

ECE Workforce Salary Supplement Evaluation

External Evaluation of Maine's Early Childhood Workforce Compensation Strategy

Performance period 04/2025–12/2025

As part of Maine's Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG R), the PDG state evaluation team was engaged to assess whether a separately contracted external evaluator conducted the Workforce Salary Supplement System evaluation as proposed, generated credible and decision-relevant evidence, and produced findings useful for system building and sustainability decisions. This report does not reevaluate the system itself; rather, it examines the scope, execution, and utility of the external evaluation conducted by the Center for Early Learning Funding Equity (CELFE) presented in the *Maine ECE Workforce Salary Supplement System Evaluation Report*.

Consistent with PDG expectations, the analytic task was not to over-attribute outcomes, but to determine whether the external evaluation tested key assumptions, documented early signals of effectiveness, and identified design considerations relevant to Maine's early childhood workforce system. In doing so, the state sought to ensure that PDG-supported evaluation activities translated into actionable knowledge that could inform policy, funding, and system-level decisions beyond the life of the grant. Findings reflect the feasibility of implementation and participants' reported experiences rather than causal attribution.

This report presents findings from a review of the *Maine ECE Workforce Salary Supplement System Evaluation Report* with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, the extent to which the CELFE evaluation documented evidence related to the Workforce Salary Supplement System's stated goals, what the evaluation established, and where questions remain.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including what the CELFE evaluation documented about coordination and what system-level context emerged from interviews with state and initiative-level staff.
- **System building**, including what the CELFE evaluation documented about the system's contributions to system infrastructure, and how interviews and system documentation provided broader context about alignment with state workforce development efforts.
- **Supports and access**, including whether the CELFE evaluation was designed to support broad participation and capture representative perspectives from across the workforce.

Data sources for this report include a review of the Maine ECE Workforce Salary Supplement System Evaluation Report prepared by the Center for Early Learning Funding Equity (CELFE) and interviews with state- and initiative-level staff involved in the design, implementation, and oversight of the Workforce Salary Supplement System.

The CELFE evaluation employed a mixed-methods design to document implementation and early workforce-level effects of Maine's Workforce Salary Supplement System. Data collection focused on educators and system leaders actively receiving supplements, capturing perspectives across roles, settings, and geographic regions.

Survey instruments examined educators' experiences regarding compensation stability, retention decisions, financial stress, and engagement in professional development and credentialing. Focus groups were designed to deepen understanding of these issues and to surface implementation strengths and challenges not fully captured through survey data. Administrative data supported verification of participation patterns, career lattice placement, and system reach.

The evaluation was designed to test core assumptions of the system—specifically, whether linking predictable, workforce supplements to the state career lattice could support workforce stability and incentivize professional advancement—rather than to assess child-level outcomes or establish causal effects. From a PDG evaluation perspective, this design was appropriate given the initiative's scale, maturity, and policy context. The mixed methods approach balanced breadth and depth, prioritizing feasibility, early signals, and implementation learning over attribution, consistent with PDG guidance for large-scale workforce investments.

WORKFORCE SALARY SUPPLEMENT EVALUATION FEATURES

Evaluator: Center for Early Learning Funding Equity (CELFE)

Scope: Statewide; licensed center-based and family child care settings

Methods:

- **Survey of 7,925 eligible educators** receiving salary supplements; 1,903 respondents (24% response rate)
- **Four focus groups** with 30 participants (educators, center directors, family child care owners)
- **Analysis of administrative data** provided by the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS)

Timeline: Spring–Summer 2025; final report submitted December 2025

Primary Focus Areas: Workforce retention and stability, compensation and financial stress, professional advancement and credentialing, implementation feasibility, and sustainability considerations.

What did the external evaluation establish?

Findings indicate that the Workforce Salary Supplement System was largely functioning as intended with respect to its core design. Administrative data documented that approximately 93 percent of eligible systems statewide participated by summer 2025, indicating effective access and distribution mechanisms.

From a system-building standpoint, administrative feasibility at scale is itself a meaningful finding. Workforce compensation initiatives frequently falter due to complexity, inconsistent eligibility determination, or administrative burden on providers. The CELFE evaluation's documentation of high participation and manageable compliance requirements indicates that the system's design can be sustained and potentially scaled without undermining provider engagement.

