

Navigator Roles

Workforce and Program Navigation in Maine’s Early Childhood System

Performance period May 2024–December 2025

Early care and education in Maine operates within a mixed-delivery system¹ spanning licensing, affordability, workforce development, and education, each with distinct requirements, funding streams, and administrative processes. Program leaders and educators are often required to navigate these systems simultaneously while making decisions related to staffing, compliance, professional learning, and credentialing.

The **Navigator Initiatives** were implemented as part of Maine’s Preschool Development Grant–Birth to Five Renewal (PDG-R) to pilot statewide roles for workforce and program navigation within this complex system. The initiative supported two coordinated positions—a Program Navigator and a Workforce Navigator—designed to help early childhood programs and educators interpret requirements, access existing supports, and coordinate next steps across systems. Rather than creating new services, the Navigator roles focused on improving system usability by clarifying processes, aligning guidance, and supporting informed decision-making.

This report presents **findings from outcome-focused assessment activities** during the May 2024–December 2025 performance period as part of Maine’s PDG-R program. Drawing on multiple data sources,² the report examines the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including findings related to educator and program decision-making, workforce advancement, and access to existing supports associated with navigation assistance.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, the roles of the navigators in facilitating communication and coordination among state agencies (the Office of Child and Family Services [OCFS], the Department of Education [DOE], and the Department of Labor [DOL]), community organizations, and early childhood providers.
- **System building**, including early contributions related to navigation, coordination, and engagement within Maine’s mixed-delivery early childhood system, as well as factors affecting sustainability.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitated participation and engagement, and barriers affecting the reach of navigation supports across programs and educators.

²Data sources for this report include interviews with initiative leads; focus groups with state agency partners and early childhood providers; navigator activity documentation; implementation documentation; and initiative summary materials.

The Program Navigator supported early childhood programs in navigating licensing, affordability, business operations, and education systems. Support included responding to program-initiated questions, clarifying requirements, reviewing documentation, and coordinating referrals to relevant

¹Mixed 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.

agencies or partners. Assistance focused on interpreting existing systems—such as licensure, compliance, stabilization, and Pre-K participation—rather than delivering new services.

The **Workforce Navigator** supported early childhood educators and prospective educators in navigating career pathways, credentialing, and professional learning. Support included individualized guidance to interpret Career Lattice requirements, sequence training or credentials, and identify workforce supports, as well as information sessions focused on entry into and advancement within the field. Assistance was tailored to diverse backgrounds, experience levels, and readiness levels.

Although the roles addressed different entry points, implementation was coordinated. Navigators aligned guidance, shared information, and reinforced consistent messaging across systems, and developed targeted activities—including **B.R.I.D.G.E.** and **PEECE**—to address recurring navigation needs.

NAVIGATOR ROLES FEATURES

Program Navigator

- 180 childcare program connections documented
- 77 agency and community partnerships established or maintained
- 8 in-person summits, conferences, or large-group engagements, including a keynote address, three breakout sessions, and four staff trainings
- **Focus areas:** DOL Wage & Compliance training; Business Foundations initiative

Workforce Navigator

- 37 program-based presentations delivered
- 112 individualized professional development plans created
- 26 educators documented advancement on Maine's Career Lattice during the performance period
- 8 educators reported new employment in the early childhood education field
- **Focus areas:** Grow Your Career in ECE presentations; Careers with Kids events

Collaborative Activities

- **B.R.I.D.G.E.:** 13 programs participated
- **PEECE:** 11 job-shadowing sites
- 159 combined technical assistance events

Navigator Roles at a Glance

Program Navigator	Workforce Navigator
Childcare programs	Educators and prospective educators
▶ Licensing, CCAP, and regulatory systems ▶ Business and operational requirements ▶ Pre-K partnership readiness	▶ Career pathways and Career Lattice ▶ Training, credentials, and degree sequencing ▶ Workforce entry and advancement
Shared Functions	
▶ Coordinated communication between the field and state agencies ▶ Reducing uncertainty when engaging with state systems ▶ Individualized guidance, referrals, and follow-up ▶ B.R.I.D.G.E. and PEECE (targeted collaborative activities)	

What was the impact of the Navigator initiative?

The impact of the Navigator roles was most evident in how programs and educators **interpreted, engaged with, and made decisions within existing systems**. Rather than producing direct service or child-level outcomes, the Navigators influenced **system navigation**, supporting clarity, access, and informed engagement.

