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Outcome Reports

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AIM Early Literacy Modules

Strengthening Evidence-Based Early Literacy Instruction Across Pre-K–3

Performance period 10/2021–4/2026

High-quality professional development is a core strategy for strengthening early childhood systems and supporting children's learning from Pre-K through Grade 3. Effective PD provides coherent, research-aligned opportunities that build educator knowledge and leadership capacity across settings. Within the PDG-R initiatives, professional learning efforts are designed to promote integrated, equitable, and developmentally appropriate early learning environments statewide.

The **AIM Early Literacy Modules** are a series of eight self-paced, online professional learning modules designed to build Pre-K–3 educator knowledge of evidence-based early literacy practices aligned with the science of reading. Developed by the **AIM Institute for Learning and Research**[1], the modules were made available to Maine educators through a partnership with the Maine Department of Education (DOE) with support from the Preschool Development Grant–Birth to Five Renewal (PDG-R). The initiative aims to strengthen the implementation of structured literacy by providing consistent, high-quality learning opportunities across schools and grade levels.

This report presents **findings from outcome-focused assessment activities** conducted in fall 2025 as part of the PDG-R grant. Drawing on diverse data,[2] the report examines the AIM Early Literacy Modules initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including intended outcomes, participant-reported changes in knowledge and confidence, and learning activities identified as most valuable.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including collaboration among DOE, the AIM Institute, and school-based teams.
- **System building**, including contributions to statewide literacy infrastructure and alignment with Maine's State Literacy Action Plan.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitated participation, adaptations made in response to early implementation experience, and barriers identified by participants.

[2]Data sources for this report include participation records, post-participation surveys of educators who completed modules, Communities of Practice session documentation, interviews with initiative leads Renee Reilly and Dee Saucier, and CoP participants' written responses.

During the PDG-R performance period, the Department of Education implemented the AIM Early Literacy Modules through two delivery models. In Summer 2024, educators accessed the modules individually through a self-paced format. DOE purchased licenses from the AIM Institute and released them to educators statewide, with stipends provided for module completion. Participants completed modules independently and engaged with embedded quizzes and assessments.

[1]AIM Institute for Learning and Research. (n.d.). *Literacy Modules.* https://institute.aimpa.org/who-we-serve/state-training-partnerships/maine

In 2025, DOE shifted to a team-based implementation model. Schools applied for participation grants, and teams of educators completed modules together. DOE introduced facilitated Communities of Practice (CoPs), led by the DOE Inclusive Education Literacy Specialist, to support shared learning. CoP sessions included discussion of module content, reflection on current literacy practices, and identification of areas for improvement. Participation incentives were provided in both phases of implementation: individual stipends during the initial self-paced rollout and a reimbursement upon completion model during the team-based phase.

Across both phases, the DOE coordinated registration, managed license distribution, and provided technical assistance. The initiative leads oversaw fiscal management, facilitation, and communication with participating schools.

What was the impact of the learning modules?

The evaluation examined early evidence related to implementation and intended outcomes.

The AIM Early Literacy Modules were designed to support the following **intended outcomes**:

- **Increased educator knowledge of early literacy practices** aligned with the science of reading.
- **Strengthened confidence and preparedness** to institute structured literacy practices in the classroom.
- **Statewide access t**o consistent, high-quality literacy professional development for PreK–3 educators.
- **Team-based learning structures** supporting ongoing application rather than one-time training.
- **Shared understanding** and common language around structured literacy.

AIM EARLY LITERACY MODULES FEATURES

Participation: 978 educators registered (Summer 2024); 650 completed at least one module; 52 teams participated across both CoP cohorts, with approximately 300 educators.

Format: Eight self-paced, online modules; 21,000+ hours of professional learning logged.

Module Topics:

- Overview of the Science of Reading
- Phonological Awareness
- Decoding & Spelling
- Vocabulary
- Language Comprehension & Written Expression
- Demystifying Dyslexia
- Growing Proficient Readers: Dr. Ehri's Phases of Development
- Specialized Reading Knowledge Bundle: English Learners

Participants: General education teachers, instructional coaches, interventionists, special educators, and administrators serving PreK–3; majority teaching K–2

Incentives: Stipends (Summer 2024); team-based reimbursement model (2025)

Initiative Leads: DOE Early Learning Team Coordinator Renee Reilly (fiscal and administrative oversight); DOE Inclusive Education Literacy Specialist Dee Saucier (technical lead, CoP facilitation)

The initiative lead emphasized that the goal was to build a sustained professional community rather than isolated training:

> **"The goal of this whole thing is to build a community of practice, to build growth, to build change, and not just be a one-and-done, so that it's not just another sit-and-get. I wanted them to network and learn as a team and learn from each other."**

Outcomes associated with the AIM Early Literacy Modules were most evident at the level of educators' knowledge, confidence, and shared understanding, with less evidence of sustained instructional change. Table 1 summarizes evidence across each outcome area; findings are discussed in the sections that follow.

Table 1. AIM Early Literacy Modules: Impact Summary

Outcome	Evidence Summary
Increased educator knowledge	**Strong evidence of progress.** 75–80% reported increased knowledge across all eight modules; <1% reported no gain; this pattern was consistent across both foundational and specialized content. CoP participants discussed their understanding of frameworks (e.g., Scarborough's Reading Rope) and articulated connections between literacy components.
Confidence to shift practice	**Moderate evidence; varied by content area.** Confidence declined as content became more specialized: 56% felt adequately prepared for Modules 1–2, declining to 28% for Module 8; <5% felt unprepared. CoP participants identified both current strengths and areas for development.
Statewide access	**Achieved.** 978 registered; 650 completed at least one module; 52 teams participated across both CoP cohorts, with approximately 300 educators.
Team-based learning	**Achieved.** Teams assessed current literacy systems and identified gaps in morphology, vocabulary, writing, and supports for older struggling readers.
Common language	**Emerging evidence.** Participants used shared terminology and referenced common frameworks; sustainability depends on follow-through at the school level.

Educator Knowledge and Confidence to Apply Learning

Survey findings and CoP documentation indicate meaningful self-reported increases in knowledge of evidence-based literacy practices across all modules, including: the role of phonological awareness in decoding, the relationship between word recognition and language comprehension, the phases of reading development, and indicators of reading difficulties such as dyslexia.

Notably, 74% of survey respondents reported 10 or more years of experience yet consistently identified the module content as new, pointing to **gaps in prior preparation across the workforce**.

The quote below is representative of themes that emerged consistently across open-ended survey responses and Communities of Practice documentation.

> **"I learned many new things that, unfortunately, are not taught in preparatory teacher education programs but should be."**

Educators who frequently work with specialized populations—English Language Learners, New Mainers, and children with disabilities—reported smaller gains in knowledge. At the same time, specialists rated the later modules as highly valuable (91–100% reported that the content was worth the time investment), despite reporting smaller personal gains, suggesting that the modules supported shared understanding and capacity-building across roles rather than individual skill acquisition.

Confidence to Shift Practice

While knowledge gains were consistent across all modules**, confidence in applying the learning declined as the content became more specialized**.

CoP participants described feeling more grounded in research-based practice and acknowledged ongoing learning:

> **"Using scripts, I feel more empowered because I know I am teaching students using a research-based method that works, rather than something I am throwing together and hoping it works."**

Team-Based Learning and Gap Identification

In the CoP sessions, school teams moved beyond individual knowledge gains to collective assessment and planning. Participants reported strong existing implementation of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction:

> **"We use UFLI[2] and Heggerty in all the classroom instruction. We also use SPIRE in the special education classrooms."**

Teams identified specific gaps—most commonly in morphology, vocabulary, writing, and supports for older struggling readers. This form of **collective gap identification** reflects early awareness of the system and readiness for improvement.

Application to Practice

Evidence of classroom application is limited but present. Some participants described deepening their understanding of tools already in use rather than adopting entirely new practices:

> **"The daily integration of phonics and phonemic awareness using skills I have learned through Heggerty and UFLI is gradually proving to be effective. Students are benefiting from hands-on, engaging activities like phoneme manipulation, sound boxes, and decodable practice."**

[2]University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) Foundations Toolbox

Overall, available evidence reflects early application and instructional reflection rather than documented, sustained changes in classroom practice.

How did AIM Early Learning Modules support collaboration and coordination?

Collaboration was **primarily situated within the public-school context** rather than across multiple sectors. AIM supported collaboration through team-based participation and facilitated Communities of Practice within and across schools and school administrative units (SAUs).

Team-Based Participation and Shared Learning

Across both CoP cohorts, approximately 52 teams participated (some representing individual schools, others multiple schools within an SAU), with approximately 300 educators. Teams typically included classroom teachers across grade levels, literacy interventionists, special education teachers, instructional coaches, and building administrators. This cross-role composition encouraged dialogue among educators and leaders responsible for instruction, intervention, and oversight, and provided structured opportunities to reflect on module content and future development within their schools.

Collaboration Within and Across Schools

Documentation from CoP sessions indicates that collaboration extended beyond facilitated meetings. Teams reported meeting independently to discuss learning and consider next steps within their local contexts. Facilitated discussions also enabled participants from different schools and SAUs to exchange perspectives and discuss common challenges in implementing structured literacy. While collaboration remained largely school-based, the team-oriented structure fostered connections across sites, supporting shared language and collective reflection.

How has AIM Early Literacy Modules contributed to building a strong statewide early learning system, and will it continue to do so?

The AIM Early Literacy Modules contributed to system capacity by **establishing infrastructure that supports continued access** to evidence-based literacy professional learning beyond the PDG-R performance period. The DOE negotiated master agreements with AIM Pathways and Keys to Literacy, enabling SAUs statewide to purchase modules at reduced cost. These agreements support infrastructure sustainability and promote consistency in access across districts.

The initiative is also aligned with *Maine's State Literacy Action Plan*, which identifies expanded access to evidence-based literacy professional learning for Pre-K–3 educators as a statewide priority.

Addressing the Preservice Gap

Findings from the AIM evaluation point to gaps in preservice preparation. Even experienced educators consistently identified foundational literacy content as new. In response, the DOE extended access to

the AIM and Keys to Literacy modules to institutions of higher education across the state. **Seven instructors across six Maine institutions**, representing both four-year universities and community colleges, requested **nearly 700 module licenses** for use in preservice coursework.

The scale and distribution of this effort represent a meaningful system-building contribution by **addressing educator preparation upstream** and strengthening coherence across preparation and practice.

In what ways did the design of AIM Early Learning Modules facilitate participation, and what improvements were suggested?

The evaluation team examined whether the initiative's design facilitated participation, which factors helped or created barriers, and the adaptations made in response to implementation experience.

Design Features That Facilitated Participation

The self-paced, online format allowed educators to access professional learning regardless of location or schedule. Survey respondents described the modules as well-structured, with clear explanations, multiple modalities, and built-in accountability through quizzes. The asynchronous design enabled participation across rural, suburban, and urban communities statewide.

Participation incentives also contributed to engagement. **Sixty-eight percent of survey respondents** reported that compensation influenced their decision to enroll and complete modules, particularly given the expectation that coursework be completed outside of contracted work hours:

> **"I honestly only considered doing the modules because of the stipend. I am glad I did it for other reasons, though, now that I completed them."**

Barriers and Limitations

Time was the primary barrier to completion, particularly for later modules. Non-completion rates increased from 4% for Module 1 to 37% for Module 8—a pattern consistent with qualitative feedback about the substantial time investment required. Despite this, nearly all educators who completed each module (99%) reported that it was worth the time investment.

Design Adaptations Over Time

The initiative evolved in response to early implementation experience. In Summer 2024, approximately one-third of registered participants did not complete a module, prompting a shift to team-based participation with facilitated Communities of Practice and a reimbursement-upon-completion model, as described above. These adjustments supported sustained engagement and more efficient use of licenses.

Lessons Learned

Several design-level insights emerged from implementation of the AIM Early Literacy Modules:

- **Self-paced professional learning benefits from accountability structures**. Early participation patterns indicated that asynchronous formats alone were insufficient to sustain engagement across all modules.
- **Experienced educators continue to need foundational literacy content**. Participant feedback highlighted persistent gaps in preparation related to the science of reading, underscoring the importance of accessible, system-wide professional learning.
- **Knowledge gains do not automatically translate to changes in practice.** Findings reinforce the need for ongoing supports that help educators move from understanding concepts to applying them in instructional settings.
- **Team-based learning supports readiness for system-level improvement.** The CoP model enabled teams to collectively assess current practice and identify gaps in ways that individual module completion did not.

Summary

From participants' perspectives, the AIM Early Literacy Modules addressed a significant gap in educator preparation by providing foundational knowledge about how children learn to read that many had not encountered in preservice training. Survey findings indicate strong self-reported knowledge gains across all modules, alongside more moderate confidence to apply learning.

While evidence of sustained classroom implementation is limited, at the system level, the initiative contributed to alignment and readiness by supporting shared reflection through team-based Communities of Practice and extending structured literacy content into higher education coursework.

Challenging Behaviors Text Study

Strengthening Relationship-Based Approaches to Challenging Behavior

Performance period 1/2025–11/2025

Professional learning focused on challenging behavior is a critical component of early childhood system building, particularly in supporting educators to create inclusive, responsive, and emotionally supportive learning environments. Challenging behavior remains one of the most frequently cited concerns among early childhood educators and is a leading contributor to suspension and expulsion in early learning settings. Effective professional learning in this area must move beyond one-time workshops to support sustained reflection, shared language, and practical application grounded in relationship-based and trauma-informed practice.

The **Spotlight on Young Children: Challenging Behavior text study** was developed by the Maine Department of Education (DOE) in response to sustained requests from the field for professional learning that supports educators in understanding, preventing, and responding to challenging behaviors in developmentally appropriate ways. Designed as a facilitated, discussion-based book study using *Spotlight on Young Children: Challenging Behavior* (NAEYC, 2024), the initiative emphasized peer learning, guided reflection, and application to real classroom contexts. The format supported educators in developing an understanding of behavior as communication and strengthening their reflective practice.

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 exit tickets, follow-up outreach, interviews with state leads, and implementation documentation, the report examines the Challenging Behavior Text Study with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including changes in educator understanding and early application of relationship-based and trauma-informed approaches to behavior.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including shared learning across roles and some settings within Maine's mixed-delivery system.
- **System building,** including contributions to shared language, professional norms, and informal connections across early childhood settings.
- **Supports and access,** including design features that facilitated participation and engagement, as well as barriers identified by participants.

Data sources for this report include registration and participation records; educator exit tickets collected during each session across four cohorts; follow-up outreach (survey) to participants after the conclusion of the text study; and interviews and group conversations with state initiative leads regarding design, implementation, and perceived impact.

The text study was designed as a facilitated, discussion-based professional learning experience that emphasized reflection, peer exchange, and application to practice rather than lecture-style delivery. Initiative leads described the intent as offering learning "in a different way"—one that allowed educators to engage with real classroom situations, test ideas between sessions, and learn from colleagues across roles and settings.

Implementation occurred across four cohorts offered in early winter, spring, and fall 2025, with participation from educators across public schools, Head Start programs, and community-based early child care settings. The cohorts included classroom teachers, special education staff, educational technicians, early childhood educators, program directors, and administrators.

Sessions were scheduled to align with the end of the school day and to minimize conflicts with other professional learning opportunities. In response to demand and participant feedback, the implementation team made adjustments over time, including offering simultaneous sessions and later reducing cohort size to strengthen interaction and discussion. These adaptations reinforced the initiative's emphasis on quality of engagement over scale and informed refinements to the delivery model.

CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR TEXT STUDY FEATURES

Approximately **64 educators** participated during the grant period.

Four facilitated discussion-based cohorts offered statewide using *Spotlight on Young Children: Challenging Behavior* (NAEYC).

Combination of **assigned readings, small-group breakout discussions,** and **whole-group synthesis.**

Emphasis on **guided reflection, peer learning, and application to real classroom contexts.**

Participation from **public schools (47), Head Start (4) and community-based early childhood programs (14).**

Virtual sessions scheduled from 3:**30–4:30 p.m.**

Brief exit tickets collected at each session to **inform continuous improvement.**

Cohort sizes adjusted over time to support interaction and peer learning.

No cost to participants; books and materials provided through PDG funding.

What was the impact of the text study on educators' understanding of challenging behavior?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported professional learning initiatives is essential to assessing whether investments are achieving intended outcomes and supporting meaningful change in educator practice. This section examines the impact of the Challenging Behavior Text Study, focusing on evidence of changes in educators' understanding, reflective practice, and early application of relationship-based and trauma-informed approaches to behavior.

Initiative leads identified several **intended outcomes** for the text study, focused primarily on educator learning and early changes in practice:

- **Reframing children's behavior** as communication, rather than defiance or "bad behavior."
- Increased use of trauma-informed, relationship-based approaches to guidance and behavior support.
- **Strengthened adult reflection and self-regulation i**n response to challenging behavior.
- **Development of peer network**s that support sharing strategies across roles and early childhood settings.
- **Long-term contribution to reductions** in suspension and expulsion, through strengthened preventive classroom practices.

While reductions in exclusionary discipline were described as a **long-term aspiration**, the initiative's immediate focus was to build educators' understanding, support reflective practice, and strengthen preventive approaches to behavior.

Shifts in Educator Understanding

Data from session exit tickets, follow-up outreach, and interviews indicate that the Challenging Behavior Text Study contributed to **shifts in educators' understanding of challenging behavior and their role in responding to it**. According to **initiative leads**, the primary impact of the text study was not the introduction of new techniques, but a reframing of how educators interpret behavior and reflect on their own responses in classroom situations.

Across cohorts, educators frequently described a shift away from viewing challenging behavior as something to manage or control, toward understanding it **as meaningful communication that reflects children's needs, experiences, and developmental stages**. Many reflections highlighted increased awareness of adult tone, assumptions, and self-regulation, underscoring the adult's role in shaping children's behavioral experiences.

> **"We have to calm ourselves first before we can help kids calm down."**
> (Text study participant)

> **"Behaviors are not always what they appear. Understanding the 'why' behind behavior changes how we respond."** (Text study participant)

Together, these reflections and others indicate **meaningful conceptual learning and the development of a shared language** around behavior that emphasizes connection, prevention, and reflective practice rather than reactive responses.

Early Changes in Educator Practice

In addition to conceptual shifts, educators identified **concrete ways they intended to apply ideas from the text** study in their daily work. Across **260 coded statements** about intended practice, educators most frequently described plans to:

- Increase use of visual supports (27%)
- Apply preventive and supportive guidance strategies (24%)

- Strengthen relationships with children and families (20%)
- Improve transitions and routines (14%)
- Adjust the classroom environment (13%)

A smaller but meaningful subset of participants described **changes already underway during the study**. These early applications included printing and using visual supports, slowing adult responses to challenging behavior, sharing materials with colleagues, and applying guidance frameworks more intentionally in classroom settings.

> **"I have already made copies of the five-step reflective cycle[3] and shared them with my coworkers."** (Text study participant)

Reflective Cycle Used by Educators

Educators described using a structured reflective process to guide their responses to challenging behavior. While specific tools varied by setting, the process typically involved:

1. Pausing to observe behavior without immediate reaction.
2. Reflecting on underlying needs, triggers, and developmental factors.
3. Adjusting the adult response, with attention to tone and self-regulation.
4. Applying preventive and relationship-based strategies (e.g., visual supports, routines, connection).
5. Reviewing and refining responses based on children's cues and outcomes.

This process supports intentional, reflective responses to behavior rather than reactive or punitive approaches.

Follow-up outreach conducted shortly after the conclusion of the text study provided additional evidence of **early application beyond the sessions themselves**. Educators reported continued use of strategies introduced during the study and described observing improvements in classroom climate and children's responses. Since data collection occurred shortly after participation, findings reflect early indicators of learning and practice change, rather than sustained implementation or child-level outcomes.

Several educators also described **sharing materials or strategies with colleagues or administrators**. While sharing does not, in itself, indicate learning, it is a powerful indicator of the value participants assign to the practices and to the relevance and usefulness of book study resources. Sharing also provided additional educators with access to evidence-based resources on a **high-interest, practice-relevant topic.**

A small number of respondents described **early observations of changes in children's behavior** when applying these strategies. These observations were reported by **six of seven respondents** who participated in follow-up outreach and were described as emerging rather than sustained changes.

[3]The '5-step reflective cycle' referenced here comes from Claire D. Vallotton et al.'s guidance framework for interpreting and responding to young children's behavior, reprinted in Spotlight on Young Children: Challenging Behavior (Wahman & Lee, 2024

"By increasing positive relationships for students struggling with behavior and implementing consistent positive interventions, we have seen a decrease in negative behavior." (Text study participant)

"Children have started to independently use the skills taught." (Text study participant)

Activities That Were Most Influential in Changing Practice

Participants consistently identified the **text study's discussion-based design** as central to their learning. **Small-group breakout discussions** were the most frequently cited element supporting engagement, allowing educators to share experiences, ask questions, and explore how ideas applied across different roles and settings.

Educators also responded positively to the **overall structure and flow of the sessions**, including beginning and ending together as a whole group, **predictable routines**, and **clear facilitation**. The combination of **assigned reading, peer discussion, and intentional application between sessions** supported deeper reflection than traditional workshop formats.

Over time, **adjustments to cohort size** further strengthened the experience. Initiative leads reported **that smaller cohorts—typically 15-20 participants**—supported more balanced participation and richer discussion, reinforcing the importance of **quality interaction over scale** in discussion-based professional learning.

How did the text study support collaboration and a shared understanding across the early childhood system?

In addition to supporting individual educator learning, the text study operated within Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system, where shared understanding and communication across roles and settings are essential. The following section describes how the initiative supported collaboration and shared understanding among public school staff, Head Start, and community-based early childhood programs. The text study supported a **common language around behavior and guidance** and reinforced **shared responsibility** for supporting young children and families.

Initiative leads described the initiative as helping **to reframe conversations about behavior away from children's deficits and toward adults' responsibility** for creating supportive environments. As one initiative lead noted, "the behaviors aren't necessarily challenging for the children, they're challenging for the adults." This reframing closely aligns with the themes that educators emphasized in exit-ticket reflections and discussions.

Initiative leads also reported that some educators reached out for additional guidance after participating, suggesting that the initiative strengthened **ongoing relationships and expanded access to support beyond the sessions**.

How has the text study contributed to system building, and will it continue to do so?

In addition to influencing educator learning and practice, PDG-supported initiatives are examined for their contributions to broader system conditions, including **shared understanding, alignment, and access to guidance** across Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system. For discussion-based professional learning initiatives, system-building contributions are most often reflected in **relational and informational connections** rather than formal structures or policy changes.

Initiative leads described the text study as contributing to early system-building efforts **by strengthening relationships across sectors, reinforcing a shared language around behavior and positive supports, and increasing access to state-level guidance and resources**. These contributions reflect strengthened connections and shared understanding, rather than formal system structures or policy changes, and represent an effective way to engage a broader set of educators in this work by sharing evidence-based resources.

Looking ahead, initiative leads expressed a **clear intention to continue offering discussion-based professional learning opportunities focused on challenging behavior**, though on a reduced scale and with reduced capacity if PDG funding is not sustained. They emphasized that while staffing levels and frequency may change, the relationships built through the work and the shared understanding fostered among educators are durable outcomes that are likely to continue influencing practice.

Several implementation lessons also emerged. **Smaller cohorts** supported stronger engagement, and **predictable session structures** helped educators feel comfortable participating. While challenges such as book availability, scheduling across sectors, and occasional technology issues arose, many were addressed through adjustments to pacing, cohort size, and confirmation processes.

In what ways did the design of the text study support participation and access?

Supports and access for the Challenging Behavior Text Study were primarily shaped by design choices intended to reduce barriers to participation and support consistent engagement. **Virtual delivery and end-of-school-day scheduling** supported access for many educators, though these choices aligned more closely with public school schedules than with those of community-based early childhood programs. The table below shows the breakdown of participants in public schools, Head Start, and community early childhood programs by Maine's five state regions, based on registration data.

Table 1. Regional Representation of Book Study Participants (N=65)

Maine Region	Public School Participants	Head Start Participants	Community EC Programs	Total
Southern Maine	28	2	10	40
Midcoast	9	1	1	11
Central / Western Maine	6	0	1	7
Downeast	3	0	1	4
Northern / Aroostook	1	1	1	3
CDS (Statewide)	—	—	—	1

Eighteen of the 65 participants (28%) were from community-based early childhood programs (14) or Head Start (4), indicating cross-sector participation within a cohort composition weighted toward public-school educators, with particularly low participation from Maine's Head Start programs. A range of factors could influence participation across settings—including staffing patterns, daily schedules, the availability of coverage or substitutes, and how information about the opportunity reached different sectors. These conditions vary widely across early childhood programs and may have affected participation in ways not fully visible in the available data, including the limited Head Start participation. Notably, participation patterns in the final cohort differed from earlier groups, with three of the six participants coming from community-based programs and three from the public school. The reasons for this shift are not clear from available information. Session timing remained consistent across cohorts.

The facilitated, discussion-based format encouraged participation without requiring prior expertise or specialized materials. Initiative leads and participants identified **cohort size, predictable session routines, and clear facilitation** as particularly important for supporting engagement. While some logistical challenges emerged—including book availability, scheduling across sectors, and occasional technology issues—these were addressed through adjustments to pacing, cohort size, and confirmation processes, except for scheduling across sectors.

Lessons Learned

- **Discussion-based formats are central to participant learning.** Participants identified small-group breakout discussions as the most influential element of the text study, and initiative leads reported that smaller cohorts of 15–20 produced more balanced participation and richer exchange than larger groups.
- **Reframing behavior as communication shifts educators' orientation.** Across cohorts, the most frequently reported change was in educators' interpretation of children's behavior. Early evidence suggests this reframing influenced both immediate responses and longer-term planning.
- **Structured professional learning can reach across the mixed-delivery system when scheduling and format reduce participation barriers.** Virtual delivery and end-of-day scheduling supported broad access, though participation during the performance period was weighted toward public school educators, with lower representation from Head Start and community-based programs.
- **Informal sharing is a meaningful indicator of perceived value.** Participants described sharing materials, strategies, and frameworks with colleagues and administrators beyond the sessions. While sharing does not constitute evidence of learning transfer, it suggests that educators found the content relevant and applicable.

Summary

Across four cohorts, the Spotlight on Young Children: Challenging Behavior text study engaged 65 educators from public schools, community-based programs, and Head Start in a structured, discussion-based learning series. Educators identified 260 intended practice changes, most frequently describing plans to increase use of visual supports, apply preventive guidance strategies, and strengthen relationships with children and families. While child-level outcomes were not measured, the text study strengthened relationships across sectors, built shared language around behavior as communication, and expanded access to evidence-based resources.

Career and Technical Education

Strengthening a Workforce Pipeline Through High School CTE Programs

Performance period 04/2024–12/2025

Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs focused on early childhood education offer high school students the opportunity to learn about child development and begin working toward certifications, credentials, or degrees that position them for employment or further education in the field. These programs represent one entry point into the early childhood workforce, and strengthening their connection to postsecondary and professional pathways is a strategy for building a more sustainable workforce pipeline.

Maine included **Career and Technical Education** in its Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R) to address a barrier identified in the state's 2019 Needs Assessment: the lack of clearly articulated pathways into and through early childhood professions. With 23 of Maine's 27 CTE centers already offering ECE programming, the PDG-R investment was intended to supplement and strengthen this existing infrastructure—implementing an articulated ECE pathway from CTE to the statewide training system to two-year and four-year degree programs, rather than creating a new program. The grant proposed using renewal funds to support CTE students in obtaining a CDA or equivalent State of Maine credential, to develop or update articulation agreements with community colleges, and to expand the ECE curriculum to include special education and business management content.

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) in **Career and Technical Education (CTE)** initiative, with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including curriculum enhancements and professional development that strengthened CTE course quality and content, credential recognition, credit alignment findings across programs, and students' connection to the broader ECE profession.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination** through the Advisory Group and CTE instructor network, which provided a forum for sharing resources and elevating local issues to the systems level.
- **System building**, including efforts to sustain CTE as an entry point into the workforce and to identify systems-level work, such as credit consistency and credential recognition, that extends beyond what CTE alone can address.
- **Supports and access**, including considerations that shape instructors' participation in additional training and students' access to improved CTE courses.

Data sources for this report include review of available initiative documentation related to the Advisory Group; review of materials collected and curated on a shared drive by CTE teachers including a fall 2025 survey of CTE instructors; focus group with members of the Advisory Group; and feedback from the state initiative lead and project manager.

The CTE initiative began by surveying CTE instructors across the state to identify needs and priorities related to curriculum, credentials, and program alignment. Findings from this outreach informed the initiative's focus areas and guided early planning. To support implementation, a statewide Advisory Group was convened, including two subgroups: one focused on curriculum enhancements and the other on how credits are awarded and may align with certificate or credential completion. This structure provided a mechanism for translating identified needs into coordinated activities. The initiative also supported ongoing communication among ECE instructors to facilitate resource sharing and program improvement discussions.

A central focus of the initiative was curriculum enhancement in two areas: working with children with special needs and sustaining a child care business. The cross-agency team worked with the Office of Special Services to identify recommended materials, and programs received up to $2,500 for adaptive equipment and instructional resources. A consultant from Coastal Enterprises, Inc. (CEI) contributed time to draft a unit on establishing and maintaining a child care business; members of the sub-team reviewed the draft, though timing did not allow for piloting. MRTQ PDN highlighted an existing course on supporting adult learners in ECE and made it available to CTE instructors at no cost.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION (CTE) INITIATIVE FEATURES

23 of Maine's 27 CTE centers offer ECE programming; 30 teachers and 469 enrolled students in 2025

Connected to Strategic Plan Goal 1: Workforce Retention and Recruitment

Guided by a cross-agency internal planning team and statewide Advisory Group

$2,500 per program for instructional resources; CTE student registration for MAEYC Annual Conference

Curriculum enhancements and credential pathway development supported through contracted partners and MRTQ

The initiative adapted its credentialing approach over the grant period. The original plan included support for up to 20 CTE students to obtain either a CDA or an equivalent State of Maine credential, with MRTQ PDN covering costs and supporting students through the necessary coursework. The CDA pathway was revised based on its higher cost and operational difficulties in completing required observation visits on schedule. The initiative focused on the State of Maine credential side of this goal, with a focus on the Certified Early Childhood Assistant (CECA) and on developing a preschool credential aligned with Maine's credentialing system. This shift allowed the initiative to concentrate on program-level supports rather than subsidizing individual credential attainment. State leads reported that it also deepened relationships between CTE instructors, MRTQ, and other statewide workforce initiatives, positioning CTE more closely within Maine's broader workforce development system.

What was the impact of the Career and Technical Education (CTE) initiative?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives requires assessing whether investments advanced their intended purposes. For the CTE initiative, impact is understood primarily at the

program and system levels—strengthening the infrastructure that supports CTE programs and connecting them more intentionally to Maine's broader early childhood workforce system.

State leads identified three general goals for the initiative:

- **Establish and maintain an Advisory Group** of critical partners to guide the work of the initiative.
- **Develop resources and support CTE teachers' professional development,** with an emphasis on working with children with special needs and business skills for operating a child care program.
- Examine the **alignment of credits and credentials** available to students in CTE programs.

The initiative made progress across all three areas. The **Advisory Group**, comprised of staff from the Department of Education, MRTQ PDN, and CTE instructors from across the state, met regularly and guided the work. The Group worked as a whole as well as in subgroups (curriculum enhancements and credits) to identify gaps, and to respond to feedback from the field that came through surveys or pilot testing/reviewing of materials. Findings related to the other two goals are detailed below.

Professional Development and Curriculum Resources

Through the initiative, CTE instructors gained access to the MRTQ PDN course on engaging with adult learners at no cost. Instructors were also recognized as MRTQ PDN trainers, allowing them to offer professional learning opportunities with hours recorded in the Maine Early Childhood Registry. For example, one instructor leveraged her MRTQ PDN trainer status, along with participation in an emergent literacy train-the-trainer program, to bring multiple professional learning opportunities back to her district and community.

In the focus group, CTE instructors reported that the **adaptive equipment and special needs materials addressed a gap in their programs, noting that students would not otherwise have had the opportunity to learn about available adaptive materials** or how to use them. The sub-team pursued additional resources to supplement the unit and/or offer other options. Child care business management will remain a focus of the CTE Advisory Team.

The initiative also advanced credential alignment. The CECA is now recognized as a Tier 3 credential, equivalent to the Child Development Associate (CDA).

> **This Tier 3 recognition connects CECA holders to Maine's Tiered Salary Supplement program, linking CTE students' credentialing pathway to a direct financial benefit upon entering the workforce.**

Credit Alignment Across Programs

The credentials subgroup surveyed CTE teachers and documented variation in how CTE coursework is documented in students' education records. The survey revealed differences across programs in the number of credits students received toward graduation requirements for CTE courses and in how those credits are weighted in grade point averages.

Table 1. CTE Credit Alignment Survey Findings

Finding	Detail
Programs offering postsecondary credit	90% of programs, through concurrent enrollment, dual enrollment, or articulation agreements
Range of credits available	3–7, varying by institution and agreement type
Variation in HS credit structures	Differences in credits toward graduation and GPA weighting across programs

State leads noted that these findings elevated what had been understood as local variation into a statewide systems concern, with implications for how students decide to enroll in CTE and how CTE coursework articulates into postsecondary pathways.

Students' Connection to the Profession

The initiative paid registration costs for CTE students to attend the Maine AEYC Annual Conference. In a focus group, CTE teachers described students' experience at the conference, noting that

> **"The other adults were connecting with them and inspiring them for the work that they were doing, being able to be there to participate."**

How did the CTE initiative strengthen communication and cross-sector coordination?

The CTE initiative linked an existing network of CTE teachers with staff from state agencies and MRTQ PDN through the Advisory Group. Although the Advisory Group and the cross-agency planning group were newly formed through the initiative, they intersected with an established network of CTE teachers who had already begun gathering information and identifying gaps and needs. In interviews, state leads described the Advisory Group as a forum for critical partners to come together not only to share resources but also to elevate local issues to the systems level. For example, variations in eligibility for general education credits exist across schools that could benefit from additional state guidance.

> **State leaders noted the "critical role" that Maine Roads to Quality plays as a thought partner and for its ability to adjust systems to better support CTE teachers and students.**

How has the Career and Technical Education (CTE) initiative contributed to building a strong statewide early childhood service system?

Early education CTE programs provide an entry point into the field for high school students interested in entering the early childhood workforce. This pathway is one of many that individuals take into the profession, and the initiative contributed to sustaining it through several interconnected supports: professional development for CTE teachers offered through MRTQ PDN; participation in the statewide

early childhood professional conference that connected students with the broader field; and resources and adaptive equipment to prepare students for working with children with special needs.

The initiative also surfaced work that extends beyond what CTE alone can address. Building consistency in how CTE coursework translates into high school credit, how these credits build toward certificates and credentials, and how credentials articulate into college credit will require continued collaboration with institutions of higher education and providers. Although the CECA is now recognized as a Tier 3 credential by the state, Head Start programs have yet to provide this recognition, creating a disconnect across the system.

In what ways did the CTE initiative support access and effective participation for teachers and students?

This initiative primarily supported CTE programs and teachers, but access issues were noted for both teachers and students.

There were a few barriers to CTE instructors' participation in the initiative's work. Access to all resources and benefits, including funds for materials, was available to all programs. Advisory Group participants received stipends for their time, and most of the work was completed virtually, minimizing cost and travel burden. Some teachers reported constraints on participation—one noted in the focus group that she has limited paid professional development time in her district, which requires her to choose among potentially useful offerings. Teachers' designation as MRTQ PDN trainers also supported their engagement in the initiative, as it allowed them to offer courses that counted toward students' hours in the Registry.

Teachers frequently mentioned challenges their students faced in accessing CTE programs. Not all students across the state have local access to a CTE center, and transportation to attend classes or complete required field experience hours can be a barrier. In addition, the credit alignment survey revealed that students may receive different amounts or types of credit for participation in CTE programs. In systems where CTE credits are not equally weighted in grade point averages or compete with enrollment in advanced courses, students may be discouraged from enrolling. Finally, CTE teachers and state leads noted that school guidance counselors have not been heavily engaged in the CTE work and may be less informed about the programs' benefits.

Sustainability

The state lead reported that both the cross-agency planning group and the full Advisory Group favored continuing their meetings. Going forward, meetings will shift to fully virtual, and the initiative will no longer be able to offer stipends for participants' time. Teachers in the focus group noted that their twice-annual gatherings would continue as before, with the addition of state agency staff and other partners who would likely remain in attendance.

Many of the state agencies and partnering organizations on the Advisory Group, as well as many of the CTE teachers engaged in the initiative, also participated in a statewide Pathways Summit in August 2025, planned as an annual event. Participants continued to convene through ECE Pathways Community Conversations (December 2025, February 2026, and planned for April and June 2026).

These continued convenings indicate that the relationships and infrastructure developed through the initiative have a basis for continuation beyond the grant period.

What were the lessons learned from the CTE initiative?

- **Leveraging existing networks accelerates progress.** The initiative successfully brought CTE teachers—who had already established a practice of meeting regularly and sharing resources—together with staff from state agencies and other statewide ECE partners. The network of CTE teachers had been collecting information and developing a means to share resources across programs, providing important infrastructure for the initiative to build on.
- **Individual supports can compound across initiatives.** The CTE initiative provided several specific supports that contributed to a broad range of outcomes. For example, one CTE instructor leveraged her approval as an MRTQ PDN trainer to offer learning opportunities to her district and community and was further supported by having participated in an emergent literacy train-the-trainer program and a regulated classroom training that she could bring back to her school and community.
- **MRTQ is a critical partner in supporting the ECE workforce.** Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network plays a central role in the ECE workforce system—maintaining the state registry, hosting professional development courses, managing multiple credentials, and tracking data on early educators. The initiative demonstrated that MRTQ PDN can play a pivotal role in addressing ongoing workforce development challenges, including adjusting systems to better support CTE teachers and students.

Summary

High school CTE programs for students interested in early childhood education provide a pathway into the workforce, offering foundational knowledge and experience that can lead to certificates, credentials, or further education. Through the PDG-R, the CTE initiative strengthened this pathway by building a statewide network of CTE instructors connected to state agencies and MRTQ, enhancing curriculum in working with children with special needs and child care business management, and providing programs with resources and materials to improve students' preparation. CTE instructors gained access to professional development and MRTQ trainer designation, and the CECA credential was recognized as a Tier 3 credential equivalent to the CDA.

The initiative also identified systems-level work that remains to be done—including building consistency in how CTE coursework translates into high school and college credit, engaging school guidance counselors to promote CTE pathways, and securing Head Start recognition of the CECA credential. The relationships and infrastructure developed through the initiative, including the Advisory Group, the CTE instructor network, and ongoing participation in statewide Pathways Community Conversations, provide a foundation for continuing this work beyond the grant period.

Child Care Scholarships

Expanding Access to Higher Education for the Early Childhood Workforce

Performance period January 2024–December 2025

Child care scholarships are a long-standing component of early childhood system building, supporting access to higher education for educators while strengthening workforce pathways across a mixed-delivery system.[4] In a field characterized by low wages, uneven access to postsecondary education, and limited advancement opportunities, scholarships help reduce financial barriers that otherwise prevent educators from pursuing credentials and degrees. By supporting degree attainment while maintaining employment, scholarship programs contribute to broader system goals related to workforce preparation, professional advancement, and the availability of qualified educators in early care and education settings.

Maine included **Child Care Scholarships** in its Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R) to address workforce needs identified in the state's Birth–Five needs assessment and strategic plan, particularly challenges related to recruitment, retention, and access to degree pathways for early childhood educators. The PDG-R investment was intended to strengthen existing workforce infrastructure by expanding access to higher education through targeted scholarship supports, rather than creating a new stand-alone program. By supporting scholarships **administered through MaineAEYC**, the state sought to reduce structural barriers to participation, align scholarship supports with broader workforce and professional development systems, and advance PDG-R priorities related to workforce capacity, equitable access to credentials, and long-term system sustainability.

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 [1] the report examines the Child Care Scholarships initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including intended outcomes related to access to higher education, degree pathways, and professional advancement for early childhood educators.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including coordination among the administering organization, state agencies, and higher education partners.
- **System building**, early contributions related to workforce pathways, alignment with existing scholarship and credentialing systems, and sustainability considerations.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitated participation in scholarship pathways and barriers affecting educators' ability to engage.

Data sources for this report include semi-structured virtual interviews with the state initiative lead and the MaineAEYC scholarship coordinator, review of implementation documentation, and administrative scholarship data.

[4]Mixed delivery early care and education (ECE) is the coordinated effort to support early childhood services and programming across a range of settings to help meet the varied needs of children and families.

The Child Care Scholarships initiative was administered by MaineAEYC using its established scholarship infrastructure and data systems. PDG-R funding supported a discrete cohort within MaineAEYC's broader portfolio, providing awards to early childhood educators pursuing bachelor's or master's degrees in early childhood–related fields. Scholarship funds covered full tuition and included a modest stipend for course-related expenses.

The initiative initially prioritized family child care providers. Recruitment within that group was more limited than anticipated, with administrators reporting that many family child care providers were already at capacity or not positioned to return to school during the implementation period. As implementation progressed, scholarships were awarded to eligible applicants across the early childhood workforce, including center-based educators and public Pre-K teachers. The PDG-R–supported scholarships operated alongside, but separately from, other MaineAEYC-administered scholarship pathways, and maintained distinct eligibility criteria and funding requirements.

The first cohort began receiving funding in Fall 2024. Recipients were required to be actively enrolled in eligible degree programs and to meet defined credit load expectations during each academic period. Participation timelines vary based on individual degree progress and extend beyond the initial funding term for some recipients. MaineAEYC managed outreach, application review, and award administration and coordinated with institutions of higher education to verify enrollment and process tuition payments. Degree pathway, enrollment status, and coursework progress were tracked through MaineAEYC's centralized scholarship database, which supports multiple scholarship pathways and differentiates awards by funding source.

CHILD CARE SCHOLARSHIPS FEATURES

MaineAEYC administered Child Care Scholarships through its existing scholarship infrastructure.

18 scholarships were awarded during the PDG-R period.

Scholarships supported educators enrolled **in bachelor's and master's degree programs** in early childhood–related fields.

Scholarships covered **100 percent of tuition costs** and included a **$250-per-semester access stipend** for course-related expenses.

Eligibility was limited to educators earning less than $25 per hour, working at least part time, and meeting degree prerequisites (associate degree or 60 credits for bachelor's pathways; bachelor's degree for master's pathways).

Unlike standard TEACH models, PDG-R scholarships **did not require employer sponsorship or employer contribution.**

PDG-R–supported scholarships were administered as a **distinct funding stream** within MaineAEYC's broader scholarship portfolio.

What was the impact of the scholarships?

Impact was defined at the workforce level, focusing on access to higher education and participation in bachelor's- and master's-level degree pathways.

The initiative was intended to achieve the following outcomes.

