

FY 2025–26

ANNUAL REPORT

Buffett
Early Childhood
Institute
at the University of Nebraska

Acknowledgments

This report represents the collective work of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska during Fiscal Year 2025–26 (July 1, 2025–June 30, 2026). Every member of the Institute team and our many partners contributed to this work and to the story told throughout these pages.

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Dear Friends,

At the Buffett Early Childhood Institute, our work begins with a simple belief: The earliest years of life matter profoundly, and improving them requires more than any one program, discipline, institution, or community can accomplish alone.

That guiding belief is reflected throughout this FY 2025–26 annual report.

Over the past year, we have continued to deepen the partnerships at the heart of our mission: between research and policy, universities and communities, evidence and practice, and Nebraska and the broader national landscape.

You will see those connections in the stories told throughout these pages. Through our teaching and professional learning initiatives, we are supporting the next generation of researchers with our Native Children's Research Exchange and Graduate Scholars programs, and helping early educators strengthen their practice in Nebraska and beyond.

Our partnerships are improving early learning in school districts, exploring how emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence can benefit the early childhood field, and expanding the role of our Community Chairs across the University of Nebraska System. And through our research and policy efforts, we are finding new ways to address the needs of military families and build young children's early language and literacy skills.

Together, these stories—representing just some of the meaningful work that defined the past year—depict an Institute that is increasingly more connected, more collaborative, and innately focused on translating strong data and research to create stronger systems for young children, families, and the people who serve them.

There is more to do. Soon, we will unveil a new strategic plan that defines how the Institute will accomplish these goals to more fully utilize the many strengths of the University of Nebraska System and continue to broaden our impact.

We thank you for your continued partnership and support, and look forward to sharing our next chapter together.

Sincerely,



Walter Gilliam, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Richard D. Holland Presidential Chair in Early Childhood Development





"Ensuring all families and children have access to affordable, quality care is key not only to the healthy growth and development of Nebraska's children but also to the economic vitality and prosperity of the state."

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

About the Institute

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

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

Together, we are transforming early care and education in Nebraska and across the country.

Our Year in Numbers

$2.2 million

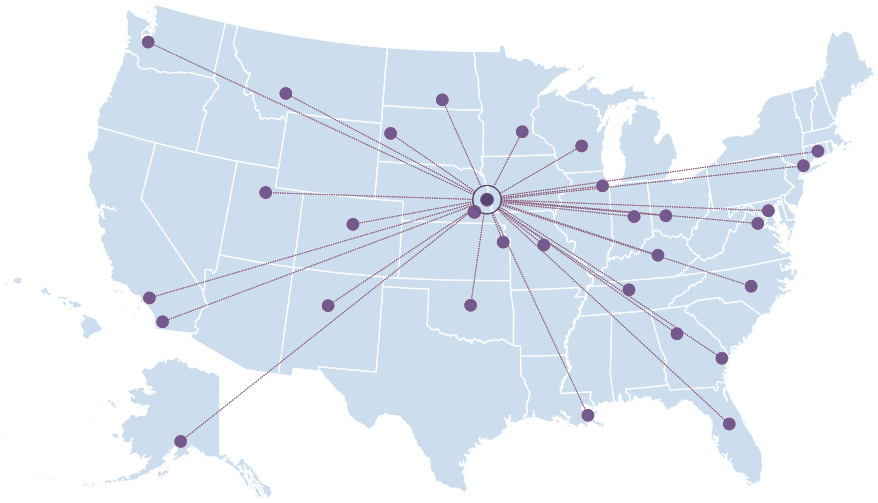
in new grants and contracts awarded this year

15,000+

children PreK through Grade 3 in districts participating in the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan

33

speaking engagements across the country growing our national reach



*Markers indicate locations where Institute staff have presented or spoken at events since 2024.

More Highlights

Celebrated a Decade of Buffett Graduate Scholars

30

doctoral students across the University of Nebraska System awarded $750,000 in research funding since 2016

16

School as Hub Sites

across six districts in the Omaha metro region, directly impacting more than 4,600 children

609

Earned Media Mentions

in high-profile news outlets, including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Gray Media TV affiliates, Chalkbeat, The 74, and The Hechinger Report

25

Institute Reports and Peer-Reviewed Articles

5

National Keynote Presentations

47,000

Website Visitors



The14th cohort of the Native Children's Research Exchange Scholars, mentors, and local leaders in Oklahoma, November 2025

Tribal Work: Building a Legacy of Native Research

The Native Children's Research Exchange (NCRE) Scholars program was launched in 2012. With the leadership of Michelle Sarche, senior director of Tribal research, policy, and partnerships, the program aims to tackle a major problem in substance use prevention and mental health research: underrepresentation.

