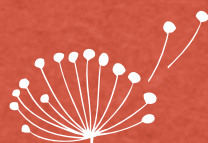


Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan Annual Report 2025–26



Buffett
Early Childhood
Institute
at the University of Nebraska

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Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties Coordinating Council and the 11 school district superintendents

Evaluation team at the Munroe-Meyer Institute at the University of Nebraska Medical Center

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The Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska promotes the development and learning of children from birth through age 8.

Visit buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu for more information.

Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan Annual Report 2025–26

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Letter from the Director

Dear Colleagues and Community Members,

As I reflect on the past 11 years of the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan, I am reminded of what a privilege it is to help steward this remarkable partnership. Since 2014, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska has had the honor of serving as a convener, facilitator, and thought partner alongside school districts committed to improving opportunities for young children and their families. While our role is to help bring people together, create conditions for learning, and support continuous improvement, the work itself belongs to the dedicated educators and leaders who carry it forward every day.

This year, 10 districts participated in the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan through district action planning, customized assistance, School as Hub programming, and professional learning. Ten School as Hub sites, part of the Superintendents' Plan, and six additional School as Hub sites through the Omaha Public Schools Intensive Early Childhood partnership supported more than 4,600 children and their families. Throughout the year, educators came together to learn from one another, strengthen their practice, and advance a shared vision for early learning.

One of the greatest lessons I have learned over the past decade is that meaningful collaboration cannot be mandated. It grows through trust, shared purpose, and a willingness to learn together. Every year, I continue to be inspired by district leaders who openly share their successes and challenges, educators who generously exchange ideas across district boundaries, and teams that remain focused on what children and families need most. Their commitment has strengthened not only their own districts but our region as a whole.

The pages that follow celebrate those efforts. They reflect the creativity, leadership, and dedication of our district partners, along with the relationships that continue to make this work possible. They also show encouraging progress in outcomes that matter deeply to schools and families, including early learning, family engagement, and student attendance. At School as Hub sites, district partners are reporting continued progress in attendance, building on prior findings of reduced chronic absenteeism. I hope you see what I have the privilege of witnessing every day: a community of educators who believe that we accomplish more when we learn with and from one another.

Thank you to our district partners, the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, and my colleagues at the Buffett Early Childhood Institute for your trust, partnership, and shared commitment to young children and their families. It is an honor to continue this work alongside you.

With gratitude,



Amy Schmidtke, Ed.D.
Director of Educational Practice
Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan Project Lead
Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska

District Highlights:



Bellevue Public Schools

Strengthened literacy using real-world learning through community field trips and family engagement.

Bennington Public Schools

Improved alignment and collaboration through regular team meetings, and increased understanding across early childhood efforts by facilitating Preschool Advisory Committee work to define shared professional learning priorities.

Douglas County West Community Schools

Ensured broad perspectives, shared ownership, and aligned implementation by including representatives from each grade level and specialist area on the Continuous Improvement team.

Elkhorn Public Schools

Initiated teamwide conversations exploring the implementation of a home visitation model, emphasizing its importance, potential impact, and alignment with family engagement efforts.

Gretna Public Schools

Established a district-level early childhood leadership team to strengthen alignment, decision-making, and support across early childhood initiatives.

Millard Public Schools

Supported families through play-based sessions that built children's foundational skills and confidence while equipping families for a successful transition to preschool.

Omaha Public Schools Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan Sites

Strengthened the alignment of literacy instruction, family engagement, and community outreach to support the district's Moonshot Goal of ensuring all students read on grade level by 2030.

Omaha Public Schools Intensive Early Childhood Sites

Strengthened relationships and equipped families to support their children's learning and development through family events, personalized outreach, resource referrals, and opportunities for families to connect with one another.

Papillion La Vista Community Schools

Established a collaborative team to design and refine early childhood resources, resulting in a more aligned and comprehensive program guide and family handbook.

Ralston Public Schools

Launched a new School as Hub site at Meadows Elementary, expanding early learning opportunities through birth through age 3 "stay and-play" program, socializations, and home visits. In the first year, the home visitor supported 13 families and 24 children, building strong relationships and increasing early family engagement.

Westside Community Schools

Demonstrated consistent year-over-year growth in median percentile scores on Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessments (math and English language arts), along with increased student proficiency on state assessments.



About The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan is a collaborative initiative of the 11 school districts of Douglas and Sarpy Counties in Nebraska to improve educational outcomes for young children. The focus of the plan is on closing opportunity gaps so that all children can reach their full potential. In partnership with the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska provides leadership and support for the plan, which is an innovative and comprehensive approach to ensure early learning opportunities for all children.

