

Our vision is to make Nebraska the best place in the nation to be a baby.

Research demonstrates that high-quality early learning experiences are linked to progress in school, increased earnings, reduction in anti-social behavior, lowered welfare participation, reduced adolescent pregnancy, and less trouble with the law. In making Nebraska the best place to be a baby, we believe that we hold in our hands the potential to transform the trajectory of life for children in greatest need—both here and ultimately, beyond Nebraska. Given what we know, there is no justification for ignoring the impact of high-quality early care and education.

Our mission is to *transform the lives of young children by improving their learning and development*. We accomplish this by harnessing the interdisciplinary resources and research of the four University of Nebraska campuses and developing collaborations with schools, agencies, community partners, and policymakers all across the state to implement and support high-quality, evidence-based services, programs, and policies for young children and their families.



Outcomes

To close the achievement gap and improve opportunities to learn, the Institute's senior leadership identified a set of global outcomes, as well as a related group of more fine-grained indicators, to enable us to monitor how this is being accomplished. Working with a wide range of collaborators and organizations, the following represent the categorical outcomes we established:

- Children's health and development are on track
- Children's learning and development are on target
- Families are supported and supportive
- High-quality early care and education from birth–Grade 3 is available to all
- The early childhood workforce is skilled, informed, and diverse
- Communities are committed and engaged
- Public policies are informed and effective

These outcomes and their associated indicators help guide the Institute's decision-making and represent a set of beliefs about how to close the achievement gap and create greater opportunities for all children to grow, thrive, and reach their potential. We are well aware that these outcomes exceed the grasp of anything the Institute alone can accomplish. We view our mission as one of collaborating with others and serving as a catalyst to bring about the broad systemic changes we seek—changes that are

necessary for reducing the number of children who are placed at risk.

In articulating outcomes and specific measurable indicators, our goal is to help Nebraska focus on those factors that are the most important and salient for young children's growth and development. Over the first three years of the Institute's activity, we've been struck by the receptivity of state and community leaders, policymakers, and practitioners who are ready to work together and with us to achieve these outcomes. In the months ahead, the Institute will document its approach to this work in order to share it more broadly with others seeking to implement similar programs elsewhere.

