



nebraska early childhood  
COLLABORATIVE

2014-2024

# ORIGIN STORY

CELEBRATING A DECADE OF  
INNOVATION, COLLABORATION,  
AND SERVICE

*Inspired by providers and parents like them*





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## FOREWORD

In 2014, Nebraska put a stake in the ground to support child care providers and families with young children when an early childhood funder, the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, put into place a long-standing idea: create a collaborative that could serve as a backbone organization, offering “shared services” in finance and human resources to a group of Educare centers. The concept was bold, innovative, and just the beginning.

The Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative (NECC) was established with a mission rooted in strengthening the early childhood education system across Nebraska. NECC positioned itself as a vital connector, supporting the professionals who care for and educate Nebraska’s youngest children and advocating for the families who rely on those services.

What began with five Educare centers 10 years ago evolved into a statewide network. Today, NECC serves more than 1,800 child care providers across 85% of Nebraska’s counties, making it the largest child care provider network in the state, and one of the largest in the country. We’ve stayed true to our core model of shared services while dramatically expanding its meaning, creating new pathways for sustainability, quality, and support in one of Nebraska’s most essential and under-recognized industries.

Today, NECC still serves as a backbone organization but with expanded offerings including coordinating services across the field while actively strengthening the economic and policy environment for child care providers and families. This is mission critical, because we know that the health of Nebraska’s economy equals the strength of the child care provider field. How could it not? When providers thrive, families can work, businesses can grow, and children receive the early experiences they need to succeed. After all, the children in their care are Nebraska’s future. Every investment in child care providers is an investment in our state’s families and children.

That’s why NECC’s programming helps providers strengthen and expand their business and now spans from licensing assistance to business training, from bilingual professional development to direct family engagement. We launched Nebraska’s first statewide business-focused child care conference, the Elevate Business Summit. We established the first Parent Ambassadors Program in Nebraska, which

prepares families to navigate policy and advocate for change at the local, state, and federal levels. And we have consistently lifted the voices of providers and parents to shape a more responsive early childhood system.

In a landscape where early care and education has long been undervalued and underfunded, NECC emerged as a strategic response, one built on innovation, collaboration, and service. For too long, the child care system has operated without the recognition it deserves as essential economic infrastructure. Parents of young children need reliable, quality care to participate fully in the workforce, and our economy depends on their ability to do so. Together, with our child care provider and family partners and funders, we are working toward a near future where early childhood comes first. When realized, child care providers will have the tools, support, and recognition they need to succeed, and the child care field will be valued as a central part of Nebraska’s economic strategy. A simple yet powerful activity from NECC’s 10th anniversary year involved diagramming our name. We broke it down to explain who we are:



This visual exercise became more than an illustration. It is a meaningful way to connect with our purpose and offer others a clear, accessible way to understand why NECC exists. We are committed to helping people see that early childhood in Nebraska deserves both clarity and commitment.

This origin story captures our special organization’s first ten years. Get to know NECC and our purpose and impact. We hope our story inspires you to partner with us in strengthening Nebraska’s child care businesses and the families they serve.

**Sarah Ann Kotchian**  
CEO, Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative (NECC)

# NECC TIMELINE



## 2017

Number of staff: 44

Annual budget: \$4.9 million

Officed out of the Mastercraft building in downtown Omaha

Launched a substitute teacher pool to support the Early Learning Centers NECC served

## 2018

Number of staff: 43

Annual budget: \$5.6 million

Merged with Early Childhood Services

Opened CDA credentialing prep courses to the community, expanding access beyond EHS partner sites

Served more than 600 children across 258 families in Douglas County with emergency financial support through the Community Response Program (CRP)

Underwent NECC's first strategic planning process

## 2019

Number of staff: 48

Annual budget: \$12.0 million

Added two additional Early Head Start classrooms of 8 children at the Omaha Early Learning Center at Skinner, bringing the number of children served to 176

Hosted Elevate19, NECC's first summit designed exclusively for the business of child care

Awarded \$2.6 million EHS-CCP expansion grant for 104 additional slots, growing capacity to 280 children and their families

Opened temporary Early Head Start classrooms in the Omaha Public Schools Mills Building

Partnered with All Our Kin, which supported the launch of two core programs for child care providers: Licensing Toolkit and Business Training Series

Partnered with Wonderschool, a Child Care Management Software (CCMS)

Sponsored and awarded the Kids Can Can Do Provider Award to Alexis Varoz-Norval

Number of staff: 11

Annual budget: \$921,000

Established as a strategic initiative of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund

## 2014

Number of staff: 29

Annual budget: \$3.0 million

Awarded \$2.7 million Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership Grant

