



MECA Board Meeting
February 3 and 4, 2026

Day One Call to Order and Welcome

Meeting called to order at 1:02 p.m.

Roll Call

Present: Tory Malek, Mackenzie Espeland, Kathy Deserly, Jackie Ronning, Louisa Libertelli Dunn, Caitlin Jensen, Lisa Malmquist, Tracy Moseman, Beth Branem, Jackie Ronning, Crystal Armstrong

MECA Manager Present: Michelle Cusey

ECFSD Support Present: Sally Tilleman, Alex Dahy

All public comments are to be held until designated portions of the meeting. The agenda has been distributed in the Zoom chat.

Board Membership Changes

Angie Porch resigned and Lisa Malmquist has been appointed to fill the vacancy. Lisa Malmquist is Director of the Early Learning Center and a Middle School Principal. She is also Special Education and 504 Director. "I believe early childhood has come a long way in Montana, but it still has a long way to go." Lisa is excited to share her expertise in child development to help this board build a better system for Montanans.

Review and Approve January 7, 2026 Meeting Minutes

Tory Malek motions to approve the meeting minutes.

Crystal Armstrong seconds the motion.

Unanimous approval by the board.

Motion passed with no changes to be made to the meeting minutes.

Vision Statement Adoption

The Board rereads the vision and purpose statements to verify that they align with the work the board is doing. There are two versions of the vision statement to be dissected by the board for adoption. Members decide to use version two of the vision statement because it utilizes more concise language.

Jackie Ronning motions to adopt version two of the vision statements.

Tory Malek seconds the motion.

Unanimous approval by the board.

Motion passed.

Bylaws Adoption

Bylaws serve as the board's main governing document. The board may adopt rules, but it is not required to do so. Rulemaking is not necessary at this time for board operation. In the future if the board feels formal rules would help the implementation of projects this can be reconsidered. Board members are to individually review the conflict-of-



interest portion of the bylaws. This helps protect the integrity of the board's work and insures public trust within the board. The Lieutenant Governor has previously reviewed the bylaws. Current bylaws include the changes that she has made.

Mackenzie Espeland motions to adopt the bylaws.

Louisa Libertelli-Dunn seconds the motion.

Unanimous approval by the board.

Motion passed.

Election of Officers

The board chair will be running the meetings with Robert's Rules. The board chair typically will not vote unless there is a tie. They also do not typically add to the discussion unless it is needed.

Tory Malek nominates Tracy Moseman as Chair.

Tracy would like to see if anyone else would like to be the Chair since she is the administrator for ECFSD and explains that this may not be appropriate due to ECFSD being the department that manages the account. She will also be able to better assist the chair administratively in a Board Member position. Crystal suggests choosing someone outside of state government to lead committee since they would have on the ground experience. Caitlin Jensen is agreeable to the Chair nomination for this board but is currently in transition with a newborn at home. The board discusses nominating Lisa Malmquist as Chair since she is an experienced leader, with Caitlin as the Vice Chair.

Tracy Moseman motions to formally nominate Lisa Malmquist as Chair and Caitlin Jensen as Vice Chair.

Jackie Ronning Seconds the motion.

Unanimous approval by the board.

Motion passed.

Michelle will guide Lisa and Caitlin in facilitating future meetings.

Lunch Logistics

Lunch plans for tomorrow include an hour-long recess for lunch. Board business is not to be discussed outside of the board meeting. The group discussed breaks and is in favor of this plan.

Board meeting schedule

This discussion will help set a recurring time for board meetings.

ECFSD Fiscal has stated that it would be best not to have meetings within the first week of each month so that they could have up to date financial information ready for the board.



Board members agree with the requirement of one-month advanced notice minimum for all board meetings. Michelle Cusey to draft a meeting schedule and this will be voted upon in tomorrow's meeting.

DPHHS Strategic Plan and Needs Assessment

The Strategic Plan and Needs Assessment are available for review. The board will be looking over this with presenter Dr. Allison Wilson from U of M who helped create these documents in conjunction with the Rural Institute and the PDGB-5 Grant team. The board will need to consider what strategies they could potentially implement from these documents if any.

Board Members Work Focus Ideas After Review of SP and NA

- Caitlin Jensen - Having common language around needs assessment was so helpful. I would like board to understand this more deeply and request any additional information needed. Everyone should make decisions based on the data and knowledge. The board should be moving to a better understanding of these documents to help ground the work that they will be doing.
- Jackie Ronning - Recommendations could be used to be supportive in the most important ways. Especially since the research has already been done.
- Beth Branam - I would like to consider everything as holistically as possible.
- Louisa Libertelli-Dunn - Do not reinvent the wheel. We need more structure for providers and parents as well as using common language to explain themes of these documents. Sustainability is a requirement. I am speaking for community sustainability and provider sustainability by making sure providers have the best tools possible to help families and children in our communities.
- Tracy Moseman - I am hoping to use my expertise to help build long-term sustainable strategies. Prioritization of implementation and measurement are paramount. Tracking results over extended periods of time is important in understanding how strategies that are implemented have affected the system.
- Kathy Deserly - I am remembering little to no resources for providers in earlier work. The responsibility of the board is to help bring solutions to this. The documents presented could help drive this work.
- Crystal Armstrong - I connect back to the vision and mission statements. How can the work we do connect the charge we have been given to the strategic plan? Can we take recommendations and instructions to prioritize what would be the most valuable early on? We could look at the things that would be the most feasible for prioritization on the front end. Additional information and data may be needed to support the conversations here.
- Mackenzie Espeland - Business development and expansion are relevant to childcare deserts. Making sure we aren't duplicating funding and using the funds provided here for new opportunities. We need to prioritize actionable items.
- Tory Malek - I agree with the other board members.



Public Comment

- Grace Decker: “Hi, I'm Grace Decker, and I am the director of the Montana Advocates for Children, which is a statewide coalition of organizations who are concerned with young children and families, and particularly with early care and education. There are 15 member organizations, and they are listed on this handout that I have here, which also has some comments. So, at the MAC Coalition, one of the things that we do is bring all of those organizations together regularly to bring input from their constituencies and from their networks. And then together, we come to a consensus about policy priorities. Based on all of that input we then reflect our consensus agreement about how to prioritize advancements in our early childhood system for children and families. And then we're also connected regularly on the ground, across the state, to folks who work in early care and education. I regularly meet, talk, text, travel, and visit with providers all across the state to get a really clear sense of what things look like on the ground right now. In the handout that I just shared with you, you'll see the results of a recent quick survey that we did of our network of providers, families, and some community members asking them about their priorities for these funding decisions. We were not surprised to see that the top priorities that folks shared with us had to do with the affordability of care for families, had to do with supporting the people who work in early care and education, and with compensation and benefits to make those jobs more attractive. I'm not at all surprised to hear that those are top priorities, because, as I've traveled across the state, I've been hearing from providers that their programs feel more unstable right now than they ever have before. Even long-standing programs are finding that due to staffing shortages, high levels of turnover, shifts in enrollment that see four-year-olds leaving their classrooms and moving into public school settings, which impact their bottom line in a big way, combined with the rising cost of, I mean, everything. Right? So, put all of that together, and even long-standing programs are finding it difficult to keep their doors open, their classrooms staffed up, and their enrollments at full capacity. That impacts families, that impacts businesses, that impacts communities. And in the end, it impacts children, of course. The MAC coalition would ask that as you begin your deliberations about moving forward, you take really seriously the responsibility of putting first things first, of addressing the foundational challenges in our system, before moving forward to other kinds of enhancements that, of course, we all also want to see happen. But we can't build a house of quality on top of a foundation of sand. And right now, the people who work in our early care and education settings are seeing a very brittle system. A system that really can't take a lot more challenges being thrown at it. I will call your attention to the pilot that took place under the B5 or the preschool development grant over the past few years, and some really incredibly promising success stories from those pilots. I loved what you said about not starting new programs but really building



