



MISSOULA EARLY LEARNING FELLOWS

2021 - 2022 Executive Summary Report



MISSION

The Missoula Early Learning Fellows are a growing network of Missoula County early learning leaders working with and on behalf of families and their young children birth - age eight. Fellows work is intentionally focused on ensuring all children arrive at kindergarten with equal opportunities to learn and thrive with sustained opportunities throughout early school years.

VISION

Missoula Early Learning Fellows envision collective action to promote opportunities for young children to learn and thrive.

RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP



Missoula Early Learning Fellows (ELF) is a partnership between Zero to Five Missoula County, and the University of Montana Institute for Early Childhood Education.

Zero to Five Missoula County works so that every child in Missoula County is nourished by the experiences and supports they need to thrive in school and beyond.

The goal of the research-practice partnership is based on the premise that there must be a more intentional focus on the needed changes to occur in adult capabilities, and the organizations and programs that comprise a system which surrounds and supports those adults, before meaningful child outcomes can be realized.

The research-practice partnership leverages the ELF initiative to investigate challenges and identify solutions to ensure all children arrive at school ready to learn and thrive with sustained opportunities throughout school years.

Who are Missoula Early Learning Fellows?

Year One Organizations

Missoula County Public Schools

Missoula Catholic Schools

Seeley Lake Elementary

UM LAB Preschool

Spirit at Play Early Childhood Program

Missoula Food Bank and Community Center

Missoula City-County Health Department

Missoula Public Library

Families First Learning Lab

Moving Mountains Therapy Center

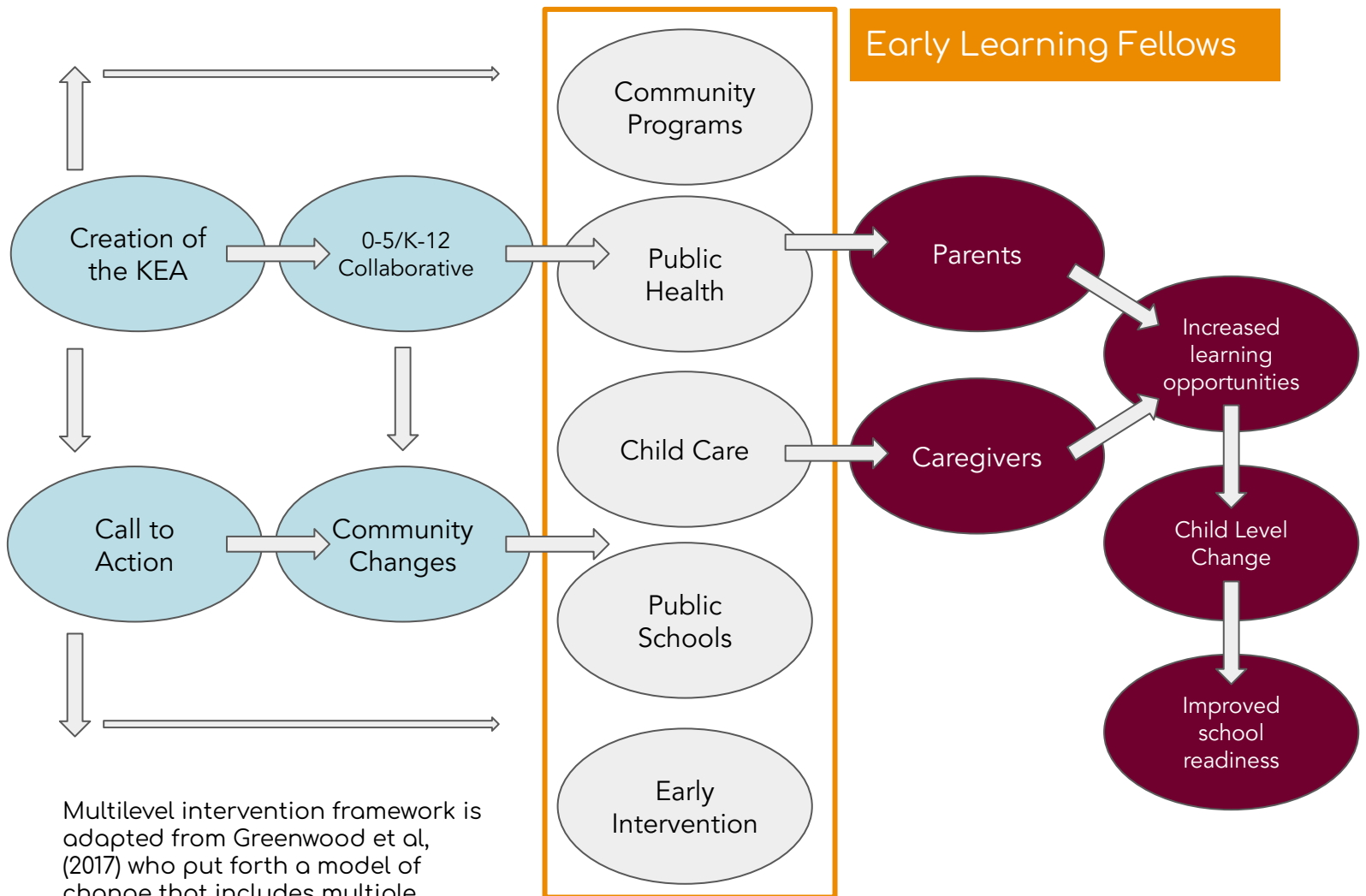
Collective Action

Launching in fall of 2021, the Missoula Early Learning Fellows aims to identify, gather, and grow a network of early learning leaders. Fellows' work is intentionally focused on collective action that promotes quality opportunities for young children and families. During the first year of implementation, the cohort of fellows met for four half-day sessions, across the span of six months, to participate in inquiry-based professional development activities.

Missoula Early Learning Fellows

Community Level Intervention

Population	Community	Child
Mobilize action	Engage local people in data-driven action planning to ensure all children arrive at school with equal opportunities to learn and thrive, with sustained opportunities throughout early school years.	Increase learning opportunities for young children



Multilevel intervention framework is adapted from Greenwood et al, (2017) who put forth a model of change that includes multiple ecological settings: population, community, child/family.

Action Planning

Session One

Identify vision for change and innovation

Session Two

Develop action plan to implement and address a unique challenge in Fellows' organization based on Missoula Kindergarten Entry Assessment Data

Session Three

Reflect and revise action plan based on reflection and collective support from Fellows' peers and colleagues

