

Communities for Kids Plus

2022 Evaluation Report | June 2022



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Interdisciplinary Center for Program Evaluation

Communities for Kids Plus

2022 Evaluation Report

The Communities for Kids Plus (C4K+) project, administered by the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, utilizes community engagement and collective impact strategies to solve quality and capacity challenges in early childhood in communities across Nebraska. In 2020, federal funding under the auspices of the Preschool Development Grant enabled C4K+ to provide 31 communities with Quality and Capacity Building funding. Of these, 27 communities receive funding for an Early Childhood Community Coordinator, 18 receive additional dollars to support tuition assistance through Early Learning Scholarships, and 9 communities receive additional dollars for the Spanish Speaking/Bilingual Child Care Support Initiative to support child care providers whose first language is Spanish with training and materials in their primary language.

The C4K+ Annual Evaluation Report includes descriptive information and progress data for the 27 communities participating in the Early Childhood Coordinator initiative plus the Early Learning Scholarships and the Spanish Speaking/Bilingual Child Care Support Initiative.

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Initiative Elements

The Communities for Kids Plus (C4K+) initiative evolved from the original Communities for Kids that works together with communities—small and large, rural and urban, experienced and just beginning to organize—in order to strengthen early childhood services across Nebraska. In 2020, the federal Preschool Development Grant became an invaluable resource to Nebraska communities seeking to increase capacity and promote quality in early childhood care. The PDG funding for C4K+ is split into four projects:

- **Early Childhood Community Coordinators (ECCC) funding** - This is a paid, professional position in each community charged with developing a local collaborative infrastructure, aligning early care and education systems, and focusing on sustainable funding and activities.
- **Quality and Capacity Building (QCB) funding** - Quality and Capacity Building contracts support each community's unique needs and innovative ideas related to enhancing quality and/or increasing capacity of the current early childhood landscape. These project funds have been separated into five buckets including initiatives supporting a provider network, capital/operations, quality enhancement, community engagement, and innovation.
- **Early Learning Scholarships (ELS) funding** - Combined with private funds, the ELS opportunity supports tuition scholarships for 164 children in Nebraska. Participating child care programs must meet the following criteria:
 1. Be enrolled in Step Up to Quality
 2. Demonstrate the characteristics of a high-quality program
 3. Track and report financial and evaluation criteria
 4. Serve low- and moderate-income families at or below 200% of Federal Poverty Guidelines.
- **Spanish-Speaking Bilingual Provider Support Initiative (SSBPSI) funding** - Communities (or neighborhoods) with a 12% or higher population of Spanish-speaking residents are provided additional funds to support licensed and unlicensed providers. This initiative focuses on providers who are often unable to take advantage of resources due to the language barrier. As with other C4K+ initiatives, the intent is to increase quality and support child care licensing if applicable. In addition, the SSBPSI seeks to expand access to resources that are typically only offered in English to Spanish-speaking child care providers.

In addition to the 27 current C4K+ communities, ten more Nebraska communities that are part of C4K are reviewing their readiness to join the C4K+ initiative.

C4K+ Communities

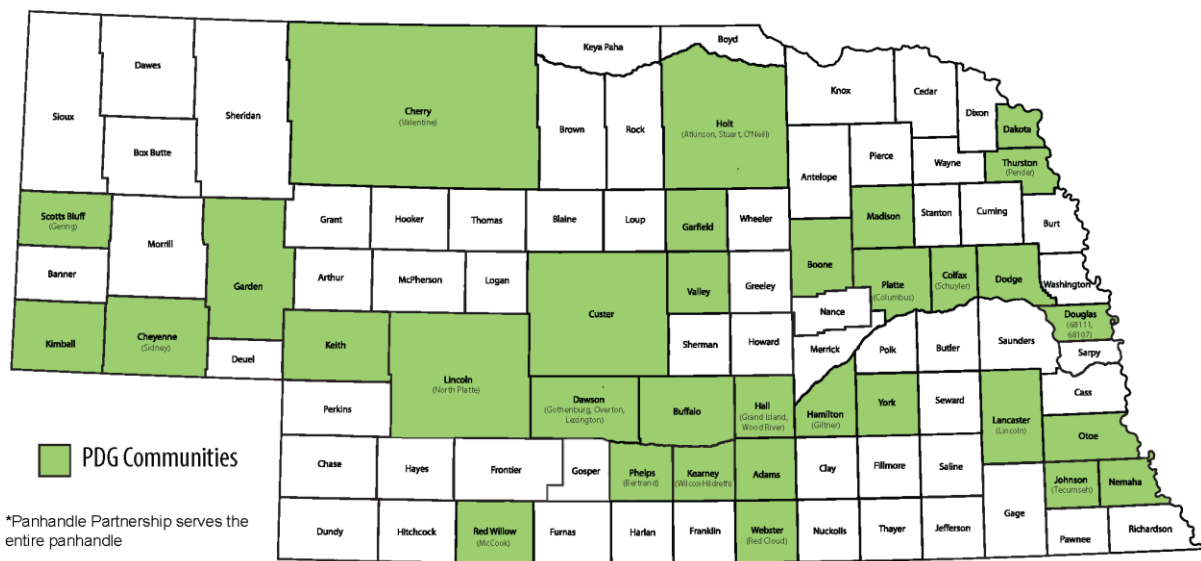
The 27 communities that are supporting an Early Childhood Community Coordinator (ECCC) funded through the Preschool Development Grant are found across the state. The communities are evenly split by size with one third rural (population up to 7,500), one third mid-size (population 7,501 to 15,000) and one third having populations over 15,000 people.

C4K+ communities were selected through an extensive RFP process. Applicants provided information about the community's demographics, including how many families meet federal guidelines for poverty. They conducted a needs assessment to document the number of licensed child care facilities in their community and the gap between available spaces and the number of young children needing care. The application included a job description for the Early Childhood Community Coordinator. Communities had

wide latitude in setting the qualifications, salary, and hours so that the position could be tailored to the unique needs of each community. As a result, some coordinator positions are part-time while others are full-time.

Each community is utilizing a Collective Impact approach to bring together multiple stakeholders to improve the quality and availability of early childhood care. Communities are framing early childhood care as a key element for economic development and essential for future growth and well-being. To combat attitudes that child care needs only impact young families, they are engaging leaders in the business community, local government, foundations, social service agencies, healthcare, K-12 education, and higher education. The hope is that building a strong coalition committed to improving the early childhood sector will lead to meaningful improvements that endure over time.

Communities for Kids with Preschool Development Grant communities



Evaluation Approach. The C4K+ evaluation includes quantitative and qualitative measures. In the second year of the initiative, coordinators regularly logged their activities, including trainings, stakeholder meetings and community awareness events, that demonstrated collaboration and engagement around early childhood. They completed a survey about successes and challenges they faced during the program year. Each C4K+ community had key stakeholders take the PARTNER survey to see how well their goals for early childhood aligned and how their partners view the collaboration efforts in their community. Parents and providers who are accessing the Early Learning Scholarship funds completed surveys about the impact of the scholarships. In addition, evaluators visited the C4K+ communities to meet the coordinators and stakeholders and to learn more about the initiative’s impact on the early childhood landscape.

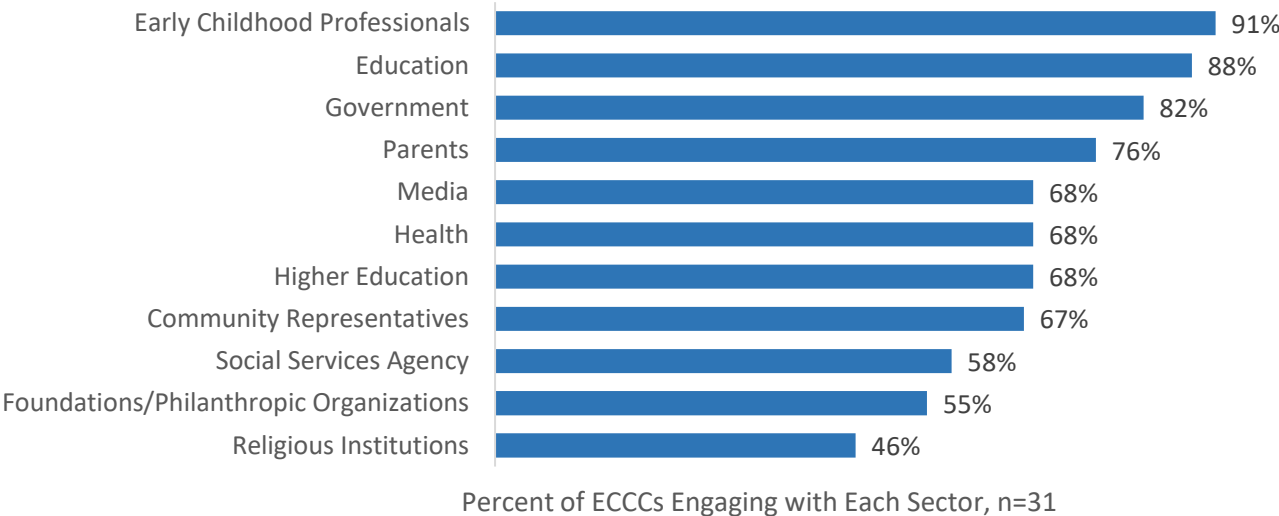
Early Childhood Community Coordinators

The Early Childhood Community Coordinators (ECCC) support building quality and capacity by promoting a network of community leaders, stakeholders and providers focused on early childhood. The coordinator is seen as essential to the success of the C4K+ initiative, as their passion and expertise facilitate the collaboration necessary to achieve the community’s goals. In the second year of C4K+, the evaluation of the ECCC role was achieved through several means: a survey, a social network analysis, activity logs, and site visits.