on what has worked. And I would call your attention to the childcare worker program that recently ended, right at the end of 2025. That program provided childcare scholarships for people who work in childcare. We saw an incredible result in retention when that program was implemented. In fact, for the folks who were able to utilize that scholarship for their own children by participating in that program, turnover among that group was about one in nine on an annual basis. That is compared to one in three for childcare workers more broadly. That is an evidence-based strategy. It's also something that's been successful in other states. MAC's priority really is to reinstate that childcare worker program. As you look at other kinds of expenditure, we ask that you prioritize the workers as the foundation of all early childhood systems and then focus on affordability for families as a second priority. I'm really grateful for the chance to speak. I imagine we'll be talking to you again, and I'm really excited to be able to listen in on the conversations. Thank you all for your time."

Jackie Ronning motions for a ten-minute recess.

Crystal Armstrong seconds the motion.

Unanimous approval by the board.

Motion passed .

Board to reconvene at 2:07 p.m.

Meeting called back to order at 2:07 p.m.

DPHHS Strategic Plan and Needs Assessment Cont.

Dr. Allison Wilson presents a PowerPoint with a high-level outline of the Strategic Plan and Needs Assessment. She also reviews the strategies for each objective listed so that board members may discuss the possibility of implementing some of the researched strategies in the documents.

Needs Assessment Breakdown

Needs Assessment Data Source Description

- Early Childhood Family and Service Provider Survey - Tailored surveys for families and service providers; 1,760 total responses (960 families, 770 providers) from 53-55 counties.
- Early Childhood Family and Service Provider Interviews -21 interviews with 22 family members across diverse regions and backgrounds.
- Existing Reports - Incorporates findings from the 2023 Part C Needs Assessment and other relevant state-level reports and assessments.
- Public Data Sources - Includes administrative, U.S. Census, and other publicly available datasets to describe child/family demographics and service access.

Needs Assessment Sections

- Section 1: Montana's Young Children and Families



- Behavioral concerns rising in young children; ECCE Workforce Report highlights benefits of IECMHC for retention and child success.
- Childcare costs represent 28% of household income; eligibility thresholds do not reflect regional variation.
- Over 600 new childcare slots created via technical assistance and business supports; unmet capacity remains in many counties.
- Section 2a: Access and Use of Early Child Care
 - Only 6% of surveyed families use school-based early education programs; uptake may change with new targeted literacy initiatives.
 - Approximately 66,000 parents were fully or partially out of the labor force in 2023 due to caregiving responsibilities.
- Section 2b: Access and Use of Home Visiting and Early Intervention
 - 47% of ECCE providers do not use formal screening tools to identify and refer children with developmental delays.
 - Only 2.11% of children birth to age three in Montana received IDEA Part C services between 2017–2022, in alignment with national averages.
 - 84.8% of children enrolled in Montana MIECHV programs had a timely screening for developmental delay.
- Section 3a: Family and Provider Perspectives on Systems Supports and Sustainability
 - Providers identified the top barriers to engagement as limited family capacity, staff limitations, transportation, and childcare.
 - Families appreciated inclusive communication, especially when fathers, kin, and foster caregivers were acknowledged; default references to 'mom' were noted as exclusionary.
- Combined Sections 3B – 3D: 3B (Workforce), 3C (Quality), and 3D (Cross-Sector Systems)
 - Drawing from needs assessment findings and the June 2024 virtual stakeholder convening, six core categories emerged that reflect overlapping system priorities and actionable integration points (replacing approximately twenty-seven individual recommendations):
 - Coordinated Professional Development
 - Equitable Onboarding Access
 - Workforce Retention and Well-Being
 - Aligned Quality and Data Systems
 - Family Navigation and Communication
 - Shared Governance and Infrastructure
- Stakeholder Engagement and Feedback
 - Stakeholders reviewed key takeaways and aligned draft recommendations
 - ranked each recommendation on importance and feasibility (across each section).
 - Feedback was visualized in a matrix to identify:



- High-impact, ready-to-implement actions
- Priorities needing more resources/planning
- Long-term equity & sustainability goals
- Recommendation Tiers
 - Tier 1 (Ready Now): High feasibility and importance
 - Tier 2 (Emerging): High in one category; needs more resources/planning
 - Tier 3 (Future Focus): Long-term priorities for equity and sustainability
 - All visual aids available in PowerPoint presentation

Strategic Plan Breakdown

- Organized into five focus areas within the early childhood system:
 - Access to High-Quality Services
 - Workforce
 - Family Engagement
 - Coordination
 - Shared Early Childhood Governance
- Objectives and Strategies
 - Each goal includes clear objectives that define what must be achieved to drive progress.
 - Objectives guide the development of strategies and identify possible metrics for measurement.
 - Each section begins key findings and statewide indicators that establish a baseline for progress.
 - Ensures every strategy is:
 - Evidence-based: rooted in data and research
 - Actionable: practical and feasible for implementation
 - Aligned: connected to Montana's identified priorities and opportunities
- Focus Area one: Access to High Quality Services
 - Objective 1 – Expanding ECCE Access
 - Strategies:
 - Revise childcare subsidy eligibility based on cost of living.
 - Increase licensed capacity in childcare deserts.
 - Integrate childcare into economic development plans.
 - Strengthen mixed-delivery partnerships across school, Head Start, and community programs.
 - Objective 2 – Developmental Supports
 - Strategies:
 - Expand training and technical assistance for providers to use standardized developmental screening tools.