While the National Institutes of Health (NIH) was funding grants to address health priorities in Native American communities, including those designed to tackle addiction, the opioid crisis, mental health concerns, and suicide, Native Americans themselves made up just a tiny fraction of researchers—less than 1%—leading the very projects aimed at helping their communities.

More than a decade later, the NCRE Scholars program is a success story, helping build the scientific workforce of Native American researchers addressing substance use and child development.

"It has been a tremendous honor to support these emerging leaders who are addressing pressing health priorities related to substance use and Native children's development in partnership with their communities."

– **Michelle Sarche**
Senior Director of Tribal Research, Policy, and Partnerships



41 Early-Career Scholars Across 14 Cohorts

Program alumni have become faculty members, psychologists, scientists, a Tribal epidemiologist—even leaders of their own nations. Scholars have published more than 300 peer-reviewed articles, presented more than 700 times, and been awarded more than 40 grants from NIH and other sources.

Beyond providing Scholars with the support needed to advance their research careers, program leaders and Scholars point to other crucial program benefits: ongoing mentorship, career development, and a national network of fellow researchers who share ideas, collaborate on research projects, and grasp the nuances of existing in the dual worlds of academia and Native culture.

"More than one person echoed the sentiment that the NCRE network is more than just a position or a job," said Sarah Momilani Marshall, a Native Hawaiian researcher, 2019-22 NCRE Scholar, and an assistant professor in the Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. "These are relationships. These have been woven into the fabric of our lives now."

'It Changed My Life'

Scholars represent roughly 50 Tribes and Indigenous communities. Still, several were clear: their background hasn't given them immediate buy-in with Native communities, which are highly distinct.

Some Scholars grew up participating in Native traditions; others began to explore their roots as adults. Native communities can be understandably wary of outsiders, considering the history of "helicopter research," where researchers have taken what they've needed and left.

Lauren White is currently working with Alaska Native communities and the Yakama Nation in the Pacific Northwest on mental health and suicide prevention programs.

"NCRE Scholars are so important because we can mentor each other in how to behave as an insider and outsider, how to do that in a way that's not just getting buy-in, but also being respectful," she said.

For many, the NCRE network extends long after any cohort ends. Former Scholars gather at the biennial Native Children's Research Exchange Conference, mentor new Scholars, and partner on new and ongoing studies and projects.

Tribal Research at the Institute

- **Tribal Early Childhood Research Center**

  In spring 2026, the Tribal Early Childhood Research Center hosted a three-part webinar series on Tribal data sovereignty in early childhood research. Speakers included Michelle Sarche, the Buffett Institute's senior director of Tribal research, policy, and partnerships.

- **NCRE Conference and Network**

  The Native Children's Research Exchange Conference marked its 15th anniversary in September 2025. Roughly 120 researchers, practitioners, federal staff, and funders attended to support the well-being of American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and other Indigenous children and families.

- **CIRCLE HV Partnership**

  Three Tribal home visiting research-practice partnerships launched locally designed projects, including an Indigenous-led home visiting model for urban families and a nurse practitioner-provided integrated behavioral health and substance use services in a rural, reservation-based home visiting program.



Graduate Scholars Spring Showcase, Davis Global Center at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha, April 2026

"As a mentor in the Graduate Scholars program, I've seen firsthand how transformative this experience can be for students and for the future of early childhood research."

– **Ann Anderson Berry**

M.D., Ph.D., chief, University of Nebraska Medical Center Division of Neonatology, Department of Pediatrics, and executive director, Child Health Research Institute

Graduate Scholars: Developing the Next Generation of Researchers

Microplastics in baby food. Preschooler vegetable consumption. Intergenerational caregiving.

Across the University of Nebraska System, doctoral students are tackling these real-world issues—and more—with support from the Buffett Institute's Graduate Scholars program.

Each year, up to four doctoral students receive one-year fellowships worth up to $25,000 each.

Since 2016, the program has invested $750,000 in 30 Graduate Scholars from across the University of Nebraska campuses, funding cutting-edge research on issues such as nutrition and mealtimes in child care programs, early math skills, the association between agrichemical mixtures and pediatric health outcomes in Nebraska, and prosthesis use in young children.

