



# Explorers Academy

50 Years of Head Start



2020-2021 Annual Report





Genia Castro Waller, Board Chair

On behalf of the Board of Directors I am pleased to share the Explorers Academy Annual Report 2020-2021. Explorers Academy's mission to provide comprehensive services to young children and their families to achieve school readiness and lifelong success is lived out every day in our agency. The 2020-2021 school year provided unforeseen challenges, changes and crisis but we were able to rise to the occasion and fulfill our mission in new and inventive ways.

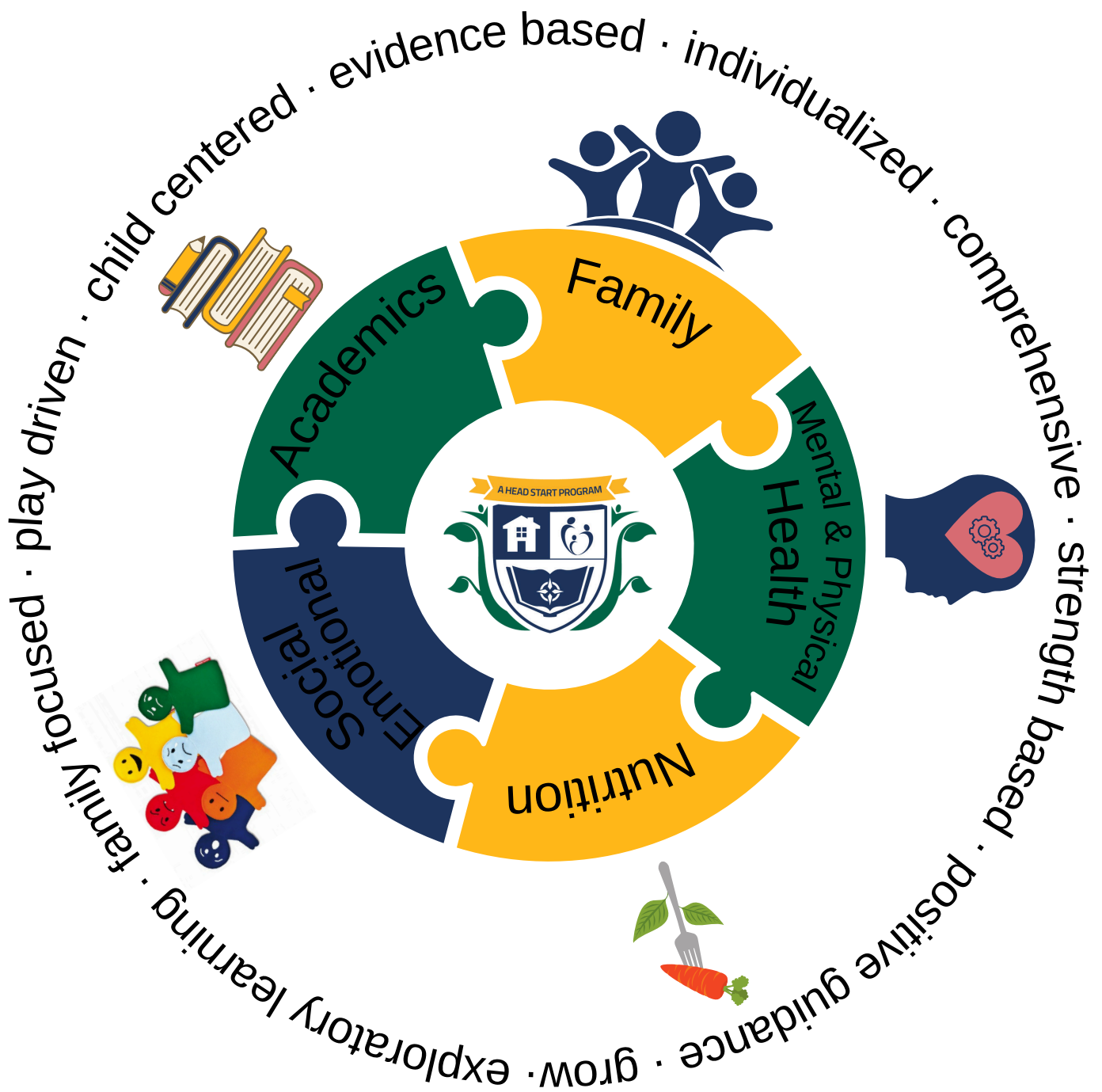
This year we proudly celebrate 50 years of Head Start services in Yellowstone and Carbon counties. Explorers Academy has played a major role in the transformation of our community's children and it is with great honor and joy that we look forward to continuing to serve them for the next 50 years. Serving over 360 young children and their families is no small task. The Board of Directors is continually in awe of the dedication our agency's staff show to each and every child and parent who walks our hallways. Despite this year's unique challenges, Explorers Academy has continued to be a leader in the community demonstrating perseverance to keep the doors open to provide the highest quality education to our attendees.

