

Findings and Recommendations from North Carolina's Preschool Development Grant Birth-5

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Introduction

In 2019, North Carolina's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) received a three-year federal Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five (PDG B-5) from the U.S. Administration for Children and Families.¹ North Carolina was one of 23 states to receive this grant, with an award of more than \$40 million to support young children's development and strengthen the early care and education mixed delivery system (ECE system). Over the course of three years of funding, North Carolina used these funds to support 21 PDG activities (see Appendix A for more detail).

Defining the ECE system

North Carolina's early care and education mixed delivery system includes center- and home-based child care, Head Start and Early Head Start, NC Pre-K, early intervention services, and home visiting programs across the public, private, and faith-based sectors.

The goal of PDG B-5 is to help states, like North Carolina, improve their existing ECE mixed delivery systems. States awarded PDG B-5 funding are required to support continuous quality improvement by developing and implementing a program performance evaluation (PPE) plan. DCDEE has partnered with Child Trends, an independent research and evaluation organization, to design and carry out North Carolina's PPE plan. The plan looks at the progress of individual PDG B-5 activities, as well as how the overall grant is contributing toward five key goals. Four of the goals are aligned with North Carolina's Statewide B-5 Strategic Plan, and a fifth goal—developed for the PDG B-5—is focused on strengthening the ECE system.

Goal 1: High-quality early learning

Babies, toddlers, and young children across North Carolina will be able to participate in high-quality early learning programs.

- This goal aims to improve the quality of ECE programs and increase access to high-quality ECE programs for families.

¹ North Carolina was awarded an initial, one-year federal PDG B-5 Planning Grant in 2018. The three-year grant awarded in 2019 was referred to as a Renewal Grant. North Carolina was awarded a second, one-year Planning Grant in 2023. All three grants were administered by DCDEE.

Goal 2: On track for school success

Young children across North Carolina will reach their developmental goals by the time they enter kindergarten.

- This goal aims to make transitions easier for children, families, and teachers, and to improve referrals to early identification services.

Goal 3: Supportive and supported families and communities

Families with babies and toddlers across North Carolina feel supported, are engaged in early learning, and are connected to the resources they need.

- This goal aims to increase the number of families connected to supportive services, engaged in leadership opportunities, and empowered to advocate for their children.

Goal 4: Fostering social-emotional health and resilience

Babies, toddlers, and young children across North Carolina will express, recognize, and manage their emotions in a healthy way, especially under stress.

- This goal aims to increase the number of professional development offerings focused on social-emotional health and well-being, the availability of services promoting children’s social-emotional health and well-being, and the number of children receiving those services.

Goal 5: Strengthening North Carolina’s mixed delivery system

North Carolina’s comprehensive early childhood system will be more integrated, experience increased capacity to offer technical assistance to families and early childhood professionals, and offer sustained improvements for children, families, and professionals.

- Two of the objectives supporting this goal specifically focus on improving early childhood data systems and increasing data-informed decision-making efforts across the ECE system.

Below, we summarize findings from the program performance evaluation, with the goal of addressing three primary evaluation questions:

1. To what extent were North Carolina’s PDG B-5 efforts fully implemented, and what challenges or facilitators affected implementation success?
2. How did North Carolina’s PDG B-5 activities support the strengthening of the ECE system, especially with regard to the five PDG B-5 goals?
3. What can be learned from North Carolina’s implementation and outcomes of PDG B-5 to inform future work to strengthen the ECE system?

Along with the findings, we share recommendations—grouped by topic or goal—that are primarily applicable to a variety of audiences. We have noted situations where recommendations are only relevant to a specific audience.