Beyond the financial support, the program gives students valuable opportunities to connect with and learn from Institute experts.

The Institute's 2025–26 Graduate Scholars—Colman Freel, Rebekah Rapoza, and Ali Shull—answered questions about their research, what they've gained from the program, and why their fellow doctoral students should consider applying.

"What are you studying, and how could it make a difference for young children and/or families?"



Colman Freel
Department of Cellular and Integrative Physiology,
University of Nebraska Medical Center

"I study how diabetes during pregnancy impacts the long-term risk for cardiovascular diseases in offspring. Evidence suggests that programming of cardiovascular risk begins in the womb and may involve dysfunction of the fetal vascular endothelium, which forms the inner layer of all blood vessels and plays a vital role in controlling blood pressure."



Rebekah Rapoza
Department of Pediatrics,
University of Nebraska Medical Center

"I study how maternal stressors—such as low food security or an income below the federal poverty level—can affect pregnancy and long-term maternal and infant health. I focus on how these stressors can change how certain key genes involved in metabolism are regulated. This research helps us to better understand the biological effects of these stressors during pregnancy and could inform future programs to support at-risk families and improve child health in Nebraska."



Ali Shull
Department of Educational Psychology,
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

"My dissertation examines how parenting content on social media influences parents' stress levels and their sense of parenting self-efficacy. Parents are exposed to a constant stream of advice and highly curated portrayals of family life, which can create pressure to meet unrealistic standards. Understanding these dynamics can help researchers and practitioners better support families in navigating digital parenting spaces in healthier, more informed ways."

A Decade of Graduate Scholars

- **$750,000**
  invested over 10 years
- **30**
  Graduate Scholars since 2016
- **16**
  Scholars from University of Nebraska-Lincoln across four different colleges
- **6**
  Scholars from University of Nebraska at Omaha, across two different colleges
- **8**
  Scholars from University of Nebraska Medical Center, across three different colleges and the Munroe-Meyer Institute
- **11**
  former Scholars are faculty or staff at universities or hospitals
- **13**
  former Scholars living and working in Nebraska



Purposeful play in the classroom; Mount View Elementary in Omaha, April 2026

"When educators begin to consistently ask, 'What is this child experiencing?', they gain powerful insight into how to support each child's growth, curiosity, and sense of belonging."

– **Amy Schmidtke**
Director of Educational Practice



'Lens of the Child' Training Puts Focus on Children

What is this child experiencing right now?

This simple but powerful question led Amy Schmidtke, director of educational practice at the Buffett Institute, to name and refine what is now called the Lens of the Child: a way of seeing children's experiences more clearly.

"When educators begin to consistently ask, 'What is this child experiencing?', they gain powerful insight into how to support each child's growth, curiosity, and sense of belonging in the classroom, leading to lifelong learning and success," Schmidtke said.

The Lens of the Child is not a curriculum or program. Instead, it is a way of seeing and being with children that helps educators align their teaching with how children actually experience learning.

And it doesn't replace what educators already know. It helps them see more clearly what children are experiencing and respond with greater intention.

"I discovered that there is so much more nuance when working with young children that you don't necessarily learn from a classroom setting," said participant Robyn Helwig, an Early Head Start teacher in Sarpy County.

Integrating Research-Based Practices

Thirty local educators participated in a cohort that ended in March. Through the series, they participated in five, four-hour sessions, exploring how their environments, interactions, and learning opportunities shape those experiences for children from birth through Grade 3.

The series combines experiential learning with research-based practices. Rather than simply hearing about strategies, participants actively engage with the concepts. They reflect on them, and then they apply them in their real classroom settings with the children they serve. The series encourages educators to rethink their environments, their interactions, and their learning activities by asking what children are truly experiencing in those moments.

"Educators shared that the series has changed the way they teach, the way they look at their classroom environments and learning activities, and the way they build relationships with children," said series facilitator Kimberlee Telford, an early childhood coordinator for the Buffett Institute who worked with a team to design the series.

The Buffett Institute offers professional learning workshops for schools and child care programs on more than two dozen topics, including the Lens of the Child. A second Lens cohort will start in January 2027.

Expanding Professional Opportunities for Educators in Nebraska and Beyond

Through the Lens of the Child training series and other interactive workshops, the Institute helps educators connect research to practice, collaborate with peers, and strengthen intentional, child-centered teaching.

