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New Sixpence grants connects child care programs, public schools to promote quality early learning opportunities

LINCOLN, NE- The Trustees of the Sixpence Early Learning Fund announced that two new grants have been awarded from the pool of applications from the October 2015 RFP. These grants are awarded to school districts in partnerships with local licensed early care and education providers to improve the care for infants and toddlers at risk. Starting January 2019, Grantee partnerships in Grand Island and York join the existing grantees in Chadron, Gering, Sidney, Kearney and Falls City who first received funding in 2016 and in Auburn and Hastings who first received funding in January 2018. Sixpence, a collaborative funding structure involving the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Nebraska Department of Education and private sector investors, has issued grants to community partnerships statewide since 2008, now totaling 34 communities, reaching a total of over 1700 at-risk infants and toddlers. Traditionally, Sixpence grants are awarded to school districts working with other local agencies that meet the statutory requirements governing the use of Sixpence funds providing either center-based or home-based family engagement programs. This latest round of School-Child Care Partnership grants utilize federal Child Care Development Funds, authorized by LB547 in the 2015 Unicameral. These grants impact the quality of early learning experiences, offered through community child care, for over 700 of Nebraska's infants and toddlers at risk, and represent a significant new strategy in Sixpence's efforts to narrow the achievement gap before children enter kindergarten.

Nearly 30,000, or more than 40 percent of Nebraska children between birth and age 3, face risk factors that threaten their chances of arriving at kindergarten developmentally on par with their peers. These children are more likely to struggle in the K-12 system, attain a lower level of education, enter the criminal justice system as offenders, develop chronic health problems and early less as working adults. Neuroscientific, sociological and even economic evidence suggest that stimulating and supportive experience in the first years of life encourage the emergence of cognitive skills, behaviors and character traits that drive academic success and steer children toward healthier, more productive life outcomes.

While child development experts agree that parents play the most important role in children's earliest learning and developmental experiences, it is also true that child care is a reality for Nebraskans who must participate in the workforce to provide for their families. The Sixpence School-Child Care Partnership grants ensure that more infants and toddlers are being cared for in environments that provide the kinds of early learning experiences known to narrow the achievement gap.

"The success of Sixpence over the past decade shows Nebraskans understand the value of programs that help parents put kids on the path to success early in life," said Amy Bornemeier, Sixpence Administrator and Vice President of Early Childhood Programs at Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, which administers the grant program under the direction of the Sixpence Board of Trustees. "Connecting licensed child care providers with school districts and other local partners allows communities to make better use of the existing resources, facilities and early childhood workforce available to them."

The latest round of grants was made possible through 2015 legislation addressing the urgent need to grow the state's quality early childhood workforce, "Working with parents to support our state's youngest children's early development requires professionals who are experienced and skilled," said Bornemeier. "Right now in Nebraska, only about 8 percent of our at-risk infants and toddlers have access to early learning opportunities we can verify as meeting the quality standards known to close the achievement gap. If we are going to get ahead of that problem, we need to find new ways to attract, cultivate and retain more professionals in the field. These new grant awards move us in the right direction by using Sixpence's blended public-private funds to deliver professional development, technical assistance and other resources to the child care providers that Nebraska's working parent rely upon."

The growing focus on Nebraska's early childhood workforce also created common ground between the latest Sixpence grants and the state's Step Up to Quality child care rating and improvement system. Step Up to Quality a collaboration between the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services and the Nebraska Department of Education, provides training, professional development, coaching opportunities and financial incentives to participating child care providers and their staff. Step Up to Quality also provides parents information to identify and choose quality child care programs. Under the Sixpence School-Child Care Partnership grant, licensed providers receive coaching, access to professional development and financial support to achieve a Step 3 rating on a 5-step quality scale by the end of the third year of grant.

"By working together, Sixpence and *Step Up to Quality* make our approach to the early education of our youngest, most vulnerable children more efficient, effective and accountable," said Bornemeier. "This partnership enables us to maximize our existing resources, gives communities more flexibility to meet the needs of local families, and provides a pathway toward a more robust, professionalized early childhood workforce throughout the state. Most importantly, it reinforces the central role of parents in their children's early education."