Session Four

Celebrate steps toward change, continue iterative reflection, and make commitments for the future

ELF sessions serve as a sounding board where fellows collaboratively work with professionals outside their organizations to explore and develop plans for innovation and changes within their own organizations.

Fellows connect over similar challenges encountered through implementing a change idea and embrace new perspectives for moving forward.



Evaluating Impact of Year One

Data Sources

Data sources included:

- Exit surveys taken at the end of each of the four ELF sessions in November, January, March, and May (48); Fellows' action plans (13);
- Interviews with ELF organizers (2);
- Interviews with a representative group of fellows with regard to sectors and roles (9);
- Materials from four ELF sessions (slides, activity templates, etc.)

Analysis

Using descriptive statistics and cross tabulation of exit surveys, we were able to examine fellows' perspectives on their own learning and development over time.

We analyzed fellows' interviews and action plans by focusing on themes that emerged through cycles of evaluation (Braun & Clark, 2012; Nowell et al., 2017). Using critical reflexivity to enhance trustworthiness of the process, we engaged in data analysis individually and then reviewed that data as a larger group.

Using triangulation, we examined connections within and then across our data sources. Examining trends from the interviews in relationship to the exit survey data and presentation materials was particularly enlightening. We conducted member checking with two ELF program organizers who were not involved in the interviews, and integrated their comments into our results.

Evaluating Impact of Year One

Main Findings

Analyses show that participation in ELF resulted in fellows':

- Enhanced cross-sector relationships
- Emerging leadership roles
- Enhanced work in fellows' own organizations
 - Impact on daily work with children
 - Extended learning community
 - Expanded advocacy work
 - Goal-oriented action
- Increased interest and engagement in using data

Cross-Sector Collaborative Networks

Analyses show that the ELF program provided a unique space for early childhood professionals to break down silos and collaborate across sectors and roles. In interviews, many fellows expressed appreciation for the opportunity to connect both with other professionals with roles similar to their own, as well as those with distinct roles. Fellows overwhelmingly shared that forging relationships with colleagues across sectors was a highlight of ELF, and was a key component for fostering their feeling of connectedness to the broader community. Doug Rossberg, a district-level P-2 instructional coach, reflected:

I think I feel more established as a result of the fellows, especially with the community piece. Some of the relationships developed there are huge. Even if we didn't work together super directly, I feel like that was great just to have those connections and that now... If I had a circumstance where I needed to partner with one of those resources, I would have a point person and I would have no anxiety at all calling them up to ask for an opinion.

