

METRO-OMAHA COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS ACTION PLAN

RAISE ME TO READ

***METROPOLITAN OMAHA EDUCATION
CONSORTIUM***

***UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA OMAHA
LEARNING COMMUNITY OF DOUGLAS AND
SARPY COUNTIES
UNITED WAY OF THE MIDLANDS***

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Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge ~ Omaha – Council



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Preface

Systems Leadership

This plan has been created for the Metro-Omaha area by the backbone organization, the Metropolitan Omaha Education Consortium (MOEC). MOEC is a collaborative organization dedicated to public education and bringing Omaha-area educators together to meet education commitments. An endeavor of such magnitude as a Community Solutions Action Plan (CSAP) requires consideration of the larger system (Senge, et al., 2015, p. 28-29), including schools, organizations, philanthropic efforts, communities, and the families which reside within them. With this plan, MOEC hopes to “embody an ancient understanding of leadership; the Indo-European root of ‘to lead’ literally means to step across a threshold” (Senge, et al., 2015, p. 28).

In order for this step across the threshold to be truly effective, it requires one to first “see the field”. A rich and thriving network of family and literacy support already exists in our Metro-Omaha area. The original work for this plan included: Sensing – investigation and evaluation of existing entities and initiatives supporting schools and families, stakeholder reports and state and local school district data; Presencing – study, reflection, conclusions, and conversations about possible actions; and Realizing – acting on the information in order to create a plan which is meaningful and acts in the word, instead of “on the world” (Senge, 2015, p. 87).

“This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose you consider a mighty one, the being a force of nature.” ~George Bernard Shaw

Often in conversations with partners and allies, “intersectionality,” “timing,” and “convergence” have been voiced or become evident. With multiple initiatives already engaged in our area, the Campaign for Grade Level Reading plan has no need or wish to duplicate efforts. Our partners, The Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy County (TLC), The United Way of the Midlands (UWM), The Buffett Early Childhood Institute (BECI), and the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO) are already engaged in all aspects of the assurances – as is the backbone organization, MOEC – with professional development, shared resources, working groups, and ongoing collaboration within its consortium members. Additionally, the allies are deeply involved in family supports, outreach and instruction. It is MOEC’s intention, then, that a system level perspective will allow us to evaluate next steps together.

Following research and planning, a task force was created and invited to participate in an advisory capacity for both the Council Bluffs and Metro-Omaha campaigns. It is essential to note here that the Council Bluffs, IA Raise Me to Read Campaign for Grade Level Reading is in its sixth year, and has provided resources and events for families in the Council Bluffs area in the campaign categories of

school readiness, summer learning and attendance. Throughout its existence, Raise Me to Read has been working closely with the Council Bluffs Community School District, the United Way of the Midlands and the Iowa West Foundation. Council Bluffs and Omaha – and surrounding communities – are in the same general area, with the Missouri River dividing state and city lines, thus continuity of name and messaging makes common sense. The Metro-Omaha GLR campaign has the fortunate advantage of learning from the expertise of the Council Bluffs Raise Me to Read GLR initiative.

At the convening of MOEC's duo-state task force (a group comprised of experts from each of the campaign areas, and including public health), deep listening and shared reflection was evident. It is through such continued conversation that trust will be fostered between the entities, and appreciation gained regarding individual situations. Members reflected in small, rotating groups, suggesting key issues and circumstance connected to each of the CSAP assurances. Task force members also determined additional vital individuals and entities who/which should be involved.

When defining "the problem," the task force members noted that a myriad of family issues including socio-economic status, adverse childhood/generational experiences, limited access to books and stimulating well-rounded activities, and lack of community supports result in learning and achievement gaps. There was keen awareness that some families may not understand the importance of early learning or how to engage with their children from infancy onward, and that this may be a result of their own trauma and learning abilities. One individual noted succinctly, "We are trying to create a world where children, no matter their resources, may live and learn in a literacy-rich environment within supportive communities."

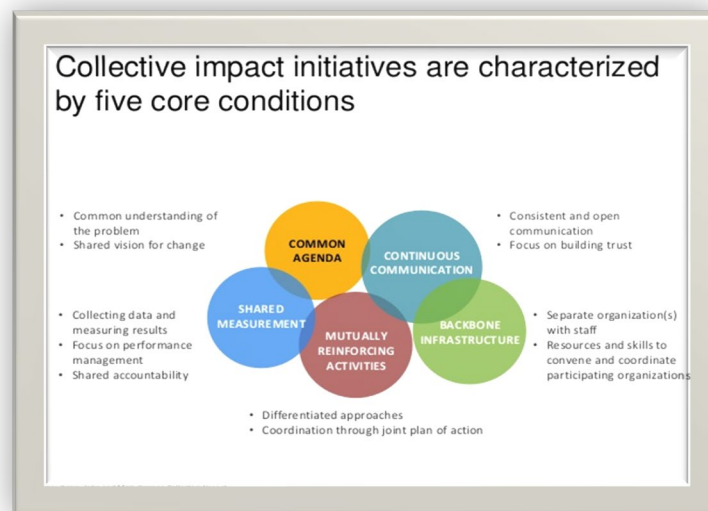
It has often been the practice of schools and other support systems to react to needs. This is a marvelously humane act, and it assists the person or problem in the moment, but it does not change the existence of the problem. Within a systems framework, one must, instead, respond. It is necessary to set goals which thoroughly and thoughtfully plan for that which will effect change. "Continuing to do what we are currently doing but doing it harder or smarter is not likely to produce very different outcomes. Real change starts with recognizing that we are part of the systems we seek to change" (Senge et al., 2015, p. 29). Our task force members suggested "mapping efforts," and "connecting the dots" in addition to leveraging to greater effect activities which are already occurring. Actor mapping has thus become an important foundational aspect of our plan as we explore the relationships and connections among actors and their links to our initiatives of family support, community conversation and early literacy. It is essential that efforts are managed so that the essence of the work is not merely assisting with survival, but is also giving families the skills and supports to thrive (Pankoke, 2015, p. 19). Plans will include responses for the future, with the hope of becoming inspired by what is possible.

Collective Impact

A distinctive feature of the plan will be the consideration of the initiative as one of community engagement. Thoughtful engagement “of the people whose lives are most directly and deeply affected” by the problem of grade level reading is essential (Preskill, 2014). As research continues to provide evidence regarding the significance of children’s earliest learnings and habits, it is understood that the future of the children in our community does not rest merely on the shoulder of schools, nor does it rest only in family homes. In order to elicit the transformation imagined, “strong programs” are not necessary (though they will be helpful); what is needed is “strong community, the only change that is truly sustainable” (Schmitz, 2017, p. 6).

Position yourself for what is coming ~ Senge

Sustainable change involves an asset-based mindset. “Rather than begin by defining people and communities by their deficits [or in some cases, by their ‘zip codes’ – as is the common nomenclature] and trying to fix them, you discover their assets (experience, knowledge, skills, talents, passions, and relationships) and engage them” (Schmitz, 2017, p. 6). An essential element in this collective impact amalgam is to consider our work as one of being active in the community, as opposed to doing to or for the community. This problem solving approach will include the Five Core Conditions of collective impact, including a common agenda, continuous communication, shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, and the backbone function as demonstrated in the visual below from *Stanford Information Review* (Preskill, et al., 2014, p. 4):



The common agenda has already included, and will continue to include, conversation with many others about the “problem” of grade level reading and what can be achieved together in response. Even as this is being written, our core team members are reaching out to those individuals and

entities working in the community and schools in order to establish an ongoing dialogue and, further, to enable us to meet the families where they are, continuing the conversation “on-the-ground”.

Unceasing communication will occur in the realms of personal outreach, and of press and social media. Shared media in both the Council Bluffs and Metro-Omaha community is a signature aspect of the cross-state collaboration, and one reason we share the moniker of “Raise Me to Read”. Messaging will include initiatives and activities in our metro area as well as the push of information regarding literacy, public health, extended learning opportunities and attendance. While focus is on the immediate community, there are many initiatives from which to learn that are a part of the Campaign for Grade Level Reading, or connected with Attendance Works, as well as from those who are working on educational and social-emotional initiatives around the globe. Valuable information will come from such groups as Boston Basics, Zero to Three, The Harvard Center on the Developing Child, The National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI), ACE’s Connection, First 2000 Days from Canada, The Green String Network in Africa, and ACE’s Scotland Forum, and the newly forming Success Starts Small from the Prosper Lincoln (Nebraska) initiative, as well as others.

Work regarding a shared measurement system is wrought with hazards. For good reason, those working in education often consider shared measurement to mean comparisons and rankings. That is the unfortunate byproduct of state testing. What MOEC considers important is agreement between the many school districts in our area on a few measures for the purpose of considering growth or improvement, and not for comparison of one district to another.

Our partners and allies use shared information, measures, and reports such as:

- Kids Count in Nebraska Report
- State Department of Education’s Nebraska Education Profile
- 2018 Community Health Needs Assessment Report
- The Youngest Nebraskans: A Statistical Look at Infants and Toddlers in Nebraska
- Raising the Next Nebraskans
- Their Future, Our Future Community Report
- United States Census Bureau
- Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties Annual Plan Evaluation and Community Report
- Buffett Early Childhood Institute Reports

In April, 2018, Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts signed the Legislature’s Nebraska Reading and Improvement Act, taking effect in the coming (2019-2020) school year. Nebraska State Senator Lou Ann Linehan noted, “Early literacy is the foundation for academic success,” adding that “the power of reading opens doors that lead to fulfilling careers and richer understanding of the world around us” (ExcelinEd, 2018). With the effective date of August 2019, this new act may provide an opportunity for shared literacy measure because the separate districts may choose to adopt the same assessment

(possibly NWEA's MAP®) for this newly-required reading assessment and reporting. This could lead to a cohesive understanding of the proficiency and needs of our students.

The MOEC Strategic Work Group for Attendance and the School Based Attendance Committee (SBAC) also have concluded together that a focus on chronic absenteeism is the most effective measure to consider. What constitutes an "absence" is not uniform throughout the districts, though an agreement of the percentage of time missed as being considered "chronic" has been reached. Both entities are in ongoing conversation in order to eliminate duplication of efforts.

All of the mutually reinforcing activities which may occur as this initiative moves from informing to consulting, to collaborating with the community cannot at present be fully conceived. However, it is envisioned that the work will include:

- Support of partners, allies, and stakeholders in the work that has begun.
- Employment of actor mapping in order to understand what is missing or requires enhancement.
- Consideration of additional collaboration with, and identification of, new allies existing in the Community Engagement Center at UNO, and elsewhere throughout the entire community.
- Changing the trajectory for children and families in our community by successfully creating a generational knowledge regarding literacy, and by encouraging discussion (out-loud and often) in all community spaces regarding the importance of communicating and engaging with children from birth.
- Ensuring that businesses and entities increase their understanding of the importance of literacy, and that all support organizations include providing literacy information to families as a natural and holistic approach for increasing a child's success in life.
- Being present consistently and continuously in the community until true progress has been made, effectively "working ourselves out of a job".

Community engagement must be "result-driven and purposeful" (Schmitz, 2017). Using the Community Engagement Toolkit (Schmitz, 2017), MOEC provides answers to these two questions: Why is community engagement important to your Initiative? How will it contribute to your results?

Community Engagement is Important Because:

- Meaningful change occurs from the individual outward toward society.
- Parents, families and neighbors cannot merely be told to read more to-and with children.
- Engagement, enlightenment and family supports are necessary aspects.
- If the habits and understandings of families are changed, then everything else is possible.

Community Engagement Will Contribute to Results By:

- Fostering improved understanding of the importance of grade level reading.
- Creating changed perceptions as to communicating with and reading to children from birth.
- Enhancing support for more calm and cared-for families.
- Contributing to society by reduction of delinquency and drop-outs due to improved literacy.
- Creating a community of ambassadors who spread the message about grade level reading from generation to generation.

Fundamentals

The great lesson is that the sacred is in the ordinary, that it is to be found in one's daily life, in one's neighbors, friends, and family, in one's backyard.

~ Abraham Maslow

During the creation of this plan, and no matter what issue was being addressed, a recurring thought was that it would be helpful to add an icon throughout, indicating “See Maslow”. For example, beside a goal of increasing professional development and improving teacher instruction, one might add “See Maslow” because, if basic needs are unmet, rigorous instruction in the classrooms will not matter for those students who arrive at school not ready to learn due to their circumstances. In Creating Productive Cultures in Schools, Joseph Murphy notes, “There is an especially valuable line of research that confirms that many students, especially students in peril, will not benefit unless the elements of care and other norms of personalization are blended. When this cocktail of push and support is in place, students are able to see challenge as coming from a place of teacher concern about the students themselves” (Murphy, 2014, p. 58).



