

*Addressing Age, Gender, and Socioeconomic Factors in Montana's Early Childhood Education:
Policy Options for Improving Reading Literacy and School Readiness*

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Abstract

This article explores the influence of age, gender, and socioeconomic status on early academic success in Montana, a state without state-funded preschool. Montana's kindergarten enrollment policy allows children to begin school if they turn five years old on or before September 10, resulting in some children entering kindergarten as young as four years old and others as late as six or seven, depending on parental decisions (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2023). This wide range in enrollment age contributes to developmental disparities, with younger students potentially facing disadvantages in early literacy and social-emotional skills compared to their older peers (Scammacca et al., 2020). The article also highlights gender differences, noting that boys often develop critical skills like language and self-regulation at a slower pace than girls, which may impact their early educational experiences (Brebric et al., 2020). The absence of state-funded preschool further widens the educational gap, especially among low-income children who may enter kindergarten without foundational skills (Delaney & Devereux, 2021; Conway-Turner et al., 2023). This article invites stakeholders to consider policy options such as adjusting the kindergarten entry age, implementing state-funded preschool, or creating targeted early literacy interventions to address these disparities. Montana can work towards a more equitable early education system for all children by engaging in a comprehensive discussion about these policy options.

"Early childhood education is the key to the betterment of society" (Maria Montessori, n.d.). Early childhood education plays a critical role in cognitive, social, and emotional development, establishing the foundation for academic success and long-term outcomes (Long, Palmer, & Anderson, 2021). In Montana, challenges such as the lack of state-funded preschool programs and lower-than-average kindergarten enrollment age create disparities in school readiness, often influenced by age, gender, and socioeconomic status. Research shows that younger children entering kindergarten at age four often struggle with literacy, self-regulation, and social interaction, placing them at an academic disadvantage compared to older peers (Scammacca, Fall, & Roberts, 2020). Additionally, boys frequently develop language and self-regulation skills more slowly than girls, further influencing adaptation to classroom settings (Brebric, Hernandez, & Williams, 2020). For children from low-income families, limited access to quality early learning experiences exacerbates these challenges, with Montana's lack of state-funded preschool intensifying inequities (Delaney & Devereux, 2021; Conway-Turner, Smith, & Graham, 2023).

Using Piaget's theory of cognitive development as a framework, this analysis examines how developmental readiness during the preoperational stage (ages two to seven) impacts young learners, particularly in structured academic settings (Piaget, 1952). Addressing these disparities requires policy interventions such as adjusting kindergarten enrollment age, implementing state-funded preschool programs, and introducing targeted early literacy initiatives. These strategies can help align educational practices with developmental benchmarks and address inequities in access to early education. By providing a research-based foundation, this discussion aims to guide policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders in enhancing school readiness and promoting equitable educational outcomes for Montana's young learners.

Exploring Early Literacy in Montana's Educational Landscape

Early literacy serves as both a foundation and a predictor of academic success, yet many children in Montana face barriers to developing these essential skills. The absence of state-funded preschool programs, combined with the state's low kindergarten enrollment age, creates systemic gaps that particularly affect children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Research demonstrates that younger children entering kindergarten are often at a developmental disadvantage compared to older peers, especially in acquiring early reading skills such as phonemic awareness and comprehension (Scammacca, Fall, & Roberts, 2020). Boys also frequently exhibit slower development in self-regulation and language skills than girls, posing additional challenges in early literacy acquisition (Brebric, Hernandez, & Williams, 2020). The lack of access to preschool exacerbates these issues, as many children from low-income families begin kindergarten without the foundational language and literacy skills necessary for success (Delaney & Devereux, 2021; Conway-Turner, Smith, & Graham, 2023).

The theoretical framework for this exploration is grounded in Piaget's stages of cognitive development (Piaget, 1952), emphasizing the importance of aligning educational interventions with children's developmental readiness. During the preoperational stage, when logical thinking and symbolic understanding are still emerging, younger children often struggle to meet the demands of structured literacy instruction. In Montana, this developmental mismatch underscores the challenges faced by younger children in adapting to academic environments without adequate preparation.

The research referenced in this article was carefully selected through a qualitative review process, prioritizing peer-reviewed articles and policy analysis reports published within the last five years. These sources were chosen for their focus on key themes, including age-related

school readiness, gender-specific developmental differences, and the role of socioeconomic factors in early childhood education. Particular attention was given to studies providing insights into the impact of kindergarten entry age, the benefits of early literacy programs, and the consequences of unequal access to preschool education. This rigorous selection process ensured that the research addressed current challenges and informed potential policy interventions specific to Montana's educational landscape.

