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Recommendations from the FIRST 10 PILOT INITIATIVE



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Maine First 10 Pilot Initiative Recommendations for Implementation

The Maine Department of Education supported the First 10 Community School Pilot (2023–2025) with funding through Maine’s Preschool Development Grant (PDG, 2022-2025). The pilot brought together school administrative units (SAUs), families, early childhood programs, and community organizations to create a system that helps young children to learn and thrive during the first 10 years of their lives.

The pilot sites were funded to implement the First 10 model for supporting community schools developed by the Education Development Center (EDC).¹ This model is designed to foster school-community-family relationships to align services and resources for families and their young children prior to and during the early years in school. Each First 10 site was led by a team that included participants from a hub school (typically members of school administration, and teachers from pre-Kindergarten to Grade 3, and other school staff) and community partners. Sites planned and implemented strategies to increase access to quality programming, comprehensive supports, parent education, and coordinated transitions for children and families into public school.

¹More details about First 10 can be found on the EDC website: edc.org/projects/first-10/

As part of their funding, pilot site teams received:

- Coaching from EDC to help communities to tailor strategies to meet their own unique and individual needs.
- Access to a set of First 10 planning and implementation tools and activities that focus on supporting children’s transition to kindergarten as well as engaging and supporting families.
- Funding to purchase resources for use in support of First 10 activities
- Funding for a local family outreach coordinator to be hired by each site

2 Unique Components of the Maine First 10 Pilots

- ▶ Site family outreach coordinator
- ▶ State First 10 Community Schools Specialist

In addition to coaching from the EDC coaches, site received oversight and technical assistance from a state First 10 Community Schools Specialist at the Maine Department of Education. This individual had experience working within the community school model in Maine, including the First 10 model, and provided one-on-one support to coordinators, including frequent participation in site teams’ meetings, identified and shared resources, and developed a community of practice (CoP) to establish the pilot sites as a statewide network.

The First 10 pilot was designed to test the feasibility of a specific community school model in a set of sites across Maine. Sites were selected based upon their applications to participate that included descriptions of their local needs and an approach for implementing a comprehensive model to address local needs.

First 10 Sites

Seven SAUs in Maine were awarded grants for the pilot. The initial cohort of 3 grantees began its work in the Summer of 2023, and a second cohort of 4 sites was awarded starting July 2024.² The communities funded came from across the state and included suburban as well as rural areas. Some had a history in implementing community school models. Overall, each represented a unique combination of factors that provide an opportunity

First 10 Pilot Sites	
Site	Cohort
East Belfast (RSU 71)	1
Limestone—Caswell	1
Sanford	1
Cape Cod School (RSU 9)	2
Deer Isle—Stonington (SU-76)	2
River Hawks (MSAD 54)	2
Wiscasset	2

²One site opted out of the pilot in spring, 2025, leaving 6 sites active at the end of the pilot.

for learning about what features or structures need to be in place for First 10 to be replicated at other sites or implemented at scale for the state.

The evaluation of First 10 pilots focused heavily on understanding how funded communities approached implementation of the First 10 model locally, and what facilitated or challenged those efforts. Where possible, the evaluation captured impact of pilot participation on children and families, schools and teachers, and communities. Both an interim evaluation report and final report were developed for the Maine Department of Education. A companion report documenting site-level implementation profiles provides additional detail.

Looking Ahead

The recommendations summarized here are drawn from the evaluation of how the pilot sites implemented the First 10 models and activities. It provides a broad framework for state and local agencies as they encourage schools to focus on building school-community partnerships to support families and their children from birth through elementary school. The recommendations focus on:

- ✓ Preparing for Success
- ✓ Critical Elements for Success
- ✓ Supporting Success

These recommendations also provide the framework for ***A Playbook for Building School-Community Partnerships to Support Children and Families*** – a resource developed specifically for communities as they work to develop partnerships across schools, community agencies and providers.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Preparing for Success

The first set of recommendations focus on creating the potential for success before any site begins to implement First 10 or any school-community partnership model.

