



ZERO TO FIVE MONTANA 2023 LEGISLATIVE SESSION SUMMARY



Overview

Every other year, Montana’s legislative session brings a short 90-day window of opportunity to make policy changes that will impact the youngest kids and families across our state for generations to come. While every session showcases new and veteran legislators, various bills, complicated political dynamics, and often tense environments, there are a few elements that set Montana’s 68th Legislative Session apart from others. It was the most conservative legislative body our state has seen in the last 16 years with the Republican party holding a supermajority. In the House of Representatives, Republicans held 68 seats, while Democrats had 32 seats. In the Senate, Republicans held 34 seats and Democrats had 16 seats.

With more than 4,600 bill drafts requested, nearly 1,700 were introduced. Roughly 50 bills related to early childhood were never introduced. As we have seen in other states (such as New Mexico) it can take decades to build up the education and momentum needed to make the greatest impact and change – long-term strategic efforts are required for even the smallest wins.

Even with bills that did not make it to debate and others that were dead on arrival, the 2023 session delivered a shift – a true conversation between our state’s elected officials about the issues impacting kids, parents, families, small businesses, and Montana’s economy. Even when legislators could not agree on policy decisions, they acknowledged that Montana’s early care and education system needs attention.

Legislator Outreach & Policy Agenda Development

The 2023 session represented a historic marker for early childhood in Montana with more bills addressing early childhood-related issues than ever before. Zero to Five Montana conducted candidate outreach in the summer of 2022 to all state legislative candidates. Immediately following the election on Nov. 8, 2022, we mailed all elected officials a congratulations letter and provided our one-pager on child care and the workforce.

Through a collaborative approach, we developed our [2023 policy agenda](#) with input from nearly 20 partners across the state including early learning organizations, child care providers, and tribal Head Start programs. Our agenda aimed to outline tangible solutions to provide more immediate relief, while working towards long-term impact. We focused on challenges including the lack of child care, limited access to early learning, low wages for early care professionals, and supports necessary to strengthen families and communities. In December 2022, we sent additional emails to all new and incumbent legislators introducing our policy agenda and providing other relevant handouts.

Session Activity

Once session began in January 2023, our organization actively tracked around 80 bills and 50 bill drafts related to early childhood. Of those bills, we testified in person or virtually 27 times. We also provided written testimony on nine occasions.

Priority Bills

HB 187 – Clarifies that for the purpose of homeowner's associations (HOAs) covenants, family and group child care is a residential use of property. Representative Alice Buckley (D, HD 63 – Bozeman).

Engagement: Provided in-person testimony in House Local Government and Senate Business.

Status: Passed and signed by the Governor.

HB 225 – Creates an adoption tax credit for families in Montana. Representative Courtenay Sprunger (R, HD 7 – Kalispell area).

Engagement: Provided written testimony for Senate Taxation hearing.

Status: Passed and signed by the Governor.

HB 230 – Provide continuous eligibility for CHIP and Medicaid for children up to age 6. Representative Ed Stafman (D, HD 62 – Bozeman).

Engagement: Written testimony to House Human Services.

Status: Tabled in House Human Services.

HB 238 – Outlines Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarship in law, expands eligibility to 85% SMI (from 150% FPL), limits copays to 7% of income, changes provider reimbursement from attendance to enrollment. Representative Howell (D, HD 95 – Missoula).

Engagement: Provided in-person testimony during House Human Services hearing.

Status: Tabled by House Human Services.

HB 249 – Child tax credit, \$1,200 (0-5) & \$600 (6-18). Refundable up to \$65k married couple. Phase out at \$25 for every \$1,000 over income. Sponsored by Representative Ed Stafman (D, HD 62 – Bozeman).

Engagement: In-person testimony in House Taxation.

Status: Tabled in House Taxation Committee.

SB 259 – Small business tax credit for paying a living wage at \$15 an hour. Businesses eligible for \$1,000 per employee (paid at least \$15 an hour for 6 months), up to \$25,000. Small business considered 30 employees or less. Not a refundable credit, cannot be carried back or forward. Sponsored by Senator Mary Ann Dunwell (D, SD 42 – Helena).

Engagement: Written testimony in Senate Business.

Status: Tabled in Senate Business, Labor, and Economic Affairs.

HB 268 – Would have established a state child tax credit, \$1,200 for families with kids ages 0-5. Refundable up to \$50k. Income threshold begins at \$50k and ends at \$56k. Representative Jacob Kassmier (R, HD 27 – Fort Benton, Big Sandy, Joplin).

Engagement: Provided in-person testimony during House Taxation hearing.

Status: Tabled.

HB 287 – Revises laws related to Indian language preservation including early childhood settings. Representative Jonathon Windy Boy (D, HD 32 – Box Elder, Hays, Fort Belknap).

