The Fishback Center for ECE Annual Report

South Dakota State University
Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education

2025-2026

Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education Vision Statement

To provide solid early childhood educational best practices in a changing society.

Mission Statement

The Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education is a model of inclusive early childhood education that: (1) Ensures optimum experiences for education and professional preparation of early childhood professionals who will serve children, and their families, on local, state, and national levels; (2) Connects with families to form family-school partnerships to enrich each other's experiences and lives; and (3) Provides a unique environment for faculty and student research that contributes to knowledge about child development and quality early educational experiences.

Philosophy Statement

At the Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education, the philosophy is grounded in social constructivism, inquiry-based learning, and is Reggio-inspired. Children are capable, competent, and build their knowledge through exploration and social interaction. Relationships with caring and responsive teachers are not only children's rights but are crucial to their growth, learning, and development. These relationships help children nurture, sustain, develop questions, and hypothesize so they may make meaning of their world.

The Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education sees parents as the children's first teachers. Teachers and college students are seen as their second teachers, and the environment of learning as their third teacher. Special consideration is given to the materials chosen for the children's opportunities for learning and how teachers construct the spaces where children will play, learn, and interact with their peers and adults in the center.

Overview of the Year

Declaration of Intent

Declaration of Intent for the Academic Year 2025-2026 - We declare this year to be a year of exploring and connecting with other Reggio-inspired settings, to enrich our own practices and strengthen our foundation for sharing our philosophy with families, educators, and the wider community.

Highlights of the Year

The Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education underwent significant changes this year, including leadership transitions, revised lab scheduling, and tuition updates. With support from the previous leadership, these changes, particularly in transitioning everything over, required extensive time and effort to understand and implement, but ultimately resulted in strengthened operations throughout the team. Two Graduate Assistants also contributed in many ways to help the Coordinator throughout this process. The center also continued to see the frequent use of the observation booths by families, high school classes, and different SDSU courses, such as our ECE, HDFS Human Development and Psychology classes. The program also continued to partner with the SDSU Physical Education and Music departments as they provided lessons and activities for our kindergartners, and with the ECE Physics class and ECE Play and Inquiry class who completed various lessons with the preschool children. This year, a new collaboration occurred where we partnered with a nutrition class led by Megan Northrup. These students planned and implemented nutrition lessons and snacks with both the 4-5 year old classrooms and the Kindergarten children. This collaboration provided the college students with the opportunity to engage with children and practice nutritional lessons they had been discussing in their coursework. Additionally, the Kindergarten class had a new collaboration with the Public Library where the Children's Librarian Katherine Eberline came and read books and other literacy/music activities with the children. The

Fishback Center for Early Childhood also participated in the SDSU Yellow and Blue Block Party to showcase what our program offers to the community and as a service to the community.

This year the center also implemented a security card access system to enhance the safety and security of the center, with a primary focus on protecting the children and families served. This initiative required a significant investment of time and effort, including planning, coordination, installation, and card issues/needs. Despite the complexity and demands of the process, the outcomes have proven highly beneficial. The new system provides controlled access to the facility, ensuring that only authorized individuals are able to enter the building. This has strengthened our overall security measures and created a more secure environment for both children and staff. Families have expressed increased confidence in our safety practices, knowing that additional safeguards are in place.

Family Advisory Council (FAC) Involvement

The FAC continued to show support for the Fishback Center staff by donating a variety of items for the teacher workroom including drink and snack options for the teachers as well as meals during conference days and cleaning days. They provided input regarding the security of the center, adjustment of hours of operation, and tuition increases. They requested that apparel be ordered to market the Fishback Center, which the Coordinator completed. Ongoing discussions include Hobo Day Parade presence, materials/supplies of need, and how to promote Fishback Center more within the community.

How Goals Were Met for the 2025-2026 Academic Year – A Year in Review

Goals for the 2025-2026 academic year included: (1) To promote meaningful and intentional early childhood experiences through an extended day schedule and promotion of our center, 2) To further our skills through professional development, (3) To continue to promote balance and wellbeing, (4) To implement our security system throughout the center, and (5) To ensure a smooth transition occurred with leadership changes.

We progressed on these goals in the following ways:

(1) This year the Fishback Center for ECE made changes to their daily schedules, thus providing more time for various activities with the children. The center also continued its online presence on Facebook and Instagram by sharing information and different photos and videos of the teaching team throughout the year. The Family Advisory Council also proposed the development of Fishback Center apparel, which was subsequently implemented by the Coordinator to help promote the center within the community.

