

First Year Recap: PDG Indigenous Evaluation

February 2023

Minnesota's Preschool Development Birth through Five grant (PDG) is a partnership of the Minnesota departments of Education, Health, and Human Services, along with the Children's Cabinet, to align education and care systems across the state. The three-year, \$26.7 million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services supports expecting families and families with children age 5 and younger. Wilder Research was contracted to conduct an Indigenous evaluation of the grant activities, focused on the experiences of and impacts on Indigenous families. The evaluation plan guiding the work was developed collaboratively with Indigenous grantees and partners, and the State. In December 2022, Wilder Research analyzed administrative data, which are presented here, along with highlights of the first year of evaluation.

Indigenous children face more risk factors compared to all Minnesota children

There are over 11,000 Indigenous children in Minnesota under age 6. This includes children under age 6 that identify as American Indian either alone or in combination with other racial and ethnic identities.

A large proportion of young Indigenous children (69%) live in greater Minnesota. Compared to young children statewide, young Indigenous children are more likely to live in rental housing, to have moved in the past year, and to live either in a single-parent household or with a non-parent (such as with a grandparent or in foster care). Young Indigenous children also live in households that have median incomes that are 75% that of children statewide.

1. CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIGENOUS CHILDREN COMPARED TO ALL MINNESOTA CHILDREN

Characteristic	All children (403,568)	Indigenous children (11,076)
Median household income	\$100,000	\$76,300*
Live in greater Minnesota	44%	69%*
All parents are working	70%	83%*
Live with parent	97%	82%*
Not moved in the past year	85%	66%*
Live in two parent households	87%	62%*
Not living in rental housing	77%	51%*
Attend preschool	54%	46%
Insured	98%	95%
Not living in poverty	89%	83%
Living in affordable housing (<30% of family income is going to housing)	78%	69%

* indicates statistically significant differences

Key takeaway: The disparate income and housing opportunities among households with Indigenous children point to a need for targeted, culturally specific interventions to support Indigenous families and communities. PDG interventions seek to build upon Indigenous strengths and traditions to support families in raising their children.



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

State staff are supporting grantees to guide the PDG efforts

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 Dutch immigrants 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.

Indigenous grantees and state staff indicated in interviews that the grant initiatives stemming from PDG are community-led, a refreshing change from most grant initiatives. The PDG has been more inclusive of Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities, and grantees feel this inclusion is “better” than it has been in the past. Grantees report the support, flexibility, and ability to guide their work is unparalleled in most grant settings. The unique issues of sovereignty and dual citizenship are being acknowledged. Grantees reported that this is not their experience across all state departments. Having a dedicated cross-agency early childhood Tribal Nations Lead is a huge asset to the PDG.

Key takeaway: PDG is engaging Indigenous communities and Tribal Nations in a new way, honoring sovereignty in ways that the state has not done before, and allowing Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities to guide the work. This approach could be broadened statewide.

PDG has increased resources to Indigenous communities through two Indigenous Community Resource Hubs

The “three sisters garden” represents a method of growing three staple crops – corn, beans, and squash. When planted together, the Three Sisters work together to help one another survive and thrive. This method of gardening draws upon centuries of Indigenous agricultural traditions and expertise. In this project, the three sisters garden is a metaphor for the resources that have been made available through the PDG. The PDG is funding Community Resources Hubs and the online Help Me Connect website to provide resources to Indigenous families with young children.



Twelve **Community Resources Hubs**, including two Indigenous Hubs – Red Lake Nation and Baby Space (in Minneapolis) – were funded through PDG to help families find and access existing services. Grand Portage, Fond du Lac, and White Earth are tribal partners with several Hubs.

- Through September 2022, the Hubs reached over 1,000 Indigenous families with navigation services.
- The two Indigenous Hubs served 338 people, reaching 388 children (duplicated).
- Two-thirds of people coming into the Hubs were parents, and a majority of those had children birth through kindergarten age (Figure 2).
- 256 referrals were made to the 338 people who came to the Hubs, and 97% of those referrals were successfully linked to the referring organization. The top five services families came in for were: child care (26%), food (18%), transportation (15%), financial support for child care (13%), and family well-being, including mental health (10%).

2. REACH OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY RESOURCE HUBS

People coming to the Hub (N=338)	%	Children served (N=388)	%
Parents	66%	Infant to 3 years old	35%
Grandparents	17%	3 years old to kindergarten	38%
Guardians	6%	Kindergarten to 3rd grade	19%
Caregivers (aunt, uncle, cousin, friend, etc.)	6%	3rd grade or up	7%
Providers (childcare, home visitor, etc.)	5%		

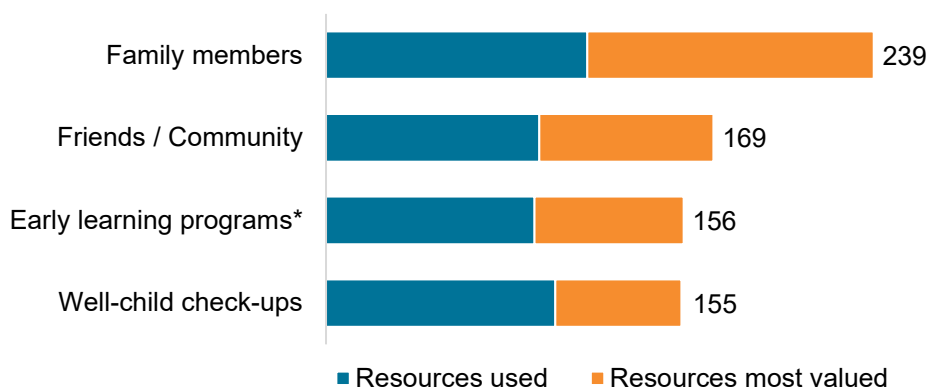
Help Me Connect is an online navigator that connects expectant families and families with young children, as well as social service providers, to needed services. Out of 159,000 visits to the site through November 2022, 432 visits were made to the American Indian page. A majority of users (66%) ended their visit to the website after clicking on that page, not going any further.

