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Collaboration for Early Learning: What We've Learned from Implementation of the School as Hub Approach

Promising Practices Brief #1



Executive Summary

Research points consistently to the value of continuity across the birth through Grade 3 years: Children experience early childhood as one continuous stretch of life, while the programs, schools, and systems meant to support them often operate apart. Much has been written about what a coherent system should include. Far less is known about how communities actually build connections across those boundaries and sustain them over time. That implementation question is explored through the lens of collaboration, the capability that became foundational to every other implementation strategy in our work.

Deeper collaboration is built slowly through shared work, trust that takes years to earn, and structures that connect people across roles and organizations. The lessons that follow are drawn from the implementation of the School as Hub for Early Learning approach: an embedded, multi-tiered strategy through which a university-based institute partners with school districts to build shared systems of support across the birth through Grade 3 continuum. It draws specifically on more than a decade of implementation and three years of independent evaluation from one regional partnership that has sustained this approach since 2014 (see: “The Regional Partnership Behind the Work”).

The analysis starts with the research that shaped this work and the structures partners built to sustain it over time. Then it turns to three lessons that became clearer during implementation and evaluation:

- Collaboration deepens through shared work, not shared attendance.
- Trust with a facilitative partner takes time and shared power.
- Collaboration does not automatically reach everyone in a system, no matter how wide the invitation.

The final section offers practical actions for three levels of collaborative work, along with a self-assessment teams can use to locate their own partnerships and decide where deeper connection is needed most.

This brief is part of a series documenting the School as Hub for Early Learning approach to building coherent birth through Grade 3 systems.

Each brief examines one implementation capability **that highlights a promising practice**. Together, they describe the organizational conditions that allow the approach to become embedded in practice, sustained through leadership transitions, and adapted to local contexts across the country. Topics will include:

- Collaboration
- Action Planning
- Family Engagement
- Professional Learning
- Leadership for Early Learning
- Continuous Improvement



The Regional Partnership Behind the Work

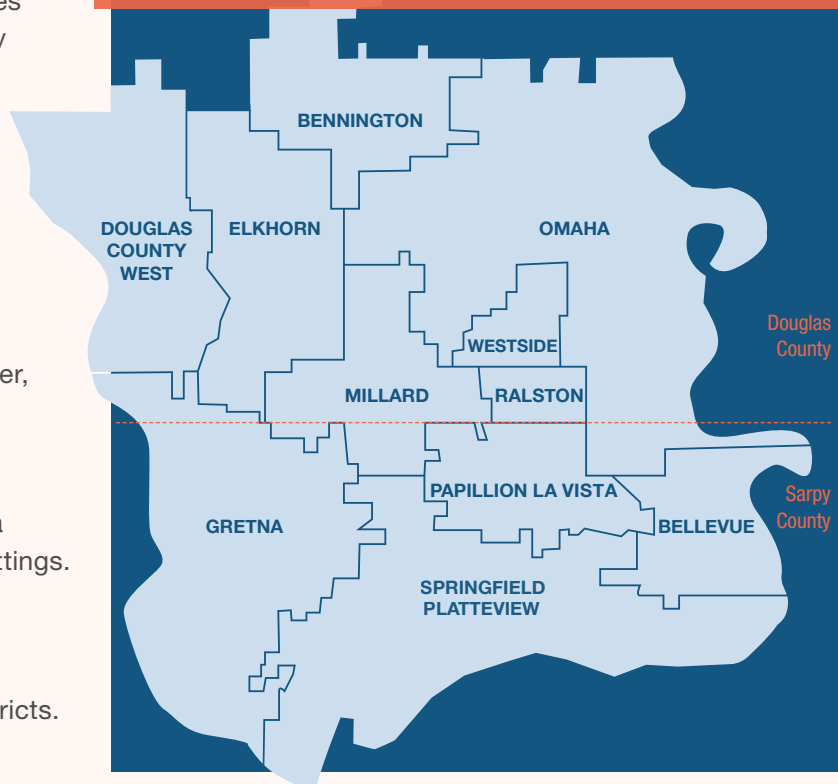
The regional partnership discussed in this brief is the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan. In May 2013, the Nebraska Legislature passed LB 585, directing the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties to work with Omaha-area superintendents on a plan to close opportunity gaps in high-poverty communities.

