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## Early Childhood/Child Welfare Priority

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**EARLY CHILDHOOD / CHILD WELFARE (ECCW)**  
**Priority**  
**University of Nebraska at Omaha**  
**December 2011**

**Whitepaper Authoring Committee**

Chair: Nancy Edick

Members: Samantha Ammons, Melissa Cast-Brede, Ann Coyne, Karen Falconer Al-Hindi, Shari Hofschire, Lisa Kelly-Vance, Jay Killion, Sajda Qureshi, Brigitte Ryalls, Peter Simi, Peter Wolcott

**Executive Summary**

This is the executive summary of a white paper that describes the context, current capacity, areas of opportunity, and next steps for the UNO Early Childhood/Child Welfare Priority (ECCW). It responds to the need for comprehensive integrated systems of services designed to give all young children (birth through age eight) access to what they need in the early years to succeed in school and in life. In this context, UNO recognizes ECCW as critical to our metropolitan university mission. Further, we must come together with early childhood service providers, P-12 districts, parents, policy makers, other University of Nebraska campuses, community service agencies and businesses to improve learning and developmental outcomes for all children, with emphasis on children who are at-risk and those with special needs.

The state of Nebraska is poised to become a national leader in an integrated approach to the field of early childhood through the Buffett Early Childhood Institute (BECI). In the metropolitan area, Building Bright Future's (BBF) mission is to "measurably improve lifelong educational outcomes for every child by mobilizing a comprehensive network of community resources." At the same time, UNO is becoming a "metropolitan university of distinction" through its many contributions to Early Childhood and Child Welfare. We have the opportunity to bring together and capitalize on the unique contributions of multiple disciplines (see Appendix A) to promote positive development and growth in early childhood. In particular, our **areas of opportunity** at UNO in ECCW are the establishment of an Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Policy, Practice and Research Consortium (IECPPR) and an Open Institutional Repository.

This committee recognizes the need for increased communication and collaboration in the area of ECCW. The white paper identifies **potential next steps** which could include: formalizing an IECPPR Consortium, increasing recognition and support for innovative IECPPR Consortium activities, increasing IECPPR external funding efforts, and enhancing internal investments in IECPPR.

The ECCW committee concludes that UNO is well positioned to contribute to the local BBF and statewide BECI initiative and provide leadership at the state and national level. Our close partnership with the metropolitan community combined with faculty and student expertise and passion will result in an integrated effort that identifies and responds to needs and opportunities.

## **I. Introduction**

This white paper by the ECCW Priority Committee describes the context, current capacity, areas of opportunities, and next steps for Early Childhood/Child Welfare (ECCW) at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. At UNO, ECCW is among our five key campus priorities.

Decades of research have established the years from birth to age 8 as the period during which children make their greatest gains in cognitive, behavioral, language and social-emotional growth (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Yet large numbers of children emerge from this period lacking the basic abilities they need to succeed in life. Most vulnerable and at risk for later failure are those many children who grow up in poverty, abuse or have developmental delays, learning, behavioral and physical challenges (Cunha & Heckman, 2007; Douglas-Hall & Chau, 2007). A collective effort of educators, scholars, policy makers, and community agencies is needed to address these complex issues.

Coordinated efforts around research, practice, professional development, and policy can have a significant impact in the state. The urgency for this effort is clear. According to Nebraska State Department of Education figures (Christensen, 2008), since 1990:

- The number of Nebraska children living in poverty has increased 62%
- The number of children growing up in families where a language other than English is spoken has risen 275%
- The number of young children identified as having a disability has grown 72%

Additionally, only 20.6% of the 4-year-olds and 12.1% of all 3-year-olds are enrolled in a high quality state-supported pre-kindergarten program, Head Start or Pre-K special education program (NIEER, 2009).

UNO must continue to play a significant and expanding role in the improvement of opportunities for young children to succeed in school and in life. This is consistent with UNO's metropolitan mission and consistent with our community and statewide initiatives already underway.

