Parent Leadership Training Program

Parent Leadership in Early Childhood System Building

Performance period 5/2024–12/2025

Family engagement and parent leadership are important components of early childhood system building, supporting families' understanding of services, strengthening communication across programs and agencies, and creating opportunities for family perspectives to inform planning and implementation. Effective parent leadership efforts create structured opportunities for shared learning and information exchange and are most effective when they are accessible, culturally responsive, and grounded in families' lived experiences.

The Parent Leadership Training Program is a pilot leadership development initiative designed to support parents of young children in building knowledge about Maine's early childhood system and sharing information with other families. Developed as a shorter-term alternative to the 10 month Maine State Parent Ambassadors program, the pilot emphasized peer-to-peer learning and trusted messenger approaches within a six session training series. The training was co-facilitated by the Maine State Parent Ambassadors program and Portland Empowered, with coordination from state partners. The Parent Leadership Training Program was designed to build parent capacity and knowledge for peer-to-peer information sharing and feedback, rather than to deliver direct services or measure downstream child or family outcomes during the pilot period.

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 Parent Leadership Training Program initiative with respect to the following PDG-R outcome areas:

- **Impact**, including intended outcomes related to participant learning and early application of training content.
- **Communication and cross-sector coordination**, including coordination among state agencies and collaboration with community-based partners involved in implementation.
- **System building**, including early observations related to family engagement, information sharing, and feedback between families and system partners.
- **Supports and access**, including participation supports provided, design features intended to facilitate engagement, and barriers affecting participation.

[1]Data sources for this report program materials, a group interview with first cohort participants, interviews with state initiative leads Ana Hicks and Meg Swanson, monthly initiative reports, implementation evaluation form responses, and rating notes.

The work emphasizes shared learning, leadership development, and peer-to-peer information sharing through a trusted messenger approach, while also creating opportunities for parent perspectives to be shared back with system leaders.

Initiative leads, Meg Swanson (Office of Child and Family Services) and Ana Hicks (Children's Cabinet), described the program as emerging from conversations with families about challenges navigating early childhood services, accessing clear information, and understanding how systems function. They also noted that while the Maine State Parent Ambassadors (MSPA) program provides a comprehensive 10-month leadership experience, there was a need for a shorter-term option. Twelve immigrant parents with children ages 0-8 participated in the first six-session training cohort in Portland, which was co-facilitated by MSPA and Portland Empowered.

During the PDG Renewal period, parent leadership activities were implemented alongside other family-facing initiatives, including Help Me Grow and First4ME. Rather than operating as a stand-alone effort, the Parent Leadership Training Program was situated within a broader landscape of navigation, outreach, and service coordination, with the goal of preparing parents to serve as trusted messengers and contributors to community- and system-level conversations.

The sections that follow examine the outcomes of the Parent Leadership Training Program, including participant-reported learning, early application of training content, and the initiative's role in supporting information sharing and coordination with system partners.

PARENT LEADERSHIP TRAINING FEATURES

Pilot cohort: 12 parents completed a six session training

Program design: Shorter-term alternative to the 10-month Maine State Parent Ambassadors (MSPA) program

Facilitation: Co-facilitated by MSPA and Portland Empowered; guest speakers included

Approach: Trusted messenger / peer-to-peer model

Design input: 3 Shared Space Cafés (2023) informed program development

Application: Parent leaders facilitated 2 community education meetings

Reach: 24+ additional parents reached through peer-led sessions

Participation supports: Onsite childcare and stipends

Topics: Child development, Help Me Grow, developmental screening, transitions to school, advocacy

Why a Shorter-Term Parent Leadership Pilot?

> **Initiative leads identified a need for a more accessible entry point for parents unable to commit to a long-term leadership program. The Parent Leadership Training Program was intentionally designed as a shorter-term pilot to test core leadership development and trusted-messenger components within Maine's existing parent leadership infrastructure.**

What was the impact of the Parent Leadership Training Program?

