



# NORTH DAKOTA PRESCHOOL DEVELOPMENT GRANT BIRTH THROUGH FIVE 2023 NEEDS ASSESSMENT FINAL REPORT

# Contents

Introduction & background .....	2
Building on previous studies .....	2
Methodology.....	3
Findings.....	6
Meeting needs, communication, quality, and access matter most to families and providers..	6
Current systems provide valuable support to providers and families. ....	11
Gaps exist in access, communication, collaboration, and training.....	14
Opportunities exist to strengthen the workforce and improve communication.....	18
Conclusion & recommendations.....	22
Appendix.....	24
Detailed methodology.....	24
Data collection tools.....	25

## Introduction & background

Federal preschool development grants birth through five (PDG B-5) fund efforts by states and territories to support early childhood experiences. Grants support improved collaboration among existing programs as well as a mixed delivery system. In December 2022, the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services Early Childhood section (HHS-EC) was awarded \$6.75 million in PDG B-5 funding; it will receive up to \$6.75 million in 2023 and 2024. This grant builds on the work completed through a PDG B-5 grant awarded to North Dakota in 2018.

North Dakota’s vision for the grant is that all children and families in all areas of the state have access to quality early childhood experiences in all program settings, supported by a well-aligned state system that is responsive to and supportive of both families and the early childhood workforce.

North Dakota families and providers know best what it takes to achieve this vision. Knowing this, HHS-EC contracted with a research and evaluation firm, The Improve Group, for a needs assessment to engage families, providers, and experts in North Dakota’s early childhood sector to understand where the state should invest with the grant. In particular, North Dakota understands that quality early childhood experiences depend on a competent workforce. The needs assessment sought to better understand the issues, concerns, and needs of North Dakotans making up the early childhood workforce, as well as what supports or deters their ability to acquire professional skills and knowledge to create a successful career.

## Building on previous studies

This needs assessment built on lessons learned from North Dakota’s continued efforts to strengthen its early childhood sector. Participants in a 2023 survey of North Dakota Head Start agency staff<sup>1</sup> said their top priority was support for the expansion of and access to high-quality workforce and career development opportunities for staff. Higher pay is a known need—as is increased access for families. A December 2022 Kids Count North Dakota report<sup>2</sup> found that families struggle to pay for child care and that some counties do not have enough early childhood slots. The report illustrated many challenges North Dakota families know firsthand:

- Child care costs continue to weigh on families—in 2021, families typically spent between \$7,800 and \$9,800 on child care; many families eligible for the federal Child Care Assistance Program were not accessing it.

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<sup>1</sup> North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services Head Start Collaboration Office. (2023). (rep.). *2023 Needs Assessment Summary*. Retrieved October 27, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Kids Count North Dakota. (2022). (rep.). *NORTH DAKOTA’S CHILD CARE SYSTEM: INVESTMENTS NEEDED TO SUPPORT FAMILIES AND CHILD CARE BUSINESSES*. Retrieved October 27, 2023, from <https://ndkidscount.org/north-dakotas-child-care-system-investments-needed-to-support-families-and-child-care-businesses>.

- The supply of licensed child care (excluding Tribal child care, which was not represented in the study) does not keep up with demand.
- Few licensed programs are open on the weekend, evenings, and in the early morning.
- Child care provider wages hover just above the poverty level.

This PDG B-5 needs assessment sought to better understand how these challenges affect families and the early childhood workforce in North Dakota, in order to point to potential solutions.

## Methodology

The State of North Dakota engaged The Improve Group to conduct a comprehensive statewide needs assessment to understand strengths and gaps of its early childhood system. The needs assessment gathered input from multiple stakeholder groups in Fargo, Bismarck/Mandan, the Spirit Lake reservation, and urban and rural perspectives statewide.

### *Study questions*

The following questions guided the needs assessment:

1. How can the early childhood-serving systems better meet the needs of North Dakota families?
2. What does it take to support robust early care providers?
  - a. What does an affordable and accessible system for training child care professionals look like?
  - b. What is needed in North Dakota to support and maintain a pipeline of competent and trained child care and early education professionals?
3. What gaps currently exist in North Dakota's early care and education system?
4. What assets and strengths exist to meet families' and children's needs?

### *Sources*

The following groups in North Dakota contributed to the study:

- **Parents and primary caregivers**, including biological or adopted parents or guardian-assigned caregivers of children age 0-5 in North Dakota.
- **Early childhood providers and administrators**, including child care providers working in school, in-home (family/group), and center-based settings. This group included Head Start and Early Head Start providers and administrators, as well as administrators who manage or own child care or other education settings serving children 0-5. This group also included early intervention and special education specialists.

- **Early childhood experts**, including professionals working in the early childhood sector in North Dakota. These participants, referred to as “key informants” in the report, provided systems-level and statewide perspectives on early childhood strengths and needs.
- **Tribal leaders**, including administrators of Tribal funds for child care and people who are leaders in general and/or hold deep knowledge as elders in their Tribe.

### *Approach and methods*

This study used a mixed methods design, which allowed findings from different methods to build on each other for a comprehensive picture of early childhood sector strengths and needs in North Dakota. The Improve Group partnered with First Nations Women’s Alliance (FNWA) to ensure cultural responsiveness and effective outreach with Tribes and Indigenous populations in North Dakota. FNWA is the Tribal domestic violence/sexual assault coalition for Tribes sharing North Dakota’s geography. With deep connections across the state, they were an invaluable partner to this work.

Data for this needs assessment was collected through workshops, interviews, and a survey.

*Workshop:* The needs assessment team held three workshops over a five-week period in August 2023. Workshops took place in Fargo, Mandan, and Spirit Lake. Each workshop used a semi-structured group interview protocol that investigated participants’ perspectives of the strengths and barriers to quality child care access in North Dakota. Workshops engaged a total of 57 parents and providers, with several providers also being parents of children ages 0-5. Please refer to the appendix for the number of parents and providers per workshop location.

*Interviews:* The team also conducted 17 key informant interviews with professionals working in organizations supporting the early learning sector; a few parents who served on advisory groups related to early childhood were also key informants. Informants had deep involvement with and understanding of the needs and experiences of different community groups affected by North Dakota’s early childhood system, including multiple Tribal Nations. The interviews provided perspectives on training, workforce needs, coaching, and inclusion.