This article addresses four critical research questions: How do age, gender, and socioeconomic factors intersect to influence early literacy outcomes among Montana's youngest learners? What developmental and educational challenges arise from Montana's lower kindergarten enrollment age? How does the lack of state-funded preschool impact school readiness and literacy development, particularly for children from low-income families? Finally, what policy interventions could enhance early literacy outcomes and promote equitable educational opportunities across the state? By framing the inquiry around these questions, the article provides a structured approach to examining the interconnected factors that shape early literacy success and identifying actionable solutions.

Further identified are key policy interventions to address these challenges, including adjusting the kindergarten enrollment age, implementing state-funded preschool programs, and introducing targeted early literacy initiatives. These measures aim to enhance developmental readiness, ensure equitable access to early education, and improve reading outcomes across diverse demographic groups in Montana. By exploring these strategies, I advocate for systemic reforms to bridge existing gaps and provide every child with a strong foundation for lifelong learning. This integrated approach highlights the interconnectedness of age, gender, and socioeconomic factors in shaping early literacy success. It offers a comprehensive roadmap for

policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to address these critical issues. Collaborative efforts among community leaders, educational institutions, and government agencies are essential for implementing policies that support the diverse developmental needs of children, ensuring they have the resources necessary to thrive. Ultimately, this underscores the need for a unified, evidence-based strategy to bridge gaps in literacy outcomes and foster lifelong success for all children in Montana.

Early Childhood Education in Montana

Montana's early childhood education landscape presents unique challenges, making it a critical yet complex area of policymaking. As one of the three states in the U.S. without state-funded preschool, Montana faces distinct hurdles in providing equitable access to early educational resources (Delaney & Devereux, 2021). The lack of universal preschool means that many children, especially those from low-income families, do not have access to the foundational educational experiences that are crucial for school readiness. The absence of state-funded preschool disproportionately affects families who cannot afford private preschool, thus perpetuating cycles of educational inequity from an early age (Barnett & Hustedt, 2020; Conway-Turner et al., 2023). The urgency of addressing these issues is paramount, as early childhood education provides children with critical cognitive and social-emotional skills that lay the groundwork for lifelong learning and success. The lack of such services in Montana creates a significant gap in early literacy and school readiness.

The state's lower kindergarten enrollment age compared to many others further complicates matters, as it impacts a wide range of developmental, cognitive, and social factors that influence academic success, particularly in the early years of schooling. Research suggests that starting formal schooling at an older age allows children to reach critical developmental

milestones important for academic and social success, such as self-regulation and early literacy skills (Scammacca et al., 2020). In Montana, where children may enter kindergarten as young as four, the developmental variability among children can be considerable. This variability often results in younger students needing help with foundational skills, such as phonemic awareness and self-regulation, which puts them at a disadvantage compared to their older peers (Rothbart & Heflin, 2023). This developmental gap is exacerbated for children without access to preschool programs, as they may lack the early academic and social-emotional skills needed to adjust to the structured kindergarten environment.

Age, gender, and socioeconomic status all significantly shape the educational outcomes of Montana's youngest students. Gender differences are evident, with boys often developing self-regulation and language skills at a slower pace than girls, which impacts their ability to succeed in early school settings (Brebric et al., 2020). These differences in developmental readiness can lead to disparities in school performance, as boys may struggle more with meeting kindergarten's behavioral and cognitive demands (Ali et al., 2023). In addition, socioeconomic disparities mean children from lower-income families are more likely to lack access to quality early learning opportunities, further impacting their school readiness and academic achievement (Delaney & Devereux, 2021). This highlights the importance of creating equitable access to early childhood education programs to bridge these gaps and ensure that all children, regardless of gender or economic background, have an equal opportunity to succeed.

Addressing the challenges related to age, gender, and socioeconomic status in Montana's early education system requires multifaceted policy interventions. These may include aligning the kindergarten enrollment age with that of other states, implementing state-funded preschool programs to provide foundational learning experiences, and designing targeted early literacy

interventions to support at-risk children (Scammacca et al., 2020; Conway-Turner et al., 2023). Each of these policy options carries unique benefits and challenges, but by engaging in these discussions, stakeholders in Montana can play a crucial role in creating a more inclusive and equitable early education system that meets the diverse needs of all its young learners. This sense of empowerment should inspire action, setting the foundation for a brighter educational future (Long et al., 2021).

