

COMMUNITIES FOR KIDS

The Early Years:

Partnering with Communities to Prioritize Child Care





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“The focus in our community has shifted in that we have really started a conversation that wasn’t happening before. It has made us all more aware as a community and really helped unify our team on goals for our organization to fully make an impact.”

– Gering Community

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building Quality Early Child Care, One Community at a Time

Our Communities for Kids' team has a saying, that if you have seen one community, you have seen just that—one community. That's a pretty good way to get to know our initiative.

Communities for Kids (C4K) is driven by a simple yet powerful vision: to lead national efforts to ensure that communities, primarily rural areas, can grow and prosper by strengthening and sustaining a quality early childhood care and education infrastructure. Created by Nebraska Children and Families Foundation in 2017, we began this important work in Nebraska, and throughout the last seven years, we have partnered with 67 communities to refine a unique initiative that is scalable to any community seeking to establish quality child care and increased capacity.

Our mission is grounded in the belief that the answers to a community's challenges will be found in that community. At C4K, this guiding philosophy shapes our unique initiative features, employing a collective impact approach to tailor and co-create effective solutions for rural communities. Our insights, gleaned from our teams' experiences in rural communities coupled with working closely with Nebraskans, reinforce the notion that no two communities are the same. Through our mission work and leaning into the culture of each community, we partner with them to prioritize the expansion and enhancement of quality early childhood care and education by identifying and addressing their unique strengths and needs.

Acting as a catalyst and a guide, C4K encourages communities to envision and implement strategies for their specific early childhood challenges. Together, we strive to make a lasting impact through community-led initiatives, collective engagement, data-driven approaches, resource connections, commitment to inclusivity, fostering dynamic connections, and measurement.

What does this look like in reality? In our first seven years, the C4K team has partnered with communities to co-create some noteworthy accomplishments. Here are a few highlights from our key outcomes that you can learn more about on pages 32-37.



Quality and Capacity: *In the years following the pandemic, stabilization of child care programs became an important focus. C4K communities have **increased child care capacity**, across all cohorts, between June 2021 - June 2023 by 1,934 slots, through program development and expansion support.*

Scaling: *Increased collaboration between C4K and Nebraska communities, elevating our impact with an **11% rise in partnering communities**. This represents a **52% growth in counties** where the C4K initiative is actively working toward meaningful and positive change.*

Economic Impact: *Added almost **\$25 million** of increased financial support for quality early childhood efforts in communities across Nebraska.*

Results like these and our initiative's approach are some of the reasons we are getting attention nationally. We were glad to welcome PBS Newshour journalists who found their way to Nebraska when they were looking around the country for innovative work in the early childhood field. The impact created by the C4K team and partner communities was spotlighted in their series called "Raising the Future: America's Child Care Dilemma." We love our work and are always happy to talk about our initiative and the answers we have found.

Which is one of the main reasons this report was written: to serve as a resource and to provide insight into our work, approach, and impact. We extend an invitation to you or anyone interested in diving deeper into the C4K initiative to reach out to us. We like to build relationships sitting across the table from one another when possible, but a virtual cup of coffee works, too.

Our journey to create impact in the early childhood landscape is gaining momentum, one community at a time.



Marti Beard
Vice President of Early Childhood Programs
Communities for Kids
Nebraska Children and Families Foundation

ORIGIN STORY OVERVIEW

*“Awareness is accelerating, new programs opening,
businesses are collaborating, quality is increasing.”*

– City of Lincoln

ORIGIN STORY OVERVIEW

Communities for Kids (C4K) is an initiative, launched in Nebraska in 2017, that is dedicated to the idea that communities, primarily rural areas, can grow and prosper by strengthening and sustaining a quality early childhood care and education infrastructure.

The concept emerged from community requests for assistance with shortages of quality child care programs, getting the attention of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, the William and Ruth Scott Family Foundation, and the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. Over the course of seven years, C4K evolved from a simple idea into a dedicated initiative serving over 67 communities across the state. Everywhere C4K goes in Nebraska, they generate change as they work to foster collaboration, deliver key resources, and share expertise with communities working to prioritize child care.

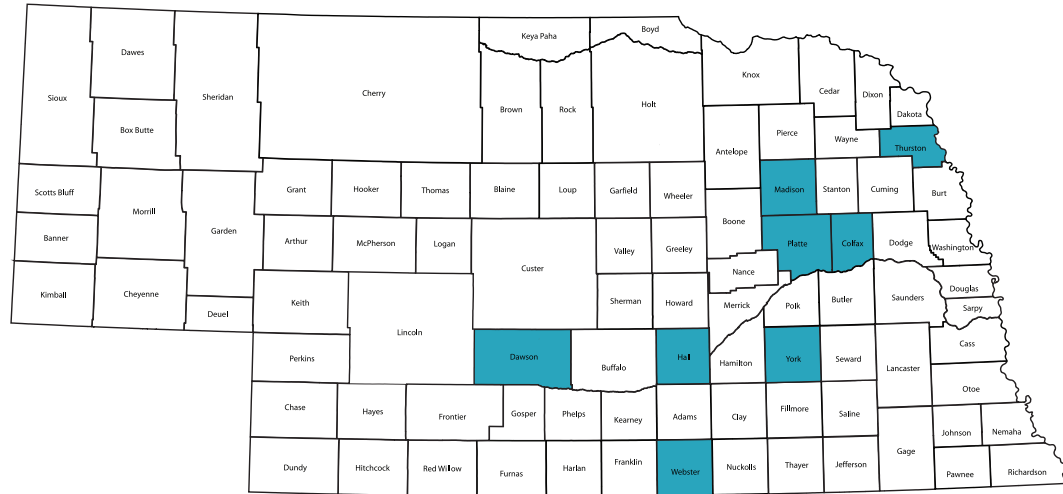
The pioneers of C4K authored a concept paper predicting that an initiative focused on community listening, data utilization, and engaging diverse champions would be the key to lasting change, along with a capable technical assistant who could offer helpful guidance, but not prescriptive solutions, and extend the right resources at the right time. This led to the creation of an approach that was tailored to meet each community's specific needs and strengths.

The initiative began with a pilot cohort of nine and expanded significantly, particularly with the Preschool Development Grant boosting Nebraska's early childhood field beginning in 2020, allowing C4K to grow its reach and impact. Impressive outcomes followed, technical assistants were hired, and a statewide network of trust was built.

