

Nebraska Landscape Assessment: Community Conversations

Early Childhood Care and Education Systems
2024

Families 1st Partnership

4 community conversations, 45 participants

Introduction

The Landscape Assessment is a Nebraska statewide effort carried out at the community level to understand how well services and families are connected to support children, families, and individuals. In spring 2024, Families 1st Partnership hosted four conversations with key community people, including childcare and service providers, families, and school district staff, to discuss the local early childhood care and education system.

The collaborative worked with the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFF) and the Munroe-Meyer Institute (MMI) at the University of Nebraska Medical Center for logistics, facilitation, and data collection. The primary focus was early childhood systems, supported by data gathered about school connections, concrete supports, and mental health.

For questions about the Nebraska Landscape Assessment, please contact Jackie Farrell at jfarrell@nebraskachildren.org.

Acknowledgments

Many acknowledgments are needed to recognize the efforts of all those who made this landscape assessment happen, starting with the local communities and their collaborative backbone agencies. They work across the state to connect families to services and resources to ensure everyone in Nebraska has the opportunity to thrive. We are grateful to all participants who shared their time and expertise.

Deep gratitude to Dr. Danae Dinkel at the University of Nebraska Omaha for her collaboration and contribution in the data analysis.

Strengths in the Community

Participants thought the collaborative nature of individuals and the partnerships among organizations was a major strength within their communities. They stated that the network of early childhood collaborators such as Rooted in Relationships, Communities for Kids, and the Educational Service Unit's along with the dedication of early childhood educators and growth mindedness of the people in the community had helped to contribute to increases in quality care.

Another strength noted by participants was the increased awareness and support around early childhood care and education in general.

Further, participants felt that identification of children in need of early intervention services was a strength noting that parents seemed more willing to allow people within their home to help their children.

Lack of Availability within Early Childhood Care and Education

Participants mentioned a need for more spots in early childhood care and education facilities with some communities mentioning a loss of both in-home and center facilities. Others stated there were long waitlists for current quality licensed childcare and parents did not have a choice of where to go but enrolled their child in what was available. A few participants cited that part of the challenge for those offering childcare was the lack of physical space to add more spots.

Several participants also acknowledged that in their communities, people primarily relied on public school options, particularly for preschool, as there had been a decline in community-based preschools. Others explained that a few schools were opening childcare facilities for their teachers.

Conversely, several participants thought there was childcare availability within their community; however, families could not afford it.

Importantly, participants noted a lack of understanding from families in their communities of the importance of preschool and early childhood education as some families realized they could survive on one income after COVID while others were choosing to homeschool their children.

Barriers to Accessing Early Childhood Care and Education

As mentioned above, the high cost was one barrier to those interested in accessing early childhood care and education. If public preschools were not available, parents may not be able to afford it. While a few churches provided scholarships, others noted this was a challenge within the system. Further even though childcare subsidies were available, a few participants stated that some parents make too much money to qualify but yet still could not afford care.

Another challenge pointed out by many participants was a lack of transportation to/from childcare which often impacted low-income and rural families. While schools did provide transportation if families had an Individualized Education Program for their child with a disability, only a few participants explained that their school provided transportation to all children. Further, few childcare facilities offered transportation and others felt parents were unsure of putting their 3-year-old on a bus or van. A portion of participants stated another challenge was that if there was availability in a childcare facility, new parents and migrant families didn't know where to go and by the time they found out about the opening it was full.

Other challenges highlighted by participants included a need for more childcare for children with disabilities as well as children in foster care.

A final challenge participants brought up was the lack of flexible childcare options. This included different childcare hours for parents working non-traditional daytime hours as well as those who only needed part-time care and were having to pay the full-time rate. A participant did mention that one educator who tried to offer more varied hours ended up going back to traditional hours due to the limited number of children she was receiving.

Need for More Licensed Early Childhood Educators

Participants highlighted a need for more early childhood educators. While they knew of some people who had tried to enter the field, the barriers to opening a licensed home or center or even hiring staff within the field was often overwhelming due to the amount of time to complete required processes/training and money needed to navigate through the regulations. A few participants thought that the field was still experiencing burnout and secondary trauma from the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the low pay and lack of benefits – even lower than working in fast food – and the exhaustion of working in the field were identified as barriers to maintaining and expanding the workforce. Several

participants believed that some educators similar to parents had left the field because they also felt the importance of being home with their child. Participants stated that recent grants which had paid for professional development had helped, but with some of these grants ending this was a concern.

Additionally, participants brought up that efforts had been made to reach unlicensed individuals to provide incentives to go through licensing and they thought this could be a good way to help improve the workforce issue.

Finally, participants thought there was a need for more professional development for educators on how to support families and children with special needs.

Need for More Health Services

Participants mentioned they thought poor behavior, low social-emotional skills, high anxiety and other mental health challenges had increased for children. Further, they stated mental health issues of parents and early childhood educators had also increased. In general, there was discussion around drug use issues with adults that negatively impacted children as well. Due to these challenges, the mental health system was strained and for some felt nonexistent.

Additionally, the need for care expanded beyond mental health to health in general and more particularly dental health care was viewed as another need within communities. While a new telehealth service for mental health care was brought up some had concerns around whether parents could afford internet service to be able to connect and if children would respond to receiving care this way. Stigma was also noted as a challenge to receiving mental health care.

Of promising news was the increase in engagement in facilitators being trained in Circle of Security. Overall, the workforce, similar to early childhood, was lacking and experienced high turnover.

Opportunities for Growth in Early Childhood

In addition to the opportunities highlighted above, participants described a variety of ways they thought that their communities could continue to support their communities. Necessities such as having available housing, transportation, quality cell service and internet access were pointed out as essential ways that families needed support. Specific to early childhood, was a need to help educate parents on the importance of preschool.

Regardless of where families desired to educate (public, private, in-home, home-school), participants felt some families needed to be made aware of the importance of providing preschool as well as how to empower parents in interacting with the school system to help them become more aware of publicly available programs.

Additionally, participants mentioned the importance of engaging more businesses to support early childhood care and education, either through helping employees directly through benefits or through supporting the administration of childcare (i.e., paying for staff).

Finally, participants thought that providing more education and resources to first-time parents would be beneficial.



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