Understanding the impact of PDG-R–supported initiatives is essential to assessing whether investments contribute to the intended outcomes for participants and to informing future system-building efforts. This section examines evidence related to the intended outcomes of the Parent Leadership Training Program, drawing on participant self-reports and early examples of application during the pilot period.

Initiative leads Meg Swanson and Ana Hicks described explicit intended outcomes for the Parent Leadership Training Program. The **intended outcomes** of the series were to:

- **Reach families** who are less engaged with existing early childhood systems and increase their understanding of early childhood services, supports, and how to navigate those systems.
- **Strengthen** parents' confidence to share information with other families, particularly within their own communities.
- **Develop and test** a trusted messenger model, whereby parent leaders return to their communities to provide peer-to-peer information.
- **Create a shorter-term leadership development opportunity** than that required for the 10-month Parent Ambassador Program.

Pilot Cohort and Target Population

The pilot cohort reflected the initiative's intended target population. Twelve immigrant parents with children ages 0–8 participated in the first training cohort in Portland, consistent with the initiative's focus on engaging families who are less connected to existing early childhood systems. Following a policy change, the target population was later broadened to include all families with young children. The work with the first cohort was completed prior to this policy change.

Participant-Reported Learning and Confidence

Evidence from a participant group interview conducted at the final training session indicates that intended outcomes were met for participants who completed the pilot cohort.

During the group interview conducted at the final session of the first training series, eight of twelve participants reported feeling more prepared to take on leadership roles within their communities. One participant stated during a mid-training check-in:

> **"I have been in this country for five years, and this is the best training I have ever attended. There were so many things I did not know."**

Participants described learning new information related to child development, developmental screening, Help Me Grow, and transitions to school. Several parents noted that understanding developmental expectations helped them better interpret children's behavior and learning needs.

Participants also identified learning about previously unfamiliar resources as particularly influential. Learning about Help Me Grow was frequently cited as important, especially as a centralized source of information and referral. Parents described learning new information about child protective services

(CPS), including the role of cultural brokers and how expectations around child safety may differ across cultural contexts.

Information related to health coverage and screening was also described as influential. Participants reported learning about MaineCare eligibility for immigrant families and discussed openly about how developmental screening tools, such as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), may not align with parenting norms across cultures.

Finally, some participants highlighted learning related to navigating the education system, including differences in access to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs, parents' rights in decision-making, and differences in childcare hours available for children with autism diagnoses. Participants described this information as helpful in understanding how to advocate for their children within early childhood and school systems.

Participant self-reports indicate increased confidence in explaining processes, answering questions, and connecting families to supports. One participant stated:

"We learned to identify the issues and to connect people in need to the solutions."

Early Application of Learning

Evidence of application indicates that informational reach extended beyond the initial cohort. Of the twelve parent leaders who completed the first training series, four to five facilitated two community education meetings in September 2024. Each meeting was attended by at least twelve additional parents and included interpreters to support language access. These activities provide evidence of short-term application of the trusted messenger model through peer-to-peer information sharing in community settings.

Emergent Observations

Although not identified as an intended outcome, initiative leads described an emergent benefit: two-way communication between families and system partners. Feedback shared by parents during training discussions and the group interview provided insight into family experiences with early childhood systems, including communication barriers, cultural considerations, and trust in family engagement. Initiative leads characterized this feedback as unexpected and welcome, noting that it supported reflection on how services are communicated and experienced by families. Evidence from this evaluation reflects the presence of two-way communication pathways, rather than changes to policies, practices, or service delivery resulting from that communication.

The evidence presented reflects participant-reported experience and early application within a single pilot cohort. The evaluation did not assess longer-term outcomes, changes in service utilization, or broader system-level effects. Findings should therefore be interpreted as early signals of whether intended outcomes were met for participants who completed the training, rather than evidence of sustained or population-level impact.

How did the Parent Leadership Training Program build collaborations?