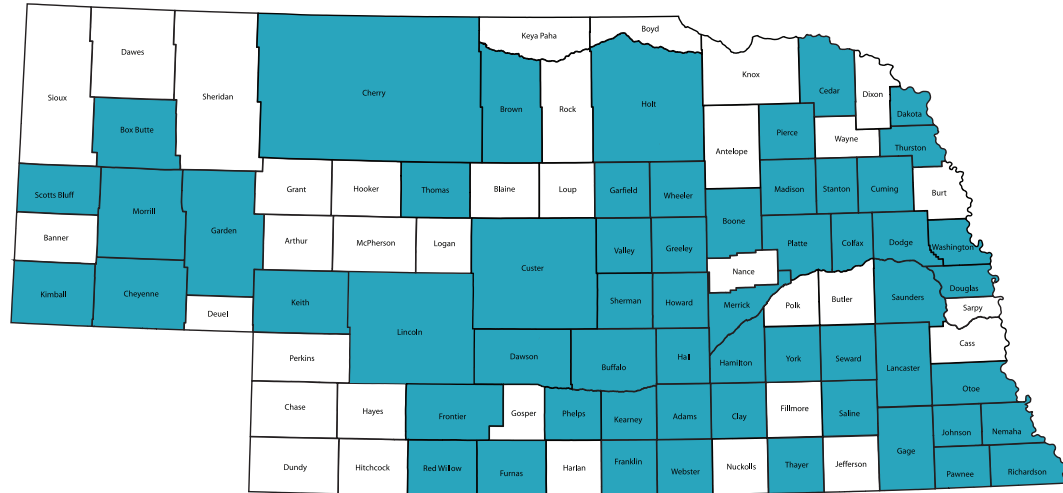
As processes evolved, the methodology cemented. C4K's framework became structured around a collective impact approach, technical assistance that is as flexible as it is resourceful, and a well-researched theory of change. It guides communities through readiness, exploration, commitment, and action phases, and special emphasis is placed on rural communities, fundraising skill development, and navigating challenges holistically, aiming for inclusive, community-based early childhood solutions.

Since it began, the initiative has not lost any steam. Key outcomes include enhancing quality and increasing capacity of child care, scaling the initiative to serve a wider area, and generating significant economic impact. The initiative has also grown organically, indicating its trustworthiness and effectiveness. Stories from communities highlight the transformative impact of C4K, emphasizing not just quantitative success, but profound benefits, both individual and community-wide.

C4K Communities in 2017



C4K Communities in 2024

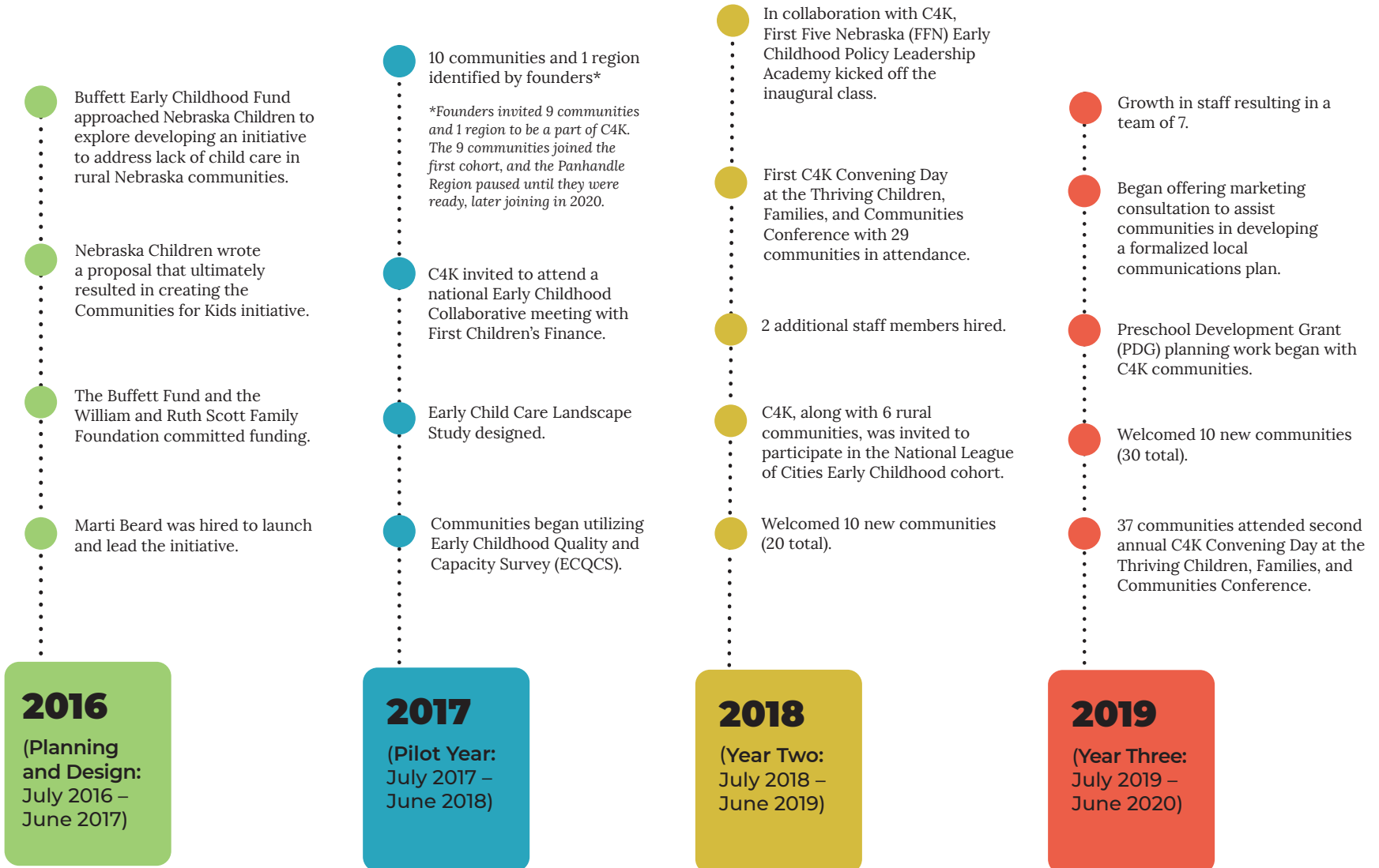


TIMELINE

“This has been a great year for us with a lot of learning, pivoting and education. We are excited to see what we can do this next year.”

– Keith County

TIMELINE



2020
(Year Four: July 2020 – June 2021)

- Supported distribution of Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) funds to assist in stabilizing child care programs across the state.
- Implemented PDG funds to support local infrastructure, quality and capacity expansion, and increased accessibility to child care within C4K communities.
- Partnered with First Five Nebraska (FFN) to create “My Story” videos, focused on sharing various communities’ journeys of early childhood from across the state.
- 50 communities were represented at the third annual C4K Convening Day at the Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference.
- C4K team invited to participate in Harvard Learning Child Theory of Change workshop.
- C4K Webinar Series focused on Storytelling and Creating Community Storyboards.
- Welcomed 13 new communities and the Panhandle Region (43 total).