Began serving children in temporary classrooms in Ashland Park Robbins and Skinner Elementary Schools in Omaha

Launched the Nebraska Exchange, a resource-rich website for child care providers

## 2015

Number of staff: 35

Annual budget: \$4.6 million

Hired NECC's first CEO, Shannon Cotsoradis

Served 160 children through NECC's partnerships with the Early Learning Centers at Skinner and Gateway

## 2016





Number of staff: 60

Annual budget: \$14.8 million

Hosted Elevate20 virtually

Moved into NECC's current office in the heart of North Omaha

Added Early Learning Center at Kennedy to NECC's EHS-CCP

Prompted by COVID-19 limitations, expanded services to be online and accessible statewide

Sponsored and awarded the Kids Can Can Do Provider Award to Shanna Johnson

Received first grant from Communities For Kids (C4K)

Officially launched the NECC Child Care Network

# 2020

Number of staff: 59

Annual budget: \$14.8 million

Hosted Elevate21

Published a statewide report on how access to capital shapes the child care sector in Nebraska

Awarded a \$25,000 grant from No Kid Hungry to serve 55 families in Douglas County with weekly grocery delivery

Sponsored and awarded the Kids Can Can Do Provider Award to Dawn Dreher

Partnered with Pie for Providers to help providers claim more of the child care subsidy dollars they've earned

Established the Early Learning Scholarship to bridge the gap between the cost of quality child care and families' ability to pay

Partnered with Shine Early Learning and Wonderschool for Project Breakthrough

Recruited and launched the first class of Parent Ambassadors to support leadership and advocacy skills in parents and caregivers of young children

Updated our organizational mission, vision, and values

# 2021

Number of staff: 55

Annual budget: \$13.7 million

Hosted Elevate22

Developed the Omaha Early Childhood Workforce Initiative to address ongoing workforce crisis

Launched the Early Childhood Champion awards, recognizing 24 child care providers across the state with \$1,000 gifts

Sponsored and awarded the Kids Can Can Do Provider Award to Ana Yumul

Published the first Child Care Network report

Expanded our Early Head Start services in Omaha through two new community partnerships with Child Saving Institute (CSI) and Connected Roots Care Center (CRCC)

First class of Parent Ambassadors graduates

Expanded the Teen and Young Parent Program to an additional 20 counties beyond Douglas County, serving 371 parents with support of our service partners

Provided 212 families and 566 children in Douglas County with emergency economic assistance and community resources through the Community Response Program

# 2022

# 2023

Number of staff: 53

Annual budget: \$12.5 million

Sarah Ann Kotchian named second CEO of NECC after four years as the first Chief Operating Officer (COO) and one year as a member of the Board of Directors

Reached 1,000th member of the Child Care Network

Parent Ambassadors became a member of the United Parent Leaders Action Network (UPLAN)

Sponsored and awarded the Kids Can Can Do Provider Award to Ashley Carlock

Expanded all activities and services across 79 Nebraska counties

Hosted the first North Omaha Child Care Village in NECC's parking lot, connecting members of North Omaha with child care programs

Awarded \$100k Hearst Foundation Grant to expand the Licensing Toolkit program with the addition of 11 statewide partner mentors

Awarded First National Bank of Omaha (FNBO) Community Impact Grant

Awarded Union Pacific Community Ties Giving Program

Launched the Business Resource Center to support child care providers with access to technology, program resources, and more at no cost

# 2024

Number of staff: 53

Annual budget: \$12.1 million

Awarded grants from the William and Ruth Scott Family Foundation and the Lozier Foundation

Hosted Elevate24

Celebrated 10th anniversary

Supported the only 3 family child care providers in Nebraska to become accredited through the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC)

Sponsored and awarded the Kids Can Can Do Provider Award to Carime Ruvalcaba

Traveled for NECC Road Trip to western Nebraska to visit members of the Family Child Care Network Advisory Council

Welcomed the 4th class of Parent Ambassadors

Began the Early Childhood Education Technology Landscape work with Opportunities Exchange

Launched Essentials for Early Educators course

Partnered with I Be Black Girl to create the Child Care Catalyst program

Served as a Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) site for tax preparation for child care providers

Worked in partnership with Hoppe Development to create an architectural blueprint and finance model to design housing that addresses home ownership for family child care home providers



## CHAPTER ONE

# THE BEGINNING: PURPOSE AND PEOPLE



The Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative (NECC) was born from a bold idea: to create a sustainable support structure for early childhood programs that could strengthen the quality and consistency of care for Nebraska's youngest children. That idea was first put into action in 2014, when a group of early childhood leaders at the Buffett Early Childhood Fund (BECF) in Omaha came together to form a backbone organization that would provide shared services for five Educare schools.

