



Nebraska

Innovative Funding Model Provides Long-Term Support for Infants and Toddlers

OVERVIEW

In 2006, the Nebraska State Legislature committed \$40 million in land trust funds to an endowment to provide high-quality early care and education for at-risk infants and toddlers. The state also asked private donors to raise \$20 million for the endowment within five years.

To leverage these investments, the legislation that established the fund, now called the Sixpence Early Learning Fund, requires local communities to develop programmatic solutions for their unique needs and match state dollars with cash or in-kind funds. Today, for every private dollar invested to support infants and toddlers, \$2 is invested by the state and \$3 by the local community. This amounts to a total of \$6 for every \$1 spent by program providers.

PURPOSE

The primary goal of the Sixpence Fund is to provide a sustainable, long-term funding source that makes high-quality early care and education available to at-risk infants and toddlers across the state and closes achievement gaps by kindergarten. Nebraska is a large, sparsely populated state with governing structures that are traditionally local rather than centralized. As a result, Nebraska's challenge is to reach very young children not just in center-based programs, but also in family or home-based child care programs that are struggling to thrive in a large, mostly rural state.

In 2018, the Fund distributed 31 grants to serve about 1,000 infants and toddlers and 78 pregnant women. Approximately 94% of families served are low-income.



THE MODEL

The funding model on which Sixpence relies is more complex than the 1:6 ratio (\$1 private investment = \$6 total spending for infants and toddlers). The initial investments made from the public and private sectors yield annual earnings that feed into the Early Childhood Endowment “Cash Fund.” In addition, Nebraska adds federal dollars (like Child Care Development Block Grant funds) and state dollars into the Cash Fund to further leverage annual earnings from investments. Program funding decisions are made by a six-member Board of Trustees, and the grants are administered by the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCF), both situated within the Nebraska Department of Education.



The NCF awards three-year grants to three types of infant and toddler programs, many of which operate in combination with each other:

- **Family engagement/parent coaching programs**, or home visiting, in which skilled professionals visit homes to help parents increase positive interactions with their infants and toddlers.
- **Center-based early care and education programs**, which operate in close partnership with local school systems and are often located at and staffed by the school. These centers must follow evidence-based curricula, emphasize parental involvement, and adhere to the Nebraska Department of Education’s quality rating system and professional requirements.
- **Community early care and education partnerships**, where independent center- and home-based providers collaborate with local school districts to raise professional development standards. Family and home-based providers also participate in the state’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) called “Step Up to Quality.”

The majority of children served by Sixpence-funded programs (about 70%) participate in year-round weekly home visits taking place in family homes or at agreed upon community locations. The program was deliberately designed to reach at-risk children who might otherwise remain invisible in a center-based support system.

According to Mike Medwich from First Five, a nonprofit that works closely with Sixpence, “Our mantra is that wherever children are, we need to go there and help.” Since Nebraska has large amounts of sparsely populated land, the model also prioritizes traditionally hard to reach rural communities. In fact, most of Sixpence’s recent grants went to rural areas, with the rest divided among urban and mid-sized communities.



WHY IT WORKS

Sixpence leaders believe the program works because it maximizes local resources that are already in place, such as school districts and existing child care centers. “Nebraska is a locally-controlled state,” Becky Veak of First Five explained. “Each district has its own elected board. Not a lot of policies are top-down, everything is very local. The grants go to a local school district, but they are required to partner with existing resources like the YWCA, Head Start, and local child care centers.”

Furthermore, the program helps professionalize and build a skilled workforce of early childhood educators and administrators and creates a supportive pathway towards kindergarten readiness. Like other states, many individuals providing care to Nebraska’s infant and toddlers are not licensed and do not participate in the state’s QRIS. Sixpence incentivizes quality by requiring grant recipients to participate in Nebraska’s Step Up to Quality program.

Sixpence also keeps home-based and family providers engaged by giving them more flexibility. Whereas centers that partner with a school district must use the Teaching Strategies GOLD® program and achieve step three of five in Step Up to Quality by the end of their third year in the grant program, home providers undergo a more qualitative evaluation process. Data collection and analysis is also managed for these providers to help offset costs and ensure reliable data.

