



**Creation  
in Common**

*Strengthening Communities  
through Shared Creativity*

# **Minnesota Department of Education**

## ***Kindergarten Voices: Young Learner Engagement Findings Report***

July 8, 2025

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# Overview

In 2025, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) engaged Creation in Common to lead a groundbreaking effort to learn directly from the voices and experiences of the state’s youngest K-12 learners—kindergarteners.

Centering child engagement across Minnesota, this work set out to elevate what children say, do, and feel in order to build a fuller, more grounded understanding of what it truly means to learn, grow, and express knowledge in the early years of school. MDE and Creation in Common were guided by a deep belief that young learners’ lived experiences, preferences, and expressions are essential to shaping learning environments that are equitable, developmentally appropriate, and affirming of every child’s identity.

While the findings from this effort will inform critical work around the Minnesota Kindergarten Fall Assessment (MnKFA), their relevance stretches far beyond any single framework or tool. The insights that have come forward here are intended to inform a wide range of decisions and practices—strengthening broader efforts to support positive transitions into kindergarten and more responsive, child-centered approaches across early education. Above all, this work aims to amplify what matters most to children when it comes to learning, belonging, and feeling seen.

This work was grounded in three core objectives:

- **Understand Young Learners’ Kindergarten Experience(s)**  
Explore how children experience kindergarten as a whole—what feels joyful or overwhelming, inclusive or stressful. Understand how they build relationships, navigate daily routines, and engage with learning in ways that can inform statewide strategies for smooth transitions and responsive classroom practice.
- **Capture Young Learners’ Perspectives on Learning and Demonstration**  
Understand how children describe their preferred ways of learning and showing what they know. What makes learning feel fun and affirming—or, on the other hand, judgmental or disengaging? Identify tools and strategies (e.g., storytelling, manipulatives, drawing) that support self-expression and growth, while also illuminating where well-intentioned practices may fall short.
- **Inform the Design and Implementation of the MnKFA**  
Identify how elements of the MnKFA, associated tools, resources, and training can be designed in a way that supports the various ways that young children demonstrate what they know and are able to do. Ground this work in play, joy, and strengths-based learning. Findings from these

efforts will inform future professional development and resource creation, helping ensure that assessment is inclusive, meaningful, and aligned with what children need to thrive.

To achieve these objectives, the team centered a set of core guiding questions:

- What do children’s words and behaviors reveal about how they experience kindergarten—including what supports joyful, empowering participation in learning? What contributes to stressful or confusing learning experiences?
- How do children prefer to learn and demonstrate what they know? What activities or conditions help them feel confident, engaged, and safe when sharing their thinking?
- What aspects of their school environment (such as physical space, instructional elements, peer dynamics, and adult support) seem to influence how openly and comfortably children learn and participate—and which ones present challenges?
- What can these perspectives teach us about building assessments and instructional systems that reflect the strengths of Minnesota’s youngest learners, honor their developmental journey, and align with inclusive, child-centered goals?

## Acknowledgements

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For Creation in Common, Lindsey Burdick served as the Project Lead, Engagement Specialist, and Reporter. Kyle Moore contributed as an Engagement Associate and Co-Reporter, with Kallie Akinola also serving as an Engagement Associate. Dana Gillespie was Editor for this report. Carlo Cuesta served as Principal.

# Methodology

## Overview

Between April 28 and May 30, 2025, Creation in Common conducted a series of 12 focus group engagements with 56 children aged 4 to 6 years, across Minnesota. Each 30–45 minute session included three to five young learner participants and was mindfully designed to create a relaxed, play-based setting in which children could reflect on their kindergarten experiences and share how they prefer to learn and demonstrate their knowledge. These sessions provided an opportunity for young learners to voice, in their own ways, what they enjoy about school, what challenges them, and how they express what they know.

Each focus group included two to three Creation in Common facilitators. One team member led the core group discussion, while another invited individual children into brief one-on-one conversations to allow for more personal sharing. A third team member, when present, supported group management and observational note-taking. This structure helped ensure that all children had space to participate in ways that felt inviting and comfortable.

The lead Engagement Specialist for these sessions, Lindsey, brought nine years of experience as a 7–12 science teacher and holds a master’s degree in K–12 literacy, which included work with early learners focused on vocabulary acquisition. Lindsey is also an ENVoY Certified Demonstration Teacher with training in nonverbal communication strategies to support engagement and emotional safety. The Engagement Associates, Kallie and Kyle, supported facilitation, observation, and note-taking throughout the sessions. While their experience with early childhood learners was more limited, they prepared in collaboration with the Engagement Specialist. Lindsey shared strategies for engaging young children in developmentally appropriate ways. This included using nonverbal cues, maintaining a calm and welcoming presence, avoiding leading questions, and offering simple scaffolds to support children’s understanding. This shared preparation helped the team approach each group with a consistent and child-centered mindset.