- **Enable access to bachelor's- and master's-level degree** pathways for early childhood educators through full tuition coverage.
- **Support** educators who were unable to access other scholarship models due to sponsorship or employment requirements.
- **Prioritize participation by family child care providers**, consistent with workforce needs identified at the outset of implementation.

Administrative records indicate that PDG-R funding supported 18 early childhood educators enrolled in postsecondary degree programs. Of these 18 recipients, three completed bachelor's degrees during the evaluation period, eleven remained actively enrolled in degree programs, and four exited the scholarship program due to job changes, relocation, or loss of eligibility. Participation and supported pathways are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participation and Degree Pathways Supported

Measure	PDG-R Period
Total scholarship recipients	18
Bachelor's degree (in progress)	6
Bachelor's degree (graduated)	3
Bachelor's degree (exited scholarship program)	4
Master's degree (in progress)	5
Tuition coverage	100% of tuition costs
Sponsorship required	No

Note: Degree pathways reflect enrollment status during the PDG-R evaluation period.

MaineAEYC collected participant feedback across its broader scholarship portfolio; however, responses were not disaggregated by funding source, and satisfaction data specific to the 18 PDG-R–supported recipients could not be isolated. Across the full scholarship population, respondents reported high satisfaction with scholarship supports. While these findings reflect overall perceptions of MaineAEYC's scholarship model, they cannot be interpreted as evidence of PDG-R–specific outcomes. They are included to provide context regarding participant experience within the broader scholarship model.

Administrative records indicate that, although family child care providers were an intended priority population, participation by family child care providers was limited to one recipient during the evaluation period.

Interview data from structured interviews with the state PDG lead (Andie Faurot) and the MaineAEYC scholarship coordinator (Morgan Tolin) indicate that scholarship recipients were at varied stages in their degree programs, with some closer to completion and others earlier in their coursework, reflecting different entry points at the time of award. Interviews followed a structured protocol aligned to the evaluation questions, addressing intended outcomes, implementation, participation, and early indicators of progress. While degree completion was documented for three recipients, most participants remain in progress, and longer-term outcomes related to workforce retention and advancement extend beyond the evaluation window.

How did communication and coordination support the Child Care Scholarships initiative?

Communication and coordination were primarily administrative. MaineAEYC worked with state partners, including the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) and the Maine Department of Education (DOE), regarding scholarship administration and alignment with PDG-R requirements. MaineAEYC also coordinated with participating institutions of higher education to verify enrollment and process tuition payments and communicated directly with scholarship recipients about application requirements, enrollment verification, credit load expectations, and required documentation.

Coordination with broader workforce and professional development partners, including the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN), occurred at a systems level (e.g., alignment of funding streams and degree pathway supports within the broader TEACH scholarship infrastructure) and included use of the Maine Early Childhood Workforce Registry as a recruitment tool under an established data sharing agreement. However, there was no evidence of jointly planned or co-delivered activities specific to the PDG-R–funded scholarship recipients. Outreach and recruitment activities were primarily informational and are described in the Participation and Access section.

How did the Child Care Scholarships initiative contribute to system building?

The initiative addressed one defined component of Maine's early childhood workforce system: access to advanced degree pathways through scholarship design. It did not establish new governance structures, credential policies, or professional development systems; rather, it operated within MaineAEYC's existing scholarship infrastructure, where PDG-R functioned as a discrete funding stream within the TEACH framework.

Within that defined scope, PDG-R funding allowed administrators to test specific design variations—including full tuition coverage and removal of employer sponsorship and post-award employment commitments—within the existing framework. Interviewees described these features as addressing a targeted gap for educators unable to participate in traditional scholarship models.

The initiative also informed ongoing state-level discussions about scholarship structure and long-term sustainability, including whether full tuition coverage could be sustained within existing funding streams and how adjustments to coverage levels might affect the number of educators supported.

In what ways did the design of the Child Care Scholarship initiative support participation and access?

The scholarship model included several design features relevant to access and participation, including financial support, eligibility criteria, outreach activities, and instructional options available through participating institutions of higher education.

According to interview data, a central factor enabling participation was full tuition coverage, supplemented by a $250-per-semester access stipend to offset course-related expenses such as books and learning materials. Interviewees described full tuition coverage as a key factor influencing applications, particularly for educators who had previously viewed college as financially unattainable. Unlike other TEACH scholarship models that require a financial contribution from a sponsoring employer, PDG-R–supported scholarships did not require employer sponsorship or contribution, reducing reliance on program-level approval or cost-sharing as conditions of access.

MaineAEYC provided administrative support to scholarship recipients, including guidance on application requirements, enrollment verification, credit load expectations, and required documentation. Staff also offered individualized assistance to help recipients navigate degree requirements while maintaining employment in early care and education settings. These supports were part of MaineAEYC's standard scholarship administration process and were not unique to the PDG-R cohort.

Outreach and recruitment activities were designed to share information about scholarship opportunities with eligible educators. MaineAEYC used an existing data-sharing agreement with the Maine Early Childhood Registry to identify and contact educators based on education level, employment setting, and geographic location. MaineAEYC also conducted outreach through community colleges to reach additional prospective applicants. In addition, the PDG-R Workforce Navigator shared information about scholarship opportunities with educators in rural areas and among those outside established professional networks. These activities were informational and operated independently rather than as part of a coordinated recruitment strategy.

Interview data also indicate that some participating institutions of higher education, including the University of Maine at Farmington, offered online or flexible course options that supported participation among some working educators enrolled in degree programs.

Eligibility criteria targeted educators earning less than $25 per hour and working at least part-time, with PDG-R funding extending eligibility to public Pre-K teachers. Although participation by family child care providers was an intended focus, only one family child care provider accessed a scholarship during the evaluation period.

Administrative records indicate that the 18 scholarship recipients represented multiple counties across Maine, including Androscoggin, Cumberland, Penobscot, Knox, York, Oxford, Franklin, Somerset, Kennebec, and Sagadahoc, reflecting geographic distribution across the state.

The number of scholarships awarded was constrained by available PDG-R funding. At the time of the interview, MaineAEYC reported a waitlist of approximately 10 eligible applicants, with an additional 20 prospective applicants who had submitted incomplete applications or had not yet applied to a degree program. Interviewees identified several additional barriers to participation, including the time

demands of balancing coursework with employment, geographic distance from institutions of higher education, and varying readiness to return to school. While some virtual or flexible course options were available, these barriers—time, distance, and readiness—were largely outside the scope of the scholarship model's direct supports.

Lessons Learned

- **Removing employer sponsorship and employer contribution expands** access but does not eliminate all participation barriers. Time, workload, geographic distance, and readiness to return to school continue to shape who participates.
- **Targeted outreach alone was not sufficient to engage family child care providers** in degree pathways. According to interviewees, barriers for family child care providers extended beyond tuition cost and included workload capacity, life stage, and the demands of operating as a sole provider. Identifying what additional supports might address these barriers was beyond the scope of this evaluation.
- **Flexible or online course options** supported participation for some educators.

Summary

During the PDG-R period, the Child Care Scholarships initiative supported 18 early childhood educators pursuing bachelor's- and master's-level degrees through MaineAEYC's established scholarship infrastructure. Recipients were already enrolled in degree programs when PDG-R funding began, and the scholarship provided financial support that enabled them to continue their progress.

By removing employer sponsorship requirements and covering full tuition, the initiative tested a variation of the scholarship design within Maine's existing TEACH framework. Participation patterns indicate that while this structure expanded access for some educators, tuition support alone was insufficient to engage family child care providers, whose barriers extended beyond financial cost.

Child Care Stabilization & Quality Grants

Extending Stabilization Support for Maine's Licensed Child Care Programs

Performance period 09/2024–12/2024; 12/2025

Child care stabilization funding serves as a bridge within early childhood systems during periods of financial disruption. Nationally, the expiration of federal pandemic recovery funds created acute pressure on providers already operating within thin margins, threatening the staffing, operations, and program continuity on which families depend. Stabilization strategies are designed to address these immediate financial pressures across mixed-delivery settings[5], on the premise that programs cannot pursue quality improvement if they cannot first sustain basic operations.

In 2024, federal pandemic recovery stabilization funds that had sustained Maine's licensed child care programs expired. Through the Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R), the state committed to bridging this gap by extending financial support to programs facing the abrupt loss of federal recovery funding.

The initiative was originally designed as "Align Quality Bumps for Child Care Assistance," intended to provide quality-linked payments to programs serving families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). It was redesigned and expanded as the **Child Care Stabilization & Quality Grants** initiative, extending eligibility to all licensed child care providers regardless of TANF status. By tying payments to Star level under Rising Stars for ME, Maine's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), the initiative created the first direct financial connection between stabilization funding and program quality. The initiative's two primary goals were to stabilize program operations as federal pandemic recovery funding ended and to maintain accessible, affordable child care for families during the funding transition, while recognizing that higher quality programs incur higher costs.

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 **Child Care Stabilization & Quality Grants** initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including how providers used funds, evidence of stabilization effects, and the relationship between program stability and quality.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including initiative design, administration, and post-distribution data collection.
- **System building**, including contributions to program continuity, provider retention, and capacity preservation across the mixed-delivery system.
- **Supports and access**, including eligibility adaptation, reach across provider types and geographies, participation barriers, and sustainability.

Data sources for this report include provider narrative responses collected through the post-distribution survey (*N* = 311), the implementation evaluation interview with initiative leads, implementation documentation, OCFS payment records, and administrative data on provider characteristics.

[5]Maine defines mixed-delivery ECE as the coordinated effort to support early childhood services and programming across a range of settings to help meet the varied needs of children and families.

The Child Care Stabilization & Quality Grants initiative was designed and administered by the Maine Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS). The initiative distributed payments in two rounds

2024 Program Grant. The first round supported licensed child care programs—including center-based programs (including Head Start and Early Head Start) and family child care homes—across four expenditure periods from August through November 2024, with payments issued the following month (September–December). Participation grew 19% over the four months, from 911 programs in August to 1,080 in November. Payments included a stability grant of $25 per licensed capacity and a tiered quality bump based on the program's Star level and capacity tier (Table 1). Over the four months, the initiative distributed approximately $6.4 million in grants, with $5 million in state funds for the base funding of the stabilization grant and $1.4 million in PDG funds for the quality bumps.

CHILD CARE STABILIZATION & QUALITY GRANTS FEATURES

Two funding cycles: 2024 (four monthly payments, September–December) and 2025 (one monthly payment, December)

2024: Stability grant at $25/licensed capacity plus tiered quality bumps by Star level and licensed capacity; **1,080 programs** by November

2025: $25/slot based on licensed capacity; **931 programs**

$2.3 million in PDG funds, $5 million in state funds ($7.3 million total)

Reached approximately **80% of Maine's licensed child care providers** (1,080 of ~1,368 eligible programs) across all 16 counties

Participating programs represent approximately **40,500 licensed capacity** statewide

Streamlined application process; broad allowable uses

Table 1. 2024 Quality Bump Monthly Payment Structure by Star Level and Licensed Capacity

Rising Stars for ME Star Level	3–12	13–20	21–49	50+
Star 2	$50	$75	$100	$125
Star 3	$100	$150	$200	$250
Star 4	$175	$250	$325	$400
Star 5	$275	$375	$475	$575

Note: Quality bumps were part of the stability grant. Both components were issued together as one grant from September–December 2024. Source: OCFS payment records.

2025 Program Grant. A subsequent one-month quality grant distributed payments of $25 per licensed capacity, to 931 programs, totaling approximately $899,800.

Programs applied through the Early Childhood Salary Supplement registration portal; once approved, subsequent payments were processed automatically. Funds could be used for staff recruitment and retention; financial assistance to families, including clearing tuition debt and providing scholarships for

parent fees; operating support to avoid raising tuition rates; minor renovations and repairs; quality improvements; learning environment enhancements and materials; and workforce development. The one-time grant in 2025 was limited to quality improvements.

What Was the impact of the Child Care Stabilization & Quality Grants?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives requires assessing whether investments advanced their intended purposes.

The Child Care Stabilization & Quality Grants were designed to:

- **Stabilize program operations** as federal pandemic recovery funding ended.
- **Maintain accessible, affordable child care** for families during the funding transition.

Combined, the initiative distributed more than $7 million to programs across all 16 Maine counties, including both center-based programs and family child care homes. Over the 2024 round, individual program payments ranged from approximately $800 for a small family child care home (capacity of 6, Star 2) to more than $10,000 for larger center-based programs at higher Star levels. The median four-month payment was approximately $1,900. Family child care homes received, on average, $1,400 over the four months; center-based programs averaged $6,300. Programs that participated in the 2025 one-month round received $25 per licensed capacity.

Documented impact is reflected in provider-reported uses of funds, self-described effects on program operations and family affordability, and participation data across program types and geographies (Table 2). Findings are organized around these intended outcomes.

Stabilizing Program Operations

A post-distribution survey was administered to all recipients at the close of the 2024 funding round. Of the 311 program owners and administrators who responded, 285 provided substantive narrative descriptions of how they used the funds and what impact they observed. Respondents were evenly split between center-based and family child care programs. They represented all four Star levels, though Star 2 programs comprised the majority, consistent with their share of the recipient population. Table 2 summarizes the most frequently described uses of funds across these narratives.

Table 2. Most Frequently Described Uses of Funds in Provider Narratives

Theme	Count	Percent of Total (*n* = 285)
Supporting staff (wages, recruitment, retention)	160	56%
Family support and tuition affordability	122	43%
Rent, facilities, and utilities	79	28%
Classroom materials and supplies	69	24%
Professional development	23	8%
Staying open/avoiding closure	19	7%

Note: Programs could describe multiple uses; percentages do not sum to 100%.

More than half of respondents described using funds to support their workforce—increasing wages, offering bonuses, or recruiting and retaining staff. Providers consistently linked these investments to a broader staffing crisis in which low compensation drives turnover and limits their ability to maintain licensed capacity. As one Star 3 center director explained,

> **"Payroll expenses have gone up so high that they account for around 75–80 cents of every dollar we take in for childcare services. The stability grant money has helped considerably."**

Another center director noted the supplement's direct effect on a staff member:

> **"The supplement has helped one of my staff members go from working 3 jobs to 2."**

The second most common theme—family support and tuition affordability—reflected providers' efforts to absorb rising costs rather than pass them to families. A Star 2 family child care provider wrote,

> **"I am very thankful for these funds, for all of the above, but most importantly, for the fact that I did not have to raise my rates for parents who are also working hard, some struggling to take care of their families."**

A second family child care provider described holding a spot for a family in crisis:

> **"We have a family who, due to health conditions, needed to take a few weeks off because they were unable to work and pay for daycare. They were afraid to lose their spot here because they could not pay. Instead of filling their spot, I used some funds to cover their tuition cost and hold their spot until they were back on their feet."**

Rent, facilities, and utilities appeared in more than a quarter of narratives, particularly among family child care providers managing household-level operating costs alongside program expenses. Classroom materials and supplies—toys, books, curriculum resources, and art supplies—were described in nearly a quarter of responses, often by providers who noted they had been deferring these purchases due to budget constraints.

Notably, 19 programs described the funding as essential to remain open. A Star 2 family child care provider wrote,

> **"These funds made the difference for me to be able to stay open. Without the help with rising costs, I would not have been able to absorb the costs. I run a small in-home and with inflation being so high, I was beginning to lose money. This got me over the cliff."**

One respondent reported that the funds were not enough:

> **"Without the funds we would have not stayed open as long as we did. We closed on January 31, and our property is up for sale."**

Among the narratives, a recurring theme was the tension between immediate relief and ongoing financial pressure. Roughly one in eight respondents described the funding as helpful while also noting that rising costs, payroll demands, and inflationary pressures continued to outpace available revenue.

Maintaining Accessible, Affordable Child Care for Families

Across all program types and Star levels, providers described a consistent pattern in which stabilization funding enabled them to hold tuition rates or provide direct financial relief to families. Among the 285 narrative respondents, 43% described family-facing uses of funds, including tuition freezes, fee reductions, cleared tuition debt, and scholarships for parent fees. These responses appeared across both center-based programs (42%) and family child care homes (54%), though family child care providers described family-facing uses at a somewhat higher rate.

Providers framed tuition stabilization not as a secondary benefit but as a core function of the funding. Several explicitly stated that without the funding, rate increases would have been unavoidable. One Star 5 center director wrote,

> **"Families certainly appreciated not having a 42% jump in tuition rates last July. I was able to negotiate a 15% increase in hopes that more stability funding would be available, which thankfully there was in September–December."**

A Star 2 family child care provider described a similar dynamic:

> **"These funds helped me to not have to raise my rates significantly and impact my families while also getting some much needed supplies."**

Others described using funds to absorb costs for families facing hardship. A Star 4 family child care provider wrote,

> **"Most of our families went through hardships this year, including most families separating. Being able to offer scholarships and discounts to families during these times made the year a little less stressful for families, I hope!"**

One Star 2 center described covering tuition directly to prevent a child from losing care:

> **"We have one family that would have had to withdraw their son if we hadn't covered the cost of his tuition. He didn't get into the public pre-k, so he would have been home if we had not offered him this tuition assistance."**

Taken together, these narratives suggest the two intended outcomes of the initiative—stabilizing program operations and maintaining affordable care for families—were experienced by providers not as separate goals but as interdependent: programs that could cover operating costs were programs that could hold rates for families.

How did the Child Care Stabilization & Quality Grants initiative strengthen communication and cross-sector coordination?

The Child Care Stabilization & Quality Grants initiative was administered internally by OCFS and did not require the multi-agency coordination structures that characterize some other PDG-R initiatives. The initiative's primary contribution to cross-sector alignment was structural: by tiering payments to Rising Stars For ME Star level, the design linked program stability and program quality within a single funding mechanism. Initiative Leads noted that the PDG-R Program Navigator could serve a coordinating function in future iterations, providing targeted outreach and application assistance to family child care providers who may benefit from stabilization funding but lack the capacity to navigate the process independently (Implementation Evaluation Interview, 2025).

How has the Child Care Stabilization & Quality Grants initiative contributed to building a strong statewide early childhood service system?

The Child Care Stabilization & Quality Grants operated alongside two other PDG-R–funded initiatives that collectively addressed different layers of Maine's early childhood infrastructure. The Quality Improvement Awards (QIA) provided funding and technical assistance to support programs advancing their Star level under Rising Stars for ME. The Early Childhood Education Salary Supplement System addressed workforce retention through direct compensation support to individual staff. The Stabilization Grants addressed a more foundational layer: whether programs could sustain basic operations long enough to engage with these quality improvement and workforce development supports.

By tying payments to Star level under Rising Stars for ME, the Stabilization Grants created an early, tangible connection between QRIS participation and financial support, positioning programs to engage with the more structured QIA process , which required programs to first establish a Star rating and complete a Quality Improvement Plan before receiving funds (Implementation Evaluation Interview, 2025).

The licensed child care programs stabilized through this initiative represent one layer of Maine's early childhood supply. Public pre-K, funded separately through the school funding formula, served an additional 6,116 four-year-olds statewide in 2024–2025, with the highest enrollment rates in the counties where licensed child care capacity is thinnest (Maine Children's Alliance/Maine DOE, 2024). Together, these systems—licensed child care, public pre-K, and Head Start—form the mixed-delivery infrastructure that the PDG-R is designed to strengthen. The stabilization initiative's contribution was preserving the licensed child care portion of that infrastructure during a period when it was most at risk.

In what ways did the Child Care Stabilization & Quality Grants initiative support accessibility and participation for early childhood education programs?

The initiative extended eligibility to all licensed child care programs in Maine, regardless of Rising Stars For ME Star level, program type, or subsidy participation status. The application process was streamlined through the existing Early Childhood Education Workforce Salary Supplement registration portal, requiring no additional documentation of planned use. Participation grew over the 2024 funding cycle, from 911 programs in August to 1,080 by November, as additional programs applied and were automatically enrolled in subsequent payments. In 2025, 931 programs received payments through the one-month quality grant.

Figure 1: Participating Licensed Child Care Programs by County (November 2024)

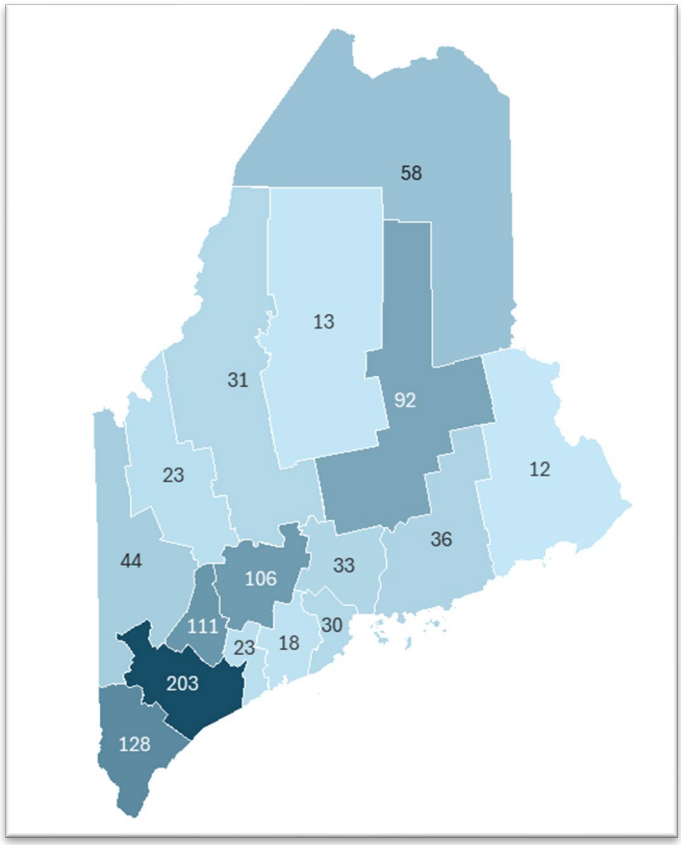


Table 3 summarizes participation during the final month of the 2024 stability grant by program type and Star level.

Table 3. Program Participation by Type and Star Level (November 2024)

Rising Stars For ME Star Level	Center-Based	Family Child Care	Total
Star 2	409	384	793
Star 3	54	22	76
Star 4	48	29	77
Star 5	124	9	133
Total	**635**	**445**	**1,080**

Source: OCFS administrative records.

Center-based programs accounted for 59% of recipients with an average licensed capacity of 56; family child care homes accounted for 41%, nearly all within the smallest capacity tier (3–12 seats). The initiative

reached programs at every Star level, though Star 2 programs comprised most recipients (73%), consistent with their share of the eligible population.

By November 2024, approximately 80% of Maine's licensed child care providers (1,080 of approximately 1,368 eligible programs) had participated in at least one funding round of the Child Care Stabilization & Quality Grants initiative. Participating programs represented approximately 40,500 in licensed capacity statewide and spanned all 16 counties. Figure 1 displays the geographic distribution of participating licensed child care programs.

Participation was highest in Maine's more populous counties and extended across rural regions where licensed supply is comparatively limited. In several rural counties, family child care homes comprised the majority of participating programs—including Washington (67%), Aroostook (57%), Franklin (52%), and Androscoggin (52%)—underscoring the initiative's reach across both provider types and geographic contexts.

Lessons Learned

- **Stability and quality are interdependent**. The most frequently described reported uses of funds—workforce retention, classroom materials, family tuition relief—are foundational to program quality. Programs that could cover core costs reported greater ability to maintain consistent programming and staffing.
- **Center-based programs and family child care providers have distinct needs**. Family child care providers more frequently described family-facing and operational funding uses such as tuition relief, rent, and materials. Center-based programs more frequently describe workforce investments, including wages, retention, and hiring.
- **Streamlined design supported broad participation.** The use of the existing salary supplement portal with automatic renewal reached 1,080 of approximately 1,368 eligible programs without requiring new administrative infrastructure. The streamlined application process supported broad participation across provider types.
- **The two-component payment structure reached programs of all sizes, with trade-offs**. The $25-per licensed capacity base funding ensured broad reach across program types and capacity tiers, while tiered quality bumps provided higher payments to programs at higher Star levels. However, this structure meant that the smallest programs—often operating on narrow margins—received the most modest payments. Nearly all family child care homes fall within the smallest capacity tier and therefore received lower payment amounts on average.
- **Time-limited funding addresses immediate need but not structural instability**. Among the 285 narrative respondents, roughly one in eight described the funding as helpful while also noting that rising costs, payroll demands, and inflationary pressures continued to outpace available revenue. At least one program reported closing despite receiving funds.

Summary

The Child Care Stabilization & Quality Grants initiative distributed more than $7 million in stability and quality grants to more than 1,000 licensed child care programs across all 16 Maine counties over two funding rounds (2024 and 2025). The initiative reached center-based programs and family child care homes at every Star level, including rural communities where family child care is often the sole option. Provider narratives indicate that the funding preserved program capacity during a period of acute financial disruption: more than half of respondents directed funds to workforce retention, 43% held tuition rates or provided direct relief to families, and 19 programs described the funding as essential to remaining open. The initiative also served a bridging function within the PDG-R framework, providing an early, tangible connection between Rising Stars for ME participation and financial support before the more structured Quality Improvement Awards initiative was fully operational.

Community-Based Organization (CBO) Awardees

Maine's Community-Based Health Worker Initiative for Families with Young Children

Performance period 4/2024–12/2025

Community-based, culturally and linguistically responsive approaches are a critical component of early childhood system building, particularly for families who face barriers to accessing traditional service systems. For families who have recently resettled in Maine, trusted community-based organizations play a central role in supporting navigation, early identification of needs, and connections across early childhood, health, and social service systems. When delivered by trusted messengers and grounded in cultural and language compatibility, these approaches can strengthen family engagement, promote equitable access to services, and support more coordinated and responsive systems for young children and their families.

The Community-Based Organization (CBO) Awardees initiative was originally designed to support families with young children who have newly resettled in Maine through culturally and linguistically responsive, community-based service delivery. Building on health equity investments initiated during the COVID period, the initiative focused on the use of community health workers (CHWs) embedded within trusted community-based organizations to support navigation, early identification of needs, and connections to early childhood, health, and social service systems. While participating organizations varied in their specific focus and service models, all awardees used grant funds to recruit CHWs who were culturally and linguistically compatible with the populations they served. The initiative prioritized implementation in Lewiston, Portland, and York County, areas with the highest concentrations of newly resettled families, while recognizing that unmet needs persist elsewhere in the state. It is important to note that the grantees broadened their reach in the last year of the PDG and CHWs were available to support all families with young children in their communities.

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,[1] the report examines the Community-Based Organization (CBO) Awardees initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including intended outcomes related to family access, early identification, trust-building, and connections to early childhood and health services.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including partnerships among community-based organizations, state agencies, and service providers.
- **System building**, including early contributions related to navigation, referral pathways, and coordination across early childhood, health, and social service systems t.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitated participation, training, and supports for community health workers, and barriers affecting families and providers.

[1]Data sources for this report include an interview with state leads Ana Hicks and Chan Himm, interviews with staff from three of the four CBO awardees, and monthly initiative reports.

Across the four CBO awardees, organizations brought distinct organizational focuses and served different community contexts, but all used grant resources to support community health workers recruited to ensure cultural and language compatibility with the populations served. Individuals selected for CHW roles were typically members of the communities they served and brought multilingual capacity to support communication and trust-building with families. Across sites, CHWs were positioned to support families with navigation and connections to services for young children, while remaining responsive to broader family needs that emerged through ongoing engagement.

CBO AWARDEES FEATURES

Participating organizations (4): York County Community Action; Greater Portland Health; New Mainers Public Health Initiative (Lewiston); Maine Community Integration (Lewiston).

Community health workers: 9 community health workers hired across participating organizations.

Languages spoken by community health workers: English, Lingala, Portuguese, French, Spanish, Dari, Pashto, Somali, Kinyarwanda, and Swahili

The sections that follow examine how the CBO Awardees initiative was implemented across sites and its early contributions to family access, cross-sector coordination, and system-building efforts.

What was the impact of the awards?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives is essential to assessing whether investments are achieving intended outcomes and meaningful changes for children, families, and providers. This section examines the impact of the CBO Awardees initiative, focusing on evidence of change in family access, trust-building, and early identification of needs.

The **intended outcomes** of the awards included:

- **Strengthened early childhood prevention** through community-based health workers who supported families in navigating health, early childhood, and social service systems.
- **Increased trust and access** to community services among newly resettled families through culturally and linguistically responsive engagement
- **Improved family knowledge** through education, resources, and tools to support children's development and strengthen parent–child relationships.
- **Earlier identification of developmental and health needs** and improved follow-through with appropriate health and educational supports

Within these shared goals, individual awardees identified more specific outcomes aligned with the needs of the populations they served. For example, Greater Portland Health prioritized increasing access to children's health and developmental screenings, while the New Mainers Public Health

Initiative (NMPHI) focused on educating new and first-time mothers about early childhood health and development.

Interviews with state initiative leads and representatives from participating organizations indicate that the awards contributed to progress toward these intended outcomes, particularly through direct service delivery and relationship-based engagement with families. Impacts were most evident at the family and community level, while broader institutional or system-level changes were more limited during the performance period.

Supporting access to health, developmental, and early childhood services. Community health workers supported families in addressing young children's health and developmental needs, including facilitating developmental and health screenings, referrals to early intervention programs, placement in child care and Head Start, immunizations, and access to basic needs such as nutrition and equipment (e.g., care seats). These supports helped reduce barriers related to language, system complexity, and trust, enabling families to engage more consistently with services.

Responding to family needs through a whole-family approach. As noted by state leads Ana Hicks and Chan Himm, planned activities were frequently overtaken by "the crisis of the moment," as families faced urgent challenges related to mental health, violence prevention, job loss, and housing displacement. These realities shaped how services were delivered and required flexibility in implementation.

> **State initiative lead Chan Himm emphasized that a distinguishing feature of the awards was sustained attention to the relationship between parent and child, noting that trust was built when families saw consistent care and concern for their children's well-being.**

The site examples that follow illustrate how awardees advanced intended outcomes across different community contexts, drawing on interviews with participating organizations.

Greater Portland Health has 16 locations serving approximately 5,000 young children. Prior to the grant, the organization had difficulty ensuring that developmental screenings were happening routinely for all populations. Through three grant-funded community health workers, they focused on social drivers of health screening. Community health workers addressed families' concerns (often related to required immunizations or autism diagnoses) and connected them to services immediately after screenings.

According to the organization's outreach manager, visits to health centers by families among harder-to-reach populations increased significantly as trust developed, and medical appointment "no shows" decreased dramatically. Further, over the grant period, medical personnel increasingly relied on community health workers. While young children were the grant's focus, the program's "whole family" perspective meant that multiple family members' needs could be addressed simultaneously: Support for the full family builds trust.

One major outcome was ensuring that children who screened positive for intervention received services from Child Development Services by managing paperwork and connections. Approximately 80 children were referred to CDS during the performance period.

New Mainers Public Health Initiative focused on providing classes in health and early childhood development to mothers, offering resources such as formula, making referrals to Head Start, and responding to concerns and questions about normal development, vaccines, special needs, the role of CDS, and school entry.

Repeated participation in parenting classes, incremental increases in the number of participants, and return visits to the agency for guidance are markers of the trust that developed.

> **"Without us, parents don't have anyone to cheer for them."**
> **(Community health worker, New Mainers Public Health Initiative)**

York County Community Action Corporation (YCCAC) services started with the goal of ensuring that children receive developmental assessments, but quickly found that families needed health care, housing, and other services before they were ready to engage. Over time, the community health worker served 120 families (approximately 400 children) who had relocated to Sanford; many of the families are headed by single mothers. He engaged families' trust by first addressing their priorities, often housing, while persisting in focusing their attention on their children's needs. He found ways to navigate various medical and social service systems and streamline access, including working with hospitals and medical providers to enable families to complete health screening and intake forms online on his behalf in advance of medical visits.

YCCAC's community health worker undertook a special project to understand the effects of trauma that families had experienced prior to relocating to Maine, focusing on the effects of trauma on children. He learned that most families reaching Maine from Angola or the Congo had been in 9-10 countries before arriving. By the time the family arrives in Maine, they are depleted of resources, and the children have lost 2-3 years of study because formal learning has been episodic. He packaged the information into a presentation and shared it with other providers to help them better understand and serve families.

Across sites, the **whole-family approach** involved addressing immediate family needs—typically through referrals—while maintaining a focus on young children's health and development. Addressing urgent family priorities was described as necessary to build trust and create conditions for families to engage in services for their children.

How did CBO Awardees build collaborations?

The PDG grant plays a pivotal role in supporting initiatives that coordinate services across early childhood, health, and family support systems. For families who have recently resettled in Maine, access to timely, culturally responsive services often depends on effective coordination among community-based organizations and public agencies. Cross-sector collaboration enables community health workers to connect families to appropriate supports, reduce barriers to access, and respond flexibly to changing needs, contributing to a more integrated and responsive service landscape for young children and their families.

Brokered connections across multiple service systems. The initiative depended heavily on partnerships to meet the wide range of needs families presented. Community health workers brokered

services across multiple systems—health, early childhood, housing, food and nutrition, transportation, and legal supports—responding flexibly as family priorities shifted over time.

Common CBO Partners and Referral Networks

- Help Me Grow (car seats and referral support)
- Office of Child and Family Services
- Maine Centers for Disease Control (training)
- Maine Community Health Worker Initiative (training and peer support network)
- Maine Developmental Disabilities Council
- Catholic Charities (diapers and infant supplies)
- Maine Needs (basic baby equipment)
- Head Start programs
- Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)
- Biddeford Welcome Center
- Maine Families (home visiting)
- CradleME (pregnant parents and newborns)
- Local hospitals and medical providers

Peer collaboration among CBO awardees. Community health workers were quick to take advantage of resources throughout the state. Perhaps the most important collaborations were among the four CBOs and their community health workers, who met monthly for training and to exchange experiences.

Spreading culturally responsive practices through partnerships. Lessons related to overcoming cultural barriers extended beyond direct service delivery, reaching partner organizations and CBOs themselves. According to initiative leads, some partnering organizations learned lessons about serving newly resettled populations in culturally responsive ways. While the health care system was described as "piecemeal" in understanding of cultural differences related to health, progress was made in increasing sensitivity to cultural barriers. Community health workers at Greater Portland Health and YCCAC made headway within their own agencies to address cultural barriers related to health, transportation, and housing

How has the CBO Awardees initiative contributed to system capacity and sustainability for families who have been newly resettled in Maine?

Early childhood system building emphasizes the importance of coordination, capacity, and continuity across programs and services that support children and families. For families newly resettled in Maine, effective systems depend not only on the availability of services but also on trusted intermediaries who can help them navigate complex, often fragmented service landscapes. Within this context, the CBO Awardees initiative contributed to system functioning by supporting community health workers

who strengthened service navigation, facilitated cross-sector connections, and enhanced organizational capacity to respond to families' needs.

The evaluation team examined whether and how the initiative contributed to system-level capacity, coordination, and sustainability, including the extent to which grant-supported activities strengthened organizational infrastructure, improved service navigation, and positioned communities to continue supporting newly resettled families beyond the grant period.

Sustainability is constrained by funding limitations. Findings related to sustainability and continuation indicate that system-level contributions were meaningful but constrained by funding limitations. Without new grant funds, the CBOs are unlikely to maintain these community health workers. Portland, Lewiston, and York County agencies expressed a commitment to specialized work with targeted populations but acknowledged they do not have the capacity to provide services comparable to those of community health workers.

> **"We have learned that the model of an 'in-between' liaison is very important. Families are more familiar now with our services, and more people are coming to us."**
> (York County Community Action Corporation staff member)

> **"Our goal is to continue doing some form of this work and try to keep up with demand. The work won't end, but the capacity to spend time will change."**
> (Greater Portland Health representative)

Enduring organizational capacity gains. At the organizational level, some gains in system capacity are likely to persist. For example, Greater Portland Health improved documentation practices and data reporting, enabling them to identify gaps in screening and trends in need. This level of documentation enabled them to prepare for the expiration of SNAP benefits; they quickly supported 125 families with pediatric food resources.

In what ways did the CBO Awardees initiative support access and effective participation for families and community health workers?

Supports and access in early childhood system building focus on the conditions that enable effective participation and service delivery for children and families. For community-based organizations serving families who have recently resettled in Maine, access is shaped not only by the availability of services but also by training, implementation flexibility, and resources that support community health workers in responding to families' needs.

The evaluation team examined whether and how the CBO Awardees initiative supported effective service delivery, including training and peer networks for community health workers, flexibility to adapt services to local contexts, and conditions that either facilitated or constrained access for families and providers.

Which aspects of the program facilitated success for the CBOs and community health workers?

Training and Professional supports. Grantees praised the training provided for community health workers and the monthly meetings of the four grantees. The community health workers received foundational and ongoing training, which was universally highly valued.

Training highlights included:

The 40-hour online CHW Core Competency Training program

- Early childhood training
- Touchpoints training was especially important for helping parents navigate challenges.
- Trauma-informed practices
- Deep dive into Help Me Grow and statewide resources
- ASQ (Ages and Stages Questionnaire)
- CDC's Learn the Signs. Act Early

Flexibility and peer support. Grantees found the combination of flexibility and support to be helpful in maximizing benefits for families. The grant was flexible, allowing CBOs to prioritize and adjust services to meet the needs of their local client populations. One grantee noted that the autonomy enabled them to get things done and boosted staff morale, as they were happy to meet the immediate needs of families. Regular networking and extensive training for community health workers provided the type of support needed to maintain a high level of service.

Major challenges faced by CBO Awardees and community health workers

Contextual and system-level challenges. The economic and political climate further strains families struggling to meet basic needs and contributes to the already low level of trust in institutions. The state leads described several reasons why providing services to newly resettled populations in Maine is challenging, including the dispersion of the population seeking housing and job opportunities, racial and religious discomfort with the newcomers in some communities, and a lack of trust in government services stemming from experiences in home countries. The messages and actions of the current Administration toward immigrants have heightened fears of institutions—even for those with legal status—which has made the goals of the CBOs more difficult to achieve. Under these circumstances, families may move overnight and be difficult to locate. Families who have taken 5 to 6 years to arrive in Maine and made many adjustments along the way are now retraumatized by the prospect of new disruptions.

Population needs are ever-changing and difficult to predict. Service needs that had not been anticipated at the outset include mental health and emotional supports, suicide prevention, coping with and preventing violence, and oral health. With the 2025 government shutdown, food insecurity became a major concern. One of the biggest challenges is not being able to find the resources families need; sometimes "the rules" simply don't work in individual cases, and "you're up against a wall" with no recourse.

Operational challenges for community health workers. Community health workers faced the following obstacles:

- Communicating in less familiar languages without losing meaning.
- Learning about all the resources available.
- Reluctance of some parents to acknowledge children's problems and/or hesitation about the value of early intervention, often hoping their child will outgrow the issue.
- Navigating the referral process to Child Development Services.
- Facing conflict while advocating for children's interests in school settings: We need to be advocates for what is best for children. Schools are often not ready to hear advocacy…they may not be expecting questions.

Lessons Learned

Across implementation, community-based organizations and community health workers identified several lessons related to building trust, navigating cultural differences, and supporting families as they engage with health, early childhood, and social service systems that may differ from those they have previously experienced.

- **Trust is built through relationships.** Much of the success rests on the individual community health worker's demeanor and ability to build trusting relationships. Relationship-building through informal communication in non-clinical encounters paves the way for more formal screening. Families are getting information from a variety of other sources, so trust-building is ongoing.
- **Cultural understanding must remain individualized.** While some generalizations about language and culture may be valuable, every home has its own culture.
- **Neutral, strengths-based information supports engagement.** Provide information in a neutral manner, grounded in research and best practice, but let families make their own decisions about what is best for their children. People who believe we are sent by someone are naturally skeptical, and they won't come back. This approach helps maintain trust and prevents families from disengaging, believing that providers are being too pushy.
- **Parents' roles should be reinforced**. Reinforce parents' roles as their child's primary caregiver, that they are the ones to make decisions about their children. Interfering with parents' decision-making can cause blame or confrontation.
- **Starting with families' priorities supports sustained engagement**. Start with the family's priorities, which are often basic needs (e.g., housing, food) but persist in getting to the children. Pay attention to the children during a discussion with parents. Make connections with the children and informally assess what may be going on, and try to talk to parents about the children.

Summary

Families who have newly resettled in Maine and whose languages and cultures differ from the mainstream benefited from trusted liaisons—community health workers—who helped them access existing services and navigate unfamiliar systems. CBO awardees embraced a whole-family approach to service delivery, building trust while supporting early screening and intervention for populations that might otherwise be reluctant to engage.

During the 20-month grant period, the awards provided direct benefits to families and children and generated valuable lessons about effective engagement and service delivery. However, while these lessons are likely to inform future work, participating organizations reported that they cannot continue services at the same level of intensity without additional grant funding.

Community-Based Organization (CBO) Tribal Partnerships

A Community-Based, Tribally Led Initiative Supporting Families with Young Children

Performance period 1/2025–10/2025

Professional Strengthening maternal, infant, and early childhood well-being in Maine's Wabanaki Tribal communities is a critical component of building an equitable early childhood system. Community-based, culturally grounded approaches play an essential role in supporting families with young children, particularly when services are delivered by trusted, tribally led organizations with deep community relationships.

The **Tribal Community-Based Organization (CBO)** initiative was a one-year Preschool Development Grant–Birth through Five (PDG-B5) investment designed to strengthen tribal relationship-based, culturally responsive supports for families with young children in all five Wabanaki Tribal communities. The initiative was implemented through a partnership between the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) and Wabanaki Public Health & Wellness (WPHW), a tribally led public health organization serving Wabanaki communities statewide. Rather than introducing a new service model, the initiative built on existing tribal home visiting, maternal-child health, and community outreach infrastructure identified by tribal leadership and WPHW as effective and trusted.

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,[1] the report examines the CBO Tribal initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including documented activities and early observations related to family engagement and service delivery.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including collaboration between state partners and a tribally led organization.
- **System building**, including early capacity-building contributions within tribal communities.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitated participation and implementation within a one-year funding period.

[1]Data sources for this report include administrative and implementation data from the CBO Tribal Spreadsheet and accompanying Notes on the CBO Tribal Spreadsheet; meeting summaries and interview transcripts from conversations with Ana Hicks and Chan Himm; and program documentation prepared by Wabanaki Public Health & Wellness, including the Annual Report of Partnership, Healing, and Hope.

Implementation of the Tribal CBO initiative emphasized culturally grounded, relationship-based engagement with families, drawing on WPHW's established presence and trusted relationships within Wabanaki communities.

WPHW managed day-to-day implementation, staffing, and service delivery across communities. OCFS provided state-level oversight and coordination, while Ana Hicks, representing the Governor's Children's Cabinet, participated in discussions related to cross-agency coordination and alignment. This structure supported implementation within a single PDG funding year while respecting tribally led approaches to service delivery.

Because the initiative was initiated and completed within a one-year funding period, data collection focused on documenting participation and implementation. Data sources included counts of families reached, materials distributed, and training completed, supplemented by interviews and qualitative review. As a result, the findings presented in this report reflect documented activities, reported experiences, and early observations related to implementation, rather than longer-term outcomes or system-level change.