The Role of Age in Early Academic Success: A Key Factor in School Readiness

Across the United States, the age at which children begin formal schooling can vary, and research consistently suggests that starting school at an older age confers certain developmental advantages. Studies have demonstrated that older children perform better academically, particularly in reading and language development. This is mainly because older students are more likely to have reached critical cognitive, emotional, and social developmental milestones that enable them to successfully navigate the structure and demands of kindergarten (Long et al., 2021).

In states like Montana, where the kindergarten enrollment age is lower than the national average, the age at which children start school becomes an important consideration. Younger children—often just four or five years old when they begin kindergarten—may be at a developmental disadvantage compared to their older peers. These younger students are more likely to struggle with early literacy skills such as phonemic awareness, letter recognition, comprehension, and the social and emotional challenges of adjusting to a structured school environment (Scammacca et al., 2020). This is particularly true for children who have not had the opportunity to attend preschool, as is often the case in Montana due to the lack of state-funded programs (Conway-Turner et al., 2023).

Given the developmental variability in children of kindergarten age, it is worth considering whether Montana might benefit from aligning its kindergarten enrollment age with states with a higher entry age. Research suggests that older students perform better in the early grades and throughout their academic careers so that this alignment could improve academic outcomes for Montana's students. However, this is a complex decision that requires careful consideration. Raising the kindergarten entry age could create challenges for families who rely on schools for childcare or may need access to alternative early learning programs (Rothbart & Heflin, 2023). Moreover, each child develops at their own pace, and some younger students may thrive in a school environment, while others might benefit from an additional year at home or in a less structured setting (Brebric et al., 2020). This issue invites an open conversation about the benefits and drawbacks of adjusting Montana's kindergarten enrollment age and the best ways to support the developmental needs of its youngest learners (Clark & Kjellstrand, 2023).

Gender Differences in Developmental Readiness: Understanding the Gaps

In addition to age, gender plays a significant role in shaping how children experience their early years of education. Research shows that children develop specific cognitive and social skills at different rates, which impacts their readiness for school (Selvitopu & Kaya, 2023; Long, Palmer, & Anderson, 2021; Piaget, 1952; Rothbart & Heflin, 2023; Scammacca, Fall, & Roberts, 2020). Boys tend to develop self-regulation and language skills more slowly than girls, affecting their ability to succeed in structured classroom environments during the early years of schooling. Self-regulation, including focusing attention, controlling impulses, and managing emotions, is crucial for success in kindergarten. Boys' delayed development in these areas can create significant challenges, particularly in adhering to classroom expectations, such as sitting still,

following instructions, and participating effectively in early literacy activities (Brebric et al., 2020).

The effects of these developmental differences are especially pronounced in states like Montana, where a lower kindergarten enrollment age means that many boys start formal education before they are developmentally prepared. This puts younger boys, who may already struggle with self-regulation, at an increased risk of academic and behavioral challenges. Brebric et al. (2020) point out that boys are more likely to experience disciplinary issues during the early years of schooling, which further hinders their academic progress and can negatively shape their school experience. The emphasis on early academic standards, combined with insufficient development in critical areas such as language and social-emotional regulation, can result in boys being labeled as "troublemakers" or academically "behind," which can impact their self-esteem and future school performance (Conway-Turner et al., 2023).

Conversely, girls enter kindergarten with stronger social-emotional and language skills, which give them an advantage in academic tasks like reading and early literacy activities (Ali et al., 2023). These skills make it easier for girls to adapt to the structured kindergarten environment, allowing them to engage more readily with peers and teachers. Girls' better-developed ability to regulate their emotions and behavior contributes to a smoother adjustment to school life and provides a solid foundation for future academic success. However, it is important not to view these gender differences as rigid determinants of academic outcomes, as each child develops at their own pace. Instead, the disparities highlight the need for educators to adapt their teaching strategies to address these developmental gaps effectively.

This presents a critical challenge for Montana: How can schools and educators be supported in creating learning environments that accommodate developmental differences while

avoiding reinforcing stereotypes or lowering expectations for any group of students? Research suggests that implementing gender-sensitive teaching approaches and offering more flexible classroom practices could help address the unique developmental needs of both boys and girls (Selvitopu & Kaya, 2023). For example, allowing for more movement-based activities in the classroom could help boys better regulate their energy, while providing structured opportunities for emotional learning could benefit all students regardless of gender (Long et al., 2021).

