

PRE-K AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

CREATING A BETTER PATH FOR MONTANA STUDENTS



BIG SKY
Brighter Future

Charting the course for a better Montana.

Quality child care and preschool should not be limited to those higher income families who can afford it. To support families and help ensure Montana kids get the educational foundation they need, Montana should:

- Invest \$15 million in statewide public pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds and
- Invest \$15 million to expand support for parents and quality care providers for children aged 0 to 3.




HOW WE GOT HERE

Learning begins at birth and more needs to be done to integrate early childhood into an educational path from cradle to career. Parents struggling to afford quality child care are often forced to make the difficult decision of placing children in cheaper, lower-quality care or leaving the workforce. High-quality child care helps prepare children to enter school with stronger cognitive and emotional skills and promotes better economic and health outcomes over a lifetime. Full-time child care for an infant in Montana costs, on average, \$9,096 annually, 25 percent higher than in-state tuition and fees at Montana State University.

Montana is one of six states that does not fund public preschool programs, a significant loss for our youngest learners. These resources pay off enormously at a 13 percent return on investment.

In addition to lack of access to pre-K, many families struggle to access quality child care for children aged 0 to 5. Montana has about 45,000 children under the age of six in households where both parents work outside of the home, but licensed child care providers only have capacity to care for 20,000 children. Montana's child care assistance program, called Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarship, serves just 14 percent of children in families struggling to afford child care. Families of color are even less likely to be served by the Best Beginnings program than white families.

 "As a single mother, 30% of my income is spent on child care and I'm working overtime just to get by. I'm also missing so many special moments with my daughter."

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ON THE HORIZON

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Invest \$15 million in statewide public pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds. Montana should ensure that all children have access to a high-quality preschool education. Funding should be allocated through the statewide public school formula, providing local school districts the ability to shape a quality pre-kindergarten program that fits their community's needs. Enrollment would be optional for Montana families. Montana could build a statewide program over time, with initial investments in school districts with high rates of families living on low incomes.

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Invest \$15 million to expand support for parents and providers for quality care for children aged 0 to 3. Montana should align itself with surrounding states by expanding eligibility levels of the Best Beginnings Scholarship program to the federally recommended level of 85 percent of state median income, providing 30,000 more Montana families with access to child care assistance. Montana should also provide categorical eligibility of the Best Beginnings Scholarship program for parents already eligible for Head Start and for job-seeking parents accessing unemployment insurance. Montana should invest in advanced training and other direct support for child care providers which are often small businesses struggling to cover the high costs of quality care for young children.



ABOUT BIG SKY BRIGHTER FUTURE

Big Sky Brighter Future is charting a clear course to rebuild our state. This concrete plan for lawmakers has specific proposals to help families, workers, children, and communities, and creates a tax code that works for everyone. Montana cannot go back to the time when families faced barriers to build their best future. We can move our state forward and make it one where we can all live, work, and enjoy all Big Sky Country has to offer. There's a better Montana on the horizon, and this is how we get there.