CBO TRIBAL FEATURES

One-year PDG-B5 investment supporting maternal, infant, and early childhood well-being in all **five of Maine's Wabanaki Tribal communities.**

Partnership between OCFS and Wabanaki Public Health & Wellness (WPHW), a tribally led public health organization.

Built on existing home-visiting and maternal–child health infrastructure.

Implementation and service delivery led by WPHW, drawing on established community relationships

State-level oversight and coordination by OCFS, with participation from the Governor's Children's Cabinet

Data collection focused on participation and implementation.

What was the impact of the learning series?

The CBO Tribal initiative was designed with clearly articulated intended outcomes related to strengthening maternal, infant, and early childhood supports within Maine's Wabanaki Tribal communities. As with other PDG-supported initiatives, examining impact requires attention to the initiative's purpose, design, and time horizon. Interviews with state initiative lead Chan Himm and Governor's Children's Cabinet representative Ana Hicks emphasized that the primary goal of the work was to support Wabanaki Public Health & Wellness (WPHW) in building on its existing home-visiting and maternal–child health infrastructure, rather than introducing new programming.

The initiative's **intended outcomes** focused on early, community-level contributions and included the following.

- **Expanded access** to culturally grounded supports for families with young children across all five Wabanaki Tribal communities.
- **Provided practical resources and services** responsive to family-identified needs.
- **Strengthened relationship-based engagement** between WPHW home visitors and staff to strengthen maternal and child health programming in all five tribal communities.

- **Supported community capacity** through training and workforce development aligned with tribal priorities.

Hicks and Himm noted that the initiative was intentionally designed to respond to community input while operating within the constraints of a single PDG funding year. As a result, evidence of impact reflects documented activities and early observations related to access, engagement, and capacity-building, rather than longer-term outcomes for families or system-level change.

Alignment Between Intended Outcomes and Implementation

Administrative data and interviews with state and community partners indicate **alignment between the CBO Tribal initiative's intended outcomes and the activities carried out**. Data collected by WPHW focused on participation and service delivery and were supplemented by qualitative documentation and interviews.

Table 1 captures participation counts and services delivered through September 30, 2025, across all five Wabanaki Tribal communities.

Table 1. Participation and Service Delivery During the PDG Funding Period

Indicator	Count (through 9/30/2025)
Households supported	531
Literacy supplies distributed	172
Safety resource bundles distributed	118
Parenting education classes provided	9
Childbirth education courses provided	83
Indigenous doula training participants	24

Note. Counts reflect administrative records maintained by Wabanaki Public Health & Wellness and document service delivery during the PDG funding period.

Illustrative Example From Implementation

Program documentation and interviews describe how relationship-based engagement shaped service delivery in practice. Rather than distributing standardized kits, WPHW home-visiting staff worked with families to identify specific safety and early learning needs and assembled individualized resource bundles accordingly. One-to-one conversations focused on household safety, infant care, and early literacy guided the selection of materials, reflecting family priorities and context. This approach provides an example of how supports documented in Table 1 were delivered through individualized, relationship-based engagement.

Interviews with Hicks and Himm provide additional context for how progress toward these goals was understood. Both emphasized that, given the initiative's single-year timeframe, the primary indicator of progress was whether WPHW delivered tangible support and services responsive to family-identified needs. Partners described WPHW's ability to tailor supports to individual families, rather than relying on standardized service packages, as a defining feature of implementation. In addition,

Indigenous doula training was identified by state and tribal partners as a concrete example of workforce capacity developed through the initiative.

Taken together, the available data indicate that the initiative addressed the intended outcomes related to delivery of identified supports, reach across tribal communities, and early capacity-building within the limits of the PDG funding period. Rather than assessing longer-term outcomes for families or systems, the data present evidence of implementation and early progress, not sustained impact.

What communication and cross-sector coordination were associated with the CBO Tribal initiative?

For community-based initiatives implemented within a mixed-delivery early childhood system, communication and cross-sector coordination are central to effective implementation. Coordination supports shared understanding of roles, alignment of activities across agencies, and timely problem-solving as initiatives are carried out. Examining communication and coordination associated with the CBO Tribal initiative helps clarify how partners worked together during implementation and how information-sharing supported activities within a single PDG funding period.

Regular check-ins with WPHW, OCFS, and the Governor's Children's Cabinet, along with ad hoc discussions, supported problem-solving on contracting timelines, scope adjustments, and activity sequencing during implementation.

Two multi-agency convenings provide examples of communication and coordination in practice.

WPHW documentation describes two multi-agency convenings held during the initiative period to support relationship-building and shared understanding among state and tribal partners.

- **A Spring Gathering (June 2, 2025)**

  Representatives from Wabanaki Public Health & Wellness and multiple state agencies—including Maine CDC, OCFS, DOE, the Office of Population Health Equity, and the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF)—participated in a convening focused on strengthening connections, aligning priorities, and supporting communication related to services for tribal families and children.

- **October 2025 Convening**

  Additional state offices participated, including the Office for Family Independence, the Department of Administrative Finance, and the Department of Contract Management. Breakout discussions addressed leadership, procurement, maternal and child health, and tribal liaison roles, providing structured opportunities for information-sharing across agencies.

Source: Wabanaki Public Health & Wellness, Annual Report of Partnership, Healing, and Hope.

WPHW documents capture engagement from multiple state agencies during convenings associated with the initiative, including the Maine CDC, OCFS, DOE, and the Governor's Office of Policy

Innovation and the Future (GOPIF). As with other aspects of the initiative, these activities reflect early coordination processes rather than sustained or formalized cross-sector systems.

What system-building contributions were associated with the Tribal Community-Based Initiative?

State and community partners described system-building contributions primarily in terms of relationship development, early workforce capacity, and increased alignment between state agencies and a tribally led implementation partner. Based on interviews with Ana Hicks and Chan Himm, PDG funding created space for sustained engagement with Wabanaki Public Health & Wellness (WPHW), supporting shared understanding of roles, expectations, and priorities within Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system.

> **In this context, system-building contributions are best understood as early, relationship-based conditions that supported alignment, shared understanding, and visibility between state agencies and a tribally led implementation partner, rather than as formal or sustained system changes achieved within the PDG funding period.**

Rather than producing formal system changes, system-building contributions were reflected in how partners worked together during implementation.

Hicks and Himm described these contributions as intentionally relational and responsive, shaped by both the single-year funding context and the importance of trust in state–tribal partnerships. Communication focused on maintaining alignment, addressing challenges as they emerged, and supporting WPHW's role within the broader early childhood landscape, rather than on establishing new structures or prescriptive processes.

What support was made available through the Tribal Community-Based Initiative, and how was access approached?

Supports and access in community-based initiatives focus on the conditions that enable families to engage with services in ways that are responsive to their needs and contexts. For the CBO Tribal initiative, access was shaped by the use of existing home-visiting and community-based delivery structures, relationship-based engagement, and flexibility to tailor supports to families rather than relying on standardized enrollment or referral processes.

The initiative supported families with young children through a range of services and resources delivered by WPHW. Supports were made available across all five Wabanaki Tribal communities and were delivered through existing home-visiting and community-based structures.

Supports included literacy supplies, safety resource bundles, parenting education classes, childbirth education courses, and access to Indigenous doula training. Administrative records document the delivery of these supports across tribal communities (see Table 1).

Family Spirit Program Curriculum

As part of home-visiting and parenting education activities, Wabanaki Public Health & Wellness staff incorporated elements of the Family Spirit Program curriculum. Family Spirit is a **provider-facing, structured curriculum developed for and with indigenous communities** and used by home visitors to guide one-to-one conversations and activities with families during home visits and parenting education sessions.

Access to supports relied on individualized, relationship-based engagement. WPHW staff identified needs through direct interaction with families and tailored resources accordingly, consistent with existing practices and community context.

What professional learning activities were associated with the Tribal Community-Based Initiative?

Professional learning within community-based initiatives focuses on building workforce knowledge and skills in ways that align with service delivery models and community priorities. For the CBO Tribal initiative, professional learning **was embedded within implementation activities** and reflected **targeted, community-identified capacity-building needs** rather than a standalone or formalized professional learning system.

The primary professional learning activity was **Indigenous doula training**. This training, delivered in partnership with Zaagi'diwin, was completed by 24 community members and Wabanaki Public Health & Wellness (WPHW) staff. The training emphasized culturally grounded approaches to perinatal support and was aligned with priorities identified by WPHW and tribal partners, supporting workforce capacity within existing service delivery contexts.

In addition to doula training, knowledge sharing and skill building occurred through parenting education classes and childbirth education courses.

Professional learning was intentionally limited in scope and tailored to a single-year funding context. Based on interviews with Hicks and Himm, professional development activities are best understood as targeted capacity-building efforts rather than as part of a broader, sustained professional learning framework.

Lessons Learned

- **Building on existing infrastructure accelerated implementation within a short funding window.** Because the initiative was delivered through WPHW's established home-visiting and community-based structures rather than creating new programming, services reached all five Tribal communities within a single year.
- **Individualized, relationship-based service delivery shaped how supports reached families.** Staff identified needs through direct interaction and assembled resources accordingly, rather than distributing standardized kits.

- **Workforce capacity-building can be embedded within service delivery.** The Indigenous doula training prepared 24 community members while simultaneously strengthening the service infrastructure available to families—a dual function that maximized the impact within a limited funding period.
- **A one-year funding period supported tangible service delivery but limited the development of sustained system-level change.** Evidence reflects documented activities and early progress. Longer timeframes are needed to assess whether relationship-based alignment between state agencies and a tribally led partner translates into durable coordination structures.

Summary

The Tribal CBO initiative supported maternal, infant, and early childhood well-being across all five Wabanaki Tribal communities through a one-year PDG-B5 partnership between OCFS and Wabanaki Public Health & Wellness (WPHW). During the funding period, WPHW reached 531 households, distributed literacy supplies and safety resource bundles, delivered parenting and childbirth education, and supported 24 community members through doula training. Communication and coordination between WPHW, OCFS, and state agency partners supported implementation through regular check-ins and two multi-agency convenings.

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.[6]**

[6]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.

Early Childhood Information Data System

Implement Early Childhood Information Data System (ECIDS)

Performance period 4/2024–12/2025

Data play a central role in how states understand and support young children and their families. State agencies rely on data to describe populations of young children, plan for resource allocation, and monitor access to early care, education, and early intervention services. However, these data are typically housed within separate programs and agencies, limiting their usefulness for addressing cross-cutting policy questions. An integrated data system enables information from otherwise independent systems to be used together, preserving the integrity of existing data while supporting more comprehensive, system-level analyses that individual data sets cannot support on their own.

The **Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS)** initiative is designed to support the analysis of data drawn from multiple agencies serving young children and their families. With funding from the Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R), the state advanced preliminary work begun under earlier grant rounds by establishing a formal, replicable process to enable data sharing and integration across agencies. As part of this work, the initiative supported a targeted use study to test and refine this process, generating practical learning about governance, data sharing, and cross-agency collaboration needed to support future integrated analyses.

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,[1] the report examines the ECIDS initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including intended system-level outcomes related to feasibility, governance, data readiness, and the establishment of a replicable process for cross-agency data integration.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including collaboration among state agencies, data stewards, legal offices, and centralized analytic partners involved in integrated data work.
- **System building**, including contributions to statewide capacity for using integrated data to address cross-agency policy questions related to young children and their families.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that supported agency participation, adaptations made to support engagement, and barriers identified.

[1]Data sources for this report include interviews with the initiative leads, review of initiative-generated documents shared by the initiative leads, monthly initiative reports, and review of an external process evaluation.

The ECIDS initiative focused on establishing the organizational and technical foundations needed to support cross-agency data integration. The work was undertaken in support of the Children's Cabinet and was managed through the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF), led by the state lead, Ana Hicks, with day-to-day coordination provided by an ECIDS project coordinator hired for

this role. Data integration and analytic work were conducted within the Office of Information Technology (OIT).

The initiative initially planned to conduct two use studies and ultimately implemented a single, targeted use study. As implemented, the selected use study—*Understanding Access to Early Care and Education in Maine: Settings and Eligibility*—examined the types of assistance young children, particularly children with disabilities and children in low-income families, receive to access care and education and the settings in which those servic es are delivered across multiple programs. The use study was designed to test the end-to-end process for requesting, sharing, integrating, and analyzing data across agencies.

In addition to conducting the use study, ECIDS carried out foundational infrastructure work to support secure data sharing. This included identifying agency data stewards, documenting available data sources and parameters, and establishing Memoranda of Understanding and Data Use Agreements to enable analysis. An external process evaluation was also funded as part of this work.[7]

EARLY CHILDHOOD INFORMATION DATA SYSTEM FEATURES

Hired and onboarded key staff to oversee ECIDS development.

Identified **critical sources of data** related to young children and their families across state agencies.

Planned and completed a use study to **test processes and systems** for integrating data across agencies to address a critical policy question.

Established necessary **Memoranda of Understanding and Data Use Agreements** to allow the Office of Information Technology (OIT) access to data to integrate and analyze.

Conducted **a process evaluation** to learn from the initial use study and inform future development of the ECIDS.

What was the impact of the ECIDS?

This section summarizes outcomes associated with the ECIDS initiative during the PDG-R performance period. Consistent with PDG expectations for system-building initiatives, the assessment focuses on foundational and process-level outcomes rather than downstream service or child-level impacts.

The ECIDS initiative was designed to achieve the following **intended outcomes** during the PDG-R period:

- **Demonstrated proof of concept** for cross-agency data integration that is technically and politically complex.
- **Established a formal, replicable process** for integrating data across state agencies.
- **Strengthened cross-agency governance, coordination, and shared understanding** related to data use and data sharing.

[7]The evaluation was performed by Heuristic Strategies with Melissa Coffey, Ph.D., as lead. Dr. Coffey had bene engaged in the earlier ECIDS work. The final report, *Maine ECIDS: Developmental Evaluation Report*, was submitted to The Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future on December 31,2024. Its findings amplify and are consistent with data collected as part of the overall PDG evaluation.

- **Increased clarity** regarding available data sources, data parameters, and requirements for secure data access.
- **Assessed the feasibility** of integrated data analysis through a targeted use study.
- **Documented learning** about governance, coordination, and technical requirements to inform future ECIDS development.

The findings below describe the extent to which these intended outcomes were realized during the PDG-R performance period. Evidence is drawn from the targeted use study and the accompanying external process evaluation and reflects outcomes appropriate to a system-building initiative at this stage of development.

Evidence from the targeted use study indicates that ECIDS demonstrated the feasibility of a structured, end-to-end process for integrating data across state agencies. The work confirmed that cross-agency data integration is achievable using existing state roles and infrastructure and that a defined analytic process can be replicated to address future policy-relevant questions requiring integrated data.

Findings also indicate **strengthened governance and coordination related to cross-agency data use.** Leadership through the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF) and the Children's Cabinet set shared expectations for participation and clarified roles regarding data ownership, access, and analysis. Over the course of the initiative, agencies developed a more common understanding of responsibilities and decision-making structures associated with integrated data work.

The initiative contributed to **increased clarity regarding available data sources and the conditions under which those data can be accessed and used**. Evidence from the use study and process evaluation indicates improved shared understanding of data definitions, formats, privacy protections, and limitations across agencies. This increased data readiness represents a foundational system-level outcome that supports more informed consideration of integrated analyses.

Finally, the targeted use study and external process evaluation **generated documented learning about governance, coordination, and technical requirements** associated with cross-agency data integration. These findings underscore the importance of central leadership, early engagement of data stewards and legal offices, and clear communication about data availability and constraints. **Together, this learning provides an evidence-based foundation** to inform future decisions about the scope and sequencing of ECIDS-related work.

How did ECIDS support coordination and communication across agencies?

Evidence from the targeted use study and external process evaluation indicates that **ECIDS supported the development of cross-agency collaboration necessary for integrated data work**. Rather than creating new structures, the initiative focused on **strengthening relationships among existing offices and staff,** including agency leadership, data stewards, legal teams, and the OIT.

Through **coordinated engagement** led by the ECIDS coordinator and state leadership, agencies strengthened working relationships and increased trust in data sharing and use. Findings indicate **that**

regular, multi-channel communication and a deliberate meeting cadence supported shared understanding of data availability, data governance, and agency roles. Over time, participating staff developed greater clarity regarding how data are collected, housed, protected, and used across agencies, supporting more effective coordination for integrated analysis.

ECIDS also reinforced OIT's role **as a central, neutral mechanism** for data integration and analysis across agencies. Evidence indicates that this positioning supported cross-agency collaboration by providing a consistent pathway for articulating data requests and conducting analyses, while maintaining agency control over their data. Together, these coordination and communication outcomes **reflect progress toward building the collaborative conditions necessary for future cross-agency data use.**

How has the ECIDS contributed to building a strong statewide early learning system?

ECIDS contributed to statewide system building by establishing and testing a structured process for using integrated data to address cross-agency policy questions related to young children and their families. As a systems-focused initiative, the work did not seek to create a centralized data repository or produce immediate analytic outputs across multiple policy domains. Instead, it **demonstrated how existing data, governance structures, and technical capacity can be coordinated to support system-level inquiry**.

Evidence from the targeted use study indicates **strengthened state capacity to link policy questions raised through the Children's Cabinet with coordinated data requests, integration, and analysis across agencies**. By situating governance within existing cross-agency structures and relying on the Office of Information Technology (OIT) as a central analytic mechanism, the work reinforced **durable pathways** for system-level data use while preserving agency ownership and control of data. These contributions represent **foundational system-building** outcomes that support more coherent use of data across the early learning system.

The work also increased **shared understanding across agencies** of what data are available, how those data are governed, and what is required to use them responsibly for integrated analysis. This increased data readiness—including clarity about data definitions, access requirements, and limitations—supports more informed decision-making and reduces barriers to future cross-agency analysis. Together, these outcomes position ECIDS as an enabling systems tool that strengthens the infrastructure and conditions needed for coordinated early childhood policy analysis in Maine.

How did ECIDS support participation and access?

ECIDS was not designed as a family- or provider-facing initiative; therefore, participation and access outcomes are reflected primarily in the extent to which agencies engaged in cross-agency data integration processes. As described in the Coordination and Communication and Systems Building sections, ECIDS incorporated design features intended to reduce barriers to agency participation, including narrow scoping, reliance on existing governance structures, and centralized analytic support through OIT.

Sustainability and Continuation

During the PDG-R period, the work established a viable approach for integrating data across agencies to address policy-relevant questions. Sustainability depends less on maintaining a discrete initiative and more on whether the processes tested through this effort continue to be used within existing state structures. Leadership emphasized the importance of the Children's Cabinet and the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF) in providing governance and ownership of this approach. To the extent that these entities continue to articulate cross-agency policy questions, the process is positioned for continued use.

The work was intentionally designed as a process for integrated analysis rather than as a centralized data system. Data remain housed within their originating agencies, preserving existing data architecture and ownership and reducing barriers to continued participation. The use study reaffirmed the Office of Information Technology (OIT) as the central mechanism for integrating data and conducting analyses—a function that aligns with OIT's ongoing responsibilities and supports sustainability within current state capacity.

The initiative will continue with funding from a one-year Preschool Development Grant. This funding will allow a team focused on the early care and education workforce to develop and implement a data use case to answer policy questions about Maine's ECE workforce. The team will receive technical support from ECDataLab to participate in a data analytical cohort with counterparts from other states. Together, this team will develop shared use cases, data dashboards, and code to support data integration. This technical assistance will build the capacity of the program and technical staff to support greater sustainability for the continued integration of data across early childhood programs.

While core components supporting this work—including the Children's Cabinet, agency data stewards, and OIT—are supported through ongoing state funding, certain activities would require additional resources beyond the next one-year Preschool Development Grant. These include coordinating data integration requests, supporting analytic work at OIT, and producing reports or visualizations. Findings from interviews and the process evaluation indicate that continued funding would also support further documentation of processes and clearer communication about scope and purpose.

What were the lessons learned from the ECIDS initiative?

- **Strong central leadership is essential for cross-agency data integration.** Executive-level governance through the Children's Cabinet and leadership from the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF) provided clear authority, coordination, and ownership, while supporting champions across agencies, reducing ambiguity, and fostering participation.
- **Regular communication sustains relationships, understanding, and progress.** A critical driver for cross-agency work is building and sustaining relationships, understanding the roles and responsibilities of participants within their own agencies, and developing the ECIDS. Regular communication, including regularly scheduled meetings and email, created the conditions for these relationships and provided a means of sharing progress.

- **Narrowly scoped use studies support feasibility and buy-in.** A single, well-defined use study enabled testing of governance, legal, and technical processes while limiting burden and perceived risk for participating agencies.
- **Relying on existing structures reduces barriers to participation.** Locating the work within established governance and technical systems, including the Children's Cabinet and the Office of Information Technology, aligned data integration with existing state capacity and minimized disruption to agency operations.
- **Clear communication about scope and intent matters.** Misunderstandings about the purpose of the work—particularly concerns about creating a centralized data system—affected buy-in, underscoring the importance of clearly distinguishing integrated analysis processes from data storage.
- **Documentation supports continuity in a staff-dependent system.** Clear documentation of workflows, data definitions, and agreements is critical for maintaining continuity and preserving institutional knowledge amid staff turnover.

Summary

ECIDS represents a system-building effort focused on enabling the use of integrated data to address complex, cross-agency policy questions related to young children and their families. Through a targeted use study and accompanying process evaluation, the initiative demonstrated the feasibility of coordinated data integration across agencies, strengthened governance and collaboration structures, and increased shared understanding of data availability and constraints. Together, these outcomes reflect foundational progress toward a more coherent approach to data-informed decision-making within Maine's early childhood system.

Emergent Literacy Professional Learning Communities

Maine's Statewide Early Literacy Professional Learning Series

Performance period Summer 2024–Fall 2025

High-quality professional learning is a core strategy for strengthening early childhood systems and supporting children's learning from Pre-K through Grade 3. Effective professional learning provides coherent, research-aligned opportunities that build educator knowledge across settings. Within the PDG-R initiatives, professional learning efforts are designed to promote integrated, equitable, and developmentally appropriate early learning environments statewide.

The **Emergent Literacy Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)** initiative was implemented by the Maine Department of Education (DOE) as part of the Preschool Development Grant–Birth to Five Renewal (PDG-R) to pilot a facilitator-led, discussion-based professional learning modules focused on foundational emergent literacy skills for educators working with children ages 3–6. The initiative used a train-the-trainer approach and open-source modules developed by the Regional Education Laboratory (REL) Program--Southeast. Modules addressed four emergent literacy domains: Print Knowledge, Phonological Awareness, Vocabulary, and Oral Language.

This report presents **findings from outcome-focused assessment activities** conducted in fall 2025 as part of Maine's PDG-R program. Drawing on diverse data,[1] the report examines the Emergent Literacy PLCs initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including intended outcomes, facilitator preparedness and delivery, and participant knowledge gains.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including cross-setting professional learning and coordination with existing professional development structures.
- **System building**, including contributions to a statewide facilitator network, alignment with Maine's professional development infrastructure, and sustainability beyond the grant period.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitated participation, barriers affecting reach during early implementation, and areas for improvement identified by facilitators.

[1]Data sources for this include facilitator training records, PLC delivery documentation, pre- and post-participation assessments, facilitator feedback collected through written responses and interviews, and interviews with initiative lead Renee Reilly and DOE Inclusive Education Literacy Specialist Dee Saucier.

During the PDG-R performance period, the DOE recruited facilitators from across the mixed-delivery system[8], targeting educators and leaders working in child care, Head Start, public pre-K, and K–3 settings. Applicants were vetted for experience supporting adult learners or facilitating professional development. Approximately forty individuals applied; training was offered to thirty, and through

[8] Mixed delivery early care and education (ECE) is the coordinated effort to support early childhood services and programming across a range of settings to help meet the varied needs of children and families.

natural attrition, a cohort of approximately twenty-five completed the program. Each facilitator signed a Memorandum of Understanding committing to deliver at least two of the four modules following training.

Facilitators completed a centralized training session and received comprehensive, ready-to-use materials, including facilitator guides, participant materials, and CEU templates. Prior to training the 25 facilitators, two small pilot PLCs were conducted to assess pacing, feasibility, and facilitator support needs: one delivered virtually by the DOE Inclusive Education Literacy Specialist and one delivered in person by the vendor contracted to conduct the facilitator training. These pilots informed the final facilitator guidance on session structure, delivery options, and pacing.

The initiative offered multiple delivery formats—a series of three 2-hour sessions, a single full-day session, or virtual delivery—to accommodate scheduling and staffing in early childhood and early elementary settings. Each module provided six hours of continuing education credit. Facilitators received a $500 stipend per module delivered, with most facilitating up to two modules. Facilitators determined scheduling and locations based on the needs of participants in their areas of the state.

What was the impact of the learning series?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives is essential to assessing whether these investments contribute to meaningful change within Maine's early childhood system. For the Emergent Literacy PLCs, impact is reflected primarily in facilitator readiness, PLC session delivery, and educator knowledge gains, rather than in direct changes in instructional practice or child-level outcomes.

EMERGENT LITERACY PLCS FEATURES

Facilitator Preparation and Delivery

- **25 trained facilitators** prepared through train-the-trainer model.
- 19 facilitators delivered at least one module; fewer than 5 delivered two or more.
- 198 educators completed pre-assessments; 159 completed post-assessments.

PLC Structure

- 4 modules (3 sessions each): Print Knowledge, Phonological Awareness, Vocabulary, Oral Language
- 6 CEU hours per module; modules are not sequential.
- Multiple delivery formats: multi-session, full-day, or virtual
- Target group size: minimum 6 educators per PLC

Implementation Supports

- Facilitator stipend: $500 per module
- Open-source materials (no licensing costs)
- Ready-to-use facilitator guides, participant materials, and CEU templates

Target Audience: Child care, Head Start, public pre-K, and K–3 educators (ages 3–6 focus).

The Emergent Literacy PLCs were designed to support the following **intended outcomes**:

- **Facilitators prepared** to lead discussion-based emergent literacy PLCs.
- **Increased educator knowledge** of foundational emergent literacy practices.
- **Extended access** to evidence-based emergent literacy professional learning across settings.

> **The initiative lead emphasized that the goal was to build ongoing professional learning capacity rather than deliver one-time training, noting that trained facilitators retain all the materials they need to continue delivering PLCs independently.**

Evidence related to each outcome area is summarized below.

Facilitators Prepared and Lead Discussion-Based PLCs

There is convincing evidence that facilitators were prepared to lead emergent literacy PLCs following training. Twenty-five facilitators completed training, and feedback consistently described the materials and structure as well-organized, evidence-based, and ready to use. According to facilitators, this reduced preparation burden and enabled them to engage participants in meaningful discussions, rather than on developing content. Many facilitators reported shifts in their understanding of emergent literacy, particularly regarding how everyday interactions can support literacy development.

> **"Once I had time to just dig in and work with the materials, everything was straightforward and clearly laid out. Having the ability to edit PowerPoint was extremely helpful, especially since I had participants from multiple backgrounds, not just PreK teachers."** (Facilitator, written feedback)

Evidence related to PLC delivery is mixed. Of twenty-five trained facilitators, nineteen delivered at least one module, while fewer than five delivered two or more. Facilitators who did not deliver, or who delivered fewer modules than anticipated, attributed this primarily to structural and logistical factors rather than training quality. These factors included compressed implementation timelines, lack of institutional affiliation or built-in participant cohorts, and challenges aligning PLC schedules with existing professional development calendars.

Educator Knowledge Gains

There is emerging evidence of gains in educators' knowledge across emergent literacy domains. While pre- and post-self-reported assessment data show increases in knowledge, facilitators consistently observed wide variation in baseline knowledge, even among experienced educators, reinforcing findings from an earlier AIM Early Literacy Modules evaluation, namely that foundational literacy content remains new for many educators.

> **"I assumed going into facilitating these trainings that the knowledge base teachers would enter with would be similar, but they were vastly different. Even teachers who had worked in early childhood for four or five years often had a limited**

> **understanding of topics like phonemic awareness or print concepts."**
> (Facilitator, written feedback)

Facilitators collaborating with Educational Technicians and other paraprofessionals described the PLCs as particularly valuable for staff who had not earned college credits or who had prior formal preparation in literacy instruction. In these settings, facilitators reported early indicators of engagement and reflection, including increased questioning and willingness to adapt instructional activities.

> **"I have found that they are, as a group, more willing to ask questions, to seek ways to modify activities—especially with vocabulary—and to understand what the general education classroom teachers are asking to be done."**
> (Facilitator, K–2 Special Education Teacher)

Facilitators working in child care, Head Start, public pre-K, and early elementary settings delivered PLCs within their own programs and networks, which extended access to emergent literacy learning across the mixed-delivery system. While participant-level data on setting type were not consistently available, facilitator reports show that PLC delivery reached educators across multiple roles and contexts.

Evidence of application beyond self-reported knowledge gains is limited. The initiative focused on facilitator preparation, PLC delivery, and educator learning, and did not include observing classroom practice or assessing child-level outcomes.

How did Emergent Literacy PLCs support collaboration and coordination?

Collaboration occurred primarily within the professional learning context rather than across multiple sectors or agencies. The initiative's collaborative contribution was embedded in its delivery model of a distributed facilitator network that brought educators from distinct roles and settings together around shared emergent literacy content. Facilitators noted that participating alongside colleagues from across the state supported engagement and reinforced common language and understanding.

> **"It was nice to be among other people from the state working in various roles, but all working within emergent literacy."** (Facilitator, written response)

Some facilitators reported drawing participants from multiple backgrounds and roles, including educators working across different age levels, rather than only Pre-K teachers. This cross-role composition supported engagement with emergent literacy concepts across settings and encouraged dialogue among educators with varied levels of prior preparation. Facilitators contrasted this experience with self-directed or self-paced training, noting that the discussion-based PLC format supported richer engagement, shared sense-making, and collective learning.

Coordination With Existing Systems

DOE aligned the PLCs with Maine Roads to Quality (MRTQ) through the statewide Professional Development Lattice, positioning the initiative within recognized professional development pathways for early childhood educators across both child care and school-based settings.

How has the Emergent Literacy PLC contributed to building a strong statewide early learning system?

Emergent Literacy PLCs contributed to system capacity by establishing a distributed network of trained facilitators who can continue to deliver evidence-based professional learning on emergent literacy beyond the PDG-R train-the-trainer performance period. Unlike centrally delivered or vendor-dependent models, the initiative's use of open-source materials and trained local facilitators provides infrastructure for ongoing delivery without recurring licensing costs.

Through the train-the-trainer model, approximately twenty-five facilitators across the mixed-delivery system were prepared to deliver PLCs within their own programs, schools, and regional networks. Many facilitators hold roles—such as literacy coaches, curriculum directors, and supervisors—that position them to integrate PLC delivery into their regular responsibilities. The initiative intentionally targeted facilitators collaborating with the earliest learners across child care, Head Start, and public pre-K settings, rather than focusing exclusively on public school educators.

> **"Out of the two [literacy initiatives], I feel like the Emergent literacy initiative really impacts them a lot more. When we extended the trainer application, we specifically targeted child care providers, teachers, Head Start, who work with the earliest, earliest learners."** (Initiative lead)

The initiative emerged to address workforce preparation gaps by reaching educational technicians and paraprofessionals who often lack formal training on how literacy develops. Facilitators described this training as particularly valuable for staff without college credits or prior exposure to evidence-based literacy instruction, reinforcing the importance of professional learning models that are accessible across credentialing levels.

In what ways did the design facilitate participation and access?

Access to the Emergent Literacy PLCs was influenced by the flexibility of the delivery model, the quality of facilitator supports, and alignment with existing professional development structures. Multiple delivery formats—multi-session, full-day, and virtual—allowed facilitators to adapt implementation to local scheduling and staffing realities.

> **"Being able to modify the proposed timeline to fit in with a one-day intensive model is what allowed implementation to be successful. If they had been offered only during a series of after-school sessions, I do not think we would have sufficient numbers to offer all four."** (Facilitator, written response)

Compensation also supported participation. Facilitator stipends helped offset preparation and delivery time beyond regular job responsibilities, while CEU credit supported educator participation.

> **"I very much appreciated being compensated for the "extra" work, prep time, and facilitation beyond my regular job responsibilities."** (Facilitator, written response)

There were some design-related constraints. Facilitators reported that compressed grant timelines limited opportunities to align PLC delivery with existing professional development calendars and that session pacing often required shortening or combining activities. Facilitators without institutional affiliation or a built-in participant cohort experienced additional challenges securing host sites and recruiting participants. Administrative requirements related to pre-approval of training dates (from one public school site) and participant numbers added complexity when schedules shifted, and last-minute cancellations and fluctuating attendance affected group sizes. Facilitators were encouraged to proceed with PLCs, when possible, to increase access during early implementation.

Sustainability

Several features of the PLCs increase the likelihood that this work will continue beyond the grant period. The use of open-source materials eliminates licensing barriers. Trained facilitators retain all modules and materials, enabling continued delivery without recurring costs. Alignment with the Maine Roads to Quality (MRTQ) Professional Development Lattice, once finalized, will further position the PLCs as a permanent professional learning option for child care providers.

At the same time, demand for facilitator training exceeded available capacity, with approximately 40 applicants to fill 30 training slots. Additional train-the-trainer sessions could not be offered within the grant timelines. More significantly, grant management and coordination required to support recruitment, scheduling, quality monitoring, and alignment with statewide professional development structures were tied to grant-funded roles. With the initiative lead position ending shortly after grant close-out, sustaining these functions will be more challenging than sustaining the PLC delivery model itself.

Overall, the sustainability profile of the Emergent Literacy PLCs is mixed: the instructional model and materials are well-positioned for continuation, while the infrastructure supporting coordination and quality oversight is less secure.

Lessons Learned

Several design-level insights emerged from implementation of the Emergent Literacy PLCs:

- **Ready-to-use materials reduced facilitator burden and supported consistent delivery.** Facilitators consistently described the comprehensive, open-source materials as enabling them to focus on discussion and engagement rather than content development. This design feature was a primary factor in facilitator confidence and willingness to deliver.
- **Delivery was strongest among facilitators with existing organizational connections and built-in participant cohorts.** Of 25 trained facilitators, 19 delivered at least one module, and fewer than 5 delivered two or more. Facilitators without institutional affiliation faced greater barriers to recruitment and scheduling, indicating that organizational positioning influenced delivery as much as individual preparation.
- **Compressed timelines limited alignment with existing professional development structures.** Facilitators cited insufficient time between training completion and expected delivery as a constraint, and several could not align PLC scheduling with established PD calendars.

- **Baseline literacy knowledge varied widely, even among experienced educators.** Facilitators reported that foundational content was new to many participants, regardless of years in the field—consistent with AIM Module findings. This reinforces the importance of professional learning that does not assume prior preparation in evidence-based literacy practices.

Summary

The Emergent Literacy PLCs made meaningful progress toward intended outcomes, particularly in facilitator preparation, PLC delivery, and educator knowledge gains. The initiative established a network of trained facilitators across the state, and the use of open-source materials increases the likelihood of continuation beyond PDG-R funding.

First 10

First 10 Community School Pilot

Performance Period 4/2024 – 3/2026

Community schools focus on developing partnerships between schools and community partners to provide access to programs and services for children and families. In the years prior to school entry, this work includes engaging children in both formal and informal care arrangements, as well as those not in out-of-home care. The First 10 Community Schools model emphasizes family and community engagement and supports children's transitions into school. These partnerships are critical for connecting children and families from across a mixed-delivery early childhood system to schools and for supporting successful entry into the early grades.

First 10 launched in 2023 to test the feasibility of a community school model designed to strengthen school–family–community connections during children's first ten years of life. Seven sites from diverse Maine communities participated (three launched in 2023; four in 2024, with one exiting early). Sites implemented the First 10 model developed by the Education Development Center (EDC), which is designed to foster school–community–family relationships and align services and resources for families and their young children prior to and during the early years of school.

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,[1] the report examines the First 10 Community School Pilot initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact** including intended outcomes related to school–family relationships, school–community partnerships, transition-to-kindergarten practices, and family awareness of local supports and services.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination,** including relationship-building and coordination among schools, community partners, and early childhood providers at the local level.
- **System building**, including early contributions related to partnership-based approaches, coordination across a mixed-delivery early childhood system, and insights relevant to strengthening transition practices statewide.

[1]Data sources for this report include interviews with site coordinators, team members, EDC coaches, and state staff; surveys of First 10 team members; site visit observations; and review of site documentation, including meeting records and activity materials.

The **First 10** initiative supported seven sites in implementing a school-based, cross-sector approach to strengthening early school transitions, family engagement, and community–school collaboration. Each site formed a local team anchored in a hub school and hired a dedicated coordinator responsible for organizing activities, facilitating communication across partners, and adapting the First 10 framework

to the local context. Sites implemented the First 10 model developed by the Education Development Center (EDC), with ongoing technical assistance from EDC coaches, and a state First 10 Community School Specialist at the Maine Department of Education.

While all sites implemented the same overarching model, the ways in which activities were planned, sequenced, and emphasized varied across communities. Sites entered the pilot with differing levels of readiness, staffing stability, and prior experience collaborating with community partners, which influenced the pace and focus of implementation. These differences shaped how quickly sites moved into coordinated transition activities and how much time was devoted to early team development. This flexibility allowed sites to align implementation with local needs and capacity, though it also contributed to variation in the scope and intensity of activities.

Across sites, implementation drew from a common set of recommended First 10 activities focused on transitions to kindergarten, family engagement, and community connection. While all sites implemented core transition activities—such as school-connected Play & Learn opportunities, a parenting campaign, and welcome-to-kindergarten events—implementation emphasized sequencing and integration rather than one-off activities. Several sites described developing visual transition maps to align key dates and events leading up to kindergarten entry, and some combined activities—such as pairing kindergarten registration with a Play & Learn event—to increase coherence and family engagement. These examples illustrate how sites adapted the First 10 framework to make transition supports more intentional and connected.

FIRST 10 FEATURES

7 pilot sites across two cohorts (3 launched in summer 2023; 4 launched in summer 2024) representing diverse communities statewide

Implementation of the **First 10 Community School model**, developed by the Education Development Center (EDC)

Dedicated local coordinator at each site to lead cross-sector planning, communication, and activity coordination

Ongoing technical assistance provided by EDC coaches and a **state First 10 Community School Specialist** at the Maine Department of Education

Primary focus areas: supporting transitions to kindergarten, strengthening family engagement, and advancing school–community collaboration

What was the impact of the First 10?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives is essential to assessing whether investments are contributing to intended changes for children, families, and communities. The evaluation emphasized implementation and early outcomes rather than long-term impacts on children, reflecting the pilot's purpose as a feasibility test of the First 10 community school model.

The **intended outcomes** of the First 10 were:

- **Strengthened communication and trust** between schools and families of young children.

- **Strengthened relationships** between schools and community-based partners serving children prior to school entry.
- **Clear, coordinated, and intentional** approaches to supporting transitions to kindergarten.
- **Increased awareness** of local supports and services among families with young children**.**

Evidence related to impact was examined across multiple sources, including surveys of First 10 team members, interviews with site coordinators, team members, EDC coaches, and state staff, site visit observations, and review of site-developed documentation. Together, these sources provide insight into how the pilots functioned in practice and how sites experienced change over the course of implementation.

Table 1 summarizes how the intended outcomes appeared during early implementation across pilot sites.

Table 1. Early Progress Toward Intended Outcomes

Intended Outcome	Evidence of Early Progress	Boundary / Notes
Strengthened school–family communication and trust	Sites described earlier engagement with families prior to kindergarten entry through transition events, Play & Learn activities, and outreach efforts. Families who participated were reported to have greater familiarity and comfort with school settings.	Participation varied across sites; evidence reflects experiences of families who engaged rather than universal reach.
Strengthened school–community partnerships	Sites reported new or strengthened relationships with community partners, particularly libraries, family-serving agencies, and municipal organizations, often supported by shared planning and outreach activities.	Collaboration varied, especially with community-based child care providers. More details in the Communication and Coordination section.
Clear, coordinated, and intentional approaches to transitions to kindergarten	Documentation and interviews indicate that sites increasingly treat transition activities as a connected sequence rather than as isolated events, including aligned timelines, shared messaging, and combined registration and family-engagement activities. In a small number of sites, improved on-time registration rates provided additional support.	Evidence is primarily descriptive and site-reported; administrative data were limited to a subset of sites.
Increased family awareness of local supports and services	Sites described sharing information about community resources through events, newsletters, social media, and take-and-make materials. Families who engaged were reported to have greater awareness of available supports.	Changes in access or service uptake cannot be quantified across sites.

Together, these patterns reflect how First 10 functioned on the ground, particularly in shaping early relationships and transition practices.

> **Teachers described the value of familiarity with incoming students and families, noting that knowing children's names, family contexts, and needs before the first day of school helped ensure smoother starts and stronger early relationships.**

How did First 10 build collaborations?

Building school–community collaboration was a central goal of the First 10 Community School Pilot. Across sites, collaboration developed primarily through intentional relationship-building and ongoing coordination, rather than through formal agreements or new structures.

Sites **reported new or strengthened relationships with community partners** by the end of the pilot period. Libraries, family-serving agencies, municipal partners, and community organizations most frequently emerged as engaged partners, reflecting both shared interest in supporting families with young children and the accessibility of these partners for outreach and joint activities. In many communities, collaboration took the form of shared events, coordinated outreach, or resource distribution.

Connections with community-based child care providers were more challenging to establish and sustain. Barriers included scheduling constraints, limited awareness among providers, particularly of home-based programs, and concerns about the expansion of public pre-K. While some sites took steps to address these challenges through targeted outreach, communication with providers remained uneven across the pilot.

Across all sites, **local coordinators played a central role** in facilitating communication and coordination.

> **Coordinators served as consistent points of contact, organized meetings, and supported follow-through across multiple activities. At the same time, variation in coordinator time, tenure, and turnover affected sites' ability to sustain collaboration, underscoring the importance of role stability for cross-sector coordination.**

Overall, First 10 supported early progress in local collaboration through relationship-based approaches and the coordinator role, with variation shaped by local context, staffing stability, and pre-existing partnerships.

How has First 10 contributed to building a strong statewide early learning system?

The First 10 Community School Pilot functioned as a **system-learning effort**, generating insight into how schools can engage families and community partners around early transitions and related points of coordination within Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system. Although implemented locally, the pilot addressed **a statewide challenge**: children enter school from a wide range of early learning settings, while transition supports and partnerships are often fragmented.

At the state level, the First 10 experience contributes practical understanding of how partnership-based approaches operate across varied contexts. Rather than producing uniform outcomes, the pilot provides **insight into the conditions needed to support consistent coordination**, informing how community school strategies can be integrated into broader statewide efforts focused on transitions, family engagement, and system coherence.

Sustainability and Continuation

Sites expressed commitment to continuing school–community collaboration beyond the pilot period, though approaches to sustainability varied. Rather than maintaining the full pilot team structure, many sites viewed smaller, issue-focused groups—such as transition-to-kindergarten teams—as more feasible for ongoing coordination and planning.