- Increase awareness of Part C services and eligibility.
- Establish consistent follow-up protocols and referral pathways for children identified through screenings.
- Focus Area Two: Workforce
 - Objective 3 – Building a Sustainable Workforce
 - Strategies:
 - Create a coordinated training system with shared standards and flexible delivery models.
 - Expand professional development to include mentorship, trauma-informed practices, and early childhood business skills.
 - Support recruitment and retention by funding bonuses, stipends, and wellness supports.
 - Expand pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs.
 - Support professional development that incorporates tribal approaches and cultural knowledge.
 - Expand access to Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health services for early childcare and education professionals.
- Focus Area Three: Family Engagement
 - Objective 4 – Families as Partners
 - Strategies:
 - Provide tailored engagement opportunities that reflect cultural, linguistic, and geographic diversity.
 - Expand communication tools and resources to help families navigate and evaluate early childhood services.
 - Encourage employer-supported policies (flexible hours, paid family leave) that strengthen family participation in services and activities.
- Focus Area Four: Coordination
 - Objective 5 – Seamless Navigation
 - Strategies:
 - Develop shared referral and follow-up systems across early childcare and education, home visiting, health care, and special needs services.
 - Build regional and local partnerships to coordinate eligibility, enrollment, and transition supports.
 - Pilot family portals and warm-handoff models to improve access and reduce fragmentations.
 - Objective 6 – Alignment Across Agencies
 - Strategies:
 - Expand joint planning efforts with the Office of Public Instruction (OPI), Tribal governments, and community partners.
 - Share data across systems through secure agreements and dashboards that inform policy and practice.



- Objective 7 – Building Engagement Structures
- Strategies:
 - Reestablish a statewide early childhood stakeholder engagement structure with clear roles for decision-making and accountability.
 - Formalize ongoing consultation between the state and sovereign Tribal governments.
 - Support local and regional coalitions in aligning with statewide priorities, while honoring community voice.

Work Session

There are five approved funding areas that could potentially align with strategies laid out in the Strategic Plan. These include:

- Provider Support and Workforce Development: Grants for business expansion, workforce training, recruitment, and retention (e.g., wage supports/stipends).
- Quality Improvement Initiatives: Funding for accreditation, curriculum, safety upgrades, and support for infants, toddlers, and children with special needs.
- Affordability Initiatives: Expanding before-/after-school care and supporting the state child-care subsidy program and family hardship assistance.
- Innovation Initiatives: Community childcare expansion and early intervention access programs.
- Emergency Assistance and Disaster Relief: Aid for child-care facilities impacted by natural disasters or emergencies.

Board members familiarize themselves with the language of objectives and strategies. The board works to place strategies from the Strategic Plan into these five different categories. Using chart paper, each category has three sections for board members to consider. Column one is for Strategic Plan Alignment. Column two is for investment opportunities and in column three they identify the impact lenses for these strategies. Lastly, they identify any guardrails for strategies.

Review of the chart paper tables

Please see accompanying documents

Work Session Closing Thoughts:

- Crystal Armstrong: It's been valuable to look at everything in here and think about what this group can look at for immediate actions to take versus what will build a sustainable system. We should be setting up the system long-term to meet as many needs as possible.
- Caitlin Jensen: Reflecting on the time this afternoon and looking through how funds can go towards supporting different parts of the system. Appreciative of everyone around the table.



Public comment

- Rachel Wanderscheid: My name is Rachel Wanderscheid. I'm the director of the Montana After School Alliance. Thank you for letting me be here virtually today. After School Alliance is the only statewide intermediary organization that's working to uplift the needs of the school aged programs around the state. The most likely programs that you are familiar with would be sort of the Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs, local programs based either in community settings or even in schools. We're very similar to Zero to 5, but since we work with kids over five, I like to consider us five to thrive. I want to thank all of you for your time today, your commitment, and your service on this account board. I also want to really point out that after-school programs are left out of all of our systems. They're usually an afterthought at best. Most folks really believe that they are a part of the early childcare system or the K-12 system, but really neither of these systems work with most of our programs very well or very seamlessly. As you all know, this board itself does have the ability to support school age programs in Montana. Other than that, there's only a few federal funding streams that may be available. They're not robust enough to fit the needs of our state. Most of Montana is considered childcare desert. I would even argue that this is worse for our school age programs. In some of our bigger areas or more populated areas, data tells us that for every singular child in a program, there are four more waiting for a spot to get in. And again, that's only in our communities that have programs. This data has been difficult to get. It has not been studied in Montana very well. We're trying to get folks to do that. I would say that in a lot of our companies, it is much worse, because no preferences exist. Finally, as you guys are doing the work (I love all the ideas you have) I want to encourage you to really think about how school age programs are pretty different from early childcare programs. They have unique needs. I could go on for quite a long time about those unique needs. I can also go on for a very long time about the benefits that these programs have to our kids, to our parents, to our communities, and to our schools. I'm happy to be a resource or to come and attend future meetings to provide more information. Try to get information about how they may be different or how the solution you come up for might not work quite the same in our in our programs because of the slightly different needs. Now that there's a licensing for school age programs, we want to help get them licensed, so that they can access this funding and other funding sources. I really do hope that you guys can kind of keep us in mind as you're doing this work so that we can make sure those programs aren't left out. All of the work that you guys do gets to be extended through kids' childhood. Thanks so much again and have a great afternoon.



- Grace Decker: Hi, again, everyone. I am Grace Decker with Montana Advocates for Children. Thanks for the chance to chat a little bit about the amazing conversation that you all just had. It really unpacks the breadth and kind of diversity of what we're talking about when we talk about the early childhood system, and certainly the system documents that have been developed over the past few years really look at that system very broadly. I feel like I want to point out, though, that the early childhood trust is very much in the public discourse from policymakers and described as a solution to some of the challenges we're experiencing around childcare. Most of the legislators who fought for this bill really talked about childcare as a core and urgent problem that needs to be solved for families, for communities, for businesses, and folks in the childcare system who are experiencing fragility and realness in their system in some unique ways. I recently looked at numbers of programs that existed in Missoula County today compared to 2020. In 2020, there were three different kinds of programs that are centers (big ones) groups (medium ones) and family (small ones). In Missoula County, there were 48 centers in 2020. In 2026, there are 45, but 10 of those are brand new licensed school age programs, a category that did not exist in 2020. Today, we're down to 35 centers using that same sort of apples-to-apples comparison from 2020. Group programs in 2020, there were 52. Now there are 36. And in 2020 for Family programs there were 26. Now there are 12. So that's a dramatic change in those years. Opening of new slots doesn't necessarily keep track of how many facilities are closing on a year-over-year basis. What folks are telling me across the system in the handout that I gave you before there are some quotes from members and network folks. I'm going to read one who didn't want to share her name but did want to share her words. "At this stage, our priority is staff retention, not new materials or program expansion. We have built strong effective programs, but their success depends on stable qualified staff. Funding that supports living wages and benefits directly strengthens program continuity, quality of care, and long-term sustainability." I'm going to, again, just really suggest that the foundations are where to pay attention first things first. When you focus on the people who work in programs, you're actually addressing many of the other issues at the same time. Supporting staff in programs helps stabilize costs for families, because if their support comes from another source, we don't have to raise tuition more. Support for staff stabilizes access, because when programs can operate at full capacity, then what looks like a community's capacity in our licensing numbers is actually the capacity of slots. Many programs are now operating at reduced capacity because they don't have enough teachers. And importantly, when you stabilize staff, you open the door to higher quality. With the amount of turnover in our workforce that we're seeing, training and technical assistance are going to need to be repeated year over year among staff who are relatively new. Thank you for all of the attention that you've given to the breadth of the system today, and



thank you for giving me a chance to share this perspective from the field, and the way things stand today, we really need to focus on those foundational core needs for someone. Thank you.

