

# Nebraska Head Start State Collaboration Office



## 2021 Needs Assessment Summary

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We gratefully acknowledge the individuals and organizations who contributed to the needs assessment process.

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## **Introduction**

Nebraska's Early Head Start and Head Start programs are working to close the gap for young children and their families by providing educational and comprehensive services within communities across the state. Today's youngest will be the workforce of the mid-century. When families and young children have the support they need, communities benefit with healthier families, stronger schools, higher graduation rates, and a prepared workforce to compete in the future. Nebraska's Early Head Start and Head Start programs serve over 5, 228 young children ages birth to five and pregnant women.

The Head Start Act (as amended December 12, 2007) requires the Head Start Collaboration Offices (HSCOs) to conduct an annual needs assessment of Head Start and Early Head Start grantees. The purpose of the 2021 Head Start Collaboration Needs Assessment is to evaluate perceptions held by Head Start and Early Head Start programs to inform strategic planning for the year. The Office of Head Start does not specify the methodology or instrument used to collect information. Head Start Collaboration Office (HSCO) directors do have a common resource and guidance they can follow, but guidance is optional.

### **Goal of the 2021 Needs Assessment**

The goal of the Nebraska HSCO needs assessment is to assess how Head Start and Early Head Start programs collectively respond to the various priority areas, as listed by the Office of Head Start. The Nebraska HSCO continued this year with a series of questions that directly relate to the priority areas. The purpose of the grantee survey was

to assess how Early Head Start/Head Start grantees collectively responded to survey questions regarding:

1. Supporting child and family transitions
2. Nebraska's Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) termed Step Up to Quality
3. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic
4. Professional learning needs
5. Identifying family and community partnership priorities for 2021-2022

## **Data Collection and Methodology**

The Nebraska Head Start Collaboration Office contracted with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) to facilitate the statewide needs assessment and report results. The needs assessment was informed by existing needs assessments conducted by HSCOs in other states, existing literature identifying best practices for supporting child and family transitions, and then additional questions were added to address specific priority areas of the Nebraska HSCO (e.g., experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic).

In September 2021, UNL used a web-based online survey approach to collect information from grantees with Qualtrics. Survey questions consisted of check all that apply, multiple choice, and open-ended questions. The survey link was emailed to Early Head Start and Head Start directors in Nebraska. A total of 14 or 74% of Program Directors responded to the survey during the first few weeks of September 2021.

## Findings

The findings are based on the use of a needs assessment survey. The results, though informative, are not to be considered representative of all Head Start and Early Head Start employees in Nebraska. The purpose of the survey was intended to inform the Head Start Collaboration Office and other partners to guide further planning and strategic efforts to support Head Start and Early Head Start programs in Nebraska in 2022.



## Supporting Family and Child Transitions

**Child and Family Focused Transition Practices.** Respondents were asked to identify what activities their program was involved in to support child and family focused transition practices by choosing “yes”, “no”, or “don’t know”. These practices were identified in existing research in terms of best practices that support Head Start children and families transition to kindergarten. Fourteen respondents answered this question on behalf of their program. Percentages are shown in Table 1.



Table 1. *Activities focused on children and families to support the transition to kindergarten (n=14)*

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't Know (%)
Prepare children for what to expect during the transition with books and activities about kindergarten	92.9%	7.1%	0%
Send families a letter with information about the transition to kindergarten	92.9%	7.1%	0%
Teach families (e.g., parents) skills to advocate for their child	92.9%	7.1%	0%
Giving backpacks filled with supplies for children to use during the summer and to bring to kindergarten	71.4%	28.6%	0%
Create “kindergarten friendship groups” where children from different Head Start classrooms with your program who are going the same school get to spend time together.	38.5%	61.5%	0%
Create bulletin boards or books to show families which children are attending the same schools	38.5%	61.5%	14.4%
Teachers change their dramatic play areas to resemble kindergarten classrooms at the end of the school year.	42.8%	42.8%	14.3%

Most programs engaged in activities to support children and families with the transition to kindergarten. All but one program sent letters about the transition to kindergarten to families, taught families skills to advocate for their child, and prepared children for the transition with books and activities in the classroom. It was less common for programs to connect children and families across classrooms in preparing for the transition or setting up the dramatic play area as an activity to prepare children for the transition to kindergarten towards the end of the year.