Lessons Learned

First 10 generated several cross-cutting lessons relevant for future scale-up:

- **Readiness matters:** Sites varied in their preparedness to implement a comprehensive model, influenced by staffing stability, prior partnerships, and leadership continuity.
- **Time is essential:** The 2–3-year pilot window limited the depth of implementation and team development.
- **Leadership matters:** District leadership can encourage collaboration among schools and with community partners, can provide resources, and may be able to adjust district-wide policies, procedures, and schedules. Local leadership support is essential to set the tone and expectations for school staff participation, leverage school resources, and engage families.
- **Family engagement requires flexibility:** Sites that adapted formats, locations, and timing in response to parent feedback and attendance patterns were more successful in reaching families.
- **Data-informed adaptation strengthens implementation:** Sites that tracked attendance, gathered parent feedback, and adjusted activities accordingly demonstrated stronger family engagement over time
- **Sustaining collaboration is fragile:** Partnerships often relied on personal relationships and the coordinator role, raising concerns about continuity after pilot funding.

In addition to previously noted lessons, the pilot highlighted:

- The importance of **stable leadership** for maintaining momentum
- The need for **explicit team development** early in implementation
- The significance of **the coordinator role as the nexus** of project activities and effort to build and maintain collaboration and partnerships
- The value of allowing sites **flexibility while maintaining clarity** of core expectations

These lessons suggest that future pilots or scale-up efforts would benefit from longer planning phases, clearer role definitions, and explicit support for partnership development.

Summary

The First 10 Community School Pilot was implemented across multiple Maine communities to support family engagement, school–community partnerships, and children's transitions into kindergarten. Sites formed cross-sector teams anchored in schools, hired local coordinators, and implemented a range of First 10 activities focused on outreach, coordination, and transition-related practices with ongoing technical assistance.

Across the pilot period, sites implemented most recommended activities and adapted approaches to fit local context, resulting in variation in emphasis and sequencing across communities. Evidence of early progress was most apparent in school–family relationships, local collaboration, and more intentional transition practices. The pilot underscored the importance of local coordination, flexibility in implementation, and sufficient time to build and sustain partnerships—considerations that are central to future community school and system-building efforts. A more comprehensive evaluation of the First 10 Community School Pilot, including site-level implementation profiles, is documented in a companion report.

For ME (Vertical Curriculum Alignment)

Vertically Aligned Curriculum PreK-2

Performance period Summer April 2023–December 2025

Across early childhood and elementary education, coherence in curriculum and instructional approaches across the early grades is widely understood as an important condition for supporting effective teaching and learning. When expectations, materials, and instructional practices vary substantially across Pre-K, kindergarten, and the primary grades, educators may face challenges in building on prior learning, and children may experience fragmented instruction during a critical period of development. Efforts to improve alignment across the Pre-K–2 continuum are often intended to promote continuity in instructional practice, support shared understanding among educators, and strengthen early literacy and language development within developmentally appropriate learning environments.

For ME builds on prior curriculum work led by the Maine Department of Education by enhancing the Boston Public Schools' Focus Curriculum, a developmentally appropriate, hands-on, inquiry-based, and playful instructional approach for classrooms serving children from pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) through Grade 2. The For ME program is intended to support alignment of curriculum and instructional approaches across grades within the Pre-K–2 continuum and to provide a coherent progression of learning experiences for students in schools that adopt the full program sequence. As a PDG-supported initiative, the program also emphasizes whole-child instruction, playful learning, and language-rich classroom environments, with a particular focus on strengthening early literacy foundations in the early grades.

This report presents key findings from the For ME Instructional Program, offering insights to guide future system building and policy decisions:

- **Impact**, including teacher-reported confidence in using their grade-relevant For ME program and instructional practices, as well as perceived impact on student learning.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination** as teachers within schools adopt the instructional program and plan integration
- **System building**, including a more aligned curriculum from Pre-K through 2nd grade and potential adoption of Pre-K for ME across the mixed delivery system.
- **Supports and access**, including participation, training, and implementation considerations identified during the pilot.

Data sources for this report include teacher feedback surveys following each summer training session; focus groups, one with school principals and another with Pre-K and K teachers; and feedback from the state initiative lead and project manager.

Implementation of the **For ME** program focused on introducing the adapted curriculum and providing structured professional learning and support for educators across Pre-K through Grade 2. The For ME Instructional Program continues the work begun by the Maine Department of Education by enhancing the Boston Public Schools' Focus Curriculum, which features developmentally appropriate, hands-on, inquiry-based, and playful instruction for classrooms serving children from pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) through Grade 2.

With guidance from curriculum consultant, Melissa Luc, the Department is building from the Focus Curriculum and providing teachers in pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) through 2nd grade with initial training on the For ME program, as well as ongoing access to resources and consultation and support from mentor teachers. The initial training was provided during a free, multi-day summer training session and focuses on the program design, its tools, and instructional practices. Following each training, teacher feedback on content and format is collected. The Department has modified training since the launch, most recently adding a day of training specifically for kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd-grade teachers to focus on several literacy components of the programs and ease their feelings of being overwhelmed by the amount of information they receive in this area.

FOR ME (VERTICAL ALIGNMENT) FEATURES

Completed development of **aligned curriculum for Pre-K through 2nd grade.**

Piloting of the 2nd grade for ME curriculum and training for 2nd grade teachers.

Added enhancements, including **developing centers/studios for math, an outdoor nature-based learning component, and a look-for tool.**

Provided **professional development for 680 Pre-K through 2nd grade teachers.**

What was the impact of For ME?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives requires assessing whether investments advanced their intended purposes. The state leads articulated **three general goals** for the **For ME Instructional program** that provide context for interpreting evidence of implementation progress and observed impacts:

- **Complete "enhancement work" on the program**, mostly in kindergarten through Grade 2, because they were largely in place for pre-K. For example: add content for mathematics; introduce supplemental text lists; add outdoor learning and nature-based lessons; design a "look-for" tool for school leaders and teachers.
- **Continue to increase the number of educators and schools utilizing the programs.**
- **Provide initial training at each grade and then offer ongoing implementation support**.

Progress toward these goals is summarized below, followed by evidence of observed impacts associated with participation in the For ME Instructional Program.

By the end of the PDG grant, the For ME program had completed most of the planned enhancements. Work on outdoor learning and nature-based lessons was in progress, as was the design and launch of "look fors," but other features, notably work on math centers and studios, were in place.

Across the grant period, 680 teachers had participated in professional development through the For ME Instructional program, demonstrating broad engagement and program success. Teachers from all grades participated in training, with increasing participation in grades 1 and 2 over time, though participation remains lower among 2nd-grade teachers than in other grades. Increasing uptake in 2nd grade, especially, reflects the substantial commitment made through the PDG to pilot 2nd Grade for ME and to provide training to 2nd-grade teachers as part of the For ME program. Table 1 summarizes participation by grade level across the three-year grant period.

Table 1. For ME Professional Development Participation by Grade and Year

Grade	2023	2024	2025	Total by grade
Pre-K	150	97	85	332
Kindergarten	50	87	50	187
Grade 1	23	36	49	108
Grade 2	—	20	33	53
Totals by year	223	240	217	680

Teacher- and Leader-Reported Changes in Instructional Practice and Classroom Experience

Teachers and leaders provided several examples of the impact on teachers' participation in For ME training and using the For ME instructional program through surveys and focus groups:

Pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers reported that their teaching felt more developmentally appropriate for children's learning and enabled them to use more play-based instruction and integrate learning across content areas. Most highlighted the increased language in the program. Survey responses from 2nd-grade teachers show changes over time in their reported competence with several instructional approaches (use of studios, literacy stations) from before training through the school year.

Teachers observed students' increased engagement, perseverance, and language abilities over the year and reported that teachers in subsequent grades could distinguish students coming out of For ME classrooms because of differences in how they approached learning and in their language skills. Several teachers noted that when using For ME, *all students* were engaged in learning, including students for whom English is not their first language and children from diverse backgrounds.

School leaders noted that their teachers seemed to enjoy teaching more when using the For ME instructional program. Especially in schools where teachers across the early grades had adopted the program, there was greater interaction among teachers, and instruction was more coherent for students year after year. One leader noted that her school had become defined by For ME, and that

teachers had largely adopted the model across their classrooms. This gave her a way to talk to families and community partners about the school, and it also informed her recruitment of new teachers.

How did For Me build collaborations?

State lead Larsen noted that while some schools send teams to the training, schools have not been required to send teams for teachers to participate, nor have school leaders been required to attend training. However, teachers and school leaders noted in focus groups that as more teachers collaborate, especially across grades, instruction is more coherent from year to year.

State Lead Larsen noted that others have become interested in learning from Maine's experience, including the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) collaborative focus on high-quality instructional materials, as well as the Gates Foundation, which is funding the University of Michigan to do an implementation study of high-quality instructional materials in a couple of states. Maine and the For ME program is one of them. Both opportunities are bringing Maine's efforts to improve the Pre-K to 3rd grade systems into spaces for potential collaboration across states.

How has For ME contributed to building a strong statewide early learning system?

Because the program and training have now been launched for Pre-K through 2nd grade, they potentially provide coherence to a Pre-K to 2nd-grade system. There are a striking number of schools in Maine that are configured for Pre-K to 2nd-grade (approximately 170 Pre-K/K to 2nd-grade in 2025-26), suggesting that as whole schools adopt the instructional program, a large portion of the system will become aligned, in addition to other elementary schools that include Pre-K to 2nd grade.

One school leader participating in a focus group noted that all the Pre-K teachers in the school were using Pre-K for ME, as were four community partners with 4-year-old classrooms. She noted that this meant the class of kindergarten children largely had similar experiences in the year before school entry, making transitions to school easier for children, families, and teachers.

Several teachers reported that they had sought training for Pre-K for ME when their school began offering pre-kindergarten, in some cases through the Pre-K Expansion grant, and needed to find a curriculum aligned with developmentally appropriate practice. As the system expanded, they sought ways of providing instruction that aligned with their expectations for teaching young children. Others noted that they were drawn to the For ME instructional program because their school did not appear to have a curriculum in place for their grade level(s).

Sustainability and Next Steps

Because the For ME program is **open-source and available for free** to interested schools and teachers, there are no immediate barriers to its continued implementation. The state has secured funding to continue providing no-cost professional development for teachers in summer 2026, with hopes of continuing support beyond. State lead Larsen noted that multiple state agency staff have completed training in the For ME program and approach and can provide training moving forward. In addition,

they continue to seek Melissa Luc's support as a consultant when possible. Finally, among the cadre of previously trained teachers, a group of mentor teachers has emerged to support newer adopters. In addition to continually adding resources to a shared online space, these teachers also support the training sessions, lead PLCs, and as was apparent during focus groups, have formed a small network of expertise to support each other as well as teachers starting to implement For ME.

In what ways did the For ME initiative support access and effective participation for teachers?

The For ME initiative uses curriculum and materials available online through the Maine Department of Education website for any teacher in the state, making them accessible to all teachers with an interest. Some of the training materials are available online as well. In-person training has been provided during the summer at no cost to teachers, though they must cover any travel expenses.

Data from teacher surveys show dozens of SAUs represented across the state, but State lead Larsen noted that the training has tended to attract teachers from the southern and eastern parts of the state. She also noted a planned emphasis on engaging teachers in special education roles and instructional coaches in the future, as they have not been as highly engaged as classroom teachers.

What did we learn?

- **Training may need to be modified.** Based on feedback from the first series of summer training, the schedule was modified to break the training into 2 sessions for kindergarten,1st-grade, and 2nd-grade teachers (a single-day session and a 2-day session) to allow more focused time on early literacy instruction.
- **Adoption was often organic.** Teachers and leaders reported that once one or two teachers in a school participated in For ME training and adopted the program and instruction in their classrooms, other teachers became interested in what they felt was a preferred or more natural approach to children's learning.
- **Early adopters are those who have bought into the For ME approach**. The state completed program updates sequentially, moving progressively from Pre-K to 2nd grade. This meant that the earliest adopters were from Pre-K, and the last teachers recruited were from 2nd grade. In the focus group, participating teachers all noted that they found the For ME approach more aligned with what they thought instruction should look like and were quick to take the training and put it into practice. They speculated that 1st and 2nd-grade teachers may be less comfortable with an approach more consistent with early education than with elementary education. It will be important to understand how 2nd-grade teachers respond to the training and how it affects their instruction.

Summary

The For ME Instructional Program completed the adaptation and enhancement of Boston Public Schools' Focus Curriculum through grade 2, increased adoption of the For ME instructional programs, and provided teachers in Pre-K to 2nd grade with initial professional development in its use. By the end of the grant period, more than 650 teachers had participated in training and were implementing the program in their classrooms. Teachers who participated in training reported that it supported their developmentally appropriate instruction, in turn supporting their children's engagement in school and language skills. In schools where multiple teachers have completed the training and are using the program, there is increased alignment and coherence across the early curriculum. Because the instructional program is open source, it remains available to interested teachers and leaders, as well as prior years' training sessions (that were recorded.

Help Me Grow (HMG) Maine

Maine's Statewide Family Support Resource

Performance period 10/2023–4/2026

Community-based approaches that help families navigate early childhood services are a critical component of system building, particularly for families who face barriers to accessing traditional service systems. Trusted organizations that support navigation, early identification of needs, and connections across health, education, and social services can strengthen family engagement and promote more coordinated, responsive systems for young children and their families.

Help Me Grow (HMG) Maine is a national model that builds coordinated community-based resources for early detection and intervention for developmental and behavioral concerns in children from birth through age eight. Through the PDG-R, Maine invested in expanding HMG Maine statewide by strengthening centralized access points, increasing outreach to families and organizations, and improving referral pathways across pediatric providers, early care and education programs, public schools, and community service providers.

Because HMG Maine operates as a systems initiative—connecting families to existing services rather than delivering them directly, its impact is visible at two levels: the families it serves and the systems it strengthens. The sections that follow examine how HMG Maine was implemented, what it achieved for families, and how its data, partnerships, and practice contributed to changes in Maine's early childhood service landscape.

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,[1] the report examines the Help Me Grow Maine initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including families reached, developmental screenings conducted, service connections made, and early evidence of family navigation outcomes.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including partnerships with state agencies and community organizations that extended the initiative's reach.
- **System building**, including contributions to cultural and linguistically responsive service infrastructure.
- **Supports and access**, including multilingual services, cultural brokering, and strategies for reducing barriers to family engagement.

[1]Data sources for this report include a qualitative focus group with HMG Maine initiative staff, service descriptive statistics, data dashboards, and annual reports provided by HMG Maine.

The Maine Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) launched Help Me Grow Maine in November 2022 as a centralized access point connecting families of children from birth through age eight, as well as expecting parents, to developmental screening, service navigation, and community resources. Operating in partnership with 211 Maine, HMG Maine can be reached by phone, web referral, fax, or through community outreach events. The initiative uses the STAR (System for Tracking Access to Referrals) database for care coordination and data collection.

HMG Maine offers two tiers of support based on family preference. Inquiry cases provide information and resource connections without ongoing follow-up. Intake cases involve care coordination from a Family Support Specialist, with structured follow-up at 5, 25, and 60 days after initial contact. The initiative was fully staffed for the first time in 2024, with a Program Manager, Outreach Specialist, Developmental Screening Specialist, Program Specialist responsible for data and policy, and five Family Support Specialists including two cultural brokers who provide navigation, interpretation, and direct support to families who speak languages other than English.

Core activities included developmental screening using the ASQ-3 and ASQ-SE[9], service referral and care coordination, "closed-loop" communication with referring providers, and community outreach. Outreach took multiple forms: Build & Bloom family engagement events combining literacy activities, developmental screenings, and resource distribution; Stories and Screenings events at libraries statewide; screening trainings at early childhood education programs; and resource tables at health fairs, professional conferences, and community events. HMG Maine also sent

KEY FEATURES OF HELP ME GROW MAINE

Launched in November 2022 **by OCFS in partnership with 211 Maine** as a centralized access point for families of children from birth to eight and expecting parents

Two service tiers: inquiry (information only) and intake (care coordination with follow-up at 5, 25, and 60 days)

Developmental screening using the **ASQ-3 and ASQ-SE[1] with "closed-loop"** communication back to referring providers

Family Support Specialists, including two cultural brokers serving families in multiple languages

Community Leader Taskforce comprising 20 representatives from 12 ethnic communities; produced informational videos in 10 languages

Car seat safety certification and statewide distribution through partnership with **Maine Child Passenger Safety Program**

RUBI pilot and Reach My Teach multilingual communication platform use developed in response to family needs identified through program data

[9]The ASQ-3 (Ages and Stages Questionnaires, Third Edition) and ASQ-SE (Ages and Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional) are standardized parent-completed screening tools for developmental and social-emotional concerns.

information and materials about the resource to every library, food pantry, and early care and education provider in the state.

Over the course of the grant period, HMG Maine developed additional activities in response to needs identified through its work with families. The Community Leader Taskforce—comprising 20 trusted leaders, agency representatives, and community health workers from 12 ethnic communities—was convened to bridge communication between immigrant families and service systems. The task force produced informational videos on prenatal care, postnatal care, and child development in 10 languages and worked with providers to identify effective outreach locations and communication channels. Through a partnership with the Maine Child Passenger Safety Program, five HMG Maine staff members became certified car seat safety technicians and began distributing car seats statewide. HMG Maine also initiated a Research Units in Behavioral Intervention[10] (RUBI) pilot that provides evidence-based parenting support for families of children with autism, intellectual disability, and developmental delay, and implemented Reach My Teach. This communication platform enables staff to connect with families through WhatsApp and other tools in the languages they use daily.

What was the impact of Help Me Grow?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives requires assessing whether investments advanced their intended purposes. Help Me Grow Maine was designed as a statewide system expansion, building a coordinated, community-based infrastructure to connect families to screening, services, and support. Unlike time-limited professional development initiatives, HMG Maine operated as a continuous service, with impact documented through program data collected across two full calendar years (2023 and 2024) and into 2025.

HMG Maine's intended outcomes were to:

- Provide **ongoing navigation support so families** can access services needed to support their children's development.
- Make **developmental screening universally available** across Maine.
- Strengthen **families' knowledge of child development** and ability to advocate for their children.

The findings below are organized around these intended outcomes.

Family Navigation and Service Connection

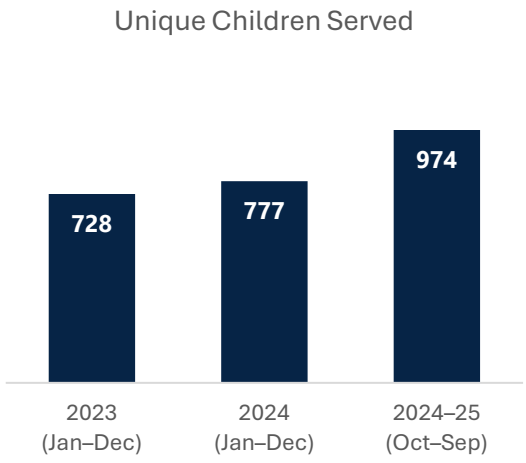
Families contacted HMG Maine regarding developmental milestones, behavioral concerns, basic needs such as food, housing, and car seats, child care access, and caregiver support—often presenting with multiple needs simultaneously. Throughout the grant period, both the scale/spread of the resource and the successful connections with families to meet their needs showed improvement.

Approximately four out of five families were successfully connected to at least one service in each reporting period, with the highest rate (84%) in 2024. At the same time, documented barriers to

[10]Research Units in Behavioral Intervention (RUBI) is an evidence-based parent training program for caregivers of children with autism, intellectual disability, and developmental delay.

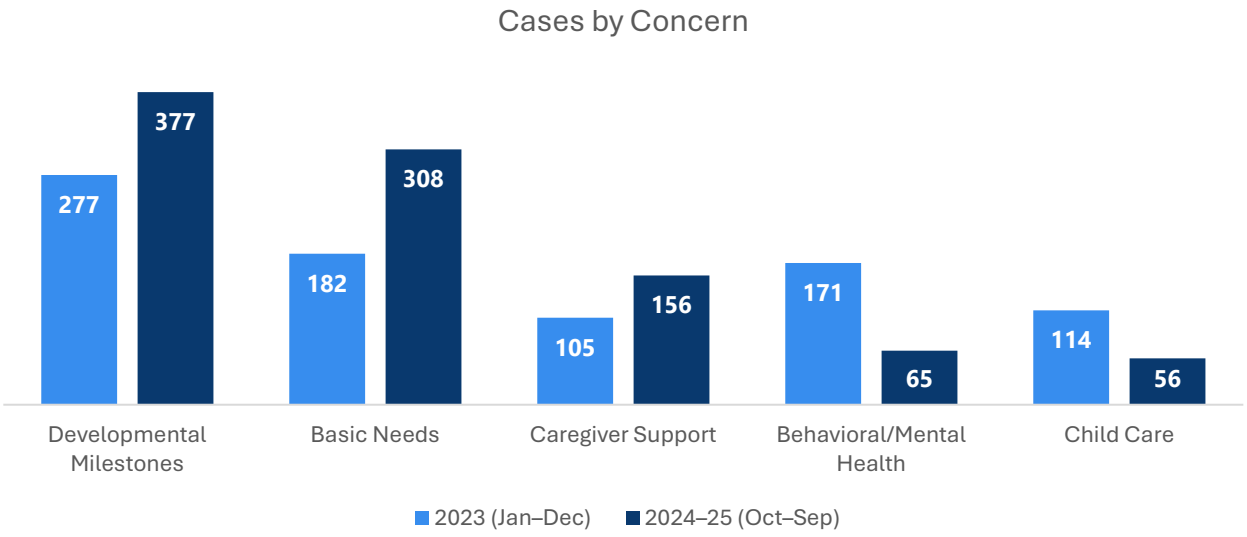
service access—including eligibility requirements, waitlists, and access to services—declined from 13% of cases to 4%. Even among families who faced barriers, more than half remained connected to services. These shifts indicate not only expanded reach but also more consistent navigation success as the initiative matured.

Families increasingly selected ongoing care coordination rather than one-time information (54%–74%), with intake cases remaining open for an average of 66 days—reflecting sustained engagement rather than one-time contact. This increase occurred alongside growth in overall service volume, indicating that HMG Maine maintained the quality of engagement even as demand expanded. One caregiver described the experience:



"It wasn't until working with our Family Support Specialist that I felt that finding support for my daughter would actually happen." (Family Satisfaction Survey, 2024)

Patterns of need also evolved during the grant period:

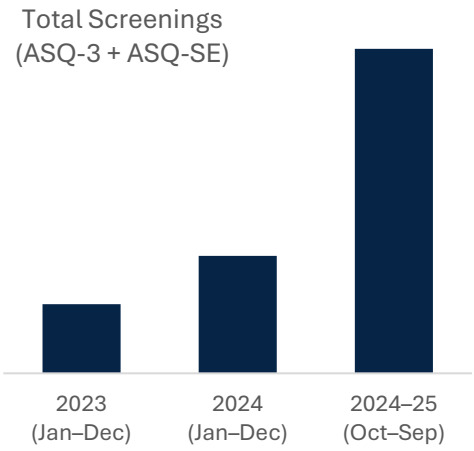


Basic needs referrals nearly doubled from 2023 to 2024, particularly among families of infants and toddlers. This trend reflects HMG Maine's role as an entry point for a broad range of family supports, extending beyond developmental screening alone.

Developmental Screening and Early Identification

This increase reflects both direct screening and expanded screening capacity through partner systems. When screenings identified concerns—over half of ASQ-3 screenings and roughly one-quarter of ASQ-SE screenings—families received follow-up and referral support. The introduction of screening through additional access points—including the newborn bundle box[11] distribution and partner-administered screenings—further broadened reach. **Together, these trends indicate that screening has become more accessible and more embedded in family touchpoints across the state.**

Screening volume expanded significantly during the grant period:



Family Knowledge and Advocacy

At Build & Bloom events, **100% of attending parents reported increased awareness of community resources,** and 89% reported improved understanding of how play supports development (HMG Maine 2023 Annual Report, parent interview). Families' growing preference for ongoing navigation support, along with declining barriers and increased service connection rates, suggests improvements not only in service access but in families' ability to engage effectively with providers. **The closed-loop communication model—in which screening and referral outcomes were shared with referring providers in 85% of consented cases—reduced duplication and supported continuity across systems**.

How did Help Me Grow contribute to building a stronger early childhood service system?

For most PDG-R initiatives, collaborations and system building are distinct topics—partnerships support the work, and system-level changes emerge from it. For Help Me Grow, they are inseparable. Because HMG Maine connects families to existing services rather than delivering them directly, its partnerships are not supplementary; they are the mechanism by which the initiative operates and systems change. A collaboration with the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program—serving low-income families with young children—functions at once as a referral relationship, a screening strategy, and a structural change in how developmental monitoring reaches families statewide. This section, therefore, presents HMG Maine's collaborations and system-building contributions together, reflecting how the initiative functioned in practice.

[11]Bundle boxes are packages of Help Me Grow informational materials—including Maine Access Guides, developmental milestone resources, and information about HMG services—assembled for distribution to families of newborns through partner organizations.

Over the grant period, HMG Maine built partnerships that strengthened referral pathways, expanded access to screening, and generated data to inform policy and funding decisions. The table below summarizes how needs identified through HMG Maine's work with families led to coordinated partnerships and system-level responses.

Table 1. HMG Partnerships and System-Level Results

What HMG Identified	Partner	What Changed
Screening access is limited in community benefit settings.	WIC	Statewide text-based ASQ invitations in all available languages; 221 screenings in one quarter; recurring twice-yearly mechanism for future collaboration
Screening capacity was concentrated within the HMG Maine staff.	6 early care and education centers	ASQ training and screening kits provided; providers now screening independently
Developmental screening and follow-up is not embedded consistently in the healthcare workflow.	HealthReach / Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs)	Collaboration with HealthReach, ASQ training, and workflow/policy support for all providers in the network
Car seat safety is a significant basic need.	Bureau of Highway Safety	5 HMG Maine staff certified Child Passenger Safety Technicians; 150 car seats distributed statewide
Communication gaps exist between families and providers.	Community Leader Taskforce	20 representatives from 12 communities; videos about targeted topics created and posted on YouTube in 10 languages; outreach strategy advising
Delays and documentation barriers in referral pathways are a concern.	Child Development Services / Child Care Affordability Program /HeadStart	Streamlined workflows; reduced waitlist delays
Diapers are a top unmet basic need.	Maine Community Action Partnership	$1M diaper distribution grant
Families are unaware of HMG Maine at birth.	United Way	1,417 newborns reached through Bundle box distribution
Behavioral health waitlists are a significant barrier for families.	MaineCare/RUBI	RUBI pilot initiated; continued advocacy for early intervention policy development
There is a need for provider coordination.	Healthcare providers	3,779 provider contacts; 85% closed-loop communication rate with referring providers
There is a need for data-informed decision-making.	Children's Cabinet/ Maine Centers for Disease Control (CDC)/Behavioral Health	Data shared with Children's Cabinet, Maine CDC, and community partners statewide to support local needs assessment

These examples illustrate how real-time data-informed policy, funding, and infrastructure decisions extend beyond direct service delivery. In addition, day-to-day coordination between HMG Maine and partner agencies addressed practical access barriers; for example, collaboration with the Childcare Affordability Program resolved a documentation gap that had kept a family on a waitlist (Staff Focus Group, 2025).

Cross-Sector Coordination and Communication. HMG Maine's position as a centralized access point created communication pathways between systems that had not previously been connected. The closed-loop model formalized information sharing between HMG Maine and healthcare providers. Staff developed direct workflows with Child Development Services (CDS), the Child Care Affordability Program, and Head Start to streamline referrals and reduce the number of steps families needed to navigate independently. The Community Leader Taskforce created a two-way channel between community leaders and service providers, providing advice on communication strategies and increasing community awareness of available supports. In this role, HMG Maine functioned as a connector not only for families but also between the systems that serve them.

Data as a system-building tool. The Maine Legislature required HMG Maine to report on trends and barriers, positioning program data as evidence for state-level decision-making. In January 2025, HMG Maine presented data to the Maine Children's Cabinet. Program data contributed to policy and resource development beyond the initiative itself, including:

- Development of a statewide RUBI behavioral health pilot in response to waitlist data
- A $1 million diaper distribution grant secured by Maine Community Action Partnership
- Ongoing Medicaid early intervention policy development for children who do not meet diagnostic thresholds but demonstrate developmental delays—expanding access during a period of significant early brain plasticity.

Together, these shifts moved developmental screening from an HMG Maine-centered activity toward infrastructure embedded across multiple systems.

National recognition and quality infrastructure. In 2024, Help Me Grow Maine achieved full implementation status within the HMG National Network. Maine served on the 2025 National Affiliate Advisory Board and presented its work nationally. HMG Maine also renewed its STAR database contract and initiated a Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle to strengthen WIC linkage and reinforce continuous quality improvement practices.

Internal Collaboration. Qualitative data indicates that HMG Maine's external partnerships were supported by strong internal coordination. Staff described routinely drawing on one another's expertise in program management, data and policy analysis, community engagement, and direct family support. As one staff member reflected, "I think our team in general, we are doers. We don't sit around and wait…we work together and find a solution that is possible" (Staff Focus Group, 2025). This internal collaboration enabled the initiative to translate data into coordinated system responses.

Together, these partnerships and data-driven responses indicate that HMG Maine functioned not only as a family navigation service but as a contributor to structural change within Maine's early childhood system.

In what ways did Help Me Grow support accessibility and participation for families?

Help Me Grow Maine was designed to be accessible to all families of children from birth to eight across the state. Over the grant period, the initiative expanded both the strategies it used and the populations it reached.

Access

HMG Maine invested in multiple strategies to reduce barriers and meet families where they are. These included staff who provided direct accompaniment to appointments and assistance with paperwork and applications; the Reach My Teach communication platform, enabling staff to connect with families through multiple channels; informational videos and print materials designed to be accessible across a range of needs; and outreach through trusted community settings such as libraries, child care centers, shelters, and family events. As one staff member described:

> **"You know, families are calling us to get help in overcoming the barriers and getting connected every day. They use us, and we go the extra mile. I'll scroll after hours and make sure they have been connected. This is something that we try to do, and we've been successful in closing many cases this way."**

Geographic Reach

Families connected with HMG Maine from all 16 Maine counties, and over half of the counties saw increases in children served from 2023 to 2024. Build & Bloom events were held in Waterville (2023), Presque Isle (2024), and Wiscasset (2025), expanding the geographic footprint of family engagement. Bundle boxes with HMG Maine materials were distributed to 1,417 newborns in five predominantly rural counties. The initiative planned a 2025 outreach focused on rural and underserved areas, using data to identify specific locations. (HMG Maine Annual Reports; HMG Maine 2025 PDG Poster; Monthly Implementation Logs).

Documented barriers to service access declined substantially during the grant period. When barriers were present, staff connected families to alternate services or identified issues that could be resolved. The car seat initiative addressed a basic safety need that families could not easily access through other channels—150 car seats were distributed statewide, with child development packets tailored by age group included with each seat (HMG Maine Annual Reports; HMG 2025 Data Dashboard; Monthly Implementation Logs).

Entry points. HMG Maine maintained multiple pathways for families to connect, including direct parent/caregiver contact, healthcare provider referral, 211 transfer, community provider referral, Child Development Services referral, online ASQ completion, and community outreach events. The top three ways families heard about HMG Maine in 2024 were outreach events (24%), healthcare providers (22%), and Child Development Services (17%), suggesting that both community-based and system-based referral pathways were functioning (HMG Maine 2024 Annual Report).

Sustainability

Several elements of Help Me Grow's design position components of the work to continue beyond the grant period. Screening capacity built within early childhood programs, healthcare providers, and WIC operates independently of direct HMG Maine staffing. The Legislature's requirement that HMG Maine report on statewide trends, along with achievement of full implementation status within the national HMG network, provides institutional anchors that support continued investment and oversight.

At the same time, the sustainability of staffing and dedicated coordination remains dependent on funding decisions. Exploration of alignment with Community Action Programs reflects ongoing efforts to identify shared service models that may strengthen long-term viability.

Lessons Learned

- **Flexibility to respond to emerging needs was a defining strength of HMG Maine's implementation.** The initiative's most impactful activities—the Community Leader Taskforce, the WIC screening partnership—were not part of the original implementation plan. They emerged because staff had internal communication and institutional support to act on what they were learning from families. Initiatives that build in room for adaptive response may achieve outcomes beyond their original design.
- **Ongoing data collection enabled system-level advocacy, not just program management**. HMG's use of the STAR system to track trends and barriers in real time drove the RUBI pilot, the Maine Community Action Partnership diaper grant, and the Medicaid early intervention policy work. Programs that collect and use data continuously can function as early warning systems for the broader service landscape.
- **Building capacity in partner systems proved more scalable than expanding direct service.** Training early care and education centers, Federally Qualified Health Centers and WIC to administer screenings and connect families independently created an infrastructure that persists regardless of HMG Maine's grant status. Investing in partner capacity extends reach without requiring proportional growth in staffing.
- **Families' needs were broader than developmental screening alone.** The growth in basic needs and caregiver support contacts underscores the importance of centralized access points that connect families across multiple service domains, not just child development.
- **Strong internal teamwork was foundational to every external success**. Staff with diverse expertise drew on each other's knowledge daily, solving problems in the moment rather than through formal channels. As one staff member reflected: "I hope that this work shows the value of this kind of staffing, and that funders can see that accessibility is so much more improved with their help" (Staff Focus Group, 2025).

Summary

Help Me Grow Maine grew from a newly launched centralized access point in 2022 to a fully implemented, nationally recognized system serving nearly 1,000 children per year across all 16 counties. During the PDG-R period, the initiative increased the number of families served, improved service connection rates, reduced documented barriers from 13% to 4%, and more than quadrupled developmental screening volume. Families increasingly engaged in ongoing care coordination, and screening became accessible across multiple community entry points—early care and education centers, Federally Qualified Health Centers, and WIC.

Beyond direct service outcomes, HMG Maine's data and partnerships drove concrete changes in the broader system—contributing to: a potential Medicaid early intervention policy, a $1 million diaper-distribution grant, and a behavioral health pilot. The initiative's responsiveness—adapting its activities based on what families actually needed—was a defining feature of its implementation and a key contributor to its results. Elements of this work, particularly the screening infrastructure embedded in other systems and the data reporting mandate from the Legislature, are positioned to continue beyond the PDG-R grant period.

Inclusionary Practices

Building Educator Capacity for Inclusive Practice Across Maine's Early Childhood System

Performance period 04/2024–12/2025

Professional development focused on inclusive practice is a critical component of early childhood system building, particularly as Maine continues to strengthen its mixed-delivery system[12] and expand access to learning environments that support all children. Educators across settings—including public schools, Head Start programs, and community-based early childhood programs—are called upon to serve children with diverse learning needs, cultural backgrounds, and developmental profiles. Effective inclusion requires more than awareness of special education processes; it depends on shared understanding of inclusive principles, reflective practice, and shared responsibility for implementing practical strategies that support participation, belonging, and learning for all children.

To support this work, a set of **inclusion-focused professional learning opportunities** was developed and offered through Maine's Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R). Designed and implemented by the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN), in collaboration with the Maine Department of Education (DOE) and the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Office of Child and Family Services, the initiative provided multiple learning pathways at no cost to early childhood educators. The offerings were intentionally structured to vary in intensity and time commitment, allowing educators to engage at different entry points while building toward a shared foundation of inclusive practice across Maine's early childhood system.

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 participation records, educator feedback, interviews with initiative leads, and implementation documentation, the report examines the Inclusive Education Professional Growth Opportunities with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including educator-reported changes in understanding of inclusive practice and early examples of application in classroom and program settings.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including dialogue across roles and settings within Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system.
- **System building,** including contributions to shared understanding of inclusion, professional norms, and early relational connections across the field.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitated participation, identified barriers to engagement, and lessons learned from implementation.

Data sources for this report include recruitment materials; interviews with state and MRTQ PDN lead staff (Andie Faurot, Jordan Detwiler-Michelson, Lorie Moses, Lee Lingelbach, Shilo Johnson, Jennifer Maeverde); implementation report; monthly reports; interviews/communications with participants (based on those responding to MRTQ PDN about willingness to participate), excerpts from Book Club end-of-series feedback, observation of Book Club.

[12]Maine defines mixed delivery early care and education (ECE) as the coordinated effort to support early childhood services and programming across a range of settings to help meet the varied needs of children and families

To support inclusion in Maine's early learning programs, four professional development opportunities were designed and offered through the Preschool Development Grant, made available at no cost to early educators. The initiative was offered by the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN) in collaboration with the Maine Department of Education (DOE) and the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Office of Child and Family Services.

The offerings varied in time demand and were designed to work together incrementally to build knowledge and skills. The Inclusion Book Club was based on virtual group discussions of *Inclusion Includes Us*[13] . Three sections of the six-week series were offered to accommodate different schedules.

The micro-credential is offered by the University of Maine System and includes training modules developed by the Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies (CCIDS) at the University of Maine. The Inclusion Credential is competency-based and requires prerequisites for education; cohort participation was encouraged.

MRTQ PDN assembled a technical assistance team composed of individuals with experience and backgrounds in special education and inclusion to facilitate training sessions and provide support to cohorts.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES FEATURES

Four professional learning pathways designed to support inclusive practice at varying levels of intensity and time commitment:

- **Inclusion Book Club**
- **On-demand inclusion training modules**
- **Inclusion micro-credential** (on-demand modules with an in-person application session)
- **Maine Inclusion Credential** (competency-based credential requiring 72 hours of training, demonstration of competencies, and an observation/interview)

Credential content areas aligned with evidence-based inclusive practice, including:

- Access, participation, and supports
- Child development and learning
- Curriculum, assessment, instruction, and learning environments
- Building relationships with children and families
- Professionalism

What was the impact of the inclusive education professional learning opportunities?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported professional learning initiatives is essential to assessing whether investments are supporting meaningful change in educator understanding and practice. For inclusion-focused professional learning, impact is reflected not only in participation levels

[13]Huber, Mike (2023). Inclusion Includes Us: Building bridges and removing barriers in early childhood classrooms. St. Paul: Redleaf Press.

but also in early indicators of learning, confidence, and application within classroom and program settings.

The structure and implementation of the inclusive education professional learning opportunities reflect several **intended outcomes**, including:

- **Educators engaged across all available professional learning pathways**, taking advantage of multiple formats offered to accommodate differing roles, time availability, and levels of commitment.
- **Increased educator understanding of inclusive practice**, broadly defined to include access, participation, and belonging for children with diverse learning needs, cultural backgrounds, and developmental profiles.
- **Improved educator confidence and readiness** to reflect on and apply inclusive strategies within classroom and program settings.

The sections that follow examine educator engagement across the four pathways and evidence of early outcomes, drawing on participation data, self-reported outcomes, and qualitative feedback from participants.

Because participation and outcome data were most robust for the Inclusion Book Club during the performance period, the impact analysis focuses primarily on this pathway, while findings related to the other professional development options are addressed in sections on engagement, access, system building, and sustainability.

Educator Engagement Across Professional Learning Pathways

The different professional learning pathways were intended to accommodate varying bandwidth levels and teacher interests. During the performance period, participation varied across pathways, with the Inclusion Book Club generating the highest level of engagement. **Table 1** summarizes participation by pathway.

Participation by Pathway

Four options	Number participating
Inclusion Book Club	42 in 3 cohorts
On-demand training modules	30 participated in Level 1 23 participated in Level 2
Inclusion micro-credential	30 achieved prerequisites, but none earned the credential
Maine Inclusion Credential	5 participated; one earned a credential

Participation patterns indicate that the Inclusion Book Club attracted the highest level of engagement. Participation in the credential pathways was more limited during the performance period. MRTQ PDN leaders described using lessons learned from the rollout and implementation of the credential options to inform adjustments to future professional development offerings (discussed further below).

Educators and administrators who participated in the Inclusion Book Club were motivated by a range of personal and professional experiences. One center director noted that she was "looking for different things to try," while another described her own experiences as the mother of a child with a disability. An elementary principal described long-standing frustration with the practice of removing children with special needs from classrooms, limiting access to peer learning, and reinforcing stigma. Other participants reported seeking information and language to help them engage supervisors in conversations about the importance of inclusive practice.

What was the impact of the Inclusion Book Club?

Changes in Educator Knowledge and Confidence

Participants reported increased knowledge and confidence in inclusive practice as a result of participating in the Inclusion Book Club. In a follow-up survey conducted by MRTQ PDN, **100% of respondents reported an increase in knowledge about inclusion, and 95% reported increased confidence in creating an inclusive culture** based on the book study content (survey respondents: N = 20; response rate = 67%). Initiative leads also noted that interest in the Book Club spread through word of mouth, and subsequent cohorts continued to fill.

Shifts in Understanding of Inclusive Practice

Book Club focus group participants emphasized the insights they gained, both from the readings and especially from the peer discussions.

Participants first described broad shifts in perspective related to adult mindset and the role of inclusive practice in supporting all children:

> **"It gave me a lot of insight into managing diverse personalities and challenging behaviors. Inclusionary practice makes everyone feel important."**
>
> **"We're in a different time, and the way we need to think about children is different."**

Several participants noted that the Book Club expanded their understanding of inclusion beyond disability-focused definitions to encompass culture, religion, and the full range of children's identities and experiences:

> **"My eyes were opened . . . . I learned that inclusion isn't just for children with disabilities but those from various cultures and with different religious backgrounds. Inclusion affects the whole spectrum."**
>
> **"Book talks get you thinking. What all our specialists' teachers are doing with individuals is good for the whole classroom to experience."**

Participants also reflected on increased awareness of family context and the importance of remaining open and responsive to families' experiences and perspectives:

> **"Being open to the idea that every family is different. I should be open to learning and growing with my kids."**

In addition, educators described gaining new understanding related to children's emotional regulation and the importance of identifying underlying causes of behavior and responding proactively:

> **"One thing that stayed with me was the information on dysregulation. We, as the child's village (parents, family, teachers, service providers, etc.), need to help figure out what is causing the dysregulation, and try to teach the child strategies to help them self-regulate. We need to figure out the triggers so we can pre-teach and help prevent them."**

Finally, participants described a shift toward viewing inclusion as a universal approach that should be intentionally modeled and embedded across classrooms and programs, rather than applied only in response to individual needs:

> **"I believe one takeaway that I have from the book study was intentional modeling for my staff how to create a more universal approach to inclusion. Often, in our setting, we have focused on ways to include our learners, but we haven't focused on making that holistic and natural."**

Participants were eager to discuss the need to emphasize that inclusivity goes well beyond children with special needs, relating examples of children affected by traumatic events and experiencing emotional and mental crises. They also emphasized the importance of cultural inclusion in early childhood education, highlighting the benefits of bridging cultural gaps between children and staff. Book Club participants felt supported and encouraged to pursue additional training, including the Maine Inclusion Credential.

Early Application of Inclusive Practices

Several participants described applying what they had learned to **strengthen relationships with families and increase cultural responsiveness at the program level**. One center director reported adding questions to the child enrollment process to learn more about families' cultural backgrounds; she noted that families in her program include African, Brazilian, Asian, Latino, and French communities. A teacher in an out-of-school program described creating a list of her students' positive qualities.