The plan was mandated in 2013 by LB 585 of the Nebraska Legislature, which directed the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties to enact a program created by the Omaha-area superintendents "to establish early childhood programs for children in poverty." The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan was developed by the Buffett Early Childhood Institute in collaboration with district superintendents and their staff and launched in 2015. Today, more than 4,600 PreK through Grade 3 students are served at School as Hub Sites, and many more benefit through their district's work in customized assistance through the Superintendents' Plan.

The plan provides three interconnected levels of support for school districts, elementary schools, and community-based professionals to strengthen their birth through Grade 3 efforts:



School as Hub Programming for Birth Through Grade 3

The School as Hub approach provides intensive support to selected elementary schools in neighborhoods impacted by high concentrations of poverty. Programming is designed to establish the school as a “hub” that connects young children and their families with quality, comprehensive, and continuous early childhood services and resources.



Customized Assistance for School Districts

Customized Assistance provides access to consultation services through the Superintendents’ Plan to all 11 school districts. These services are tailored to the unique strengths and needs of each district and are designed to help them build their organizational infrastructure and capacity for providing quality early childhood programming. Consultation services are provided by Institute staff in collaboration with other state and national consultants.



Specialized Professional Learning

Professional learning opportunities include tailored workshops aligned with the School as Hub Birth through Grade 3 approach. These sessions can be seamlessly integrated into annual professional learning and support action plan goals to advance leadership effectiveness, enhance instructional excellence, and foster strong family and community partnerships. Custom workshops are available to districts, individual schools, and community child care programs in Douglas and Sarpy Counties.

A summary of services available at each level of the plan is provided in Appendix A.

In addition to supporting the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan, the Buffett Institute’s Educational Practice Team also supports the expansion of School as Hub through additional Learning Community partnerships in Omaha Public Schools. These sites participate in the same School as Hub efforts, including action planning, professional learning, cross-district Communities of Practice, coaching, and continuous improvement, strengthening birth through Grade 3 systems through a shared implementation infrastructure.



Key Accomplishments in 2025–26: All Participating Districts



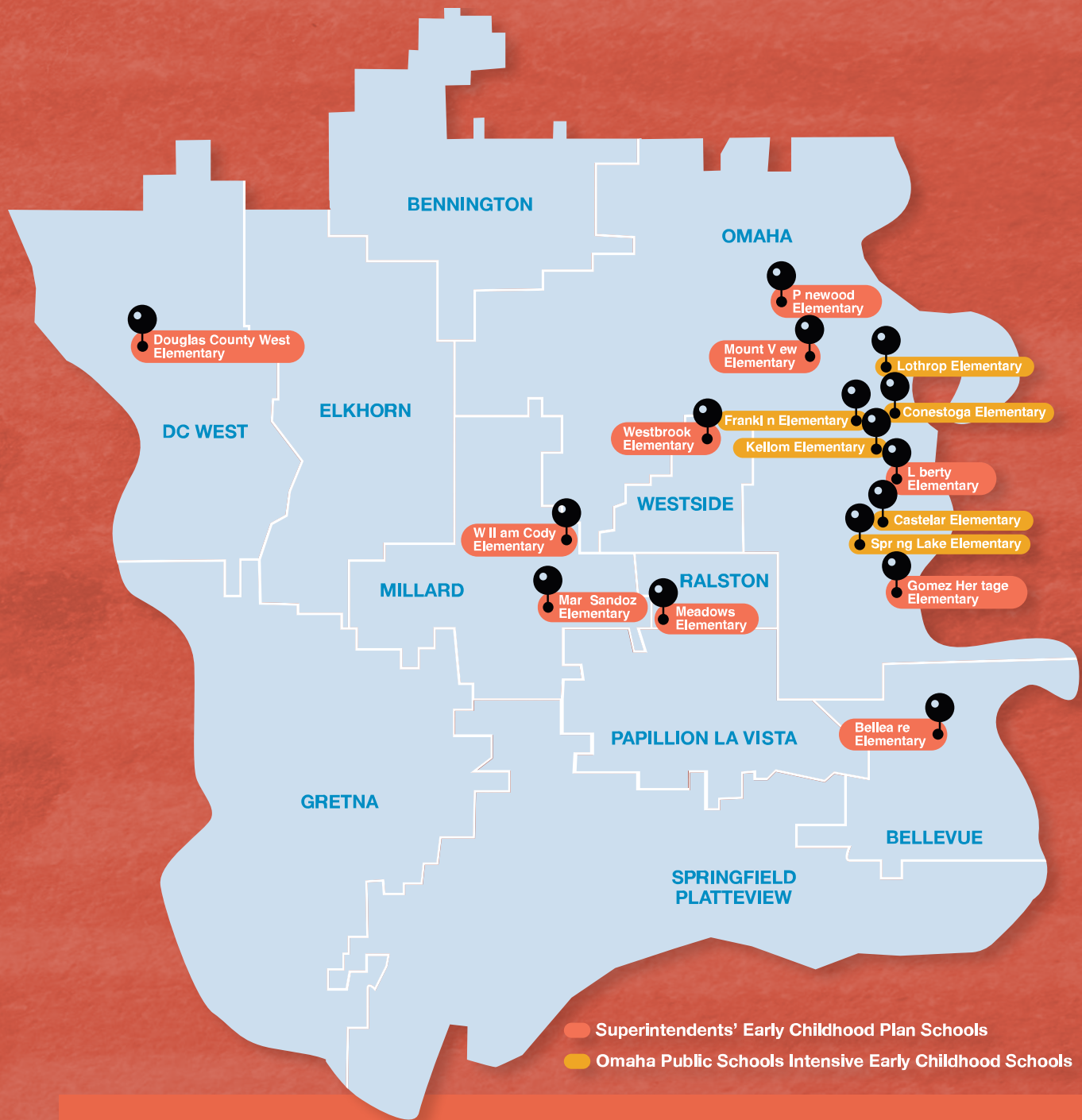
Leaders in 10 of the 11 Learning Community districts developed and implemented action plans that specified what they did to close opportunity gaps for young children, with a focus on improving professional practice in three domains:

- ▶ Leadership effectiveness
- ▶ Instructional excellence
- ▶ Family and community partnership engagement

Each participating district implemented activities aligned with its district-level action plan and monitored progress to determine how its efforts are impacting schools, families, and children.

Additional support was provided to 16 schools across six districts to implement comprehensive School as Hub programming for children and families.

Participation numbers for the 2025–26 school year across all districts involved in the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan are provided in Appendix B.



Key Accomplishments in 2025–26: School as Hub Districts

Bellevue Public Schools

School as Hub Site:

Belleaire Elementary School

Activities

Leadership Effectiveness

District staff met monthly with the principals, reinforcing the importance of principal support in family engagement and preschool collaboration. Staff completed an annual presentation to the Bellevue Public Schools' school board to share the work of School as Hub and developed a districtwide early childhood staff handbook to increase consistency in instructional practices.

Instructional Excellence

Bimonthly professional learning for specialists (PE, art, music, library, counselor, intervention), preschool–School as Hub coaching, a birth–preschool professional learning plan, and ongoing family engagement events were provided to strengthen instructional practices and early childhood experiences.

Family and Community Partnership Engagement

Themed learning backpacks (including math, literacy, and STEM) provided clothing and basic needs during “get to know you” conferences, and a summer preschool transition program was offered for children entering Kindergarten. At least 15 families were supported through home visiting, as measured by family engagement rates and participation data from fall to spring.

Reach and Impact

Leadership Practices

With additional Learning Community funding, full-day preschool was expanded at two sites, increasing student access to early learning programming, and 11 Creative Curriculum™ kits were implemented, increasing consistency of instructional materials across classrooms.

Family Engagement

1,584 parents and children engaged in community events, increasing family participation in school-based activities.

Family-School Partnerships

Chronic absenteeism decreased from 18.15% to 15.13%, placing the school in the 99th percentile statewide.

Douglas County West Community Schools

School as Hub Site:

Douglas County West Elementary School



Activities

▶ Leadership Effectiveness

Communication systems were strengthened to ensure a shared vision across the school through increased visibility of family and community engagement, including a new family partnership initiative. Monthly team meetings support district strategic goals and advance continuous improvement initiatives.

▶ Instructional Excellence

Professional learning on language-responsive classroom practices was provided to support instruction that responds to the strengths and needs of every learner. Effective literacy instruction was strengthened through targeted professional learning and ongoing coaching support. Preschool curriculum and instruction were enhanced by integrating Pyramid Model coaching and developmentally appropriate practices.

▶ Family and Community Partnership Engagement

Summer programming was offered to extend learning and engagement, and staff were provided with professional learning to strengthen family volunteer engagement. Falcon Café sessions were recorded and offered at varied times to increase family participation.



Reach and Impact

▶ School Readiness

A 5.20% growth in gross motor skills was observed from fall to spring on Ages & Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) measurements, with overall increases seen across all developmental areas in children who are enrolled in home visiting.

▶ Literacy Improvement

A 17-point increase in students performing in the 30–84th percentile from fall to winter reflects significant improvement in overall student achievement, alongside continued growth among high-performing students.