In June 2014, the superintendents of every public school district in Douglas and Sarpy Counties voted unanimously to pursue a shared early childhood strategy. That vote established a regional commitment to young children that continues today. The Learning Community funds the work; the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska helps implement it.

The 11 districts that make up the Learning Community are far from a monolith. Together, they reflect the range of school systems across the country, spanning a large urban district with higher poverty levels, affluent suburban districts, a district that includes a military base, and districts in more rural settings.

With two more sites joining in fall 2026, the School as Hub approach will reach roughly 4,600 children across 18 schools in six districts.

The 11 school districts of the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties in Nebraska



How It Works

The Superintendents' Plan provides three interconnected levels of support. Customized Assistance, open to all 11 districts regardless of poverty rate, offers tailored consultation to build early childhood capacity. Specialized Professional Learning extends training and coaching to educators and providers regionwide. School as Hub, the most intensive tier, concentrates embedded partners and individualized action planning in the schools with the highest poverty levels.

The School as Hub approach is organized around eight principles of practice across three impact areas: Leadership Effectiveness, Instructional Excellence, and Family and Community Partnership Engagement. The principles describe a shift from fragmented systems toward connected structures and embedded professional learning. They do not specify staffing models; different communities build different structures.

Our role at the Buffett Early Childhood Institute has never been that of a consultant who designs a program and delivers it. We convened rather than dictated from the first workgroup meetings, and remain an embedded partner today, present in buildings and at leadership tables. Districts develop their own plans and make their own decisions. Our job is to create the conditions for that to happen well.

What Research Tells Us

Pillar 1: Why Connected Systems Produce Better Outcomes for Children

Research on PreK through Grade 3 alignment tells a consistent story. When early childhood programs operate separately from the elementary schools children eventually enter, the gains children made in high-quality preschool tend to fade because no one carried the learning forward. Children experience the early years as one continuous life, and disconnected systems break that continuity (Stipek et al., 2017; Takanishi, 2016; Ritchie and Gutmann, 2014).

When educators learn together across grade levels and organizational boundaries instead, professional learning communities become one of the most well-documented levers for sustained instructional improvement (Borko, 2004; Vescio et al., 2008), and early childhood priorities embedded in strategic plans gain staying power they rarely find as standalone initiatives (Kauerz & Coffman, 2019; Jacobson, 2016).

Pillar 2: What Meaningful Collaboration Requires

Not all collaboration produces the same results. Frey and colleagues describe five levels on a continuum, from networking, where organizations share information but decide independently, through cooperation and coordination, to coalition and full collaboration, where trust is mutual and decisions are genuinely shared (Frey et al., 2006).

Most partnerships that call themselves collaborative sit somewhere in the middle. Collective efficacy, the shared belief among educators that their combined effort can improve outcomes for children, is one of the strongest documented predictors of school improvement (Donohoo et al., 2018), and one of the slowest things to build; it grows only through experiences where working together actually produced something better than working alone.

Collaboration quality, not just its existence, predicts results at scale. A 2026 evaluation of the Gates Foundation's Networks for School Improvement initiative found that schools with denser connections to other schools in their network, sustained

through role-alike meetings and coach-facilitated collaboration, showed both stronger implementation and meaningful gains in student outcomes (RAND Corporation, 2026). The lever was not the network's existence; it was how connected any single school actually was within it.