Methodology and Data

Over the course of the PPE, Child Trends used multiple data sources to evaluate the implementation progress of PDG activities and the outcomes of these efforts. These sources included secondary data, such as meeting notes from regular activity monitoring meetings and monthly reports to document activity progress. We also conducted original data collection efforts, such as annual interviews and surveys, with NC PDG staff and activity leads/implementation partners from PDG B-5 activities. To bring in families' lived experiences and connect the evaluation to their everyday lives, we sought input from our Family Evaluation Advisory Group. Finally, to better understand how PDG B-5 activities helped to achieve project goals, we conducted in-depth evaluations on three content areas: data and data systems, family engagement, and transition to kindergarten. Each deep dive included distinct research questions and methodologies.²

PDG B-5 Implementation Findings

Implementation findings

- Many activities struggled to reach full implementation within the three-year grant period. At the evaluation's midway point in July 2022, many activities were still in the early stages of implementation and were not on track to be completed by the end of the grant. DCDEE worked with staff from each activity to adjust their scopes of work and amend their contracts; with those adjustments, most activities successfully met their revised outputs and outcomes by the end of the grant period.
- Common implementation facilitators for activities included having dedicated and qualified staff in place when the activity began, having local partners champion the work, collecting data to inform ongoing planning and improvement, and receiving support from DCDEE and NC PDG team staff.
- Common implementation challenges for activities included contracting delays with DHHS, staffing shortages, adapting to and rolling out new technology, and limited resources to conduct data collection. Some activities had timelines that were not realistic to fully implement within the three-year period. Implementation infrastructure—things like staffing new teams and creating collaborative partnerships—requires a significant investment of time and resources, which may not always be available in a time-limited grant.

Context for PDG B-5 implementation

- Most PDG activities began at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which became a major factor that affected implementation of PDG B-5, impacting individual activities, grant management, and overall progress toward outcomes and goals. The pandemic delayed the start of some activities and, in some cases, led to the revision of work plans and contracts.
- At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic also created opportunities for creativity and reflection, leading to new procedures or processes such as remote service delivery, virtual conferences, and asynchronous online learning opportunities.
- Activity leads and NC PDG team staff frequently cited the ECE workforce crisis as a major implementation challenge. Staffing shortages, high rates of turnover, and other operational challenges faced by programs and providers (e.g., low subsidy reimbursement rates, closures due to COVID-19, reduced enrollment) impacted the ability of some PDG B-5 activities to provide direct services and reach target audiences.

² For more information about the deep dives, please see our three in-depth evaluations known as "[deep dives](#)."

Strengthening the ECE System: Goal-specific Findings and Recommendations

Advancing Goal 1: High-quality early learning

PDG B-5 supported seven activities that worked to improve the quality of ECE programs and increase access for families. PDG B-5 advanced Goal 1 by:

- **Increasing educators' knowledge and competencies related to child development and classroom practices as a strategy to improve overall program quality.** Specifically, PDG B-5 activities created professional development opportunities—including trainings, workshops, conferences, and coaching—that helped educators increase their knowledge, competencies, and skills. For example, Activity 3.4 (PBS NC) connected educators to free classroom resources and strengthened home-school connections through workshops and a statewide conference. Activity 5.1 (Babies First NC) provided relationship-based coaching to infant and toddler teachers to support quality improvement.
- **Studying and designing pilot programs and policies to increase accessibility and affordability, generating plans and products to position the state for future implementation.** Specifically, PDG B-5 funded two research studies to inform the design of detailed plans to increase the accessibility of high-quality early learning programs, while offering financial support to ECE programs to cover the true cost of care. Activity 5.2 designed a pilot of a comprehensive statewide program for infants and toddlers, described as a companion to NC Pre-K for children from birth to age 3. Activity 5.6 developed alternative models for setting child care subsidy rates, with the goal of supporting the true cost of care for providers and addressing equitable access to ECE for lower-income families.

Recommendations

State agencies and partners working to improve the quality of ECE and families' access to high-quality programs should:

- Consider additional, innovative ways to support the compensation and preparation of the ECE workforce as a strategy to promote quality. Continuing current efforts (e.g., through PDG B-5 and QRIS modernization efforts) can help create multiple pathways to build the knowledge and skills of the workforce while also acknowledging both educational and on-the-job experience.
- Follow through on existing plans to achieve increased ECE accessibility and affordability. Specifically, North Carolina should consider how to carry out the next steps outlined in the strategic plans and program designs developed by PDG B-5 activities. For example, Activities 5.2, 5.4, and 5.6 created detailed plans to increase access to ECE opportunities for low-income families, families experiencing homelessness, and infants and toddlers.