A center director described **having open conversations with families** about children who may need extra help. She explained that families quickly pick up a child who is different, and they can help their own children learn to include all children.

The school principal shared that **parents have been supportive of more inclusive classrooms**, noting significant improvements in their children's classroom experiences, higher-quality instruction, and overall happiness. He also described the challenge of convincing teachers and special educators of the value of inclusion**. Participation in peer discussions**, such as those held during the Book Club,

provides an avenue for collaborative sharing of experiences, which he believes is essential for changing perspectives.

A pre-K teacher was introduced to Polyvagal Theory during the Book Club, was motivated to attend two Regulated Classroom trainings, and has been **using the techniques in her classroom**. A teacher of infants and toddlers was reinforced to individualize her strategies based on what she learns from parents about children's strengths. A preschool coordinator described how she has worked to **identify her own biases through reflection** and worked with her staff to do the same.

How did the inclusive education professional learning opportunities support collaboration and shared understanding across the early childhood system?

Communication and collaboration within PDG-R initiatives are reflected in opportunities for shared learning, dialogue across roles and settings, and informal connections that support common understanding over time. Within the inclusive education professional learning opportunities, evidence related to communication and collaboration was most apparent in formats that emphasized facilitated discussion and peer interaction.

Participants emphasized the value of **interaction with peers from diverse backgrounds and roles,** noting that **sharing stories and experiences was a highlight** of the learning experience. Several participants remarked on the importance of the **mix of directors, principals, and teachers across age groups, noting** that the Inclusion Book Club was a **model of inclusiveness among adults**. One participant noted, "We don't have enough opportunities to do things as a group," underscoring the role of discussion-based professional learning in supporting communication across roles.

Participants described **peer discussions**, such as those held during the Book Club, as providing **an avenue for the collaborative sharing of experiences, which they viewed as essential for changing perspectives on** inclusive practice. Participants also reported feeling **supported and encouraged to pursue additional training**, including the Maine Inclusion Credential, and more comfortable engaging in conversations about inclusion within their programs or schools.

How has the inclusive education initiative contributed to system building? What is its role in a mixed-delivery system, and will it continue?

In addition to influencing educator learning and practice, PDG-supported inclusion education initiatives are examined for their contributions to broader system conditions, including **shared understanding, alignment, and access to guidance across Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system.** For inclusion-focused professional learning offered through multiple pathways, system-building contributions are most often reflected in **the development of shared language, clarified understanding of inclusive practice, and relational connections across roles and settings**, rather than in formal coordination structures or policy changes.

The MRTQ PDN team emphasized the importance of inclusion education as a component of system building, particularly for child care providers. They noted that educators often **misconceive inclusion**

as synonymous with special education, rather than as a broader framework for supporting access, participation, and belonging for all children.

Participants and initiative leads described inclusion education as a topic that **brings together professionals from various fields**, making it especially relevant within Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system. In this context, inclusion education supported shared understanding across roles and settings by emphasizing universal approaches to practice. As one participant noted, **universal design can reach all children**, including those whose needs may not have been previously identified.

Together, these perspectives suggest that inclusion-focused professional learning contributed to early system-building conditions by clarifying the purpose of inclusion education and reinforcing its relevance across child care, Head Start, and public-school settings. While this work did not establish formal coordination structures, it supported shared language and understanding that can inform future alignment across the early childhood system.

Sustainability and Continuation

All-inclusive education offerings are planned to move forward beyond the performance period, though in some cases in a modified form and under specific conditions.

Steps are underway to **continue the inclusion offerings in a modified form.** The facilitators of the Inclusion Book Club are interested in continuing with additional cohorts, although funding would need to be located for textbooks. The **micro-credential is still being offered** with current take-up from school districts. MRTQ PDN intends to **continue offering the Inclusion Credential** with the goal of increasing participation from school staff as more districts move toward the **FAPE[14] transition**. The credential is also included in the teacher apprenticeship program.

In what ways did design and implementation affect participation and access across the inclusive education pathways?

In examining PDG-supported professional learning initiatives, supports and access are considered in relation to how design and implementation features shape participation. Because the inclusion education initiative offered professional learning **through multiple formats with differing levels of intensity, participation varied across pathways during the performance period**. Examining supports and access, therefore, provides important context for understanding engagement patterns and why educator-level impact was more evident in some formats than others. This section focuses on design features that **supported participation** and on **barriers that limited access and completion**, drawing on participation data, implementation observations, and reflections from MRTQ PDN leaders.

Design Features That Supported Access to the Inclusion Book Club

Participants appreciated the **facilitation, peer interactions, and pace**. The design of the Inclusion Book Club hit the right notes for participants. The opportunity for **interaction with peers from diverse backgrounds and roles** was very appealing. **Sharing stories and experiences** was a highlight. As one

[14]Free Appropriate Public Education

remarked, "We don't have enough opportunities to do things as a group," noting that in-person trainings are rare post-COVID. While asynchronous training modules can be convenient, participants miss the person-to-person interaction. Several remarked on the value of the **mix of directors, principals, and teachers across different age levels, observing that the Book Club was a model of adult inclusiveness.**

Facilitators received high marks for their input and the **pace of learning. Focusing on one chapter of the book at a time** allowed time to process and reflect. **Options for different time blocks** accommodated the needs of varied role groups. In an observation of one of the sessions, the evaluators saw a lively discussion. Facilitators started with **clear ground rules** and invited participation with open-ended questions; they intentionally linked the discussion to the book chapters and shared personal experiences, which set the stage for a notably high level of engagement. The participants seemed very comfortable sharing their experiences and feelings about what they read.

The text that served as the basis for the Book Club provided **a solid foundation for the discussions**, with each chapter serving as background for **application in early learning settings**. The major chapters focused on:

- Definitions: physical, informational, attitudinal, and cultural barriers
- Rethinking diversity: strengths, needs, and preferences
- Self-reflection on one's culture and abilities; managing stress
- The variety of experts in early childhood, including family and community
- Application in the classroom: proactive, global, and individual strategies

Barriers to Participation in Credential-Based Professional Learning Pathways

Recruitment efforts fell short, and the **demands of earning the credential within the allotted time seemed daunting**. MRTQ PDN faced recruitment challenges due to limited registration time. Further, the registration information for the Inclusion Credential **did not include details on the availability of stipends** that accompany the training. While MRTQ PDN leaders anticipated 10-15 applicants for the Maine Inclusion Credential, they speculated that the **short timeline did not allow participants to fully commit** to both the training and the credential process, such as preparing a portfolio.

MRTQ PDN leaders described **lessons learned from the rollout and are applying them** to other professional development offerings.

Apart from allowing **sufficient lead time**, the MRTQ PDN staff also recognizes the need to employ **multiple entry points and levels of professional development to meet diverse needs**. Recruitment success depends on a variety of methods, including **state agency promotions, newsletter announcements, and facilitated connections** made by the MRTQ PDN ECE Program Quality Specialists. Above all, they stress the importance of coordination across **methods, messages, and staff**.

To promote greater understanding of the steps and time required to complete the Maine Inclusion Credential, MRTQ PDN is working to **break the credential-earning process into more easily recognized phases.** For a different credential (family child care), MRTQ PDN is developing a "start to finish" framework that schedules the required training over a two-year period, with built-in time to

develop the portfolios used to verify competencies. The lesson learned is about conceptualizing the learning process over time, building and documenting knowledge and skills incrementally. They cited **the Leading Early Learning series as a good example to emulate**. To support peer learning with the micro-credential, consider adding a community of practice to foster skill development and knowledge application.

Lessons Learned

- **Low-barrier formats generated the strongest participation.** The Inclusion Book Club—virtual, discussion-based, no prerequisites—attracted the highest engagement across all four pathways. Credential-based options drew significantly fewer participants, suggesting that the level of commitment and clarity of expectations influenced uptake more than topic relevance.
- **Recruitment for credential pathways requires sufficient lead time and transparent information about requirements**. Registration timelines were too compressed, and initial communications did not include details about prerequisites, time commitment, or the credential-earning process. MRTQ PDN is now developing phased frameworks that break credential processes into recognizable steps.
- **Cross-role participation enriched the learning experience.** The mix of directors, principals, and teachers of different age groups within the same cohort was consistently described as a strength. Participants valued learning from peers in different settings and roles, thereby supporting the broader application of inclusive practices.
- **Educators' understanding of inclusion expanded beyond disability when given structured opportunities for reflection.** Participants entered with inclusion largely framed as special education; through facilitated discussion, many described a shift toward viewing inclusion as encompassing the full range of children's identities, experiences, and family contexts.

Summary

The inclusion education initiative offered four professional learning pathways of varying intensity to support educators across Maine's mixed-delivery system. Across pathways, 71 educators participated during the performance period, with the Inclusion Book Club generating the strongest engagement. Credential-based pathways drew more limited participation. MRTQ PDN leaders are committed to continuing inclusion credential pathways and are applying lessons from this experience to future professional development strategies.

Kindergarten Entry Inventory (KEI) Pilot

Testing Kindergarten Readiness Tools to Inform Statewide Decision-Making

Performance period Summer April 2024–December 2025

Kindergarten Entry Inventories (KEIs) provide snapshots of children's learning and development as they enter school. This information can be useful for teachers planning instruction and for schools and districts as they prepare for and allocate resources to align with students' strengths and needs at the beginning of kindergarten. KEIs are intended to gather information during children's first year of public school that can inform instructional practice and provide insight into children's development across domains, offering a lens on the years leading up to kindergarten entry.

The **Kindergarten Entry Inventory (KEI) pilot** addressed a gap identified by the Children's Cabinet in Maine's early learning system: the absence of a consistent way to gather information about children as they enter kindergarten. While KEIs are used in many states, Maine lacked a shared approach for understanding children's strengths and needs at the beginning of their first year of public school. The pilot was designed to draw on teachers' experiences using kindergarten entry tools to inform recommendations about which approaches would best meet instructional needs and support future state decision making.

This report presents key findings from Maine's KEI pilot, offering insights to guide future system building and policy decisions based on fall 2025 assessment data:

- **Impact**, including teacher-reported value of kindergarten entry tools and their usefulness for understanding students' strengths and needs at kindergarten entry.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including collaboration through the KEI advisory group.
- **System building**, including implications for future state decisions on assessment, data use, and infrastructure, underscores the commitment to strengthening early learning systems, encouraging stakeholders to see their role in shaping the future.
- **Supports and access**, including participation, training, and implementation considerations identified during the pilot.

Data sources for this report include: a nationwide scan of kindergarten entry inventory tools; teacher and administrator surveys in spring 2024; teacher item-testing surveys for 2024-25; a post-pilot teacher survey in 2025; KEI Advisory Group input; and feedback from the state initiative lead and project manager.

The pilot took a systematic approach to reviewing available kindergarten entry inventory (KEI) tools and teacher feedback on them. The state engaged WestEd to provide technical assistance for implementing the KEI pilot. WestEd conducted a nationwide scan of states' use of KEI tools and a survey of teachers and school leaders on their current practices. Based on these findings, three widely used tools were identified for initial item testing during the 2024–25 academic year: the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), Teaching Strategies Gold (TS Gold), and the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA).

Teachers tested items drawn from these tools and provided feedback on their experience using them through surveys developed by WestEd, who analyzed and presented findings to the KEI Advisory Group.

Based on teacher feedback, the KEI Advisory Group selected tools for pilot testing in fall 2025. The Advisory Group moved forward with a pilot of Teaching Strategies Gold, the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment, and Teaching Strategies Gold, adding the FINCH tool to reflect interest in including a direct assessment via technology alongside teacher observation. Eighty-seven kindergarten teachers participated in the fall 2025 pilot and used the assigned tools during the assessment window.

At the end of the fall 2025 assessment cycle, teachers participating in the pilot completed an extensive survey to provide feedback on the training, use, and interpretation of the KEI tools. Findings from the survey were provided to the KEI Advisory Group in early December and were discussed during the Advisory Group's December 10, 2025, meeting.

KEI PILOT FEATURES

WestEd supported the state team and the KEI Advisory Group, including developing tools to collect feedback from teachers and analyzing and presenting findings to inform Advisory Group discussion.

During the 2024–25 academic year, teachers tested items drawn from three commonly used KEI tools—**Teaching Strategies Gold (TS Gold), the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA), and the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP)**—and rated them across multiple design and use criteria.

Based on teacher feedback, the **Advisory Group selected tools for pilot testing in fall 2025**, including Teaching Strategies Gold, the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment, and Teaching Strategies Gold with the addition of the FINCH tool.

87 kindergarten teachers participated in the fall 2025 pilot, using the selected tools; 81 teachers completed extensive surveys addressing training, use, and coverage.

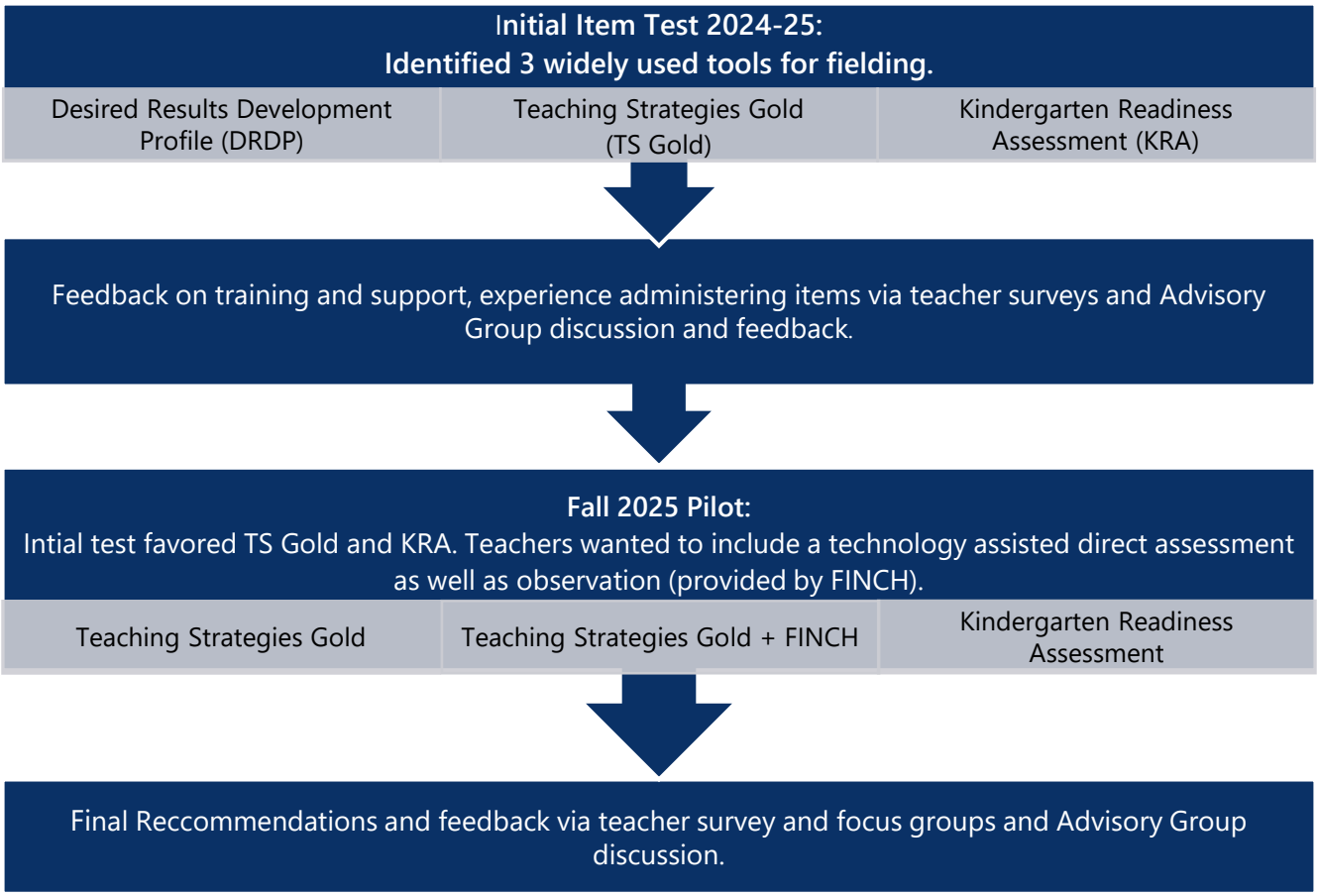
What was the impact of the learning series?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives requires assessing whether investments supported their intended purpose. For the Kindergarten Entry Inventory (KEI) pilot, the **intended outcome was regarding kindergarten entry inventory selection.**

Consistent with PDG-R expectations for pilot initiatives, impact is understood here as changes in classroom practice or statewide implementation.

For the KEI pilot, impact is defined by whether teacher experience was systematically gathered **and used to inform state-level decision-making**. The pilot was intentionally designed to incorporate teacher input at multiple stages, ensuring that the evidence used to inform state-level deliberation was grounded in classroom experience and elevating practitioner perspectives as a core input into tool comparison and selection.

Overview of the KEI item testing and pilot process, 2024-2025



Teacher survey results and qualitative feedback were reviewed by the KEI Advisory Group and used to differentiate among tools on dimensions most directly related to classroom use, interpretation, and instructional relevance. Teacher experience was drawn from 87 kindergarten teachers who participated across multiple phases of the pilot, including item testing, pilot use, and post-pilot feedback.

Across all tools, teacher survey data indicate that kindergarten entry inventories provided useful information about students' strengths and needs at the beginning of the school year. Between **95–100%** of teachers agreed that the KEI they used:

> **"[KEI] provides information that helps me understand my students' strengths and needs."**
>
> **"[KEI] helps me identify areas where many of my students may need additional support or enrichment."**

These findings indicate that teachers viewed KEI information as instructionally relevant, regardless of the tool used. through the pilot. This alignment strengthened teachers' confidence in using KEI information to support early instructional planning.

Differentiating Among Tools Based on Teacher-Reported Evidence

Across tools, teachers reported that the KEI they used provided useful information about students' strengths and needs at kindergarten entry. At the same time, convergence across multiple teacher-reported measures differentiated the tools tested, with the **Kindergarten Readiness Assessment** rated more favorably overall than the others.

Although the pilot was not designed to measure instructional change, teacher and state lead reflections suggest early signals regarding how KEI information may shape instructional priorities if implemented.

> **"A better understanding of whole child development will impact what you see in a kindergarten classroom—more playful learning, more opportunities for children to choose what they're doing."**

These reflections represent early signals of how KEI information may shape instructional priorities rather than evidence of measured instructional change. Findings were reviewed by the KEI Advisory Group and deliberations were discussed alongside other considerations, such as cost, licensing, and local decision-making. Taken together, these elements demonstrate that the pilot succeeded in its intended purpose: ensuring that teacher experience meaningfully informed the comparative evidence used for state-level deliberation.

How did the KEI Pilot Build Collaborations?

The KEI pilot supported communication and coordination so that evidence generated through the pilot could be shared, interpreted, and used across roles and agencies involved in early learning decision-making.

The primary vehicle for collaboration was the Advisory Group of 25 individuals, including state agency staff from multiple offices, district leaders, higher education representatives, and kindergarten teachers. This group met regularly to review information generated at each stage of the pilot, including findings from item testing, pilot implementation, and teacher surveys, and provided advice on key decisions. Teacher-reported data were used to examine tool characteristics, emerging patterns across responses, and considerations relevant to future state-level decision-making. Through this structure, information flowed from classrooms to decision-makers in a coordinated and intentional way.

How has KEI contributed to building a strong statewide early learning system?

A central feature of PDG-R is supporting states to build a more coherent and robust early childhood system. The KEI pilot contributed to this work by highlighting the role that a KEI can play within the early learning system and supporting a more consistent understanding of children's learning and development as they enter school.

Teachers reported that all the tools they worked with provided information about children's learning and development that aligned with standards and should align with curriculum and instructional practice.

State leads also noted some longer-term needs highlighted by the KEI that reached across the system. For example, the state leads noted that building and district leaders will need support navigating contracting KEI tools and data agreements, as necessary. In addition, there will need to be a system to capture data and then make it accessible to teachers, schools, and policymakers. Finally, they noted the need to ensure that the use of KEI tools is part of teacher preparation programs, alongside general assessment and pedagogy.

Sustainability and Next Steps

The KEI pilot met its primary goal of capturing kindergarten teacher feedback on specific tools. Recommendations from the pilot will be presented to the Children's Cabinet, which will determine the next steps. While the data from the pilot are clear with regard to tools, training, and support for teachers, the state lead noted a series of questions yet to be addressed:

- Does the state expect all schools to participate or a sampling of schools?
- Is participation in the KEI voluntary or required?
- Is there a phased-in approach? The state lead noted, based upon their experience with the pilot, "…training every kindergarten teacher in the state to be ready to do this in the same year might be a little bit over the top."

According to the lead, there are some longer-term system needs to address should a KEI be introduced, including:

- Supporting building leaders and curriculum specialists (groups that were not a large part of the pilot) in navigating contracting KEI tools and data agreements, as necessary.
- Building a system to capture data and then make it accessible to teachers, schools, and policy-makers.
- Ensuring that using KEI tools is built into teacher preparation programs.

In what ways did the design of the KEI pilot support teacher participation and access?

Statewide, Kindergarten teachers were recruited to serve as the primary implementation group in the KEI pilot. The design of the pilot emphasized participation and access by centering kindergarten teachers—the intended end users of KEI tools—in item testing, pilot use, and structured feedback activities. Teachers received stipends to support their time spent in training, data collection, and related pilot activities, reducing participation barriers and encouraging sustained engagement. While teachers reported varying experiences across tools in surveys, the pilot design ensured that educators from across the state could meaningfully participate in the evaluation process.

What did we learn?

- **The Pilot benefited from contracted support.** The state contracted with WestED to support the work. This was described as essential by the state leaders, one of whom reported "… We would not, I don't think, be as far along with it, and we would probably not have been able to continue doing this without a level of support from them." In addition to support for Advisory Group meetings, WestED staff presented a national scan to the Advisory Group. They also managed data at each stage of the pilots, analyzing data and helping to "see patterns, trends, what's important for us to tease out of what we're collecting."
- **The KEI development initiative benefited greatly from its Advisory Group.** The advisory group met regularly, and each meeting had clearly defined goals – often discussing information sent to members ahead of the meeting to provide feedback and guidance at critical points. There is clear evidence that this group provided feedback to teacher surveys used during the testing and piloting periods, with at least 5 items added to the KEI pilot teacher survey that had not been included in the initial draft shared.
- **The power of teacher voice.** State lead Larsen pointed to the power the pilot project gave to teachers. Teachers in the pilot, she said, "it brought to life a little bit what a KEI is really designed to do…" At each step, their survey responses were critical data to inform decisions on next steps. Through surveys and focus groups. Teachers described how they learn about their students, share that information with families and administrators, and use it in IEP meetings. Furthermore, because teachers were also part of the Advisory Group, they had the opportunity to speak directly to decision-makers.
- **The pilot highlighted the need to focus on the time required to negotiate contracts with vendors and to develop data-sharing agreements as needed.** The state leads voiced surprise at how long contract negotiations could take. Indeed, for one tool, this process required a change to the project schedule so that the initial KEI item testing occurred entirely in the 2024-25 academic year. These delays also affected item testing: delays in completing the contract for use and in teacher and teacher training on using the KRA meant teachers had a shorter window for conducting the assessment with their students (by about half).

Summary

Kindergarten Entry Inventories (KEIs) provide snapshots of children's learning and development as they enter school. This can be useful information for teachers planning instruction aligned with students' strengths and needs as they enter school, and it can help prepare schools for children. The KEI pilot was a systematic process to gather teacher feedback on specific tools through a series of item and tool tests to inform critical decisions the state must make if it chooses to implement a KEI in the future.

Leading Early Learning

Maine's Statewide Professional Learning Series for Pre-K–3 Leaders

Performance period 10/2021–4/2026

Professional development (PD) for early childhood system building is a key component in training leaders, administrators, and educators and equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to create a more integrated, equitable, and effective early childhood education (ECE) and care infrastructure. The best PD provides practitioners with coherent, interrelated, and continuous learning activities aligned with the science of child development

Leading Early Learning is a professional learning series designed to build elementary administrators' understanding of the components of evidence-based, high-quality early childhood (Pre-K-3) learning environments and developmentally appropriate instructional practices. The series intends to build leadership skills to support young children, teachers, and families and was initiated through a partnership between the Maine Department of Education, Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network, the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children (MAEYC), and the Maine Principals Association (first year only). The Department of Education's initiative lead, Lee Anne Larsen, Director of Early Learning, attended all sessions.

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 Leading Early Learning initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact,** including intended outcomes, participant-reported changes in confidence and leadership practice, self-reported changes in practice, and learning activities identified as most influential in driving change.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including collaboration among statewide partners and local school- and community-based stakeholders.
- **System building**, including early system-building contributions related to participants' understanding of the broader early childhood landscape and their roles within it.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitated participation, adaptations made to support engagement, and barriers identified by participants.

Data sources for this report include recruitment materials, pre- and post-surveys of participants in 3 cohorts, a summary report of 3 years of surveys, an interview with the initiative lead, an implementation evaluation report, a focus group of principals, and monthly initiative reports).

The learning series has been offered to 5 cohorts of 20–25 participants each, with most participants completing the whole series. While most participants were school principals, other roles were also represented, including assistant principals, central office administrators, early childhood coordinators, special education administrators, and lead teachers. Over the past 2 years, the steering committee also marketed the series to special education directors, especially those with FAPE responsibilities.[15] One principal in the focus group noted the critical involvement of superintendents and assistant superintendents in messaging about the importance of early learning (it speaks volumes). Engaging as a team was described positively in surveys and interviews.

The series attracted participants from across the state, representing rural and urban areas. The steering committee targeted recruitment to pre-K expansion grantees, districts with First10 grants, and districts entering FAPE transition, and the series has spread in recent years by --word-of-mouth.

The sections that follow examine the outcomes of the Leading Early Learning series, including changes in participants' confidence, leadership practices, and the application of early childhood principles, as well as the initiative's role in supporting collaboration and system-level understanding.

LEADING EARLY LEARNING FEATURES

Approximately **65 education leaders participated during the grant period**, and 100 have participated overall.

Five 4-week learning modules.

Combination of **readings**, **video clips**, **assignments**, and a **professional learning community session**.

Self-designed project to apply learning in local contexts.

Emphasis on **team-based participation**.

Optional gatherings, including participation in the MAEYC annual conference and ongoing professional learning community sessions open to past participants.

Participants paid $200 toward the series cost

Participants earned 40 contact hours.

Topics include **developmental benchmarks**, **using data to improve outcomes**, **classroom observation**, **teacher-child interactions**, **family engagement**, and **inclusive practices**

What was the impact of the learning series?

State and local early care and education (ECE) leaders in Maine, utilizing PDG funds, have developed innovative ideas and ambitious plans to support young children's school readiness and future academic success. These initiatives have the potential to improve the landscape of early childhood education significantly. To ensure that PDG initiatives are successful and sustainable, we need to understand the impact of their investments.

[15]Maine is transitioning responsibility for providing a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) services for preschool age children with disabilities from Child Development Services (CDS) to School Administrative Units (SAUs) by 2028.

The **intended outcomes** of the series were:

- **Increased knowledge** of early childhood development and pedagogy.
- **Strengthened early childhood leadership abilities** within school districts and communities.
- **Access to resources and knowledge** of key components of high-quality early childhood programming.
- **Networking among colleagues** to build an understanding of early childhood education.

Initiative lead Larsen emphasized the goal of increasing participants' confidence in their leadership roles in preK–3, enabling them to support early learning teachers and apply their knowledge in working with families and community partners.

> **Data from surveys and interviews show that intended outcomes were met. In the postsurvey of 3 cohorts, 100% of participants reported they would recommend the series to colleagues.**

MAJOR CHANGES PARTICIPANTS MADE

- **Advocacy for play-based and developmentally appropriate practice**

  INCREASED KNOWLEDGE OF DEVELOPMENT

- **Supporting teachers and serving as an instructional leader**

  INCREASED CONFIDENCE AS A LEADER

- **Employing new resources such as the Yardsticks text[1] and observation protocols**

  ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Leadership Application in Practice

Participants in the focus group emphasized learning what to look for during observations and how to interpret what they see and hear from children and teachers. Several principals whose previous roles had been in the intermediate or middle grades described the "eye-opening" experiences of guided observations.

> **"This helped me take what I was learning while establishing myself as a leader—information I could share with staff and use to lead professional development."**

Participants also described increased confidence in their ability to support and evaluate pre-K programs as a whole, including curriculum and learning expectations, classroom practices, and connections with families and the community.

> **"I gained a better understanding of how, as the administrator, I can both support and evaluate the pre-K program as a whole. This includes the relevant learning and curriculum, classroom practices, and connecting with families and the community."**

Professional Networking and Continued Collaboration

An unexpected outcome for participants was the strong appreciation for and continuation of networking among colleagues.

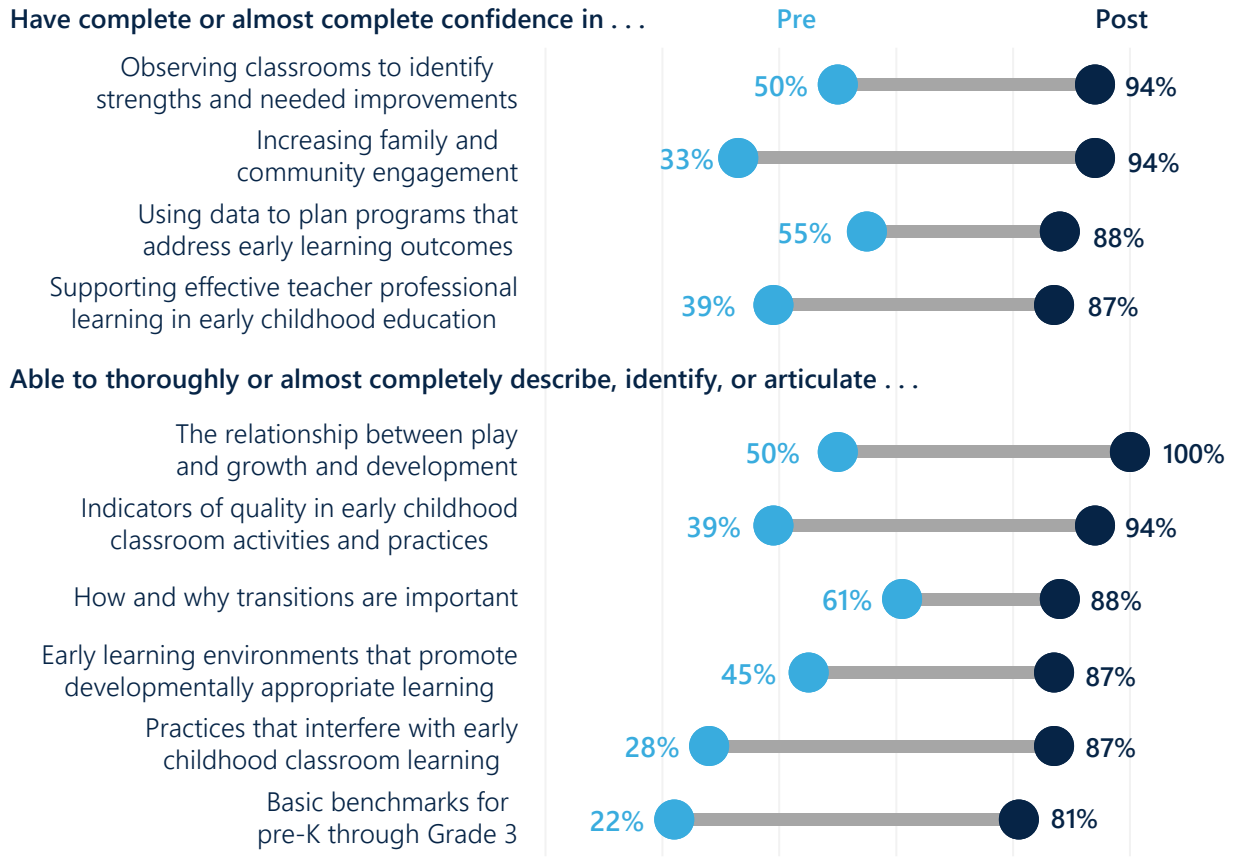
> **"I gained a lot of insight from working with and collaborating with others in similar roles. I had the opportunity to develop more leadership skills and review our practices, which has expanded my role and also led to positive changes."**

Focus group participants applied their learning to working with families, including using the Yardsticks text to help families understand developmental stages.

Self-Reported Changes in Practice

Participants reported changes in their practice. Pre- and post-self-assessments reveal participants' perceptions of the series' impact on their practices.

Cohort 4 participants reported growth in all areas of practice, with the greatest increase in confidence in increasing family and community engagement.



Overall, 63% of Cohort 4 participants reported being more prepared to lead early learning initiatives in their educational settings as a result of the series, and 19% reported being much more prepared.

Activities That Were Most Influential in Changing Practice

Participants gave the highest marks to learning about child development. In the postsurvey of 3 cohorts, participants rated the utility of the core modules for changing professional practice. The highest ratings were given to the lessons on Understanding Developmental Benchmarks, consistent with examples cited by focus group participants.

Several principals used the Yardsticks resource with staff and families to explore developmental stages, including helping families recognize typical developmental trajectories and better prepare for transitions.

> **"We could help parents understand typical developmental paths so they can identify where their children may need extra support. It also helped with preparing families for transitions."**

Shifts in Understanding of Play and Instructional Approach

Principals in the focus group described how their understanding of development influenced changes in their mindset about play. One school has implemented structured play days that began in kindergarten and have now expanded throughout the school. The same school developed a "portrait of a young graduate" to foster a collective understanding of children's goals. Another described introducing risky play.[16] into their playground, which has resulted in a reduction of referrals for challenging behaviors. Another described helping staff change their perspectives about play, building an understanding of the structured nature of productive play.

> **"We are moving from a top-down to a bottom-up model to support young learners, building up rather than pushing down."**

Additional Modules Influencing Practice

Principals also identified Observing Classrooms and Family Engagement modules as influential. One principal shared how his experience with observation led to significant benefits from having staff use half-days to observe in other districts.

How did Leading Early Learning build collaborations?

The PDG grant plays a pivotal role in implementing initiatives that coordinate or integrate early care and education programs and services. This integration is crucial for building a robust, trust-based network across different early childhood sectors. Such a network is the cornerstone of an integrated and equitable system that effectively supports children and families. Cross-sector coordination and partnerships enable various organizations to leverage their strengths and unique contexts, thereby creating high-quality programs and services that comprehensively educate and support the whole child.

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[16]Risky play involves creating environments where children can explore and take risks while having support to stay safe. Risky play allows children to test their boundaries while engaging in physical and mental challenges.

State-Level Collaboration and Coordination

The implementation of the Leading Early Learning series was grounded in collaboration with statewide agencies and organizations. The initiative was the product of collaboration among state agencies and prominent state organizations. The partnership was critical for the recruitment of participants.

Partners formed a steering committee, which met about every 2 months after an initial startup phase. Initiative lead Larsen reported that the organizations built stronger relationships, learning through the experience about each other's resources and expertise, which enabled them to turn to each other to meet different needs.

Local Partnerships and School-Based Collaboration

Some participating principals designed projects to develop local partnerships. An example is a principal who reached out to child care providers to build transition plans. Several principals engaged school colleagues in the series and valued the strengthened collaborations that resulted.

How has Leading Early Learning contributed to building a strong statewide early learning system, and will it continue to do so?

Early childhood development research emphasizes the importance of providing high-quality, continuous experiences for children from birth to age 8, particularly when families are involved. Addressing the interconnectedness among services and sectors is vital to creating effective systems that support children and families holistically. Building systems is not a one-time task, but a dynamic process that demands continuous evaluation and adaptation to meet emerging needs.

> **The evaluation team examined whether the initiative strengthened the early learning system by addressing challenges, aligning with the state's vision, and building sustainability**.

Participating leaders understand the role of schools within the mixed-delivery system. State lead Larsen highlighted the series' value in helping school principals see themselves as part of the state's mixed delivery system for early childhood, especially those entering positions with only intermediate and middle grades experience. While public pre-K has increased interactions between schools and community partners, much more work remains to integrate schools into the broader early childhood system. Leading Early Learning is a major contributor to building that understanding among school-based educators.

Sustainability and Continuation

The series will continue. The Office of Child and Family Services and Maine Roads to Quality are committed to continuing to offer the series and to supporting participant attendance at the annual MAEYC conference. Small fees will be charged to cover the cost of texts and conference presentations.

In what ways did the design of Leading Early Learning facilitate participation, and what improvements were suggested?

Supports and access in early childhood system building focus on increasing opportunities for young children and families. Key strategies include expanding affordable, high-quality education and care, enhancing inclusion for children with special needs, promoting collaboration and partnerships among programs and providers, integrating services to support seamless transitions, strengthening provider capacity, and strengthening family and community engagement.

> **The evaluation team examined whether the initiative improved the supports and resources available to staff, educators, and families, including whether training and assistance were sufficient and what factors helped or created barriers to participation.**

Well-balanced and varied learning strategies engaged participants**.** Focus group participants commented on the optimal balance between online and in-person components, the timing (late afternoon/dinner time), which resulted in excellent attendance with few distractions, and the variety of networking opportunities. They especially valued the professional learning community, the required observations, and the individual projects, which benefited participants' schools.

Design Adaptations Over Time

The program evolved in response to feedback from participants and the steering committee, primarily to ensure participants understood and could cope with the series' intensity. The schedule was adjusted to provide a more consistent pace for weekly assignments, thereby improving engagement and reducing attrition. Planning the applied projects was shifted from early in the series to become a culminating activity.

Suggested Areas for Improvement

More information about assessments would strengthen the series. Focus group participants agreed that they would have liked more information about assessment, especially the balance between traditional and play-based assessment approaches, how to assess progress toward the Maine Early Learning and Development Standards (MELDS), and new assessments that may accompany the FAPE transition.

Lessons Learned

- **Developmental knowledge appears to be the most influential content for changing leadership practice.** *Understanding Developmental Benchmarks* received the highest ratings across three cohorts. Principals described using this knowledge to reframe their approach to observation, play, and instructional expectations—and to communicate with families about developmental trajectories.

- **Peer networking is consistently identified as a valued outcome.** Participants described cross-district professional connections as influential for their leadership development, and collaboration continued after the series concluded.
- **The series shifted how principals understood their role within the mixed-delivery system.** Principals entering from intermediate or middle grades backgrounds had limited familiarity with early childhood. The series helped them see themselves as part of Maine's broader early childhood system.
- **Optional follow-up structures require intentional design to sustain engagement.** Participation in post-series professional learning communities was low. One contributing factor may have been the informal format, which lacked the predictable structure of the core series.

Summary

From participants' perspectives, the Leading Early Learning series met its intended outcomes**. Across five cohorts, approximately 100 elementary administrators participated in the series, with 100% reporting they would recommend it to colleagues. Pre-to-post self-assessments showed growth across all areas of practice, with the greatest increases in confidence in family and community engagement. The series was grounded in the cooperation of multiple agencies and organizations and will continue with their support.**

Maine's Early Learning and Development Standards for Preschool (P-MELDS)

A Community-Based, Tribally Led Initiative Supporting Families with Young Children

Performance period 1/2025–10/2025

High-quality early learning standards serve as foundational infrastructure within early childhood systems. Nationally, states use early learning and development standards to articulate shared expectations for child development, guide curriculum and assessment decisions, and promote continuity across mixed-delivery[17] settings. When clearly communicated and consistently applied, standards help align educators, administrators, and family-serving professionals around a common understanding of children's developmental progressions—strengthening instructional coherence from birth through the early elementary years.

Through its Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R), Maine implemented a focused update and dissemination initiative centered on **Preschool Maine Early Learning and Development Standards (P-MELDS)**. The initiative aligned revised P-MELDS with Infant/Toddler MELDS (IT-MELDS), developed practical implementation tools, expanded translation of standards-related resources, and structured statewide dissemination through existing professional development and distribution networks. While MELDS itself is an ongoing state responsibility, PDG-R funding supported enhanced access and structured coordination across agencies. It expanded supports intended to facilitate consistent use across Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system.

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 Preschool MELDS initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, progress toward intended outcomes such as alignment across age bands, shared terminology, foundational knowledge of child development, and uptake of MELDS training and resources.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including collaboration among OCFS, DOE, MRTQ, Head Start partners, and educators to update, disseminate, and support MELDS use statewide.
- **System building**, including contributions to mixed-delivery alignment, integration with related initiatives (e.g., curriculum and credentialing systems), and infrastructure advanced through PDG-R.
- **Supports and access**, including translation, self-paced training, dissemination strategies, implementation adaptations, and identified participation barriers.

Data sources for this report include interviews conducted with Initiative Leads in fall 2025 and March 2025, monthly implementation updates, review of training participation data from MRTQ PDN, documentation of toolkit development and translation, and related PDG-R reporting materials.

[17]Maine defines mixed-delivery ECE as the coordinated effort to support early childhood services and programming across a range of settings to help meet the varied needs of children and families.

During the PDG-R performance period (July 2024–October 2025), the MELDS initiative concentrated on updating Preschool MELDS (P-MELDS), reinforcing alignment with Infant/Toddler MELDS (IT-MELDS), and strengthening statewide access and dissemination. While MELDS is an established component of Maine's early learning system, PDG-R funding enabled a more structured implementation phase that extended beyond document revision to include tool development, translation, and coordinated outreach.

In fall 2024, Initiative Leads convened a statewide Task Force of early childhood educators and stakeholders to develop practical supports for using P-MELDS in diverse settings. Over a concentrated period of work, the Task Force produced a suite of educator-facing resources and a companion document to support communication with families. Materials were reviewed by DOE and OCFS leadership before public release.

To improve accessibility, Initiative Leads conducted a statewide survey to identify priority languages spoken by staff and families, informing translation decisions. Dissemination efforts included targeted outreach through conferences, Head Start distribution sites, and other professional networks.

MELDS FEATURES

Updated Preschool MELDS (P-MELDS) **aligned with Infant/Toddler MELDS** and Maine Learning Results (K–12 standards)

Statewide Task Force convened (22 expressed interest; 10 formal participants) to develop practical implementation tools

38 educator-facing toolkit resources and **1 Family Companion Tool** created to support standards use

Toolkit materials **translated into four languages** (French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic) based on statewide provider survey data

Centralized "one-stop" standards webpage to house IT-MELDS, P-MELDS, Maine Learning Results, and toolkit materials

Free, asynchronous P-MELDS training hosted through Maine Roads to Quality (MRTQ) Professional Development Network

Statewide dissemination through regional conferences, Head Start distribution sites, and targeted outreach events

What was the impact of P-MELDS?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives requires assessing whether investments advanced their intended purposes. For P-MELDS, impact is understood primarily at the infrastructure and systems levels rather than as measured changes in classroom practice.