Explorers Academy is committed to preparing our community's youth for lifelong success and helping families thrive through comprehensive services. This commitment has made Explorers Academy an integral part of not only Billings' success but to Montana's as well. When we invest in our children today, we're investing in tomorrow's leaders and because of Explorers Academy our future looks bright.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "G Castro Waller".

Genia Castro Waller  
Board Chair, Explorers Academy



Explorers Academy enhances the social and cognitive development of low-income children through the provision of education, health, nutrition, social and other services for children and their families.

Our Values: Children First · Respect · Positivity · Empathy · Competence

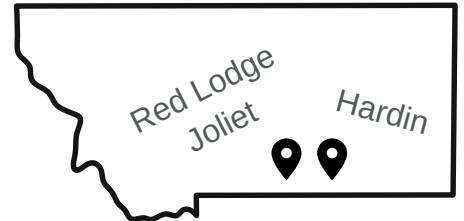
# 50 Years of Head Start History

Head Start, Inc. moves into the North Park Elementary building.

1989

Project Head Start begins nation wide as an 8 week summer program, including a program in Billings, MT

1965



Head Start, Inc. expands services to Big Horn and Carbon Counties

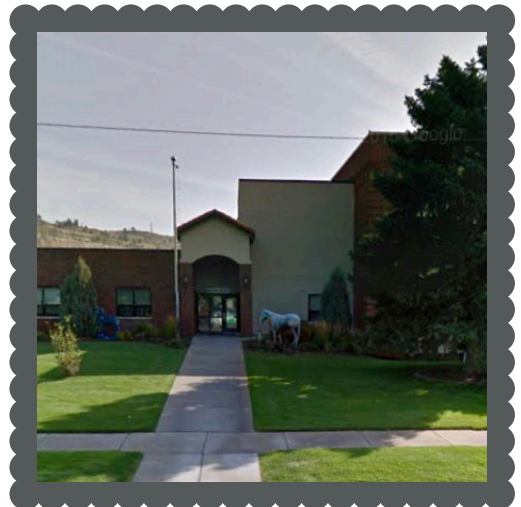
2003

2002

Head Start, Inc. purchases the North Park Elementary building.

1971

Head Start, Inc. begins providing Head Start services locally as part of the first wave of the national Head Start Expansion.





Red Lodge and Joilet  
classrooms are relocated  
to Laurel and Billings  
2016

Hardin classrooms  
are relocated to  
Billings/Lockwood  
2013



## 50th Anniversary!

Explorers Academy/Head Start,  
Inc. celebrate 50 years of  
service to our community  
2021

2013

Head Start Inc and  
Lockwood School Districts  
begin partnership with 2  
classrooms in the school  
district building

2020

Head Start Inc and AWARE  
begin partnership with 2  
classrooms in the AWARE  
Early Head Start building

2017

Head Start Inc purchases the  
Terry Park building and begins  
offering full day programming





Explorers Academy primarily serves children and families who are low-income, have special needs, are in foster or kinship care, are homeless or have experienced significant trauma.