At the time, many in the community saw the toll that managing the business side of child care took on program leaders. The work of finance, human resources, payroll, and compliance pulled directors away from classrooms. NECC was envisioned to relieve that burden, allowing educators to focus on what they do best: caring for and teaching young children and working with families.

Jessie Rasmussen, President of BECF and a national leader in early childhood, described it this way: "What we hoped originally from NECC was that it would provide efficient, high-quality administrative support for the five early childhood programs we were directly supporting. It soon became apparent that there was so much more potential."

The early vision for NECC was shaped in part by local initiative Building Bright Futures. Building Bright Futures helped spotlight the systemic



## INNOVATION AT NECC MEANS GIVING PARENTS AND PROVIDERS REAL TOOLS TO GROW.

issues affecting families in poverty and prompted deeper investments in early childhood. As the Building Bright Futures initiative wound down, its programs and infrastructure provided a launchpad for what would become NECC.

One of the most important early moves was a merger with Early Childhood Services, a nonprofit focused on wraparound supports for families. The organization was home to the Teen and Young Parent Program, which provided critical services to young parents and their children. This merger ensured that NECC's foundation would include not only business infrastructure but also a strong commitment to family and community engagement.

Before NECC had a CEO, leadership responsibilities were shared informally. "We had someone from the Buffett Fund kind of helping stand it up, but it was mostly me and a few other folks trying to get things off the ground," Rasmussen said. The work was driven by a collaborative team of early champions, including Gladys Haynes and Eric Buchanan, both leaders at the BECF, who helped define NECC's values, goals, and governance in its earliest days.

The leadership formalization of the organization came in 2016, when Shannon Cotsoradis was hired as NECC's first CEO. Cotsoradis brought strong experience in public policy and early childhood systems and helped lay the groundwork for NECC's statewide expansion. She led the organization through its first Early Head Start—Child Care Partnership grant year and developed the shared services model into a replicable approach that could work beyond the original five sites.

"Shannon was always thinking about what's next," current NECC CEO Sarah Ann Kotchian said. "She helped us reimagine what shared services could be."

In 2023, Kotchian, formerly NECC's Chief Operating Officer and a past member of its Board of Directors, was named

the organization's second CEO after playing a central role in overseeing its day-to-day operations.

Her past role supporting early childhood work at Building Bright Futures and service as a board member at Early Childhood Services, mixed with over a decade of experience as a registered lobbyist at the Nebraska Unicameral, helped smooth her transition into leadership and represented both continued stability and growth, ensuring that NECC's values and vision remained clear.

The early leaders established a vision for the organization: NECC was always about collaborative partnership and innovative support.

"We wanted to create an entity that could support providers and programs without taking over," Haynes said. "A collaborative that respected the knowledge and experience of those already doing the work and built systems around them."

That value in action honors child care providers as professional business owners and parents of young children as partners.

This beginning—part merger, part infrastructure, and part vision—set the stage for NECC to become one of the most trusted and transformative early childhood organizations in the state. NECC's framework was firmly in place and innovating.

"Innovation at NECC means giving parents and providers real tools to grow. Not just offering services, but actually building something sustainable," Justice Wilburn, Family Engagement Specialist said. "The most important thing NECC has done is advocate. We stand with families, providers, and children, and we've never wavered in that commitment. I've seen families come back years later to say, 'You helped me. You were the support I didn't have.' That's what NECC does."

## CHAPTER TWO

# FIRST MAJOR PUBLIC INVESTMENT: EARLY HEAD START-CHILD CARE PARTNERSHIP GRANT

NECC STARTED WITH THE CLEAR AND FOCUSED GOAL OF SUPPORTING FIVE EDUCARE SCHOOLS AND QUICKLY GREW INTO A STATEWIDE EFFORT TO TRANSFORM HOW NEBRASKA SUPPORTS CHILD CARE PROVIDERS AND FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN.



The Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership (EHS-CCP) grant marked one of NECC's earliest and most significant expansions. What began as shared services laid the foundation for a bold leap into federal programming. This unique initiative pairs the cultural, linguistic, and other need-based strengths of community child care with the Early Head Start Program Performance Standards to increase quality, sustainability, and growth of early learning opportunities. As a foundational effort, this work aligned with NECC's mission while helping to establish the infrastructure and credibility needed for future program innovation and statewide growth. NECC's pathway from back-office support to Nebraska's largest EHS-CCP grantee was fueled by both vision and momentum.