Intended outcomes included:

- **Improved clarity** among program leaders regarding licensing, affordability, and operational requirements.
- **Improved clarity** among educators regarding career pathways, credentialing requirements, and professional learning options.
- **More informed decision-making** when engaging with workforce, regulatory, and education systems was a key outcome of the navigation support, demonstrating how the Navigator roles facilitated understanding of these systems and engagement.
- Improved access to existing supports and resources through coordinated guidance and referrals.
- **Strengthened engagement with systems** previously found difficult to navigate.

Educator and Program Decision-Making

The most immediate impacts of the Navigator Initiatives were observed in **program and educator decision-making**. Interviews and focus groups indicate that navigation support increased clarity about processes, timelines, and available pathways, particularly when programs or educators faced consequential decisions about licensing, staffing, credentialing, or participation in system initiatives. These effects were most pronounced in contexts involving system complexity or uncertainty, where individualized guidance and follow-up reduced hesitation and supported more informed engagement.

Programs reported using the Program Navigator support to clarify licensing and compliance requirements, understand operational implications, and identify next steps related to stabilization options, expansion, or Pre-K partnership participation. Educators similarly used Workforce Navigator support to interpret Career Lattice requirements, sequence credentials or training, and assess how changes in role, hours, or education might affect their employment trajectory.

Educators also described relying on navigation support to understand how changes in wages, hours, credentials, or employment status could affect eligibility for public benefits (the “benefits cliff”), a concern consistent with findings from Maine’s **Early Childhood Educator Workforce Salary Supplement System Evaluation**. Navigation support contributed to more informed decision-making within these structural constraints.

Activity data (see page 2) illustrates the scope and early outcomes of navigation support during the performance period. While evidence indicates meaningful effects on decision-making, the impact varied by context and was constrained by capacity, geography, scheduling limitations, and broader structural challenges, including staffing shortages, regulatory complexity, and benefits eligibility rules.

Engagement With Systems and Supports

Beyond individual decision-making, the Navigator roles influenced how programs and educators engaged with workforce, regulatory, and education systems over time. Providers and educators reported greater willingness to initiate contact with agencies, seek clarification, and follow through on required steps when navigation support was available—particularly among those who had previously experienced confusion, delays, or frustration when interacting with state systems.

For the Navigator roles, the impact was primarily evident in how programs and educators interpreted, engaged with, and made decisions within existing systems, highlighting the roles' influence on system navigation rather than on direct service delivery or child outcomes.

Engagement was strongest when ongoing communication and follow-up could be sustained. Some educators required extended support to address foundational barriers, including unfamiliarity with documentation requirements or prior negative system experiences, and in these cases, progress occurred incrementally.

How did the Navigators Initiative support collaboration and coordination?

The Navigator initiatives supported collaboration by serving as clear, consistent points of contact for early childhood programs and for educators navigating complex systems. When Program and Workforce Navigator roles were implemented in a coordinated manner, the initiatives supported collaboration by bridging systems rather than simply routine inquiries. Combined roles enabled navigators to interpret how licensing, workforce, education, and labor systems intersected and to help programs and educators navigate these intersections more coherently.

From this perspective, Navigator Initiatives supported collaboration by serving as intermediaries among early childhood programs, educators, state agencies, and community partners—particularly when questions or decisions spanned multiple systems.

Rather than resolving issues on behalf of agencies, navigators helped **route questions**, clarify which systems were implicated, and support follow-through. This reduced misdirected inquiries, repetitive outreach, and inconsistent guidance in the field. State agency partners emphasized that the navigators strengthened communication without blurring role boundaries, reinforcing accurate and consistent messaging across systems.

“The Program Navigator was instrumental in making connections to providers. This connection between childcare providers and state offices helped to break down walls of confusion.” (State agency partner, Focus Group)

Navigation improved collaboration by making systems more legible and approachable, particularly at points of entry. Coordination was most evident when programs or educators were navigating:

- Licensing or compliance alongside workforce considerations
- Pre-K partnership readiness requiring engagement with multiple agencies
- Career advancement decisions are affected by employment, credentialing, and benefits rules.

The navigators improved collaboration not by creating new structures but **by reducing friction between existing ones**. Coordination gains depended on navigator capacity and sustained relationships; when capacity was constrained, proactive coordination diminished.

How did the Navigator Initiatives contribute to system building?

