

# Minnesota Preschool Development Grant Indigenous Evaluation

## Executive Summary

Minnesota's Preschool Development Grant Birth through 5 (PDG B-5) Renewal Grant is a partnership of the Minnesota departments of Education, Health, and Human Services, along with the Children's Cabinet, to align early childhood systems across the state. The \$26.7 million grant (from late 2019 through late 2023) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services supports expecting families and families with children age five and younger. Wilder Research and Bowman Performance Consulting were contracted to conduct an Indigenous evaluation of the grant activities, focused on the experiences of and impacts on Indigenous families.

The evaluation included interviews with Indigenous grantees and State staff, participatory data collection at community events, analysis of administrative data, and collection of stories from Indigenous families. The evaluation plan guiding the work was co-developed collaboratively with Indigenous grantees and partners, and the state. The results and related recommendations, co-created with PDG Indigenous grantees, are presented here.

### Process: The state's work with Indigenous grantees and communities



Source: Wampum Georgina Ontario by Oaktree b is licensed by CC BY-SA 4.0

The “two-row wampum belt” is a metaphor for the evaluation questions about how the state is working with Indigenous organizations, Tribal Nations, and communities. The story of the two-row wampum belt is about an early agreement between the Dutch and Haudenosaunee Tribe. These belts were used as part of oral tradition to document agreements and help leaders share the key messages of independence and sovereignty as well as collaboration and partnership.

- **The state relationship with Indigenous partners was strengthened through the PDG's intentional work with Indigenous communities.** State staff and community partners believe the relationship building that took place under the PDG has shifted the state's mindset in how funding should be allocated, creating pathways for Indigenous communities to use the funds to do what they think is best for their community.
- **Flexible funding and reporting requirements lessened the burden on small Indigenous organizations.** Applying for and managing the grant was easier for the grantee organizations due to the more frequent reimbursement schedule and flexible reporting requirements of the PDG grant initiatives.

- **Grant programs stemming from PDG were grantee- and community-led.** Grantees were empowered to lead their work in their own way from a cultural perspective. They felt respected and valued as equal and capable partners in choosing how to operate and manage their program services, including being allowed to determine how and where to spend their grant money in ways that would address their communities' specific needs
- **PDG grantees successfully engaged families despite staffing and pandemic challenges.** The COVID-19 pandemic was a significant challenge that delayed the start of many of the PDG-funded programs. Despite having to adjust or limit programming, grantees shared how their families still felt connected and engaged. To create a quick table on your computer, select the table below

## Indigenous families' use of and satisfaction with PDG-funded resources

The “three sisters’ garden” represents three crops important to many Indigenous communities – corn, beans, and squash – and is a metaphor for the resources that have been made available through the PDG. When planted together, the three crops work together to help one another thrive and survive. This method of gardening draws upon centuries of Indigenous agricultural traditions and expertise.



- The Community Resources Hubs successfully reached Indigenous families, though use of the Help Me Connect American Indian page was low. The two Indigenous Community Resource Hubs served 553 people, reaching 825 children (duplicated). The top five services families sought were: child care (24%), food (20%), transportation (19%), financial support for child care (13%), and family well-being, including mental health (10%). Similarly, families reported food as a top need when asked as part of data collection at Indigenous community events. Through November 2022, 432 visits were made to the Help Me Connect American Indian-specific page, though a majority of users (66%) ended their visit to the website after clicking on that page, not going any further. Designed for providers, few families indicated the Help Me Connect website was a valuable source of support.
- **PDG-funded programs provided multiple types of support for families.** In their submitted stories, parents and caregivers shared how programs supported their family with employment resources, referrals to other services and programs, and tangible items such as school supplies
- **Family, friends, and community members are a key support for Indigenous families in helping their children grow.** Attendees at Indigenous community events (N=257) most frequently indicated they used and valued their friends and family when looking for supports to help their children grow and thrive. Indigenous families also indicated using and valuing Indigenous early learning programs like Baby Space and Family Circle.

