



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan

A dynamic plan developed by and for Nebraskans to provide all Nebraska children and their families with access to quality early childhood services that support children's healthy development from birth through age 8.

OCTOBER 2020

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# A Dynamic Plan by and for Nebraskans

The science of early childhood development makes clear that providing quality early care and education is essential not only for the healthy development of our children and families but also for the economic vitality of our communities, our state, and our nation. Yet in communities across Nebraska, many families lack access to quality early childhood services. As Nebraskans, we seek to close this gap between what we know is good for our children, families, and communities and what we currently provide. The Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan describes an intentional and dynamic plan for improving the early childhood experiences of the more than 235,000 children, birth through age 8, who live in Nebraska today.

The strategic plan is based on findings from a comprehensive needs assessment conducted in 2019. Throughout the needs assessment and strategic planning process, Nebraska built upon past analyses and actively engaged stakeholders across the state, with a focus on ensuring that the voices of families and communities shape the work ahead. Thousands of Nebraska families, early care and education providers, and other professionals provided information through statewide surveys and interviews. Using that information, hundreds more Nebraskans participated in discussions to develop a strategic plan that provides a framework for how our state can improve early childhood services. These efforts have been made possible through grants from the federal and state government and have been augmented by state and local organizations working on behalf of young children and their families.

## Stakeholder engagement in needs assessment and strategic planning:

- Two surveys captured the needs and concerns of families and early care and education providers in communities across the state.
- Focus groups with parents gathered more nuanced information about families' perspectives and needs.
- Interviews and surveys with key informants from all levels of the state's early childhood system identified system-wide needs.
- Using needs assessment findings, stakeholders from communities across the state and from all sectors of the early childhood system contributed to the development of the strategic plan.
- The plan is intentionally inclusive, holistic, and dynamic—and it will continue to evolve through ongoing engagement with stakeholders across Nebraska.



The Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan contains a set of interrelated goals and objectives that are designed to better align state and local systems that serve young children and their families, improve collaboration, and ensure families greater choice in selecting the early care and education setting that best meets the needs of their children. In particular, the strategic plan focuses on ensuring that children have quality early childhood experiences because of all that is known about the importance of the early years to children's growth and development.

By creating a more integrated system of early childhood services for children and their families, more families can access quality early care and education and other essential services to help their young children thrive.

Moving forward, elements of the strategic plan will continue to evolve based on Nebraska's needs and opportunities. We invite all Nebraskans to learn more and become involved in this growing effort to support young children and families.

Learn more at [NEarlychildhoodplan.org](http://NEarlychildhoodplan.org).

# Strategic Plan Vision, Goals, and Objectives

The overarching vision of the Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan is to provide all Nebraska children and their families with access to quality early childhood services that support children's healthy development from birth through age 8.

To achieve this vision, we will pursue four interrelated goals. These four goals are intended to create a more integrated early childhood system—and work on any one of the goals will impact and inform the other goals.

Objectives provide clear targets for each goal. Together, the goals and objectives provide an organizing framework for the work ahead that is based on shared definitions of key concepts and responds to identified needs, as summarized on the following pages. Detailed strategies and action plans for how to implement the objectives will be developed through ongoing engagement with Nebraskans in 2020 and beyond.



## Key Definitions

As part of the needs assessment process, new definitions were developed for key terms relevant to early childhood services in Nebraska. The following definitions serve as organizing concepts for the strategic plan.

**Quality in early care and education.** We define quality in early care and education in terms of each child's experience. A child experiences quality early care and education as physical and emotional safety in the context of frequent, warm, one-on-one interactions with a caring adult who engages the child in language-rich and educational activities. To increase the likelihood that a child experiences quality, early care and education settings are structured to promote the well-being of early childhood professionals and to foster the child's healthy development and learning. The delivery of quality care and education across settings is facilitated by policies and continuous quality improvement practices that prioritize the child's experiences.