*Survey:* The team administered an early childhood provider survey from Aug. 4-20, 2023. The survey was sent to providers registered with North Dakota’s Growing Futures Registry. The survey’s 28 questions explored the experiences of providers in providing early childhood care in North Dakota, as well as their experiences and desires related to professional development and training. Of 5,451 invited email addresses, 657 people submitted complete responses—a 12 percent response rate. Most respondents were white, female, and working in an urban area of the state.

See an overview of how outreach and analysis were conducted for each data collection method in the appendix.

### *Limitations*

Some limitations must be considered in reviewing findings from this needs assessment:

- The provider survey was sent to those who were registered with the Early Childhood Workforce Registry, Growing Futures; this likely excluded legally unlicensed providers, such as family, friend, or neighbor child care providers.
- The North Dakota PDG coordinating team selected key informant interviewees; some chose not to participate.
- Focus groups were held in urban areas of the state to increase the ability to recruit participants. However, parents and providers living in rural areas of the state have different experiences than those in urban locations. The location of focus groups likely limited the perspective of rural families and providers in the study.
- People of different racial/ethnic backgrounds have different experiences providing and seeking child care. Due to time constraints, this study did not target outreach among all Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in North Dakota to fully understand these differences. These findings are therefore more representative of, though not exclusive to, white individuals in North Dakota who only speak English. One key informant interviewee spoke to the New American perspective; many providers of color took the survey; and one workshop was tailored to American Indians in Spirit Lake.



## Findings

Below are summarized findings on what providers, families, and experts said is important for the sector; where the sector is working well; gaps; and opportunities.

### Meeting needs, communication, quality, and access matter most to families and providers.

**Parents and providers care about the early childhood system being able to meet the needs of children ages 0 to 5.** Providers care about children reaching their developmental milestones. Parents at the Tribal and Mandan workshops said they want safe environments for their children and caring staff that are engaged with kids. At a workshop in Fargo, providers said they work to adapt the classroom to fit each child's needs, like introducing more sensory activities if needed, or offering a quieter space to calm down. Providers indicated that they care about validating children's emotions and helping children regulate them. Providers work to make sure children are learning new skills, acknowledging that this can look different in early intervention than in a preschool classroom with Head Start or early childhood special education.

**Native communities care about a holistic approach to meeting both children's and families' needs.** This can make child care both easier and harder, such as when a family's needs are more apparent and often inescapable. Participants in the Tribal workshop expressed how seeing a child as part of a community is also central to an Indigenous approach to child care. For example, one Tribal child care provider highlighted the importance of recognizing community leadership skills even among toddlers. She watched one child model walking and talking. Prompts from adults had not worked, but the "non-talkers and non-walkers" became excited about imitating their peer leader and soon were walking and talking themselves. The provider expressed confidence that children learn new skills best from each other, including developing the relationship skills that they will need to fully participate in a community. Relatedly, both parents and providers in the Tribal workshop expressed a desire to integrate cultural values and teachings in age-appropriate ways.

**Parents and providers place importance on being able to communicate with each other about children's care.** Parents and caregivers want providers to see them as partners in their children's care. The amount and quality of communication between parents and providers varies by setting type and communication method. At a workshop in Mandan, providers urged transparency regarding progress children are making, much like how Head Start tracks children when they start and shares reports with parents on the progress children are making toward goals or milestones. Parents at that workshop said they trust providers; both parents and providers expressed wanting to share both the good and the bad about a child's day, which can further build trust. Mandan parent participants who utilize in-home providers reported receiving more updates during pick-up times than parents whose children were at larger child care centers.

Tribal workshop participants expressed a need for consistent and clear communication between parents and providers, on topics from what the child did that day to updates on child care opening and closing times.

In multiple workshops, parents and providers who use apps for communication expressed positive experiences with communication.

While many parents expressed a desire for more communication with providers, they also acknowledged the need for balance so as not to impede the provider's ability to spend quality time with their children. They also said they desire more centralized communication and information about existing resources and programs for young children. Both parents and providers want consistency in information about developmental milestones and expectations for children—both to help them as parents and providers but also to identify if they need early interventions.

Providers at the Fargo workshop said they place great importance on the development of skills and facilitating space to have difficult conversations with parents of children with special needs.

**Having access to early childhood experiences for all children—including through financial support that helps all families—is important to parents and providers.** Providers and parents in the Mandan and Spirit Lake workshops discussed the high cost of care for infants and toddlers. Different workshops raised different issues, from the cost of diapers and formula, to the disconnect between private (paid) services like the healthcare system and the need for alternative low- to no-cost options for services and help. For example, parents and providers expressed frustration that health systems are not incentivized to tell parents about free screening and therapy funded by the state when they provide this service for a fee.

Providers at the Fargo workshop said they felt there was the possibility of layering and braiding different funding streams to create more opportunities for children in the years before kindergarten in North Dakota.

Some providers in the Mandan workshop said child care assistance policies do not help families succeed—some families make too much for Head Start but not enough to pay for private child care. Providers urged support for families in crisis. Providers felt that access to child care is lacking, and that transportation needs to be included for some families to access Head Start.

As one provider in Mandan said,

*“Right now, we're one of the states that don't have state-funded preschool and the State doesn't even fund our early intervention services. It's all through waiver, Medicaid waiver. So there really isn't a stake in the game, if you will, from our own state to support our earliest learners.” -Provider*

In one Tribal community, funding streams from the pandemic have greatly subsidized the cost of care for families through sliding fee schedules. However, this funding will soon end, leaving



families and providers to make tough choices about child care. As some parents and providers noted in the Spirit Lake workshop, this can mean having someone who is untrained and does not provide quality care watching a child. One Tribe works to address the risks of poor quality or unsafe environments—such as child sexual abuse—by doing three times more home visits than the state licensing requirements. However, this suggests oversight only among licensed or known providers and may not include child care by family, friends, or neighbors.

**Providers being well-trained in providing quality early childhood experiences for all children is important to parents and providers.** Parents in Mandan said they felt their providers do a good job of providing early care for their children and identified this as their main criteria for choosing a provider.

Provider survey respondents answered an open-ended question about what kind of training they would like to see offered; many responses related to mental and emotional supports, including:

- Special needs/disabilities (especially autism and ADHD) and talking to parents about it.
- Managing difficult behaviors.
- Social-emotional development.
- Trauma and brain development.

