



December 2025

BSB's Year in Review:

Living Through “Interesting Times” - Challenges and Opportunities for Nebraska’s ELO Field in 2025

This past year reminded us of the promise and peril of the old saying *“may we live in interesting times.”*

For Nebraska’s Expanded Learning Opportunity (ELO) field, 2025 delivered no shortage of interesting moments. Early attempts to eliminate the Federal 21st CCLC program, followed by a months-long grant pause and the longest federal government shutdown in U.S. history, created unprecedented instability. Proposed administrative changes, such as shifting 21st CCLC oversight from the Department of Education to the Department of Labor, added new uncertainty as the year drew to a close.

Still, Nebraska’s ELO programs persisted. Local leadership, strong family demand, and coordinated state and national advocacy helped maintain current funding levels as programs prepared for the 2025–26 school year.

And, true to the saying, challenges revealed opportunity. Despite national turbulence, partners stepped forward with renewed commitment to children, youth, and families. The C.S. Mott Foundation extended BSB’s participation in the 50 State Network through 2028, and several Nebraska philanthropic partners reinforced their support of our important work. We strengthened our partnership with Nebraska Extension and state partnerships deepened as well: relationships across NDE expanded from ESSER implementation into Career and Technical Education and 21st CCLC, and we continued coordinated work with DHHS and a pilot effort with the Department of Economic Development.

These investments fueled significant programmatic progress. We advanced career-connected learning through *Engineering Pathways*, *Exploring Career Connections*, and other near-peer STEM initiatives, and launched the mentorship-based *Boys in HEAL* project. Community partners aligned with emerging statewide literacy goals, piloting a promising summer literacy effort for underserved youth. Meanwhile, BSB supported local programs with coaching, grants, regional meetings, and technical assistance as NDE navigated federal shifts, and BSB transitioned to new leadership under Dr. Alison O'Toole.

As the year ended, new America After 3PM data offered perhaps the clearest signal of opportunity amid uncertainty in these “interesting times.” Nebraska parents report high satisfaction, strong bipartisan support for public investment, and unmet demand for far more ELO programs. These findings, highlighted by Nebraska Public Media and many other outlets, reinforce a theme that has carried the field through a turbulent year: when challenges emerge, Nebraska’s ELO community responds with collaboration, innovation, and an unwavering commitment to young people.

With strengthened partnerships and clear evidence of broad public support, 2026 holds real promise for turning uncertainty into progress for ELO programs statewide.

Introducing the Mott Million Dollar Challenge — Coming Soon to Inspire Nebraska Youth!

Speaking of the strengthening partnerships, BSB is excited to spread the word about a new national pitch competition sponsored by our long-term national partners at the C.S. Mott Foundation, inviting K–12 students from all 50 states – including youth from here in Nebraska – to share their boldest business and social-impact ideas for a chance to win part of **\$1 million in prizes**.

This is a powerful opportunity for Nebraska’s afterschool and summer programs to shine. Our programs already excel at helping young people explore interests, build teamwork, and develop real-world skills – making them the perfect launchpads for student pitch teams. Whether you’re in Omaha, Scottsbluff, Lincoln, Norfolk, or any community in between, your program can help students brainstorm ideas, develop prototypes, and get “pitch-ready.”

Want to start preparing now?

While specific details haven’t yet been released, we wanted Nebraska programs to have a head start on preparing for this national pitch competition. Visit mizzen.org to explore free entrepreneurship activities and tools you can weave into your afterschool schedule. Resources are now available to help Nebraska youth start shaping their ideas before pitches are due **February 28**. Keep an eye on this space, and we will share more information as the competition parameters become available.

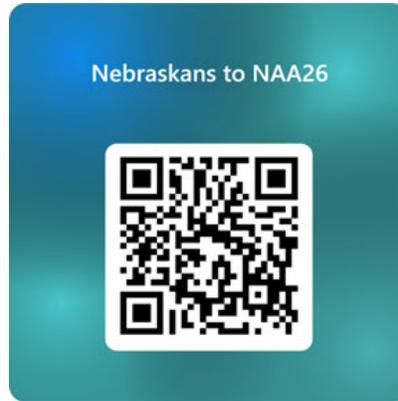
Let’s empower Nebraska’s young innovators and showcase to the nation what our students can achieve!

Dare, Dream, Do! 2026 NAA Convention

Join the National Afterschool Association for the annual **NAA convention in Washington, DC, on March 11-14, 2026**. As the field navigates change and uncertainty, NAA26 offers more than professional development. It’s a space to recharge, reconnect,

and reaffirm your purpose. Gain practical tools and strategies while building relationships that sustain your work. Every session is designed to value human connection, inspired learning, and collective strength. Registration is open, and rates are scheduled to increase on January 1st, so reserve your spot now!