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Art Print

Holly Fisher

The importance of basic needs is also found in response to family and childhood trauma. “Many of our students [and families] experienced years of toxic stress in...home environments that shifted them into living every moment of every day in survival mode. Their new ‘normal’ is fear, reactivity, and failure. This is how they have survived. It is all they know. The result is that their brains are wired for fear” (Sporleder and Forbes, 2016, p. 1). “The single greatest predictor of academic success that exists is the emotional stability of the home. It’s not in the classroom. And if you really wanted to do educational reform, you would start with the home” (Sporleder and Forbes, 2016, p. 6). What is “fundamentally going on” (Senge, 2015, p. 86) in the Omaha metro area closely parallels challenges in other CGLR communities with regard to the stability and vitality of families and communities, and the ability of families to engage in valuable learning experiences within the home. “A child’s success is strongly tied to his or her family’s stability and well-being” (AECF, 2014). Or, as the State of Babies Yearbook 2019 states: “Young children develop in the context of their families, where stability and supportive relationships nurture their growth. All families of infants and toddlers benefit from support with parenting, and many – particularly those challenged by economic instability – need access to resources that help them meet their children’s daily and developmental needs” (AECF, 2014, p.1). In order to achieve changes desired, it is important to address what is occurring within the family structure, noticing what might be getting in the way of family success. “Poverty constrains more than material resources. Sustained poverty imposes chronic stress on families, affecting parental health and functioning, and likely harming the relationship between parents and between parent and child. The list of negative child outcomes associated with poverty is long, including increased likelihood of illness and injuries, psychological and behavioral problems, diminished cognitive development and school achievement, and shorter life expectancy” (Murphy, 2015, p. 23).

While no single policy can meet every child’s needs, investments that address the interrelated needs of young children will achieve the greatest return and impact.
~ Zero to Three Initiative

There exist a multitude of reports regarding familial situations at the United States, state, and local level. The following Nebraska data points are important to understand:

- 58% of children have experienced one-to-two Adverse Childhood Experiences, and 20% of children have experienced three or more, with the most prevalent events including economic hardship, divorce, mentally ill family member, family member with substance abuse problems, and parent incarceration (VFCN, 2018, p. 43)
- 37.9% of children live in low-income families (VFCN, 2018, p. 18)
- 28.1% of Nebraska children were living with a single parent in 2017 (VFCN, 2018, p. 33)
- Substantiated maltreatment of children included 82.4% physical neglect and 14.1% physical abuse (VFCN, 2018, p. 69)
- 5.5% of households had no vehicle available – equal to 41,169 households (VFCN, 2018, p. 66)

- 24% of mothers reporting less than optimum mental health (NSBY, 2018)
- 1.9% of families say they live in unsafe neighborhoods (NSBY, 2018)
- 6.2 (deaths per 1,000 live birth) is the infant mortality rate while the national rate is 5.9 (NSBY, 2018)
- 5.4% of mothers received late or no prenatal care (NSBY, 2018)

In our consortium area, Sarpy County has 13,300 children aged four-and-under; Douglas County has 42,788 children aged four-and-under. Child economic stability data by county include:

- Low Income Family: Sarpy County 23.7% and Douglas County 39.9% (Poverty, 2018)
- Food insecure children: Sarpy County 15.3% and Douglas County 18.2% (Poverty, 2018)
- Lack of home ownership: Sarpy County 26.9% and Douglas County 34.3% (Poverty, 2018)
- Ranking in state (out of 93 counties) for Overall Child Well-being – Sarpy County #8/93; Douglas County #69/93 (VFCN, 2018)
- Poverty Rate in Sarpy County: 6.2% (Bellevue 11%, Chalco 7.8%, Gretna 6.7%, LaVista 7.5%, Offutt AFB 7.2%, Papillion 3.9%, Springfield 4.2 (Poverty, 2018)
- Poverty Rate in Douglas County: 16.3% (Bennington 6.9%, Omaha 16.3%, Ralston 7.4%, Valley 18.3%, Waterloo 9.8%) (Poverty, 2018)

It is important to be aware of the aggravating circumstances into which some children are born. First Five Nebraska notes that 39% of Nebraska children are at risk for failure in school by virtue of their family circumstance and income level. A sense of urgency exists due to our evolving understanding that individual, family, and community trauma adversely affects the developing brain, and therefore presents a direct correlation to learning and achievement. Children require norms including “assistance, encouragement, safety nets, monitoring, mentoring and advocating. It is useful to think of these ingredients as overlapping and intertwined strands in the web of support” (Murphy, 2015, p. 65).

Adam Kahane notes “When you’re facing very difficult issues or dilemmas, when very different people need to align in very complex settings, and when the future might really be very different from the past, a different process is required” (Senge, 2004, p. 87). Our connecting for synergy efforts have been embedded within the call to our task force, our desire to understand the works being undertaken in the community, and the use of the Collective Impact and Community Engagement models. The only way to achieve genuine change is to work with the individuals to whom this matters most: the children and their families. The focus on the family as surrounded by city, school, community and philanthropic supports, along with our synergistic efforts, will breed success and sustainability as the families and community begin to understand the importance of early literacy and practice constant communication and reading with their children.

Circle of Influence

Another aspect of connecting for synergy and collective impact includes a magnificent “problem” with regard to the many actors surrounding parents and communities with various and important supports. When discussing the aspects of the plan and what needs to be accomplished, it was suggested that a “circles of influence” diagram was the most apt manner of visualization. Later in discussing this image and vision with a group from Children’s Hospital and the Center for the Child and Community, it was noted that the image is very similar to what is used in the medical field, with the patient being at the center.

Deb Halliday of Halliday and Associates notes, “It’s when we slow down and examine our circles of influence, that we are often surprised at what we find.

1. We discover a vast network of relationships. The ‘six degrees of separation’ can certainly ring true... We realize that someone knows someone who knows the very person we hope to reach.
2. We discover we can change program and practices. One of the beautiful things about collective impact is that it is often a matter of aligning *existing* resources, programs and practices to reinforce a larger vision. We have the ability to advance more effective approaches *within* our existing organizations and initiatives.
3. We discover we can change our behaviors. If collaboration moves at the speed of trust, it behooves us to establish deeper relationships with colleagues, partners and key stakeholders. That starts with us: doing what we say, speaking truth in respectful ways, and connecting on a more personal level” (Halliday, 2016).

“...We have many levers to pull within our circles of influence. Once we begin to do so, a remarkable thing starts to happen: we discover that our circle of influence begins to expand, increasing our ability to impact our circles of concern” (Halliday, 2016).

It is essential to assert that, without exception, the schools, cities, allies, philanthropists, stakeholders, and partners are already doing great and good works on their own and with some connections with one another. MOEC’s vision includes increasing the level of understanding between actors regarding what others are doing. The intention regarding the graphic visualization is to demonstrate our adamant focus on the family, and to show the multitude of supports surrounding children and their families. It is our intention to increase the number of allies and enhance our already-existing collaborations.

Backbone



Partners



Stakeholders
Peter Kiewit Foundation,
Sherwood Foundation, and Iowa West Foundation



Building Ourselves Out of the Story

In order to “make sense of our common reality” (Senge, 2004, p. 71), it is essential to include the story of those involved in the creation and support of this initiative, and of the wealth of culture and cultures existing in community in which we live. Peter Senge notes that the new library of Alexandria in Egypt includes “. . . along the concrete façade, the creation stories from ancient traditions around the world [which] are engraved in their own script” (Senge, 2004, p. 72) Our plan must reflect what has existed, just as the tens of thousands of books in Egypt did; but it will also be a plan of listening to all voices in the present, and planning a response for the future.

“It’s like everyone tells a story about themselves in their own head. Always. All the time. That story makes you who you are. We build ourselves out of that story.” ~ Patrick Rothfuss

Backbone

Founded in 1988, MOEC bridges the communities on both sides of the Missouri River, including Pottawattamie County in Iowa, and Douglas and Sarpy Counties in Nebraska. The collaborative includes the school districts of Bellevue, Bennington, Council Bluffs, Douglas County West, Elkhorn, Gretna, Millard, Omaha, Papillion/LaVista, Ralston, Springfield/Platteview, Westside. MOEC is directed by an executive steering committee comprised of superintendents of these Omaha-area public school districts, administrators of two educational service units; the leaders of Iowa Western Community College, Metropolitan Community College and the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

MOEC core values:

- Everything we do is grounded in the experiences, strengths, challenges, and aspirations of our students.
- We set ambitious goals and launch transformational initiatives to achieve major gains in performance and outcomes for all students. We also embrace new ideas and are willing to take risks in the pursuit of dramatic impact.
- We collaborate across sectors and with the community, including students and their families, to spread best practices, make the best use of resources, and build upon all of our region’s strengths and assets.
- We are committed to putting in place the resources and human capital that will ensure that our efforts and our impact achieve long-term, sustainable success.
- We use data and metrics to drive continuous evidence-based improvement. We pursue innovative strategies and initiatives that have been proven effective especially for students of poverty and limited English proficiency.

As the backbone of the Metro-Omaha Grade Level Reading Campaign, MOEC’s objective is to support the facilitator position, engage campaign task force members, support identified providers/partners,

collaborate with Raise Me to Read in Council Bluffs for media, outreach and (as much as possible) shared metrics. MOEC will, of course, continue its important consortium work which will also aid the campaign, especially through its strategic working groups focusing on Curriculum and Assessment, Baseline Data, Early Literacy and School Attendance.

Local Control

It is not uncommon for large cities, such as Chicago or New York City, to have only one school district. A markedly different school culture exists in the Metro-Omaha area. MOEC schools house K-12 populations ranging from a district with 958 students in four schools, to the largest with 52,836 students in 109 schools. Within the city limits of Omaha, there are four separate school districts and one independent city (Ralston) wholly surrounded. Local control has been an issue for some time in Nebraska, whether the subject has been school reorganization or annexation by the City of Omaha.

“Local control of education is a concept that has become embedded in American Culture. It is generally accepted that decisions about the education of children in a public district should be made by those who are closest to the site” according to University of Nebraska researchers in Omaha and Lincoln (Uerling, 1989). The authors note further that enshrined in our constitution is Article VII “Free instruction in the common schools of our state” and that “the Nebraska constitution also recognizes authority greater than that of the Legislature – the power of the people” (Uerling, 1989). Author John LaRue also connects the idea directly to individual students: “The most important aspect of local control is the student and his/her support group. . . .This local emphasis – individual student – has greatly improved the education experience for many students and has made us a better society” (LaRue, 2014).

On June 6th, 2007, the Omaha Public Schools launched a “One City One School” campaign and moved to absorb school districts (excepting two) within the city’s boundaries. There ensued various iterations and intrigue on the behalf of superintendents and state legislators with the end result being the establishment of The Learning Community which, at first, required a common levy among the school districts. The other aspects were to freeze the Omaha Public School boundaries, institute focus or magnet schools and open transfers with socio economic basis, to modify finances to support at risk students or populations, and the creation of a Learning Community Coordinating Council with representation from throughout the area (Green, 2014).

In 2016, the law was altered to abandon the common levy, but maintained the structure and programs including two Learning Centers and several Early Childhood programs. The most recent bill requires school districts to work together to raise achievement for all metro-area students. To that end, our partner, The Learning Community (TLC), created a five-year road map to “challenge and address the opportunity gap for children and families across the metropolitan area”. Legislatively tasked to focus

on early childhood, this consortium of eleven school districts has prioritized initiatives in six urban schools (TLC, 2019).

“The goal of the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan is to reduce or eliminate social, cognitive, and achievement gaps among young children living in high concentrations of poverty. By translating research into practice, the plan provides for a comprehensive systems approach to programming that is required to increase opportunities to learn and eliminate income-and race-based achievement gaps for children most at risk for school failure by the end of third grade. In so doing, the plan elevates the capacity of the Omaha metro school districts to serve all young children well” (BECI, 2018).

Collaboration

It is important to note that the building in which MOEC and the Metro-Omaha Campaign for Grade Level Reading are housed in the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center (CEC) at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. The significance is found in the aspect of collaboration with our allies who reside in the building, and the many organizations which will be part of our future outreach and engagement in support of the GLR the initiative. MOEC is proud to be housed within such a community, and believes that in this setting, we discover once again that “intersection,” “alignment,” and “synergy” as to our purpose, values, and goals. Those who have worked in the CEC describe it as “transformational,” and an atmosphere in which great ideas are “incubated” resulting in collective impact and community engagement in its most authentic form.



The small bronze figures are reproductions of actual people from UNO and Omaha, working in collaboration to build a stronger community.