Initiative Leads identified the following **intended outcomes** for this work:

- **Aligned** IT-MELDS and P-MELDS across the birth-through-Grade 3 continuum
- **Increased foundational knowledge** and shared language of child development across early childhood educators
- **Increase practical use of P-MELDS in** curriculum planning and assessment.
- **Expanded access to standards-related resources** across mixed-delivery settings

At this stage, documented impact is reflected primarily in structural and engagement indicators. Findings are organized around these intended outcomes.

Advancing Alignment Across Birth–Grade 3

The following actions represent structural alignment efforts rather than direct measures of classroom change. Structural actions during the grant period included:

- Updating Preschool MELDS to align with IT-MELDS
- Creating a centralized standards webpage housing IT-MELDS, P-MELDS, and Maine Learning Results
- Initiating crosswalk updates between P-MELDS and commonly used assessment tools
- Identifying needed updates linking For ME lesson plans to revised P-MELDS standards

> **Initiative Leads described the preschool space as "the epicenter of the two worlds colliding," referencing the alignment between OCFS (birth–3) and DOE (Pre-K–Grade 2).**

Strengthening Foundational Knowledge and Shared Language

P-MELDS training is hosted through the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN) as a free, self-paced module.

Training Participation (July 2024 – October 2025)

Training	Format	Completions
P-MELDS	Asynchronous, free	2,404
IT-MELDS	Facilitated, synchronous	482

Completion numbers reflect participation in standards-related professional learning during the grant period. Initiative Leads noted that the asynchronous format expanded access, while also acknowledging that facilitated training historically allowed more in-depth discussion of distinctions among standards, curriculum, and assessment.

> **As one Lead reflected, the on-demand format increases reach, but "some of the deeper understanding and deeper conversations get lost because there's no opportunity for that."**

Encouraging Practical Use of Standards in Planning

Initiative Leads described the development of a practical toolkit as an unanticipated outcome of the initiative. Rather than translating the full standards document alone, Initiative Leads convened a Task Force to develop: 38 educator-facing tools and 1 Family Companion Tool. Responses to a fall provider survey indicated that several educators described P-MELDS as a curriculum rather than a standards

framework. This finding reflects continued confusion regarding the distinction between standards, curriculum, and assessment.

Expanding Access Across Mixed-Delivery Settings

Maine's early childhood system operates through a mixed-delivery model—center-based programs, family child care homes, Head Start programs, and school-based pre-kindergarten—each serving diverse staff and family populations. Translation decisions were guided by statewide survey data identifying priority languages spoken by staff and families. Toolkit materials were translated into four languages beyond English.

Conference-based dissemination also generated anecdotal feedback from providers serving multilingual communities, including one educator who noted that translated materials addressed a longstanding barrier to using MELDS in programs serving migrant families.

Initiative Leads also reported that the P-MELDS training module remains in English only. In communities with significant Spanish-speaking staff populations, educators have completed training with informal translation support from colleagues.

How did MELDS strengthen communication and cross-sector coordination?

Updating P-MELDS required coordination across child care programs, Head Start, public pre-K and elementary schools, and state agencies. Multiple stakeholder groups—including a Steering Committee, Writing Team, Targeted Review Team, and an ad hoc Task Force—contributed to the update and development of practical implementation tools.

Continued collaboration between the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) and the Department of Education (DOE) was central to aligning birth–3 and pre-K–grade 2 systems. Head Start programs served as regional distribution sites, and the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN) hosted the P-MELDS training module within its system. Educator participation in the Task Force informed resource design and translation priorities.

Table 2. Cross-Sector Coordination in the MELDS Initiative

Sector / Partner	Coordination Function	Structural Implication
OCFS & DOE	Joint oversight and review of revised standards and toolkit materials	Alignment across birth–3 and pre-K–grade 2 systems
MRTQ PDN	Hosted and disseminated P-MELDS training through the registry platform	Embedded MELDS within existing professional development infrastructure
Head Start programs	Regional distribution sites for standards and toolkit materials	Extended access into community-based early learning settings
Task Force educators	Mixed-delivery practitioner participation in tool development	Resources reflect classroom application across settings
ESOL / equity advisors	Consultation on language access and dissemination	Translation priorities informed by field and community needs

How has MELDS contributed to building a strong statewide early childhood service system?

MELDS operates as a shared standards infrastructure within Maine's early learning system. During the PDG-R period, system-level contributions were reflected in coordinated updates, consolidated access to standards, and integration into existing professional development structures.

These changes represent structural adjustments in how standards are accessed, aligned, and supported rather than direct measures of classroom practice. Table 3 summarizes the primary infrastructure shifts that occurred during the grant period.

Table 3. System-Level Infrastructure Strengthened Through MELDS

System Area	Pre-PDG Context	PDG-Enabled Structural Action
Standards Access	Separate documents across age bands	Centralized webpage housing IT-MELDS, P-MELDS, and K–12 standards
Professional Learning	Facilitated training model only	Free, asynchronous P-MELDS training embedded in MRTQ PDN registry
Practical Application	Standards document as primary reference	Toolkit of educator-facing tools and Family Companion resource
Language Access	English-only standards	Toolkit translated into four priority languages

In what ways did the P-MELDS initiative support accessibility and participation for early childhood education programs?

Because MELDS operates as a shared standards infrastructure, access to materials and professional learning was central to the initiative's design. As described earlier, translation priorities were informed by statewide survey data, and practical toolkit resources were developed to support everyday application across mixed-delivery settings.

P-MELDS training is available at no cost through the MRTQ PDN registry platform, reducing financial barriers to participation. However, while the toolkit materials are available in multiple languages, the training module itself remains in English. In some communities, educators have relied on informal translation support to complete the training.

Sustainability

The core components of the MELDS initiative are now embedded in existing state systems. Updated standards and toolkit materials are publicly housed on a centralized standards webpage alongside IT-MELDS and Maine Learning Results. P-MELDS training continues to be delivered through the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN) registry platform, integrating standards-related learning into Maine's established professional development infrastructure. Head Start distribution sites and established dissemination practices remain in place.

Activities supported directly by PDG-R funding—including compensated Task Force participation and translation development—were time-limited. Continued expansion of translated training materials or facilitated delivery formats would require additional resources.

Lessons Learned

Several lessons emerged during implementation of the MELDS initiative:

- **Practical tools support standards use more effectively than document translation alone.** Convening a Task Force to develop adaptable, educator-facing resources responded directly to practitioner feedback and provided structured supports for applying standards in daily practice.
- **Access and depth operate in tension within professional learning design.** Transitioning to asynchronous, no-cost training expanded participation, while reducing opportunities for facilitated discussion about distinctions among standards, curriculum, and assessment.
- **Language access extends beyond written materials.** While toolkit resources were translated into four priority languages, the P-MELDS training module remains in English only, creating uneven accessibility for multilingual staff.
- **Inclusive stakeholder engagement requires intentional outreach.** Although multiple educator groups participated in the update and toolkit development process, Initiative Leads identified the need for stronger tribal, CTE, and parent representation in future efforts.

Summary

The MELDS initiative focused on updating and disseminating Maine's Early Learning and Development Standards as shared infrastructure across the state's mixed-delivery early childhood system. During the PDG-R period, the initiative advanced alignment between Infant/Toddler MELDS and Preschool MELDS, expanded access through translation and structured dissemination, and embedded standards-related professional learning within the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN). The development of practical implementation tools responded to practitioner feedback and provided structured supports for applying standards in daily practice.

At the same time, the initiative identified areas for continued attention, including balancing access and depth in professional learning, strengthening language accessibility in training delivery, and broadening stakeholder representation in future updates. Core standards infrastructure and access mechanisms are now embedded within existing state systems, positioning MELDS as a shared reference point across child care, Head Start, and public school settings.

Maine Youth Thriving (MyT)

Maine's Statewide Professional Learning Series for Trauma-informed Care

Performance period 10/2023–12/2025

Professional learning that supports educator understanding of children's social-emotional development, stress responses, and resilience is a critical component of building a robust system of comprehensive services for Maine's young children, and particularly the adults who care for them and support their learning.

Maine Youth Thriving (MyT) is Maine-based organization focused on the provision of statewide professional learning designed to strengthen educator understanding of how stress, trauma, and resilience affect children and adults in educational settings, and to support practices that promote positive experiences for children. Building on earlier work conducted under the name Maine Resilience Building Network (MRBN), MyT implemented professional learning with support from the Maine Department of Education (DOE) through the Preschool Development Grant–Birth to Five Renewal (PDG-R).

This report presents **findings from outcome-focused assessment activities** conducted in fall 2025 as part of PDG-R grant. Drawing on diverse data,[2] the report examines the MyT Professional Learning initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including shifts in educators' understanding of adverse and positive childhood experiences, strengths-based practice, and compassion fatigue, as well as early evidence of application in practice.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including statewide reach across sectors and settings.
- **System building**, including a statewide shift toward strengths-based, PCE-informed practice in early childhood education.
- **Supports and access**, including the impact of using multiple training formats on participation, adaptations made in response to participation data and feedback, and statewide geographic reach.

Data sources for this report include pre- and post-training surveys across five training offerings (N=828 responses from 542 unique respondents), a Train-the-Trainer post-survey (N=28), post-training surveys from certified trainers' sessions (N=80), follow-up survey and email responses of past participants (N=30), an interview with MyT facilitators Meg and Delvina, an interview with state lead Renee Reilly, and monthly initiative reports.

Over the grant period, MyT facilitators delivered more than 60 training sessions through virtual, in-person, site-based, and conference formats, reaching approximately 1,820 educators across all 16 Maine counties. The initiative offered two core trainings: **The Impact of Experience**, which introduces research on adverse and positive childhood experiences and strengths-based reframing strategies; and **Compassion Fatigue and Resilience Strategies**, which focuses on helping educators recognize the signs of compassion fatigue and develop self-care practices. In Year 3, the initiative introduced a

Train-the-Trainer program, preparing two cohorts of 28 educators to deliver MyT content in their own communities.

The initiative adapted its design over the grant period in response to participation data and facilitator feedback. *The Impact of Experience* was originally offered as a two-part series—How Adverse Childhood Experiences and Positive Childhood Experiences Impact Healthy Child Development (Part I) and A Framework for Implementing Positive Childhood Experiences to Support Healthy Child Development (Part II)—and was later consolidated into a single training when facilitators observed that participants often attended only one session and missed essential content. In Year 3, the state also reduced the frequency of offerings and introduced minimum attendance thresholds in an effort to concentrate participation into fewer, larger sessions.

Data collection was integrated into implementation to support evaluation. Post-training surveys were administered at the conclusion of each session to assess participant-reported knowledge gains, relevance of the content to their work, usefulness for practice, and perceived impact on children and families. In addition, a follow-up survey was administered approximately six to twelve months after participation to gather information on whether and how educators reported applying MyT concepts in their ongoing practice. The sections that follow examine findings across four PDG-R outcome areas: impact, communication and cross-sector coordination, system building, and supports and access.

MAINE YOUTH THRIVING (MYT) FEATURES

Professional learning grounded in public health research on adverse and positive childhood experiences.

Focus on strengths-based, PCE-informed practice across two core trainings

- The **Impact of Experience**—understanding ACEs and PCEs and applying strengths-based strategies
- **Compassion Fatigue and Resilience Strategies**—recognizing compassion fatigue and building self-care practices

Approx. **1,820 participants** trained statewide across all **16 Maine counties**

Over 60 virtual and in-person sessions offered across the grant period, including standalone trainings, site-based sessions, and conference presentations

Reached a **mixed-delivery audience**: Head Start/Early Head Start (36%), public schools (35%), center-based and family child care (14%), and other settings (15%)

Participants included teachers (40%), educational technicians and teaching assistants (23%), administrators and directors (10%), and other roles including family service staff, counselors, behavioral health professionals, and coaches (25%)

Train-the-Trainer program with stipends to support participation and delivery of community-based trainings

What was the impact of the learning series?

To ensure that PDG-R professional learning investments are effective and sustainable, it is essential to understand their impact on educators who participated in these opportunities. The state lead and MyT facilitators described the intended outcomes of the trainings in complementary terms: changing educators' mindsets from a deficit focus on adversity to an action-oriented emphasis on positive experiences, and helping educators see that the relational work they were already doing has long-term impacts backed by research

The MyT professional learning trainings were designed to support the following **intended outcomes**:

- **Increased understanding** of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) and their role in children's development.
- **A shift toward strengths-based approaches** that prioritize positive experiences over deficit-focused responses.
- **Increased intentionality** in applying PCE strategies in daily practice with children.
- **Recognition of compassion fatigue** and knowledge of self-care strategies to support educator well-being.

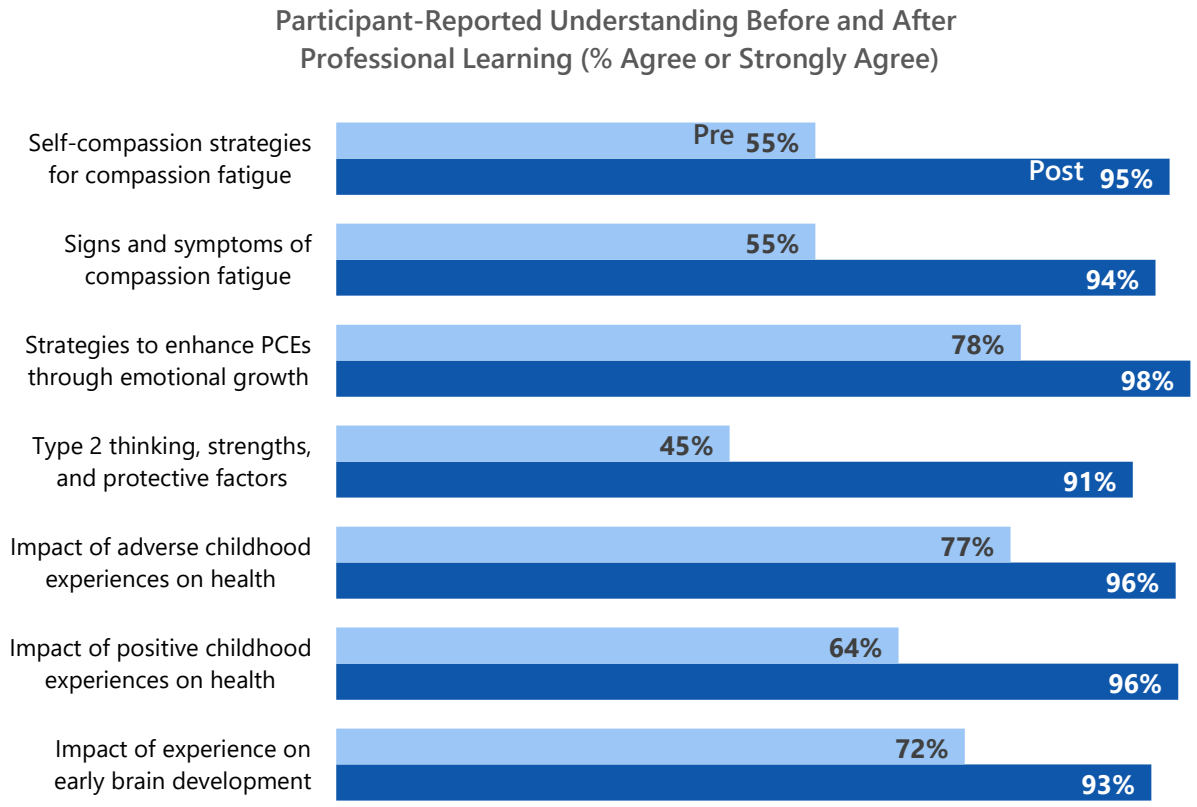
Pre- and post-training survey data from 828 respondents across five training offerings—representing 542 unique participants out of approximately 1,820 trained—indicate substantial gains in self-reported knowledge among survey respondents across all measured areas (Figure 1). Results reflect matched pre- and post-training survey responses; Ns vary slightly by item due to incomplete responses.

> **Across all training offerings, pre- to post-training data show gains in every measured outcome area. The largest shift was in Type 2 thinking—a reframing approach that helps educators pause reactive responses and interpret children's behavior through a strengths-and-protective-factors lens—rising from 45% to 91%.**

Figure 2 presents self-reported understanding across seven outcome areas, comparing pre- and post-training results.

Beyond knowledge gains, participants across all training offerings and respondents to both survey instruments consistently rated the training content as highly relevant to their work (88–100%), useful in changing practice (86–100%), and impactful for children and families (88–98%).

Figure 2: Pre- and Post-Training Participant-Reported Understanding.



Understanding ACEs and PCEs

Participants entered the trainings with moderate familiarity with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) but considerably less understanding of Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs). As the chart shows, the most notable shift was in PCE understanding—an increase of 32 percentage points.

As one facilitator described, participants often arrived with a foundation in ACEs but had not encountered the concept of PCEs: "It's really nice to hear that this is actually really important, and that I'm already intuitively doing some of that."

The training helped educators recognize that many everyday relational practices are supported by research linking positive childhood experiences to long-term health and well-being. While these practices were familiar to many participants, fewer had encountered the term "positive childhood experiences" or its research base; informal polls showed recognition of the term increasing from near zero to roughly 25–35% of participants over the grant period.

For some participants, increased awareness translated into shifts in daily practice. One follow-up respondent, a direct service provider, described how the PCE framework reshaped her daily interactions

> **"I have breakfast duty every morning. I've made connections with every single student who walks into the cafeteria. I'm the first face that greets them each day, and I interact with them in a way that shows them I'm interested in them as a person both at but also outside of school."**

She noted that the training changed not what she does but why:

> **"Although my behaviors haven't changed much, the intentionality with which I do them has increased."**

Another follow-up respondent, a classroom-based educator, described a similar shift:

> **"Using the role of PCEs in our classroom has been beneficial to us and the children . . . there is a way to help them overcome the adversities they have faced."**

Strengths-Based Practice and Type 2 Thinking

The MyT framework introduces "Type 2 thinking," a reframing approach that asks educators to pause reactive responses to children's behavior and instead interpret what they observe through a lens of strengths and protective factors. The **46-percentage-point gain** in self-reported understanding of this area—from 45% to 91%—was the largest across all measured outcomes. Eighty-eight percent of respondents also rated Type 2 reframing strategies as **useful for changing their practice**, suggesting that the concept resonated not only as new knowledge but as something applicable to their work.

Qualitative responses reflect this shift: participants described learning to:

> **"listen to the story the behavior is telling"**

> **"focus less on reactive practices and more on cultivating positive experiences"**

> **"stop always expecting the same challenging behavior from the same child"**

The state lead described this reorientation as the initiative's central value, connecting it directly to workforce sustainability: when educators lack tools to respond constructively, they burn out and leave the field, creating cycles of turnover harmful to children and programs.

Compassion Fatigue and Educator Well-Being

The Compassion Fatigue and Resilience Strategies training focused on helping educators recognize the signs of compassion fatigue—distinct from general burnout—and develop self-compassion and self-care strategies to sustain their well-being in the classroom. Addressing educator well-being is critical to workforce retention; without tools to manage the emotional demands of their work, educators are more likely to leave the field, creating cycles of turnover that affect children and programs.

Pre- to post-training survey data show that this topic produced some of the largest gains across all MyT training offerings. Among survey respondents, self-reported understanding of compassion

fatigue increased by 39 percentage points, and knowledge of self-compassion strategies increased by 40 percentage points.

> **Facilitators noted that while most educators entered the training familiar with the term "compassion fatigue," many conflated it with burnout; the training helped distinguish between the two.**

Participants who responded to a post-training follow-up survey described concrete changes in practice:

> **"I call on my co-teachers to swap out when I feel overwhelmed—that support network is what helps me."**
>
> **"I am inserting moments to breathe during my day."**

Others described identifying "glimmers" as a technique for rewiring negative thought patterns.

Facilitators reported that participants consistently wanted more time with this content: "Folks left being like, nobody's really spoken to me about this before." The state lead confirmed that no comparable training exists in Maine's professional learning landscape—a unique contribution of the MyT initiative.

Impact of the Train-the-Trainer Experience

At the end of its second year, MyT introduced a Train-the-Trainer (TTT) model to expand the initiative's reach beyond what two facilitators could deliver directly and to build distributed training capacity across the state.

Table 1: Figure 1: Train-the-Trainer (TTT) Cohort and Certified Session Outcomes.

	TTT Cohorts	Certified Sessions
Participants	28	>80
Sessions	2 cohort series	10
Counties represented	Statewide recruitment	9
Rated quality/relevance highly	84%	98%
Felt prepared to deliver	75%	NA

Eight certified trainers went on to deliver a total of ten community-based sessions—two trainers facilitated multiple sessions—reaching participants across nine counties. Based on post-session survey responses (n=80), 98% of respondents rated the content as relevant to their work, consistent with findings from the direct-delivery trainings.

Facilitators noted that TTT participants also began applying the framework in their own practice during the cohort experience—even though the program was designed to prepare them to train others. As one facilitator observed,

> **"The goal was really to share this information, to understand it and share it with others. But they were reporting back that they were using the tools themselves."**

Facilitators reflected that the "trainer" framing may have been too narrow, noting that not all graduates were comfortable leading rooms of adults but were nonetheless championing the work in their own settings. As one facilitator put it, future iterations might reconceptualize the trainer role as one of leadership or advocacy—"ambassadors" rather than trainers—better capturing the range of ways participants carried the framework forward.

What communication and cross-sector coordination was involved?

MyT professional learning was implemented in partnership with the Maine Department of Education, which served as the coordinating and overseeing agency for training logistics, recruitment, and scheduling. Recruitment and delivery were intentionally designed to engage educators across public schools, Head Start, child care, and other early childhood settings, reflecting the mixed-delivery nature of Maine's early learning system.

> **The state lead described the content as relevant to anyone working with young children, regardless of setting, and facilitators noted that mixed groups enriched discussions by bringing different professional perspectives into the same room.**

MyT facilitators presented the Impact of Experience and Compassion Fatigue content at the annual MDOE summer summit and other statewide venues. These events served as both professional learning opportunities and venues for introducing the MyT framework to educators outside the initiative. The initiative's cross-sector reach also extended beyond traditional early childhood settings—one TTT graduate delivered sessions at a martial arts educators' conference, reporting afterward that participating instructors had shifted their focus from the performance of the martial arts to the success of the child.

How has MyT contributed to building a strong statewide early learning system?

The evaluation team examined whether the initiative strengthened the early learning system by building statewide training capacity, contributing to a shared professional vocabulary, and positioning the work for sustainability beyond the grant period.

The MyT initiative contributed to system building by establishing ACEs, PCEs, and compassion fatigue as a shared, strengths-based framework that could be applied across roles, settings, and professional learning contexts. By grounding relational practice and educator well-being in public health research, the initiative helped normalize a common language around resilience, protective factors, and stress,

supporting greater coherence across the mixed-delivery early childhood system[18] and alignment with other professional development efforts. As noted by state leadership, addressing compassion fatigue is foundational to sustaining the workforce, particularly in a field where educators experience chronic stress and turnover pressures.

The Train-the-Trainer (TTT) model functioned as a system mechanism intended to extend this framework beyond direct delivery. While the model had limitations in terms of formal training reach, it supported a multi-tiered approach in which trained educators acted as local carriers of the framework—sharing concepts through trainings where feasible and through leadership, peer exchange, and informal diffusion within programs and communities. One TTT graduate's subsequent enrollment in the Regulated Classroom TTT illustrates this alignment—**educators building on the MyT foundation with complementary PDG-R professional learning conten**t. In this way, the system-level contribution of TTT lies less in scale and more in expanding pathways for uptake and integration over time.

Together, these findings suggest that MyT made early system-building contributions by expanding facilitation capacity and shared language. Continued impact depends on future coordination, funding, and adaptation.

In what ways did the design of MyT facilitate participation, and what improvements were suggested?

MyT reached approximately 1,820 educators across all 16 Maine counties over the grant period. The evaluation team examined what design features supported that reach and what factors limited it.

The initiative used multiple delivery formats to maximize access—virtual sessions, in-person regional trainings, site-based sessions within schools and programs, and conference presentations at statewide venues. Facilitators noted that each format served a different purpose: site-based sessions felt most practice-oriented, smaller virtual sessions often produced deeper engagement, and conference presentations introduced the framework to broader audiences. The introduction of the Train-the-Trainer model in Year 3 added a further access pathway, extending the initiative's geographic and sector reach through locally delivered sessions in nine counties.

The initiative also adapted its design in response to participation patterns and feedback. The Impact of Experience, originally a two-part series was combined into a single training. In Year 3, the state reduced the frequency of offerings and introduced minimum attendance thresholds to concentrate participation into fewer, larger sessions. At the time, the adjustment was reasonable given concerns about overall return on investment. However, based on facilitator accounts, this adjustment reduced the number of educators reached overall, as ECE professionals typically attended based on schedule availability rather than planned enrollment. No comparative attendance data were available at the time of this report.

Facilitators identified one notable gap in access: the absence of translated materials. They recommended developing resources in languages other than English to better serve Maine's growing

[18]Mixed delivery early care and education (ECE) is the coordinated effort to support early childhood services and programming across a range of settings to help meet the varied needs of children and families.

multilingual workforce. This access barrier is not unique to MyT and may apply to other PDG-R professional learning initiatives as well.

Looking ahead, there is additional development work to be done, including creating a family-focused version of the training—identified by the state lead as a natural extension that was not implemented during the grant period.

What did we learn?

- **Consolidated delivery supports completion**. Combining the two-part Impact of Experience training into a single session reduced attrition and ensured participants received the full ACEs-to-PCEs arc.
- **Naming existing practice increases intentionality**. Many educators were already using PCE-aligned strategies; connecting these practices to a research base increased awareness and purposeful application rather than introducing entirely new behaviors.
- **Addressing compassion fatigue is foundational to workforce sustainability.** Educators consistently identified this content as highly resonant, and pre-/post-training data showed the largest gains in this area.
- **Train-the-trainer models benefit from flexible facilitator roles**. While not all TTT graduates led formal trainings, many carried the framework forward through leadership, modeling, and informal sharing within their settings.
- **Professional learning is strengthened through coordination.** MyT complemented other PDG-R initiatives, illustrating how aligned offerings can reinforce learning across domains of educator practice.
- **Scheduling flexibility mattered more than session size**. Efforts to reduce the number of offerings and impose attendance thresholds did not increase participation and were associated with lower overall reach.
- **Access gaps remain**. Materials were available only in English, potentially limiting participation among multilingual educators, and a family-focused version of the training, identified as a logical extension, was not implemented during the grant period.

Summary

The Maine Youth Thriving initiative addressed a foundational challenge within Maine's early childhood system: equipping educators to support children's healthy development while supporting their own well-being in a profession marked by chronic stress and turnover. Participants reported substantial gains in understanding ACEs, PCEs, and compassion fatigue, with 88% rating the content as useful for changing their practice. The Train-the-Trainer model extended reach across nine counties at a quality level consistent with direct-delivery sessions, and follow-up responses describe educators applying strengths-based strategies in their daily interactions with children.

Navigator Roles

Workforce and Program Navigation in Maine's Early Childhood System

Performance period May 2024–December 2025

Early care and education in Maine operates within a mixed-delivery system[19] spanning licensing, affordability, workforce development, and education, each with distinct requirements, funding streams, and administrative processes. Program leaders and educators are often required to navigate these systems simultaneously while making decisions related to staffing, compliance, professional learning, and credentialing.

The **Navigator Initiatives** were implemented as part of Maine's Preschool Development Grant–Birth to Five Renewal (PDG-R) to pilot statewide roles for workforce and program navigation within this complex system. The initiative supported two coordinated positions—a Program Navigator and a Workforce Navigator—designed to help early childhood programs and educators interpret requirements, access existing supports, and coordinate next steps across systems. Rather than creating new services, the Navigator roles focused on improving system usability by clarifying processes, aligning guidance, and supporting informed decision-making.

This report presents **findings from outcome-focused assessment activities** during the May 2024–December 2025 performance period as part of Maine's PDG-R program. Drawing on multiple data sources,[2] the report examines the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including findings related to educator and program decision-making, workforce advancement, and access to existing supports associated with navigation assistance.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, the roles of the navigators in facilitating communication and coordination among state agencies (the Office of Child and Family Services [OCFS], the Department of Education [DOE], and the Department of Labor [DOL]), community organizations, and early childhood providers.
- **System building**, including early contributions related to navigation, coordination, and engagement within Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system, as well as factors affecting sustainability.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitated participation and engagement, and barriers affecting the reach of navigation supports across programs and educators.

[2]Data sources for this report include interviews with initiative leads; focus groups with state agency partners and early childhood providers; navigator activity documentation; implementation documentation; and initiative summary materials.

The Program Navigator supported early childhood programs in navigating licensing, affordability, business operations, and education systems. Support included responding to program-initiated questions, clarifying requirements, reviewing documentation, and coordinating referrals to relevant

[19]Mixed delivery early care and education (ECE) is the coordinated effort to support early childhood services and programming across a range of settings to help meet the varied needs of children and families.

agencies or partners. Assistance focused on interpreting existing systems—such as licensure, compliance, stabilization, and Pre-K participation—rather than delivering new services.

The **Workforce Navigator** supported early childhood educators and prospective educators in navigating career pathways, credentialing, and professional learning. Support included individualized guidance to interpret Career Lattice requirements, sequence training or credentials, and identify workforce supports, as well as information sessions focused on entry into and advancement within the field. Assistance was tailored to diverse backgrounds, experience levels, and readiness levels.

Although the roles addressed different entry points, implementation was coordinated. Navigators aligned guidance, shared information, and reinforced consistent messaging across systems, and developed targeted activities—including **B.R.I.D.G.E**. and **PEECE**—to address recurring navigation needs.

NAVIGATOR ROLES FEATURES

Program Navigator

- **180** childcare program connections documented
- **77** agency and community partnerships established or maintained
- **8** in-person summits, conferences, or large-group engagements, including a keynote address, three breakout sessions, and four staff trainings
- **Focus areas**: DOL Wage & Compliance training; Business Foundations initiative

Workforce Navigator

- **37** program-based presentations delivered
- **112** individualized professional development plans created
- **26** educators documented advancement on Maine's Career Lattice during the performance period
- **8** educators reported new employment in the early childhood education field
- **Focus areas**: Grow Your Career in ECE presentations; Careers with Kids events

Collaborative Activities

- **B.R.I.D.G.E.**: 13 programs participated
- **PEECE:** 11 job-shadowing sites
- **159** combined technical assistance events

Navigator Roles at a Glance

Program Navigator	Workforce Navigator
Childcare programs	**Educators and prospective educators**
▶ Licensing, CCAP, and regulatory systems ▶ Business and operational requirements ▶ Pre-K partnership readiness	▶ Career pathways and Career Lattice ▶ Training, credentials, and degree sequencing ▶ Workforce entry and advancement
Shared Functions	
▶ Coordinated communication between the field and state agencies ▶ Reducing uncertainty when engaging with state systems ▶ Individualized guidance, referrals, and follow-up ▶ B.R.I.D.G.E. and PEECE (targeted collaborative activities)	

What was the impact of the Navigator initiative?

The impact of the Navigator roles was most evident in how programs and educators **interpreted, engaged with, and made decisions within existing systems.** Rather than producing direct service or child-level outcomes, the Navigators influenced **system navigation**, supporting clarity, access, and informed engagement.

Intended outcomes included:

- **Improved clarity** among program leaders regarding licensing, affordability, and operational requirements.
- **Improved clarity** among educators regarding career pathways, credentialing requirements, and professional learning options.
- **More informed decision-making** when engaging with workforce, regulatory, and education systems was a key outcome of the navigation support, demonstrating how the Navigator roles facilitated understanding of these systems and engagement.
- Improved access to existing supports and resources through coordinated guidance and referrals.
- **Strengthened engagement with systems** previously found difficult to navigate.

Educator and Program Decision-Making

The most immediate impacts of the Navigator Initiatives were observed in **program and educator decision-making**. Interviews and focus groups indicate that navigation support increased clarity about processes, timelines, and available pathways, particularly when programs or educators faced consequential decisions about licensing, staffing, credentialing, or participation in system initiatives. These effects were most pronounced in contexts involving system complexity or uncertainty, where individualized guidance and follow-up reduced hesitation and supported more informed engagement.

Programs reported using the Program Navigator support to clarify licensing and compliance requirements, understand operational implications, and identify next steps related to stabilization options, expansion, or Pre-K partnership participation. Educators similarly used Workforce Navigator support to interpret Career Lattice requirements, sequence credentials or training, and assess how changes in role, hours, or education might affect their employment trajectory.

Educators also described relying on navigation support to understand how changes in wages, hours, credentials, or employment status could affect eligibility for public benefits (the "benefits cliff"), a concern consistent with findings from Maine's **Early Childhood Educator Workforce Salary Supplement System Evaluation.** Navigation support contributed to more informed decision-making within these structural constraints.

Activity data (see page 2) illustrates the scope and early outcomes of navigation support during the performance period. While evidence indicates meaningful effects on decision-making, the impact varied by context and was constrained by capacity, geography, scheduling limitations, and broader structural challenges, including staffing shortages, regulatory complexity, and benefits eligibility rules.

Engagement With Systems and Supports

Beyond individual decision-making, the Navigator roles influenced how programs and educators engaged with workforce, regulatory, and education systems over time. Providers and educators reported greater willingness to initiate contact with agencies, seek clarification, and follow through on required steps when navigation support was available—particularly among those who had previously experienced confusion, delays, or frustration when interacting with state systems.

For the Navigator roles, the impact was primarily evident in how programs and educators interpreted, engaged with, and made decisions within existing systems, highlighting the roles' influence on system navigation rather than on direct service delivery or child outcomes.

Engagement was strongest when ongoing communication and follow-up could be sustained. Some educators required extended support to address foundational barriers, including unfamiliarity with documentation requirements or prior negative system experiences, and in these cases, progress occurred incrementally.

How did the Navigators Initiative support collaboration and coordination?

The Navigator initiatives supported collaboration by serving as clear, consistent points of contact for early childhood programs and for educators navigating complex systems. When Program and Workforce Navigator roles were implemented in a coordinated manner, the initiatives supported collaboration by bridging systems rather than simply routine inquiries. Combined roles enabled navigators to interpret how licensing, workforce, education, and labor systems intersected and to help programs and educators navigate these intersections more coherently.

From this perspective, Navigator Initiatives supported collaboration by serving as intermediaries among early childhood programs, educators, state agencies, and community partners—particularly when questions or decisions spanned multiple systems.

Rather than resolving issues on behalf of agencies, navigators helped **route questions**, clarify which systems were implicated, and support follow-through. This reduced misdirected inquiries, repetitive outreach, and inconsistent guidance in the field. State agency partners emphasized that the navigators strengthened communication without blurring role boundaries, reinforcing accurate and consistent messaging across systems.

> **"The Program Navigator was instrumental in making connections to providers. This connection between childcare providers and state offices helped to break down walls of confusion. "** (State agency partner, Focus Group)

Navigation improved collaboration by making systems more legible and approachable, particularly at points of entry. Coordination was most evident when programs or educators were navigating:

- Licensing or compliance alongside workforce considerations
- Pre-K partnership readiness requiring engagement with multiple agencies
- Career advancement decisions are affected by employment, credentialing, and benefits rules.

The navigators improved collaboration not by creating new structures but **by reducing friction between existing ones**. Coordination gains depended on navigator capacity and sustained relationships; when capacity was constrained, proactive coordination diminished.

How did the Navigator Initiatives contribute to system building?

From a system-building perspective, the Navigator Initiatives' primary contribution was to strengthen shared understanding and coherence across Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system. System building occurred through improved alignment and clarity, not structural change.

Navigators reinforced a consistent interpretation of licensing, workforce, and education requirements and helped surface recurring areas of confusion for programs and educators. Over time, this contributed to clearer engagement and improved readiness to participate in initiatives such as Pre-K partnerships and workforce advancement opportunities.

When roles were combined, navigation also contributed to system building by creating feedback loops and cross-sector learning. Integrated navigation helped surface how system requirements were experienced collectively by programs and educators, informing adjustments to communication strategies and partnership design. From this perspective, combined roles shifted navigation from system clarification to system insight.

Targeted activities such as B.R.I.D.G.E and PEECE exemplify this contribution by intentionally linking programs, educators, and partners around shared expectations and readiness.

> **The Program Navigator's B.R.I.D.G.E. initiative (Building Relationships in Diverse Groups for Education) illustrates this type of system-building contribution. Through B.R.I.D.G.E., 13 programs participated in school administrative unit (SAU) collaboration and Pre-K partnership readiness activities, supporting the kinds of cross-sector connections described above.**

At the same time, navigation work reaffirmed persistent system challenges, including:

- Licensing and compliance complexity
- Workforce credentialing and advancement barriers
- Benefits eligibility uncertainty
- Administrative and technology burden

System-level impact was formative rather than transformational. Navigation strengthened alignment and feedback loops but remained constrained by reliance on time-limited, individual roles.

In what ways did the design of the Navigators Initiative facilitate participation and access?

The Navigator Initiatives' design facilitated participation by offering **individualized, flexible, and relationship-based** support. Programs and educators could seek assistance when questions arose rather than at fixed entry points, reducing barriers for those managing multiple responsibilities.

Barriers to participation included limited navigator capacity, statewide scope, geographic distance, scheduling constraints, and uneven digital readiness among providers.

Multiple engagement modalities-virtual, phone, and in-person- helped reduce geographic and scheduling barriers, particularly for rural providers and educators.

> **"The director described her engagement with the Program Navigator as 'seamless.' The Program Navigator's response was quick and expressed her immediate interest: How can I support you? When can we meet? It "boggled my mind" how easy the process was."** (Child care program director, Focus Group)

Warm hand-offs, follow-up support, and contextualized guidance increased the likelihood that participants would complete required steps or pursue opportunities.

Sustainability

The Navigator Initiatives were implemented as a PDG-R pilot. Following the conclusion of the PDG-R pilot, OCFS worked to absorb some core navigation functions into existing agency roles. State partners noted that navigation reduced workload and improved communication in the field.

> **"It took a significant amount of work off my plate." (State agency partner)**

> **"Having a 'boots on the ground' connection—someone who is engaged in one-on-one communication with childcare providers—is really helpful. It is valuable to have someone who can communicate that state workers and agencies are there to support them."** (State agency partner, Focus Group)

Integrated navigation delivers distinct value—cross-system continuity, responsiveness, and learning—but is difficult to sustain without dedicated capacity. The primary barrier to sustainability identified by the initiative leads was the availability of ongoing funding to support that capacity.

What did we learn?

- **Individualized navigation is most effective when aligned with immediate decision points**. Programs and educators were most likely to engage when navigation aligned with moments of uncertainty or transition, such as licensing decisions, workforce advancement, or consideration of a new partnership.
- **Intermediary roles improve access without duplicating agency functions.** Maintaining clear role boundaries helped sustain productive relationships with agency partners.
- **Cross-system coordination benefits from continuity and shared context.** Coordination gains during the performance period depended on sustained, cross-agency engagement; distributing these functions across existing roles reduced the intensity and consistency of coordination.

- **Navigation clarifies but does not resolve structural system barriers.** Issues related to workforce compensation, benefits eligibility, administrative burden, and provider capacity remained structural.
- Integrated roles produce **different—not just greater—outcomes.** Combined roles shifted navigation from system clarification to system insight.
- Navigation generates **system learning when positioned as a connective function.** Navigators (workforce, program) function as "connective tissue" connecting the foundational elements of building robust early education and care mixed-delivery systems and pilots.

Summary

The combined Navigator roles produced impacts that extended beyond access and clarity to include continuity, coordination, and system learning. Integration reduced fragmentation, strengthened collaboration, and generated insights that support longer-term system improvement, underscoring the importance of dedicated capacity for sustaining these benefits.

Parent Leadership Training Program

Parent Leadership in Early Childhood System Building

Performance period 5/2024–12/2025

Family engagement and parent leadership are important components of early childhood system building, supporting families' understanding of services, strengthening communication across programs and agencies, and creating opportunities for family perspectives to inform planning and implementation. Effective parent leadership efforts create structured opportunities for shared learning and information exchange and are most effective when they are accessible, culturally responsive, and grounded in families' lived experiences.

The Parent Leadership Training Program is a pilot leadership development initiative designed to support parents of young children in building knowledge about Maine's early childhood system and sharing information with other families. Developed as a shorter-term alternative to the 10 month Maine State Parent Ambassadors program, the pilot emphasized peer-to-peer learning and trusted messenger approaches within a six session training series. The training was co-facilitated by the Maine State Parent Ambassadors program and Portland Empowered, with coordination from state partners. The Parent Leadership Training Program was designed to build parent capacity and knowledge for peer-to-peer information sharing and feedback, rather than to deliver direct services or measure downstream child or family outcomes during the pilot period.

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,[1] the report examines the Parent Leadership Training Program initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including intended outcomes related to participant learning and early application of training content.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including coordination among state agencies and collaboration with community-based partners involved in implementation.
- **System building**, including early observations related to family engagement, information sharing, and feedback between families and system partners.
- **Supports and access**, including participation supports provided, design features intended to facilitate engagement, and barriers affecting participation.

[1]Data sources for this report program materials, a group interview with first cohort participants, interviews with state initiative leads Ana Hicks and Meg Swanson, monthly initiative reports, implementation evaluation form responses, and rating notes.

The work emphasizes shared learning, leadership development, and peer-to-peer information sharing through a trusted messenger approach, while also creating opportunities for parent perspectives to be shared back with system leaders.

Initiative leads, Meg Swanson (Office of Child and Family Services) and Ana Hicks (Children's Cabinet), described the program as emerging from conversations with families about challenges navigating early childhood services, accessing clear information, and understanding how systems function. They also noted that while the Maine State Parent Ambassadors (MSPA) program provides a comprehensive 10-month leadership experience, there was a need for a shorter-term option. Twelve immigrant parents with children ages 0-8 participated in the first six-session training cohort in Portland, which was co-facilitated by MSPA and Portland Empowered.

During the PDG Renewal period, parent leadership activities were implemented alongside other family-facing initiatives, including Help Me Grow and First4ME. Rather than operating as a stand-alone effort, the Parent Leadership Training Program was situated within a broader landscape of navigation, outreach, and service coordination, with the goal of preparing parents to serve as trusted messengers and contributors to community- and system-level conversations.

The sections that follow examine the outcomes of the Parent Leadership Training Program, including participant-reported learning, early application of training content, and the initiative's role in supporting information sharing and coordination with system partners.

PARENT LEADERSHIP TRAINING FEATURES

Pilot cohort: 12 parents completed a six session training

Program design: Shorter-term alternative to the 10-month Maine State Parent Ambassadors (MSPA) program

Facilitation: Co-facilitated by MSPA and Portland Empowered; guest speakers included

Approach: Trusted messenger / peer-to-peer model

Design input: 3 Shared Space Cafés (2023) informed program development

Application: Parent leaders facilitated 2 community education meetings

Reach: 24+ additional parents reached through peer-led sessions

Participation supports: Onsite childcare and stipends

Topics: Child development, Help Me Grow, developmental screening, transitions to school, advocacy

Why a Shorter-Term Parent Leadership Pilot?