Additional responses related to:

- Classes that will lead to Child Development Associate credential.
- Running a business.
- Working with parents.
- Providing care for certain age groups (especially infants).

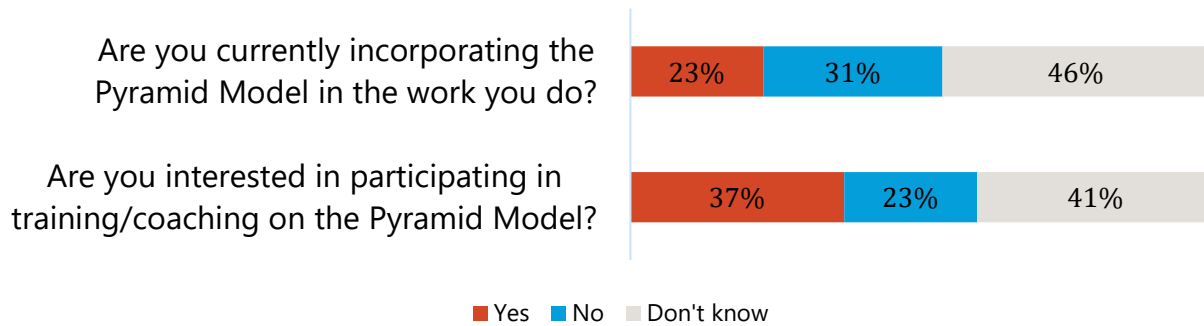
Meanwhile, providers in Fargo talked about how child care programs lack general funding for mental health and emotional supports. Providers said more in-depth staff training is needed to better support children’s emotional wellbeing and to meet behavioral needs. Providers said there is a need in North Dakota to raise awareness that addressing social-emotional needs is foundational for children’s growth.

*“I think something to that programs lack is just general funding for mental health and emotional supports, you know, the push for it has gotten a lot better in the last few years, but like thinking into my classroom, in particular, any of those emotional supports are things that I’ve personally purchased to meet the needs of my children. It’s not something that’s already been provided for me.”*  
-Provider

**While most provider survey respondents said they do not use the Pyramid Model, many are interested in learning about it.** The Pyramid Model is North Dakota’s framework for supporting early childhood professionals’ ability to care for children’s social-emotional needs

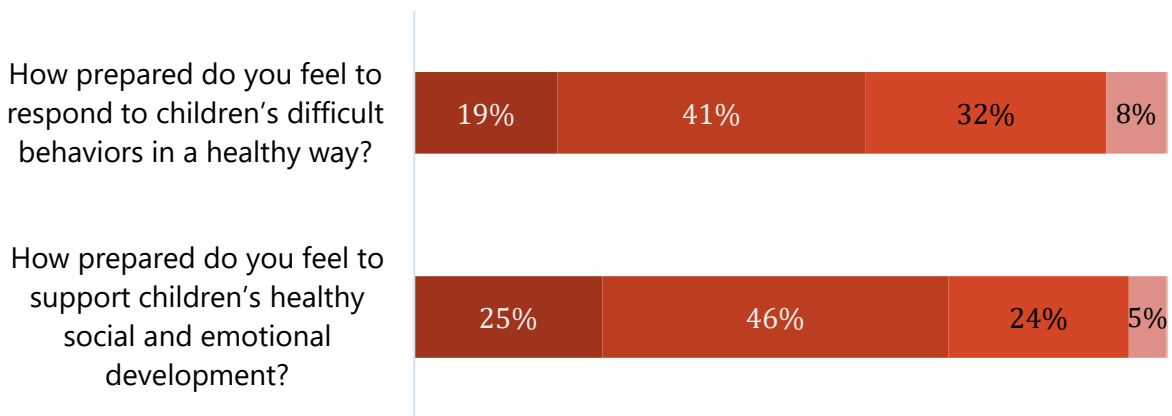
and behaviors. However, only 23 percent of provider survey respondents said they are currently incorporating the Pyramid Model in their work (Figure 1). Just over one-third of provider respondents said they are interested in training/coaching on the Pyramid Model.

Figure 1: Most provider survey respondents are **not using the Pyramid Model**, though **many are interested in learning about it**.



Seventy percent of survey respondents said they feel “very prepared” or “prepared” to support children’s healthy social and emotional development; just under 60 percent said they feel “very prepared” or “prepared” to respond to children’s difficult behaviors in healthy ways (Figure 2).

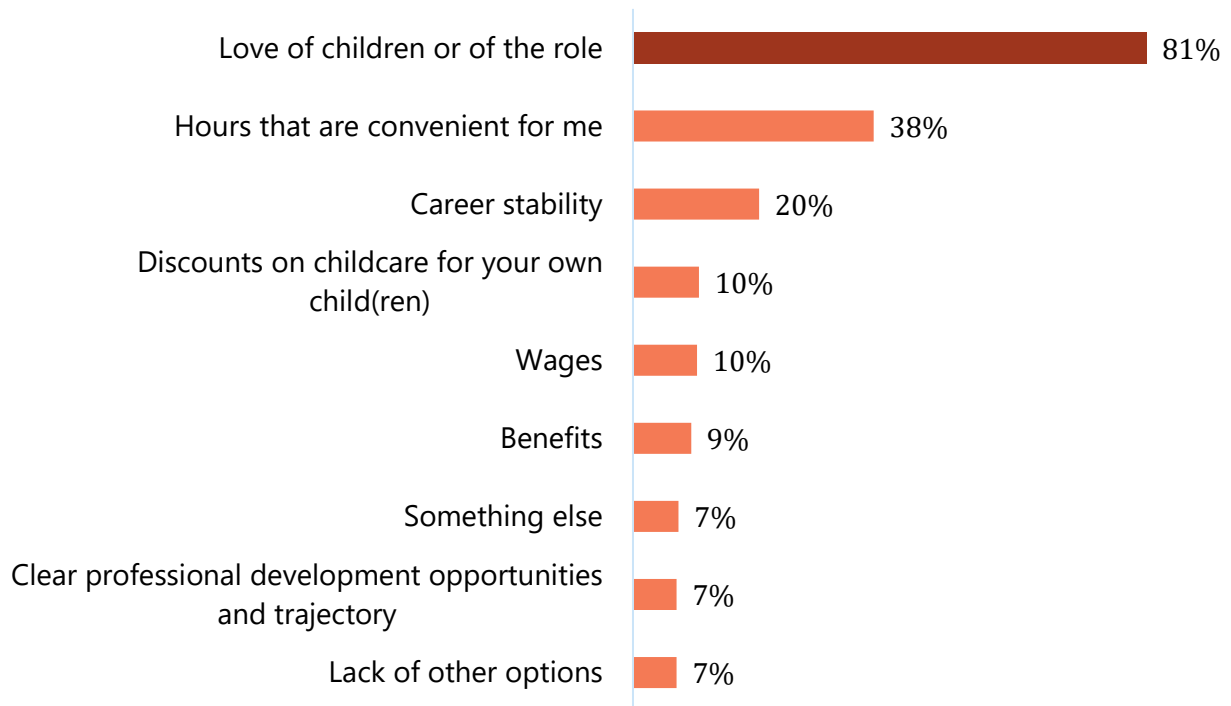
Figure 2: Provider respondents **mostly feel prepared** to support children’s healthy social and emotional development and to respond to children’s difficult behaviors in healthy ways.