- **Adrian Kenison:** My name is Adrian Kennison. I'm the owner and director of Monarch Mountain Montessori School in Helena. I think there are some really great ideas and a lot of funding. I am kind of piggybacking on what Grace said. A lot of providers have made it really clear from who I've talked to around the state, that the problem right now is staff retention As well as pre-K. funding. A lot of schools, including mine right now, are not in capacity. Since public pre-K has expanded, for the first time in two years, I do not have a waiting list. I feel like I'm begging everyone to come to my school, and I know a lot of other centers in Montana are experiencing the same thing. I went to a school in Bozeman recently that is very established with over 30 years in operation. They're putting up signs in people's yards for pre-K. I think we could utilize a mixed funding where we work with existing private schools who do have accredited qualified teachers that could go teach in a school district right now for pre-K. Why don't we give parents the choice and families' the choice to work with private schools, so we don't clutter our public schools? Allow the pre-K population to stay in these private childcare centers, or private mini micro schools. Without them, we don't have an infant/toddler population. For example, this year I had to cut sixteen infant toddler children. That's 3 classrooms. That has never happened in the history of my school. The reason why is because I don't have the pre-K population anymore to sustain the infant/toddler program. It costs a lot more money to operate with lower ratios. What we do is utilize the pre-K funding to sustain infant/toddler. Without pre-K funding, I've had to lay off staff. Then we can't get the children in the infant toddler program that are now on a waiting list. It is a ripple effect. I think if we really were to focus on supporting childcare centers who can also offer pre-K and get that population back it would be a game changer. Parents don't want to leave, but I now have ten that just told me, hey, I signed up for pre-K because it's free, but they don't really want to go. Their kids are established, and we know them, and there is history. How can we get them to stay and work with these private schools? Also, that retains staff, too, because then I don't have staff leaving to go to the school district when they could just stay where we are, and keep offering this amazing community school and childcare center for Helena. Everywhere in Montana has this problem. Is there a way that we can expand this pre-k funding to qualified community schools who have accredited teachers who can also report to OPI? I would just like to see if there's any comment on that or any guidance. Thank you in advance for that information.



- Sophia Helmer: My name is Sophia Helmer. I am a lifelong Montanan and the owner, the director, and the lead teacher at the Magic Forest Childcare and Preschool in Missoula. For nearly 30 years, I've known Montana to value hard work and personal responsibility. Childcare providers embody those values. We're constantly asked to sacrifice more than we can afford just to keep this system functioning. I'm here to ask this board to do two very specific things. Reinstate the childcare worker program and expand it in a meaningful way the way HB 456 would have done. Like most providers in Montana, I don't have the margins to pay the wages my teachers deserve to keep the doors open. I absorb the cost of their childcare tuition. Other providers across the state do the same. That's just the reality of how fragile his system is. I built my program from the ground up. I did it the right way, and my program is something I'm proud of. It's something my community relies on. And yet, the financial reality of this work means my husband and I have had to put off starting our own family. I can't afford childcare for my own child, even in the program that I own. That is the sacrifice that I have to make to keep my teachers and to keep childcare available in my community. The childcare worker program that ended in December was life-changing for the workers who were qualified. The eligibility was so narrow that many childcare workers, including every teacher in my program, were excluded. HB 456 would have fixed that by expanding eligibility and supporting workforce directly. Its veto was devastating. Providers are still left carrying the cost. Costs for families continue to rise and workers are still forced to make impossible choices. If Montana wants childcare to be more affordable, accessible, and stable, workforce support has to come first. Stabilizing the childcare workforce is the most efficient use of these funds and everything else the state wants to build depends on it. Childcare workers are holding the system together at great personal cost, and we cannot keep asking them to do that without real support. We can't build new programs on top of a workforce that's barely surviving. Fix the workforce first or nothing else we build will last. Thank you for listening.

Tory Malek motions to adjourn.

Jackie Ronning seconds the motion.

Unanimous approval by the board.

Motion passed.

Meeting adjourned 4:39p.m.



Day Two Call to Order and Welcome

Meeting called to order at 9:01 a.m.

Roll Call

Present: Tory Malek, Mackenzie Espeland, Kathy Deserly, Jackie Ronning, Louisa Libertelli Dunn, Caitlin Jensen, Lisa Malmquist, Tracy Moseman, Beth Branem, Jackie Ronning, Crystal Armstrong

MECA Manager Present: Michelle Cusey

ECFSD Support Present: Sally Tilleman, Alex Dahy

ECFSD Fiscal Bureau Support Present: Shannon Mackey, DiDi High, Nicole Quirino

From Vision to Action

Review of board generated ideas and themes from the strategic plan activity

- There was a focus on the workforce with this being the foundation for the system.
- Seeing the Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan and then walking through it as a starting place for today helped to put things into perspective. As well as the feedback from the community
- The timing of the Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan aligns with the work the board must do. There is a need to find out what was missing from yesterday's conversation.
- There is an opportunity to move the work presented yesterday forward.
- Appreciation from the board for public comments. There was consistency in the message from providers who spoke.
- Needs are varied and overwhelming. Yesterday's process helped put things into perspective
- There are many possibilities to support and move forward. The challenges are to focus in and look at this holistically from a strategic standpoint.

Unidentified or emerging priorities

- Emergency Assistance:
 - Missing the big picture of what this means. Should help with natural disaster relief etc. Still needs to be defined more clearly.
 - Missing updated and more innovative training for these situations that could be on demand. Preferably with hard copies available. *Yikes!* needs to be more in depth and realistic as well as being updated for rural areas in Montana.
 - More training for things like active shooters, poisoning, etc. needs to be addressed.
 - Training and different supports are needed. Go kits were available previously. We could think about this as well though these can be provided through some contractors who provide TA in the state of Montana.



- Funding for alternative locations and for temporary staffing/tools/food for emergency cases.
 - Long term support to help with infrastructure, staffing, and supplies after emergency situations.
 - Possible grants to provide a bridge in the case that a program may be closed due to emergency or natural disaster situation.
 - Federal funding impacts- need short term bridge gap grants to ensure programs can keep providing services to kids when they are not receiving regular funding.
- Innovation Programs:
 - The ecosystem of childcare is very complex. We have private stand alone childcare, employer sponsored childcare, community cooperative childcare, and school integrated childcare. All business models are very diverse.
 - Creating a private public relationship to have max funding for centers is paramount. There is a need for more information on this model.
 - Encourage individuals to create these models with mentorship and assistance.
 - The return on investment data sharing from 6.2 could be relevant in terms of understanding ROI for these investments.
 - Need more understanding of the ways in which we could evaluate potential models for this.
 - Obligation to use the data given to make decisions.
 - Innovative models have been successful historically but could be expanded.
 - These have a large community impact.
 - Mentorship programs have been previously piloted. We may look back at these to see how they went and what could be implemented as far as promising practices that support the ecosystem.
 - Previous pilots for mentorship are sunseting due to funding coming to an end
 - More school districts are providing early literacy and numeracy programs. There is an idea to put more of these in focus for infant and toddler programs as this would bolster infant and toddler programs across the state.
 - Special needs preschools are needed.
 - Providers need more training for this and children need hyper-specialized needs met.