**Coordination Practices.** Respondents were asked to identify what activities their program was involved in to support coordinating children’s and families transition to kindergarten by choosing “yes”, “no”, or “don’t know”. Fourteen respondents answered this question on behalf of their program. Percentages are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Coordination activities used by programs to support children and families’ transitions (n=14).*

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don’t Know (%)
Collaborating with schools around the needs of children receiving special education services	92.9%	7.1%	0%
Coordinate planning for kindergarten teachers and families	85.7%	14.3%	0%
Hold joint meetings	85.7%	14.3%	0%
Head Start program shares and receives information about curriculum to support alignment with elementary schools	85.7%	14.3%	0%
Sharing child records with schools	78.6%	23.4%	0%
Head Start program shares and receives information about <i>programming</i> to support alignment with elementary schools	76.9%	23.1%	0%
Head Start program shares and receives information about <i>assessment</i> to support alignment with elementary schools	64.3%	28.6%	7.1%

Almost all the programs (13 out of the 14) indicated that they collaborate with schools around the needs of children receiving special education services. Also, across most of the programs (12 out of 14), *coordination* practices and activities to support children and families with the transition to kindergarten were used. Although used by many programs, fewer programs (64%) practiced sharing and receiving information about assessments to support alignment with elementary school practices.

### **Child and Family Transition Practices Involving Elementary School**

**Engagement.** Respondents were asked to identify what activities their program was involved in to support children’s and families’ *engagement with elementary schools* to support the transition with a “yes”, or “no” response. Fourteen respondents answered this question on behalf of their program. Percentages are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *Child and family transition practices involving elementary school engagement (n=14).*

	Yes (%)	No (%)
Working with the district and families with registration efforts	92.9%	7.1%
Coordinating with elementary schools for Head Start children and families to visit elementary schools	78.6%	21.4%
Host a kindergarten parent night with elementary representation	57.1%	42.9%
Inviting elementary school principals and/or kindergarten teachers to attend a parent meeting at Head Start	50%	50%
Providing transportation services for families to attend elementary school-sponsored events	21.4%	78.6%
Providing translation services for families at elementary school-sponsored events	21.4%	85.7%

Regarding supporting children and family engagement in kindergarten events and activities, most programs supported registration and coordinating visits for children and

families to visit the elementary schools. Most programs did not provide translation services (86%,  $n=12$ ) or transportation services (79%,  $n=11$ ) for children and families at elementary-sponsored or events during the transition. Half of the programs invited kindergarten teachers and/or elementary principals to attend parent meetings at the Head Start to support children and families transition to kindergarten.

### **In the Words of Respondents**

**Benefits of Coordinating and Engaging with Elementary Schools.** To better understand the perceived benefits of supporting children and families during the transition, respondents were invited to respond to a question prompt in terms of the benefits to Head Start programs and elementary schools to engage in these activities. Most of the written comments referred to these activities supporting an *“easier and smoother transition to kindergarten.”* One respondent wrote that these practices support, *“the child to feel less anxious about the transition because they know what to expect.”* Another commented that these practices ensure that, *“All stakeholders are invested in making this successful for the child.”*

In addition to acknowledging the importance of these practices for children, a few commented on the benefits to families and fostering positive relationships. As one respondent commented, *“It's about relationships. I know when some of the transitioning families think about their children going to a classroom with more than 8 children, they get very nervous. It's important for them to develop a relationship with their children's next teacher. It will help the families feel more comfortable advocating for their children.”*

**Challenges of Coordinating and Engaging with Elementary Schools.** Respondents were also invited to write comments about the perceived challenges to engaging in these

transition practices. Many commented that a challenge was that elementary teachers are busy and they do not have the time to engage in coordination or engagement practices, there are conflicts in scheduling, each district has different practices, and lack of accountability from the Nebraska Department of Education for elementary schools to coordinate with Head Starts to support children and families with the transition. One respondent wrote, *“When we tried to have families and children meet the future preschool classrooms, it's difficult in one of the larger Head Start Program because they are on the August to May calendar. Parents are not usually told their child's new Head Start classroom until the very end of summer. In another Head Start program, we have been successful in having transition families meet but it is not housed in an elementary school.”* This person commented on how coordination and engagement can be successful when scheduling and other competing priorities are not an issue.

## Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Another interest of the Nebraska’s HSCO was to understand potential ways that the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted their programs. Most programs indicated that there were challenges related to engaging learners, monitoring learner progress, increased workload responsibilities and working longer hours (see Table 4). Some respondents also indicated challenges with communicating with families and having access to internet, and a few respondents also had some challenges with having teaching materials due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021.



Table 4. *COVID-19 Pandemic (n=13).*

	Yes (%)	No (%)
Challenges with monitoring learner’s progress	83.3%	16.7%
Maintaining motivation of learners and caregivers	83.3%	16.7%
Increased workload or work responsibilities	83.3%	16.7%
Longer work hours	75%	25%
Communicating with parents (families)	58.3%	41.7%
Lack of internet	41.7%	58.3%
Communicating with staff	41.7%	58.3%
Lack of iPads or computers	33.3%	66.7%
Lack of teaching materials/curriculum	16.7%	83.3%

## Participation in the State Quality Rating Improvement System: Step Up to Quality

Step Up to Quality in Nebraska supports early childhood providers and programs to recognize and identify areas of strength and areas for improvement to increase program quality for children and families. Step Up to Quality consists of five steps. Seven of the 14 respondents were participating in Step Up to Quality at the time of this survey. One program was at Step 1, four programs were at Step 2 and two respondents were at Step 3. For the seven respondents who were not currently participating in Step Up to Quality, they were asked to choose all options that pertained to their reason for not participating (see Figure 1). A reason for all the programs for not participating was the process of participating seemed redundant to other processes involving oversight and verification.

