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Education Interim Committee

66th Montana Legislature

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TO: Education Interim Committee
FROM: Pad McCracken, Staff
RE: Pre-K Openers
DATE: June 11, 2020

Perhaps it would be useful to start off the pre-k work session with some opening assumptions, definitions, and thoughts.

Assumptions

People involved in early childhood care and education primarily do it because they love and want what's best for kids, and not for the money.

The main driver of the pre-k conversation, the problem we are trying to solve, is: many Montana children, especially disadvantaged kids, do not have access to high-quality pre-k and do not enter elementary school "kindergarten ready" which often leads to enduring achievement gaps throughout the child's educational trajectory.

There are a number of secondary drivers of the pre-k conversation that include:

- affordability and accessibility of early childhood care and education;
- parent anxiety related to ensuring high-quality pre-k for their kids;
- ensuring a stable, high-quality early childhood care and education workforce;
- allowing more parents to participate more fully in the workforce;

Some program terminology

Voluntary - participation in any pre-k program in Montana will be up to a child's parents; pre-k will be voluntary just like kindergarten

Targeted or open eligibility - a program that limits or prioritizes funding or slots based on family income or other factors would be targeted while a program in which slots are allocated on a first-come or lottery basis would be open eligibility

Mixed delivery - a variety of pre-k providers are allowed to receive state funding (directly or indirectly) as part of the program, typically public schools, Head Start programs, and community-based providers

Fully funded statewide or limited - will the state provide enough funding so that potentially every 4-year-old in the state can participate or limit funding in some manner (a set number of communities, programs, classrooms, or slots; prorated funding amounts; etc.)

Optional for districts or mandated - do districts opt in or are they required to provide pre-k; districts are mandated to provide at least half-day kindergarten; full-day kindergarten is optional

Universal - while universal is sometimes used synonymously with open eligibility, it might be more accurate to think of a universal state pre-k system as one in which a slot is guaranteed for every 4-year-old in every school district through a mixed delivery model or solely through the public schools

Thoughts

Montana does currently have something of a targeted, mixed delivery "system" providing state funding for the care and education of 4-year-old children:

- through the "exceptional circumstances" mechanism discussed in a separate memo, the state provides about \$1.4 million/year to public schools for 4-year-olds in "K-1" programs
- through the state match of federal child care and development block grant dollars, the state provides about \$8 million/year to community-based child care providers for serving children from low-income families through the Best Beginnings Scholarship program, some of which flows to providers serving 4-year-olds; private providers receiving funds through this program with STAR ratings of 2+ are required to be trained on the [Montana Early Learning Standards](#) (MELS) which describes four core developmental domains that are repeated nearly verbatim in the [Board of Public Education's Chapter 63 Preschool Accreditation Standards](#) (providers with STAR 3+ must use curriculum aligned with MELS)