97% of children served were income eligible



Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our enrollment numbers were limited during the 2020-2021 school year in order to ensure in-person services were provided in a safe and healthy environment. Staff and families partnered together to innovate new ways to complete home visits and parent teacher conferences, many of which were completed virtually.

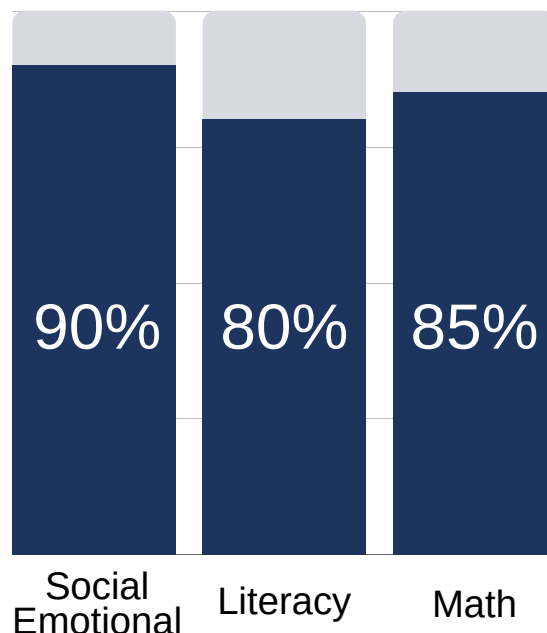
While we had to adapt our services to meet the ever changing world, we never deviated from our mission or high quality standards. Our program follows a comprehensive school readiness plan with quantified goals to make sure every student and family is ready for kindergarten.

## Getting Ready for Kindergarten

At Explorers Academy, it is our mission to prepare young children and their families for kindergarten. Our services emphasize a focus on the whole child, not just academics. Each child participates in screenings to identify strengths and areas for growth in cognitive, social/emotional and physical health.

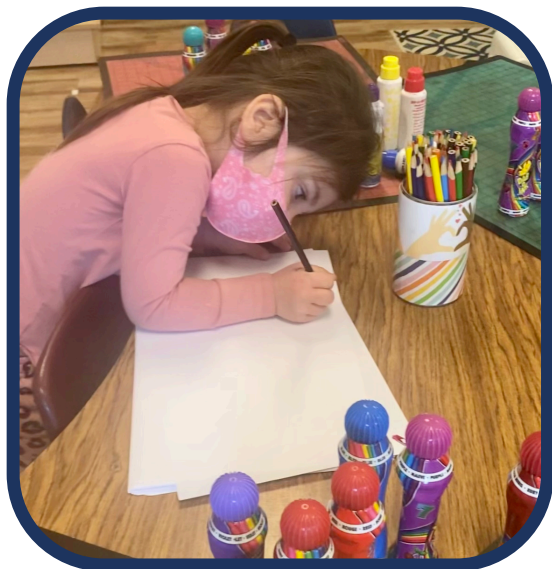
Our services are always individualized to each family in order to meet children and families where they are and encourage growth. Parents and teachers work together regularly to identify individualized goals for their child and families are provided information and activities to work on at home to meet their goals.

The percentage of enrolled children who met or exceeded milestone expectations





Explorers Academy knows social emotional, cognitive and physical development are all equally important to the success of young children. We believe children learn best through play and interactive experience. We utilize multiple curriculums and educational programs to encourage growth and development in different areas for each child.



### **Creative Curriculum**

is our academic curriculum used to individualize learning with developmentally appropriate scaffolding. This framework uses creative and active teaching strategies to encourage child driven learning through play.

### **Second Step**

is our social/emotional learning curriculum. This program focuses on social and personal safety skills in a nurturing and supportive environment.