■ Very prepared ■ Prepared ■ Somewhat prepared ■ A little prepared ■ Not at all prepared

**Providers want opportunities for career stability and support.** Twenty percent of provider survey respondents selected “career stability” as one of the top two reasons they work in the early childhood field (Figure 3). However, only 7 percent said “clear professional development opportunities and trajectory” keep them in the field.

Figure 3: **Love of children or of their role** is the top reason provider survey respondents said they are in this field.



Providers in the Fargo workshop and one key informant interviewee described apprenticeship models, training, and gatherings with other providers as opportunities for providing more career stability and supports.

*“There is not an apprenticeship program or anything that is bringing students in early [to the field] and attracting them to early childhood. And so, our programs statewide that are training early childhood educators are dwindling.” -Provider*

Providers and parents in workshops, as well as key informant providers interviewed, also see investments in affordability for families as a way to increase career stability for families who have children in care. They urged the State of North Dakota to fund opportunities for families by combining funding, even if families pay on a sliding fee scale, to increase the number of providers.

**52% OF PROVIDERS SAID INCREASED PAY WOULD KEEP THEM IN THE FIELD LONGER.**

**Both parents and providers see it as important that the early childhood system fairly compensates providers.** Fair compensation that aligns with the cost of living is key to employee retention and providing continuity of services for children and families, participants shared across data sources. Only 5 percent of providers in the survey got into the field because of

the wages, and only 10 percent said they stay in the field due to wages. When asked what would make providers stay in the field longer, 52 percent of respondents said increased pay. Many also suggested benefits. A few providers in workshops raised the issue of having to compete with the service sector and manufacturing jobs that pay more and that they perceive to have less responsibility and training requirements than early childhood care.

**Both parents and providers see it as important that the state government gives them a voice in changes to the early childhood system and recognizes, values, and understands their needs.** Providers seek opportunities for dialog with lawmakers and decisionmakers. Both parents and providers in the Fargo workshop said they wished they had more of a voice in changes to the early childhood system.

Parents in the Mandan workshop envisioned a state system that funds home visits for families, a focus on maternal mental health services, and generally better communications about resources and services available to families.

Providers wished for a single platform with statewide information about early learning and care resources. They want the state to be more supportive of providers. For instance, the lowering of the USDA Child and Adult Food Care Program reimbursement rates for food negatively impacted providers.

Providers in the Mandan workshop said they also want better reimbursement rates for intervention services, given the advanced educational requirements for providing these services. Providers also asked for state-mandated preschool that complements Head Start and more cross-sector collaboration.

## Current systems provide valuable support to providers and families.

Providers, parents, and key informants discussed the strengths of the current early childhood system.

**Providers appreciate the business support currently provided.** Providers in both the Fargo and Mandan workshops lauded programs through which they partner with other organizations (e.g., businesses or schools) that can maintain payroll and benefit systems—systems that some providers lack. Of the 246 provider survey respondents who manage or own their business, more than half wanted additional support on budgeting, taxes, and insurance topics. Most wanting support said they were not currently receiving support, indicating that current support is inadequate or inaccessible to them. One provider recommended providing business law and management training for common issues in early childhood:

*“The other thing that I think would be really, really beneficial to providers in North Dakota is courses in business law, right—how to manage people, how to work with difficult people, or how to work with difficult employees, how to work*

*with difficult families, how to set up your business truthfully, with other people that have been successful.” -Provider*

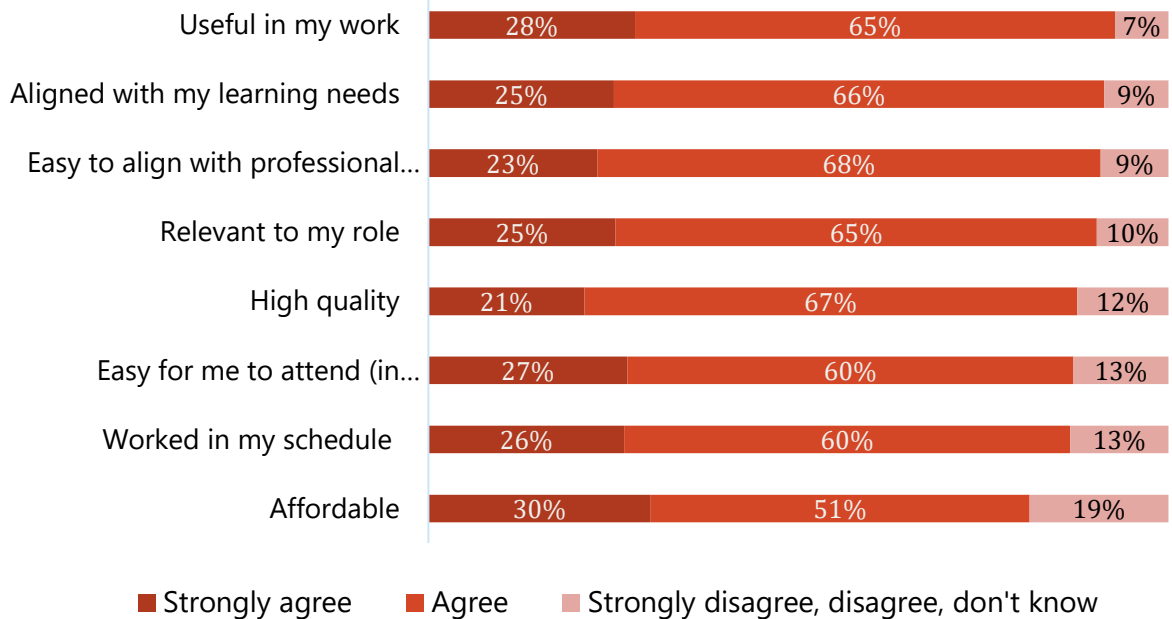
**Parents and providers appreciate the financial support, like subsidies, provided by the State for the early childhood system.** Providers in a workshop and a couple key informants representing providers said they appreciated the subsidies the State has provided to child care providers, especially during the pandemic, when providers were struggling to keep their businesses operating. Native providers and parents in their workshop inferred that the pandemic subsidies have increased stability for children in Spirit Lake’s licensed Tribal child care center. A few key informants raised that stabilization grants and workforce stipends were helpful for providers but would have been better as wage supplements.

