

MONTANA STRATEGIC PLAN



ZERO TO FIVE
MONTANA



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**THE CASE FOR
MONTANA'S
YOUNG CHILDREN**

EVERY CHILD DESERVES A GREAT START

These words are more than just an idea. When children have a great start in life—that is, the opportunity to grow strong and healthy, build foundational skills and knowledge, and have their needs met during the first 5 years—the benefits reverberate throughout their lives. Developmental research makes it clear that the first 2,000 days of a child’s life—the time between birth and kindergarten entry—represent the most critical period in human development. During this time a child’s brain is growing at an unmatched rate and creating the architecture for all future development and learning.

In Montana, as in other parts of the country, inequitable policies and practices within the early childhood system have led to gaps and disparities in access to the kinds of early life experiences that children need to thrive— particularly along the divides of income, race, and place. Too many mothers lack access to critical prenatal and infant care because of insufficient health-care coverage or the inaccessibility of equipped medical facilities. Due to chronic underfunding of early childhood care and education, many families are left to bear impossibly high costs, or to be “priced out” of early learning settings altogether. While state and federal programs like Child Care Development Fund (CCDF)—supported child care scholarships and Head Start/Early Head Start begin to narrow the gap, their capacity is not nearly sufficient to serve all children and families who could benefit from these programs. As early childhood systems are notoriously fragmented and complicated to navigate, many families do not experience coordinated services that recognize and care for the whole child within the child’s family, community, and cultural context.

BY THE NUMBERS: Challenges Facing Montana’s Youngest Residents



Twenty-seven percent of mothers receive late or no prenatal care. Prenatal care is essential to screen for potential dangers to the mother and baby during pregnancy, many of which can be resolved when caught early.² The consequences for a mother who cannot access prenatal care can be dire; the result can be premature birth, low birth weight, and other serious issues that can impact the child’s health for a lifetime or even cost lives.



Thirty-nine percent of children have one or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs are a specific set of traumatic experiences during early life that have been shown to undermine learning, social and emotional well-being, and health in both the short and the long term.



In all of Montana, only 83 early learning providers achieved a high quality rating score through the state’s quality rating and improvement system (QRIS).

This means that the majority of early childhood care and education settings are of low or undocumented quality. For young children, access to high-quality learning environments is a necessary ingredient for school readiness. For families, the opportunity to choose a provider they can trust to deliver high-quality services offers peace of mind and stability.³



Less than 50% of Montana’s children have access to a medical home. Many children cannot access a medical home for reasons of insufficient health-care coverage or inaccessibility of pediatricians. As a result, these children are less likely to access regular preventative health care, receive appropriate immunizations, and benefit from developmental screenings that can lead to timely interventions.



Eighteen percent of children ages 5 and under are living in poverty. Poverty is a profound and unnecessary social injustice, and the result of an economy defined by the inequitable distribution of wealth and resources. A society that allows poverty to persist places its members at risk of hunger, inadequate housing, and other traumatic experiences that impact children, families, and society as a whole.



Montana is one of only six states without state-supported pre-K.⁴ Recent studies have shown that pre-K programs have a significant impact, not only on school readiness, but also on essential “noncognitive skills,” such as social and emotional intelligence, perseverance, and motivation. In addition, the availability of funded pre-K programming expands access to the care that families need to remain in the workforce and can relieve many low- to middle-income families of the economic burden of paying for child care.

The potential benefits of narrowing these gaps are great—not only for children and families most impacted, but for society as a whole.

Research on the economic benefits of investing in the early years has demonstrated over and over again that the returns are realized in both the short and long term through decreased spending on special education, health and behavioral interventions, and better outcomes for employment and earnings later in life. Recently, this economic case for early childhood has gained the field's attention as early childhood leaders nationwide have been working to increase funding for early childhood programming.

Beyond the return on investment realized through cost savings on social supports, accessible early childhood programming can play a critical role in stabilizing Montana's workforce. Having adequate child care and other resources to meet the needs of young children enables families to work and earn consistently and thus helps to put families on firmer ground economically. This is especially important as the state works to recover from the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, a well-supported early childhood system is a cornerstone of any sustainable society—strengthening the economy of today while preparing children to succeed and contribute within their communities for decades to come.

Zero to Five envisions a Montana dedicated to every child. To realize this vision would mean that state leaders, early childhood service providers, business and civic leaders, communities, and families work together to ensure that every child within Montana's borders has what they need to thrive. It would mean that policy makers are informed and committed to early childhood, and champion policies and practices that address inequities and put children and families first. It would mean that the early childhood community builds bridges between the array of services offered, creating a network so strong that no child or family can fall through. The belief that progress toward such a reality is possible is what calls Zero to Five and its partners to action. That belief drives their work to facilitate focused advocacy and equity-centered system design—for Montana's children and for the future.

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“The longer society waits to intervene in the life cycle of a disadvantaged child, the more costly it is to remediate the disadvantage. Similar dynamics appear to be at work in creating child health and mental health. Society needs to adopt a life cycle focus in designing and implementing policy.”

— Economist and Nobel laureate
James Heckman, circa 2016



THE OPPORTUNITY

From its establishment in 2018, Zero to Five has stated and lived into its commitment to supporting Montana's children and families in the early years. Since its inception, Zero to Five's leadership has worked to build relationships with key actors within the state and local early childhood system and other related sectors. The state office has lent its capacity and expertise to support policy and systems-building efforts at the state level aligned to Zero to Five's vision and mission, and thus has built its reputation as a champion for early childhood and a pillar of Montana's early childhood system. Meanwhile, the LCCs have established



“[Zero to Five has] that expertise to be the thought leader . . . Zero to Five could play a role in just helping do some convening . . . Or even helping [advocates] to be informed, and to cooperate in that more informed way, saying, ‘these are the bills we want to watch, and we want to act on,’ or even help us be more communicative with our representatives.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

transformative relationships and added capacity to local early childhood networks within their communities—creating opportunities for co-informing relationships between statewide policy and systems-development work and an array of local efforts. The Zero to Five network has forged inroads with policy makers and the public by communicating key issues and engaging both “traditional” and “nontraditional” allies in the most pressing issues facing young children and their families. As the political landscape, the discourse around early childhood issues in Montana, and the capacity of the network have evolved, the opportunity has emerged to reimagine the role of the Zero to Five network for 2022 and beyond.



“What has been great is their willingness to really be a resource and provide technical assistance to the local collaboratives. That’s huge. And I think really trying to build some community between local service providers and advocates on the ground in communities, and trying to think about how to connect that back up to some statewide work.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader





A Montana Dedicated to Every Child

Zero to Five’s Theory of Change

In 2019, the Zero to Five network worked to define its shared commitment and collective statewide and local work through a theory of change. Facilitated by its partners at School Readiness Consulting (SRC), Zero to Five started by identifying three broad child and family impact areas to guide and focus its efforts:

- **Healthy pregnancies and births:** expanding access to prenatal care and health insurance for mothers and infants; reducing preterm births and infant mortality
- **Supported families:** reducing rates of child poverty, child abuse and neglect, and children entering the foster care system
- **School readiness:** increasing reading and math proficiency; increasing access to high-quality early childhood experiences

Zero to Five recognized that to create this impact on a large scale would be an “all hands on deck” issue—requiring the buy-in and support of stakeholders across Montana, including policy makers; governmental agencies; early childhood systems leaders and advocates at the state and local levels; leaders representing a range of business, governmental, and civic interests; early childhood program leaders; providers; communities; and families. Indeed, change on this scale would require *a Montana dedicated to every child*.

