

March 2026

PRESCHOOL DEVELOPMENT GRANT

Evaluation Outcomes Report

2023–2025



Authors

Early Childhood Associates

Linda Warren

RMC Research Corporation

M. Christine Dwyer)

This report was prepared for the PDG Steering Committee, Office of Child and Family Services (Maine Department of Health and Human Services) and the Maine Department of Education.

Design by Koko Wadeson. (RMC Research)

Funding Acknowledgement

This report was produced through work supported by Maine’s Preschool Development Grant Birth to 5 (PDG B–5) Renewal Grant, awarded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. The contents of this report are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Administration for Children and Families, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, or the U.S. Department of Education.

Acknowledgements

This evaluation reflects the collective effort of many individuals and partners committed to strengthening Maine’s early childhood system.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the **PDG-R Steering Committee** for its cross-agency leadership, shared governance, and sustained engagement throughout the grant period. The Committee’s willingness to reflect on findings, support adaptive learning, and advance system coherence has been central to this work.

We are deeply grateful to the **initiative leads and program staff** across state agencies, community organizations, school administrative units, higher education institutions, Tribal partners, and statewide intermediaries who shared documentation, participated in interviews and focus groups, responded to surveys, and engaged in thoughtful dialogue about both successes and challenges. Their openness to learning strengthened the quality and relevance of this evaluation.

We also extend our appreciation to the **families, children, and educators** across Maine whose participation in PDG-R initiatives—and whose feedback, lived experience, and daily practice—made this work possible. Their engagement, insights, and commitment to young children are the foundation of Maine’s early childhood system.

The evaluation was conducted by **Early Childhood Associates, Inc.** in partnership with **RMC Research Corporation**. This collaborative partnership brought together complementary expertise in systems evaluation, early childhood research, and continuous improvement. Early Childhood Associates, Inc. directed all aspects of the evaluation design, data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Contents

Section 1

The PDG-R Grant: Purpose, Scope, and Governance	1
--	----------

Section 2

System Framework: Understanding the Role and Contributions of Initiatives	4
--	----------

Section 3

System Findings and Initiative Lessons	7
What the Framework Reveals	7
Cross-Cutting System Findings	8
Finding 1 Relationship-Based Approaches Are a High-Leverage System Asset.....	9
Finding 2 Structural Workforce Constraints Limit the Impact of Training	10
Finding 3 Feedback Loops and Evaluation Data Support Learning and Accountability.....	11
Finding 4 PDG-R Initiatives Have Made System Conditions Visible.....	12
Lessons From Initiatives	13
Lasting Value: A Word About Sustainability.....	21

Section 4

Priorities for Next Steps: Strengthening Maine’s Early Childhood System	23
Priority 1 Deepen Relationship-Based System Capacity.....	25
Priority 2 Align Workforce Expectations and Incentives, Program Quality Improvement, and Professional Learning as a Coherent Strategy	26
Priority 3 Treat Mixed Delivery as a System Design Requirement.....	26
Priority 4 Strengthen Data and Learning Infrastructure for Continuous Improvement.....	27
Priority 5 Address Sustainability Through Governance and Financing Alignment.....	27
Ensuring Durable Change.....	28
Looking Ahead.....	29

Appendix A Evaluation Questions	30
--	-----------

Appendix B Evaluation Methodology	32
--	-----------

Exhibits

PDG-R Initiatives	2
PDG Initiatives and Activities by System-Building Role.....	6
Cross-Cutting System Patterns.....	8
Pilot Learning Loop	19
Maine Early Childhood System—Future System Building.....	24
Durable Delivery System	28

This report presents the outcome evaluation of Maine’s Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R). It is designed to **complement earlier initiative-level reports and interim evaluation products** by stepping back from individual activities to examine what the PDG-R portfolio reveals about overall progress made toward strengthening Maine’s early childhood system.

The purpose of this report is to synthesize system-level learning, surface cross-cutting findings and implications, and inform future decision making related to system strengthening. It focuses on patterns, conditions, and leverage points rather than on assessing the success of individual initiatives. Individual initiative reports are compiled in a separate volume.

Section 1

The PDG-R Grant: Purpose, Scope, and Governance

The Preschool Development Grant–Renewal supported Maine in strengthening its early childhood system across birth to early elementary services. PDG-R investments spanned multiple domains, including family engagement and access, workforce development, leadership, quality improvement, transitions, data use, and cross-sector coordination.

Consistent with Maine’s **mixed-delivery system**, PDG-R initiatives intentionally engaged public schools, community-based child care centers, family child care providers, Head Start and Early Head Start programs, statewide interest groups, local community partners, and Tribal programs. Governance of PDG-R work included cross-agency leadership through a PDG Steering Committee, creating shared responsibility for strategy, coordination, and learning across agencies and partners.

PDG-R funding supported a portfolio of efforts that included initiatives to create and bolster foundational system infrastructure; provide contributing components and connectors to increase access and strengthen the workforce; and time-limited pilots and demonstrations to explore innovations that address identified issues. Together, these investments were intended to build capacity, test approaches, and generate learning to inform longer-term system development.

PDG-R Initiatives

AIM Literacy Learning Modules

Career and Technical Education (CTE) Early Childhood Education Programs

Challenging Behavior Book Study

Community-Based Organization Awards

Community-Based Organization Tribal Initiative

Early Childhood Education Pathways (formerly Articulation Agreements)

Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS)

Emergent Literacy Professional Learning Community

First 10 Community Schools

For ME Instructional Program (Vertical Curriculum Alignment)

Help Me Grow Maine

Inclusionary Practices for Students with Special Needs Training and Book Study

Kindergarten Entry Inventory (KEI)

Leading Early Learning Fellowship

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

Maine Youth Thriving Trauma-Informed Training

Navigator Roles (Workforce and Program)

Parent Leadership Training Program

Pre-Kindergarten Partnerships/Mixed Delivery

Child Care Stabilization & Quality Awards

Quality Improvement Awards

Regulated Classrooms

Registered Early Childhood Education Apprenticeships

Transition to Kindergarten Mini-Grants

Workforce Salary Supplement Evaluation

Organization of the Report

This report is organized to support multiple audiences, including state leaders, the PDG Steering Committee, agency partners, and funders:

- **Section 2** describes the system framework used to interpret PDG-R investments, including Maine’s mixed-delivery context and the roles initiatives played as foundational elements, components, or pilots in the system.
- **Section 3** introduces 4 cross-cutting findings about the overall system of early care and education and offers lessons derived from the individual initiatives related to professional learning, the role of intermediaries, communication and collaboration, quality improvement, pilots, and mixed delivery. The section concludes with a discussion of initiative sustainability.
- **Section 4** identifies priority directions for strengthening Maine’s early childhood system based on the evaluation findings.

