

Transition to Kindergarten Mini-Grants

Supporting Local Planning and School–Community Partnerships for Kindergarten Transitions

Performance period September 2024–October 2025

As part of Maine’s Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R), the state used targeted pilots and mini-grants to support local planning and strengthen practices in priority areas across the mixed-delivery early childhood system. Transitions into kindergarten had been identified as an area where many communities were engaged, but where approaches varied, and opportunities for coordinated planning were limited. Mini-grants paired with technical assistance were intended to provide structured planning time, encourage cross-sector collaboration, and support school administrative units in strengthening transition practices in ways responsive to local context.

The **Transition to Kindergarten Planning Assistance and Mini-Grants** focused specifically on supporting school administrative units (SAUs) as they planned and implemented coordinated approaches to the transition from pre-K into kindergarten. The Maine Department of Education, in partnership with the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), offered SAUs the opportunity to apply for technical assistance and grant funding to support high-quality transition plans designed to smooth the transition for families and children into kindergarten.

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,¹ the report examines the Transition to Kindergarten Planning Assistance and Mini-Grants initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including evidence related to local transition planning activities and family engagement efforts.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including collaboration among schools, community-based child care providers, and state partners.
- **System building**, including early contributions related to local capacity, readiness, and alignment across Maine’s mixed-delivery early childhood system.
- **Supports and access**, including design features that facilitated participation and challenges that affected implementation.

¹Data sources for this report include recruitment/announcement materials, an interview with state lead Marcy Whitcomb, a focus group of grant recipients, and monthly initiative reports.

School administrative units were eligible to apply for Transition to Kindergarten mini-grants based on participation in preparatory technical assistance sessions. These sessions emphasized the importance of early childhood education, highlighted the expertise of community-based child care providers, the diversity of the state’s mixed-delivery system¹, and underscored the need for collaboration across

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.

systems to support families and children entering kindergarten. Grantees received individualized support for team-based planning and implementation, with opportunities for follow-up sharing and reflection across participating sites.

In addition to supporting local planning, the initiative created structured opportunities for shared learning across participating sites. A joint follow-up sharing session enabled grantees to exchange experiences, discuss challenges, and reflect on transition-planning strategies.

The following section examines the early outcomes associated with the Transition to Kindergarten Planning Assistance and Mini-Grants, drawing on interviews, focus group input, and implementation documentation.

What was the impact of the mini-grants?

State and local early care and education (ECE) leaders in Maine, using Preschool Development Grant–Renewal (PDG-R) funds, engaged in planning and implementation efforts to strengthen transitions into kindergarten. Through the Transition to Kindergarten Planning Assistance and Mini-Grants, participating school administrative units explored approaches to improving transition planning, family engagement, and collaboration with community-based early childhood providers. Examining the impact of these investments clarifies which outcomes were most evident during the performance period and which considerations may inform future transition work.

The **intended outcomes** of the planning assistance and mini-grants were:

- **Build** a deeper understanding of the kindergarten transition process and its importance.
- **Develop** local kindergarten transition teams and year-long transition plans.
- **Strengthen partnerships** with community organizations, including child care programs.
- **Support families** through a multi-month transition process before they enter public school.

TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN MINI-GRANTS FEATURES

Six SAUs received transition mini-grants across two rounds of funding.

Three preparatory technical assistance sessions were offered prior to the grant application process (not all participants applied for funding).

SAU teams included school leaders, teachers, families, and community child care providers.

Grantees received **individualized technical assistance and support** throughout implementation.

Awards ranged from \$9,000 to \$15,000, depending on kindergarten enrollment size.

Peer learning and reflection: A joint follow-up sharing session offered grantees an opportunity to reflect on implementation and to exchange practices.

Grantees: RSU 14 (Windham); RSU 57 (Waterboro); Sanford; St. George (Tenant's Harbor); Bangor; RSU 40 (Union)

Initiative lead Marcy Whitcomb emphasized the importance of understanding children’s diverse early learning experiences and building relationships with families and community partners over time:

“Children entering kindergarten come from many different experiences... schools need a year to build relationships with families and children to be successful with them in kindergarten. Community providers are experts on families—schools need a mindset and systems that appreciate what providers can offer.”

(Marcy Whitcomb, Initiative Lead)

Early Evidence from Grantee Experience

Discussions with grantee representatives **suggest that the initiative supported early progress toward its intended outcomes**. Initiative lead, Marcy Whitcomb, described strong engagement among participating teams, noting that many entered the process with limited prior experience in transition planning and deepened their understanding over time. For example, one school administrative unit that initially planned to involve two schools expanded participation to include three additional schools in response to interest and demand.