The Parent Leadership Training Program required coordination across state agencies and collaboration with community-based organizations to support implementation of the pilot. Initiative leads described coordination between the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) and the Children's Cabinet as central to planning and oversight.

Community-based organizations supported outreach, facilitation, and post-training activities. These included Kennebec Valley Community Action Program (KVCAP), Educare Central Maine's Parent Ambassador Program, and Portland Empowered. Initiative leads reported that partnering with organizations already connected to families supported recruitment and helped situate the training within trusted community contexts.

Initiative leads, Swanson and Hicks, noted that coordination required ongoing communication and role clarification across organizations with different missions and operating structures, including aligning expectations for recruitment, facilitation roles, and follow-up activities. This coordination was described as time-intensive but necessary for the pilot's implementation.

Relationships developed through the pilot informed coordination across existing parent leadership efforts. Swanson and Hicks described how connections formed during implementation supported adjustments in where activities were convened and informed coordination with the Maine State Parent Ambassadors program.

The pilot also created opportunities for information sharing between participating parents and the two initiative leads. Feedback shared during training discussions and group interviews provided insight into how families experience early childhood systems and services. Swanson and Hicks described this exchange as supporting learning related to communication practices, cultural considerations, and family trust.

Swanson and Hicks noted that engaging with families through this pilot reinforced the importance of partnerships with families, which are as important as partnerships with schools, childcare providers, and community organizations.

How has the Parent Leadership Training Program contributed to building a strong statewide early learning system, and will it continue?

Swanson and Hicks described the Parent Leadership Training Program as contributing to agency-level learning related to family engagement and communication during the pilot period. Feedback shared by parents through training discussions and group interviews provided insight into how early childhood systems are experienced by families, particularly immigrant families and families who are less engaged with existing services.

Swanson and Hicks identified several areas of learning that emerged from parent feedback during the pilot. These included increased awareness that developmental screening tools, such as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), may not align with parenting norms across cultures, and that child welfare communication can be misinterpreted when families lack context about system expectations.

These examples informed reflection on how information is conveyed and how families from diverse cultural backgrounds experience services.

The pilot reinforced the value of feedback loops in family engagement practice. Swanson and Hicks described the two-way exchange of information with parents as reinforcing the importance of listening and responding, rather than relying solely on one-directional communication. While this was not an intended outcome of the pilot, initiative leads reported that it informed internal discussions about capturing and using family input in other contexts. This evaluation does not assess whether these discussions resulted in changes to agency guidance, practices, or decision-making.

With respect to continuation, Swanson and Hicks described how selected elements of the pilot were incorporated into the existing parent leadership infrastructure following the pilot period. Coordination shifted to the Kennebec Valley Community Action Program (KVCAP), and core aspects of the work were embedded within the Maine State Parent Ambassadors Program. Current activities include engaging fathers and male caregivers and collaborating between parent leaders and childcare providers through MaineAEYC's Leadership, Engagement, and Advocacy Program (LEaP).

With respect to sustainability, initiative leads described how the Parent Leadership Training Program was intentionally designed as a shorter-term pilot, informed by and emerging from the Maine State Parent Ambassadors Program, which provides a more intensive, 10-month leadership experience. The pilot responded to identified needs for a more accessible entry point for parents who could not commit to the full Parent Ambassador model.

Initiative leads reported that current activities are supported through CCDF funding through at least September 2026 and described the intent to continue to explore the ability to use the Parent Leadership Training model for a targeted audience that has historically been underrepresented or more difficult to reach, such as fathers on an ongoing basis, contingent on the availability of CCDF funding supporting the broader Parent Ambassador infrastructure. At the same time, they noted that expansion beyond the pilot scale would require dedicated staffing and deliberate attention to contracting and timing, reflecting broader system capacity considerations to support sustained, long-term impact at the community and systems levels.