- Potential to have partners from Montana Cooperative Development Center present as they will mentor business leaders who are looking to implement something like this.
- Look into expansion pilots to see what worked with these that we could build off of.
- **Affordability Initiatives:**
 - Piloting a school child development class or an independent study to be childcare provider certification through CCT.
 - Work based internships could help them become certified as a childcare provider.
 - Restructure BBS as restrictions affect providers and military.
 - Line items and specific help for children with medical needs. Could expand this to be more inclusive.
 - Income limits for BBS change as FPL is evaluated annually.
 - The board could set income limits but will need to fall within the federal guidelines for CCDF funds. Rates for subsidies are raised, which reduces the budget for other things that may be needed.
 - Utilize infant toddler subsidy enhancements as access, availability, and affordability are all issues here.
 - Quality incentives that existed for providers had a huge impact on programs. Helped to build quality programs in our communities.
 - New CCDF Quality Program is already in the process of being built.
- **Provider Support/Workforce Development:**
 - Utilizing students for work-based internship.
 - Campaign around development of the workforce but take away the perception that it's just "babysitting".
 - There is a need to elevate this workforce because it is important to have competent childcare. This is a viable profession.
 - Professionalize childcare workers by possibly utilizing an information campaign.
 - There would be more respect if people understood the amount of training hours needed to keep certification.
 - Incentive program could provide workforce with tech which could be used for classes and to improve the learning experience. It could also provide new modalities.
 - Cohorts with childcare providers specifically for workforce- could expand on this by building new cohorts or mentorships.
 - Improving the environment for staff.
 - Turnover and retention could be tracked more specifically through mentorship for leaders.
 - On demand learning and alternate schedules are needed for help during hours where childcare is not running.



- More business resource training (need more in-depth training).
 - Zero to 5 provides different business supports and tools. Some services and supports around mentorship have sunset. However, these showed great impact on the industry.
- Need for more universal support for children with special needs.
 - Children may not be identified as special needs, but more staff may be needed since children are experiencing accelerated rates of behavioral issues.
- **Quality Improvement:**
 - Addressing areas where we have noted childcare deserts.
 - Part C hand off gaps (If child does not qualify there is a gap)
 - Tier two supports missing (these are children who do not qualify but are still considered high risk).
 - Job training and PD opportunities should be more specialized and accessible.
 - Reconfigure adult learning.
 - Better partnerships between school districts and early learning centers.
 - Integration is a systems challenge that should be addressed intentionally.
 - Local and statewide systems data could be looked at.
 - Advocate for partnering with schools.
 - Bring back quality incentives for quality and education programs.
 - Provide opportunities for program enhancement.

Crystal Armstrong motions for a fifteen-minute recess.

Louisa Libertelli-Dunn seconds the motion.

Unanimous approval by the board.

Motion passed.

Meeting to reconvene at 10:46 a.m.

Meeting reconvened and is called back to order at 10:46 a.m.

Fiscal Planning

The ECFSD Fiscal Bureau team reviews the information that was presented at the last board meeting.

Overview

- Funding runs on the State Fiscal Year, which started July 2025
- Starting revenue \$10 million
- \$7.5 million in appropriations



- Any cash not expended within the fiscal year will be carried over to the next fiscal year
- Appropriations will change every fiscal year
- \$9.98 million left in cash balance and \$7.4 million left in appropriations
 - Personnel and operating costs are what was expended here. Projections show how these expenses will continue to accumulate over the fiscal year.
 - Rent office space and supplies will be recurring monthly expenses.
 - There is a need for the MECA specialist to have certain tech. This as well as MECA account manager salary were not projected for the full first fiscal year since this did not occur until the second quarter of the fiscal year.
- Indirect for DPHHS run on quarterly basis.
 - No activity in the first quarter.
 - Quarter two had indirects that totaled \$4,817.67.
 - Indirects are non-budgeted activities so these expenses will not affect appropriation but will affect the overall cash balance.
 - Indirects will likely be lower than the projection that was provided.
 - Once the spending plan is made this projection can be updated.
- The Governor's budget staff recommends spending \$3.5 million in the first fiscal year to allow for interest to carry over to the next fiscal year.
 - As a reminder for the trust fund interest, this should come annually in August, but there is not a number still of what percentage this accrues at.

Planning

Activities should be decided upon with projected costs. Project timeframes should be pinned down for this as well.

- There will be some operational costs.
 - Quarterly travel expenses will be coming out of this budget.
 - Board members to touch base with Nicole in regards to travel vouchers if they need them.

Procurement

DiDi High presented a document that breaks down procurement.

- Anything costing \$10K or above will need an API which has all details and funding information for each project.
- Timelines for purchases
 - Small purchases (three months)
 - Limited solicitations (four months)
 - Invitation for bid (6 months)
 - Request for proposal (9 months)
 - Anything costing over \$200K must be procured via RFP.



- Sole source- done when a purchase or service can only be made with one vendor. This must be approved by the procurement officer and DOA.
Must only be done when completely necessary.
- IT contracts require an ITPR - additional time may be needed for this.
- Competitive procurement promotes transparency and drives down cost while ensuring higher quality services.
 - Some extensions are exempt from this such as government to government, intergovernmental, MCA, and human services.

Questions

- As funding is being allocated, does it have to be obligated?
 - There is an accrual period, but expenditures must be completed before June 30 annually. This is the fiscal year end.

Crystal Armstrong motions that the board spend \$3.5 million for the rest of the fiscal year 2025.

Jackie Ronning seconds the motion.

Unanimous approval from the board.

Motion passed.

Public comment:

- Heather O'Loughlin: Hi, members of the board. My name is Heather O'Loughlin with the Montana Budget Policy Center. Thanks so much for taking public comment right now. I'm a little frazzled because I was sort of waiting, thinking that it would be later. I do have a couple handouts, if that's okay. I'm sharing with you today may not be super relevant for the bigger, more detailed conversations that you all are having in relation how we need to address the overall early childhood system. I thought I would just share it because we put together this report on HB 924. I think this has been sort of helpful in thinking about what the money and the flow looks like across all of the different initiatives that were reflected in HB 924. I think that a lot of this is outside the scope of what you all are working on, but one of the things that is helpful to think about is how the trust works with other funding mechanisms in some of these other areas. And we do include a little table for each of those. You kind of see how early childhood compares to some of the other funding streams. I will note that we do include what is projected to be the revenue into each of these accounts, that is based off of the legislative fiscal division's projections from right around when this bill passed. We don't know exactly how much will come in, but this was what had been projected would come into each of these accounts. About \$4.6 million of interest earnings has been accumulated as of July one, and the early childhood account would receive 20% of that, so that's about \$920,000. The other thing to really note is that for most of the other accounts, they're able to access other supplemental funding. So local bridges are a good example. They also oversee



\$100 million transfer, and then the interest. They have an additional appropriation of \$78 million for bridges. I just want to applaud you all. You have a big task ahead of you, looking at the entire early childhood system with a relatively small amount of funds. I think that for us, that really speaks to thinking about how to prioritize. What is really the most essential thing that you're hearing from stakeholders and then how can we potentially use this money to really focus on those initiatives? I am happy to stay for questions. I will be here for the rest of the day. Thank you.

