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# Perspectives of Rural Nebraska Community Leaders on Pre-Kindergarten in Public Schools

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Perspectives of Rural Nebraska Community Leaders on  
Pre-Kindergarten in Public Schools

by

Bradley G. Stauffer

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Studies  
(Educational Leadership and Higher Education)

Under the Supervision of Professor Marilyn Grady

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2018

Perspectives of Rural Nebraska Community Leaders on  
Pre-Kindergarten in Public Schools

Bradley G. Stauffer, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2018

Adviser: Marilyn Grady

The investigator in this study explored perspectives of rural Nebraska community leaders on pre-kindergarten in public schools. Thirty rural Nebraska community leaders were interviewed, 10 from each of three different communities ranging in population from around 1,000 to 2,500. For this qualitative study, the investigator asked two primary research questions related to the impact of pre-kindergarten on:

1. Child development
2. Community development

Six main themes were derived from the interviews:

1. Child Development
2. Community Development
3. Changes in the Family and Society
4. Funding
5. Equity
6. Educating the Community

The literature review focused on the efficacy of pre-kindergarten and early childhood education. Three seminal research studies set the standard and gave the field some of the first evidence that comprehensive early childhood education can make a big impact on the trajectory of disadvantaged children. Results of these landmark studies are

significant and have helped guide public policy on early childhood for decades. These longitudinal studies showed significant benefits for school readiness, but perhaps more significant are the long-run benefits that provide a host of socio-economic benefits.

Rural Nebraska community leaders understood the value of these benefits for their children and their communities. They were unanimous in their support of pre-kindergarten programs.

Funding pre-K was the biggest challenge for local school districts and communities. Because of a reluctance to further burden tax payers, leaders felt alternative revenue sources would be needed to start and sustain high-quality pre-K for all children. With a preference for public-private partnerships, community leaders believed funding high-quality early childhood education and care was ultimately a local responsibility.

Interview participants said their communities lacked local leadership and expertise to get early childhood initiatives off the ground. A recommendation offered by the investigator is a public relations process that emphasizes public participation strategies. Another recommendation is employment of an individual who can assist rural communities with planning, organization and support. This role would be similar in approach to those found through cooperative extension programs and would be funded in the spirit of public-private partnerships.

## Dedications

This dissertation would not have happened without the support of my wife, Judy. She was my biggest supporter, provided encouragement when I needed it, and allowed me the grace to suspend many duties around the house. I am forever grateful, and this work is dedicated to her.

As I have reflected on this journey, I have also realized how blessed and privileged I have been to have been the product of a family that values education. I had one grandparent with a college degree. Both parents had graduate degrees. Both siblings were college graduates and one a DVM. All my aunts and uncles earned college degrees and all seven of my cousins—a group that included two attorneys, a Ph.D., an architect, a nurse anesthetist, a university recreation director, and a facilities supervisor. I find that remarkable, and I probably would never have realized the significance of this without pursuing this degree. I am grateful for my wonderful and accomplished family and especially my parents who made higher education a reality for me.

## Acknowledgements

The pursuit of a doctorate does not happen by the student's efforts alone. My adviser, Dr. Marilyn Grady, was the person who inspired me to take the plunge when we had an opportune conversation at an awards luncheon. I am sure that I frustrated Dr. Grady over the years, but she is a patient soul with a heart of gold. I am thankful for her wisdom and guidance through this process. I am also thankful for my committee members, Drs. Barbara Lacost, Kent Mann and Dixie Sanger, who have taken the time to provide constructive feedback and who encouraged me when I proposed my dissertation topic and research.

The office staff in the Department of Educational Administration have been a big help over the last four years answering questions about application, enrollment, dissertation format, deadlines and tracking down faculty members. Thank you, Cindy DeRyke and Diane Pope.

I have been fortunate to have a regular EDAD Coffee Group that met monthly to discuss our progress, frustrations, revelations, world events, higher education leadership, Husker athletics and personal triumphs and pitfalls. I am thankful for Dave Dibelka, Brent Freeman, Ryan Lahne, Will Sheppard and Barbara Shousha. Our Monday morning sessions were meaningful, and I appreciated their feedback and friendship.

Finally, I fondly thank Dr. Marjorie Kostelnik for her kindness and support. As my dean and supervisor in the College of Education and Human Sciences at Nebraska, she allowed me flexibility to take a class during work hours, provided academic resources, inspired me, informed me and showed interest in my progress and research. Dean Kostelnik also encouraged me to think about next steps after my degree, urging me

to take what I learned and apply it to a problem or need in our world. I am looking forward to discovering what that will be.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction: Let's Change the World**

I came into this doctoral journey filled with passion about what I believed were undeniable benefits of pre-kindergarten for children of poverty. I felt confident that if public policy makers would just look at the research, they too would see the great academic benefits to children and the convincing economic benefits for society. It would be a slam dunk. Soon, universal pre-kindergarten would be flourishing across the United States of America. We would finally win America's War on Poverty. Rural kids would close the gap on their urban peers. The achievement gains and lifelong benefits of pre-kindergarten would help both rural and urban children break the cycle of poverty, and along the way, America would take its rightful place as the international leader in student achievement and world accomplishment. The U.S. would be the envy of the modern world.

Clearly, I was a bit starry-eyed. But what I found in reading the literature on pre-kindergarten and early childhood in general is that, in fact, there is great potential for interventions in the early years to make significant positive impact on the life trajectory of children in poverty. It is not inexpensive to deliver high-quality developmental programs for children from birth to age 5, but recent projections of return on investment show favorable economics of 13% per annum for comprehensive early childhood education (Garcia, Heckman, Leaf, & Prados, 2016).

#### **Researcher's Interest**

Why do this study in the first place? I am not an early childhood practitioner. I do not have an academic background in early childhood education. Good grief, I am a

former sportscaster! However, I have had the good fortune to spend most of my career working in school communications and public relations in K-12 and higher education. Through my 25 years in the field, I have developed a firm belief that quality early childhood experiences can be the difference maker for all children, but especially for children who are raised in poverty. It is an issue of equity and opportunity.

My interest in early childhood education sprouted while serving in communications with the Topeka (KS) Public Schools. An urban district with a majority minority population and a majority of students on free and reduced-price lunch, Topeka had the same achievement gaps and challenges of similar school districts.

Through caring and dedicated administrators, teachers, board members and parents, I saw first-hand the commitment to help at-risk children overcome their academic and social deficits. I learned the importance of closing the gap in the primary grades and observed the district directing more resources into school readiness initiatives. While I was there, the district established full-day kindergarten for all children, and I helped pass the bond issue that funded additional kindergarten classrooms to accommodate this policy change.

This understanding of the importance of early childhood education has been with me ever since—going on 30 years. When I arrived at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln’s College of Education and Human Sciences, I found more educators dedicated to the promise of early childhood, but at a different level. They are focused on preparing the next generation of educators for early childhood roles, exploring the relationship of research and practice, training school leaders, and providing the statewide leadership in early childhood needed to strengthen Nebraska’s response to this critical need.

The college, the campus administration and the University of Nebraska system have all made early childhood a priority. It made perfect sense for me to incorporate early childhood into my doctoral journey.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Poverty is a pervasive condition, and it is not easy to break the cycle. Parents in poverty typically cannot afford high-quality pre-kindergarten, preschool or childcare, yet the research literature informs us that these opportunities can have life-changing impacts for the good of children, families, communities and society. Further, the literature makes a convincing case for the investment of public dollars to support pre-K. In fact, the research shows that universal pre-kindergarten returns many fold the investment made.

The natural follow up question, and one I have pondered for more than 20 years, is why more states do not invest in universal pre-kindergarten? When we know the outcomes for children who participate in high-quality childcare and preschool are notably better than for children who do not, why is funding of these services not a priority of public policy?

### **Purpose of the Study**

I purposely chose not to answer these questions from a national perspective. Instead, I was interested in a local viewpoint, specifically rural perspectives in Nebraska. I entered this research assuming rural leaders would be supportive of pre-K, and I thought their voices might inform policy makers at the statewide level. Simply put, the purpose of the study was to learn the perspectives of rural Nebraska community leaders on pre-kindergarten in their public schools.

## **Research Questions**

My primary research question asked rural Nebraska community leaders about the impact of pre-kindergarten in two areas:

1. Child development
2. Economic development

Sub-questions included:

- What is your general opinion of pre-kindergarten in public schools?
- What do others in your community say about pre-kindergarten?
- Is it appropriate for public schools to take on pre-kindergarten?
- How much of a priority should pre-kindergarten be?
- What role should pre-kindergarten play in the future of your community?
- What are your feelings about the level of state funding for pre-kindergarten?
- What would you think of the state of Nebraska funding pre-kindergarten for all four-year-olds and how could it be paid for?

The complete interview protocol is found in Appendix A.

## **Significance of the Study**

Efficacy research on high-quality pre-kindergarten suggests that these programs are improving the school readiness of young children, especially those from backgrounds of poverty. Data show improved school achievement for children who have participated in high-quality pre-kindergarten programs. The academic benefits from high-quality pre-kindergarten programs appear to diminish over time, however, long-run benefits last into adulthood, including reduced crime, higher income, reduced special education costs and more educational attainment (Garcia, Heckman, Leaf, & Prados, 2016).

The literature suggests these longer lasting benefits have economic implications that more than pay for the cost of the pre-kindergarten investment. Although most states invest some public dollars in pre-kindergarten programs, only a handful have ventured into pre-K for all. The return on investment with these programs would suggest that universal pre-kindergarten would be more widespread.

I was interested in gathering perspectives of rural community leaders about pre-kindergarten in their local community and determining what their views may be, from a public policy perspective. Data collected in these interviews could be used to inform the broader community, statewide leaders, school leaders, education advocates, state officials, public policymakers and other researchers.

### **Limitations and Assumptions**

This is a qualitative study. It does not attempt to make conclusions that might be found in quantitative research. This dissertation is focused on the perspectives of 30 rural Nebraska community leaders from three communities. The findings in this study reflect the participants' own experiences and observations as community members and local leaders and attempt to draw inferences from research studies on pre-kindergarten efficacy.

In this research, there were a few basic assumptions that are probably not that significant to the process, but I will mention them for the sake of thoroughness. First, because of my personal views in support of pre-kindergarten, there would naturally be some bias, as I interviewed community leaders. I tried to be open-minded and give my interview participants full latitude to share their perspectives about early childhood, without steering them down a predetermined path.

I assumed that the participant would feel free to share their honest views about pre-kindergarten and its potential impact on children and communities. I believe that all participants were forthcoming, and some were quite passionate in their views.

I also assumed that my interview questions were sound and fair and designed to foster genuine answers, not a slanted response.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

As I had hypothesized, participants naturally and genuinely brought forward their perspectives about the need for more pre-kindergarten and other high-quality childcare. They nearly universally felt that school-based pre-K was beneficial for child development, and 17 of the 30 leaders were convinced that offering pre-K in public schools was an economic development tool that attracted young families to their communities.

Participants even shared strong and insightful perspectives about funding these services. That feedback was varied and often practical. Although most participants spoke of a need for additional state funding for pre-kindergarten in their public schools, they also made it clear they understood the realities of budget challenges and tax climate in Nebraska—especially as it relates to property taxes in ag-dependent rural communities.

In my doctoral coursework, I conducted interviews with professionals working in a variety of early childhood leadership roles. My preconceived notions about investment in universal pre-kindergarten have been challenged by people who work in the field every day. Early childhood education and care is multi-faceted, and the state's governmental and political entities have limited resources.

With that in mind, I was prepared to have my assumptions further challenged by rural community leaders who I interviewed in June, July and August. I must admit I was pleased that the participants were unanimous in their belief that pre-kindergarten was a good idea, but the notion of the stay-home mom lingered fondly in the minds of a few leaders, and they seemed to long for a return to that fading model. However, a majority of leaders noted that families are different now, society has changed, and parents do not typically have the option or desire to stay home to raise their children.

My hope for this work is that others might find the perspectives of rural Nebraska community leaders to be informative for public policy and it will provide insights about the value these leaders place on early childhood and its importance to their rural communities.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

There has been much public debate about the effectiveness of preschool, the return on investment, how well it meets the promise of closing the school achievement gap, and whether it can really help deliver children from poverty's grip. Often these debates are at state houses where legislative funding for early childhood programs and state policy is at stake. These are important considerations because the future success of our children, families, schools, communities, states and nation can hang in the balance with these questions. Let us take a closer look at what the literature says.

#### The Seminal Studies

Many worthwhile studies have explored the effects of pre-kindergarten and other early childhood programs. These studies have returned mixed results, but there are three seminal studies that set the standard and gave the field some of the first real evidence that comprehensive early childhood education can make a big impact on the trajectory of disadvantaged children.

The earliest comprehensive, longitudinal and most well-known studies targeted at disadvantaged families are:

- Abecedarian Project in North Carolina
- Chicago Child-Parent Center Program (CPC)
- Perry Preschool Program operated by the HighScope Educational Research Foundation (Perry/HighScope) in Ypsilanti, Michigan

The Abecedarian Project, started in 1972 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and ran for five years. It is the most researched early childhood education experiment in the

nation. It provided full-time, full-year educational child care and pre-K for five years, beginning at 6 weeks until age 5. Children who attended Abecedarian had higher adult educational attainment and employment rates which resulted in a predicted lifetime earnings increase of 26% (Bartik, 2014).

CPC, started in 1967 by Chicago Public Schools, had two groups of half-day pre-K programs. One included 4-year-olds and the other included both 3- and 4-year-olds. Researchers have followed these participants into their 30s, and their results predict the effect from the program increased participants' average earnings by 8% (Bartik, 2014).

Perry/HighScope was a half-day pre-K program operated from 1962-67 for 3- and 4-year-olds. On average, the Perry Preschool increased the future earning of its participants by 19% (Bartik, 2014).

