

Montana Early Childhood School-Readiness Initiative
(Approved 12/06/04, revised 02/04/05)

Issue: By 2002, two-thirds of 4-year-olds and more than 40 percent of 3-year-olds were enrolled in early care and education programs, according to a study by the National Institute for Early Education Resources. The study found education to be the primary motivation for parents to place their children in early care and education programs.

Further, the math and literacy curriculum once implemented for first grade has been pushed down to 5- and 6-year-olds. A movement to expand kindergarten to full day has taken place in many states, and now 60% of children attend full-day kindergarten programs according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Montana early childhood advocates want to adequately prepare young children to enter kindergarten "ready to learn," by ensuring that children receive age appropriate pre-academic, social/emotional, language and learning skills needed to succeed in their earliest school years.

Background: More than a decade of scientific research conclusively demonstrates that the human brain develops more rapidly between birth and age 5 than during any other subsequent period. High quality child care and early education programs are proven to build a solid foundation for student success. Investments in children's early education are repaid in savings to school systems over time. The term *pre-kindergarten* refers to a comprehensive early care and education system of community coordinated child care, preschool, and support services for families.

In 2003/2004, a range of activities were implemented by Montana state systems to improve family access to positive early education outcomes for all children. These parallel efforts should be coordinated for maximum effectiveness:

- The Montana's Governor's Office joined other states in working intensively with the National Governors Association to identify public policy strategies that could ensure all children enter school ready to learn.
- The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services complied with requirements of the federal Department of Education "No Child Left Behind Act" by drafting and promoting the *Montana Early Learning Guidelines* to assist parents, child care providers and preschool teachers to prepare children for school.
- The Department of Public Health and Human Services has discussed the option of piloting three to four coordinated community pre-kindergarten programs for the next two years. These would be required to meet quality standards for early childhood education services, serve low income children, involve public and private child care and preschool programs, and ensure coordination between early care and education and the public schools.

- The Maternal and Child Health Bureau and Early Childhood Services Bureau of DPHHS are in the second year of a federally funded Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems grant, focused on coordinating community efforts to prepare young children for school in five areas of support services: education, mental health, health care and insurance, parent education and family support services.
- The Montana Office of Public Instruction has included early childhood and special education leadership in the Comprehensive System of Professional Development (CSPD) for all teachers of children through third grade.

Goals of the Montana Early Childhood School-Readiness Initiative:

1. Statewide, to ensure access to high-quality child care, preschool and kindergarten services for all Montana children.
2. At state and local levels, to coordinate publicly and privately-funded services to preschoolers in order to better prepare children and families for kindergarten.
3. To improve skill levels and career longevity of the early childhood workforce by promoting training in the *Montana Early Learning Guidelines* through Best Beginnings Merit Pay and Star Quality Tiered Reimbursement programs.

Legislative Request: Montana Advocates for Children requests \$.7 million, not included in the child care program funds necessary to maintain the current budget, to be dedicated specifically to school readiness training and compensation for public and private child care/preschool caregivers.

Supporting Partners

- Montana Association for the Education of Young Children
- Montana Child Care Association
- Montana Child Care Resource & Referral Network
- Montana Head Start Association