Evaluation findings demonstrate both the reach of these opportunities and educators' growing confidence in applying what they learn.

25
professional learning opportunities available to school districts, teachers, and child care programs across the country through the professional learning catalog

1,577
educators attended district or school professional development

82
workshops held with participants from 11 districts in the Omaha area

93%
of surveyed workshop attendees agreed that facilitators created engaging and collaborative learning environments



School leaders discuss the impact of the School as Hub approach at the Superintendents' Plan convening, March 2026

"As a result of our work, we have strengthened instructional practices, grown an understanding of teaching the whole child through best practice, and increased family involvement."

– **Melissa Poloncic**
Superintendent, Douglas County West Community Schools

School as Hub Approach Offers Lessons for Districts Nationwide

What if school districts united to strengthen early childhood education and build connections between schools and families?

That approach is the backbone of the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan, a decade-long partnership between 11 districts across the Omaha metro.

And we know it's working, as outlined by school and district staff who shared the outcomes and impact of the initiative at a daylong collaboration summit hosted by the Buffett Institute on June 16.

"How do we know, through evidence, that systems are being impacted, that families are benefiting, and that children are benefiting?" said Amy Schmidtke, the Buffett Institute's director of educational practice. "We want staff and partners to connect the dots between those strategies, the activities that different districts are doing, and the types of outcomes that they're seeing."

The Buffett Institute's Educational Practice team works alongside school and district leaders to strengthen early childhood practices, connect with families, and use data and reflection to understand what's working.

Through its partnership with the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, the Institute helps participating districts adopt services and programs aimed at families and young children facing persistent economic and social challenges.

Positioning Schools as a Central Hub

The School as Hub for Early Learning approach positions schools as central hubs that connect children and their families to quality learning experiences, supports, and community resources within and beyond school walls.

These efforts are not tied to any one school district, region, or state—they can be adapted and replicated based on the needs and priorities of different schools and programs.

At the summit and a previous family engagement event in March, schools and districts presented posters highlighting school data, ongoing initiatives, and points of pride. Family engagement strategies included:

- Parents and teachers using a school app to translate different languages and send announcements, reminders, and quick notes about sick kids
- Providing outreach beyond just families—school officials work with local child care providers, churches, and other community members to support students
- Establishing a preschool readiness program so parents and children can be introduced to school staff and get familiar with the school building

Schmidtke said the Superintendents' Plan—and its focus on connecting families and children to schools beginning at birth—remains a model for school districts nationwide.

"I don't know anyone else in the nation who is doing it like we are, prioritizing the youngest learners in our communities," she said.

How We Work With Schools

Through the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan, the Institute works with 11 Omaha-area school districts that enroll more than 15,000 children in PreK-Grade 3.

One part of the plan, the School as Hub approach, provides intensive services to children and families at 16 schools across six districts, impacting more than 140 classrooms and 4,600 children.

How We're Expanding This Work in Nebraska

Lessons learned through this work will now inform statewide early childhood efforts. The Institute and the Nebraska Department of Education are partnering on a pilot that will include professional learning webinars, a statewide community of practice for early educators, and visits with Nebraska districts.

How We're Sharing Our Expertise Nationally

Institute leaders co-authored research and practice briefs and participated in webinars on early literacy, Kindergarten transitions, and supporting student attendance through a Center on Early Learning Success partnership funded by the U.S. Department of Education.



OMA x AI conference at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, June 2026

"We are building new ways for teachers to practice and strengthen their skills. We want educators to feel confident and supported, so they are ready for the realities of the classroom."

– **Dalhia Lloyd**
Director of Digital Education



Supporting Children, Families, and Educators with AI Tools

The Buffett Institute and several Nebraska partners are joining forces to bring innovative artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) professional learning tools to the early childhood workforce.

New projects with Boys Town and Omaha's Nelson Mandela Elementary are working to center the voices of early childhood professionals and design tools that help professionals grow in their practice. By combining the strengths of each organization, we're ensuring early childhood professionals are not left behind in the age of AI—instead, they're leading the way.

Partnering to Drive Innovation

The Buffett Institute-Boys Town partnership leverages the strengths of both organizations. Boys Town has become a leader in developing AI-integrated training and language tools, while the Buffett Institute is a nationally recognized leader in advancing early childhood care and education.

The Institute's Digital Education team is adapting Boys Town's Reality Coach tool for early educators, allowing them to practice classroom management skills with AI-driven student avatars and receive instant feedback and coaching.