What would it mean to create a Montana dedicated to every child?

To expound upon its vision, Zero to Five identified and defined four necessary system outcomes:

- **Reach**—every child has access to universal and targeted services to meet their unique needs.
- **Commitment**—Montanans value and prioritize early childhood through action.
- **Equity**—every child, regardless of race, geography, or family income, has what they need to thrive.
- **Coordination**—community partners coordinate to provide high-quality, easy-to-access services.

Each of these outcomes is founded in strong relationships and driven by the power of relationships to transform mindsets, conditions, and actions surrounding the state’s commitment to young children. These four outcomes reflect the aspirational conditions that Zero to Five believes are most essential and in which the network is best positioned to stabilize, innovate, and build the early childhood system in Montana so all children, families, and businesses can thrive.

Looking ahead . . .

Bringing child and family impacts, vision, and system outcomes into focus enabled Zero to Five to define its strategic approach for the coming years. Thus, this plan identifies the areas of work and strategic actions that Zero to Five will prioritize over the next 5 years to increase reach, commitment, equity, and coordination in the early childhood system to move toward more healthy pregnancies and births, supported families, and school readiness.



Building on the relationships and reputation established in Zero to Five Montana's early years, and in response to the current political landscape, there is an opportunity for Zero to Five Montana to broaden and deepen its impact. By channeling more energy and resources toward partnership for action, the Zero to Five network can step into its role as the “go-to” organization to advance early childhood at the state and community levels—that is, to unify advocacy and systems-building efforts and influence policies and practices that benefit young children. As the state transitions into a new gubernatorial administration and works to recover from the social and economic upheaval of COVID-19, the time is right for Zero to Five Montana to lead this charge as a nonpartisan, nongovernmental entity positioned as a powerful *convener*, *connector*, and *communicator* for Montana's early childhood system.



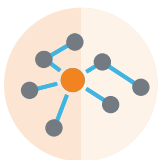
“In terms of policy and advocacy, Zero to Five is really recognizing that in order to be a strong player in this space, in a state like Montana, they've got to be able to be seen as a neutral resource. That they're an organization dedicated to kids. They're not a partisan organization. I think that's really important and clearly more important as we've had administrative changes.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader



CONVENING

Early childhood systems within states and communities are notoriously complex—administered by multiple agencies and governing bodies, and supported through a variety of federal, state, and local funding streams. As such, there is a need for an organization like Zero to Five Montana, removed from state agency bureaucracies, to convene the range of early childhood leaders. At the state level, this means being a catalyst for setting directions and building collective power to drive common policy and action priorities among leaders who have a role in state-supported early childhood programming. Similarly, Zero to Five Montana can bring together local networks of early childhood stakeholders to focus on collaborative efforts and elevate community-specific needs.



CONNECTING

In the midst of a rapidly evolving and changing state and national landscape, there is a need for intentional efforts to connect the early childhood system to resources that create opportunity for advancement where priorities align. This includes making connections between partnering agencies and organizations and any number of financial (e.g., grants, federal assistance) and nonfinancial (e.g., partnerships, toolkits, learning experiences) resources. This also includes efforts to build relationships and establish “champions” for early childhood within the legislature and among others who have a stake in early childhood as part of the infrastructure of a thriving and prosperous state.



COMMUNICATING

The Zero to Five network also assumes a key role in creating an exchange of knowledge among and between state and local early childhood initiatives. Such an exchange enables a co-influential relationship between programming and efforts “on the ground” and the ongoing push to advance child-and-family-centered policy that drives toward the impact areas (i.e., healthy pregnancies and births, supported families, and school readiness). As part of a comprehensive effort to drive beneficial policy and practice for young children and families, communication efforts also include advocacy as a way to build public awareness among Montanans about key early childhood issues and the potential of investments in early childhood to move the state forward.



MONTANA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

For the purposes of this strategic plan, the early childhood system broadly refers to the system of programs and services designed to support children's learning, health, and development in the early years—including workforce preparation and parenting, economic, and other supports for the adults who care for young children.



In Montana, the early childhood system is administered through various state government agencies and departments, tribal governments, nonprofit organizations, institutions of higher education, and other public and private entities. This distribution of early childhood services across agencies and sectors means that efficient, child-and-family-centered care relies on intentional effort to connect programs within a coherent network of supports. The work of early childhood leaders and advocates operating within their respective spheres of influence can be strengthened exponentially through an aligned and strategic agenda for advancing the system. This effort calls for leadership to bring direction, clarity, and purpose under a shared vision for what the early childhood system could be and empower early childhood leaders to speak with a single voice about what Montana's youngest residents need and deserve. That is where Zero to Five Montana comes in . . .

THE PROCESS

In 2021, Zero to Five Montana partnered with SRC to facilitate the development of a five-year strategic plan. The process initiated with a scan of the early childhood landscape to identify assets to build upon, gaps, and opportunities for Zero to Five Montana to expand its role and reach. This process culminated in strategic planning, through which this document was developed and the state office has articulated its commitment to action over the next several years.

THE TIMELINE . . .	THE KEY PLAYERS . . .
<p>PART 1: Landscape Analysis</p> <p>January–February 2021: Document review. The SRC team collected information about the early childhood system, including prior and ongoing statewide initiatives, influential leaders, and the current policy landscape.</p> <p>March–April 2021: Montana early childhood leader and partner interviews. The SRC team interviewed leaders representing various agencies and allies of the early childhood system to hear about Zero to Five Montana’s potential contributions to the early childhood landscape from the perspectives of state-level partners.</p> <p>April–May 2021: Interviews with leaders in other states. The SRC team interviewed leaders of functionally similar initiatives in Virginia, Oregon, Nebraska, Colorado, and Georgia to hear about effective practices and lessons learned from implementation within their state systems.</p> <p>PART 2: Strategic Planning</p> <p>June–August 2021: Strategic planning “mini-retreats.” The SRC team facilitated a series of three workshops to (a) present and reflect on landscape analysis findings and strategic directions, (b) confirm strategies and map tangible action steps over the next 5 years, and (c) link meaningful measures of progress and implementation considerations to strategies.</p> <p>July–September 2021: Developing the strategic plan. The SRC team developed a report to link findings from the landscape analysis to actionable strategies and action steps to define Zero to Five Montana’s work in the coming years.</p>	<p>The Zero to Five state office; and Montana early childhood leaders in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the Montana Head Start Collaborative Office the Child Care Resource and Referral Network Salish Kootenai College the University of Montana the business sector <p>Leaders of innovative statewide early childhood policy initiatives in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Virginia—Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) Oregon—Children’s Institute Nebraska—First Five Nebraska Colorado—Early Milestones Georgia—Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS)

ZERO TO FIVE MONTANA'S STRATEGIC PLAN

What work will Zero to Five Montana prioritize?