Engagement: Provided virtual testimony in House Education and Senate Education hearings.

Status: Passed and signed by the Governor.

HB 317 – Creates a Montana Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). Representative Jonathon Windy Boy (D, HD 32 – Box Elder, Hays, Fort Belknap).

Engagement: Provided written and virtual testimony in House Human Services and virtual testimony in Senate Public Health.

Status: Passed and signed by the Governor.

HB 336 – Removes requirements for military child care facilities to be licensed by the state. Sponsored by Ed Buttrey (R, HD 21 – Great Falls area).

Engagement: Provided written testimony for Senate hearing.

Status: Passed and signed by the Governor.

HB 352 – Provide targeted interventions to support 3rd grade reading proficiency. Representative Brad Barker (R, HD 58 – Red Lodge Area).

Engagement: Provided in-person testimony for all hearings (4 total, House Education, House Appropriations, Sen Education, Senate Finances & Claims).

Status: Passed and signed by the Governor.

SB 376 – Would have barred covenants from prohibiting child care. Senator Kenneth Bogner (R, SD 19 – Miles City area).

Engagement: Provided in-person testimony in Senate Local Government and House Judiciary.

Status: Tabled in House Judiciary.

HB 422 – Increases some child to staff ratios for child care. Sponsored by Representative Terry Falk (R, HD 08 – Kalispell).

Engagement: In-person and written testimony in House Human Services, written testimony in Senate Health.

Status: Passed and signed by the Governor.

HB 466 – Would create an advisory council focused on working to engage fathers. Sponsored by Representative Jane Gillette (R, HD 64 – Bozeman/Gallatin Gateway).

Engagement: Written testimony in House Human Services.

Status: Tabled in House Human Services Committee.

SB 450 – Would require a licensed child care provider to serve children with religious or conscience vaccine exemptions. Sponsored by Senator Daniel Emrich (R, SD 11 – Great Falls area).

Engagement: In-person testimony in Senate Health and House Judiciary.

Status: Tabled in House Judiciary.

HB 556 – Removes licensing requirements for providers caring for 6 children or fewer in a private residence – unless they are receiving payments for Best Beginnings. Sponsored by Representative Jennifer Carlson (R, HD 69 – Manhattan area).

Engagement: In-person and written testimony in House Human Services, in-person testimony in Senate Health.

Status: Passed and signed by the Governor.

HB 648 – Would increase eligibility for Best Beginnings to 185% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), cap copies at 9% of income for families, and base reimbursement rates on enrollment instead of attendance, and fund the program with \$7 million annually from the general fund. Sponsored by Representative Alice Buckley (D, HD 63 – Bozeman area).

Engagement: In-person testimony in House Human Services and House Appropriations. Written testimony to Senate Health.

Status: Passed Both Chambers, signed by the Governor.

HB 651 – Would create Montana Family and Medical Leave Insurance Act. Sponsored by Derek Harvey (D, HD 74 – Butte area).

Engagement: Written testimony to House Business.

Status: Tabled in House Business and Labor.

HB 688 – Would prohibit social-emotional learning in school settings, primarily outlines social-emotional learning as school surveys regarding stress, well-being, and using those surveys to inform practices. Sponsored by Representative Lola Sheldon-Galloway (R, HD 22 – Great Falls).

Engagement: Written testimony in House Education.

Status: Tabled in House Education.

HB 816 – As amended out of Senate Local Government (prior to heading to Senate Finance and Claims), would have established a child tax credit as included in HB 268. The child tax credits were removed from the bill in committee.

Engagement: In-person testimony in Senate Finance and Claims.

Status: Passed without the child tax credit amendment, signed by Governor.

HB 832 - Would provide early care and education workers with a \$1,600 tax credit, adjusted annually to inflation. Sponsored by Melissa Romano (D, HD 81 Helena)

Engagement: In-person testimony in House Taxation.

Status: Tabled in House Taxation.

HB 850 – Would provide continuous eligibility for CHIP and Medicaid for children up to age 6. Representative Ed Stafman (D, HD 62 – Bozeman).

Engagement: In-person testimony in House Human Services.

Status: Tabled in House Human Services.

HB 954 – Revise day-care facility immunization requirements. Sponsored by Jennifer Carlson (R, HD 69 – Manhattan area).

Engagement: In-person testimony during House Human Services hearing.

Status: Tabled in House Human Services.

HB 967 - Would establish a child care subtrust using dollars from the Coal Severance Tax Trust Fund, starting with an initial \$150 million into the subtrust. Eligible uses of the funds in the account include funding programs within the department that provide scholarships or grants for child care expenses. Sponsored by Alice Buckley (D, HD 63 – Bozeman area).

Engagement: In-person testimony in House Taxation.