Indigenous caregivers rely on family members, friends and community, early learning programs and well-child check-ups to help their children thrive

In spring and summer 2022, Wilder Research hosted a bead voting booth at three events in the Twin Cities. Indigenous caregivers were asked to indicate (by placing beads in jars) which programs and supports they have used to help their child(ren) grow physically, culturally, spiritually, and academically, and which were most valuable to them. Approximately 95 caregivers participated. According to the number of beads placed in each jar, the most commonly used and valuable resources to caregivers were: family members, friends/community members, early learning programs, and well-child checkups.



3. RESOURCES MOST USED AND VALUED BY INDIGENOUS CAREGIVERS



* American Indian Montessori, PreK, High5, Headstart

Key takeaway: While the Hubs and Help Me Connect reached only a small proportion of the target population (Indigenous families with young children), several hundred Indigenous families received referrals or accessed information they may not otherwise have had access to as a result of these PDG-funded resources. Sharing information about resources to the larger community could help increase word-of-mouth access.

Grandmas will know whether children are thriving

During the evaluation co-design process with the PDG Indigenous grantees, one of the participants said “we will know if our Indigenous children are doing well by how their grandmas feel they are doing.” The “Grandma Test” is used as a metaphor in the PDG Indigenous evaluation to address the impact of the PDG on Indigenous children, families, and communities. It indicates how children are able to interact with their grandmas and other Indigenous relatives. Can they tell jokes and giggle with their friends and elder relatives using their Indigenous language? Do they interact with their peers and relatives in ways that reflect their cultural values and teachings?



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.

Although Indigenous 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 be able to thrive in this world with that basis of strength and resilience.

These culturally relevant tools were designed with input from Indigenous people and measure impact based on Indigenous values and ways of knowing. The place value on the perspectives of elders and use storytelling, a traditional Indigenous ways of sharing information.

Grandma Test Observation Tool

As part of the PDG Indigenous evaluation, Wilder worked with PDG Indigenous grantees and elders to develop the “Grandma Test” observation tool to assess a young child’s development from an Indigenous worldview, which emphasizes balance and development of cultural values and aligned behaviors. It is intended to be administered by an elder or non-professional to provide a snapshot of child’s activity in an early childhood program; it is not intended to be used a comprehensive assessment or diagnostic tool.

The first step in developing this tool was to talk with PDG Indigenous grantees and the elders who work with them about what is important in early childhood development from an Indigenous perspective. Based on that input, Wilder developed two versions of the observation tool. The first version uses the Seven Grandfather Teachings, which are core Ojibwe cultural values (other tribes have similar teachings, such as the Seven Lakota virtues). This version, which asks the elder observer to indicate when they see behaviors in a child that are consistent or not consistent with these teachings, may be better suited for children are age two or older. The second version of the observation tool is based around the medicine wheel and the foundational Indigenous value of balance, and may be more appropriate and easier to use for the very youngest babies and toddlers. Both versions of the tool gather some contextual information about the circumstances under which the observation occurred, and provide space for the elder observer to indicate the child’s strengths as well as areas where the child may need additional support, and what that support might look like.

The next step was to try out the tool. As of the end of 2022, Wilder had received a handful of pilot test observations from elder observers and was working with other elders and PDG Indigenous grantees to compile a few more. After we receive the completed forms, Wilder will meet with the elders and PDG Indigenous grantees to hear their feedback about how the tool worked for them and to examine the results. Wilder are also looking into options for making this tool more widely available for Indigenous early childhood programs by getting it approved as a Parent Aware assessment tool.

The results of these observations may be useful at a few different levels. First, this tool may be used to ensure that an individual child is getting their unique needs met. Second, this tool could be used by a classroom teacher to determine a special focus of their programming and activities to address the needs of the group of children in the room. Finally, this tool can be used to communicate about the impact of culturally relevant early childhood programming on young children’s development, from an Indigenous lens.

Story Banking

Wilder is also gathering information about the impact of the PDG on Indigenous children, families, and communities through Story Banking. To answer questions about how Indigenous children and families are living in thriving communities, Indigenous families with young children and those who are expecting children are invited to share stories and experiences, through writing, videos, photos, and other images, about the impact of early childhood programs and resources in their lives. After someone shares their story, they are invited to assign a “theme” to their story from a list of pre-defined themes. In this way, participants help to do a preliminary interpretation of what their story means.

Wilder created a flyer about story banking, including a QR code linking people to the website we developed (accessible by laptop or smart phone), for PDG Indigenous grantees to share with their families and participants. However, we found that few people were uploading their stories when given such a light touch prompt.

Therefore, we also invited caregivers to participate and assisted them in submitting stories through Indigenous community events in 2022. We plan to continue gathering stories from families over the next several months, from PDG Indigenous grantees and the families they serve as well as at larger Indigenous community events.

Key takeaway: These culturally sensitive data collection methods will help demonstrate the impact of the PDG on Indigenous families in way that is congruent with Indigenous values and ways of thinking.



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