▶ Family Engagement

A Mystery Reader program engaged more than 100 family guest readers. This initiative increased meaningful family participation in classroom literacy, strengthened home–school connections, and enhanced student engagement with reading through shared storytelling.

Millard Public Schools

School as Hub Sites:

William Cody Elementary School, Mari Sandoz Elementary School

Activities

▶ **Leadership Effectiveness**

Integrated Universal Design Learning (UDL) practices and data-informed decision-making into systems improvement as evidenced by updates to leadership artifacts, reflection tools, and observation notes, and conducted PK–5 instructional rounds followed by team debriefs to identify instructional strengths and system gaps. School as Hub leadership team walkthroughs were implemented with structured reflection sessions across PK-5 settings to identify barriers and opportunities

▶ **Instructional Excellence**

Offered PreK and K–5 math training emphasizing early math progression and hosted professional learning sessions for teachers connecting Millard instructional model tools with UDL principles and lesson planning practices.

▶ **Family and Community Partnership Engagement**

Teachers and family engagement staff hosted events where families engaged in games, stories, and activities to reinforce mathematics learning at home. Home learning kits aligned with classroom content were distributed, and family listening sessions were incorporated during school improvement meetings that fed directly into planning engagement strategies and upcoming learning events.

Reach and Impact

▶ **Instructional Practices**

65% of teachers reported increased understanding of UDL (rating 4 or 5), and 77% reported designing instruction using UDL principles.

▶ **Family-School Partnership**

628 parents engaged in the Parent Powered app, increasing access to at-home learning activities.

▶ **School Readiness**

Attendance remained above 91% across both Millard School as Hub sites, indicating consistent student participation.

Omaha Public Schools Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan Sites

School as Hub Sites:

Gomez Heritage Elementary School, Liberty Elementary School, Mount View Elementary School, Pinewood Elementary School

Activities

▶ Leadership Effectiveness

School leadership teams led PreK–5 Professional Learning Communities and instructional rounds, supporting teacher collaboration, use of student data, and alignment across grade levels. The principals supported the exploration of purposeful play in PreK–2 classrooms by coordinating coaching, resources, and instructional time. They also fostered collaboration across partner schools by coordinating services and leveraging shared family engagement staff.

▶ Instructional Excellence

Teachers engaged in PreK–5 Professional Learning Communities focused on student work, observational data, and improving literacy instruction across grades. Early childhood specialists provided coaching to support ongoing improvement in literacy instruction and purposeful play. PreK–2 teachers began incorporating purposeful play in their classrooms to enhance learning, engagement, and developmentally appropriate instruction.

▶ Family and Community Partnership Engagement

Family engagement staff incorporated early literacy into home visits and child care settings through coaching, supporting the use of literacy activities, and providing literacy kits and monthly books. A children's book series featuring real school families was created to help families engage in early literacy and explore key School as Hub practices through accompanying parent tip cards. The community facilitators provided outreach to community and in-home child care providers, connecting them with Conscious Discipline training offered by ESU #3 Early Learning Connection.

Reach and Impact

▶ Child Well-Being

Through community facilitator outreach, 52 child care professionals completed Conscious Discipline training, increasing the use of relationship-based and self-regulation strategies.

▶ Increased Attendance

Regular attendance increased from 39% to 54% (+15%) over two years at Mount View Elementary, the largest reduction in chronic absenteeism in OPS, which the principal attributes to the School as Hub approach.

▶ Family Engagement

Over 550 family and community engagement events occurred throughout the year, including 62 provider visits, 40 socializations, 58 drop-in and plays, and 396 home visits.

Omaha Public Schools Intensive Early Childhood Sites

School as Hub Sites:

Castelar Elementary, Conestoga Elementary, Franklin Elementary, Kellom Elementary, Lothrop Elementary, Spring Lake Elementary

Activities

▶ **Leadership Effectiveness**

School leadership teams facilitated PreK-5 Professional Learning Communities to align instruction, review student work, share data, and strengthen collaboration. Principals partnered with family engagement staff to plan and align School as Hub events with literacy and family engagement priorities and engaged in the School as Hub action planning process, identifying key activities to drive outcomes in the birth to Grade 3 continuum.

▶ **Instructional Excellence**

Teachers started to incorporate purposeful play in PreK–2 classrooms to boost engagement, self-regulation, and early literacy. Alongside child care providers, teachers participated in coaching and feedback on literacy-rich, developmentally responsive practices and used engagement, behavior, and student observational data to guide instruction and improve classroom outcomes.

