

# Put children before politics

By SUSAN CHRISTOFFERSON

Montana parents today are working harder than ever to support their families. And they are seeking quality child care experiences that can help their children start school ready to succeed.

## Guest Opinion

In 2000, three-fourths of all families with children younger than six —

and two-thirds of married couple families with young children — had parents who worked. More than two-thirds of women with children younger than 13 and over one-half of mothers with infants under age one are in the labor force. Working is not optional for many American parents. Both parents must work to make ends meet. In fact, the majority (55 percent) of working women in the United States now bring home half or more of their family's earnings.

Quality child care has become increasingly essential. Moms and dads need reliable, affordable child care — care that allows them to feel safe and secure about their children — while they are at work. In Montana, full time child care for just one child can easily cost from \$3,900 to \$5,700 per year — more than tuition at our public universities. Yet one-quarter of America's families with young children earn less than \$25,000 per year. This is simple math, and the numbers do not add up for families forced to choose between rent, food, utilities and child care.

Although the number of children receiving child care assistance has increased over the past five years, according to data from the Department of Health and Human Services, only 11.1 percent of Montana children eligible for assistance are receiving any. In

Montana, a family of three earning \$22,000 does not even qualify for help.

Parents face tremendous difficulty finding quality child care that won't break their budget and that helps their children get ready for school. And parents need child care to work. Over the past two years, several retail and health care businesses across the state have worked with their local child care resource and referral agencies to document the surprisingly high costs of employee absenteeism and turnover that results when workers can't meet their child care needs. Child care services are important to children, families, and communities.

Consider the facts:

■ A study released in 2000 found that 46 percent of kindergarten teachers reported that at least half of the children in their classes had specific problems with entry into kindergarten, including difficulty following directions, lack of academic skills, and/or difficulty working independently.

■ In 30 states including Montana, teachers can begin work in child care centers with no training in early childhood development. Because child care providers are some of the lowest paid workers in our society, with a national average salary of \$16,350, it is increasingly difficult for programs to recruit and retain teachers. As a result, many children experience enormous turnover and instability in their child care settings.

■ Nearly 7 million children are left home alone after school each week. In Montana cities, licensed child care programs serve from 22 to 45 percent of school-age children who need care. In rural areas, the capacity is much less or nonexistent. Yet school-age children need safe, constructive after-school activities. Unsuper-

vised afternoon hours are prime time for juvenile crime and other threats to our children's health — like smoking, drug and alcohol use, and early sexual activity.

We hope that leaders of both parties in Washington, D.C. and in Montana will make child care a priority this year as attention in Congress turns to the reauthorization of the major child care program — the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). With a slow economy and growing state deficits, significant new investments in child care are critical. Currently, no state is able to serve all eligible families. Major new investments would help Montana serve more low-income parents by improving the quality of child care for all children, and support more affordable child care and safe, constructive after-school activities.

Without additional funds for child care, states will face acceptable tradeoffs. Montana will be forced to deny help to low-wage families struggling to stay in the workforce, and/or to pay so little to child care providers that it will be difficult for parents to find safe, stable, and quality care.

An opportunity exists now. It is critical that the President and Congress come together in a bipartisan way to put children before politics. To keep Montana's families working, quality child care must be available to every family. As we work to provide for our children, let's make sure that our children are provided for. That's why all of us across the state, and the nation, must speak out for additional resources to strengthen the quality of child care, so that all of our children are ready for school and beyond.

*Christofferson is executive director of The Nurturing Center in Kalispell.*

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