### A Federal Launch and First Grants

**2015–2016:** After establishing the organization and the shared services infrastructure, NECC applied for the federal Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership Grant (EHS-CCP). In 2015, NECC was awarded a \$2.7 million grant explicitly for Omaha-area Educare centers, enabling staff to serve infants and toddlers in partnership with the Early Learning Centers at Gateway and Skinner, housed temporarily at Ashland Park Robbins and Skinner campuses. By 2016, those classrooms were open and serving around 160 children and families, marking NECC's transition from coordinator to service provider at scale.

Another important milestone for NECC during this time was the hiring of Shannon Cotsoradis as its first CEO.



### Expansion of Enrolled Children

**2019–2021:** By 2019, NECC had added two more classrooms at Skinner, increasing the total served to 176 with temporary classrooms placed in the Mills Building. Growth of the EHS-CCP program would continue as NECC successfully secured a \$2.6 million EHS-CCP expansion grant for an additional 104 slots, bringing the total number of children served to 280 – a 75% increase.

After construction on a new building was completed in 2020, the Early Learning Center at Kennedy opened as part of NECC's newly secured EHS-CCP expansion grant. The new site, which is also home to NECC's office, was developed in partnership with 75 North and Omaha Public Schools in support of the Highlander neighborhood's purpose built community and "cradle-to-career" vision work.

2020 also marked a turning point for NECC's strategic focus, as Educare of Omaha and the Omaha Early Learning Centers merged to create Educare of Omaha, Inc. With this merger, NECC would eventually phase out the back-office financial and human resources shared services for these partner sites (except for Educare Lincoln) in early 2022.



**2022–2024:**

The organization's efforts reached a new milestone in 2022, as NECC strategically added new providers, Child Saving Institute (CSI) and Connected Roots Care Center (CRCC), to expand services in Omaha further. Two other child care partners would be added to this list, briefly sustaining service before transitioning out: Brighten Our Future Early Learning Center (2022–2023) and Element Learning Center (2023–2024).

**Serving with Care, Consistency, and Compassion**

NECC's EHS-CCP program is more than just a federal-funded initiative, it reflects the organization's mission-driven core. As NECC's current CEO Sarah Ann Kotchian said, "As the recipient of Nebraska's largest Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership grant, we've made a promise: to show up with care, consistency and compassion, especially when families face the toughest of times."

Through grant partnerships with the Early Learning Centers at Gateway, Kennedy, Skinner, CSI, and CRCC, infants and toddlers from diverse backgrounds, and their families, are served in safe, nurturing early learning environments.

NECC's entry into Early Head Start didn't shift its mission, it expanded it. The organization's original purpose was to offer strong, centralized supports so that providers could focus on delivering quality care. That same model made NECC uniquely positioned to apply for and receive its two federal Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership grants that have since become consolidated into one.

As the EHS-CCP grantee, NECC does not directly care for children. Instead, its grant partners deliver the day-to-day services. NECC employs a team of health and child development specialists focused on quality, compliance, family engagement, and program operations, all aligned to the federal standards of Early Head Start. This team collaborates with partner sites' staff, supports families, and ensures consistency and excellence across partner programs.

By combining systems and services into a seamless model, NECC helped elevate the Early Head Start partnership from a grant opportunity to a scalable, sustainable, high-impact solution for the early childhood field.

"When I started at NECC, I didn't know what I was walking into, but I quickly realized it was going to be something big, something different," Yari Jarvis, EHS Family Engagement Specialist said. "NECC invited the community in, listened to their needs, and then built programs to meet those needs."

The story of NECC's founding is one of practical innovation rooted in community values. It started with a clear and focused goal and quickly grew into a statewide effort to transform how Nebraska supports child care providers and families with young children.



“

WHEN I STARTED AT NECC, I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT I WAS WALKING INTO, BUT I QUICKLY REALIZED IT WAS GOING TO BE SOMETHING BIG, SOMETHING DIFFERENT.

”

YARI JARVIS,  
EHS FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SPECIALIST

## CHAPTER THREE

# EVOLUTION OF SHARED SERVICES AND ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH

The original vision for NECC focused on easing the administrative burden for five Educare centers by providing centralized support in finance, human resources, and compliance. This approach, known as “shared services,” was rooted in a simple idea: when providers are freed from time-consuming back-office demands, they can focus more fully on children, families, and program quality.

“We knew that if this model worked for the Educare schools, there would be an opportunity to scale it,” NECC founding CEO Shannon Cotsoradis said. “But even in the early days, we understood that shared services couldn’t be one-size-fits-all.”