### **The Benefits**

The results of these landmark studies are significant and have helped guide public policy on early childhood for decades. In fact, the age and limited scope of these projects are often used to criticize their continued relevance. The research suggests many more benefits than the examples I provided above related to increased employment earnings in adulthood. Additional benefits of high-quality preschool and other early childhood programs include:

- Peer effects in education (other students' achievement increases up to 50% for every child who attended pre-K) (Bartik, 2014)
- Lower crime (more cost effective than prison)

- Short-term and long-term fiscal benefits including increased tax revenues, less need for government welfare services, lower prison costs and judicial system expenses
- Lowered costs for educational remediation and special education services
- Long-term benefits for the next generation (children of pre-K participants)
- Increased earnings of parents (who can work because their child is in preschool)
- Spillover effects of increased earnings tend to raise wages of other workers
- Health benefits (and cost savings) such as lower drug use, lower blood pressure and better quality of life

### **Making the Economic Argument**

The benefits of preschool and early childhood programs are substantial, as noted above. But they come at a cost. The Abecedarian full-day, all-year program (similar to the Educare model operated in Lincoln and other Nebraska communities) costs about \$18,000 a year per student in 2012 dollars (Bartik, 2014). Are the benefits to individuals and society enough to justify the large cost of high-quality pre-K? Yes, claims Bartik, even if you only consider the future earnings increases of participants. “These programs have a good economic payoff in that benefits significantly exceed costs,” said Bartik (2014, p. 27).

Lynch suggested that fiscal benefits from a high-quality universal pre-K program would be about eight times program costs after 43 years (as cited in Bartik, 2014, p. 58).

Bartik also reported that universal pre-K breaks even from a combined federal and state perspective after nine years and after 23 years at the state level alone (p. 58).

According to Heckman (2016), “Every dollar spent on high quality, birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children delivers a 13% per annum return on investment...The cost of inaction is a tragic loss of human and economic potential that we cannot afford” (p. 2).

Garcia, Heckman, Leaf, & Prados (2016) revisited data from the Abecedarian project and another North Carolina experiment, the Carolina Approach to Responsive Education (CARE), and revised upward the long-term effects of the programs. “The program generates a benefit of 6.3 dollars for every dollar spent on it (p. 43),” the researchers said. That is not a 6.3% increase, that is a 630% increase over the life of the participants. By any standard, that is a good return on investment and instructive to policy makers.

Rolnick and Grunewald (2011) examined the economic case for preschool and noted that the Abecedarian, Perry and CPC projects showed annual rates of return, adjusted for inflation, ranging from 7% to just over 2%. Benefit–cost ratios range from 4:1 to more than 10:1. The economic argument is strong, and there is much agreement on these benefits, but there are some differences of opinion on how to best take advantage of the promise of preschool.

### **Universal vs. Targeted**

Within the debates on the merits of pre-kindergarten programs, is a difference of opinion among researchers about which policy recommendation makes more sense: universal pre-K or targeted pre-K.

Universal pre-kindergarten is offered to all children, regardless of income. There are arguments that, long-term, universal availability makes the most sense because the benefits reach everyone. It is a “high tide floats all boats” approach. Others believe that with limited resources, it is more effective to target the neediest children, because the positive effects of preschool are greater with disadvantaged children.

Rolnick and Grunewald (2011) were in the targeted camp. They believe that our limited public funds need to be spent where they will do the most good. Research indicates that children from low-income families get larger benefits from high-quality early childhood programs than their more affluent peers. Therefore, in a world with finite resources, these researchers argue that it would be more productive to limit public early childhood funds to disadvantaged families and children. The per-child rate of return, they suggested, would be greater with low-income children as compared to the entire population.

Lawrence (2011) suggested that a universal approach to pre-K yields more political support because Americans favor equal opportunity, fairness and democracy. That approach makes it easier to push through the political process and generates more public support as well. Lawrence does not focus on the economic benefits but rather the political realities of gaining support for the tax increases necessary to fund universal pre-K. His arguments are compelling, and his enthusiasm infectious.

### **Trade-offs**

If the argument is convincing and programs are self-financed in the future, why do more states not fund early childhood enhancements? There are a number of reasons.

Chief among these reasons is the aforementioned draining of the early childhood bank account.

Barnett (2013) said, “The cost of quality pre-K must be paid up front, while most of the benefits accrue many years later” (p. 6). This creates a cash flow problem for state government. However, Barnett estimated that within 10 years, if states implemented a high-quality program that met the 10 quality standards, the economic benefits created by the early childhood program would offset the costs through savings of other state expenditures such as special education services (p. 6-7).

### **High-quality is the Key**

What is high-quality when it comes to pre-kindergarten? According to Gilliam (2009) and other researchers, the quality of early education programs can predict outcomes, including academic achievement and other social indicators. According to Gilliam, in order to better understand the role of quality in preschool programs, additional research is necessary. However, the existing research is quite revealing.

Quality in early childhood education (ECE) is generally divided into process and structural characteristics (Lowenstein, 2011). Process relates to the actual experience children have with teachers, peers and resources. Structural characteristics refer to child-teacher ratios, group size, and teacher education, training and experience. Gilliam (2009) suggested that stressing structure variables “is not likely to be of much help (p. v)” and process quality is most important.

Barnett (2013) cited meta-analysis about preschool outcomes that indicated long-term effects are half the size of initial impacts. Barnett suggested that to obtain significant long-term gains, higher quality programs that produce large initial impacts are needed.

One of the most significant predictors of quality is the level of teacher education, training and pay (Ackerman, Barnett, Hawkinson, Brown, & McGonigle, 2009). Higher salaries for early childhood educators drives up the cost of early childhood services. It is a double-edged sword: higher salaries drive up costs, but low pay results in fewer qualified professionals and a shortage of ECE teachers.

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University uses a checklist of 10 research-based quality standards in its annual “State of Preschool” reports. Those standards are:

- Does the teacher have a bachelor of arts degree?
- Does the state offer specialized training in early childhood?
- Does the child care assistant have a CDA (Child Development Association credential) or higher?
- Does the state require at least 15 hours of inservice training per year?
- Does the state have comprehensive early learning standards?
- Is class size 20 or lower?
- Is the staff-child ratio 1:10 or better?
- Are health screenings and referrals provided?
- Do children receive at least one meal per day in their program?
- Does the state require site visits at least every five years? (Barnett, Friedman-Krauss, Weisenfeld, Horowitz, Kasmin, & Squires, 2017)

Nebraska ranks higher than many other states in meeting the NIEER high-quality standards checklist. In NIEER’s 2016 annual yearbook, its most recent published,

Nebraska is 19<sup>th</sup> nationally in access for 4-year-olds, 6<sup>th</sup> in access for 3-year-olds and meets seven of the 10 standards. Unfortunately, Nebraska is ranked 36<sup>th</sup> based on state spending per child (Barnett et al, 2017).

### **What Is Missing?**

In the review of the literature on pre-kindergarten and early childhood education, specific research on the effects of pre-kindergarten in rural communities was not reported. Given that approximately 53% of schools nationally are classified as being in rural areas compared to 23% in suburban areas, 18% in towns and 6% in cities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), there seems to be a critical gap in rural perspectives on pre-kindergarten, both nationally and in Nebraska.

There is an increasing number of rural school districts in Nebraska that apply for and receive state pilot funds to begin pre-K programs in the public schools. These grants provide funding for three years, so school districts must find new funding sources when the grant expires.

There are 244 public school districts in Nebraska, and all but 30 receive pre-kindergarten grant funding from the state. However, only 18,558 (14%) of Nebraska's 132,557 children aged 3-5 are served in pre-K programs in these districts (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017).

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

#### **A Phenomenological Approach**

The value and benefits to individuals and society of high-quality early childhood education are established in the literature. Longitudinal studies have tracked individuals from their entry into high-quality preschool programs through their adult lives and into their working careers. It is evident, especially for children from backgrounds of poverty, that these high-quality early childhood interventions have positive impacts on their life success. In addition, a convincing public policy argument can be made about the public investment in these programs.

What was not evident, and what I wanted to explore, was what rural Nebraska community leaders thought about pre-kindergarten programs in the public schools. This study focused on the perspectives of rural Nebraska leaders from three communities. It was a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach that consisted of in-person, narrative style interviews used to explore, record and analyze perceptions and lived experiences of rural leaders about early childhood education. Implications of the findings can be used to inform the broader community, statewide leaders, school leaders, education advocates, state officials, public policymakers and other researchers.

Phenomenological research seeks to explore the subjective or lived experience of individuals to “understand and describe” a person’s or group’s point of view on a specific subject. The participants’ “subjective experience is at the center of the inquiry” (Mertens, 2015, p. 247). In the analysis of the data (interview transcripts), I sifted through the subjective experiences of the participants to address the central research questions.

## **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the “Perspectives of Rural Nebraska Community Leaders on Pre-Kindergarten in Public Schools.” I used narrative style interviews. The two central questions were:

- What impact do rural Nebraska community leaders believe pre-kindergarten has on a child’s educational progress?
- What impact do rural Nebraska community leaders believe pre-kindergarten has on their communities and its residents?

Creswell (2009) suggested that the central questions be broad enough “so as not to limit the inquiry. The intent is to explore the complex set of factors surrounding the central phenomenon and present the varied perspectives or meanings that participants hold” (p. 129). A set of sub questions were part of the interview protocol (Attachment A).

A qualitative study is not a rigid adherence to a scripted, sequential set of questions. Josselson (2013) stated, “if what we are interested in is the structure and organization of the participants’ inner world, we want them to be doing the painting without our suggesting what they put into it” (p. 66). To avoid an orally administered survey, Josselson said we must be in a “listening stance” during the interview, and as Creswell (2009) noted, questions may be “under continual review and reformulation” (p. 131) during the course of the data collection (interviews).

I mention this to make it clear that in the interviews there was some wandering from the submitted set of research questions, but that was consistent with the subjective nature of phenomenological research. To provide depth to the narrative process, it was

important to have a loose set of reins to allow participants to share their insights on the importance of early childhood education in their communities.

### **Methodology: Interviews**

Face-to-face interviews were the method of research for this qualitative study. The interviews took place on the participant's home turf. I traveled to three rural Nebraska communities so that interviews would be conducted in an environment that the participant was accustomed to. Interviews were held in a comfortable, quiet and private setting with minimal distractions. Most interviews were in one location in the community—a library, a community college classroom and a school conference room. Due to scheduling conflicts, one interview from each community was conducted using the Zoom online conferencing platform.

In a phenomenological study, it is important to make the interview participant comfortable. Building trust with participants throughout the recruiting, scheduling and interviewing process made for interviews richer and deeper in their content and more revealing in their significance. To provide consistency, my interactions with participants were fundamentally structured and professional, yet casual enough and non-threatening in approach so that participants were willing to share their true perspectives. Fowler (2014) suggested interviewers “avoid influencing the answers” while “maximizing the accuracy” of responses (p. 5).

Leaders included school principals and superintendents, school board members, local business leaders, local elected officials, local health industry leaders, retirees, leaders from the faith community and local community development leaders.

### **Interview Procedures**

Data collection consisted of 30 face-to-face interviews in the participant's community, with the exception of three interviews that were conducted using Zoom online. Participants were invited by email to participate in the interviews (Appendix B). The email included a description of the project and interviewee expectations. Leaders who agreed to participate received a confirmation email with dates for interviews. A reminder email was sent two days prior to the interview. I sent thank you notes to each participant. I will send them a link to my dissertation in the DigitalCommons when it is available.

I recorded interviews on a laptop computer with an external microphone for the purpose of transcribing the interview. My personal iPhone was used as a backup recorder.

The average length of interviews was 20 minutes, with the longest being 39 minutes and the shortest 9 minutes. There was one interview session per participant.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The principal investigators and a paid transcriptionist completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certification, as required by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL). The research project was approved on Nov. 17, 2016 by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in the Office of Research and Economic Development at UNL. The IRB Number is 20161116645EX and the Project ID is 16645. The IRB has certified the project as exempt, category 2. A copy of the IRB approval letter is included as Appendix C.

Initially, the interview recordings were saved on my password protected laptop and my password protected iPhone. Audio files were transferred to a secure UNL Box folder (cloud storage) for the transcriptionist to access. Once those files were transcribed,

all audio files were deleted by the principal investigator and the transcriptionist. Printed copies of the transcripts will be kept for two years after completion of the research in the PI's home office. Only the PI and doctoral advisor will have access to the printed transcripts.

### **Consent and Confidentiality**

Interview participants signed the informed consent letter (Appendix D) at the time of the scheduled interview, before the interview began.

All participants were recognized community leaders. At the time of the interview, I knew each individual's name. Pseudonyms were used for all participants. Audio file labels, transcription files and narratives used pseudonyms.

Other than the satisfaction of sharing their thoughts about pre-kindergarten and the satisfaction of assisting in a research project, there was no direct benefit to participants for participating in the research. The findings of the study may benefit society by better informing the public, state leaders, and public policy makers. The study has the potential to contribute to informed decisions about early childhood public policy in Nebraska.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Research Findings**

This chapter is the heart of the dissertation, the presentation of the perspectives of 30 rural Nebraska community leaders who were asked to share their views on pre-kindergarten in the public schools. The two main research questions were focused on child development and economic development. Although these leaders offered their insights on these two key issues, they also shared their worries, passions, hopes and dreams about their communities and how early childhood education and care were at the epicenter.

I conducted 30 interviews with leaders—10 from each of three communities. All the interview participant names quoted in the dissertation are pseudonyms. The communities were all in the western two-thirds of Nebraska, with U.S. Highway 281 serving as the dividing line. Community populations ranged from approximately 2,500 to 1,000. Two of the public schools had existing pre-K programs and one did not. District enrollment was 572, 396 and 231.