From a system-building perspective, the Navigator Initiatives' primary contribution was to strengthen shared understanding and coherence across Maine's mixed-delivery early childhood system. System building occurred through improved alignment and clarity, not structural change.

Navigators reinforced a consistent interpretation of licensing, workforce, and education requirements and helped surface recurring areas of confusion for programs and educators. Over time, this contributed to clearer engagement and improved readiness to participate in initiatives such as Pre-K partnerships and workforce advancement opportunities.

When roles were combined, navigation also contributed to system building by creating feedback loops and cross-sector learning. Integrated navigation helped surface how system requirements were experienced collectively by programs and educators, informing adjustments to communication strategies and partnership design. From this perspective, combined roles shifted navigation from system clarification to system insight.

Targeted activities such as B.R.I.D.G.E and PEECE exemplify this contribution by intentionally linking programs, educators, and partners around shared expectations and readiness.

The Program Navigator's B.R.I.D.G.E. initiative (Building Relationships in Diverse Groups for Education) illustrates this type of system-building contribution. Through B.R.I.D.G.E., 13 programs participated in school administrative unit (SAU) collaboration and Pre-K partnership readiness activities, supporting the kinds of cross-sector connections described above.

At the same time, navigation work reaffirmed persistent system challenges, including:

- Licensing and compliance complexity
- Workforce credentialing and advancement barriers
- Benefits eligibility uncertainty
- Administrative and technology burden

System-level impact was formative rather than transformational. Navigation strengthened alignment and feedback loops but remained constrained by reliance on time-limited, individual roles.

In what ways did the design of the Navigators Initiative facilitate participation and access?

The Navigator Initiatives' design facilitated participation by offering **individualized, flexible, and relationship-based** support. Programs and educators could seek assistance when questions arose rather than at fixed entry points, reducing barriers for those managing multiple responsibilities.

Barriers to participation included limited navigator capacity, statewide scope, geographic distance, scheduling constraints, and uneven digital readiness among providers.

Multiple engagement modalities-virtual, phone, and in-person- helped reduce geographic and scheduling barriers, particularly for rural providers and educators.

“The director described her engagement with the Program Navigator as ‘seamless.’ The Program Navigator’s response was quick and expressed her immediate interest: How can I support you? When can we meet? It “boggled my mind” how easy the process was.” (Child care program director, Focus Group)

Warm hand-offs, follow-up support, and contextualized guidance increased the likelihood that participants would complete required steps or pursue opportunities.

Sustainability

The Navigator Initiatives were implemented as a PDG-R pilot. Following the conclusion of the PDG-R pilot, OCFS worked to absorb some core navigation functions into existing agency roles. State partners noted that navigation reduced workload and improved communication in the field.

“It took a significant amount of work off my plate.” (State agency partner)

“Having a ‘boots on the ground’ connection—someone who is engaged in one-on-one communication with childcare providers—is really helpful. It is valuable to have someone who can communicate that state workers and agencies are there to support them.” (State agency partner, Focus Group)

Integrated navigation delivers distinct value—cross-system continuity, responsiveness, and learning—but is difficult to sustain without dedicated capacity. The primary barrier to sustainability identified by the initiative leads was the availability of ongoing funding to support that capacity.

What did we learn?

- **Individualized navigation is most effective when aligned with immediate decision points.** Programs and educators were most likely to engage when navigation aligned with moments of uncertainty or transition, such as licensing decisions, workforce advancement, or consideration of a new partnership.
- **Intermediary roles improve access without duplicating agency functions.** Maintaining clear role boundaries helped sustain productive relationships with agency partners.
- **Cross-system coordination benefits from continuity and shared context.** Coordination gains during the performance period depended on sustained, cross-agency engagement; distributing these functions across existing roles reduced the intensity and consistency of coordination.

- **Navigation clarifies but does not resolve structural system barriers.** Issues related to workforce compensation, benefits eligibility, administrative burden, and provider capacity remained structural.
- Integrated roles produce **different—not just greater—outcomes.** Combined roles shifted navigation from system clarification to system insight.
- Navigation generates **system learning when positioned as a connective function.** Navigators (workforce, program) function as “connective tissue” connecting the foundational elements of building robust early education and care mixed-delivery systems and pilots.

Summary

The combined Navigator roles produced impacts that extended beyond access and clarity to include continuity, coordination, and system learning. Integration reduced fragmentation, strengthened collaboration, and generated insights that support longer-term system improvement, underscoring the importance of dedicated capacity for sustaining these benefits.