The Institute has contributed video data, classroom insights, and real-world interaction scenarios to ensure the Reality Coach platform reflects the complexity of working with young children and families.

This innovative tool gives educators the opportunity to rehearse challenging moments, practice family communication, and strengthen relational decision-making before those moments happen in real settings.

Technology in Early Education

Early childhood education is often overlooked in conversations about AI. The Institute's Digital Education team is hoping to change that.

This year, work also began on a small pilot program aimed to ease the transition into Kindergarten. It started with a simple question: Could technology, including AI, help create a more welcoming Kindergarten transition for children and families? That question led to the partnership with Nelson Mandela Elementary to create personalized videos for students before the first day of school.

A Kindergarten teacher recorded one video speaking about her favorite vacation spot and a voice memo of each child's name. From there, the Buffett Institute and Boys Town worked together to explore how AI could take that and turn it into a personal welcome video for every child without requiring the teacher to record a separate video a dozen times.

With these projects, the Institute is developing new approaches to help educators practice and strengthen their skills and build the confidence and preparation needed to navigate classroom realities.

The work also focuses on equipping families with tools to strengthen school connections, support learning at home, and embrace their role as their child's first teacher.

Impact

Strengthening Kindergarten Transitions with Digital Innovation

To create a warm, welcoming transition to Kindergarten at Nelson Mandela Elementary in Omaha, the Buffett Institute partnered with Boys Town engineers to create personalized AI videos featuring teacher Diann Moore that were sent to the families of incoming Kindergartners.

OMA x AI Conference

Director of Digital Education Dalhia Lloyd presented with Maurice Bailey, an AI engineer at Boys Town, during the OMA x AI conference on June 30. They provided a live demo of the Reality Coach tool, which Lloyd and her team have been adapting with Boys Town for early educators.

National AI Workgroup

Lloyd is a member of the ZERO TO THREE AI Workgroup, where she contributes to setting a national agenda for AI in the early childhood field.



Debora Wisneski, the University of Nebraska at Omaha Community Chair, speaks at an Omaha reception, October 2025

‘Play Your Part’: Honoring a UNO Community Chair and Early Childhood Champion

Note: Professor Wisneski passed away in June 2026 after a courageous, years-long battle with cancer.

Debora Wisneski shared a go-to piece of advice: “Play your part.”

“We each have a perspective, a talent, a gift, a resource, that matters,” she said. It’s a fitting motto for a teacher education professor who spent much of her career championing the power of play-based learning for young children.

Wisneski, the John T. Langan Community Chair in Early Childhood Education at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and the Buffett Institute, was honored at a community chair reception in Omaha on Oct. 22, 2025. More than 100 people attended, including nearly 30 staff and faculty from the College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences at UNO.

“Wisneski is a key liaison between dedicated faculty and community partners who share a deep interest in supporting early childhood.”

– **Joanne Li**

Chancellor, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Community Chairs connect the university and community

Click or scan to watch

"Even before I came here, I knew about Professor Wisneski's work," said Walter Gilliam, the executive director of the Buffett Institute. "She's a giant in the field of early childhood play, and I've long admired the work that she did reminding us that all learning comes from play, especially with young children."

Connecting Campuses and Communities

NU President Jeffrey P. Gold, M.D., said the chairs provide campus leadership and connect with communities, "serving to bridge the gap between academia and Nebraskans."

There are four endowed community chairs at the Buffett Institute. Wisneski became the first in 2013, modeling how community chairs can collaborate with the Institute as well as early educators, families, and community organizations.

Gilliam said the community chair positions demonstrate the University of Nebraska's strong support of early childhood education and its care for children, "18 years before they even set foot on campus."

At the UNO reception, speakers praised Wisneski's leadership in the early childhood field, mentorship of college students and aspiring teachers, and extensive community engagement.

"She is a key liaison between dedicated faculty and community partners who share a deep interest in supporting early childhood," said UNO Chancellor Joanne Li.

Wisneski worked on play-based projects like Omaha Urban Thinkscapes, the redesign of infant and toddler playscapes with Educare, RDG Planning & Design and BCI Burke playgrounds, the creation of the UNO PLAY Lab, and the Playful Learning and Community Engagement (PLACE) faculty group.

At the reception, Wisneski noted the importance of centering the needs of children. "My whole life I have worked for and with children," she said. "I found it required me to become more healthy and whole, and braver and kind. By committing ourselves to early childhood education, we may discover that the lives we are saving may be our own."