Collaboration
Jamie Burmeister 2013
Wood and Bronze
Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center ~ UNO

This center has received many national awards, including to be among the first universities to receive the “Community Engagement Classification” by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The mission of the CEC, is to “contribute positively and measurably to the community’s quality of life by creating, supporting, and expanding mutually beneficial partnerships, engaged scholarship, and academic and student programming that creates tomorrow’s leaders and agents of change”.

Metropolitan History

Omaha: The “Upstream People”

Bordered by three rivers (the Missouri, the Platte, and the Elkhorn) Douglas County, Nebraska is a fertile plain with lush (but hardy) flora and fauna and serves as a path of many migration patterns. There is evidence of cultures in this area hunting and trading 8,000 years ago. “The next inhabitants were called the Woodland’s Culture people, settling around 2,000 B.C. . . .Anthropologists have named a third group of immigrants the east Nebraska Culture people” who had a sophisticated farming culture (Reilly, 2003, p. 7). In the early 1700’s a group of about 3,000 settled on the west bank of the Missouri River, naming themselves the “Omaha” which means the “upstream people”.

Other cultures began to explore the area – Spanish, English, French and those from various European countries. On July 27th 1804, the Lewis & Clark expedition arrived in this area. “. . . The vistas were spectacular . . .the broad expanse of the prairie must have seemed limitless to men used to heavily forested hills and valleys” (Reilly, 2003, p. 8). With the discovery of this area and its vast resources, the establishment of trading companies was not far behind.

“A place where you can see the wind coming out of next week.” ~ Reilly

A group of Mormons made their “Winter Quarters” on the northern edge of the town (now known as the Florence area), but after losing many to the harsh winter, and losing a case with the government in a dispute with the Omaha, thousands moved on to the Great Salt Lake with Brigham Young, and the remaining moved across the river to what is now called Council Bluffs (IA). Many adventurous souls followed the Mormon Trail westward, some remaining in the territory and others continuing on. The Kansas-Nebraska Act drew groups of settlers, with land officially available. In 1857, “the Third Territorial Legislature approved the incorporation of the ‘town of Omaha City’” (Reilly, 2003, p. 19).



Development

With Abraham Lincoln's 1863 approval of Omaha as the eastern terminus for the westward direction of a transcontinental railroad, came the creation of the Union Pacific Railroad company; along with it emerged many significant benefits of proximity and ability to move and market goods and services. Some of the communities which belong to our MOEC consortium owe their genesis to the railroad including Valley, where a depot and platted town was established in 1864, with Elkhorn, Waterloo, and Millard being created in subsequent years. Union Pacific remains a strong force in the Omaha Community and has operations in 7,000 communities within 23 states, reporting a net income of \$4.6 billion (Fritz, 2017, p. 7).

Next to winning the Civil War and abolishing slavery, building the first transcontinental railroad, from Omaha, Nebraska to Sacramento, California, was the greatest achievement of the American People in the nineteenth century. ~ Stephen Ambrose

Issues of civil rights import have developed within our environs since the time of exploration and expansion. One such matter was the trial of Standing Bear, a chief of the Ponca, who was imprisoned for bringing the body of his eldest son home to Nebraska for burial after he died following the forced march to Oklahoma. The order to return to Oklahoma was challenged in a trial beginning in April 1879 using the 14th Amendment guaranteeing any person within any state equal protection under the law. The now unimaginable question was, whether or not a so-called Indian could be declared a "person". The verdict stated that "An Indian is a person within the meaning of the law of the United States".

In a series entitled "24th & Glory" *Omaha World Herald* writer Dick Chatelain describes segregation in North Omaha from the sports and civic perspective. In 1919, following a questionable allegation by a white woman toward a black man named Will Brown, an abhorrent series of events involving riots and the hanging and shooting of Will Brown ensued. Only the threat and arrival of 800 troops from Fort Omaha quelled the riots. From 1910 to 1920, Omaha's black population doubled from 4,425 to 10,315 due to available jobs in Omaha. Then, "from the Great Migration and the Great War, [this] ghastly murder and nights of terror, Omaha's half-century of de facto segregation was born" (Chatelain, 2019). A remarkable aspect of the segregation to one area in North Omaha were the "tireless mentors" who nurtured a "fanatical rec sports culture" in North Omaha, resulting in some of the greatest players in the history of sports, including Bob Gibson, Gale Sayers, Bob Boozer, Deacon Jones, and Fred Hare among others (Chatelain, 2019). Preston Love, Jr., the son of the great jazz musician and Nebraska football player, Preston Love, said, "it was something in the dirt" (Chatelain, 2019).

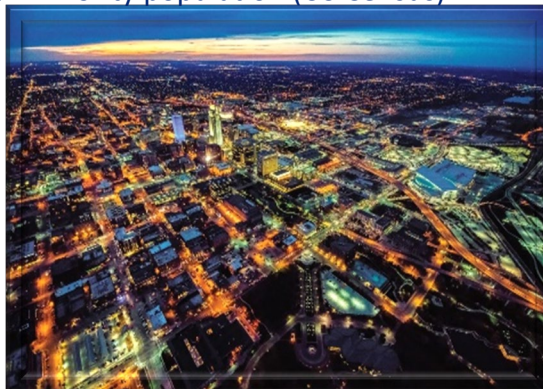
Two decades later, Omaha would participate in the important change engulfing the nation beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education*. Litigation by Nellie Mae Web and six other women regarding racial segregation of schools in the Omaha Public School District was decided finally in 1975 (*United States V. School District of Omaha* 521 F.2d 530 1975). The court found that via faculty assignment, student

transfers, optional attendance zones, school construction and the deterioration of one high school, the situation in the Omaha Public School District met the standard of “natural, probable and foreseeable consequence of creating and maintaining segregation”. During the period of the desegregation order, “. . .white student enrollment in OPS decreased dramatically, placing the majority of the busing burden on African-American students who were encouraged to travel, often long distances, to predominantly white schools. Mandatory busing in Omaha ended in 1999 when the district adopted an open enrollment policy based on income instead of race. In 2014-2015, more than half (53.8%) of the schools in the Learning Community could be described as economically segregated.

Population

Omaha was once considered an immigrant city. In the 1920's, “50% of the population was immigrants or their children. . .” (Larsen, 2007, p. 206) and “Omaha's foreign-born percentage was larger than that of the nation as a whole and much larger than that of other cities in the Missouri River Valley” (Larsen, 2007, p. 206). “By nationality the largest aggregates were Czechoslovakians, Germans, Italians, Swedes, Danes, Poles, Russians (mostly Jewish)”, English and Irish (Larsen, 2007, p. 205). “Of the twenty-four thousand Black residents of Nebraska [at this time], at least seventy-five percent lived in Omaha” (Larsen, 1997). Among the 466,893 citizens who live in the City of Omaha, the most recent census demographics are as follows: White 67.4%, Black or African American 12.3%, American Indian and Alaska Native 0.5%, Asian 3.5%, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander 0.1%, Hispanic or Latino 13.7% (US Census).

The consortium area in Nebraska covers 587 square miles and has rivers marking its east and west boundaries. Nebraska is an agricultural state with 25% of jobs related to that industry. The Omaha area market is somewhat less ag-oriented with its top three industries of health care and social assistance, accommodation and food services, finance and insurance. Omaha has a 3.0% unemployment rate which is less than the national average. The area is comprised of districts in urban and suburban towns, varying in size, demographics, workforce, and industry. In the eastern, urban section of the city of Omaha, one will find the most at risk students with poverty rates as high as 86%. On the western edge of the consortium in a suburban/rural area, the poverty rate is the lowest at 8%. Comparing these same areas, the western sector includes a 7.85% minority population, while the eastern sector includes a 75.44% minority population (US Census).



A Thriving Community



“Using a 2B pencil, Bellows achieved near photographic results in his painstakingly rendered figurative studies and portraits.”

Untitled Color Lithograph: 1992

Kent Bellows

UNO Print Workshop Display

Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center ~ UNO

The arts and recreation community is thriving in the Metro-Omaha area. Families and children can avail themselves of a multitude of fine arts and nature experiences which are important for an whole-child understanding of self and of the world. Joslyn Art Museum (which also houses the Kent Bellows Studio and Mentoring program) holds a collection of 11,000 works from Renoir to Pollack, to installations from Chihuly. Its endowment and members support free access to the museum. Joslyn’s Art-Deco style building is a work of art as well, and was on the list of America’s finest buildings in 1938. El Museo Latino was the first Latino Art & History Museum and Cultural Center in the Midwest, and among 17 such museums in the United States. Love’s Jazz and Arts Center exists to “preserve, present, and promote African American art and Jazz, . . .build[ing] bridges within the greater Omaha community among all its residents through cultural preservation of the Arts”. There are several other major art centers in the metro. In 1921, the Omaha Symphony was formed, and Opera Omaha was founded in 1958. Both the symphony and opera regularly perform free of charge throughout the community. An interesting partnership exists between Opera Omaha and Omaha South High School, which houses an exquisite Fine Arts wing. Opera Omaha uses the stage for its practice, and students are able to obtain free or significantly reduced-cost tickets to the opera as part of the partnership. The area includes fifteen performing choral groups as well.

“Art washes from the soul the dust of everyday life.” ~ Pablo Picasso

The Omaha Community Theatre is the largest community theatre in the nation and “local” actors included Henry Fonda and Marlon Brando and the Community Theatre currently houses the John Beasley Theater and workshop. Other award winning entities include the Blue Barn Theater, the Nebraska Shakespeare Festival, and Film Streams theater.

“The arts should be supported not only because research supports their value but also because they are as dynamic and broad-based as more widely accepted disciplines. They contribute to the development and enhancement of multiple neurobiological systems, including cognition, emotional, immune, circulatory, and perceptual-motor systems. Ultimately, the arts can make us better people.”

~Eric Jensen

The Omaha Public Library (OPL) “acts as an essential catalyst, collaborator and connector of ideas, and is dedicated to strengthening our community by connecting people with ideas, information and innovative services. . .and continues to collaborate and partner with hundreds of community organizations” (OPL, 2019). Housed in twelve branches throughout the city, OPL is open to all citizens and is an essential partner in any endeavor in Literacy.

Our metro area features 240 parks across 11,000 acres and 120 miles of recreational trails, with dozens of playing fields interspersed throughout the area. Fontenelle Forest in Sarpy County was established in 1913 (named after Logan Fontenelle a son of a French man and a Native American woman), and encompasses 2000 acres of forest, wetlands and prairie. Omaha is home to Lauritzen Gardens, a 100-acre public-private partnership with gardens and atrium; and, the number-one zoo in the nation, The Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium. Yearly, Omaha hosts the College World Series, the Berkshire Hathaway shareholders meeting, River City Round-up, Omaha Fashion Week (featuring and encouraging local fashion designers), Jazz on the Green, the Cathedral Flower Festival, and the International Fort Omaha Tribal Pow Wow (on the grounds where Chief Standing Bear was held prisoner).

“Nebraska’s 1% for Art law has been in effect since 1978 and has generated more than \$5 million in artwork for Nebraska’s State buildings, state colleges and the University of Nebraska System” (Dion, 2019). These areas are all open to public access.

The Omaha Community Foundation gathered insights from direct engagement with residents in targeted areas for its “The Landscape” report. For example, with regard to arts and culture, they learned that “many residents value the strength and assortment of our region’s arts, culture, and recreational activities and believe this strongly contributes to the quality of life:

When discussing the “best” parts of our community, residents often cited the variety of entertainment and recreational options available to take part in, highlighting the museums, cultural centers, and

dining opportunities. People shared that these places and opportunities help make Omaha a great city to live in—especially for families. While individuals who participated in the online listening campaign often talked about these arts and cultural activities being both accessible and affordable, there were many other listening participants who spoke about the difficulties accessing recreational activities, or the lack of awareness about what cultural and arts opportunities may be available or affordable to them (OCF, 2017).

Research provides a plethora of utilitarian reasons for learning or viewing any aspect of fine arts. The Brain and Creativity Institute found that “musical experiences in childhood can actually accelerate brain development, particularly in the areas of language acquisition and reading skills” (BHET, 2019). Art “engages children’s senses in open-ended play, and develops cognitive, social, emotional, and sensory-motor skills” (Reyner, 2008). That reasoning is important, and might garner support from otherwise-skeptical readers. However, what is intuitively known, as well as through research, is that the fine arts take one beyond one’s self. They touch one’s emotions and allow one to realize that there is beauty in this world, even if that beauty does not exist in one’s every-day interactions. It gives one hope.