Status: Failed Second Reading in the House.

Advocacy Efforts

Our policy team entered the 2023 legislative session with a well-rounded plan that aimed to foster engagement in early childhood advocacy for a diverse audience. We sought to provide a spectrum of engagement options, ranging from a quick-and-easy email submission to the opportunity to participate in our hands-on, in-person Have a Heart for Kids advocacy event held at the state capitol (see page 9 for details.)

In addition to our more direct approaches, we also prioritized extensive outreach and education efforts throughout our network of partners (including engagement through our membership with Montana Advocates for Children) ensuring that other stakeholders were up to date on the latest legislative proceedings and our efforts were aligned. This multi-faceted approach was intended to facilitate expanded engagement by stakeholders, foster collaboration, and increase awareness regarding issues affecting young children and families in Montana.

Every Action

To boost citizen engagement, we leveraged Every Action's online action form as our primary tool. This user-friendly platform offered a convenient and efficient way for constituents to communicate directly to their elected officials. The online form included pre-drafted, topic-specific emails, enabling individuals to express their support or raise important issues related to early childhood.

Throughout the legislative session, a total of 109 constituents used this platform to send emails to their personal representatives and senators, covering a wide range of topics. The breakdown of submissions included:

- General Early Childhood Support: 16 submissions
- Early Literacy Support: 13 submissions
- Child Tax Credit Support: 27 submissions
- Child Care Subtrust Support: 4 submissions
- Child Care Licensing Deregulation (opposition): 49 submissions

By providing this accessible online tool, we empowered citizens to actively engage with their legislators and voice their opinions on critical early childhood matters.



Outreach/Education

Our organization used a range of outreach and educational activities via multiple platforms to educate and engage constituents both before and during the 68th Legislative Session.

In fall 2022, we developed an Advocacy 101 training. This training was offered four times, twice in-person and twice virtually. Audiences included child care professionals, parents, and community leaders.

Email, text message, and phone call action alerts were sent out consistently throughout the session, averaging once per week. In general, each action alert went to the Montana Early Childhood Coalition and Local Community Collaborative list serve (40 people), individuals that filled out our action alert signup form (14 people) and additional contacts as necessary. In total, we sent 39 action alerts.

As part of our efforts to increase overall awareness of early childhood related legislation, our Policy Manager offered 17 virtual weekly session update calls. Each call focused on early childhood related bills and offered the opportunity for attendees to ask questions. To reach individuals unable to attend the update calls, we also provided 12 video updates through our social media platforms.

By using these multifaceted outreach and education approaches, we sought to inform and engage constituents throughout the session, empowering them to actively participate in early childhood advocacy.

Montana Parent Voice

Montana Parent Voice was launched in October 2022 as a statewide parent advocacy network dedicated to increasing awareness related to critical early childhood issues in Montana. It serves as a place for families to come together, learn, and take action on early childhood issues. In May 2023, Montana Parent Voice had 91 Facebook group members, 225 Instagram followers, and we had posted 41 times on both platforms.

Constituent Support and Resources

Recognizing that advocacy can be overwhelming and confusing, especially for constituents new to the process, we took steps to demystify the process and provide support for those wishing to engage. We created a comprehensive list of resources to help explain advocacy, provide general education on policy, and remove barriers. These resources included fact sheets on early childhood issues, information on the Montana state government and the legislative process, as well as guidance on different types of advocacy. These resources were easily accessible on our website and were also used during individual support conversations.

While tracking the exact number of constituent public comments assisted by our organization's efforts was challenging, we can confidently say that we provided one-on-one support to 16 individuals. Each individual, either a child care professional or a parent, received assistance in preparing live or written testimony during the legislative session. It's worth noting that several provided testimony on more than one occasion, further highlighting their commitment and engagement in the advocacy process.

Serving as an Early Childhood Resource

Our organization played a vital role as a comprehensive early childhood resource, engaging in a wide array of activities during the 2023 legislative session. Our policy team focused on several key areas, including providing valuable feedback to legislators on bills, facilitating advocacy organizing efforts, conducting policy research, and establishing connections with prominent national organizations involved in early childhood policy and advocacy.

As part of our commitment to closely monitor legislative developments, we implemented a daily bill tracking system. This enabled us to stay up to date with the progress of early childhood-related bills, ensuring we were well-informed and prepared to provide timely feedback and support.

In addition to internal tracking, we also established an external-facing early childhood [bill tracker](#). This tracker was regularly updated and made accessible to the public, empowering stakeholders to stay informed about the status and content of important legislation. By providing this resource, we aimed to foster transparency and encourage broader engagement in early childhood policy discussions.

Throughout the session, our dedicated staff prioritized strengthening existing relationships with legislators while actively forging new connections with members from across the political spectrum. By doing so, we aimed to foster collaboration and drive positive change for early childhood initiatives.