What This Report Covers—and What It Does Not

This report **does not re-report individual initiative implementation progress or duplicate earlier PDG-R reports**. Detailed descriptions of specific initiatives, activities, and metrics are documented elsewhere. Instead, this report synthesizes evidence from focus groups, surveys, interviews, document review, and initiative-level evaluations—structured around a common set of evaluation questions—to identify system-level patterns, implications, and decision-relevant learning. Evidence reflects a mix of implementation findings, feasibility insights, and early outcomes, consistent with PDG-R’s role as a system catalyst rather than a long-term program funder.

By clarifying both its scope and its limits, this report is intended to support an informed discussion of what PDG-R has made possible and which conditions will matter most as Maine continues to strengthen its early childhood system.

Appendix A includes evaluation questions that guided the full evaluation, and Appendix B provides methodological detail for readers seeking additional information.

Section 2

System Framework: Understanding the Role and Contributions of Initiatives

Maine's PDG investments were intentionally designed to operate at multiple leverage points within the early childhood system. Rather than advancing a single reform strategy, PDG supported a portfolio of initiatives designed to strengthen foundational infrastructure, reinforce critical system components, and test emerging models through pilots and demonstrations. This section describes the framework that the evaluation team has used to interpret the contributions of those investments and explains how initiative-level evidence was synthesized to inform system-level findings.

Mixed Delivery as Maine's System Context

Because Maine's early childhood system is inherently mixed delivery and PDG investments were designed within this context, the evaluation report highlights findings from many initiatives intended to operate across provider types, including workforce initiatives, quality improvement efforts, family navigation supports, leadership development, and transition strategies. Understanding mixed delivery as a system context—rather than only as a discrete initiative—is essential for interpreting PDG outcomes and implications.

System Building Framework and Evaluation Questions

The evaluation team developed the System Building Framework toward the latter part of the PDG-R period and shared it with the PDG Steering Committee to both synthesize implementation and evaluation data and suggest priorities and considerations for the future. PDG initiatives were **not designed or implemented around this framework**. Rather, the framework was derived **from** PDG learning and is used in this report to interpret evidence and inform implications for future system strengthening.

In this report, the framework serves a **synthetic and interpretive role**: it organizes findings across diverse initiatives, identifies system-level patterns, and connects PDG learning to decisions about what to deepen, connect, stabilize, or redesign in the next phase.

The evaluation team was guided by **12 core evaluation questions**¹ which we used to structure data collection. These questions informed the design of focus groups, surveys, interviews, and document reviews, as well as the selection of indicators and analytic perspectives **across** initiatives. In other words, the evaluation questions—rather than the System Building framework—anchored the empirical work.

Foundations, Components, and Pilots: Distinct but Interdependent Roles

To support system-level analysis and organize findings, the evaluation team grouped PDG initiatives by their primary system-building function or role during the grant period:

- **Foundational Initiatives** establish or strengthen core infrastructure and routines without which the system cannot function effectively (e.g., shared standards, data systems, planning processes).
- **Component or Connector Initiatives** reinforce system capacity by improving access, quality, coordination, and workforce support, while relying on foundational elements for continuous improvement and durability.
- **Pilot and Demonstration Initiatives** were time-limited efforts designed to test models, surface implementation realities, and inform future policy or investment decisions.

While many initiatives have long-term potential to contribute to the overall system in several ways, this 3-part categorization reflects their dominant functions during the PDG-R period and provides a high-level structure for interpreting results.

¹Included in Appendix A.

PDG Initiatives and Activities by System-Building Role

FOUNDATIONAL <i>enduring infrastructure and governance</i>	COMPONENT <i>connective and strengthening mechanisms</i>	PILOT/DEMONSTRATION <i>time-limited implementation</i>
1. Early Childhood Integrated Data System 2. Needs Assessment and Strategic Planning 3. P-MELDS Distribution 4. Workforce Salary Supplement Evaluation	1. AIM Literacy Learning Modules 2. Career and Technical Education-ECE Programs 3. Early Childhood Education Pathways (formerly Articulation Agreements) 4. Early Childhood Education Summits 5. Emergent Literacy Professional Learning Community 6. Help Me Grow Maine 7. Maine Youth Thriving Trauma-Informed Training 8. Navigator Roles (Workforce and Program) 9. Parent Leadership Training Program 10. Leading Early Learning Fellowship 11. Quality Improvement Awards 12. Registered Early Childhood Education Apprenticeships	1. Challenging Behavior Book Study 2. Community-Based Organization Awards 3. Community-Based Organization Tribal Initiative 4. First 10 Community Schools 5. For ME Instructional Program (Vertical Curriculum Alignment) 6. Inclusionary Practices Training and Book Study 7. Kindergarten Entry Inventory 8. Child Care Stabilization & Quality Grants 9. Pre-Kindergarten Partnership Pilots 10. Regulated Classroom Training 11. Transition to Kindergarten Mini-Grants

Section 3

System Findings and Initiative Lessons

What the Framework Reveals

Viewing PDG-R initiatives through the System Building Framework, the evaluation team has reached several overarching conclusions. PDG investments have strengthened relational and connective tissue across the system, particularly through leadership development; trusted intermediary roles; quality improvements, including professional learning; and collaborations across departments, agencies, and sectors. At the same time, there are sustainability challenges driven by workforce economics, governance complexity, and funding realities rather than by weaknesses in implementation.

Pilots and demonstrations have been valuable as learning mechanisms, generating decision-relevant insights even when scale or continuation was not feasible within PDG timelines. Together, these patterns suggest that the next phase of system building should focus less on launching new initiatives and more on deepening, connecting, and stabilizing the capacity that PDG has developed.