2021
(Year Five: July 2021 – June 2022)

- 4 national features:
 - Featured on PBS NewsHour child care series, “Raising the Future, The Child Care Crisis”
 - Served as panelist for – “Fight Crime: Invest in Kids”
 - Highlighted in Mark Swartz’s Child Care Crisis article for Early Learning Nation
 - Invited to join National Association of County Officials four-state learning series cohort
- State Chamber presentation.
- Awarded Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) funds to support capacity expansion for child care.
- 69 communities attended the fourth annual C4K Convening Day at the Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference.
- 4 additional staff members hired, creating a team of 11.
- Secured \$4 million of the state’s American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds through Nebraska Legislative Bill 1014 for child care capacity building.
- Second annual C4K Webinar Series focused on Sustainability Planning.
- Welcomed 7 new communities (50 total).

2022
(Year Six: July 2022 – June 2023)

- Second Preschool Development Grant (PDG) aimed at supporting providers implemented with 6 C4K communities
- Staff and community Technology of Participation (ToP) facilitation training.
- First Spanish Speaking Early Childhood Conference led by communities in partnership with various statewide agencies and organizations.
- Nebraska Department of Education Administrator’s Days presentation.
- 81 communities were represented at the fifth annual C4K Convening Day at the Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference.
- Welcomed 10 new communities (60 total).

2023
(Year Seven: July 2023 – June 2024)

- Third annual C4K Webinar Series focused on next steps and the “Now What” of Collective Early Childhood Efforts
- National presentations/meetings
 - National Opinion Research Center (NORC) Data Convening presentation
 - Bipartisan Policy Center Focus on Rural Child Care meeting
 - American Enterprise Institute Ready Rosie presentation
- State presentations
 - Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association (NRCSA) panelist
 - Nebraska Department of Education Administrator’s Days presentation
 - Importance of Early Childhood presentation for all five district meetings for Nebraska Association of County Officials (NACO)
- Second annual Spanish Speaking Early Childhood Conference
- 84 communities attended the sixth annual C4K Convening Day at the Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference with 255 participants

INITIATIVE FRAMEWORK

“It feels as though we are just getting started in this initiative, but we have seen many positive impacts already in these early stages, such as having established an enthusiastic C4K committee, with diverse backgrounds and professions represented.”

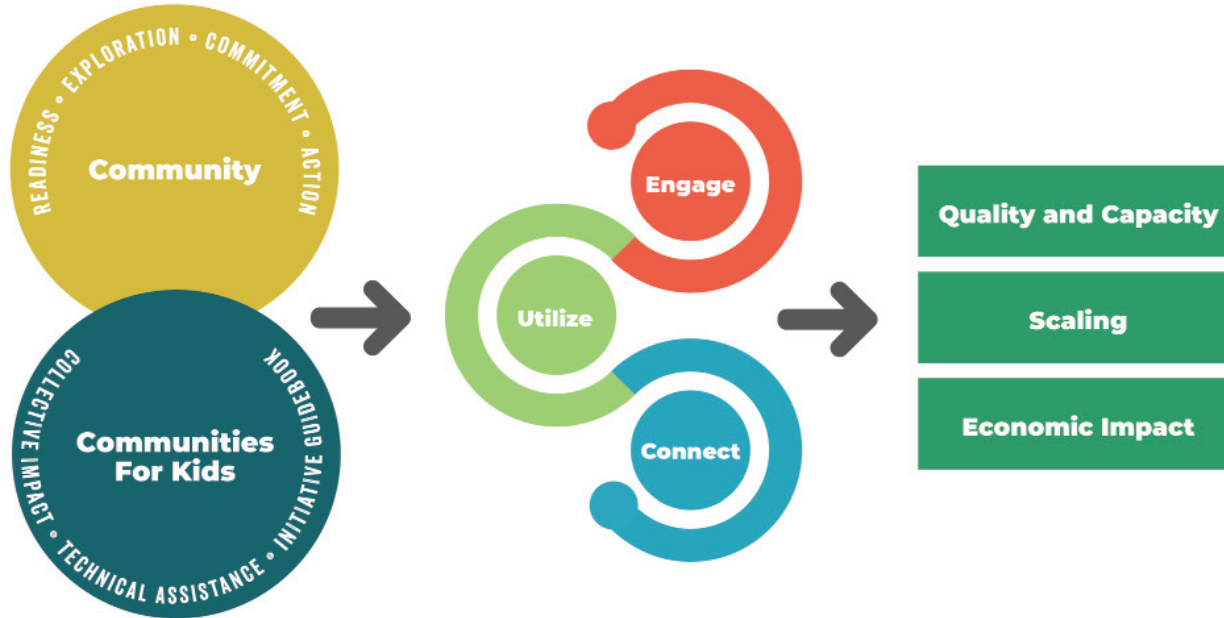
– Gage County

INITIATIVE FRAMEWORK

The Communities for Kids (C4K) initiative partners with communities to increase their access to quality child care by providing a framework, and guiding and supporting each community's planning process. Each partnership is customized to address the community's unique needs and assets. Ultimately, the community will build an early childhood infrastructure.

The first step in becoming a part of the C4K initiative is a conversation with the C4K team. After the initial conversation, if a community is interested and ready to commit to the project, an invitation to apply is sent to the community. To date, 100% of applicants are referred from existing C4K communities and partners and, due to demand, C4K has a waiting list. Once the application is assessed for community readiness and local leadership commitment, and accepted, the orientation process begins.

INITIATIVE DESIGN



The illustration demonstrates the C4K initiative framework and how C4K partners with a community to prioritize child care.

INITIATIVE DESIGN

When partners work together, key outcomes are achieved, and the community's Core Team (the group of people spearheading the work) learns to Engage with the whole community, Utilize data to set strategy and key messaging, and Connect with networks and resources across the state. Measurement is a core component of the C4K initiative and outcomes are tracked in three key areas including *Quality and Capacity*, *Scaling*, and *Economic Impact*.

THE FRAMEWORK

The C4K framework illustrates the initiative's unique approach of partnering with communities to prioritize child care.

C4K OFFERS COMMUNITIES:

- **Collective Impact Approach**

C4K uses a collective impact approach to foster the synergy of diverse community stakeholders working together toward a common goal. Collective impact is based on the idea that no single organization can create lasting change alone. Long-term, sustainable change requires several entities—including government, private and public organizations, community members, and funders—to work collectively toward a shared vision of community well-being for all. This approach ensures that the combined efforts of the community create a more comprehensive and impactful response to creating an early childhood infrastructure.