The interview participants had a variety of backgrounds and occupations. They included a nursing home director, mayors, superintendents, school board members, business owners, farmers, a city administrator, retirees, a community college satellite coordinator, teachers, special education administrators, a hospital administrator, historic site manager, bankers, pastors, tourism director, psychologist, and media manager.

#### **Themes**

The chapter is organized by the themes that developed from the 30 recorded interviews. The interview transcripts were analyzed with the qualitative data analysis

software called MAXQDA. I tapped only a fraction of the power and resources of the software. I used the software primarily as a tool to organize the data into relevant categories.

I first used the software to identify what I titled “priority quotes.” These were quotes I coded or highlighted because I felt they were the essence of what leaders believed about the impact of pre-kindergarten in their public schools. From these priority quotes, I did additional coding using MAXQDA to divide them into themes that emerged from the perspectives of the 30 participants. Some of the themes were tied to my research questions, but others emerged more organically. Following are the six main themes and the two subthemes that surfaced from the data analysis. They form the following sections of this chapter.

- Child development
- Economic development
- Changes in the family/society
- Funding
  - Public-private partnerships
  - Early childhood as an investment
- Equity
- Educating the community

Before I asked participants the interview questions, I wanted to gauge their general dispositions toward pre-K in the public schools. The question was: What is your general opinion of school-based pre-kindergarten in public schools? The most popular response was some variant of, “it’s very important.” Sixteen respondents shared that

general language. Unanimously, the general opinion was favorable. Some of the unique responses included:

“100% beneficial.”

“It’s definitely a must.”

“A band-aid for a bullet hole.”

“It’s too bad we have to have it.”

“The basis for them to be successful in the future.”

“You gotta have preschool, I mean there’s no way around it.”

“It’ll be mandated at some point.”

“It’s just unfortunate not everyone has pre-kindergarten.”

“It’s necessary, almost essential.”

These were their quick responses. They did not ponder on them, which suggested to me that these were closely held beliefs and were not made lightly. The “band-aid for a bullet hole” comment was made in the context of the overall needs of young children in rural Nebraska, meaning pre-K was just one piece of needed interventions. The “too bad we have to have it” response was a lament about the “failing family.” This leader from the faith community—a former school board member—was frustrated about the “instability” of families in his community but felt their pre-K program was great and was necessary. There was not a single community leader who said pre-kindergarten in public schools was a bad idea. In fact, it was universally accepted as a needed, essential resource for the community’s children.

A survey conducted by the Buffett Early Childhood Institute and Gallup (2016) seems to confirm this general opinion of the importance of early childhood education. The survey indicated a majority of Nebraskans (68%) “say early care and education has a lot of impact on the long-term success of students in school and in life” (p. 4). Only

6% of Nebraskans see little or no effect on long-term success from early childhood educational experiences.

The two superintendents who already had pre-K programs took their support to another level and suggested that these programs were now an inseparable part of the school district. “They’re all the same priority,” said Ryan. “It’s just the amount of effort we put into it might be a little different, based on the needs. To me, the pre-K program’s just as important as any other grade.”

“I try not to talk about preschool as a cost—any different than I do 3rd grade,” offered Vick. “You know, we don’t talk about eliminating 3rd grade, if there’s a budget crisis, so we want to have preschool just become part of what we do now.”

The superintendents made pre-K a top priority, but other leaders also saw it as a communitywide priority. I asked, as a community leader, how much of a priority do you believe pre-kindergarten should be? More than 80% of the participants said pre-K was a high priority. Descriptors included “paramount,” “very high,” “critical,” and “it’s huge.” Three responses were more tempered: “top ten,” “on the radar screen” and “between 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> place.” Only one participant, who supported pre-K programs in general, indicated that it was not a top priority. “I guess I don’t think it’s a huge priority, not really,” said Fred. “In the grand scheme of things, I think the school does a pretty good job of educating in 13 years (K-12).”

Other voices included:

“It’s so extremely important.”

“If somebody says it’s number one, I wouldn’t argue with that.”

“As a community member, I’m looking at it as number one.”

“Definitely top priority.”

“The utmost priority.”

“Pre-K is just as important as any other grade.”

For a quick gauge of the level of priority that respondents placed on pre-kindergarten, I subjectively placed responses into three categories: high priority, medium priority and low priority. As figure 4.1 indicates, approximately 83% of the leaders indicated pre-K was a high priority, 14% felt it was a medium priority and 3% thought pre-K was a low priority. There were only 29 responses, because I inadvertently skipped asking the “priority” question with one participant.

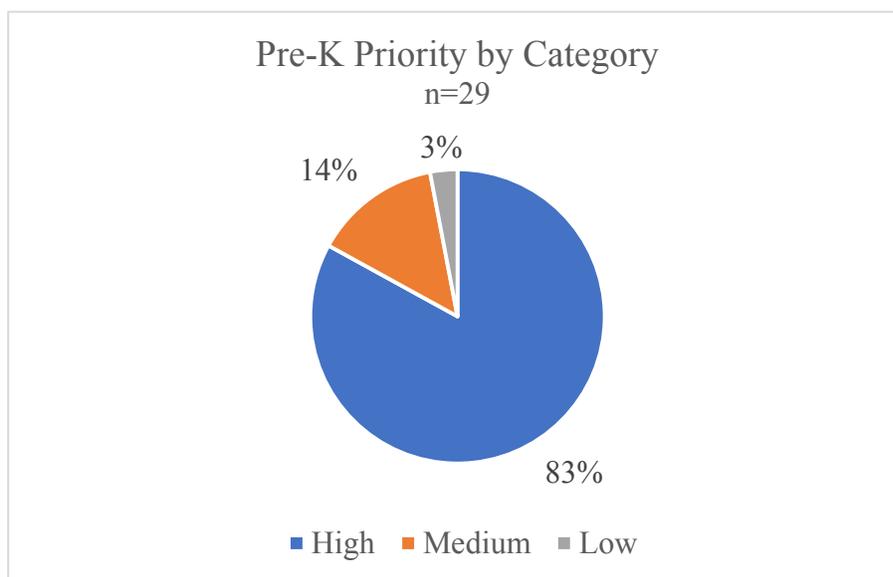


Figure 4.1

### **Child Development**

The first of the two main research questions asked: What impact do you believe pre-kindergarten has on a child’s educational progress? I kept this question purposefully broad to allow participants wide latitude in their answers. I did not want to steer them toward any particular conclusion.

One community I visited has had pre-kindergarten in its public schools for more than a decade. It has also studied early childhood more closely in recent years as part of their community planning efforts. It was evident that many leaders from this community were well informed about the issues of child development and the impact of high-quality early childhood education and care.

“Since 85% of brain growth has been established by age 5 or 6, and the majority of that before age 3, [pre-kindergarten has] a huge impact,” said Nan, who taught preschoolers for more than 30 years.

Gina, a part-time physical therapist, mother of pre-school aged children and volunteer, was also aware of the brain science of child development. “85% of the brain is developed by age 5, but definitely most in the first 3,” said Gina. This was a specific statistic shared independently by four different leaders from this community.

According to the website of the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska (2017):

Nearly 90% of brain growth takes place during the first five years of life.

During the early years, 700 new neural connections are formed every second. Neural connections are formed through the interaction of genes and a baby’s environment and experiences. These are the connections that build brain architecture—the foundation upon which all later learning, behavior, and health depend. (About the Early Years, para. 2)

Leaders from this community cited, more than once, the knowledge they gained from the Buffett Institute, and specifically mentioned a visit from its executive director Sam Meisels. The knowledge they demonstrated ties to the later section in this chapter

titled “Educating the Community.” It was evident that leaders from this community had been exposed to some current research on early childhood development, had remembered it and were able to share it with others. I found this to be a significant finding.

Many of the community leaders in each community were able to make the association of pre-K and school readiness. A Buffett Early Childhood Institute/Gallup survey (2016) on Nebraskans opinions of early childhood education seemed to support that children need more help to be ready for kindergarten. “Only 10% strongly agree that most young children in Nebraska are prepared to be successful in school when they start kindergarten,” noted the survey (p. 5).

“The transition is seamless, and it makes everyone a lot more at ease and ready—really ready for kindergarten,” explained Gina about the existing pre-K program in her school district that serves both 3- and 4-year-olds. “It’s really invaluable.”

“I strongly support it,” said Fran, a retired teacher who still volunteers at the school. “As a teacher for 35 years, I can tell the kids that have had that preschool education as opposed to kids that have not, especially in the lower grades. So yeah, I think it’s very important in our community.”

Leah, an executive director of a local foundation, used an analogy to illustrate her thoughts on the importance of high-quality preschool to the development of children.

You wouldn’t take your car to be worked on by a chef,” she laughed, “so why would you take your child to somebody that doesn’t have an educational background in what children need at an early age? It’s so fundamentally important that we get away from this model of dropping our kids off at daycare, at the babysitter and we start to look at ways that the child can be stimulated...in a

structured environment with a program that's suitable for their needs...and start to identify deficiencies that might exist prior to entering kindergarten and elementary school.

"The quicker you identify [special education] needs, the quicker they can graduate out of special education and be on track with everybody else," echoed Ryan, the superintendent. "That one year [in pre-K] is probably the equivalent of three in regular school" to identify and get children special services that can get them caught up with the academic and social development of peers.

"It prepares them for success," said Nancy, who works for an environmental council. "I think that pre-K just really gives them that tool. It helps them be more successful and be prepared to sit through a full day of school."

"I think that if there are issues that the child has in the learning setting, the academic setting, I think maybe those can be identified earlier in a pre-K setting," said Donna, a school board member. "[In pre-K] the appropriate referrals can be made for the child prior to them entering kindergarten, and some of those things can be caught sooner and attended to earlier."

Myron, a retired local banker, took a stronger position. He saw pre-K in his community as a lifeline for kids who come from impoverished backgrounds or who have parents who are not up to the task. "[Because of our pre-K] maybe every child that comes through there won't have his future already determined," said Myron. "I know that there are some children in kindergarten, first grade...their future's set already. I hate to say that. So how does this change that? Hopefully expanding minds beyond just getting up and getting through the day, and maybe some real simple things like being able to write

their names, being able to read a little bit of a book, being able to write, or count to a hundred. Just let them still have a chance when they get to kindergarten.”

In the community that did not have a pre-K program in the public schools, the manager of a commercial media outlet would like to see more kids get access to pre-K. Currently the town has private preschool offerings and Head Start. “Coming into kindergarten you have to be prepared now,” said Gary. “[Teachers] see the difference between kids that do have a pre-K and kids that don’t have a pre-K. It’s not just daycare. It’s a learning environment that people are looking for.”

Unfortunately, many current and prospective parents in rural communities do not find what they are looking for. Nancy, who lives in the same community as Gary, has witnessed the frustration of these parents.

“One of the struggles that we have in rural communities, not necessarily related to pre-K, is early daycare availability,” she said. “The availability of daycare and being able to have a place to send your kids when you’re at work is really lacking in these rural communities.”

“I think it’s legitimately impossible to disagree with the value of early childhood education,” said Len, a business owner and father of small children. “If they are, their heads are stuck in the sand.” Len is a vocal proponent of adding a school-based pre-K program and has been trying for several years to generate more support in the community. The superintendent is now in the same corner and predicts the district will add a pre-K offering within two years.

The longitudinal studies from the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina, the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program and the Perry Preschool Program in Michigan

provide compelling evidence of the continuing benefits of pre-kindergarten and high-quality daycare. Community leaders were confident about the outcomes of enhancing the early childhood footprint in their communities.

“Our graduation rates would probably be in the 80% range instead of 100%,” said Ryan, the superintendent who has had a pre-K program for more than 10 years. “I would guarantee at least 20% of those kids would be on a five-year plan or dropout. Dropout rates would be higher, ACT scores lower, and to some extent, some folks moving” from town out of frustration with the school district.

“I think it sets them up for greater chance of academic success down the road,” said Donna. “I think it increases graduation rates. I think that just the overall confidence of the child is increased by attending a pre-K program. I think it very much has a ripple effect as time goes on.”

“I strongly believe that if you get them in there at pre-K, we’re going to show less high school dropouts,” said Brenda, a social services agency director. “We’re hopefully going to have more responsible and educated adults. That way they can go out and bring more things back to their hometown and take that pride.”

“If it were to be embraced here by our education system, I see it having long-range effects of having kids get a better education sooner,” said Ben, a local pastor whose spouse is an experienced elementary educator. “I think the graduation rates would increase. With a pre-K program, I think you could nip some of the behavior [problems] in the bud and begin that curve of becoming a good citizen of the world.”

## **Economic Development**

Good citizens make for good communities, and rural leaders see not only the academic benefits of pre-K, but the potential economic benefits that can help their rural communities thrive and grow. Many community leaders believe that pre-K and other high-quality early childhood initiatives could have long-lasting ramifications beyond the school landscape.

The second main research question was: What impact do you believe pre-kindergarten has on your community and its residents? Again, the question was broad, to avoid directing participants to any preconceived answer. I suspected that community growth and economic development would be a factor in this discussion, but I was surprised by the many responses that strongly tied pre-K and other early childhood services, such as daycare, to the future vitality of communities.

Participants shared several aspects of how pre-kindergarten and affordable high-quality daycare can influence the community in positive ways, but the one that seemed to rise to the top of the list was attracting new young families to the community.

“If we do things right...that’s like building a brand,” said Len. “It’s saying that we are a place that wants families, that wants children to develop, that invests in our people. We can brand ourselves totally different, if we have a really well-developed early childhood offering through the public school system.”

“I do think the pre-K need is an important one for these rural communities,” ventured Nancy. “Especially if we’re trying to keep those young families here. You know if they have those resources for their students, then they’ll be more willing to stay in these communities.”