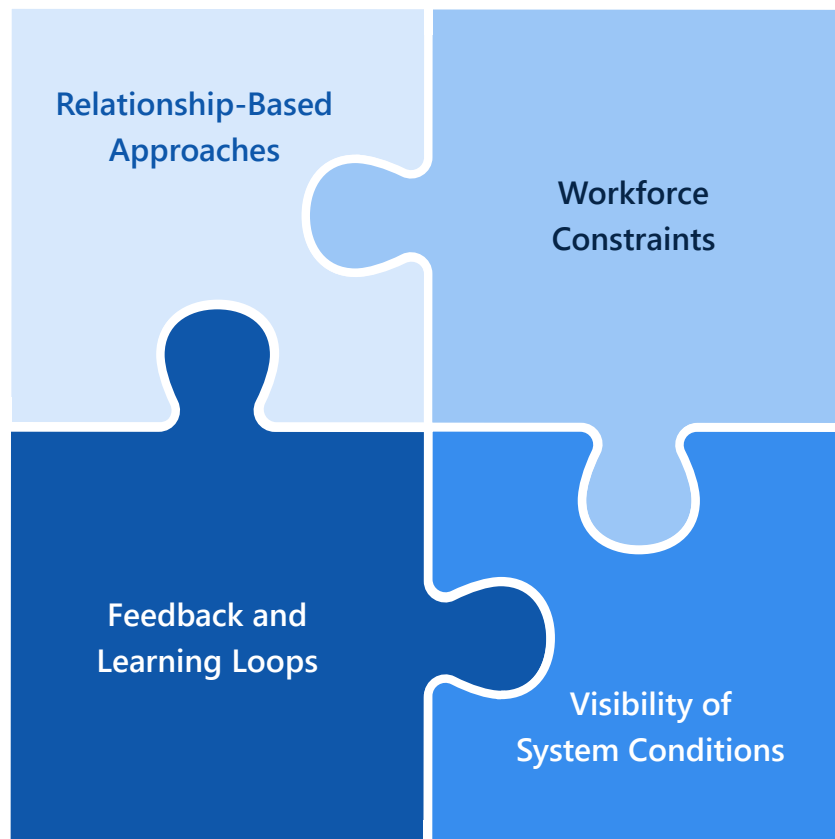
In this section, we unpack those conclusions first as cross-cutting findings that apply to the system as a whole and then as lessons learned from the initiatives.



Cross-Cutting System Findings

The cross-cutting findings below complement the initiative-specific findings presented later in this section. They surface **system-level patterns** that help explain why certain strategies gained traction, where progress stalled, and what conditions will matter most for future system strengthening.

Cross-Cutting System Patterns





Finding 1

Relationship-Based Approaches Are a High-Leverage System Asset

Across family-facing, workforce, leadership, and transition-focused initiatives, relationship-based approaches consistently enabled deeper engagement, stronger uptake, and more durable changes in practice than transactional, information-only, or asynchronous learning models. This pattern was evident across initiatives operating at different system leverage points. Examples include workforce and program navigation, facilitated professional learning, community– school pilots, data coordination efforts, and intermediary roles supporting families and educators. Initiatives that emphasized trust, continuity, and peer or navigator relationship swere better able to:

- Reach participants who face structural barriers;
- Adapt to local contexts and circumstances; and
- Surface system friction points that would otherwise remain invisible.

Examples are community health workers, tribally led services, parent leadership models, facilitated professional learning cohorts, and transition planning teams. The effectiveness of these approaches did not depend on initiative type or content area.

Implications. Relationship-based roles and structures should be treated as *core system infrastructure* for all improvement strategies, not as supplemental supports. Future system building should prioritize incorporating and stabilizing relationship development and cultivation. When intentionally linked to policy, practice, and accountability, sustainability is more likely.





Finding 2

Structural Workforce Constraints Limit the Impact of Training

PDG-R's considerable investments in professional learning contributed to meaningful gains in knowledge, confidence, leadership skills, and instructional practices across multiple initiatives. Evidence from professional learning initiatives, navigation supports, and workforce compensation efforts consistently shows that these **gains are constrained by broader workforce conditions**—particularly compensation, staffing instability, benefits eligibility, and limited career mobility. Professional development, credentials, and apprenticeships were most effective when they included:

- Coaching, mentoring, peer engagement,
- Flexible pathways with incremental learning options, and
- Clear alignment to expectations and incentives.

Implications. Workforce development must be addressed as an economic and structural issue, not solely a capacity-building one. Training investments will have limited long-term impact unless aligned with compensation, retention strategies, and coherent career pathways.





Finding 3

Feedback Loops and Evaluation Data Support Learning and Accountability

Leaders of PDG-R initiatives successfully employed data for reflection, learning, and course correction rather than solely for accountability. Regular feedback loops—such as participant surveys, peer reflection, implementation check-ins, and cross-agency review and discussions—supported midcourse adjustments and improved relevance for participants. Regular formative review opportunities can strengthen collaborations among cooperating departments and agencies. Ensuring that initiatives benefit from ongoing formative review requires intentional planning (sometimes involving external contracting) and a mindset of continuous improvement. It may also require specific preparation of participants to prepare them to provide feedback; an example would be the engagement of kindergarten teachers in the implementation and trial of the Kindergarten Entry assessment. At the same time, limitations in data integration, analytic capacity, and cross-system interoperability constrain the ability to assess cumulative or longitudinal system effects.

Implications. Future system building should strengthen data infrastructure and analytic routines that support continuous improvement and decision-making, while avoiding overburdening providers with duplicative reporting requirements.





Finding 4

PDG-R Initiatives Have Made System Conditions Visible

Taken together, PDG-R initiatives have made visible the conditions for system change—as well as where those conditions are constrained. While the evaluation shows success in a number of individual initiatives, meaningful progress going forward will depend less on isolated program excellence and more on coherence across policy, financing, data, and governance, grounded in relationship-building.

The visibility of conditions that contribute to system strength is itself a significant outcome. By triangulating evidence across initiatives operating at different leverage points, the evaluation results help to clarify where future investments are most likely to produce transformative change. PDG-R has generated decision-quality lessons about system strength that position Maine to move from incremental improvement toward more durable system change.

Implications. The next phase of work should focus on acting on what PDG-R has revealed—deepening effective approaches, connecting related efforts, and stabilizing critical system functions—rather than expanding standalone initiatives.



Examples of Professional Learning Initiatives

Leading Early Learning Fellowship

Facilitated leadership cohorts strengthened PreK–3 instructional alignment, shared language, and cross-role collaboration across settings.

My Youth Thriving Trauma-Informed Training (MyT)

Trauma-informed training increased educators' capacity to respond to adversity through reflective, relationship-based practices.

AIM Literacy Learning Modules

Cohort-based learning modules combined guided reflection and practical tools to improve instructional practice and local application.

Lessons From Initiatives

The following findings are derived from specific initiatives.

Professional Learning

PDG-supported professional learning initiatives were most effective when grounded in peer engagement, team-based, paced to participants' capacities, and explicitly connected to practice. Across initiatives, facilitated cohorts, peer exchange, guided reflection, and ready-to-use materials were consistently favored over asynchronous formats, especially when participation expectations and application supports are explicit.

