



MONTANA EARLY CHILDHOOD ACCOUNT (MECA) INVESTMENT-LEVEL FRAMEWORK

ENGAGEMENT LEVELS

To guide decision-making, the following three engagement levels are provided for each priority area. These levels reflect increasing degrees of financial commitment, system impact, and duration.

For each level, generally, the Board establishes policy direction and funding parameters. DPHHS staff are responsible for operational design, implementation, and reporting. Within each project, roles and responsibilities will be more specifically outlined based on the board's selected level of engagement and proposed activities.

LEVEL 1 - EXPLORATION

PURPOSE: Validate need, assess feasibility, and define scope before committing significant resources.

TYPICAL FUNDING RANGE: Minimal to modest (planning, data collection, stakeholder engagement).

TYPICAL TIMEFRAME: 3–9 months.

OUTCOME: Clear data, cost modeling, and defined implementation options.

LEVEL 2 - PILOT INITIATIVES

PURPOSE: Test a defined strategy on a limited scale to evaluate effectiveness and cost.

TYPICAL FUNDING RANGE: Moderate, time-limited investment.

TYPICAL TIMEFRAME: 1–2 fiscal years.

OUTCOME: Evidence to inform continuation, expansion, modification, or discontinuation.

LEVEL 3 - ONGOING SYSTEM INVESTMENT

PURPOSE: Implement sustained policy, funding, or structural change.

TYPICAL FUNDING RANGE: Recurring annual appropriation or multi-year commitment.



TYPICAL TIMEFRAME: Multi-year, integrated into base operations.

OUTCOME: Embedded sustainable system-level change.

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

TRAINING FOR INDIVIDUALS SERVING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

STRATEGIC QUESTION

Should the Board expand structured training and specialist support to increase provider capacity to serve children with developmental, behavioral, and high-support needs?

CURRENT STATE

Training and technical assistance for serving children with special needs is provided through existing contracts.

IDENTIFIED GAP

Previous targeted investments and specialized support have been reduced or discontinued.

IMPLEMENTATION OPTIONS FOR PILOT OR ONGOING INVESTMENT

- **Developmental Screening Training-** Provide training and technical assistance to child care providers on the use of standardized developmental screening tools to improve early identification of developmental delays.
- **Sandbox Project Relaunch-** Re-establish the Sandbox project model to provide structured training from OT and Speech language specialists.
- **Early Childhood Special Needs Professional Development Grants-** Provide targeted funding to support professional development opportunities for staff serving children with special needs. Training could include but is not limited to infant and toddler mental health, developmental support strategies, and inclusive care practices.

RECOMMENDED LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT

Select the level of engagement the board wishes to pursue:

- Exploration- Further define scope, cost, and implementation options
- Pilot- Implement a time-limited, targeted initiative
- Sustain- Establish ongoing funding and infrastructure
- Table- Revisit as part of future fiscal planning discussions.



INCENTIVES FOR SERVING HIGH-NEED CHILDREN

STRATEGIC QUESTION

Should the Board invest in targeted supports and incentives to increase provider capacity to serve children with developmental, behavioral, and high-support needs?

CURRENT STATE

Targeted technical assistance for providers serving high-need children was previously supported through the Sandbox project and related specialist engagement.

IDENTIFIED GAP

Specialized supports, including access to OT, PT, Speech-Language, behavioral consultation, and Tier 2 support for children birth to five, have been reduced or discontinued.

IMPLEMENTATION OPTIONS FOR PILOT OR ONGOING INVESTMENT

- **Pyramid Model Coaching** - Implement Pyramid Model coaching to support providers in implementing evidence-based practices that strengthen social-emotional development and address challenging behaviors in early learning environments.
- **Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation** - Increase availability of infant and early childhood mental health consultation to support providers working with children experiencing behavioral, emotional, or developmental challenges.
- **Inclusion Support Fund** - Establish a fund to provide financial assistance to child care businesses serving children with special needs to help offset costs related to specialized staffing, adaptive equipment, or environmental modifications.

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INNOVATION INITIATIVES

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

STRATEGIC QUESTION

Should the Board invest in or expand public–private partnerships to strengthen coordination of early childhood services across sectors?