Over the course of the year, fellows reported to be more comfortable and committed to engaging in a more collaborative early learning system. On exit surveys across four sessions (from August through May), fellows' responses showed a steadily increased commitment to engaging in a more collaborative early learning system.

Year One Highlights

Emerging Leadership

Surveys as well as action plan and interview data showed fellows' development in leadership identity and activity. Statistical analyses of exit surveys across the year showed fellows' growth in their self-perceptions as early learning leaders in the broader community. The majority of fellows started the program with a view of themselves as "not yet" leaders (see Figure 1). Over time, the group overwhelmingly came to perceive themselves as emerging community leaders, with two fellows indicating a shift to "established leader." A dramatic advance in leadership self-perception across the group occurred between the second and third ELF meetings (see Figure 1); this change aligned with a shift in ELF meeting activities during those sessions, where the time allotted for fellows' action planning, sharing, consulting, and networking was doubled.

Fellows' Perceptions of Their Roles in the Broader Community Over Time

When thinking about our greater Missoula community, how do you view your leadership role?

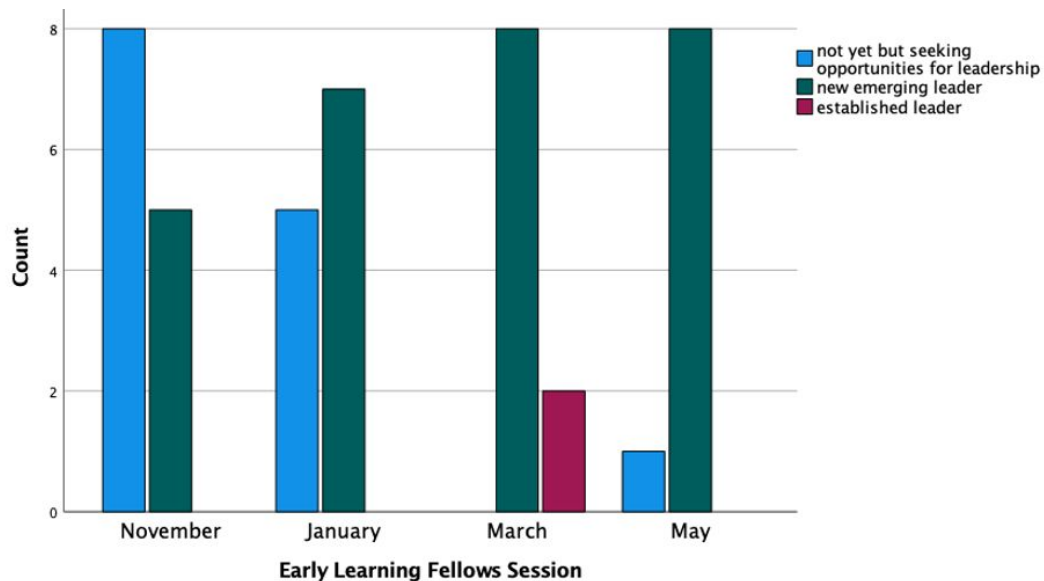


Figure 1

Average responses on a seven-point likert scale increased following the initial ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.23$), second ($M = 5.91$, $SD = .8$), third ($M = 6.0$, $SD = .7$), and final ELF meeting ($M = 6.11$, $SD = .6$). Overall fellows' responses moved away from responses such as "interesting but how will this affect me" to "I'm committed and how can we bring this vision to more people." Inconsistent attendance across ELF sessions due to illness was a limitation of the data.

Average responses to 4-pt exit survey: first meeting ($M = 2.38$, $SD = .50$, $N = 13$), second ($M = 2.58$, $SD = .52$, $N = 12$), third ($M = 3.2$, $SD = .42$, $N = 10$), and fourth ($M = 2.9$, $SD = .33$, $N = 9$).