### **Handwriting Without Tears**

is our interactive handwriting program which uses multisensory techniques to develop the fine motor, visual and cognitive skills needed for writing.

### **Heggerty Phonemic Awareness**

is our phonics curriculum. It uses systematic and engaging lessons to build phonics skills needed for reading and spelling. The program teaches 5 phonological awareness skills (rhyming, beginning sounds, ending sounds, blending, segmenting).

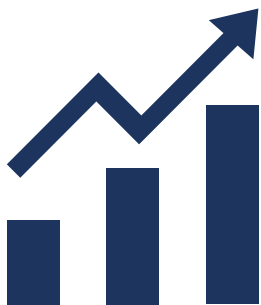
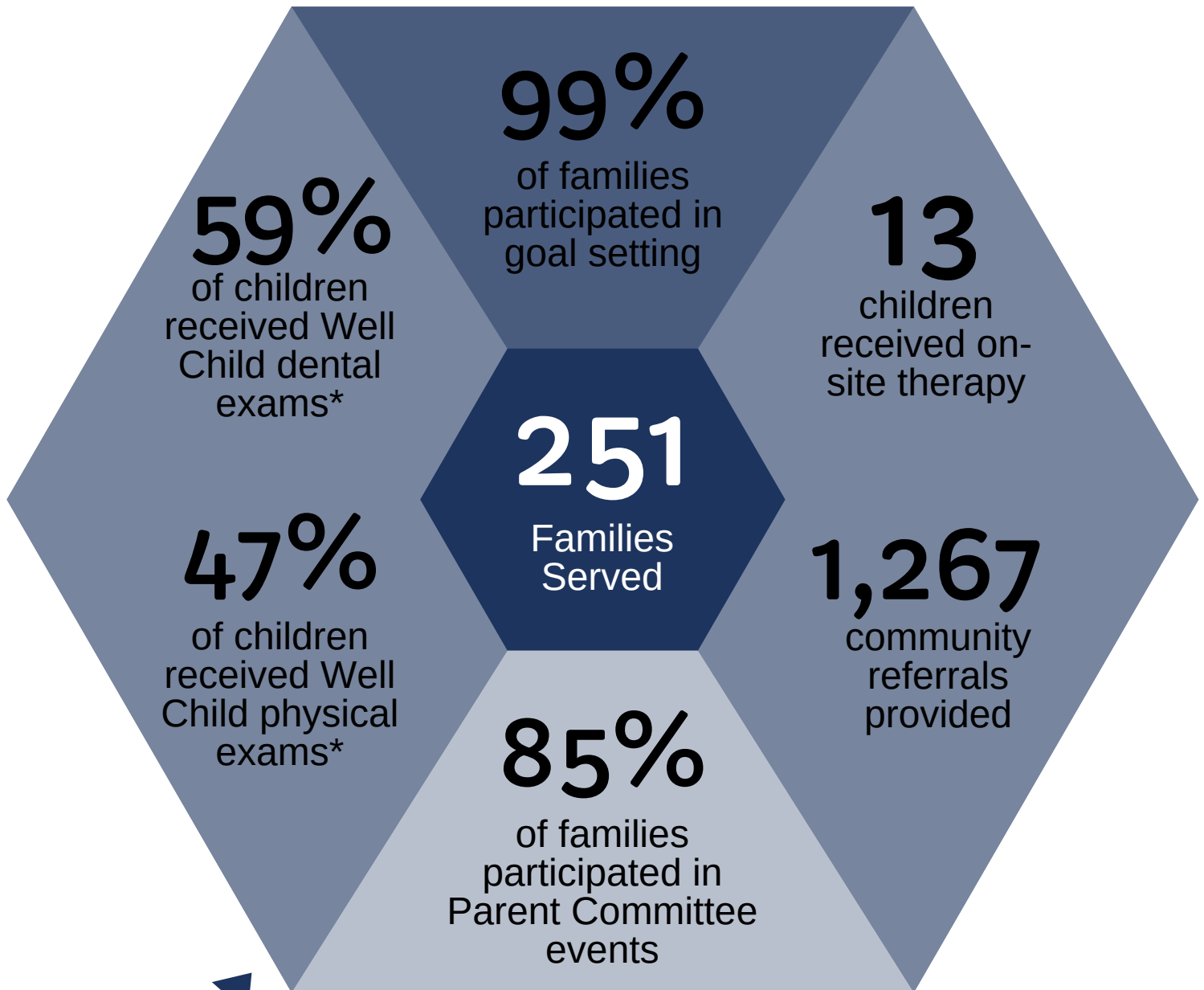
## **Remote Learning**