In total, grantee activities supported approximately **850 incoming kindergartners**. Across sites, school administrative units implemented a range of **transition activities**, including:

- Family education meetings that included explanations of learning materials
- Playground activities for incoming kindergarten students
- Joint professional development for school staff and child care providers
- Provision of curricular materials to child care providers
- A bus ride from child care centers to schools
- Development of family activity calendars
- A focus on inclusive classroom transitions, supporting children moving from special purpose classrooms to general education settings to foster a sense of belonging and
- Opportunities for gathering family input about the effectiveness of transition activities.

State lead, Whitcomb, emphasized that many grantees remained focused on the broader goal of building relationships with families and community-based child care providers. Reflections shared by grantees during the focus group suggest that teams **adopted a common mindset** about transition planning, including:

- Remembering the “why” behind transition activities, rather than approaching them as a checklist
- Recognizing that building trust and collaboration takes time and persistence
- Leading with empathy when engaging families, particularly when addressing frustration or disengagement
- Emphasizing communication with families and partners to foster a sense of belonging.

Examples of Transition Planning in Practice

Most grantees carried out multiple transition activities. During the focus group, one grantee presented a comprehensive overview of her district's project, which involved a series of three family engagement events, kindergarten readiness packets with tools and resources, a welcoming bus ride, opportunities for pre-K and kindergarten teachers to meet around specific students, school tours for families and children, and informal recreational “get to know you” activities.

Another grantee focused on improving coordination between early learning centers and kindergarten staff. Activities included identifying and making high-quality books with related activities available, conducting joint professional development in early math for pre-K and kindergarten teachers, engaging in a wide range of early learning centers, and purchasing Heggerty curriculum materials for those centers.

A third grantee focused on transitions for 3–5-year-olds from Child Development Services (CDS) into pre-K classrooms, hosting sessions for families, staff, and area providers. The grant gave the district “a push” to get started on work toward the FAPE transition. The initiative established partnerships with local child care centers to create warm handoffs and maintain community awareness about school transitions. The same grantee also addressed the challenges students face when moving between different elementary schools within the district.

Perceived Benefits Valued by Grantees

Grantees in the focus group described the outcomes they most valued:

- The experience elevated staff conversations around why we need families to see themselves as critical partners and why family engagement is important: Staff are invested in what “we could do better”—there is definitely buy-in.
- Use of focus groups with parents was enlightening for staff: Seeing needs and planning from the perspective of parents was new to staff.” This grantee described now taking a “more consumer-focused approach” rather than relying on what staff thinks parents should know. They plan to hold more focus groups with parents to help shape transition activities.
- Parents recognize the importance of early learning experiences. One grantee reported that 83% of incoming families registered their children for kindergarten before the summer, a highly unusual positive outcome. In their first two months of pre-K, attendance was a record 95%.

One grantee is applying the lessons from the transition grant to improve family engagement in middle school, conducting surveys and focus groups to better understand and meet the needs of families transitioning from elementary to middle school.

How did Transition to Kindergarten Mini-Grants build collaboration and coordination?

The PDG-R initiative examined whether and how the Transition to Kindergarten Planning Assistance and Mini-Grants supported collaboration and coordination among schools, community-based early

childhood providers, and state partners. This section describes how participating school administrative units engaged with partners to strengthen transition planning and leverage expertise across systems during the performance period.

Building local partnerships between schools and community-based child care providers was a goal of the initiative. As the initiative lead noted, school administrative units (SAU) and community partnerships enabled participating sites to leverage existing resources, such as extending professional development opportunities to child care providers.

One grantee described how district staff increasingly recognized the importance of connecting with early learning centers and understood that these relationships needed to be nurtured over time. He emphasized the importance of persistent engagement and treating early learning centers as equal partners. The district began to see more meaningful engagement from early learning providers once they could offer concrete resources and support.

Whitcomb also credited collaboration with colleagues within the Maine Department of Education, who brought expertise to address technical assistance needs related to readiness assessments and support for multilingual learners.

These examples illustrate how collaboration supported local transition planning and helped participating sites access expertise and resources across systems.

How did the Transition to Kindergarten Mini-Grants contribute to system capacity and sustainability?

Early childhood system building emphasizes the importance of coordination, capacity, and continuity across programs and services that support children and families. This section examines whether and how the Transition to Kindergarten Planning Assistance and Mini-Grants contributed to system-level capacity by strengthening local transition structures, supporting coordination across the mixed-delivery system, and reinforcing practices that may be sustained beyond the grant period.

Strengthening Transition Structures and System Alignment

The transition-to-kindergarten mini-grant is one of several efforts led by the Department of Education (DOE) to strengthen transitions, including the creation of transition resources on the DOE website and the First10 pilot, which also emphasized transitions. These efforts are complementary. Grantees suggested intentionally linking activities and scaling them up statewide. As grantees learned, focusing on transitions engages a host of critical activities, including building family partnerships, developing working relationships with community-based providers, and supporting young children with special needs.