CURRENT STATE

Coordination between public and private early childhood partners has been supported through the current contractor structure, including the Public/Private Early Childhood Partnership Cohort Pilot.

IDENTIFIED GAP

The Employee Sponsored Grant that supported this work ended on December 30, 2025, creating a potential gap in dedicated funding and structured support for partnership coordination.

IMPLEMENTATION OPTIONS FOR PILOT OR ONGOING INVESTMENT

- **Public/Private Partnership Cohort-** Provide funding or contractual support to continue or expand the Public/Private Early Childhood Partnership Cohort model to strengthen cross-sector collaboration and service coordination.
- **Home Visiting Program-** Provide funds to continue or expand the home visiting program to strengthen early connections with families and improve coordination between health, early childhood, and community support systems.

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LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS AND COALITION INFRASTRUCTURE

STRATEGIC QUESTION

Should the Board explore investments to strengthen local early childhood partnerships and coalition infrastructure to improve coordination of services and address system barriers such as provider insurance access?

CURRENT STATE

Technical assistance contractors support local coordination efforts among early childhood partners and providers.

IDENTIFIED GAP

DPHHS Early Childhood does not directly fund local coalition infrastructure. As a result, local partnerships may lack stable support for coordination activities and addressing shared challenges, such as access to insurance providers willing to ensure child care providers.



IMPLEMENTATION OPTIONS FOR PILOT OR ONGOING INVESTMENT

- **Local Early Childhood Systems Grant-** Develop Competitive grants to support local early childhood coalitions that coordinate services, partnerships, and community planning.
- **Early Intervention & Child Care Partnership Grants-** Provide grants to support partnerships between Early Targeted Intervention sites and licensed or registered child care programs to strengthen collaboration, improve inclusion practices, and support children with developmental needs.
- **Community Preschool Partnership Grants-** Develop an RFP for a grant program to support partnerships between community-based preschool programs (including Head Start) and school districts to coordinate enrollment, training opportunities, and shared early childhood resources.
- **Insurance Cooperative Structure-** Develop a cooperative or partnership structure to improve access to insurance providers willing to cover child care providers.

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QUALITY IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES

QUALITY INCENTIVES FOR PROVIDERS

STRATEGIC QUESTION

Should the Board establish or support financial incentives that encourage providers to engage in quality improvement efforts?

CURRENT STATE

There is currently no ongoing financial incentive tied specifically to quality improvement for providers.

IDENTIFIED GAP

Without dedicated incentives, providers may have limited financial motivation or capacity to pursue additional quality improvement activities.

IMPLEMENTATION OPTIONS FOR PILOT OR ONGOING INVESTMENT

- **Quality Rating Participation Grants** - Provide grants to support child care providers participating in the Quality Rating System (QRS), helping offset costs associated with quality improvement activities, professional development, and program enhancements.



- **Child Care Facility Improvement Grants**- Offer grants to early childhood programs in both center- and home-based settings to renovate, expand, or construct facilities that support quality learning environments.
- **Licensing Barrier Reduction Mini-Grants** - Provide small grants to help new child care providers cover startup costs related to licensing requirements, including local city or county licensing fees.
- **Early Childhood Workforce Retention Incentives** - Provide stipends or financial incentives to support recruitment and retention of early childhood professionals, including child care workers, home visitors, and family support specialists.

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WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

STUDY OF CHILD CARE DESERTS AND TARGETED RECRUITMENT

STRATEGIC QUESTION

Should the Board pursue additional analysis and targeted strategies to address child care deserts and support provider recruitment in areas with limited child care access?

CURRENT STATE

Technical assistance contractors actively recruit providers in areas identified as potential child care deserts.

IDENTIFIED GAP

It can be difficult to determine whether an area is a true child care desert or if families are meeting needs through other arrangements. Limited data from these areas makes it challenging to accurately assess demand and determine the most effective solutions.

IMPLEMENTATION OPTIONS FOR PILOT OR ONGOING INVESTMENT

- **Child Care Desert Study** - Conduct an updated analysis of areas previously identified as child care deserts to better understand whether gaps remain or if families are meeting needs through alternative arrangements.
- **Targeted Recruitment Strategy** - Use improved data to guide focused provider recruitment and support strategies in areas where gaps are confirmed.

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