

"Collaborating with Jason Nitschke and the Montana Small Business Development Center has been instrumental in advancing our mission at BELN. Jason's insights and support has enhanced our strategic planning and operational efficiency, enabling us to more effectively serve our community and advocate for early childhood education."
Ariella Wells, Executive Director

Bitterroot Early Learning Network

Hamilton, MT

The journey of the Bitterroot Early Learning Network (BELN) began in 1980 as Bitterroot Preschool, founded by a group of dedicated parents seeking quality early childhood education in Hamilton. By 1984, Evergreen Kids Corner (EKC) was born and by 1989, they purchased the schoolhouse where the school operates today.

However, like many early childhood education programs across Montana, the COVID-19 pandemic brought significant challenges such as labor force shortages, rising inflation and impacts on affordability for parents. Due to these factors, Ariella Wells approached the SBDC in November of 2022 for help.

With help from the SBDC, Evergreen Kids Corner (EKC) rebranded itself as the Bitterroot Early Learning Network (BELN). This rebranding evolved the school into a community development organization committed to providing high quality early childhood education throughout the Bitterroot area. Over the last two years EKC/BELN has received 46 hours of one-on-one technical assistance and trainings in marketing, managing a business, workshop development and government contracting assistance.

When BELN initially engaged with the Missoula SBDC for technical assistance, the program employed three staff members, was cash poor with less than $5000 in the bank, was obligated to $55,000 in debt and monthly gross revenue of $7700. As of November 2024, staff size has doubled to six, the program is debt free, monthly gross revenue has also doubled to an average of $14,000 and cash on hand is more than $100,000.

“Ariella’s dedication to early childhood education, creativity, and willingness to innovate led me to believe BELN would be successful,” stated Jason Nitschke, Senior Child Care Business Advisor for Zero to Five Montana.

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