

Midlands Voices: Early childhood ed can narrow gaps

By Samuel J. Meisels

The writer is the founding executive director of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska.

It's often said that Nebraska represents the "Good Life," and certainly that sentiment echoes statewide. Nebraskans work hard, value family and are committed to their communities.

Intrinsic to the notion of the good life is the promise that all of Nebraska's youngest citizens will have the opportunity to learn, grow and develop and become contributing, productive members of society.

Yet Nebraska, like many other states, is burdened by a significant gap in the academic achievement of many of its students, particularly students who are poor, African-American or Latino. A recent EducationQuest report finds that only about a quarter of Nebraska's high school graduates meet or exceed ACT college readiness benchmarks in all four subject areas, and the numbers by race/ethnicity show that Hispanics, Native Americans and African-Americans lag far behind whites.

But Nebraska has a resource that sets it apart from the rest of the country and may, in time, create a more level playing field and greater equality of opportunity for its youngest citizens.

In 2011, the University of Nebraska, supported by a generous founding gift from Omaha philanthropist Susie Buffett, established the Buffett Early Childhood Institute, a four-campus, university-wide, research, training, outreach and policy division of the university that became operational in 2013. The institute is devoted to transforming the development and education of vulnerable young children and their families and supporting those who work with them.

Using resources from all four campuses, the institute assists schools, families and community organizations with narrowing the achievement gap experienced by young children growing up in poverty. The institute also seeks to help all children in Nebraska, birth through age 8, have the opportunity to be successful — intellectually, socially, emotionally and academically. Research tells us that the early years of life are "prime time" for emotional, intellectual and social growth. Synapses, the connections between brain cells, undergo more change during the first five years of life than at any other time. Language is learned, and skills to manage or regulate emotions and behavior, effectively communicate and learn, and sustain positive relationships with others have their origins in the first years of life.

Differences in children's learning by family income show up as early as nine months. Gaps for low-income children then continue to widen so that, by kindergarten, many children are a year or more behind their more advantaged peers, with these gaps further widening across the early grades.

In short, the early years of life matter. High-quality, coordinated early learning programs are linked to progress in school, increased earnings, reduction in antisocial behavior, lowered welfare participation and less trouble with the law.

Numerous studies show a return of at least \$7 for every dollar invested in young children — especially children at risk and children with special needs. If we want to take advantage of this potential, early childhood education must be viewed as an investment, not an inoculation. A year of pre-K is a good thing but not nearly enough — especially for children at-risk.

Working with the 11 superintendents in the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, the Buffett Institute has launched a program in a dozen schools with high concentrations of poverty.

Beginning at birth and continuing to the end of third grade, this plan views the school as the hub of a seamless system of services for young at-risk children and their families. It focuses on home visiting for birth to age 3, intensive preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, and aligned preschool and early elementary for ages 3 to 8. In addition, technical assistance and professional development options will be implemented for all teachers of young children across the Learning Community.

Access to a full continuum of high-quality, continuous programming like this is not yet available in Nebraska or anywhere else. Although our work to close the achievement gap in Nebraska begins in Omaha, it will extend statewide as we devise ways to assist communities across the state improve young children's early learning and development.

Achievement gaps not only limit children's opportunities to realize their full potential. They also limit the viability and productivity of Nebraska's future workforce. We know how to reduce or eliminate these gaps through high-quality early childhood programming.

The lesson is clear: Start early, start well.