Pillar 3: The Organizational Conditions for Sustainable Implementation

Research on how educational practices become sustainable points to three conditions that work together: leadership, professional learning, and collaboration (Schmidtke, 2026). When all three are present, practice becomes embedded in organizational culture. When one is missing, what looked like shared commitment turns out to be individual effort, present in some classrooms and absent in others. That finding came from a study of Kindergarten teachers sustaining guided play under accountability pressure, but the pattern holds at the organizational level too: without leadership that signals priority, professional learning stays disconnected from practice; without professional learning, planning becomes circular; without collaboration, even capable leaders build something that only holds as long as they are present.



Building Collaboration in Practice

Different systems will build these functions differently. Here is how our partnership organized them:

- **Differentiated ways to participate within a shared framework.** Customized Assistance (tailored consultation open to every district), Specialized Professional Learning (regionwide coaching and training), and School as Hub site implementation (embedded, intensive support concentrated in the highest-poverty schools) let districts engage at different levels and around locally determined priorities while staying connected to one regional birth through Grade 3 structure.
- **Embedded facilitative partnership.** Institute staff work alongside district and school leaders over time in buildings, at leadership tables, and inside planning conversations while districts make and own their own decisions.
- **Cross-district learning structures.** A district workgroup, principal community of practice, shared learning for family engagement staff, and a teacher leadership network give people in similar roles regular opportunities to learn with peers outside their own district system.
- **Shared planning and continuous-improvement rhythms.** Annual action-planning retreats and convenings bring every level of the system into the same room to take stock, examine data, and set direction, both together and within their own local districts.
- **Common tools with room for local adaptation.** Standardized systems for planning, coaching, and data review give staff moving between buildings and districts a consistent basis for comparing notes, even as each district builds around its own priorities.

Five Examples from Districts

1. **Collaborative Learning** An early childhood administrator, all elementary principals, and teacher leaders from one elementary school began attending the same monthly collaboration meetings. District administration, school leadership, and building-level teacher leaders now build early learning leadership skills together instead of separately.
2. **Child Care Connections** In one district, staying connected to the local child care landscape happened when a home visitor built a relationship with a parent through drop-in play events and supported her in becoming a licensed in-home child care provider, expanding local child care options and deepening the family's connection to the school.
3. **Family Engagement** A Family Engagement Framework built at the district level was shared with leadership and all district elementary schools. Every building has access to the same tool, with room to connect it to its own family engagement activities.
4. **Preschool Advisory Committee** District leaders built a Preschool Advisory Committee that includes community-based child care and preschool providers, not just district staff. An internal planning structure became a cross-sector one.
5. **Kindergarten Transitions** School as Hub principals held a collaboration meeting where teachers worked across grade levels to plan Kindergarten transitions. Classrooms that don't usually share a schedule or a supervisor planned together.

What We Learned

Evaluation Design

An evaluation of the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan is conducted annually by independent evaluators from the Munroe-Meyer Institute (MMI) at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) and the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO). The evaluation is conducted separately from program implementation by the Buffett Institute, providing an independent assessment of collaboration across Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan stakeholders. The evaluation examines perceived levels of collaboration across districts, between districts and the Institute, and among different stakeholder groups using a combination of a validated collaboration scale and stakeholder surveys.

Beginning in 2022, collaboration has been measured annually using an adapted version of a validated collaboration scale that assessed three program domains: Leadership Effectiveness, Instructional Excellence, and Family & Community Partnership Engagement. The scale measured collaboration across five levels that captured the extent to which partners shared communication, decision-making, roles, and resources:

(1) Networking, (2) Cooperation, (3) Coordination, (4) Coalition, and (5) Collaboration.

Findings presented in this brief drew on three years of descriptive evaluation data (2022-2023 through 2024-2025), documenting changes in collaboration and partnership quality to be examined over time. A self-assessment version of the same scale appears later in this brief (see Assess Your Collaboration).

In the Field

“The Superintendents’ Plan really aligns with our district plans, and the Teacher Leadership Network has really allowed me to see that alignment between why we’re doing what we’re doing.”

