

Early Care and Education in North Idaho | Letter of Support

One of the most difficult struggles North Idaho families face is the cost of child care. For a family of four with two working adults and two young children, child care costs often exceed \$1000 per month. The strain that child care puts on the typical family budget has been highlighted by the United Way ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) reports every year since 2016. To address this issue, United Way of North Idaho developed the Early Care and Education (ECE) Task Force.

The ECE Task Force focuses on building public-private partnerships to invest in early care infrastructure, strengthening the child care workforce, and increasing the availability of high-quality early care to working families. The Task Force includes representation from Head Start, Early Head Start, school districts, community foundations, colleges and universities, Chambers of Commerce, community development organizations, municipal government, child care providers, and parents.

Quality child care has a major impact on a child's future. Nurturing early experiences in and out of the home builds the foundations for healthy development. Quality early care helps prepare children for a happy and successful transition to school and benefits the whole classroom.

Quality child care is also important for the child's family. Affordable child care is vital for parents to be able to work and achieve financial stability. That's why the ECE Task Force developed child care scholarships that provide monthly tuition assistance for families who are working or going to school and earn too much to qualify for public assistance, but are struggling to make ends meet. The Task Force distributed nearly \$50,000 in scholarships from November 2020 to March 2021 to keep children in care and parents able to work.

On the provider side, child care businesses are labor-intensive and operate on slim margins, with 90% or more of their budget going to personnel despite child care teachers making some of the lowest wages of American workers; supporting these essential workers builds quality. The ECE Task Force invests in licensing compliance, quality improvement, COVID relief and recovery, and even start-up costs for new businesses through grant programs. The Task Force has invested over \$12,000 in these initiatives to-date. On a larger scale, businesses who invest in child care support for employees see big returns in recruitment and retention. The ECE Task Force created a local Employer-Supported Child Care Handbook to guide our business community through ways to advance the health and success of their workforce and also add much-needed stability to the child care provider infrastructure. Chambers of Commerce across the nation recognize the importance of business leadership in early care investments, and North Idaho is no exception.

Substantial evidence shows that the long-term effects of investments in early childhood education are reduced social costs, more effective schools, higher tax revenue, and a more productive workforce.

In 2019, the State of Idaho was awarded \$3.3 million from the federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) program to fund local collaborations in conducting needs assessments for early education. United Way of North Idaho's ECE Task Force was one of the collaborative groups that received funds from this award, and used them to conduct needs assessments and develop strategic plans for Bonner and Kootenai Counties to improve early childhood systems and outcomes. The Task Force concluded that after decades of underfunding, the early childhood education system has severe fractures that can lead to poor outcomes for children, their families,



schools, and communities. The strategic plans that were developed address the need to increase the number of high-quality child care seats, increase professional development achievement for providers, continue child care scholarships to support working families, strengthen child care businesses, provide tools to parents to succeed in their role as children’s first teachers, create pathways for employer-supported child care, and more.

In January 2021, Idaho was awarded a second grant of \$6 million from the PDG program. This grant would provide three years of funding to local collaborations across the state to begin implementing initiatives identified in the first phase. By leveraging the PDG with the more than \$300,000 invested in North Idaho for early childhood in 2020, the Task Force would be able to give a major boost to the conditions that optimize brain building for children throughout our community. The programs PDG funds are locally led and shaped; decisions about how these programs are run – such as curriculum – are decided by our North Idaho community members who oversee the programs.

But in March 2021, the Idaho legislature voted against receiving the \$6 million PDG grant for Idaho’s youngest and most vulnerable citizens.

Evidence from neuroscience, psychology, education, and economics all point to the foundational importance of early childhood development. If you agree with the importance of investing in early childhood systems, tell Idaho legislators to support these policy initiatives and financial opportunities. On behalf of the United Way of North Idaho Early Care and Education Task Force, thank you for adding your voice to the call to invest in Idaho’s youngest children.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Tucker".

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Keri Cederquist".

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