

Registered ECE Apprenticeship Program

Strengthening Workforce Pathways in Maine's Early Childhood System

Performance period 10/2023–12/2025

Strengthening Maine's early childhood workforce is a central component of building a stable, high-quality, and equitable early childhood system. Workforce preparation, credential attainment, and career advancement are critical levers for improving program quality and supporting long-term retention, particularly in a field characterized by low wages, variable access to training, and limited advancement pathways. Registered Apprenticeship models offer a structured approach to workforce development by combining paid, on-the-job learning with credential-aligned training and sustained mentoring, creating opportunities for educators to build skills while remaining employed in the field.

The **Registered Early Childhood Education (ECE) Apprenticeship Program** represents a long-standing workforce strategy in Maine designed to strengthen career pathways for early childhood educators through a competency-based apprenticeship model aligned with state credentials and Maine's Career Lattice. Implemented through Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN) in partnership with workforce agencies, training providers, employers, and early childhood system partners, the initiative supports educators pursuing Infant Toddler, Preschool, Youth Development, and associate-degree pathways. Rather than operating as a short-term or stand-alone intervention, the initiative builds on existing workforce and credentialing infrastructure. It adapts over time to reflect the realities of the early childhood labor market and educators' needs across diverse settings.

This report presents findings from outcome-focused assessment activities examining the Registered ECE Apprenticeship Program implemented by MRTQ PDN during the Fall 2023–December 2025 period, supported through Maine's Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R). Drawing on diverse data sources¹, the analysis examines how the initiative supported workforce preparation, credential attainment, and career advancement within Maine's early childhood education system. Findings are organized across the following PDG-R outcome areas, consistent with the structure used in other PDG initiative reports:

- **Impact**, including intended outcomes related to workforce entry, skill development, credential attainment, and professional growth.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including partnerships among state agencies, workforce partners, employers, and training providers.
- **System building**, including early contributions related to career pathways, alignment with credentialing and workforce systems, and program adaptations.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitate participation, mentoring and training supports, and barriers affecting apprentices and employers.
- **Professional development**, including role-specific training and supports embedded within the apprenticeship model, particularly for mentors.

¹Data sources for this report include interviews with initiative leadership, surveys of apprentices and mentors, administrative data, and implementation documentation.

The Registered Apprenticeship Program is a competency-based workforce pathway that combines paid, on-the-job learning, credential-aligned training, and structured mentoring for early childhood educators. During the PDG-R evaluation period, the initiative supported apprentices pursuing Infant, Toddler, Preschool, Youth Development, and associate-degree pathways across multiple, overlapping cohorts, with participants progressing at varied paces based on prior experience and credential requirements.

Although the initiative was established at MRTQ PDN prior to PDG-R, this report focuses on the period when the initiative was included in PDG-R-supported evaluation and coordination activities, during which apprentices from multiple cycles were actively engaged in training, mentoring, and credential attainment.

Because registered apprenticeship pathways unfold over multiple years and involve overlapping cohorts, data collection during the PDG-R evaluation period focused on documenting progress toward credential attainment, skill development, mentoring engagement, and persistence within the field, rather than capturing final workforce or compensation outcomes. Data sources included administrative records, apprentice and mentor surveys, and interviews with initiative leadership. As a result, the findings presented in this report reflect measurable progress, reported experiences, and observed patterns during the evaluation window, with longer-term outcomes related to retention, compensation, and system sustainability continuing to evolve beyond the review period.

The following section examines the extent to which the Registered Apprenticeship Program supported its intended workforce outcomes during the PDG-R evaluation period.

What was the impact of the Registered Apprenticeship Program?

State and local early care and education (ECE) leaders in Maine, utilizing PDG-R resources, have developed strategies intended to strengthen workforce capacity and support long-term system stability. The Registered Apprenticeship Program reflects this investment by focusing on workforce preparation,

REGISTERED ECE APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM FEATURES

Scope during PDG-R period: 42 apprentices enrolled across four overlapping cycles.

Credential pathways supported: Infant Toddler, Preschool, Youth Development, and associate-degree pathways.