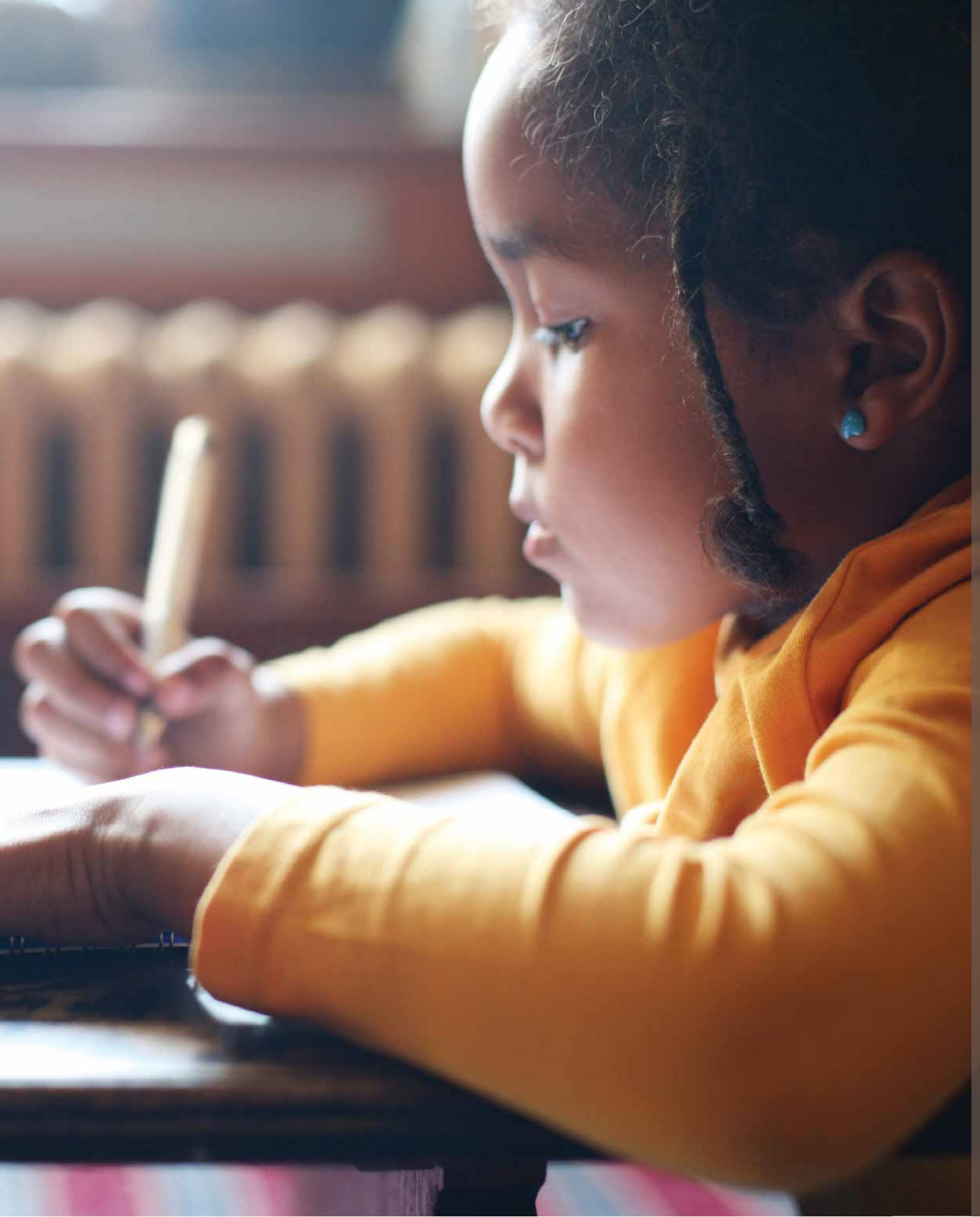
Our Goals

1. Increasing opportunities for young children to learn and eliminating achievement gaps for children in greatest need by the end of third grade.
2. Ensuring that a skilled, informed, and diverse workforce is available for all children by reinventing teacher preparation, helping create responsive state regulations, and building a positive professional environment in which early care and education professionals work.
3. Improving public understanding of early care and education for children and families by enhancing and engaging public support.

Closing the Achievement Gap

An innovative, groundbreaking approach to eliminating income- and race-based achievement gaps will help all children reach their potential.





Achievement Gap Challenge

The Achievement Gap Challenge is one of two signature programs at the Buffett Institute. Its goal is to increase opportunities to learn and eliminate income- and race-based achievement gaps for children by the end of third grade.

Like other states in the U.S., reducing or eliminating achievement gaps is a high priority for Nebraska. Using a criterion of 185 percent of the U.S. poverty rate, First Five Nebraska estimates that

42 percent of the state's children, age 5 and younger, are at risk for school failure due to poverty.

For a small population state, this is a staggering statistic. All the more staggering, however, is the disproportionate representation of children of color.

Research tells us that differences by family income in children's learning can show up as

early as 9 months and can be persistent and pervasive. Recent findings tell us that educational gaps for low-income children often continue to widen so that, by Kindergarten, many children are a year or more behind their more advantaged peers, with these gaps further widening across the early grades. These gaps limit children's opportunities for school and life success and negatively affect communities' health and well-being, workforce productivity, wealth, and quality of life.

Against this backdrop, the Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan—the first initiative of the Achievement Gap Challenge—was launched in the Omaha metro area in fall 2014. Over time, the Buffett Institute will work with partner organizations, agencies, schools, and others to introduce new initiatives in other communities, including in Western Nebraska, where planning conversations are already underway, and in locations throughout the U.S.



The Achievement Gap Challenge is one of two signature programs at the Buffett Institute.



Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan is a groundbreaking initiative that represents the nation's most innovative, comprehensive approach to reducing achievement gaps for children from birth through Grade 3. Led by Christine Maxwell, director of program development at the Institute, the plan offers a systematic approach that puts into action the best of what research has taught us. It is built around intensive, continuous, and evidence-based services for children living in high concentrations of poverty in the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, 11 school districts in the Omaha metro area.