▶ **Family and Community Partnership Engagement**

Family engagement staff created dedicated spaces for families to participate in story hours, socializations, and playgroups, strengthening connections to the school. Family engagement staff distributed literacy kits and books, supported library registration, and connected families to academic and community resources, extending literacy-rich learning beyond school.

Reach and Impact

▶ **School Readiness**

More than 2,300 books were distributed to families across six schools, supporting home libraries and a culture of reading from birth.

▶ **Family Engagement**

Over 900 family and community engagement events occurred over the year, including 94 provider visits, 63 socializations, 154 drop-in and plays, and 593 home visits.

▶ **Child Well-Being**

Students across six sites demonstrated meaningful growth in early learning outcomes during the 2025–2026 school year, including statistically significant gains in receptive vocabulary, school readiness, and social-emotional development.

SCHOOL AS HUB STORIES

Promoting Early Literacy Through the School as Hub Book Series

In the Liberty Elementary School Family Room, families gather to read a new picture book, “Learning with Lulu.” The faces in the pictures look familiar. In fact, the stars of the book are in the room.

“Learning with Lulu” follows the adventures of Lulu Bustos Rodriguez, a home visitor at the school in downtown Omaha, as she embarks on a visit with toddler Mariano and his mom, Adriana.



Home Visitor Lulu Bustos Rodriguez with Mariano

On the first page, we see Mariano beaming, excited for Bustos Rodriguez to arrive. She shares games and activities with Mariano and his mom while supporting strong parent-child relationships, child development skills, and parent education.



Together, they are building the bridge between home and school through these home visits.

“Learning with Lulu” is the first book in the School as Hub book series, which highlights key elements of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute’s School as Hub approach under the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan. The series celebrates the experiences of children and families while providing a firsthand look into School as Hub programming and inviting more families to participate.



The Buffett Institute’s Laura Cady, second from left, with Liberty Elementary staff, Mariano, and his mom



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Ralston Public Schools

School as Hub Site:

Meadows Elementary School

Activities

Leadership Effectiveness

A back-to-school event was held to welcome families, with a play space for children and a birth through Grade 3 focus. Staff implemented targeted strategies with enrolled families to build relationships, support child development, and track family engagement outcomes, including preparing for a STEAM night with hands-on science and literacy activities for families.

Instructional Excellence

The home visitor/family facilitator collaborated with the reading specialist to implement consistent, literacy-rich strategies across home visits, family events, and school partnerships. Monthly take-home bags provided reading strategies and materials to families.

Family and Community Partnership Engagement

Families received tools and support to reinforce reading at home and build strong school connections, contributing to a measurable increase in K–6 students meeting grade-level reading benchmarks. Staff shared homework and attendance tips, introduced families to one another to build early connections, and supported hands-on activities tracked through passports and reflection cards.

Reach and Impact

Family Engagement

73 students and their families participated in family engagement events, increasing family participation in literacy- and play-based activities.

Literacy Improvement

70% of students showed accelerated-to-high literacy growth (at or above the 30th percentile), reflecting progress in Kindergarten and first grade.

Leadership Practices

Birth through age 5 literacy stations were integrated into student-led conferences, resulting in increased alignment of early literacy practices across family events and school settings.

SCHOOL AS HUB STORIES

Building Community Before Kindergarten: Meadows Elementary Finds Success Through Early Childhood Programming



Meadows Elementary offers families with young children “stay and plays, socializations, and home visiting through the School as Hub approach.

For Meadows Elementary in Ralston Public Schools, the 2025–26 school year marked the beginning of something new.



Susan Morice is the family facilitator at Meadows Elementary in Ralston Public Schools.

In August, the school began its first year as a School as Hub site. School as Hub programming highlights the central role that schools can undertake as “hubs” that connect young children—and their families—with high-quality, comprehensive, and continuous early childhood education and services starting at birth and continuing through third grade.

One aspect of the programming, affectionately called the “Little Mustangs” program, aims to connect families with resources, support, and a sense of community long before children enter a Kindergarten classroom.

“We know that these families are going to be part of our school, so why not start when they’re young?” said Susan Morice, the family facilitator at Meadows Elementary. “If you want to build a community, a school community, the best way to do that is to bring them in as early as we can.”



The school’s “Little Mustangs” program aims to connect families with resources, support, and a sense of community long before children enter a Kindergarten classroom.



Scan or click to read the full story.

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Westside Community Schools

School as Hub Site:

Westbrook Elementary School

Activities

▶ Leadership Effectiveness

School leaders facilitated a six-week continuous improvement cycle that included data review, collaborative planning with instructional staff, and family input gathered through engagement activities. Each cycle resulted in targeted instructional adjustments and professional learning supports, with progress documented in coaching logs, planning notes, and family feedback summaries.