Delivery model: Earn-while-you-learn apprenticeship integrating paid employment, credential-aligned training, and documented competency progression.

Mentor-supported structure: Required mentor preparation and ongoing mentor communities of practice.

System partnerships: Coordination among MRTQ PDN, the Maine Department of Labor, workforce partners, and higher education.

Adaptive design features: Flexible timelines, competency-based progression, and expanded mentor-matching options across settings.

credential attainment, and career advancement for early childhood educators. Examining the extent to which the initiative achieved its intended outcomes during the evaluation period clarifies its contribution to Maine's broader workforce strategy.

The **intended outcomes** of the Registered Apprenticeship Program focused on workforce-level benefits for participating early childhood educators:

- **Improve the skills of the existing early childhood workforce** through participation in a structured, competency-based apprenticeship model aligned to Maine credentials.
- **Support advancement along Maine's Career Lattice**, enabling apprentices to move to higher levels based on education and experience.
- **Position participating educators to access higher levels of compensation**, including eligibility for increased stipends through aligned mechanisms such as the Maine ECE Workforce Salary Supplement System.
- **Increase retention of participating educators** by investing in skills, credentials, and career advancement opportunities.

The program's Training and Apprenticeship Committee identified **credential attainment and retention in the field** as the primary indicators of success. The program was not designed to produce direct outcomes for children or families, and impact is appropriately assessed at the workforce level.

Discussions with initiative leadership, administrative data, and survey findings provide evidence of progress toward the Registered ECE Apprenticeship Program's intended workforce outcomes during the evaluation period. Evidence reflects outcomes for participating apprentices and mentors and is drawn from multiple, overlapping cohorts active during the PDG-R-supported evaluation window.

Findings are summarized below across key workforce outcome areas.

- **Progress toward credential attainment.**
Administrative data indicate that 42 apprentices were enrolled across four overlapping cycles. As of October 2025, 10 apprentices earned the Maine Infant Toddler Credential, and 2 earned a Preschool Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. An additional 23 apprentices were in the active stages of apprenticeship, including training completion, credential coursework, or application submission, across the Infant Toddler, Preschool, and Youth Development pathways. Seven apprentices exited the program during this period due to job changes, program closure, or leaving the early childhood field.
- **Advancement along workforce pathways.**
Program leadership reported that the apprenticeship model was designed to support movement along Maine's Career Lattice through credential attainment. The Training and Apprenticeship Committee identified credential attainment and continued participation in the field as the primary indicators of success, with advancement understood as varying by credential pathway and prior experience.
- **Self-reported skill development and professional growth.**
Findings from the Six-Month Apprentice Feedback Survey (n = 14 completed responses) indicate perceived increases in knowledge and confidence associated with participation in the program. At the time of the survey, 94 percent of responding apprentices reported that they

would recommend the Apprenticeship Program to a peer. Apprentices cited the combination of structured training, mentoring, and accountability as supporting their professional growth and application of skills in daily practice.

- **Mentor-reported changes in practice and leadership.**

Data from the Six-Month Mentor Feedback Survey (n = 16 completed responses) indicate that mentors observed growth in apprentices' communication, organization, leadership, and skill application in classroom and family-facing settings. Mentors reported meeting with apprentices weekly or more frequently and described apprentices taking on increased responsibility, leading activities, and demonstrating greater confidence in decision-making over time. Mentors also noted that progress varied by credential pathway and individual circumstances.

- **Retention and persistence within the field.**

Administrative records show that while 7 of the 42 enrolled apprentices exited the program during the evaluation period, most remained engaged in apprenticeship activities or in credential completion. Initiative leadership emphasized that factors beyond the program itself influence retention and should be interpreted as a longer-term outcome, particularly given the multi-year nature of apprenticeship pathways and overlapping cohorts.

Together, these data sources provide evidence that the Registered Apprenticeship Program contributed to measurable progress toward credential attainment, skill development, and advancement along workforce pathways for participating educators during the evaluation period, while longer-term outcomes related to compensation and retention remain shaped by broader system conditions.

How did the Registered Apprenticeship Program contribute to system capacity and sustainability?