The landscape analysis and strategic planning process resulted in a statement of purpose for the Zero to Five Montana initiative: *to advance statewide policies that promote healthy pregnancies and births, supported families, and school readiness by supporting advocacy and systems-building approaches that put children and families first.* In support of this purpose, the state office worked with SRC to identify three imperatives representing present opportunities to strengthen the early childhood system in which the state office can make a meaningful impact in the coming years.

Zero to Five Montana will work to

- create alignment across statewide policy and systems-building efforts;
- align state and local systems and capacity-building efforts; and
- increase the sustainability of state and local early childhood initiatives.

How will Zero to Five Montana approach the work?

Building from these imperatives, Zero to Five Montana developed specific strategies and action steps as a “road map” to guide its work within the three imperatives and drive toward the intended systems outcomes and child and family impacts. The following strategy map captures, at a high level, the work that the state office is planning for the next 5 years.

Statement of Purpose: Zero to Five Montana works to advance statewide policies that promote healthy pregnancies and births, supported families, and school readiness by supporting advocacy and systems-building approaches that put children and families first.

IMPERATIVES	STRATEGIES	SYSTEM OUTCOMES	CHILD AND FAMILY IMPACTS
Create alignment across statewide policy and systems-building efforts	Support statewide systems-building efforts to advance goals that align with Zero to Five Montana’s desired outcomes and impact	A Montana dedicated to every child: Reach —every child has access to universal and targeted services to meet their unique needs.	Healthy pregnancies and births expanding access to prenatal care and health insurance for mothers and infants; reducing preterm births and infant mortality Supported families reducing rates of child poverty, child abuse and neglect, and children entering the foster care system
	Convene state-level early childhood leaders to develop a cohesive policy agenda to define and address the most critical barriers to child-and-family-centered policy		
Align state and local systems- and capacity-building efforts	Strengthen connections between national, state, and local partners to establish and advance policy priorities	Commitment —Montanans value and prioritize early childhood through action.	School readiness increasing reading and math proficiency; increasing access to high-quality early childhood experiences
	Build the capacity of state and local partners to advance policy and programmatic priorities	Equity —every child, regardless of race, geography, or family income, has what they need to thrive.	
Increase the sustainability of state and local early childhood initiatives	Engage a broad audience of stakeholders and potential partners/allies through effective storytelling	Coordination —community partners coordinate to provide high-quality, easy-to-access services.	
	Champion the improvement of data and evaluation as a central component of systems development, empowering early childhood leaders with access to high-quality data		

Although the distance between what the early childhood system is today and what Zero to Five Montana and other leaders envision for children and families is vast, the strategies and actions put forth in this plan bring clarity to the role of the state office to bring change through bold leadership and effective partnership. The sections that follow will discuss each imperative in detail—illustrating the context in which Zero to Five Montana is taking on this work. These sections will present clear opportunities for action that is responsive to the current early childhood landscape, Zero to Five Montana’s vision for a stronger and more equitable system, and the capacity and tools that the initiative has at the ready.



**TAKING ACTION FOR
OUR CHILDREN,
FOR OUR FUTURE**

IMPERATIVE 1: CREATE ALIGNMENT ACROSS STATEWIDE POLICY AND SYSTEMS-BUILDING EFFORTS

As Zero to Five Montana works to *advance statewide policies that promote healthy pregnancies and births, supported families, and school readiness*, they are joined by advocates and early childhood leaders across the state who share in the aspiration for all of Montana’s young children to thrive. But to create the network of supports that children and families need in order to thrive will require more than aspirations; it will require targeted action to align resources, efforts, and messaging, and channel these assets toward what matters most.

WHAT WORK CAN ZERO TO FIVE MONTANA BUILD ON?

The state of Montana has leveraged resources and made some important strides to align child-and-family-serving agencies in recent years. As a result of Montana’s 2019 PDG B-5 funding, the *Strengthening Montana’s Early Childhood System Project* provided an opportunity for early childhood leaders at the state level to collaborate on strategies to promote access to high-quality early childhood services. As a direct result of recommendations in the 2019 needs assessment and strategic plan, the Early Childhood and Family Services Division was established within the Department of Public Health and Human Services to encompass an expanded Early Childhood Services Bureau. This shift was effective in bringing together multiple child-and-family-serving programs that had previously been spread across state agencies and departments without clear channels of coordination and collaboration. The expanded Early Childhood Services Bureau



“I think even seeing that that division was created shows that we’ve got people in Montana that have a vision for how things could be better, and are willing to put one foot in front of the next to get it there.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

also created the impetus to reimagine the state Early Childhood Advisory Council (formerly known

as the Best Beginnings Advisory Council) to streamline membership and refocus its efforts on improving coordination and collaboration among the array of governmental and nonprofit agencies that support Montana’s young children. According to key stakeholders, the needs assessment and strategic planning process created momentum around coordination and served as a unifying factor among state leaders who engaged in the process, leading to increased commitment to working together.



“All of us in our early childhood circles—there’s no disagreeing about the importance of supporting young children and families, and building quality programs, and looking at the early care and education system.

But we keep coming back to the perennial challenges in our field.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader



“Just being in the same division allows for easier collaboration and being in closer proximity when we get to be there. So some of us were in different bureaus, some of us were in different divisions totally. And so I think all those things are really going to help solidify, see those collaborations and make policy, better support kids and families overall rather than being more programmatic focused.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

There is an emerging precedent in Montana for partnership across governmental agencies, and between the public and private sectors, to advance good policy for young children and their families.

Within the state’s prominent advocacy organizations— Funders for Montana’s Children, Montana Advocates for Children, and Montana Healthcare Foundation, among others—there is recognition of the interconnectedness of early childhood, family, and community well-being and economic issues, and a resulting commitment to cross-sector engagement. While collaboration between statewide early childhood advocacy partners (both public and private) is in its nascent stage, Zero to Five Montana has begun to play a role in convening diverse groups of stakeholders in initiatives to advance child-and-family-centered policies and systems. For example, the Building Strong Foundations for Families initiative, supported through a grant from the Center for Law and Social Policy and Zero to Three and facilitated by Zero to Five Montana, brings together a range of early childhood leaders to build a comprehensive birth-to-3 policy agenda for implementation in 2022 and beyond. Additionally, Zero to Five Montana and early childhood leaders from Montana State University co-lead a cross-sector table known as the Montana Preschool Alliance, focused on creating a preschool policy strategy for 4-year-olds. In the 2019 legislative session, the bill that would have advanced state-supported preschool for 4-year-olds failed. However, this unfortunate outcome created the impetus for increased cross-sector advocacy for early childhood investments as a critical lever for economic growth and stability. Thus, the ECE Business Collaboratory was established to build upon the platform of Family Forward Montana—increasing engagement of the business and economic development communities to improve family-friendly business practices and support access to child care for working families. As a leader and key partner in these and other initiatives, Zero to Five Montana has taken the opportunity to facilitate connection and leverage the differing resources and advantages of multiple public and private entities, creating synergy around shared aspirations for a well-supported early childhood system.