Year 2 ECCC Survey

Relationships and Engagement. The purpose of this year’s ECCC survey was to understand efforts around building relationships and fostering community engagement in the C4K+ initiative. ECCC’s reported engaging with early childhood professionals, the education sector, and government the most, while the sectors with the least amount of engagement were religious institutions, foundations/philanthropic organizations, and social service agencies.

Over 75% of ECCC’s engaged with early childhood professionals, local school leaders, local government officials and parents.



On average, the 31 ECCC’s most often engaged with partners through one-on-one meetings (44.3%), partnering on an activity/training/event (32.8%), and serving together on a task force or steering committee (31.7%). They used the following engagement strategies less frequently: requesting assistance (25.9%), funding/in-kind support (15.4%), and other (9.1%). ECCC’s are most likely to engage with early childhood professionals in one-on-one meetings (85%) and by partnering on activities, trainings, or events (76%). Less than half of ECCC’s reported having one-on-one meetings with community representatives (46%) or parents (33%).

When asked specifically about engaging with the business community, 57.6% of ECCC’s reported that they have engaged with the business community through community meetings, and another 57.6%

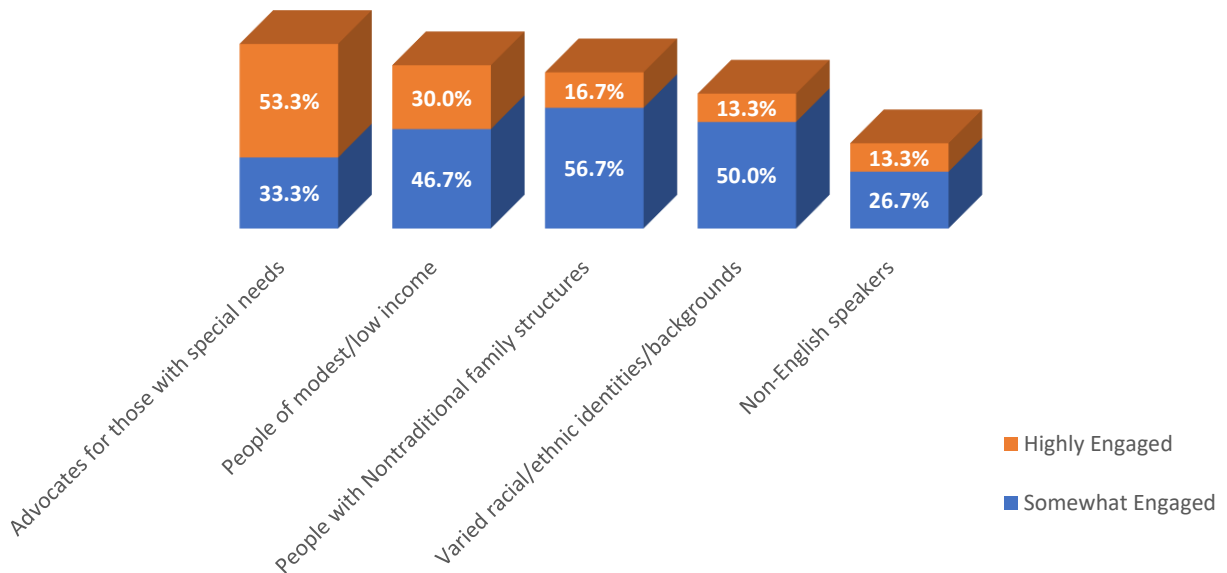


reported that they have business representatives serve on task forces or stakeholder groups. Only 9.1% of ECCCs reported they have tried to engage the business community but haven't had a positive response from business leaders, and another 6.1% reported they haven't yet started to engage the business community.



ECCCs reported on the extent to which they have engaged diverse stakeholders in their work.

Over half the ECCCs report being highly engaged with advocates for those with special needs



Extent to which ECCCs engage diverse stakeholders in C4K+ work, n=31

ECCCs also reported on what other community or early childhood initiatives they were engaged with in their communities. The majority of ECCCs were engaged with public pre-K, Head Start/Early Head Start, and the Community Well Being Initiative funded by Nebraska Children.

<i>Initiative</i>	<i>Percent of ECCCs engaged</i>
<i>Public School Pre-K</i>	73%
<i>Head Start / Early Head Start</i>	60%
<i>Community Well Being</i>	57%
<i>Rooted in Relationships</i>	47%
<i>Sixpence Home Visiting / Center Based services</i>	43%
<i>Sixpence Child Care Partnerships</i>	30%
<i>Family Literacy Program</i>	27%
<i>Other</i>	7%

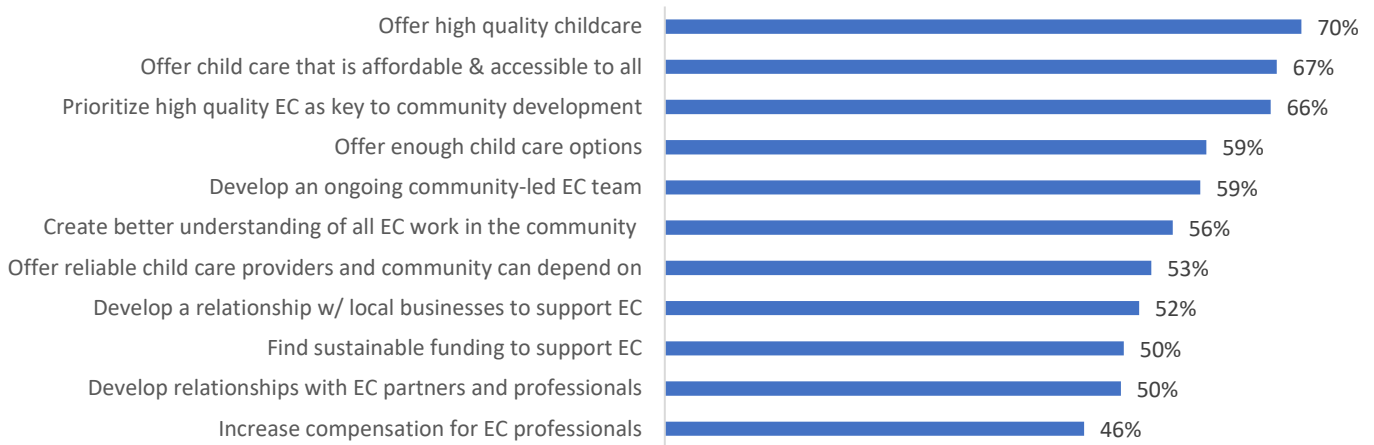
Finally, ECCCs were asked to rank the key factors that they felt were most important to the successes they've had over the past year.

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Key Factors Leading to Success</i>
1	Getting the word out about early childhood
2	Building new relationships with community members
3	Having financial resources (i.e., \$ to give stipends to providers, \$ to host events)
4	Building trust with providers
4	Having a strong background in early childhood
6	Support from Nebraska Children (e.g., technical assistance, bi-monthly coordinator calls)
7	Networking with coordinators in other communities
8	Having dedicated time to focus on C4K+
9	Having my goals align with partners in the community
10	Drawing on previous relationships I had in the community

Community Partner Feedback and Priorities. In the spring and summer of 2021, ECCCs identified key community partners to participate in the PARTNER survey which measures collaboration and shared goals among people and organizations that work together. Across the 27 C4K+ communities, 299 people took the survey. The following graphs show some of the key findings.

Participants were invited to select the key outcomes their communities will experience as a result of the C4K+ work. Over two-thirds of the respondents hoped the initiative leads to higher quality childcare in their community that is affordable and accessible to all. Less than half of the respondents prioritized increasing compensation for early childhood professionals.

Over the next 1-3 years, what outcomes do you hope the network achieves?



Percent of respondents prioritizing each outcome, n=299
Respondents could select multiple outcomes.

When asked to select the most important outcome of the local early childhood network, 81 respondents hope that their community will prioritize high quality early childhood offerings as a key to community development. Far fewer respondents (7) prioritized engaging local businesses to support early childhood in their community or increasing compensation for EC professionals.

What is this early childhood network's most important outcome?



Number of respondents selecting the outcome as most important, n=279
Respondents could select only one outcome.

Respondents selected the most concerning barriers to child care that they see in their community. Over half the respondents (57%) noted that the high cost of child care is the biggest barrier. Only 10% of respondents felt that the location of child cares is an issue.