(2) The mentor teaching team participated in numerous professional development opportunities, both as a teaching team as well as independent choices based on needs and wishes.

(3) The Fishback Center teaching teams continued to promote balance and well-being mindfulness practices, as well as safety practices throughout the Fishback Center.

(4) The Fishback Center implemented a security card access system within the center to enhance security and safety for the children and families served.

(5) The new Coordinator worked closely with prior leadership to facilitate a smooth transition that continued into this past year.

NAEYC Accreditation

The Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education became the first program in the state of South Dakota to be accredited by the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs (NAECP) in affiliation with the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The center pursued accreditation at the inception of the process in 1978. In March 2022, the Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education

successfully completed its re-accreditation visit with an overall 97.3% pass rating. We are currently in the process of preparing our portfolio boxes for an upcoming visit during the 2026-2027 school year.

NAEYC Accreditation is a voluntary process by which early childhood programs demonstrate that they meet national standards of excellence. It is a rigorous process. Programs seeking accreditation undergo an intensive self-study process (usually a two-year-long process) collecting information from parents, teachers, and administrators. The collected information is in the form of questionnaires, observations, and documentation showing evidence for the national standards. Programs receive an onsite visit by an early childhood professional validator to confirm the results of the self-study. The validator's report is then submitted to the NAECP review board made up of a panel of early childhood education experts to grant or defer the program's accreditation status. Currently, there are 5 NAEYC accredited programs (increased by 1) in South Dakota, which include Enemy Swim Day School FACE Program in Waubay, SD, Ellsworth AFB Child Development Center on Ellsworth AFB, the Early Learning Center of Brookings in Brookings, SD, the Skies the Limit Academy in Fort Meade, SD and the Fishback Center for ECE in Brookings, SD. Neighboring states with accredited centers include North Dakota (4, decreasing by 2 from last year), Minnesota (287, increasing by 1 from last year), Iowa (62, increasing by 5 from last year), Nebraska (38, remaining stable from last year), and Wyoming (25, increasing by 2 from last year). There are a total of 2,000 accredited centers in the US, Guam, and Puerto Rico which remains stable from last year.

Throughout this annual report, the description of activities and events illustrate how the Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education has actively supported the university's mission, the department's mission, the center's mission, and the NAEYC Accreditation mission, as well as meeting the needs and desires of the families and children it serves. Beginning in July 2026, the center will be begin the re-accreditation application process which will require extensive time to complete.

Teaching in Relation to the Fishback Center

During the 2025-2026 academic year, the Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education continued its teaching mission as it facilitated the professional development of undergraduate students through field experiences, teacher candidate placements, and observations.

Teacher research topics continued to be authentic and deeply explored questions that were important to the teacher candidates and mentor teachers' thinking (See Table 1 for a list of inquiry investigations with the children).

Placement Sites

Throughout the academic year 2025-2026, 467 teaching and laboratory placements occurred. Professional Skills I (PS I) Field experiences occurred once a week in the classroom for 3 ½ hours each; students in field experiences worked with children in guidance situations and observed their learning. Teacher candidate placements are full-time placements, present during the entire laboratory program for a particular group of children. Various methods laboratory experiences are shorter (1/2 to 1 hour) experiences where students plan and implement activities that coordinate with the curriculum studied in their methods and content courses. The Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education served as a site for 32 weekly PS I field experiences, 22 teacher candidate placements, and 413 methods observations and experiences (see Table 2 for details). Those individuals completed 8,367 observations/hours (see Table 3 for details), and over 1200 assignments (see Table 4 for details).

Enrollment Statistics

During the 2025-2026 academic year, the center enrolled 9 younger toddlers, 12 older toddlers, 17 3- & 4-year-olds, 30 4 & 5-year-olds, and 19 kindergartners, of whom all 19 were also enrolled in the center's Out-of-School-Time (OST) Program. The total enrollment was 87.

Of the children who were enrolled, their family members identified as being a member of the following nationalities: American (42), Sudanese (1), Nigerian (1), Ghanaian (1), Bangladeshi (1), Iranian (1), Mexican (1), Malawian (1), Hispanic (2), Native American (4), Colombian (1), Guatemalan (1), Swedish (3), Norwegian (3), German (4), Irish (4), Italian (2), Belgian (1), Danish (1), Dutch (1), French (1), Polish (1), Scottish (1), Bulgarian (1), and No Identified Nationality (5).

