Distribution of the Commission Report	R	R	R	R
January 2020 – March 2021: Continued Community Conversations			R	R
March and June 2020: Nebraska COVID-19 Early Care and Education Provider Surveys 1 and 2	R	R	R	R
April 2020: Preschool Development Renewal Grant Awarded	R	R	R	R
April 2020: Launch of the Nebraska Child Care Referral Network	R			R
August 2020: Release of <i>The Bottom Line</i> Study		R		R
September 2020: Governance and Finance Task Force		R		R
September 2020: Hearing for Legislative Resolution 390 (LR 390)	R	R	R	R
September 2020: Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference	R	R	R	R
November 2020: Early Childhood Education (ECE) Business Collaboratory		R		
February 2021: Release of LR 390 Report	R	R	R	R

Each of these collaborative initiatives is described briefly below, and links are provided to additional information.

- **January 2020: Launch and Distribution of the Commission Report (Supports Goals 1 – 4).** Since the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission launched its report and recommendations, [Elevating Nebraska’s Early Childhood Workforce](#), at a well-attended event held in Lincoln on Jan. 30, 2020, commission members have helped distribute the report across Nebraska and nationally. Beyond the launch event, the report has been mailed to more than 2,700 homes or offices, with many other copies distributed by commission members to people in their organizations and networks. Those who were not able to attend the launch in person or via the livestream tuned in later to watch the recordings. Links to the report and recordings of the event are available [here](#).

Throughout the year, commission members have continued to share information about the report through their organizations’ social media channels and newsletters. Many have also included the report in presentations. For example, Marjorie Kostelnik and Susan Sarver presented an overview of the report’s findings at a webinar hosted by the Council of Chief State School Officers in June. Senator John Stinner has frequently referred to the report in his work surrounding Legislative Resolution 390 (LR 390, described below). Commission members also shared the report through op-eds that ran in local papers, such as ["How we can grow Nebraska,"](#) authored by K.C. Belitz from the Nebraska Community Foundation, which ran in the Columbus Telegram. The commission report also continues to be a report of record referred to in other key early childhood efforts, including the [2020 Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference](#), the Nebraska Legislature’s LR 390 interim study report, coverage of the [COVID workforce surveys](#), and Buffett Early Childhood Institute Managing Editor Matthew Hansen’s ["A Silver Lining in 2020" news column](#). All of these efforts led by commission members are working; since last January, the [webpage](#) where the report is posted has been visited more than 4,400 times.

- **January 2020 – March 2021: Continued Community Conversations (Supports Goals 3 and 4).** The need to engage communities in conversation about the importance of early childhood education did not diminish in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders in North Platte, Lexington, and Garden County continued to leverage the documentary *No Small Matter* to kick-start virtual community conversations about quality early care and education. The film was made available publicly in fall 2020 and can be purchased or rented on [Amazon](#).
- **March and June 2020: Nebraska COVID-19 Early Care and Education Provider Surveys 1 and 2 (Supports Goals 1 – 4).** The commission’s goals and recommendations are grounded in a commitment to ensuring that any effort to elevate Nebraska’s early childhood workforce is informed by and responsive to the strengths and challenges of the workforce. Two surveys conducted by the Buffett Early Childhood Institute in 2020 align well with this commitment.

In late March, the Buffett Institute conducted the first of two surveys with early childhood providers to better understand the impacts of the pandemic. More than 2,100 providers responded, and survey results reflected the incredible stress providers were facing linked to economic insecurity, the

threat of health problems, and a lack of reliable information. Highlights from the survey are available [here](#).

In June, the Buffett Institute conducted the second survey with early childhood providers. Survey results indicated that stressors reported in March were continuing and that providers needed more support if they were to stay in business. The survey also revealed the resilience and dedication of Nebraska's early childhood workforce, despite the high levels of stress. Findings from the survey are available [here](#).

These surveys would not have made it into the hands of providers statewide without the support of commission members who were able to distribute the surveys through their organizations' social media channels and through personal outreach via email. In addition, commission members have used the findings from both provider surveys to continue to focus public and policymaker attention on the critical issues facing child care and the early childhood workforce. The surveys received statewide media attention, including stories in the [Omaha World-Herald](#), the [Norfolk Daily News](#), the [Lincoln Journal Star](#), and many others.

Findings from both surveys also informed the findings of the LR 390 report (see below).