Nancy sees young families in her community “changing the dynamic of what our community is. Instead of going from a strictly ag-based community in these rural areas, we’re also looking at developing other types of businesses. You know we’ve got small breweries popping up, and dance studios, and all different kinds of things to really grow these rural communities. But if we don’t have a strong education base, then families won’t want to stay. And I think that starts with our pre-K programs.”

For the community in this study that lacked a pre-K in its school district, it has been a barrier to bringing young professionals to town. Gary, the media professional, said, “the proper daycare system, the early childhood development, is one reason why we’ve missed out on the opportunity to recruit some people to town for jobs. [Pre-K] is going to help out with the labor force, which helps out in the housing,” another struggle for rural Nebraska. “If we’re going to get younger people here, there’s got to be qualified daycare and pre-kindergarten for them to come here, because that’s just a fact of life. If they were in a big city somewhere, they would have that opportunity. And so rural Nebraska, we just lag behind.”

Len, who has been trying to recruit young doctors to that community, has his work cut out for him without a school-based pre-K. “You want young doctors because you hopefully get 30 or 40 years out of them,” he said. “They’re concerned about what access their kids are going have to early childhood education. The schools are one thing, but there’s so much gain to be had from early childhood education. So, when I show them that we have either a church-based or a private-based [pre-K], but they have waiting lists, and they’re not sure what’s going to be available, it’s not a good thing. It doesn’t help my recruitment.”

Nora works for a community college branch, and as a young mother knows the importance that early childhood has on recruiting young professionals with growing families. “If they have young kids,” she says, “those are the things they’re looking for. So, to keep people here and grow our community, it’s very important.”

Said Leah about pre-K and other high-quality early childhood services, “I think it’s just a basic community service. It’s something that communities have to offer if they’re going to be competitive in terms of community development and set themselves apart. If there’s a school-based environment or center-based environment, [it] provides that impetus for people to get together and make connections. That’s something that can help drive community development. I think there’s definitely a role that early childhood development plays in terms of not only attracting and retaining young families, but just quality of life reasons.”

The idea of building community through the connections developed at pre-K and daycare centers was noted across communities. Molly, an elementary principal, indicated young parents of preschoolers get an early start just like their kids, and the outcomes have long-lasting implications for rural communities.

“Building those relationships are just really important,” she said. “I think that those relationships are part of that foundation to get to the top where the students can really function and learn better. I tell parents, ‘Look around this room now. These are the people that one day you’re going to plan prom with.’”

Retired preschool teacher Nan agreed. “When we can affect those parents even at a younger stage in their life, we’ll have that much more effect. It’s just going to raise it all up—attitudes, acceptance and respect.”

Said Brenda,

We're not just growing a child, but we're growing the whole family—engaging the family and having them get a buy-in to their community and maybe setting down roots. So many of the smaller communities lose young people because they go off to college and then the big cities and everything. How do we get them to come back and stay? Sometimes I think that is through their roots.

In two communities, another local economic development challenge was noted: not enough available people to fill open positions in the labor market. Rural leaders said many parents would work, even if only part-time, if they did not have to stay home with their children.

“As a community development tool, [childcare] will create better workforce opportunities,” said Leah. “It takes down barriers that might exist for people who are wanting to enter the workforce but can't because there aren't options for [childcare].”

“I think it's a huge priority. I'm looking at it as number one, as a community member. I know I've struggled being able to hire people, because they don't have daycare,” said Brenda, who runs a community services agency.

Len heard the same message from business owners in his community.

We're also missing people that are not part of the workforce, because they're staying home,” he says. “And it's a conscious decision, but it might not be their preference. They just think it's the best, for their children by staying home with them. [But] if there were a high-quality option available, I think their kids would get an equal or better early development experience, and we would gain an employee in town.

From a community and economic development perspective, Vick, a superintendent, summed up the importance of pre-kindergarten in the stark contrasts of two options for his rural community.

I think there's two possible futures for our community; One of a slow death of the community where you lose families and resources to the point where the community is no longer viable. If that's the future that this community has, I think preschool will play an important role for the individuals that attend, but I'm not sure that it'll be a difference maker for the community. If that happens, at some point you have to wonder, 'Do you offer preschool for six kids? Or do you consolidate [with another district] or do something different?'

The other potential future that I see is one where we become a great place to raise a family, and people are willing to commute to [larger nearby communities] and make this a bedroom community, or possibly attract some new businesses. People can cyber commute, from [here]. We've got great access to high speed internet—a 200 megabit per second pipeline out here. If that's the future that this community creates for itself, I think preschool's going to be really important as part of the package of making this a great place to live. If we can offer...great educational opportunity for young families, if they see the value in it, and want to live here, and then create a great life in a Mayberry-type setting, which we can be, I think preschool's going to be really, really important.

### **Changes in the Family and Society**

As noted earlier, two community leaders lamented the need for pre-kindergarten in their public schools, but both also acknowledged it was needed and a good thing for

their community. A dozen leaders pointed to changes in family structure and in society that have led to the critical need for pre-K and other early services for young children. Poverty, more single parent homes, and women who desire to have professional lives or need to work to support their families were all factors that rural Nebraska community leaders pointed to in explaining the need for pre-K.

Donna, who serves on a school board that only recently added a pre-K program, said,

I think the need for pre-K now is greater than it ever has been, because of the change in the family dynamic and the change in our society. [Those] little minds are like sponges and can pick up so much, and unfortunately, they pick up a lot of things at that age they shouldn't be. I feel if they can have access to a pre-k program—not only for the academic, emotional, social skills that they obtain—[but] to give them an advantage to being exposed to an educational system early on, to hopefully give them what they need to be successful later on...to graduate from high school and go on to be productive citizens in whatever they choose to do.

Rae Lynn added,

I'm going to be completely honest. When I first got on the school board, there was talk about doing preschool, and I was against it. I just think families need to be more involved. Once I got on the school board and had a little research...[First Five Nebraska] came in and talked to us about poverty. I don't think it's the school's responsibility...I think it's the parents, but I see that the parents aren't doing the job. So, I thought, 'Well if it's not going to be done at home, [school's]

a safe place, [and] these kids can get the jump-start they need.’ The family is not what it was like when I was growing up. I think a lot of the responsibility’s been put on public education. I don’t think it’s ours, but we have to do it.

One of the school superintendents also said that young parents were sometimes falling short of their responsibilities and schools were the default solution for getting kids ready for school. “I like to call it the age of entitlement, where the young parents that we have now feel as though ‘It’s somebody else’s responsibility other than mine,’” said Ryan. “If we catch them, we’re basically doing what the good parents are doing at home with them. I think that’s the biggest benefit of having [pre-K].”

“The nature of the beast with public education is, you take what comes. I think people send the best they know how to send,” said another superintendent about the diverse backgrounds and skills that children bring to school. “That means a lot more different things than it used to. Preschool, having a breakfast program—things that years ago people took for granted, that was taken care of at home. But it’s those basic things you have to have before you can get to the next step.”

A church leader suggested,

The family is under attack and falling apart and disintegrating. Those are the parents who could really use the help in getting their kids up and running. We saw that well in our church. We had families with kids that age that were benefitting from the pre-K program (in a previous community), and we felt like the parents and families in general benefitted from that. It helped get some wheels underneath them, get their education started and were way ahead of the curve as far as when they got to kindergarten.

“Sometimes we take the family aspect out of it, and we just give it to professionals,” said Fred, another pastor. “In that regard, I’m not crazy about the idea, [but we’re] a fairly low-income area, and there’s an awful lot of single mothers. In the grand scope of things, [pre-kindergarten] is probably good for [our community].”

“I’m sorry that we have to have public schools involved in pre-K,” noted Reggie, a former school board member. He described society as more “transient or fluid” than in the past, with “people in and out” of the lives of children. “There certainly needs to be some stability, and that’s where the home is failing right now. Therefore, it gets put over to the public sector...and [that’s] probably necessary, probably a good thing. It’s great that we have it...and it’s too bad that we have to have it, if you know what I mean.”

Although some leaders lamented that schools were taking up the slack for some parents, others were more philosophical in their reactions. “We don’t want [preschool] to replace families, but I think families are different than maybe what they were many years ago,” said Ed, who farms for a living. “A lot has to do with economics and both [parents] working or single parent families.”

“Parents feel like they need to be working outside the home to make ends meet,” said Nan, the retired preschool teacher. “They could live on less, but they choose to work, or they need to work. We have to have good care for all children and pre-K.”

Donna, the school board member, was convinced that public schools are the right entity to take on the surrogate parent role that pre-kindergarten performs. She understands the fundamentals of brain development and knows that kids’ brains do not get a second chance to develop.

We have to evolve with change. We have to change with the times, and, I guess I feel that [pre-K] is an area that is necessary for public schools to be involved in, because of the changes in our society, the changes in the education system. At those early ages, their little brains are like sponges and can absorb so much. If you miss that opportunity, later on down the road, physiologically that brain is not the same as what it is at 3, 4 or 5 years of age. Even though the plate is full for public school systems, I feel that we have to continue to change and evolve, and I feel this is something that needs to be included.

### **Funding**

One of the biases I had to set aside during this research was my belief that public funding of pre-kindergarten is a “no-brainer.” The research supports public funding pre-kindergarten. Professionals tout it. Parents beg for it. The 30 rural Nebraska community leaders I interviewed indicated pre-K was a good thing for their communities. But for all the praise of early childhood education, these leaders were conflicted about how to pay for it.

Two-thirds of Nebraskans strongly agree or agree that the state should make early care and education a higher priority than it is, according to a survey from the Buffett Early Childhood Institute and Gallup (2016, p. 3). The survey finding indicated a majority of Nebraska residents (58%) believe the state is investing too little in early care and education, although only 6% think the state is investing too much, (p. 3). Yet funding to serve this critical population has not been made a priority by policy makers.

School districts across Nebraska have had to be creative to start and sustain pre-K programs. Since 1991, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) has provided

limited start up grants for school districts, but the funding is typically for just three years, then districts must find other revenue to keep the programs going. Grant funding comes from the state general fund, although state lottery funds were partially used for two years. The funding will be made available only as long as the Nebraska legislature continues to authorize it.

Some leaders were adamant that the state should fund pre-K. Others were more cautious and understood that state budget woes and a public with little appetite for tax increases were important factors. Some individuals were at a loss for a way to fund what they agreed were critical programs.

“The more children you can reach at a younger age the better in my opinion. So, if the state can help these schools and these communities reach out at a younger age to bring them in and start the learning process, I think that would be very beneficial,” said Haley, who is a business official at a healthcare organization.

“I grew up in a situation where the only option was public schools,” Len told me. “There are only a handful of private schools in Western Nebraska. [Public schools are] the known commodity. It’s a sustainable system. The only risk is, that there’s such political pressure to push property taxes down, because that’s where they get their revenues, that adding programs has to be very well thought out and justified.”

Ben said,

I know that every dollar is fought for in education, and there’s always budgetary constraints that come into play with the school board. I know they’re always trying to balance that out. Of course, you have ranchers and land owners that are always complaining about their taxes. I understand that, having been a land owner

myself when I farmed. If those ranchers could put themselves in the place of young families and understand what they're paying for. I would love to see the state be able to fund [pre-K], either with grants or with the increase of sales tax or something that could pay for a pre-K program here.

"I think a lot of people will not be in favor, if you had to increase taxes," predicted Frank, a city official who knows numbers. "I don't have a problem with the state funding [pre-K]. I think they should. If the state's goal is to have better prepared students, more successful people, more [to attract people] to their communities, then they need to take some steps to make that happen."

"You know, that's always the question," says Nancy. "We want these programs, but how are we going to fund it? There's always the tax levy—levy more taxes—but that just irritates people. So, it's a tough balance."

The biggest hurdle for expanding pre-K across Nebraska is finding the money. Facing a biennial budget deficit of nearly a billion dollars, the Nebraska Unicameral passed a budget in May 2017 that included millions in spending cuts, accessing "rainy day" funds and other financial maneuvering. However, in the first year of that budget, the 2018 legislature is faced with a budget deficit of \$173 million, because of continued lagging state tax revenues.

In January of 2018, Gov. Pete Ricketts proposed additional budget cuts in the fiscal year of 2% and 4% for the following year. So far, he has not talked about cutting K-12 funding. Talk of funding preschool in Nebraska public schools does not get much traction in this legislative environment, but that does not stop rural Nebraska community leaders from throwing out ideas.

“I would say more responsible use of the funds would be the way to [fund] it,” pitched Frank. “Go in there and find out where money’s being wasted, or where it’s being misspent, and move that money over [to pay for pre-k].”

Rae Lynn, a school board member, also would look within existing budgets to find a way to pay for pre-K. Her district’s state funding for pre-K will soon run out, and she does not want to lose the program. “I don’t think we really have a choice anymore. It’s something that we just have to do,” she said. “I think [pre-K has] been out there long enough and been implemented enough that schools have to figure how to do it. If there were cuts to be made, I think it would have to be one of the very, very last things that we would need to cut. I think that some of those extracurricular things would have to go before the preschool would go.”

Lydia, a local elected official, is on the same wave length about how to fund pre-K. It is not so much about cutting, she suggested, “but diverting it in a different direction. Even if the pie doesn’t get any bigger, it may just be a little bit different on how the pie is sliced up.”

A superintendent can appreciate making due, but Vick desperately wants to keep his pre-K program and would like to see the state step up and fund it.

I don’t talk a lot with people in the community about that funding cliff or whether we’re profitable or losing money on our preschool. I want that to be just part of what we offer as a school, so that it’s not the first thing that disappears in a tight fiscal climate.

I try not to talk about preschool as a cost, any different than I do 3rd grade. We don't talk about eliminating 3rd grade, if there's a budget crisis. We want to have preschool just become part of what we do now.