Business and Philanthropy

The Omaha metro area is home to ten Fortune 100 or 1,000 firms. It may be best said about the local business community that there is much “good-doing,” and interest to do more. The achievement gap is of great concern to Omaha businesses, due to its effect on the current and future workforce, as well as the health and well-being of those in the communities in which these companies reside. It is foreseeable that, after completion of the CSAP, there will be companies and foundations willing to fund specific initiatives.

“I don’t want to be recognized. I want to do good.” ~ Robert Daugherty

Several task force members noted it will be essential to partner with business in the messaging about early literacy so that all entities in the Metro-Omaha area have a collective understanding about its importance and are spreading the message. It will be important to have community leaders understand that a dollar spent now in early learning saves seven-dollars in spending later when people are struggling and in need of deep help.

The Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce “Prosper Omaha 2.0” initiative has committed \$16M for Business Growth initiatives (recruitment, investment in job growth), \$7.6M for “People” Initiatives (retain talent, transition existing talent) and \$8.4M for “Place” initiatives (investment in urban core, enhanced transportation, engaging public places) (GOC, 2019).



Business Growth

New jobs, payroll, investment and tech startups.



People

The nation's top talent living, working and thriving right here.



Place

A stronger urban core, modern transit, increased community marketing – and an elevated global standing.

Let's get to work. The Power of Your Prosper Omaha Investment.

Prosper Omaha 2.0

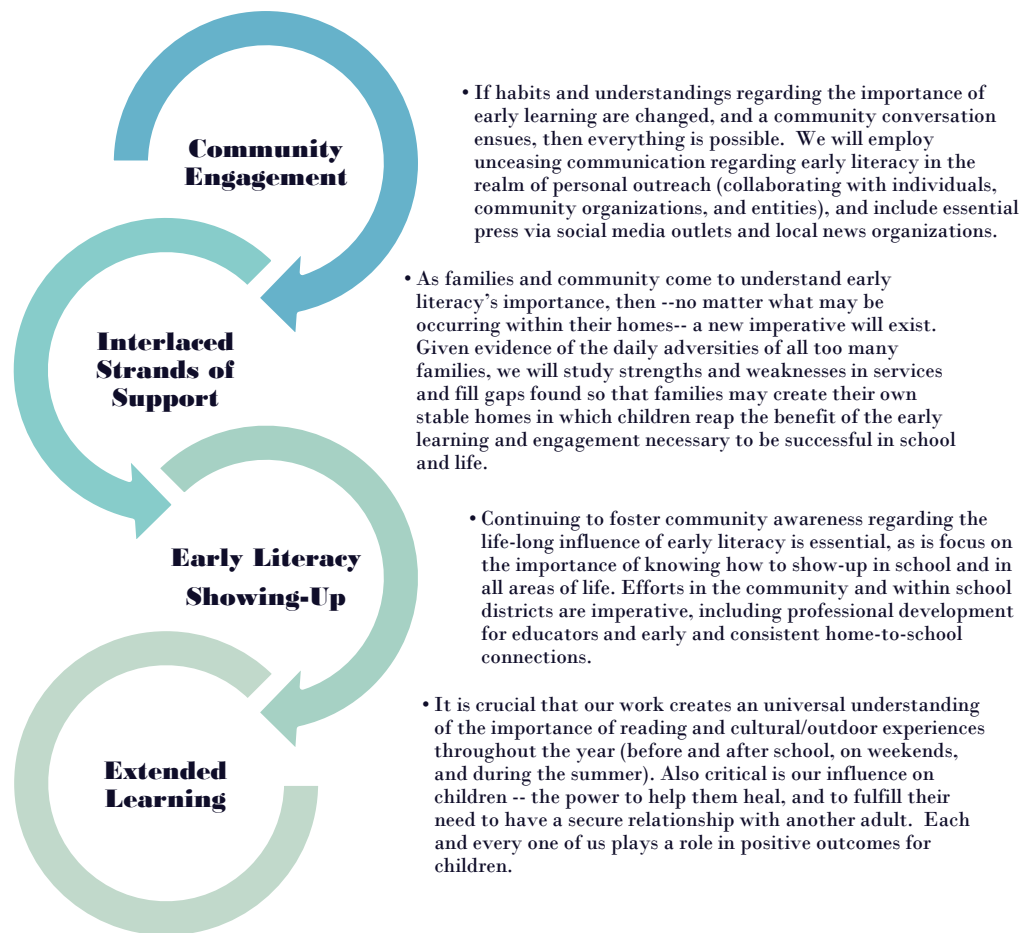
Building on Progress. Accelerating Toward Prosperity
Omaha Chamber of Commerce

https://www.omahachamber.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/PO_Book_FinalPDF-1.pdf

Another community organization, The Omaha Community Foundation (OCF) exists to consolidate efforts to better the community. “Omaha has ranked in the Philanthropy 400 since 2007” (OCF, 2017). With regard to per-capita giving, Omaha ranks in the top three percent. Included among other areas within the Omaha Community Foundation’s “Education Landscape,” is a focus on Kindergarten Readiness, Third Grade Reading, and Attendance. Within the Health Landscape, the foundation includes the issue of Childhood Trauma; and within the Arts & Culture, the foundation notes the many arts events and entities available in Omaha. Within each area, they include data and connections for “adding your voice,” “finding a nonprofit,” and “get[ing] involved” (OCF, 2017).

Our partnerships with these and many other businesses and foundations will be key to expanding the message of early literacy, acquiring funding for specific initiatives, and, most importantly, working collectively to make the “landscape” of Metro-Omaha one which is alive with possibilities for all citizens.

Executive Summary



The Metro-Omaha Community Solutions Action Plan contains a broad base of research including the neurological importance of early literacy, the tragic effect of adverse childhood experiences and trauma, the necessity of a balance between relationships and rigor in the classroom, the requirement of having one's basic needs met, the current status of families in Nebraska and Metro-Omaha, the most recent state assessment scores, and the essential nature of meaningful change occurring from the level of the individual and family outward.

This graphic denotes the essence of our intentions as we engage this plan. Supporting families so that children will be ready to learn when they enter school, creates a trajectory of unlimited success building upon that first, decisive learning experience. With those experiences, positive outcomes are probable, and the goal to end poverty will be met by the successful actions and learning of the children and families themselves.

Graphics included on the following two pages define the outcomes, metrics, measures and strategies which will be employed within the assurances. These are shared measures by the Raise Me to Read initiatives in Council Bluffs, IA and in the Nebraska Metro-Omaha area.



SCHOOL READINESS

DESIRED OUTCOME

Increase number/percentage of children ready for kindergarten as measured by an appropriate evaluation tool.

SUMMATIVE METRIC

Percentage of children ready for kindergarten as measured by NE/IA Department state assessments

FORMATIVE MEASURES

- Increase the number of individuals, neighborhood businesses, and community organizations that are engaged in spreading the message about the importance of early learning and are associated with Raise Me to Read
- Increase number of early childhood educators who receive literacy training and resources from Raise Me to Read or partner/ally organizations
- Increase number of preschool and kindergarten classroom teachers with an endorsement in early childhood education
- Expand the number of books distributed by Raise Me to Read or partner/ally organizations
- Increase number of families actively involved with Raise Me to Read
- Increase number of schools and early childhood centers that are actively involved with Raise Me to Read

STRATEGIES

- Create consensus regarding what ten-twelve skills are needed to be considered ready for kindergarten
- Strengthen/create partnerships with metro libraries, especially in areas of high need
- Support increased family/community engagement with schools especially in areas of high need
- Support/enhance programs fostering best practices for families' literacy acquisition
- Expand outreach to early childhood programs within the counties, especially in areas of high need
- Identify, establish and promote programs, projects and practices that capture/redirect existing time toward reading



SUMMER LEARNING/OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNING

DESIRED OUTCOME

Increase the number/percentage of children who demonstrate evidence of sustained or improved reading proficiency from one year to the next.

SUMMATIVE METRIC

Percentage of students who measure as proficient in reading on state assessments

FORMATIVE MEASURES

- Increase number/percentage of non-literacy-proficient preschool-grade 3 children attending extended learning opportunities
- Increase number of preschool-grade 3 children who attend extended learning/ enrichment opportunities throughout the year
- Increase number of Raise Me to Read partners/allies that use trauma informed information / practices in their work with students or families

STRATEGIES

- Provide access to collaborations and trainings focusing on resiliency, trauma informed care and Adverse Childhood Experiences to educators and program staff
- Increase media initiatives to expand understanding of the importance of summer and extended learning, especially in areas of high need
- Expand number of community organizations and neighborhood businesses spreading the message of the importance of summer and extended learning, especially in areas of high need
- Provide resources to school districts and Raise Me to Read partners to help achieve their summer or out-of-school programs' learning goals
- Expand reading initiatives to vulnerable children and families in crisis or living in transitional centers
- Encourage and support family literacy events by Raise Me to Read partners/allies



SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

DESIRED OUTCOME

Increase number/percentage of preschool – third grade children who are present in school 95% of school days.

SUMMATIVE METRIC

Percentage of students present as reported in official school attendance data supplemented by United Way Attendance Mapping

FORMATIVE MEASURES:

- Increase number of community organizations that are engaged in the message about the importance of school attendance
- Increase partnerships with local health professionals to distribute Attendance Awareness campaign materials
- Increase partnerships with neighborhood businesses pledging to promote positive school attendance
- Decrease number/percent preschool and kindergarten students who are chronically absent from school

STRATEGIES

- Partner with schools to decrease chronic absenteeism
- Encourage school attendance messages with preschool and kindergarten students in order to help set good attendance patterns, especially in areas of high need
- Increase positive messaging around creating a culture of “showing up”, especially in areas of high need
- Develop/Expand common language, benchmarks and interventions to discuss and measure the collective work of tracking and recording school attendance
- Identify and engage community reading champions to promote school attendance, especially in areas of high need



GRADE LEVEL READING

DESIRED OUTCOME

Increase number/percentage of children who are reading proficiently by the end of third grade.

SUMMATIVE METRIC

Percentage of students proficient on state assessment at end of third grade



INTERRUPTING CHILDHOOD & GENERATIONAL POVERTY

DESIRED OUTCOME

Increase number/percentage of children 5 and under who are living above the poverty level.

SUMMATIVE METRIC

Percentage of children and families living in poverty conditions as measured by the U.S. Census, Kids Count and other data sources

RaiseMetoRead.org



Raise Me to Read



@RaiseMetoRead



Foundation and Pillars

“Community engagement is about ensuring that those most impacted by social challenges have a say in designing and implementing solutions. The participation of intended beneficiaries and their families, neighbors, and trusted leaders can be an integral part of data driven processes to achieve better results” (Schmitz, 2017). Our assurance-specific work is grounded by three Pillars. The process of grouping into pillar areas was fostered by community engagement toolkit work considering the following: the overall goals and outcomes of our initiative; the reason community engagement will help advance the results; and, the evolving roles for the community. The foundation is listed first, followed by the pillars. Within each is listed Community Engagement and Impact, and then Goals and Metrics.

