

Leading Early Learning

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

Performance period 10/2021–4/2026

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

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

This report presents findings from outcome-focused assessment activities conducted in fall 2025 as part of Maine's Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R) program. Drawing on diverse data, the report examines the Leading Early Learning initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

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

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

The learning series has been offered to 5 cohorts of 20–25 participants each, with most participants completing the whole series. While most participants were school principals, other roles were also represented, including assistant principals, central office administrators, early childhood coordinators, special education administrators, and lead teachers. Over the past 2 years, the steering committee also marketed the series to special education directors, especially those with FAPE responsibilities.¹ One principal in the focus group noted the critical involvement of superintendents and assistant superintendents in messaging about the importance of early learning (it speaks volumes). Engaging as a team was described positively in surveys and interviews.

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

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

LEADING EARLY LEARNING FEATURES

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

Five 4-week learning modules.

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

Self-designed project to apply learning in local contexts.

Emphasis on team-based participation.

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

Participants paid \$200 toward the series cost

Participants earned 40 contact hours.

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

What was the impact of the learning series?

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

¹Maine is transitioning responsibility for providing a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) services for preschool age children with disabilities from Child Development Services (CDS) to School Administrative Units (SAUs) by 2028.

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

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

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

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

MAJOR CHANGES PARTICIPANTS MADE

▶ Advocacy for play-based and developmentally appropriate practice	▶ Supporting teachers and serving as an instructional leader	▶ Employing new resources such as the Yardsticks text and observation protocols
INCREASED KNOWLEDGE OF DEVELOPMENT	INCREASED CONFIDENCE AS A LEADER	ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Leadership Application in Practice

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

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

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

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

Professional Networking and Continued Collaboration

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

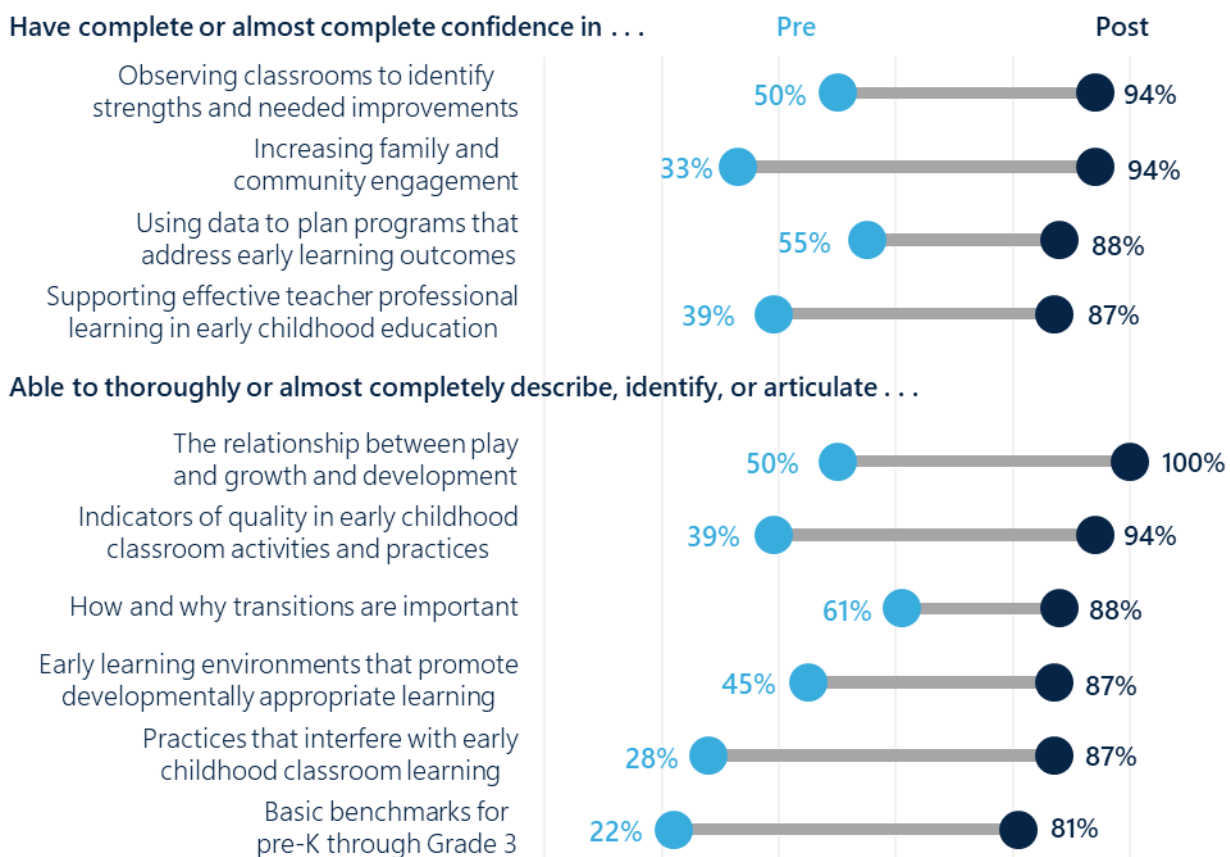
"I gained a lot of insight from working with and collaborating with others in similar roles. I had the opportunity to develop more leadership skills and review our practices, which has expanded my role and also led to positive changes."

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

Self-Reported Changes in Practice

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

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



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

Activities That Were Most Influential in Changing Practice

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

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

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

Shifts in Understanding of Play and Instructional Approach

Principals in the focus group described how their understanding of development influenced changes in their mindset about play. One school has implemented structured play days that began in kindergarten and have now expanded throughout the school. The same school developed a “portrait of a young graduate” to foster a collective understanding of children's goals. Another described introducing risky play.² into their playground, which has resulted in a reduction of referrals for challenging behaviors. Another described helping staff change their perspectives about play, building an understanding of the structured nature of productive play.

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

Additional Modules Influencing Practice

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

How did Leading Early Learning build collaborations?

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

²Risky play involves creating environments where children can explore and take risks while having support to stay safe. Risky play allows children to test their boundaries while engaging in physical and mental challenges.

State-Level Collaboration and Coordination

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

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

Local Partnerships and School-Based Collaboration

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

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

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

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

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

Sustainability and Continuation

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

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

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

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

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

Design Adaptations Over Time

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

Suggested Areas for Improvement

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

Lessons Learned

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

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

Summary

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