- **Technical Assistance and Initiative Guidebook**

The initiative shares C4K's Three Pillars: Engage, Utilize, and Connect—to represent the initiative's core strategies delivered through expert technical assistance and the resourceful Initiative Guidebook, the process document that breaks down the basic steps and activities of the C4K initiative. These areas of focus emphasize the fundamental and essential nature of each aspect in achieving the overall goals of the initiative.

- **Theory of Change**

C4K offers insights into positive change from a C4K perspective with some familiarity with Dr. John P. Kotter's "The 8 Steps for Leading Change." Kotter's methodology is a proven approach to positive and lasting change within communities. Internally, on the C4K team, outcome measurements of the initiative are tied to Kotter's theory. This theory of change currently operates in the background of the C4K initiative and is poised to assume a more central role in the coming year.

Using a collective impact approach, the C4K technical assistance team guides communities to build a strong, diverse Core Team and a work plan to address both the challenges they face and the opportunities they have with enhancing and expanding local child care efforts.

By joining the C4K initiative, a community commits to making continuous contributions that emphasize its crucial role in promoting positive change, with a focus on prioritizing child care within the community.

A COMMUNITY COMMITS TO BRINGING:

- **Readiness**

Assessing and preparing the community for the work to partner to prioritize child care

- **Exploration**

Delving into the potential opportunities and challenges for collaboration

- **Commitment**

Formalizing the dedication to actively participate and work the C4K framework

- **Action**

Implementing the agreed-upon strategies and taking practical steps towards achieving defined goals

Communities are offered a three-year contract that comes with nominal funds distributed each year to pay for anything that assists them in their planning process. Examples include a part-time coordinator to facilitate meetings and delegate tasks, meals or snacks to bring community members together, material incentives for community participation, or travel to training and events—most notably, the annual C4K Convening conference, where they can meet and learn from other C4K teams across the state.

The largest impact of the initiative, however, lies in the C4K staff assigned to the community. They come armed with the tools of a master facilitator, helping community Core Teams shape their work plans by asking key questions and providing expertise on everything from how to continually keep a community engaged to doing deep dives into local data analysis. They provide valuable connections to resources and people who will assist them in accomplishing their goals. They meet in person, on Zoom, or by phone, and *stay available* as a sounding board at all times—even when the contract period has passed. When surveyed, every community cited their relationship with the C4K staff as a top reason for their local success.

Each community is different, so each specific approach varies, but there are several primary activities C4K staff implement across the board once the work plan is built. The first is to provide guidance on developing and distributing an Early Childhood Quality and Capacity Survey in order to get the best results. The surveys are customizable, and include sections for parents of young children, child care providers (both licensed and non-licensed), the business community, and general community members. These surveys include questions such as:

- How important is it to have available child care for all families who need it in our community?
- How important is having choices in your selection of child care placement?
- In the last 12 months, has a lack of child care or disruption to child care services affected your ability to work?
- As a business owner/supervisor, have you had a potential or current employee not take a job or leave the job because of a lack of child care?

Once the survey is complete, the results are combined with data drawn from various sources, and everything is poured into the next activity, a one-pager called the Early Childhood Landscape Study. This sheet teaches the reader about the current state of child care statistics and perceptions in the area and becomes an effective tool for the core team to make its case across the community. It shows the Child Care Gap number, which is the measurement of children with all available parents working who do not have a licensed child care or public preschool to attend during the day. This number is cited the most when Core Teams begin to spread their message.

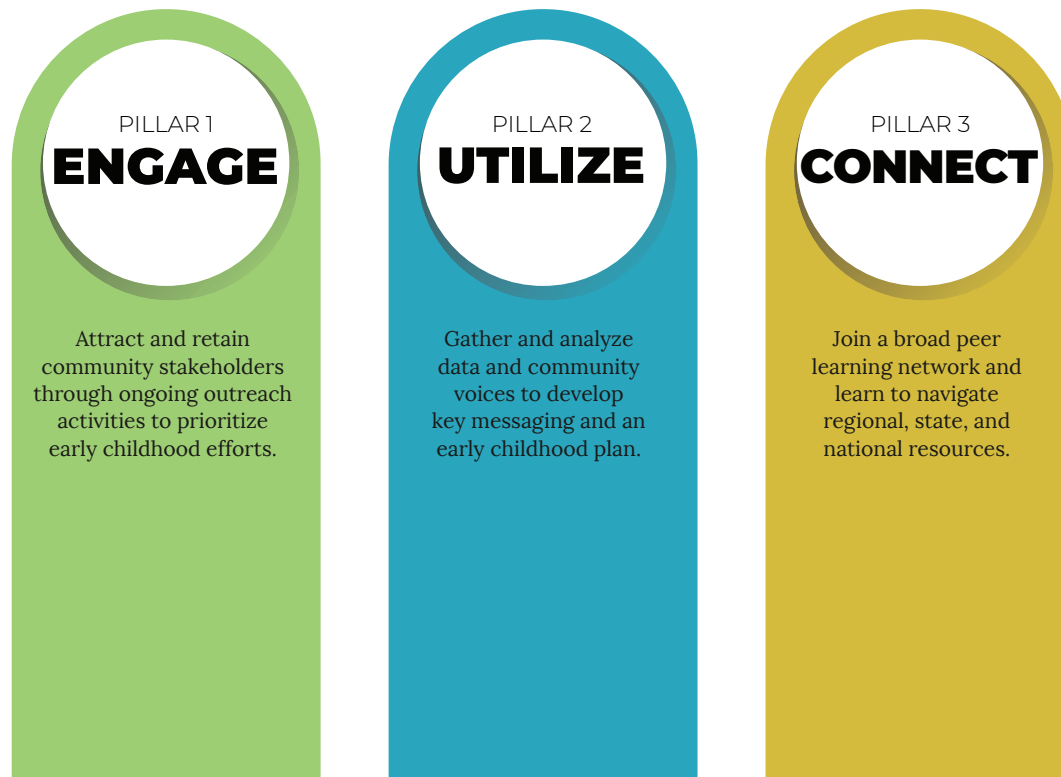
Communities are next referred to a professional marketing consultant to develop that message, which includes a Vision and Mission statement. These messages are used in communication, fundraising, marketing, grants, and long-term sustainability efforts. They share why early childhood is important in the community and what is being done to further develop early childhood systems. These messages can be shared with the broader public to help raise awareness of the C4K work.

With those steps complete, the Core Team works with the local community to identify strategies for implementation. These strategies vary greatly based on the needs, preferences, and hopes of the community. The Technical Assistant then connects the community to peer networks, grants, potential funders, fundraising/capital campaign training, and an array of local, regional, state, and national resources. If a community is choosing to expand or start a child care program, facility start-up resources and specific technical assistance is provided to assure that the community is aware of rules and regulations and grant opportunities available.

