Early Childhood Education Career Pathways

Strengthening Credit Pathways Across Early Childhood Preparation Systems

Performance period 04/2023–12/2025

The early childhood education (ECE) workforce develops through multiple preparation and credentialing pathways, including Career and Technical Education (CTE), state workforce registries, community colleges, and four-year institutions. While this diversity can expand access to the field, it can also create complexity for individuals seeking to navigate progression across educational systems. One mechanism for connecting these pathways is articulation agreements, which allow prior coursework and credentials to count toward academic credit across institutions. When implemented effectively, they allow educators to build on prior learning, reduce duplication of coursework, and support a workforce pipeline in which experience and credentials are recognized across stages of professional advancement.

The **Early Childhood Education (ECE) Career Pathways** initiative was proposed in Maine's PDG-R grant as "Articulation Agreements" in response to documented barriers in how educators progress across preparation systems. The grant identified inconsistent credit recognition and limited coordination among CTE programs, the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN) credentials, community colleges, and universities, resulting in duplicated coursework and unclear advancement pathways. The initiative was designed to identify existing articulation models and strengthen alignment so that educators could build on prior learning rather than restart at each transition point. This work focused primarily on articulation of completed credentials into two-year programs; a separate PDG-R–funded initiative addressed credit alignment from CTE programs into higher education. Articulation from two-year to four-year programs received less direct attention during the grant period, though cross-institutional relationships initiated through this work may support future progress in that area.

This report presents **findings from outcome-focused assessment activities** conducted in fall 2025 as part of Maine's Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R) program. Drawing on diverse data, the report examines the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Career Pathways initiative, with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including the impact of the Pathways initiative on identifying articulation agreements, expanding understanding of the statewide pathway landscape, and establishing structural alignment mechanisms.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination,** including the extent to which the reactivation of the Higher Education Committee, Summit planning activities, and outreach to higher education, CTE, and workforce partners reduced duplicated coursework and unclear advancement pathways.
- **System building**, including the extent to which infrastructure development, such as credential pilots, crosswalks, pathway mapping, and the articulation of shared statewide priorities for workforce alignment, contributed to building a statewide pathways system infrastructure.

- **Supports and access**, including the extent to which efforts to clarify pathways and identify mechanisms to support workforce navigation removed or minimized direct access barriers for frontline educators and students.

Data sources for this report include review of available initiative documentation related to the Higher Education Group; a review of materials collected and curated on the ECE Pathways Summit website; participation in the Summit and review of participant survey responses; a focus group with members of the Higher Education Group; and interviews with the initiative lead.

To support the ECE Career Pathways work, a higher education coordinator position was established at Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN) to provide leadership for the work. Early outreach to institutes of higher education and members of the Higher Education Committee revealed that the concept of articulation agreements was viewed cautiously by some institutional partners—"almost like a bad word," as one leader described it—reinforcing the need to build shared understanding and trust before pursuing formal agreements. As a result, relationship-building and technical alignment were priorities for implementation.

The Higher Education Committee became the primary forum for advancing this work. The Working Group remained the central coordinating structure throughout implementation, serving as the primary venue for cross-institutional dialogue and pathway mapping. Engagement increased over the grant period. Discussions shifted from isolated agreements to a broader examination of how CTE programs, MRTQ credentials, national credentials, apprenticeships, and higher education programs intersect. In parallel, the coordinator conducted direct outreach to institutions across the state to understand their policies and practices related to credit for prior learning.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE) CAREER PATHWAYS (CTE) FEATURES

Established higher education coordinator position at MRTQ PDN

Reactivated Higher Education Committee as a standing coordination body for career pathways alignment

Created four parallel implementation tracks: convening partners, mapping credentials and pathways, developing new credentials, and advancing statewide dialogue

Developed the Maine Preschool Credential through MRTQ PDN, including portfolio requirements and P-MELDS-aligned training; pilot cohort launched April 2025

Pursued credential-to-credit conversations and competency crosswalks with community colleges, universities, and private institutions

Explored alternative entry routes into the field, including JMG career exploration badges, a WCCC badging model, and CTE instructor-to-MRTQ trainer pipeline

Convened an Inaugural ECE Career Pathways Summit in August 2025 with 65 stakeholders from state agencies, higher education, CTE, and community organizations

Established Maine as one of six states to participate in the NGA Center Service-to-Career Pathways Policy Academy (2025)

Implementation also included piloting new credentials and exploring alignment tools. The Maine Preschool Credential was developed and launched in April 2025, and credential-to-credit conversations were initiated with multiple institutions. As discussions progressed, the scope of work expanded beyond bilateral agreements to consider alternative entry routes into the field and clearer statewide pathway structures.

The initiative's convening work included the inaugural ECE Career Pathways Summit in August 2025, bringing together 65 stakeholders from state agencies, higher education institutions, CTE programs, and community organizations to identify shared priorities for continued pathway development.