- **April 2020: Preschool Development Renewal Grant Awarded (Supports Goals 1 – 4).** In 2019 – 2020, several organizations represented on the commission contributed to the successful implementation of a grant awarded to Nebraska by the Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS): the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) Birth through Five Initiative. Building on this foundation, Nebraska applied for a continuation grant, and on April 1, 2020, HHS awarded the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services \$8.9 million each year for three years for the PDG Renewal Grant. Together, contributing partners, including several organizations represented on the commission, pledged \$2.7 million in annual matching funds.

The PDG Renewal Grant provides funding from 2020 – 2023 to implement the [Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan](#), which was developed under the previous PDG award. The new award has resulted in an extremely busy and productive year for early childhood organizations across the state, and numerous initiatives funded by PDG align with the goals and recommendations of the commission, including the following:

- **Workforce Commission Implementation (Supports Goals 1 – 4).** The PDG-funded Workforce Commission Implementation initiative is focused on developing and implementing the statewide infrastructure needed to fulfill the vision and goals of the commission report. As part of this effort, work is underway to conduct a landscape analysis of existing early childhood efforts that support the goals and recommendations of the commission report. The landscape assessment will be utilized as a tool to guide implementation efforts into 2021 and beyond.
- **Implementation of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan (Supports Goals 1 – 4).** The goals of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan complement the goals of the commission report. For example, a top priority in the ongoing strategic planning process is to achieve a shared understanding across Nebraska of what quality means in early care and education

settings and to infuse that definition into every aspect of the work, which aligns with Goals 1 – 4 of the commission report.

Another priority is to improve alignment of economic, social, regulatory, and funding policies to streamline business operations, reducing the administrative burden on early childhood providers while allowing them to cover the costs of providing quality programs. This priority aligns with commission Goals 2 and 4.

In addition, implementation of the strategic plan involves informing stakeholders about all aspects of Nebraska’s early childhood system. Informational materials, including the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan Executive Summary, are available online and will continue to be developed as the plan evolves. Opportunities for input and engagement will also be shared with stakeholders statewide. These efforts align with commission Goals 3 and 4.

Learn more at NEarlychildhoodplan.org.

- **Nebraska Early Childhood Career Advising updates (Supports Goal 1).** With funding from PDG, the Buffett Institute is documenting early childhood programs across the state that lead to certificates, degrees, and teacher certification. This information will be used to update the Nebraska Early Childhood Career Advising guide in cooperation with the Nebraska Department of Education. This documentation will also allow for facilitated conversations between programs and institutions about articulation.
- **Public Education Campaign Planning (Supports Goal 3).** Through funding made possible by the Holland Foundation and PDG, plans are underway for a statewide public education campaign to build support for quality early childhood care and education and the early childhood workforce. The public education campaign is conceived as a broad collaborative effort that will engage partners and stakeholders across the state, including many organizations that are represented on the commission. The campaign is intended to build on the efforts of earlier campaigns in the state, and work thus far is focusing on communications research and analysis that will inform campaign messages and development. The campaign will launch later this year.

More information about PDG is available [here](#).

- **April 2020: Launch of the Nebraska Child Care Referral Network (Supports Goals 1 and 4).** The commission report calls for engaging Nebraskans, including early childhood professionals, in collaborative efforts to support quality early care and education (Goal 1) and ensuring the communication and coordination necessary to accomplish objectives (Goal 4). The Nebraska Child Care Referral Network, launched on April 21, 2020, is an example of a collaborative and coordinated effort to promote quality early care and education in response to the child care crisis that emerged when pandemic restrictions were implemented. To help providers fill empty slots and remain open, and to help essential workers find care for their children during the pandemic, individuals and organizations from the public and private sectors collaborated and volunteered their time and resources to build a searchable website of licensed child care providers and programs across the state. At this time, all licensed child care programs are integrated into the site. Providers can register on the site and create a profile to provide additional information beyond what is available on the child care roster. In the next few months additional information will be added to the website, such

as information about Head Start, school-based PreK, and school-based before- and after-school programs. Collaborations are in the works to encourage more providers to sign up for profiles on the site and to generate greater awareness of the site among parents. The Child Care Referral Network can be found [here](#).

