

# Ensuring Bright Futures

## UNH leads effort to strengthen New Hampshire's early childhood system

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New Hampshire is ranked one of the best states to live in America. A strong education system, high quality public health indicators and safe communities top the list. While those accolades are hard earned and well deserved, disparities and inequity exist throughout the state — within communities, towns and cities, and neighborhoods.

In a collaborative effort to ensure that all New Hampshire's children have a bright future, UNH has partnered with New Hampshire's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and Department of Education (DOE) to lead a three-year \$26.8 million

preschool development grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families. The grant will enable New Hampshire to improve cohesion and efficiency across supports and services for young children and their families, with the goal of ensuring that all children are healthy, learning and thriving. Building on the foundational work of a current preschool development planning grant, this project includes an array of diverse community partners throughout the state, including the NH Governor's early childhood advisory council and others in the areas of physical and behavioral healthcare, family support, advocacy, philanthropy and early childcare and education.

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"DHHS has been intensely focused on integrating and strengthening programs and services that support families with young children, and we've been on this journey shoulder to shoulder with an array of multi-sector partners throughout the state," says Christine Tappan, associate commissioner of the NH Department of Health and Human Services. "The resources and partnerships brought to bear through this grant will build capacity and accelerate collective efforts across our state to improve experiences for parents, children and professionals in the workforce. The expertise that UNH has brought to this grant is invaluable to truly advance our efforts in the state's early childhood system, progressing from aspiration to action."

UNH resources and expertise include the integration of research-informed practices that are developmentally and culturally appropriate, says Kimberly Nesbitt, assistant professor in UNH's department of human development and family studies and primary investigator for the grant. "UNH has long provided exceptional pre-service training for early childhood educators throughout the state," she says. "Under this grant, we aspire to expand our reach and support UNH's strategic emphasis on embracing New Hampshire through collaborations that support the state's quality of life, serving as a trusted partner for early childhood research and community outreach."

One of the ways UNH brings research-informed practice into communities is through implementation of play-based learning — an instructional method the state of New Hampshire introduced in 2018 and is being applied through the preschool development grant. Nesbitt and her colleagues have provided in-service professional development to more than 40 districts across the state. During the past year, more than 30 kindergarten teachers have received individualized coaching to increase teacher-initiated, child-directed, hands-on guided play, which can lead to better learning outcomes for children. These professional development initiatives will continue and expand over the next three years.

A major emphasis in the development of an integrated early childhood system will be on placing families at the center of all decision-making. “New Hampshire is unique in that we view families as having a dual role within the early childhood care and education system, as both recipients and providers of services,” said Christine Brennan, deputy commissioner of the NH Department of Education. “With this perspective, the preschool development grant will sustain a network of supports that address family needs while simultaneously building the capacity of all families to be a part of that system of supports. Our goal is to build on the foundation of state and local communities working together with families to offer children the best opportunity for positive growth and development.”

Nesbitt says about \$3 million of the funding during the first year of the grant will be invested into community grants, which will directly address disparities at local levels by helping to identify and address local specific needs, implement new programs, expand access and improve overall quality.

“Across New Hampshire, support and services most needed by children and families often vary neighborhood by neighborhood,” says Christina Lachance, director of early childhood and family initiatives at the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation. “Improving outcomes for New Hampshire’s children and families will require collaboration at the state and local level, and the preschool development grant gives us an unprecedented opportunity to help make this happen.”

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