Barriers to Child Care in the Community	% who agree
<i>Cost of child care</i>	57%
<i>Lack of capacity for child care</i>	49%
<i>Limited child care hours of operations and availability</i>	47%
<i>Lack of understanding of importance of EC</i>	46%
<i>Limited quality of child care</i>	42%
<i>Lack of funding</i>	38%
<i>Getting community leaders to the table</i>	29%
<i>Getting EC providers to the table</i>	25%
<i>Not enough qualified people in EC workforce</i>	25%
<i>Limited transportation options to get to child care</i>	20%
<i>Not enough qualified people in EC workforce</i>	18%
<i>No time to bring people together to work on EC issues</i>	13%
<i>Limited information promoting EC services and resources</i>	12%
<i>Location of child care</i>	10%

The following table shows how respondents rate challenges partners may experience in participating in the community's local early childhood network. Over a quarter (28%) feel that getting the right partners to the table will be an issue. Twenty-one percent of respondents do not think there are any challenges to participating.

Greatest Challenges Organizations Face in Participating in the Local Early Childhood Network	% who agree
<i>Getting the right partners to the table</i>	28%
<i>Difficulty in bringing stakeholders together</i>	23%
<i>Funding</i>	22%
<i>There are no challenges to participating in the network</i>	21%
<i>Competing priorities of partners</i>	15%
<i>Different perspectives of partners</i>	12%
<i>Communication within the network</i>	11%
<i>Messaging and communications strategies</i>	10%
<i>Bureaucracy within the system</i>	8%
<i>Effective leadership to move things forward</i>	8%
<i>Capacity for advocacy work</i>	8%
<i>Staff turnover</i>	7%
<i>Lack of mission congruence among partners</i>	6%
<i>Lack of previous relationships between groups/agencies</i>	6%
<i>Leadership transitions and turnover</i>	4%
<i>Lack of resources to coordinate across stakeholder groups</i>	4%
<i>Lack of political will within the system</i>	3%

Social Network Analysis of ECCCs. To measure the strengths of the collaboration across organizations in individual communities to support early childhood initiatives, the C4K+ evaluation originally planned for a social network analysis of stakeholders in each community to be conducted via the PARTNER Tool survey in summer of 2021. However, due to low response rates, the social network analysis results from the PARTNER Tool were incomplete.

As an alternative, the Research and Evaluation Team at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation collaborated with the Munroe-Meyer Institute at University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC MMI) to develop survey questions to analyze the network connections between ECCCs across communities throughout Nebraska. ECCCs were asked to indicate which of the other ECCCs were a source of 1) Information and Resources that are helpful in their work as an ECCC, and 2) Emotional Support. These questions were added to the Early Childhood Community Coordinator Year 2 Survey.

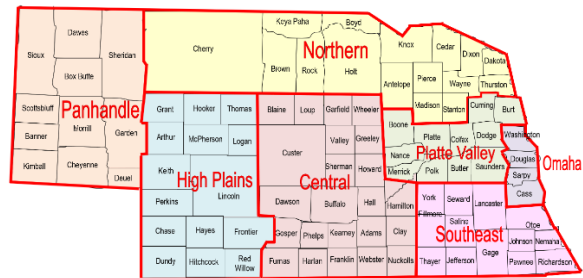
Of the 33 ECCCs, 27 responded to at least one of the social network analysis questions for an 82% response rate. When asked if they had networked with other ECCCs outside of the twice-monthly meetings, 22 ECCCs reported they had networked (67%, n=27). Of the five ECCCs who indicated they had not networked, three indicated they have not had the time and two indicated it was due to an ECCC staff change either in their own organization or another's.

Those who did not respond (n=6) or indicated they had not networked outside of twice-monthly meetings (n=5) are still included in the following network maps because they may have been reported as a source of Information and Resources and/or Emotional Support. Responses in which an ECCC indicated receiving either Information and Resources or Emotional Support from themselves were removed for the purpose of this analysis.

Below are some highlights from the Social Network Analysis, see the Appendix for the full SNA report prepared by the research and evaluation team at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation.

Main Findings

- The top five connected Early Childhood Community Coordinators (ECCCs) in the sharing of Information and Resources are the same top 5 in the sharing of Emotional Support. These are key leaders in the ECCC network. Four of these 5 serve in the Central Region.
- ECCCs reported more connections due to sharing Information and Resources than due to Emotional Support.
- On average, ECCCs in the Panhandle and Southeast Regions are the least connected on average, both within their Regions and with those in other Regions.
- Those in the Central and High Plains Regions are the most connected.
- On average, ECCCs serving Metropolitan and Micropolitan communities are reported as a source of Information and Resources and Emotional Support more often than ECCCs serving Rural Communities.



Twenty-one ECCCs responded to the question, “What have you found to be most valuable about the connections you have made?” Responses to this question often focused on the benefit of sharing effective ideas and strategies with each other to their guide work, in addition to having people to go to with questions and concerns. Another advantage often identified was the value of being connected with others who have a shared experience and can offer support when encountering difficulties or obstacles in the role.

“To hear their ideas and to have them share their thoughts on my challenges with fresh eyes. Someone to just bounce things off of – someone who understands my role but is a safe person to share frustrations with.”

- A rural ECCC

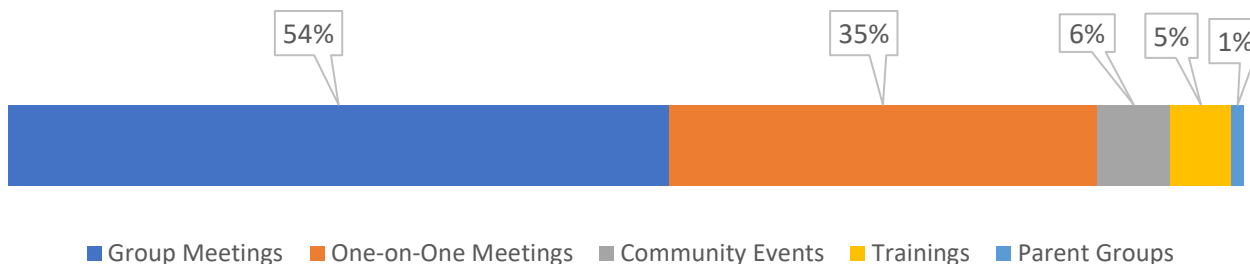
ECCCs reported many benefits of being connected to their fellow ECCCs. Some of the key advantages identified include being able to share ideas and strategies that have been effective and receiving support during difficult times with someone who shares the experience. ECCCs reported being more connected in the sharing of helpful Information and Resources than the sharing of Emotional Support. Regionally, those located in the Central and High Plains Regions, both centrally located in Nebraska, tended to be more connected than those in the Panhandle and Southeast Regions. ECCCs serving Micropolitan and Metropolitan regions also reported having more connections on average than Rural ECCCs.

Early Childhood Community Coordinator (ECCC) Activities

ECCCs logged their activities related to building early childhood in their communities into an online database to track the work they’ve done in building their community’s early childhood systems. From January 2021 to April 2022, coordinators across the state spent 3,337 hours on 2,298 activities. Over 31,661 people (duplicated) across the state attended these activities - many of which included community events that hundreds of people attended. The majority of activities were group meetings (53%), followed by one-on-one meetings (35%).

- **2,298** ECCC activities logged
- **31,661** people attended/participated in ECCC activities
- **3,337** hours invested in ECCC activities

ECCCs logged 2,298 activities.
The most frequent activity was group meetings.



The purpose of the ECCC activities varied widely, from building relationships (19%) to fundraising/grant writing to support early childhood initiatives (2%).

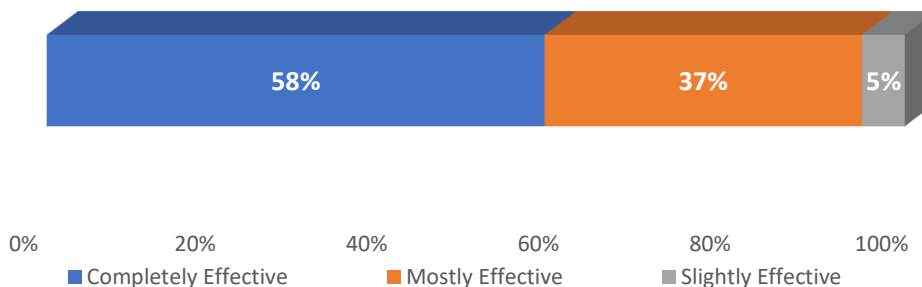
Purpose of ECCC Activity

19%	Build Relationships
18%	Share Information or Raise Awareness About Early Childhood
14%	Increase Early Childhood Quality
13%	Address Early Childhood Capacity Issues (i.e., increase number of slots available)
10%	Sustainability Planning
9%	Continuing Education/Professional Development for Early Childhood Professionals
8%	Increase Number of Early Childhood Professionals in Community
7%	Core Team/Board Meetings
2%	Fundraising or Grant Writing to Support Early Childhood Initiatives

Overwhelmingly, ECCCs thought that their activities were either completely or mostly effective (95%). Only 5% of ECCC activities were rated as “Slightly Effective” by coordinators.