- Grace Decker: Hi everybody. I'm Grace Decker and I'm with Montana Advocates for Children. I really want to say to all of you that in all the work you've done yesterday and today, you've done so much to unpack what is needed in our state's early childhood system. And it is a lot. Our early childhood system has been under resourced in comparison to many of our neighboring states and other states across the nation. I think that to set a level, there's really no expectation that all of that is going to be solvable with the investment that you all are tasked with allocating. And I think the temptation may be to try to do a little bit in a lot of areas because we've unpacked so many areas of need. Right? And so to ask a big picture question, I would ask philosophically whether this board is more interested in looking at a deep impact, and perhaps addressing a core need, or doing something that is more of a sprinkle. We've heard loud and clear from folks in communities that they are looking for something that is sustainable. I will also say that when we think about sustainability, we shouldn't only think about this trust funding those expenditures in the same way over the long haul. People will continue to fight for other investments from the legislature and from our governor's office advocacy and efforts to increase our state's investment, to match our neighbor's states, is ongoing and will continue. Some of the kinds of things that this board can do, with its flexibility in what we're able to invest in, may be addressing gaps, extending something that's been very successful, and maybe look at the moment that we're in, and what will make the most impact over successive years to build out our system piece by piece and break by brick in a logical way. With that in mind, I did bring for all of you, a little more detail about one of the very successful pilots that took place that I talked about yesterday. Some other folks talked about this as well. The childcare worker program. Folks asked for a little more detail, and this is a report that the department put out in the fall of 2024 that outlines some of the impact in terms of recruitment and retention of workers. I wanted to just share that. And thank you for the time.
- Carrie Krepps: Good morning. My name is Carrie Krebs. I'm the executive director at Florence Crittenton Family Services, here in Helena. One of our largest programs is our child enrichment center. We serve up to 46 children, ages zero to



five, in that program. I'm here representing our child enrichment center. Again, I want to echo what Grace said. I just think that this board has an incredible task. I was online listening this morning, and I think everything that is on these walls and what I heard is, I can say, yes, yes, yes, yes, as a provider. Yes, these are all the things that we are challenged with, and I appreciate the provider voices on this board. There are so many opportunities, and in the grand scheme of things, this isn't going to be a lot of money year to year. It can make a huge impact as we move forward over the years. We should be focusing efforts on trying to utilize some of the amazing pilot projects that have been started and some of the things that have been done in the last couple of years through the PDGB-5 grant and some of the COVID era money and all of that. There were some really great things that happened. There were some cliffs that happened after that, and it just seems to me that taking advantage in these early years of the account for things that we saw success by continuing to carry them on. We are able to collect more data on some of these projects and bring them back to the legislature for other initiatives and other bills. I just kind of wanted to voice that piece of it. Workforces are one of the biggest components we put in time. We were one of those facilities that went from 24 spots to 46 because of our space. Staffing those 46 spots was not as easy. I think that workforce component is such a huge piece, and we have to balance it with providing incredible education and training opportunities with the knowledge that when we make these people incredibly educated and experienced, they become more valuable. We have to be able to pay them, or support them in some way financially, to be able to keep them in this space. I think the childcare workers scholarship program was one of those. We would have lost four of our staff when that ended, had we not used a Washington Foundation grant to actually pilot our own continuation of that program. We have data that shows what that did. I'm really excited and I hope that there's a space that we can provide that data. I will just kind of finish with that. We are business. I have a business degree. I'm a childcare center. I mean, it really is a business, but we have such a unique intersection with human services. We don't get to just run businesses that say, cost went up for us, and so will your costs. We can effectively destroy the community infrastructure if we raise our costs too high and people can't afford childcare. We live in this very strange, you know, hybrid world, and I think if we can constantly recognize them and find balance and be able to talk about it to others in the state, I think that's really important with the United Voice. Thank you again so much for your time.

- Xanna Berg: My name is Xanna Berg, and I work as the director of Kids Count. I want to highlight, again, the success of this childcare worker pilot program, the one funded by the federal PDGB-5 grant. This expanded best beginnings of up to 250% of the poverty level for childcare workers. And as it's been stated that this pilot recently ended leaving many workers, parents, and providers struggling.



While this was implemented, the worker pilot was incredibly successful at improving retention of childcare workers. Typically, the turnover of childcare workers is around 32%. Roughly one in three childcare workers leave the field entirely each year. So not just leaving a program but leaving the entire field. For workers in this pilot program, turnover was only 9%. This means the pilot program resulted in a 71% decrease in turnover. And just connecting the dots that decreasing turnover matters for the whole childcare system. A child's relationship with their caregivers is a key part of high-quality care for young children. When workers are retained for longer, children get that benefit. Lower turnover also means more stability for families and programs when classrooms are fully staffed. There's a financial benefit when turnover is low. The Montana Childcare Business Connect estimates that it costs a childcare center about \$16,000 every time they have a staff turnover due to lost days of care, staff time to rehire, and the time it takes to onboard and train new staff. Montana's not the only state that has piloted a program like this. In North Dakota, childcare workers are eligible for childcare assistance with no income limit. And that's been in place since July of 2024, and it's largely funded using state investments. Kentucky is another example. It was the first state to implement this eligibility for workers using the Federal American Rescue Plan Act dollars, and the state has since invested to continue their program for workers. Also, just to note that during the last Montana legislative session, a bill was proposed to continue and slightly expand the eligibility criteria for the childcare worker program. This bill had bipartisan support passing with both the House and the Senate support. This pilot program has concrete evidence that it works to improve the childcare workforce. It would make an immediate impact on childcare programs and families. It's widely supported across the state by policymakers and providers alike. Thank you for the time to give public comment today.

- Kamille Bergquist: My name is Kamille Bergquist, and I wanted to offer a perspective as a parent using childcare, a board member of a world program, and as someone who works professionally in marketing outreach and communications. One of the biggest challenges I see for childcare programs is capacity. I specifically wanted to zero in on the capacity to strategize, message, and engage communities in a way that supports long-term sustainability. There are groups already doing some of us work within our spheres. I think that most centers are focused understandably on daily operations like staffing and clients. That leaves very little room to step back and ask questions, like, how do we explain our value to community? How do we engage local partners, donors, or supporters who might want help, but they might not know how? Just from my experience programs often run into barriers, whether that's the lack of tools, lack of systems, simply not knowing where to start, or what options there are. At the same time, there's people within our communities who do have relevant skills in



communications, finance, technology, and fundraising to support early childhood programs. This means that I just see a potential opportunity here for the MECA board, rather than each program. I'm hoping for shared tools and systems that function as a statewide toolbox. We have potential to use other resources and communication. I kind of do this as an investment that would help elevate the professional model of early childhood providers, which was also touched on this morning. I think it would fairly communicate the real economics of care and that would support programs in developing more diversified rounded support. I'm thinking of things like online giving, community campaigns, possibly some savings strategies, and other partnerships that were mentioned today, like the local libraries and school partnerships or working with other community groups. Ultimately, it sounds like everyone agrees that childcare really can't survive if it's functioning like a traditional business model. But I think also if we want programs to become stable, visible, and truly valued, they need support not just in operations, but in strategy, communication, and communication. I say that's what the potential investment should be. I want to offer this perspective as you think about how to use this account in a way that empowers care and hopefully rides long-term infrastructure and stability to progress throughout the state.