That insight became a guiding principle as NECC’s role quickly evolved from technical support for a handful of centers into a broader, more flexible support model for the entire child care sector across the state.

The team began listening closely to providers across Nebraska. They learned that needs varied not only by location, but also by business structure, staffing capacity, language, and licensing requirements. Some providers asked for help with bookkeeping and payroll, while others needed professional development, accreditation guidance, or help navigating complex funding streams. In response, NECC expanded its offerings beyond finance and human resources to include business training, technology integration, and customizable resources designed in collaboration with providers themselves.

“We didn’t start with a rigid service menu,” current CEO Sarah Ann Kotchian said. “We built around the real needs of the field. That meant co-designing tools with providers, not for them.” This responsiveness allowed NECC to grow without losing its core focus: empowering providers to deliver high-quality care in a sustainable, supported way.

The organization’s physical growth mirrored this programmatic evolution. From a small founding staff, NECC grew into a 55-person team working across departments including shared services, family engagement, professional development, and operations. After several small rental spaces in the early years, the organization made its home in an Omaha Public Schools administration building in North Omaha, transforming the space into a vibrant hub for collaboration and community connection.

Central to the space is a 5,000 square foot training center, designed to welcome providers from across the state for workshops, summits, hands-on learning, and



“ THEY ARE DOING SHARED SERVICES, JUST IN A DIFFERENT WAY THAN WE ORIGINALLY ENVISIONED. THE IMPACT NECC HAS EXTENDS FAR BEYOND WHAT WE THOUGHT. YOU INCREASINGLY SEE THE TENDRILS OF NECC TOUCHING ALL SORTS OF THINGS. ”



access to a business resource center. Post-pandemic, NECC also redesigned its office footprint to support hybrid work and more flexible engagement with families, partners, and child care professionals. The building became more than just an office; it became a shared space that reflects NECC’s collaborative approach.

“When we think about shared services, I think we have learned to expand our definition of what that means,” Eric Buchanan of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund said. “They are doing shared services, just in a different way than we originally envisioned. The impact NECC has extends far beyond what we thought. You increasingly see the tendrils of NECC touching all sorts of things.”

Looking back, the shift from a narrow set of administrative supports to a full suite of evolving services marked a key turning point in NECC’s history. It showed that shared services, when rooted in relationships and trust, can be a lever for both stability and innovation in child care.

NECC’s model continues to evolve, always guided by the same core belief that launched the organization: that child care providers are essential, and they deserve strong systems of support behind them. Families and communities benefit when child care providers are supported.

“We started as a shared services back office for nonprofits, but we evolved into something much bigger: an organization that directly impacts child care providers and families,” Dwight Lang, NECC Chief Financial Officer, said.



## CHAPTER FOUR

# TRANSFORMATIVE MILESTONES AND PROGRAMS

As NECC grew beyond its early role supporting five Educare centers, its vision expanded, and so did its impact.

“Child care providers don’t just wear one hat, they’re educators, accountants, HR managers, and storytellers for their communities,” Kotchian said. That recognition steered NECC’s investment in truly foundational supports.

The organization introduced new programs, initiatives, and tools designed to not just support providers and families, but to reshape early childhood care in Nebraska. These transformative milestones reflect NECC’s deep commitment to innovation, collaboration, and accessibility.

“NECC is one of the only organizations that prioritizes parent and family and caregiver voice,” Jess Parker, Parent Ambassador Alumni and Mentor said.

### Elevating the Business of Child Care

One of the most visible evolutions was the creation of the Elevate Business Summit, Nebraska’s first conference focused entirely on the business aspects of child care. At its launch in 2019, Cotsoyadis said, “We wanted to bring together providers for a day full of business-related trainings. No one had ever done that before in Nebraska.” The summit equipped directors with practical skills in finance, legal compliance, and operations, acknowledging that passion alone doesn’t make a business sustainable.

While the first year of the summit was a co-sponsored event between multiple early childhood organizations, NECC would become the summit’s sole proprietor as support for child care business success became a defining priority. From licensing and subsidy navigation to digital tools and on-demand learning, NECC created a robust ecosystem of resources that make the administrative side of running a child care business more manageable.

### Child Care Network Creation and Expansion

In August 2020, NECC launched the Child Care Network, a statewide initiative created to address the growing challenges facing the child care industry. The program was developed in 2019 from two innovative pilot projects.

The Network’s initial focus was on supporting Family Child Care Home (FCCH) programs but has since expanded to include licensed Center-Based programs. That work has grown to serve more than 1,800 network members across 85 percent of Nebraska counties. The Network focuses on helping build business competencies, strengthening access to technology and automation, and offering no-cost child care licensing supports, with most resources available in both English and Spanish.