Participation in teams strengthened transfer of learning to local settings, particularly when local leaders and state agency staff participated alongside practitioners. Initiatives that embedded feedback loops and adjusted pacing or content in response to participant input demonstrated stronger engagement and persistence.

Implications. Professional learning should be designed as a system function rather than a collection of offerings. Future efforts should prioritize cohort-based models, explicit train-the-trainer support, alignment with existing professional development infrastructure, and clarity about expectations for participation, workload, and application. Nonmonetary incentives—such as career advancement, recognition, and leadership pathways—should be made explicit alongside any financial support. Appropriate recruitment can take time; the more complex the offering, the more information potential participants may need before committing. Train-the-trainer models can be effective but only when there is explicit attention to how to implement training, including opportunities for guided practice.

Similar themes were raised in the strategic plan about improvements to professional development options, including prioritizing coaching opportunities, differentiating offerings, and making explicit opportunities for communities of practice, staff exchanges, and mentoring.

Examples of Initiatives Featuring Intermediaries

Help Me Grow Maine

A centralized navigation and screening hub that connected families to services while generating actionable data to inform statewide system improvements.

Navigator Roles (Workforce and Program)

Dedicated intermediary positions that translated complex licensing, credentialing, and workforce systems into accessible pathways for educators and programs.

CBO Awardees

Community-based intermediary partners that expanded access, reduced fragmentation, and strengthened culturally responsive coordination for families.

Role of Intermediaries

Intermediary roles—such as navigators, community health workers, and trusted connectors—played a critical role in translating system complexity into accessible pathways for families, educators, and programs. These roles were especially effective when staffed by individuals with lived experience and strong relational skills, and when embedded within a trusted community or organizational infrastructure.

Across initiatives focused on workforce navigation, family and program support, and cross-system coordination, intermediary roles functioned as connective infrastructure—reducing fragmentation, improving access, and generating actionable insights beyond their immediate scopes of work.

Intermediaries reduced confusion across fragmented systems, increased access to services, and surfaced recurring system barriers through their day-to-day work. Demand for individualized support often exceeded capacity, highlighting both the value of these roles and the importance of clearly defined scope and documentation. Intermediaries play an essential role in bolstering return on investment.

Implications. The more complex the system, the greater the need for intermediaries. Intermediaries should be recognized as core access infrastructure within the early childhood system and be entrusted with the flexibility to address clients' priority needs. Future system building should focus on stabilizing these roles, providing peer support and training, clarifying service parameters, and intentionally using intermediary insights to inform system redesign and reduce recurring barriers. The strategic plan includes suggestions for strengthening the roles of intermediaries.

Examples of Initiatives That Relied on Strong Communication and Collaboration

Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS)

A cross-agency data infrastructure initiative designed to improve shared governance, data alignment, and coordinated, decision-making across Maine's early childhood system.

Kindergarten Entry Inventory (KEI)

A coordinated entry process that fostered shared understanding of school readiness and strengthened alignment between early childhood providers and K–12 systems.

MELDS (P-MELDS Distribution)

A statewide standards alignment effort that strengthened shared language, instructional coherence, and cross-sector expectations across birth-Grade 3 settings. alignment.

Communication and Collaboration

Strong vertical and horizontal communication is a prerequisite for effective collaboration across agencies, sectors, and initiatives. PDG-R investments demonstrated that intentional leadership routines, regular cross-agency meetings, and shared governance structures enabled coordination and problem-solving that would not have occurred organically. During this PDG grant and the previous grant, the state has made major strides toward expanding and deepening collaborations across agencies and improving communication with the field. The PDG's Steering Committee model of collaboration has spurred positive actions at multiple system levels.

Over the 3 years of the PDG-R grant, the Departments of Health and Human Services (OCFS) and Education periodically hosted group meetings of state and regional staff in a central location to share updates and gather input. For example, large group sessions focused on:

- Reviewing progress under previous grant cycles and American Rescue Plan funding;
- Gathering reactions to the needs assessment findings to shape ideas for the strategic plan;
- Sharing examples from First 10 communities about transition activities;
- Preparing for the FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education) transition to SAUs;
- Gathering input for the strategic plan; and
- Sharing the results of initiatives funded through PDG-R.

The state and regional meetings typically attracted 90–100 participants and were well received, as documented through follow-up evaluations.

Differences in terminology and inconsistent understanding of core concepts (e.g., inclusion, mixed delivery, care coordination) were persistent barriers. Community listening activities and

facilitated professional learning proved valuable in developing shared language and aligning expectations. Collaboration depends on sustained structures and role clarity, not on informal goodwill alone.

Implications. Communication and collaboration require sustained investment in structures, routines, and leadership time. Future efforts should prioritize common definitions, clear communication strategies—particularly related to mixed delivery—and mechanisms for ongoing feedback to reduce duplication and misalignment. The strategic plan includes recommendations for creating common frameworks and definitions, as well as public-facing vehicles that effectively demonstrate the benefits of collaboration, such as a one-stop application for services and messaging campaigns about the value of high-quality early care and education.



Examples of Quality Improvement Initiatives

For ME (Vertical Curriculum Alignment)

A curriculum alignment initiative that strengthened instructional coherence across grade levels and reinforced consistent expectations within Maine's mixed-delivery settings.

Career & Technical Education (CTE) ECE Programs

A workforce pipeline strategy that early childhood career pathways through credential alignment, curriculum enhancement, and cross-sector coordination.

Quality Improvement Awards (QIA)

A structured incentive model that paired technical assistance with performance-based funding to accelerate advancement within Rising Starts for ME.

Quality Improvement

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) principles were operationalized across many PDG initiatives, even when CQI language was not explicit. Several initiatives were specifically designed to improve program quality. Effective quality improvement efforts shared common features: clear expectations, adult capacity building, implementation support, and feedback mechanisms.

Progress toward higher quality thresholds was often non-linear and extended beyond PDG timelines. Interim indicators of readiness for advancement, shared understanding, and alignment of practices with intentions or—are meaningful even when endpoint quality thresholds are beyond PDG timelines.

Implications. Quality improvement should be treated as a cross-cutting system function. Future efforts should track interim progress, align incentives with expectations, and ensure that workforce supports are in place to sustain gains. Making connections among quality, workforce, and professional learning initiatives visible will strengthen system coherence.

Approaches for improving program quality were noted in the strategic plan, including defining program quality attributes from multiple perspectives and expanding supports for the QRIS (technical assistance, explanatory aids, and financial resources), such as explanations of standards.