▶ Instructional Excellence

Staff participated in joint learning focused on student progress, culturally responsive practices, and using behavior coaching as a reflective—not punitive—strategy. All certified teachers completed two self-reflection cycles using video and peer feedback to align instruction with learning goals and whole-child development.

▶ Family and Community Partnership Engagement

Families were recruited through postcards, newsletters, social media, community events, and direct outreach. The home visitor and family facilitator collaborated with community partners to co-distribute transition-focused learning materials and promote school readiness among families of preschool-aged children.

Reach and Impact

▶ Family and Child Well-Being

Implemented 46 “life event” backpacks across six themes, increasing access to support resources for students and families during transitions.

▶ School Readiness

100% of families surveyed agreed that they have seen an improvement in their child’s social skills, such as problem-solving, conflict resolution with peers, and managing emotions.

▶ Literacy Improvement

Demonstrated measurable growth in early literacy from fall to winter assessments in Kindergarten and Grade 1. Kindergarten had a 19% increase in students who scored proficient, and Grade 1 had a 9% increase in students’ proficiency.



Customized Assistance Districts



Bennington Public Schools



Activities

► Leadership Effectiveness

Refined and documented early childhood special education transition processes and procedures through quarterly birth-5 team meetings, trainings, and within the existing early childhood handbook.

► Instructional Excellence

Refined instructional coaching models in preschool classrooms and behavior intervention coaching models in preschool through Grade 3 classrooms through consistent monthly cycles to improve foundations for early learning and essential child experiences. The effectiveness of the instructional coaching model was evaluated, leading to informed adjustments and continuous improvement.

► Family and Community Partnership Engagement

The Preschool Advisory Committee consisting of district team members and community child care directors collaborated to develop a plan to increase family involvement. The annual Preschool Advisory meeting engaged both returning and new participants to foster stronger connections, and feedback was collected to improve future engagement efforts.



Reach and Impact

- 104 individualized coaching sessions were completed, focusing on behavior, social skills, meaningful individualized education program (IEP) goals, and tailored supports.
- Monthly data from the K–3 Behavior Intervention program was analyzed to guide decision-making and strengthen progress toward goals from additional Learning Community funds.
- Quarterly birth-5 team meetings were established and sustained, resulting in stronger alignment of transition practices across programs.



Elkhorn Public Schools



Activities

► Leadership Effectiveness

An early intervention handbook was developed to strengthen program consistency and support, and a preschool staff handbook is expected to be finished during the 2026–27 school year. Early childhood initiatives were aligned with the district's strategic plan, including vertical collaboration across schools.

► Instructional Excellence

With the director of curriculum and learning, curriculum options were explored, and the preschool team identified “must-haves” for a high-quality curriculum.

► Family and Community Partnership Engagement

Participation of children (birth–age 5) in schoolwide events increased, strengthening early connections with the school community. A team conversation about implementing a home visitation model was initiated, focusing on its importance, potential impact, and alignment with work supporting families.



Reach and Impact

- An early intervention handbook was developed to strengthen program consistency and support.
- Initiated conversations with stakeholders to plan professional learning opportunities for staff focused on the science of reading.
- Welcomed Alana Johnston to the leadership team and supported her participation in the Teacher Leadership Network.
- Worked closely with a school principal to strengthen collaboration with building leadership and explored including birth–age 3 representation.

Gretna Public Schools

Activities

► **Leadership Effectiveness**

A district-level early childhood leadership team was established to strengthen alignment, decision-making, and support across early childhood initiatives.

► **Instructional Excellence and Family and Community Partnership Engagement**

An implementation readiness assessment tool was developed to assess how well their district reflects the School as Hub approach and its guiding principles. Teachers, staff, district leaders, families, and community members participated in focus groups to provide feedback that informed data-driven planning, decision-making, and future early childhood priorities

Reach and Impact

- A district-level early childhood leadership team was established to strengthen alignment, decision-making, and support across early childhood initiatives.
- Pyramid Model training was implemented from preschool through elementary years.
- Thomas Elementary hosted a schoolwide family engagement event that included early learning and play. Families engaged in reading “The Most Magnificent Thing,” participated in growth mindset activities, and received take-home learning materials. Meals and books were provided at no cost, strengthening access and supporting family engagement.

Papillion La Vista Community Schools

Activities

► **Leadership Effectiveness**

To ensure systemic alignment and coherence between early childhood programs and the broader school district, a comprehensive program guide and family handbook were developed. The handbook was developed through team input and feedback, creating clearer, more accessible information for families about early childhood opportunities and support.

