

Report to:

Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services,  
Early Childhood Services Bureau

# MONTANA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

STRATEGIC PLAN

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Montana was awarded a 2019 Preschool Development Birth through Five (PDG B-5) grant from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to conduct early childhood systems work in the state. The resultant Strengthening Montana’s Early Childhood System Project is focused on developing the state’s comprehensive early childhood system to support early learning and development, family support and engagement, and health. The project is intended to promote access to high-quality early childhood care and education (ECE) for infants, toddlers, and preschool age children in a mixed-delivery system to support the state’s vision that children achieve their highest potential in school and in life. The target populations are underserved children, families, and geographic regions, and the early childhood providers and supporting system.

The second activity of the project was to conduct strategic planning for Montana’s early childhood system. The strategic plan was developed May—July 2019, with a significant focus on engaging family and provider voices throughout the process. Montana’s early childhood strategic plan reflects the state’s approach to implementing a five-year effort toward strengthening the state’s early childhood system, with a focus on enhancing its early care and education mixed delivery system for children birth through five, particularly for vulnerable children. This plan builds from and replaces the 2013 early childhood system strategic plan and reflects the 2019 comprehensive statewide needs assessment findings and recommendations. Montana’s needs assessment, conducted January – July 2019, was a broad and deep analysis of the state’s ECE, family support, and health services and supports.

The early childhood strategic plan is a guide to state government and focuses on what is within the scope of DPHHS. The state will continue to align and coordinate this plan with broader early childhood stakeholders throughout the state.

The state feels the timing is right for Montana to make significant progress in its early childhood system. Effective early childhood champions are in place in state government, philanthropic and non-profit organizations, and local and tribal agencies. Montana and its local communities have been developing the infrastructure and resources to do this work well. There is a palpable excitement for early childhood system improvement possibilities.

## DESCRIPTION OF STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

Montana was committed to meaningfully engaging stakeholders throughout the planning process. The state engaged a wide range of early childhood stakeholders, including family members/caregivers and providers/educators representing ECE, public education, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Parts C and B, home visiting, nutrition, child and family services, intellectual and developmental disabilities, children’s mental health, children and youth with special healthcare needs, physical disabilities, and primary health services and supports with local, state, and tribal representatives. The state conducted targeted and general strategic planning workshops. The strategic planning process, including participation opportunities, is detailed in the table below.

Figure 1. Early childhood strategic planning process

Process Step	Description
1. Engage Best Beginnings Advisory Council	The state presented preliminary findings and recommendations from the early childhood needs assessment to the state advisory council, the Best Beginnings Advisory Council (BBAC), in May and facilitated a conversation to elicit strategies to enhance the state’s early childhood system from participants based off findings and recommendations. There

Process Step	Description
	were approximately 120 stakeholders in attendance, representing the breadth of the state’s early childhood system.
<b>2. Conduct focused dialog on school readiness and transitions</b>	The state convened education stakeholders, including ECE and the public school system, in June to discuss transitions within early childhood, transitions into school, and school readiness. The meeting included an optional hour of reviewing the Strengthening Montana’s Early Childhood System project. The remainder of the meeting was focused on developing a common understanding of and vision for transitions, and defining critical success factors, barriers, and strategies for school readiness and transitions. Approximately 40 stakeholders attended.
<b>3. Conduct formal Tribal Consultation</b>	The Tribal Consultation was held in June as an opportunity for tribal partners and DPHHS to share and learn about the strengths, gaps, and opportunities in tribal early childhood systems and tribal-state collaboration. Approximately 25 people attended from federal, state, and tribal agencies. Blackfeet, Chippewa Cree, Confederated Salish-Kootenai, Crow, Fort Belknap, Fort Peck, and Northern Cheyenne tribes were represented.
<b>4. Conduct regional planning workshops</b>	The state conducted planning workshops in five regional locations in June and July: Missoula, Billings, Helena, Great Falls, and Bozeman. The workshops included a discussion of needs assessment findings and recommendations, strategy development, and prioritization of developed strategies. Approximately 125 early childhood stakeholders representing the breadth of the early childhood system attended the five workshops (25 per workshop). Local coalition’s stakeholder recruitment for regional planning workshops. The state provided workshop results to coalitions for their use.
<b>5. Refine strategies</b>	Across a series of meetings, the PDG B-5 project steering committee reviewed needs assessment findings/recommendations, aggregated regional planning strategies, regional prioritization, and the Department of Public Health and Human Services’ strategic plan to develop/refine strategies and define the goals and objectives for the early childhood strategic plan.
<b>6. Present draft plan to BBAC</b>	The state presented draft strategic goals to the BBAC in July for input.
<b>7. Finalize strategic plan</b>	The Department finalized the strategic plan with the steering committee, for federal review and approval.
<b>8. Future – continue to work with stakeholders</b>	The Department will send out the finalized strategic plan to early childhood system stakeholders statewide via an online survey for comment and prioritization. The state will communicate ongoing regarding plan implementation progress through local coalitions, the BBAC, and electronic media.