Four Chairs, One University-Wide Commitment



Philip Lai (2025–present) UNK

University of Nebraska at Kearney

Cille and Ron Williams Community Chair for Early Childhood Education

Department: Communication Disorders

Research Interests: Social development, executive function, and cognitive development in individuals with autism and other neurodevelopmental disorders, including verbal and nonverbal communication during social interactions in various populations



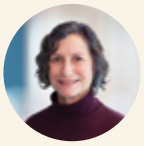
Paula Thompson (2025–present) UNK

University of Nebraska at Kearney

Cille and Ron Williams Community Chair for Early Childhood Education

Department: Teacher Education

Research Interests: Early childhood workforce preparation and well-well-being, with a focus on professionals serving rural communities, family engagement, early STEM implementation, child development, family advocacy, and special education



Julia Torquati (2019–present) N

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Community Chair in Infant and Child Mental Health

Department: Child, Youth and Family Studies

Research Interests: Infant and child mental health and development of children's social skills and regulation



U.S. Senate briefing on military child care, July 2026

Expanding Efforts to Address Military Family, Child Care Challenges

"We have a special obligation to support military families—not just in recognizing their sacrifices, but in ensuring they have the resources, stability, and opportunities they need to thrive."

– Walter Gilliam
Executive Director



Military families have distinct strengths.

Frequent moves, deployments, and high-stress national defense jobs cultivate traits like adaptability, resilience, and a strong sense of duty and community.

And yet, those strengths often come at a cost to our military families. Consider:

- More than 75% of military families report two incomes are necessary to get by. Yet, the unemployment rate for military spouses hovers around 22%, five times higher than the national average.
- Families may have limited support systems nearby, and child care is in short supply—there are approximately 7,800 children on waitlists for on-base child care alone.
- Military families report higher rates of stress than their civilian peers, with lower rates of well-being showing as early as childhood.

Partnering to Advance Research

To address these challenges, the Institute is partnering with military systems and leaders in Nebraska and across the nation.

In February 2026, University of Nebraska System President Jeffrey P. Gold, M.D. and Buffett Institute Executive Director Walter Gilliam met with Adm. Richard Correll, Commander, United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), and Col. Aaron Gray, Commander, 55th Wing, Offutt Air Force Base, to discuss the child care needs of local military families.

Gilliam has expertise in military child care issues and has been an invited speaker for the Department of Defense's Child Care Summit and for Headquarters Marine Corps in Quantico, Va.

The Institute is also working with the new Office for the Advancement of Military Medicine at the University of Nebraska Medical Center to share emerging research as the university builds out its evolving initiatives to support military-connected families.

"Over the 30 years I spent in uniform, a constant and critical concern was the support and care provided to military children and their families. For a service member to be ready and effective, they must know the physical and emotional needs of their families are met," said Col. Lee Williames (USAF, Ret.), M.D., the Office's new director.

Additionally, Patricia Barron joined the Institute as a trusted consultant to deepen military research and policy work. Barron, a longtime military family expert, previously spent four years as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy.

"Our service members, when they take the oath to protect and defend, are prepared to give us everything; their time, their careers, their lives. It's not easy for them, and it's not easy for their families," Barron said.

In April, Barron and leaders from the National Military Family Association (NMFA), the nation's oldest organization representing the interest of military family policy, met with the Institute for a data camp to discuss future research collaborations.

The Buffett Institute and NMFA will be analyzing issues including:

- Military child care supply and shortages
- The military early childhood workforce
- Workforce development for military spouses
- The well-being of military families and child care providers.

From Nebraska to the Nation

School District Work Near Offutt Air Force Base

The Institute provides specialized support to Belleaire Elementary in Bellevue Public Schools. Located just outside Offutt Air Force Base, the school serves a community in which 23% of students are connected to the military.

Meetings with Offutt and USSTRATCOM Leadership

President Gold and Gilliam met with the commanding officers for Offutt AFB and the United States Strategic Command to learn more about how our work aligns and share Institute data on child care access. The highest child care gap in Nebraska is concentrated in the community around Offutt AFB.

Congressional Briefings with National Military Family Association

The Buffett Institute and NMFA planned two congressional briefings and senior-level Pentagon meetings in July on military child care featuring new data on access, workforce, and well-being.