Figure 1. *Reasons for Not Participating in Step Up to Quality (choose all that apply option)*

7 programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The process of participating in Step Up to Quality is too redundant from other quality verification and oversight we do.</li></ul>
5 programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Head Start Performance Standards are not given sufficient weight in the current Step Up to Quality system.</li></ul>
5 programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We do not participate in Step Up to Quality because Head Start federally monitored CLASS data scores are not accepted.</li></ul>
2 programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The process of participating in Step Up to Quality takes too much time.</li></ul>
2 programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We would like to be involved but it is not enough of a priority for our organization currently.</li></ul>

## Professional Learning Needs

Respondents were asked to identify specific trainings they would like their education staff to participate in during the next year by choosing from a list of pre-identified training topics. There was also an option for “other” and then to describe. There were four training topics that received the most requests: family engagement (16%,  $n=7$ ), mental health (16%,  $n=7$ ), staff wellness (16%,  $n=7$ ), and strategies to support children’s challenging behaviors (16%,  $n=7$ ). See Table 5 for the list of possible training topics with the corresponding percentages. No one identified training needs in addition to the list provided on the survey.

Table 5. *Identified training needs for 2021-2022 (completed by 14 respondents, choose all that apply option)*

	(%)	N (number of programs who requested this training)
Family engagement	16%	7
Mental health	16%	7
Staff wellness	16%	7
Strategies to support children’s challenging behaviors	16%	7
Understanding data to inform decision-making	9%	4
Supporting children with disabilities	9%	4
Trauma-informed care	7%	3
Coaching	7%	3
Increased understanding of ACEs	5%	2

## Family and Community Partnerships – Focus for 2021-2022

Respondents were asked to identify the most important areas to focus on in the coming year related to family and community partnerships. The greatest identified priorities were promoting the understanding of the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement framework among Head Start grantees and other early childhood partners (30%,  $n=9$  programs), increasing state and community partner’s awareness of the EHS/HS model and the benefits these programs provide (27%,  $n=8$  programs), and assisting Head Start agencies in developing public and private partnerships to increase and coordinate resources for Head Start and other early childhood programs (23%,  $n=7$  programs).

Table 6. *Identified priority areas for family and community partnerships (completed by 14 respondents, choose all that apply option)*

	(%)	N (number of programs who identified strategy as priority)
Promote understanding of the Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework among Head Start grantees and other early child care partners.	30%	9
Increase state and community partner's awareness of the EHS/HS model and the benefits these programs provide.	27%	8
Assist Head Start agencies in developing public and private partnerships to increase and coordinate resources for Head Start and other early childhood programs.	23%	7
Increase the capacity of Head Start grantees to collaborate with local museums, public and school libraries, and other resources to provide learning experiences for Head Start children.	10%	3
Promote partnerships between Head Start agencies and local early childhood coalitions.	10%	3

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to guide the work of the Nebraska HSCO over the next year.

1. Continue efforts to bolster and increase ways for local public elementary schools to engage with Head Start programs to support children and families' transitions. It may be helpful to increase the local public school's responsibility to engage with Head Start programs to coordinate transition processes and in identifying effective ways to engage families in the process.
2. Celebrate the success of Head Start programs in continuing to provide quality services to children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic. It may be worth exploring how children need additional learning supports due to time away from being in the classroom to learn. Many of the programs identified working longer hours and increased work responsibilities which may have increased workplace stress and exhaustion. It may be helpful to identify some effective resources and supports for EHS/HS staff to support their health and wellness. Also, though mentioned less frequently, reaching out to programs with internet challenges may be worth investigating further.
3. Increase participation in Step Up to Quality and identify ways to support the partnership in terms of the time commitment and clarifying the roles and expectations of Step Up to Quality for those programs who want to participate. It may be helpful to identify ways for having their current assessments (CLASS) accepted and/or identifying other ways to reduce redundancies and processes that may add to perceptions of increased work.

4. Half of the programs (7 out of 14) identified training in family engagement, mental health, and staff wellness as top training needs. Additionally, strategies for supporting children's challenging behaviors was identified as a training need for programs. It may be helpful to provide trainings on the topic of family engagement to decrease children's challenging behaviors. It is interesting that these same training needs were also highly requested in the 2019 needs assessment.
5. Identify ways to increase awareness in the state and in local communities of the EHS/HS model, the benefits of these programs for children and families, and increasing public and private partnerships to increase resources for EHS/HS programs.