Of the children who were enrolled, their family members identified as being part of the following cultural heritages: American (34), Caucasian (3), Christian (3), Catholic (5), Native American (3), Cherokee (1), Hispanic (2), Colombian (1), Guatemalan (1), Latin (1), Nigerian (1), African (1), Ghanaian (1), Iranian (2), Persian (1), Swedish (3), Norwegian (3), German (4), Irish (4), Italian (2), Danish (2), French (1), Polish (1), Scottish (1), Bulgarian (1), and No Identified Culture (8).

Of the children who were enrolled, we had eight different languages represented: English (56), Spanish (4), Arabic (1), Bulgarian (1), Turkish (1), Twi (1), Bangla (1), and Farsi (1).

Space Usage

The entire Fishback Center was used for classroom and programming space. Visitors and faculty also used the program spaces.

Table 1: Inquiry Topics WITH Teacher Candidates AND SmaLL Groups of Children

Name of Topic/Investigation	Classroom	Semester Inquiry Occurred
Mix, Match, Toddler Bash!	Toddler Lab	Fall 2025
Adventure Friends	Toddler Lab	Fall 2025
Baby Dramatic Play	Toddler Lab	Fall 2025
Sensory	Toddler Lab	Fall 2025
Little Explorers	Toddler Lab	Fall 2025
Rumble, Roll, and Toddler Patrol	Toddler Lab	Fall 2025
Ramps and Balls	3 & 4 Morning Lab	Fall 2025
Instruments	3 & 4 Morning Lab	Fall 2025
Elements of Art	3 & 4 Morning Lab	Fall 2025
Science	4 & 5 Morning Lab	Fall 2025
Plants and Nature	4 & 5 Morning Lab	Fall 2025
Bugs	4 & 5 Afternoon Lab	Fall 2025
SDSU Campus	4 & 5 Afternoon Lab	Fall 2025
Animal Habitats (Individualized)	Kindergarten Lab	Fall 2025
Science Exploration	Toddler Lab	Spring 2026
Tubes and Tunnels	Toddler Lab	Spring 2026
Animals and Sensory	Toddler Lab	Spring 2026
Dry Sensory	Toddler Lab	Spring 2026
Ocean Animals	3 & 4 Morning Lab	Spring 2026
Character Exploration	3 & 4 Morning Lab	Spring 2026
Storytelling	4 & 5 Morning Lab	Spring 2026
Occupations	4 & 5 Morning Lab	Spring 2026
Racing	4 & 5 Afternoon Lab	Spring 2026
Dinosaurs	4 & 5 Afternoon Lab	Spring 2026
Ball Ramps	Kindergarten Lab	Spring 2026
Marble Mazes	Kindergarten Lab	Spring 2026
Rube Goldberg	Kindergarten Lab	Spring 2026

Table 2: Placements in the Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education

Number of Placements	Course	Type of Experience
32	PS I – ECE 360	2nd Year Field Experience
18	ECE 488	Student Teaching Preschool-Age
4	ECE 488	Student Teaching K-3
12	PE 460	Phys. Ed. Kindergarten Field Exp/Fall
13	PE 342	Phys. Ed. Kindergarten Field Exp/Spring
93	PHYS 216	Physical Science for Early Childhood
10	MUS 351	Music Ed. Kindergarten Field/Fall
24	ECE 196	Infant/Toddler Field Experience
15	EDFN 102	Introduction to Education
40	PSYC 492	Behavior Technician Fundamentals classroom experience
202	HDFS 227	Toddler/Preschool/Kindergarten Development Observations
4	MATH 245/345	Math for the Primary Grades Lesson Plans
Total of 467 Placements during the 2025-2026 Academic Year		

Table 3: Observations in the Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education

Number of Observations/Hours of Observations	Course	Total Enrolled	Type of Experience
1,440	PS-1 ECE 360	32	Developmental & Curricular Observations
3,456	ECE 488	18	Student Teaching Toddler-Preschool Age
1, 760	ECE 488	4	Student Teaching-Kindergarten
720	ECE 196	24	Infant Toddler Field Experience
606	HDFS 227	202	Toddler/Preschool/Kindergarten Developmental Observations
240	PSYC 492	40	Behavior Fundamentals Observations
111	HDFS 451	37	Toddler/Preschool/Kindergarten Mental Health Observations
36	Phys 216L	36 individuals or small groups	Science Implementation and DAP
10	HDFS 150	10	Child Observation
Total of 8,367 Observations/Hours during the 2025-2026 Academic Year			

