

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.

¹Data 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 system¹, 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

¹ 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.