A Head Start classroom in Fremont, Neb. uses the LENA technology, June 2026

Connecting Research and Practice to Strengthen Early Literacy in Nebraska

"The goal isn't simply to get adults to talk more. It's to help educators use data to recognize which children may need more back-and-forth interaction and then give them practical strategies."

– **Alexandra Daro**
Director of Applied Research



In Head Start classrooms across Nebraska, a small, cassette-shaped device tucked inside purple vests worn by young children is helping students and teachers build critical early language and literacy skills. These "talk pedometers" use LENA Grow technology to measure conversational turns, the back-and-forth verbal interactions between babies, toddlers, and preschoolers and their caregivers.

These exchanges are key to children's brain development and early language formation, helping them learn new words and setting the stage for later reading success. This innovative professional development and early literacy project is supported by a five-year, $1.3 million Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) grant from the U.S. Department of Education and Nebraska Department of Education.

With this funding, the Buffett Institute and colleagues at the University of Nebraska at Kearney are partnering with the Nebraska Head Start Association and Nebraska Head Start programs across the state. More than 1,300 children across urban and rural settings are expected to participate in the first two years of the grant.

Preliminary Data From 15 Classrooms is Promising

In center-based early childhood classrooms, LENA expects about 15 conversational turns per hour. Forty is optimal. The first Nebraska Head Start classrooms started high, with an average of 35 conversational turns per hour. Through tracking and coaching, that increased to 45 turns per hour—a 28% increase in just five weeks.

The LENA data flags which children may need more support or intervention because they're receiving fewer interactions or hearing less talk. Those who started out in the lower third of conversational turns went from an average of 22 turns per hour to 36 turns, jumping 65%.

"What's especially encouraging is that we're seeing the largest gains among children who started out experiencing fewer conversational turns," Alexandra Daro, director of applied research, said. "The goal isn't simply to get adults to talk more. It's to help educators use data to recognize which children may need more back-and-forth interaction and then give them practical strategies they can build into the routines they're already doing every day."

This summer, a Northeast Nebraska Community Action Partnership Early Head Start classroom of infants and toddlers in Norfolk led by Gianna Caputo and Cassie Niedig participated in the program. Once a week, on "LENA Day," the teachers would outfit their students in purple vests with the listening devices and wait to see what the data showed.

"We just let them talk and we collect the data," Niedig said. But the data revealed surprises, too. Niedig didn't realize how much more she talked to one of the classroom's oldest and most-vocal students. A toddler who is nonverbal made a lot of vocalizations, but teachers realized they weren't always responding directly to him.

Children learn language from adults. By counting and analyzing conversations, this project makes sure all students are receiving the talk and attention they need.

"It's definitely helped us see which one of them talks the most, which one needs a little more talking to," Niedig said.

Building Early Literacy by the Numbers

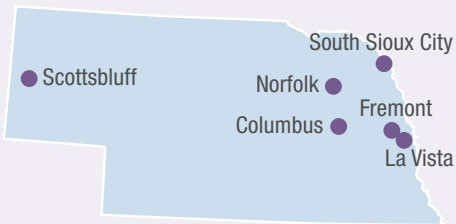
1,300+
children expected to participate in the first two years

99
children and 23 teachers participated in the first two LENA Grow cohorts in spring 2026

28%
increase in children's hourly conversational turns with teachers

4
statewide and university partners: Nebraska Department of Education, University of Nebraska at Kearney, Nebraska Head Start Association, LENA