Tory Malek motioned to break for lunch reconvening at 12:30 p.m.

Tracy Moseman seconded the motion.

Unanimous approval by the board.

Adjourned for lunch at 11:37 a.m.

Reconvene from lunch break at 12:33 p.m.

Implementation Pathways

Board members will each receive five sticky notes to determine priority areas, with the option to allocate multiple stickies to a single project if desired. Once priorities are selected, the board will map projects to specific fiscal years and develop a corresponding implementation timeline.

From a fiscal standpoint, it is considered ideal to spend a portion of the seed money since unspent funds will accrue interest. Any funds remaining at the end of FY 2026 will carry forward into FY 2027 and will be used first in that year's spending plan. The FY 2027 ending balance will reflect the spending decisions made for that fiscal year. Moving forward, the annual appropriation will remain capped at \$10 million per year, regardless of any interest earned.

- Several priority areas were discussed. A major focus is addressing childcare deserts, particularly in rural areas, by partnering with chambers of commerce, businesses, and county commissioners to better understand community needs.



Competitive grants could be structured to give preferential points to providers operating in childcare deserts, and there is a need to better understand and address services for children with special needs in those areas.

- There is also a strong emphasis on expanding Tier 2 (at-risk) supports for children ages zero to five, potentially through additional learning opportunities for caregivers. Related to this is the need for more staff and services to support children with special and behavioral needs, aligning with Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports and outside service initiatives. Incentives to recruit and retain specialized staff may be considered.
- Workforce development remains a central theme. This includes supporting adult learners entering the field, expanding apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship opportunities, and aligning these efforts with Career and Technical Education programs. Apprenticeship models could extend to high school students and college students who can earn CDA credentials, with collaboration among DLI, OPI, CCDF Quality, and ECFSD. Addressing wage progression gaps is critical, and funding could potentially support RTI or training facilities. Supporting tribal colleges to provide training for industry-relevant credentials was also discussed as a way to broaden and strengthen the workforce pipeline. In addition to education pathways, career supports that improve retention were identified as important.
- Quality improvement and provider support are also key priorities. This includes offering quality incentives for providers, assisting facilities in meeting county or licensing requirements, and bolstering existing technical assistance. There is a need for increased business training for owners and directors so they better understand available financial incentives and supports.
- Employer and community engagement strategies were discussed, including incentivizing employer-supported family policies. Employers who help employees with childcare could potentially receive benefits, and tax incentives for landlords who reduce rent for childcare facilities were suggested. Establishing and supporting local sector partnerships to connect stakeholders and cover convening costs was also identified as important. Additionally, there is interest in launching a public awareness campaign to elevate the perception of childcare professionals, communicate the use of curriculum and professional standards, and attract new entrants to the field.
- Family support strategies include exploring grants for families who do not qualify for BBS.
- Finally, Tracy Moseman discussed infrastructure strategies that would have minimal cost implications. At the next board meeting, a list of strategies that DPHHS could implement without requiring significant funding will be presented for consideration.



The group discussed determining which initiatives can realistically be taken on by agencies, assigning projects to specific fiscal years, and identifying associated dollar amounts. For FY 2026, the possibility of retroactive payments for childcare workers was raised, potentially going back to February 1. Tracy Moseman will confirm whether this is allowable under the bill language. If pursued, this would require long-term budget planning and annual obligation of funds, as well as development work within MAQCS, the new CCL system. Apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship expansion will also be further explored, and Michelle will prepare two proposals for the next board meeting.

Staffing to Support Implementation

ECFSD is requesting that the Bureau Chief and Program Manager charge some of their time to the MECA.

- Bureau chief 10%
- Program manager 15%

Public Comment

Grace Decker: I'm with Montana Advocates for Children. I'm going to be very quick and say to manage something does take work. I will just reflect back to the chart that Heather O'Loughlin from the Montana Budget and Policy Center shared with you all earlier about the other funds that come with HB 924 Go Trust. Those are much larger sums of money, and I would be curious to know whether new staff are being allocated to manage those funds. For none of those other funds is a new board established. That is not to say that I don't respect the decision about how to make this work move smoothly, and I know full well the professionalism that the department brings to all of this work, including during this meeting. What I will say is that this brings the annual cost of managing this fund to over \$200,000 a year. I think that's a number to keep in mind when we talk about what is or isn't available in terms of supporting the people on the ground that these funds are for. Thank you.

Jackie Ronning motions to accept option one as illustrated in the fiscal document.

Tory Malek seconds the motion.

Unanimous approval by the board.

Tracy Moseman abstains from voting.

Motion passed.

Board Schedule

Tory Malek motions to accept the calendar as discussed.

Lousia Libertelli-Dunn seconds the motion.

Unanimous approval by the board.

Motion passed.

Public Comment

- Grace Decker: Grace Decker with Montana Advocates for Children, you guys are going to get so tired of me. I'm sorry. But I'm grateful for the chance to be here and to talk with you. I just want to say thank you for all the hard work and brain



space that you've given to these important considerations. Thank you for really pushing to figure out exactly where to spend these funds in the way that will be the most impactful. I really look forward to being in touch with you and continuing to support this process for all of you. I have one question that could be answered, perhaps, in follow up materials, but I want to share a question from some of the folks who've been in touch with me today about what the best methodology is to provide input or public comment in between meetings. Whether the best way is to send that directly to Michelle, who then will email it out, or whether it'll be compiled and presented at a future point. Folks are just curious about what engagement looks like in between meetings. Thank you all so much. You all deserve a little brain break after all this.

- Jamie Simonez: My name is Jamie Simonez. I am the District Clerk and the Business Manager for Geyser Public Schools. I also volunteer as the director of Geyser Daycare. We're a tiny little town, but our daycare operates as a nonprofit. We operate out of our school's gymnasium. I'm also a mom of a six-year-old with high needs and five-year-old twins. Based on all these roles, I feel like I'm deeply involved with the school and the daycare, and it gives me kind of a different perspective in a small town. For instance, how funding decisions have impact on our staff, our families and just our overall community. We opened the daycare in 2020, and I think we're one of the first daycares that opened within a school building. I have seen firsthand how our school and our daycare work together to support our school staffing, family stability, and our workforce retention. One thing, as the board moves forward with its path for funding. I would just express a few concerns that we have run across with relying solely on Best Beginnings Program for a means of supporting our daycares. It's very helpful for most communities. We've had a few roadblocks when it comes to eligibility for our families. We're a farming and ranching community, and best beginnings counts depreciation as income. So that results in basically every single one of our families not qualifying for assistance because they are over the income threshold. Even though they are farmers and ranchers, they operate on tight margins. We currently have also a staff daycare member who's ineligible because her and her ex-husband don't have a formal custody agreement. The parents cooperate outside of the court system, but without legal documentation, they can't access Best Beginnings, benefits. I just want you guys to please consider those things when looking at funding options. I understand Best Beginnings is a program that's already running. It's easy to filter through there, but there are some restrictions for some of our unique situations that we've run into. We haven't been able to utilize those funding sources. Thank you, everyone, for your time.