The Department of Education website includes a range of transition resources created by the early learning team under a previous grant. Whitcomb plans to update the transition learning modules in the coming year, including examples drawn from grantee experiences.

Sustainability and Continuation of Transition Practices

Most communities expect to sustain their current efforts, and some districts have already begun developing plans to do so. Participants in the focus group agreed that making a long-term commitment to high-quality transitions is important so that parents of incoming kindergartners can expect similar experiences each year. Costs are relatively low, and all grantees believe they will be able to continue activities through a mix of budgeted funds and local sponsorships or grants for expenses such as giveaways and welcome packets. One district has already budgeted for the continuation of a highly successful week-long transition “boot camp” for families and children. The opportunity focused on building children’s skills to ensure they have family support as they develop foundational skills.

Whitcomb believes that grantees are likely to continue emphasizing the importance of building strong relationships with families and community providers.

In what ways did the design of Transition Mini-Grants facilitate participation, and what improvements were suggested?

In early childhood system building, supports and access focus on the conditions that enable effective participation and implementation across programs and communities. This section examines whether and how the design of the Transition to Kindergarten Planning Assistance and Mini-Grants supported participation by school administrative units, facilitated planning and coordination efforts, and provided sufficient technical assistance and flexibility to respond to local contexts. Findings draw on focus group input, interviews, and implementation documentation to describe the supports that contributed to participation and the challenges that shaped implementation during the performance period.

Conditions That Facilitated Success

Grantees identified factors in their own locales that facilitated participation and success. One grantee described the initiative's compatibility with the district’s strategic plan, which prioritizes family engagement and gathering community input on school approaches. The district’s objective of approaching parents with empathy and intentional communication aligns well with transition activities.

The district has multiple elementary schools, which facilitate healthy competition and ongoing sharing of implementation successes and challenges, extending to transition activities and contributing to shared accountability for the grant. Comparing school performance data and activities across schools motivated principals to improve their family engagement efforts.

School leaders acknowledged that post-COVID issues with attendance and behavior management heightened the need for greater family involvement.

Leadership, Champions, and Communication

A grantee that was part of the First10 initiative highlighted the importance of a dedicated staff member working on outreach to parents and providers:

“Getting feedback from early learning partners and having them as equal partners at the table was important. They were so appreciative of sitting in the same room for professional development; otherwise, they had been fearful that we would take their children through the process of establishing public pre-K.”

Several agreed on the importance of coordinating messages, especially in larger districts, including school committee buy-in and buy-in at all leadership levels. School principals were deemed critical:

“School principals must be educated about the value of family engagement, as they hold the key to making it work at the school level.”

Several also noted the importance of having a champion. For this set of grantees, the champion was often a central office staff member who served as the grant’s point person.

Design Features and Adaptations

The initiative design included three preparatory technical assistance sessions offered prior to the grant application process, followed by individualized support during implementation. Grantees engaged local teams in grant planning and were encouraged to incorporate sustainability considerations into project design from the outset. Participating SAUs established a peer community through the preparatory sessions and continued to share resources and practices across sites during implementation.

Because the second cohort of grantees had a shorter timeline to prepare activities, Whitcomb adapted the technical assistance by offering shorter initial meetings with individualized follow-ups, while emphasizing the importance of prioritizing key activities.

Lessons Learned

- **Preparatory technical assistance before grant awards strengthened implementation.** All grantees identified the pre-application professional development sessions as valuable for team formation, project planning, and early buy-in. Whitcomb noted that front-loading technical assistance allowed implementation to begin immediately upon award.
- **Planning with a sustainability lens from the outset supported continuation.** Grantees approached planning with sustainability as an explicit consideration, and all reported the ability to continue transition activities post-grant through budgeted funds, local sponsorships, or low-cost adaptations. Costs for most activities were modest enough to be sustained without dedicated grant funding.
- **Gathering family perspectives shifted staff orientation.** Grantees who used parent focus groups described the experience as reframing their approach—moving from what staff assumed parents

needed to know toward what families actually identified as priorities. One grantee adopted a "more consumer-focused approach" as a direct result.

- **A designated champion at the district level was consistently identified as critical to momentum.** Across sites, the point person—typically a central office staff member—drove coordination, sustained engagement, and connected transition work to broader district priorities. School principal buy-in was described as essential to execution at the building level.

Summary

The transition-to-kindergarten mini-grant is one of several transition initiatives the Department of Education (DOE) has spearheaded to strengthen kindergarten transitions, including the creation of transition resources on the DOE website and the First10 pilot, which also emphasized transition. These transition efforts are complementary. Grantees suggested intentionally aligning the activities and scaling them up statewide. As grantees noted, a focus on transitions engages several critical activities, including building family partnerships, strengthening relationships with community-based providers, and supporting young children with special needs.