Zero to Five Montana has taken bold steps as a catalyst, a bridge builder, and a leader in systems alignment. Zero to Five Montana has invested in building relationships with state early childhood leaders and has begun to establish its own reputation as a leader in the field. The ongoing work of Zero to Five Montana has led to increased public and political attention to state-funded preschool, supports for birth to age 3, and other important early childhood issues; heightened awareness of existing tools and resources for state leaders; influenced the state allocation of federal resources such as PDG B-5 and the more recent COVID-19 relief funds; and contributed to the pool of data and research to inform a range of early childhood efforts. In addition, Zero to Five Montana has contributed vital perspectives on equity as it relates to early childhood policy and practice across the state.

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“Everybody agrees on the data . . . It’s obvious that [the early childhood system] is broken. But there’s no consensus about a solution. But there’s such a huge foundational agreement on this issue, that it seems like a stepping stone toward more cooperation is possible.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

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“I feel like [Zero to Five’s] willingness to engage statewide folks, that’s really impressive. And I feel like that’s going to help to support our state-level systems because funding, opportunity, and networking can happen a little bit differently in that organization, without some of the bureaucratic barriers that happen in state government.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

AND YET, THERE IS MUCH TO DO IN THE COMING YEARS . . .

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

Despite the Strengthening Montana’s Early Childhood System Project and its implications for increased alignment, state early childhood leaders lack a unifying policy and systems-building framework. Without shared goals and priorities, the state agencies and programs that benefit children and families are deeply siloed—with each entity focused primarily on securing resources to meet funder-specific benchmarks. This fragmentation of efforts and resources creates inefficiencies at all levels of the system due to capacity gaps and needless duplication of efforts. Siloing of resources and perspectives on child and family supports perpetuates a “scarcity mindset” among early childhood systems leaders in all sectors and fosters a culture of competition over collaboration. When the early childhood system fails to coordinate the various types of care it offers, navigating the system becomes confusing and overwhelming for families and providers and divides up resources in ways that can disenfranchise some parts of the system in favor of others. Furthermore, system fragmentation has an outsized negative effect on families who already face barriers in getting their needs met—including those who are targeted by racial discrimination; experience poverty, homelessness, and other economic hardships; have limited English proficiency; are geographically isolated; or have special needs. Recognizing this, there is a clear need for leadership to elevate equity as a priority in all decision-making—applying a critical lens to identify the potential impact of policies and actions on diverse populations and supporting growth of the system in a balanced way.



“As they are engaging in policy, [Zero to Five can be] looking at policy solutions that are being proposed with that equity lens and doing that analysis, like ‘That idea maybe sounds good, but how will that actually impact somebody?’ . . .

And so, I think as they are tracking policies to early childhood . . . there’s an opportunity for some defense strategies if there are policies that are really going to hurt kids, that they might need to actually show up and take a stance.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

Based on the current presidential administration’s commitments to early childhood, states are likely to see opportunities for the infusion of federal dollars over the next several years, including the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 as well as continued support to expand and enhance state early childhood systems. To best leverage current and future resources will require more than a shared intention to meet the needs of all Montana children and families. Indeed, there is a clear and pressing need for dedicated resources and effort to create the “connective tissue” between leaders at the state level and to generate collective action on behalf of the whole early childhood system.



Similarly, while there are multiple organizations advocating for young children and families, advocacy is not yet coordinated or leveraged toward a unified vision or agenda. As evidenced by legislative decisions in recent years and according to key stakeholders, there is an unmet need for coordinated and consistent advocacy to increase public support for early childhood issues. Advocacy to increase state commitment to young children has become politically tenuous as decision-makers lag behind the early childhood field in awareness and buy-in to the social and economic benefits of investing in early childhood. Meanwhile, advocates for early childhood contend with the reality of limited resources and tend to focus on narrow, issue-specific agendas. As a result, decision-makers are met with disparate and conflicting messages and lack a clear impetus to make change. The untapped opportunity exists for a coordinated network of advocates with a unified policy agenda to interrupt the cycle of legislative apathy, scarcity, and competing



“We haven’t gotten to the point where we’ve crossed those party lines, where everybody feels like we’re investing in Montana children.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader



“Two years from now, there could be some really clear, strong policies that they had already been planning for two years to bring forth. I think the pre-K is huge. And then I think if there’s any kind of infant care bill, that could be interesting too. But I think really, it’s just being prepared. Like having really built their ground game over these two years and actually going into the session with a unified coalition around some early childhood policy, because it still doesn’t feel like that exists.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

STATE PERSPECTIVES: What advice would you offer to Zero to Five Montana as an organization working to build strong statewide policy and advocacy systems for young children and their families?



“I think these things move at the speed of trust, and so starting with relationships and figuring out who are some legislative champions and others to connect with and cultivate those relationships. I think that’s a really basic, but often overlooked strategy—just lots of over communication and connection. I feel like Swati [former executive director] was always brilliant at setting those tables and bringing people along, meeting people where they are and bringing them along. I would say I’ve already mentioned multiple times that communication strategy, but also having a clear strategic vision and knowing that you’re not going to solve all the problems at once. Start focusing on some short-term goals and then the longer-term goals. What do you want to accomplish in a year? What would be some clear metrics and guideposts for how you know you’re reaching who you want to reach and have that expansion plan? . . . I think it really helped us to have those likely suspects from the beginning and those business leaders engaged.”

— Marina Merrill, Director of Research and Strategy, Children’s Institute (Oregon)

“I mean to be frank, I think COVID has helped us to elevate these issues not just as a care issue, but this is an economic issue too, for the state. So, I think COVID has opened a lot of people’s eyes as to just how critical this is to the state and Nebraska being a conservative leaning state much as Montana is. That’s how we’ve really framed our arguments. So, when we talk to policy makers, we are making those points from not just the merits of how important developmental issues are and how important it is to have quality early learning experiences, but also the economic benefits that it provides to the state because again, being able to have folks in the workforce, child cares are our businesses; they are taxpayers.”


— Jason Prokop, Director, First Five Nebraska

WHAT ACTIONS WILL ZERO TO FIVE MONTANA TAKE?

  **STRATEGY 1.1** Support statewide systems-building efforts to advance goals that align with Zero to Five Montana’s desired outcomes and impact

Zero to Five Montana’s positioning as a nongovernmental agency with a stake in the full spectrum of learning, health, and well-being in the early years enables a broad perspective on the use of existing and forthcoming resources to support children and families. Zero to Five Montana can therefore play an important role to support the Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) and other statewide tables in decision-making with the full early childhood system in focus—creating efficiencies and prioritizing funding to the highest-impact opportunities.