Moreover, early interventions that focus on building self-regulation and language skills in boys could help mitigate these developmental gaps before they become obstacles to academic success. Programs emphasizing social-emotional learning (SEL) have been shown to support children in developing essential skills like empathy, emotional regulation, and effective communication, which are critical for academic and social success (Downey et al., 2022). By incorporating SEL into the early childhood curriculum, Montana schools could help bridge the developmental differences that contribute to educational disparities between boys and girls.

In addition to gender-sensitive practices, individualized attention and support are crucial. Teachers need adequate training to understand the developmental differences between boys and girls, and they should be provided with resources to adapt their teaching strategies accordingly (Clark et al., 2023). For instance, targeted early literacy programs and differentiated instruction can ensure that both boys and girls receive the specific support they need to develop critical academic and social skills. The goal is to create an inclusive learning environment where all children, regardless of gender, are given the tools and support they need to thrive academically.

Montana's challenge lies in finding a balance between setting high expectations for all students while recognizing and accommodating their unique developmental needs. This balance can only be achieved by fostering an educational environment that values diversity in

development and encourages personalized learning. By doing so, Montana can work towards an equitable education system that empowers every child to succeed, regardless of their developmental timeline or gender differences (Conway-Turner et al., 2023).

The Socioeconomic Factor: Equity in Access to Early Education

While age and gender are essential considerations in school readiness, socioeconomic status adds another layer of complexity that must not be overlooked. Research indicates that children from lower-income families often face substantial disadvantages when it comes to accessing early learning resources, creating disparities in school readiness (Selvitopu and Kaya, 2023). This gap is particularly evident in Montana, where there is a lack of state-funded preschool. Access to affordable early education is necessary for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter kindergarten with the foundational skills required for success, which perpetuates educational inequities from the earliest stages (Delaney & Devereux, 2021).

The cost of private preschool is prohibitive for many families in Montana, further compounding the challenges children from lower-income backgrounds face. According to Barnett and Hustedt (2020), the cost of high-quality early childhood education is one of the most significant financial barriers for families already struggling. In states like Montana, where no state funding is allocated to support early education, the burden of paying for private preschool falls entirely on families, resulting in many children missing critical learning opportunities during their most formative years.

The importance of early childhood education, particularly preschool, cannot be overstated. Research consistently shows that attending preschool has a significant positive impact on children's development; additionally, children who attend preschool are more likely to

develop essential skills, including literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional regulation (Conway-Turner et al., 2023). These skills lay the groundwork for a successful transition into kindergarten and beyond, providing a crucial foundation for future learning. Studies have also highlighted that in states with state-funded preschool programs, children benefit academically, socially, and emotionally. These children are more likely to enjoy school, participate actively in class, and positively engage with their peers, enhancing their learning experiences and outcomes.

The lack of state-funded preschool in Montana highlights the need for a broader conversation about educational equity and access. Research by Conway-Turner (2023) underscores the long-term economic and social benefits of investing in early childhood education, suggesting that providing access to preschool for all children can yield significant returns for both individuals and society at large. The potential of universal preschool programs to bridge the gap in school readiness, leveling the playing field for children regardless of their family income, is a hopeful prospect. Such programs would ensure that all children in Montana, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have access to the foundational skills they need to succeed in school and later in life.

Implementing a universal preschool program is complex and costly, requiring careful consideration of potential funding mechanisms and policy implications. Stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, and community leaders, play a crucial role in this process. They must weigh the benefits of expanding access against the financial and logistical challenges involved. This raises important questions: Could targeted programs specifically designed for low-income families provide a more immediate and cost-effective solution? What role might public-private partnerships play in making preschool more affordable and accessible? These are critical

questions that the audience must consider as they work toward creating a more equitable educational system in Montana.

Engaging in meaningful dialogue about how best to expand access to early childhood education is a necessary step in addressing these inequities. The benefits of early childhood education are well-documented, and the consequences of failing to provide this foundational learning are too significant to ignore. By exploring a range of solutions—whether through state funding, public-private partnerships, or targeted programs for disadvantaged families—Montana could build a more equitable educational system that ensures all children have the chance to succeed.