Table 4: Assignments in the Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education

Course Number	Number of Assignments	Types of Assignments	Number of Students
PS I – ECE 360	6	Child Descriptive Review	32
	3	Affordance Studies Obs. & Lesson Plan	
	6	Small Group Inquiry & Lesson Plan	
PE 460/342	1	PE Lesson Plan	25
MUS 351	1	Music Lesson Plan	10
PHYS 216	2	Plan and implement a physics activity with the preschool children.	93
ECE 488 (PreK)	6-9 visits and 1 summary reflection	Student Teacher Meet & Greet Visits	18
	6-9 children	Portfolios: Baseline Assessments	
		Portfolios: Baseline Goals - 8 per child	
		Portfolios: Midterm Documentation Posts – 4 per child	
		Portfolios: Final Paragraphs – 8 per child	
	6-9 conferences and 1 summary reflection	Family-Teacher Conferences	
	3	Lesson Plans	
	3	Newsletters	
	1	Small Group Investigation: daily lesson plans and implementation, overall documentation journal, Celebration of Learning Showcase	
	1	Documentation Panel	
	Numerous	Seesaw Posts as Communication with Families and Daily Documentation	
	2-3	Teaching Reflections after lead teaching	
ECE 488 (K-3)	7	Weekly Lesson Plans	4
	5	Cognitive Coaching Observations	
	5	Parent Teacher Conferences	
	1	Newsletter	
	1	Small Group Investigation	
Math 245	1	Implementation of Math Lesson	4
EDFN 102	1	Reflection Paper	15
NUTR 794	12	Nutrition Lessons	4
Total over 1,200 Assignments during the 2025-2026 Academic Year			

Table 5: Presentations, Grants & Publications

Publications:
Cutler, K., Gloege, L., Benson, C., Haselhorst, A., Suhn, J. (under review/revisions). Reflecting on the aesthetic dimension of our practice when working with children and teacher-candidates. Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Emilia Exchange.
Clark, A. (2026). The Complexities of infant and toddler communication. (accepted, not yet published) St. Paul, MN: Reggio-inspired Network of MN Newsletter. (Mentored by Kay Cutler regarding writing article development and submission/editing process.)
Grants:
Benson, C. (2025). Neurodiverse Learner Books for Children. Brookings Disability Awareness Committee. $250
Presentations:
Gloege, L. (2026). Get the Scoop: Literacy Integration within ECE Classrooms (CFRN Training Series)
Haselhorst, A. (2026). Learning about ECE and Early Intervention. Brookings High School Invite.
Johnson, J. (2026). Showcasing Fishback Center for ECE: What Reggio-inspired, inquiry-based learning looks like. C & FRN Empowering Leaders.
Johnson, J. (2026). Get the Scoop: Math Integration within ECE Classrooms (CFRN Training Series)

*Please refer to Appendix A for Research Report within Fishback Center for ECE from Dr. Carie Green

Professional Development

Mentor Teachers choose their professional development based on their goals and interests, school district required trainings, and licensing required trainings. The team participated in numerous professional development opportunities, including but not limited to CPR/First Aid certification, Early Math Counts, the Science of Literacy Trainings, Birth to Three Early Intervention trainings, Leadership, and a virtual tour and professional development training from Boulder Journey School. Each mentor teacher and the coordinator completed at least 15 hours of professional development/training this past year totaling over 90 hours.

*Please refer to Appendix B for Professional Development Activity within Fishback Center for ECE

Table 6: Fishback Center Leadership in the Community and Field

Highlights for the Year
Jen Johnson is a member and VP of the Head Start Pre-Birth to 5 Policy Council and serves as the Early Childhood Consultant to the Head Start Board. She also works with Child and Family Resource Network as a consultant on early learning and quality care.
Ashlee Haselhorst also works as a Birth to Three provider for the Brookings community.
We collaborate with the Early Head Start program in Brookings, where we share our classrooms and other program spaces for family programming throughout the school year.
Jen Johnson assisted with the development, administration, and analysis of a community-based childcare survey in Codington County to reassess local childcare needs. The survey targeted parents and guardians who live or work in the county and was designed to inform community decision-making and policy discussions. I also contributed a final report summarizing data from approximately 240 respondents, supporting ongoing planning efforts for the Codington County Social Services Advisory Council.