Understanding that access depends on language, NECC made bilingual services a central standard. All materials, trainings, and coaching

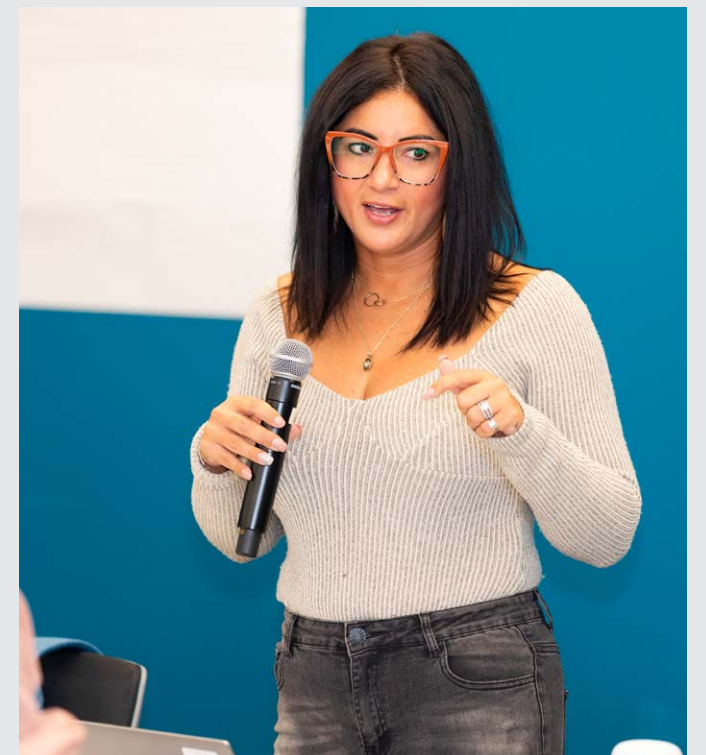
are now available in both English and Spanish. For providers like Lisette Christian, a Spanish-speaking owner of Diana’s Learning Center, the impact has been personal and professional. “They’ve gone above and beyond for our community,” Christian said. “They know time is limited, and they’ve been extremely accommodating.”

That thoughtful inclusion helped fuel the growth of NECC’s Child Care Network. The Network’s goal is to address the industry’s greatest challenges including antiquated business practices, low wages, isolation, and large numbers of educators leaving the field. The Network offers free business training, professional development, and accreditation support in English and Spanish, ensuring that home-based, center-based, rural, and urban providers all have a voice in the system.

Within NECC’s Child Care Network is the Family Child Care Network Advisory Council, whose purpose is to advise and co-create Network programs and initiatives. The Advisory Council also offers a platform for leadership and growth as members share information about professional development opportunities, grants, and other important resources amongst their peers.

### Launch of Parent Ambassadors

NECC also deepened its reach with families through the launch of the Parent Ambassadors program in 2020. Influenced by the work of



THE ORGANIZATION INTRODUCED NEW PROGRAMS, INITIATIVES, AND TOOLS DESIGNED TO NOT JUST SUPPORT PROVIDERS AND FAMILIES, BUT TO RESHAPE EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE IN NEBRASKA.

Maine and Washington State, this year-long leadership and advocacy experience empowers parents and caregivers to engage in state and local policymaking and provides education on how Nebraska's unicameral legislature works.

#### Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated NECC's growth in unexpected ways. As in-person programs halted, NECC quickly pivoted. Programs moved online. Emergency funding was distributed. Personal protective equipment, books, and cleaning supplies were delivered to providers across the state.

"We became the central point of intake during the crisis, responding to whatever providers and families needed, fast," Kotchian said.

#### Sunset Programs and Pilots

Each initiative reflects NECC's willingness to pilot bold ideas, adapt to evolving needs, and carry forward lessons that inform future efforts, even when a program's chapter comes to a close. We are grateful for the contributions of these programs:

- Douglas County Community Response Program (CRP): 2018–2024
- Early Childhood Champions: 2022–2023
- Early Learning Scholarship (ELS): 2021–2024
- Elevated Network: 2021–2024  
*In partnership with Wonderschool, Playground, and Brightwheel*
- Project Breakthrough: 2020–2022

- Pie for Providers (subsidy partnership): 2021–2024
- Teen and Young Parent Program (TYPP): 2018–2024
- Omaha Workforce Initiative: 2022–2023

In the first ten years, NECC has evolved strategically, launching Nebraska's first child care business summit, fostering parent-led policy work, embedding bilingual services, and building a statewide child care provider network rooted in shared needs. These milestones reflect an enduring principle: lasting change begins with listening, learning, and aligning resources with real-world challenges. The result is a decade of strategic transformation that honors the complexity of child care, the professionalism of providers, and the power of families.





