

# Evaluation of the First 10 Pilot

## Introduction

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In 2020, Michigan was one of 20 states selected by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to receive a Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B–5) Renewal Grant. This grant funded the First 10 Pilot, among other Michigan Department of Education (MDE) initiatives, under the state’s broad goal of preparing children to enter kindergarten and improving transitions into school. Michigan launched a pilot of the First 10 initiative, a community-based school readiness program, in June of 2022.

As part of Michigan’s PDG B–5 evaluation, MDE contracted with the American Institutes for Research<sup>®</sup> (AIR<sup>®</sup>) to conduct an evaluation of the First 10 Pilot. This brief describes the findings from the evaluation, which focused on the initiative’s first year of implementation, including successes and challenges.

## About First 10

First 10 is a community-based intervention offered by the Education Development Center (EDC), a nonprofit research and technical assistance (TA) organization. The overall goal of the First 10 initiative is to improve young children’s well-being and school readiness by increasing collaboration among elementary schools, early childhood education (ECE) programs, health and social service agencies, and other partners; providing comprehensive services for children and families; and fostering culturally responsive partnerships with families. The model builds on research demonstrating the importance of aligned, coordinated high-quality early childhood experiences, particularly for children whose families are experiencing poverty.<sup>1</sup>

Each First 10 site conducts an initial needs assessment and asset-mapping in their community to inform the development of a First 10 action plan. First 10 strategies typically include kindergarten transition activities, school-connected “play and learn” groups, and community-wide parenting campaigns. As part of their efforts to improve children’s transition to kindergarten, sites offer joint professional development to kindergarten teachers and ECE staff. An EDC First 10 facilitator provides TA to each site. Typically, EDC works with each site for 2 to 3 years to support implementation. Sites can continue to participate in ongoing meetings with a national network of First 10 sites to inform their work.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobson, D. (2019, April). *All children learn and thrive: Building First 10 schools and communities* [Policy study]. Education Development Center.

MDE selected six First 10 sites to implement the initiative, providing funding from June 2022 through September 2023. The six First 10 sites are in the lower and upper peninsulas of Michigan, representing both rural and urban communities.

To address the study’s research questions (see sidebar), we conducted individual and group interviews in April and May 2023 with team members from each of the six First 10 sites. These team members included principals, assistant principals, and assistant superintendents; directors of early learning; an instruction and student services coordinator; a curriculum and a literacy specialist; a professional development coach; a charter school network leader; directors of the local Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP), Head Start program, and Early Head Start program; a professional school business manager; and kindergarten and preschool teachers. In addition, we conducted an interview with EDC TA facilitators to gather context about the initiative. Interviews were conducted almost a year after each site received funding and launched their work. After coding the qualitative data, we analyzed the information to identify common themes in response to the research questions.

## Findings

This section highlights findings from the implementation evaluation of the Michigan First 10 Pilot Study.

### **The First 10 Model Is Designed to Adapt to Local Context.**

In the initial phase of the First 10 initiative, a facilitator leads the First 10 site team through a needs assessment process to identify gaps and challenges within the community. In addition, the team engages in an asset-mapping exercise to inventory existing services and resources related to children’s well-being and school readiness. The information generated through the needs assessment and asset-mapping work informs the development of a First 10 action plan.

In general, pilot sites described the asset-mapping and needs assessment process as positive and an important first step in planning their work. They appreciated that the First 10 model was flexible and intentionally leveraged existing strengths. One site leader explained that “[EDC] heard that we were

### Research Questions

1. How did pilot sites implement First 10 strategies?
2. How did sites consider diversity, equity, and inclusion in their work to implement First 10 strategies?
3. What were the challenges and successes in implementing First 10?
4. How will participation in First 10 continue? What protocols or plans have been put in place to ensure sustainability?
5. What additional supports, if any, would pilot sites like from First 10 or the MDE to continue to implement First 10 in their community?
6. What recommendations does each pilot site have for other communities interested in implementing First 10?

already doing stuff and they did not make us stop and do it the First 10 way . . . I think there was a lot of hesitation from us because our program was already fairly developed.” The site leader emphasized that EDC helped them braid First 10 strategies into their existing practices and procedures rather than develop something entirely new.