Reach and Impact

- A team was established to design and refine early childhood resources, resulting in a more aligned and comprehensive program guide and family handbook.
- Cross-district examples and best practices were reviewed to strengthen the quality and consistency of early childhood handbooks and content.
- Early childhood programming (ages 3–5) was collaboratively identified across the district and community.



Specialized Professional Learning

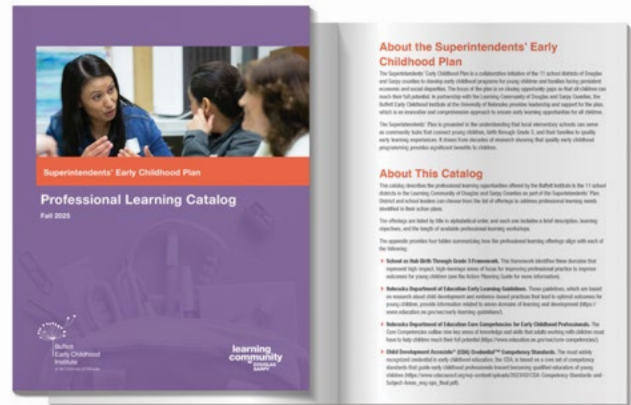


The Buffett Institute's Professional Learning Catalog covers topics including early literacy and math, family engagement, child development, and school leadership. Institute staff are continually adding new topics based on feedback and district needs.

The offerings are available to the Superintendents' Plan school districts and, upon request, local child care programs.

Each session is aligned with the Institute's School as Hub framework and Nebraska Department of Education Early Learning Guidelines and Core Competencies.

To schedule a workshop, school officials and child care providers can contact the Institute staff members who serve their district.



Scan or click to view the catalog.

buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/schools/professional-learning-catalog



Reach and Impact



82 workshops completed in 2025–26, with
2,251 participants from across all
11 districts



20-plus topics currently available, with additional workshops being developed

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING STORIES

The Lens of the Child: Seeing Learning Through Children's Experiences



Thirty Omaha-area early educators participated in the Early Learning through the Lens of the Child series that helps educators align their teaching with how children actually experience learning.

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 and aligning teaching with how children actually experience learning.



Early childhood educators participated in five, four-hour sessions during the Lens series.

"It can sometimes be hard to see exactly how each child is experiencing a learning moment," Schmidtke said. This approach helps make those experiences more visible so teachers can respond with greater intention."

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. The Lens of the Child doesn't replace what educators already know. It helps them see more clearly what children are experiencing and respond with greater intention.

The approach provides a way to more clearly see which children are deeply engaged, which may need more challenge or support, and how learning opportunities can be strengthened. In doing so, it helps ensure that all children have meaningful opportunities to engage, learn, and thrive.

What makes the series unique compared to other professional learning opportunities is its strong integration of experiential learning with research-based practices.

"Many approaches in education focus on what teachers do—strategies, activities, or lesson structures," Schmidtke said. "Even when they are designed to be child-centered, educators are working to ensure those experiences are truly meaningful for each child. The Lens of the Child helps make that more visible, so teachers can respond with even greater intention."



Scan or click to read the full story.

buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/blog



Looking Ahead to 2026–27

As the work continues, the Institute will continue supporting district teams in implementing the Superintendents' Plan core initiatives, with a specific focus on enhancing leadership and technical assistance support services to increase efficiency in program administration. Other goals include expanding the reach of strategic communications and strengthening implementation measures across all three core levels of support.

Key areas of focus for the next year will include:



Expanding language and literacy-focused professional learning, coaching, and instructional supports across the birth through Grade 3 continuum.



Strengthening district leadership through action planning, continuous improvement, and implementation support aligned to local priorities.



Deepening family and community partnerships by expanding home visiting, Kindergarten transition support, and meaningful opportunities for family engagement.



Growing cross-district collaboration through Communities of Practice, leadership networks, and shared learning opportunities.



Increasing access to School as Hub programming while strengthening alignment across all levels of the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan.



Enhancing strategic communications, implementation resources, and evaluation measures to support continuous improvement and document impact.