We exempt more sales tax than the entire state budget in Nebraska. The Revenue Committee is actually more like the Tax Exemption Committee, because they're always granting exemptions from sales tax. I think removing many of the exemptions from sales tax is one way to pay for it. I think a sin tax on sugar beverages makes sense. When you look at the obesity issues in the state of Nebraska, and then you look at the economic benefit that a small tax on soda or other sugar beverages might have, if that money were captured and reinvested in early childhood...yeah, I could see that being of some benefit, as well. If you eliminate the exemptions, or several exemptions, and look at a soda tax, I think those are ways that you could pay for it.

Larry, a city elected official, said an old saying fits the funding scenario for pre-kindergarten. "We've gone so long with so little, we cannot do everything with nothing. I'd hate to say increase taxes. I don't want to say that. That would get you shot in this area. The money's out there, you just got to find it."

Eleven of the rural Nebraska community leaders noted that if they want to start, sustain or expand pre-K and other early childhood programs it will require some form of public-private partnership. Larry's insight came from successes his community has had in raising dollars for a new early childhood facility. The community realized that in an era when the political will is for limited government, they were not going to be able to rely on state funding.

“I think that communities are going to have to figure it out on their own,” said Emily, a special education director. “I wish I didn’t have to say that, but it’s true. I think that it’s important enough that communities should be trying to figure out how they can fund programs, and maybe take from somewhere else, if necessary.”

“If we’re going to see something happen here,” predicted Jen, “we’re probably going to have to generate most of that.” Jen is a school counselor and has seen her district struggle with deciding about pre-K. Her superintendent is on board with adding a pre-K program but is taking a cautious approach about funding it.

“There’s a real concern about property tax,” said Maggie, the superintendent. “As a school district, we’re always trying to figure out a way to not add cost...unnecessarily. I’ve got staff I can rearrange and [make] do with what we already have. I think I can get it to go.”

“Ideally somehow between state and federal funding, you’re going to come up with enough to float that boat,” Maggie continued. “But I’ve doing this a long time, and I know that doesn’t happen. I don’t want to be pessimistic, but at the same time I want to be realistic about it. If you’re going do it as a school district, you’ve got to commit that you’re paying the bill. If we’re going do it, we’re going to have to commit and do it with what we have, or it’s not going to happen.”

“It has to be prioritized at a higher level,” said Leah, a non-profit foundation director. “If we’re investing in early childhood education through taxpayer dollars, as I believe we should be, ultimately, I think we will end up saving money. There needs to be some sort of public and private partnership to really build the type of quality early childhood educational opportunities that are needed.”

“I don’t think the public is as well-versed in knowing the benefits [of pre-kindergarten],” said Lisa, a business owner and longtime school board member. “I think we need to educate them more. I think all they hear, is [it’s going to] cost more money. You’re going to raise my taxes. Especially our ag community. Our ag community is just really pushing back.”

### **It’s an Investment**

When there are differing opinions and a lack of consensus on important public policy issues, communication—and lots of it—is the secret to getting people to come together. Lisa’s point about educating the community on the benefits was a common theme. On the dicey topic of funding, a dozen leaders repeated the message that early childhood education is not a cost, it is an investment.

Superintendent Vick said,

[Universal pre-K] would be a tremendous investment in the future of our state.

There’s lots of studies that show it’s some of the best bang for your buck. An investment at the state level provides opportunities for increased productivity of those individuals as they enter the workforce, but also benefit parents who can be in the workforce or pursuing their own education while their kids are in a high-quality care and learning environment. Then there’s the decrease in costs of prisons and [other benefits to society] that we see from the research on preschool or early childhood. So, even though it’s a tough pill to swallow in the political environment that we’re in, it would be a great decision by our state to invest in universal pre-K services funded by the state. In Nebraska, education is the state’s

responsibility under our Constitution. We need the state to fulfill that responsibility at an early age, so that we can achieve our greatest outcomes.

As a business owner and banker, Len finds practicalities in the efficiencies that school districts can offer by hosting pre-K.

I think it's the best investment they can make. I think the best way to bridge the gap in a sustainable fashion is through school-based programs. Particularly when they already have the sum cost of the facility and the maintenance and the food service. The cost to them is really incremental, and the gain should be substantial, based upon everything that I've ever read.

"If we don't have pre-K...studies have shown that we will have increased problems," said Frank, a municipal official. "Be it crime or joblessness or whatever it may be. If we know that we can reduce that by a certain percentage, and it's going to be a nominal cost for us in the beginning, why not do it?"

Frank and Len may not have a complete picture of the per pupil costs of pre-K—it is more than nominal or incremental—but the spirit of their comments is that putting the money in on the front end is going to yield benefits in the end. "You're investing in a child, and you've got to wait 12, 18, 20 years. It's a long-term investment," said Alan, a school psychologist. "[For some people] it's not tangible. It's too far down the road. People just need to go in with a leap of faith, like hey, this is going to work. And it will. Your money is much more wisely spent if you do it at a younger age. I tell people all the time, 'It's not rocket surgery [*sic*].' That check engine light comes on, take it to the dealership right away. You don't wait until the engine blows."

The “pay me now or pay me later” mentality surfaced in all three communities. These leaders saw the practicality of investing in early childhood education, a logic supported by research, and one that resonated for rural leaders.

“The return on investment for doing these child development programs is so much higher than anything else, really,” said Doc, who directs the local economic development efforts in the community. “If you’re thinking on a practical level and not a bleeding heart level, in practical terms the ROI is so high, why not invest in [pre-K]?”

“The payback is so great,” said Nan, who taught preschool for decades. “We know that the payback to society for high-quality early childhood is like 14%. How can we not do that? We have to make the investment to do that, and we need to do it on a much larger scope.”

With a nod to the state legislature, Lisa suggested, “what makes you a good policymaker is if you’re forward thinking. It would make sense. They probably wouldn’t see it for a little bit, but in the long run, front-loading your system is the way to go. I’m a business person, and I’ve been convinced. I’ve seen all the facts and figures, and I’m convinced this is where we should be spending our money.”

## **Equity**

During the interviews, I met individuals deeply committed to their communities who wanted the best for the children and families who lived there. I also discovered frustration about the limitations that hinder many rural communities.

Ed started to get choked up as he shared his feeling about his small community and the poverty he sees—the lack of opportunity for adults and children, because of financial disparity.

Everybody has the right [to quality preschool]. Just because someone on the street's not making as much as what he might, doesn't mean he's not working hard every day to support his family. It's hard for me to talk about because it's that important to me.

Just because we live in a rural community doesn't mean that we shouldn't have the same opportunities as everyone else. We should have all those opportunities that everybody in Lincoln and Omaha has, too. My greatest hope is that everybody that chooses will be able to affordably [have early childhood care]. I can imagine we'll have better citizens down the road. I just think it's important enough that every community should have it.

Nancy, whose community is still scrambling to bring pre-K to their public schools, would like to have some of the same advantages in rural Nebraska that larger communities enjoy. "We always feel like in this part of Nebraska that we're kind of left off the map," she said. "You know everything happens from...that eastern section of the state, and this western part of the state tends to not have as much access to a lot of those funds and a lot of resources that are available."

Her fellow community member, Nora, said pre-K in the public schools would fill some of the gaps she sees between family income levels that impact access to preschool.

I feel like there's maybe a gap that's missing in there. [There's] the people who are sending [their kids] to a [church-based] preschool and paying for it. And then you have the Head Start which helps the low income, but it's very low income from what I understand, with Head Start. So, I feel like there's a gap missing in there that maybe didn't quite get their name on the list for the private preschools,

but don't make the cutoff for the Head Start, and maybe are just saying, 'well it's just preschool' and just skipping it. And maybe those kids are the ones that really needed that extra little help.

"I really do think that as a state, we need to look at [Pre-K]," says Brenda, from the same community. "It's a need for a lot of children so they don't get left behind. I think every child should at least have the chance to go to preschool, because all of them are going to need it."

### **Educating the community**

One of the communities I visited had a remarkable group of volunteers who for years banded together to support building a child development center. The vision was a high-quality center that would serve children beginning at 6 weeks of age, through entering the school-based pre-kindergarten program. Committee members made more than 40 presentations in the small community, educating residents about the importance of early childhood. At times, their ambitious fund-raising goals seemed far from reachable. Then the presentation at the American Legion happened.

"A gentleman stood up and said, 'You know I have six kids and they've all graduated from college and my wife stayed home with them, and we didn't need this. You just need to kick those moms in the butt and make them stay home,'" recalled Nan, a member of the presentation team. "The only female veteran in the room turned around in the front row and said, 'What?'"

"She just gave it to him. 'I need to work, you know, and my children need good care.' To all of us, it was like a shot of courage. Little remarks like that just feed us. It's like we have to prove that one wrong."

Nan said she and her colleagues were in disbelief that one of their own community members thought that having high-quality early childhood education at an affordable cost was “too good” for the community. With help from an outside agency that encouraged them to dream big, the community accomplished what even the most ardent supporters did not think was possible. In January 2018, the community opened the doors to a new child development center that serves local children and families.

Educating the community was the key to their success, and is what other communities are trying to accomplish. “I don’t think the community is always aware of what goes on in preschools,” said Emily. “From the meetings we’ve had, I haven’t seen that there’s a lot of understanding.”

In fact, there are misunderstandings that can hurt efforts to start school-based pre-K programs. Emily recalled school board meetings where the discussion about pre-K was a concern about putting the private preschools out of business. “That wouldn’t happen here,” she said, “because there’s enough kids at the preschool level. We don’t want to put people out of business.”

The community conversation needs to go beyond tax rates, said Lisa, a business owner and longtime school board member. “I don’t think the public is as well-versed in knowing the benefits [of pre-kindergarten],” she said. “I think we need to educate them more. I think all they hear, is [it’s going to] cost more money. You’re going to raise my taxes.”

Len, who has made it his mission to bring school-based pre-K to his community, is building support with the help of others through building relationships.

We have to get all of these different groups to work together, without seeming as though it's threatening to them. People are starting to understand the greater good of it. The intent is to provide an option. There will still be private options, there will still be church-based options, there will still be income-based options, but adding that other option can help fill the gap so we don't have those waiting lists, so every kid whose family wants them to participate, can participate.

Educating the community and building relationships and partnerships takes time. It requires leadership, and that leadership is not always readily available in every community or the community is not willing to add that responsibility to an already full plate. But when someone steps up to start the conversation, to push the subject forward, good things can happen.

“If [pre-K is] done well with good community input—and it's shown to be a good investment—I think [our community] will get behind it,” said Len. “It makes perfect sense for public schools to serve that need.”

However, data from the Nebraska Department of Education (2017) show that only 14% of Nebraska children are being served in district-operated pre-kindergarten programs. Those children receive care and education from certified teachers in programs that must meet higher standards than those required of licensed providers. NDE (2017) data reports that 77% of the children in those school-based pre-K programs met or exceeded widely held expectations across all developmental areas.

Said Len,

You've got to get the stakeholders on board, which is what we're working on.

You've got to show...all the research and benefit of early childhood education.

You've got to identify the need locally, [and get] people behind the movement.

The leadership has to come from within somehow. When you're relying upon the leadership to come from within a school district, or within an industry, so to speak, they're already stretched to the limits. When you think about adding another program, it's got additional requirements, and additional students and additional funds that are required. It's kind of a tough row to hoe.

A superintendent admitted,

It's kind of bothered me as a school we've been slow to respond. But it's a balancing act, too. You have to have the community realize there's a need and be willing to step up and figure out how to meet that need. I don't want to make excuses, but I just think everybody gets there in their own way, in their own time.

The community has changed in terms of demographics, and I don't know that the average Joe on the street realizes that.

## **Conclusion**

Changing demographics. Changing families. Changing society. As leaders in rural Nebraska communities have shared, these are significant factors that have increased the need for pre-kindergarten in public schools. These leaders understand the child development and economic development realities of pre-K, and slowly, through their leadership efforts, community members are beginning to understand, too.

Rural communities are discovering that raising the bar on early childhood takes partnership. First, through consistent outreach and input, the community must be informed. “Public sentiment is everything,” Abraham Lincoln stated famously in the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates. “Whoever can change public opinion can change the government.” (Thomas & Morel, 2014, p. 171) Another version of Lincoln’s popular quote on public relations sits at my desk and says, “Public sentiment is everything. With it, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed.” Many of the leaders interviewed for this research understood this “wisdom of the ages.”

In 2018, Nebraska does not appear to have the resources or the political will to expand pre-K across Nebraska. As more than one leader acknowledged, rural communities must find a way to fund early childhood initiatives on their own. One of the communities has had remarkable success raising private money to meet their goals for early childhood. This can be a model for other communities. Organizations like the Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska, the College of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Nebraska Extension, Nebraska Community Foundation, the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, the Sixpence Early Learning Fund, First Five Nebraska, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, Dividends Nebraska, and the Nebraska Department of Education provide resources to support communities, as they seek to improve their early childhood footprint.

In the next chapter, I suggest that rural communities need more money for early childhood initiatives and more help to help themselves. There is a need for leaders to step up in rural communities, and I believe having partners come along side to help them communicate, plan and execute would increase their chances of success.

The implications of expanding high-quality early childhood in rural Nebraska could include the very existence of rural communities. As Lincoln said, “The struggle of today, is not altogether for today—it is for a vast future, also” (Thomas & Morel, p. v).

## Chapter 5

### A Need for Leadership, Support and Expertise

#### Introduction

Much of my professional career has been spent informing and engaging the public on educational issues. As noted, public sentiment is critical to governmental policy and that includes publicly funded education. The profession of public relations has been much maligned in its history, but the premise of genuine public relations is to find the sweet spot between the goals of an organization or entity and the desires of the public. Often, that sweet spot will result in public good.

