



DEPARTMENT OF
**PUBLIC HEALTH &
HUMAN SERVICES**

Rural Institute
For Inclusive Communities

Sustaining and Strengthening Montana's Early Childhood System Strategic Plan

September 2025- September 2030



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Report Information

This report was prepared for the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Early Childhood and Family Support Division.

Contributors

This strategic plan reflects the combined efforts of multiple contributors.

Initial writing and stakeholder engagement were conducted in 2024 by Karen Filipovich.

In 2025, the Rural Institute Research and Evaluation team assumed responsibility for completing the strategic plan, including facilitating additional stakeholder engagement, text revisions, and final formatting. Members of the Rural Institute team who contributed to this work include Allison Wilson, Kaitlin Fertaly, and Gretchen Neal.

The development of this strategic plan was also informed by valuable feedback from the Bright Futures Birth through Five leadership team at the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS), along with many stakeholders across the Montana early childhood system who provided input throughout the project's duration.

Their engagement helped shape the goals and objectives and ensure that this document reflects a broad range of perspectives.

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Strategic Plan Background and Development

Montana first developed a statewide early childhood strategic plan in 2019, under its initial Preschool Development Grant from Birth through Five (PDG B-5). That foundational plan established system-level priorities to guide state and local partners. Since then, the early childhood landscape has undergone significant shifts, shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, persistent workforce shortages, economic pressures, and evolving family needs.

In 2024–2025, under the Bright Futures Birth to Five (BFB5) program, Montana undertook a renewed planning process to adapt to these evolving conditions and define a clear path forward. This updated plan directly builds on the findings of the 2025 Early Childhood Needs Assessment and includes extensive stakeholder engagement throughout the state. Surveys, interviews, meetings, and focus groups with families, tribal leaders, early learning providers, home visitors, health and mental health professionals, administrators, coalitions, and policymakers helped identify urgent needs and actionable priorities.

The 2025 needs assessment organized recommendations into three tiers to differentiate immediate, high-impact strategies from longer-term options. Tier 1 recommendations, those considered by stakeholders to be both highly important and highly feasible, serve as the foundation of this strategic plan. These priorities focus on:

- Expanding equitable access to affordable, high-quality early childhood services
- Strengthening and retaining the early childhood workforce
- Engaging families as true partners in system design and decision-making
- Improving coordination and navigation across programs and sectors
- Establishing sustainable governance to ensure alignment, accountability, and tribal consultation

This plan builds on momentum from stakeholder meetings held in both 2024 and 2025, most recently in conjunction with the 2025 Great Beginnings Great Families Conference. Participants reviewed key needs assessment findings, ranked recommendations based on feasibility and importance, and turned priority recommendations into actionable steps. Through small group strategy discussions, action planning roundtables, and large-group synthesis, stakeholders identified promising local initiatives already in progress, highlighted barriers and gaps, and outlined potential feasible actions for the next 12 months.

To extend this work, a statewide survey was distributed to stakeholders to capture examples of community- and state-level initiatives already in existence that align with the objectives and strategies of the strategic plan. Responses helped spotlight ongoing efforts, ensuring the plan reflects both existing momentum and opportunities for alignment. Together, insights from the GBGF conference and the stakeholder survey have been incorporated into this plan, grounding it in statewide priorities and the lived experiences of Montana's families, providers, and communities.



Mission and Vision for the Early Childhood System

Vision

Every Montana family has the opportunity to choose, use, and engage with early childhood services to meet their family's and children's needs and interests from pregnancy through age eight.

Mission

Sustain and strengthen Montana's comprehensive early childhood system by engaging families and supporting the early childhood workforce to improve young children's health, well-being, and developmental outcomes.

Strategic Plan Structure

The plan is organized into five focus areas within the early childhood system:

1. Access to High-Quality Services
2. Workforce
3. Family Engagement
4. Coordination
5. Shared Early Childhood Governance

Within each goal, specific objectives outline what must be achieved to drive progress. These objectives set the direction for strategies and identify suggested metrics to ensure accountability. To provide context for each objective, brief data-informed introductions drawn from the 2025 Montana Early Childhood Needs Assessment summarize key findings and statewide indicators that establish a baseline for progress. Grounding the objectives in these data ensures that the strategies which follow are evidence-based, actionable, and aligned with Montana's identified priorities and opportunities.

Throughout the plan, *Key Partner Community Spotlights* showcase examples from across Montana where local communities, tribal nations, and regional coalitions are already advancing innovative approaches. These stories illustrate how effective practices can be scaled or adapted to meet diverse needs across the state, demonstrating how data, collaboration, and local leadership intersect to strengthen Montana's early childhood system.

