

Pre-Kindergarten Partnerships/Mixed Delivery

A Community–District Partnership Model to Expand Access to Public Pre-K in Maine

Performance period 04/2024–03/2026

Preschool programs across the country include both school-based and community-based settings. School-based Pre-Kindergarten programs typically follow the public school calendar and daily schedule, offering programming for approximately 10 months of the year and about six hours per day. Community-based child care programs, by contrast, often operate full-day, year-round schedules that better align with the needs of working families and offer continuity of care for children who may have been enrolled in those settings before age four. When school districts and community-based providers partner to deliver public Pre-K together, they can combine public funding, enrollment infrastructure, and K–12 alignment with the extended schedules and established family relationships that community-based programs offer..

Maine included the Public Pre-K Expansion through Partnership Initiative in its Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R) to address barriers identified in the state’s Needs Assessment regarding access, capacity, and mixed-delivery coordination. Although approximately 47% of Maine’s four-year-olds were served through publicly funded Pre-K during the 2019–20 school year, not all local education agencies had the facilities, staffing, or funding to reach universal enrollment. The PDG-R investment tested mixed-delivery partnership models¹ between school administrative units (SAUs) and community-based providers to expand access to high-quality public Pre-K and to inform future policy and funding decisions.

This report presents findings from outcome-focused assessment activities conducted in late fall 2025 as part of Maine’s Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R) evaluation of the Grants to Expand Public Pre-K Partnerships initiative, offering insight into the feasibility and early outcomes of a partnership-based Pre-K pilot model in Maine:

- **Impact**, including an analysis of early child development data, classroom quality indicators, and family experience across pilot sites.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including the extent to which partnerships among state agencies, SAUs, and community-based providers contributed to the model’s success.
- **System building**, including ways the Public Pre-K Partnership initiative contributed to Maine’s capacity to build a robust EC mixed delivery system
- **Supports and access**, including design features, service delivery conditions, and implementation considerations relevant to future scale.

Data sources for this report include parent surveys administered at both Year 2 pilot sites (N=10); Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment data (N=16 per site); CLASS observation results; teacher and administrator surveys; interview with the initiative lead; Pre-K Advisory Team documentation; and monthly implementation logs.

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. This initiative focused on partnerships between school districts and community-based child care providers.

The initiative first established the Pre-K Expansion Advisory Team, convened by the Maine Department of Education (DOE). The Team included representatives from community-based programs, school administrative units (SAUs), higher education, career and technical education, Child Development Services, the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS), Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN), and families. Meeting monthly and later bimonthly, the Advisory Team guided the design of initiatives, including funding structure, quality expectations, and credential requirements.

The Advisory Team recommended structuring initial awards on a per-classroom rather than per-child basis, a decision that informed pilot startup planning.

PDG-R Grant Year 2 Cohort 1 Pilot Sites Launched (2024–25)

Two SAU–community partnerships were awarded funding through a competitive process and launched Pre-K classrooms in Fall 2024:

- Scarborough partnered with Shooting Stars to create 16 school-day seats with district-provided meals.
- Sanford partnered with the Springvale YMCA to create 16 full-day seats, including meals, transportation, and before- and after-care.

Classroom staff implemented state-approved curricula and used Teaching Strategies GOLD (TSG) for child assessment. CLASS observations were conducted in Fall 2024 and Spring 2025.

PDG-R Grant Year 3 Cohort 2 Partnership Expansion (2025–26)

Two additional partnerships received Public Partnership funds: Belfast (with the YMCA) and Damariscotta (with Coastal Kids). Participating programs were expected to hold a QRIS Level 3 or higher rating. Both sites participated in the MDOE Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) Transition Cohort and operate a full-day, year-round model with wraparound care.

The initiative lead provided ongoing technical assistance, site visits, and coordination of professional development across all sites.

PRE-K PARTNERSHIPS/MIXED DELIVERY FEATURES

16 Pre-K seats per classroom across four partnership classrooms (64 seats total)

Two classrooms launched in PDG-R Grant Year 2—Cohort 1 (Scarborough and Sanford); two additional classrooms opened in PDG-R Grant Year 3 –Cohort 2 (Belfast and Damariscotta)

Each pilot site partnered with an SAU and a community-based child care program

Year 3 sites participated in the **MDOE FAPE Transition Cohort**, aligning partnership expansion with statewide Pre-K access requirements

Guided by a Pre-K Advisory Team with representation across the mixed-delivery system

Cohort 2 sites required QRIS Level 3 or higher; monitored through CLASS observations and Teaching Strategies GOLD assessments

Consistent with the pilot design initiative, implementation focused on partnership formation, quality alignment, and technical support.

What was the impact of the Pre-K Partnerships/Mixed Delivery initiative?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives requires assessing whether investments advanced their intended purposes. Because the Pre-K Partnerships initiative was designed as a pilot—testing the feasibility of a community-based partnership model rather than implementing an established statewide practice—impact is understood in terms of what the initiative demonstrated during a limited implementation period.