THREE PILLARS

The C4K framework is supported by the Three Pillars of C4K: Engage, Utilize, and Connect. If a community does these three things successfully, they are likely to make great strides in their goals and achieve meaningful change in creating a child care infrastructure in their community.

The best way to demonstrate the Three Pillars is to highlight some of our C4K communities in action. All three of the communities featured have implemented each of the Three Pillars successfully, but for the purposes of this report, we focused on communities who excelled at a particular piece, to illustrate how the successful implementation of a pillar can positively affect a community.



ENGAGE: LEXINGTON, NEBRASKA

GOAL: Attract and retain community stakeholders through ongoing outreach activities to prioritize early childhood efforts.

In the heart of Nebraska, a dynamic and visionary team in Lexington has been quietly transforming the landscape of early childhood development through an innovative and inclusive approach to community engagement. Their journey is one of vision, collaboration, and a relentless commitment to fostering a child care infrastructure that includes everyone.

Several years ago, Lexington faced a critical need for a comprehensive child care infrastructure that could cater to the diverse needs of its community. Enter Communities for Kids (C4K) as a partner and the process to prioritize child care in the community began. At its core, engagement in Lexington thrives on the involvement of the community.

The Lexington team, along with Shonna Werth, the C4K Assistant Vice President of Early Childhood Programs, recognized early on that building trust within the community was paramount. Trust became the bridge connecting caregivers, parents, educators, and local organizations. This trust-building process involved active listening, knocking on doors, understanding cultural nuances, recognizing the unique strengths within the community, and hiring the right team.

The Lexington team strategically identified influential individuals within various cultural groups, engaging them as ambassadors to facilitate communication and trust-building. By acknowledging the resilience and importance of immigrant communities and fostering a sense of belief and support, Lexington laid the groundwork for a welcoming child care infrastructure.

Maricela Novoa, Central Region Early Learning Connection Bilingual Specialist, identified one of Lexington's secrets to success in gaining momentum in the community to prioritize child care: "Find your people. Get people to the table." In Lexington, this means to intentionally look for and identify key community members who act as connectors to broader unconnected networks. Lexington sought out home visitors, community health workers, and individuals with established community relationships, ensuring that the right people were at the forefront of their engagement initiatives.

"Find your people. Get people to the table."

–Maricela Novoa

Central Region Early Learning Connection Bilingual Specialist



This deliberate approach not only expanded the reach of their efforts but also brought diverse perspectives to the table, enriching the entire process. By valuing the input of these influencers, Lexington ensured that their engagement strategies were culturally sensitive and tailored to the needs of the entire community. “We didn’t go in and say like, ‘Hey, this is what we’re offering,’ it was all about ‘What is your need?’” said Stephanie Novoa, C4K Child Care Coach/Coordinator. “We’re here to listen and see how we can meet that need and just open that door. Anyone is invited!”

In the journey to enhance early childhood development, Lexington discovered the power of mission alignment. By partnering with local organizations like the YMCA and the public library, Lexington created a shared vision for the well-being of children in the community. These partnerships weren’t just superficial; they were rooted in a genuine commitment to a common cause.

Lexington’s engagement efforts extend beyond simply checking boxes. Recognizing that the right people need to be at the table, the team ensured that representatives from the city, including the mayor and city administrator, were engaged in the process. This intentional inclusion paved the way for the city to recognize the importance of becoming a partner in the endeavor. “We set up this meeting, and we sent out the information to a bunch of people and you know, we just kind of hoped a couple people might show up,” said Scott Foster, Workforce Developer for the City of Lexington. “I have a boardroom that has about 15 chairs in it, and I think we ran out of space. We had people from the hospital, Tyson Foods, the city, and people from other groups that were interested in what we were talking about.”

Measuring the success of community engagement in Lexington is not just about numbers; it’s about witnessing transformative change. The journey from having only two Spanish speaking licensed trainers to training seven is a testament to the impact of engagement.

In just two years, the Lexington team saw the Spanish learning series evolve from nine participants to a state conference boasting over 60 attendees. This growth showcases not only the hunger for knowledge within the community but also the effectiveness of engagement strategies in reaching a broader audience.

“We’re here to listen and see how we can meet that need and just open that door.”

–Stephanie Novoa

C4K Child Care
Coach/Coordinator



Lexington's focus on mentorship has further amplified the impact. Licensed providers have become champions, guiding others through the licensing journey, and fostering a supportive community. This mentorship model ensures that the seeds planted by Lexington's engagement efforts are not only taking root but are flourishing. "The prioritization of ongoing engagement with child care providers is one example of how that investment is the creation of long-lasting sustainability of the C4K work in Lexington," Werth said.

The flexibility within systems, introduced by Lexington to meet unique needs, has become a model for other communities. The Lexington team's ability to challenge existing systems and advocate for necessary changes has created a blueprint for statewide success.

In the field of early childhood development, Lexington's approach to community engagement is a model to study. From the early days of nurturing trust to the present, where mentorship and mission alignment are creating a thriving child care infrastructure, Lexington has truly become an example for others.

The Lexington team's commitment to finding 'your people,' aligning missions, and measuring success through transformative change serves as an inspiration. "Lexington is the dandelion, and now we're blowing the seeds," said Alexandra Dillon, Central Region Early Learning Connection Grant Manager. "They're landing and the work that Communities for Kids has done has fertilized the soil and provided the resources so that those seeds can grow."

As they continue to blow the seeds of change into the wind, it's clear that Lexington's vision for an inclusive, diverse, and robust child care infrastructure has taken root and is blooming.

"...that investment is the creation of long-lasting sustainability of the C4K work in Lexington."

–Shonna Werth

C4K Assistant Vice President
of Early Childhood Programs



UTILIZE: GOTHENBURG, NEBRASKA

GOAL: Gather and analyze data and community voices to develop key messaging and an early childhood plan.

Gothenburg is a small but proactive community in Nebraska that is home to several Fortune 500 companies, including Bayer and Frito Lay. Roughly 10 years ago, in the wake of Harvard's brain architecture studies, the local school district began exploring ways in which to enrich the development of their youngest citizens. Current school district superintendent Dr. Allison Jonas explained that at the time it was unusual for schools to have incorporated preschools, but that in light of the Harvard data, local educators saw the impact a district preschool might have for children.

In 2014, interested parties in the town set out to collect data that would convince the community of the importance of early childhood education and the need for a preschool. They began with a simple two-question survey that was sent home to the families of all children, kindergarten through sixth grade. It asked about the child's preschool experience. According to Jonas, "The results were shocking!" From this early data exploration, they learned that students who didn't attend preschool had a 0% chance of being in the top one-third of their class and an 80% chance of being in the bottom one-third. They also saw clear evidence that students from some private preschools were under performing.

