

**Cindy Christin
on behalf of
the Montana Library Association**

Joint Appropriations Subcommittee on Education

Public Testimony

January 17, 2013

Chairman Hollandsworth and Members of the Committee:

For the record, my name is Cindy Christin, children's librarian at the Bozeman Public Library for 25 years and also a Children's Services Consultant for the Montana State Library for the past 11 years. I spend about 40 hours a year—not a week—helping with the Ready2Read project and the statewide summer reading program.

I am here today on behalf of Montana libraries to speak to you about the need for an early literacy support position at the Montana State Library.

I am here to represent the 62,000 children ages 0-5 in our state. These early years are the foundation for all future learning and success. . . and these children are Montana's future as well.

Children ages 0-5 need safety, healthy food, caring adults, and experience with language, books, and learning opportunities. They thrive in an environment that provides positive social interactions, rich language exposure, and early literacy experience. If they're lucky, they get that at home. Sometimes they find this rich environment at day care or preschool. But what is the one place in almost every Montana community that offers all this, and is free? Public libraries provide books, information, a safe and warm place, parental support, and social connection at a time when families need it most. Libraries are a big part of building a strong community in both our rural and urban areas.

1 in 4 children under the age of 5 live in poverty in Montana. . . that's over 15,000 young children. (2011 Montana Kids Count) It's even more important that we help children in poverty, because that's where we see the biggest return for taxpayers. Providing the resources for them now reduces what they will need later, and what we will inevitably have to pay for later.

There is a big gap between what we know and what we do. We know that 85% of brain development is formed in these early years, but less than 4% of public money

is spent on education and development during these first years. (Montana Kids Count) We also know that the most effective way to remediate the disadvantage caused by adverse family environments is to invest in children when they are young. It's pay now, or pay later. Investing in very young children today means:

- Montana has students who are reading at grade level
- less money is spent on remedial education
- more kids graduate from high school
- fewer kids are in jail or addicted to drugs,
- and Montana has a better educated work force.

We now have the long-term research that conclusively shows us the strong, consistent return on public investment in young children.

Our challenge is to reach families with young children. Because kids age 0-5 have yet to enter our public or private schools, we know that our 82 public libraries can be part of the collective solution. The State Library can offer support to Montana libraries to provide services and resources to families. The Ready2Read project, begun in 2009, has offered early literacy training for librarians, given quality books and materials to begin infant/toddler programs, provided blocks and other play materials to libraries, and organized two successful workshops to bring children's librarians together to share the best, most effective, practices. We've achieved an enormous amount in the past three years, but it will be a struggle to continue with a part-time marketing person and a *very* part-time consultant.

State libraries in Utah, Oregon, Idaho and Washington—as well as most other states-- fund youth services and early literacy full-time positions to address this important audience. Idaho has 2 ½ dedicated staff for early literacy at the Idaho Commission for Libraries. These neighboring states provide great models for us as we move forward in addressing the needs of families in our communities.

I urge you to add the FTE early literacy position that will continue the Ready2Read program and will focus the time and resources needed to nurture Montana's youngest citizens.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.