> **Initiative leads identified a need for a more accessible entry point for parents unable to commit to a long-term leadership program. The Parent Leadership Training Program was intentionally designed as a shorter-term pilot to test core leadership development and trusted-messenger components within Maine's existing parent leadership infrastructure.**

What was the impact of the Parent Leadership Training Program?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives is essential to assessing whether investments contribute to the intended outcomes for participants and to informing future system-building efforts. This section examines evidence related to the intended outcomes of the Parent Leadership Training Program, drawing on participant self-reports and early examples of application during the pilot period.

Initiative leads Meg Swanson and Ana Hicks described explicit intended outcomes for the Parent Leadership Training Program. The **intended outcomes** of the series were to:

- **Reach families** who are less engaged with existing early childhood systems and increase their understanding of early childhood services, supports, and how to navigate those systems.
- **Strengthen** parents' confidence to share information with other families, particularly within their own communities.
- **Develop and test** a trusted messenger model, whereby parent leaders return to their communities to provide peer-to-peer information.
- **Create a shorter-term leadership development opportunity** than that required for the 10-month Parent Ambassador Program.

Pilot Cohort and Target Population

The pilot cohort reflected the initiative's intended target population. Twelve immigrant parents with children ages 0–8 participated in the first training cohort in Portland, consistent with the initiative's focus on engaging families who are less connected to existing early childhood systems. Following a policy change, the target population was later broadened to include all families with young children. The work with the first cohort was completed prior to this policy change.

Participant-Reported Learning and Confidence

Evidence from a participant group interview conducted at the final training session indicates that intended outcomes were met for participants who completed the pilot cohort.

During the group interview conducted at the final session of the first training series, eight of twelve participants reported feeling more prepared to take on leadership roles within their communities. One participant stated during a mid-training check-in:

> **"I have been in this country for five years, and this is the best training I have ever attended. There were so many things I did not know."**

Participants described learning new information related to child development, developmental screening, Help Me Grow, and transitions to school. Several parents noted that understanding developmental expectations helped them better interpret children's behavior and learning needs.

Participants also identified learning about previously unfamiliar resources as particularly influential. Learning about Help Me Grow was frequently cited as important, especially as a centralized source of information and referral. Parents described learning new information about child protective services

(CPS), including the role of cultural brokers and how expectations around child safety may differ across cultural contexts.

Information related to health coverage and screening was also described as influential. Participants reported learning about MaineCare eligibility for immigrant families and discussed openly about how developmental screening tools, such as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), may not align with parenting norms across cultures.

Finally, some participants highlighted learning related to navigating the education system, including differences in access to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs, parents' rights in decision-making, and differences in childcare hours available for children with autism diagnoses. Participants described this information as helpful in understanding how to advocate for their children within early childhood and school systems.

Participant self-reports indicate increased confidence in explaining processes, answering questions, and connecting families to supports. One participant stated:

> **"We learned to identify the issues and to connect people in need to the solutions."**

Early Application of Learning

Evidence of application indicates that informational reach extended beyond the initial cohort. Of the twelve parent leaders who completed the first training series, four to five facilitated two community education meetings in September 2024. Each meeting was attended by at least twelve additional parents and included interpreters to support language access. These activities provide evidence of short-term application of the trusted messenger model through peer-to-peer information sharing in community settings.

Emergent Observations

Although not identified as an intended outcome, initiative leads described an emergent benefit: two-way communication between families and system partners. Feedback shared by parents during training discussions and the group interview provided insight into family experiences with early childhood systems, including communication barriers, cultural considerations, and trust in family engagement. Initiative leads characterized this feedback as unexpected and welcome, noting that it supported reflection on how services are communicated and experienced by families. Evidence from this evaluation reflects the presence of two-way communication pathways, rather than changes to policies, practices, or service delivery resulting from that communication.

The evidence presented reflects participant-reported experience and early application within a single pilot cohort. The evaluation did not assess longer-term outcomes, changes in service utilization, or broader system-level effects. Findings should therefore be interpreted as early signals of whether intended outcomes were met for participants who completed the training, rather than evidence of sustained or population-level impact.

How did the Parent Leadership Training Program build collaborations?

The Parent Leadership Training Program required coordination across state agencies and collaboration with community-based organizations to support implementation of the pilot. Initiative leads described coordination between the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) and the Children's Cabinet as central to planning and oversight.

Community-based organizations supported outreach, facilitation, and post-training activities. These included Kennebec Valley Community Action Program (KVCAP), Educare Central Maine's Parent Ambassador Program, and Portland Empowered. Initiative leads reported that partnering with organizations already connected to families supported recruitment and helped situate the training within trusted community contexts.

Initiative leads, Swanson and Hicks, noted that coordination required ongoing communication and role clarification across organizations with different missions and operating structures, including aligning expectations for recruitment, facilitation roles, and follow-up activities. This coordination was described as time-intensive but necessary for the pilot's implementation.

Relationships developed through the pilot informed coordination across existing parent leadership efforts. Swanson and Hicks described how connections formed during implementation supported adjustments in where activities were convened and informed coordination with the Maine State Parent Ambassadors program.

The pilot also created opportunities for information sharing between participating parents and the two initiative leads. Feedback shared during training discussions and group interviews provided insight into how families experience early childhood systems and services. Swanson and Hicks described this exchange as supporting learning related to communication practices, cultural considerations, and family trust.

Swanson and Hicks noted that engaging with families through this pilot reinforced the importance of partnerships with families, which are as important as partnerships with schools, childcare providers, and community organizations.

How has the Parent Leadership Training Program contributed to building a strong statewide early learning system, and will it continue?

Swanson and Hicks described the Parent Leadership Training Program as contributing to agency-level learning related to family engagement and communication during the pilot period. Feedback shared by parents through training discussions and group interviews provided insight into how early childhood systems are experienced by families, particularly immigrant families and families who are less engaged with existing services.

Swanson and Hicks identified several areas of learning that emerged from parent feedback during the pilot. These included increased awareness that developmental screening tools, such as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), may not align with parenting norms across cultures, and that child welfare communication can be misinterpreted when families lack context about system expectations.

These examples informed reflection on how information is conveyed and how families from diverse cultural backgrounds experience services.

The pilot reinforced the value of feedback loops in family engagement practice. Swanson and Hicks described the two-way exchange of information with parents as reinforcing the importance of listening and responding, rather than relying solely on one-directional communication. While this was not an intended outcome of the pilot, initiative leads reported that it informed internal discussions about capturing and using family input in other contexts. This evaluation does not assess whether these discussions resulted in changes to agency guidance, practices, or decision-making.

With respect to continuation, Swanson and Hicks described how selected elements of the pilot were incorporated into the existing parent leadership infrastructure following the pilot period. Coordination shifted to the Kennebec Valley Community Action Program (KVCAP), and core aspects of the work were embedded within the Maine State Parent Ambassadors Program. Current activities include engaging fathers and male caregivers and collaborating between parent leaders and childcare providers through MaineAEYC's Leadership, Engagement, and Advocacy Program (LEaP).

With respect to sustainability, initiative leads described how the Parent Leadership Training Program was intentionally designed as a shorter-term pilot, informed by and emerging from the Maine State Parent Ambassadors Program, which provides a more intensive, 10-month leadership experience. The pilot responded to identified needs for a more accessible entry point for parents who could not commit to the full Parent Ambassador model.

Initiative leads reported that current activities are supported through CCDF funding through at least September 2026 and described the intent to continue to explore the ability to use the Parent Leadership Training model for a targeted audience that has historically been underrepresented or more difficult to reach, such as fathers on an ongoing basis, contingent on the availability of CCDF funding supporting the broader Parent Ambassador infrastructure. At the same time, they noted that expansion beyond the pilot scale would require dedicated staffing and deliberate attention to contracting and timing, reflecting broader system capacity considerations to support sustained, long-term impact at the community and systems levels.

Sustainability at a Glance

- **Status: Shorter-term pilot model, sustained in function**
- **Infrastructure: Embedded within Maine's Parent Ambassador leadership framework**
- **Funding: Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)**
- **Time horizon: Supported through at least September 2026**
- **Conditions for growth: Dedicated staffing and contracting capacity**

In what ways did the design of the Parent Leadership Training Program facilitate participation?

Findings in this section draw on participant perspectives shared during a group interview and facilitated discussion conducted at the final training session, as well as interviews with initiative leads, Swanson and Hicks.

Several design features were identified as supporting participation, learning, and early application during the pilot cohort. Participants and initiative leads describe culturally responsive framing and facilitation as influential. Participants reported that training sessions created space to discuss how early childhood systems operate across different cultural contexts and to ask questions about expectations that may differ from parenting practices in their home countries. Swanson and Hicks reported that themes emerging from the Shared Space Cafés informed this emphasis, including a focus on culturally responsive content, opportunities for dialogue, and the use of a trusted-messenger approach.

Background: Themes From Shared Space Café Participants

In 2023, three Shared Space Cafés held in Biddeford, Portland, and Lewiston gathered input from immigrant families. Themes included:

- Cultural differences in parenting and discipline create strain to acclimate to systems
- Communication barriers highlight the need for cultural bridging
- No communication = No understanding
- Childcare access and financial strain are core stressors
- Beliefs about early childhood development range widely across cultures, causing conflict and mistrust with early intervention systems.

Participants in the final-session group interview identified opportunities for dialogue and exchange as important design features. Parents reported valuing sessions that allowed time for discussion and reflection rather than one-directional information delivery. Participants also described learning from facilitators with shared cultural or lived experience as increasing trust and relevance, and as supporting their readiness to share information with peers following the training.

Participants consistently identified participation support as essential to engagement (final-session group interview). Participants described on-site childcare as necessary for their ability to attend training sessions. Participants cited financial stipends as important supports that helped offset time and transportation costs. Participants also noted that language access and interpretation enabled them to engage with training content and discussions in accessible ways. Swanson and Hicks reported that interpretation and translated materials were important for equitable access to both training content and post-training information sharing.

Participants and initiative leads also identified barriers to participation (final-session group interview and initiative lead interviews). Participants reported that scheduling constraints and competing family

and work responsibilities limited some parents' ability to continue engagement beyond the training sessions. Initiative leads noted that uncertainty about expectations for post-training activities initially created confusion for some participants. Participants described trust and familiarity with systems as contextual factors shaping initial hesitation, particularly for parents with prior experiences that influenced their comfort engaging with early childhood or child welfare systems.

An area for refinement was identified through participant feedback collected during the final training session. Participants indicated that earlier and clearer communication about expectations for community information sharing following the training would have been helpful.

Lessons Learned

- **A shorter-term format showed early evidence of meeting core leadership development objectives.** Participant self-reports from the six-session pilot indicated increased understanding and confidence, and early peer-to-peer information sharing within a shorter timeframe than in the 10-month Parent Ambassador Program.
- **Trusted messenger models extend informational reach beyond direct participants.** Four to five parent leaders facilitated two community education meetings, each attended by at least 12 additional parents, with interpreters present.
- **Two-way communication between families and system partners was an emergent benefit of the pilot.** Feedback shared by parents during training surfaced insights about how families experience early childhood systems—including ASQ cultural alignment concerns, child welfare communication barriers, and differences in ESOL access.
- **Participation supports were critical to engagement.** Participants described on-site childcare as necessary for their ability to attend, cited financial stipends as important for offsetting participation costs, and identified culturally responsive facilitation as influential in creating space for open discussion.

Summary

Findings indicate that the Parent Leadership Training Program met its intended short-term outcomes for participants, including increased understanding of early childhood systems, increased confidence in sharing information with peers, and early testing of a trusted messenger model. As a pilot, the program also generated learning about family engagement approaches. While the evaluation did not assess longer-term or system-level outcomes, the findings provide early insight into how parent leadership efforts can inform future family-facing work.

Pre-Kindergarten Partnerships/Mixed Delivery

A Community–District Partnership Model to Expand Access to Public Pre-K in Maine

Performance period 04/2024–03/2026

Preschool programs across the country include both school-based and community-based settings. School-based Pre-Kindergarten programs typically follow the public school calendar and daily schedule, offering programming for approximately 10 months of the year and about six hours per day. Community-based child care programs, by contrast, often operate full-day, year-round schedules that better align with the needs of working families and offer continuity of care for children who may have been enrolled in those settings before age four. When school districts and community-based providers partner to deliver public Pre-K together, they can combine public funding, enrollment infrastructure, and K–12 alignment with the extended schedules and established family relationships that community-based programs offer..

Maine included the Public Pre-K Expansion through Partnership Initiative in its Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R) to address barriers identified in the state's Needs Assessment regarding access, capacity, and mixed-delivery coordination. Although approximately 47% of Maine's four-year-olds were served through publicly funded Pre-K during the 2019–20 school year, not all local education agencies had the facilities, staffing, or funding to reach universal enrollment. The PDG-R investment tested mixed-delivery partnership models[20] between school administrative units (SAUs) and community-based providers to expand access to high-quality public Pre-K and to inform future policy and funding decisions.

This report presents findings from outcome-focused assessment activities conducted in late fall 2025 as part of Maine's Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R) evaluation of the Grants to Expand Public Pre-K Partnerships initiative, offering insight into the feasibility and early outcomes of a partnership-based Pre-K pilot model in Maine:

- **Impact**, including an analysis of early child development data, classroom quality indicators, and family experience across pilot sites.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination,** including the extent to which partnerships among state agencies, SAUs, and community-based providers contributed to the model's success.
- **System building**, including ways the Public Pre-K Partnership initiative contributed to Maine's capacity to build a robust EC mixed delivery system
- **Supports and access,** including design features, service delivery conditions, and implementation considerations relevant to future scale.

Data sources for this report include parent surveys administered at both Year 2 pilot sites (N=10); Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment data (N=16 per site); CLASS observation results; teacher and administrator surveys; interview with the initiative lead; Pre-K Advisory Team documentation; and monthly implementation logs.

[20]Mixed-delivery early care and education (ECE) is the coordinated effort to support early childhood services and programming across a range of settings to help meet the varied needs of children and families. This initiative focused on partnerships between school districts and community-based child care providers.

The initiative first established the Pre-K Expansion Advisory Team, convened by the Maine Department of Education (DOE). The Team included representatives from community-based programs, school administrative units (SAUs), higher education, career and technical education, Child Development Services, the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS), Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN), and families. Meeting monthly and later bimonthly, the Advisory Team guided the design of initiatives, including funding structure, quality expectations, and credential requirements.

The Advisory Team recommended structuring initial awards on a per-classroom rather than per-child basis, a decision that informed pilot startup planning.

PRE-K PARTNERSHIPS/MIXED DELIVERY FEATURES

16 Pre-K seats per classroom across four partnership classrooms (64 seats total)

Two classrooms launched in PDG-R Grant Year 2—Cohort 1 (Scarborough and Sanford); two additional classrooms opened in PDG-R Grant Year 3 –Cohort 2 (Belfast and Damariscotta)

Each pilot site partnered with an SAU and a community-based child care program

Year 3 sites participated in the **MDOE FAPE Transition Cohort,** aligning partnership expansion with statewide Pre-K access requirements

Guided by a Pre-K Advisory Team with representation across the mixed-delivery system

Cohort 2 sites required QRIS Level 3 or higher; monitored through CLASS observations and Teaching Strategies GOLD assessments

PDG-R Grant Year 2 Cohort 1 Pilot Sites Launched (2024–25)

Two SAU–community partnerships were awarded funding through a competitive process and launched Pre-K classrooms in Fall 2024:

- Scarborough partnered with Shooting Stars to create 16 school-day seats with district-provided meals.
- Sanford partnered with the Springvale YMCA to create 16 full-day seats, including meals, transportation, and before- and after-care.

Classroom staff implemented state-approved curricula and used Teaching Strategies GOLD (TSG) for child assessment. CLASS observations were conducted in Fall 2024 and Spring 2025.

PDG-R Grant Year 3 Cohort 2 Partnership Expansion (2025–26)

Two additional partnerships received Public Partnership funds: Belfast (with the YMCA) and Damariscotta (with Coastal Kids). Participating programs were expected to hold a QRIS Level 3 or higher rating. Both sites participated in the MDOE Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) Transition Cohort and operate a full-day, year-round model with wraparound care.

The initiative lead provided ongoing technical assistance, site visits, and coordination of professional development across all sites.

Consistent with the pilot design initiative, implementation focused on partnership formation, quality alignment, and technical support.

What was the impact of the Pre-K Partnerships/Mixed Delivery initiative?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives requires assessing whether investments advanced their intended purposes. Because the Pre-K Partnerships initiative was designed as a pilot—testing the feasibility of a community-based partnership model rather than implementing an established statewide practice—impact is understood in terms of what the initiative demonstrated during a limited implementation period.

The initiative's intended outcomes were:

- **Increased early childhood education** options for families
- **Enhanced quality of early learning environments** within community-based settings
- **Information available to guide future decisions** about program design, funding, and scaling.

Findings below are drawn from Year 2 pilot sites (Scarborough and Sanford) during the 2024–25 school year, including Teaching Strategies GOLD (TSG) data (N=16 per site), CLASS observations, parent surveys (N=10), and teacher and administrator perspectives. Year 3 sites (Belfast and Damariscotta) are included where relevant.

Increasing Early Childhood Education Options for Families

In Year 2, the initiative created 32 publicly funded Pre-K seats across two community-based classrooms (16 per site), both of which operated at full enrollment. In one district, the pilot was the first publicly offered Pre-K program locally. Service models differed by site:

> **Scarborough followed a school-day schedule with district-provided meals, while Sanford offered full-day, year-round programming that included meals, district-provided transportation, and before- and after-care.**

In Year 3, two additional partnerships were launched in Belfast and Damariscotta, extending the model beyond southern Maine into Lincoln and Waldo counties. Both Year 3 sites operate full-day, year-round models and participate in the MDOE Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) Transition Cohort.

At one Year 2 site, approximately half of the enrolled children had no prior formal early childhood experience (Initiative Lead Interview, 2025), indicating that the pilot reached families who had not previously accessed Pre-K.

These findings demonstrate that the pilot expanded the range and structure of publicly funded Pre-K options available within participating communities.

Enhancing the Quality of Early Learning Environments

Teaching Strategies GOLD (TSG) data documented developmental growth across domains at both Year 2 sites (N=16 per site), with the strongest gains observed in social-emotional development and literacy. Growth was measured across fall-to-winter or fall-to-spring assessment windows, depending on the site's schedule. Teacher and parent reports reflected similar patterns, including increased vocabulary, improved peer interaction, and greater confidence.

CLASS observations conducted in fall 2024 and spring 2025 documented supportive classroom environments at both sites. Emotional Support scores were in the high range, while Classroom Organization and Instructional Support scores fell in the mid-to-high range. Scores were sustained across observation periods.

Parent survey results (N=10) indicated high levels of satisfaction with classroom quality, communication, and staff responsiveness. Most parents reported feeling welcomed, able to share goals and concerns, and satisfied with how teachers supported their children's learning.

While the pilot scale limits generalizability, the convergence of classroom observation data, child assessment data, and family feedback provides early evidence that partnership classrooms maintained quality and supported developmental growth during the implementation year.

Generating Information to Guide Future Design and Scaling

The central purpose of the pilot was to identify the conditions under which a partnership-based Pre-K model can be implemented effectively. The Pre-K Expansion Advisory Team shaped key design decisions during the first year. The Advisory Team recommended funding sites on a per-classroom rather than per-child basis during startup, a decision that the Advisory Team determined made the implementation more successful. The Advisory Team also recommended flexibility in credential requirements within QRIS standards for Cohort 2 sites, allowing one site to retain existing staff with several years of experience and strong relationships with families. All Chapter 124 staffing credential requirements were met at Cohort 1 sites.

Early implementation surfaced operational challenges that informed subsequent practice. District and community-based partners navigated issues related to curriculum alignment, assessment coordination, meal delivery, enrollment processes, Pre-K screening, and access to special education supports. Teachers from the first implementation year, now in their second year of operation, reported that they were more comfortable and that coordination was proceeding much more smoothly than during the inaugural year.

The pilot also surfaced sustainability considerations. The initiative's lead dedicated coordination role—including support for partnership agreements, implementation guidance, and site-specific technical assistance—was consistently identified as critical to the partnerships' functioning. The initiative lead noted that a centralized support system is key to ensuring alignment of data collection, goals, and vision, and to making community partners feel included in the district and the community.

Together, these findings provide the state with documented evidence about the conditions necessary for partnership-based Pre-K delivery, including per-classroom startup funding, credential flexibility, centralized coordination, and differentiated technical assistance.

How did the initiative strengthen communication and cross-sector coordination?

At the **state level,** the initiative operated across multiple agencies. The initiative lead described a productive relationship with the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) and noted that the Pre-K Partnership itself modeled an OCFS–DOE collaboration, with additional coordination involving Child Development Services (CDS) and the Office of Special Services and Inclusive Education (OSSIE) to clarify FAPE transition responsibilities within partnership programs (Initiative Lead Interview, 2025).

The Pre-K Advisory Team served as the **primary cross-sector coordination mechanism**, bringing together state agencies, districts, and community-based providers to guide design and implementation. The initiative lead described the group as aligned, substantive, and deliberate, with no contentious positions. She specifically valued the inclusion of CTE and higher education voices, which brought perspectives not typically represented in Pre-K planning.

At the **local level, relationship-building and communication between SAU and community-based partners emerged as a consistent theme across implementation years**. The initiative lead emphasized that introducing a new partnership concept requires deliberate communication about messaging, timing, and support availability. The initiative lead articulated the value of centralized coordination: ensuring consistent data collection and aligned goals and vision is key to making community partners feel included in the district and the community (Initiative Lead Interview, 2025).

How has the initiative contributed to building a strong statewide early childhood service system?

The initiative contributed to broader system awareness. Knowledge and understanding of mixed-delivery systems are now discussed at multiple levels: the DOE Early Learning team, OCFS, and FAPE transition planning. More SAUs understand that a mixed-delivery approach can lead to universal Pre-K delivery.

> **The initiative lead observed that schools are beginning to recognize their responsibility to children and families before kindergarten entry (Initiative Lead Interview, 2025). The expansion into FAPE Transition Cohort districts in Year 3 reinforces this trajectory.**

The continuation of the coordination function that made the pilot work is among the most significant system-building questions the initiative leaves unresolved.

The initiative lead's dedicated role in managing recruitment, technical assistance, site visits, CLASS observations, and relationship-building is not secure beyond the PDG-R funding period, and the initiative has not accessed funding outside the grant to sustain the work (Initiative Lead Interview, 2025).

In what ways did the initiative support access and participation?

The initiative incorporated intentional supports to enable successful implementation across sites with varying levels of readiness and capacity. It also surfaced access considerations.

Technical assistance was differentiated based on site readiness. The initiative lead developed detailed requests for proposals, implementation guidance, and site-specific support. Sites entering implementation with established teams and familiarity with curriculum and assessment tools required less intensive onboarding, while sites with newer teams received targeted coaching, professional development, and facilitated connections with curriculum coordinators (Implementation Report, 2025). Participants consistently cited the initiative's ongoing consultation and responsiveness to site-specific needs as critical to maintaining quality and supporting staff.

Access for families was enhanced through the community-based delivery model itself. By locating Pre-K within trusted community programs, the initiative reduced logistical barriers and supported continuity of care for children and families. Full-day, year-round programming at the Sanford site—and at both Year 3 sites—directly addressed the needs of working families who cannot rely on school-day-only schedules. Wraparound care, including before- and aftercare, meals, and, in some cases, district-provided transportation, expanded the practical accessibility of Pre-K in ways that traditional school-based programs often cannot.

At the same time, the pilot identified several access gaps that will require attention as the model develops:

- Transportation remained a barrier at one Year 2 site where it was not available. District leadership noted that the lack of transportation may limit access for some families.
- Special education and behavioral supports were inconsistently available across sites. Leaders and staff emphasized challenges in accessing services and the importance of earlier, more consistent support for children with diverse learning needs.
- Supports for multilingual learners were identified as a gap at both Year 2 sites, with staff recognizing the need for stronger services and resources for children and families whose primary language is not English.
- Professional development opportunities were unevenly distributed. While district leaders referenced professional development as a benefit of the partnership, classroom staff at one site reported limited participation, and both sites identified a need for more targeted coaching and training.
- Connection to school-wide experiences was limited for children in community-based classrooms. Teachers and administrators noted that children in partner programs had fewer opportunities to participate in specialist activities, assemblies, PTA events, and interactions with kindergarten teachers—experiences that could strengthen transitions and deepen families' sense of inclusion in the broader school community.

These findings reflect the kind of implementation learning a well-designed pilot is intended to produce—specific, actionable information about what worked, what requires further development, and what **conditions must be in place for the model to succeed at scale**.

What were the lessons learned from the initiative?

- **Partnership does not follow from structure alone.** Districts and community-based child care programs entered with different cultures, expectations, and levels of familiarity with the partnership concept. A dedicated coordination role was the most frequently cited factor in partnership functioning across all data sources.
- **The full-day, year-round model—meaning extended hours beyond the traditional school calendar—is a design feature, not a convenience.** It shaped access, enrollment, and family engagement, and both cohort 2 sites adopted it.
- **Quality can be established in community-based settings, but workload demands attention.** CLASS and TSG data confirmed quality; teachers flagged the cumulative burden of multiple curricula and assessment requirements.
- **Credentialing requirements must be calibrated to the existing workforce.** The Advisory Team's waiver recommendation enabled sites to retain experienced staff while maintaining quality expectations.
- **Access gaps surfaced by the pilot are specific and addressable.** Transportation, special education and behavioral supports, services for multilingual learners, professional development distribution, and connection to school-wide experiences all require attention in future iterations.
- **Communication is cumulative. Cohort 2 partnership formation was smoother than Cohort 1.** The mixed-delivery concept becomes more workable with repeated exposure, consistent messaging, and visible examples of functioning partnerships.

Summary

The Pre-K Partnerships initiative tested whether community–district partnerships could expand access to public Pre-K within a mixed-delivery system.

The initiative generated practical knowledge about the conditions required for partnership-based Pre-K delivery, including funding structure, credential flexibility, coordination supports, and identified access gaps. Findings provide early evidence of feasibility and highlight considerations relevant to future policy and funding decisions regarding mixed-delivery Pre-K in Maine.

Quality Improvement Awards

Incentivizing Advancement in Rising Stars for ME

Performance period 04/2024–12/2025

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) serve as structural infrastructure within early childhood systems. Nationally, QRIS frameworks define tiered standards of program quality, establish clear pathways for advancement, and provide public transparency regarding quality benchmarks. When paired with structured technical assistance and financial incentives, QRIS models are designed to support continuous quality improvement across mixed-delivery settings[21]. Incentive strategies, in particular, are often used to reduce financial barriers associated with meeting higher standards and to accelerate movement within tiered quality systems.

Maine launched Rising Stars for ME, its revised Quality Rating and Improvement System, in March 2023. Through the Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R), the state committed to advancing this framework by expanding financial incentives tied to quality benchmarks. The **Quality Improvement Awards (QIA)** initiative carried out this commitment by pairing performance-based funding with coordinated technical assistance to support programs in meeting advancement standards. While Rising Stars for ME remains an ongoing state responsibility, PDG-R resources supported a time-limited expansion of structured incentives and implementation supports intended to increase verified advancement during the grant period.

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 Quality Improvement initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including intended outcomes, Star rating changes, and evidence of quality improvement.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including collaboration between MRTQ PDN, OCFS, and regional supports.
- **System building**, contributions to workforce development, QRIS engagement, and statewide quality infrastructure.
- **Supports and access**, including translation, self-paced training, dissemination strategies, implementation adaptations, and identified participation barriers.

Data sources for this report include the QIA Final Report submitted by MRTQ PDN (January 2026), monthly implementation logs, interviews with initiative leads, and administrative data.

The Quality Improvement Awards (QIA) initiative was implemented by the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN) in partnership with the Maine Office of Child and

[21]Maine defines mixed-delivery ECE as the coordinated effort to support early childhood services and programming across a range of settings to help meet the varied needs of children and families.

Family Services (OCFS). The initiative provided financial incentives to early childhood education (ECE) and out-of-school time (OST) programs seeking advancement within Rising Stars for ME.

The initiative operated as a structured, two-stage incentive model. P rograms first completed a Rising Stars for ME application to establish their current Star rating and receive a Recommendations Report identifying unmet standards. Programs then developed a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) with support from MRTQ PDN staff.

Once approved, programs received initial funding to implement planned improvements. Programs that verified Star advancement through reapplication received a final performance-based incentive payment. Initial funding totaled $917,760. Final performance payments totaled $499,000, bringing total administered funds to approximately $1.4 million.

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AWARDS FEATURES

Two-stage incentive model pairing initial Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) funding with performance-based payments for verified Star advancement

$1.4 million in PDG-R funds administered across initial funding ($917,760) and final performance payments ($499,000)

178 Quality Improvement Plans submitted: 149 programs funded across all 16 Maine counties

Near-equal participation **from center-based programs (75) and family child care homes (74)**

Participating programs represented a **combined licensing capacity of 4,466 children and a workforce of 1,000** ECE and OST professionals

Structured QIP process aligned with Rising Stars for ME Recommendations Reports

Embedded regional technical assistance delivered through MRTQ PDN Quality Specialists

Rolling submission structure allowing programs to enter the initiative throughout the implementation period

Table 1. Funding Structure by Star Movement

Star Movement	Initial Funding Limit	Final Incentive
Star 2 to Star 3	$6,500	$3,500
Star 3 to Star 4	$7,000	$3,000
Star 4 to Star 5 (maintaining) S	$7,500	$2,500

Implementation updates indicate that 178 programs submitted Quality Improvement Plans during the implementation period, of which 149 received funding, including 75 center-based and 74 family child care programs across all 16 Maine counties. Most funded participants (126 programs, 85%) entered at Star 2, with smaller numbers entering at Stars 3, 4, and 5. Participating programs represented a combined licensed capacity to serve 4,466 children and a workforce of 1,000 ECE and OST professionals.

Initial funding supported QRIS-aligned quality improvement activities, including training, materials, facility upgrades, and administrative planning time. QIPs were accepted on a rolling basis throughout the implementation period. MRTQ PDN's ECE Program Quality Specialists supported application navigation and documentation requirements.

What was the impact of the Quality Improvement Awards?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives requires assessing whether investments advanced their intended purposes.

Initiative Leads identified the following **intended outcomes** for this work:

- **Increased engagement** with regional technical assistance.
- **Increased the number** of programs advancing within the QRIS.

At this stage, documented impact is reflected primarily in structural and engagement indicators. Findings are organized around these intended outcomes.

Increased Engagement With Regional Technical Assistance

Initiative Leads stated that some providers who had previously expressed hesitation about the prior QRIS model initiated or renewed engagement because of the incentive structure, increasing their interaction with regional supports. Programs became more familiar with Quality Specialists and relied on them for assistance in navigating the Recommendations Report, E-Portfolio system, and documentation requirements.

Self-reported participant survey data collected by MRTQ PDN at the conclusion of the initiative further indicate increased QRIS literacy:

- 94% of respondents reported improved understanding.
- 89% reported greater confidence explaining how their program meets quality standards.
- Quality Specialists reported observing increased use of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) plans, family surveys, and self-assessment tools (MRTQ PDN QIA Final Report, 2026).

One participant reflected:

> **"I haven't felt this way in 30 years. I'm learning again, and I'm excited by that. . . . It feels like a whole new world of information has opened up to me."**
> (QIA participant, as reported by a Quality Specialist)

This increased engagement was reflected in how programs directed resources. Programs invested QIA funds primarily in materials and equipment ($532,831, 58% of initial funding), followed by training ($224,660, 24%) and administrative stipends ($135,718, 15%), with smaller allocations for technical assistance and other needs (MRTQ PDN QIA Final Report, 2026). Materials expenditures included curriculum and assessment tools, technology upgrades, and facility improvements. Training funds supported MELDS training and credential-related coursework and covered staff time or substitute costs associated with professional development participation.

Increased the Number of Programs Advancing within the QRIS

Administrative data indicate that 112 of the 149 funded programs (75%) achieved at least one Star rating increase during the implementation period—78 programs increased by one Star, 33 by two Stars, and one by three Stars—resulting in 147 total Star movements (MRTQ PDN QIA Final Report, January 2026).

Table 2. Star Movement Outcomes Among Participating Programs

Outcome	Number of Programs	Percent of Total (n=149)
Star 2 to Star 3	69	46%
Star 2 to Star 4	33	22%
Star 2 to Star 5	1	0.7%
Star 3 to Star 4	6	4.0%
Star 4 to Star 5	3	2.0%
Maintained Star 5	5	3.4%
No Star increase	37	24%

Source: MRTQ PDN QIA Final Report, January 2026.

Between April 2024 and November 2025, 244 total Star increases occurred statewide. QIA participants accounted for 147 of these increases (60%).

Table 3. QIA Contribution to Statewide Star Advancement

Measure	Count
Total star increases statewide (April 2024–November 2025)	244
Star increases achieved by QIA participants	147
Percent of statewide increases attributable to QIA	60%
Total programs statewide that increased Star rating	172
QIA participants who increased Star rating	112
Percent of advancing programs that were QIA participants	65%

Source: MRTQ PDN QIA Final Report, January 2026.

Initiative Leads stated that advancement to higher Star ratings was influenced by **workforce qualification thresholds embedded within the Career Lattice framework** (Interview, November 2025). Progression beyond midlevel Star ratings required meeting credential and experience benchmarks that often extended beyond the project timeframe. While QIA funds supported professional development activity, credential completion frequently required additional time. Material and

infrastructure improvements addressed compliance gaps; however, when workforce qualification thresholds were unmet, these improvements alone were insufficient to generate Star movement.

Thirty-seven programs did not achieve verified Star advancement during the initiative timeframe (Table 3). Administrative data indicate that all 37 of these programs received initial funding and engaged in Quality Improvement Plan activities—including training, meeting requirements across several Rising Stars standard areas, and facility improvements. Non-advancement was more concentrated among programs at higher starting Star ratings; while 82% of Star 2 programs achieved advancement, the rate was lower among programs starting at Stars 3, 4, and 5 (maintained), where Career Lattice credential and experience thresholds are more demanding. Initiative Leads stated that progression beyond mid-level Star ratings required meeting workforce qualification benchmarks that often extended beyond the project timeframe. Another challenge to meeting or maintaining these higher standards included that the departure of a single qualified staff member could cause a program to fall below the proportion of credentialed staff required for its Star rating (Interview, November 2025). Technology barriers and administrative complexity also contributed to non-advancement among some programs.

How did the QIA initiative strengthen communication and cross-sector coordination?

Implementation of the Quality Improvement Awards (QIA) initiative required coordination between the Maine Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS), the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN), in particular the MRTQ PDN Quality Specialists (regional staff who provide direct technical assistance to ECE programs and providers).

Aligned messaging between OCFS and MRTQ PDN was important during early rollout. Because the revised QRIS was new to the field and some providers were still adjusting to the transition from the prior system, Initiative Leads described deliberate efforts to clarify that Rising Stars for ME and the QIA were intended to be strengths-based and supportive.

Initiative Leads further stated that early participants served as informal ambassadors, sharing their experiences at statewide summits and through peer networks. This organic advocacy contributed to a gradual shift in provider attitudes and supported subsequent recruitment through word of mouth.

OCFS provided policy oversight and alignment with statewide quality priorities, while MRTQ PDN managed operational implementation and funding administration. Quality Specialists served as intermediaries between state-level administration and participating programs, supporting application navigation, documentation assembly, and interpretation of Recommendations Reports.

These coordination mechanisms were intended to support consistent implementation across counties and program types during the grant period.

How has the QIA initiative contributed to building a strong statewide early childhood service system?

The QIA initiative operated within Maine's existing QRIS and workforce infrastructure and reinforced several structural components of the state's early childhood education system.

Table 4. System-Level Infrastructure Strengthened Through QIA

System Area	Pre-QIA Context	PDG-Enabled Structural Action
QRIS Engagement	Participation is often aligned with license renewal cycles	Financial incentives for programs to seek Star advancement before their next license renewal cycle
Workforce Alignment	Career Lattice benchmarks embedded in QRIS standards	Funds supported credential-related activity aligned with Career Lattice qualification thresholds
Regional Technical Assistance Infrastructure	Quality Specialists provided general consultation	Incentive structure increased QRIS-specific engagement with regional supports
Incentive Structure	Limited direct financial linkage to advancement	The two-stage funding model tied financial incentives to verified Star movement

The initiative functioned within existing state systems rather than as a standalone funding mechanism. Its workforce alignment component also intersects with the Workforce Salary Supplement initiative, which addresses staff retention through compensation support. Participation was nearly evenly distributed between center-based programs (75) and family child care homes (74), indicating that the incentive model was accessible across settings within Maine's mixed-delivery system. Together, these initiatives target complementary dimensions of the workforce barriers identified as the primary challenges to sustain Star advancement.

The initiative's integration within existing infrastructure was facilitated by MRTQ PDN's institutional positioning. As an holistic workforce development and technical assistance system with statewide reach, MRTQ PDN houses the state workforce registry, provides professional development aligned with the Career Lattice, and maintains established relationships with providers across regions. These assets positioned MRTQ PDN to deliver initiative components within trusted, pre-existing systems rather than requiring new operational structures.

In what ways did the QIA initiative support accessibility and participation for early childhood education programs?

The initiative incorporated several design features intended to facilitate broad participation. Programs were permitted flexible documentation submission methods for their quality improvement plans, including handwritten plans, screenshots, and email-based submissions. Administrative stipends offset

planning time, and regionally distributed technical assistance from Quality Specialists provided hands-on support with application navigation, documentation, and use.

Initiative Leads and implementation updates indicate that technology barriers and administrative complexity nonetheless remained challenges for some programs. Smaller providers without dedicated office space or computers reported difficulty managing documentation requirements. Programs simultaneously pursuing Rising Stars advancement and national accreditation reported administrative fatigue from managing multiple documentation systems. The transition to revised QRIS standards and a new online platform also created an initial learning curve during early implementation.

Administrative records indicate that participation was concentrated among programs beginning at Star 2, with fewer programs at higher Star ratings (Stars 3–5) electing to participate (MRTQ PDN QIA Final Report, January 2026). Initiative Leads stated they would have welcomed greater engagement among Star 4 and 5 programs. While the awards were available to both advance and sustain higher Star ratings, participation at upper tiers was limited during the implementation period

Sustainability

Initiative Leads stated that Quality Specialists are funded through MRTQ PDN's core grant and will continue to support Rising Stars for ME beyond the PDG-R period. Because the initiative operated within MRTQ PDN's existing professional development and workforce registry infrastructure, these operational components are not dependent solely on grant funding.

Several design elements position the initiative for partial continuation. The Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) framework developed for the QIA provides a structured approach to translating Recommendations Reports into actionable plans. The QIA Final Report (January 2026) recommends adapting this framework for broader QRIS use, thereby extending its application beyond funded cohorts.

While OCFS has expressed intent to continue quality improvement incentives, funding levels and structure beyond the grant period have not been confirmed.

Initiative Leads noted that dedicated cross-sector leadership—with named staff at both OCFS and MRTQ PDN responsible for coordinating the initiative—was instrumental during implementation. Maintaining this shared leadership structure would support continuity if the initiative is scaled or replicated. The dedicated initiative lead position at MRTQ PDN was eliminated at the conclusion of the grant period.

Lessons Learned

Several lessons emerged during implementation of the QIA initiative:

- **Timing matters**. Launching the QIA shortly after the rollout of the revised QRIS created simultaneous learning curves for providers and regional staff. Early implementation required additional support as programs adapted to new standards and a new application platform.

- **Staff turnover affects advancement.** The departure of a single qualified staff member could affect a program's eligibility for higher Star ratings. The advancement pace was therefore influenced not only by program effort, but also by workforce stability.
- **Incremental progress is not fully captured within Star movement.** Some programs completed substantial quality improvement activities but did not achieve verified Star advancement within the initiative timeframe. Current QRIS structures do not formally recognize progress occurring within a rating level. Introducing sub-steps or a point system within Star ratings could provide a mechanism for recognizing incremental progress and sustaining program motivation between rating changes.
- **Technology capacity influences participation.** Variation in technology access and administrative capacity across providers influenced participation during the implementation period (see Supports and Access).
- **Strengths-based messaging supports engagement. Initiative** Leads stated that clear, non-punitive communication helped address skepticism from the transition to the revised QRIS. Consistent messaging contributed to provider participation and sustained engagement.
- **Administrative workload was higher than anticipated.** Both regional staff and participating programs experienced significant documentation, and coordination demands during early rollout. Implementation intensity was influenced by the concurrent transition to revised QRIS standards.

Summary

The Quality Improvement Awards (QIA) initiative supported 149 programs across all 16 Maine counties in engaging with Rising Stars for ME. Of these, 112 programs (75.2%) achieved at least one Star rating increase, resulting in 147 total Star movements. QIA participants accounted for a majority of verified Star advancement statewide during the implementation period. Survey findings and interviews indicate increased engagement with regional technical assistance and improved understanding of QRIS standards among participating programs.

The initiative operated within Maine's existing QRIS and workforce infrastructure, reinforcing linkages between Star advancement and Career Lattice qualification benchmarks. While funding supported improvements in curriculum, facilities, and professional development, the pace of advancement was influenced by workforce qualification timelines and staff stability. Core implementation components—including regional technical assistance and the Quality Improvement Plan framework—are embedded within existing systems, while continuation of performance-based incentive funding remains dependent on future resource decisions. Alternative incentive structures, including linking tiered subsidy rates to Star-rating attainment, have been identified as options for sustaining quality improvement momentum beyond the grant period.

Registered ECE Apprenticeship Program

Strengthening Workforce Pathways in Maine's Early Childhood System

Performance period 10/2023–12/2025

Strengthening Maine's early childhood workforce is a central component of building a stable, high-quality, and equitable early childhood system. Workforce preparation, credential attainment, and career advancement are critical levers for improving program quality and supporting long-term retention, particularly in a field characterized by low wages, variable access to training, and limited advancement pathways. Registered Apprenticeship models offer a structured approach to workforce development by combining paid, on-the-job learning with credential-aligned training and sustained mentoring, creating opportunities for educators to build skills while remaining employed in the field.

The **Registered Early Childhood Education (ECE) Apprenticeship Program** represents a long-standing workforce strategy in Maine designed to strengthen career pathways for early childhood educators through a competency-based apprenticeship model aligned with state credentials and Maine's Career Lattice. Implemented through Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN) in partnership with workforce agencies, training providers, employers, and early childhood system partners, the initiative supports educators pursuing Infant Toddler, Preschool, Youth Development, and associate-degree pathways. Rather than operating as a short-term or stand-alone intervention, the initiative builds on existing workforce and credentialing infrastructure. It adapts over time to reflect the realities of the early childhood labor market and educators' needs across diverse settings.

This report presents findings from outcome-focused assessment activities examining the Registered ECE Apprenticeship Program implemented by MRTQ PDN during the Fall 2023–December 2025 period, supported through Maine's Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R). Drawing on diverse data sources[1], the analysis examines how the initiative supported workforce preparation, credential attainment, and career advancement within Maine's early childhood education system. Findings are organized across the following PDG-R outcome areas, consistent with the structure used in other PDG initiative reports:

- **Impact**, including intended outcomes related to workforce entry, skill development, credential attainment, and professional growth.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including partnerships among state agencies, workforce partners, employers, and training providers.
- **System building**, including early contributions related to career pathways, alignment with credentialing and workforce systems, and program adaptations.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitate participation, mentoring and training supports, and barriers affecting apprentices and employers.
- **Professional development,** including role-specific training and supports embedded within the apprenticeship model, particularly for mentors.