## **II. UNO Current Capacity**

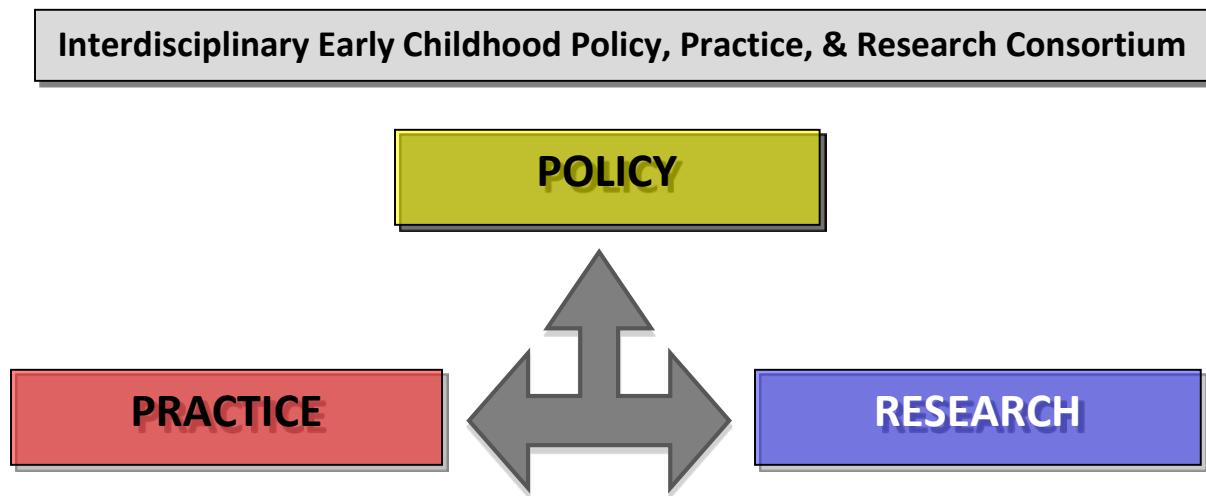
Our metropolitan mission is well aligned with the strengthening of ECCW efforts. UNO is promoting evidence-based best practices and enhancing our capacity to serve the community in an ECCW leadership and policy role (see Appendix A). Current capacity for the ECCW priority includes:

- Multidisciplinary initiatives that represent diverse and varied interests. This is consistent with both the UNO Strategic Plan and the OASA Priority Initiative. An investigation of lead in Omaha soils provides an example: Soil samples were collected by geology students, processed by chemistry students, and analyzed by James Carroll and colleagues. A student made the public presentation of the findings earlier this semester. Lead is particularly toxic to young children and is especially hazardous to those who play in yards and playgrounds.
- Faculty have a history of influencing policy that impacts the welfare of young children.

- Faculty are involved in policy, research, community engagement and teaching that spans from infancy through early childhood (birth through age 8) and this focus is consistent with the Buffett Early Childhood Institute’s priorities. Schools, departments and programs include (and are not limited to): Chemistry, Criminal Justice, Environmental Studies, Foreign Languages and Literatures, Geography/Geology, History, Music and Visual Arts, Nebraska State Data Center, Physics, Psychology, Social Work, Sociology and Anthropology, Special Education and Communication Disorders, Teacher Education, Women’s and Gender Studies, and the UNO Child Care Center. (See Appendix A for more information.)
- We have an applied focus on not only understanding the early childhood issues that families face, but on helping families and the wider community. Service learning and community connections are two of our strengths.

### III. UNO Areas of Opportunity

UNO is becoming a “metropolitan university of distinction” and in the context of that evolution, ECCW is an opportunity for interdisciplinary, proactive support for children and families that includes prevention and targeted intervention with the ultimate goal of diverse, healthy families. UNO’s areas of opportunity lie in the intersection of policy, practice and research.



We propose the establishment of an **Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Policy, Practice and Research Consortium** that will bring together experts in Early Childhood who will develop policy, conduct research and partner with the community to provide services to young children and their families, especially those who have financial limitations, lack resources, and children with developmental disabilities. Different experts will define early childhood in different ways

and these varied approaches will enhance the well-being of young children in the formative years. The goals of the Consortium are to:

- Expand partnerships with community and state initiatives, i.e., Building Bright Futures and the Buffet Early Childhood Institute
- Increase Recognition and Support for Innovative IECPPR Consortium Activities
- Increase IECPPR Consortium External Funding Efforts
- Enhance Internal Investments in IECPPR Consortium

We also propose the development of an *Open Institutional Repository* at Criss Library that will enhance access to the intellectual products of UNO and the Early Childhood Consortium members. The institutional repository can:

- Showcase early childhood research and community activity from UNO
- Enhance access to UNO early childhood research and community activity through search engines and databases
- Assess usage of UNO intellectual activity in the area of early childhood and related areas through the monitoring of access to resources