The initiative’s intended outcomes were:

- **Increased early childhood education** options for families
- **Enhanced quality of early learning environments** within community-based settings
- **Information available to guide future decisions** about program design, funding, and scaling.

Findings below are drawn from Year 2 pilot sites (Scarborough and Sanford) during the 2024–25 school year, including Teaching Strategies GOLD (TSG) data (N=16 per site), CLASS observations, parent surveys (N=10), and teacher and administrator perspectives. Year 3 sites (Belfast and Damariscotta) are included where relevant.

Increasing Early Childhood Education Options for Families

In Year 2, the initiative created 32 publicly funded Pre-K seats across two community-based classrooms (16 per site), both of which operated at full enrollment. In one district, the pilot was the first publicly offered Pre-K program locally. Service models differed by site:

Scarborough followed a school-day schedule with district-provided meals, while Sanford offered full-day, year-round programming that included meals, district-provided transportation, and before- and after-care.

In Year 3, two additional partnerships were launched in Belfast and Damariscotta, extending the model beyond southern Maine into Lincoln and Waldo counties. Both Year 3 sites operate full-day, year-round models and participate in the MDOE Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) Transition Cohort.

At one Year 2 site, approximately half of the enrolled children had no prior formal early childhood experience (Initiative Lead Interview, 2025), indicating that the pilot reached families who had not previously accessed Pre-K.

These findings demonstrate that the pilot expanded the range and structure of publicly funded Pre-K options available within participating communities.

Enhancing the Quality of Early Learning Environments

Teaching Strategies GOLD (TSG) data documented developmental growth across domains at both Year 2 sites (N=16 per site), with the strongest gains observed in social-emotional development and literacy. Growth was measured across fall-to-winter or fall-to-spring assessment windows, depending on the site's schedule. Teacher and parent reports reflected similar patterns, including increased vocabulary, improved peer interaction, and greater confidence.

CLASS observations conducted in fall 2024 and spring 2025 documented supportive classroom environments at both sites. Emotional Support scores were in the high range, while Classroom Organization and Instructional Support scores fell in the mid-to-high range. Scores were sustained across observation periods.

Parent survey results (N=10) indicated high levels of satisfaction with classroom quality, communication, and staff responsiveness. Most parents reported feeling welcomed, able to share goals and concerns, and satisfied with how teachers supported their children's learning.

While the pilot scale limits generalizability, the convergence of classroom observation data, child assessment data, and family feedback provides early evidence that partnership classrooms maintained quality and supported developmental growth during the implementation year.

Generating Information to Guide Future Design and Scaling

The central purpose of the pilot was to identify the conditions under which a partnership-based Pre-K model can be implemented effectively. The Pre-K Expansion Advisory Team shaped key design decisions during the first year. The Advisory Team recommended funding sites on a per-classroom rather than per-child basis during startup, a decision that the Advisory Team determined made the implementation more successful. The Advisory Team also recommended flexibility in credential requirements within QRIS standards for Cohort 2 sites, allowing one site to retain existing staff with several years of experience and strong relationships with families. All Chapter 124 staffing credential requirements were met at Cohort 1 sites.

Early implementation surfaced operational challenges that informed subsequent practice. District and community-based partners navigated issues related to curriculum alignment, assessment coordination, meal delivery, enrollment processes, Pre-K screening, and access to special education supports. Teachers from the first implementation year, now in their second year of operation, reported that they were more comfortable and that coordination was proceeding much more smoothly than during the inaugural year.

The pilot also surfaced sustainability considerations. The initiative's lead dedicated coordination role—including support for partnership agreements, implementation guidance, and site-specific technical assistance—was consistently identified as critical to the partnerships' functioning. The initiative lead noted that a centralized support system is key to ensuring alignment of data collection, goals, and vision, and to making community partners feel included in the district and the community.

Together, these findings provide the state with documented evidence about the conditions necessary for partnership-based Pre-K delivery, including per-classroom startup funding, credential flexibility, centralized coordination, and differentiated technical assistance.

How did the initiative strengthen communication and cross-sector coordination?

At the **state level**, the initiative operated across multiple agencies. The initiative lead described a productive relationship with the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) and noted that the Pre-K Partnership itself modeled an OCFS–DOE collaboration, with additional coordination involving Child Development Services (CDS) and the Office of Special Services and Inclusive Education (OSSIE) to clarify FAPE transition responsibilities within partnership programs (Initiative Lead Interview, 2025).

The Pre-K Advisory Team served as the **primary cross-sector coordination mechanism**, bringing together state agencies, districts, and community-based providers to guide design and implementation. The initiative lead described the group as aligned, substantive, and deliberate, with no contentious positions. She specifically valued the inclusion of CTE and higher education voices, which brought perspectives not typically represented in Pre-K planning.

At the **local level, relationship-building and communication between SAU and community-based partners emerged as a consistent theme across implementation years**. The initiative lead emphasized that introducing a new partnership concept requires deliberate communication about messaging, timing, and support availability. The initiative lead articulated the value of centralized coordination: ensuring consistent data collection and aligned goals and vision is key to making community partners feel included in the district and the community (Initiative Lead Interview, 2025).