Action Steps	Y 1-2	Y 3-4	Y 5+
Participate on statewide decision-making tables, including the ECAC, to establish alignment and partnership around shared priorities			
Lend additional capacity to statewide decision-making tables to support planning for upcoming investments in the early childhood system (especially including American Rescue Plan Act funds and other federal resources)			
Assess and communicate the early childhood landscape, key issues, and upcoming funding opportunities to key stakeholders on an ongoing basis			
Lead a cross-system examination to identify root causes of agency divides and resistance to change, and opportunities to better incentivize collaboration and progress among early childhood leaders and decision-makers			

 **STRATEGY 1.2** Convene state-level early childhood leaders to develop a cohesive policy agenda to define and address the most critical barriers to child-and-family-centered policy

Zero to Five Montana is also uniquely positioned to provide leadership in the early childhood advocacy space. As innovators and bridge builders, Zero to Five Montana can lead the way in developing a framework that is grounded in shared outcomes, to collaboratively prioritize available resources and to be proactive and consistent in messaging to decision-makers and their constituents. There is an important and timely opportunity to bridge the work of current advocacy initiatives to which Zero to Five Montana already has clear connections in the next 2 years as Montana looks to the 2023 legislative session. Beyond that, Zero to Five Montana can broaden its approach by facilitating alignment among the full spectrum of birth-through-5 priorities and mobilizing key advocates according to their respective capacities and institutional advantages.

Action Steps	Y 1-2	Y 3-4	Y 5+
Facilitate cross-agency and cross-sector efforts to create a cohesive and mutually beneficial policy agenda and key messages within and between advocacy groups focused on (a) state-supported preschool and (b) access to quality early childhood care and education for children ages 0–3			
Build relationships, credibility, and awareness of Zero to Five Montana’s work among existing state-level advocates, including both public and private sector advocacy partners (state advocacy partners)			
Convene state advocacy partners whose agendas encompass the full early childhood landscape and advise on considerations for equity, toward the development of a broad, equity-informed birth-to-age-5 policy framework			
Define clear roles and mobilize state advocacy partners to systematically advance key messages through a shared policy framework, and provide support and accountability to state advocacy partners in execution of their respective roles			

How will we know we are making progress?

We will see . . .

- Establishment of clear policy and systems-building priorities for the Zero to Five network and its key partners that emphasize equity
- Increased role clarity and effectiveness among the full range of state-level partners, including partners representing early childhood care and education, child and family health, and other related sectors
- An increase in collaboration between state agencies and other early childhood organizations at the state level

IMPERATIVE 2: ALIGN STATE AND LOCAL AND SYSTEMS- AND CAPACITY-BUILDING EFFORTS

Early childhood leaders at the state level have the advantages of relationships and influence with philanthropic funders, advocates, and decision-makers within Montana and at the national level. They hold a perspective on the needs of Montana’s early childhood system that spans all regions and parts of the system. Meanwhile, early childhood leaders and advocates at the regional and community levels are best positioned to build trust and momentum around young children’s issues within their communities, contextualize local issues, and elevate the needs and experiences of children and families. With these institutional advantages in mind, the Zero to Five Montana state office can partner with local, state, and national entities, creating vital linkages and leveraging the unique influence of actors at all levels.

WHAT WORK CAN ZERO TO FIVE MONTANA BUILD ON?

Montana’s early childhood system includes a variety of state-to-local leadership structures that are impacting early childhood within communities and beyond. Across the state, there are 20+ local coalitions recognized by the state that focus on the formation of strong local early childhood networks. These groups can represent counties, reservations, or cities and may be located within local public health departments, tribal governments, or nonprofit organizations. Local coalitions are set up to work across sectors to improve the well-being of young children and their families, and to raise key issues to ECAC and other state-level leadership. Within and across these local networks lies the potential to innovate, leverage unique resources, and generate grassroots solutions that can be communicated and scaled for broad impact. In one important example, Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies gathered local coalitions around a collective impact framework, which was founded on a set of shared metrics that local coalitions agreed were most useful for both community and statewide efforts. This process resulted in the Montana Children’s Health Data Partnership Project, which aligns key indicators and related strategies for children prenatal to age 3 across the state. This and other examples set a precedent for coordinated systems-building efforts through effective partnerships between state and local early childhood entities.



“I love hearing about what’s happening in other parts of the state . . . And even looking at different parts of the state, and just thinking about the overlap of our reservations and tribal communities, and the amazing work and things that are happening there for children and families, and then things that are not happening for children and families, it’s very diverse. But [in terms of engaging communities,] I can’t think of anyone on the scale of what Zero to Five is accomplishing and what they will accomplish. They’re leading that charge. And I’m thankful that the whole state is benefiting from that.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader



The connections across national, state, and local advocacy organizations play a key role to advance child-and-family-centered policy. For instance, Montana Association for the Education of Young Children (MT AEYC) is the state affiliate of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)—the leading organization to connect early learning policy, research, and practice. Building on NAEYC’s resources for advocacy in the early learning field, MT AEYC and local chapters rely on one another to ensure local priorities become part of a broader state-level discussion. Montana is also a state affiliate of the national Alliance for Early Success, which offers a framework for beneficial early childhood policies. The Alliance for Early Success also connects the state with other national partners that provide technical assistance for advocacy efforts leveraging the capacities and perspectives of state and local entities. Within state government, the network of local child care resource and referral agencies is one example of local leadership playing an integral role in rolling up the experiences of providers and families to the state agency. In turn, affiliated state agencies have the opportunity to seek additional resources and advocate for policies and systems that better support the early childhood community. Each of these examples represents a commitment among advocates to center the needs and interests of those most impacted by early childhood policies—and creates a basic model for bidirectional advising and collaboration.

Zero to Five Montana’s reach spans national, state, and local stakeholders within and beyond the early childhood system. The investments Zero to Five Montana has made to support and streamline local initiatives have created new pathways for engagement and have laid the groundwork for ongoing work to deepen the impact of local networks in the coming years. Meanwhile, the state office’s proximity to state and national partners positions it as an ideal connector, capacity-builder, and facilitator of bidirectional communication and collaboration across all levels. Moreover, Zero to Five Montana’s reach extends beyond traditional actors in the early childhood system, connecting a wide range of civic and governmental interests in support of policies and practices that are good for children and families and good for Montana as a whole. As Zero to Five Montana matures as a state-to-local entity in Montana, the potential exists to facilitate stronger alignment, build capacity in local communities, and leverage the unique positioning of national, state, and local partners toward better policy and stronger outcomes for children and families.



“There are key players in communities that have connections and relationships to the business leaders, to legislators, to all kinds of folks in these communities. And so I think that there’s a huge opportunity for them to really think about how can they leverage that network to start to build a case of uplifting the importance of early childhood. I don’t know exactly what that looks like but I think that there’s just opportunity there and I think there’s a lot of interest from those local organizations to think about how they start to engage in the policy advocacy work that’s needed.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader



“I feel like there’s better guidance because . . . Zero to Five is sending out really specific information, ‘If you would like to be involved, do this.’ And just giving a template and just making it much more straightforward for people on how to reach out [to representatives]. Because I feel like in years past, it’s been, ‘we need to speak up about this.’ But not with any sense or direction of how to do that.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

HOWEVER, THERE ARE SOME IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN NATIONAL-STATE-LOCAL ALIGNMENT . . .