Based on demographic data collected from the survey, the most important correlation for kindergarten readiness was age by days, meaning the literal age of a child by days. Findings then indicated that preschool seats in quality care facilities were crucial to answering the community's needs. The community members established the Gothenburg Early Childhood Learning Coalition (GECLC) and began a two-pronged approach to improving their early childhood education system, an approach that focused on increasing capacity and improving quality.

As part of this approach, the GECLC became part of the first Communities for Kids (C4K) cohort in Nebraska and hired Early Childhood Community Coordinator Nichole Hetz, who set out to continue collecting data that Jonas describes as "the springboard for building community conversations." A 2016 grant had allowed the local school to add a single half-day preschool section for at-risk students, and a subsequent 2017 grant allowed the school to increase that class to a full-day program, but applications soon outpaced enrollment capacity.

"[The data is] the springboard for building community conversations."

—Dr. Allison Jonas

Superintendent at
Gothenburg Public Schools



To address those families who were unable to enroll, the Gothenburg C4K team initially utilized school-readiness data to raise scholarship funds that covered a family's tuition at private preschools in the area, a project that raised \$35,000 over four years to assist 52 students. Even with the scholarship funds, C4K identified a 70-student shortfall of licensed full-time spots for families looking for care. Hetz and the GECLC president met with local providers to ask them if they could expand their programs to meet the need. All of them said no.

The solution came in part from ongoing data collection, which showed that 94% of the community identified child care as very important to Gothenburg's future growth. The town's largest employer, Gothenburg Health, became a proponent, citing their own experience in losing a leader. "We hired a manager's position and that person only worked with us for about three weeks and gave notice, saying 'We can't find child care,'" said CEO Mick Brant. With businesses on board, the GECLC created a plan for an Impact Center that would provide 194 full-time spots, enough to allow the school's preschool to move to the center, two private preschools to opt in, the two existing centers to join, and address the 70-spot gap.

The GECLC board understood that such a large undertaking would require a significant budget and that they would need significant community investment to reach their goal. They used data from the school district, businesses, and the city to convince them of the importance of early childhood care and education. Some were quick to buy in. For example, Nate Wyatt, an Investment Officer and CFO at Flatwater Bank, said: "As our community and workforce has continued to grow, we've realized that child care's an even bigger piece. Without child care we don't have a workforce." The school district also recognized the importance of early childhood care and education in their workforce and was able to commit \$1.5 million to the capital campaign and additional operational funds.

"As our community and workforce has continued to grow, we've realized that childcare's an even bigger piece."

–Nate Wyatt

Investment Officer and
CFO at Flatwater Bank



Others required more convincing, including local child care providers who were afraid the center would take their jobs. Hetz visited with skeptical in-home providers about their concerns. “We talked about what they needed from us to be the best versions of themselves,” Jonas said. In addition to calming concerns and educating the public, planners for the Impact Center also found unique ways to convince others and to finance the project. The city had recently done a feasibility study for an events center and Impact Center planners offered to include such a space and staff it if the city would contribute to operational costs. They did the same for the city baseball league, including an indoor sports facility. Gothenburg utilized data and community engagement to find solutions for multiple community needs.

The result was a plan for an Impact Center that included 17 early childhood classrooms, a Healthy Families Center, an events center, and a sports facility that all fall under one budget, a strategy that provided a funding source for the early childhood program. “Our plan from the beginning has been to provide that quality early childhood education,” Hetz said. “Because we have that data to show how important it is.” Jonas reinforces that idea: “The one piece of data I’ve heard time and time again as we’ve engaged with stakeholders is the gap of available child care options. Knowing that number was incredibly powerful.”

The Impact Center is on track to open in the summer of 2024. It addresses both the capacity issues for Gothenburg and the need for quality care. The facility will be a Step Up to Quality program that employs two curriculum directors and invests in curriculum materials that will be utilized by all ages at the center. The Gothenburg solution stemmed from data, was promoted through continued data use, and, according to Jonas, will continue to use data to ensure that the highest standards of quality child care are met.

“Our plan from the beginning has been to provide that quality early childhood education.”

–Nichole Hetz

Early Childhood
Community Coordinator



CONNECT: OTOE COUNTY, NEBRASKA

GOAL: Join a broad peer learning network and learn to navigate regional, state, and national resources.

When they began their journey with Communities for Kids (C4K) in 2020, Otoe County's Core Team had their work cut out for them. Things seemed pretty bleak. Many parents just did not have a place to take their children, and the county was beginning to hemorrhage workers and businesses left and right—the very people who kept it alive. Once they decided to do something about it, however, Otoe County could not be stopped, and weren't easily discouraged by roadblocks.

They applied for and were accepted into C4K and got right to work. After trial, error, and two long years, the needle finally began to move. The local economic development director, Dan Mauk, had been leading the efforts, and decided to partner with Early Childhood Community Coordinator Tiffany Walker to take the goal of increasing quality care in the area to the next level. They theorized that Mauk had the expertise on the business side and Walker knew how to speak the language of local providers, so if they combined the two, the Core Team would be able to make more than a dent in their child care crisis.

The theory turned out to be true. Mauk and Walker worked with C4K on engaging with their community, developing a strong and unified message, and carrying out the beginnings of an early childhood work plan. With ongoing work and support from C4K, Otoe County's early childhood gap number began to shrink, and they became passionate about sharing their successes and challenges to anyone who would listen.

Through C4K technical assistance, both were plugged into an abundance of regional and statewide networks and resources, and have gone above and beyond the call of duty, grabbing the attention of many local leaders and C4K teams who hoped to follow in their footsteps. Mauk has worked to increase visibility to early childhood issues across Nebraska by speaking with elected officials, economic development groups, and other C4K communities. He was one of the first economic development directors in Nebraska to recognize that a lack of quality child care opportunities was directly hurting the town he lived in.



After getting connected to First Five Nebraska, he went through the Policy Leadership Academy, and had the privilege of testifying before the Nebraska Legislature on an interim study on challenges in the early childhood system. He now believes that it is widely accepted as a priority among other economic development teams and, while he takes pride in the work he has done, he continues to advocate for more work and attention on early care and education so that every child in Nebraska has the access they need to high quality care.

Walker works to elevate the voices of child care providers and families not only in Otoe County, but regionally as well, through constant social media outreach. She uses her valuable experience as a parent and early childhood professional to increase capacity of quality care and stays engaged with coordinators across the state to both share Otoe County's successes and learn what is working well in other rural places. Together, Walker and Mauk go live on Facebook after conferences, updating their group with what they've learned, especially when it includes grants they can apply for, and how to do so. The providers that watch the videos usually can't attend conferences and meetings due to their commitment to caring for children so parents can go to work, so every little bit helps—especially when it comes to money.