Providers saw the new Early Childhood section of the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services and Best in Class funds as evidence of the state valuing early childhood development.

**Providers find value in recent professional development and training.** The provider survey asked respondents about recent professional development and training. Most providers indicated finding value from training experiences in the previous year, though they were least likely to say it was affordable (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Most provider respondents found professional development/training they received in the previous year to be **useful** and **aligned with their needs**.

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the professional development/training you received in the last year? *The professional development/training I received was...*



**Early childhood special initiatives provide value to parents and providers.** Participants in one workshop shared several examples of “special initiatives” they felt added value for families. Providers in Mandan said they appreciate community-based programs and partnerships that help families, including grant-funded initiatives like Mandan Little Learners. Parents said they appreciate the generosity of the local business community that supports families in need. Providers in Fargo pointed to programs like the Even Start Family Literacy Program that is free for New Americans and provides citizenship courses for parents and early education for their children.

Providers in workshops said they appreciate the inclusion coaching program and grants to support inclusion, which they see as critical for children with special needs. Forty-two percent of provider survey respondents said they currently have a child with a disability (diagnosed or undiagnosed) in their care. Of those, 84 percent said they provide inclusive accommodations for the child(ren)’s disability.

**Providers value Bright & Early ND for improving the quality of early childhood experiences for children.** Survey responses indicate that among providers who know about the Bright & Early Quality Rating and Improvement System, many believe it is easy to navigate/access and they appreciate the online training. Some specifically described that it helps improve their quality and is an indicator to parents of this quality. A few key informants also supported the perspective that the system addresses the need for higher quality. Though parents described wanting quality relationship-based care for their children (components of the Bright & Early system), they did not note familiarity with Bright & Early.

Asked “What is the best thing about this program?” regarding Bright & Early, many providers indicated they do not participate in Bright & Early or do not know about it. Of those who do, providers indicated the following as best parts of the program:

- Easy to navigate/access.
- Online training.
- Coaching.
- Helps improve quality and indicates quality to parents.
- Incentives.

Asked how Bright & Early could better meet their needs, several providers suggested:

- More incentives (financial or other, e.g., parents caring about it).
- More relevant and a greater variety of training.
- Less time/burden on providers.
- More time with/access to coaches.
- Technology issues (log in/system issues).
- No changes, i.e., it is good as-is.



**Parents value community initiatives that provide in- and out-of-home parental support.** Providers and parents in Fargo and Mandan said they recognize the value of active community partners in supporting the early childhood sector. Parents in Mandan, for example, said organizations in the area are trying to improve and reduce gaps in resources for families, with several systems or entities available to support them through health, parks, public schools, libraries, etc. Community partners in the Fargo area provide clinical services; a non-profit provides mentors for children; and organizations provide backpacks and food for children, workshop participants there said.

Similarly, providers in both the Fargo and Mandan workshops said they see the benefits of and potential for partnerships with local area businesses as one means of supporting local parents while also filling child care slots.

**Consistent and clear communication between providers and parents helps build trusting relationships.** Providers in the Fargo and Mandan workshops said they see value in building trust with parents through open and clear communication. Parents reported getting child development information from friends, family, and their children’s teachers or child care providers.

**Providers are passionate about their work and committed to the field.** Eighty-six percent of survey respondents started in the early childhood field because they love the work and children. The next highest reason for being in the field was convenient hours. What brought people to the field—love of children or their role and hours that are convenient to them—are the same reasons they stay in the field, according to survey data. Almost half of provider respondents said they plan on staying in the field for their entire career, with another 15 percent planning on staying for the medium term. Twenty percent of those who stay in the field because of the hours plan to only stay for 1-3 years. Of those who plan to leave the field in the next 1-3 years, few see career stability (6 percent) as a reason for staying in the field (compared to 12 percent for those staying longer).

In the Spirit Lake workshop, no Tribal providers said child care was a career goal—they went into the field because of children and grandchildren’s needs.

## Gaps exist in access, communication, collaboration, and training.

Participants across data sources described gaps between the current state of early childhood in North Dakota and what is needed to provide what is important to families and providers.

**Parents face challenges in finding and accessing early childhood services, while providers experience challenges in meeting the demand.** The lack of child care availability was continuously echoed by both parent and provider workshop participants in both Fargo and Mandan, with many providing examples of friends and family who have been unable to find open child care slots. Additionally, several parent workshop participants from both areas reported being on waitlists for a year or more before being able to find care for their children. In

fact, one parent stated that she was on the waitlist for three years before having her child move up to the second spot on a waitlist. For many of these parents, frustration was expressed through joking that future child conception will need to be based on the projected timing of child care slot availability.

Looking at the big picture, it is important to consider the ripple effects of lack of child care—such as the inability to work or go to school—and how this can contribute to economic disparities. Alternatively, families may turn to less safe options for child care, which can put children at risk.

In addition to lacking availability, many parent workshop participants mentioned cost as another significant issue to accessing child care. One parent in the Fargo workshop mentioned using close to 20 percent of their household income on early childhood services. Many others stated they use equally large portions of their income on early childhood services.

While the state provides some funding to support accessing early childhood care, many families find that these resources are designed for low-income families or families with children with disabilities. Fewer financial supports exist for families outside of these parameters, leaving many families with incomes just above the eligibility threshold but still struggling. Several parent workshop participants from Fargo and Mandan expressed difficulties with finding, accessing, and qualifying for child care assistance.