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

There is currently no mechanism to connect the array of local advocacy efforts, contributing to a lack of coherence around early childhood initiatives. The 2019 needs assessment supported by PDG B-5 noted that Montana’s early childhood system is implemented regionally and locally by various entities that are accountable to different funders, each with its own priorities and goals. This reality leads to an early childhood system in which local entities mirror the siloed nature of their parent organizations at the state level—narrowly focused on discrete issues and missing the “big picture” of what coordinated local efforts could look like and the potential impact. As early childhood leaders work to improve alignment of policy and systems-building efforts at the state level, it will require specific effort to bring local partners into alignment with one another (horizontally) and with statewide efforts (vertically). Additionally, there could be untapped potential for collaboration across local collaboratives, expanding local perspectives on what is needed for a balanced and equitable statewide approach to advancing the early childhood system. The development of a successful statewide policy framework will require the engagement and support of local entities. Leaders of this effort at the state level will need to partner with local leadership—ensuring that there is initial adoption of strategies and continual feedback from local early childhood leaders through clear and consistent channels of communication. Buy-in from local leaders relies on their ability to see their interests, community knowledge, and ongoing work represented in both the process and the outcome of a statewide policy framework.



“While there has been a lot of work around early childhood at varying local levels, there’s never been a great connector of this work across the state. And there’s not a specific agency focused on this, necessarily.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

While cross-sector and cross-agency partnership for local early childhood networks is widely valued in theory, there is a need to build capacity and create incentives for local entities to be effective in this complex work. One of the most challenging barriers to overcome in generating local collaboration and alignment is the reality that human and financial resources in regional and community-based agencies are stretched thin. Community partnerships in support of children and families may begin with basic efforts like making referrals and sharing information across programs—but the potential for local collaborative advocacy and action that is aligned both horizontally and vertically goes far beyond that. The kinds of effective partnership that can truly transform communities would require building trust, the sharing of resources, data-based priorities and actions that cross-cut individual agency work plans, a commitment to expend limited staff and



“I feel like there’s a policy and advocacy place within our nonprofit organizations, which is really important, but I think it takes a certain savvy and insight to be able to navigate some of that stuff.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems



“We see this all the time in the early childhood world . . . providers who are providing services to families are saying messages that are really hurtful. And I don’t think they mean to but they’re just repeating narratives and assumptions that are out there. And so there’s got to be some kind of equity training and helping people even recognize those things could be really valuable.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

leadership capacity to build relationships and networks, and resources to overcome geographic barriers. Where resources are scarce and highly regulated, local agencies are driven to a narrow focus on disparate, funder-specific benchmarks and lack the capacity and incentive to engage in effective partnerships. Furthermore, stakeholders have identified the critical need to increase local capacity to assess and advance equity within their spheres of influence and to collaborate on an aligned state and local approach to equity-centered communication and systems-building. In order to create stronger alignment and bridge these and other gaps, there is a clear need for targeted capacity-building within local networks—which could include financial resources, training, technical assistance, and tools to support local systems development aligned with statewide priorities.

STATE PERSPECTIVES: What advice would you offer to Zero to Five Montana as an organization working to build strong statewide policy and advocacy systems for young children and their families?

“We took the bipartisan stance from the beginning, that this [ECE] is really an issue that everyone can relate to—children—and finding those people who will want to champion that. I feel like in Montana a business strategy might be a good one. We’ve really tried as much as we can to focus on partnerships and collaboration and convening. I didn’t want to come into this space and have any direct service provider or advocacy entity feel like we were sucking up resources or funds. When you shine a light, you shine a light wider, and so if we’re successful there’s going to be more private support and public support for early learning. There’s going to be more resources hopefully for more families. I want to come at it from a perspective of abundance as opposed to from a perspective of deficit. And so we work really hard not to be a threat. And I think that’s really important.”

— **Mindy Binderman**, Founding Executive Director, GEEARS (Georgia)



WHAT ACTIONS WILL ZERO TO FIVE MONTANA TAKE?



STRATEGY 2.1 Strengthen connections between national, state, and local partners to establish and advance policy priorities

Zero to Five Montana has built capacity and relationships with and among a variety of local organizations that are contributing their knowledge and perspectives to statewide policy and strategy and recommendations and working to elevate family and community voice. In the coming years, these relationships and lines of communication can be strengthened and leveraged in the alignment of state and local policy priorities. This effort would benefit statewide advocacy and systems-building by ensuring communities are well represented, which leads to increased public will to drive policy change, and would benefit local efforts by expanding access to resources, centralizing data and information, and endorsing aligned initiatives.

Action Steps	Y 1-2	Y 3-4	Y 5+
Build strategic relationships based on shared priorities and trust with mission-aligned organizations and collaboratives representing Montana communities/regions (local advocacy partners)			
Engage the perspectives and wisdom of local and national advocacy partners to inform statewide policy and systems priorities on an ongoing basis			
Create a platform for local advocacy partners to communicate policy “wins,” critical issues, and opportunities both horizontally (across regions/communities) and vertically (between local and state entities)			



STRATEGY 2.2 Build the capacity of state and local partners to advance policy and programmatic priorities

As the capacity and reach of the Zero to Five network expands, there is an opportunity to reimagine the kinds of support it offers its partners at the state, regional, and community levels. The support that the state office is best positioned to provide includes building leadership capacity within local entities, partnering to improve discourse and action around equity in early childhood, and facilitating connections to an array of financial and nonfinancial resources.

Action Steps	Y 1-2	Y 3-4	Y 5+
Connect early childhood leaders to learning opportunities that (a) build skills and capacity to affect local systems change and (b) increase cultural sensitivity and equity-centered practices			
Develop and contribute nonfinancial resources to support local systems-building efforts, and link communities to timely and beneficial resources (financial and nonfinancial) from other state and national sources in support of aligned initiatives			

How will we know we are making progress?

We will see . . .

- A consistent, bi-directional exchange of information between advocates and systems leaders, and those implementing early childhood initiatives
- State and local partners engaging effective, equity-informed advocacy and systems-building strategies that lead to substantive change
- An increase in partnership with stakeholders beyond early childhood-focused agencies and organizations
- Local early childhood networks connected to a variety of partners and resources according to the most pressing local issues

IMPERATIVE 3: INCREASE THE SUSTAINABILITY OF STATE AND LOCAL EARLY CHILDHOOD INITIATIVES

An essential function of advocacy and systems-building in early childhood is to ensure the sustainability of programs and services that children and families rely on, including the expansion and improvement of these programs as needed. Within a political context in which policy makers have not yet championed early childhood issues as part of their platform, the role of aligned and strategic efforts to sustain and enhance the early childhood system is crucial. Ongoing support for early childhood initiatives relies on the ability of leaders to access relevant data, make connections to local and national research, and effectively message the needs and opportunities to decision-makers.

WHAT WORK CAN ZERO TO FIVE MONTANA BUILD ON?