“The providers are so appreciative of the funding opportunities,” Mauk said. “It’s made a big difference in their ability to care for the kids, their ability to get licensed, and their ability to learn more about how to provide better care.” He also notes that none of this work could have been done with volunteer time alone, and using funding they received through Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCF) to compensate Walker made a huge impact in their ability to move forward. In fact, the work Walker has done has been so critical, the community has found a way to incorporate county funds to sustain her position for multiple years. Mauk is very proud of the work Walker has done to connect with providers in the area.

“[Funding opportunities] made a big difference in their ability to care for the kids, their ability to get licensed, and their ability to learn more about how to provide better care.”

–Dan Mauk

Executive Director of the
Nebraska City Area Economic
Development Corporation

“Dan and Tiffany have so much trust between them,” said Katrina Hurley, C4K Assistant Vice President of Early Childhood Programs, who provides technical assistance to Otoe County. “They are an excellent team; they have a great ‘yin and yang’ going on.” Indeed, they’ve attended every year of the Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference, an annual conference that brings together early childhood professionals, even speaking about their efforts at the most recent event. They frequently speak about their work in a variety of gatherings, both in-person and on Zoom, and have become an outstanding example of how to stay connected—and Otoe County isn’t planning on slowing down anytime soon.

They continue to be a part of the statewide conversation, but are continuously asking their child care providers and families what they need in order to be successful, and are building out their work plan for years to come. “You get gratification from helping families and helping providers, and you can’t ask for anything more than that,” Mauk said.

“I can’t help it, I love it,” Walker agreed. “I had a parent come out this morning specifically just to tell me, ‘Thank you for helping us find child care, because we didn’t know what we were gonna do.’”



MEASURING IMPACT

“This has been a learning experience, and a lot more work than I ever would have expected. But I am so proud of the amount of progress that we have made in such a short time.”

– Cedar County

MEASURING IMPACT | BY PILLAR

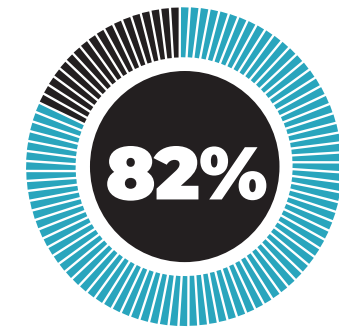
ENGAGE

Attract and retain community stakeholders through ongoing outreach activities to prioritize early childhood efforts

Early Childhood Community Coordinators (ECCC) hosted local activities related to building early childhood care and education in their communities.*

4,017

local community events related to prioritizing early childhood care and education



of local C4K ECCCs reported directly engaging with local government officials



5,821






hours invested in planning and coordinating activities related to early childhood care and education



738

activities related to Bilingual Provider Support Initiative

Types of Early Childhood Local Activities

-  Relationship Building
-  Raising Awareness for Importance of Early Childhood
-  Professional Development for Early Childhood Professionals
-  Increased Early Childhood Capacity
-  Sustainability Planning

10+
community sectors engaged to build relationships and foster community engagement around early childhood efforts



55,030*

people attended or participated in local activities related to early childhood care and education*

**duplicated participants*

UTILIZE

Gather and analyze data and community voices to develop key messaging and an early childhood plan.

12,454 Nebraskans have submitted responses to local Early Childhood Quality and Capacity Surveys (ECQCS)

Created by local teams to gather community voice and help develop early childhood efforts in their community

Communities Have Learned

100%

of communities participated in ECQCS and landscape studies. Including creation of a data snapshot assessing available capacity, children needing care, gap in services, and community demographics.

86%

of respondents believe that affordable and accessible child care for all children in their community is important

47%

of respondents reported that in the last 12 months a lack of child care caused their employees to be tardy, miss work, or be distracted at work.

67%

of communities hope to prioritize high-quality early childhood care and education as key to community development.

49%

of communities hope to develop an ongoing, community-led early childhood team.

Community Partner Feedback and Priorities

CONNECT

Join a broad peer-learning network and learn to navigate regional, state, and national resources

Connective Support

In 2022, C4K Technical Assistance Staff traveled

62,915 miles

that means



We have crossed the state of Nebraska

252
times
(north to south)

We have crossed the state of Nebraska

140
times
(east to west)

We have gone around the world

2½
times



of participants in Policy Leadership Academy have been from communities engaged with C4K

C4K Convening Day Participation

at Thriving Children, Families, and Communities Conference

2018

29

of Nebraska communities registered

73

of participants

1

of states registered

2023

84

of Nebraska communities registered

255

of participants

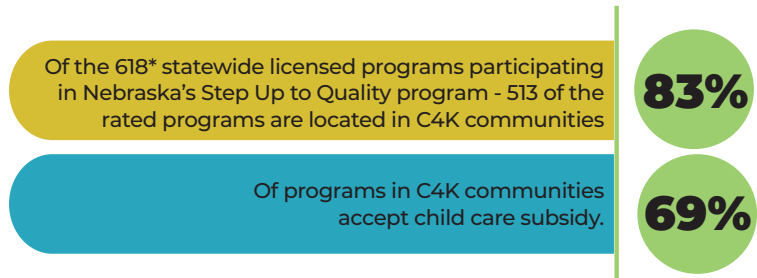
7

of states registered

KEY MEASUREMENTS

QUALITY

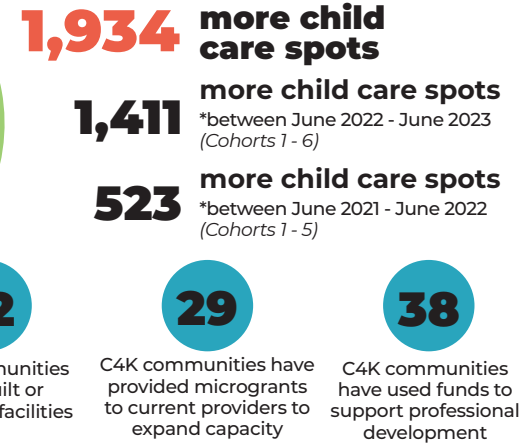
Child care programs located in C4K communities are strongly encouraged to participate in Step Up to Quality, Nebraska's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS)



**As of June 2023 Step Up to Quality has a total of 733 programs enrolled including licensed child care programs, Head Start programs, and school district early childhood programs.*