Some Beyond School Bells staff plan to attend and would love to see you there! If you're going, or even just thinking about it, please let us know with [this survey link](#) or this QR code:



Funding Opportunities

The Contribution Project – Round 2

That's right! The Contribution Project will be open to Nebraska 14-25-year-olds for a second round of community engagement projects this spring.

In October, 21 Nebraska youth and young adults had the opportunity to make an impact in their community, with their projects wrapping up this month. This spring, there will be another chance to do it again.

BSB partner, the **Contribution Project**, will provide **\$400 in funding** for up to 29 youth or teams to bring their ideas to life – whether that's helping a neighbor, supporting a local cause, or creating something entirely new. Projects can be big or small: if they matter to the youth in your community, they qualify. At its core, this initiative is more than just funding – it's a study in purpose that uplifts youth voices and showcases how they contribute to their communities.

Here is how it works:

1. Youth create an account and complete a short survey (earning a \$10 Amazon gift card for participating).
2. They share their idea in writing, video, or audio by answering four simple questions.
3. Selected applicants receive \$400 by direct deposit or gift card to launch their project within six weeks.
4. All participants are invited to complete a final survey and receive an additional \$20 Amazon gift card.
5. This is an exciting way for Nebraska's afterschool programs to **support youth leadership, creativity, and community impact**—and to encourage young people in your communities to see themselves as changemakers right here in Nebraska.

Applications are not yet open, but now is a great time for students to start thinking about what they may want to apply for.

Keep an eye out for more information, including the open call for applications, in our January newsletter.

Service-Learning through Conservation 2025-2026



Are your students interested in conservation? Do they want to make a difference in their communities and the surrounding environment? Would they like to secure funding for a service-learning project they create themselves, centered around something they care about?

BSB has an opportunity for youth-led, conservation-based, service-learning projects in partnership with National Geographic's Slingshot Challenge. We will host this opportunity for high school students to join a cohort of conservation leaders and work in groups or individually to research, plan, and enact their service-learning projects. BSB is offering funding for student project supplies and career exploration experiences. We will also provide assistance and coaching to youth leadership, adult supervisors, and facilitate career connections.

[Application here!](#)

[What is service-learning?](#)

An approach to teaching and learning where students use academic and civic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs. It's a process, not just a project! Youth voice, youth leadership, and youth-adult partnerships are all key.

[Why service-learning?](#)

Service-learning is brain-based learning; the brain works best when there is active engagement in the learning, choice of activity or project, feedback and reflection, variety and novelty, complexity and challenge, and connection to others. SL provides students with the opportunity to engage their brains in these ways while also developing critical thinking, social, and other essential skills.

[National Geographic Slingshot Challenge:](#)

Each student or group of students will be participating in the National Geographic Slingshot Challenge throughout their project(s). The aim of this challenge is to encourage students aged 13-18 to design and document their ideas for tackling environmental issues and creating a sustainable future.

Visit our [website](#) for more details on service-learning, the National Geographic Slingshot Challenge, and how we can support your students in connecting these processes to their conservation goals!

National Geographic Slingshot Challenge

There are fewer than 2 months left to sign up for the [National Geographic Slingshot Challenge](#)! Video submissions are due February 6th, 2026. If your afterschool program is interested in supporting youth to lead the way with a Slingshot Challenge submission, please [reach out today](#)!



Learning Opportunities

Family Engagement Learning Community

Designed for afterschool professionals who want to strengthen partnerships with families and create more connected, supportive learning environments. This monthly series will guide programs in developing effective, sustainable strategies that deepen family involvement. Monthly topics will include effective communication practices, relationship building, two-way engagement approaches, and many more practical topics.

The kick-off session will take place on **Tuesday, January 20, from 12:30 to 1:00 pm**. To register, please complete the registration form, and we will send you a session link.

[Register Here](#)

Power On Afterschool: Keeping the Lights On Afterschool All Year Long

Power On Afterschool: Keeping the Lights on Afterschool All Year Long: Join us as we explore practical ways to turn your "*Lights on Afterschool*" into a year-round movement by incorporating advocacy, partnerships, youth and family voice, staff empowerment, program innovation, celebration, recognition, awareness, and storytelling into your program each month. The next session will be on **December 16 from 12:30-1:00 pm**.

Join Us via Zoom

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