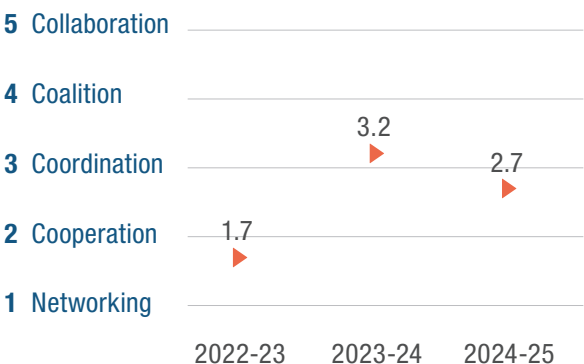
-Teacher Leadership Network member

Lesson 1: Collaboration Deepens Through Shared Work, Not Shared Attendance

In the early years, districts engaged with the Institute individually, communicating with each other but not yet working together. What changed was specific—time and multiple connection points. Joint retreats brought leaders from different systems together to work on real problems side by side. Cross-district workgroups gave staff a place to share what was and was not working. The trust that lets one superintendent or school leader tell another, “We tried that, and it failed,” took years to build, and it is still a work in progress.

What the evidence showed

The evaluation examined collaboration across districts by measuring the extent to which participants engaged with colleagues beyond their own school systems. The greatest improvement occurred between Years 1 and 2, when cross-district collaboration increased from a level consistent with Networking (mean = 1.7) to Coordination (mean = 3.2).



This shift reflected movement from limited information sharing toward more regular communication, defined roles, and shared resources, suggesting that districts progressed from informal connections to more structured partnerships. This growth coincided with the expansion of cross-district workgroups, Communities of Practice, and other Institute-facilitated opportunities that brought educators and leaders together around shared action plan priorities. By Year 3, participants who engaged in these collaborative structures continued to report Coordination-level collaboration with colleagues across participating districts, though the average eased from its Year 2 high of 3.2 to 2.7.

Lesson 2: Trust With a Facilitative Partner Takes Time and Shared Power

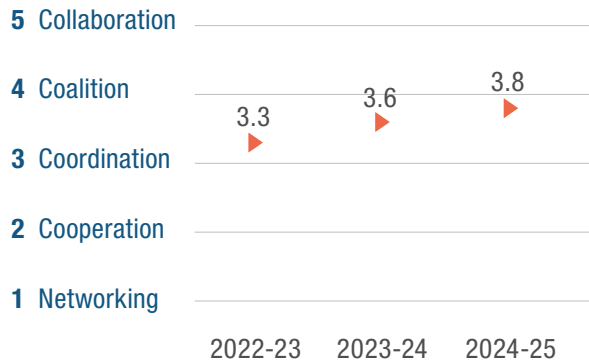
The Institute’s role was intended to be that of an embedded partner, not simply a consultant who designs a program and delivers it. It convened—rather than dictated—from the first workgroup meetings, and the Institute remains in that role today, present in buildings and at leadership tables. Districts make and own their own decisions. Staying in that relationship long enough for honest conversations to become normal mattered as much as any structure the partnership built.

In the Field

“I appreciate the ability to develop our plan to align with our district focus and best support our families, staff, and communities.”
-District Administrator

What the evidence showed

The evaluation also examined collaboration between districts and the Institute as the facilitative partner for School as Hub for Early Learning. Levels of collaboration steadily increased, rising from an average of 3.3 in Year 1 to 3.8 in Year 3, reflecting movement from Coordination to Coalition.



At the Coalition level, partners regularly shared ideas, information, and resources while engaging in focused communication and frequent, shared decision-making. Partnership quality remained consistently high throughout the evaluation period. In Year 3, respondents reported strong agreement that they could speak openly within the partnership, that their ideas were listened to and given appropriate consideration, and that power was shared between districts and the Institute (average rating of 4.5 out of 5).



Lesson 3: Collaboration Within Roles Does Not Automatically Become Collaboration Across Roles

People often collaborated well with others who shared their role. Teachers learned with teachers. Family engagement staff connected with other family engagement staff. District and school leaders worked together around shared priorities. The harder work was connecting those groups within the same system so each could contribute their perspective, expertise, and effort toward the same goals. Without intentional structures for cross-role collaboration, strong professional relationships can still operate in parallel. Building a coherent birth through Grade 3 system requires creating opportunities for people to understand how their work connects and to act together across traditional role boundaries.