Considering Policy Options: Exploring Solutions for Early Childhood Education in Montana

Montana's current approach to early childhood education presents an opportunity for reflection and meaningful discussion on improving educational outcomes for the state's youngest learners. Montana is one of only a few states that do not provide state-funded preschool programs, and the kindergarten enrollment age remains lower than the national average. This lack of early childhood support creates significant barriers to ensuring all children enter school equally (Delaney & Devereux, 2021). Despite these limitations, there is a growing awareness among policymakers, educators, and the community of the need to address the challenges faced by young learners, which makes this an ideal moment for reassessment and reform (Clark et al., 2023).

As policymakers consider the future of early childhood education in Montana, it is essential to explore a range of potential solutions, each with unique advantages and challenges.

These solutions should be carefully tailored to meet the specific needs of Montana's diverse communities, recognizing that the state's rural nature, cultural diversity, and economic landscape all play roles in shaping access to and the effectiveness of early childhood education (Selvitopu & Kaya, 2023). Montana's current position provides an opportunity to make targeted, impactful policy decisions that can significantly influence the educational outcomes for young children, especially those from marginalized backgrounds.

One avenue for exploration is adjusting the kindergarten enrollment age. Currently, Montana's kindergarten enrollment age is lower than that of many other states, potentially leading children to start formal schooling before reaching critical developmental milestones in language, literacy, or social-emotional regulation. By aligning Montana's kindergarten enrollment policies with states that start children at an older age, the state could give children more time to develop the cognitive, emotional, and social skills needed to succeed in school (Scammacca et al., 2020). This approach could help to close the gap for those who start school with developmental disadvantages and allow them to better cope with the demands of kindergarten.

However, while delaying the start of kindergarten might provide benefits for children's readiness, it also requires careful consideration of the unique needs of Montana's families. For many families, schools serve as an important source of childcare, and delaying enrollment could create economic challenges related to securing alternative care options (Rothbart & Heflin, 2023). Therefore, any policy changes regarding the kindergarten enrollment age would need to be complemented by accessible, affordable childcare options, which could mitigate the burden on families that may arise from such a change. Additionally, flexible entry policies that consider

individual developmental readiness may also be explored to support parents and children while still addressing school readiness challenges (Brebric et al., 2020).

Another option worth considering is the implementation of state-funded preschool. A wealth of research supports the positive effects of high-quality early childhood education on children's academic and social development (Long et al., 2021; Conway-Turner et al., 2023). State-funded preschool can help ensure that children, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have access to the foundational skills necessary to succeed in kindergarten and beyond (Conway-Turner et al., 2023). Providing high-quality preschool education can help mitigate the disadvantages experienced by children from low-income families who may otherwise not have the opportunity to attend preschool (Delaney & Devereux, 2021). These early experiences are crucial for developing early literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness, letter recognition, and early vocabulary, which are foundational for later reading success (Scammacca et al., 2020).

Implementing state-funded preschool in Montana would provide developmental benefits for children and create more significant equity across the educational system. Research shows preschool children are likelier to perform well academically throughout their school careers, are less likely to require special education services, and are more likely to graduate from high school (Long et al., 2021). Given these benefits, state-funded preschool could be a key lever for improving long-term educational outcomes across the state, resulting in a better-prepared workforce and stronger communities (Ali et al., 2023).

However, there are practical challenges to implementing state-funded preschool that must be addressed. Funding and organizing these programs will require careful planning and consideration of how to make the programs sustainable and effective (Selvitopu & Kaya, 2023).

Alternative models could also be explored to increase access to early education. For instance, targeted programs focused on serving low-income families could be a cost-effective way to begin expanding early childhood services (Clark et al., 2023). Additionally, partnerships between public schools, private childcare providers, and community organizations could expand access without the state bearing the entire financial burden (Downey et al., 2022).

Montana is at a crossroads in early childhood education. By thoughtfully considering adjustments to the kindergarten enrollment age and the introduction of state-funded preschool, the state can significantly improve educational outcomes for all children. If implemented carefully and considering the unique challenges facing Montana families, these measures can lay the foundation for a more equitable and effective early education system. Policymakers must engage in discussions that include all stakeholders—families, educators, community leaders, and child development experts—to ensure that decisions reflect the diverse needs of Montana's children and provide them with the best possible start in their educational journeys (Clark & Kjellstrand, 2023; Conway-Turner et al., 2023).