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*[EDC was] a great thought partner for thinking about how to better use the data that we already have and pushed us to think about how to make better connections in our existing systems so that [they're] more useful to us.*

—Director of Early Learning

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## **First 10 Pilot Sites Addressed Barriers That Limit Families’ Access to School Readiness Services.**

All the First 10 site leaders reported that they were focused on removing barriers to improve access to kindergarten-readiness-related programming and resources, including for families from historically underserved groups. These efforts included holding play and learn groups in more neighborhoods, offering childcare at evening events, and providing transportation to kindergarten roundup events. Some sites indicated that they have focused on income disparities in their communities, helping families experiencing homelessness access kindergarten readiness services and resources. In addition, several sites indicated that they were putting considerable effort into engaging a broader range of ECE programs and community partners than they have in the past to increase awareness of their programming to more diverse groups of families. Sites also said that they have made greater efforts to staff First 10 events with people from the communities they serve and to select children’s books that represent diversity in terms of race, culture, and language.

## **Joint Professional Development Increased Collaboration Between Pre-K and Kindergarten Teachers.**

Prior to First 10, it was rare for sites to include pre-K and kindergarten teachers together in professional learning activities, given how difficult it is to schedule these. Pre-K and kindergarten teachers tend to work on different schedules, and sites lack funding for substitutes. However, funding through the First 10 initiative has enabled sites to hire substitute teachers, hold training sessions during the day, and compensate teachers when training sessions are held at night.

Pilot site leaders described a range of topics covered in joint pre-K and kindergarten training supported by First 10 (see sidebar), much of which focused on creating stronger alignment among preschool and kindergarten

### **Joint Pre-K and Kindergarten Professional Development Topics**

1. Alignment between kindergarten and preschool curricula
2. Kindergarten and preschool child assessment tools and procedures
3. Kindergarten, Head Start, and GSRP learning standards
4. Use of data from the local GSRP Parent Advisory Committee
5. Essential literacy practices
6. Information on community-based resources for families with young children

curricula, assessment, and learning standards. Pilot site leaders emphasized that a significant benefit of joint professional development, beyond strengthening teachers' knowledge in these topic areas, has been the opportunity for kindergarten and preschool teachers to connect; develop an understanding of one another's skills, expertise, and teaching practices; and build mutual respect and understanding.

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*A feature of our joint professional learning is that we want to ensure that the early childhood educators are afforded the same respect that the kindergarten teachers receive, so that they are on [an] equal playing field. It's a two-way conversation. It's not just the kindergarten teachers saying, "well, this is what you need to do to prepare a kid for kindergarten." We want it to be a conversation where they're learning from each other.*

—First 10 Facilitator

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### **To Facilitate Families' Transition Into School Systems, First 10 Pilot Sites Enriched Kindergarten Roundup Events.**

All the First 10 sites focused on improving their kindergarten roundup events (which schools offered before they participated in First 10) to identify, enroll, and support the transition of children into kindergarten. Through the initiative, First 10 Pilot sites had an opportunity to (a) think more strategically about these events in the context of promoting successful kindergarten transition, (b) include preschool and kindergarten teachers in planning efforts, and (c) engage more community partners to promote the events.

Sites used a variety of strategies to improve their existing roundup approaches, such as holding more events, offering transportation to families attending the events, providing more resources to parents ("swag bags" with parenting information and children's books), offering play activities for children to help teachers gauge their developmental strengths and needs, and linking families to health and social services based on needs. Through First 10, one site began offering hearing and vision screenings at their kindergarten roundup events, a requirement for enrollment in school.

### **To Foster Children's School Readiness and Engage Families, First 10 Pilot Sites Implemented School-Connected Play and Learn Groups.**

First 10 Pilot sites implemented play and learn groups (or expanded existing groups to reach more families) to support children before they enter kindergarten. Each of the sites tailored the play and learn groups on the basis of the needs of their communities. Two sites hosted groups for children birth to 5 years old, whereas others focused specifically on toddlers and/or preschoolers. One site held groups specifically for children 4 to 7 years old, with the goal of increasing parent engagement in school and bringing more families into the kindergarten building.

Prior to First 10, sites that already had play and learn groups held them at various locations, such as libraries. Through First 10, the majority of sites shifted their groups to local elementary schools to create a stronger connection between the community and the school. In most sites, a kindergarten teacher or an early childhood professional from the intermediate school district planned and led the

group, with support from GSRP, Head Start teachers, home visitors, and/or other early childhood staff. Play group series varied in length across the pilot sites, with some lasting up to 6 weeks. In general, play groups included fun activities to promote children’s development, as well as a component to help parents to become familiar with the school and learn about community-based services and supports. The play groups also provided an opportunity for teachers and parents to discuss children’s strengths and needs, including the potential need for early intervention services prior to kindergarten entry.

