

Kindergarten Entry Inventory (KEI) Pilot

Testing Kindergarten Readiness Tools to Inform Statewide Decision-Making

Performance period Summer April 2024–December 2025

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

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

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

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

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

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

the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), Teaching Strategies Gold (TS Gold), and the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA). Teachers tested items drawn from these tools and provided feedback on their experience using them through surveys developed by WestEd, who analyzed and presented findings to the KEI Advisory Group.

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

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

What was the impact of the learning series?

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

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

KEI PILOT FEATURES

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

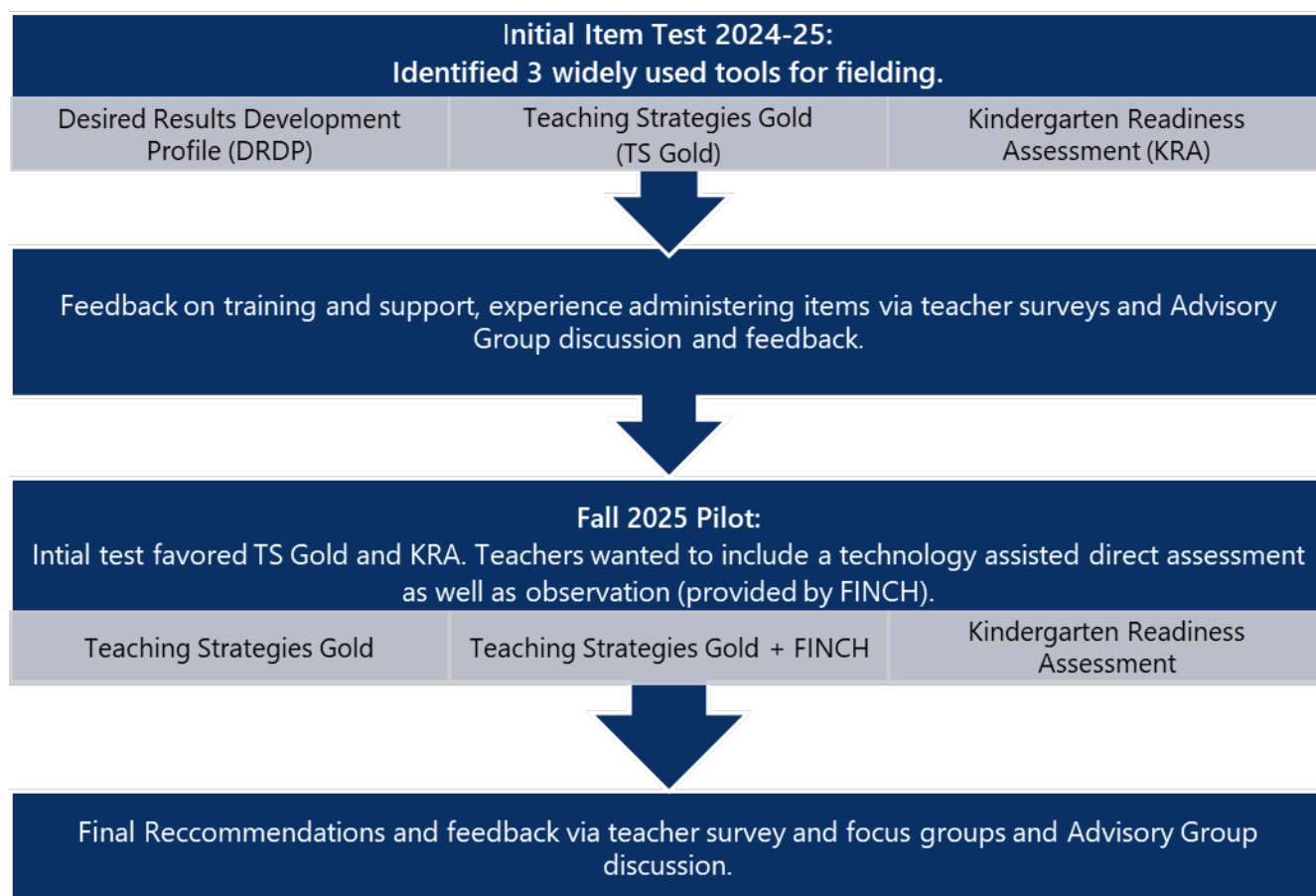
During the 2024–25 academic year, teachers tested items drawn from three commonly used KEI tools—**Teaching Strategies Gold (TS Gold), the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA), and the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP)**—and rated them across multiple design and use criteria.

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

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

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

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



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

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

“[KEI] provides information that helps me understand my students’ strengths and needs.”

“[KEI] helps me identify areas where many of my students may need additional support or enrichment.”

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

Differentiating Among Tools Based on Teacher-Reported Evidence

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

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

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

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

How did the KEI Pilot Build Collaborations?

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

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

level decision-making. Through this structure, information flowed from classrooms to decision-makers in a coordinated and intentional way.

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

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

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

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

Sustainability and Next Steps

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

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

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

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

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

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

What did we learn?

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

Summary

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