Early childhood leaders have blended data, research, and community voice to tell a compelling story about the needs of the early childhood system, contributing to increased engagement of key stakeholders. Zero to Five Montana and its partners recognize the power of storytelling to increase awareness and support for early childhood by linking what matters most to children and families with the interests of decision-makers and potential allies. For example, Zero to Five Montana and its partners have met with success in engaging the business and economic development communities with effective messaging about the benefits of family-centered business practices and access to child care to support the local workforce and economy. To promote streamlined and effective messaging, Zero to Five Montana has leveraged relationships—with KidsCount; the University of Montana Center for Children, Families, and Workforce Development; local United Ways; governmental agencies; and other entities—to establish metrics surrounding the priorities identified in Zero to Five Montana’s theory of change and to track and communicate progress on key early childhood outcomes over time. Likewise, the strong presence and engagement of institutions of higher education in Montana contribute to early childhood strategy and policy recommendations that are aligned with the field’s most current research and best practice, and emerging alliances between state and tribal governments increase the representation of Indigenous families and communities in messaging and decision-making.



“We all work so hard at writing grants, and then they run out, and so we try to fill in the gaps, which that will leave a gap when one grant runs out. And so, then it’s called a different program. And so, we all try to help families navigate all of that. But that’s something we’d like to see somehow—not having to keep doing these programs that have to end and then start over again.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader



“[Storytelling is] a friendly way to get people’s attention. It’s a very human connection that’s made and it works . . . While I say that parts of Montana are very kind of individualist-minded, in a very local way—like inside a company—they’re very family oriented. And so it’s when they could do good for the person right next to them, I think there’s an openness to that kind of generosity.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader



“The Family Forward work, it’s really smart right now, given that we do know that for Montana, foreseeably for the next four to eight years, the priority of the governor’s office is around putting people back to work. And it’s an economic development focus. And so I think really tying their strategies to how investing in kids is an economic issue that results in strong economies and a better workforce and allows parents to go to work if there’s child care is really important and helpful too.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

The state has invested in updated data system technology and infrastructure and is exploring approaches to data collection and storage that emphasize cross-system linkages and availability of high-quality data. The ability to collect, analyze, and track data about program and child outcomes and apply up-to-date research is at the crux of effective advocacy and decision-making within the early childhood system. As early childhood leaders in all sectors work to unify efforts and policy priorities in the coming years, the exchange and collective analysis of data will enable them to respond to the most pressing issues facing Montana’s young children on an ongoing basis. The strides that the state has taken in recent years to improve access to data for state and local stakeholders demonstrates a commitment to coordinated data collection and usage to benefit a variety of stakeholders and has laid the groundwork for ongoing efforts to streamline data.

Through building relationships and reputation, Zero to Five Montana has established itself as a trusted messenger and voice of the field across stakeholder groups by highlighting innovations, best practices, and research. In recent years, Zero to Five Montana has made inroads with policy makers by addressing the legislature about early childhood research, beneficial policies and practices in other states, and opportunities to improve the early childhood system in Montana. Zero to Five Montana has partnered with state agencies to support initiatives where priorities align. Zero to Five Montana has built trust with communities providing a platform to share innovation and resources among early childhood leaders in western Montana communities, and hosting community forums to open channels of communication with families and local leaders. In addition, Zero to Five Montana has built public awareness by publishing community-facing research and policy briefs on key issues in partnership with the University of Montana Center for Children, Families, and Workforce Development. In the coming years, the depth of knowledge that Zero to Five Montana possesses and its breadth of relationships with stakeholders will position Zero to Five Montana as a leader, an amplifier, and a documentarian of state and local early childhood initiatives—and a key contributor to their sustained presence and success.



“Just get those messaging out and just start working on those grassroots little fires that you can start. ‘My child, my grandchild went to Headstart. Oh, my daughter couldn’t find any good, safe place for her baby,’ and all of a sudden there’s more and more conversations happening that trickle into all the demographics.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader



“Those data pieces, which we have been working on for several years . . . I think are really important to being able to push the work forward and really know that what we’re doing is making a difference. And then, using a secure process to be able to look at data and change strategies systematically.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

AND YET, IN SOME WAYS, THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM FACES AN UPHILL BATTLE WHEN IT COMES TO SUSTAINING AND EXPANDING EARLY CHILDHOOD INITIATIVES . . .

WHAT ARE THE GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES?

Strategic efforts are urgently needed to secure additional revenue for Montana’s early childhood initiatives. While Montana’s early childhood system enjoyed support with the previous gubernatorial administration, the current administration has not named early childhood as a policy priority. Not only does this impact the decisions made by the governor’s office and the state legislature, but it also has a significant influence on the leadership of governmental agencies whose purview includes but is not limited to early childhood programming. Where state agencies were populated with champions for young children at the highest tiers of leadership, many of these influential individuals have moved on, leaving a dearth of informed



“There’s political barriers in the case where [people] don’t want to pay for someone else’s kids to go to school, basically. A big misunderstanding about how the world works, in my opinion.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

and empowered leaders to advance early childhood priorities. This political reality makes the role of Zero to Five Montana to unify state and local early childhood leaders all the more critical. Engaging the governor’s office, policy makers, and the general public with messaging to illustrate the lasting impact and return on investment that early childhood initiatives can bring will be the challenging but necessary work of early childhood leaders over the next few years. To prepare for this charge, local and state leaders will need additional support to increase the effectiveness and impact of storytelling—including messaging tools and capacity-building around the strategic messaging of data.

In addition to supporting ongoing funding for the programs and services that directly impact families, Zero to Five Montana’s work in the coming years must include strategies to establish itself as a unique but connected entity in the early childhood space. As Zero to Five Montana focuses its efforts and matures in its role, it will be essential to effectively tell the story of its contributions and impacts on the system. By doing so, Zero to Five Montana will be better positioned to create additional revenue streams for its work and to expand its impact on the sustainability of aligned early childhood initiatives across the state.



“The same old struggles I think have always been of this lack of recognition [of early childhood issues]—‘What do you mean we need more [child care]? Moms should be home’ . . . I don’t know the particular legislator that said it, but we have had child care compared to caring for a goldfish in this session . . . I think that’s still real here, unfortunately.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader



“We really see ourselves as a seed funder for [Zero to Five], which we’re really hoping that it can become a sustainable entity . . . So I’m really curious about ways that state agencies think about what role Zero to Five really brings to the table. And what services do they feel like are really missing, based on their needs assessments and the strategic plans that they have done, whether they’ve been funded or not, to continue.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

Despite progress to increase coordination of data across child-and-family-serving agencies, data systems are not where they need to be in order to support efficient data-based messaging. There is much work to do by designated working groups at the state level to address the gaps in communication across data systems. Additionally, as data alignment efforts continue to move forward, there will be a need to increase buy-in and support from both state and local partners—as data outputs are only as good as user inputs. By messaging the importance of access to high-quality data for stakeholders and improving the available tools, stakeholders can be incentivized to participate meaningfully as both contributors and end users of evaluation and outcomes data for the purposes of advocacy and decision-making. The state’s charge to improve data infrastructure includes the capability to both improve coordination across programs (horizontal data systems) and also to improve understanding of long-term outcomes associated with early childhood policies and programming (longitudinal data systems). While initial data system efforts have been primarily focused on the former, there is an opportunity for the continued improvement of the state’s longitudinal data system, which can support and sustain advocacy efforts by demonstrating the educational and economic impact of early childhood services over time. While data system development is not within the scope or capacity of Zero to Five Montana, there is an opportunity for the state office and its partners to ensure that the importance of continuing state investments—and user participation—in data systems is clear to stakeholders, as state leaders work to create a statewide culture of evaluation and data-driven decision-making.