How has the initiative contributed to building a strong statewide early childhood service system?

The initiative contributed to broader system awareness. Knowledge and understanding of mixed-delivery systems are now discussed at multiple levels: the DOE Early Learning team, OCFS, and FAPE transition planning. More SAUs understand that a mixed-delivery approach can lead to universal Pre-K delivery.

The initiative lead observed that schools are beginning to recognize their responsibility to children and families before kindergarten entry (Initiative Lead Interview, 2025). The expansion into FAPE Transition Cohort districts in Year 3 reinforces this trajectory.

The continuation of the coordination function that made the pilot work is among the most significant system-building questions the initiative leaves unresolved.

The initiative lead's dedicated role in managing recruitment, technical assistance, site visits, CLASS observations, and relationship-building is not secure beyond the PDG-R funding period, and the initiative has not accessed funding outside the grant to sustain the work (Initiative Lead Interview, 2025).

In what ways did the initiative support access and participation?

The initiative incorporated intentional supports to enable successful implementation across sites with varying levels of readiness and capacity. It also surfaced access considerations.

Technical assistance was differentiated based on site readiness. The initiative lead developed detailed requests for proposals, implementation guidance, and site-specific support. Sites entering implementation with established teams and familiarity with curriculum and assessment tools required less intensive onboarding, while sites with newer teams received targeted coaching, professional development, and facilitated connections with curriculum coordinators (Implementation Report, 2025). Participants consistently cited the initiative's ongoing consultation and responsiveness to site-specific needs as critical to maintaining quality and supporting staff.

Access for families was enhanced through the community-based delivery model itself. By locating Pre-K within trusted community programs, the initiative reduced logistical barriers and supported continuity of care for children and families. Full-day, year-round programming at the Sanford site—and at both Year 3 sites—directly addressed the needs of working families who cannot rely on school-day-only schedules. Wraparound care, including before- and aftercare, meals, and, in some cases, district-provided transportation, expanded the practical accessibility of Pre-K in ways that traditional school-based programs often cannot.

At the same time, the pilot identified several access gaps that will require attention as the model develops:

- Transportation remained a barrier at one Year 2 site where it was not available. District leadership noted that the lack of transportation may limit access for some families.
- Special education and behavioral supports were inconsistently available across sites. Leaders and staff emphasized challenges in accessing services and the importance of earlier, more consistent support for children with diverse learning needs.
- Supports for multilingual learners were identified as a gap at both Year 2 sites, with staff recognizing the need for stronger services and resources for children and families whose primary language is not English.
- Professional development opportunities were unevenly distributed. While district leaders referenced professional development as a benefit of the partnership, classroom staff at one site reported limited participation, and both sites identified a need for more targeted coaching and training.
- Connection to school-wide experiences was limited for children in community-based classrooms. Teachers and administrators noted that children in partner programs had fewer opportunities to participate in specialist activities, assemblies, PTA events, and interactions with kindergarten teachers—experiences that could strengthen transitions and deepen families' sense of inclusion in the broader school community.

These findings reflect the kind of implementation learning a well-designed pilot is intended to produce—specific, actionable information about what worked, what requires further development, and what **conditions must be in place for the model to succeed at scale**.

What were the lessons learned from the initiative?

- **Partnership does not follow from structure alone.** Districts and community-based child care programs entered with different cultures, expectations, and levels of familiarity with the partnership concept. A dedicated coordination role was the most frequently cited factor in partnership functioning across all data sources.
- **The full-day, year-round model—meaning extended hours beyond the traditional school calendar—is a design feature, not a convenience.** It shaped access, enrollment, and family engagement, and both cohort 2 sites adopted it.
- **Quality can be established in community-based settings, but workload demands attention.** CLASS and TSG data confirmed quality; teachers flagged the cumulative burden of multiple curricula and assessment requirements.
- **Credentialing requirements must be calibrated to the existing workforce.** The Advisory Team's waiver recommendation enabled sites to retain experienced staff while maintaining quality expectations.
- **Access gaps surfaced by the pilot are specific and addressable.** Transportation, special education and behavioral supports, services for multilingual learners, professional development distribution, and connection to school-wide experiences all require attention in future iterations.
- **Communication is cumulative. Cohort 2 partnership formation was smoother than Cohort 1.** The mixed-delivery concept becomes more workable with repeated exposure, consistent messaging, and visible examples of functioning partnerships.

Summary

The Pre-K Partnerships initiative tested whether community–district partnerships could expand access to public Pre-K within a mixed-delivery system.

The initiative generated practical knowledge about the conditions required for partnership-based Pre-K delivery, including funding structure, credential flexibility, coordination supports, and identified access gaps. Findings provide early evidence of feasibility and highlight considerations relevant to future policy and funding decisions regarding mixed-delivery Pre-K in Maine.