Implementation

The 2025–2030 Strategic Plan focuses on ensuring that gains and strengths in Montana’s early childhood system are sustained while closing persistent gaps at the system level. Implementation is envisioned as a collective effort, where every partner has a role in advancing the plan’s goals. Implementation will be carried out by:

- **State of Montana agencies and programs:** The Early Childhood and Family Support Division will lead many activities. Other divisions in the state, including the Office of Public Instruction and the Department of Labor and Industry, also have critical responsibilities in supporting young children and families.
- **Tribal governments:** With sovereign oversight of early childhood activities, tribes play a key role in guiding consultation, coordination, and culturally grounded approaches.
- **Local, regional, and statewide entities:** Community-based providers, school districts, home visiting programs, and professional development organizations are crucial in providing services, offering coaching, and supporting ongoing improvement.
- **Coalitions and networks:** The Montana Early Childhood Coalition, local community Early Childhood Coalitions, Montana Home Visiting Coalition, Early Childhood Tribal Coalition, and the Early Childhood Network serve as platforms for communication, coordination, advisory, and advocacy.
- **Business, economic development, and philanthropic partners:** Employers, chambers of commerce, and funding organizations help increase access, support workforce retention, and foster innovation.
- **Families:** Families stay at the heart of implementation. Their priorities, perspectives, and lived experiences will keep shaping strategies, metrics, and accountability processes.

Two important drivers will also guide implementation:

- **Alignment with State Priorities:** The creation of the Montana Early Childhood Special Revenue Account (HB 924) provides a critical opportunity to ensure that investments across the system are coordinated, sustainable, and tied to shared priorities. The strategic plan

acts as a guiding reference for the new Trust Board, ensuring that decisions about HB 924 allocations are made in alignment with Montana’s statewide priorities and the goals outlined here. Each objective is grounded in data from the 2025 Early Childhood Needs Assessment, which establishes a baseline for measuring progress over time. These data-informed introductions help contextualize the plan’s objectives, ensuring that implementation efforts are guided by clear evidence of need and opportunity across Montana’s early childhood system.

- **Key Partner Community Spotlights:** To guide implementation of the strategic plan, this document highlights *Key Partner Community Spotlights*, which feature examples of promising practices and collaborative initiatives from across Montana’s early childhood system. Each spotlight illustrates how local, tribal, regional, and statewide partners are advancing the objectives and strategies outlined in this plan through innovation, alignment, and family-centered approaches. These spotlights not only celebrate current progress but also identify key partners whose ongoing leadership will be critical to sustaining and scaling effective practices statewide. It should be noted that the community spotlights featured here were curated from responses to a statewide survey distributed by early childhood system leadership. They are intended to illustrate a range of efforts and innovations currently underway but do not represent a comprehensive account of all initiatives occurring across the state. Together, they demonstrate how coordinated action across sectors—education, health, family support, and workforce—translates shared priorities into measurable outcomes for young children and their families.



Continuous Improvement

Montana's early childhood system is dynamic, and this plan is intended to be a living document. While capacity for formal statewide review processes remains limited, the state and its partners are committed to continuous learning, adaptation, and transparency.

Approach to Review

Progress on this plan may be revisited over time as action steps unfold, with input gathered from families, providers, tribes, and coalitions when possible. As statewide structures continue to develop, review of the plan could become part of the responsibilities of a future governance entity or other coordinating body. Each review cycle may also consider how strategies are advancing opportunities for all children, supporting rural and tribal communities, and reflecting family voice. As capacity allows, updates, additional metrics, or progress reflections may be developed and shared to support ongoing alignment and learning.

Triggers for Review

Several upcoming projects, analyses, and assessments are expected to directly influence and guide implementation. As findings are finalized, they could be used to refine objectives, actions, and metrics.

| Convening | Potential Timing |
|--|------------------|
| Montana Prenatal to Five Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis | Fall 2025 |
| Quality Recognition System | October 2026 |
| Workforce Research and Project Completion | 2025 |
| CCDF Plan | September 2027 |

Commitment to Continuous Improvement

As new projects and studies are completed, or if policies, funding, or external conditions change, it is encouraged that this plan be updated accordingly. Community spotlights of promising practices will also guide review, ensuring that innovation and local leadership are recognized and shared. By integrating review and adaptation into the system itself, Montana ensures that this strategic plan remains relevant and actionable, serving as a reliable guide for practice, policy, and investment in the years to come.

Improve Access to High-Quality Services

Objective 1: Expand access to a continuum of affordable, high-quality ECCE options that meet diverse family needs

Access to affordable, high-quality early care and education remains a major challenge for Montana families. Families currently spend about 28 percent of their household income on child care, which is significantly higher than the federal affordability benchmark of 7 percent.¹ Although over 600 new licensed child care slots have been created through business and technical assistance efforts, many rural and high-growth counties still face unmet capacity.² Only 6 percent of surveyed families are currently participating in school-based early education programs, revealing untapped opportunities to expand mixed-delivery options.³ Meanwhile, around 66,000 parents in 2023 were fully or partially out of the workforce due to caregiving responsibilities.⁴ These figures highlight the interconnected issues of access, affordability, and economic participation, emphasizing the need for coordinated strategies to increase licensed capacity, modify subsidy eligibility based on regional cost-of-living differences, and foster partnerships among public, private, and school-based early learning providers.