Early childhood system building emphasizes strengthening pathways, aligning roles across sectors, and adapting structures to better reflect how services and supports operate in practice. For workforce initiatives, system building involves not only supporting individual participants but also making adjustments that improve coherence, access, and sustainability across the broader early childhood landscape. Examining system-level contributions helps clarify how the Registered Apprenticeship Program functioned beyond individual participation during the evaluation period.

The evaluation team examined whether and how the Registered Apprenticeship Program contributed to system-level capacity, alignment, and sustainability, including the extent to which program adaptations, partnerships, and emerging structures supported longer-term workforce pathways.

Interview data, implementation records, and cohort documentation indicate that the Registered Apprenticeship Program contributed to system building primarily through adaptive design, pathway alignment, and the development of new entry points into the early childhood workforce. Key system-level contributions observed during the evaluation period are summarized below.

- **Shift toward flexible, competency-based pathways.**

Program leadership described a deliberate shift away from a rigid cohort model toward a fully

competency-based approach. This change reflected observed variation in apprentices' entry points, credential goals, and pacing, and was intended to better align apprenticeship participation with the realities of the early childhood workforce. This adaptation supported continued engagement across diverse settings and credential pathways.

- **Alignment with credentialing and career pathway structures.**

The apprenticeship model was implemented in alignment with Maine credentials and the Career Lattice, positioning participants to progress through existing workforce pathways rather than creating parallel or stand-alone structures. Credential attainment and progress toward credentials were identified as primary indicators of success, reinforcing alignment with established professional systems.

- **Expansion of mentoring capacity within the system.**

During implementation, the number of mentors supporting apprentices increased substantially, and mentoring was described as a central feature of the program's structure. Program leadership noted that mentoring provided experienced educators with opportunities to contribute to workforce development without transitioning into administrative roles, strengthening instructional leadership capacity within programs.

- **Development of a Pre-Apprenticeship pathway.**

The emergence of a Pre-Apprenticeship Program represented a system-level response to observed recruitment challenges and interest from individuals new to the field. This pathway was designed to support underrepresented populations and create community-based entry points into early childhood careers, extending the apprenticeship model beyond incumbent educators.

- **Constraints affecting sustainability and scale.**

Program leadership identified limits to system-level expansion related to funding availability, wage structures in the early childhood field, and capacity for program administration. These constraints were described as external to the initiative itself and shaped expectations for growth, scale, and long-term sustainability.

Together, these findings suggest that the Registered Apprenticeship Program contributed to system building by adapting structures to better reflect workforce realities, aligning with existing credential and career pathways, and introducing new entry points into the field. At the same time, sustainability and scale remained dependent on broader workforce and funding conditions beyond the initiative's direct control.

In what ways did the Registered Apprenticeship Program support access and effective participation?

Supports and access in early childhood system initiatives focus on the conditions that **enable participation and sustained engagement for individuals and programs**. For workforce-focused initiatives such as the Registered Apprenticeship Program, access is shaped by the availability of training, mentoring, technical assistance, and program flexibility, as well as by the extent to which

barriers to participation are identified and addressed. Examining supports and access helps clarify how design features influenced participation during the evaluation period.

The evaluation team examined whether and how the Registered Apprenticeship Program supported access and effective participation for apprentices, mentors, and sponsoring employers, including the adequacy of training and technical assistance, adjustments made to reduce barriers, and factors that facilitated or constrained engagement.

Interview data, survey findings, and implementation records indicate that the Registered Apprenticeship Program incorporated multiple supports to facilitate participation, while also revealing areas where additional support was needed. **Key supports and barriers influencing access and participation during the evaluation period are summarized below.**