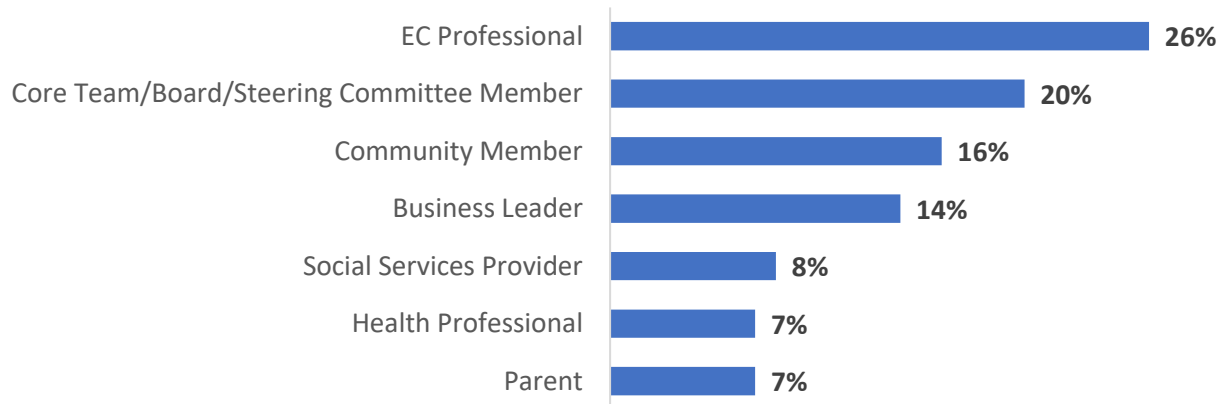
Overall, ECCCs rated their activities as highly effective.

n=2,298



ECCCs engaged a wide variety of individuals in their work. Early childhood professionals (26%) were most often engaged by ECCCs, followed by Core Team, Board, or Steering Committee members (20%). Parents and health professionals (e.g., doctors, nurses, mental health providers) were less often engaged in ECCC work.

Types of People Engaged in ECCC Work



Summary of Site Visits. During the 21-22 program year, seven evaluators visited 23 PDG C4K+ communities. As COVID-19 restrictions abated, the ECCC's graciously set up meetings and site visits so the evaluators could see the community's work first hand. Evaluators attended 12 partner meetings, some of which included representatives from the local economic development office, funders, and leaders from school districts, non-profits, and child cares. They stopped in to see eight child care centers for a tour of classrooms and an opportunity to meet some of the early childhood educators. In four communities, the coordinators took evaluators on a tour of new child care sites that had not yet opened.

Each visit included one-on-one time with the early childhood community coordinator to learn more about their work. Coordinators shared their successes. These included launching a community survey to assess child care needs, helping providers move through the Step-Up to Quality rating process, and sponsoring trainings and distributing curriculum to help providers increase quality. A few communities have launched unique initiatives that really stood out. In one mid-sized community, the coordinator collaborated with other early childhood initiatives to sponsor two billboards in high traffic areas to raise awareness about early childhood needs and resources in their community. Another hosted a "Traveling Baby Shower" event with giveaways for families with newborns. To commemorate the Week of the Young Child, another mid-sized community held a "Kids on the Bricks" community event in their downtown district. This collaboration of the business community and the early childhood sector brought families out for fun activities in the heart of their town.

An employee at the chamber of commerce shared "that her first child, who is now five, was able to get into to a childcare setting right away. However, with her infant now there is nothing available, so she is relying on a 16-year-old homeschooler and her grandmother to watch her baby."

Site visit report



Early childhood community coordinators also talked about the challenges of their work. These included navigating COVID-19 protocols, finding convenient training times for early childhood teachers, and supporting Spanish-speaking providers through the state licensing process. Several coordinators spoke about the “crisis” their communities face due to the lack of child care staff and the low pay that makes it nearly impossible to compete for workers. One coordinator noted that her community used to have eight in-home providers but two had recently retired, leaving only six child care providers which was not enough to meet the need. In fact, some families have asked their providers when an opening might happen so they can plan the births of their children to coordinate with openings in their child care.

One coordinator shared the results of a business survey she helped conduct. Over 52 businesses participated in a survey which showed that 66% of the employers reported the lack of childcare caused employees to be tardy, miss work or be distracted at work due to the childcare issues. Fifty-four percent of the employers reported childcare availability affected their ability to hire or retain employees. One positive result the survey is that business owners are coming together to start planning how they could build a new community childcare center to help combat these ongoing childcare issues.

Another coordinator reported that she has met with many business leaders in the community. The CEO of their largest business informed her that they have no workers in the age range of 30-45 and this is directly due to the housing and child care shortages. They have workers who live an hour away and commute to town because of the lack of available housing and child care.



Quality and Capacity Building

The Quality and Capacity Building Initiative provides funding to communities to increase child care quality and/or increase the number of child care slots available in their community. Funds can be used for five different activities: provider network, capital/operations, quality enhancement, community engagement, and innovation. Thirty-one communities are receiving funds to improve child care quality and increase child care capacity.



Quality

While there are many measures of quality, in this context quality child care is identified by enrollment in Step Up to Quality (SUTQ), which is Nebraska's quality rating and improvement system. Information on the number of providers enrolled in SUTQ in each community and SUTQ ratings were collected in May 2022, highlighted in the table below. Many communities saw growth in the number of child care programs participating in SUTQ over the past year, and overall there was a 38% increase in the number of programs participating in SUTQ. Across all communities, 27% of programs are participating in Step Up to Quality. The majority of programs have ratings in the 1-3 range, with 11% of programs having a SUTQ rating of 4 or 5.

Community Name	Number (%) participating in SUTQ	% change from previous year	% providers with a SUTQ rating of 4 - 5
<i>Adams County*</i>	12 (29%)	+71%	25%
<i>Atkinson/Holt County</i>	2 (33%)	+100%	0%
<i>Boone County*</i>	5 (31%)	+67%	0%
<i>Buffalo County*</i>	34 (37%)	+70%	24%
<i>Burwell/Garfield County (Sandhills Coalition)*</i>	0	--	--
<i>Cherry County (Valentine)*</i>	3 (30%)	--	0%
<i>Columbus (Platte)</i>	9 (16%)	+125%	0%
<i>Schuyler (Colfax)</i>	1 (14%)	+100%	0%
<i>Custer County Communities 4 Kids (Sandhills)*</i>	6 (35%)	+100%	17%
<i>Dodge County*</i>	10 (26%)	+11%	10%
<i>Douglas County*</i>	140 (21%)	+22%	7%
<i>Garden County (Panhandle)*</i>	2 (100%)	+100%	0%
<i>Gering (Panhandle)</i>	3 (27%)	+50%	0%
<i>Gothenburg (Dawson County)</i>	3 (38%)	+50%	0%
<i>Growing Community Connections (Dakota)*</i>	12 (48%)	+300%	0%
<i>Hall County Community Collaborative</i>	13 (17%)	+117%	23%
<i>Lexington (Dawson County)</i>	5 (36%)	+25%	20%
<i>Lincoln, City of (Lancaster)</i>	116 (32%)	+35%	8%
<i>Loup Valley Childhood Initiative (Sandhills) (Ord/Valley Co)*</i>	2 (25%)	-50%	0%
<i>Madison County (Norfolk)*</i>	24 (33%)	+60%	17%
<i>McCook/Red Willow County*</i>	5 (23%)	+400%	0%
<i>Nebraska City/Otoe County*</i>	2 (10%)	--	0%
<i>North Platte Communities 4 Kids</i>	9 (30%)	+50%	11%
<i>Ogallala/Keith County*</i>	2 (15%)	+100%	0%
<i>Panhandle Partnership** (less City of Gering, Garden and Cheyenne Counties)</i>	33 (40%)	+3%	21%
<i>Pender</i>	1 (33%)	--	0%
<i>Stuart</i>	0	--	--
<i>Tecumseh Tomorrows</i>	1 (20%)	+100%	0%
<i>The Valley Child Development Center (Red Cloud)</i>	1 (50%)	--	0%
<i>Wilcox-Hildreth</i>	0	--	--
<i>Wood River (Hall)</i>	1 (50%)	+100%	0%
<i>York*</i>	8 (33%)	--	13%
Total	465 (27%)	+38%	11%

*County wide numbers

**Regional Numbers (9 of 11 Panhandle Counties)



Capacity Building

Capacity building is measured by the number of child care programs available in each community. Information on child care programs by community was collected in May 2022, highlighted in the table below. Overall, there are 1,725 child care programs available in the 31 communities participating in the Quality and Capacity Building initiative, an 8% drop in the number of child care programs from the previous reporting year. Almost two-thirds are family child care homes, and over one-third of programs are center-based.