Advancing Goal 2: On track for school success

PDG B-5 supported five activities to improve transition to kindergarten and referrals. PDG B-5 advanced Goal 2 by:

- **Supporting transition to kindergarten efforts, improving the process of sharing information between preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, and families.** Specifically, Activity 4.2 set

statewide expectations for NC counties to build a strong infrastructure to support their transition to kindergarten efforts by establishing a transition leadership team in addition to developing and implementing a community transition plan. Activity 6.3 supported technology infrastructure and increased data sharing practices by creating and launching a platform for pre-K teachers to share child-level developmental information with kindergarten teachers.

- **Engaging families and improving access to early intervention services despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.** For example, Activity 5.3b supported virtual teletherapy services by providing necessary technology and interpretation to families across the state, demonstrating the feasibility of a virtual teletherapy model for early intervention services.

Recommendations

State agencies and local communities working to improve transition to kindergarten efforts and referrals to services should:

- Engage in continuous quality improvement activities to ensure that local communities are implementing transition efforts as intended, and in ways that positively impact children, families, and educators.
- Engage in systematic and proactive efforts to solicit input from families on their needs and experiences related to referrals and transitions.
- Leverage new and existing partnerships within and outside the ECE system. For example, North Carolina should consider how to leverage the partnerships that were created and strengthened through PDG B-5 to continue building awareness and coordination within and outside the ECE system, and increase and improve referrals to early intervention services.

Advancing Goal 3: Supportive and supported families and communities

PDG B-5 supported eight activities that worked to increase the number of families with young children connected to supportive services and engaged in leadership activities. PDG B-5 advanced Goal 3 by:

- **Connecting families across the state to needed services and resources, including home visiting and teletherapy support.** For example, Activity 3.1 (Family Connects) expanded access to universal postpartum home visiting services in rural areas and Activity 6.2 (NCCARE360) created the infrastructure to expand future service delivery by incorporating ECE agencies and organizations into a larger referral network.
- **Engaging parents and caregivers in leadership roles, demonstrating successful strategies for putting the *North Carolina Early Childhood Family Engagement and Leadership Framework* into action.** Specifically, PDG B-5 activities strengthened relationships between organizations to facilitate development of family engagement resources and tools, such as the trainings developed by Activity 3.2. Other activities created opportunities for family leaders to inform decision making at the local and state levels, such as the development of a strategic plan for supporting families experiencing homelessness in Activity 5.4.
- **Making progress toward a mindset shift about the importance of including families in planning and decision-making** and thinking about how to systematically embed best practices in family engagement and leadership throughout the ECE system.

Recommendations

State agencies and partners working to support and engage families with young children should:

- Ensure that family engagement and leadership activities are embedded in future efforts and center families in decision making. For example, North Carolina should prioritize creating or sustaining key infrastructure, like the Family Engagement and Leadership Coalition (FELC), to guide ongoing work.
- Build family engagement and leadership into future grants and contracts from the beginning. In addition, family leaders should be integrated into the planning and implementation process at an early stage. Plans should also be made at the outset for how families will be compensated and supported in their participation.
- Ensure that families who speak a language other than English can fully participate in activities and access opportunities for engagement and leadership. This should include both planning ahead for the needs of communities and families, offering translation and interpretation at all events and for all written materials, and compensating families fairly for translation or interpretation services.

Advancing Goal 4: Fostering social-emotional health and resilience

PDG B-5 supported two activities that aimed to increase professional development related to social-emotional health and well-being. PDG B-5 advanced Goal 4 by:

- **Providing opportunities to train educators, administrators, and other ECE professionals, improving their knowledge of and ability to promote social-emotional health and well-being.** For example, Activity 5.7 provided ongoing training and coaching to classroom educators in the Pyramid Model, a framework of classroom and instructional practices for promoting social and emotional development and preventing challenging behaviors. Activity 4.3 created a system for infant and early childhood mental health endorsement credentials, emphasizing the importance of building the knowledge and skills of ECE professionals across the continuum of care.
- **Enabling the creation of lasting cross-sector partnerships that built awareness and generated greater buy-in for the importance of social-emotional health and well-being.** For example, Activity 4.3 created and strengthened partnerships with a wide range of agencies and organizations that support or interact with young children and families (e.g., child welfare agencies, home visitors, researchers, community colleges that train ECE educators) to generate buy-in for increasing the number of professionals who can support children's social-emotional health and well-being.