Invest in community readiness to implement the First 10 Model

All of the participating sites in the pilot submitted applications providing an overview of their communities and their needs, identifying team members, and outlining activities to implement. Often, key partners included letters of support. However, there were few specific indicators of the sites' capacity to implement the pilot.

Issues of readiness only emerged as sites began efforts at implementation. For example:

- Letters of support may not address areas of potential conflict or distrust between community partners and local schools that can limit collaboration (or at least require prolonged team development before it occurs).
- Plans to implement Play and Learn sessions at a school without understanding how effectively the school has been able to draw families for events in the past, can underestimate the scale of work necessary.
- Within the mixed-delivery system³ common across communities, the relationships between school-based and community-based early education providers can vary. In some sites for example, community providers may be located in or adjacent to schools and have established relationships. In others, there may be no specific relationship(s) established between the school and some or all community providers.

³Mixed 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.

Community Factors That Affect Readiness

To what extent are there **proven relationships among the partners?**

What **structural, procedural or historical barriers** may pose challenges to **collaboration?**

What steps have been undertaken to **understand local needs and assets before launch?**

Create an onramp for sites to begin

A strength of the First 10 approach is a focus on helping teams understand the model components and processes. It also provides time for teams to work together with their coaches to clarify needs and assets and formulate plans to guide each team. A consequence of the 3-year pilot was that these necessary “start-up” activities had to occur both quickly and briefly. In addition, because funding was announced in spring and teams were brought together for planning over the summer, many did not reconvene again until the fall. This gap not only meant lost time but also lost momentum among the teams.

Provide a longer period of support to allow sites to develop

Sites participating in the pilot had less than 3 years for implementation.⁴ While all of the sites were able to identify teams, make a plan of activities, and begin to implement at least some of the activities in those plans, it was clear that most sites remained closer to their launching stage than complete implementation. At the time of the final report, all sites had implemented many activities but at least 3 had activities they were planning to do but had not implemented (as of fall 2025). In some instances, sites specifically did not plan some activities (for example joint professional learning for teachers across grades or settings) because they did not expect to have sufficient time to plan and successfully complete the activity. A longer period of time would mean more activities would have been implemented. In

⁴ Although described as a “3- year pilot” in practical terms sites had less time for implementation as they launched. Cohort 1 sites had approximately 2¾ years for implementation while Cohort 2 sites had approximately 1¾ for implementation.

addition, anticipating a longer time frame would allow sites to learn from their attempt to implement planned activities, and ultimately would allow them to be more successful.

Give teams the time and support they need to develop

Each site utilized a team-based model to plan and implement First 10 activities. Teams need time to develop as functioning units. Especially when teams are drawn from across a range of roles and settings, and when they represent new relationships, there needs to be time for members to come to know, understand, and have confidence in each other and how they each contribute to the team. During the pilot, teams received support in implementing First 10, and some coordinators received coaching specifically on managing teams, but overall, teams did not receive much support in how to work together as a team. Future efforts would benefit from providing teams opportunities and supports to develop as functional teams.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Critical Elements for Success

The evaluation focus on implementation was able to identify critical elements that contributed to success across sites.

A local coordinator is a critical part of each site's success

One of the most distinct components of the pilot in Maine was the introduction of a dedicated on-site coordinator hired specifically to focus on the goals of First 10. They generally worked closer with the First 10 coaches and materials and tended to take on more of the burden for implementation, and teams tended to let them (at least initially). The coordinators typically managed the flow of work, planned and led meetings, and were often the primary connection between the school and community partners. They were more often the ones providing planned activities. They also provided a single point of contact to school or district leaders and were portrayed as informal gatekeepers of information that was appreciated by leaders. District leaders valued having a dedicated role with the time to maintain relationships across partners and provide regular updates on progress—a function that existing staff could not absorb alongside their other responsibilities.