Community Name	Total Number of licensed programs	% change from previous year	% Family Childcare Homes	% Center Based (including PreK)
<i>Adams County*</i>	41	-2%	68%	32%
<i>Atkinson/Holt County</i>	6	-33%	100%	--
<i>Boone County*</i>	16	+7%	94%	6%
<i>Buffalo County*</i>	92	-6%	73%	27%
<i>Burwell/Garfield County (Sandhills Coalition)*</i>	5	0%	60%	40%
<i>Cherry County (Valentine)*</i>	10	-23%	100%	--
<i>Columbus (Platte)</i>	56	-7%	70%	30%
<i>Schuyler (Colfax)</i>	7	0%	86%	14%
<i>Custer County Communities 4 Kids (Sandhills)*</i>	17	-19%	76%	24%
<i>Dodge County*</i>	39	-13%	46%	54%
<i>Douglas County*</i>	654	-8%	58%	42%
<i>Garden County (Panhandle)*</i>	2	0%	--	100%
<i>Gering (Panhandle)</i>	11	-8%	55%	45%
<i>Gothenburg (Dawson County)</i>	8	-11%	25%	75%
<i>Growing Community Connections (Dakota)*</i>	25	-17%	68%	32%
<i>Hall County Community Collaborative</i>	76	-11%	78%	22%
<i>Lexington (Dawson County)</i>	14	-18%	79%	21%
<i>Lincoln, City of (Lancaster)</i>	359	-6%	65%	35%
<i>Loup Valley Childhood Initiative (Sandhills) (Ord/Valley Co)*</i>	8	-33%	88%	13%
<i>Madison County (Norfolk)*</i>	72	-1%	76%	24%
<i>McCook/Red Willow County*</i>	22	+5%	64%	36%
<i>Nebraska City/Otoe County*</i>	20	-33%	75%	25%
<i>North Platte Communities 4 Kids</i>	30	-12%	50%	50%
<i>Ogallala/Keith County*</i>	13	0%	77%	23%
<i>Panhandle Partnership** (less City of Gering, Garden and Cheyenne Counties)</i>	82	-10%	65%	35%
<i>Pender</i>	3	0%	67%	33%
<i>Stuart</i>	4	+33%	100%	--
<i>Tecumseh Tomorrows</i>	5	+25%	60%	40%
<i>The Valley Child Development Center (Red Cloud)</i>	2	0%	50%	50%
<i>Wilcox-Hildreth</i>	0	--	--	--
<i>Wood River (Hall)</i>	2	+100%	50%	50%
<i>York*</i>	24	-11%	54%	46%
Total	1,725	-8%	64%	36%

*County wide numbers

**Regional Numbers (9 of 11 Panhandle Counties)



Early Learning Scholarships

The Early Learning Scholarships program is intended to support working families in meeting the high cost of quality care for children six weeks to 6 years of age in full day/year-round settings (not attending kindergarten) or attending the program due to a need for care that extends beyond the hours provided by a publicly funded program (e.g., wrapping hours around Head Start or Public Preschool).

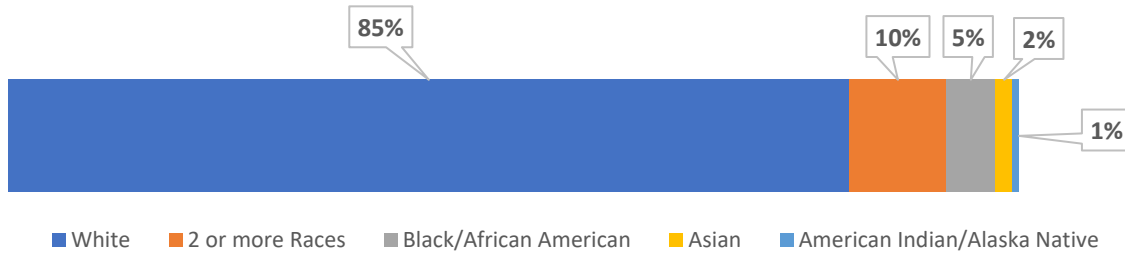
Support includes increasing access to high quality care for young children in low and moderate-income earning families in Nebraska. Funding is being made available through C4K+ communities to early childhood providers engaged in delivery of quality early learning environments and experiences for young children. Tuition assistance is available to families whose income is at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines based on family size.

Early Learning Scholarship data was collected between October 2021 and April 2022. Thirteen communities participated in the ELS initiative during the evaluation year. A total of 164 children were served through 434 scholarships: many children received scholarships for multiple weeks or months throughout the evaluation year. A total of \$154,205 in scholarships was distributed.

Community	Number of Children Receiving Scholarship	Number of Scholarships Distributed	Number of Providers Participating in Scholarships	Total dollar amount distributed
<i>Adams County (Hastings)</i>	22	68	9	\$20,030
<i>Buffalo County (Kearney)</i>	37	48	4	\$18,490
<i>Custer County Communities 4 Kids (Broken Bow)</i>	10	31	2	\$14,227
<i>Dodge County (Fremont)</i>	16	16	3	\$5,895
<i>Growing Community Connections (Dakota County)</i>	7	37	2	\$14,336
<i>Hall County Community Collaborative</i>	6	15	2	\$6,693
<i>Lexington (Dawson County)</i>	6	36	2	\$4,568
<i>Lincoln Littles (Lancaster County)</i>	27	69	2	\$34,329
<i>Madison County</i>	4	11	2	\$6,830
<i>North Platte Communities for Kids</i>	9	54	3	\$16,334
<i>Tecumseh Cares for Kids</i>	3	15	1	\$4,639
<i>Valley Child Development Center (Red Cloud)</i>	8	8	1	\$480
<i>Wood River</i>	9	26	1	\$7,353
Total	164	434	34	\$154,205

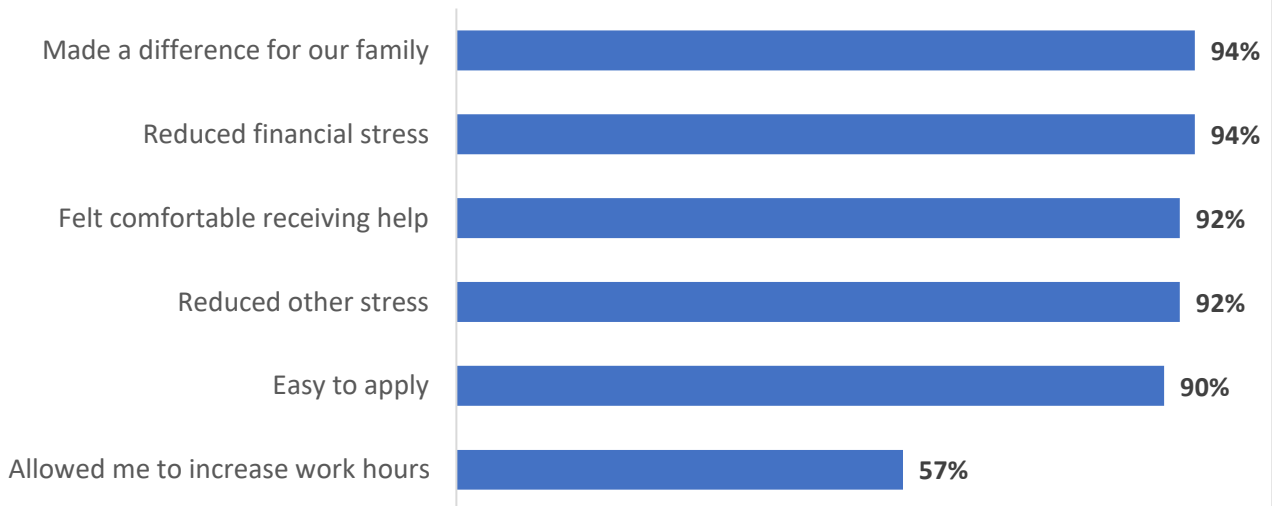
Characteristics of Children Served. The majority of children served by the ELS were White, Non-Hispanic (84.8%). Of children served, 13.4% were Hispanic. The average age of children served was 3.3 years.

Race of children receiving early learning scholarships



ELS Parent Survey. Parents who received Early Learning Scholarships were asked to fill out a brief survey about their experience receiving the scholarships and its impact on their family well-being. Fifty-one parents responded to the survey. Overwhelmingly, the scholarships had a positive impact on parents.

Parent Impressions of the Early Learning Scholarships



Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree with statement, n=51

Parents noted few barriers to applying for the Early Learning Scholarships. One parent noted that they were directed to apply for state assistance before they could qualify for the ELS, which was a lengthy and cumbersome and in turn delayed receiving financial support for child care expenses. Another parent stated they were unsure whether they made too much money to qualify for the ELS.

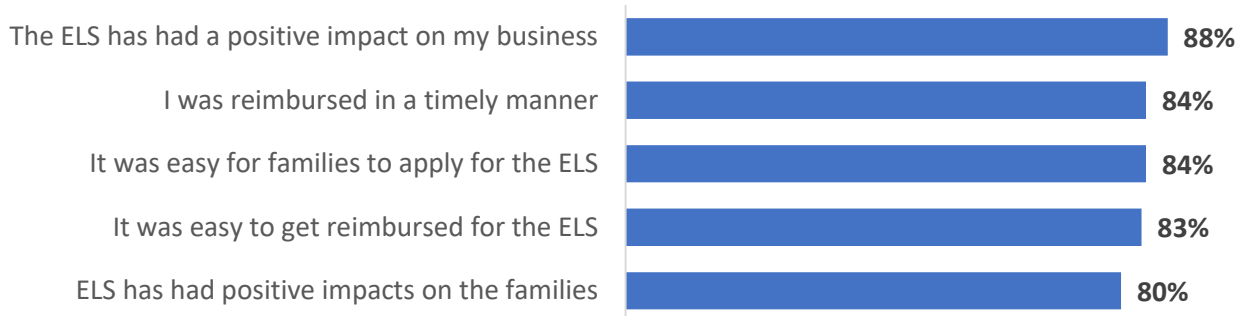
Overall parents had very positive reactions to receiving the Early Learning Scholarships. Many parents expressed gratitude for receiving the financial assistance and their child's early care and education center. Some parents noted that their child would not have been able to attend child care without the scholarship, while other parents observed positive impacts in their children's growth and development.