OVERLAPPING AND INTERLACED STRANDS OF SUPPORT

Early Literacy

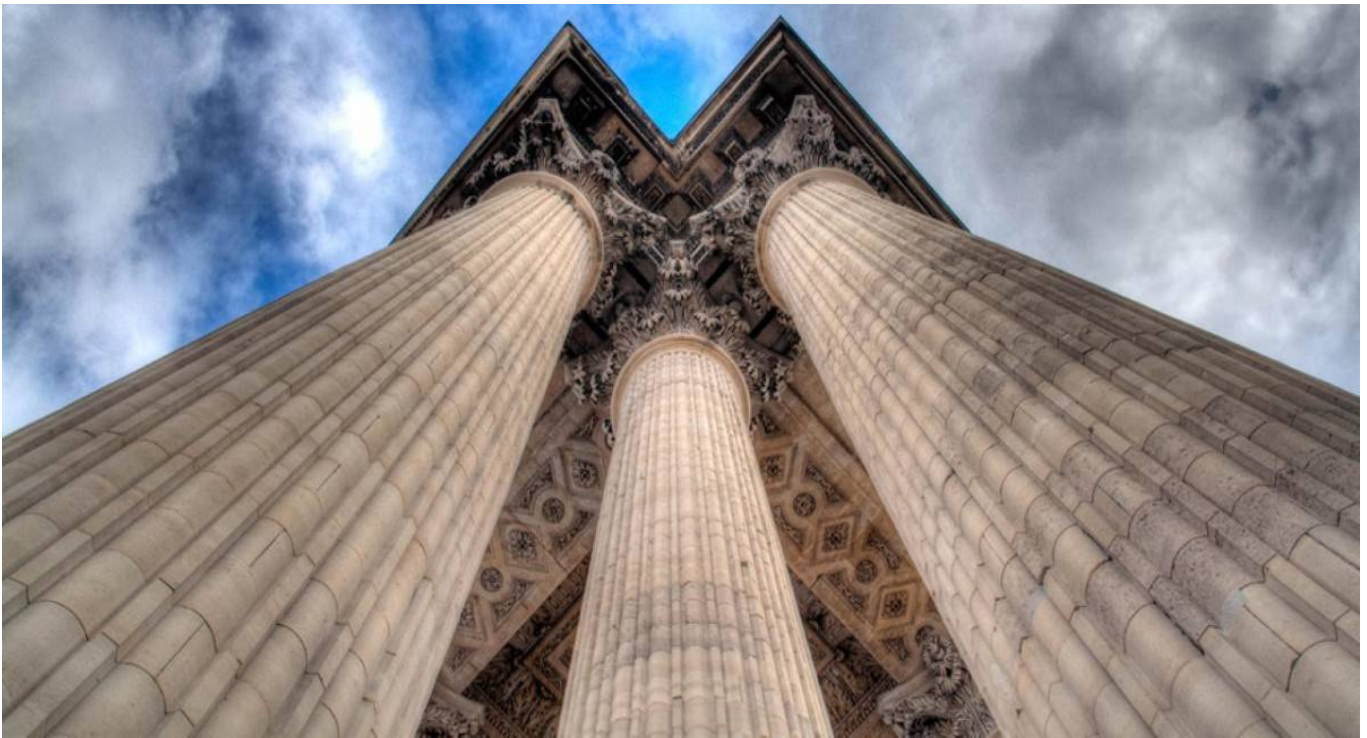
Kindergarten Readiness

Summer/Extended Learning

Trauma and Adverse Experiences

Third Grade Proficiency

A Culture of Showing Up – School Attendance



Foundation: Overlapping and Interlaced Strands of Support

Complete Actor Mapping. Notice the connections between entities and community initiatives, identifying areas for enhancement, and missing links. Additionally, identify and increase the number of families and children connected to services.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: Community-wide shared agreement with regard to areas of enhancement. Personalization of effort to increase the number of families and children receiving needed services.

COMMUNITY IMPACT: *The overall system improves its performance with children and families receiving the help they need which enables them to engage their own assets and abilities.*

Because of the challenge to consider the larger system, the work requires “unprecedented collaboration among different organizations [and] sectors” (Senge et.al, 2015, p. 28). Information has been presented earlier in the Circles of Influence regarding the change-agents involved in our community. As also noted, the task force members believe that understanding the intersectionality of local efforts is essential. There may be redundant services wherein time/resources could be better spent. Additionally, many entities admitted that they do not know what others are doing, which is unhelpful in a systems approach. A reframing is possible – a place where the “field knows” itself (Senge, et al., 2004, p. 109) and entities move together in a manner beyond one’s own, individual acts and positions.

The work will unfold in an heuristic manner, garnering an understanding of individual structures which make-up the entire system, in order to discern what (if any) further actions are required. Through actor mapping, we will endeavor to develop a “collective intelligence” (Senge, et al., 2015 p. 30) of the larger whole. We must develop together a “strong understanding of the interlaced strands of care and support” (Murphy, 2014, p. 67).

The actor map approach will explore “the relationships and connections among actors, as well as their relationships to a given issue, project, or intended outcome.” With this approach, we envision our purpose to be “strengthening weak connections or filling gaps in the system” (FSG, 2019, p. 2). As we prepare for this mapping, our scale will be local, with boundaries to surround the three MOEC consortium Nebraska and Iowa counties of Douglas, Sarpy and Pottawattamie. The focus will be on specific organizations which provide service and support to metro-area families. Upon initiation of

this process, a decision will be made as to the disaggregation of community work. For instance, a sample system frame may include (as does the Circle of Influence) Children and families at the core, with entities populated in care and education, health, parents/family/community, social services and other (FSG, 2019, p.6).

The result of the actor map assessment, in addition to noting strengths and gaps, is that it may provide an understanding of ways in which to increase the number of individuals benefiting from the supports and opportunities that the many actors in this system provide. While every, single child helped may positively change his/her life trajectory, in order to create systemic change, many more children and families need to be reached. Once the goal of improving the overall system performance is achieved, the work can be combined with what parents and communities are learning about early literacy and its effects on future outcomes.

Perhaps if one considers mapping in terms of pastoral care, one can see that it can produce an effective “protective power. . . attacking social problems that place students in peril”. What is possible from there forward in schools and in homes is “supportive learning environments [which] create assets, social and human capital, to draw youngsters into the hard work that is required to be successful in school” (Murphy, 2014, p. 52, 53).

Pillar I

Early Literacy: Kindergarten Readiness; Extended Learning

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: Share knowledge regarding the importance of parent-child interaction (in homes, daycares, and preschools), kindergarten readiness skills, and opportunities for summer activities and learning.

COMMUNITY IMPACT: *Homes & communities become spaces where communication with babies and children is ongoing and engaging, preparing children (no matter whether taught at home or in a more formal situation) to be ready for Kindergarten with a prognosis of long-term effects on success. The culture of learning extends beyond the school day into after-school and family activities. More children will be engaged in reading and immersion activities addressing the whole child.*

Kindergarten Readiness

Goal: Increase number/percentage of children who are ready for kindergarten as measured by an appropriate evaluation tool.

Metrics:

- **Summative**
 - Percentage of children ready for Kindergarten as measured by NEA/IA Department of Education literacy assessments
- **Formative**
 - Increase the number of individuals, neighborhood businesses, and community organizations that are engaged in spreading the message about the importance of early learning and are associated with Raise Me to Read
 - Increase number of early childhood educators who receive literacy training and resources from Raise Me to Read or partner/ally organizations
 - Increase number of Preschool – Grade 3 classroom teachers with an endorsement in early childhood education
 - Expand the number of books distributed by Raise Me to Read or partner/ally organizations

-
- **Increase number of families actively involved with Raise Me to Read**
 - **Increase number of schools and early childhood centers that are actively involved with Raise Me to Read**

It is common understanding that parents are a child's first teachers; however, research has highlighted the importance of that interaction. Neuroscience demonstrates that "nearly 90 percent of brain growth takes place during the first five years of life. During the early years, more than 1 million new neural connections are formed every second. These are the connections that build brain architecture – the foundation upon which all later learning, behavior and health depend" (Buffett, 2019). When children are born, they depend on the important adults in their lives to act as their first teachers and help them develop the right skills. "How the brain grows is strongly affected by the child's experiences with other people and the world. Nurturing care for the mind is critical for brain growth" (CDC, 2019).

The importance of nurturing children is demonstrated in oft-quoted evidence of a 30 million-word gap between the amount of words and language heard by poor children and their wealthier peers, which was presented in 1985 by researchers Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley. This gap, they asserted, would lead to developmental delays and difficulty in literacy. In a 2018 commentary, NPR reporter Anya Kamenetz suggested listeners "stop talking about" this gap. However, she reported that in a "near-replication" of the study, the word gap was around 4 million by the time children turned four. A researcher interviewed indicated she would rather we "talk about it as building a foundation rather than reducing a gap". Whether a gap or an emerging foundation, 4 million words is a considerable deficit (NPR, 2018).

Consider a few of the "8 Things to Remember about Child Development" from the Harvard Center for the Developing Child:

- Even infants and young children are affected adversely when significant stresses threaten their family and caregiving environments.
- Development is a highly interactive process, and life outcomes are not determined solely by genes.
- While attachments to their parents are primary, young children can also benefit significantly from relationships with other responsible caregivers both within and outside the family. (Harvard, 2019)

Social-Emotional learning is important beginning at birth. "Children are born with the need and desire to connect with those around them" (Ed.gov, 2019). "Parents and caregivers play a central role in fostering social and emotional development by responding sensitively and consistently to the needs of their infants. When families and caregivers provide consistent and warm care, read their infant's cues, and engage in meaningful back-and-forth interactions, they show children that they are

loved and secure. This security gives young children the confidence they need to explore the world around them, discover new concepts, and form positive relationships with others” (CDC, 2019).

The Buffet Childhood Institute and the Learning Community have involved more than 15,000 children in the Superintendent’s Early Childhood Plan. In their Five Year Report, they note that 9,000 home visits with more than 100 children birth to age three have taken place, along with 3,000 parent-child group meetings for birth to age five. Additionally, “a dozen elementary schools in six school districts have become hubs, providing home visiting for families with children from birth to age three.”

Findings regarding the schools’ engagement with families indicate that: “home visiting is reaching families with greater needs; families are increasing their access to supports that help reduce stress, higher home visiting dosage is associated with children’s language development; schools are learning to welcome and engage families in meaningful and inclusive ways” (BECI, 2018, p. 26).

The continued work of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute and the Learning Community in the realm of home coaching and engagement, and in establishing positive connections between home and schools is essential in changing the outcome for children and families. With actor mapping, community engagement and messaging, more families may engage in this early learning process, and understand its importance for the future outcomes of their children.

There are mixed results on specific programs of early childhood education. Research of the Head Start program noted that children “made greater gains across the preschool year than nonparticipating children on many of the cognitive measures of language and literacy achievement” but “by the end of kindergarten the control group had caught up, erasing the difference between the two groups” (Lipsey, et al., 2016, p. 5). However, in a consensus statement (Phillips, et al., 2017) on Preschool indicates:

1. Convincing evidence shows that children attending a diverse array of state and school district Preschool programs are more ready for school than those who do not attend Preschool. Improvements in literacy and numeracy are most common. Evidence from a smaller number of studies show more modest improvements for social emotional learning.
2. Studies of different groups of preschoolers often find greater improvements in learning at the end of the Preschool year for economically disadvantaged children and dual language learners.
3. Preschool programs are not equally effective. Effectiveness factors in the most successful programs include:
 - a. Well implemented, evidence-based curriculum
 - b. Coaching for teachers and staff
 - c. Orderly but active classrooms
4. What happens to children after Preschool is also very important. Some elementary schools are better able to support and sustain the Preschool learning into kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, 3rd,

and beyond than others. In some studies, like Tennessee, the kindergarten curriculum actually repeated what happened in Preschool so the children who did not attend Preschool “catch up”.

5. There is still research and evaluation to be done, particularly in examining the impact of programs from Preschool through the elementary years (Phillips, et al., 2017).

Additional research found that “In most states, the programs that support children on their path to academic success from birth to third grade are disconnected. . . The lack of coordination between early care and education programs that serve children from birth to age five and the K-12 education system presents a missed opportunity for states” (Daily, 2014, p. 3).

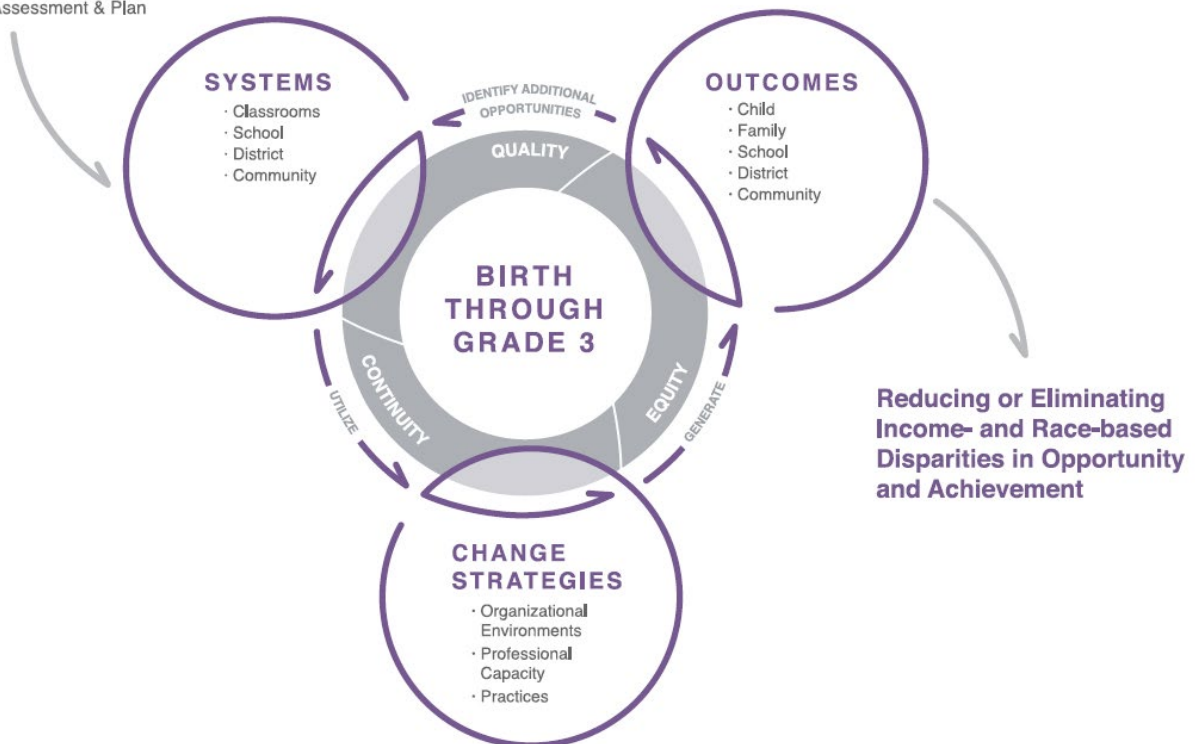
Elliott Regenstein notes: “...Throughout its policy choices and its cultural norms, the K-12 world ends up paying inadequate attention to the years that matter most to the achievement of whatever outcomes it could possibly define: the birth-to-eight years. . . .For too many K-12 leaders, early learning is the ‘other’ – something that they are in favor of even if it’s not really their job to do something about it. And the data are quite clear: the thing that is ‘their job to do’ will never happen properly without a stronger connection between the early years and what comes after them” (Regenstein, 2019, p. 1).

