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## Statement Regarding Early Childhood Education and House Bill 755 - March 29, 2019

The undersigned public education advocates partnering in the Montana Public Education Center (MT-PEC) are disappointed in the recent rhetoric, including disparagements and mischaracterizations of our unified position **in support of** publicly-funded and accountable early childhood education and our corresponding **opposition to** the deeply-flawed House Bill 755 by Representative Moore. The current level of political discourse in retribution for our opposition to this bill as well as the hazardous pace of House Bill 755's consideration is beneath the clear-headed deliberation of this issue that Montanans deserve.

The delay in the unveiling of House Bill 755 only 7 days before its transmittal deadline created a compressed time frame for passage and a corresponding environment where careful deliberation was rendered impractical, perhaps deliberately so. The hearing proceeded without the benefit of a fiscal note and the timing was such that the committee was required to immediately act upon the bill following its hearing in order to meet the transmittal deadline.

In spite of the highly unusual pace in the progression of this bill from hand-drawn concept to a hearing in less than a week, MT-PEC engaged because of our support for preschool. We provided extensive concerns and suggestions that could have led to a viable bill that would have secured universal access of Montana families to high quality public, accountable preschool into the future. Instead, all of our recommendations were rejected in favor of a proposal to publicly fund private charter preschools for the first time in Montana's history at rates 12% higher than the rates proposed for public school pupils. Additionally, HB 755 would create a new all-powerful state bureaucrat with statutory powers in denigration of the ownership of public schools in each community in Montana as well as overriding the constitutional authority of the Board of Public Education. Montanans deserve better and the committee made the right decision to table House Bill 755.

Our unified opposition to both the contents of House Bill 755 and the timing and method of its introduction is well grounded in voter sentiment in opposition to public funding of private education<sup>1</sup> as well as in the position statements adopted by each of our respective organizations. These positions call for our opposition to public funding of private education, for the defense of each community's ownership of its public schools, and for the freedom from top-down, onerous mandates imposed at a state level. House Bill 755 failed on each of these key issues and others, leaving MT-PEC with little choice but to oppose the bill.

MT-PEC has strongly supported and fought valiantly for the Governors' original proposal for public preschool in HB 225 and will continue to monitor and support actions that would resurrect the HB 225 public preschool language while continuing to oppose actions that would resurrect HB 755 preschool language until sine die of this legislative session. We remain confident we have made the right decision, as directed by our members and in the best interests of families who have successfully relied on Montana's public schools to provide high quality education to their children for over 150 years.

<sup>1</sup> (55% opposed, 30% in support with 15% undecided), Zogby International poll of the opinions of Montana Voters, administered August 2018.

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