Recommendations

State agencies and partners working to promote social-emotional health and well-being should:

- Continue to support the training of ECE professionals across different agencies and organizations to promote social-emotional health and well-being for young children and families.
- Consider ways to coordinate across agencies and organizations to align competencies to build and embed a shared knowledge of social-emotional health and well-being across the ECE continuum of care.

Advancing Goal 5: Strengthening North Carolina’s mixed delivery system through data system improvements and data-informed decision-making

PDG B-5 supported five activities that focused on strengthening North Carolina’s capacity for data integration, management, and use. PDG B-5 advanced Goal 5 by:

- **Providing opportunities to develop or strengthen partnerships, increasing the sharing of data.** Specifically, PDG B-5 activities brought people together from different organizations and agencies to share and integrate data. For example, Activity 6.1 (NC ECIDS) brought together leaders from different ECE programs—such as Head Start, subsidized Child Care Assistance, and the NC Pre-K Program—to support data integration efforts at the state level. At the local level, Activity 6.4 (Local Data-Informed Strategic Planning) convened county teams to use data in strategic planning, and Activity 6.5 convened the Early Childhood Data Advisory Council, bringing together data experts at the state level.
- **Increasing the knowledge and use of data at both the state and local levels, including improved electronic data sharing practices.** For example, Activity 6.3 supported the use of the Teaching Strategies® platform to compile and share data between pre-K and kindergarten teachers.
- **Increasing the number of data-informed decisions.** Specifically, PDG B-5 activities increased the capacity of data systems—such as the NC Early Childhood Integrated Data System (NC ECIDS, Activity 6.2) and NCCARE360 (Activity 6.1)—and increased knowledge of these data systems (e.g., Activities 6.4 and 6.5), making it easier for communities and administrators to access and use data for planning and decision making.

Recommendations

State agencies and partners working on data-related efforts in ECE should:

- Develop and leverage existing resources—such as trainings, materials, and webinars—to increase potential users’ knowledge and understanding of available data to promote greater use of the data systems.
- Increase access to disaggregated data available at the local level to help monitor progress, and support planning and coordination efforts.
- Establish requirements for documenting processes and decisions to sustain historical knowledge of data systems.
- Implement permanent structures, such as staffing and ongoing funding, to sustain and grow data systems and increase capacity for data use at the state and local levels.

System-level advancements

Collaboration, coordination, and alignment

- Across PDG B-5, activities leveraged existing relationships and built new relationships at multiple levels of the ECE system (i.e., state, county, and local agencies and organizations) to facilitate coordination. Several activities hosted or participated in statewide, cross-sector leadership teams or advisory committees to encourage collaboration and alignment around key priority areas.

- PDG B-5 activities successfully utilized cross-sector partnerships between governmental agencies and private sector organizations. For example, activities partnered with organizations—such as Moms Rising and the Exceptional Children’s Assistance Center—with firsthand knowledge of community needs and expertise in building trusted relationships with families. These partnerships encouraged alignment in family engagement and leadership practices across activities and organizations.
- PDG B-5 improved the efficient use of resources by blending and braiding federal, state, local, and philanthropic funding to strengthen the ECE system. NC PDG team staff noted that PDG B-5 was a valuable opportunity to learn how to successfully blend funding. DCDEE blended PDG B-5 funds with other sources of funding to expand existing programs to reach a wider audience and provide additional services. Individual activities also blended sources of funding as part of their sustainability planning.

Equity

- In the wake of a renewed racial justice reckoning in the United States, along with the COVID-19 pandemic’s exacerbation of inequities, demands have increased to strengthen equity-aligned approaches within ECE systems to achieve more equitable experiences and outcomes for children, families, and educators. PDG B-5 was not explicitly organized within an equity frame, but individual activities presented opportunities to embed an equity-aligned approach.
- Activities sought to be responsive to the needs of the communities they engaged, tailoring their supports to consider different lived experiences and involving community members in decisions about planning and implementation. For example, Activity 5.4 included two parent consultants with lived experiences of homelessness in the Yay Babies! advisory group to support the development of a statewide strategic plan to ensure that families with young children experiencing homelessness have access to high-quality early childhood services.
- Activity leads and NC PDG team staff noted the importance of building trust among communities who have historically been marginalized or underserved by the state, and shared examples of how PDG B-5 has addressed inequities in access to services. For instance, Activity 5.3b helped overcome geographic, language, and technology barriers to increase access to telehealth services for rural families and Spanish-speaking families.