Implementation of the plan involves three levels, including full implementation at a dozen elementary schools in six school districts, customized technical assistance for seven school districts, and a "professional development for all" series that is offered to school and community-based personnel working with young children throughout the two-county area. Services consist of a home-visiting program for children from birth to 3 years old, intensive support for school- and community-based preschools and child care centers to reach 3- and 4-year-olds, and support to align Kindergarten through Grade 3 curriculum, instruction, and assessment for 5- through 8-year-olds. Family engagement and teacher mentoring are critical features of this approach.

The Superintendents' Plan represents a strong collaborative, community effort. The plan was made possible by the Nebraska Legislature in 2013 through the passage of LB 585 and is funded with enhanced levy authority of the



The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan is a groundbreaking initiative that represents the nation's most innovative, comprehensive approach to reducing achievement gaps for children from birth through Grade 3.



Learning Community. It was developed by the Buffett Institute in partnership with the superintendents and their district representatives and was endorsed unanimously by all 11 superintendents. The Buffett Institute continues to facilitate implementation of the plan.





Six Big Ideas

The plan reflects what research tells us about young children’s development and learning. Our work revolves around six evidence-based ideas:

- 1. Birth Through Grade 3.** Although intervention at any point during the first eight years of life is helpful for children placed at risk, research teaches us that we must go beyond a single year of PreK, or even birth–3 or birth–5 programs, for the benefits of intervention to endure. The foundations for building children’s brain architecture, language and skill acquisition, and relationships with others are established early but take time to reach their full potential. If we can maintain continuity through the end of third grade, children are more likely to achieve lasting success in school and beyond.
- 2. School as Hub.** At the core of our plan is the idea that schools can serve as the “hub” for complex learning systems, connecting children and families to resources within and beyond school walls. Schools have the potential to span conventional silos, overcome traditional barriers, and become connectors across communities and different age groupings. They can help families navigate and access early education services and community resources and become a source of long-term continuity for children and families.
- 3. Developmental Change.** We are committed to helping children negotiate the ongoing biological, neurological, psychological, and social pathways of development, through which they evolve from a newborn infant to a competent and confident third-grader. Sustained learning doesn’t occur in isolated fragments. Only when skills and emerging capabilities are followed up, supported, and extended is it likely that new skills and new capacities will be acquired and become reliably present over time.



4. Parent and Family Support. Parents and families are key to children’s success and our most powerful allies in supporting and enhancing their children’s strengths and abilities. But families know too well the personal stress and toxicity that can accompany poverty and social inequality. Whether in home-visiting, preschool, or K–Grade 3, active family engagement and support are central to our work and to children’s growth.

5. Professional Growth and Support. Enhancing the skills of early care and education professionals and those supervising and directing them is crucial. Educators equipped with research-based knowledge about children’s development and early learning can maximize effectiveness of educational experiences for children with diverse learning needs. When the ability of caregivers, teachers, and administrators to translate child development research into practice is enhanced, children thrive.

6. Persistence. Evidence assures us that the earlier we begin working with children and families placed at risk and the more persistent, consistent, and well-designed our efforts are, the more likely it is that children will be launched on a path toward life success. It’s a long-term commitment, and one that can lead to a lifetime of accomplishment and fulfillment. Persistence of effort yields persistence of effect.



Persistence of effort yields persistence of effect.



Three Levels of Implementation

The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan provides three interconnected opportunities for school districts, elementary schools, and community-based professionals to strengthen early childhood efforts.

Professional Development for All. A connected series of professional development institutes open to all school leaders, teachers, early childhood professionals, and caregivers who work with young children from birth through Grade 3 in the Omaha metro area. "PD for All" introduces leading-edge research and innovative practices to those who work with young children and families and gives early childhood professionals the opportunity to come together and learn from one another.

Customized Technical Assistance. Seven school districts are receiving intensive assistance and consultation tailored to specific needs. This professional development addresses such topics as social-emotional development, family engagement, and assessment and accountability. Technical assistance provides districts with access to state and national consultation as they engage in strategic planning and improvement efforts that will impact system-wide early childhood education and services.

Full Implementation of Birth–Grade 3 Approach. Twelve elementary schools, all with more than half of their students eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch, serve as hubs that connect

young children and their families with high-quality, comprehensive, and continuous early childhood education and services. The birth through Grade 3 continuum includes three integrated components: weekly home visiting for children birth to age 3, high-quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, and aligned Kindergarten through Grade 3 curriculum, instruction, and assessment for 5- through 8-year-olds.