What the evidence showed

Survey responses show a consistent gap by role across three years. District-based and school-based leaders reported higher collaboration with the Institute than educators, paraprofessionals, and family facilitators did. That gap describes each group's connection to the Institute, not collaboration between roles within a district.

Qualitative data comes closer to the question this lesson is asking. Respondents named inconsistent communication across stakeholder groups as a standing challenge. One school leader described the pattern directly. She had built strong collaboration with peer principals through a district Community of Practice but had not found a reliable way to extend that learning to the teachers and paraprofessionals in her own building. Future evaluation cycles could ask this question directly, not just how stakeholders collaborate with the Institute, but how they experience collaboration with other roles in their own building.

In the Field

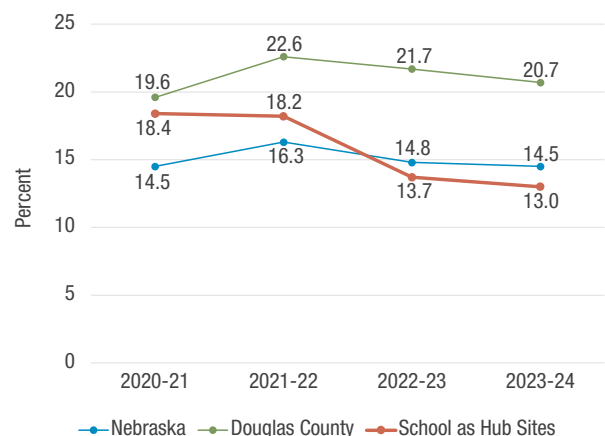
"It was great to connect with other principals on topics that are relevant to my daily work. I was able to connect with another principal regarding some strategies they have implemented at their building, and we have interest in exploring these strategies in our own building. We are working through our site planning process. I am going to ensure family engagement is represented within our plan, and my hope is that our parent/staff Belonging Team plays a major role in development and implementation of the plan."

— School as Hub principal

A pattern worth watching

The same years collaboration deepened most sharply were also the years School as Hub sites saw their steepest drop in chronic absenteeism, from 18.4 percent in 2020–21 to 13.0 percent in 2023–24, a steeper decline than either Douglas County or the state of Nebraska posted over the same years (Nebraska Department of Education, n.d.). This brief does not claim one caused the other, but it is consistent with what the research now suggests at a much larger scale—that denser, better-connected collaboration predicts stronger outcomes for students (see What Research Tells Us). This is precisely the kind of pattern the next step described above should test directly.

Percentage of School as Hub Students With 20+ Absences Per Year Compared to County and State Trends



(Nebraska Department of Education, n.d.)

Areas to Take Action

Building birth through Grade 3 collaboration happens at three levels: within your own program, across organizations serving the same children, and with a facilitative partner. Most systems work on all three at once.

Tier 1: Within Your Program or District

Build the relationships before you build new structures.

- Bring the right people to the table. In most organizations, planning starts and stops with administrators and principals; classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, home visitors, and family facilitators each hold knowledge the others need.
- Connect vertically. Superintendents, principals, teachers, and home visitors each know something the others don't. Make sure that knowledge travels up and down the system, not just sideways.
- Connect across the birth-Grade 3 boundary. When the educators working with 4-year-olds and the educators receiving them the next fall for Kindergarten do not plan together, continuity breaks at the most consequential moment.

Tier 2: Cross-Program and Cross-Sector

Know who else is already in the work, and be honest about how deep that work really goes.