- **August 2020: Release of *The Bottom Line Study* (Supports Goals 2 and 4).** In its report and recommendations, the commission called for fully funding Nebraska’s early childhood system and provided an estimate of the size of the investment needed to do so. In a complementary effort, partners at First Five Nebraska commissioned a study by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln’s Bureau of Business Research to explore how gaps in child care availability affect family income, employer profitability, and state revenue in Nebraska. On Aug. 27, 2020, First Five Nebraska released results of its study in *The Bottom Line: Economic Impacts of Inadequate Child Care Access in Nebraska*. Information about the report is available [here](#).
- **September 2020: Governance and Finance Task Force (Supports Goals 2 and 4).** In addition to a call to fully fund Nebraska’s early childhood system (Goal 2), the commission report also calls for developing the infrastructure needed to implement the commission’s goals and recommendations (Goal 4). As part of the PDG effort, a stakeholder task force, known as the Governance and Finance Task Force, was launched by First Five Nebraska in September 2020. The task force has been exploring Nebraska’s early childhood financing practices, related regulatory barriers, and promising models of early childhood governance. Several members of the commission now serve on the task force and its workgroups, which are working diligently to (1) develop a detailed concept for a shared leadership model of the early care and education system in Nebraska, and (2) develop a plan to coordinate and align early care and education revenue streams from disparate sources.

The work of the task force is informed by a funding landscape technical report, entitled *Nebraska’s Public Investment in Early Childhood Care and Education, Fiscal Year 2017*, that was developed by Cathey Huddleston-Casas at the Buffett Institute and Jen Goettemoeller, a private consultant, with assistance from colleagues from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, the Nebraska Department of Education, and the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. The report is available [here](#).

- **September 2020: Public Hearing for Legislative Resolution 390 (Supports Goals 1 – 4).** When the COVID-19 pandemic interfered with plans to conduct a statewide tour to share the commission report and recommendations, Senator John Stinner, a member of the Legislature and the commission, recommended undertaking a legislative study to keep the spotlight on the early childhood workforce, especially in light of the pandemic. The Legislative Resolution 390 (LR 390) interim study report sought to assess the fiscal and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Nebraska’s early childhood workforce and the early childhood care and education system (available [here](#)). The commission report was named in the legislative resolution as foundational to the study, and other workforce-related efforts contributed to the LR 390 report, including the two Nebraska COVID-19 early care and education provider surveys, *The Bottom Line* study, the funding landscape technical report, and letters from several commission members that were entered as part of the public record.

Senator Stinner introduced LR 390 on July 27, 2020, and a public hearing was held on Sept. 29, 2020. The hearing provided a valuable opportunity to brief members of the Appropriations Committee on the commission's report and recommendations, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the early childhood workforce, and the ways in which the commission estimated the funding requirements for a fully funded early childhood care and education system in Nebraska. The hearing was well attended by the committee, and NETV carried the hearing live on its website. University of Nebraska President Ted Carter was among those to testify and noted that early childhood education remains one of the university's top strategic priorities. The resulting press and social media coverage continued to communicate the importance of the issues and the Legislature's growing concern for the early childhood workforce. In addition to the Sept. 29 hearing with the Appropriations Committee, a separate briefing was held with the Health and Human Services Committee on Dec. 15, 2020, to share the same information and to assist them in understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the early childhood workforce.

- **September 2020: Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference (Supports Goals 1 – 4).** At the [2020 Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference](#) on Sept. 14, Senator Stinner offered opening remarks and used the opportunity to highlight the work of the Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission. Held online due to COVID-19, this annual conference drew registrations from 700 individuals, including those from 100 Nebraska communities and 20 states. Senator Stinner also used his remarks at the conference to encourage Nebraska parents and business owners to respond to an online survey to share their experiences regarding child care during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal was to receive a response from parents and business owners in all 93 Nebraska counties. This effort, supported by the Buffett Institute and First Five, received more than 1,000 responses and helped to inform the findings of the LR 390 report.
- **November 2020: Early Childhood Education (ECE) Business Collaboratory (Supports Goal 2).** Nebraska is one of 12 states participating in the 2020 cohort of the ECE Business Collaboratory. Offered by First Children's Finance, the [ECE Business Collaboratory](#) is designed to assist states that are seeking to create and strengthen pathways to child care business sustainability. The Nebraska team is led by Stephanni Renn, vice president of early childhood programs at the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, and includes members from the Buffett Early Childhood Institute, First Five Nebraska, Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative, state agency partners from the Nebraska Department of Education Office of Early Childhood, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services Office of Children and Family Services, and Step Up to Quality. The team has worked to assemble a map of Nebraska's child care business ecosystem and is currently completing a child care business ecosystem assessment for the state.
- **February 2021: Release of Legislative Resolution 390 Report (Supports Goals 1 – 4).** On Feb. 16, 2021, Senator Stinner publicly released the interim study report authorized by Legislative Resolution 390 (LR 390) and conducted by the Legislature's Appropriations Committee. Entitled [Examination of the Fiscal and Economic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Nebraska's Early Childhood Workforce and the Early Childhood Care and Education System](#), the report addressed impacts of the pandemic as well as the requirements of a fully funded early childhood system.