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*Our current play and learn model engages the parent and the child in all the domains of early childhood development. It connects them to community resources and to parenting tips. We were able to weave the First 10 model into what was already happening. Adding in The Basics was easy to do because it was really kind of already there, but it also enriched it and strengthened it.*

—Great Start Collaborative Coordinator

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### **Sites Used a Range of Other Strategies to Align Pre-K and Kindergarten Practices.**

Beyond joint professional development and kindergarten roundup events, other First 10 strategies varied across the six sites. Several examples of those strategies included the following:

- **Improving outreach to early childhood programs.** All the pilot sites expanded their outreach to local early childhood programs, including Head Start and home-based early childhood programs, to improve their participation in kindergarten transition events and create stronger connections with local schools.
- **Improving the use of child-level data.** One site standardized how pre-K teachers document child assessment findings to improve consistency in the type and level of information provided to kindergarten teachers.
- **Supporting early literacy.** Some efforts focused on early literacy—for example, all sites reported using funds to distribute books to families and classrooms. Two sites reported that they created book lists, jointly developed by pre-K and kindergarten teachers. The sites provided the selected books to families, local libraries, community-based early childhood programs, preschools, and kindergarten classrooms.

### **To Raise Awareness About the Importance of Early Learning, First 10 Sites Implemented Parenting Campaigns.**

All but one of Michigan’s First 10 sites implemented a parenting campaign known as “The Basics,” which is part of the First 10 model and recommended by EDC. The Basics is designed to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood development and provides parents with guidance for how to best support children’s growth. As a campaign, The Basics is meant to be implemented community-wide together with community partners who regularly engage with families (e.g., pediatricians offices, religious spaces, libraries) to spread information on child development and developmentally appropriate parenting skills.

Most First 10 sites indicated that they shared information from The Basics on social media, via flyers in the community, through items given out during kindergarten roundup, and through school communication platforms (e.g., Classroom Dojo). Most sites also reported that they integrated parent education activities from The Basics model into their play and learn groups. One site reported that they added information from The Basics campaign to their family data visits with pre-K parents, which are meetings to discuss children’s progress and answer parents’ questions. Another site used kindergarten roundup events to talk to parents about The Basics’ core message and resources. The site that reported that they did not use The Basics indicated that they had already successfully implemented their own community-wide parenting campaign, which they found to be very similar to The Basics.

The Basics includes an optional “The Basics Insights” texting service in which parents receive parenting information on their smartphones on a weekly basis. The messages provide parents with evidence-based child development facts and activities to do with their children. First 10 sites must purchase The Basics texting component and are responsible for enrolling families in the service. Sites reported marketing the text program during kindergarten roundup events, through a district-wide superintendent’s letter, and via other means. Site leaders described varying levels of success in recruiting parents for the text component, with one site reporting being able to sign up only 17 families countywide. This site theorized that families “are just getting too many text messages” to find the service valuable. In general, feedback from sites on The Basics texting service were mixed, with one site disliking it because of recruitment challenges, another expressing satisfaction, and one other site stating that they did not use the service because they already had one in place. The three remaining sites did not indicate whether they used the texting service as part of their campaigns.

### **The First 10 Pilot Has Helped to Improve Collaboration Among Schools, Early Childhood Programs, and Community Partners, Among Other Positive Outcomes.**

After a year of implementation, pilot site leaders expressed strong satisfaction with the initiative. In addition to providing needed funding, the initiative elevated school readiness as a priority within school systems (and the larger community). Site leaders reported that they were able to make progress on long-standing goals, such as expanding kindergarten roundup events, through the initiative.

Positive outcomes of participation in the initiative, according to pilot sites, include increased collaboration between local partners, including pre-K and kindergarten teachers, schools and pre-K programs, and schools and local health and social service agencies. In addition, sites reported stronger engagement by staff and families in school readiness events because of funding for teacher compensation and family incentives.

The initiative has also helped schools effectively reach more families before the first day of kindergarten. Site leaders noted that there has been an increase in the number of families reached through school readiness events and through improved services and supports. In addition to helping

families become more familiar and comfortable with their local school, the initiative helped raise awareness of local services and supports, such as GSRP and play and learn groups.

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*As a result of the joint work, the preschool teachers feel that they are making great strides in regaining or strengthening that respect for what they do. They [are] really excited about squashing that perception that all they do is play. So they're feeling much more valued and respected and appreciated.*

—Instruction and Student Services Coordinator

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### **Participation in the First 10 Initiative Requires a Significant Time Commitment, a Challenge for Some Sites.**

Site leaders emphasized that implementation of the First 10 initiative is time intensive, requiring a deep level of commitment by staff. Several sites reported that teachers and other staff struggled with the amount of time needed to fully participate in the initiative in addition to their existing responsibilities. For example, one site reported that they had a significant amount of turnover of teachers participating in the initiative, with some teachers dropping out of the program because they lacked the bandwidth to attend the required number of meetings and activities.