Strategy 1.1 Child Care Subsidy Eligibility

Revise child care subsidy eligibility rules to better reflect actual family income and expenses. Strategies may include reviewing current thresholds, examining cost-of-living variations across Montana, and exploring policy options to ensure subsidies more effectively reduce barriers for families.

Strategy 1.2 Licensed Child Care Capacity

Increase licensed child care capacity by prioritizing underserved communities and child care deserts. Approaches may include targeted grants or incentives for providers, supporting facility expansion, and partnering with local governments and organizations to address zoning or infrastructure barriers.

Strategy 1.3 Workforce and Economic Development Integration

Integrate child care access into workforce and economic development strategies. This could include highlighting child care as essential infrastructure in local and state economic planning, partnering with employers to expand on-site or subsidized care, and leveraging economic development funds to support new or expanded child care businesses.

Strategy 1.4 Mixed-Delivery Partnerships

Strengthen partnerships across public schools, Head Start, and community-

based providers to increase mixed-delivery options for families. The term “mixed delivery system” as defined in the 2022 PDG NOFO, referencing section 9212(b)(5) of the Every Student Succeeds Act (42 U.S.C. 9831 note) refers to “a system of early childhood care and education (ECCE) services that are delivered through a combination of programs, providers, and settings, such as Head Start, licensed family and center-based child care programs, public schools, and other community-based organizations, that is supported by a combination of public and private funds.”

Building on this definition, the strategy emphasizes intentional collaboration across these diverse settings to ensure that families can access high-quality ECCE options that meet their needs and circumstances. Actions may include developing shared service agreements, aligning enrollment and eligibility processes, and supporting professional learning communities across sectors to promote continuity of care and education.

| Expected Outcomes | Possible Metrics |
|--|--|
| More families access ECCE services that fit their schedules, cultural preferences, and economic circumstances. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reporting families eligible for Best Beginnings scholarship • Percent of families reporting services met their needs • Enrollment data disaggregated by demographics |
| Increased licensed child care availability in rural, tribal, and underserved regions. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Licensed capacity by county/tribe • Ratio of licensed slots to estimated demand • Number of child care deserts reduced |
| Stronger mixed-delivery partnerships expand options for families beyond a single program type. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of partnership agreements (e.g., public school–Head Start–community providers) • Number of children served in mixed-delivery settings |

Implementation of Montana’s access strategies depends on coordinated action across state agencies, local governments, early learning providers, and

community coalitions. Ensuring that every family can access affordable, high-quality ECCE requires policy reform, infrastructure investment, and intentional partnerships across settings. The following implementation partners illustrate how cross-sector collaboration is already advancing equitable access and expanding mixed-delivery options for families across Montana.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: Navigating School-Age Licensure

The Montana Afterschool Alliance, in partnership with local providers, is helping school-age programs navigate state licensing requirements. Efforts include clarifying regulations, supporting applications, and troubleshooting facility and staffing barriers. These partnerships are expanding the number of licensed afterschool and summer programs, ensuring families, particularly in rural areas—have access to safe, reliable out-of-school care.

Strategic Alignment in Action: Advances Strategies 1.2 and 1.4 by addressing regulatory barriers, expanding licensed capacity, and strengthening the mixed-delivery network that supports families with school-age children.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: Expanding Access in Carbon County

The Carbon County Coalition is expanding child care access by connecting families with providers and identifying barriers in rural communities. These efforts strengthen the local early childhood infrastructure and increase options for families.

Strategic Alignment and Impact: Advances Strategies 1.1 and 1.2 by identifying gaps, informing local investment priorities, and demonstrating how community-driven partnerships can close access disparities in child care deserts.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: Missoula Child Care (MCCA) Initiative

MCCA is a network of independent child care businesses that share services to streamline operations and boost their finances. Local companies can pay a fee to join MCCA as Business Members. Their staff then get preferred access to an Enrollment and Waitlist Portal, making it easier to find child care. Membership fees help cover shared services, making them free for participating providers.

Strategic Alignment and Impact: Supports Objective 1 by strengthening access pathways and community partnerships

Together, these partners illustrate how state and local collaboration can expand child care availability, streamline regulatory processes, and strengthen mixed-delivery systems that meet families where they are. Their work models the

collective action needed to ensure that all Montana families, across geography, income, and culture, can choose from a continuum of affordable, high-quality early learning and care options that support children's growth and family well-being.

Objective 2: Strengthen access to developmental supports, including Part C Early Intervention services

Montana's data show ongoing gaps in early identification and intervention for children with developmental delays. Nearly 47 percent of ECCE providers reported not using formal developmental screening tools, which limits opportunities for early detection.⁵ Although 84.8 percent of children enrolled in federally-funded Home Visiting programs received timely developmental screenings, inconsistent follow-up and lack of cross-sector coordination remain challenges.⁶ From 2017 to 2022, only 2.11 percent of infants and toddlers received services under IDEA Part C, aligning with, but not exceeding, national averages.⁷ These figures highlight both the strengths of the current home-visiting infrastructure and areas for systemic improvement. Enhancing provider training, increasing family awareness of eligibility pathways, and creating shared referral and follow-up protocols across early learning, health, and home-visiting programs will improve developmental support systems across the state.