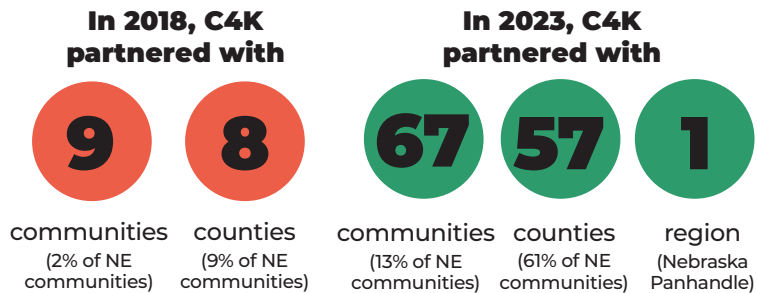
INCREASED CAPACITY

C4K communities have increased child care capacity across all cohorts through program development and expansion support



SCALING

Expansion of C4K operations, increased reach, and growing impact



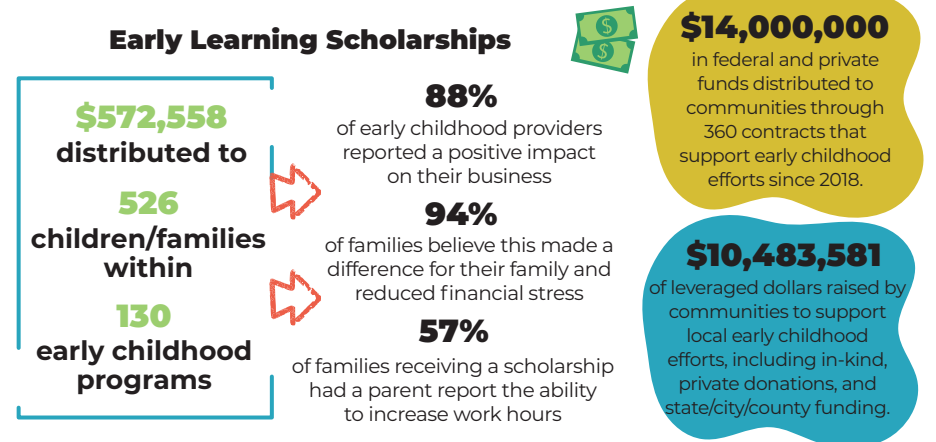
✓ Growing interest in C4K ✓

15 national organizations or states have reached out to learn more about C4K in the past year

Eight statewide organizations initiated contact to learn more about C4K in the past year

ECONOMIC IMPACT

Quantify new resources available to support child care. Capture and understand the broader benefits that quality child care services and supporting systems bring to a community's economy



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

“The focus has impacted the conversations our community is having and bringing people together. Conversations are centered on what we need to do in the future and how we will accomplish this together.”

– Gage County

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

AN INVITATION TO CONNECT

As the Communities for Kids (C4K) initiative advances, the journey so far has been shaped by a collaborative spirit and a commitment to fostering positive change for early childhood development in our partner communities. Along the way, we have carefully documented our approach, detailing how we plan to build upon these foundations, extend our impact, and continue the collaborative work toward enhancing early childhood outcomes across diverse communities.

Based on feedback and inquiries, C4K has built an initiative framework and approach that is resonating with communities across Nebraska as well as other communities in the United States. The team is preparing for three areas of scaling work in the coming years:

NEBRASKA

Work with interested communities in all 93 Nebraska counties.

NATIONAL

Answer the calls coming from outside of Nebraska by developing plans to scale C4K nationally. This will include forming a pilot cohort with communities from two new states. (Launch of national scaling project in 2024-25)

HYBRID

Extend the reach and impact of the initiative by creating resources and materials that can be easily disseminated through digital platforms and accessed on a broader scale, both in Nebraska and nationally. (Coming in 2025)

We encourage communities in Nebraska to keep reaching out to the C4K team. For the first time, we're extending a formal invitation to communities across the United States to connect with C4K. In doing so, they'll be able to learn more about the work in our current communities, receive a list of criteria to be considered for the first national pilot, and can pursue a possible partnership with C4K in their area. Interested communities should email the C4K team at C4KInfo@nebraskachildren.org.

In addition to the scaling work, the C4K team will concentrate on three other areas of focus, one of which involves transforming Kotter's Theory of Change from an internal team tool to a resource accessible to communities. C4K will also continue to look for opportunities to bring the initiative to urban communities and continue our research into how the C4K framework adapts to population dense neighborhoods and areas. And lastly, we will continue to track data in Nebraska to form new areas of measurement and to expand reporting of outcomes. In the next five years, as Nebraska's C4K communities continue to mature and grow through challenges and successes, we believe there will be opportunities to understand how the C4K framework is influencing more outcomes, including infant and child developmental milestones, school readiness, economic impact, and the reduction of the Opportunity Gap.

The C4K initiative is embarking on a significant phase of growth and outreach. With plans to engage interested communities across all 93 Nebraska counties, launch a national scaling project in 2024-25, and expand impact through digital platforms in 2025, C4K is poised for transformative developments. We look forward to hearing from new people and communities to connect with us, learn about our work, and explore partnerships.



OUR THANKS

OUR THANKS

Communities for Kids has benefited greatly from the support of funders and partners who guide us and believe in the work we do. We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Jessie Rasmussen and Gladys Haynes at the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, John Scott and John Levy at the William and Ruth Scott Family Foundation, and Mary Jo Pankoke, Josh Cramer, Betty Medinger, and Amy Bornemeier at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation for providing funding and the opportunity to learn and grow in our work. A special thank you to Brenda Weyers, Sarah Corey, and the marketing team, who have been instrumental in the creation of this report and supporting our communications needs.

Our state and national partners and connections have allowed the work to progress, improve, and gain momentum. While there are too many to name everyone, special recognition goes to Joan Lombardi, Erin Owen, Ron Fairchild, National League of Cities, Bipartisan Policy Center, National/Nebraska Association of County Officials, Buffett Early Childhood Institute, First Five Nebraska, Nebraska Department of Education, Nebraska Department of Economic Development, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative, and the Nebraska Community Foundation.

We especially want to take a moment to thank the Communities for Kids communities for their invaluable contributions and dedication. It is a privilege to walk alongside you as you have worked so hard to increase access and quality child care across our state. As early childhood champions, you have given countless hours and resources that continue to drive the work that we do. Thank you for sharing your unique communities with us, entrusting a piece of your community's future to us, and thank you for continuing to help drive our goal of prioritizing child care in Nebraska.

Our initiative has expanded solely through connection and collaboration. Your interest in this report helps to further drive our mission in assisting communities as they work to prioritize child care.

Communities for Kids has excelled because of these, and many other, fantastic partnerships. From the bottom of our hearts, we thank you.

—The Communities for Kids Team



VISION

Communities for Kids will lead national efforts to ensure that communities, primarily rural areas, can grow and prosper by strengthening and sustaining a quality early childhood care and education infrastructure.

MISSION

To partner with communities to prioritize the expansion and enhancement of quality early childhood care and education by identifying and addressing each community's unique strengths and needs.



Communities for Kids[™]
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