Table 7: Tours of the Fishback Center

Role	Number of Individuals
Jackrabbit Previews, Daily Visits, & Other Days	22
Educators Rising	83
Flandreau FCS Education Class	13
Baltic HS Family & Consumer Science class visit	18
C & FRN Empowering Leaders	10
Instructors of courses where students observed	3
Potential Enrolled Children and their Families	6
Foundation Director	1
Potential Donors & Current Donors	14
Nutrition Students	4
Total:	**174**

FIELD TRIPS AND GUEST SPEAKERS

APPENDIX A: Research at the Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education 2025-2026

Dr. Carie Green, Director of Research, Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education Profilet and DeJong Family Endowed Director of Early Childhood Education
School of Education, Counseling, and Human Development South Dakota State University

Overview

The Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education aims to **advance research and practice** in early childhood education, child development, children's health and well-being, formative art processes, early language acquisition, STEM learning, and much more. It serves as a **model lab school and research center at SDSU**, offering toddler, three-four, four-five, and Kindergarten classrooms at South Dakota State University. Each of the four classrooms are equipped with one-way window observation booths for SDSU researchers, students, and families to observe (see and hear) children as they interact, play, and learn in their environments.

Additionally, the Lab school offers a library/community meeting space, a makerspace, an art studio, a large motor movement room, conference room, documentation room, light studio, and sensory-rich and interactive outdoor play and natural learning space, which can be utilized for research purposes.

Research Training and Professional Development

The library/community meeting space and conference room provides space for researchers to meet and host research events and meetings. In Fall 2025, an **Informational Forum** was hosted for SDSU faculty and researchers who may be interested in facilitating research at the Fishback Center. The presentation provided general information about the facility, an overview of the mission and philosophy of the University Lab School, examples of research projects, and a sampling of research methods that could be implemented at the Lab School.

Informational sessions, research training, and professional development opportunities will continue to be offered annually and catered towards SDSU faculty interests.

Additionally, in October 2025, the ***Guidelines for Research at the Fishback Center*** were refined and approved by ECE faculty, the School, and the College (see item 1). The guidelines outline the protocol and expectations for researchers interested in pursuing research projects at the lab school. First, researchers are invited to reach out to the Fishback Center Director of Research, prior to submitting a 250-word abstract to outline their research idea. Then the Director will consult with the Fishback Center Research Committee for initial approval and feedback. Next, the researchers will ensure completion of CITI training for Social and Behavioral Science Research before submitting an IRB application using the SDSU Cayuse system. Once IRB approval is obtained, the researchers will share their protocol and approval letter with the Fishback Director(s) and arrange logistics (time, space, and facilities) for the research. After data collection and analysis are complete, the research team will share initial findings with the Fishback Center faculty, staff, children, and families. Researchers are also strongly encouraged to share their research findings with Fishback Center staff, children, and families at a public event.

Research Projects

During the 2025-2026AY, two research projects were facilitated at the Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education: 1) *Nature as a Place for Learning* (PI Dr. Allison Esparza, Co-PI Dr. Carie Green), and 2) *Books in Your Place* (PI Dr. Carie Green, Co-PI Dr. Sergio Levia Cardona). A third project, *The Effects of Simplified and Realistic Animation on Attention and Concept Retention in Preschool Children* (PI Dr.

Hamid Amini, Co-PI Rebecca Martin) was proposed and approved by the Fishback Research Committee and the SDSU Institutional Review Board in the April 2026. However, data collection will not begin until September 2026.

