



Education Commission
of the **States**

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September 8, 2014

Honorable Senator Tom Facey
Honorable Representative Don Jones
Members of the Montana Education and Local Government Interim Committee

Dear Chairman Facey, Vice Chairman Jones and Committee Members;

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) is a 50-state education compact established in 1965 by the states for the states. We are non-partisan and not-for-profit serving all state-level education leaders and their staffs including governors, legislators, state board members, state superintendents and higher education leadership. Today we are submitting written testimony regarding your hearing on September 16th when you will be addressing the issue of a pre-k program in the great state of Montana.

Testimony:

The development of human capital through high-quality early learning and K-12 education is becoming ever more critical to the long-term vibrancy of communities as economic trends continue to reward individuals with skills and education. Key priorities such as economic development, public safety, civic engagement and the stability of families and neighborhoods all hinge on whether children enter kindergarten ready to succeed, develop to their full capacity during the school years and graduate from high school prepared for postsecondary education or to begin a career.

50-100 years ago, family structures were such that early education had a better chance of being tackled in the home, but in this day and age, many young children's developmental and educational needs are being met outside the home. As you have heard in previous testimony on the pre-k issue, a large and growing body of research shows that high quality pre-k yields both short- and long-term benefits for children and their communities.

- A voluntary universal pre-k program could ultimately save K-12 resources in Montana by avoiding the high costs of retention and remediation.
- States with high-quality pre-k programs report a 12% reduction in the need for special education services.
- Later on, savings are even greater when costs are cut that are associated with high school drop-outs, public assistance, on-the-job training and incarceration.
- Studies of high-quality pre-k programs have shown that students gained 1/3 to a full-year of additional learning compared to students not in those programs.
- Studies have also shown that children with high-quality pre-k experiences are more like to be reading at grade level at the end of third grade.

This period in our development is critical for cognitive, social, and behavioral development and lays the foundation for future success in school and in life. It has been said that pre-k is the new kindergarten and that kindergarten is the new first grade. Changing the role of kindergarten further emphasizes the need for high quality pre-k classrooms where students learn to manage emotions, share with others, stand in line, etc. These soft skills are not only important in and of themselves, they also support early reading and math aptitude, predict later academic achievement, and help children learn more effectively.

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Montana is one of only 8 states that do not have a pre-k program with the investment of state dollars. You have Head Start (Federal to local without any state investment), faith based preschools, private for profit facilities and not-for-profit child care facilities but with approximately 61,768 children under the age of 5 in Montana and 21% of the children under the age of 18 living at or below the federal poverty level you are not meeting the needs of your children most at risk. However simply investing in pre-k slots, does not guarantee high individual and economic payouts. To make a difference, when you establish a pre-k program you should:

- Meet high standards and demonstrate practices proven to positively affect children's development and school success including hours per week, hours per year, credentialing, licensing of teachers and ongoing professional development, parent and family involvement, and curriculum utilized.
- Ensure that the standards you set reflect the values of parents, educators, administrators, and policy-makers who are striving for the best possible education for Montana's young children.
- Consider teacher pay (currently early childhood teachers are in the lowest 3% of all wage earners), kindergarten entry assessments, class size, and teacher to child ratios.
- Consider possibilities regarding private/public partnerships. The state should not be in the business of taking slots from the private sector, but there are ways to create win-wins, i.e. the private provider meets the states standards and the state pays for a certain number of slots to serve more children in the community.
- Ensure there is a viable and sustainable funding source. Many states have started pre-k programs without raising taxes i.e. public private partnerships, mechanisms through the school finance act, minimum local matches etc.

The future of any society depends on its ability to foster the well-being of the next generation. Today's children will become tomorrow's parents and leaders. When we invest wisely in families and children, the next generation will pay that back through a lifetime of productivity. The most recent research tells us that 3rd grade reading and math proficiency must be built upon a strong foundation that begins long before a child reaches grade 3. That supporting the developmental needs of our youngest learners can provide significant payouts for the individual student, their family and the community at large.

Every year ECS does a 50 state analysis of state investments in pre-k. In the 2013-14 report overall increases in state pre-k were 6.9% . Preliminary analysis for the 2014-15 year are showing that investments may be increasing by as much as 10%.

ECS staff was not able to schedule to testify to your Committee in September. However, we are available for phone conversations or to come and testify in person at any future hearings.

Thank you for your service and the attention you and Governor Bullock are giving to this important issue to further ensure the success of Montana's children.

Sincerely,



Executive Director of Policy and Operations
Education Commission of the States