[1]Data sources for this report include interviews with initiative leadership, surveys of apprentices and mentors, administrative data, and implementation documentation.

The Registered Apprenticeship Program is a competency-based workforce pathway that combines paid, on-the-job learning, credential-aligned training, and structured mentoring for early childhood educators. During the PDG-R evaluation period, the initiative supported apprentices pursuing Infant, Toddler, Preschool, Youth Development, and associate-degree pathways across multiple, overlapping cohorts, with participants progressing at varied paces based on prior experience and credential requirements.

Although the initiative was established at MRTQ PDN prior to PDG-R, this report focuses on the period when the initiative was included in PDG-R–supported evaluation and coordination activities, during which apprentices from multiple cycles were actively engaged in training, mentoring, and credential attainment.

Because registered apprenticeship pathways unfold over multiple years and involve overlapping cohorts, data collection during the PDG-R evaluation period focused on documenting progress toward credential attainment, skill development, mentoring engagement, and persistence within the field, rather than capturing final workforce or compensation outcomes. Data sources included administrative records, apprentice and mentor surveys, and interviews with initiative leadership. As a result, the findings presented in this report reflect measurable progress, reported experiences, and observed patterns during the evaluation window, with longer-term outcomes related to retention, compensation, and system sustainability continuing to evolve beyond the review period.

REGISTERED ECE APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM FEATURES

Scope during PDG-R period: 42 apprentices enrolled across four overlapping cycles.

Credential pathways supported: Infant Toddler, Preschool, Youth Development, and associate-degree pathways.

Delivery model: Earn-while-you-learn apprenticeship integrating paid employment, credential-aligned training, and documented competency progression.

Mentor-supported structure: Required mentor preparation and ongoing mentor communities of practice.

System partnerships: Coordination among MRTQ PDN, the Maine Department of Labor, workforce partners, and higher education.

Adaptive design features: Flexible timelines, competency-based progression, and expanded mentor-matching options across settings.

The following section examines the extent to which the Registered Apprenticeship Program supported its intended workforce outcomes during the PDG-R evaluation period.

What was the impact of the Registered Apprenticeship Program?

State and local early care and education (ECE) leaders in Maine, utilizing PDG-R resources, have developed strategies intended to strengthen workforce capacity and support long-term system stability. The Registered Apprenticeship Program reflects this investment by focusing on workforce preparation,

credential attainment, and career advancement for early childhood educators. Examining the extent to which the initiative achieved its intended outcomes during the evaluation period clarifies its contribution to Maine's broader workforce strategy.

The **intended outcomes** of the Registered Apprenticeship Program focused on workforce-level benefits for participating early childhood educators:

- **Improve the skills of the existing early childhood workforce** through participation in a structured, competency-based apprenticeship model aligned to Maine credentials.
- **Support advancement along Maine's Career Lattice**, enabling apprentices to move to higher levels based on education and experience.
- **Position participating educators to access higher levels of compensation**, including eligibility for increased stipends through aligned mechanisms such as the Maine ECE Workforce Salary Supplement System.
- **Increase retention of participating educators** by investing in skills, credentials, and career advancement opportunities.

The program's Training and Apprenticeship Committee identified **credential attainment and retention in the field** as the primary indicators of success. The program was not designed to produce direct outcomes for children or families, and impact is appropriately assessed at the workforce level.

Discussions with initiative leadership, administrative data, and survey findings provide evidence of progress toward the Registered ECE Apprenticeship Program's intended workforce outcomes during the evaluation period. Evidence reflects outcomes for participating apprentices and mentors and is drawn from multiple, overlapping cohorts active during the PDG-R–supported evaluation window.

Findings are summarized below across key workforce outcome areas.

- **Progress toward credential attainment.**
  Administrative data indicate that 42 apprentices were enrolled across four overlapping cycles. As of October 2025, 10 apprentices earned the Maine Infant Toddler Credential, and 2 earned a Preschool Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. An additional 23 apprentices were in the active stages of apprenticeship, including training completion, credential coursework, or application submission, across the Infant Toddler, Preschool, and Youth Development pathways. Seven apprentices exited the program during this period due to job changes, program closure, or leaving the early childhood field.
- **Advancement along workforce pathways.**
  Program leadership reported that the apprenticeship model was designed to support movement along Maine's Career Lattice through credential attainment. The Training and Apprenticeship Committee identified credential attainment and continued participation in the field as the primary indicators of success, with advancement understood as varying by credential pathway and prior experience.
- **Self-reported skill development and professional growth.**
  Findings from the Six-Month Apprentice Feedback Survey (n = 14 completed responses) indicate perceived increases in knowledge and confidence associated with participation in the program. At the time of the survey, 94 percent of responding apprentices reported that they

would recommend the Apprenticeship Program to a peer. Apprentices cited the combination of structured training, mentoring, and accountability as supporting their professional growth and application of skills in daily practice.

- **Mentor-reported changes in practice and leadership.**
  Data from the Six-Month Mentor Feedback Survey (n = 16 completed responses) indicate that mentors observed growth in apprentices' communication, organization, leadership, and skill application in classroom and family-facing settings. Mentors reported meeting with apprentices weekly or more frequently and described apprentices taking on increased responsibility, leading activities, and demonstrating greater confidence in decision-making over time. Mentors also noted that progress varied by credential pathway and individual circumstances.
- **Retention and persistence within the field**.
  Administrative records show that while 7 of the 42 enrolled apprentices exited the program during the evaluation period, most remained engaged in apprenticeship activities or in credential completion. Initiative leadership emphasized that factors beyond the program itself influence retention and should be interpreted as a longer-term outcome, particularly given the multi-year nature of apprenticeship pathways and overlapping cohorts.

Together, these data sources provide evidence that the Registered Apprenticeship Program contributed to measurable progress toward credential attainment, skill development, and advancement along workforce pathways for participating educators during the evaluation period, while longer-term outcomes related to compensation and retention remain shaped by broader system conditions.

How did the Registered Apprenticeship Program contribute to system capacity and sustainability?

Early childhood system building emphasizes strengthening pathways, aligning roles across sectors, and adapting structures to better reflect how services and supports operate in practice. For workforce initiatives, system building involves not only supporting individual participants but also making adjustments that improve coherence, access, and sustainability across the broader early childhood landscape. Examining system-level contributions helps clarify how the Registered Apprenticeship Program functioned beyond individual participation during the evaluation period.

The evaluation team examined whether and how the Registered Apprenticeship Program contributed to system-level capacity, alignment, and sustainability, including the extent to which program adaptations, partnerships, and emerging structures supported longer-term workforce pathways.

Interview data, implementation records, and cohort documentation indicate that the Registered Apprenticeship Program contributed to system building primarily through adaptive design, pathway alignment, and the development of new entry points into the early childhood workforce. Key system-level contributions observed during the evaluation period are summarized below.

- **Shift toward flexible, competency-based pathways.**
  Program leadership described a deliberate shift away from a rigid cohort model toward a fully

competency-based approach. This change reflected observed variation in apprentices' entry points, credential goals, and pacing, and was intended to better align apprenticeship participation with the realities of the early childhood workforce. This adaptation supported continued engagement across diverse settings and credential pathways.

- **Alignment with credentialing and career pathway structures.**
  The apprenticeship model was implemented in alignment with Maine credentials and the Career Lattice, positioning participants to progress through existing workforce pathways rather than creating parallel or stand-alone structures. Credential attainment and progress toward credentials were identified as primary indicators of success, reinforcing alignment with established professional systems.
- **Expansion of mentoring capacity within the system.**
  During implementation, the number of mentors supporting apprentices increased substantially, and mentoring was described as a central feature of the program's structure. Program leadership noted that mentoring provided experienced educators with opportunities to contribute to workforce development without transitioning into administrative roles, strengthening instructional leadership capacity within programs.
- **Development of a Pre-Apprenticeship pathway.**
  The emergence of a Pre-Apprenticeship Program represented a system-level response to observed recruitment challenges and interest from individuals new to the field. This pathway was designed to support underrepresented populations and create community-based entry points into early childhood careers, extending the apprenticeship model beyond incumbent educators.
- **Constraints affecting sustainability and scale.**
  Program leadership identified limits to system-level expansion related to funding availability, wage structures in the early childhood field, and capacity for program administration. These constraints were described as external to the initiative itself and shaped expectations for growth, scale, and long-term sustainability.

Together, these findings suggest that the Registered Apprenticeship Program contributed to system building by adapting structures to better reflect workforce realities, aligning with existing credential and career pathways, and introducing new entry points into the field. At the same time, sustainability and scale remained dependent on broader workforce and funding conditions beyond the initiative's direct control.

In what ways did the Registered Apprenticeship Program support access and effective participation?

Supports and access in early childhood system initiatives focus on the conditions that **enable participation and sustained engagement for individuals and programs**. For workforce-focused initiatives such as the Registered Apprenticeship Program, access is shaped by the availability of training, mentoring, technical assistance, and program flexibility, as well as by the extent to which

barriers to participation are identified and addressed. Examining supports and access helps clarify how design features influenced participation during the evaluation period.

The evaluation team examined whether and how the Registered Apprenticeship Program supported access and effective participation for apprentices, mentors, and sponsoring employers, including the adequacy of training and technical assistance, adjustments made to reduce barriers, and factors that facilitated or constrained engagement.

Interview data, survey findings, and implementation records indicate that the Registered Apprenticeship Program incorporated multiple supports to facilitate participation, while also revealing areas where additional support was needed. **Key supports and barriers influencing access and participation during the evaluation period are summarized below.**

- **Structured mentoring as a primary support.**
  Apprentices were supported through a required mentoring structure that included regular meetings with experienced educators. Mentors were expected to provide feedback, model skills, encourage reflective practice, and document apprentice progress. Mentor survey responses indicate that most mentors met with apprentices at least weekly, and both mentors and apprentices identified the mentoring relationship as central to participation and progress.
- **Training and professional learning supports**.
  Apprentices accessed formal training aligned with credential requirements alongside on-the-job learning. Survey data indicate that apprentices viewed training and mentoring as beneficial for skill development, while also noting challenges in balancing coursework, documentation, and work responsibilities. These findings highlight the role of structured supports in facilitating participation and the demands placed on participants.
- **Adaptations to expand access across settings.**
  Program leadership implemented changes to expand apprentices' access across diverse program settings, including allowing apprentices to be matched with mentors outside their sponsoring employer. This adjustment was particularly important for Family Child Care providers, who often work alone and lack access to an internal mentor.
- **Supports for apprentices with additional needs.**
  Coordination with the workforce and state partners enabled access to additional supports for apprentices with disabilities or other identified needs. The participation of external partners in mentor meetings helped connect apprentices to resources beyond those available within the Apprenticeship Program.
- **Barriers affecting participation.**
  Survey and interview data indicate that apprentices and mentors experienced challenges related to time demands, administrative requirements, and balancing participation with work and personal responsibilities. Mentors, in particular, identified areas where additional support would strengthen their role. These barriers influenced the pace of participation and underscore the importance of ongoing support and flexibility.
- **Professional development support for mentors.**
  Mentor professional development was embedded within the apprenticeship model rather than operating as a standalone initiative. Mentors were required to complete Foundations of

Mentoring training (15 hours) focused on mentoring strategies, reflective practice, and supporting adult learners. Mentors also participated in regular Mentor Communities of Practice, which provided opportunities for peer learning and shared problem-solving related to apprentice progress and documentation requirements. While mentors valued the training and peer support provided, many reported a need for additional tools, clearer guidance, and more structured resources to effectively support their role. In response, MRTQ PDN now provides more information about the credential process at the beginning of the mentorship experience, so that mentors can understand the entire apprenticeship process, and has made the connection between training objectives, proficiency skills, and credential portfolio activities and competencies clearer.

Together, these findings suggest that the Registered Apprenticeship Program incorporated multiple supports that facilitated access and participation, particularly through mentoring, training structures, and role-specific professional development for mentors, while also revealing ongoing challenges related to time, administrative complexity, and the need for additional resources to support mentors in their role.

Lessons Learned

- **Flexible, competency-based apprenticeship models work best for a diverse workforce.** Allowing apprentices to move at different paces helped educators with varying levels of experience stay engaged as they worked toward credentials.
- **Mentoring is central to apprentice success.** Regular, structured mentoring supported learning, confidence, and persistence, though mentors would benefit from clearer tools and guidance to support their role.
- **Apprenticeship supports advancement and compensation pathways**. By helping educators earn credentials and advance up the Career Lattice, the program positioned participants to qualify for higher compensation, including eligibility for programs such as the Maine ECE Workforce Salary Supplement System.
- **Strong coordination across systems is essential.** Ongoing communication among the workforce, training, and early childhood partners supported recruitment, access to supports, and timely program adjustments.
- **Program changes reflected learning, not problems.** Shifts to a fully competency-based model, more flexible timelines, expanded mentor matching, and development of a Pre-Apprenticeship pathway responded to real workforce conditions and improved access.
- **Apprenticeship outcomes take time to emerge fully**. Because apprenticeship pathways span multiple years and cohorts overlap, short-term data capture progress rather than outcomes.
- **Long-term growth depends on conditions beyond the program itself.** Expansion and sustainability are shaped by funding availability, wage structures, and having enough staff and operational support to manage recruitment, tracking, coordination, and ongoing oversight over time.

Summary

During the fall 2023–December 2025 evaluation period, the Registered Apprenticeship Program supported early childhood educators through a competency-based model integrating on-the-job learning, credential-aligned training, and mentoring. Evidence indicates progress toward credentials, skill development, and advancement along Maine's Career Lattice, with variation across credential pathways and individual circumstances.

The program relied on cross-sector coordination to support implementation and adaptation, contributed to system alignment through flexible design and mentoring capacity, and introduced a Pre-Apprenticeship pathway to broaden access. Findings also highlight that apprenticeship outcomes require time to mature and that sustainability and scale depend on workforce and funding conditions beyond the program itself.

The Regulated Classroom™

Professional Learning Opportunities for Early Child Care Educators

Performance period 10/2024–12/2025

The Maine Department of Education (DOE) has supported training for educators in The Regulated Classroom™ (TRC), a framework that helps children feel safe, regulated, and ready to learn and educators be more connected, flexible, and grounded. Prioritizing regulation reduces stress and improves focus, memory, engagement, and problem solving. The training is based on strategies within 4 Core Practices (Connectors, Activators, Settlers, and Affirmations) which fit into daily routines and set the stage for optimal learning conditions. TRC is based on Polyvagal theory, which incorporates an understanding of neuroanatomy and neurophysiology. Strategies based on the theory both neutralize defensive strategies and communicate cues of safety. TRC tools and resources enable educators to recognize and bring regulation to the classroom[22].

The Maine Department of Education initiated a statewide train-the-trainer model with TRC in 2023; participants received multiple copies of the TRC text to share with others in their schools and districts. Maine has also set up Lead Co-Regulators from each of Maine's nine Superintendent Regions who facilitate follow-up events in their regions to support the implementation and sustainability efforts of educators trained in the TRC framework.

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 Regulated Classroom initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including results from surveys and interviews with teachers about applications and changes in children's behaviors.
- **Communication and coordination**, including collaboration of state partners
- **System building**, including the contribution of teacher confidence and successful classroom management to the efficacy of other types of professional learning
- **Supports and access**, including multiple opportunities for in-person training as well as virtual options and additional materials for sharing with colleagues.

Data sources for this report include interview transcripts from conversations with Rene Reilly and Sue Gallant (representing First 10); a small focus group with training participants; a short survey of participants (N=22).

Aware of the popularity of training with Maine educators (approximately 1800 have been trained, typically in groups of 40-50) and seeking support for educators to help address challenging behaviors, the Preschool Development Steering Committee offered several Regulated Classroom professional

[22]Daniels, Emily Read (2020, Revised 2026). The Regulated Classroom: "Bottom Up" Trauma-informed Teaching. Peterborough, NH: Here This Now, LLC.

learning opportunities intended specifically for early learning educators (pre-K to grade 3) at no cost to participants.

There were some challenges in focusing on the TRC opportunity for early educators: the developers advertised sessions widely and sessions were flooded with applicants from all grade levels; and the materials were not specifically customized for early care and education for the initial sessions.

The Maine Department of Education Preschool Development Grant Manager and state lead, quickly stepped in to manage registrations to ensure the target population of early educators was prioritized. More recently, developers have adjusted the activities to adapt to young learners. Participants were very enthusiastic about the strategies they learned but did not feel prepared to train others.

The state lead described the statewide reaction to the training: **We haven't seen a tool that has had this much positive reaction**. She further explained that, through behavior regulation, educators can support and leverage all the other initiatives that PDG has introduced, e.g., emergent literacy training. She emphasized the value of TRC's self-care techniques for reducing teacher burn-out which has a positive effect on teacher retention.

Educators have appreciated the focus on both their own regulation and self-awareness as adults, as well as on classroom dynamics and children's behavior. The table below illustrates the competencies that TRC works on developing through modeling and practice.

REGULATED CLASSROOM™ FEATURES

Highly popular professional development opportunity

Focus on trauma-informed teaching to cultivate conditions for "felt safety" in the classroom

- **Connectors which build relationships**
- **Activators which help synchronize with others**
- **Settlers which calm the body**
- **Affirmations which reinforce associations with positive experiences**

More recently adapted for early educators

Approx. 300 early educators participated in training

Supported by texts and materials; participants receive multiple copies to share with colleagues

Regional opportunities for maintaining connections

ESSENTIAL EDUCATOR COMPETENCIES

- **Increasing self-awareness in order to more fluidly shift physiological state. Check yourself first.**
- **Recruiting the realm of social engagement. Consider relational cues (e.g., voice prosody, social proximity) and environmental cues (e.g., lighting, visuals)**

What was the impact of the Regulated Classroom professional development?

Information from participants and observers is consistent in supporting the value of TRC techniques for the **intended outcome of equipping educators with tools to manage challenging behaviors**. In the years following the pandemic, educators have sought help in addressing children's behaviors and social-emotional dysregulation that they perceive as disruptive and beyond their skills. This has remained a high priority for professional development despite a variety of efforts to address it.

Educators are applying the TRC techniques in the Classroom

In both interviews and surveys, respondents gave high marks to the utility of TRC techniques.

> **77% of survey respondents indicate they regularly use TRC strategies; the remainder use them at least occasionally.**

Survey respondents offered many examples of how they apply their learning, including for themselves (i.e., their own regulation) and children's behavior, in 1-to-1 situations, and for whole-class activities. Unusually, each survey respondent added one or more examples in an open-ended response. Examples of responses from **teachers**:

> **"I use activators daily; rhythm sticks and movement activities. I use settlers when energy is high, passing the rainstorm, snowflake tapping, and grounding."**
>
> **"I am using connectors almost daily and helping students learn to regulate their feelings and understand how important it is to listen to what their bodies are telling them."**
>
> **"One of the biggest changes I've made is that I've given myself permission to stop, or reroute, a lesson. I will pause and do a short regulation activity (whether energizing, connecting, or taking deep breaths)."**
>
> **"I do activators and settlers throughout the day. My kids love it and so do I! Game changer!"**

School **support personnel** have also found the techniques helpful:

> **"As a school social worker, I started teaching my students settler skills. They all love the massage ball that came in my kit, which opened up even more conversation about our brains and how different techniques can be helpful."**
>
> **"I work as a school nurse and help children regulate themselves every day. I learned the importance of regulating myself in order to help students regulate."**
>
> **"At staff meetings and all school morning meetings, my team and I have taught staff and students connectors, activators, and settlers. For example, last month we taught snowflake tapping during our gratitude presentation."**

The educators interviewed were able to offer similar examples. They noted that the techniques fit into learning activities throughout the day. One described how the training helped shift their school culture and provided practical strategies for managing challenging situations, such as having a calming corner/shelf with aids such as fidgets and weighted scarves. A CTE early childhood instructor shared the information with her high school students, who were familiar with some of the techniques but had not known the reason behind the activities.

> **"When a student might seem to be dysregulated, it is easy to think about a strategy and use it immediately to counteract things outside of our control."**
>
> **"We shifted our thinking about how to do safety drills, and now they look more like conversations."**
>
> **"We could see kids prompting each other—noticing each other's behavior and being more accepting ("you need to use a strategy")."**

The state First10 Community School Specialist encouraged the First 10 school districts to participate in TRC training. She noted that First 10 interest stems from educators reaching out for help to address challenging behaviors. They have been trying to shift the understanding that those behaviors are a form of communication that can stem from poverty and cultural discontinuity. In an interview, she described a classroom where TRC activities were fully integrated into classroom activities—during morning meetings, built into a center, kids doing activities in groups—to keep them regulated. The teacher provided training to help children be aware of their bodies and the space they are in. She noted that the training is a good complement to PBIS programs.

How Children's Behavior is Affected

Respondents to the survey provided specific examples of how both individual children and groups of children reacted to TRC techniques.

> **94% of survey respondents reported seeing positive changes in children's behavior as a result of using the strategies.**

> **"I have a student who struggles with anxiety. She has been able to transition to school without having a meltdown."**
>
> **"Students make connections to one another, and I have seen new relationships with students who did not tend to gravitate toward one another before that. I also recognize more thoughtful interactions with my students."**
>
> **"My kids know when we start a settler activity, it's time to calm down, take a breath, or do some tapping. Sometimes they settle before we even get started because they know it's coming."**
>
> **"The activities can change the mood and dynamic so quickly."**

> **"I have noticed far fewer visits to the nurse's office for somatic[23] complaints since many of the teachers in our school have attended the regulated classroom."**

One teacher noted that effective use depends on a deep understanding of students; her nonverbal students require lots of repetition and consistency. Another noted that while the training was effective for moderate behavioral issues, it was less helpful for children with more severe issues, including those with significant difficulty working independently.

What communication and cross-sector coordination was involved?

Different agencies have cooperated to support TRC training. Agencies that assisted with advertising and recruiting include the Office of Child and Family Services, Office of Early Learning, Head Start, First 10, the PreK Partnership and CTE early childhood instructors. The Department of Education has identified regional co-regulators to assist in the continued application of TRC training by providing opportunities for educators to meet and exchange experiences.

Feedback used to adjust professional development?

The developer of Regulated Classroom, Emily Read Daniels, worked with an expert in early childhood to redevelop the current guidebook that accompanies the program, and she has revised the training to focus more on early childhood examples. This change responds to the requests of both the training sponsors and the participants.

The state lead indicated another change to make it easier for rural providers and family child care staff to access the training was to provide virtual training offered over a four-day period. To improve access, subsequent in-person trainings have been moved to locations around the state different from the original locales.

How does TRC training contribute to a robust early learning and education system?

State lead Renee Reilly noted that when educators feel equipped with practical tools and techniques, their confidence is boosted, and they feel they can do something positive to change situations. Further, the sense of confidence and control complements other professional development initiatives. She emphasized that TRC training supports various educational goals, such as increasing literacy and family engagement, by creating emotionally regulated environments that extend beyond the classroom. She commented:

> "**This is money well spent. No matter what classroom you are in, students need to be ready to learn."**

Participants gave high marks to TRC's in-person training for its engagement, clarity, and enjoyment. They noted that in-person training was more impactful than virtual sessions because of the hands-on,

[23]Related to how internal sensations are experienced in the body.

practical nature of the work, which allowed participants to rehearse and practice the techniques. They also commented on the value of understanding the "why" behind the techniques—a great **combination of tangible activities and theoretical insights.**

However, there were repeated comments that the train-the-trainer format was not effective—it was very challenging to try to bring the training to other staff **in a comprehensive way**. Some said they would have appreciated more help with crafting a training program and an occasional refresher.

How will the impact of TRC be sustained?

The Department of Education plans to continue offering training sessions, so there will be continued opportunities to learn and update techniques. As indicated above, there were a number of complaints about the lack of explicit train-the-trainer methods, but some aspects of the implementation design have facilitated dissemination. For example, each person who attends training receives 15 guidebooks to share with others. From surveys, interviews, and observations, it appears that some level of sharing is occurring.

> **Nearly all survey respondents reported sharing techniques informally with colleagues, but only one reported conducting a full training session.**

Typically, the sharing has occurred in small increments, woven into staff meetings or professional development sessions. Some staff have also taught the techniques to families at play-and-learn events. One of the First 10 coordinators who was trained developed a packet of TRC strategies targeted directly to families, that is, activities that work best with 1-2 children. She posted the packet of activities on a Facebook page, gave them out through the public library, and took a wagon with packets to share during playground activities.

Summary

The Regulated Classroom represents a highly effective professional development program that has helped address educators' needs for managing children's behavior they perceive as challenging. The program's popularity has spread among Maine educators through word of mouth. Educators and school support personnel report they have integrated the techniques, tools, and materials into their classroom activities. They appreciate the theory behind the activities, which they use with both individual children and groups, and also share with parents. At this point, many educators have been through the training that facilitates peer support in implementing specific techniques. While the program did not fulfill the goal of serving as a train-the-trainer model, participants have been sharing the ideas informally and regularly with their colleagues.

Transition to Kindergarten Mini-Grants

Supporting Local Planning and School–Community Partnerships for Kindergarten Transitions

Performance period September 2024–October 2025

As part of Maine's Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R), the state used targeted pilots and mini-grants to support local planning and strengthen practices in priority areas across the mixed-delivery early childhood system. Transitions into kindergarten had been identified as an area where many communities were engaged, but where approaches varied, and opportunities for coordinated planning were limited. Mini-grants paired with technical assistance were intended to provide structured planning time, encourage cross-sector collaboration, and support school administrative units in strengthening transition practices in ways responsive to local context.

The **Transition to Kindergarten Planning Assistance and Mini-Grants** focused specifically on supporting school administrative units (SAUs) as they planned and implemented coordinated approaches to the transition from pre-K into kindergarten. The Maine Department of Education, in partnership with the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), offered SAUs the opportunity to apply for technical assistance and grant funding to support high-quality transition plans designed to smooth the transition for families and children into kindergarten.

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,[1] the report examines the Transition to Kindergarten Planning Assistance and Mini-Grants initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including evidence related to local transition planning activities and family engagement efforts.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including collaboration among schools, community-based child care providers, and state partners.
- **System building**, including early contributions related to local capacity, readiness, and alignment across Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitated participation and challenges that affected implementation.

[1]Data sources for this report include recruitment/announcement materials, an interview with state lead Marcy Whitcomb, a focus group of grant recipients, and monthly initiative reports.

School administrative units were eligible to apply for Transition to Kindergarten mini-grants based on participation in preparatory technical assistance sessions. These sessions emphasized the importance of early childhood education, highlighted the expertise of community-based child care providers, the diversity of the state's mixed-delivery system[24], and underscored the need for collaboration across

[24]Mixed delivery early care and education (ECE) is the coordinated effort to support early childhood services and programming across a range of settings to help meet the varied needs of children and families.

systems to support families and children entering kindergarten. Grantees received individualized support for team-based planning and implementation, with opportunities for follow-up sharing and reflection across participating sites.

In addition to supporting local planning, the initiative created structured opportunities for shared learning across participating sites. A joint follow-up sharing session enabled grantees to exchange experiences, discuss challenges, and reflect on transition-planning strategies.

The following section examines the early outcomes associated with the Transition to Kindergarten Planning Assistance and Mini-Grants, drawing on interviews, focus group input, and implementation documentation.

TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN MINI-GRANTS FEATURES

Six SAUs received transition mini-grants across two rounds of funding.

Three preparatory technical assistance sessions were offered prior to the grant application process (not all participants applied for funding).

SAU teams included school leaders, teachers, families, and community child care providers.

Grantees received **individualized technical assistance and support** throughout implementation.

Awards ranged from $9,000 to $15,000, depending on kindergarten enrollment size.

Peer learning and reflection: A joint follow-up sharing session offered grantees an opportunity to reflect on implementation and to exchange practices.

Grantees: RSU 14 (Windham); RSU 57 (Waterboro); Sanford; St. George (Tenant's Harbor); Bangor; RSU 40 (Union)

What was the impact of the mini-grants?

State and local early care and education (ECE) leaders in Maine, using Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R) funds, engaged in planning and implementation efforts to strengthen transitions into kindergarten. Through the Transition to Kindergarten Planning Assistance and Mini-Grants, participating school administrative units explored approaches to improving transition planning, family engagement, and collaboration with community-based early childhood providers. Examining the impact of these investments clarifies which outcomes were most evident during the performance period and which considerations may inform future transition work.

The **intended outcomes** of the planning assistance and mini-grants were:

- **Build** a deeper understanding of the kindergarten transition process and its importance.
- **Develop** local kindergarten transition teams and year-long transition plans.
- **Strengthen partnerships** with community organizations, including child care programs.
- **Support families** through a multi-month transition process before they enter public school.

Initiative lead Marcy Whitcomb emphasized the importance of understanding children's diverse early learning experiences and building relationships with families and community partners over time:

> **"Children entering kindergarten come from many different experiences… schools need a year to build relationships with families and children to be successful with them in kindergarten. Community providers are experts on families—schools need a mindset and systems that appreciate what providers can offer."**
> (Marcy Whitcomb, Initiative Lead)

Early Evidence from Grantee Experience

Discussions with grantee representatives **suggest that the initiative supported early progress toward its intended outcomes**. Initiative lead, Marcy Whitcomb, described strong engagement among participating teams, noting that many entered the process with limited prior experience in transition planning and deepened their understanding over time. For example, one school administrative unit that initially planned to involve two schools expanded participation to include three additional schools in response to interest and demand.

In total, grantee activities supported approximately **850 incoming kindergartners**. Across sites, school administrative units implemented a range of **transition activities**, including:

- Family education meetings that included explanations of learning materials
- Playground activities for incoming kindergarten students
- Joint professional development for school staff and child care providers
- Provision of curricular materials to child care providers
- A bus ride from child care centers to schools
- Development of family activity calendars
- A focus on inclusive classroom transitions, supporting children moving from special purpose classrooms to general education settings to foster a sense of belonging and
- Opportunities for gathering family input about the effectiveness of transition activities.

State lead, Whitcomb, emphasized that many grantees remained focused on the broader goal of building relationships with families and community-based child care providers. Reflections shared by grantees during the focus group suggest that teams **adopted a common mindset** about transition planning, including:

- Remembering the "why" behind transition activities, rather than approaching them as a checklist
- Recognizing that building trust and collaboration takes time and persistence
- Leading with empathy when engaging families, particularly when addressing frustration or disengagement
- Emphasizing communication with families and partners to foster a sense of belonging.

Examples of Transition Planning in Practice

Most grantees carried out multiple transition activities. During the focus group, one grantee presented a comprehensive overview of her district's project, which involved a series of three family engagement events, kindergarten readiness packets with tools and resources, a welcoming bus ride, opportunities for pre-K and kindergarten teachers to meet around specific students, school tours for families and children, and informal recreational "get to know you" activities.

Another grantee focused on improving coordination between early learning centers and kindergarten staff. Activities included identifying and making high-quality books with related activities available, conducting joint professional development in early math for pre-K and kindergarten teachers, engaging in a wide range of early learning centers, and purchasing Heggerty curriculum materials for those centers.

A third grantee focused on transitions for 3–5-year-olds from Child Development Services (CDS) into pre-K classrooms, hosting sessions for families, staff, and area providers. The grant gave the district "a push" to get started on work toward the FAPE transition. The initiative established partnerships with local child care centers to create warm handoffs and maintain community awareness about school transitions. The same grantee also addressed the challenges students face when moving between different elementary schools within the district.

Perceived Benefits Valued by Grantees

Grantees in the focus group described the outcomes they most valued:

- The experience elevated staff conversations around why we need families to see themselves as critical partners and why family engagement is important: Staff are invested in what "we could do better"—there is definitely buy-in.
- Use of focus groups with parents was enlightening for staff: Seeing needs and planning from the perspective of parents was new to staff." This grantee described now taking a "more consumer-focused approach" rather than relying on what staff thinks parents should know. They plan to hold more focus groups with parents to help shape transition activities.
- Parents recognize the importance of early learning experiences. One grantee reported that 83% of incoming families registered their children for kindergarten before the summer, a highly unusual positive outcome. In their first two months of pre-K, attendance was a record 95%.

One grantee is applying the lessons from the transition grant to improve family engagement in middle school, conducting surveys and focus groups to better understand and meet the needs of families transitioning from elementary to middle school.

How did Transition to Kindergarten Mini-Grants build collaboration and coordination?

The PDG-R initiative examined whether and how the Transition to Kindergarten Planning Assistance and Mini-Grants supported collaboration and coordination among schools, community-based early

childhood providers, and state partners. This section describes how participating school administrative units engaged with partners to strengthen transition planning and leverage expertise across systems during the performance period.

Building local partnerships between schools and community-based child care providers was a goal of the initiative. As the initiative lead noted, school administrative units (SAU) and community partnerships enabled participating sites to leverage existing resources, such as extending professional development opportunities to child care providers.

One grantee described how district staff increasingly recognized the importance of connecting with early learning centers and understood that these relationships needed to be nurtured over time. He emphasized the importance of persistent engagement and treating early learning centers as equal partners. The district began to see more meaningful engagement from early learning providers once they could offer concrete resources and support.

Whitcomb also credited collaboration with colleagues within the Maine Department of Education, who brought expertise to address technical assistance needs related to readiness assessments and support for multilingual learners.

These examples illustrate how collaboration supported local transition planning and helped participating sites access expertise and resources across systems.

How did the Transition to Kindergarten Mini-Grants contribute to system capacity and sustainability?

Early childhood system building emphasizes the importance of coordination, capacity, and continuity across programs and services that support children and families. This section examines whether and how the Transition to Kindergarten Planning Assistance and Mini-Grants contributed to system-level capacity by strengthening local transition structures, supporting coordination across the mixed-delivery system, and reinforcing practices that may be sustained beyond the grant period.

Strengthening Transition Structures and System Alignment

The transition-to-kindergarten mini-grant is one of several efforts led by the Department of Education (DOE) to strengthen transitions, including the creation of transition resources on the DOE website and the First10 pilot, which also emphasized transitions. These efforts are complementary. Grantees suggested intentionally linking activities and scaling them up statewide. As grantees learned, focusing on transitions engages a host of critical activities, including building family partnerships, developing working relationships with community-based providers, and supporting young children with special needs.

The Department of Education website includes a range of transition resources created by the early learning team under a previous grant. Whitcomb plans to update the transition learning modules in the coming year, including examples drawn from grantee experiences.

Sustainability and Continuation of Transition Practices

Most communities expect to sustain their current efforts, and some districts have already begun developing plans to do so. Participants in the focus group agreed that making a long-term commitment to high-quality transitions is important so that parents of incoming kindergartners can expect similar experiences each year. Costs are relatively low, and all grantees believe they will be able to continue activities through a mix of budgeted funds and local sponsorships or grants for expenses such as giveaways and welcome packets. One district has already budgeted for the continuation of a highly successful week-long transition "boot camp" for families and children. The opportunity focused on building children's skills to ensure they have family support as they develop foundational skills.

Whitcomb believes that grantees are likely to continue emphasizing the importance of building strong relationships with families and community providers.

In what ways did the design of Transition Mini-Grants facilitate participation, and what improvements were suggested?

In early childhood system building, supports and access focus on the conditions that enable effective participation and implementation across programs and communities. This section examines whether and how the design of the Transition to Kindergarten Planning Assistance and Mini-Grants supported participation by school administrative units, facilitated planning and coordination efforts, and provided sufficient technical assistance and flexibility to respond to local contexts. Findings draw on focus group input, interviews, and implementation documentation to describe the supports that contributed to participation and the challenges that shaped implementation during the performance period.

Conditions That Facilitated Success

Grantees identified factors in their own locales that facilitated participation and success. One grantee described the initiative's compatibility with the district's strategic plan, which prioritizes family engagement and gathering community input on school approaches. The district's objective of approaching parents with empathy and intentional communication aligns well with transition activities.

The district has multiple elementary schools, which facilitate healthy competition and ongoing sharing of implementation successes and challenges, extending to transition activities and contributing to shared accountability for the grant. Comparing school performance data and activities across schools motivated principals to improve their family engagement efforts.

School leaders acknowledged that post-COVID issues with attendance and behavior management heightened the need for greater family involvement.

Leadership, Champions, and Communication

A grantee that was part of the First10 initiative highlighted the importance of a dedicated staff member working on outreach to parents and providers:

> **"Getting feedback from early learning partners and having them as equal partners at the table was important. They were so appreciative of sitting in the same room for professional development; otherwise, they had been fearful that we would take their children through the process of establishing public pre-K."**

Several agreed on the importance of coordinating messages, especially in larger districts, including school committee buy-in and buy-in at all leadership levels. School principals were deemed critical:

> **"School principals must be educated about the value of family engagement, as they hold the key to making it work at the school level."**

Several also noted the importance of having a champion. For this set of grantees, the champion was often a central office staff member who served as the grant's point person.

Design Features and Adaptations

The initiative design included three preparatory technical assistance sessions offered prior to the grant application process, followed by individualized support during implementation. Grantees engaged local teams in grant planning and were encouraged to incorporate sustainability considerations into project design from the outset. Participating SAUs established a peer community through the preparatory sessions and continued to share resources and practices across sites during implementation.

Because the second cohort of grantees had a shorter timeline to prepare activities, Whitcomb adapted the technical assistance by offering shorter initial meetings with individualized follow-ups, while emphasizing the importance of prioritizing key activities.

Lessons Learned

- **Preparatory technical assistance before grant awards strengthened implementation.** All grantees identified the pre-application professional development sessions as valuable for team formation, project planning, and early buy-in. Whitcomb noted that front-loading technical assistance allowed implementation to begin immediately upon award.
- **Planning with a sustainability lens from the outset supported continuation.** Grantees approached planning with sustainability as an explicit consideration, and all reported the ability to continue transition activities post-grant through budgeted funds, local sponsorships, or low-cost adaptations. Costs for most activities were modest enough to be sustained without dedicated grant funding.
- **Gathering family perspectives shifted staff orientation.** Grantees who used parent focus groups described the experience as reframing their approach—moving from what staff assumed parents

needed to know toward what families actually identified as priorities. One grantee adopted a "more consumer-focused approach" as a direct result.

- **A designated champion at the district level was consistently identified as critical to momentum.** Across sites, the point person—typically a central office staff member—drove coordination, sustained engagement, and connected transition work to broader district priorities. School principal buy-in was described as essential to execution at the building level.

Summary

The transition-to-kindergarten mini-grant is one of several transition initiatives the Department of Education (DOE) has spearheaded to strengthen kindergarten transitions, including the creation of transition resources on the DOE website and the First10 pilot, which also emphasized transition. These transition efforts are complementary. Grantees suggested intentionally aligning the activities and scaling them up statewide. As grantees noted, a focus on transitions engages several critical activities, including building family partnerships, strengthening relationships with community-based providers, and supporting young children with special needs.

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?

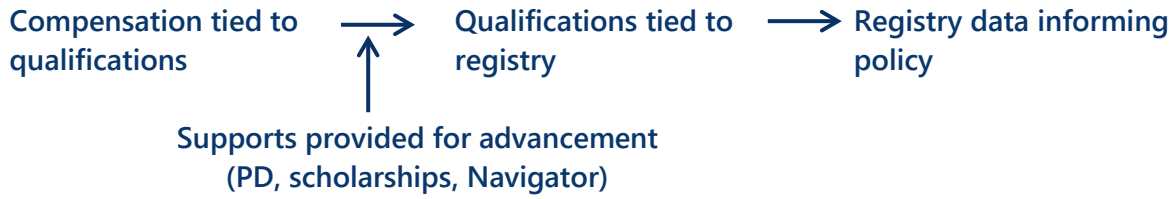
Implementation required coordination among the Governor's Office, OCFS, the Department of Education, Maine Roads to Quality (MRTQ), and other workforce partners. Coordination with MRTQ was essential as it operates Maine's workforce registry. Interviews with state- and initiative-level staff highlighted 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.

Glossary Of Acronyms

ACE — Adverse Childhood Experience
ASQ — Ages and Stages Questionnaire
ASQ-3 — Ages and Stages Questionnaire, Third Edition
ASQ-SE — Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social-Emotional
CBO — Community-Based Organization
CCDF — Child Care and Development Fund
CCIDS — Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies, University of Maine
CCSSO — Council of Chief State School Officers
CDA — Child Development Associate
CDS — Child Development Services
CECA — Certified Early Childhood Assistant
CELFE — Center for Early Learning Funding Equity
CLASS — Classroom Assessment Scoring System
CoP — Community of Practice
CPS — Child Protective Services
CQI — Continuous Quality Improvement
CTE — Career and Technical Education
DHHS — Maine Department of Health and Human Services
DOE — Maine Department of Education
DOL — Maine Department of Labor
DRDP — Desired Results Developmental Profile
ECE — Early Childhood Education
ECIDS — Early Childhood Integrated Data System
EDC — Education Development Center
ESOL — English for Speakers of Other Languages
FAPE — Free Appropriate Public Education
GOPIF — Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future
HMG — Help Me Grow
IEP — Individualized Education Program
IT-MELDS — Infant/Toddler Maine Early Learning and Development Standards
JMG — Jobs for Maine Graduates
KEI — Kindergarten Entry Inventory
KRA — Kindergarten Readiness Assessment
KVCAP — Kennebec Valley Community Action Program
KVCC — Kennebec Valley Community College
MaineAEYC — Maine Association for the Education of Young Children
MeCAP — Maine Community Action Partnership
MELDS — Maine Early Learning and Development Standards
MRBN — Maine Resilience Building Network
MRTQ — Maine Roads to Quality
MRTQ PDN — Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network

MSPA — Maine State Parent Ambassadors
MyT — Maine Youth Thriving
NGA — National Governors Association
NMPHI — New Mainers Public Health Initiative
OCFS — Office of Child and Family Services
OIT — Office of Information Technology
OSSIE — Office of Special Services and Inclusive Education
OST — Out-of-School Time
P-MELDS — Preschool Maine Early Learning and Development Standards
PCE — Positive Childhood Experience
PD — Professional Development
PDG-B5 — Preschool Development Grant–Birth through Five
PDG-R — Preschool Development Grant–Renewal
PLC — Professional Learning Community
QIA — Quality Improvement Awards
QIP — Quality Improvement Plan
QRIS — Quality Rating and Improvement System
REL — Regional Education Laboratory
RUBI — Research Units in Behavioral Intervention
RSU — Regional School Unit
SAU — School Administrative Unit
SMCC — Southern Maine Community College
STAR — System for Tracking Access to Referrals (HMG Maine data system)
TANF — Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
TRC — The Regulated Classroom
TSG — Teaching Strategies GOLD
TTT — Train-the-Trainer
UFLI — University of Florida Literacy Institute
UMF — University of Maine Farmington
USM — University of Southern Maine
WCCC — Washington County Community College
WIC — Women, Infants, and Children
WPHW — Wabanaki Public Health & Wellness
YCCAC — York County Community Action Corporation

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