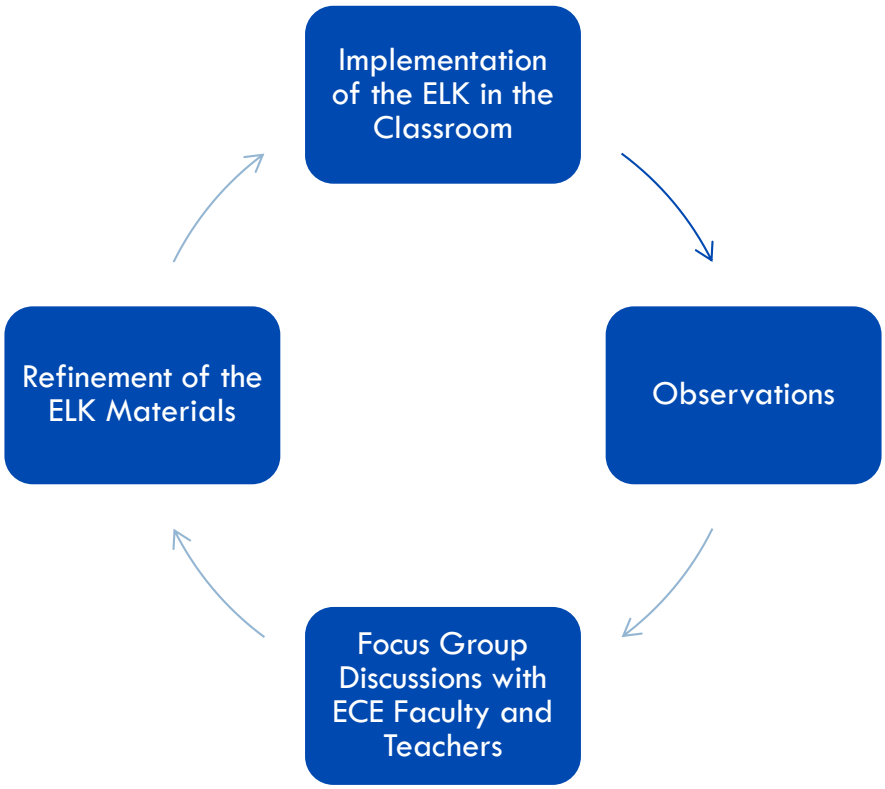
Nature as a Place for Learning

The first project, *Nature as a Place for Learning,* was facilitated by Dr. Allison Esparza and Dr. Carie Green. The primary goal of this research was to describe how teacher candidates utilize ambitious science teaching and environmental identity development principles to enhance their science teaching in a nature-based context. As part of the main project, Teacher Candidates were paired with 2nd Grade Students from St. Thomas More Catholic school for nature exploration at Dakota Nature Park. However, prior to the nature explorations, Drs. Green and Esparza introduced Elementary Teacher Candidates to the emotional and behavioral attributes of the Environmental Identity Development (EID) framework. Next, Teacher Candidates were invited to observe Kindergarten students in the outdoor play space of the Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education. This practice session, helped students brainstorm and interpret the emotions and behaviors observed by young children as they interacted and engaged with their environment. While formal data was not officially collected for the research, the practice session gave the Teacher Candidates an opportunity to apply the EID model in children's play and exploration. A debrief following the outdoor observations of children at the Fishback Center, revealed that the teacher candidates had accurately interpreted and applied the EID model.

Books in Your Place: Brenda Bultsma

In late January 2026, the *Books in Your Place* project was piloted with children at the Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education. This South Dakota early literacy special place project honors the life and legacy of Brenda Bultsma, a dedicated Early Childhood Educator and an advocate for those in need in her community. The goal of the ***Books in Your Place*** project is to strengthen South Dakota children's early literacy development in the home in a meaningful way through integrating social and independent literacy activities with young children's special places. Whether hiding behind the couch, under the table, or in the bushes, special places are spaces that children create or carve out in their environments to play and explore their own identity. While young children have little control over their home/school/childcare settings, special places are micro-spaces in these settings that are chosen and created *by* and *for* children. This early childhood home-based literacy project aims to invite children to 1) share their special places with an early childhood educator/interventionalist and their parents/caregivers during a scheduled home visit. The educator will then provide early literacy resources (books, stuffed animals, and literacy resources) to enhance early learning and literacy in children's special places in a way that is meaningful and special to each child.

Research associated with the Books in Your Place project aimed to pilot, assess, and refine the development and introduction of an Early Literacy Kit (ELK) associated with the *See You Later Alligator* story. The **Phase One** Pilot Stage occurred at the Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education on January 30, 2026. An Action Research Methodology – observations – focus group discussions of observations – refinement of the ELK – classroom implementation – was facilitated in two rounds. The first round occurred during the morning 4-5-year-old class, while the second round occurred during the 4-5-year-old afternoon class at the Fishback Lab school.