*"It shouldn't take me living in poverty to send my kid to pre-school—which it might be coming down to if I don't qualify for assistance." -Parent*

As early childhood care costs continue to financially challenge families, the option to grow and expand one's families is not viable for some parents. Many parent workshop participants in Fargo stated that the high cost of early childhood services was a significant contributing factor in their decision not to expand their families further.

**Parents struggle to navigate the application process for early childhood financial resources.** While many parent workshop participants in Fargo and Mandan acknowledged that the State provides some financial resources for early childhood, many also indicated that navigating the process is confusing and difficult. More specifically, these participants indicated having difficulty in understanding child care assistance or disability services program requirements and qualifications; completing application forms; and staying up-to-date with system or process changes. Tribal workshop participants similarly said they knew of both parents and providers who did not take advantage of Tribal or state supports because the paperwork was too burdensome.

*"... If I couldn't speak very fluent, educated English, there are zero ways I would have been able to get through that [child care assistance] application. And so, I just wondered as we took it, 'How was that accessible to refugee families? How was that accessible to low-educated families who aren't familiar with other parts*

*of the system? How was that accessible to people without a social worker?”*

*-Parent*

In addition to difficulties navigating the application process for child care assistance, some parent workshop participants utilizing state assistance expressed issues with payment delays, lack of communication about payment processing, and the limited pool of providers who accept assistance payments.

**Providers struggle to collaborate with each other and the State.** Provider workshop participants and some key informant interviewees said inter-sector collaboration is a significant challenge to the field. They noted that divisions occur across provider types (in-home, center-based, and school-based), with some providers having competitive versus cohesive relationships as they compete for the same resources. This competitive environment makes many providers unwilling or resistant to sharing information, further hindering collaboration. Where support networks exist, they are valuable for retention, such as one lauded in the Tribal workshop:

*“I couldn’t live without it.”*

*-Tribal provider, referencing a valuable support network*

Provider workshop participants and some key stakeholder interviewees noted several communication issues that contributed to poor inter-sector collaboration, including a lack of regular communication pathways among providers; poor communication about program changes, delays, or cancellations; and resistance from some providers to receive communication about child developmental needs or concerns during transitions. Some providers and key informants noted that communication issues were particularly prevalent between school-based providers (e.g., preschool) and non-school-based providers, where they said there is less incentive and time for communication.

Several workshop providers, key informant interviewees, and survey respondents characterized their relationship with the State as lacking mutual respect and partnership. They said this sentiment results from limited opportunities to give input on or be involved in the decision-making process for early childhood policies; poor communication from the State on policy changes or updates; and limited State funding and support for adequate compensation and professional development. Many in-home providers expressed feeling especially undervalued by the State as they battle to be recognized professionally for their competencies and skills.

**Providers want more in-depth and advanced training opportunities.** Workshop providers, key informant interviewees, and survey respondents highlighted a need for opportunities that support advancement and growth in the field of early childhood.

While the State does offer some training opportunities, many workshop providers and some key informant interviewees said many of these trainings are limited to topics for newer providers, difficult to fit within the provider schedule, and costly. Both key informant interviewees and some workshop providers also observed a need for in-home providers to build entrepreneurship

skills as they start their business. When survey respondents were asked about business support topics, 61 percent indicated wanting more support on the topics of budgeting and finances.

While the key motivation for most providers to advance in the field is tied to a desire to increase monetary compensation for their work, many also seek advancement as a way to increase competency and knowledge. Most survey respondents identified “Higher pay/more compensation at work” (65 percent) and “Satisfaction with having the most current knowledge of quality early learning practices” (50 percent) as very important for increasing their education related to early childhood. For providers already established in the field, the limited availability of advanced or in-depth training topics and the lack of funding and incentives for professional growth can hinder career advancement.

Both Tribal and non-Tribal providers in workshops described neo-natal substance abuse and the resulting effects on children in care as a top training need. These providers expressed a need for skills and patience to appropriately address behavioral challenges young children exhibit as they try to navigate the world while dealing with addiction or fetal alcohol syndrome.

**Parents described State communication efforts and methods as inconsistent and haphazard.** Some parent workshop participants said communications from the State about child care assistance, developmental disability services, child development, and licensed provider listings are difficult to access or are disseminated without notice. One parent workshop participant in Fargo stated that she learned about an update to child care assistance requirements for infants only after seeing a post on Facebook.

*“I wouldn't have known that unless somebody posted it and I randomly saw it.”  
-Parent on hearing about child care assistance requirement update via  
Facebook*

Many of these parents said they want a way to communicate directly with a person at the State but express fear due to negative interactions with State agencies. One parent workshop participant recounted an experience where she called a healthcare navigator for help accessing Medicaid, only to be laughed at and told that she had no clue what she was doing. Interactions like these increase parents’ fear and mistrust of the State, they said, with many avoiding the use of State helplines when seeking support.

*“That's kind of how everything is in North Dakota—yes, like from a parent perspective or somebody not part of the system, it looks haphazard, inconsistent, not well thought-out. But like I think people want to be heard and [they] don't feel like they are. That's how I feel.” -Parent*

**Communication gaps about operating hours emerged as a particularly tough challenge in Tribal communities.** Driving to a center and finding a note on a locked door indicating they are closed creates more than an inconvenience, Tribal workshop participants explained. Uneven access to Facebook hinders uniform communication using that platform on reservations.

Facebook is often the primary vehicle for communicating all kinds of information, but not everyone used it. At times, the use of Facebook communications created significant confidentiality issues as well.

**Parents want more timely early intervention and prevention services for their children.** When talking about access to resources for children’s development, many parent workshop participants in both Fargo and Mandan indicated that they struggle to find information unless they actively search for it. Even then, some parents find that navigating resources like the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services website is confusing and often does not provide the information they are seeking. In other cases, parents indicated that they received child development information only after seeking treatment for a specific issue.

**Providers struggle to pay staff adequate wages while staying accessible to families.** Workshop providers from Fargo and Mandan and key informant interviewees said providing staff with adequate compensation is a significant challenge as many struggle to find and access state subsidies that will help them hire and retain staff. While some workshop providers and key informant interviewees indicated knowing about existing state support funding sources, many also noted that these sources are disproportionately focused on the needs of children 4 years and older and offer few incentives for infant care. The lack of infant incentives, the generally low child care reimbursement rates, and staff-and-children ratios create a perfect storm that inhibits many providers from providing competitive wages and benefits that would attract staff without increasing costs to parents. This also leaves many early childhood providers earning poverty-level wages.