Strategy 2.1 Developmental Screening Tools

Expand training and technical assistance for providers on the use of standardized developmental screening tools. Promote consistent use of screenings across medical, childcare, and home visiting settings, and explore opportunities to align training with existing professional development systems. Develop or utilize existing systems that track and report the percentage of children ages 0-5 screened using standardized tools in medical, childcare, and home visiting settings.

Strategy 2.2 Awareness of Part C Services

Increase awareness of Part C services and eligibility pathways among families and providers. Strategies may include developing outreach materials for parents and caregivers, integrating referral information into pediatric and family practice clinics, and leveraging community-based organizations to share resources.

Strategy 2.3 Follow-Up and Referral Protocols

Establish consistent follow-up protocols and referral pathways for children identified through developmental screenings. Strategies may include developing standardized guidance for providers across medical, childcare, and home visiting settings; creating shared referral forms and processes. Tracking mechanisms

could be developed or aligned with existing systems to monitor referral rates and outcomes.

| Expected Outcomes | Possible Metrics |
|---|---|
| More children are screened early for developmental delays and referred to appropriate supports. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Percentage of children screened by age 3• Referral-to-service timelines• Number of children receiving Part C services |
| Families and providers have greater knowledge of Part C services and pathways to eligibility. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family survey results on knowledge of early intervention• Provider training participation rates |
| Statewide follow-up protocols reduce gaps between screening, referral, and service delivery. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Average time from screening to referral and from referral to service start |

Implementation of this objective depends on strong collaboration among state agencies, early learning programs, family advocacy organizations, and community-based partners. By aligning training, outreach, and referral systems, Montana can ensure every child receives timely developmental supports. The following implementation partners illustrate how statewide and community-level initiatives are already advancing this work.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: Head Start Early Intervention Roadshow

In 2024–2025, the Montana Head Start Collaboration Office (HSCO) partnered with the Office of Public Instruction and the Montana Empowerment Center to host a statewide “Early Intervention Roadshow.” The team convened 19 meetings with 22 of Montana’s 23 Head Start programs, connecting them with local Part C providers, Family Education and Support contractors, school special education staff, and community partners. The Roadshow strengthened referral systems, clarified IDEA requirements, and built lasting partnerships to improve access to developmental supports.

Strategic Alignment in Action: HSCO’s leadership exemplifies how statewide coordination can build the connective infrastructure needed for early identification and intervention across systems.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: Promoting Awareness of Part C

The Montana Empowerment Center (MEC) actively raises awareness of Part C services through conference presentations and resource tables. By meeting families and providers where they are, MEC helps ensure more children are referred to and connected with early intervention supports.

Strategic Alignment and Impact: MEC's family-centered outreach highlights the critical role of parent advocacy organizations as trusted messengers in helping families navigate developmental supports.

Together, these partnerships illustrate how Montana's network of early learning programs, family organizations, and state offices is already advancing early identification and intervention. Their collaboration serves as a foundation for scaling consistent, family-centered developmental support systems statewide.



Workforce

Objective 3: Build a coordinated, supported, and sustainable early childhood workforce pipeline

Montana's early childhood workforce continues to face critical shortages, high turnover, and limited access to professional development. Findings from the ECCE Workforce Report highlight compensation disparities and inadequate training access, particularly in rural regions.⁸ Providers identified limited substitute coverage and time constraints as barriers to participation in professional learning opportunities.⁹ Stakeholders consistently called for a coordinated training system with shared standards, stackable credentials, and flexible delivery methods, as well as expanded content on trauma-informed practice, leadership, and early-childhood business management.¹⁰ In addition, the workforce identified a strong need for retention supports such as bonuses, stipends, and wellness initiatives, alongside expanded access to Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Services (IECMH).¹¹ Collectively, these findings establish a clear baseline: strengthening Montana's early-childhood system depends on building a unified, accessible, and well-supported professional pipeline that advances workforce well-being and program quality across all regions.

Strategy 3.1 Coordinated Training System

Create a coordinated training system with shared standards and flexible delivery models. Strategies may include aligning content across institutions of higher education, offering stackable credentials, and utilizing online and hybrid delivery options.

Strategy 3.2 Expanded Training Content

Expand professional development to include mentorship, trauma-informed practices, and early childhood business skills. Explore integration into existing training structures and ensure opportunities are accessible across urban, rural, and tribal communities.

Strategy 3.3 Recruitment and Retention Supports

Support recruitment and retention by funding bonuses, stipends, and wellness supports. Consider strategies that reduce turnover, promote career advancement, and strengthen provider well-being.

Strategy 3.4 Entry Pathways

Expand pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs to strengthen entry

pathways into the field. Leverage partnerships with schools, community colleges, and employers to ensure equitable access.