In parent's own words:

- *"After being isolated during the first year of the pandemic, I was so grateful for the assistance to help my child attend preschool and catch up on learning much-needed social skills!"*
- *"I appreciate this scholarship immensely. We felt the financial burden heavily when we surprisingly found out we were blessed with a 3rd child. Having 3 children in daycare was eating up almost all of our income. We have appreciated this and felt humbled to receive it."*
- *"I cried of joy when I heard that we had been accepted and how much our new weekly daycare rate was. The amount of financial stress that was relieved by this scholarship is life changing. Thank you very much."*
- *"I am just so incredibly grateful! I had to stop working and have a disability claim pending. Because I no longer work, I'm no longer eligible to receive Title XX assistance. Without [the scholarship], my son would have had to stop attending pre-k."*
- *"The scholarship has helped me and my son tremendously. Not only financially but the center he is at is amazing and works with his disabilities."*
- *"This scholarship program has made a massive difference to my family, as a single mother of two young children. I work full time in a job that should support a family. However, my paycheck is not enough to cover our living needs and the high cost of quality child-care. Your early learning scholarship program enables my children to attend a quality child care center so I can continue to work to support my girls. Thank you so much!"*
- *"We have been so incredibly grateful for this assistance. My husband has Type 1 Diabetes and an enormous amount of medical expenses per year. We also have other expenses which aren't counted when typical services account for our yearly income. This scholarship has helped our family immensely."*
- *"This was a blessing in disguise for me as a single parent. I was able to get a job outside my home because I could now afford daycare! Thank you!"*

ELS Provider Survey. Child Care Providers who participated in the Early Learning Scholarships were also asked about their experiences. Thirty providers responded to the survey.

Provider Impressions of the Early Learning Scholarships



Percent of respondents who agree or strongly agree with the statement, n=30.

Overall, providers reported that the process of applying for and receiving reimbursement for the Early Learning Scholarships was simple, streamlined, and fast. Providers appreciated that they only needed to submit an invoice for reimbursement, as opposed to completing extensive paperwork each month. Some areas that providers found difficult included having to wait on a rejection letter from DHHS before being able to approve scholarship eligibility, some reimbursement payments (especially early on) took a long time to receive, and for centers that bill families prior to providing care, billing became more difficult with the reimbursement model. Providers made some suggestions for improvement - including doing direct deposit instead of paper checks, including invoice numbers on the reimbursement checks so providers could more easily track payments, and expanding the availability of scholarships to more children and centers.

“The overall impact on our families was wonderful but one story is definitely worth sharing. The child received the scholarship at the age of 10 months - at that time she wasn't mobile at all. We were all concerned with her development so our teachers did an assessment so that we could make a referral to receive services at the Center. These services were taught to our teachers as well so that they could help her throughout the full day. Today at 17 months she has begun standing on her own with the intent to walk soon. All the services she has received was due to her attendance with the ELS assistance.”

A provider on the impact of the ELS on children in care

Spanish-Speaking Bilingual Provider Support Initiative

The Spanish-Speaking Bilingual Provider Support Initiative (SSBPSI) offers communities with a high Spanish-speaking population the opportunity to improve access to early childhood professional development and quality improvement activities for Spanish-speaking bilingual child care providers (which may include licensed, licensed exempt, family, friends, and neighbors) serving children ages 0 to 5.

There are nine communities participating in the bilingual child care support initiative: Adams County, Columbus and Schuyler (Platte/Colfax counties), Dodge County, Douglas County, Growing Community Connections in Dakota County, Hall County Community Collaborative, Lexington (Dawson County), McCook/Red Willow County, and Panhandle Partnership. A total of \$99,673.37 was spent on the SSBPSI during the evaluation time period.



Information about the SSBPSI was gathered from several sources: ECCC activity logs, year-end reports, and reflections from coordinators in the bilingual initiative communities. Of the 2,298 activities logged by ECCCs, 305 of those activities (13.3%) were related to the Bilingual Provider Support Initiative. Additionally, 411 events (18%) logged by ECCCs had bilingual people attend or participate.

Here are some SSBPSI highlights from the 2021-2022 program year:

- In Adams County, 50 women attended the first ever early child care conference for Spanish speaking providers. The free conference included training in Spanish, bilingual materials for home child cares, and support for engaging parents in their home language in early childhood education. In addition, nine child care providers completed a Spanish child care academy. They have hired a new team member who helps providers get to the library and access resources. They are also planning to host a business series for Spanish providers.
- The Dodge County ECCC has identified Spanish speaking providers in the community and is building relationships with them. The initiative supported two providers to attend the Spanish early child care conference. A new cohort will be joining Rooted in Relationships in the fall and the ECCC is hoping to recruit some Spanish speaking providers to participate.
- Douglas County provided CDA (Child Development Associate) credential classes in Spanish.
- Growing Community Connections in Dakota County contracted with a Spanish speaking CPR/First Aid trainer to conduct a training in South Sioux for child care providers at two Spanish speaking centers.
- H3C in Hall County supported efforts to bring a Spanish speaking conference to central Nebraska. They had many written materials translated into Spanish. They are getting training and resources to unlicensed providers and will roll out Spanish immersion curriculum and provide small group coaching.
- In Lexington (Dawson County), the Spanish Pyramid Pilot project hired a bilingual child care coordinator and began outreach to Spanish child care providers. As of this report, they had engaged 15 child care providers. A quarter of them have requested information for licensing. Ten attended ELG (Early Learning Guidelines) training and 19 attended left brain/right brain training. They are providing Pyramid Model coaching sessions in English and Spanish.



C4K+ Planning Communities

C4K+ Planning funds are intended to support communities to develop local efforts focused on expanding capacity and enhancing quality using the Communities for Kids (C4K) approach of engagement, utilization, and connection. Communities are supported with technical assistance as they engage stakeholders in identifying the strengths and gaps of the current early care and education landscape, utilizing informed data-driven decision-making to determine strategies and outcomes most relevant to meeting local need. The technical assistance connects communities with resources, including peer networks, research and best practices in early care and education.

A total of 10 communities received planning dollars. Communities that received these funds included six new communities: Bertrand, Giltner, Kimball County, Nemaha County, O’Neill/Holt, and Overton. The four counties of Buffalo, Dakota, Dodge, and Douglas were also selected to participate in the planning efforts as well as receive funding in other activity areas such as ECCC or quality and capacity building efforts.

Information below includes the number of licensed child care programs in each planning community and the number of programs participating in Step Up to Quality as of May 2022.

Community Name	Total Number of Programs	% Family Childcare Homes	% Center Based (including PreK)	Number (%) participating in SUTQ
<i>Bertrand</i>	3	68%	32%	0
<i>Buffalo County*</i>	92	73%	27%	34 (37%)
<i>Dakota*</i>	25	68%	32%	12 (48%)
<i>Dodge County*</i>	39	46%	54%	10 (26%)
<i>Douglas County*</i>	654	58%	42%	140 (21%)
<i>Giltner</i>	1	--	100%	0
<i>Kimball County*</i>	2	100%	--	0
<i>Nemaha County*</i>	15	73%	27%	6 (40%)
<i>O’Neill/Holt</i>	15	80%	20%	4 (27%)
<i>Overton</i>	3	100%	--	2 (67%)
Total	849	60%	40%	208 (24%)

*County wide numbers

Conclusions and Next Steps

In the second year of the C4K+ initiative, the ECCCs noted many successes, the top three being getting the word out about early childhood in their community, building new relationships and having financial resources to host events, and give stipends to providers to attend trainings. They engaged diverse stakeholders, most notably initiating connections with people who are advocates for those with special needs. The results of the PARTNER survey indicated that many stakeholders aligned their goals, with the majority hoping that the C4K+ initiative would increase high quality child care that is affordable and accessible to all. A social network analysis highlighted how ECCCs viewed each other in different communities as sources of information, resources, and emotional support.

The ECCCs logged 3,337 hours to host 2,298 activities that engaged various sectors of their community's early childhood care and education. Over 31,500 people participated.

Many communities saw growth in the number of child care programs participating in SUTQ over the past year, which is a measure of increasing quality. Across the C4K+ communities, there was a 38% increase in the number of programs participating in SUTQ. Unfortunately, while a few communities saw an increase in the number of child cares, most did not. Across the initiative, there was an 8% decline in the overall number of child cares compared to the previous year. It is likely that the overall decline in child cares is related to the negative impacts of COVID-19. Child cares saw a decline in enrollment and loss of staff. As businesses closed or went fully remote, many families removed their children from child care to ease the financial burden of care. In addition, some families kept children home to protect them from the virus.

The Early Learning Scholarship Initiative was launched in 13 communities, serving 164 children. A total of \$154,205 in scholarships was distributed. Providers found the program had a positive impact on their business and on their families. Nearly all parents reported that the ELS made a difference for their family and reduced financial stress.