For well-intended goals of an organization to mesh with the public in the most effective way, it requires some intervention or public relations strategy. In my practice, and in the spirit of professional PR, this approach is not a slick manipulation of the public to serve the needs of government, an organization or a movement, but rather a genuine engagement of the public to find common ground and to move forward an agenda of public good and good public policy.

With that in mind, the conclusion of the dissertation falls around a public engagement process that I will outline in some detail. This process would help rural Nebraska community leaders to engage their publics about pre-kindergarten in their public schools and other early childhood development programming. It would help inform, build support and lead to planning and strategies to help enhance early childhood education and care in rural Nebraska.

Going into this dissertation journey, I believed there was a need for practical leadership that met the community at their level, on their turf. Developing a public

engagement strategy to impact pre-kindergarten or other high-quality early childhood initiatives in rural Nebraska was a natural conclusion, based on my background in school public relations and the leadership learning in my coursework. I could not have been more pleased that the same needs surfaced organically, in my research interviews and subsequent data analysis. It became apparent that the rural Nebraska leaders I interviewed believed that high-quality pre-K and other early childhood care were essential to child development and economic development in their communities. Unfortunately, there is a lack of understanding, funding, expertise, organization and willing leadership to effectively move the needle forward. The demand is greater than the supply.

### **Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore the “Perspectives of Rural Nebraska Community Leaders on Pre-Kindergarten in Public Schools.” The two central research questions were:

- What impact do rural Nebraska community leaders believe pre-kindergarten has on a child’s educational progress?
- What impact do rural Nebraska community leaders believe pre-kindergarten has on their communities and its residents?

I interviewed 30 rural Nebraska community leaders—10 from each of three different communities ranging in population from roughly 1,000 to 2,500. The six themes that emerged from the analysis of the 30 interviews with rural Nebraska leaders were: child development, economic development, changes in the family and society, funding, equity, and educating the community.

There was not a single community leader who said pre-kindergarten in public schools was a bad idea. Although two participants wished that parents would provide the developmental environment that allows all children to succeed in school, thus eliminating the need for pre-K in public schools, it was still universally accepted as a reality and a needed, essential resource for children in their communities. School-based pre-K was a high priority for 83% of this sample of rural Nebraska leaders.

Given that children come to the public schools from a diverse range of backgrounds, they do not come equally prepared for success. Developmentally, community leaders recognized that pre-K can help fill learning gaps and help children get ready for kindergarten. They also realized that early childhood development has a direct relationship on some of the most onerous societal problems.

“Since 85% of brain growth has been established by age 5 or 6, and the majority of that before age 3, [pre-kindergarten has] a huge impact,” said Nan, who taught preschoolers for more than 30 years.

“If it were to be embraced here by our education system, I see it having long-range effects of having kids get a better education sooner,” said Ben, a local leader whose spouse is an experienced elementary educator. “I think the graduation rates would increase. With a pre-K program, I think you could nip some of the behavior [problems] in the bud and begin that curve of becoming a good citizen of the world.”

“I think it’s legitimately impossible to disagree with the value of early childhood education,” said Len, a business owner and father of small children. “If they are, their heads are stuck in the sand.”

The question of economic development was almost as important to leaders as child development. Having a school-based pre-kindergarten was embraced by leaders who had them and was greatly desired by the community leaders who did not. Leaders saw pre-K as a way to make their communities more attractive to young families and to give the labor shortage a boost.

“If we do things right...that’s like building a brand,” said Len. “It’s saying that we are a place that wants families, that wants children to develop, that invests in our people. We can brand ourselves totally different, if we have a really well-developed early childhood offering through the public school system.”

“If we’re going to get younger people here, there’s got to be qualified daycare and pre-kindergarten for them to come here, because that’s just a fact of life. If they were in a big city somewhere, they would have that opportunity. And so rural Nebraska, we just lag behind,” said Gary, a media manager.

“As a community development tool, [childcare] will create better workforce opportunities,” said Leah. “It takes down barriers that might exist for people who are wanting to enter the workforce but can’t because there aren’t options for [childcare].”

“I think it’s a huge priority. I’m looking at it as number one, as a community member. I know I’ve struggled being able to hire people, because they don’t have daycare,” said Brenda, who runs a community services agency.

“I think it’s just a basic community service,” said Leah about pre-K and other high-quality early childhood services. “It’s something that communities have to offer if they’re going to be competitive in terms of community development and set themselves apart. If there’s a school-based environment or center-based environment, [it] provides

that impetus for people to get together and make connections. That's something that can help drive community development. I think there's definitely a role that early childhood development plays in terms of not only attracting and retaining young families, but just quality of life reasons."

Changes in family structure and society were reasons given by 12 community leaders for the need to add or sustain pre-K in public schools. "I think the need for pre-K now is greater than it ever has been, because of the change in the family dynamic and the change in our society," said Donna, a school board member whose district added a pre-K program in the past four years. "I feel if they can have access to a pre-k program—not only for the academic, emotional, social skills that they obtain—[but] to give them an advantage to being exposed to an educational system early on, to hopefully give them what they need to be successful later on...to graduate from high school and go on to be productive citizens in whatever they choose to do."

"The family is under attack and falling apart and disintegrating," suggested a church leader. "Those are the parents who could really use the help in getting their kids up and running. We saw that well in our church. We had families with kids that age that were benefitting from the pre-K program (in a previous community), and we felt like the parents and families in general benefitted from that. It helped get some wheels underneath them, get their education started and were way ahead of the curve as far as when they got to kindergarten."

Although most rural Nebraska community leaders I spoke to would welcome state funding for pre-kindergarten, they were pragmatic. Most were not optimistic the state would be fully funding pre-K anytime soon, and that if communities wanted to have

school-based pre-K or other affordable high-quality childcare, they were going to have to get creative.

“I think that communities are going to have to figure it out on their own,” said Emily, a special education director. “I wish I didn’t have to say that, but it’s true. I think that it’s important enough that communities should be trying to figure out how they can fund programs, and maybe take from somewhere else, if necessary.”

Public-private partnerships were mentioned by more than a third of the leaders as the way to find the necessary funding. One community has had some remarkable success fund raising for a new child development center. It was done through local fund raising and support from a variety of private and non-profit sources with a mission of supporting community development and/or early childhood. The effort required a team of dedicated local volunteers and years of planning, communicating and battling.

Part of the educational campaign for this new center was informing the public about the kind of investment early childhood education can be for a community. It was a common thread among the leaders I spoke to.

“The return on investment for doing these child development programs is so much higher than anything else, really,” said Doc, who directs local economic development efforts in his community. “If you’re thinking on a practical level and not a bleeding heart level, in practical terms the ROI is so high, why not invest in [pre-K]?”

“The payback is so great,” said Nan, who taught preschool for decades. “We know that the payback to society for high-quality early childhood is like 14%. How can we not do that? We have to make the investment to do that, and we need to do it on a much larger scope.”

While getting a great return on investment, communities also address the important issue of equity when they add pre-kindergarten. “Leveling the playing field” was a benefit community leaders noted about pre-K and something that would help their communities in the future.

“I really do think that as a state, we need to look at [Pre-K],” said Brenda. “It’s a need for a lot of children so they don’t get left behind. I think every child should at least have the chance to go to preschool, because all of them are going to need it.”

Nora said, “I feel like there’s a gap missing in there that maybe didn’t quite get their name on the list for the private preschools, but don’t make the cutoff for the Head Start, and maybe are just saying, ‘well it’s just preschool’ and just skipping it. And maybe those kids are the ones that really needed that extra little help.”

The final theme concerned the general public’s lack of awareness of the benefits and importance of providing high-quality early childhood education. Educating the community was seen as essential to getting the community on board for school-based pre-kindergarten.

“I don’t think the public is as well-versed in knowing the benefits [of pre-kindergarten],” said Lisa. “I think we need to educate them more. I think all they hear, is [it’s going to] cost more money. You’re going to raise my taxes.”

“If [pre-K is] done well with good community input—and it’s shown to be a good investment—I think [our community] will get behind it,” said Len. “It makes perfect sense for public schools to serve that need.”

“You’ve got to get the stakeholders on board, which is what we’re working on. You’ve got to show...all the research and benefit of early childhood education. You’ve got to identify the need locally, [and get] people behind the movement.”

### **Conclusions, Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Research**

What Len described is foundational to my public relations recommendation. Rural Nebraska communities could greatly benefit from additional leadership and a public engagement process that can be duplicated in communities across Nebraska and elsewhere. The need for more pre-kindergarten programs and high-quality early childhood care is evident in rural Nebraska. Leaders believe it is necessary for the vitality of their children and their communities. Funding from the state is not forthcoming to start or sustain these programs, so communities must make their own way.

What is also evident is that many, if not most, rural communities are not equipped to take this journey on their own. They need additional expertise that can provide encouragement, guidance, support, planning, strategy, connections and resources. What they need is a specialized public participation process and expertise to help *guide* the way, using local leaders and volunteers to *champion* the way. I have developed a proposed process using public participation principles that I became more familiar with at a weeklong training in June conducted by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2). I believe this framework will give communities some of the support they need to help them help themselves.

### **An Opportunity for Leadership and Service**

I propose a leadership position that will assist communities in planning and executing a public participation process with a goal of helping communities add school-

based pre-kindergarten and other high-quality early childhood services. I generically call the position the “director of rural community engagement.”

As mentioned in the findings section, rural Nebraska community leaders believe that some form of public-private partnership is necessary to raise the financial support required for high-quality early childhood programming in rural communities. Taking that same wisdom, I propose that this asset be funded through a partnership of public and private entities.

The College of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has made early childhood development a main priority across its disciplines. I propose the position be housed in CEHS, and the college would be one of the funding partners to cover the cost of salary, benefits, office space and expenses for executing the role in Nebraska communities. The director of rural community engagement would work with CEHS faculty and staff to elevate the community engagement process.

Nebraska Extension at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln would be another logical funding partner for this position. One of Extension’s strategic initiatives is called “The Learning Child.” It supports numerous early childhood goals including expanded learning opportunities, healthy kids and parent power—all components of successful pre-K and high-quality care for infants and toddlers. Extension helps fulfill the Land Grant mission of the university by reaching out to serve all parts of the state. In addition, its 4-H focus supports youth development and leadership. This position would collaborate with other extension faculty and staff to enhance public participation projects.

In my discussions with early childhood leaders across the state, I found an interested partner in the Nebraska Community Foundation. Its executive director, Jeff

Yost, is convinced that high-quality early childhood education is a critical component of growing rural Nebraska communities. The organization has already made important contributions for advancing this agenda and is interested in expanding their reach in early childhood education. Although Yost has not promised funding, he has made it clear that he is interested in partnering to help make this type of proposal a reality. In fact, he would like this new leader to be an integral part of the Nebraska Community Foundation team.

These three partners may be enough to move this proposal forward, but if necessary, there are additional options to consider. One would be the University of Nebraska's Buffett Early Childhood Institute. They may also be interested from a research perspective, and their mission of making Nebraska the best place in America to raise a baby is consistent with the intent of this partnership proposal. Their existing relationships with campuses across the state system could be another strategic partner, or at least, a valued collaborator.

Finally, another possibility would be the Omaha-based Sherwood Foundation. Two of its funding categories are natural fits for this proposal: Rural Community Partnerships and Early Childhood Education. Under Rural Community Partnerships, their website describes funding priorities around community leadership development, community inclusion and community collaboration—all things that would be important in this proposed public participation process. The Sherwood Foundation funds early childhood education through the Buffett Early Childhood Fund. It currently supports almost every major early childhood organization and initiative in Nebraska and several

more nationally. They are not currently accepting unsolicited requests for funding, however, existing university relationships may be helpful in opening a dialogue.

The actual work performed by the director of rural community development would be multi-faceted, but the heart of it would be working directly with community leaders in their communities. It would require regular travel across the state and a high degree of collaboration and relationship building. High impact, personal relationships at the local, state and national level would be important to the success of this position. As Jeff Yost from the Nebraska Community Foundation told me, “change happens at the speed of trust.”

Activities would include visioning exercises, strategic planning sessions, leadership training, goal-setting, hand holding, encouragement, fundraising support, and walking with community leaders as they execute a public participation process to build support for their community goals. The concept is not doing the work for them but helping them to do it more effectively. A proposed job description is included in Appendix E.

### **A Public Participation Process**

As an example of how this leader would help guide communities through a public relations process, I developed a public participation scenario using IAP2 principles. The complete scenario is included in Appendix F, and is summarized here as well.

IAP2’s foundational principles for public participation (P2) state that effective P2 must be values-based, decision-oriented and goal driven (IAP2, Planning, p. 15). These aspects will be built into the community planning process.

In the “Ruraltown” scenario, the school superintendent and board of education want to add a pre-kindergarten program but are not sure if the board and community will support it. A person in the role proposed would work with school leaders to engage the community on the topic. The process would start with assessing the values of the superintendent and board to make sure those values were consistent with what they were proposing.

The board would be the sponsor of the project and the decision-maker, but various community stakeholders would be engaged for input and to help fashion a solution. It must be clear what the board is expecting. In this scenario, it would actively involve the community in a decision-oriented process on how to achieve a goal of adding pre-kindergarten.

A formal decision statement for this project focused on early childhood might be:

“The Ruraltown School Board is seeking the public’s input to develop recommendations about establishing a new pre-kindergarten program to serve children aged 3-5 in the Ruraltown School District. From this input and community recommendations, the board of education will formulate a plan to implement a pre-K program within the next three years.”

The statement identifies who will be making the final decision (school board), that the decision will be based on the input from the community, and the decision will be made in a time frame that will allow the program to start within three years.

Understanding who the decision-maker is and how the public will be involved determines the level of public engagement as outlined by the IAP2 public participation “spectrum:” inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower (IAP2, Planning, p. 30). This

project is consistent with “collaborate” on the spectrum. The goal is to “partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution” (IAP2, Planning, p. 30). The school board’s promise to the public is: We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.