## CHAPTER FIVE

# ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC INVESTMENT

From the beginning, NECC recognized that lasting change in early childhood care and education could not be achieved without public investment. But policy change would require more than strong programs; it would require strong voices.

NECC's approach to advocacy is grounded in the belief that the most powerful messages come from those closest to the issue. That's why the organization invests in leadership development for both parents and providers.

"We were never just building programs," NECC founding CEO Shannon Cotsoradis said. "We were building capacity in the field so that providers and parents could shape the system they're part of."

This belief is most visible in the Parent Ambassadors program. Launched in 2021, the leadership and advocacy initiative trains yearly cohorts of parents in the mechanics of Nebraska's unicameral system and gives them tools to share their stories with lawmakers and local leaders.

After their ambassadorship year, alumni continue to engage with each other and are now active in 35 of the state's 49 legislative districts.

"I testify pretty often at the Unicameral on bills that impact my family and community," said Jess Parker, a graduate and mentor of the Parent Ambassadors program. "Before NECC, I had found my voice. But through

Parent Ambassadors, I learned how to use it."

Parent Ambassadors has also been involved in national advocacy efforts, with both active and alumni members representing Nebraska parent voice through United Parents Leadership Action Network (UPLAN), Family Resource Information, Education, and Network Development Service (FRIENDS) National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention, and presenting at the National Center for Families Learning conference.

NECC's advocacy efforts also include providers. Through its statewide Child Care Network and regular gatherings, providers are invited to surface concerns, identify policy barriers, and engage directly with decision-makers. When Spanish-speaking providers in Omaha struggled with city licensing regulations, NECC helped coordinate meetings and supported their advocacy for change.

Lisette Christian, a child care provider in Omaha, who participated in those meetings, said, "Through our monthly regional meetings, we were able to express our frustration and connect with someone who could help us move from a Home I to a Home II. That opened up opportunities for others, too."

NECC's role is not to speak on behalf of providers and parents, but to amplify their voices and give them the tools to influence change. That

“**THROUGH PARENT AMBASSADORS, I LEARNED HOW TO USE [MY VOICE].**”

includes briefings with lawmakers, participation in statewide coalitions, and partnerships with funders and civic leaders committed to early childhood.

"One of the greatest impacts we can have is helping providers and families understand the role they can play in shaping policy," Kotchian said. "When their voices are centered, we don't just change minds, we change systems."

Advocacy at NECC isn't an add-on. It is embedded in everything from professional development to program design. Over time, the integrated approach seeks to help shift the perception of child care from a private family issue to a public good worthy of investment.

As NECC continues its work, it remains focused on mobilizing community voice to address Nebraska's chronic underfunding of early childhood programs. The organization knows the path forward requires leadership and shared action. And with parents and providers at the forefront, the future looks more possible than ever.

## CHAPTER SIX

# 10<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY IMPACT CELEBRATIONS, SIGNATURE PROJECTS, AND BRAND REFINEMENT

As NECC reached its 10-year milestone in 2024, the organization took time to celebrate, reflect, and set a path for the future. The anniversary was more than a marker in time, it was a statewide opportunity to recognize the child care providers and families who make up Nebraska's early childhood ecosystem and the enormous work and impact that occurred in NECC's first ten years.

The anniversary year was dedicated to studying the organization to capture impact; clarify its story; and celebrate NECC's people and programs. That reflective process, rooted in understanding NECC's origins and measuring its reach, led to a refreshed vision and mission, crafted to better reflect the organization's purpose and role:

### VISION

Creating a future where early childhood comes first.

### MISSION

Investing in the early childhood landscape through innovation, collaboration, and service – strengthening families, businesses, and Nebraska.

Other anniversary outcomes include:

#### Internal Focus

##### *Clarified Organizational Structure*

Internally, NECC clarified its departmental structure by formally establishing an Operations Department and launching a development initiative.

The newly formed Operations Department, led by the Chief Operating Officer, brings together previously independent units – human resources and strategic communications – under one department and introduces a new area of focus: development.

The new development effort formally structures the work to expand NECC's network of financial supporters to ensure

NECC's services are always available and to invite buy-in for the responsibility of supporting a critical sector of our economy: child care providers and the parents who are in the workforce.

These changes reflect the organization's growing capacity and its continued commitment to organizational excellence.

##### *Clarified Impact Measurement*

As part of the anniversary year, NECC introduced three formal measurement categories to better articulate and track its work: Innovate, Collaborate, and Serve.