#### Possible IECPPR Consortium Activities:

- *Early Childhood Literacy Lab*: Partner with schools to provide intensive, experience-rich literacy instruction for K-3 children. The lab would focus on best practices in emergent literacy supporting developmental growth in foundational learning that strengthens the capacity for learning to read and write. The STEM Priority initiative would be an integrated partner in this effort.
- *Interdisciplinary Research Assistance Center (IRAC)*: Develop a research and methodological teaching center on campus that will provide quantitative and qualitative hands-on research support to faculty, staff, students and members of the community. This center will offer periodic workshops on methods topics such as use of major data sets, innovative research methods, and up-to-date statistical methods. IRAC will support many areas at UNO, including priority initiatives like ECCW and STEM.
- *Education and Poverty Policy Center (EPPC)*: Examine local, regional and national issues related to the problem to determine the effectiveness of programs and policies to improve the ability of children in poverty achieving educational success from pre-school through college. The Center would perform policy analysis to determine causal linkages between poverty and educational success. It will also conduct assessments of barriers to implementation. The products will inform both local educational practice and national policy.
- *UNO Child Care Center*: Improve existing childcare facility, expand the age range of children to include infant care, and systematically integrate UNO's Child

Care Center operations with the research and practice activities of the Consortium.

- *Expand the Educational Administration and Supervision Department:* Provide an Early Childhood Leadership option through the Educational Administration and Supervision department's advanced degree programs.
- *Parents and Children Together (PACT):* The purpose of PACT is to provide parents with the tools needed to be effective parents, with the assumption being parents are in the best position to teacher their young children but many parents have limited opportunity to learn the most effective parenting skills. PACT would provide services to caregivers and enhance child outcomes.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Faculty, staff and students at UNO are already engaged in many varied projects and initiatives that address Early Childhood and Child Welfare. In this white paper, we propose connecting, strengthening the resources already present at UNO, and expanding on them. The action steps we propose are:

- **Formalizing an IECPPR Consortium Committee:** The campus needs to formalize an interdisciplinary committee that will provide a conduit for collaboration, shared discussions, and partnerships.
- **Developing the Open Institutional Repository.**

The potential long term benefits of the IECPPR Consortium and Repository are increased collaboration, increased external funding, and the improved welfare of children and families across the state of Nebraska. The success of these efforts will be assessed by increases in external funding and data demonstrating improved child outcomes.

## **APPENDIX A: UNO Current Capacity**

**Introduction:** What follows should be considered a partial and non-representative list. It illustrates the richness and variety of work underway on the UNO campus and is *not* exhaustive.

### **Biology**

Suzanne Sollars' research focuses on developmental aspects of sensory systems. Her studies examine brain and system-wide physiological alterations in neural processes and anatomy as a result of perturbations during development. Examination of developmental dynamics in neuroscience are also ongoing projects by other Psychobiology faculty (Strasser and French) and students in the Master's and Ph.D. Graduate Program.

### **Chemistry**

Rich Lomneth and students have measured formaldehyde levels inside energy efficient homes as part of a Zero Net Energy Home project with faculty from UNL, UNMC and Architectural Engineering. Indoor air quality, including formaldehyde levels, is a children's health concern. The group may extend the work to include the design of "healthy" child care facilities in addition to "healthy" homes.

James A. Carroll and colleagues have analyzed soil samples in the Omaha area to detect low levels of metals particularly toxic to children: specifically, lead. Statistical analysis of data on soils collected by geology students, digested by general chemistry students, and analyzed by experienced UNO faculty is complete. Adjustment for intraurban migration, and patterns of prevailing winds, might help to formulate more robust conclusions. In addition, Chemistry could support a focus on safe toys for youngsters if others were interested.

### **Criminal Justice**

School of Criminology and Criminal Justice (SCCJ) sees early childhood development as part of an interconnected web that cannot be understood in isolation from other aspects of the social system or other phases of the life course. A team of SCCJ faculty and graduate students (with representatives from Creighton University) are currently conducting the 2011 Omaha gang assessment: A comprehensive analysis of the nature and prevalence of Omaha street gangs. One of the most significant childhood risk factors is growing up in a neighborhood where street gangs prevail. Another SCCJ project focused on early childhood involves assessing programmatic efforts to cultivate stable and healthy relationships between children and incarcerated mothers. SCCJ faculty are partnering with the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services to evaluate the agency's parenting program for female inmates.