ECE researchers, teachers, and Head Start staff utilized the observation booths at the Fishback Center to observe children as they interacted with the *See You Later Alligator* story and the Early Literacy Kit (ELK) in the classroom. Observers took note on the teacher's implementation of the ELK (what went well and what could be modified/adjusted for next time) as well as children engagement with the materials.

Dr. Carie Green led the reading of the *See You Later Alligator* story and introduced the materials in the kit to the whole class. The children were provided rhyming and letter cards and invited to participate in the story. Altogether, the children were engaged with the reading of the story and participated in the activities associated with the materials (identifying letters, finding letter sounds, and making rhymes, and making real-life connections with the story). The second lesson was adjusted based on observations and reflections on the first story reading. During the first reading, children were introduced to all of the literacy concepts on almost every page of the story. While the children did well in engaging, the lesson went a little long. Thus, during the second reading the literacy concepts were introduced as the story progressed. First, children were invited to identify letters and beginning sounds, then rhyming sequences, then word segmenting. The concepts were revisited towards the end of the story. Children were also asked comprehension questions throughout, engaging in dialogue with the stuffed alligator. Overall, the children loved the stuffed alligator and interacting with the materials.

After the whole class reading of the story, children were invited to explore the Early Literacy Kit (ELK) in a special place in the classroom. Children were provided with blankets and pillows to create a cozy space of their choosing. To gain insight on children's experiences and perspectives of the learning materials, children were also invited to wear GoPro cameras as they explored the materials in their special places. Findings from this method showed that the children were immediately drawn to the stuffed alligator. A few mimicked talking with the Alligator as they went through the pages of the story. Several of the children engaged with the rhyming cards, matching animal pictures to objects from the story. Children also manipulated the alphabet letters, using them to identify letters and sounds. Out of all the materials in the kit, the alphabet letter cards were the least used materials. Comments such as, "can I take

this home!" "this is fun" suggested enjoyment of the kit. However, some of the children became distracted with other materials in the classroom and the GoPro camera. As such, the classroom teachers intervened and redirected the children during their exploration.

In addition, observations of children's manipulation with the kit materials informed minor adjustments to the materials. The rhyming cards were limited to eight sets (16 cards total), choosing the most familiar rhyme patterns (e.g., "hat" and "cat"). Plastic zip lock bags were used to store the materials versus smaller pull string bags, which were more aesthetically attractive, but more challenging for children to manipulate. Observations also led to discussions as to how to best integrate the alligator with the literacy activities. Assigning the alligator as a "friend" in the story gave the alligator purpose and modeled such interaction for the children.

All in all, the children enjoyed the illustrations of the "See You Later Alligator" story.

They loved the stuffed alligator, and were excited to play with the materials in the kit. Following the Fishback pilot, the revised materials will be piloted with Brookings Head Start children and families in the home environment.

Item 1: Overview

The Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education is a **model lab school and research center at SDSU**, offering toddler, three-four, four-five, and Kindergarten classrooms at South Dakota State University. Each of the four classrooms are equipped with one-way window observation booths for SDSU researchers, students, and families to observe (see and hear) children as they interact, play, and learn in their environments. Additionally, the Lab school offers a library/community meeting space, a makerspace, an art studio, a large motor movement room, conference room, documentation room, light studio, and sensory-rich and interactive outdoor play and natural learning space. **The SDSU Fishback Center offers a premier space for SDSU researchers to engage in research and creative activities with the youngest members of our Jackrabbit Community**!

As a University lab school, the Fishback Center aims to **advance research and practice** in early childhood education, child development, children's health and well-being, formative art processes, early language acquisition, STEM learning, and much more. Recognizing children as active agents of culture and change, Early Childhood Education Faculty at SDSU are internationally recognized in their fields, with expertise in Reggio Emilio-inspired practices, visional arts and design, critical pedagogy and social learning theories, early literacy and language arts, child-centered research methodologies, and children's place and environmental identity development. **We welcome transdisciplinary collaboration with SDSU researchers across diverse fields to advance understanding in young children's learning and development.**

What should I do if I am interested in doing research at the Fishback Center?