In the fall of 2021, Explorers Academy recognized that some children and families would not be able to participate in in-person services due to concerns and complications related to the pandemic. Four of our Education staff and one of our Family Services staff graciously accepted the challenge to develop and implement a Remote Learning Program. The families enrolled in this program were provided program services including education, family, nutrition, health and mental health services. Teachers created weekly take-home packets with individualized goals and activities for each child. These packets, along with nutritious food and needed health supplies were provided for the family every week. Staff communicated with families regularly to build healthy relationships, provide any additional resources or referrals and ensure child and family success. Staff, children and parents participated in Zoom calls, phone calls and in-person socially distanced outdoor meetings.



# Family Services

At Explorers Academy, we know parents are a child's first and most important teacher. We include families in every aspect of our program from the classroom to program governance. Our Family Advocates partner with families to complete strength based Family Outcomes Assessments, create and achieve family led goals and provide support and services to manage sudden or chronic crisis.



Family Advocates meet individually with parents to help identify strengths, develop goals, and provide support. Our Family Outcomes Assessment uses key indicators to build on family strengths and track progress throughout the program year. Key indicators include housing, safety, mental/physical health, financial security, employment, nutrition, school readiness, education at home, community connections and leadership/advocacy.

\*Well Child physical and dental exams were minimized in our community during the COVID-19 pandemic



# Our Staff Make A Difference

Over the last 50 years, Explorers Academy has made a positive impact in the lives of over

## 15,000 children

and their families. This impact is directly related to our staff and the high quality services they provide. The children and families in our program have received education, support and love in their most formative years from the people we are proud to call our team.

Our highly qualified staff dedicate their professional lives to the improvement of early childhood education in our community. All of our Lead Teachers and Family Advocates hold degrees in their respective fields and all staff complete yearly continued education to ensure we follow the most recent developments and practices in Early Childhood Education, Family Services and Nutrition. Explorers Academy currently has 105 staff members, including

## 28 current or former program parents.

As part of our mission, we are committed to providing sustainable employment opportunities to the families we serve.

Explorers Academy understands the role trauma plays in the lives of the children & families we serve. We are devoted to providing Trauma Informed Care to those we serve.

## 18% ↑

in employee retention in 2021.

Over the past 50 years, Explorers Academy has had the opportunity to employ amazing members of our community. Some of our staff have worked for our agency for over 30 years

with a total of **553 years** of combined service amongst our current employees. One of our longest serving employees, Julie Carlos, has been with the agency for 33 years! When reflecting on her years of service Julie says

## "I love Head Start, there's no other way to put it."

Julie has worked in almost every component over the years including Transportation, Education, and Nutrition. Her current title is Child Plus Data Specialist. Julie's favorite part of her job is building relationships with the children and families we serve.

"I've seen a lot of people come and go over the years but our focus has always stayed the same: Children First!"