Focal populations

- As part of planning for PDG B-5, North Carolina identified specific groups of children, families, or ECE providers as focal populations. Only some PDG B-5 activities were designed to directly reach these focal populations, while others were designed to support the systems, infrastructure, or professionals who could, in turn, have a direct impact on them.
- Activity leads most frequently mentioned reaching the following focal populations: families who speak a language other than English (most often, Spanish-speaking families), families living in rural areas, infants and toddlers, children with developmental delays, and families with low incomes. A smaller number of activities mentioned reaching families experiencing homelessness or children living as part of a Tribal population.
- Despite interacting with and engaging some of these key groups of children and families, most activities did not consistently or systematically collect or report reliable data on who they reached. Similarly, there was no systematic approach to consistently track activities’ reach among focal populations at the grant management level.

Strategies and Recommendations for Sustaining Future Large-Scale Funding Efforts

Strategies for sustaining PDG B-5 efforts

PDG B-5 provided opportunities for North Carolina to fund activities to support innovations and bring new voices to the table in support of NC’s early childhood efforts; indeed, much of this work would not have been accomplished without PDG B-5 funding. Given the time-limited nature of PDG B-5 funding, sustainability work occurred at both the grant level and individual activity level. Nine PDG B-5 activities had time-limited outcomes intended to generate valuable information, recommendations, or resources for future work and were never intended to be sustained beyond PDG B-5. Thirteen activities were intended to be sustained—either fully or in part—after PDG B-5 funding ended.

Successful sustainability strategies included:

- Maintaining and continuing key partnerships
- Creating detailed documentation, plans, or blueprints that could support the next phase of work
- Building awareness for critical issues facing the ECE system
- Engaging in creative efforts to identify new or supplemental funding sources

Challenges in sustainability planning included:

- Discrepant visions and perspectives about sustainability efforts
- Unclear expectations for sustainability planning
- Assumptions about who would take responsibility or provide ongoing funding

Recommendations

Large-scale funding efforts, such as those provided by the federally funded PDG B-5, provide critical opportunities for states to enhance the ECE mixed delivery system; these efforts can, with continued investment, support longer-term change. To best position states to build on the progress made using time-limited grants like PDG B-5, we offer the following lessons learned from North Carolina. PDG B-5 management and implementation experiences can be applied to state agencies engaging in future large-scale, time-limited funding efforts.

- State agencies and implementation partners should engage in a clear and thorough planning process to identify 1) shared priorities across the ECE system, and 2) projects and partners that best advance those priorities. This planning process should include meaningful representation and input from families, educators, local community groups, advocates, statewide organizations, and state agencies.
- State agencies should set aside time at the start of a new grant, if possible, to determine what *types* of activities should be funded given timing and resource limitations. Determinations about feasibility should be made in partnership with local, community-based organizations and high-level leadership across state agencies. By understanding and integrating the principles of implementation science³ at an

³ For more information, see the National Implementation Research Network: <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/>

early stage, state agencies can better position activities and initiatives to succeed. These efforts should include being clear from the outset on what can be accomplished within the allocated timeline and resources, stating which aspects of the work will need to continue beyond the life of the grant, and determining who will be responsible for sustainability planning and efforts.

- State agencies should explore and establish creative approaches to streamlining and improving the contracting process for new grants to reduce delays and maximize efficiencies. For example, it may be beneficial to explore options for more flexible contracts, which could avoid unnecessary rounds of contract modifications and amendments to scopes of work.
- State agencies pursuing future grants and funding opportunities should plan to include intentional, effective practices to engage target populations in meaningful ways throughout the life of the grant. Activities should be planned and implemented around the needs of families and communities to ensure that systems improvements reach their target audiences and promote equity for families, children, and the ECE workforce.