Adults in all settings promote quality experiences through:

- Sensitive and responsive interactions with each child
- Developmentally appropriate instruction that engages the whole child (physical, emotional, cognitive, social) and is individualized to each child's unique skills and needs
- Engagement with families in the care and education of their children and in learning about their child's development
- Inclusion of the families' and children's culture and language

Early childhood settings promote quality experiences through:

- Caregivers and teachers who have the qualifications and training they need to build positive relationships with the children and families they serve
- A professional environment that promotes the physical and mental well-being of caregivers and teachers by providing appropriate compensation and professional supports
- Learning resources and structures—such as classroom materials, routines, and teacher-student ratios—that are designed to meet the developmental needs of the children being served
- Facilities and equipment that are clean, safe, and designed to foster children's healthy development and learning

Local, state, and federal agencies and organizations promote quality experiences through:

- Economic, social, regulatory, and funding policies designed to enable early care and education providers to cover the costs of quality programs delivered by qualified professionals
- Continuous quality improvement practices that include observations of the child's experiences of quality in addition to observations of the structure and facilities of the care setting

Going forward, Nebraska will further develop this definition by describing characteristics of quality care and education across different settings. In addition, Nebraskans will work to expand the use of this new definition into as many contexts as possible so that the child's experience of quality is the focus of everyone's work.

**Access to early care and education.** We define access to quality early care and education in terms of availability and access. Availability refers to having enough early care and education options in a given community—in terms of capacity, quality, and types of services—to meet the needs of families living in the community. Access refers to a family's ability to actually enroll their child in the early care and education setting that best meets the child's and family's needs, without facing undue barriers. Potential barriers include those related to cost, transportation, or flexibility of hours as well as systemic barriers related to race, ethnicity, gender, language of origin, disability, or any other social or cultural characteristic. For children to receive quality early care and education, such services must be available in the communities in which they live and accessible to their families.

**Vulnerability in early childhood.** Children are considered vulnerable when they experience conditions that may have a negative impact on their development and learning. Poorer developmental outcomes are expected when children experience multiple conditions. A core assumption of the needs assessment and strategic planning efforts is that Nebraska's children, especially those who experience vulnerability, will thrive more in an integrated early childhood system that provides seamless access to all services needed to support the child's development and well-being.

Conditions that may contribute to children's vulnerability:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent with mental illness (including maternal depression)</li> <li>• Discrimination based on perceptions of a child's or family member's race and/or ethnicity</li> <li>• Trauma, including adverse childhood experiences</li> <li>• Poverty</li> <li>• Low socioeconomic status</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homelessness or housing insecurity</li> <li>• Food insecurity</li> <li>• Inadequate prenatal care</li> <li>• Low birthweight</li> <li>• Teen parents</li> <li>• Parents without high school education</li> <li>• Primary language at home is not English</li> <li>• Special health needs or disability</li> <li>• State care/foster care</li> </ul>

**Nebraska's early childhood mixed delivery system.** Nebraska has a "mixed delivery" early childhood system that encompasses early care and education services offered in a variety of settings (such as homes, child care centers, and schools), as well as an array of other services that are essential for early childhood development (such as health care, nutrition, housing, and parenting support services). These services are delivered through various providers, programs, organizations, and agencies that have traditionally functioned as distinct and independent entities. Changes in policies and procedures at the state level are needed to support better coordination and alignment across all levels of Nebraska's early childhood system.

#### SERVICES IN NEBRASKA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD MIXED DELIVERY SYSTEM



# GOAL 1

## Access



**Goal 1 focuses on ensuring equitable access to quality early childhood services for every child and every family in the state.**

### IDENTIFIED NEEDS

**Today, many Nebraska families lack access to quality early care and education.** In a survey conducted in 2019, Nebraska families in all parts of the state reported a lack of available early care and education options in their communities. Of those who responded to the survey, nearly half (48%) of those living in metropolitan areas to just over three quarters (76%) of those living in remote rural areas reported a lack of options.

**Finding quality care for infants and toddlers is particularly challenging.** In a survey of early care and education providers across Nebraska, the majority reported that they had no vacancies for infants and toddlers, and home-based providers reported having the fewest vacancies overall. Yet, most of the Nebraska families surveyed (66%) reported using a home-based provider as their primary source of care and education. Families who reported conditions that may contribute to vulnerability—such as poverty, trauma, or food insecurity—were much more likely than families without those conditions to use a home-based provider.

**Even when quality options are available, many families do not have the financial resources they need to pay for the quality of care they want for their child.** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 62% of Nebraska families reported at least one condition that might negatively impact their children's learning and development—and these families were nearly four times more likely to report difficulty in paying for their child's early care and education. These families also face other barriers to accessing the quality of care and education their children need. For example, families of children with disabilities face unique barriers related to transportation, flexibility of hours, and additional costs.

**Most Nebraska families do not have the information they need to make informed decisions about early care and education options.** More than 90% of the families surveyed would like to have a list of early care and education providers in their area with information about cost, quality ratings, availability, and user reviews.

### GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

**GOAL 1: ACCESS—Each child and their family can access the quality early care, education, and other essential services they need to support each child's healthy development.**

- 1.1 Increase availability of quality early care and education services in communities across the state by creating funding strategies that pay providers for the full cost of quality services.
- 1.2 Increase families' access to quality early care and education services by improving continuity of care and removing barriers.
- 1.3 Create coordinated and aligned resource, referral, and enrollment systems across the state, regional, and local levels that make it easier for families to find and enroll in (or access) quality early care and education services.
- 1.4 Increase access to essential services especially for vulnerable families and families living in rural areas.

Throughout the strategic planning process, stakeholders emphasized the importance of listening to community voices and equitably serving every child and every family in the state, including those who:

- Live in remote rural communities
- Live in underserved urban communities
- Are people of color
- Are immigrants or refugees
- Have disabilities or special health needs
- Are experiencing any other condition that may contribute to vulnerability

We continue to listen to voices from these and other communities in our state, and we are committed to collaboratively seeking equity across all populations.

# GOAL 2

## Quality



**Goal 2 focuses on ensuring that the care provided to each child in the state is quality care, consistent with the state's new definition of quality.**

### IDENTIFIED NEEDS

In Nebraska today, low wages and lack of supportive professional environments create significant hardships for many early childhood professionals, resulting in high turnover rates. Early childhood professionals play an important role in shaping the experiences of the children they serve. Yet, in our current system, Nebraska's early childhood professionals are undervalued and underpaid, making it difficult to retain the qualified professionals we have and recruit the additional professionals we need to meet the demand for quality early care and education in our communities. Many Nebraska families are frustrated with high rates of staff turnover and settings that are short-staffed because these conditions interfere with the caring, one-on-one interactions that families want for their children.

**Many early childhood professionals cannot afford to pay for higher education or take the time off needed for professional development.** Overall, compared to center- or school-based providers, home-based providers reported their caregivers had less access to professional development resources. Yet, there is a clear need for greater access to professional development, as nearly half of the early care and education providers surveyed indicated that it is difficult for them to hire staff with appropriate qualifications.

**Family engagement is a critical component of quality early care and education.** When parents are more engaged and empowered in support of children's learning, they are better able to support their children's development. However, many Nebraska parents reported that they had rarely or never talked to providers about parenting issues (77%), improved educational opportunities for their children (71%), or their child's development (43%).

### GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

**GOAL 2: QUALITY—All early care and education settings provide quality experiences for children.**

- 2.1 Establish shared, statewide definition of quality to shape and direct all early care and education systems change efforts.
- 2.2 Promote the provision of quality early care and education throughout the state by promoting, supporting, and training the early childhood workforce.
- 2.3 Promote the provision of quality early care and education through improved family engagement practices.
- 2.4 Promote the provision of quality early care and education by assessing the physical spaces and facilities where children receive care.

Quality in early care and education is defined by each child's experience. A child experiences quality early care and education as physical and emotional safety in the context of frequent, warm, one-on-one interactions with a caring adult who engages the child in language-rich and educational activities.

# GOAL 3

## Collaboration



**Goal 3 focuses on supporting local community leaders, early childhood providers, and school personnel to build collaborative relationships and develop their capacity to coordinate local resources for families and their children.**

### IDENTIFIED NEEDS

#### Promoting quality early childhood services for all children and families requires

**collaboration.** Success in building an integrated early childhood system that provides quality care, education, and other essential services to each child depends on coordination and alignment of community-level and statewide resources. This in turn requires strong relationships and effective communication among stakeholders representing all sectors of the early childhood system—including state and local government, private organizations, business leaders, philanthropists, families, new and emerging community leaders, and other stakeholders.

**A survey of Nebraska providers suggests that while there is some cooperation between schools and early childhood providers, there is little true collaboration.** The most common types of cooperation reported were providing before- and after-school care, transportation to and from school, and enrichment activities during school breaks.

The transition from home, preschool, or child care into Kindergarten is a key milestone in children's learning and development—and successful transitions require collaboration between community early childhood providers and school staff. In focus groups, many families expressed concerns that their children would not experience quality in the transition to Kindergarten, and some cited examples of challenges they had encountered with their older children. The survey of Nebraska's early childhood providers revealed that most providers do not engage in any practices to support children's transition to Kindergarten.

**Nebraska families reported significant challenges related to continuity across their children's early care and education settings, with greater challenges for families experiencing conditions of vulnerability.** Nebraska families who use school-based early care and education are much more likely to use two or more forms of care than families whose

primary form of care is home- or center-based, perhaps because school-based early childhood programs are only half-day programs. In addition, families who reported one or more conditions of vulnerability also reported having more care arrangements and more frequent changes in settings than families who did not report any conditions of vulnerability.

### GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

#### **GOAL 3: COLLABORATION—Communities coordinate a locally designed mixed delivery system that provides continuous care and meets the needs of families.**

- 3.1 Create more collaboration among early care and education providers, schools, families, coaches, and businesses in communities and regions across the state.
- 3.2 Provide models for communities to build customized collaboration plans that meet the local families' needs.
- 3.3 Build or expand capacity within communities to support continuity of quality care for children making transitions across early care and education settings, including those from early care and education settings to Kindergarten.

The strategic plan builds on a strong foundation of existing and expanding collaborative relationships and ongoing initiatives across the state, providing a clear framework and targets for the shared work ahead. At the same time, the goals and objectives are broad enough to allow stakeholders across Nebraska to define, implement, and refine strategies and action plans that respond to the strengths and needs of specific communities and populations.

# GOAL 4

## Alignment



**Goal 4 focuses on creating an aligned vision for Nebraska's early childhood mixed delivery system that will shape funding and policy decisions and will facilitate coordination and assessment.**

### IDENTIFIED NEEDS

**Regulatory inconsistencies in Nebraska's early childhood mixed delivery system create challenges for stakeholders at all levels.** For example, families experience barriers to accessing essential services when eligibility criteria are defined differently for different programs. Members of Nebraska's early childhood workforce confront contradictory licensing and credentialing expectations based on where they work rather than consistent professional standards based on what their day-to-day work with children entails. And providers of early childhood programs often must apply for and combine funding from multiple sources in order cover operating expenses—an administrative burden that takes time and energy away from serving children and their families.

**Early care and education play an important role in the economic vitality of Nebraska communities.** A community's ability to attract business investment is dependent upon the size and qualifications of the labor supply available, and labor supply is dependent in part upon access to affordable early care and education opportunities for the children of potential employees. Stakeholders across the state consistently stated the importance of ensuring that all Nebraskans understand the value and impact of quality early childhood services—not only for the healthy development of our children and families but also for the economic vitality of our communities, our state, and our nation.

**Increased coordination, collaboration, and communication are needed to ensure that individual initiatives complement rather than compete with each other.** Organizations in Nebraska's early childhood system are often not familiar with the work of other organizations and do not have an understanding of how their own work intersects with the work of others. Furthermore, Nebraska community leaders and policymakers do not have access to the full range of data needed to make fully informed decisions about policies, funding, and programs that would lead to greater alignment at all levels of the early childhood system.

### GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

**GOAL 4: ALIGNMENT—Statewide systems align to support communities in creating an integrated and comprehensive mixed delivery system for all children.**

- 4.1 Create more alignment and integration of vision and planning across state-level organizations, including agencies, nonprofits, private and philanthropic organizations, and advocacy groups.
- 4.2 Promote the importance of early childhood and the value of quality early care and education to the community, state, and economy.
- 4.3 Expand the state's capacity to support coordination and alignment of early childhood programs and services through integrated data systems that track outcomes and support decision making at the state and community levels.
- 4.4 Conduct ongoing needs assessment and strategic planning efforts to expand the knowledge gained and to continue to inform the efforts to transform the early childhood system.

In Nebraska's early childhood mixed delivery system, services are delivered through various providers, programs, organizations, and agencies that have traditionally functioned as distinct and independent entities. Changes in policies and procedures at the state level are needed to support better coordination and alignment across all levels of Nebraska's early childhood system.



## Learn More and Get Involved

The Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan is designed to create a more integrated system of early childhood services and to ensure that, no matter where a family lives or what challenges they face, each child in Nebraska has access to quality early childhood services. The goals and objectives build on a strong foundation of existing and expanding collaborative relationships and ongoing initiatives across the state, providing a clear framework and targets for the shared work ahead. At the same time, the goals and objectives are broad enough to allow stakeholders across Nebraska to define, implement, and refine strategies and action plans that respond to the strengths and needs of specific communities and populations.

The Nebraska Early Childhood Strategic Plan is a dynamic plan by and for Nebraskans. As we develop detailed implementation strategies, we need the continued input and participation of people from across the state who share our commitment to providing equitable access to quality early childhood services that support children's healthy development from birth through age 8. Learn more about how you can get involved at [NEarlychildhoodplan.org](http://NEarlychildhoodplan.org).

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