# We couldn't do it without our community!

As a non-profit agency, Explorers Academy relies on support from our community in order to provide the highest quality services and make lasting impacts on the lives of our children and families. The generosity of individuals and business in our community has always been apparent but was amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Inspire Brands & The Arby's Foundation** provided funding to ensure our children and families participating in remote services received nutritious meals each week. **First Presbyterian Church of Billings** hosted a food/cash drive to contribute to benefit our remote learners. **Rimrock Pediatric Dentistry** donated reusable water bottles for every child to reduce the spread of germs while keeping our children hydrated. **Bright Smiles Dental Hygiene Services** provided on site dental screenings for our children who could not make it to their dentist office. **The Optimist Club** donated funds to enhance our program gardens allowing our children to explore nature and expand their gardening skills.

One of the most important roles our community plays in our program is that of volunteering. Volunteers show our children their community supports them and provide a much needed helping hand to our staff. This year, senior volunteers from **The Foster Grandparent Program** through St. Vincent Healthcare provided our teachers and children with care packages, learning activities and notes of encouragement. Explorers Academy partnered with the **Yellowstone Art Museum** who provided art education and virtual museum tours from the safety of our own classrooms. Volunteers from **First Interstate Bank** worked diligently on-site, from their offices and from their homes on projects to support our program. These volunteers cleaned up our playgrounds, provided hygiene packages for families and provided digital administrative assistance.

## Thank you to all of our sponsor and donors

United Way

Siedman Family Trust

Paul Foster Foundation

First Interstate Bank

Louvin Foundation

Donald Roberts Foundation

MT Community Foundation

Rimrock Pediatric Dentistry

Inspire Brands & The Arby's  
Foundation

Optimist Club

Bright Smiles Dental

The Foster Grandparent Program

First Presbyterian Church

Ava Williams

Western Sugar



# 2020-2021 Board of Directors

Lynette Schwalbe	Board Chair	MSU-Billings
Genia Castro Waller	Vice Chair	Graphic Finesse
Eric George	Treasurer	Stockman Bank
Heidi Jensen-Christison	Secretary	Interstate Engineering
Dr. Erin Allen		Billings Clinic Pediatrics
Chase Brown		Netzer Law Office
Sue Devries		Former Program Grandparent
Daniel Brooks		Chamber of Commerce
Jessica Robinson		Policy Council Liaison



## Our Executive Director

Janice King has played a crucial part in the growth and development of Explorers Academy during her 17 year tenure. Her extensive knowledge in Early Childhood Education, Family Services, and Head Start have been an asset to our program.

# 2020-2021 Fiscal Audit

Delays, due to COVID-19, have prevented our audit firm from completing our 2020-2021 year end fiscal audit. The Office of Head Start has extended the filing date for the financial audit in order to accommodate delays resulting from the pandemic. Once the 2020-2021 financial audit is complete, it will be posted at [www.explorershs.org](http://www.explorershs.org). If you would like a copy of the audit mailed or emailed directly to you, please call 406-245-7233.

2020-2021 Explorers Academy Received Funding From the Following Sources	
Source	Head Start Amount
Child & Adult Care Food Program	\$ 162,095
Health & human Services	\$ 4,072,063
Private/Business Donations	\$ 69,328
Interest	\$ 288
Other (Insurance Proceeds)	\$ 53,400
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$ 4,357,174</b>





	2020-2021 EXPENDITURES Explorers Academy	
Description	Head Start Amount	
Personnel	\$	2,424,457
Fringe Benefits	\$	637,781
Travel	\$	3,920
Equipment	\$	-
Supplies	\$	329,465
Contractual	\$	17,695
Other	\$	850,903
T/TA	\$	57,227
Total Federal Share	\$	4,321,448
Non-Federal Share	\$	285,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	\$	<b>4,606,448</b>

	2021-2022 Proposed Budget Explorers Academy	
Description	Head Start Amount	
Personnel	\$	2,507,767
Fringe Benefits	\$	557,225
Travel	\$	4,050
Equipment	\$	-
Supplies	\$	89,315
Contractual	\$	46,920
Other	\$	553,906
T/TA	\$	41,818
Non-Federal Share	\$	950,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	\$	<b>4,751,001</b>