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## Midlands Voices: Early childhood ed can narrow gaps

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

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

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

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

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

Using resources from all four campuses, the institute assists schools, families and community organizations with narrowing the achievement gap experienced by young children growing up in poverty. The institute also seeks to help all children in Nebraska, birth through age 8, have the opportunity to be successful — intellectually, socially, emotionally and academically. Research tells us that the early years of life are "prime time" for emotional, intellectual and

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

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

Numerous studies show a return of at least \$7 for every dollar invested in young children —