As literacy work at the Buffett Early Childhood Institute and the Learning Community continues, so does MOEC’s efforts. Goal 1 of MOEC states: “Students are prepared for success in Kindergarten and the primary grades.” In a cross-state collaboration, the Early Literacy Working Group is currently working in partnership with Dr. Deborah Reed and the Iowa Reading Research Center by adopting modules for “maximizing the benefit of literacy instruction and implementing strategies that address specific literacy skills or topics” (IRRC 2019). At the present time, 11 school districts will be involved with 151 district representatives (131 from Metro-Omaha) becoming certified in a training-of-trainers model for delivery of professional development and implementation of these instructional methods. A total of 1,306 teachers will be trained, in addition to the 131 trainees, with a total of 1,437 modules being used in the consortium schools. “Rather than a prescription for how to teach, modules provide evidence-based suggestions for maximizing the benefit of literacy instruction and implementing strategies that address specific literacy skills or topics” (IRRC 2019).

The Learning Community’s School as Hub concept is an approach to “help schools, educators and communities strengthen their roles in reducing educational disparities by enhancing opportunity and achievement” (BECI, 2018, p. 12). Further, “an essential feature of the School as Hub approach is the connected continuum of change strategies that combines educational experiences for children with opportunities for family engagement and parenting supports” (BECI, 2018, p. 13).

Inputs

Engagement & Readiness
Landscape Assessment & Plan



School as Hub for Birth Through Grade 3: Theory of Change

Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan Evaluation: 2017-2018
Third Year Report
Buffett Early Childhood Institute

According to the theory of change for the School as Hub for Birth – Grade 3, quality, continuity, and equity for children are the lens through which practices and policies are shaped and evaluated at all levels of educational systems, including classrooms, elementary schools, districts, and communities. Only by addressing all levels of the system can this approach be effective in reducing or eliminating income- and race based disparities in opportunity and achievement (BECI, 2017 p. 12).

When such supports like the School as Hub are in place, they help to mitigate risks. In “What’s Behind Being Behind” researchers demonstrated that: “. . .This set of specific early risks (low maternal education, inadequate prenatal care, low birthweight/pre-mature birth, lead exposure, and child maltreatment) were negatively related to first grade reading scores, and that risk-based gaps persisted through third grade without closing or widening. These risk-based gaps existed and persisted despite controlling for the other risks in the set and the three demographic variables that typically dominate the achievement gap literature: race/ethnicity, gender, and family income.

Students who start behind appear to stay behind, despite substantial expenditures and efforts to close achievement gaps, for example, the federal expenditure of more than \$15 billion per year on Title I alone” according to the U.S. Department of Education (Fantuzzo, 2018, p. 331).

At the same time, data indicates that children who do not receive a high quality early childhood education are:

25% more likely to drop out of school

40% more likely to become a teen parent

50% more likely to be placed in special education

60% more likely to never attend college

70% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime

(BECI, 2018)

The birth to five narrative reaches public policy implications as well, as Professor James J. Heckman proposed in “The Heckman Equation”. He asserts that “The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth to age five.” He states further that “early childhood development drives success in school and life. . . [fostering] cognitive skills along with attentiveness, motivation, self-control and sociability – the character skills that turn knowledge into know-how and people into productive citizens. . . .Without resources such as “parent coaching” and early childhood education programs, many at-risk children miss the developmental growth that is the foundation for success. They will suffer for the rest of their lives—and all of us will pay the price in higher social costs and declining economic fortunes” (Heckman, 2007).

It appears that research and practice needs to be focused on the “high quality” aspect of early care and education. An aspect of that care is teacher/worker expertise. As the findings from the Gallup/Buffett Early Childhood Institute survey indicated, “Targeted efforts are needed to enhance awareness of the professional expertise of high-quality early care and education workforce that is prepared to work with children across the entire spectrum of early childhood,” and further that “more is needed to ensure that those who care for and teach our youngest children are supported, compensated, and provided with the resources to meet children’s learning and developmental needs” (Gallup, 2016, p.7).

According to the report “The Youngest Nebraskans,” work in the State of Nebraska within the Sixpence Programs (established in 2006 as an innovative partnership of state agencies and private philanthropy) and Educare (a network of high-quality schools serving children birth to age 5 who come from low-income households and face risk factors associated with failures in schools) are finding success. In the Sixpence program, 90% of children with significant risk factors were gaining skills at the expected growth rate across major developmental domains. “Children showed particularly strong gains in social-emotional competencies such as initiative, attachment and self-

regulation, all of which are known to influence a child’s ability to function productively in more formal classroom settings” (Child Trends, 2015, p. 49).

Similarly, children involved in a longitudinal study of Educare had “significant early gains in skill and knowledge areas” and these gains “persisted well into the K-12 system” (Child Trends, 2015, p. 50) “Researchers at the Munroe Meyer Institute found that those who attended Educare of Omaha for two or more years scored significantly higher than children from similar backgrounds as measured by Omaha Public Schools in district wide Nebraska state assessments. . .” (p. 50). The Youngest Nebraskans also notes that gains via home visits included “improved readiness and achievement” following the modeling of “techniques for healthy, language-rich parent-child interactions, educating parents about their children’s developmental stages, and connecting families with a network of medical, dental, mental health and other resources in the community” (p.52).

Currently, there are 337 Step up to Quality child care programs in Nebraska, with 104 located in the Metro Omaha area. This is an early childhood rating and improvement system passed by the Legislature in 2013. “The primary goal of Nebraska Step Up to Quality is to improve early care and education quality and increase positive outcomes for young children” (VFCN, 2019, p. 9). In Douglas County, 7,321 3-4 year olds were enrolled in school; in Sarpy County, 2,354 3-4 year olds were enrolled in school (VFCN, 2019, p. 115).

The Learning Community’s Superintendents’ Early Childhood Education Plan (ECP) was mandated by the Nebraska Legislature (LB 585), funded through the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, developed by the superintendents and district representatives in conjunction with the Buffett Early Childhood Institute, and endorsed unanimously by all 11 Superintendents. The Buffett Institute continues to provide leadership for the implementation of the plan” (BECI 2014). The Superintendents’ ECP Evaluation indicates that in 2017-18, there were 29 preschool classrooms in six consortium school districts, including the Bellevue, DC West, Millard, Omaha, Ralston and Westside school districts.

District	School	PreK Classrooms	K-3 Classrooms	PreK Children Sampled	K Children Sampled
Bellevue	Bellaire	1	8	4	8
DC West	DC West	2	14	8	15
Millard	Cody	4	8	11	8
	Sandoz	3	12	10	11
Omaha	Gomez Heritage	3	35	9	22
	Liberty	4	23	15	19
	Mount View	3	9	8	5
	Pinewood	2	7	8	9
Ralston	Karen Western	1	7	1	7
	Meadows	1	8	4	8

	Mockingbird	2	12	6	11
Westside	Westbrook	3	12	4	11
Totals		29	155	88	134

Preschool and Kindergarten – Third Grade Evaluation Enrollment by District in 2017-18

Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan Evaluation: 2017-18 Third Year Report
Buffett Early Childhood Institute

The Superintendents' ECP Evaluation notes improvement in quality of practices and interactions in its fully implemented schools. One conclusion is that instructional support “remains the greatest programmatic need” in Preschool - 3 classrooms (BECI, 2018, p. 24). The Superintendents' ECP also includes customized assistance to districts with the goal of professional development as providing ongoing opportunities for participants to increase their shared knowledge of research-based practices that increase quality, continuity, and equity in birth through Grade 3 education and family engagement” (BECI, 2018, p. 65).

As work continues toward increased certification of care centers, and of early childhood teachers, quality programing, and continued professional development, another idea is the development of a Kindergarten Readiness tool in order to track our efforts. This aspect is in various stages of discussion among partner organizations. It will be important to develop a long-term process involving partners and stakeholders regarding how such information will be used. Currently, 39 states have, or are in the process of adopting a Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA). It is important to measure whether collective efforts are making a difference for children entering Kindergarten and shared assessment would likely provide the most accurate information.

Another strategy to consider may be a survey of Kindergarten teachers in MOEC's consortium, involving them in the identification of ten-to-twelve skills needed to be considered Kindergarten-ready. Buy-in from Kindergarten teachers and unified language among the districts could contribute to unified community focus.

Summer/Extended Learning

Goal: Increase the number/percentage of children who demonstrate evidence of sustained or improved reading proficiency from one year to the next.

Metrics:

- **Summative**
 - **Percentage of students who measure as proficient in Reading on state assessments**
- **Formative:**
 - **Increase number/percentage of non-literacy proficient Preschool – Grade 3 children attending extended learning opportunities**
 - **Increase number of Preschool – Grade 3 children who attend extended learning opportunities throughout the year**
 - **Increase number of Raise Me to Read partners/allies that use trauma informed information/practices in their work with students or families.**
 - **Encourage and support family literacy events by Raise Me to Read Partners/Allies**

According to Beyond School Bells, Nebraska has been named a “Top 10 State for Afterschool” but “more work remains”. Nebraska ranks 44th in the number of youth eligible for free and reduced lunch participating in afterschool programs. In Nebraska the demand for summer learning programs is high and support among parents is strong.

- 42% of families in Nebraska say they wanted their children to be enrolled in a summer learning program.
- 58% of parents in Nebraska agree that it is important for their children to have summer activities that help them maintain academic skills and learn new things (BSB, 2014).

Implementation strategies among MOEC consortium members include but are not limited to: a three-week instructional program at DC West for K-11 students who scored in the bottom quartile on MAP scores, Completely Kids before school program at Field Club Elementary in Omaha Public Schools, Jump Start to Reading for students at risk with three weeks of intense reading intervention. Millard provided summer programming at one site for students from ten elementary buildings for three weeks including academic instruction and family involvement days. Collective for Youth (CFY) operates out of school time programs for thousands of youth in Omaha. Collective for Youth works with coordinating agencies in 33 Omaha Public School buildings, including 24 elementary schools.

Noted in Nebraska Children and Families Foundation research is a 6,000-hour learning gap accumulated by Grade 6 between middle class students and those from working class families. These “hours” included: time reading with parents, preschool education, enriching afterschool activities, summer experiences like camp, and visits to the zoo or museum during the summer (NCFF, 2015). It is significant that the main “hours” are relational and experiential. The foundation also asks in its report “The Big Book of ELO’s (Essential Learning Outcomes) in Nebraska”: *“What if the biggest opportunity for improvement in education happens outside of the school day?”* They suggest that it is more effective and enriching to improve educational outcomes outside the school day (NCFF, 2015, p. 2) because afterschool and summer learning is “more hands-on, with more room for student-directed exploration, in-depth digging, skill practice and social emotional growth. It’s not just an extension of school that matters. It’s an expansion of learning time, learning type and quality” (NCFF, 2015, p. 3).

The Wallace Foundation’s “Learning from Summer” study notes that in summer school programs “high-attending students” reap multiple benefits from programs and suggest that schools offer “at least five weeks of programming – and preferably six or more – with at least three hours of academics per day. Though Nebraska families note they favor summer school opportunities, national research suggests that some families believe “summer programs should be and are more relaxed than the school year, allowing for dropping in and out of summer session” (Augustine, et al., 2016, p.109). The key aspect is consistency with continuous experiences and learning.