Sustainability at a Glance

- **Status: Shorter-term pilot model, sustained in function**
- **Infrastructure: Embedded within Maine's Parent Ambassador leadership framework**
- **Funding: Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)**
- **Time horizon: Supported through at least September 2026**
- **Conditions for growth: Dedicated staffing and contracting capacity**

In what ways did the design of the Parent Leadership Training Program facilitate participation?

Findings in this section draw on participant perspectives shared during a group interview and facilitated discussion conducted at the final training session, as well as interviews with initiative leads, Swanson and Hicks.

Several design features were identified as supporting participation, learning, and early application during the pilot cohort. Participants and initiative leads describe culturally responsive framing and facilitation as influential. Participants reported that training sessions created space to discuss how early childhood systems operate across different cultural contexts and to ask questions about expectations that may differ from parenting practices in their home countries. Swanson and Hicks reported that themes emerging from the Shared Space Cafés informed this emphasis, including a focus on culturally responsive content, opportunities for dialogue, and the use of a trusted-messenger approach.

Background: Themes From Shared Space Café Participants

In 2023, three Shared Space Cafés held in Biddeford, Portland, and Lewiston gathered input from immigrant families. Themes included:

- Cultural differences in parenting and discipline create strain to acclimate to systems
- Communication barriers highlight the need for cultural bridging
- No communication = No understanding
- Childcare access and financial strain are core stressors
- Beliefs about early childhood development range widely across cultures, causing conflict and mistrust with early intervention systems.

Participants in the final-session group interview identified opportunities for dialogue and exchange as important design features. Parents reported valuing sessions that allowed time for discussion and reflection rather than one-directional information delivery. Participants also described learning from facilitators with shared cultural or lived experience as increasing trust and relevance, and as supporting their readiness to share information with peers following the training.

Participants consistently identified participation support as essential to engagement (final-session group interview). Participants described on-site childcare as necessary for their ability to attend training sessions. Participants cited financial stipends as important supports that helped offset time and transportation costs. Participants also noted that language access and interpretation enabled them to engage with training content and discussions in accessible ways. Swanson and Hicks reported that interpretation and translated materials were important for equitable access to both training content and post-training information sharing.

Participants and initiative leads also identified barriers to participation (final-session group interview and initiative lead interviews). Participants reported that scheduling constraints and competing family

and work responsibilities limited some parents' ability to continue engagement beyond the training sessions. Initiative leads noted that uncertainty about expectations for post-training activities initially created confusion for some participants. Participants described trust and familiarity with systems as contextual factors shaping initial hesitation, particularly for parents with prior experiences that influenced their comfort engaging with early childhood or child welfare systems.

An area for refinement was identified through participant feedback collected during the final training session. Participants indicated that earlier and clearer communication about expectations for community information sharing following the training would have been helpful.

Lessons Learned

- **A shorter-term format showed early evidence of meeting core leadership development objectives.** Participant self-reports from the six-session pilot indicated increased understanding and confidence, and early peer-to-peer information sharing within a shorter timeframe than in the 10-month Parent Ambassador Program.
- **Trusted messenger models extend informational reach beyond direct participants.** Four to five parent leaders facilitated two community education meetings, each attended by at least 12 additional parents, with interpreters present.
- **Two-way communication between families and system partners was an emergent benefit of the pilot.** Feedback shared by parents during training surfaced insights about how families experience early childhood systems—including ASQ cultural alignment concerns, child welfare communication barriers, and differences in ESOL access.
- **Participation supports were critical to engagement.** Participants described on-site childcare as necessary for their ability to attend, cited financial stipends as important for offsetting participation costs, and identified culturally responsive facilitation as influential in creating space for open discussion.

Summary

Findings indicate that the Parent Leadership Training Program met its intended short-term outcomes for participants, including increased understanding of early childhood systems, increased confidence in sharing information with peers, and early testing of a trusted messenger model. As a pilot, the program also generated learning about family engagement approaches. While the evaluation did not assess longer-term or system-level outcomes, the findings provide early insight into how parent leadership efforts can inform future family-facing work.