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STATE OF MONTANA

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Montana Awarded \$10 Million to Expand Access to High-Quality Early Childhood Education in High Needs Communities

HELENA – Today, Governor Steve Bullock and Superintendent Denise Juneau announced that Montana has been awarded a \$10 million-a-year federal Preschool Development grant from the U.S. Department of Education to increase capacity and expand access to high-quality early childhood education in sixteen high needs communities throughout the state. The grant provides support for school districts in these communities to improve professional and program development, including scholarships for early childhood educators, building Montana's early childhood workforce to ensure they're able to meet the accreditation and licensure standards recently approved by the Montana Board of Public Education. Additionally, grant funds will be used to expand access to publicly funded, high-quality early childhood educational programs in these communities. This competitive grant can be renewed for up to four years, for a maximum of \$40 million awarded. More than 6,000 four-year-olds are expected to be served over a four-year period. A total of 18 states received preschool development grants.

"This grant is great news for thousands of Montana's earliest learners, and an important start toward ensuring every Montana four-year-old has the opportunity to take part in high-quality early childhood education," Bullock said of the grant. "Every Montana family, regardless of where they live, should have the opportunity to send their child to a high-quality early childhood educational program that ensures they are kindergarten ready."

The grant will build on successful early literacy programs in Montana, and these programs will serve as models and mentors for new programs that are added over the course of the grant. The Office of Public Instruction and the Department of Health and Human Services will provide technical assistance to the grantee communities.

"This grant is going to allow us to jumpstart the effort to expand access to high-quality early learning programs for Montana children and families," said Superintendent Juneau. "Thousands of our youngest learners will benefit from the skills they will gain in these classrooms."

The sixteen communities included in this grant are:

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- Great Falls
- Hardin
- Lewistown
- Helena
- Bozeman
- Wolf Point
- Browning
- Anaconda
- Crow Agency
- Libby
- Kalispell
- Butte
- Box Elder
- Lame Deer
- Rocky Boy
- Pablo/Ronan

The grant complements Bullock's Early Edge initiative, which aims to make voluntary, publicly funded, high-quality early childhood education for four-year-olds available throughout Montana. In his budget, Bullock requested \$37 million to fund the initiative.

Through Bullock's proposal, block grants will be available to every Montana public school district to create or expand high-quality early childhood education programs in their community. School districts will have the option of creating a new program or partnering with an existing early childhood education program to build on the existing strengths in their community. Programs will be required to meet quality standards set by the Board of Public Education. Participation in these preschool programs will be voluntary. Last month, the Montana Board of Public Education approved content, accreditation, and licensure standards for early childhood education programs receiving public funds.

Montana is currently one of eight states without a publicly funded pre-kindergarten option for four-year-olds.

Studies have shown the benefits that high-quality early childhood education has on student success. Children who take part in high-quality early childhood education programs are:

- More likely to read at grade level;
- Less likely to repeat a grade or require special education;
- More likely to earn a high school diploma; and
- Less likely to become teenage parents, require public assistance, abuse drugs, or end up in jail.

In addition, these programs have been shown to help ensure that every child enters kindergarten ready to learn with appropriate social and behavioral habits that will allow teachers to focus on teaching rather than managing distractions.

High-quality early childhood education programs have shown a significant economic impact as well. On average, for every dollar spent on these programs, communities see a \$7-\$9 return on investment through savings and increased economic activity.

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