- Map the cross-sector landscape. Head Start programs, home visiting programs, child care networks, public health agencies, and family support organizations already work with the same children and families you serve.
- Name your real collaboration level. Attending the same training is networking. Sharing a genuine problem together is coordination. Jointly designing a solution and sharing accountability for it is coalition. The Frey et al. (2006) scale and the self-assessment in the Assess Your Collaboration section can help you locate where you actually are.
- Build for turnover. Partnerships are vulnerable to staff transitions on both sides. The most durable ones rest on documented processes and shared ownership, not on any one relationship, however strong.

Tier 3: Partnering with a Backbone or Facilitative Organization

A good partner shares power instead of just sharing a plan.

- Clarify the role before the work begins. Is the partner here to lead, to facilitate, or to build your capacity and step back? Name that expectation explicitly and revisit it when things feel off track.
- Build for the long term. Key relationships should not live in only one person's calendar; invest in structures that survive staff transitions.

For State and Policy Leaders

Policy can create the occasion for collaboration. It cannot create the collaboration itself.

- Fund the intermediary organizations that make regional collaboration possible.
- Build birth through Grade 3 alignment into state accountability frameworks as a genuine expectation, not a separate early childhood add-on.
- Invest in data systems that follow children across organizational boundaries, so what is known about a child's early learning travels with them into Kindergarten.

Five Levels of Collaboration

Rate your collaboration on a scale of 0 to 5. Use the descriptions below to find where your partnerships currently fall.

0 - No Interaction	1 - Networking	2 - Cooperation	3 - Coordination	4 - Coalition	5 - Collaboration
Your organizations are aware of each other but have no working relationship.	You share basic information. Roles are loosely defined and communication is informal. Each organization makes decisions independently.	You share information regularly. Roles are becoming more defined, and communication is more structured. Decisions are still made within each organization separately.	You share both information and resources. Roles are clear, communication is regular, and you make some decisions together. This is a meaningful level of partnership and a common place for collaborative relationships to level off.	You share ideas, information, and resources. Communication is regular and focused on shared priorities. Decision-making is frequent and genuinely shared. This level requires trust that has developed over time.	Communication is ongoing and strategic. Trust is mutual. Decisions across all areas, including organizational direction, are made together. This level is rare and requires sustained structural investment.

Self-Assessment Prompts

Use the scale above to rate each of the following relationships. Be honest. A realistic picture of where you are is more useful than an aspirational one.



Within your program or district - Think about the full range of people who serve the children and families in your organization: district administrators, building principals, classroom teachers at every grade level, paraprofessionals, preschool teachers, home visitors, family facilitators, and social workers. When those people plan together, what level on the scale best describes how that collaboration actually works? Rate it separately for leadership and for the educators and staff closest to children. They are often not the same.



With organizations in your community - Think about the Head Start programs, home visiting programs, child care networks, public health agencies, and family support organizations that serve the same children your school or district serves. For each significant cross-sector relationship, where does it fall on the scale? Are you sharing information, sharing resources, or making decisions together?



With an external facilitative partner - If you work with a university, intermediate unit, technical assistance provider, or backbone organization, rate that relationship on the scale. Then ask three additional questions about it: Can the people you work with speak openly and freely about what is and is not working? Are their ideas listened to and acted upon? Is power genuinely shared in practice, not just in principle?

Questions for Team Discussion

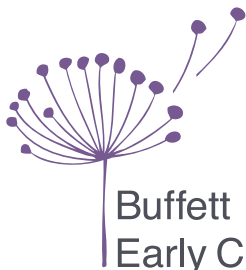
- Looking at your ratings across Prompt 1, is there a gap between how leaders experience collaboration and how practitioners closest to children experience it? If you do not know, how would you find out?
- In your cross-sector relationships from Prompt 2, are you at the same level across all of them, or are some partnerships significantly deeper than others? What made the deeper ones possible?
- What would it take to move one level up in the collaboration that matters most right now? Name one specific structural change, not a general commitment, that would reflect that movement.
- Which of the three levels of collaboration described in this brief (within your organization, across sectors, with a facilitative partner) is currently your strongest? Which is least developed? Where would investment have the most impact for children and families?

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Acknowledgments

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