

## **Nebraska's Preschool Development Grant Application**

Over the past several years Nebraska has been strengthening its commitment to its youngest children, and for good reason. Research on brain development shows that the first five years of life are incredibly important to long-term child development. The federal Preschool Development Grant is an opportunity for Nebraska to bring greater coherence and efficiencies to its existing investment, build new capacities, and support community leadership in delivering quality early childhood services. The grant will support the following activities:

- Conducting a statewide needs assessment;
- Developing a statewide strategic plan;
- Increasing opportunities for parent choice and knowledge;
- Sharing evidence-based practices among early childhood service providers; and
- Improving the overall quality of early childhood services in the state.

Grants are for one year, and are expected to average roughly \$5-6 million per state. This document outlines a proposed approach to the state's application for the grant, which is due November 6.

### ***Nebraska's Approach***

Early learning has increasingly been a priority for the state of Nebraska, its communities, and its schools. A combination of state, local, university-based, and philanthropically-funded initiatives have led to an increase in the number of young children receiving high-quality services, with a strong birth-to-five focus. The Preschool Development Grant's strategic planning process will allow Nebraska to build on its many successful components and turn those into a more coherent whole. In particular, the process will identify ways in which the state government can be more efficient and aligned in its distribution of resources – which will make it easier for communities and providers to deliver the services children and families need.

### ***Major Grant Activities***

#### Needs Assessment

In keeping with Nebraska's community-driven approach, its needs assessment will include both an analysis of statewide data and a more detailed study of community-level data.

- At the state level, Nebraska will examine its existing levels of service provided through federal and state funds.
  - The state recognizes that one of its greatest opportunities is to offer high-quality services for more infants and toddlers. The needs assessment will include a particular focus on services for the youngest Nebraskans, and the impacts of limited access to those services on children and families.
  - Nebraska's strong economy means that its adults are in the workforce – in fact, we are one of the highest-ranking states for the percentage of households where all adults are employed. This means that a large number of children are spending their days in early care and education (either center-based or home-based), and the quality of that care is critical to the long-term development of those children.
- The needs assessment will also build on Nebraska's community-level work by identifying needs that are being addressed primarily at the local level.
  - This will include an assessment of efforts to reach the populations with the greatest needs in different geographic areas. Grant funds will be used to conduct deeper analyses of needs

- in selected communities, both rural and urban, allowing for improved community planning and a better understanding of how to deliver statewide supports.
- The availability of quality child care can be linked to the economic vitality of small communities. This feature will be closely studied in the needs assessment.

### Strategic Plan

Nebraska's strategic plan will include a substantial focus on how to help state government become more responsive to the needs of its early childhood stakeholders. The state has established some strong partnerships at the state level, particularly between the Department of Education and Health and Human Services; these two agencies are the leads on most early childhood programs. They also work together as part of Nebraska's Sixpence Early Learning Fund, a public-private partnership that supports collaboration at the state and local level. The strategic plan will analyze these partnerships with an eye toward designing the next generation of Nebraska's early childhood system – one that will build on existing successes but be unafraid to make bold changes where needed.

In addition to broadly addressing the system's efficiency, the plan will address numerous key policy areas:

- *Access.* The needs assessment will identify where children need services. The strategic plan will articulate a plan for meeting those needs – one that leverages the full range of available services. This will include school-based, center-based, and home-based programming starting at birth and continuing through kindergarten entry. A statewide survey released in 2015 by the Buffett Early Childhood Institute and Gallup showed significant gaps in child care availability, particularly in rural areas of the state.
- *Quality and Accountability.* Nebraska's quality rating and improvement system, *Step Up to Quality*, is a key driver of quality, and the state will build on this program by identifying statewide performance metrics. The strategic plan will also reflect a commitment to understanding oversight and monitoring processes to streamline administrative requirements for communities and providers.
- *Community-Level Systems.* Increasingly, Nebraska communities view early childhood services as an essential public good. Statewide initiatives like *Bring Up Nebraska* – strongly supported by the First Lady – and the *Communities for Kids* project have worked to help communities build better systems for meeting the needs of families. The grant will allow Nebraska to draw lessons learned from this work to reshape its state systems.
  - Some regions are also utilizing shared services, in which multiple service providers combine their “back-office” functions to improve efficiency. The grant will allow Nebraska to plan for offering access to shared services for more providers.
- *School Transitions.* Nebraska's education plan under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* includes a focus on the importance of the transition into kindergarten. The strategic plan will allow the state to build out its articulation of best practices for this important transition, including alignment across programs and parental engagement throughout the process. The state will create an ongoing feedback loop so that the process of kindergarten transition is continually improved. The University of Nebraska's Buffett Early Childhood Institute has been a critical leader in this work through the Superintendents Early Childhood Plan implemented in the Learning Communities of Douglas and Sarpy County.
- *Early Childhood Workforce.* Ensuring qualified professionals is critical to the success of the entire system. The Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Commission, a public-private partnership, is dedicated to improving the quality of Nebraska's early childhood workforce. The commission,

staffed by the Buffett Early Childhood Institute, is developing a consensus action plan that focuses on qualifications, funding, and public will and commitment.

- *Integrated Data System.* Information about young children is currently collected in a disconnected way by multiple agencies. Creating a distinct count of young children – and using that information to analyze existing services and their impacts – will allow the state and communities to deploy resources much more effectively. Nebraska has already launched an effort to design an early childhood integrated data system, and the grant will accelerate that effort.
  - The planned work will build on an existing partnership with ECDataWorks, a competitive grant obtained by Nebraska to help build an interactive community assessment tool that will provide information to the public and other stakeholders about existing programs and services. The ECDataWorks project will inform both the needs assessment and the strategic plan.
- *Inclusion and Early Intervention.* All elements of the plan will reflect the state’s commitment to inclusion and early intervention. Nebraska’s infant-toddler early intervention programs, in existence since the early 1970’s, are administered by the Department of Education, which allows it to provide more seamless service in the birth to five years.

In all of these areas the plan will identify effective roles for the state, regional governance, counties, communities, and direct service providers. The process of developing the strategic plan will therefore need to include voices from all of these stakeholders, as well as the families served. Importantly, the grant process will engage the full range of providers in the early childhood arena.

The grant will also address two areas identified as critical by the application related to the strategic plan:

- *Parent Choice and Empowerment.* Nebraska’s quality rating and improvement system, *Step Up to Quality*, is meant to provide a pathway for providers to improve and to inform parents about their options. Using *Step Up to Quality* as a baseline, the grant will allow Nebraska to strengthen systems for informing and empowering parents. The state’s approach will include a focus on supporting regional- and community-level systems that engage parents, and will be based on the belief that parental choice is most meaningful when there are multiple quality options available.
  - Parent information portals are a key element of a parent choice and empowerment strategy. The grant will allow Nebraska to design a system of parent portals that is grounded in local communities, so that parents can easily identify the services that meet their needs.
- *Sharing Evidence-based Practices Among Providers.* Nebraska’s system for training early childhood providers includes Early Learning Coordinators through the Nebraska Department of Education Early Childhood Training Center, University of Nebraska Extension, and private trainers. The grant will be used to coordinate and align the diverse systems around Nebraska’s Early Childhood Competencies.
  - Nebraska has multiple promising efforts that provide coaching to early childhood professionals. Through the grant Nebraska will work to define a more coherent approach that builds on existing efforts.

Once the state’s strategic plan is complete, it can begin conducting activities in support of its strategic plan. As noted above, the grant will provide seed-funding to several crucial initiatives that will be implemented in support of the strategic plan.