Year One Highlights

Enhanced Work in Own Organizations

Fellows shared that the activities and discussions across the four ELF meetings impacted their goals and actions in their respective workplaces.

Impact on Daily Work with Children

Some indicators of change were immediate and concrete; many fellows mentioned that ideas introduced by guest speakers influenced their daily work. For example, several fellows noted in interviews that an ELF presentation on positive psychology inspired them to bolster their efforts to engage their young students in positive self-talk. Others recalled a presentation that shaped their thinking and work related to fostering children's risk-taking and adventurous play opportunities; *"I've taken that and put it in my classroom and teaching everyday since that presentation,"* noted Cristal Burnet, a public special education preschool teacher.

Extended Learning Community

Further, fellows reported that some skills, knowledge, and comradery they developed through their participation in ELF supported them to extend ELF dialogues with stakeholders, colleagues, and leaders within their own organizations. Julee Hall, a special education preschool teacher, said, *"Not only are we (fellows) in this really supportive environment, but it was inspiring to come back to our community and then think about 'how can we implement this and where do we want to go? How do we want to create this change?'"*

Expanded Advocacy Work

Most fellows reported that they felt better equipped to advocate for children and families because of ELF. Pam Carlton, a children's librarian at Missoula Public Library, reflected: *"Fellows kept me energized. It kept me focused on what I found important ... and what the library's purpose for kids is...now I'm a better advocate for the children in Missoula."* Again, fellows reported that the cross-sector nature of the learning community contributed to their expanded advocacy work. For example, many participants mentioned that connecting with a fellow from a family-focused nonprofit enabled them to share with families helpful information about affordable counseling services, free play spaces and activities, and parent education classes.

Year One Highlights

Goal-Oriented Action

The fellows' action plans, a central ELF activity, also indicated their enhanced work in their respective organizations. These plans showed a range of efforts, including projects such as: creating events for fostering family engagement and relationships; implementing a new social emotional learning curriculum; and designing a training for K-2 teachers. The collaborative process of designing action plans prompted rich reflection on long-term goals and short-term steps, capacity, priorities, and connections to a common data set (Kindergarten Entry Assessment).

Further study on the impact of these action plans is underway.

Increased Interest in Utilizing Data

Fellows in the inaugural year came in with a range of experience interpreting and utilizing data in their work. Examining the Missoula County Kindergarten Entry Assessment data together was a familiar task to some fellows and a brand new one to others. Surveys showed modest gains in fellows' reported comfort in utilizing data over the course of the four meetings. Interviews highlight an increased awareness of available data and a heightened sense of fellows' curiosity and interest related to data. Danielle Bailey, a preschool teacher and university adjunct shared:

I am kind of excited and more curious about the kindergarten assessment data now, because before Fellows I didn't even know that that was being done. I've been out of the public-school sphere for quite a while now, so I'm also curious about...early childhood (before kindergarten), about preschools' role in that data.

Several fellows made clear connections to KEA data on their action plans, demonstrating the ways in which their work was directly responding to trends. Other action plans had fewer direct connections. Further study on how fellows think about and engage with data over time is underway.



Discussion

What mattered for learning?

Given the powerful learning experienced by participants of the ELF program, it is important to discuss **key factors** that seemed to have shaped these overwhelmingly positive outcomes

This study highlights the significance of inquiry and relationship building through community-engaged research. It affirms and amplifies the potential of cross-sector collaboration in making substantial and long-term impact in promoting equitable early childhood education for all children.

1. Sustained Connection

The longer duration of the ELF program allowed for continuous, ongoing engagement with the community of fellows and with professional learning content and extended dialogue around action plans. It was clear in both the quantitative and qualitative analyses that sustained, collaborative work over time across the academic year set the stage for deeper and more meaningful inquiry and leadership development.

2. Professional Diversity

The professional diversity across the group was also a major source of enrichment. More research is needed to grow our understandings of the dynamics, processes, and opportunities of cross-sector learning contexts.

3. Mediating Tools

Tools mediated joint work. The KEA data and action plans were examples of tools that grounded and connected the work of individuals from different sectors and roles.

Acknowledgements

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