15
Head Start classrooms across 6 communities

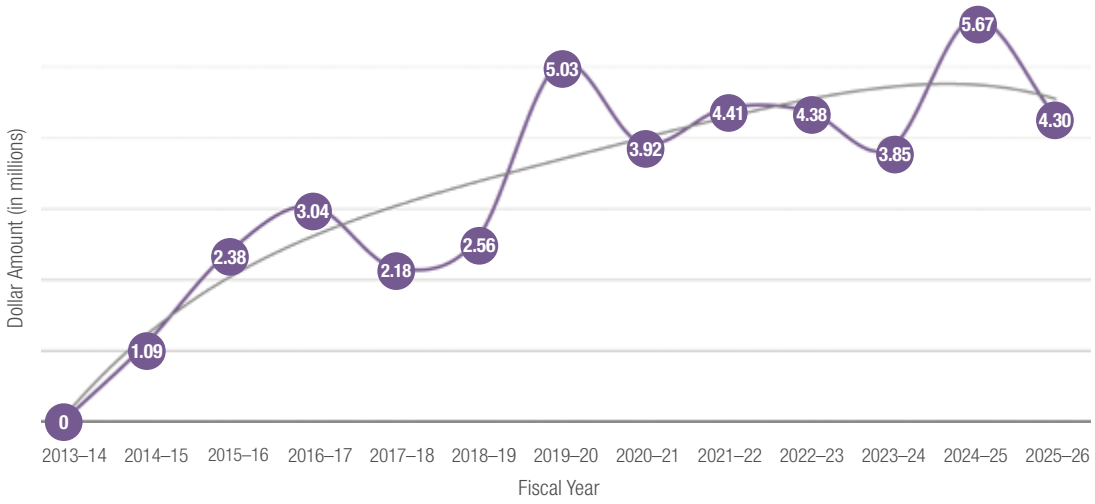


Strengthening Financial Stewardship to Advance Our Mission

How we fund and invest in our work reflects our continued commitment to improving the lives of young children and families in Nebraska and nationwide. In Fiscal Year 2025–26, the Institute continued to strengthen its external funding sources and keep the reliance on endowment funding to a minimum.

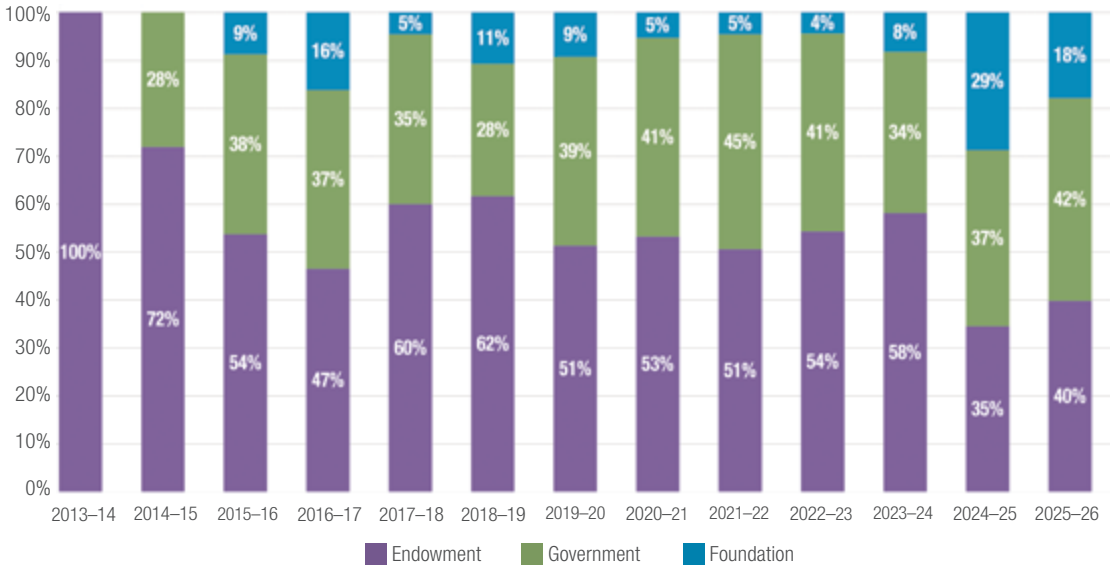
External Funding Expenditures for Projects by Fiscal Year

In this fiscal year, two grants were sunsetted, accounting for a dip in the external funding expenditures.



Total Funding Sources by Fiscal Year

Despite a decrease in external funding expenditures as indicated in the chart above, the reliance on endowment funds remained comparable to the prior fiscal year.



Our Funders

HOLLAND foundation

learning community DOUGLAS SARPY

NIH National Institute on Drug Abuse

Nebraska Department of Education

OMAHA Public Schools

The David & Lucile Packard Foundation

The Sherwood Foundation

University of Nebraska System

Universitas Nebraskensis

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Our People

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

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Venessa Bryant
Laura Cady
Demetria Carman
Lisa Caudle
Molly Colling
Jacqueline Cortez
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Ashley True
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Renee Wessels

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University of Nebraska at Kearney

Paula Thompson, Ed.D.
University of Nebraska at Kearney

Julia Torquati, Ph.D.
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Debora Wisneski, Ph.D.
University of Nebraska at Omaha

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Columbia University/Yale University

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The Campagna Center (Retired)

Jessie Rasmussen
Buffett Early Childhood Fund

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University of Michigan (Emeritus)

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