The Spanish Speaking Bilingual Provider Support Initiative was launched in nine communities. The ECCCs have been building relationships and providing support to Spanish-speaking providers in a variety of ways including getting materials translated into Spanish, offering training in Spanish, and helping providers apply for child care licenses. A highlight was the first ever conference for Spanish speaking child care providers.

A total of 10 communities have received C4K+ planning dollars. With technical assistance, stakeholders are assessing their community's needs for early care and education and using data-based decision making to create a plan to improve early childhood services and strengthen their community.

As the C4K+ initiative heads into Year 3, the ECCCs hope to build on successes and strengthen their communities' commitment to supporting early childhood efforts. They will look for ways to increase connections across multiple sectors and help more people appreciate how important high quality and accessible child care is to their community's well-being.



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Appendix: Social Network Analysis of Early Childhood Community Coordinators

Report prepared by Research and Evaluation Team at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation

June 2022

Major Findings

- The top five connected Early Childhood Community Coordinators (ECCCs) in the sharing of Information and Resources are the same top 5 in the sharing of Emotional Support. These are key leaders in the ECCC network. Four of these 5 serve in the Central Region.
- ECCCs reported more connections due to sharing Information and Resources than due to Emotional Support.
- On average, ECCCs in the Panhandle and Southeast Regions are the least connected, both within their Regions and with those in other Regions.
- Those in the Central and High Plains Regions are the most connected.
- On average, ECCCs serving Metropolitan and Micropolitan communities are reported as a source of Information and Resources and Emotional Support more often than ECCCs serving Rural communities.

Overview of Early Childhood Community Coordinators and the Year 2 Survey

The C4K+ evaluation originally planned for community stakeholders to take the PARTNER survey, a social network analysis tool, in summer of 2021 to measure the strengths of the collaboration across organizations to support early childhood initiatives. Social network analysis results from the 2021 administration of the PARTNER survey were unusable due to low response rates.

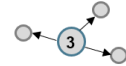
As an alternative, the Research and Evaluation Team at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation collaborated with the Munroe-Meyer Institute at University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC MMI) to develop survey questions to analyze the network connections between ECCCs throughout Nebraska. ECCCs were asked to indicate which of the other ECCCs were a source of 1) Information and Resources that are helpful in their work as an ECCC, and 2) Emotional Support.

Introduction to Social Network Analysis¹. Social networks play a key role in all our lives, such as influencing the language we use, the professional development opportunities we hear about, and which community concerns matter most to us. Social Network Analysis (SNA) aims to understand the connections and relationships between member in a social network that may be otherwise difficult to grasp. This information can then inform collaboration strategies, resource allocation, emergency planning, and more.

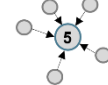
Below are key terms that will be used in this report:

- **Early Childhood Community Coordinators (ECCCs)** – the members in this social network, displayed as circles on a network map
- **Connections** – number of connections reported that involve an ECCC (e.g., Jamal is connected to 9 other ECCCs)
- **Out-Connections** – number of connections originating from an ECCC; those who did not respond to the survey will have 0 out-connections (e.g., Jamal reported receiving information from 3 ECCCs (3 out-connections))
- **In-Connections** – number of connections reported to an ECCC; ECCCs who did not respond to the survey may have in-connections (e.g., 5 people reported receiving information from Jamal (5 in-connections))
- **Isolates** – ECCCs with no connections

Out-Connections



In-Connections



Results. The Early Childhood Community Coordinator Year 2 Survey was administered by UNMC MMI on February 8, 2022, via Qualtrics. UNMC MMI emailed the survey link to the 33 ECCCs across the 27 communities and closed the survey on March 1, 2022.

Of the 33 ECCCs, 27 responded to at least one of the social network analysis questions for an 82% response rate. When asked if they had networked with other ECCCs outside of the twice-monthly meetings, 22 ECCCs reported they had networked (67%, n=27). Of the five ECCCs who indicated they had not networked, three indicated they have not had the time and two indicated it was due to an ECCC staff change either in their own community or another's.

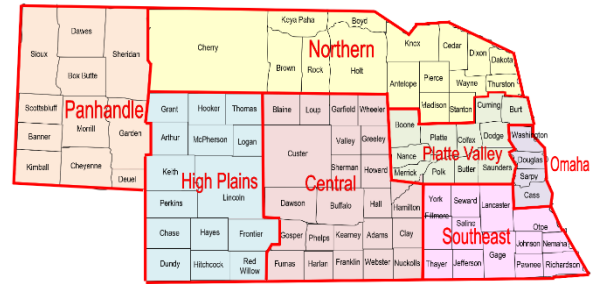
Those who did not respond (n=6) or indicated they had not networked outside of twice-monthly meetings (n=5) are still included in the following network maps because they may have been reported as a source of Information and Resources and/or Emotional Support. Responses in which an ECCC indicated receiving either Information and Resources or Emotional Support from themselves were removed for the purpose of this analysis.

Results by Geographic Region. To keep responses confidential and to understand geographic influences on network connections, each ECCC was assigned to one of six geographic regions based on the location of the community they serve. The regional breakdown was determined using the Nebraska Department of Education's [Early Learning Connection Partnerships Map](#), shown in Figure A, as recommended by the C4K+ team.² ECCCs within the Platte Valley and Omaha regions were combined under "Platte Valley + Omaha" due to only one ECCC serving the Omaha region.

Table 1: The Central region contains the most ECCCs.

Regions ²	Number of ECCCs
Central (n=10)	11
Northern (n=4)	6
Panhandle (n=2)	5
Southeast (n=4)	4
Platte Valley + Omaha (n=4)	4
High Plains (n=3)	3
Total	33

Figure A: Early Learning Connection Regions²
The Platte Valley and Omaha regions were combined under "Platte Valley + Omaha".

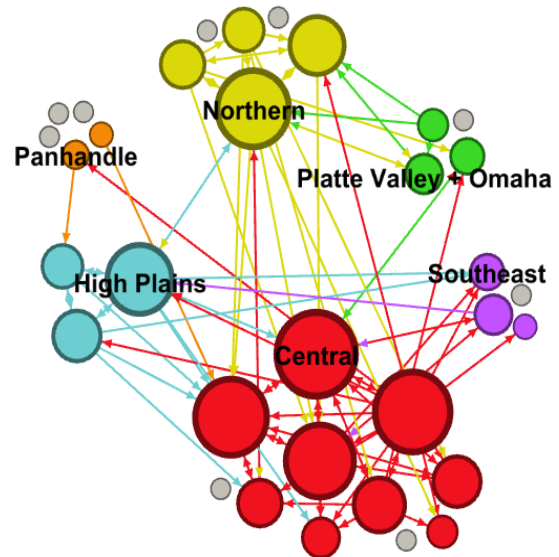


Information and Resources Connections (n=27)

The map of Information and Resources connections is displayed in Figures B.1 and B.2 to the right. In Figure B.2, the connections both to and from ECCCs in the Panhandle Region are highlighted.

ECCCs in the Panhandle Region have the lowest reported number of connections on average in which they provide or receive Information and Resources (0.6 average connections, shown in Figure B.1 and B.2). In contrast, there is at least one connection between the Central Region and every other region in the network. Those in the High Plains and Central Regions have the highest average Information and Resources connections (9.0 and 8.5 average connections, respectively). There are nine Isolates in the Information and Resources network, 6 of whom did not respond to the survey.

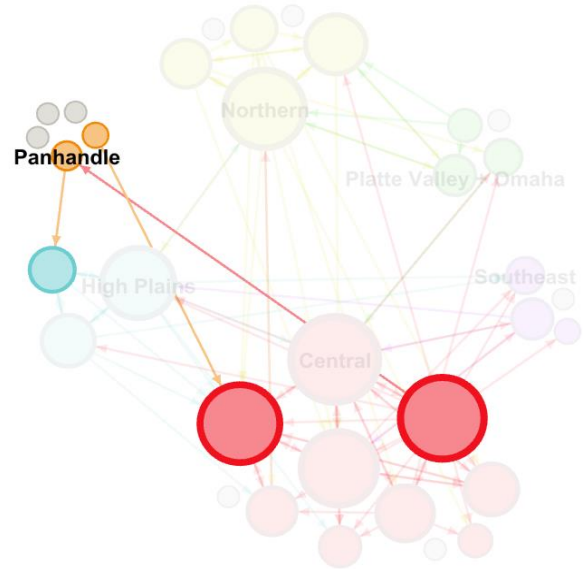
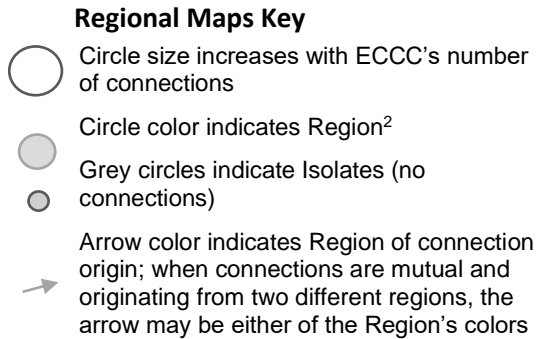
Figure B.1. ECCCs in the High Plains and Central Regions have the highest average Information and Resources connections.