In releasing the report, Senator Stinner offered remarks on the floor of the Legislature and provided copies to his colleagues, continuing to call attention to the needs of the early childhood workforce and to urge consideration for fully funding the early childhood system. Resulting media coverage of the report was extensive: more than 60 stories appeared in both Nebraska and national media outlets, including the [Associated Press](#), [U.S. News & World Report](#), [The Washington Times](#), [Omaha World-Herald](#), [Scottsbluff Star-Herald](#), [Grand Island Independent](#), [Norfolk Daily News](#), and many others.

Together, these broad, collaborative initiatives, and many other efforts across Nebraska, are helping to advance the goals identified in the commission report.

LOOKING AHEAD

In the year ahead, commission members will continue collaborating to elevate Nebraska's early childhood workforce. Following are just a few examples of ongoing collaborative efforts:

- In 2021 – 2022, Nebraskans will be engaged in further developing the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan, with a focus on identifying strategies and action plans for accomplishing its goals. Stakeholders will be invited to participate in conversations to ensure the plan addresses the priorities and needs of Nebraskans in diverse and unique communities across the state.
- Continued collaboration with Senator Stinner and other legislative leaders will focus on the needs of the early childhood workforce, including discussions about new opportunities made possible through unprecedented one-time funds available as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Development of a statewide public education campaign will build support for quality early childhood care and education and the early childhood workforce.
- Facilitation and support for the [2021 Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference](#) will continue to leverage its “big tent” strategy to bring community and state leaders together in support of quality early childhood care and education and the early childhood workforce.
- Continued collaboration with early childhood partners will facilitate the dissemination and promotion of information about the needs of the early childhood workforce and its importance to the state.
- A statewide early childhood workforce leadership cadre will be developed to support members of the workforce in influencing the evolution of Nebraska's early childhood system.
- An advisory group of stakeholders from across Nebraska will be developed to guide efforts to implement the commission's recommendations.

HELP SPREAD THE WORD

This update presents just a snapshot of what is happening now and a small glimpse of what is yet to come in this growing effort to elevate the early childhood workforce in Nebraska. Going forward, commission members are invited to help spread the word and shine the spotlight on authentic partnerships that contribute to elevating the state's early childhood workforce.

You can help spread the word in several ways, including the following:

- Follow the [Buffett Institute](#) on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [LinkedIn](#) for implementation updates and share with your networks.
- Continue to share copies of the commission's report, [Elevating Nebraska's Early Childhood Workforce](#), when presenting or communicating with stakeholders. If you need copies sent to you, please reach out to beci@nebraska.edu. A virtual copy and supporting materials can be found [here](#).
- Read the findings of the [LR 390 interim study report](#) and [contact your state senator's office](#) to show your support of the findings.
- Read the [Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan Executive Summary](#) to learn more about the overarching vision to provide all Nebraska children and their families with access to quality early childhood care and education and other essential services that support children's healthy development from birth through age 8. Then start sharing the plan using the supporting materials available at NEarlychildhoodplan.org.
- Save the date for the [2021 Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference](#), which will be held virtually on Sept. 27. Join community leaders, including those in education, economic development, child care, business, government, health care, higher education, and philanthropy, for a day of learning on key research, program, policy, and outreach aspects of quality early childhood education programs and services and their important role in economic development.
- Share stories about your work. The Buffett Institute seeks input from commission members about ongoing partnerships and collaborations that contribute to elevating the workforce, as well as ideas about new partnerships that may be needed. To see your work highlighted in future updates, please send a brief summary (150 words or less) to [Cama Charlet](#) at the Buffett Institute. Please also include links to any relevant publications, events, or opportunities to get involved.

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