Sociologist Annette Lareau offers possible insight as to reasoning for differing family/parent-perceptions regarding the importance of summer/extended learning. She suggests a “cultural logic” of child rearing in which families having more social and economic advantages, employed “concerted cultivation . . . (conscious attention to growth, resulting in middle-class children being exposed to more non-routine or novel social environments). . .” while families with fewer economic and social resources operate under the “accomplishment of natural growth. . . (an organic process of development not sullied by parental intervention. . . without activities organized by adults)” (Alexander, et al., 2016, p. 117). Families which focus on natural growth, then, may see extended/summer learning opportunities as something extra, but not necessary.

Additionally, with the advent of summer, comes the “turning off of the faucet” of some family supports, and working class families may lack the means to take advantage of activities such as camp or other experiences. Research suggests, however, that building social capital via organizations “serving as brokers which connect individuals to other individuals...thereby connecting them to the resources” is a means of involving working class children to a host of summer activities (Alexander, et al., 2016, p. 125). Generally, “it seems likely that the best policy strategy is capacity-building: helping families and communities to enhance their capacity to thrive . . .” (p. 128).

Trauma/Adverse Experiences

There are many aspects of poverty: lack of access to experiential and hands-on learning, insufficient income, a dearth of relationships and engagement with meaningful adults, or a poverty of the spirit which arises out of adverse experiences not always dependent on income. The focus of any intervention for children needs to be “not on ‘this child’ or ‘that child’, but rather on all children” (Yu, 2019). When considering all children, and the reasons that they may experience deficits in relationships and opportunities for summer/extended learning, gaining an understanding of family, and generational trauma and other health issues is essential.

According to the Live Well (Omaha) Community Health Needs report and survey, community respondents voiced their priorities for community’s health needs as:

- Mental Health
- Nutrition, Diabetes and Physical Activity
- Access to Health Care Services
- Substance Abuse
- Injury and Violence (PRC, 2018)

Live Well and its partners will prioritize response to these community needs. Also noted in this needs assessment is information regarding percent of children in low-income households, with the combined Metro Area housing 79,108 children 0-17 living below 200% of the poverty level (PRC, 2018, p. 53). 13.9% perceive their neighborhood as slightly/not at All Safe (p. 30), and 10% report that a typical day is extremely/very stressful (p. 31). Food insecurity (limited access to adequate, nutritious food to support a healthy lifestyle due to a lack of money or other resources) is an issue as well with 18.2% of children in Douglas County and 15.3% of Sarpy County children food-insecure. (Lester, 2019) Food Desserts and Food Swamps add to this issue. The most important aspect of food insecurity is that it is an “additive” aspect (Lester, 2019).

With insecurity, safety and other issues present, a toxic cocktail of stress is created. Research demonstrates that toxic stress (long-term changes to brains and bodies) “is about basic human biology and that adversity happens everywhere, among all races and geographic areas” (Burke-Harris, 2018, p. 158). Stress caused by adversities knows no zip-code, though there may be ways in which some communities have learned to hide the circumstances or effects. Because of this, an important strategy of the summer/extended learning outcome is to provide access to collaborations and trainings focusing on resiliency, trauma informed care and Adverse Childhood Experiences to educators, program staff, and community members.

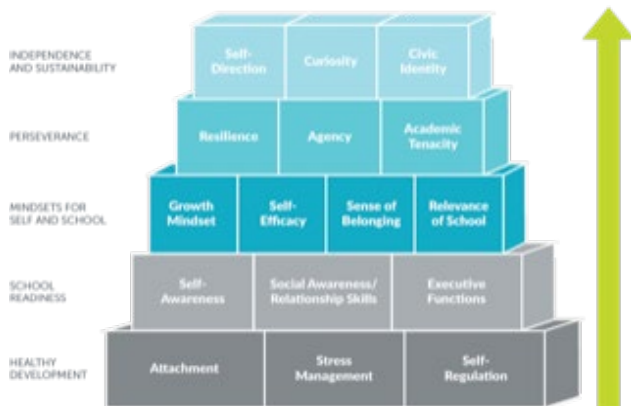
Our brains can be significantly changed by trauma resulting from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's). "Toxic stress response can occur when a child experiences strong, frequent, or prolonged adversity, such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance-abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship, in the absence of adequate adult support. This kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems and increase the risk of stress related disease and cognitive impairment well into the adult years" (Allison, 2019, p. 2). Critical neural connections are created long before a child has entered school, and "when students face adversity and stress in their home environment and/or fail to access quality early childhood education, the development of cognitive and social-emotional skills and mindsets is at risk" (Stafford-Brizard, 2016, p. 4). If building cognitive and social-emotional skills is integrated in neither the home nor the classroom, students are "left without tools for engagement or a language for learning" (Stafford-Brizard, 2016, p. 4). The most significant obstacles to academic success are stress "and the absence of a secure relationship with a caregiver that would allow a child to manage that stress" (Tough, 2012, p. 195). However, it is also known that "we, as humans, have a profound power to heal ourselves and one another" (Burke-Harris, 2018, p. 168).

The impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences is evident in children with:

- Increased difficulties as adversities accumulate
- Reduced size of the brain cortex, causing difficulty in memory, language, thinking and regulation
- Reduced ability to anticipate or avoid danger
- Increased incidence of self- or caregiver- blame
- Increased incidence of diagnosable disorders in 2 to 5 year olds (Long, 2016, p. 11)
- Increased incidence of adoption of health-risk behaviors
- Increased incidence of disease, disability, and social problems
- Increased incidence of early death (Tibbits, 2017, p. 5)

Adversity science tells us that strengths which children need for future success "are not simply a choice. They are rooted in brain chemistry, and they are molded, in measurable and predictable ways by the environment in which children grow up. That means that the rest of us – society as a whole – can do an enormous amount to influence [character] development in children" (Tough, 2012, p. 196). Turnaround USA refers to skills such as these as Building Blocks for learning:

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR LEARNING



The Building Blocks for Learning Framework

Building Blocks for Learning
A Framework for Comprehensive Student Development
Turnaround For Children

The Building Blocks for Learning “is a framework for comprehensive student development, grounded in science, in service of equity” (Cantor, 2016, p. 3). Research indicates that “successful engagement in the classroom and in life relies on a set of cognitive and social-emotional skills and mindsets, which are not represented in academic standards. For this reason, both the Council Bluffs and Metro-Omaha campaign plans include a strategy of collaboration and education regarding trauma-informed practices and ACE’s.

An additional tool may include facilitating community showings of documentary films such as *Resilience: The Biology of Stress and the Science of Hope*; *Paper Tigers: One School’s Unlikely Success Story*; and the most recent documentary, *Broken Places*, so that the entire community begins to understand the complex issues which get in the way of learning and thriving. “It is critical to act now, to incorporate, and leverage [a] well-established informal learning system as an essential component of our nation’s early learning needs” (IMLS, 2013).

So often in homes filled with toxic stress, the overriding issue is poverty. “The enduring problem of poverty in social life, writes Zeus Leonardo, “affects just about every facet of educational life. Poverty in education forms one of the central dilemmas in both education research and reform” (Tierney, 2015, page 77). When variance of achievement is considered, school effects on test scores “account for about 20% of the variation” and “out-of-school variables play a much more significant role. These social indicators of poverty intervene in a manner that makes change from the school seem difficult” (Tierney, 2015, page 7). William Tierney concludes, “thus, the argument has been made on several fronts that insofar as education is the ‘great equalizer,’ if one wants greater human capital development and greater civic engagement among the poor a primary path is through the schoolhouse door” (Tierney, 2015, page 5).

Once through that schoolhouse door, however, there is considerable research concluding that only via specific, intentional initiatives, will human capital be developed, therefore creating a pathway toward an end to poverty. Researchers believe that a gap in achievement due to poverty and adverse

experience can be “substantially reduced by some changes and innovations in a school’s environment” (Tierney, 2015, page 44). Innovations include (among others) a focus on:

- Reading.
 - Learning with targeted interventions.
 - Fostering an healthy, safe, and supportive learning environment.
 - Building leadership capacity.
 - Creating a culture of high expectations.
 - Fostering positive relationships.
 - Elimination of practices that perpetuate underachievement.
 - Prioritization of strategies based on needs.
 - Combating hopelessness.
- (Parrett and Budge, 2011)

The most pervasive assumption and critique in the twenty-first century is that schools matter. ~ William G. Tierney

St. John and Bowman note, that there is a “role of education in reducing poverty and inequality in the twenty-first century” (Tierney, 2015, p. 259) and suggest focus on themes including a) there is no simple solution to inequality, b) market and accountability strategies for education do not accelerate success, c) cultural shifts need to be taken into consideration when shifting educational models, d) discrimination has undermined attempts to implement higher standards in working class neighborhoods, e) an increased and uplifted cultural capital must be developed in communities, f) assessment of the students’ diverse strengths provides information that can be used in both holistic admissions and cradle to career pipeline interventions (Tierney, 2015, p. 261).

While ending poverty is a laudable goal, there is much to accomplish before that occurs. In her poem, Final Notions, social justice and intellectual icon Adrienne Rich writes:

. . .It will take all your thought
It will take all your heart, it will take all your breath . . .

It will not be simple, it will become your will
(Rich, 2016)

It is the will of this plan that an end to poverty is expedited.

PILLAR II

3rd Grade Proficiency

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: Foster the understanding of the importance learning to read by 3rd grade, and the importance of extended learning opportunities as it these serve to establish a positive trajectory for future learning and school success.

COMMUNITY IMPACT: *Children are able to matriculate through school on grade-level, and engage in activities which broaden their perspective and encourage introspection. This will lead to their individual success, to pride and hope within their family, and to thriving communities where individuals experience positive outcomes and are able to fully reach their potential.*

Goal: Increase number/percentage of children who are reading proficiently by the end of third grade.

Metrics:

- **Summative**
 - **Percentage of students proficient on state assessment at the end of third grade.**

State testing is a mere snapshot of a moment in time in a student's learning. Also true is that much of what occurs in a student's life does so beyond the school day. However, proficiency and gaps are metrics that do matter, providing information about successes or challenges and that may indicate potential responses. As with all other aspects of the plan, we need to consider the family/community as well as the instructional aspect of instruction and test scores as noted in the previous Pillar.

Research continues to support the essential nature of proficiency in reading by third grade and to relate absence of proficiency to negative outcomes. "Third grade is an important pivot point in a child's education, the time when students shift from learning to read and begin reading to learn" (Double Jeopardy p.5). Findings from the research Brief *Double Jeopardy Overview: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation* include:

- About 16 percent of children who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade do not graduate from school on time, a rate four times greater than that for proficient readers.
- For children who were poor for at least a year and were not reading proficiently, the proportion failing to graduate rose to 26 percent.

- Overall, 22 percent of children who live in poverty do not graduate from high school compared to 6 percent who have never been poor. The figure rises to 32 percent for students spending more than half of their childhood in poverty (Hernandez, 2012, p. 4, 5).

An early researcher referred to this concept in which “individuals who have advantageous early educational experiences are able to utilize new educational experiences more efficiently” as the *Matthew Effect*. –A play on words of the Bible Verse from the Gospel of Matthew: “For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance; but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath’. In other words, the academically rich get richer and the poor get poorer as small differences in learning grow into large ones” (Murphy-Paul, 2012).

Recent scores from the State of Nebraska show room for growth, and evidence of disparities. The Nebraska Student-Centered Assessment System found that 53% of Nebraska 3rd Grade students are proficient. The proficiency in our Nebraska MOEC schools is 58.8%. Further consortium student delineations and gaps are as follows: FRL: 42.8% proficient; White 57.5% proficient; and, with four of the eleven districts masked, Hispanic 45.6% proficient; Black 38.8% proficient; and ELL 44.8% proficient.

Third Grade Reading Proficiency scores from the 2018 Nebraska English Language Arts Assessment provide MOEC’s baseline data as follows:

District	Overall Proficient	FRL	White	Hispanic	Black	ELL
Bellevue	48%	36%	51%	32%	37%	40%
Bennington	75%	61%	75%	**	**	**
DC West	42%	19%	39%	**	**	**
Elkhorn	85%	66%	86%	63%	60%	54%
Gretna	58%	44%	58%	**	**	**
Omaha Public Schools	34%	28%	54%	27%	22%	25%
Millard	64%	41%	66%	49%	22%	53%
Ralston	45%	36%	50%	41%	19%	34%
Papillion LaVista	60%	42%	63%	35%	57%	48%
Springfield-Platteview	77%	54%	78%	**	**	**
Westside	59%	44%	62%	72%	41%	60%
**Masked data; not enough students						

It will be important to continue to review data and regularly discuss results with consortium members and stakeholders. The consistent review of data along with the concentration on early academics, relationship building, and constant messaging about the importance of early learning will support the already existing work of MOEC, the Learning Community, and Buffet Early Childhood Institute. This review will better ensure our goals of improved achievement are reached.