Conclusion: Fostering Collaborative Discussion for a Better Future

The issues surrounding age, gender, and socioeconomic status in early childhood education require nuanced solutions beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. In Montana, where unique challenges exist due to the lower kindergarten enrollment age compared to other states and the lack of state-funded preschool, these factors have a profound impact on shaping the academic trajectories of young learners (Scammacca et al., 2020). It is crucial to recognize that these challenges are not isolated—they are interconnected and require a comprehensive understanding of how different developmental and social contexts affect school readiness (Delaney & Devereux, 2021; Clark & Kjellstrand, 2023).

Montana's lower kindergarten enrollment age means that children who start school are, on average, younger and potentially less developmentally prepared to meet the cognitive, social, and emotional demands of a structured school environment (Long et al., 2021). Research consistently shows that younger children in a classroom setting may struggle more with literacy skills, self-regulation, and adapting to schooling routines than their older peers (Scammacca et al., 2020). This is particularly concerning in Montana, where the lack of access to state-funded preschool leaves many children unable to build foundational literacy and social-emotional skills before kindergarten (Delaney & Devereux, 2021). These early disparities can have lasting effects, resulting in persistent gaps in academic achievement and emotional well-being throughout a child's educational journey (Clark et al., 2023).

Further complicating the issue is the role that gender differences play in early education. Studies indicate that boys tend to develop self-regulation and language skills at a slower pace than girls, which makes them more vulnerable to the challenges of early school entry, especially without preschool exposure (Brebric et al., 2020). These gender-specific developmental differences highlight the need for gender-sensitive approaches in teaching and school readiness policies to ensure that children are equally prepared to succeed in kindergarten (Ali et al., 2023).

The socioeconomic context adds a layer of complexity. Children from low-income families often need more access to high-quality early learning opportunities, so they start school already behind their more affluent peers (Delaney & Devereux, 2021). Without state-funded preschool, many families in Montana cannot afford private early childhood education, resulting in a gap in school readiness that disproportionately affects children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Conway-Turner et al., 2023). This lack of early support directly contributes to educational inequities that persist over time (Selvitopu & Kaya, 2023).

Addressing these interconnected challenges will require a collaborative, long-term approach that includes policymakers, educators, community leaders, and families working together to create an equitable system. Rather than prescribing immediate policy changes, this article encourages Montana's stakeholders to engage in a comprehensive dialogue about available options. There is no simple fix—each potential solution, whether it be raising the kindergarten enrollment age, expanding access to state-funded preschool, or creating targeted early literacy interventions, comes with its benefits and trade-offs (Downey et al., 2022). However, stakeholders can collectively create policies tailored to Montana's unique needs by collectively exploring these options.

For instance, adjusting the kindergarten enrollment age could provide children more time to develop critical literacy and social-emotional skills, help them enter school ready to learn, and reduce the need for remedial support in later grades. Alternatively, expanding access to state-funded preschool would address a significant gap in educational equity by giving all children, regardless of their family's income, the opportunity to develop foundational skills critical for early academic success (Long et al., 2021). These early learning programs have been shown to positively impact early literacy and long-term educational outcomes, such as graduation rates and employment opportunities (Conway-Turner et al., 2023).

Targeted literacy interventions also play a vital role in leveling the playing field for Montana's young learners. These interventions, implemented through community centers, libraries, or after-school programs, could ensure that children at risk of falling behind receive the support they need before kindergarten (Downey et al., 2022). These programs could be designed to specifically address the literacy gap, which is often widened by a combination of low

socioeconomic status, lack of preschool, and developmental differences related to age and gender (Rothbart & Heflin, 2023).

As Montana continues to explore these solutions, the focus must be on equity and inclusion. By committing to policies that provide all children—regardless of their age, gender, or socioeconomic background—with the resources and support they need to succeed, Montana can build a foundation for lifelong learning and achievement. This means not only expanding access to early childhood education but also ensuring that the programs offered are of high quality, culturally responsive, and adaptable to meet the diverse needs of children across the state.

Montana's policymakers are uniquely positioned to create a system that sets equitable early education standards. Today's decisions about kindergarten enrollment age, access to preschool, and early literacy interventions will shape the future of thousands of children. By fostering a spirit of collaboration and thoughtful deliberation, Montana can create an educational system that nurtures all its youngest learners, setting them on a path toward lifelong success and making the state a model for how targeted, inclusive early childhood education policies can transform educational outcomes for the better (Conway-Turner et al., 2023; Downey et al., 2022).

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