Appendix: NC PDG B-5 Activities

In North Carolina, PDG B-5 funding supported 21 activities, including the Program Performance Evaluation. The Needs Assessment and Strategic Plan activities, while a key part of PDG B-5, were not formally evaluated and did not participate in our data collection.

Table 1. NC PDG B-5 Activities, 2019-2023

Activity Name	Brief description
Activity 1: Needs Assessment Update	Updating the PDG B-5 Needs Assessment, including a literature review and findings from interviews and focus groups with stakeholders across NC
Activity 2: Strategic Plan Update	Developing a clear, concise, and actionable strategic plan that aligns with DCDEE’s mission, values, and resources and reflects the input and feedback of all participants
Activity 3.1: Universal Home Visiting Pilot	Expanding access to universal postpartum home visiting services in rural areas by piloting the Family Connects program in three regions across the state
Activity 3.2: State-Level Family Engagement and Leadership	Building the capacity of the state’s early childhood agencies to engage families as leaders and experts and to develop family leadership opportunities and supports
Activity 3.3: Local Family Engagement and Leadership	Supporting local Smart Start partnerships across the state in establishing local family engagement coalitions and creating action plans to improve local family engagement efforts
Activity 3.4: At-Home Learning and Family Outreach	Working with local communities to host events aimed at deepening family engagement and providing outreach and training opportunities to families and educators
Activity 4.1: Coaching Toward Mastery	Facilitating meetings among key stakeholders to inform the development and implementation of a competency-based approach for early educators to acquire and demonstrate core knowledge and skills

Activity Name	Brief description
Activity 4.2: Transition to Kindergarten	Improving the transition to kindergarten process for children and families through a variety of activities
Activity 4.3: Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health Endorsement	Developing an Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Endorsement system to provide credentials for professionals who work with young children across the continuum of care
Activity 5.1: Babies First NC	Piloting a quality improvement model for infant and toddler classrooms, including intensive coaching supports, financial stipends, paid planning time, and other high-quality enrichments
Activity 5.2: Infant-Toddler Feasibility & Cost Study	Assessing the costs and feasibility of—and developing recommendations for—the design of a high-quality Birth-3 Early Learning Pilot program
Activity 5.3: Teletherapy and Family Engagement	<p>Teletherapy: Expanding and enhancing the scope, reach, and access of early intervention teletherapy services for families in the NC Infant-Toddler Program</p> <p>Family Engagement: Enhancing family engagement in the NC Infant-Toddler Program and building the capacity of Local Interagency Coordinating Councils to support family engagement and leadership</p>
Activity 5.4: ECE Access for Families Experiencing Homelessness	Providing technical assistance to shelters to better serve young children experiencing homelessness and developing a statewide strategic plan to promote access to early childhood services for families experiencing homelessness
Activity 5.6: Alternative Market Rate Model Study	Developing potential alternative models to establish reimbursement rates for NC’s subsidized child care program, and developing potential models for NC Pre-K to distribute funding more adequately and equitably
Activity 5.7: NC Pyramid Model Pilot	Expanding the Pyramid Model to new teachers, counties, and classrooms, including providing teachers with coaching
Activity 6.1: NC Early Childhood Integrated Data System	Integrating additional ECE data into the NC Early Childhood Integrated Data System

Activity Name	Brief description
Activity 6.2: NCCARE 360	Increasing the number of early childhood organizations participating in NCCARE360, a coordinated care network that provides referrals for families with identified needs
Activity 6.3: Data Platform for Transition	Supporting NC Pre-K programs with access to the Teaching Strategies® digital platform, to support data sharing for children transitioning from NC Pre-K to kindergarten
Activity 6.4: Local Data-Informed Strategic Planning	Providing county leadership teams with technical assistance on using and interpreting data to inform scalable and sustainable community strategic plans
Activity 6.5: NC Early Childhood Data Advisory Council	Convening early childhood data leaders to inform state-level ECE data planning efforts, improving the quality and scope of ECE data collection, and supporting the analysis and use of data for decision making

Sources: PDG B-5 activity final reports and closeout plans, monthly reports, and contracts

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