- Rachel Wanderscheid: Hello, everyone. Rachel Wanderscheid, Director of the Montana After School Alliance, again. I hope that you don't get sick of myself and Grace because we're going to have to be in a lot of these meetings. I want to thank you for all your guys' hard work. It was really encouraging to listen both yesterday and today to all your great ideas. I do also want to reiterate my message once more from yesterday. I am asking you to remember our after school and summer programs that serve our school age children as a part of this initiative, and as something that is distinct from a lot of what you guys did speak to today. I think always the default is to take our own experiences and then try to imagine how that translates to others. But a lot of times that really misses important needs. While the school age programs often have the same challenges as the early childcare programs, a lot of times they actually have very different challenges. For example, when you guys discussed today, problems with workforce and retention, this can be even more of a challenge for after school and summer programs. If you consider the staff that they're trying to recruit, it's a part-time job. It is a job that, during the school year, has hours of 3PM to 7PM. Then it flips during the summer to be full-time. Then how do you factor in the holidays and summer breaks? Whenever we're doing a reimbursement for our childcare programs, and then just automatically assuming that works for our school age programs, it often does not. Another big difference is that a lot of the childcare programs are businesses. And while we need more business support, most of the school age programs are nonprofits. As Jamie just mentioned in the last public comment, in other communities, one program is trying to be all of the hats, and that's even more of a challenge. We see problems with this when we try to do like a market rate survey for the school age programs, most of our programs are funded through a combination of grants that are changing every year. Sometimes even Private donations are changing every year. Sometimes parents' fees and scholarship fees. If you're trying to get what the actual cost of care is to run these programs, you cannot extrapolate it in the same way that you can with a business model. Another example of what you guys discussed today is trying to get credentials and trying to uplift the field of early childcare and getting more people degrees and in this pathway. In other states, there's actually a specific after school credential, but Montana does not have that yet. I'd like to encourage you to look at that as an option. We all know that there's providers out there who just love working with little kids, and then there's all those other folks who are really great with our older kids. They're not the same people. They need different training. The kids need different supports. While you are considering all of these factors, I just really want to ask again that you don't necessarily take your own experience and assume it will work in these programs, but really try to get that research and those perspectives to make sure that what is being created or extended is actually fitting everybody who is supposed to be fitted with this funding. There are some really good options out there that have been built over



the last few years. As you are making those decisions, again, I want you to remember that those were built with early childcare in mind and they weren't even available to most of our school age programs. Please continue to consider that as you move forward. I think overall, we know the field needs help. We know what many sectors in the field need, and we ultimately want to get as many programs licensed as possible so that our kids have safe quality options in all of our communities. Thank you all so much for your time and safe travels.

- Miriyah Parrish: My name is Miriyah Parrish. I've worked in childcare in Missoula for 5 years. I'm struggling to remain in a profession I deeply value. This is not due to a lack of commitment, but because the financial reality of this work is unsustainable. The childcare worker program was a critical support. During the last legislative session, early childhood educators, families, and advocates worked diligently to advance HB 456. Governor Gianforte vetoed the bill, stating that Montana had already taken steps to support childcare, and the additional efforts would be addressed through the trust. That response was devastating, and it felt disconnected from the reality we are living in every day. You understand the financial pressures facing this workforce. Childcare wages remain among the lowest in the state, while the cost of living continues to rise. My employer has absorbed the cost of my childcare in our program to retain me. I am grateful, but even with that support, I still cannot afford to live sustainably in Missoula. I am now being forced to consider leaving early childhood education. I respectfully urge this board to reinstate the childcare worker program. Without it, we risk losing experienced educators and further destabilizing the childcare system. Our communities depend on it. Thank you so much for your time and consideration.
- My name is Carrie Sweets. I'm in Billings, Montana at the Bright Little Stars. And I just agree with what the previous person said. That was on my list to talk to you guys about. The funding for employees was really helpful for the business owners and the employees. And I would really like to see that comeback. I was a little bit frustrated to hear that there was some discussion of giving private businesses help to offer childcare, because I feel like we're businesses. If you're taking our funding away to offer childcare for our staff, I just don't understand why it would be potentially given to private businesses that aren't in the early childhood field and don't have the training that we already do. I would just encourage as often as possible for the best beginnings to get as much money because that allows us to raise the guidelines and more people to get qualified, like another person had said with their school program and the farmers. It's just so helpful when parents can get that funding and pay for their childcare. And my final suggestion, I know in some states, they give stipends to licensed facilities for each enrolled child. And I just wanted to suggest that to you. I think it's North



Dakota. They give, say, \$300 a month for every child enrolled in a licensed program. Then even if that family doesn't qualify for best beginnings, that \$300 stipend then offsets a little bit of their childcare cost. And I just thought that that was a great program that maybe we could bring to Montana.

- Corrine Kuntz: My name is Corrine Kuntz and I wanted to elaborate and share my story with regards to the vetoed bill that would have provided childcare workers with the equivalent of the Best Beginning Scholarship for their children enrolled. I'm a sole proprietor for-profit business. I've been in operation for 11 years. I was awarded a \$1 million ARPA innovation and expansion grant a few years back to expand my program. My program at the time served about 67 total spots, and my wait list at the time after calling every single family to confirm that they still wanted to be on my wait list was about 80 students long. With those ARPA funds, I was able to build a new building. It allowed me to go from 67 total spots to 120 with just about half of those being infant/toddler spots. It was a huge benefit to our community. I was able to work through my entire wait list and fill those spots. The early literacy program has caused a few hiccups, but that's beside the point. We're getting there. We built this beautiful facility for our families and children in our community. 20% of the students enrolled in my program are staff children. Only two qualify for the Best Beginning Scholarship. The problem is that the average wage for my staff is about \$20 per hour. We operate with just about zero profit margin at all. My take home pay comes to about \$8 per hour. Eventually, I would give myself a little raise if I were able to. I could do this if my staff were able to qualify for some sort of childcare funding. With that I would be able to recoup that loss that I'm taking for 20% of my students basically not paying tuition. I'd be able to retain those staff. I just lost one employee this week who had 2 children enrolled because she can't afford to pay the \$500 a month that I charge for her two children combined. I do urge you to consider how you can contribute to those families that don't qualify for Best Beginnings. It supports the industry as a whole. It also supports our local economies because it allows us to keep those spots open for those families to go back to work. Thank you.

Tracy Moseman motions to adjourn.

Tory Malek Seconds the motion.

Unanimous approval by the board.

Motion passed.

Meeting adjourned at 2:54 p.m.