## VISION & MISSION

**Vision:** Children from birth to age five have the skills and knowledge they need to achieve success in learning and reach their full potential in life.

**Mission:** Strengthen Montana’s comprehensive early childhood system to enhance early learning and development, health, and family support and engagement.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM GOALS, OBJECTIVES, STRATEGIES, AND INDICATORS

Montana has organized its strategic plan by using goals, objectives, and strategies or action steps. Each goal has multiple objectives. Strategies/action steps and indicators are associated with objectives.

ACCESS AND QUALITY

**Goal 1: Increase access to and participation in high quality early care and education (ECE) across a mixed delivery system**

**Objective 1.1: Increase ECE provider capacity statewide, with specific focus on underserved cohorts and regions**

Strategy	Start	End
1. Implement increased ECE provider support through child care resource and referral (CCRR) agencies, including learning communities, shared services, home-based child care targeted networks/alliances, and others	10/1/19	Ongoing
2. Increase utilization of start-up grants, expansion, and emergency grants for child care providers	10/1/19	Ongoing
3. Continue to evaluate and implement provider-friendly child care subsidy policies (e.g. enrollment v. attendance payment, payment rates, continued support of Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership, etc.)	10/1/19	Ongoing
4. Support additional research to identify sustainable solutions addressing the cost of infant/toddler care	10/1/19	12/31/21
5. Explore additional approaches to recruiting new ECE providers	10/1/19	9/30/20, ongoing
6. Research and evaluate approaches to increasing ECE capacity in rural regions	1/1/20	12/31/20
7. Research and evaluate approaches to increasing ECE capacity in tribal communities	1/1/20	12/31/20
8. Research and evaluate approaches to increasing ECE capacity during non-traditional hours	10/1/19	9/30/21
9. Engage in continuous improvement process to continue to grow ECE system capacity	10/1/20	Ongoing
10. Increase and improve coordination between IDEA Part C, medical, and ECE providers	10/1/19	9/30/20, ongoing
11. Look for opportunities to blend and braid funding to support expanded mental health consultation for families and providers supporting young children across early childhood system	10/1/19	9/30/21, ongoing
12. Conduct additional research and planning on how to better integrate health and development/disability services in ECE settings (e.g. telehealth/tele-consultation expansion)	10/1/19	9/30/22
<p><b>Indicators:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ECE capacity (number of licensed and registered ECE options [center, group, family, FFN]) serving 0-5 year olds (as percentage of all families with children and percentage of families with all parents in the labor force)</li> <li>• ECE capacity for infants and toddlers</li> <li>• Number and percentage of licensed ECE providers accepting Best Beginnings scholarships</li> <li>• ECE capacity in tribal communities</li> <li>• ECE capacity in rural regions</li> <li>• ECE capacity in non-traditional hour care</li> <li>• Part C utilization (number or percentage of eligible children using IDEA Part C services)</li> <li>• IECMHC utilization</li> </ul>		

**Objective 1.2: Increase family access to high quality, affordable ECE, with specific focus on underserved cohorts and regions**

Strategy	Start	End
1. Examine opportunities to streamline and minimize duplication of eligibility processes in public assistance programs (i.e. analyze categorical eligibility, express lane eligibility, application questions, etc.)	10/1/19	9/30/23
2. CCRRs to implement new family engagement position to support families and children with high needs through improved coordination/navigation between families, ECE, Child and Family Services, Part C, home visiting, disability services, special needs subsidy, other financial supports (i.e. Children and Youth with Special Healthcare Needs, hardship, Medicaid, etc.) and other local service providers	10/1/19	9/30/21
3. Continue to collaborate between ECE and home visiting to support high need families and children, and determine ways to extend home visiting services to vulnerable populations	10/1/19	9/30/21, ongoing
<b>Indicators:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number and percentage of low-income families using Best Beginnings scholarships</li> <li>• Number and percentage of scholarship families using special needs subsidies</li> <li>• Number and percentage of families (all and vulnerable) receiving care from high-quality ECE providers</li> <li>• Home visiting utilization</li> </ul>		