Examples of Pilot or Demonstration Initiatives

First 10 Community Schools

A community-based pilot that tested cross-sector alignment from birth to age 10 to strengthen transitions and local governance structures.

CBO Tribal Initiative

A tribally led pilot that tested culturally grounded service delivery and strengthened community-driven coordination across early childhood systems.

Parent Leadership Training Program

A pilot initiative that built parent leadership capacity and tested mechanisms for embedding family voice into local and statewide decision making.

Pilots and Demonstrations

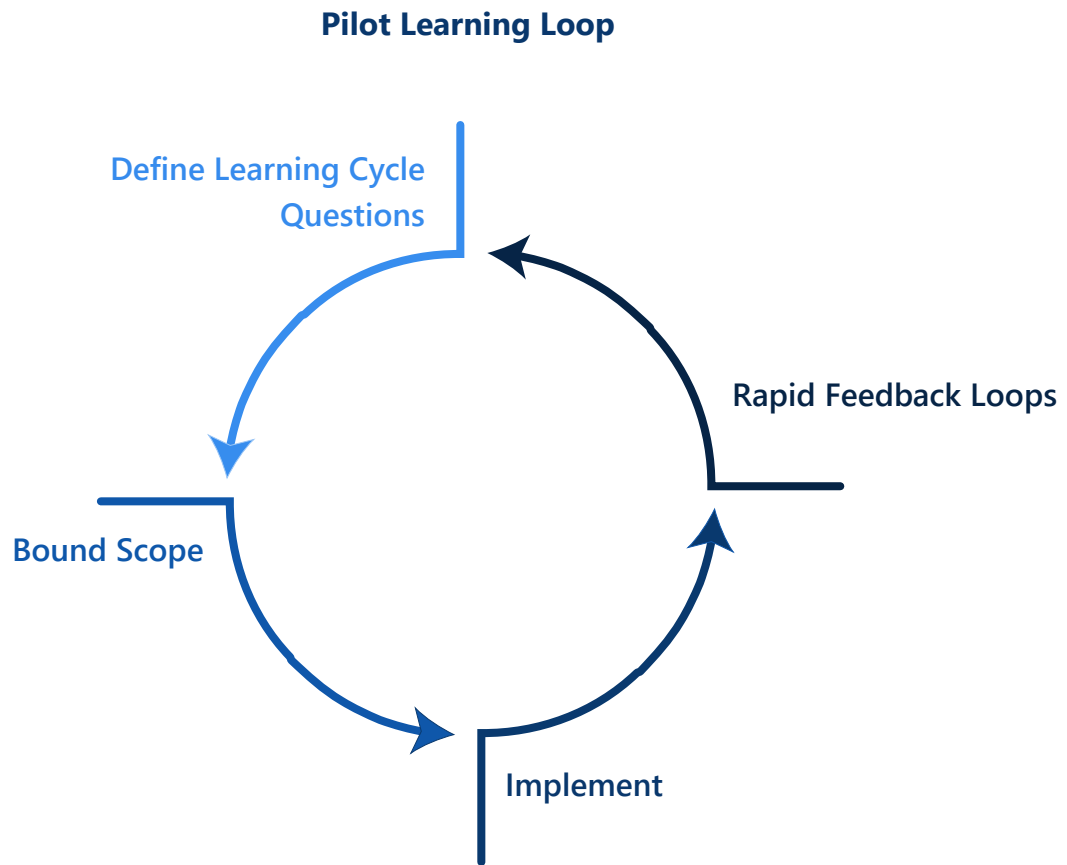
Pilots and demonstrations played a distinct and valuable role within Maine's PDG-R portfolio. When pilots were designed with clear learning aims, bounded scope, and structured feedback loops, they generated decision-relevant insights about feasibility, readiness, coordination demands, and equity considerations. Across multiple pilots, including community-based, professional learning, and system coordination efforts, initiatives generated the most decision-relevant evidence when they were explicitly framed as learning mechanisms rather than early scale-up efforts.

When pilots were used primarily for early launches without clear learning agendas, the findings were less actionable. Equity considerations—such as language access, transportation, and staffing—were critical to understanding reach and impact. Time to iterate is essential to maximize learning from a pilot.

Where the pilot design was less explicit without a learning agenda, the value for scaling is ambiguous. The value of pilots is not necessarily tied to continuation or scale-up when they yield critical insights into constraints related to timelines, staffing, governance, or infrastructure. In other words, the greatest contribution of a pilot might have been clarifying the conditions that would need to be in place before scale could be considered.

Implication. Pilots should be intentionally designed to reduce uncertainty before scale. Piloting is most successful when a model is already well defined, and the desired adaptations are known.

Future pilots should define governing questions, build rapid feedback loops, state decision thresholds upfront, and explicitly examine equity and access. Considerations of readiness are critical when choosing pilot sites, including community capacity, staffing stability, and prior partnership experience. Coordination across agencies and alignment with existing infrastructure are essential for translating pilot learning into system change. The strategic plan suggests at least a half dozen potential innovations to pilot before scaling.



Examples of Mixed Delivery Initiatives

Transition to Kindergarten Mini-Grants

Targeted grants that strengthened coordination between early childhood providers and schools, testing transition strategies within Maine’s mixed-delivery context.

Pre-Kindergarten Partnership Pilots

Community–district partnerships that expanded public Pre-K access while testing funding structures, quality alignment, and shared accountability across sectors.

Regulated Classroom Trainings

Professional development offered to educators from all settings including Pre-K, community providers and primary grades.

Mixed Delivery

Evaluation findings consistently reinforce that Maine’s mixed-delivery system is both a strength and a source of complexity. PDG investments intentionally spanned public schools, community-based providers, family child care, Head Start/Early Head Start, and Tribal programs. Across the PDG portfolio, mixed delivery functions as a unifying value—one that undergirds workforce, quality, access, family engagement, and sustainability efforts.

The mixed delivery approach recognizes that no single sector can meet statewide family needs and avoids destabilizing one part of the system in favor of another. In the mixed delivery context, family child care providers—particularly in rural areas—community organizations, and Tribal providers are essential system anchors. Successful mixed delivery depends on strong coordination across sectors. Conversely, where coordination mechanisms were weak or implicit, providers experienced duplication, inconsistent expectations, and administrative strain—particularly those participating in multiple programs or funding streams.

PDG initiatives reinforce that families benefit from having meaningful options across provider types, schedules, and settings. This is particularly important in Maine, where full-day, full-year care for working families cannot be met by school-based models alone.