Financial constraints play out differently in each community; in the Tribal provider workshop, providers described a tug-of-war as wages rose and fell for either Head Start or early childhood care. Providers in both programs expressed commitment to children but said when their own livelihoods were significantly impacted, they needed to move to the employer with more financial benefits. This sometimes meant shifting back and forth, leaving families to face staff shortages and inconsistent care.

## Opportunities exist to strengthen the workforce and improve communication.

Parents, providers, and key informants pointed to opportunities to strengthen the early childhood workforce and improve communication.

### *Opportunities to get providers into the field and keep them well-trained and retained.*

Recruiting, training, and retaining early childhood providers are all essential components for a thriving early childhood system. While there are different opportunities to achieve this, the overarching message from needs assessment participants is that providers need to be fairly compensated, well-supported, and given access to career advancement.

**Providers are more likely to remain in the field when their hard work providing quality care is recognized with fair wages and benefits.**

A resounding theme across data sources was the need for early childhood providers to earn a higher, livable wage that represents the value of the work they do for families and the community. In the provider survey, about half of respondents said they did not plan to stay in the field for the rest of their careers; when asked what drove this decision, more than a third pointed to low wages and a lack of benefits. One provider shared their reason for wanting to leave the field:

*“Not high enough wages. I love my job and the work I do, but sometimes I struggle to afford my needs. I often feel as though I could work almost anywhere else and get paid more. I find it frustrating, being that the work I do as a child care provider is so valuable, yet I get paid less than those who work in other basic jobs, such as fast food restaurants or grocery stores.” -Provider*

Similarly, appropriate compensation is a factor in recruiting workers to the early childhood field. Workshop provider participants and key informant interviewees discussed the difficulty in hiring and retaining staff when potential workers could earn more money and receive benefits in what they perceive as less-demanding jobs.

**Professional acknowledgement and appreciation can keep providers in the field.** Workshop provider participants and key informant interviewees highlighted providers’ need to feel appreciated and supported as professionals. Early childhood providers are extremely important for the development of the next generation and necessary to support economic functioning by allowing parents to work. However, some providers feel treated like “babysitters” rather than as the skilled professionals they are. Professional acknowledgement and appreciation is especially important as providers experience increasing child needs, challenges with child behaviors and parents, and difficulty in managing operations—all of which require training, support, and dedication to address.

As providers gain training, skills, and competence, they want to be recognized for their efforts and for the improved care they provide, they said. Many providers raised this in the survey; a key informant interviewee also affirmed the importance of recognition. Recognition was raised both in terms of finances (e.g. compensation) and respect (e.g. parents caring about their increased skills). Fifty-one percent of respondents reported that “compensation for completing training/being coached” is a top 5 reason for deciding to participate in training.

**Training is more accessible when it is low-cost, and providers have access to financial support from both the State and their employers.** Training must be accessible and compensated, either monetarily or through career development. When asked the top five things that are important when deciding to participate in training, the five most common responses in the provider survey were:

1. Low or no cost.



2. Virtual training at my own pace or on my own schedule (i.e., can do it whenever I want).
3. Compensation for completing training.
4. Fulfills licensing requirements.
5. Is offered virtually.

Asked the same question but about deciding to participate in coaching, the five most common responses in the survey were similar:

1. Low or no cost.
2. Compensation for completing training/being coached.
3. Virtual training at my own pace or on my own schedule (i.e., can do it whenever I want).
4. Relevant topics (i.e., related to questions/issues I have at work).
5. Virtual training.

Note that analysis of these survey responses showed many respondents thought the question was asking them about their interest in being a coach themselves—not about being coached, as was the intention.

Relatedly, when it comes to costs of increasing their education, financial assistance for tuition/training programs was very important to 47 percent of survey respondents.

**Providers are more likely to stay in the early childhood field when they have a variety of training options to increase competency and opportunities for advancement.** Key informants and survey responses show providers are also motivated to advance in the field when there is a step-by-step pathway from training efforts to a degree or other career advancement. As the survey showed, many people reported that they may leave the field due to a lack of advancement opportunities. Key informants and survey respondents raised the importance of having a variety of training options (e.g., formats, topics, times, locations) to ensure that training is accessible and relevant to their needs.

Only 7 percent of provider survey respondents said “Clear professional development opportunities and trajectory” keep them in the field. Asked about how important various factors would be for increasing their education regarding their role, 55 percent said “more responsibility or a more advanced role at work” would be either somewhat or very important.

Currently, there are few options for career advancement without increasing formal education; even then, a provider with more education or training does not necessarily earn higher wages.

**Connecting young people to early childhood opportunities early in their careers can encourage them to enter the field.** Introducing young people to the field and making it easy for them to develop their career from there could support a pipeline of early childhood professionals, participants said. Some key informant providers suggested partnerships between high schools/colleges and child care providers or changes to systems to make it easier for young people to try working in early childhood settings. In addition, some providers in workshops shared that they wanted all childhood development coursework to be reimbursed,

which is currently not the case. In one example of a unique recruitment strategy, one Tribal college in the state provides free daycare for any student pursuing an education degree.

### *Opportunities to improve communication*

Participants shared preferences about communication about training opportunities (for providers), child care financial resources (for parents and primary caregivers), and updates on children (between providers and parents/primary caregivers). Across North Dakota, preferences differ by audience, suggesting the State should consider geography (rural versus urban); age of parents and caregivers (e.g., younger families may be better reached through social media); and families for whom English is not the primary language as it designs communications. Since some participants said State communications can be sporadic and notify people about opportunities with little notice, opportunities also exist to be **more consistent and proactive** in communications.

Opportunities exist to **increase awareness of existing resources**—some parents and key informants described a disconnect between what is out there, such as free- or low-cost support, and parents' knowledge of how to access that support. Parents described that having navigators (like parent educators) who provide support and get them connected to resources would be helpful. Tribal workshop participants similarly suggested navigators to guide people through what can be complicated and intimidating processes (e.g., applying for child care assistance).

Regular newsletters and an online calendar would **help parents stay updated on ways to be engaged and get their children the support** they need to grow and develop. Parents also expressed wanting targeted supports or resources based on life situations (e.g., working parents, stay-at-home parents, single parents, different children ages, etc.), reduced costs for child care, and quality experiences for kids (e.g. children's museums, community play spaces).