**Objective 1.3: Increase number of licensed providers**

Strategy	Start	End
1. Further research ECE provider licensing obstacles and solutions, with Montana-focused and national research, evaluating support structures and incentives to help providers come into compliance with licensing requirements	1/1/20	5/31/21
2. Continue to explore avenues to bridge health and safety criteria among tribal, state, and Head Start expectations	1/1/20	12/31/21
3. Explore other licensing pathways (by age group and type of care) for unlicensed facilities/providers (Head Start, Montessori, out of school time programs, etc.), ensuring enough checks and balances to ensure state standards are met	1/1/20	12/31/21
4. Examine opportunities for more responsive and frequent communication related to licensing for providers, including providing greater guidance to ECE programs while onboarding into licensing	1/1/20	12/31/22
5. Explore legislative approaches to eliminating ECE licensing exemptions	1/1/21	5/30/23
<b>Indicators:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ECE capacity/number of state licensed ECE providers</li> <li>• Further research/progress in licensing reciprocity between tribal and state child care</li> <li>• ECE capacity/number of state licensed ECE providers in tribal communities</li> </ul>		

**Objective 1.4: Continue to improve STARS to Quality QRIS infrastructure and increase provider participation**

Strategy	Start	End
1. Conduct evaluation of STARS to Quality QRIS with BUILD, including: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exploration of opportunities to increase coordination between STARS to Quality and licensing</li> <li>Onboarding and support for providers participating in QRIS</li> </ol>	1/1/20	12/31/21

Strategy	Start	End
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>c. Analysis of wage equity/credential-based compensation across birth to elementary continuum</li> <li>d. Coordination between QRIS and Head Start programs</li> <li>e. Financial supports for participation/training</li> <li>f. Approaches to supporting more/all providers to achieve quality (extension of QRIS, pre-STARS track, etc.)</li> </ul>		
2. Implement QRIS changes defined in evaluation	1/1/22	12/31/23
3. Conduct continuous improvement of QRIS	1/1/22	Ongoing
<b>Indicators:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number and percentage of providers participating in STARS to Quality</li> <li>• STAR level of participating providers</li> <li>• Capacity of high-quality ECE providers</li> <li>• Provider satisfaction with STARS to Quality program</li> </ul>		

**Objective 1.5: Increase access to and quality of facilities for ECE providers**

Strategy	Start	End
1. Explore ways to work with municipalities for zoning, fire, and building requirements	10/1/19	12/31/21
2. Consider implementation of pilot project to support increase facility access for licensed ECE providers	1/1/22	12/31/22
3. Analyze policies to support access to high quality ECE facilities, with a focus on supporting all licensed providers, including those participating in the QRIS	1/1/20	12/31/24
<b>Indicators:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ECE capacity</li> </ul>		

**WORKFORCE**

**Goal 2: Montana has a confident and effective early childhood workforce**

**Objective 2.1: Enhance ECE professional development**

Strategy	Start	End
1. Update professional standards and competencies for early childhood educators in collaboration with the Higher Education Consortium	In progress	12/31/20
2. Coordinate and make more efficient ECE professional development content creation and implementation, including professional development reciprocity across ECE initiatives	9/1/19	12/31/22
3. Increase cross-sector training and skill alignment	9/1/19	9/30/21
4. Focus cross-sector professional development efforts on all providers working directly with children and families (educators, social workers, family support specialists, and home visitors) to have consistency in knowledge, language, and approach	1/1/20	12/31/22
5. Improve professional development approval process to be more efficient	9/1/19	9/30/22
6. Expand opportunities for high quality distance learning	9/1/19	9/30/22
7. Create and implement specialized professional development focused on vulnerable populations including infants/toddlers and children/families with high or special needs	10/1/19	Ongoing

Strategy	Start	End
8. Develop Indian education/cultural competency guidance, and enhance to be individualized for tribes and their specific needs	In progress	12/31/24
9. Explore extension of Early Childhood Practitioner registry infrastructure for broader early childhood professions	1/1/21	12/31/21
10. Build on lessons learned from pre-apprenticeship program and continue to support apprenticeship program	1/1/20	12/31/22
11. Improve coaching infrastructure and implementation	In progress	Ongoing
12. Engage in continuous improvement across professional development efforts, including training and coaching	1/1/20	Ongoing
<b>Indicators:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of providers in early childhood practitioner registry, by level</li> <li>• Number of approved distance learning opportunities</li> <li>• Number of providers using Indian early childhood education guidance</li> <li>• Number of individuals completing apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs</li> <li>• Number of apprenticeship/pre-apprenticeship program graduates sustaining employment</li> <li>• Provider satisfaction with professional development activities</li> </ul>		