Over the past three years, researchers found that a majority (67%) of infant and toddler center-based programs met the benchmarks for quality, and 85% of home visiting programs met their quality benchmarks. Researchers noted an 11% increase in the last year for the number of three-year olds meeting the goal for language development. Parent satisfaction with the program was extremely high, with 93% saying Sixpence helped them learn more about their child’s development.

Sixpence also funds programs to help stabilize at-risk families with infants and toddlers by connecting parents with available services, teaching parenting and coping skills, and helping them achieve their educational goals. In addition to child care initiatives, many communities have leveraged their funds in creative ways to provide family support services. “We wanted to create a system that would have a great deal of local control,” noted Becky Veak, director for First Five.

Several Sixpence programs in Nebraska have added an evidence-based Circle of Security® training program for parents to help them become more responsive to their children’s needs. Other local programs have contracted with mental health providers to host monthly workshops to help families better cope with the stresses of parenthood. Some grant recipients are participating in a “52 Weeks of Diapers” program, which raises extra funds to provide and distribute diapers in their local communities. Sixpence also help parents reach their own educational goals by encouraging and tracking high school or college enrollment among participating families across Nebraska.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

- A state constitutional amendment was required before the legislature could tap into the land trust money, which was set aside for public schools. Advocates had to convince not just legislators, but also voters across the state to support the amendment.
- Because of the focus on infants and toddlers, legislators were initially concerned about loss of family privacy. Supporters helped explain how home visiting programs help empower parents to be their child’s best teacher, and most families appreciate the support.
- From the beginning, philanthropic support has been important. The Warren Buffett family has been a core donor, and The Buffett Early Childhood Institute at the University of Nebraska is currently working on a separate state initiative that will examine issues surrounding child care.



FURTHER READING

- **"2016-18 Biennial Report to the Nebraska Legislature," Sixpence Early Learning Fund:**
https://www.singasongofsixpence.org/file_download/56fd1f57-0e2a-4754-8c49-0c0e9f8c21fa
- **Circle of Security® Network:**
http://circleofsecuritynetwork.org/the_circle_of_security.html
- **"New Census Data," First Five Nebraska:**
<http://www.firstfive-nebraska.org/blog/article/new-census-data-39-of-nebraska-children-from-birth-to-age-5-are-at-risk-of#.XS4n1OhKg2w>
- **Sixpence Annual Report, 2017-2018, Sixpence Early Learning Fund:**
https://www.singasongofsixpence.org/file_download/7c199e39-55d8-4d6f-a5f6-0259a2f16b22
- **"The Youngest Nebraskans: A Statistical Look at Infants and Toddlers in Nebraska," First Five Nebraska:**
http://www.firstfive-nebraska.org/uploads/nebraska_final.pdf
- **GOLD® Teaching Strategies:**
<https://teachingstrategies.com/solutions/assess/gold>
- **"Step Up to Quality," Nebraska Dept. of Education:**
<https://www.education.ne.gov/stepuptoquality/>
- **Nebraska Early Childhood Collaborative:**
<https://nebraskaearly.org/>

For more information on the work happening in Nebraska contact:

Amy Bornemeier

Vice President of Early Childhood Programs, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation
abornemeier@nebraskachildren.org

Becky Veak

Director, First Five Nebraska
bveak@firstfive-nebraska.org

Elizabeth Everett

Policy Associate, First Five Nebraska
eeverett@firstfive-nebraska.org

Mike Medwick

Senior Communications Associate, First Five Nebraska
mmedwick@firstfive-nebraska.org

Barb Jackson

Director, Dept. of Education and Child Development, Munroe-Meyer Institute (Omaha), University of Nebraska at Omaha
bjackson@unmc.edu

Rose Zweiback

Associate Director for Program Evaluation, Interdisciplinary Center, Munroe-Meyer Institute
zweibackr@unmc.edu