Implications. Policy, funding, and accountability structures should assume that multiple provider types will continue to deliver services statewide. Quality supports must remain accessible to small, rural, and community-based providers, with flexibility in how quality is demonstrated.

Universal policies require intentional design and support to reach rural, Tribal, and historically underserved communities. Terms such as “mixed delivery” require shared definitions and consistent public messaging to support collaboration and understanding. Continued attention to alignment, equity, and infrastructure will be essential to ensure that mixed delivery remains a viable and effective strategy for expanding access and improving outcomes statewide.

Lasting Value: A Word About Sustainability

The potential for sustainability varied widely across initiatives and was closely linked to whether PDG-funded activities were embedded within existing systems, governance structures, or funding streams. Sustainability depends less on the perceived value of individual initiatives and more on whether initiatives are embedded within durable structures, financed through stable mechanisms, and operated by institutions with a life beyond the grant.

Several factors enhance the potential for sustainability:

- Documentation of implementation processes.
- Location within existing infrastructures (e.g., institutions of higher education, state agencies).
- Alignment with ongoing funding sources (workforce-related efforts).
- Use of open-source materials.

Sustainability has a particular meaning in professional development initiatives, that is, the continued application of learned practices. Critical for continued application are these design elements: team participation, attention to shifting beliefs and mindsets, building peer connections, and encouraging reflective practice.

Short design and implementation timelines constrained sustainability by limiting local buy-in, documentation, and institutionalization. In contrast, initiatives with sufficient time to refine their practice and build relationships were better positioned to continue after grant funds end. Across initiatives, sustainability challenges were rarely attributable to weak design or lack of demand. Evidence from initiatives spanning professional learning, navigation, workforce compensation, and cross-agency coordination shows that sustainability constraints were driven primarily by structural conditions including fragmented financing, administrative burden, workforce instability, and unclear long-term ownership. Documentation of implementation steps and lessons learned is a basic strategy for preserving value.

Considerations to enhance sustainability for future planning include:

- **Sustainability must be defined early and explicitly.** Continuation of activity is not equivalent to sustainability. Durable system impact requires integration into policy, funding streams, staffing structures, or institutional norms. Pilots should include explicit decision thresholds: What evidence justifies scale? What structural conditions must be in place before expansion?
- **Some initiatives require related structural solutions.** For example, scholarships and professional advancement strategies cannot rely solely on competitive grants; they must align with compensation reform, employer incentives, or state-level appropriations.
- **Institutional ownership strengthens durability.** Initiatives embedded within DOE, DHHS, or partner agencies with internal staffing and cross-agency governance structures have the potential for greater resilience than standalone services.

Section 4

Priorities for Next Steps: Strengthening Maine's Early Childhood System

The findings presented in the previous section point to a clear conclusion: Maine's PDG-R investments have generated substantial learning about what enables and constrains system change. It is time to act on the lessons PDG-R has revealed by deepening and scaling effective approaches, deliberately connecting related efforts, and stabilizing critical system functions.

The preceding findings point to a clear shift in orientation for Maine's next phase of system development. PDG-R demonstrated that isolated initiatives—even effective ones—do not produce durable system change on their own. What matters most are the underlying system levers that shape how policies align, how agencies coordinate, how workforce conditions stabilize, and how families experience services across settings.

The graphic that follows translates evaluation findings into a forward-looking system model. It illustrates a shift from launching discrete initiatives to strengthening foundational conditions—alignment, governance coherence, workforce stability, family partnership, inclusion, and learning infrastructure. These levers are not new programs; they are system-level mechanisms that influence how all programs function.

The model begins with inputs—federal flexibility, legislative commitment, cross-agency leadership, existing infrastructure, lived experience, and lessons from PDG-R pilots—and shows how intentional strategic actions can generate measurable short- and intermediate-term outcomes. Over time, these reinforcing levers move the system toward a more coherent, equitable, and resilient early childhood structure. Mixed delivery remains the grounding context throughout. Rather than treating mixed delivery as an initiative, the model positions it as the system environment within which alignment, quality, workforce, and family engagement must operate.

In short, the graphic represents a pivot: from activity to architecture; from innovation to integration; and from incremental improvement to durable system change.

Maine Early Childhood System—Future System Building

Core Assumption

If PDG's next phase will strengthen foundational elements and intentionally target system levers—alignment, governance, workforce economics, and family partnership—rather than standalone initiatives, then Maine can shift from incremental improvement to durable system change.



Inputs

- PDG funding and federal flexibility
- Ongoing legislative commitments
- Cross-agency leadership commitment
- Existing quality and alignment infrastructure
- Lived experience of families and providers
- Lessons from PDG-R
- Pilots and demonstrations



Strategic Actions (System Levers)

Alignment

- Formalize shared expectations (birth–Grade 3)
- Align policies, standards, and accountability across agencies

Families as Partners

- Embed family voice in governance and design
- Standardize expectations for family engagement and responsiveness

Workforce Stability

- Address compensation and retention alongside qualifications
- Align compensation, credentials, and career pathways

Inclusion and Special Needs

- Improve early identification and service coordination
- Clarify responsibility and accountability for inclusive practice

Continuous Improvement, Data, and Learning

- Shift from compliance to learning-focused CQI
- Use data for system feedback, not just reporting



Short-Term Outcomes

- Clearer roles and expectations across systems
- More consistent family
- Reduced duplication and service gaps
- Stronger workforce retention signals

Intermediate Outcomes

- Scaled alignment from pilots to statewide implementation
- Improved access and inclusion for children with special needs
- More stable, qualified workforce across regions



Long-Term Outcomes

A coherent, equitable, and resilient early childhood system that consistently delivers high-quality experiences for children and families

Mixed Delivery Context

The priorities outlined below, which draw from evaluation findings, are high-leverage system actions. Together, they provide the beginning of a roadmap for moving from incremental improvements toward more durable, coherent system change. The Strategic Plan developed through PDG-R provides additional ideas for implementing the actions depicted in the graphic.



Priority 1

Deepen Relationship-Based System Capacity

Across domains, relationship-based approaches consistently supported access, engagement, and learning, particularly for families and providers facing the greatest barriers. Trusted messengers, navigators, community health workers, parent leaders, facilitated professional learning cohorts, and transition teams functioned as connective tissue in a complex system.

Priority Actions

- ▶ Stabilize, strengthen, and formalize trusted intermediary roles linking system components as core system infrastructure.
- ▶ Invest in professional learning and leadership development that includes coaching, mentoring, and peer engagement.
- ▶ Strengthen mechanisms that enable meaningful two-way communication between families, providers, and state policymakers.