Appendix A: Summary of Services Available Through the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan in 2025–26

Summary of Services Available Through the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan in 2025-26

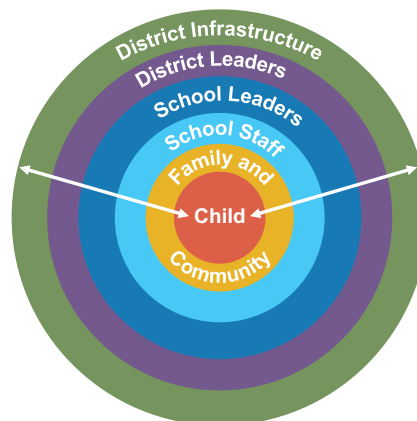
Consultation and Support Services by Level of Support	No. of Districts Participating in 2025-26	New or Enhanced Service in 2025-26
Customized Assistance—Services available to all 11 districts in the Learning Community		
District-Level Action Planning		
Annual action plan facilitation	10*	
Action plan review and discussion	10*	
Recommended activities to reach action plan goals	10*	
District-Level Project Management		
Co-creation of long-range plans: activities, milestones, timelines, responsibilities	10*	
Quarterly progress checks	10*	
Summative progress reflection and report	10*	
Using Data for Continuous Improvement in District Early Childhood Efforts		
Data collection system design and support for district early childhood programs	2	
Professional Development, Including Consultation and Coaching		
Facilitated presentations and workshops for leaders, teachers, and staff	7*	
Ongoing consultation for district leaders	9*	
Choice to join School as Hub professional learning opportunities if content is applicable to district goals	8	✓
Leadership team engagement at annual convening and collaboration summit events	10	
Ongoing consultation for selected teachers participating in the Teacher Leadership Network		
Professional learning catalog to select workshops to enhance early childhood efforts	3	✓
School as Hub—Additional services available to the six districts with School as Hub schools		
School-Level Project Management Tied to District-Level Plans		
Monthly district planning meetings	6	
Monthly school-based team meetings in School as Hub schools, expanded in 2024-25 to include district leaders	6	
Using Data for Continuous Improvement in Family Engagement Efforts		
Data collection system facilitation for family engagement staff	6	
Professional Development, Including Consultation and Coaching, in School as Hub Schools		
Monthly Community of Practice meetings for principals	6	
Monthly Program Enrichment Meetings and Community of Practice meetings	6	
Monthly Community of Practice meetings and coaching for selected teachers participating in the Teacher Leadership Network	6	
Ongoing consultation for principals and other school leaders	6	
Ongoing consultation for selected teachers participating in the Teacher Leadership Network	6	
Coaching cycles for PreK–Grade 3 teachers, paraprofessionals, and family and community engagement staff	6	
Family and Community Engagement Staffing and Services		
Family and community engagement staffing (home visitors, family facilitators, and/or community facilitators) adapted to district and school needs	6	
Family engagement events ("two generation" events for children and families)	6	
Specialized Professional Learning—Tailored workshops aligned with the School as Hub Birth through Grade 3 approach**		
Focused professional learning series for family engagement staff	8	✓
Professional learning catalog of customizable workshops to enhance early childhood efforts	4	✓
Lens of the Child facilitation to a cohort of 30 local educators and providers	***	✓



*This number includes all six districts with School as Hub schools.
 **These opportunities are available to birth–Grade 3 educators in all settings, including home-, community-, and school-based settings.
 ***Registration is open to all early childhood educators in Douglas and Sarpy Counties.

Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan 2025–26 School Year

Participation Numbers



DISTRICT INFRASTRUCTURE

School districts within Douglas and Sarpy Counties

11

DISTRICT LEADERS

Superintendents

11

Superintendents' Plan workgroup members

11

Additional district leaders actively involved in Superintendents' Plan action plans

23

SCHOOL LEADERS

School as Hub principals participating in Community of Practice

9

Additional School as Hub assistant principals, coaches, instructional facilitators, etc., actively involved in the Superintendents' Plan

11

School as Hub full district principals/school leaders engaging in professional development

12

SCHOOL STAFF

Home visitors, family facilitators, and community facilitators engaging in 1:1 coaching

34

Educators engaging in 1:1 coaching

43

Teacher Leadership Network workgroup members

24

Essential Child Experiences members, ESS Learning Cohort

30

School as Hub PreK-Grade 3 classroom teachers

206

Educators who attended district or school professional development

1,577

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Community partners connecting families with resources or services

38

Families enrolled in home visitation or family facilitation

233

Family members in engagement and support opportunities

6,141

Cumulative number of providers participating in Community Facilitation

69

CHILD

Children enrolled in home visitation or family facilitation

312

Child participants in Drop In and Play events

164

Cumulative attendance at Drop in Play events

1,456

Children in classrooms with educators participating in coaching

787

Child participants in socializations

195

Cumulative attendance at socialization events

1,426

Children enrolled in School as Hub PreK-Grade 3 classrooms

4,420

Child participants in family engagement and support opportunities

11,735

Quantities reflect the work of Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan and Intensive Early Childhood sites

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