Strategy 3.5 Tribal Knowledge and Approaches

Support professional development that incorporates tribal approaches and cultural knowledge. Collaborate with tribal communities to co-design training, mentorship, and leadership opportunities.

Strategy 3.6 IECMH Services

Expand access to Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) services for ECCE professionals. Strategies may include integrating consultation and coaching into existing PD systems, promoting cross-sector collaboration with health and mental health providers, and tracking utilization and outcomes to strengthen workforce capacity.

| Expected Outcomes | Possible Metrics |
|---|--|
| Early childhood professionals demonstrate higher levels of competency through consistent training standards. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage of workforce completing coordinated training Early Childhood Project (ECP) registry levels |
| Retention improves as workforce supports reduce burnout and financial stress. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual retention rates; staff turnover Provider wellness survey results |
| Expanded entry pathways (apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships) increase the supply of new ECCE professionals. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship enrollment and completion numbers Number of new licenses/registrations annually |
| Tribal knowledge and approaches are integrated into statewide workforce development strategies. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of PD offerings co-designed with tribes Tribal participation in workforce initiatives |
| ECCE professionals are better equipped to support children's social-emotional and mental health needs through access to IECMH services. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage of ECCE programs receiving IECMH services (consultation, training, or support) |

Implementation of this objective relies on aligned action among higher education institutions, Head Start programs, tribal partners, state agencies, professional associations, and community coalitions. The key partners below are already advancing core elements of a statewide workforce pipeline and illustrate the collaborative infrastructure needed for scale.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: IECMH Consultant Training

The University of Montana Center for Children, Families, and Workforce Development is leading training for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) consultants statewide. This effort equips professionals to better support children's social-emotional needs, expanding the state's capacity to provide mental health services across early learning settings.

Strategic Alignment and Impact: Advances Strategy 3.6 by expanding consultation capacity and embedding mental health supports into professional development systems.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: Tribal Apprenticeship Pathways

In collaboration with the Montana Department of Labor and Industry, HSCO is expanding apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship opportunities for early educators. A priority focus is ensuring access for tribal Head Start programs, which often face barriers in accessing state-funded pathways. By working tribe-by-tribe to identify funding solutions, this effort creates equitable entry points into the early childhood workforce.

Strategic Alignment and Impact: Directly supports Strategies 3.4 and 3.5 by widening on-ramps into the profession and honoring tribal approaches to workforce development.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: Peer Mentorship for Educators

The Montana Family Coalition Network (MFCN) and the Montana Association for the Education of Young Children (MTAEYC) are developing mentorship programs to support educators and programs in pursuing national accreditations. These mentorship models help build quality, reduce isolation, and strengthen workforce retention.

Strategic Alignment and Impact: Advances Strategies 3.2 and 3.3 by embedding mentorship and promoting retention through professional growth opportunities.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: University of Montana Institute for Early Childhood Education Learning Library

The University of Montana Institute for Early Childhood Education (IECE) is building

statewide workforce capacity through its new Learning Library. This resource brings together Reflect & Connect professional development series, BrightBites micro-modules, and Virtual Classroom Tours into a single, publicly accessible hub. By offering flexible, high-quality professional learning aligned with Montana's Early Learning Standards and NAEYC competencies, the Learning Library supports early educators in every region of the state. The IECE's efforts ensure that professional development is accessible, relevant, and responsive in order to help Montana retain, and strengthen its early childhood workforce.

Strategic Alignment in Action: Powers Strategies 3.1 and 3.2 with flexible, high-quality professional learning; strengthens workforce retention by making training relevant, accessible, and job-embedded statewide.

Together, these partners form a coordinated workforce infrastructure: a shared training backbone (iPD/IECE), targeted IECMH capacity, equitable apprenticeship on-ramps, including tribal pathways, and mentorship that stabilizes the field. This collaborative ecosystem operationalizes the strategies under Objective 3 and positions Montana to build, support, and retain a high-quality early childhood workforce across all regions.



Family Engagement

Objective 4: Center families as partners and decision-makers in the early childhood system.

Montana families highlight the importance of trust, respect, and inclusion in their interactions with early childhood programs. Providers identified common barriers like limited family capacity, staffing shortages, transportation, and child care¹². Families valued inclusive communication, primarily when fathers, kinship caregivers, and foster parents were acknowledged, and they noted that default references to “mom” can feel exclusionary.¹³ These perspectives highlight the importance of engagement strategies that acknowledge diverse family structures and cultural backgrounds. Families also stressed the importance of feeling welcomed, informed, and connected, values that can guide provider training and family-partnership initiatives.¹⁴ Utilizing family voices to inform system design, expanding personalized engagement opportunities, and enhancing plain-language communication tools will help ensure that families are recognized as key partners and decision-makers in Montana’s early childhood system.

Strategy 4.1 Family Priorities in System Improvements

Use shared family priorities, such as feeling safe, supported, and connected—to inform system improvements. Strategies may include gathering and analyzing family feedback, embedding family voice into advisory councils, and ensuring that continuous quality improvement processes reflect lived family experiences.