What This Enables Improved access, stronger alignment between policy and lived experience, application and adaptation of best practices in context, better return on investment, and earlier identification of system barriers requiring structural solutions.



Priority 2

Align Workforce Expectations and Incentives, Program Quality Improvement, and Professional Learning as a Coherent Strategy

PDG-R investments demonstrate that training and credentials alone are insufficient to stabilize the workforce or sustain quality improvement. The greatest improvements occur where professional learning, mentoring, program and educator incentives, and leadership expectations are aligned.

Priority Actions

- ▶ Align professional development offerings, credentials, and career pathways across settings and roles.
- ▶ Pair quality incentives with clear expectations and technical assistance.
- ▶ Strengthen technical assistance, mentoring, and coaching infrastructure to support practice change and retention.

What This Enables. Greater return on training investments, improved workforce stability and retention, a continuous improvement philosophy, and clearer pathways for advancement without leaving the early childhood field.



Priority 3

Treat Mixed Delivery as a System Design Requirement

Maine's mixed-delivery system is foundational to access, equity, and sustainability, particularly in rural communities. Evaluation findings show that when coordination is implicit or fragmented, the burden falls disproportionately on community-based and family child care providers.

Priority Actions

- ▶ Clarify shared expectations for workforce competencies, inclusive practices, quality, transitions, and family engagement across provider types.
- ▶ Streamline monitoring, reporting, and communication for providers participating in multiple systems.
- ▶ Align funding and incentives to support full-day, full-year options and access to high-quality options for families.

What This Enables. Reduced fragmentation, more consistent family experience, increased options for families, equitable opportunities independent of location, and stronger partnerships among schools, community providers, Head Start, and Tribal programs.



Priority 4

Strengthen Data and Learning Infrastructure for Continuous Improvement

Evaluation findings show that data are most powerful when used for learning and improvement rather than for accountability alone. Limitations in data integration and analytic capacity constrain system-level insight.

Priority Actions

- ▶ Strengthen shared data infrastructure and governance to support cross-system learning.
- ▶ Align data collection with high-leverage evaluation questions aimed at improvement.
- ▶ Build analytic routines that support reflection, feedback, and adaptive decision-making.

What This Enables. Stronger evidence-informed decision-making, reduced provider burden from duplicate reporting, optimal allocation of resources, more effective programs, and sustained system learning beyond PDG timelines.



Priority 5

Address Sustainability Through Governance and Financing Alignment

Sustainability challenges identified through PDG-R are structural rather than programmatic. Short funding horizons, fragmented financing, and unclear ownership limit the durability of even effective initiatives.

Priority Actions

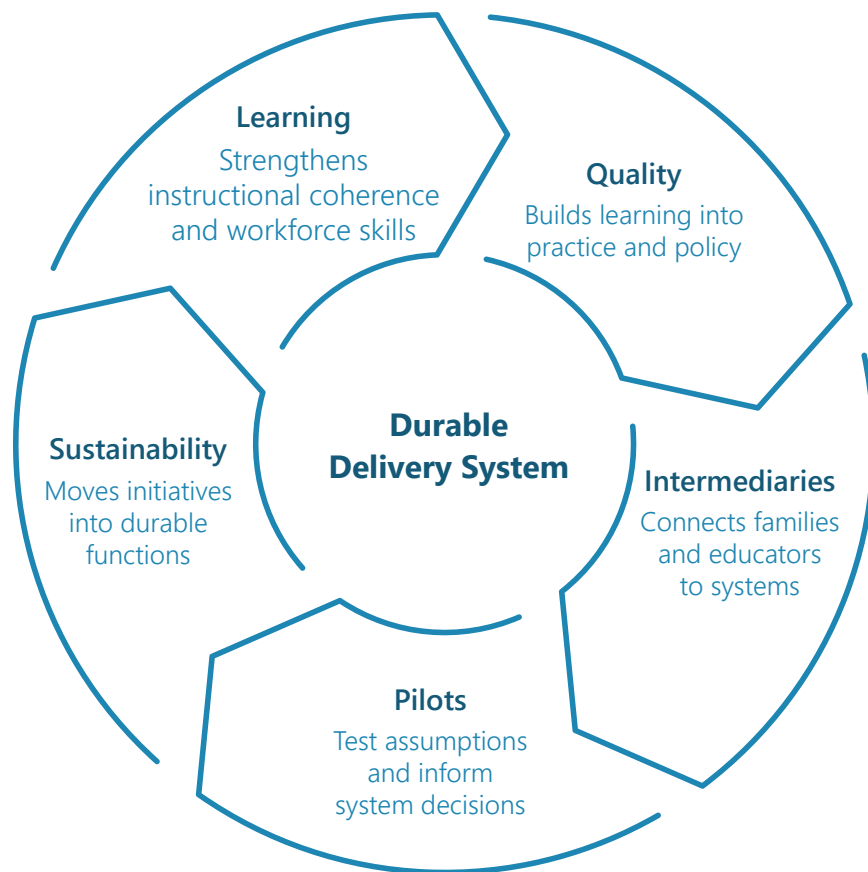
- ▶ Clarify long-term ownership and governance for critical system functions.
- ▶ Align and braid funding streams to stabilize proven approaches.
- ▶ Institutionalize effective practices within state agencies, higher education, and local systems.

What This Enables. Durable system capacity, reduced reliance on time-limited grants, and clearer accountability for sustaining progress.

Ensuring Durable Change

The priorities described above assume that future strategic actions will continue to reinforce each other as illustrated in the graphic below to create durable change. Quality improvement and ongoing learning are fundamental to ensure that systems remain vital. In the current PDG-R, we have seen the value that pilots contribute to system development and realized the critical role played by intermediaries in increasing the return on investment in system components. Durable change depends on sustainability of the system components that have proven worth. Further, durability increases when:

- Professional learning is embedded within agency structures.
- Quality improvement is institutionalized rather than initiative-specific.
- Intermediary roles are codified.
- Pilots include decision thresholds.
- Financing pathways are aligned with workforce realities.



Looking Ahead

PDG-R has positioned Maine with a clearer understanding of what it takes to strengthen an early childhood system in a mixed-delivery context. The priorities outlined above reflect a shift from launching initiatives to strengthening conditions—conditions that support equity, coherence, and resilience over time. Acting on these priorities will allow Maine to build on PDG-R learning and move toward a more integrated and sustainable system for children, families, and providers statewide.