What was the impact of the ECE Pathways initiative?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives requires assessing whether investments advanced their intended purposes. The ECE Career Pathways initiative was designed to build infrastructure—mapping existing pathways, strengthening institutional relationships, and creating mechanisms for credential recognition—rather than to deliver direct services to individual workforce participants. Because the work centered on coordination among independently operating institutions with distinct policies and practices, impact is best assessed by what the initiative clarified, what structures it established, and what groundwork it laid for continued alignment.

The original intended outcomes were:

- **Increased clarity on existing** articulation agreements and models across the state.
- Broader **shared understanding of the pathway landscape** across institutions.

As implementation progressed, the scope broadened from bilateral articulation agreements to a more comprehensive pathways framework. The initiative's work also produced outcomes beyond those originally intended, including strengthened cross-institutional coordination infrastructure, early credential-to-credit alignment mechanisms, and shared statewide priorities and sustained engagement structures.

This section assesses the initiative against both its original and emergent outcomes.

Landscape Clarity

At the outset of the grant period, there was no comprehensive picture of how credentials, training, and coursework translated into credit across Maine's institutions. Over the course of the initiative, the Higher Education Committee identified and began mapping connections across CTE, MRTQ PDN and national credentials, and higher education programs. The group also explored emerging connections with apprenticeships, JMG's Career Exploration Badge, and Maine Career Academies, though these were in earlier stages of development. Focal areas for future alignment were established, including streamlining requirements, expanding credit for prior learning, and developing shared resources to support matriculation. Institutional relationships that had not previously existed were initiated with multiple community colleges, universities, and private institutions, shifting pathways work from isolated conversations toward more coordinated engagement. Together, these activities provide a substantially richer understanding of the pathway landscape than existed previously and establish structural foundations for continued pathway development.

Credential Development and Articulation

Some progress has been made in developing articulation agreements for the completion of recognized credentials. The Maine Infant Toddler Credential, developed by MRTQ PDN, has established articulation agreements with several higher education institutions, including the University of Maine at Farmington, the University of Southern Maine, the University of Maine, Southern Maine Community College, Kennebec Valley Community College, and Central Maine Community College. Depending on the institution, completion of the credential may translate to 3–6 college credits applicable toward early childhood coursework or electives.

Credential-to-credit crosswalks were initiated with the University of Maine system, and exploration of a badging model with Washington County Community College and a bilateral credential-to-credit pathway with Central Maine Community College was underway (Monthly Implementation Logs). These represent early structural alignment efforts rather than completed statewide agreements.

Emerging Catalogue of Credit Articulation

No navigational tool existed for the workforce to identify where and how credit for prior learning was available across institutions. By the end of the grant period, curated lists were being developed through Summit work and by CTE instructors for their students. While not yet comprehensive or uniformly adopted, these efforts represent progress toward a navigational tool that did not previously exist.

Summit and Strategic Priorities

The Summit brought together 65 stakeholders to identify priority areas for strengthening professional pathways. A pre-summit survey documented existing pathways across organizations, and the results were presented to attendees as a shared baseline. The Summit produced three strategic priority areas that now frame continued pathways work statewide:

- Develop and maintain clear, consistent articulation agreements across Maine's educational institutions.
- Improve information sharing, collaboration, and coordination across pathway organizations and government sectors.
- Ensure sustained funding to support pathways and compensation progression.

A website and online information-sharing space were launched to support ongoing access to resources, and quarterly ECE Pathways Community Conversations were initiated to sustain engagement.

> **Progress is being made: 15 of 21 (71%) Summit attendees agreed that professional pathways in Maine are "more understandable now than they were three years ago."—While it is not clear what factors have contributed, the Summit and plans for its continuation can only expand understanding.[1]**

[1]These responses do not provide reasons for increased understanding so how much is due to work funded by PDG is not known

How did the ECE Career Pathways initiative contribute to collaboration and system building?

For most PDG-R initiatives, collaboration and system building are distinct: partnerships support the work, and structural change emerges from them. For the ECE Career Pathways initiative, the activities are the same. The coordinator's role was to build relationships across institutions that had historically operated independently, and those relationships are themselves the system-level contribution. As she described it, "a big part of my work was… to jump back and try to make relationships… so a lot of reaching out to those folks". This section focuses on what the initiative's coordination efforts connected, rather than restating the outcomes described above.

Cross-Initiative Connections

The Pathways initiative intersects with several other PDG-R–funded efforts and statewide workforce structures, positioning it as a connecting thread across the broader workforce development strategy.

