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STATE OF MONTANA

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Senator Tom Facey, Chair
Education and Local Government Interim Committee
Montana State Legislature
PO Box 201706
Helena, MT 59620

Dear Senator Facey and Members of the Education and Local Government Interim Committee:

At the last meeting of the Education and Local Government Interim Committee in June, my office provided you with a report on our early childhood education proposal. I write today to share some updates in advance of your next meeting in September.

As you have heard in your previous meetings, the research is clear that investing in early learning is an investment in the future. Children with high-quality learning opportunities are more likely to read at grade level, graduate from high school, earn more money and contribute their fair share of tax dollars. We also know that high-quality preschool programs ensure that all children arrive at kindergarten ready to learn. When children have the opportunity to develop their social and non-cognitive skills, the whole classroom will benefit from fewer disruptions and more time for learning.

Yet Montana is in the shrinking minority – one of eight states – that has never invested in the human capital of our earliest learners. If we want to remain a competitive and attractive place for business and economic growth, then it is time Montana catches up with the rest of country.

To address this growing need, I plan to include funding in my proposed FY16-FY17 budget for early childhood education block grants that will fit within our current budget without raising taxes or cutting any existing programs. The details of the proposal are:

- Grants will be distributed by the Office of Public Instruction to school districts that wish to participate.
- Participating school districts must use the funding to provide voluntary, high-quality preschool for four-year-olds.
- Participation will be voluntary for eligible children and families.
- School districts may partner with qualified Head Start programs, local child care centers, child care providers or preschools to provide services within or outside of district facilities. This will allow communities the opportunity to build on their current early childhood strengths, rather than replace them.

- Grants will be distributed for each block of up to 10 participating children.
- Funding is intended to support half-day attendance, but nothing will prohibit programs from using other funding to supplement services or accommodate full-day attendance.

At the July 16 meeting of the Board of Public Education, Superintendent Juneau and I asked the Board to update Montana's educator licensure and accreditation standards in order for the state to be prepared to offer publicly funded early childhood programming for four-year-olds.

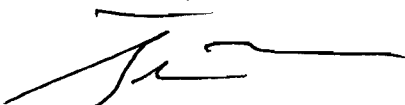
Currently, educator licensure endorsements in Montana are only issued for grades K-12, except for special education licenses, which include pre-school through 12th grade. The Board will consider a proposal for a new early childhood educator licensure endorsement for "age three to grade three," as well as a middle school endorsement for grades four through eight. The proposal offers a three-year window for educators with a current special competency in early childhood to get the endorsement or to receive a provisional license for three years in order to get licensed.

Montana's current accreditation standards only cover K-12 education programs, despite the fact that a good number of schools across the state are implementing preschool programs for three and four-year-olds. In order to ensure that publicly funded early learning programs meet high quality standards, the Board will also consider new accreditation standards for programs serving children ages three and four.

The proposed changes were drafted by experts in the field -- teachers, child care providers, Head Start representatives, special education experts, higher education and administrators -- and are based on best practices and established national standards. As with other administrative rule changes the Board considers, the proposal will be presented by Superintendent Juneau, in this case, at their September 11-12 meeting. The Board will then set the timeline for the public hearing process, a date for a public comment hearing and a window for receiving written public comment.

This is an exciting and historic time for education -- and for our state -- and I value the robust conversation that continues to occur around creating the best and most effective preschool program for Montana.

Sincerely,



STEVE BULLOCK
Governor