Strategy 4.2 Tailored Engagement Opportunities

Provide tailored engagement opportunities that reflect cultural, linguistic, and geographic diversity. Approaches may include co-designing engagement activities with families, offering interpretation and translation services, and holding events at times and locations that are accessible to rural and tribal communities.

Strategy 4.3 Family Communication Tools and Navigation Supports

Expand communication tools and resources that help families navigate and evaluate early childhood services. This may involve developing user-friendly guides, expanding use of digital platforms and hotlines, and ensuring resources are available in plain language and multiple languages.

Strategy 4.4 Employer-Supported Family Policies

Encourage employer-supported policies, such as flexible hours and paid family leave—that strengthen family participation in services and activities. Strategies

may include partnering with chambers of commerce, highlighting model employer practices, and exploring policy incentives that support family-friendly workplaces.

| Expected Outcomes | Possible Metrics |
|---|--|
| Tailored engagement strategies increase participation across geographic, cultural, and linguistic groups. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation rates disaggregated by geography, language, culture • Number of translated/accessible resources distributed |
| Families can more easily access, compare, and evaluate early childhood services. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website/portal traffic analytics • Family survey on ease of navigation • Number of referrals completed |
| Workplace policies that support parent engagement become more common across employers. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percent of employers adopting family-friendly policies per region • Percent of workforce with access to flexible leave |

Successful implementation of this objective depends on authentic partnerships with families, early childhood programs, and employers across Montana. Family engagement efforts must reflect the diversity of families' cultures, languages, and communities, which ensures that their voices directly shape services, policies, and continuous quality improvement. The following partners demonstrate how family voice is being elevated across programs and how their leadership can guide implementation statewide.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: Missoula County Parent Leadership Training Institute – Building Family Leadership and Advocacy Capacity

The Missoula County Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) is a civics, advocacy, and leadership program that equips parents, caregivers, and community members with the skills and knowledge to create positive change for youth and families. This free, 20-week program includes individualized childcare support, on-site meals, and transportation assistance to reduce barriers to participation. Through PLTI, families strengthen their leadership capacity and deepen their engagement in shaping community and system-level decisions that impact children and families across Missoula County.

Strategic Alignment and Impact: Advances Strategy 4.1 by embedding family voice and leadership within local systems of governance and promoting equitable participation in decision-making processes.

Successful implementation of this objective relies on authentic partnerships with families, early childhood programs, and employers across Montana. Embedding family voice and leadership within early childhood systems ensures that policies, services, and quality improvement efforts reflect the rich diversity of families' cultures, languages, and lived experiences. The Missoula County Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) exemplifies how community-based initiatives can elevate family voice and build leadership capacity, demonstrating that when families are engaged as partners and decision-makers, systems become more responsive, equitable, and effective. This model offers a pathway for scaling family-centered governance and engagement strategies statewide to ensure that family priorities actively shape Montana's early learning system.



Coordination

Objective 5: Strengthen system navigation and coordination so families experience a seamless continuum of services

Montana's early-childhood landscape remains fragmented, with families and providers often navigating disconnected systems of care. Findings from the 2025 Needs Assessment indicate that referral and follow-up processes vary significantly across programs, and nearly half of ECCE providers reported lacking standardized procedures for connecting children and families to additional support.¹⁵ Families shared experiences of service duplication and missed referrals, especially during transitions between home-visiting, child-care, and early-intervention programs.¹⁶ Although strong models like Montana CONNECT exist, a statewide referral platform piloted through early-childhood and health collaborations, coverage and consistent use are still limited.¹⁷ Stakeholders emphasized that shared data tools, standardized referral forms, and local cross-sector agreements are crucial for ensuring continuity and timely access to support.¹⁸ Building a coordinated navigation and referral infrastructure will decrease fragmentation and help families experience a seamless continuum of early childhood services across the state.

Strategy 5.1 Shared Referral and Follow-Up Systems

Develop shared referral and follow-up systems across ECCE, home visiting, health care, and special needs services. Strategies may include creating standardized referral forms, establishing shared data or tracking tools, and building cross-sector agreements to ensure children and families are connected to needed supports in a timely manner.

Strategy 5.2 Regional and Local Partnerships

Build regional and local partnerships to coordinate eligibility, enrollment, and transition supports. Approaches may include convening community collaboratives, aligning enrollment timelines, and supporting cross-sector case management to reduce duplication and improve continuity of care.

Strategy 5.3 Family Portals and Warm-Handoff Models

Pilot family portals and warm-handoff models to improve access and reduce fragmentation. This could involve testing digital platforms that connect families to services, embedding navigators in trusted community settings, and developing protocols for personal referrals across agencies and providers.

| Expected Outcomes | Possible Metrics |
|---|---|
| Families experience fewer barriers when moving between ECCE, health, and early intervention services. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family survey results |
| Referral systems are consistent, timely, and easier for both providers and families to use. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Average referral completion time Number of community/regional transition plans adopted |
| Families report greater satisfaction with transitions and handoffs between programs. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transition satisfaction ratings |

Implementation of this objective depends on collaboration across early childhood care and education (ECCE), health, home visiting, and early intervention systems. To achieve a truly seamless continuum of care, partners at the state, regional, and local levels must coordinate referral, enrollment, and transition supports. The following implementation partners demonstrate how statewide tools and local collaborations are already improving navigation and reducing barriers for families.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: Coordinated Services in Gallatin County

The Gallatin Area Early Childhood Community Council unites organizations to coordinate referrals, enrollment, and transitions for families. This collaborative model reduces duplication and helps families experience seamless navigation across services.