- **Structured mentoring as a primary support.**
Apprentices were supported through a required mentoring structure that included regular meetings with experienced educators. Mentors were expected to provide feedback, model skills, encourage reflective practice, and document apprentice progress. Mentor survey responses indicate that most mentors met with apprentices at least weekly, and both mentors and apprentices identified the mentoring relationship as central to participation and progress.
- **Training and professional learning supports.**
Apprentices accessed formal training aligned with credential requirements alongside on-the-job learning. Survey data indicate that apprentices viewed training and mentoring as beneficial for skill development, while also noting challenges in balancing coursework, documentation, and work responsibilities. These findings highlight the role of structured supports in facilitating participation and the demands placed on participants.
- **Adaptations to expand access across settings.**
Program leadership implemented changes to expand apprentices' access across diverse program settings, including allowing apprentices to be matched with mentors outside their sponsoring employer. This adjustment was particularly important for Family Child Care providers, who often work alone and lack access to an internal mentor.
- **Supports for apprentices with additional needs.**
Coordination with the workforce and state partners enabled access to additional supports for apprentices with disabilities or other identified needs. The participation of external partners in mentor meetings helped connect apprentices to resources beyond those available within the Apprenticeship Program.
- **Barriers affecting participation.**
Survey and interview data indicate that apprentices and mentors experienced challenges related to time demands, administrative requirements, and balancing participation with work and personal responsibilities. Mentors, in particular, identified areas where additional support would strengthen their role. These barriers influenced the pace of participation and underscore the importance of ongoing support and flexibility.
- **Professional development support for mentors.**
Mentor professional development was embedded within the apprenticeship model rather than operating as a standalone initiative. Mentors were required to complete Foundations of

Mentoring training (15 hours) focused on mentoring strategies, reflective practice, and supporting adult learners. Mentors also participated in regular Mentor Communities of Practice, which provided opportunities for peer learning and shared problem-solving related to apprentice progress and documentation requirements. While mentors valued the training and peer support provided, many reported a need for additional tools, clearer guidance, and more structured resources to effectively support their role. In response, MRTQ PDN now provides more information about the credential process at the beginning of the mentorship experience, so that mentors can understand the entire apprenticeship process, and has made the connection between training objectives, proficiency skills, and credential portfolio activities and competencies clearer.

Together, these findings suggest that the Registered Apprenticeship Program incorporated multiple supports that facilitated access and participation, particularly through mentoring, training structures, and role-specific professional development for mentors, while also revealing ongoing challenges related to time, administrative complexity, and the need for additional resources to support mentors in their role.

Lessons Learned

- **Flexible, competency-based apprenticeship models work best for a diverse workforce.** Allowing apprentices to move at different paces helped educators with varying levels of experience stay engaged as they worked toward credentials.
- **Mentoring is central to apprentice success.** Regular, structured mentoring supported learning, confidence, and persistence, though mentors would benefit from clearer tools and guidance to support their role.
- **Apprenticeship supports advancement and compensation pathways.** By helping educators earn credentials and advance up the Career Lattice, the program positioned participants to qualify for higher compensation, including eligibility for programs such as the Maine ECE Workforce Salary Supplement System.
- **Strong coordination across systems is essential.** Ongoing communication among the workforce, training, and early childhood partners supported recruitment, access to supports, and timely program adjustments.
- **Program changes reflected learning, not problems.** Shifts to a fully competency-based model, more flexible timelines, expanded mentor matching, and development of a Pre-Apprenticeship pathway responded to real workforce conditions and improved access.
- **Apprenticeship outcomes take time to emerge fully.** Because apprenticeship pathways span multiple years and cohorts overlap, short-term data capture progress rather than outcomes.
- **Long-term growth depends on conditions beyond the program itself.** Expansion and sustainability are shaped by funding availability, wage structures, and having enough staff and operational support to manage recruitment, tracking, coordination, and ongoing oversight over time.

Summary

During the fall 2023–December 2025 evaluation period, the Registered Apprenticeship Program supported early childhood educators through a competency-based model integrating on-the-job learning, credential-aligned training, and mentoring. Evidence indicates progress toward credentials, skill development, and advancement along Maine’s Career Lattice, with variation across credential pathways and individual circumstances.

The program relied on cross-sector coordination to support implementation and adaptation, contributed to system alignment through flexible design and mentoring capacity, and introduced a Pre-Apprenticeship pathway to broaden access. Findings also highlight that apprenticeship outcomes require time to mature and that sustainability and scale depend on workforce and funding conditions beyond the program itself.