Many participants expressed preferences for **short videos and visual flyers**, rather than text-heavy communications for ease of reading. In contrast, the parent group in Mandan strongly suggested a monthly physical newsletter be mailed to their house. They said this format would cut through the noise of all the other online options—and the reality that some do not use Facebook—though having the newsletter be available online would be good for referencing later. They were energized by the idea of the newsletter containing resources/programs for parents and their children, activity ideas, and information about milestones and development.

## Conclusion & recommendations

The results of this needs assessment demonstrate that much of the Preschool Development Grant plans have focused on what matters to parents and child care providers. Many of the needs and desires families, providers, and key informants described for a strong early childhood sector align with strategies North Dakota has in place. Participants pointed to some priorities for moving forward. Recommendations are as follows:

**Improve communication about quality measures and standards.** Families from different backgrounds (Tribal/Indigenous, New Americans, white, etc.) had different ideas about what successful children and quality care looked like. To this end, North Dakota should improve and increase communications across parents and providers about the existing quality standards and gather targeted input from parents and providers representing different racial, ethnic, and Tribal groups to incorporate how the standard might look in different settings. Similarly, increasing communication about core competencies that support professional growth will support providers asking for clarity about pathways that are open to them. The State should ensure these standards and competencies are translated into multiple languages to recognize and serve the full diversity of providers serving North Dakotan families.

**Build more opportunities for people providing direct care to children to advance professionally.** The State should deepen options and promote better awareness about trainings for the range of providers supporting children ages birth to 5. Develop and market training opportunities for providers to know how to respond to specific needs of children, for example, characteristics and strategies for working with children born to a mother struggling with substance abuse. Continue to centralize training opportunities into Growing Futures, including expanding opportunities through new partners who are providing high-quality offerings. In communicating about training, emphasize that providers are valued professionals who deserve to grow and be recognized in their field, a request that was raised among providers.

**Continue to infuse financial support into the sector to ensure child care providers are paid well and families can afford care.** Provider incentives—such as what was offered as pandemic relief—support fair provider wages. The federal Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is an existing resource to increase subsidies to eligible families. The State can increase communication about CCAP to providers, who are able to refer families to the program to afford care. The State can also provide small business support to providers; providers expressed some interest in small business loans to increase compensation for employees.

**Develop a broad communications plan across early child care professionals and families.** The plan should educate these audiences on child development milestones and strategies for helping children be healthy. It can also raise awareness of existing resources and how to access them. The State should coordinate with and leverage early intervention professionals to craft messaging content and formats that are inclusive of diverse families and children with a range of needs. The State should consider ways to broaden access to further education on these topics to

include the range of caregivers in a child's life (e.g. parents, child care providers, medical professionals, etc.). Both parents and providers expressed the benefits of learning more about how to support children. Considering what providers indicated in the survey, marketing to recruit new professionals to the field could focus on the love of children and convenient hours as entry points, while also adding the opportunity for career stability.

**Move forward with implementing the Pyramid Model, increasing communication about what it is, and increasing education on how to use it to increase quality.** Providers said there is a need in North Dakota to raise awareness that addressing social-emotional needs is foundational for children's growth; meeting all of children's needs is important to all participants. In the provider survey, most respondents said they are not using the Pyramid Model, which addresses social-emotional needs, though many are interested in learning about it.

# Appendix

## Detailed methodology

### *Outreach*

Outreach methods for data collection leveraged existing connections among state staff and providers across North Dakota.

Outreach for **interviews** included emails and phone calls to schedule interviews with informants.

Researchers worked with State staff to send the provider **survey** to providers registered on North Dakota's Growing Futures Registry. This registry reaches providers across the state with information on early development and learning. Providers in this registry include early learning professionals such as child care providers, administrators of child care and Pre-K and preschools, and Pre-K and preschool instructors and aides. Researchers sent an email invitation to this registry with the survey overview and link, along with two reminder emails. The first 500 participants received a \$15 Amazon gift card as an incentive for participating. The needs assessment team also posted social media reminders asking providers to check their email for a link to the survey.

Outreach for in-person **workshops** was tailored to each community. All workshop participants received an \$80 Amazon gift card for their contributions. Registration for the workshops included questions to screen participants and confirm potential participants' eligibility as a parent of a child aged 0-5 in North Dakota.

- The Aug. 2, 2023, Fargo workshop was planned around the Out-of-School Time and Early Childhood Summit. The needs assessment team asked summit organizers and local organizations to advertise the workshop to providers and local families; again, social media posts was used to expand outreach.
- For the Aug. 9, 2023, Mandan workshop, the needs assessment team worked with a well-connected local organization to reach early childhood parents and providers. This organization helped advertise the workshop opportunity through existing communication channels that reach parents and providers. The State also supported outreach to providers in the local area.
- The Aug. 24, 2023, Spirit Lake Reservation workshop was organized around the reservation and a Tribal child care site. The site invited providers and parents in their area. Tribal partners in the needs assessment also did some outreach and spoke to a mix of providers and parents on MHA Nation, Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, and Standing Rock.

### *Participants*

<b>Data collection method</b>	<b>Sample</b>
Mandan/Bismark workshop	14* providers 9 parents
Fargo workshop	9* providers 6 parents
Spirit Lake workshop	12* providers 7 parents
Key informant interviews	17
Survey	657

\*Many providers were also parents.

### *Data collection tools*

See ND PDG team lead for tools. Attached separately. The workshop guide was adapted in the moment for the Spirit Lake Reservation workshop to ensure cultural relevancy.

### *Analysis process*

Qualitative data from interviews and workshops were transferred into debrief forms, which summarized key points for each of the protocol questions organized by evaluation question. Completed forms were then assigned to and open coded by Improve Group team members to develop higher-level themes in the data. These themes were then reviewed and applied to each of the evaluation questions in a team workshop with The Improve Group and FNWA. Through this workshop, the teams identified, reviewed, and revised key findings for each of the evaluation questions. Key findings were converted to statements and presented to key community stakeholders, providers, parents, and state staff in an emerging findings meeting. This meeting provided an opportunity for participants to provide feedback on the findings, which was then used to further refine finding statements.

Quantitative data received from the survey was organized and analyzed using Excel and SPSS. Key findings from this analysis were reviewed and compared with the qualitative data during the team retreat and incorporated into the final finding statements developed for each evaluation question.