## Outcomes: How Indigenous children, families, and communities are doing as a result of the PDG

While designing the evaluation plan, a PDG Indigenous grantee indicated that we know if Indigenous children are doing well by how their grandmas feel they are doing and how they interact with their grandmas and other Indigenous relatives. Although grandmas are always proud of their grandchildren, these are the things that make them especially happy because they know a child who has these things—their Indigenous language and teachings and good balance in their life—will thrive in this world with that basis of strength and resilience. The “grandma test” thus became a metaphor for outcome-related evaluation questions.



Image by Anne Gomez, 2020. Created for the Family Spirit Program of Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe as a part of their work on the Blue Cross Blue Shield Health POWER initiative

- **Indigenous children experience healthy growth and development when family and community networks are supported by PDG-funded Indigenous programs.** Indigenous parents shared stories of their children’s increased social emotional development (such as meeting developmental milestones) and academic progress.
- **Children and their caregivers are learning about their Indigenous culture and language through early learning programs, community events, and from their parents and elders in their family.** Parents and caregivers saw their children learning about their heritage and ancestry through participating in both formal (language nests, Midē training, powwows) and informal settings (sage burning at home, singing songs in Ojibwe).
- **Parents and caregivers experience pride and joy in parenting.** Indigenous parents and caregivers shared many stories depicting the range of emotions they experienced raising young children. For example, emotions around joy often reflected families experiencing a general sense of wellbeing, stability, and having basic needs met, thus impacting and extending joy into their experiences of parenting as well. These families are able to embrace moments of every day joy. Another powerful emotion related to joy was pride, or feelings of accomplishment as their children excelled developmentally or connected with their heritage or culture.
- **Families feel more connected to their community through social gatherings supported by PDG.** Both parents and grantees shared stories of how PDG-funded Indigenous programming helped programs expand, helped families get the support they needed, and connected families to programming even during the pandemic. Many of the programs supported cultural and heritage events. These opportunities to engage in cultural practices allowed families opportunities to pass down their traditions, which is a vital part of healthy development as well as whole family wellbeing.

## Recommendations

**The state should continue to acknowledge, and work to undo, the systematic harms that impact how the state works with Indigenous communities.** The state still has much room to grow and learn how to be more intentional in collaborating and honoring the relationship between Indigenous communities and the state. Engaging in this active work at the state means moving forward from simply acknowledging harms towards repairing trust, and developing current and future efforts to ameliorate the impacts of these traumas on Indigenous people. Being intentional can include learning how to pause, listen, and include Indigenous partners in conversations and decision-making, and in generating solutions.

**Lessons learned from PDG should be applied to other state grant initiatives.** The state should take the lessons learned from the PDG and apply it to future grants, including: simplifying the grant application process; allowing flexible payment schedules and reporting/ evaluation requirements; supporting culturally-based evaluations; and considering future roles like the Tribal Nations Lead.

**Indigenous programs need future and ongoing support from the state to sustain.** Activities initiated in partnership with Indigenous communities by the PDG need more time to have long-term impact. The grant was simply too short to overcome centuries of historical trauma. The state can support the sustainability of the PDG-funded resources and grantee programs by finding new funding streams or promoting grantees' program outcomes to potential funders. The state can also help to sustain the connections and relationships built from the PDG by maintaining communication with grantee organizations and finding ways for grantees to network in the future.

**The state should explore ways to promote Help Me Connect among families.** Data collected at community events and website analytics showed relatively less use of Help Me Connect. Rather than being a resource directly for providers, state staff suggested promoting and increasing use of Help Me Connect directly with families.

**Continue and expands efforts to listen and honor the wisdom of Indigenous programs and families, using Indigenous evaluation as a tool.** For both State staff and evaluation partners, it was imperative to design initial meetings with Indigenous grantees that centered Indigenous perspectives and goals, and then use that input to design the evaluation and subsequent state support. Data collection activities were also designed to reflect Indigenous cultures and were based in the Good Relations Agreement established with Indigenous grantees at the outset. In addition, both Indigenous evaluation team members and State staff made time to show up in person at community events and meetings and to follow through afterwards; physical presence was critical to building trust with Indigenous partners and family members when gathering stories, learning about valuable parenting resources, and growing relationships. Future state grant initiatives would benefit from this type of co-designed Indigenous evaluation process and involvement of State staff, Indigenous partners, and evaluators.

**To increase use of the Grandma Test Observation Tool,** the tool could be modified for use with families to do on their own at home.

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