PILLAR III

A Culture of Showing-Up – School Attendance

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: Build a supportive and responsive school-community-entity culture where students and families thrive, and showing-up is encouraged and expected.

COMMUNITY IMPACT: *Parents and community understand the importance of being in school. Parents are empowered to expect a responsive and welcoming school culture. At home and in the community an on-going and out-loud conversation about attendance is included in everyday conversation. The community rallies around the implications of showing-up at school, and in all aspects of life.*

Goal: Increase number/percentage of Preschool – Grade 3 children who are present in school 95% of school days.

Metrics:

- **Summative**
 - Percentage of students present as reported in official school attendance data supplemented by United Way Attendance Mapping
- **Formative**
 - Increase number of community organizations that are engaged in the message about the importance of school attendance
 - Increase partnerships with local health professionals to distribute Attendance Awareness campaign materials
 - Increase partnerships with neighborhood businesses pledging to promote positive school attendance
 - Decrease number/percent of Preschool and Kindergarten students who are chronically absent from school

The Consortium schools have as their main attendance initiative a focus on chronic absences, defined as missing 10% or more school days. “Chronic early absence matters because it adversely affects academic successes” (NCCP, 2008). Additionally, chronic absenteeism can be a “better predictor of school failure than test scores. Chronic absenteeism as early as sixth grade is predictive of dropping out of school” (Allison and Elliott, 2019, p. 2).

The image below displays a model for coordinated response to such absences by schools and community agencies, especially United Way of the Midlands and the School Based Attendance Coalition.



The United Way of the Midlands continues to be the backbone in the area of attendance with its Community Attendance Mapping, support and leadership of SBAC, and work with the Greater Omaha Attendance and Learning Services (GOALS) team. SBAC includes professionals from schools and support entities across the metro area. They note that the SBAC “has taken initial steps to strengthen program and school efforts by hosting a coordinated awareness campaign and community conference. These activities leverage existing collaborative networks and seek to build momentum for a broader community-wide response to address attendance” (UWM, 2016, p. 31). UMW believes that the Campaign for Grade Level Reading will “connect the work of SBAC ...to the broader interest of academic supports” (UWM, 2016, p. 31).

Their signature mapping notes the barriers, negative school experiences, lack of engagement and misconceptions regarding attendance. Local contributing factors include transportation, rent or utility assistance, mental health, and parent engagement.

Barriers	Negative School Experiences	Lack of Engagement	Misconceptions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illness, both chronic and acute • Lack of health, mental health, vision, or dental care • Trauma • Unsafe path to/from school • Poor Transportation • Frequent moves or school changes • Involvement with child welfare or juvenile justice systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggling academically or socially • Bullying • Suspensions and expulsions • Negative attitudes of parents due to their own school experience • Undiagnosed disability • Lack of appropriate accommodations for disability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of culturally relevant, engaging instruction • No meaningful relationships with adults in school • Stronger ties with peers out of school than in school • Unwelcoming school climate • Failure to earn credits/ no future plans • Many teacher absences or long-term substitutes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absences are only a problem if they are unexcused • Missing 2 days per month doesn't affect learning • Sporadic absences aren't a problem • Attendance only matters in the older grades

Contributing Factors to Chronic Absenteeism

Community Attendance Mapping Project
United Way of the Midlands
Charles Peterson

With regard to policies, local schools indicated that they had a “district-wide policy, practices, and procedures written in a district manual or student handbook. . . .More than 2/3 (83%) of respondents indicated each school had a team in place to review attendance and best-practice among professionals focused on attendance” (UWM, 2018, p. 18).

Twenty-three agencies at work in the metro area have been identified as having “direct impact on attendance” (UWM, 2018, p. 24). “The majority of these agencies are direct service providers . . . with coverage distributed among primary, middle and high school students”. These agencies noted that support for basic needs and transportation were major issues for families. United Way researchers also note:

- A broad spectrum of resources exists to mitigate the barriers that prevent youth from attending school every day,
- Variability within and among districts with regard to coding absence reasons influences our collective ability to diagnose absences and identify appropriate interventions. Additional attention to the systems used to document absences would improve the data used in decision-making.

-
- Timing of interventions is key
 - Involvement of teachers/community partners in interventions is important
 - Chronic absence is increasing across all school-aged students, districts.
(UWM 2016, 2018)

Public school absences in the 2016/17 school year were as follows in Nebraska, and the NDE notes that according to a recent report, Nebraska ranks second only to North Dakota for best attendance rates. “Only 10 Percent of Nebraska school reported high or extreme levels of chronic absence. The national median is 24 percent” (NDE News Release).

63,8146 (20%) of students were absent 10-19 days
14,415 (4.5%) of students were absent 20-29 days
11,519 (3.6%) of students were absent 30+ days
(AECF, 2018, p.55)

Viewed through a different lens, “approximately 18,500 students in Douglas, Sarpy, and Pottawattamie County public schools missed more than 10% of days of attendance in the 2016-2017 school year,” with “many factors [contributing] to student absenteeism including family health, financial concerns, poor school climate, drug and alcohol use, transportation problems and differing attitudes toward education” (UWM, 2018, “Why”).

The United Way of the Midlands notes that “chronic absence is increasing across all school-aged students [and] districts” so the strategy of positive messaging regarding a culture of showing-up is equally important. Also essential will be connecting with all children and families when they first enter Preschool and Kindergarten by sharing the importance of attendance to their child’s future outcomes. “Schools that build strong partnerships with families and the community have shown improved student attendance” (Allison and Elliott, 2019, p. 5).

Children need a strong foundation for learning, and it is vital that parents understand that in the early years, “children are gaining basic social and academic skills critical to ongoing academic success. Unless students attain these essential skills by third grade, they often require extra help to catch up and are at grave risk of eventually dropping out of school” (Chang and Romero, 2008, p. 3). Our plan will involve collective action and active messaging in the community, support of the efforts of the United Way of the Midlands, and partnering with consortium schools.

Timeline

Foundation

Actor Mapping

One Year Goal

- *Complete Actor Mapping in May 2020*
- *Engage with Community Members to Consider the Results*

Pillar I Early Literacy

Kindergarten Readiness

5 Year Goal

- *Increase the number/percentage of children who are ready for Kindergarten as measured by NE/IA Department of Education literacy assessments.*

Summer/Extended Learning

5 Year Goal

- *Increase the number/percentage of children who demonstrate evidence of sustained or improved reading proficiency from one year to the next.*
- *Increase the number of Raise Me to Read partners/allies that use trauma informed information/practices in their work with students or families.*

Pillar II Third Grade Proficiency

5 Year Goal

- *Increase number/percentage of children who are reading proficiently by the end of third grade.*

Pillar III Culture of Showing Up – School Attendance

5 Year Goal

- *Increase number/percentage of Preschool – Grade 3 children who are present in school 95% of school days.*

Prologue

Scenario Planning and Lift

There is a theory in scenario planning called “the Flamingo” in which the flock takes-off very slowly, but takes-off together. Using instead the image of a Nebraska Sandhill Crane for scenario planning, our goal will be to use collective wing-span to gain lift. Once in flight, we know that birds will take advantage of the thermals (columns of rising air) together, to conserve energy for the long journey. Similarly, one might consider thermals to be the synergistic aspect of this initiative where we achieve more – and may go farther – by working together. With a systems approach, there is a time to remain aloft in observation and reflection; there is also a time for action. Therefore, this plan includes systems review, but also includes foraging of our prairie and urban landscape for gaps, for new ideas, for better ways of being.

Both Raise Me to Read campaigns are gaining lift with review and revision of Council Bluffs CSAP, and Metro-Omaha’s first submission to the Campaign for Grade Level Reading. While the unfolding of the plans will take time, the current energy and thought will be channeled into carefully honed efforts in research, relationship-building, and in carrying the message about the importance of early learning until it is sustained on its own within the culture of Metro-Omaha.

This initiative may not hold the power to eliminate poverty, but through responsive and welcoming schoolhouse doors and via community engagement, our collective action will impact conditions and conversations while modifying supports, so that generations are elevated in educational understanding and achievement, as well as positive health outcomes. Finally, then, (when their trajectory is changed) the next generation will erase poverty of its own volition.



Dance of the Cranes ~ John Raimondi ~ Eppley Airfield Omaha

Task Force Members

Overarching

Martha Bruckner ~ Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium

Matthew Henkes ~ Iowa West Foundation

JoAnna Murray ~ United Way of Midlands

Becky Miles Polka ~ Campaign GLR IA

Lorraine Chang ~ Former Learning Community Director, Board of Directors Children's Hospital

Melissa Mayo ~ United Way of Midlands

Brenda Moran ~ Raise Me to Read Council Bluffs

Kathleen Knudsen ~ Raise Me to Read Metro-Omaha

Public Health Systems

Carol Wang ~ Metro Omaha Medical Society – MOMS / Baby Reads

Karla Lester, MD, FAAP ~ Medical Director, Center for Child & Community, Children's Hospital

Debra Tomek ~ Center for the Child and Community Children's Hospital

Attendance

Kathy Hanafan ~ Green Hills AEA and Council Bluffs Community Schools

Treva Hugaard ~ GOALS (Greater Omaha Attendance and Learning Services)

Lisa Utterback ~ Omaha Public Schools

Readiness

Portia Kennell ~ Buffett Early Childhood Fund

Kim Bodensteiner ~ Buffett Early Childhood Institute

David Patton ~ The Learning Community

Renee Franklin ~ The Learning Community

Mike Stiehl ~ Southwest Iowa Association for the Education of Young Children

Kimberly Kolakowski ~ Family Inc.

Summer

Megan Addison ~ Collective for Youth

Jody DuRand ~ Omaha Public Library

Rachel Steiner ~ Omaha Public Library

Julie Humphrey ~ Omaha Public Library

Kathy Rieger ~ Council Bluffs Public Library

City Representatives

Patricia Mayorga ~ Omaha Chamber of Commerce

Mike Wolf ~ Council Bluffs City Councilman

Justin Schultz ~ Pottawattamie County Supervisor

Definitions (for the purpose of this plan)

Until you know a thing you cannot answer any question about it.
~ Socrates

ACE's: Adverse Childhood Experiences. Stressful or traumatic events including: emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect, mother treated violently, household substance abuse, household mental illness, parental separation or divorce, incarcerated household member.

Actor Mapping: A visual depiction of the key organizations and individuals that influence a topic, allowing insight into the players within a system.

Ally: A person or group associated with others for our common purpose (providers, community organizations, public health, medical institutions, schools, child care, programs, business, cities and chambers of commerce).

Associations – Groups of people working together for a particular purpose (churches, synagogues, mosques, clubs, community & service organizations, affiliations which gather people together.

CEC: Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center on the campus of University of Nebraska Omaha

CGLR: Campaign for Grade Level Reading

COE: College of Education

Collective Action: Group's steps or actions while working toward a common goal. When individuals engage in collective action, the strength of the group's resources, knowledge and efforts combines all parties to more readily achieve the shared goal.

Education: Schools, educational service units, early childhood centers, In-home day-care.

Family: A group of people who are related to and responsible for, one another (parents, children, guardians, relatives, honorary "family").

Formative Assessment: A frequent variety of assessment procedures that provides the required information to adjust during the process (monitoring monthly or quarterly).

Intersect: Areas where two lines cross – connections, amalgamation of efforts between allies and associations.

Kindergarten Readiness: Physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge (as defined by National Education Goals Panel).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: An hierarchical pyramid describing basic human needs, including (beginning at the base and working upward) psychological, safety and security, love/belonging, esteem, self-actualization. The lowest level needs must be satisfied before higher-order needs can influence behavior.

Metro-Omaha: The towns and cities in Douglas and Sarpy Counties in Nebraska.

MOEC: Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium

Proficiency: Three sets of interrelated skills that develop over time: language and communication, mechanics of reading, and content knowledge; the level at which students translate what they are reading into some kind of more vibrant, real experience.

Raise Me to Read: Council Bluffs, IA initiative for the Grade Level Reading Campaign (and that which will be the moniker shared by Metro-Omaha).

SBAC: School Based Attendance Coalition

Stakeholder: Person or group involved in this endeavor with responsibilities toward it (such as funding and support) with interest in the success of the initiative.

Task force: Temporary group of people formed to carry out a specific mission or project, or to solve a problem which requires a multi-disciplinary approach.

Trauma: “Overwhelming demands placed upon the physiological system that result in a profound vulnerability and/or loss of control” (as defined by R.D. Macy)

UNO: University of Nebraska at Omaha

UWM: United Way of the Midlands

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