Strategic Alignment and Impact: Advances Strategies 5.2 and 5.3 by demonstrating how regional collaboration and coordinated case management can create consistent, family-centered experiences across programs.

By aligning efforts across early childhood, health, home visiting, and early intervention systems, partners can streamline referrals, enrollment, and transitions. The Gallatin Area Early Childhood Community Council exemplifies this coordinated approach, demonstrating how shared case management and regional collaboration reduce duplication, improve navigation, and advance family-centered service delivery statewide.

Objective 6: Improve alignment across agencies, coalitions, and sectors to reduce duplication and strengthen impact

Montana's early-childhood system comprises a broad network of state agencies, tribal governments, coalitions, and local organizations that often share overlapping goals but lack effective coordination. The Needs Assessment identified duplicated planning processes, siloed data systems, and inconsistent definitions of quality as major barriers to system efficiency and accountability.¹⁹ Stakeholders expressed strong support for joint planning structures that bring together early childhood, health, workforce, and education partners around shared objectives.²⁰ Improved data-sharing mechanisms and integrated dashboards were also seen as essential for strengthening decision-making and ensuring public investments deliver measurable outcomes.²¹ These findings underscore that improving alignment across agencies and coalitions will help Montana leverage existing capacity, reduce duplication, and develop a more coordinated early childhood system that responds effectively to children, families, and communities across the state.

Strategy 6.1 Joint Planning Efforts

Expand joint planning efforts with the Office of Public Instruction (OPI), Tribal governments, and community partners. Approaches may include establishing regular cross-agency planning sessions, aligning program goals and timelines, and identifying opportunities to braid or layer funding streams for greater efficiency.

Strategy 6.2 Data Sharing Across Systems

Share data across systems through secure agreements and dashboards that inform policy and practice. Strategies may include developing or updating interagency data-sharing agreements, aligning indicators and definitions across agencies, and building user-friendly dashboards that allow stakeholders to monitor progress and identify gaps.

| Expected Outcomes | Possible Metrics |
|--|---|
| More coordinated state, tribal, and local planning efforts strengthen collective impact. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of cross-agency planning meetings or agreements• Documented collaborative initiatives |
| Shared data and dashboards inform policy and improve accountability. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of joint planning meetings or agreements• Documented collaborative initiatives |

Implementation of this objective requires intentional collaboration across state agencies, Tribal governments, coalitions, and local networks to ensure that programs and policies operate as part of a unified early childhood system. Strengthening alignment across these entities helps reduce duplication, improve efficiency, and ensure data-informed decision-making. The following implementation partners exemplify how joint planning and shared data systems can promote collective impact statewide.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: Zero to Five Montana Leads Alignment Work

Zero to Five Montana leads statewide child care alignment efforts, convening providers, advocates, and policymakers to reduce duplication, strengthen partnerships, and align state and local priorities.

Strategic Alignment and Impact: Advances Strategy 6.1 by demonstrating the power of statewide convening and collaborative planning to create shared direction and amplify the impact of local and state initiatives.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: Zero to Five Missoula County – Sharing Kindergarten Entry Assessment Data Across Sectors

Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) results are made available to authorized community partners to strengthen collaboration between early learning, health, and family-serving systems. By using KEA data to identify trends and needs, county stakeholders align strategies, tailor supports, and inform policies that improve outcomes for young children and their families.

Strategic Alignment in Action: Advances Strategy 6.2 by enabling transparent, shared data use for cross-sector planning, and supports Strategy 6.1 by aligning partners around common measures to guide joint decision-making.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: Ravalli County Early Childhood Coalition and Hamilton Public Schools – Strengthening Collaboration Between Early Learning and K–12

The Ravalli County Early Childhood Coalition is partnering with local school districts to share data and strengthen relationships between early care and education providers and kindergarten teachers. This effort is fostering alignment across systems and ensuring smoother transitions for children entering school. To deepen collaboration, the coalition is hosting a November conference that includes a social networking evening designed to connect early childhood educators and public school staff, building understanding and lasting partnerships across sectors.

Strategic Alignment in Action: Advances Strategies 6.1 and 6.2 by building coordinated, data-informed partnerships between early learning programs and K–12 systems to support seamless transitions and shared understanding statewide.