In most sites, the local coordinator was unlike any other position in the school or community agency. During the pilot, sites learned important lessons about how to maximize the impact of the role:

- Clear expectations and structures for administrative oversight provided clarity to the coordinator and the team about the coordinator's responsibilities.
- Team members needed to understand and be supported in their roles within the team.
- When the coordinator was newly hired, their qualifications and roles needed to fit within existing contractual structures.
- Coordinators may be located in a community partner or school, but they needed to "share space" with their team.

What the evaluation told us about hiring coordinators

- ▶ **Coordinators are passionate about connecting with families** as a means of providing support to them and their children.
- ▶ **Coordinators have histories working in early education**, working at community agencies, and/or as community volunteers.
- ▶ Finding the **combination of experience, credentials, and mindset** for hiring takes time, and may require compromise.

Encourage flexibility in how sites implement activities to support families and young children

The First 10 model provides a set of activities that are designed, and have been shown, to benefit young children and families. These activities are often described with a combination of purposes and processes. In developing activities sites benefit from guidance on what to do, but there is always a danger that this guidance can become overly prescriptive. When sites focus on what the goal or purpose of an activity is, the specifics should be determined by each site for each site. For example:

- All sites in the pilot developed a community book list to share with the community, but they involved their teams to varying degrees. In some sites either a survey of team members or team discussion led to the list of identified books, in others a list was proposed by the coordinator for team approval. Although these variations may have limited the possibility for team growth, they likely facilitated developing and sharing a community booklist to encourage children and their families to read. Sites fostered stronger school-community relationships by distributing book sets to teachers and community providers and sharing bookmarks featuring the list throughout the community.
- Sites planned Play and Learn sessions at one of their school locations, preparing a sequence of learning activities for children and opportunities to share information and resources with attending families. Most sites effectively pivoted in response to parent participation (or lack of it) and feedback, while keeping the goal at the core. They experimented with different schedules and formats. Many shifted locations to include community partners (e.g., libraries) and at least one recognized an opportunity to reach families through a homeless shelter. Several

sites also began to create “pop-up” experiences at other school and community events, created “take and make” kits, and hosted virtual sessions.

- Sites developed parenting campaigns, providing outreach to families with information about children’s learning and development. Most sites used The Basics as a critical resource for these campaigns. Sites generally provided resources for parents through Play and Learn and other family-focused events. Some sites also utilized their school’s parent messaging system or dedicated parenting app (e.g., Parent Powered or Basics Insights), school-based bulletin boards, and in some cases social media accounts (either their school account or one focused on their First 10 pilot).

Integrate new activities into existing plans and schedules

The set of First 10 activities included some that are common and some that may have been new to each site. The greatest success that sites reported was when they were able to integrate new or additional activities into their existing school and community routines and schedules. For example, sites added play and learn opportunities to school registration or orientation events.

Prepare for turnover, especially among key staff

Turnover is not unusual in education and during the 3-year period of the pilot, sites underwent some change in staffing. Sites that experienced turnover among district or school leadership, or in the coordinator position, experienced the greatest challenges. Given the importance of partnerships, relationships, and knowledge of the local community and families for the success of First 10 and similar school-community projects, it can be planned for.

- The establishment of teams, so that responsibility and buy-in is distributed, increases the possibility of continuity for a site’s success.
- Developing agreed-upon plans and written agreements among partners establishes a longer-term expectation for collaboration.
- A shared archive that includes plans and resources from past events should be included as a tool for maintaining institutional knowledge when there is turnover.

Build understanding to enhance community and family engagement

All sites had as their goal engaging groups and providers in their community and all sites had a goal of improving family engagement. While all sites enjoyed some success in each of these, they were able to identify some of the barriers to engagement—for families, transportation was a common challenge and for community providers time or schedule were common. In some communities, relationships between schools and community-based providers were further complicated by tensions related to the expansion of public pre-K, which some providers perceived as a threat to their enrollment and viability.