Appendix A

Evaluation Questions

Strengthen connections and communications among state agencies and with community partners and families

1. What processes are in place to facilitate cross-sector coordination and communication among agencies and stakeholders at state, regional, and local levels, and are they perceived as effective in expanding access and creating efficiencies?
2. How are the perspectives of families and other stakeholders (including the activity advisory boards) utilized by the Children’s Cabinet, DOE, HHS, and other state agencies to influence and adjust policies, practices, and resources for vulnerable children and families?
3. To what extent is the updated (2024) strategic plan aligned with updated needs assessment findings, and how does it inform priorities for adjusting PDG activities to strengthen Maine’s mixed delivery system?

Recruit, prepare, and retain the early childhood workforce

4. What new/additional professional development opportunities are offered through the PDG grant, what considerations led to these new offerings, and who is taking advantage of the opportunities?
5. How have CTE programs and the higher education system implemented to respond to the need for a larger and better prepared early childhood workforce, and who is being targeted for recruitment?
6. What new opportunities and support for alternative pathways to credentials and degrees (i.e., apprenticeships) have been created, and are they effective in attracting and preparing a diverse range of candidates?
7. How is the educational and demographic profile (e.g., degrees, early childhood training, experience) of the early childhood workforce changing?

Increase the availability of affordable and responsive childcare and family services

8. To what extent has the capacity of the mixed delivery system to provide affordable early care and education programs changed over time, and how are families from distinct groups, including historically marginalized families, taking advantage of opportunities?

9. To what extent has the capacity to provide comprehensive family services increased over time, and how are families from distinct groups, including historically marginalized families, taking advantage of opportunities?
10. To what extent has the capacity to provide early intervention services and inclusive practices increased? To what extent have training and TA in inclusive practices resulted in changes in practices, and how does the take-up of best practices vary by different settings?
11. What channels have been created to encourage vulnerable families to communicate their needs to providers and policymakers, what types of input are solicited, and how have providers and policymakers responded to family feedback?

Improve transitions between early care and K-12

12. What program activities, strategies, and other factors contribute to successful transitions, and which are especially effective for families of children with diverse needs, e.g., multilingual learners, new Mainers, and disabilities?

Improve program quality

13. How has the quality of programs within the mixed delivery system changed as a result of new policies and incentives? How is the distribution of quality ratings of different types of programs (e.g., Head Start, child care) changing as a result of new policies and incentives? In cases where the policies and incentives are not sufficient to move programs to higher levels, what are the barriers?

Cross-agency integrated early childhood data

14. How have state agencies worked together on the development of the cross-agency integrated data system?
15. What was learned from the use cases about data priorities, and how has it been applied to developing the ECIDS?
16. In what ways do agencies intend to use ECIDS to identify potential issues and explore possible solutions to arising issues and questions?

Appendix B

Evaluation Methodology

The PDG-R evaluation was designed as a mixed-methods, utilization-focused study aligned explicitly with the state’s core system-building goals and guiding evaluation questions.

PDG Evaluation Questions

The evaluation framework was organized around major “big-bucket” domains—including cross-sector coordination, workforce development, mixed-delivery system capacity, quality improvement, transitions, data systems integration, and cultural responsiveness and racial equity—and was operationalized through outcome-focused items and structured inquiry protocols.

This structure ensured that data collection was directly linked to the strategic priorities of the PDG-R grant and to Maine’s vision for a robust, mixed-delivery early childhood system from birth through Grade 3.

Data Sources and Collection Methods

The evaluation employed multiple, complementary data-collection strategies to strengthen validity through triangulation. These included:

- **Document Review:** Systematic review of PDG initiative proposals, logic models, implementation plans, state policy documents, strategic plan updates (2024), meeting minutes, cross-agency work products, and relevant guidance materials.
- **Monthly PDG Reports:** Ongoing review and synthesis of initiative-level monthly progress reports submitted to the state, allowing for longitudinal tracking of implementation milestones, adaptations, and emerging challenges.
- **Surveys:** Structured surveys administered to initiative leads, providers, educators, and other participants to assess perceived effectiveness, knowledge gains, application of professional development, technical assistance sufficiency, barriers to participation, and equity-related access considerations
- **Individual and Group Interviews / Focus Groups:** Semi-structured interviews and facilitated group discussions with PDG leadership, initiative leads, cross-sector partners, educators, providers, and families. Protocols were aligned to system-level and

participant-level outcome questions and probed collaboration, sustainability, workforce pathways, family engagement, and system integration

- **Observations and Site Visits:** Direct observations of PD activities, professional development sessions, cross-agency meetings, and selected local implementation sites to document fidelity, contextual conditions, and evidence of systems change in practice.

This layered design allowed the evaluation team to capture both implementation processes (e.g., partnership development, coordination structures, TA delivery) and perceived and observable outcomes (e.g., workforce knowledge and confidence, family engagement mechanisms, quality improvements, and cross-agency data use).

Analytic Approach

Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, observations, and open-ended survey responses were coded thematically using a structured framework derived from the evaluation domains.

Coding emphasized patterns related to system-building functions, implementation adaptations, perceived impact, sustainability, and equity. Cross-case comparisons were conducted across initiatives to identify recurring strengths, shared barriers, and emerging models of practice.

Quantitative survey data and administrative indicators (where available) were analyzed descriptively to assess trends in participation, perceived effectiveness, knowledge gains, and reported application of practices. When feasible, findings were disaggregated by role (e.g., educator, provider, family, initiative lead) and by relevant demographic or program characteristics to examine patterns of equity and access.

Throughout the evaluation, findings were triangulated across data sources—monthly reports, stakeholder perceptions, and observational evidence—to validate emerging conclusions. This iterative analytical process supported continuous learning and informed midcourse adjustments, consistent with the Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) principles embedded in the PDG-R initiative's design.

Limitations

As with many system-level evaluations, the study relied in part on self-reported data and initiative-generated documentation, which may reflect reporting bias or uneven data quality across initiatives. Variation in implementation timelines and data availability also limited the ability to attribute outcomes solely to PDG activities. However, the use of multiple data sources, repeated data collection over time, and cross-initiative comparisons strengthened the credibility of findings and allowed the evaluation to surface system-level patterns and implications for sustainability.



Early Childhood Associates supports states and communities in building strong, equitable early childhood systems through research, evaluation, strategic planning, and technical assistance.

earlychildhoodassociates.com



With decades of experience in education, arts, humanities, and healthcare RMC Research engages with clients to measure their effectiveness and meet their goals to create opportunities for families, schools, and communities.

rmcresearchcorporation.com