“Our state [data system], I think especially in early childhood, is pretty behind . . . We see that things aren’t working, and I don’t know that we have been as data driven as we could be.”

— Montana Early Childhood Systems Leader

STATE PERSPECTIVES: What advice would you offer to Zero to Five Montana as an organization working to build strong statewide policy and advocacy systems for young children and their families?

“I think some of the best advice I would give is to take some steps to create champions within the legislature, and we’ve done that in a couple of ways. One was through getting legislation to create the school readiness committee. Another was angling to be named in the legislation around our joint subcommittee for preschool reform. Create tables where you’re educating and bringing them along about the importance and the return of focusing on this work. It seems like that would be doubly important if the opportunity is only every other year for decisions to be made and investments to be decided on. Wedge their way into having bipartisan, bicameral advisors, or champions. I would really recommend that. I don’t know how they are connected to the executive branch and all of that. But, that’s another important way to figure out what kind of relationship they want to have. We have three cabinet members on our board, and then two additional ex-officio slots, and right now, our state superintendent and commissioner of social services fill those two additional spots, so that they are fully aware of and can support [our work]. We make sure that there’s no weird conflict of interest for them. We actually don’t have any legislators on our board because we did run into some of that being an issue. But I think thinking through very carefully about how to weave these relationships together [is important].”

— Kathy Glazer, President, VECF (Virginia)

“I think there’s probably four things that I would say, which is do your homework and outreach early, and understand who has concerns about the organization and why, and work to honestly resolve those, as well as work to provide some value add to your partners right away, without money exchanging hands or anything. Be there for the people that are inclined to be in your corner, and then address the people that have concerns. Be very careful about your first projects out of the gate. It was helpful to us, one, that we had some multiyear work. So it very, very much helped with our stability and credibility. And you really want those pieces of work to be a value add to multiple public and private partners, so that you can show that what you do has value, and you can bring some good things, some good outcomes, to important people . . . Then, I think continuing to really listen carefully to where the needs are, and maybe get some short-term wins in those needed areas. So one of the things that were lucky for us right away is we got asked to partner to redo the Early Childhood Colorado Framework. It was a way for us to show a lot of partners, ‘We’re here for you, we’re going to do something good.’ It’s something that everyone wanted, a new framework. They were happy with it. And it was a pretty quick project. So that was really, really nice. It gave us some visibility and gave us a way to show our value add right away. Even though that was a small one. I think, for stability, those multiyear ones are really important as well.”

— Jennifer Stedron, Executive Director, Early Milestones (Colorado)

WHAT ACTIONS WILL ZERO TO FIVE MONTANA TAKE?



STRATEGY 3.1 Engage a broad audience of stakeholders and potential partners/allies through effective storytelling

One key benefit of convening stakeholders across multiple agencies and sectors is the opportunity to tell a compelling and multifaceted story about the ongoing work of Zero to Five Montana and its partners and about the importance of sustained investments in the early years. The research shows that investments in initiatives to support young children and their families have far-reaching impacts that appeal to a wide range of civic interests. Recognizing this, Zero to Five Montana is well positioned to generate support for child-and-family-centered initiatives within the early childhood system—and between the early childhood system and potential allies in other spaces—through strategic storytelling.

Action Steps	Y 1–2	Y 3–4	Y 5+
Elevate local challenges and solutions in early childhood policy to inform efforts leading to the 2023 legislative session (and beyond)			
Demonstrate the unique role and value add of Zero to Five Montana within and beyond the early childhood system to (a) build awareness and increase reach/partnership and (b) create opportunities for alternative revenue streams to sustain the Zero to Five Montana initiative			
Identify/create and disseminate tools to support state-level and local advocacy and systems-building efforts that align to Zero to Five Montana’s priorities and/or a statewide policy framework			
Engage state and local advocacy partners in continued learning, practice, and reflection about effective storytelling as it aligns to Zero to Five Montana’s priorities and/or a statewide policy framework			



STRATEGY 3.2 Champion the improvement of data and evaluation as a central component of systems development, empowering early childhood leaders with access to high-quality data

Building from strong relationships and involvement in conversations alongside national, state, and local partners, Zero to Five Montana is positioned to reinforce the issue of data and evaluation as a cornerstone of sustainability for early childhood initiatives and the system writ large. As part of the effort to convene and unify leaders across the state around shared priorities, Zero to Five Montana can play a key role to ensure that the importance of strong data and evaluation practices remains on the table.

Action Steps	Y 1–2	Y 3–4	Y 5+
Establish, track, and communicate metrics that are meaningful, time-bound, attainable, and aligned with Zero to Five Montana’s desired outcomes (i.e., reach, commitment, equity, and coordination) and impacts (i.e., healthy pregnancies and births, supported families, and school readiness)			
Convene early childhood systems leaders to develop a clear research agenda to support messaging to decision-makers and constituents (i.e., priority topics for early childhood research and evaluation work in Montana) aligned with short- and long-term priorities, current evidence on the most pressing needs for children and families, and the existing knowledge base on these topics			
Elevate the need and key considerations for strengthening data systems as part of the development of a statewide policy framework			

How will we know we are making progress?

We will see . . .

- An increase in public support/demand for child and family-centered policies and practices
- Additional “champions” for early childhood in the state legislature, business and economic development communities, philanthropy, and more
- Decision-making at the state and local levels that clearly aligns with a shared policy agenda
- The establishment of a statewide research and data agenda that is widely and regularly leveraged for data-based decision making
- An increase in statewide efforts to improve and expand the statewide data system



NEXT STEPS

Children and families are the building blocks of a vibrant and prosperous Montana—so when it comes to ensuring that young children and their families have the support and resources they need to thrive, there is no time to waste. This plan provides an important starting point for Zero to Five Montana—outlining initial steps toward a **Montana dedicated to every child**. The plan acts as a guide and a living document to build from as Zero to Five Montana’s capacity increases and as the policy landscape and conditions for Montana’s families change over time.

As the landscape analysis and strategic planning phase concludes, the Zero to Five Montana state office turns its attention to implementing the activities in this plan. As it does so, continued engagement and collaboration with its national, state, and local partners will be foundational to its success. Therefore, this plan represents not only a commitment to action for children and families on the part of the Zero to Five Montana state office, but also an invitation to all stakeholders across the state of Montana. The plan calls on all of us to envision and work toward a higher standard of care and well-being for the state’s youngest and most vulnerable residents and, in doing so, to raise the standard for all who call Montana home.



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