



CORE ISSUES

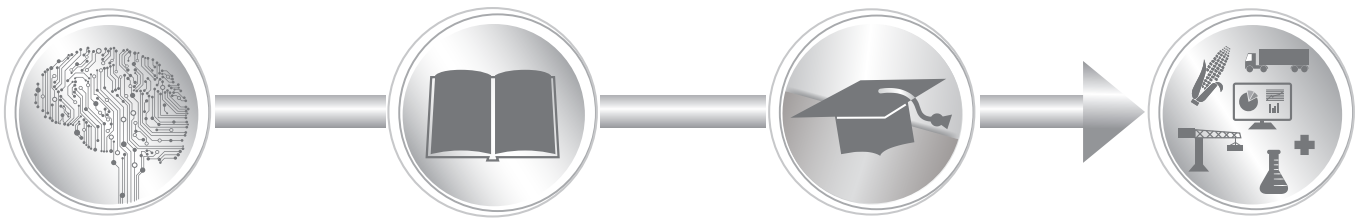
Nebraska's Talent Pipeline: Why Early Childhood is a Work Preparedness Issue

Targeted early childhood investments are a fiscally prudent strategy for building the caliber of Nebraska's workforce, cultivating business-friendly communities, and growing the state economy

Nebraska's reputation as a desirable place to do business is grounded in the skill, motivation, character and productivity of its people. But these skills and traits must be cultivated—and cultivated early—in each succeeding generation of citizens and workers. Failing to do so will undercut the quality of life in our state and threaten our ability to attract new business and compete in a rapidly changing national and global marketplace.

An alarmingly large number of young Nebraskans enter and progress through our state's talent pipeline inadequately prepared for the opportunities and responsibilities ahead of them.

For many Nebraskans, this deficit begins in the earliest years of childhood and compounds as children enter the K-12 system and grow toward the age of workforce entry.



More than **60,000, or about 42% of all children age birth to 5 in Nebraska**, face risk factors that can inhibit healthy neurological development, compromise the growth of foundational cognitive and behavioral skills, and undercut their readiness to enter the K-12 system ready to learn and thrive.¹ Developmental gaps can appear as early as 9 months of age.²

More than half of the state's fourth-graders, and nearly two-thirds of eighth-graders fail to meet reading and math proficiency standards.³

Reading competency at the end of third grade is widely recognized as a predictor of ongoing academic success.⁴

Nebraska boasts one of the highest rates of high school graduation in the country.

Yet, less than 50% of Nebraska's graduating seniors who took the ACT in 2014 met college readiness benchmarks in Reading, Math and Science.⁵

According to the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry, more than 50% of Nebraska business leaders surveyed reported difficulty finding employees with adequate skills for available jobs.⁶ Gaps in our high-skilled workforce represent the "number one issue" facing existing and potential business in Nebraska.⁷

"How do we close the skills gap? How do we ensure more high school graduates are ready for college and expand the pool of qualified workers? Achieving a world-class workforce begins with high-quality early childhood learning."

Barry Kennedy
President,
Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry

“We are short on talent to take advantage of career opportunities in Nebraska – and it’s only going to get more challenging as baby boomers retire.

We need to maximize the skills of every child in Nebraska to build a sufficient, skilled talent pool for the future. Early learning is imperative if we are to keep today’s jobs here, let alone grow our economy.”

K.C. Belitz
President,
Columbus Area
Chamber of Commerce

Strategic early childhood investments get results

The longer we wait to cultivate cognitive and character skills in young people, the less likely they will be to thrive in school, society and the workforce. Accordingly, Nebraska’s private sector has adopted a leadership role in promoting strategic early childhood investments, particularly those targeting children most at risk. Public-private initiatives such as Nebraska’s groundbreaking Sixpence program and growing network of Educare schools show how these investments can turn the odds in favor of children who might otherwise struggle to succeed as students and, eventually, as self-sufficient citizens and productive workers.

- Children grades 3 to 7 who had participated at least two years in Omaha’s Educare school performed 29% better on standardized reading tests than the comparison group of children at risk. They also outperformed the state proficiency standard by 24 points.⁸
- At-risk children who attended Omaha’s Educare school for more than two years were 50% less likely to require special education in the 2013-14 school year than students who attended one year or less.⁹
- Recent evaluations of Nebraska’s statewide Sixpence program shows that 90% of participating infants and toddlers at risk are gaining cognitive and social-emotional skills at the same rate as their more advantaged peers.¹⁰
- According to Federal Reserve analysis and Nobel-winning economist James Heckman, **targeted, high-quality early childhood investments can produce a 7 to 10% inflation-adjusted annual rate of return or higher.**¹¹

Nebraskans need more than cognitive “smarts” to be truly work ready

Language aptitude, numeracy and analytical skills are indeed essential to children’s ability to succeed in the classroom as well as the job market. However, Nebraska’s employers also report a pressing need for job candidates who exhibit social competency, a solid work ethic and overall strength of character. These qualities are not necessarily innate, nor do they suddenly emerge as young people prepare to transition to college or career, but are rooted in early development. **High-quality early childhood experiences promote children’s ability to interact successfully with others, control their impulses, plan and focus on tasks, follow directions and adapt to changes.**¹² Given the right kinds of supports, these abilities mature into marketable skills that better position young people to meet the needs of Nebraska’s workforce.

Children who arrive at kindergarten lacking these emotional and behavioral assets are likely to struggle academically and socially, increasing their risk of school dropout and even entry into the criminal justice system, effectively removing them from our pool of productive, contributing citizens.¹³

Notes

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