Implementation of this objective depends on intentional collaboration among state agencies, Tribal governments, coalitions, and local networks to ensure programs and policies function as an interconnected early childhood system. Strengthening alignment across these entities reduces duplication, improves efficiency, and supports data-informed decision-making. Statewide efforts led by Zero to Five Montana demonstrate how shared data systems and cross-sector convening can establish unified direction and amplify impact. At the community level, Missoula and Ravalli counties illustrate how these strategies take shape on the ground—using data sharing, joint planning, and relationship-building between early learning and K–12 systems to promote smoother transitions and responsive supports for children and families.

Together, these initiatives exemplify how intentional alignment and data integration can transform Montana’s early childhood landscape, creating a cohesive, efficient, and equitable system where policy, funding, and practice move in concert to improve outcomes for all young children and their families.



Engaging Early Childhood Systems Stakeholders

Objective 7: Define and develop structures to engage early childhood systems stakeholders

The Needs Assessment underscored the absence of a formal statewide engagement structure to guide Montana's early-childhood system and ensure accountability for shared priorities. Stakeholders emphasized the need for a clearly defined statewide entity with representation from families, tribal governments, early-learning providers, and community coalitions.²² Respondents also highlighted the importance of embedding formal consultation with sovereign tribal nations into decision-making processes, ensuring that policy and funding decisions honor tribal authority and reflect local priorities.²³ Local and regional coalitions expressed a desire for stronger connections to statewide planning efforts, noting that current feedback loops are inconsistent and often one-directional.²⁴ These insights establish a baseline for building an engagement framework grounded in transparency, equity, and collaboration, one that integrates local leadership, respects tribal sovereignty, and sustains cross-sector accountability across Montana's early-childhood system.

Strategy 7.1 Statewide Engagement Structure

Reestablish a statewide early childhood stakeholder engagement structure with clear roles for decision-making and accountability. Strategies may include clarifying authority across agencies, establishing representation from key sectors, and defining processes for monitoring implementation of statewide priorities.

Strategy 7.2 Tribal Consultation

Formalize ongoing consultation between the state and sovereign Tribal governments. Approaches may include embedding consultation into decision-making processes, establishing formal agreements, and ensuring Tribal representation in statewide engagement structures.

Strategy 7.3 Local and Regional Coalitions

Support local and regional coalitions in aligning with statewide priorities while honoring community voice. Strategies may include offering technical assistance, funding coordination staff, and creating feedback loops so local priorities inform state-level decision-making.

| Expected Outcomes | Possible Metrics |
|--|--|
| A statewide engagement structure is active and clearly defined in scope and responsibilities. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative process established (Y/N) • Number of meetings held annually • Participation rates |
| Formalized tribal consultation strengthens sovereignty and shared decision-making. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of formal consultations per year • Documented agreements or MOUs |
| Local and regional coalitions are better aligned with statewide priorities while retaining local responsiveness. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of local/regional coalitions aligned • Coalition survey on alignment and autonomy |

Implementation of this objective depends on the creation of formal and inclusive structures that bring together voices from across Montana’s early childhood system—state and tribal governments, higher education, early learning programs, coalitions, and families. By establishing clear mechanisms for engagement and consultation, the state can ensure that decision-making is transparent, representative, and responsive to local and tribal priorities. The following implementation partners illustrate how stakeholder engagement and shared leadership are already shaping Montana’s early childhood engagement system.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: Montana Early Childhood Coalition

The University of Montana Center for Children, Families, and Workforce Development co-facilitates the Montana Early Childhood Coalition alongside Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies and Zero to Five Montana. The coalition provides technical assistance to local early childhood groups and helps align their priorities with statewide strategies. By connecting local coalitions to the Early Childhood Network, this partnership ensures community voices inform policy and engagement opportunities.

Strategic Alignment in Action: Advances Strategies 7.1 and 7.3 by demonstrating how cross-sector coalitions can sustain statewide alignment while embedding authentic local participation in system engagement.

Key Partner Community Spotlight: University of Montana Institute for Early Childhood Education – Convening Leaders

The Institute for Early Childhood Education supports shared engagement by convening leaders and amplifying community voice. Through the Early Learning Fellows and the Annual Early Childhood Education Summit, IECE brings together professionals, families, tribal partners, and policymakers to set priorities and strengthen early childhood engagement. The IECE advisory council includes representation from local school districts, Zero to Five Montana, The Office of Public Instruction, Department of Health and Human Services, Montana Advocates for Children, School Administrators of Montana, and the Montana Early Childhood Project and early childhood higher education.

Strategic Alignment in Action: Advances Strategies 7.1 and 7.2 by exemplifying how higher education can serve as a convener for diverse voices, fostering shared leadership and data-informed decision-making at both state and local levels.

Together, these partners demonstrate a robust, collaborative foundation for Montana’s early childhood engagement system. Through coalitions that connect local priorities to statewide strategy, formal agreements that strengthen accountability, and convenings that elevate diverse voices, including Tribal and family perspectives, Montana is building an engagement structure grounded in inclusion, alignment, and continuous collaboration. These efforts ensure that future decision-making processes reflect the collective expertise and lived experiences of those who work with and on behalf of young children and families across the state.

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