Regional Maps Key

- Circle size increases with ECCC's number of connections
- Circle color indicates Region²
- Grey circles indicate Isolates (no connections)
- Arrow color indicates Region of connection origin; when connections are mutual and originating from two different regions, the arrow may be either of the Region's colors

Figure B.2 ECCCs in the **Panhandle Region** have the **lowest** average Information and Resources connections (0.6).

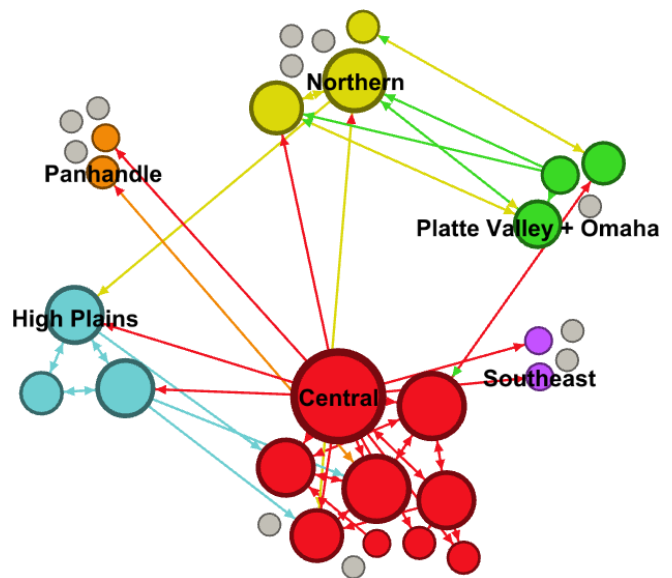


Emotional Support Connections (n=27)

The map of Emotional Support connections is displayed in Figures C.1 and C.2 below. In Figure C.2, the connections both to and from ECCCs in the Central Region are highlighted.

ECCCs in the Central Region report at least one other Emotional Support connection in each of the other Regions (shown in Figure C.1 and C.2), in addition to reporting many connections to each other. In contrast, those in the Panhandle and Southeast Regions are only connected to one region, the Central Region. No Emotional Support connections are reported within the Panhandle Region or within the Southeast Region. While the Panhandle Region is a geographic neighbor with both the Northern and High Plains Regions, no Emotional Support connections exist with either of these neighbors. There are 11 Isolates in the Emotional Support network, 6 of whom did not respond to the survey.

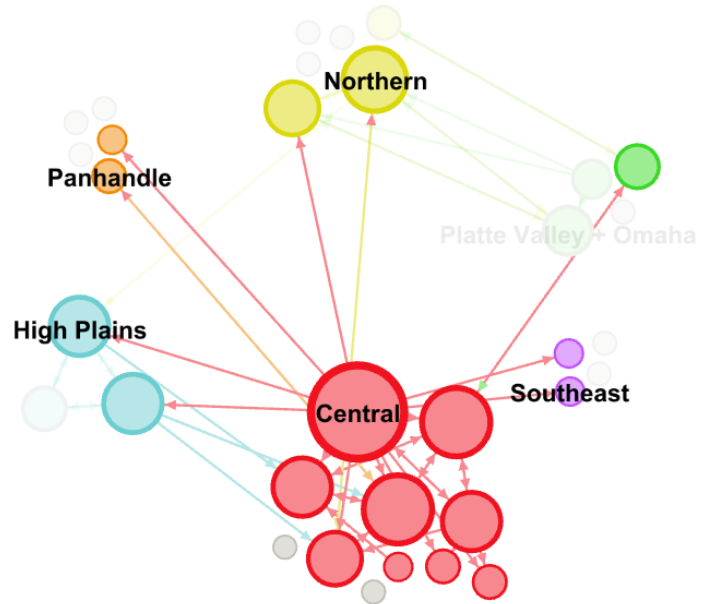
Figure C.1 The **Panhandle** and **Southeast** Regions have Emotional Support connections to one other region – Central Region.



Regional Maps Key

- Circle size increases with ECCC's number of connections
- Circle color indicates Region²
- Grey circles indicate Isolates (no connections)
- Arrow color indicates Region of connection origin; when connections are mutual and originating from two different regions, the arrow may be either of the Region's colors

Figure C.2 ECCCs in the Central Region are connected to every Region for Emotional Support.



Results by Population Category

The following is a summary of the network survey results by population size of the community the ECCC serves. The communities are split into Rural (population up to 9,999), Micropolitan (population 10,000 – 49,999), and Metropolitan (population over 50,000). A breakdown of the number of ECCCs by population category is included in Table 2 to the right.

Table 2: Over half of the ECCCs serve Rural communities.

Population Category	Number of ECCCs
Rural (n=13)	18
Micropolitan (n=11)	12
Metropolitan (n=3)	3
Total	33

On average, ECCCs serving Metropolitan and Micropolitan communities were reported as a sources of Information and Resources and Emotional Support more often than those serving Rural communities (see Table 3.). The most reported source of both Information and Resources and Emotional Support is the same ECCC serving a Metropolitan community. The map of Emotional Support connections is displayed in Figure D below.

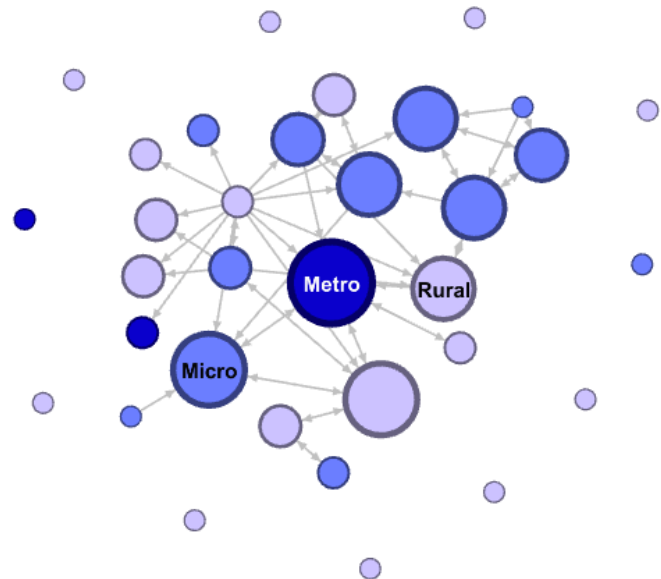
Table 3: Metropolitan and Micropolitan ECCC's were more often indicated as a source of Information and Resources and Emotional Support.

Population Category	Information and Resources	Emotional Support
Metropolitan (n=3)	5.0	2.3
Micropolitan (n=12)	3.7	2.3
Rural (n=18)	1.8	1.1
Total	2.8	1.6

Figure D. On average, **Metropolitan and Micropolitan ECCC's** are reported as a **source of Emotional Support** more often than Rural ECCC's.

Population Category Map Key

- Circle size increases with in-connections (number of connections reported to an ECCC)
- Rural (less than 10,000)
- Micropolitan (10,000 – 49,999)
- Metropolitan (more than 49,999)



Most Valuable Part of ECCC Connections (n=21)

Of the 33 ECCC's, 21 responded to the question, "What have you found to be most valuable about the connections you have made?". Responses to this question often focused on the benefit of sharing effective ideas and strategies with each other to guide work, in addition to having people to go to with questions and concerns. Another advantage often identified was the value of being connected with others who have a shared experience and can offer support when encountering difficulties or obstacles in the role.

“To hear their ideas and to have them share thoughts on my challenges with fresh eyes. Someone to just bounce things off of - someone who understands my role but is a safe person to share frustrations with.”

Rural ECCC

Limitations

Missing Responses: Results need to be interpreted with caution due to six of the 33 ECCC's in the network not responding to the survey. These six ECCC's were also identified as Isolates, or those having no in- or out-connections, in both the Information and Resources and Emotional Support networks.

Varying and Small Sample Sizes: In the comparisons of ECCC's based on region or population of the community they serve, groups with a significant variety in sample sizes are compared, with some sample sizes as small as three. Groups are labeled with sample sizes to protect against overgeneralization when possible.

Lack of Definitions: In the survey, no definitions or examples of “information and resources” and “emotional support” were provided, leaving this up to the interpretation of each respondent. This may make results less valid due to the potential variation in interpretation across respondents.

Quality and Source of Connection: It is important to keep in mind that responses identified the presence of a connection between ECCC's, rather than the quality or nature of that connection. It is unclear whether the connections identified occurred due to their shared role as an ECCC, existed prior to their role, or occurred through another means. The quality and source of the connection may be key in understanding how to strengthen the network.

Conclusion

ECCC's reported many benefits of being connected to their fellow ECCC's. Some of the key advantages identified include being able to share ideas and strategies that have been effective and receiving support during difficult times with someone who shares the experience. ECCC's reported being more connected in the sharing of helpful Information and Resources than the sharing of Emotional Support. Regionally, those located in the Central and High Plains Regions, both centrally located in Nebraska, tended to be more connected than those in the Panhandle and Southeast Regions. ECCC's serving Micropolitan and Metropolitan regions also reported having more connections on average than Rural ECCC's.

References

¹Jackson, M. O. (2008). Social and Economic Networks. Princeton University Press

²Nebraska Department of Education. (2022). Early Learning Connection.
<https://www.education.ne.gov/oec/early-learning-connection/>