Table 1. ECE Career Pathways Connections to Statewide Workforce Initiatives

Connected Initiative	How They Intersect
ECE in CTE	CTE programs are a primary entry point into the ECE workforce; the coordinator worked with CTE Advisory on credential alignment and instructor-to-MRTQ trainer pipeline
Workforce Navigator (OCFS)	Navigator helps individuals identify and move through pathways; it provides a direct link between institutional agreements and workforce members seeking to use them
MRTQ PDN / Career Lattice	Holistic workforce development and technical assistance system. Credential and experience system through which pathway progression is tracked; Maine State Credentials developed within MRTQ PDN; coordinator position housed here
Workforce Salary Supplements	As educators advance through pathways, their career lattice placement changes, potentially improving access to salary supplements
ECE Apprenticeships	Emerging apprenticeship models provide an additional pathway that the initiative is working to integrate into the broader framework
JMG / Career Academies	Career exploration badges and ELO curriculum offer alternative entry points; the initiative worked on alignment with the credential system
National Governor's Association (NGA) Multi-State Co-op	Maine participated in the National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices Service-to-Career Pathways Policy Academy (2025).

Progress and Continuing Challenges

Before the grant, articulation existed as a set of individual agreements made by specific institutions for specific situations—they were not universally in place even for the same credential, for example. The lack of consistency across institutions and credentials made articulation difficult for the workforce to navigate. By the end of the grant period, structural shifts had occurred: there was more active engagement by institutes of higher education in developing articulation agreements, the Higher Education Committee was functioning as a coordination body, the Summit had produced shared strategic priorities and shared language for addressing pathway inconsistencies, emerging credit catalogues were providing the first navigational resources for the field, and quarterly Community Conversations established a recurring forum for sustained engagement.

These changes do not yet constitute a unified statewide system. Institutions still operate independently; credit awards for the same credential still vary across institutions, and frontline workforce members have not yet directly benefited from the infrastructure being built. But the initiative moved the landscape toward shared understanding, shared priorities, and emerging shared tools—a necessary foundation for the structural agreements that will follow.

Sustainability

Three drivers support the continuation of the Pathways work. The higher education coordinator position at MRTQ PDN will continue with at least some responsibilities intact. The Summit planning committee is committed to an annual convening, and CTE teachers, whose independent network and online repository of credit articulation information has been braided into the broader pathways work, have created a self-sustaining resource that does not depend on grant funding.

At the same time, sustainability carries risks. MRTQ PDN underwent a leadership transition in late 2025; the new director attended the Summit and expressed enthusiasm for continuation, but the transition introduces uncertainty. The Higher Education Committee's history of mixed participation suggests that intentional engagement will be needed to keep the group viable.

To what extent did the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Career Pathways initiative reach workforce members and institutional partners?

This initiative operated at the institutional level rather than the individual level—its participants were state agency staff, higher education faculty, and organizational representatives rather than frontline educators or students. Participation in the Working Group, Summit, and related convenings was open to professionals and partners without limitation, and stakeholders from across the state engaged over the grant period.

However, two access gaps are worth noting. Some institutions chose not to engage, reflecting what the initiative lead described as organizations that value their independence. More significantly, students and frontline workers—the people who ultimately need to navigate these pathways—were not directly included in the pathways work during this grant period. As the infrastructure matures, connecting it to the individuals it is designed to serve will be a critical next step. The Workforce Navigator position at OCFS, which provided one mechanism for making that connection, has been

restructured. Whether and to what extent navigator functions will continue is unclear, making it important to identify additional mechanisms for connecting institutional-level infrastructure to individual workforce members.

What were the lessons learned from the ECE Career Pathways initiative?

- **The diversity of ECE pathways is both an asset and a source of inequity.** Prior learning—whether through CTE, credentials, or coursework—is not recognized equally across institutions. The number of credits awarded for the same credential varies, making the system complex to navigate and potentially inequitable for the workforce.
- **System-wide mapping was a necessary precondition for meaningful agreements.** Without a shared picture of existing pathways, institutions had no basis for consistent alignment. The shift to understanding the full landscape proved essential.
- **Relationship building required sustained, individual engagement.** The coordinator's direct outreach to institutions was as critical as broader convenings. Conversations that began with defensiveness evolved into active engagement—a shift that required patience, not a single event.
- **Infrastructure work takes longer than a single grant cycle.** The initiative built foundations—credentials, crosswalks, shared priorities, and coordination mechanisms. Structural change across independent institutions should be expected to extend beyond initial funding periods.

Summary

The ECE Career Pathways initiative sought to identify and strengthen pathways into the early childhood workforce by creating connections across Maine's professional development and higher education systems. At the outset, no single resource documented how educators could translate credentials, training, and coursework into academic credit—leaving the workforce to navigate a fragmented set of institutional relationships. Over the grant period, the initiative mapped the existing landscape, reactivated the Higher Education Committee, developed and piloted new credentials through MRTQ, and convened a statewide Summit that produced shared strategic priorities. The work evolved toward a broader career pathways framework, reflecting the coordinator's recognition that a shared understanding was needed before formal agreements. While student-level outcomes have not yet been realized, the relational and structural foundations built during the grant period—credentials, crosswalks, coordination mechanisms, and shared priorities—position the work for continued development.