IAP2’s Five-Steps for P2 Planning (IAP2, Planning, p. 33) involve the following actions:

- Gain internal commitment
- Learn from the public
- Select the level of participation
- Define the decision process and identify P2 objectives
- Design the P2 plan

Under each of these steps are activities or objectives that result in the real work of the plan. They are outlined in Appendix G.

### **Continue to Connect with Rural Nebraska Leaders**

This dissertation research only scratches the surface of collecting the perspectives of rural Nebraska community leaders on pre-kindergarten in public schools and a host of other early childhood issues. There is much more that could be done. Leaders in other communities could be interviewed to look for additional themes or confirmation of the ones that surfaced in this research.

An annual survey of rural Nebraska community leaders on early childhood issues would provide information for policy makers, educators, school boards, advocates,

researchers and the public. Having an annual survey would not only track trends in thinking, but it would also keep the topic churning each year when results of the survey were released and shared with the public. The survey could be developed and executed annually by the same partnership proposed for the public participation leadership position.

The survey would be specific to rural Nebraska community leaders but could be complementary to other surveys, including the recent Buffett Early Childhood Institute/Gallup Survey on Early Childhood Care and Education in Nebraska.

### **Conclusion**

Pre-kindergarten in public schools and other community early childhood services are clearly top priorities for most rural Nebraska community leaders who participated in this research. Pre-K was considered crucial to the academic development of young children and was needed for kindergarten readiness. A substantial number of leaders (40%) believed that investing in pre-K was a hedge against higher expenses later, such as special education costs, and costs to society that included crime, welfare and unemployment.

The economic development aspects of pre-K were also important to rural community leaders. Without pre-K and other childcare options, rural communities are not attractive to young families. Without these services, more than half the leaders said, communities would not grow and prosper.

A lack of local leadership was a factor preventing expansion of early childhood services, but funding was the biggest hurdle keeping school districts from adding pre-K programs. A reluctance to pursue additional taxes to support pre-K left a third of the

leaders calling for public-private partnerships to fund programs in unique and creative ways. One leader said, “Communities are going to have to figure it out on their own.”

That could be considered a cry for help. That is why my recommendation is to add a new position, funded through a partnership of university and non-profit resources. This extension-style leader would work directly with rural communities across Nebraska to plan and implement public participation programs to generate support for early childhood initiatives using professional principles of public participation. The effort would help communities help themselves and connect rural communities to resources for success.

The dissertation process was life altering for me as a professional. The travel across Nebraska and interview process were some of the most memorable and enjoyable professional experiences I have had in my 30 years of working in public education. The knowledge gained, people engaged, and experiences encountered left me focused on the pursuit of advancing early childhood education in Nebraska and elsewhere.

It was a privilege to take this journey, and I am thankful to so many for the opportunity. I hope this work will inform and advance the promise of pre-kindergarten and early childhood care in rural Nebraska.

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## Appendix A - Interview Protocol

“Perspectives of Rural Nebraska Community Leaders  
on Pre-Kindergarten in Public Schools”

Interviewee:

Interviewer: Brad Stauffer

Date:

Location:

Thank you for your willingness to assist me in my doctoral research.

The purpose of this interview today is to get your thoughts about school-based pre-kindergarten in your rural Nebraska community. You were chosen for this interview because you are considered a leader in your community.

With your permission, I would like to record this conversation so that I can later transcribe our conversation. I'll also be taking notes during the interview. Do I have your permission to record our conversation, and will you please sign this consent form?

Do you have any questions?

Thank you. As I said, I'm interested in your perspectives about pre-kindergarten.

1. What is your general opinion of school-based pre-kindergarten in public schools?
2. What kind of impact do you believe pre-kindergarten has on the educational development of children in rural communities?
3. What impact from the pre-kindergarten program have you seen in your community and with local residents?
4. What do you hear others in your community say about pre-kindergarten?
5. Public schools already have a full plate. Is it appropriate for them to take on pre-kindergarten? Why or why not?
6. As a community leader, how much of a priority do you believe pre-kindergarten should be?
7. When you think of the future of your rural community, what role do you think pre-kindergarten plays in that future?
8. With the exception of limited start-up grants, the state of Nebraska does not fund pre-kindergarten. Considering the constraints on state funding of public education and state budgets in general, what are your feelings about the level of state funding for pre-kindergarten programs?
9. What would you think about the state of Nebraska funding pre-kindergarten for all four-year-olds, if local school boards approved it?  
Probe: How could it be paid for?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to share about pre-kindergarten in rural Nebraska public schools?

Thank you for sharing your perspectives and for your time. If I have any follow up questions, would it be OK to contact you again?

Again, thank you and have a great day.

## Appendix B—Email Invitation to Participants

**From:** Bradley Stauffer <bstauffer@unl.edu>

**Date:** Wednesday, July 5, 2017 at 8:45 AM

**To:** "[REDACTED]"

**Subject:** Invitation to Participate in Research on Pre-Kindergarten in Rural Nebraska

Dear [REDACTED],

I am conducting research for my doctoral dissertation titled “Perspectives of Rural Nebraska Community Leaders Regarding Pre-Kindergarten in Public Schools.” As a leader in your community, I would like to schedule approximately 45 minutes of your time to interview you, in person, in [REDACTED]. I am planning on conducting interviews Aug. 3 and 4, with individual times to be scheduled.

I am interested in your opinions about pre-kindergarten and the impact of early childhood education on your community. The interview will be conducted privately at the [REDACTED]. I am interviewing 10 rural community leaders from [REDACTED] and 10 from two other rural Nebraska communities, as part of the study.

These interviews are being conducted for my dissertation research at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. When the dissertation has been successfully defended, it will be publicly available through the DigitalCommons at UNL. You will not be identified by name, occupation or location in any of the research materials.

You will be asked to sign an “informed consent” form prior to the interview, and you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time. My intention is that the results of the study may help inform other researchers and state public policy makers regarding pre-kindergarten services in rural Nebraska.

Thank you for your consideration of this invitation. **I would appreciate your response to this request as soon as possible. I am happy to answer any additional questions you may have.**

Sincerely,

Brad Stauffer  
Principal Investigator  
Doctoral Student  
Department of Educational Administration  
College of Education and Human Sciences  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
bstauffer@unl.edu  
402-472-7572



**Brad Stauffer, APR**  
*Director of External Relations*  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

## Appendix C—IRB Approval Letter



## Official Approval Letter for IRB project #16645 - New Project Form

November 17, 2016

Bradley Stauffer  
 Department of Educational Administration  
 105G HECO, UNL, 68583-0800

Marilyn Grady  
 Department of Educational Administration  
 128 TEAC, UNL, 68588-0360

IRB Number: 20161116645EX  
 Project ID: 16645  
 Project Title: Perspectives of Rural Nebraska Community Leaders on Pre-Kindergarten in Public Schools

Dear Bradley:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project for the Protection of Human Subjects. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) and has been classified as exempt.

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Final Exemption: 11/17/2016

o Review conducted using exempt category 2 at 45 CFR 46.101  
 o Funding: N/A

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- \* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- \* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- \* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- \* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- \* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 402-472-6965.

Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman, CIP  
 for the IRB



## Appendix D—IRB Informed Consent Letter

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES  
Department of Educational Administration



### Participant Informed Consent Form

IRB# 16645

Title: Perspectives of Rural Nebraska Community Leaders on Pre-Kindergarten in Public Schools

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this research project is to explore the perspectives of community leaders in rural Nebraska regarding school-based pre-kindergarten in public schools. You must be 19 years of age or older to participate. You are invited to participate in this study because you have been identified as a leader in your community.

**Procedures:**

You will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview. The interview will last no longer than 45 minutes, and will be conducted at a location of your choosing in your community. An audio recording of the interview will be made and later transcribed.

**Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the principal investigator's office and will only be seen by the investigators during the study and for 2 years after the study is complete. The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as aggregated data. You will never be personally identified in any documents or reports associated with this research. Audio recordings will be deleted following transcription.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:**

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact the investigator(s) at the phone numbers below. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review

141 Teachers College Hall / P.O. Box 880360 / Lincoln, NE 68588-0360 / (402) 472-3726 / FAX (402) 472-4300



Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

**Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**Participant Feedback Survey:**

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln wants to know about your research experience. The following 14-question, multiple-choice survey is anonymous; however, you can provide your contact information if you want someone to follow-up with you. This survey should be completed after your participation in this research. Please complete this optional online survey at: [https://ssp.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_aVvlNCf0U1vse5n](https://ssp.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_aVvlNCf0U1vse5n).

**Signature of Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Name and Phone number of investigators**

Bradley Stauffer, Principal Investigator  
Marilyn Grady, Ph.D., Secondary Investigator

Office: (402) 472-7572  
Office (402) 472-0974

## Appendix E—Job Description

Job Title: Director of Rural Community Engagement

Status: Full-time

### Position Purpose

The Director of Rural Community Engagement will be a champion for high-quality early childhood development at the local and state level in Nebraska. This individual will consistently engage with communities across the state to educate Nebraskans about the research-based benefits of high-quality early childhood education, childcare, nutrition and healthcare. The Director of Rural Community Engagement will help communities plan for and build support for high-quality early childhood initiatives at the local level using best practices in public relations, communications and community development. The leader in this position must be able to develop positive relationships with a wide range of community and state leaders and have a thorough knowledge and passion for the advancement of high-quality early childhood programs. The ability to collaborate and partner with other individuals and organizations in the field of early childhood development and community development is essential.

### Duties and Responsibilities

Providing actionable planning, strategy and leadership with measurable results, the Director of Rural Community Engagement will:

- Identify communities with high potential of advancing early childhood initiatives
- Connect with local community leaders to form a core group of supportive volunteer leaders and influencers
- Use proven strategies from other successful early childhood projects to provide guidance and resources for communities to organize support for high-quality early childhood initiatives including:
  - Planning and strategy
    - Communications
    - Public participation planning, strategy and implementation
    - Coordination with schools, city/county government, community foundations, local childcare professionals, health professionals and others
  - Events
  - Fundraising
- Serve as a liaison and connector between the community and early childhood experts and organizations to assist and develop mutually beneficial partnerships

### Education, Skills and/or Experience

- Minimum of five years of experience in early childhood development, community relations, community development or related field
- Bachelor's degree in relevant field with an emphasis on early childhood; a graduate degree in a relevant field is preferred

- Ability to plan and facilitate participatory dialogue, lead groups to consensus, and create action plans that achieve their goals
- Ability to communicate clearly and concisely, both orally and in writing, to diverse audiences, including volunteers, donors, professionals and other community constituents
- Experience working with individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds. Sees increasing diversity as an opportunity to strengthen the organization
- Committed to long-term, positive community change efforts
- Excellent listening skills
- Ability to think critically and prioritize activities
- Familiarity with principles of economic and organizational development
- Ability to build and maintain strong, trusting relationships in communities and with organizational partners
- Self-motivated and able to motivate others
- Big picture thinker who can also give attention to detail
- Strong administrative, time management and organizational skills
- Proficient in computer applications, including Word, Excel, and PowerPoint

#### Other

- Considerable travel will be required across Nebraska
- Valid driver's license and reliable transportation
- Ability to lift and move items weighing up to 25 pounds

Note: Some content for this job description was adapted from the Nebraska Community Foundation.

## Appendix F—P2 Planning Scenario

To practice my June 2017 training with the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2), I tried to think of a way to incorporate what I learned with the focus of my dissertation. In June, I began my initial interviews with rural Nebraska community leaders, collecting their perspectives on pre-kindergarten in their public schools. What I found in my first set of interviews was a void of leadership in moving the community forward on this issue. There seemed to be broad agreement that it was important and needed, but no one had really stepped into a leadership position to make it happen.

This got me to thinking about how public participation could be used to help communities discuss pre-kindergarten, or even more broadly, early childhood education, and determine if this should be a priority in their community. What follows is a hypothetical issue that is probably consistent with many rural communities in Nebraska and elsewhere. Using IAP2 guidelines, I will describe the issue, develop a decision statement and create a public participation plan that allows the community to weigh in on the community's need for early childhood services.

### **Ruraltown's dilemma**

Ruraltown, Nebraska is like many small Midwest towns. Slowly declining in population, struggling to attract jobs and young families, and worried about its future. Many young parents in the community are frustrated with the lack of childcare. Employers are frustrated that they cannot fill job openings, because there are not enough available people. It seems there is one solution that might address both problems.

The local school superintendent, Barbara Cain, believes that opening a pre-kindergarten to serve 3-, 4- and some 5-year-olds in Ruraltown would help fill the need

for child care, would free up parents to fill some of those open jobs in town, and would also help close the achievement gaps she sees, especially in students from low income families in the school district. Dr. Cain thinks she needs two classrooms to meet this need. Additionally, she will need two certified early childhood teachers and four paraprofessionals to staff the classrooms. The problem is, the district does not have two classrooms to spare and would have to get creative to fund the new positions, without raising the district's mill levy.

Dr. Cain is not sure if there is enough interest in the community to generate the support needed for this solution. She persuades her board of education to hire me to develop a public participation (P2) plan and to engage the community in a dialogue about early childhood education. Her hope is that the community will determine that a pre-kindergarten program is essential to the future vitality of their community, but she is willing to discover if they think otherwise.

### **Initial planning**

Agreeing to help Ruraltown with this public participation project, my first step is to make sure that the project meets the three-fold foundation of public participation: values-based, decision-oriented and goal driven (IAP2, Planning, p. 15). These aspects will be built into the planning process.

To initially determine values, I would talk with the superintendent and school board to assess the values that drive their work and the desire to pursue the P2 project and pre-kindergarten program. With help from the sponsor (school board), I would identify all the community's stakeholders and try to better understand the organization's culture and that of the community.