Another, somewhat related, challenge was the initiative's overall time frame. Pilot leaders reported that it took time to craft a strong First 10 implementation plan and that the period to engage with the First 10 EDC facilitator and implement First 10 activities was compressed. They described challenges implementing activities as planned and lack of time to engage as many partners as they had hoped.

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*All the people we're working with are busy. All the community-based providers are busy. You don't want to...but you're adding one more thing to their already busy day.*

—Assistant Superintendent

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### **First 10 Sites Are Committed to Sustaining the Changes They Implemented During the Pilot Phase, but Continued Funding Is Needed.**

At the time of our interviews (spring 2023), all site leaders reported that they were planning ways to continue—and strengthen—the First 10 approach in the 2023–24 school year. Most pilot sites reported that they considered joint pre-K and kindergarten professional development as the new norm. They planned to schedule these trainings far in advance to be responsive to pre-K and kindergarten teachers' schedule constraints.

Although there was interest in continuing to use First 10 practices, sites were not certain about their ability to sustain these changes after First 10 funding ended. Some sites indicated that several of the changes they made during their pilot activities could be sustained relatively inexpensively, such as continuing the needs assessment process. However, most changes they have implemented will require continued funding. These include compensating teachers to lead play and learn groups, attend

professional development and meetings, and plan kindergarten roundup events. Sites reported that when First 10 funding ends, they plan to seek alternate funding to support continued implementation of the features they identify as most important to their work. A site leader explained that without funding, “We’re going to, once again, count on teachers to give up their time, on their off time, to [do the work].”

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*I think we’re going to have to prioritize what are the most important parts that we really want to continue. And then work with our assistant superintendent who handles the grants and really leaning on him to say, “Okay, well, if we really want to continue this play and learn that’s really bringing families in and has been really successful, we have to be able to pay people, can we use 31A funds? Can we use a different type of fund to pay our teachers? And then how are we going to continue that?” Because that is a big barrier to continuing things. And we can’t expect people to just volunteer their time.*

—Assistant Principal

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## **To Support Implementation of the First 10 Initiative, Pilot Sites Urged the State to Invest in Early Childhood Systems and Services.**

Site leaders provided input on how the state could better support the First 10 initiative. Their responses focused on how the state could broadly improve early childhood systems and services, including implementing universal childcare, investing in the early childhood workforce, and continuing to pass policies that support families with young children. In general, First 10 Pilot leaders did not have specific needs to help advance their work—beyond continued First 10 funding.

## **Pilot Sites Shared Their Lessons Learned, Including the Importance of a Committed, Inclusive Planning Team.**

First 10 Pilot sites provided feedback for other communities interested in participating in the initiative, including the following:

- Ensure that the planning team is fully committed to the initiative, including before asking others to buy into the initiative.
- Be realistic about the time commitment required by participation in the initiative.
- Engage new collaborative partners, including on the planning team.
- Define a small set of actionable goals that are responsive to the needs of the community within the first year of the initiative rather than trying to accomplish too much at the start.
- Avoid viewing First 10 as “just another thing” and find strategies to braid the initiative into existing practices and procedures.
- Document the First 10 work to better understand what works well (and what does not) and to support continuity in the face of staff turnover.
- Take advantage of EDC’s TA, leveraging their knowledge of effective practices.



## Conclusion

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Each of the six pilot sites expressed strong satisfaction with their participation in the First 10 initiative. In particular, the sites emphasized that the initiative helped them create stronger connections between pre-K and kindergarten teachers, including through joint professional development opportunities. The sites described play and learn groups as effective ways of engaging families to help them learn about the school and about ways they can support their child at home. Pilot sites improved their kindergarten roundup events and implemented other activities, including some focused on early literacy, to support children’s transition into kindergarten. After the first year of implementation, pilot site leaders reported plans to continue their efforts in the coming school year. However, sites emphasized the need for continued funding to carry out some activities, particularly for staff compensation.

Participation in the initiative requires a significant time commitment, according to pilot leaders, and as a result, some sites reported turnover among teachers who participated. Relatedly, the initiative’s time frame is somewhat compressed, given the importance of beginning the work with an asset-mapping and needs assessment process. However, these steps are important to ensure that First 10 can be integrated into existing efforts rather than duplicating them.

After almost a year of implementation, pilot leaders indicated that it was too early to gauge the long-term impact of improved kindergarten readiness efforts but were optimistic about the promise of the initiative. First 10 funding kickstarted changes that many sites had hoped to make for a long time—as well as helped them identify new ways to improve their efforts to support children’s readiness for kindergarten and foster their school success.

*The project described was supported by the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Initiative (PDG B–5), Grant Number 90TP0055-03-00, from the Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Child Care, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*