Sites that were able to make the most progress were those who were able to best understand the needs of those they were trying to reach. One site had active participation on their team from a local provider who was also viewed as a leader within the community. One site hosted local providers for a potluck dinner. Several sites started to focus their outreach on locations and events that already attracted families rather than rely on drawing families to them. This understanding often arose through a combination of coordinator experience and responsiveness to feedback and participation.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Supporting Success

Once sites have launched, they benefit from regular support, from Pilot provided sources like the EDC coach and state specialist, as well as opportunities to learn from each other.

Foster the knowledge, experience, and support necessary to engage families

All of the coordinators spoke about challenges in successfully engaging families in their sites. While many had some ideas about why this may be, they struggled to come up with effective strategies. This was especially true when there were no apparent lines of communications sites had with families they could not reach. Given the diversity of needs and experiences families have had, this is an area where coordinators and teams would benefit from additional resources and support.

Technical assistance support for the pilot

- ▶ EDC staff provided coaching for meeting planning, understanding First 10 activities, and using First 10 tools to manage their site.
- ▶ The state First 10 Community Schools Specialist provided support related to family and community engagement, contract management.
- ▶ A statewide virtual Community of Practice maintained by the state specialist to share information and resources and facilitate collaboration across a statewide network.
- ▶ Annual summer in-person meetings including teams from each site to learn from each other and invited speakers.

Provide technical assistance and support

Each pilot site received support from a number of sources and through a number of strategies. Sites pointed to each of these supports as important for their success. They typically identify different sources of support for different purposes— Coordinators relied on the EDC coaches for assistance in understanding the First 10 model and also in meeting planning; Sites valued the state Specialist as both the authority on what was permissible under their contracts and for expertise working in community schools and her knowledge of the education ecosystem across Maine. By design, the level of support from the EDC coaches was gradually reduced as teams' capacity to manage their First 10 site increased. However, all supports remained available throughout.

Establish a Community of Practice to provide opportunities for regular collaboration and resource sharing

Including multiple sites in the pilot had the immediate effect of creating the possibility for sites to become a network and participate in a Community of Practice. The regular (monthly throughout the school year) virtual meetings nearly always drew all of the coordinators together to receive updates and information from the state specialist, as well as to share resources and receive resources.

Convene regular site team meetings to support ongoing learning and collaboration

The Community of Practice provided coordinators with opportunities to learn from and collaborate with each other. The annual convenings that invited sites to bring their teams to 1-day in-person meetings gave the entire team these opportunities. During the final meeting of teams, breakout groups for individuals in similar roles across sites underscored how valuable it is for teachers, administrators, and community providers to learn from others in their same role but working in different contexts.

Plan for sustainability

The First 10 Pilot was time-limited by design. Built into the pilot was an expectation that local sites would take responsibility for sustained funding of the coordinator position and resources as the pilot ended. Certainly, sustainability includes a financial burden, and sites need support in pursuing and securing funding. But sites can take other steps to sustain the work achieved by pilot sites by ensuring alignment to their school-community partnership goals through:

- **Policy review, and if necessary, modification**—Schools and community agencies sometimes have policies in place that create challenges to collaboration rather than nurturing it. These can be proactively reviewed and updated to facilitate sustainability.
- **Use existing funding in different ways**—Schools already provide funding for materials and resources, and in some instances events, activities, and staff training and development. Sites can intentionally choose to expend this funding, where possible, to continue or maintain activities related to community partnership and family engagement.
- **Eliminate siloed programs and create integration**—Schools' funding is often aligned with specific programs (e.g., Federal Title I, Title III) that can lead to silos in planning and implementation. Making efforts to blend and braid funding and integrate programs creates opportunities for efficiency as well as innovation in collaborative, partnership-based initiatives not specifically limited to single streams.
- **Use time in different ways**—Schools already invest time in many activities that can be shaped to support community and family engagement. Schools may consider modifications to school calendars to provide more opportunities for collaboration between the school and community partners and providers. Schools can actively invite community providers to schoolwide events and learning opportunities.



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