I would clearly identify that the decision-maker in this scenario is the school board. Although we are seeking community input and feedback, it is the school board who will have to make the ultimate decision to move forward with a pre-kindergarten program or not. Although the board has the final say, they must agree that they are not willing to make a final decision without carefully considering the input and feedback generated from this P2 project. In fact, in this scenario, it would be essential that the board anticipate using the public's input to help fashion the solution.

A second part of assuring that the process is decision-oriented would be determining a clear statement of the problem to be solved. Having agreed that the public will have a significant role in the decision-making process, it is also important to determine how they will participate. That will be part of the process of selecting strategies for public participation.

A decision statement for this project focused on early childhood might be:

*The Ruraltown School Board is seeking the public's input to develop recommendations about establishing a new pre-kindergarten program to serve children aged 3-5 in the Ruraltown School District. From this input and community recommendations, the board of education will formulate a plan to implement a pre-K program within the next three years.*

The statement identifies who will be making the final decision (school board), that the decision will be based on the input from the community, and the decision will be made in a time frame that will allow the program to start within three years.

Understanding who the decision-maker is and how the public will be involved is crucial, because it determines the level of public engagement for the project and therefore

the strategies used to engage. This also addresses the goal-driven aspects of IAP2's foundations of P2. The public participation "spectrum" (inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower) (IAP2, Planning, p. 30) determines what you are asking of the public and what the sponsor's responsibilities are.

In this case, the level of participation outlined by the school board is consistent with "collaborate" on the spectrum. The goal is to "partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution" (IAP2, Planning, p. 30). The school board's promise to the public is: "We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible."

### **Five-Step Planning Process**

IAP2's Five-Steps for P2 Planning (IAP2, Planning, p. 33) involves the following actions:

- Gain internal commitment
- Learn from the public
- Select the level of participation
- Define the decision process and identify P2 objectives
- Design the P2 plan

Under each of these steps are activities or objectives that result in the real work of the plan. I will outline the plan in the table format that follows. Please note these steps and activities are taken from the IAP2 Planning for Effective Public Participation workbook (2016) and customized for this planning scenario.

<b>Goal 1: Gain Internal Commitment</b>		
<i>Objective 1: Identify the decision-maker</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
As noted previously, the school board is the final decision-maker	School board with assistance from Stauffer	Week 1
Assessment of sponsor and community values	Stauffer with input from the school board and key stakeholders	Weeks 1 and 2
As part of this step, it is important to select the IAP2 Spectrum level. As previously stated, the board expects the public to be a partner in the decision-making process. In turn, the board promises to incorporate the public's recommendations into their final decision.	School board with guidance from Stauffer	Week 1
The board will be involved with the P2 process every step of the way and will actively participate in many of the activities.	School board	Ongoing
The board will develop a comprehensive list of issues and considerations around this topic.	School board	Weeks 1 and 2
A list of all stakeholders involved with this decision will be developed	School board and public with guidance from Stauffer	Weeks 1 and 2
An overall timeline will be established. As previously noted, the board would like to have a new pre-K program in place within three years.	School board with guidance from Stauffer	Weeks 1 and 2 with adjustments as needed

<b>Goal 1: Gain Internal Commitment</b>		
<i>Objective 2: Profile school board's approach to P2</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>

<p>Understanding past experiences with P2 projects is important, as they could influence this new project. The board has not involved the public to the level planned here, but has had a reputation of seeking input from the community on big decisions. This exercise is expected to be well received by the community and should experience active participation from all key stakeholder groups.</p>	<p>Stauffer with input from board and stakeholders</p>	<p>Weeks 1 and 2</p>
<p>Determine if the desire for P2 is consistent across the district, especially among leadership (board, superintendent, administrators, principals, teachers, staff)</p>	<p>Stauffer with assistance from the board and district administration</p>	<p>Weeks 1 and 2</p>
<p>Examine how the district's operational environment (culture) may affect its approach to its goal of establishing a pre-K program</p>	<p>Stauffer with input from board and administration</p>	<p>Week 1 &amp; 2</p>

<b>Goal 1: Gain Internal Commitment</b>		
<i>Objective 3: Clarify the problem/opportunity to be addressed and the decision to be made</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Identify the purpose of this P2 project: to engage stakeholders (public) for feedback, input and recommendations on developing a pre-K program to serve ages 3-5.	School board and administration with input from Stauffer	Weeks 1 and 2
Define the project from the school board's perspective. What does the board want from this and how will that happen?	School board with guidance from Stauffer	Weeks 1 and 2
Determine any known constraints with the decision including financial, political and legal/regulatory	School board and administration with review by Stauffer	Weeks 1 and 2
Explore any issues that may be related to the pre-K program that could affect the scope of the P2 process and decision.	School board and administration with input from Stauffer	Weeks 1 and 2

<b>Goal 1: Gain Internal Commitment</b>		
<i>Objective 4: Identify the preliminary list of stakeholders and issues</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Identify the stakeholders that the board and administration expect to participate.	Board and superintendent with review by Stauffer	Week 1
Examine the existing relationship between the board and these stakeholders. Are there problems? Is there past history—good or bad?	Board and superintendent with guidance by Stauffer	Weeks 1 and 2
Determine if there are any geographic differences between stakeholders	Board and superintendent with guidance from Stauffer	Weeks 1 and 2
Identify if there are any major issues on this topic or others for each stakeholder	Board and superintendent with guidance from Stauffer	Weeks 1 and 2
Identify any controversial issues among stakeholders.	Board and superintendent with guidance from Stauffer	Weeks 1 and 2
Reexamine to make sure there are no forgotten stakeholders.	Board and superintendent with guidance from Stauffer	Weeks 1 and 2
<i>Objective 5: Determine the School Board's expectation level on the IAP2 Spectrum</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Determine the level of P2 the school board is expecting. As noted earlier, it is anticipated, based on what Stauffer has been asked to do, that the level is "collaborate."	Board and superintendent with guidance from Stauffer	Weeks 1 and 2

<b>Goal 2: Learn from the Public</b>		
<i>Objective 1: Understand how people perceive the decision</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Conduct an impact analysis. This will include all possible ways the decision will affect the public. Categorizing stakeholders into groups and then try to understand all you can about each group including their motivations to participate and the level of influence they will exert.	Stauffer with input from the board and superintendent	Week 3
<i>Objective 2: Develop a comprehensive list of stakeholders</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Seek out key members of the community and ask who they think would be interested in the decision.	Stauffer with input from the board and superintendent	Week 3
Make a list of community groups that may have an interest in the pre-K project	Stauffer with input from the board and superintendent	Week 3
Identify hard to reach groups or any groups that may not normally be considered part of the community	Stauffer with input from the board and superintendent	Week 3
Develop strategies to reach these identified stakeholders—how to reach them, how to inform them, how to convince them of the benefits of participating.	Use individual school board members, the superintendent and other district staff to reach out to groups	Weeks 3 and 4
Develop or strengthen relationships with these groups and try to understand their perspectives, how they see impacts of the pre-K program, are there concerns, ask them for	Stauffer, individual school board members and superintendent armed with the proper questions and note takers.	Weeks 3-5

suggestions of other stakeholder groups and opinion leaders		
<b>Goal 2: Learn from the Public</b>		
<i>Objective 3: Review/refine the statement of the problem/opportunity to be addressed and the decision to be made</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Compare the school board's statement with the understanding of stakeholders.	Stauffer	Week 6
Review any disparities between the school board's statement and the stakeholders' statement.	Stauffer	Week 6
Determine if these differences can be resolved or if they need to be. It is important that any significant differences be addressed or sustainable decisions may be difficult.	Stauffer with consultation with the board and superintendent	Week 6

<b>Goal 3: Select the level of participation</b>		
<i>Objective 1: Assess internal and external expectations</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Use the IAP2 internal expectations worksheet to assess the school board and school district's receptiveness of the public's input on the pre-K project.	Stauffer with feedback from board, administration, and selected faculty and staff	Week 6
Use the IAP2 external/public expectations worksheet to assess the community's level of interest in the pre-K project and the degree to which they want to be involved.	Stauffer with assistance from board and district contacts	Week 6 and 7
Score, analyze and summarize the worksheet data using the IAP2 Spectrum Level Expectations Summary matrix.	Stauffer, reporting back to the superintendent and board	Week 7

<b>Goal 3: Select the level of participation</b>		
<i>Objective 2: Select the level on the IAP2 Spectrum</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the internal and external summary charts agree, select that level of P2</li> <li>• If the school board's expectations exceed the public's, select the public's level of participation</li> <li>• If the board is not willing to support the public's level of participation, re-evaluate the public's level. If it is warranted, work with the board to gain acceptance</li> <li>• If the board will not agree, use the highest level the board will agree to</li> <li>• We are operating on the assumption that both the board and the public will agree that the "collaborate" level is the appropriate level of P2</li> </ul>	Stauffer with agreement of board	Week 7

<b>Goal 3: Select the level of participation</b>		
<i>Objective 3: Assess the readiness of the school board</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
<p>Determine if the board and school district is ready to move forward with the P2 process by asking a series of questions, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there constraints on the P2 project?</li> <li>• What will success look like when the P2 project is complete?</li> <li>• Are there hidden agendas or competing or conflicting priorities in the P2 process or the pre-K proposal?</li> <li>• Does the board and district have the necessary resources and time to implement the P2 process?</li> <li>• Will additional help be needed to facilitate the P2 process?</li> <li>• Is there firm commitment by the board and superintendent for the IAP2 Spectrum level?</li> </ul>	<p>Stauffer with report back to board and superintendent</p>	<p>Week 8</p>

<b>Goal 4: Define the decision process and identify the public participation objectives</b>		
<i>Objective 1: Understand the existing decision process</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Develop a decision-making process flow chart with associated public needs so that everyone is clear on how the P2 process will move forward.	Stauffer with formal approval by the board	Week 8
Inform stakeholders of the plan and answer any questions they may have before proceeding.	Stauffer, board, superintendent	Week 8
<i>Objective 2: Set P2 objectives for each step of the decision process that clarify the public's role</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Create at least one objective (what we intend to accomplish) for each step in the decision-making process (flow chart). There will likely be multiple objectives for each step. Use the IAP2 Smart Objectives Worksheet for this process. Use each of the IAP2 Spectrum levels for each step in the decision-making process. Although this project is likely to be at a "collaborate" level overall, not every objective will be at that level. For example, for each step the board will want to inform the media and community about that step. That is not a collaborative level. It is an "inform" level. You may have an objective for each level and each step.	Stauffer with formal board approval.	Weeks 9 and 10

<b>Goal 4: Define the decision process and identify the public participation objectives</b>		
<i>Objective 3: Check back to confirm P2 and meet stakeholder needs</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Hold meetings with district staff and administrators to assess internal commitment and willingness to engage the public.	Stauffer, reporting back informally to the superintendent and board	Week 9
Hold informal meetings with the public and key opinion leaders to assess level of interest in the P2 process and the pre-K proposal.	Stauffer reporting back informally to the superintendent and board	Week 9
Make sure internal and external stakeholders agree with the level of P2 on the IAP2 Spectrum. (Likely collaborate.)	Stauffer	Week 9
Test a draft set of objectives with a small group of interested stakeholders to determine if the objectives meet their needs.	Stauffer	Week 10

<b>Goal 5: Design the P2 plan</b>		
<i>Objective 1: Determine plan format from simple to complex options</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Determine what the board requires in a plan format	Stauffer with consultation of board	Week 11
Select a planning document format that meets the needs of the board, me and that serves the public well	Stauffer with approval of the board	Week 11
<i>Objective 2: Integrate baseline data into the document</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Summarize the data gathered to date to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Background</li> <li>• Project overview</li> <li>• Summary of stakeholder groups</li> <li>• Summary of stakeholder issues</li> <li>• Statement of decision</li> <li>• Decision process steps</li> <li>• Decision step objectives</li> <li>• P2 process objectives</li> </ul>	Stauffer	Weeks 11 and 12

<b>Goal 5: Design the P2 plan</b>		
<i>Objective 3: Identify techniques that support the P2 objectives</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
<p>The P2 plan for this project has multiple levels of implementation across the IAP2 Spectrum. The format for P2 will differ depending on the P2 objective and the level of P2. Select the appropriate P2 format from the IAP2 Toolbox.</p> <p>Techniques fall under the general categories of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share information</li> <li>• Collect and compile input</li> <li>• Bring people together</li> </ul>	Stauffer	Weeks 11 and 12
<i>Objective 4: Identify support elements for implementation of the plan</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Create a detailed timeline of the decision process and P2 activities in the process.	Stauffer with review of superintendent and board	Weeks 11 and 12
Identify the P2 team—everyone who has a role and/or responsibility in the decision process.	Stauffer with collaboration of superintendent, administrative staff and board	Weeks 11 and 12
Identify the individual roles and responsibilities of the P2 team. Use the IAP2 roles and responsibilities worksheet.	Stauffer with collaboration of superintendent, administrative staff and board	Weeks 11 and 12
Identify operational needs of implementing the P2 plan including facilities, food, technology, staffing, etc.	Stauffer and P2 team	Weeks 11-13
Prepare communications plan to support the P2 plan.	Stauffer with input from the P2 team	Weeks 11-13

<b>Goal 5: Design the P2 plan</b>		
<i>Objective 5: Design evaluation methodology</i>		
<b>Activities and Tactics</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Timeline</b>

<p>Evaluate the P2 process and results to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support continuous ongoing improvement of the P2 project</li> <li>• Assess performance of the project against its objectives</li> <li>• Provide input for future P2 projects</li> </ul> <p>The evaluation will include process and tools as well as results. See the P2 Program Evaluation Worksheet.</p>	Stauffer	During and after the P2 project
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### References

International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) (2016). *Planning for effective public participation*. Louisville, CO: IAP2 International Federation.