1) **Contact the Director of Early Childhood Education, (605) 688-5707.** Please reach out early to 1) share your research idea and why you feel it is a good fit for the SDSU Fishback Center, 2) explore what age-group/class is best suited for your area of inquiry, 3) brainstorm and collaborate on your research methods and approach, 4) arrange an interactive tour of the Fishback Center facilities.

2) **Fishback Center Research Review:** All proposed research at the Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education is subject to review by the Fishback Center Research Committee. Email us with a **250-word abstract of your research.** Your abstract should include the study

purpose, aim, and research questions, research approach and methods, timeline and duration of the research, research participants/proposed age-group/Fishback classroom, ethical considerations, and how the proposed study will advance understanding of young children's learning and development.

Please note that approval of research by the Fishback Center Research Committee is independent of SDSU IRB approval. The Fishback Research Committee reserves the right to recant on an approval decision if agreed upon research practices are not being followed. If your study is changed in any way, these changes must be reviewed and approved of by the IRB and the Fishback Center Research Committee prior to resuming the research.

3) Complete **Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative** (CITI) on Social and Behavioral Science Research to fulfill the required research, ethics, compliance, and safety training for SDSU faculty, staff, and student researchers. **Submit an Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposal for Human Subjects Research through the SDSU CAYUSE system.** Please note IRB will require a letter of support from the Fishback Center, indicating approval to conduct the research. For questions on IRB requirements and review process, please contact **SDSU.IRB@sdstate.edu**.

4) Once IRB is approved, email to schedule a time to meet with Fishback Center faculty and staff and to coordinate, schedule, and implement your research. Please provide members of the Fishback Research Committee (1) a copy of your research protocol, (2) a proposed schedule for your research activities, (3) copies of family consent form(s) for the research, (4) a copy of your SDSU IRB approval letter, (5) a copy of your completed CITI training certificate. Please note timeline for research is subject to the availability of facilities and the schedule of other activities at the Fishback Early Childhood Education Center.

5) Facilitate your research at the Fishback Center. Have fun and enjoy your time observing and/or interacting with children at the Fishback Center!

6) Within 90 days of completing your research project, researchers will provide a 500-word summary write-up of your study, including your research aim and questions, what you learned in the process, initial findings, 3-4 photographs of research activities, and other highlights about your work with children at Fishback. Additionally, consider hosting a public event to share your research with the Fishback Center community (families, teachers, and affiliated faculty). Coordinate a time with the Fishback Center Coordinator, Dr. Mary Bowne (**mary.bowne@sdstate.edu**).

7) Thank you for collaborating in research with the SDSU Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education! We look forward to working with you again!

APPENDIX B: boulder journey School professional Development at the Fishback Center for Early Childhood Education 2025-2026 Report

Dr. Kay Cutler, Director of Professional Development for Early Childhood Education, Professor for Early Childhood Education
School of Education, Counseling, and Human Development South Dakota State University

The Fishback Center team began the year considering an onsite visit to the Riverfield Country Day School, located in Tulsa, OK. This school is a Preschool – K-12 school which embraces Reggio-Inspired practices. These plans were paused by the university-wide travel considerations were enacted at the beginning of the academic year. The team refocused on virtual options to connect to another site and chose to study pedagogical documentation in inquiry with the Boulder Journey School.

Boulder Journey School, developed by Ellen Hall, welcomes over 200 from ages 8 weeks to 5 years old. It operates as a full-time school and after school program with an art studio, a materials studio, and a theatre. All classrooms have outdoor learning spaces. It has a Teacher Education Program through the University of Colorado-Denver which offers a two MA degree programs, one with residency and one online. The faculty at the school have a strong relationship with the faculty of the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Their work is also informed by Frances and David Hawkins. The school is in its 36th year.

On Thursday, October, 23, 2025, together with Alex Morgan, the Community Outreach Specialist & Hawkins Centers of Learning Representative, the Fishback Center team spent a ½ day session focusing on listening to documentation, diving deeper into the possibilities of what studying documentation will tell you and considering ways that the Boulder Journey School team had listened to their children's thinking through documentation and how they have cultivated deep learning connections for all involved. About two weeks later, the team reconvened to study how the session had influenced their practices, gather remaining questions and ideas about next steps. Kay Cutler then followed up with Alex Morgan to create a follow up session focusing on the Boulder Journey School's daily schedule, their tools in their curriculum development system and how it might impact the Fishback Center Team's thinking as they approach their curriculum work with their learners. This may be a subsequent professional development session for next year.