## COORDINATION

**Goal 3: The early childhood system is coordinated to support effective family assessment, system navigation, care coordination, and use of data**

**Objective 3.1: Increase developmental screening of children using ASQ/ASQ-SE**

Strategy	Start	End
1. Adopt ASQ/ASQ-SE as preferred developmental screening tool statewide across early childhood sectors	9/1/19	12/31/21
2. Identify all programs using ASQ/ASQ-SE, and ensure all programs are trained in how to screen children, what to do with screening results, and how to engage families around screening	1/1/20	12/31/21
3. Coordinate ASQ/ASQ-SE findings among early childhood providers	1/1/21	12/31/22
4. Explore options for screening registry or shared data infrastructure for cross sector utilization of developmental screening results	1/1/21	12/31/22
5. Use developmental screening to inform referral system, school readiness and transitions, and family engagement	1/1/21	12/31/23
6. Increase public awareness for families and providers regarding the importance of developmental screening	10/1/19	12/31/23
<b>Indicators:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percentage of children screened with ASQ/ASQ-SE in ECE settings</li> <li>• Number of ECE programs adopting use of ASQ/ASQ-SE</li> </ul>		

**Objective 3.2: Improve system navigation and coordination of early childhood services and supports**

Strategy	Start	End
1. Broaden the use of a common, expanded social determinants of health family screening and assessment tool	1/1/20	12/31/23
2. Improve up-to-date and available early childhood service resource information for families and providers	9/1/19	12/31/23

Strategy	Start	End
3. Offer technical assistance on eligibility and referral pathways for children with special needs for healthcare providers	1/1/22	12/31/24
4. Clarify for providers what constitutes a referral while taking steps to move providers toward the best practice of a warm hand-off, particularly for vulnerable families	1/1/22	12/31/24
5. Continue to work on enhancing coordination between local education agencies, Part C, Part B, and ECE	10/1/19	12/31/24
6. Conduct further research to determine the root causes behind the difficulties accessing services within, or referring to, different sectors, with a particular focus on Child and Family Services, mental health, early care and education, and Indian Health Services	9/1/19	12/31/22
7. Analyze approaches to supporting early childhood system navigation for all families	1/1/20	12/31/24
8. Support efforts to increase reach of home visiting services, with focus on vulnerable, high needs families and children	1/1/20	12/31/21
9. Analyze approaches to supporting care coordination for high needs children and families	1/1/20	12/31/23
10. Continue to provide support to bill Medicaid for eligible school-based services	1/1/20	12/31/22
11. Improve CFSD-OPI coordination related to homelessness	1/1/20	12/31/22
12. Conduct further research on whether homelessness definitions could be aligned	1/1/20	12/31/20
<b>Indicators:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of providers using social determinants of health screening and assessment tool</li> <li>• Number of referrals to Part C</li> <li>• Number of referrals to Part B</li> <li>• Number of referrals to other services aligned with social determinants of health screener</li> <li>• Home visiting utilization</li> <li>• Family perspective on coordination and navigation</li> </ul>		

**Objective 3.3: Improve transitions to kindergarten for children, families, and educators**

Strategy	Start	End
1. Continue and increase conversations with educational stakeholders at local and state level around transition processes and tools	10/1/19	9/30/20
2. Evaluate kindergarten transition methodologies across state and nation, with a focus on supporting transitions for vulnerable (including rural) and underserved children	1/1/20	12/31/20
3. Support pilots in local collaborations between community coalitions and local education agencies; include evaluation of outcomes in statewide decision-making	In progress	12/31/21
<b>Indicators:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of children/families/providers using kindergarten transition tool/process</li> </ul>		

**Objective 3.4: Improve data systems to support effective decision-making**

Strategy	Start	End
1. Define early childhood data/information technology system governance approach/standards and roadmap to support information technology planning	10/1/19	9/30/21
2. Build upon existing enterprise software and analytics tools being developed through MPATH (Montana Program for Automating and Transforming	9/1/19	2/28/20, ongoing

Strategy	Start	End
Healthcare) to uniquely identify children and families and measure outcomes across the early childhood system		
3. Develop and maintain common data dashboard to provide public with accurate and valuable information about the early childhood system	9/1/19	12/31/22, ongoing
4. Define shared information technology approach to managing referral data and processes	1/1/20	12/31/22
5. Implement common referral engine across early childhood system, aligned with social determinants of health	1/1/23	12/31/24
<b>Indicators:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early childhood data governance policies defined</li> <li>• Early childhood system roadmap created</li> <li>• Early childhood data from child care system (CCUBS data set) included in data warehouse/analytics</li> </ul>		

## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

### Goal 4: Families are engaged and valued as partners in the early childhood system

#### Objective 4.1: Increase family awareness of early childhood learning, development, and health

Strategy	Start	End
1. Develop and implement initial content for 0-4 year olds with a focus on early childhood development, learning, and health for inclusion in parentingmontana.org	In progress	2/28/20
2. Extend parentingmontana.org content to incorporate prenatal and other content/focal areas based on continuous improvement process	3/1/20	12/31/23
3. Enhance ECE portal, including ECE provider data (licensing, monitoring, and quality) and state service/support information	10/1/19	9/30/21
4. Develop and implement targeted consumer outreach and education in collaboration with the CCRR Network to promote importance of choosing high quality ECE	In progress	2/28/20, ongoing
<b>Indicators:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation of 0-4 year old content in parentingmontana.org</li> <li>• Number of visits to improved ECE portal</li> <li>• Evidence of consumer education materials and media</li> </ul>		

#### Objective 4.2: Enhance and extend family engagement throughout early childhood system

Strategy	Start	End
1. Operationalize family engagement definition collaboratively with family engagement coordinators and local early childhood coalitions, with initial focus on early learning and development	9/1/19	9/30/20
2. Extend family engagement framework to other early childhood sectors (family support and health)	10/1/20	9/30/23
3. Engage in continuous improvement on family engagement definition	10/1/20	Ongoing
4. Evaluate service delivery models through a family engagement lens	10/1/20	Ongoing
5. Train early childhood workforce in implicit bias	10/1/19	Ongoing
<b>Indicators:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completion of phase 1 of family engagement framework (ECE focus)</li> </ul>		

- Percentage of ECE providers using family engagement framework
- Percentage of family members reporting feeling engaged in ECE settings

## COMMITMENT

### Goal 5: Communities make early childhood a priority, and act to support children’s health, learning, and well-being

#### Objective 5.1: Increase public understanding of and commitment to early childhood

Strategy	Start	End
1. Collaborate with 0-5 initiative and other stakeholders to develop shared messaging on early childhood	9/1/19	9/30/20
2. Collaborate with Addiction and Mental Disorders Division, Family and Community Health Bureau, Health Resources Division, the Montana Healthcare Foundation, and Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies to develop and implement shared messaging on perinatal substance use and mental illness	9/1/20	10/15/23
3. Support Family Forward Montana initiative, focused on supporting business engagement in early childhood	In progress	Ongoing
4. Work with partners to progress policy and funding priorities	9/1/19	Ongoing
<b>Indicators:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared messaging defined</li> <li>• Number of businesses participating in Family Forward Montana</li> <li>• Number of bills introduced supporting ECE</li> </ul>		

## GOVERNANCE

### Goal 6: Montana’s early childhood system is structured to support policy alignment, strategic financing, continuous improvement, and accountability

#### Objective 6.1: Enhance early childhood system governance structure at state and local levels

Strategy	Start	End
1. Improve cross-program, cross-sector program/bureau/division collaboration and coordination, with a focus on child care licensing, Part C, home visiting, nutrition, data-driven decision-making, and continuous improvement; work will include regulatory, policy, and practice coordination	9/1/19	12/31/19, ongoing
2. Explore opportunities to blend and braid funds through structural changes to coordinate/consolidate early childhood programs	9/1/19	12/31/19, ongoing
3. Conduct to work with providers to measure practice outcomes in IDEA Part C	9/1/19	9/30/20
4. Develop a trauma-informed early childhood system (cross-sector)	1/1/20	12/31/22
5. Continue to train on adverse childhood experiences	In progress	Ongoing
6. Identify how system and governance structure changes at the state level impact local actors	9/1/19	12/31/19, ongoing
7. Support consolidation and coordination of local coalitions (early childhood, prevention, health, safety, and others)	In progress	Ongoing
8. Continue to support and improve communication and collaboration with local coalitions	In progress	Ongoing

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Start</b>	<b>End</b>
9. Increase alignment of regional definitions	9/1/19	12/31/20
10. Coordinate and coalesce public private partnerships around Montana’s early childhood system priorities	In progress	Ongoing
11. Pursue efforts to increase staffing and funding resources for early childhood system	1/1/20	12/31/23
12. Define/enhance shared early childhood population level indicators	1/1/20	12/31/20
<b>Indicators:</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• System/governance changes decided and implemented</li> <li>• Early childhood system funding and staffing efficiency</li> </ul>		