- **Innovate:** NECC designs, develops, and deploys new initiatives that address longstanding and emerging needs to drive lasting improvements for child care providers and families with young children in Nebraska.
- **Collaborate:** NECC partners with child care providers; families with young children; and local, state, and national organizations to enhance collective efforts for early childhood in Nebraska.
- **Serve:** NECC offers customized resources and direct supports to meet the ongoing needs of child care providers and families with young children in Nebraska.

These categories helped sharpen the organization's focus and aligned program activity with strategic goals. They also made it easier to communicate impact to funders, policymakers, and the public.

#### External Focus

##### *Child Care Provider Statewide Tour*

To commemorate the occasion, NECC staff and leadership embarked on a statewide tour, visiting communities and providers across Nebraska. The visits were more than ceremonial. They served as listening sessions, honoring the contributions of child care professionals while also gathering insights that would inform NECC's next chapter.



##### *Signature Event: Passport Tour of NECC*

NECC also launched an internal and external Passport Tour. This immersive experience welcomed staff, board members, funders, and community partners into NECC's office space to see the work firsthand. The tour showcased real impact stories and introduced guests to the programs, people, and processes that bring NECC's mission to life. Staff described it as both energizing and grounding, a moment to connect across departments and re-engage with the organization's purpose.

"We knew we wanted to bring clarity and energy to this milestone," Kotchian said. "Our community deserves to see how far we've come and to know where we're headed."

Looking back and looking ahead, NECC used the 10th anniversary not only to honor the past but to actively shape the next era of early childhood support in Nebraska and to push for a future where early childhood comes first.

## 10TH ANNIVERSARY IMPACT HIGHLIGHTS

- Awarded one of the first Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership (EHS-CCP) grants in the country. (2015)
- Established one of the largest statewide child care provider networks in the country, with over 1,800 members across 85% of Nebraska's counties. (2020 to current)
- Launched Parent Ambassadors, the first parent and provider advocacy effort in Nebraska. (2021)
- Grew budget investments for child care providers and families with young children from \$3 million to \$15 million, spending .84 cents of every \$1 raised on programs, above the nonprofit average for cost per dollar raised. (2023)
- Transitioned to fully remote operations during COVID, maintaining all services. Served as Douglas County's central point of intake and the financial administrator for the distribution of \$2.7 million in federal and private funding to support child care providers and families with children during COVID. \$1.6 million of these funds supported teen and young parents.
- Distributed \$116 million in federal, state, and private funding over 10 years to support programs, child care providers, and families and children.
- Led in expanding bilingual access to all services.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# LEGACY AND FUTURE VISION

Ten years after its founding, the Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative stands at an exciting intersection of reflection and momentum. What began as a backbone organization offering shared services to five Educare sites has grown into one of the most impactful early childhood organizations in the state. As NECC steps into its second decade, its vision – creating a future where early childhood comes first – is more than aspirational. It is directional.

The newly adopted vision and mission, investing in the early childhood landscape through innovation, collaboration, and service – strengthening families, businesses, and Nebraska, reaffirms NECC's role as both a leader and a partner. The vision and mission are already in action, visible in the growing statewide network, the expanded bilingual services, the partnerships with policymakers, hundreds of providers empowered with tools to strengthen their businesses, and families supported through these collective efforts.

Looking ahead, NECC is committed to expanding shared services in a way that is flexible, equitable, and truly responsive to what providers and families need most. The goal is to co-create systems that work, systems that recognize the critical role of child care in Nebraska's economy, workforce, and future. NECC recently defined three strategic priorities embedded within the measurement

categories that will guide the organization's efforts in the years ahead:

- Under Innovate, NECC will expand the reach of its programs to meet longstanding and emerging needs.
- Through Collaborate, NECC will position itself as an advocacy and thought leader by deepening partnerships with providers, families, and allies.
- And within Serve, NECC will achieve long-term sustainability by developing new networks of financial and partnership support to ensure NECC always offers no-cost customized supports to providers and families.

To the funders who believed in this vision, the providers and families who have trusted us, the founders, past and present board members, and early champions who made the launch possible, and the current and former staff members who shaped NECC's evolution—thank you. Your leadership and belief in what is possible for a state when child care providers and families with young children are prioritized and supported built the foundation for all that has followed.

As we enter our next decade, we do so with deep gratitude. NECC's story is still being written. We hope you will be part of it.

Join us in shaping what comes next.





### **VISION**

Creating a future where early childhood comes first.

### **MISSION**

Investing in the early childhood landscape through innovation, collaboration, and service – strengthening families, businesses, and Nebraska.

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