Programmatically, SCCJ houses the Consortium for Crime and Justice Research (CCJR) and Juvenile Justice Institute (JJI). CCJR is serving in various capacities on the Building Bright Futures Attendance Collaborative. SCCJ routinely partners with various agencies responsible for promoting healthy childhood development such as the Omaha Boys & Girls Clubs of America. In recent years, SCCJ has also begun identifying partnerships with the University of Nebraska Medical Center's School of Public Health, Boys and Girls Town of Nebraska, and others.

### **Environmental Studies**

Worm Composting at UNO Child Care Center & "Going Green" discussions with the children.

### **Foreign Languages and Literature**

First-year second-semester students learning Spanish (SPAN 1120) with a service learning component are helping after school programs and faith based agencies with their mentoring



programs. Iluno and Japanese students read to the UNO Child Care Center children to enhance their English speaking skills. The children also participate in activities and a lunch that the Japanese students host.

### **Geography/Geology & Women's Gender Studies**

Karen Falconer Al-Hindi's research concerns fathers and the ways they stay involved with their kids who have autism. Discovering how they do so can help other fathers, which may help keep families together. Positive family relationships contribute to child welfare and are especially important for children with autism and developmental delays or disabilities.

### **HPER**

Dr. Nick Stergiou's Biomechanics Core Facility is conducting research on infant sitting, cerebral palsy and autism.

Josie Metal-Corbin leads a PE class for children enrolled at UNO Child Care Center.

Children ages 3-5 can enroll for swim lessons in the summer through HPER.

*MavKids Summer Program:* A recreational day camp for children entering first grade through age 14.

*Mini MavKids Sports Program:* For children ages 3 – 5, this is a six-week instructional program that helps parents work one-on-one with their children while teaching them the basics of sports: throwing, catching, kicking and batting.

### **History**

Sharon Wood is developing an undergraduate course on the history of childhood in North America

### **Music & Visual Arts**

UNO childcare enrollees benefit from weekly music classes led by Melissa Berke and students, as well as help with the Holiday program and graduation. Art education students have offered visual arts education lessons as well. One such lesson was the design for the Chancellor's Holiday card.

Building Bright Futures Early Childhood Services: For the past semester the music education class has provided weekly music at eight of the preschool childcare centers.

EDUCare Center /Indian Hills: Last spring three UNO art educators met with the staff of the Indian Hills Center to provide consultation on their future art plans. We provided curriculum materials, current research in early childhood development in the arts, integrated lessons and other practical/logistical advice. Also invited them to Prairie Visions workshop.

CADRE II: The Arts: For ten years the arts track of the CADRE project provided a concentration in arts education for the graduate degree in education. Over 130 teachers from seven metro districts graduated from the program (several were Headstart educators in Ralston). The drop off of most of the major districts for 2011 and the increase of the number of tracks that teachers can choose decreased the population for CADRE II to one educator. The CADRE program is one area that has potential growth in early childhood as well as the possibility of interdisciplinary ventures in more areas than just the arts.

### **Physics**

*Aim for the Stars Math and Science* camps offer students as young as 8 years old fun, hands on instruction in a “camp” environment. Director Connie O’Brien is committed to inclusion; students with a range of abilities enjoy the camp. Parents from around the U.S. travel to Omaha to enroll their students. The camp contributes to STEM education as well as UNO recruitment.

### **Psychology**

Juan Casas studies the etiology of relational aggression and victimization in early childhood. This work has primarily focused on the early parent-child relationship as it relates to these behaviors. This work also looks at gender differences and adjustment issues for both the perpetrators and the targets of these hostile behaviors.

Jeffrey French conducts research on the impact of early environments (both prenatal and postnatal) on development in the marmoset monkey, a species that exhibits many human family-like qualities (e.g., offspring care by fathers and older siblings, social monogamy, nuclear family social structure). His research demonstrates that variation in prenatal hormone environments shape postnatal development, and early postnatal social environments contribute to stress-reactivity, a feature that has important links with disease susceptibility in humans. The research has been funded by the Eunice K. Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development since 2002.

Lisa Kelly-Vance & Brigitte Ryalls have developed an assessment and intervention system that uses the context of play to determine the cognitive, social and behavioral skills of young children. Our research findings have shown that the assessment system successfully identifies the children who would benefit from interventions and that these interventions are very successful in a short period of time.

