

February 4, 2005

Testimony: House Human Services Committee on HB 426/Early Childhood School Readiness Initiative

Good Afternoon, Chairperson Becker and all Committee Members:

My name is Libby Hancock and I am the director of Montana's Early Care and Education Career Development program housed at the Early Childhood Project at MSU in Bozeman. I have worked in the field of early childhood in Montana for thirty years as a preschool teacher, family child care provider, trainer, parent and adjunct faculty for UM-Western's early childhood education program.

It is a sad truth that many Montana children come to kindergarten or first grade unprepared to be able to learn. Why? There are many factors that contribute to a child's readiness for school at age 5 or 6—all things that have or have not occurred in the child's life since birth. Solid scientific research over the last decades in brain development show us in profound ways how crucial the first 5 years are for a child's future ability to be successful in school and society.

We know what all children need to grow and develop---socially, emotionally, physically and cognitively. It does not just happen. Healthy development of the whole child depends upon a child's early experiences regardless of where they are cared for—at home, in child care, preschool, Head Start or Early Head Start.

Young children need:

--Stability and security with parents and family who provide for their most basic needs--shelter, good nutrition, and positive guidance and attention from adults who care day in and day out. In a perfect world we could assure this for all children. Our world is imperfect and our children suffer for it—14% of children under the age of six in Montana live in poverty and many suffer from the impact of unstable families that create unsafe communities and in some programs that are mediocre in quality.

--Strong relationships with adults who not only care about their well-being but can provide developmentally appropriate, engaging learning activities in warm, nurturing environments. These teachers and caregivers know how to capitalize on healthy children's abilities to be curious, ask questions, explore, discover and learn about the world around them. A majority of our youngest children spend part of each day in settings other than their own home. Most Montana families need to work to pay the bills. We know from research that workers are more productive, absent less and late less when they are confident that their children are well-cared for in child care.

--To learn powerful social skills in the early years—how to get along with other children and adults, how to cooperate, how to use language to express their feelings in appropriate ways (talking through solving problems rather than acting out.) They begin to learn self-

control, a necessary skill to be a successful learner—the ability to pay attention. Their emerging sense of self begins at birth and is positively or negatively affected by their earliest experiences interacting with other people.

--Early childhood programs with knowledgeable staff that can help families identify goals for their children and identify the need for special services and interventions that can reduce later costs for remedial education, juvenile justice, treatment programs, incarceration, and welfare costs. Children in these programs are not only more successful in school, but later on—they are unemployed less and earn more as productive members of society.

Child care workers were identified by the US Department of Labor as one of the fastest growing occupations for the period between 1998 and 2008. They estimated we would need a 26% growth rate to meet the demand. Child care workers were at the top of the list with computer programmers, registered nurses and elementary teachers. Early childhood teacher wages are not equivalent to public school teachers salaries and benefits for equal education. Therefore we lose qualified teachers to other jobs that pay more and require less training. Teachers and caregivers with higher levels of training and education in early childhood deserve increased compensation. Our recent wage study of staff in licensed child care centers in Montana shows the median hourly wage for a teacher to be \$7.50 (over 30% of these teachers hold college degrees.)

We know that the quality of early care and education depends upon well-trained and educated teacher and caregivers. A body of evidence shows that adults with a specialized early childhood knowledge base are more “intentional” in their approach to caring for and educating young children and their families. We have just published in MT our Early Learning Guidelines and have an opportunity and responsibility to offer intensive training to parents and early childhood professionals about these guidelines so they may integrate them into their planning for and guidance of children in their programs and at home. High quality child care is family support at its best—where parents and caregivers interact on a day-to day base on behalf of the children. It is a partnership.

Montana is typically innovative in their approach to many problems. I believe that we can put in place a strong, collaborative, community based school readiness initiative that will address this issue now. We have many of the pieces in place as you have heard from others this afternoon. I urge you to carefully consider the short and long term merits of solidly investing in comprehensive early childhood services that will ultimately help all of our young children be really ready to learn when they enter school—eager and bright-eyed!

I'd like to share one of my favorite quotes with you in closing:

The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children. (Deitrich Bonhoeffer)

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this bill and your hard work.