

## Missoulian Article – Sept. 1, 2019

[https://missoulian.com/news/local/school-district-looks-to-lease-cold-springs-property-for-day/article\\_65fb2449-d727-591e-983c-a242c0d780fe.html](https://missoulian.com/news/local/school-district-looks-to-lease-cold-springs-property-for-day/article_65fb2449-d727-591e-983c-a242c0d780fe.html)

The waiting lists for child care facilities in Missoula and throughout Montana are growing as parents scramble to find providers in a state that lacks a permanent publicly funded preschool program and offers even fewer options for infant and toddler care.

In Missoula, the cost of early child care is compounded by an affordable housing crisis, meaning that child care providers must factor the rising costs of owning or renting a facility into tuition and wages for employees.

That's why some providers, like the Missoula Early Learning Center, are eyeing unused buildings that could be converted to child care centers that meet state requirements.

The Missoula Early Learning Center is negotiating a lease with Missoula County Public Schools to operate the former Cold Springs Elementary building as a day care and preschool center, after it was left vacant when students moved to the newly constructed Jeannette Rankin Elementary School.

Mark Roberts, a co-owner of Missoula Early Learning Center, discussed the proposed 20-year lease of the southwest wing and gym of the Cold Springs building at a school board meeting last month.

"The facility would let us have somewhere around 55 employees, at which point we have the opportunity to offer health care and retirement plans, and those objects that aren't available for other child care facilities which will allow us to hire a good workforce and retain (them)," Roberts said at the meeting.

The idea to use vacant school buildings as child care facilities is one of several models that the Missoula Area Chamber of Commerce brainstormed after it identified child care as an issue that was limiting the local labor

supply. That's because it makes more financial sense for many parents to leave the workforce and care for their children at home than to keep their jobs.

According to a [2018 survey](#) by the Missoula Area Chamber of Commerce, Missoulians paid an average of \$637.41 per month for child care, making it the fourth-highest expense for a family behind housing, transportation and food. Infant care averaged \$819 a month — the second highest expense behind only housing.

Alternative options for expansion, like leasing unused space from the school district, are among several models that Roberts and others working with the Chamber hope will expand child care availability.

"The concept is that there's a shortage of appropriate and available child care services and preschool opportunities, and many businesses in town are very interested in enhancing and improving their availability of child care," Pat McHugh, executive director of business and operations for the district, said at the meeting.

The monthly lease payment for the Cold Springs building is expected to be approximately \$7,100, in addition to utilities that run about \$5,000 per month for the entire building.

The agreement will include plans for the Missoula Early Learning Center to invest about \$1 million in the facility prior to moving in, McHugh said in the meeting.

Roberts told the Missoulian that the investments would bring the facility up to compliance with child care licensing by adding things like sinks and toilets to each classroom, lowering windows so smaller children can see out of them, adding doors in each classroom that provide access to the building's exterior, and then having those doors secured with a keycard system.

Roberts said the square footage price is "extraordinarily reasonable" for the

city.

"Child care isn't looking to make anyone six figures," Roberts said. "What we want to do is pay high-quality teachers what they're worth and provide care for the children."

Roberts told the Missoulian that the Missoula Early Learning Center currently has 18 employees and serves 70 children, which is the maximum they're able to accept while still meeting state licensing standards. With the new building, he hopes to reach 55 employees and serve 185 children, in addition to serving more low-income families who qualify for Best Beginning Scholarships from the state.

The district is currently looking for a co-renter for the other portion of the building while it finalizes the lease with the Missoula Early Learning Center. The board will discuss the lease at the Sept. 10 meeting, where it will be open for public comment.

NOTE FROM THE CHAMBER: Vote postponed until Sept. 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019