Through our commitment to policy research, we sought to provide evidence-based solutions and innovative approaches to legislators. By establishing connections with national organizations involved in early childhood policy and advocacy, we cultivated partnerships that further bolstered our efforts to positively impact early childhood in Montana.

Strengthening Early Childhood Messaging in a Red State

2023 offered a new legislative landscape for the state of Montana, propelling our organization to ensure the messages we were communicating, both to our lawmakers and the broader community, were clear and well-informed.

Polling

In October 2022, we contracted with the Montana State University Department of Political Science to conduct a [voter poll](#). The objective of the poll was to gauge public interest in state government investment in child care. In December 2022, we collaborated with the Montana Chamber of Commerce to conduct a poll among their members, focusing on the availability of child care in the state and its impact on the economy.

The results of the polls showed overall support of government investments in early care and education, as well as supports for families. The findings provide valuable insights into the public's perception and highlighted the importance of prioritizing child care in Montana.

Conservative Thought Partners

Since the 68th legislative session showcased a new Republican supermajority, our staff tapped the expertise of our national partners who had extensive experience working with conservative groups. This thought partnership was instrumental in shaping our communications, public testimony, and talking points. Additionally, we learned about successful strategies and advocacy approaches from other states with similar political landscapes.

Bringing the Business and Economic Perspective to the Legislature

Through our connections with child care providers and the business community in Montana, we helped make the business and economic development case for a robust child care system in our state. Partners including the Montana Chamber of Commerce, local chambers, employers, child care providers, and families supported the dialog that child care is infrastructure and our state's workforce and economy depends on it.

Communications

During the 2023 legislative session, we actively engaged in communication efforts to prioritize children and families in Montana. Our social media posts, totaling 66, highlighted important session-related updates and key issues impacting children and families. Additionally, we sent out six newsletters containing session-related content to keep our greater community informed.

To further amplify our message, we published two op-eds. One emphasized the importance of lawmakers prioritizing children and families, urging them to take meaningful action. The other op-ed, in collaboration with the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), emphasized the significance of both the child tax credit and public investment in child care for Montana families.

Why Our Work Mattered This Session

As the only nonpartisan, nonprofit organization focused solely on early childhood issues, Zero to Five Montana played a pivotal role in shaping the outcomes of the 68th legislative session.

Throughout the session, our continuous presence at the capitol allowed us not only to establish new relationships with the governor's office and lawmakers, but also strengthen existing partnerships with a variety of advocates. These collaborations resulted in an even stronger network of dedicated early childhood champions in Montana.

The importance of our partnerships with organizations proved to be of great value during this session. With numerous bills under consideration and a fast-paced environment, we were able to mobilize individuals to provide impactful testimony and raise awareness about opportunities to testify and supply public comment on proposed legislation.

Our extensive knowledge of early childhood issues and expertise in the legislative process allowed us to contribute to significant progress in advancing positive outcomes. This included the successful passage of at least eight early childhood bills and the defeat of two anti-vaccine bills that posed threats to young children, families, and child care businesses.



HAVE A HEART FOR KIDS ADVOCACY EVENT

In partnership with Zero to Five Butte-Silver Bow, we hosted our inaugural Have a Heart for Kids event in the rotunda of the state capitol building on Feb. 3, 2023. A number of early childhood partners and parents were invited to attend and celebrate the state's youngest children, while urging legislators to take action on early childhood issues.

We took special interest in welcoming parents and their children to the event by providing financial support for attendance, coaching, and by creating a kid-friendly atmosphere. Fourteen parents attended (representing Helena, Butte, Great Falls, Dillon, and Bozeman), and each participant had the opportunity to share their personal early childhood story one-on-one with a legislator and during a special meeting with representatives from the governor's office.

Early childhood partners joined in the event to share information about their organization, network, and meet with policymakers. The early childhood organizations that participated included:

- Child Care Connections
- Butte 4-C's
- Montana Family Child Care Network
- Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies-the Montana Coalition
- Family Outreach
- Raise Montana
- Zero to Five Missoula County
- Early Childhood Coalition of Beaverhead County
- Healthy Communities Coalition of Mineral County
- Montana Afterschool Alliance
- Montana Head Start Association
- Montana Cooperative Development Center
- Early Childhood Coalition of the Greater Helena Area
- The Birds Nest
- Family Connections
- Headwaters Foundation

IN ATTENDANCE

14
Parents

16
Partner Organizations

1/3
Legislative Body

Teachers and children from O'Hana Day Care and Preschool joined the event for a story time hosted by the Lewis & Clark Public Library.

More than one-third of our state's legislative body attended some portion of the event over the course of the day, and four spoke during the lunch program. A video overview of the event can be viewed [here](#).