Jonathan Bruce Santo is studying systematic, mandated facilitation of school transitions. This an important but understudied aspect of the Reggio-Emilia approach to early childhood education that is admired internationally. He studied (with Barry Schneider, University of Ottawa, Canada; Mara Manetti, Laura Frattini and Nadia Rania University of Genoa, Italy) the links between Northern Italian transition practices and pupils' feelings about school, academic achievement, problem behaviors, internalizing and externalizing.

The School Psychology Graduate Program is integrally involved in early childhood research and training. Faculty have expertise in working with young children, educators and families. In the teaching domain, they offer a course in Early Childhood Assessment and Intervention; many other courses address improving education for young children with the goal of preventing problems. Numerous research projects focus on young children, and on providing proactive services to children, educators and families. Faculty and students have extensive publications and have conducted local, state, and national presentations addressing the needs of children from birth to age 8.

### **Public Administration & Community Service**

The College of Public Administration and Community Service houses the Nebraska State Data Center. It has demographers with access to many sets of state data and contributes to assessment and program evaluation needs concerning early childhood/child welfare.

### **Social Work**

Jeannette Harder is leading three projects related to early childhood and child welfare: First, growing out of her recent book, *Let the Children Come: Preparing Faith Communities to End Child Abuse and Neglect* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press), she has started a nonprofit organization: Dove's Nest. Its mission is to empower and equip faith communities to keep children and youth safe in their homes, churches, and communities [www.Dovesnest.net](http://www.Dovesnest.net) Second, she is leading a multi-dimensional statewide evaluation of the Nebraska CASA Association. Third, she is in the early stages of becoming a local evaluator for a Nebraska 21st Century Community Learning Center at an elementary school in North Omaha. Finally, she frequently evaluates child abuse prevention programs, like Parent Aide and Healthy Families programs around the U.S. Currently, she is working with programs in Downey, CA, and Elkhart, IN. Other community partners are shown on this page: <http://www.takethenextsteps.org/ca>

### **Sociology & Anthropology**

Samantha Ammons supervised a recent Master's Thesis entitled "Social Class, Parenting Styles, and Choice of Child Care." This thesis examines how social class shapes what parents desire in child care and their satisfaction with it. Dr. Ammons and the new graduate plan to submit it for publication in Spring 2012.

### **Special Education and Communication Disorders**

Student clinicians evaluate and/or treat children with articulation/phonological disorders, language delays, autism, genetic syndromes, aphasia, dysarthria and apraxia. Services are also provided through the Scottish Rite Toddler program located at the Munroe Meyer Institute on the UNMC campus.

### **Teacher Education**

The Early Childhood Endorsement is for teachers who wish to be highly qualified to teach children in settings with children from birth to primary ages.

UNO is the only institution in Nebraska offering the Bilingual Education endorsement for teachers.

Dr. Susan McWilliams coordinates the Family Literacy Project.

Literacy Support Services provides assessment, evaluation and instruction in reading and writing for children in local schools. Intense instruction and focus on the student's individual needs enables the teacher and student to see improvements in the student's reading achievement. A formal report is given to the parents at the end of the term.

### **UNO Child Care Center**

UNO Staff at the UNO Child Care Center either currently sit on several early childhood boards and committees or they have in the recent past (one staff member currently serves as treasurer on the OAEYC Board. Another is part of the Early Childhood Consortium of the Omaha Area Board, the Child Care Health Consultants, Kids and Families Committee; she served on the OAEYC board for over 10 years, served on the Commission on the Status of Women for six years, and has worked with the Building Bright Futures Initiative).

The Child Care Center staff volunteer to help or facilitate at Trainings and Workshops held in the Omaha area, and they participate in the week of the Young Child Activities in the Omaha Area.

The Child Care Center is a host facility for the Early Childhood Training Center during Environmental Rating Scales Trainings.

They also work with the OPS Special Education Work Experience Programs, where students come and volunteer at the child care center to gain work experiences and learn a trade/job.

Students from Wayne State College, Dana State College and Peru State College do their student teaching and practicums/internships at UNO Child Care Center.

Psychology, Education, Health & PE, Music, etc. students come and do observations and course work at UNO Child Care Center for their classes.

Dr. Susan McWilliams from the Education Department sends students from her early childhood development classes to UNO Child Care Center.

Marcia Adler from Health Services is the UNO CCC Health Consultant and does trainings with the staff.