Survey and focus group findings show that educators and system leaders understood the supplement as a predictable component of compensation and reported that it influenced decisions to remain in the field. Educators consistently distinguished the supplement from one-time bonuses, emphasizing its role in ongoing financial planning and employment decisions—an important indicator that the system was operating as intended. The majority of directors and owners reported that application and compliance processes were not challenging, supporting conclusions about administrative feasibility.

Leaders emphasized the importance of understanding not only whether the Workforce Salary Supplement System was associated with improved workforce retention and reduced financial stress, but also whether and where its effects were limited. From this perspective, the value of the CELFE evaluation was that it helped the state better understand where the salary supplement supported professional advancement within the existing system, and where additional or complementary strategies would be required.

WHAT THE CELFE EVALUATION ESTABLISHED

- **Over 80% of educators reported the supplement helped them stay in the field**

RETENTION
- **69–85% reported reduced financial stress**

FINANCIAL STRESS
- **80–88% reported being encouraged to complete trainings or submit credentials**

PROFESSIONAL ADVANCEMENT

The following table clarifies where the external evaluation produced strong, decision-relevant evidence and where additional inquiry would be required, reinforcing the importance of disciplined interpretation consistent with PDG guidance.

Decision-Relevant Findings: What the Evaluation Established And Where Questions Remain

Evaluation Question	Evidence Status	Summary of Evidence
Is the system reaching the eligible workforce?	Established	Administrative data documented participation by approximately 93% of eligible systems statewide by summer 2025.
Does the supplement support workforce retention?	Established	Over 80% of educators reported that the supplement helped them stay in the field; effects were strongest among educators ages 19–34.
Does the supplement reduce financial stress?	Established	Between 69–85% of respondents reported reduced financial stress associated with the supplement.
Does tying supplements to the career lattice incentivize credentialing?	Established	80–88% of educators reported being encouraged to complete training or submit credentials; increased

Evaluation Question	Evidence Status	Summary of Evidence
		engagement with the workforce registry was documented.
Is the system administratively feasible at scale?	Established	The majority of directors and owners reported that application and compliance processes were not challenging.
Does the supplement reduce pressure on parent fees?	Established (qualitative)	Focus group participants reported reduced need to increase parent fees, though this was not quantitatively assessed.
Does the supplement support recruitment of new educators?	Partially addressed	Recruitment effects were modest; the system was not designed or marketed as a recruitment strategy during initial implementation.
Does the supplement affect access to public benefits?	Partially addressed	Survey data indicated minimal reported impact (<3% of respondents), while qualitative discussions raised concerns regarding potential benefits cliffs. Additional quantitative analysis would be required to assess the structural interaction between income eligibility thresholds and structural interactions.
Are current supplement amounts aligned with workforce cost modeling and salary scale benchmarks?	Not examined	Supplement amounts were established within available funding parameters and were not formally assessed against cost modeling conducted with CELFE or the ECE workforce salary scale.
What are the long-term effects on workforce quality or child outcomes?	Not examined	Child- and family-level outcomes were outside the scope of the evaluation.

The table clarifies where the external evaluation produced strong, decision-relevant evidence and where additional inquiry would be required, reinforcing the importance of disciplined interpretation consistent with PDG guidance.

How did the evaluation enhance communication and coordination?

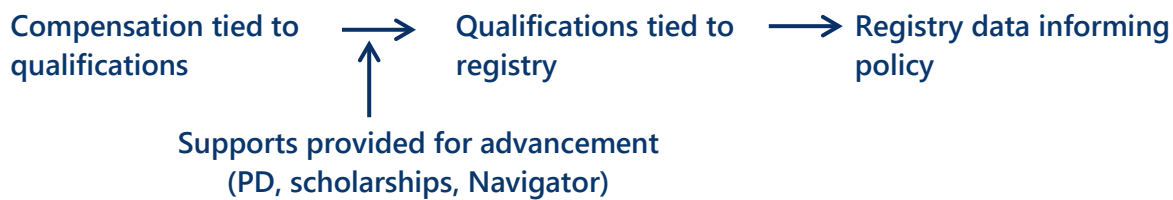
Implementation required coordination among the Governor's Office, OCFS, the Department of Education, Maine Roads to Quality (MRTQ), and other workforce partners. Coordination with MRTQ was essential as it operates Maine's workforce registry. Interviews with state- and initiative-level staff highlighted the importance of these partnerships and the emergence of new collaborations with the Department of Labor. Career Navigator and System Navigator roles served as connective infrastructure, supporting educator engagement and implementation fidelity.

How did the CELFE evaluation contribute to system building?

Comprehensive system-building requires many moving parts that work together—almost like gears in an engine. A well-compensated workforce is essential to any high-quality early childhood system.

Although the CELFE evaluation was not designed to examine state-level coordination mechanisms in depth, system-building contributions emerged through system design and implementation requirements. The Workforce Salary Supplement System intentionally linked compensation to verified workforce qualifications and required participation in Maine’s early childhood workforce registry.

THE MAINE MODEL: SUPPORTING CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT



This design strengthened workforce data infrastructure by incentivizing educators to update and submit documentation of education and training. Improved registry completeness enhances the state’s capacity to make informed policy and investment decisions.

The CELFE evaluation documented evidence that the Workforce Salary Supplement System was achieving its goals related to retention, compensation, and professional advancement. It also documented that the system’s design strengthened the state’s workforce data infrastructure by incentivizing registry participation. By pairing compensation with supports for advancement—including professional development, scholarships, and Career Navigator services—the model creates a pathway from workforce investment to improved qualifications and higher quality care for children. However, the evaluation did not examine how the system fits within Maine’s broader system-building efforts.

The evaluation findings, combined with ongoing OCFS audits, informed rule revisions and system refinements, demonstrated how evaluation evidence can support continuous system improvement. Together, these feedback mechanisms enabled the state to move beyond compliance monitoring toward adaptive management, using data to refine eligibility rules, clarify guidance, and plan for future iterations of the system.

How did the CELFE evaluation address access and participation?

The external evaluation was designed to support broad participation and to capture perspectives across roles, settings, and geographic regions. Surveys were distributed to all educators receiving supplements, and follow-up outreach was conducted for non-respondents. Focus groups intentionally included participants from outside the state’s most populous counties to ensure geographic representation.

Response rates varied by role, with higher participation among directors and owners than among educators. Despite this variation, the evaluation achieved proportional representation across urban and rural areas and across center-based and family child care settings. Incentives and multiple contact methods supported accessibility and participation.

The evaluation focused on individuals currently receiving supplements. System-level perspectives emerged through separate interviews with state and initiative-level staff, complementing participant-reported findings.

What did we learn?

Several system-level insights emerged from the review of the external evaluation:

- **Tying compensation to verified qualifications** can simultaneously support workforce stability and strengthen data infrastructure.
- **Salary supplements** address immediate financial stress and retention but are insufficient alone to drive recruitment.
- **Embedding evaluation into system design** supports timely refinement and adaptive implementation.
- **Mixed methods approaches** are particularly valuable for documenting feasibility and early signals in large-scale workforce initiatives.

Considerations for Sustainability

PDG funding supported the external evaluation, while the ECE Workforce Salary Supplement System, funded through Maine’s General Fund, represents a substantial portion of the state’s PDG match. This structure positioned the initiative as both a sustainability test case and a system-building investment.

Evaluation findings informed legislative and administrative decisions to continue funding the system in the state’s biennial budget. Ongoing audits and evaluation evidence are now guiding rule revisions and communication strategies as the initiative moves forward.

Participant concerns about sustainability underscore the importance of clear communication and predictable funding. From a PDG perspective, these findings highlight the role of evaluation in supporting policy continuity: by framing evidence around feasibility, system alignment, and risk—not solely impact—the external evaluation and subsequent PDG review equipped state leaders with information relevant to long-term funding decisions. Findings also suggest that complementary strategies—particularly benefits such as health insurance and retirement supports—may be necessary to achieve long-term workforce stability.

Summary

The CELFE evaluation was implemented as proposed and generated credible, decision-relevant evidence aligned with PDG expectations. The evaluation documented that the ECE Workforce Salary Supplement System was functioning largely as intended, identified modest but meaningful impacts on workforce stability and professional advancement, and clarified where questions remain.

By distinguishing established findings from areas requiring further investigation, the evaluation supports informed decision-making and continuous system improvement. This meta-evaluation affirms the value of external evaluation as a tool for testing assumptions, refining system design, and informing Maine's broader early childhood system-building effort.