The consistency and clarity of insights shared across groups suggest that this approach, grounded in relationship-building, nonverbal attunement, and responsive scaffolding, created an environment where children felt safe and supported to share their experiences.

All sessions were recorded using a Meeting Owl device, allowing the team to return to the footage for further analysis. This video review enabled closer attention to children’s nonverbal communication, body language, and emergent themes that may not have been fully captured during real-time note-taking. To ensure it did not become a distraction, the facilitators took care to acknowledge and

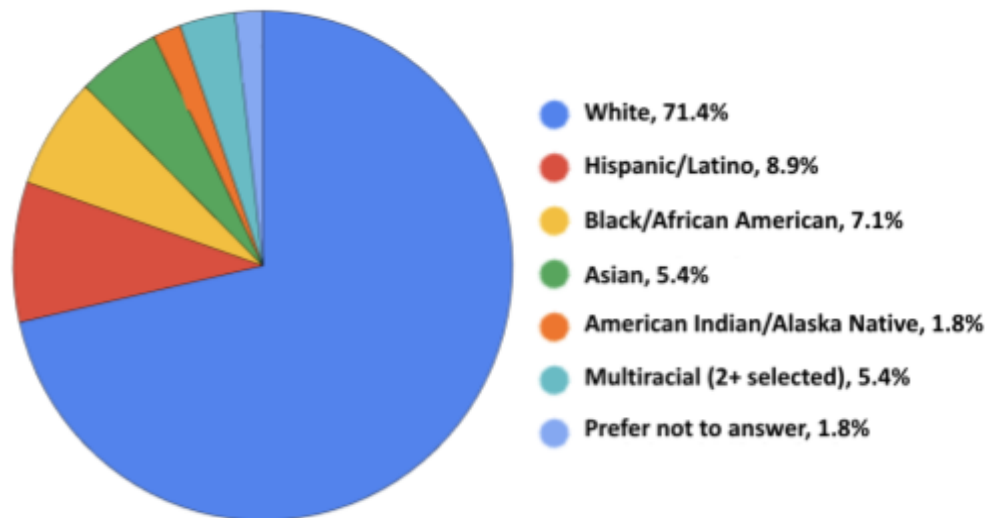
normalize the presence of the recording device. Parents and caregivers provided written consent for their child’s participation in the focus groups, as well as for the resulting recordings to be used in the creation of this findings report.

Following the in-person focus groups, brief online surveys were sent to participating families. These surveys gathered parent and caregiver insights into their child’s learning preferences, emotional adjustment, and overall kindergarten experience. Parents were also invited to provide contact information for the delivery of honorarium payments via check or electronic gift card.

### *Demographics of Young Learner Participants*

Throughout the recruitment process, the Creation in Common team worked closely with host sites to intentionally include a wide range of kindergarteners from across Minnesota.

The goal wasn’t to just fill seats—it was to hear from children with a wide variety of lived experiences. This meant focusing on diversity across race and ethnicity, gender, home language, disability status, and geographic location. The team intentionally worked toward capturing findings that would reflect the wide range of kindergarten experiences and realities across Minnesota.



**Figure 1: Racial Demographics of Focus Group Participants**

In total, 56 children took part in the focus groups.

The young learner participants represented a range of racial and ethnic identities, as shown in Figure 1. The group included children who identified as White, Hispanic/Latino, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Multiracial (identified two or more races). When compared to statewide kindergarten enrollment data from the Minnesota Department of Education, this participant group leaned slightly higher in representation of White and Multiracial children, and slightly lower for Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and Black or African American children. Still, the sample

included a close representation of the racial and ethnic groups that make up Minnesota’s public school population, giving us a meaningful window into different perspectives. The gender breakdown of participants was well balanced, with 46.4% identifying as female and 53.6% as male.

While most participating children spoke English at home, several families reported using other languages including Spanish, Mam (an Indigenous Mayan language), and Finnish. This example of language diversity reflects the multilingual makeup of many Minnesota communities, although a slightly smaller percentage of multilingual households compared to the state as a whole. One focus group was conducted entirely with multilingual learners, with the support of an interpreter. This session provided particularly valuable insights into the role language plays in shaping how children experience school.

The post-focus group parent survey invited parents and caregivers to share additional context about their child, including optional questions such as, “Are there any other factors or characteristics about your child you'd like to share?” and “Has your child been diagnosed with a disability (e.g. behavioral, physical, mental, learning)?” Seventy-one percent of parent respondents chose to provide this information, with roughly 28% sharing that their child had a diagnosed disability. This meant that sessions included strong representation from children with disabilities.

### *Selection of Target Communities*

To ensure a wide range of perspectives across the state, the Creation in Common team used multiple data points to identify the most suitable communities for these engagements. These included school district socioeconomic and demographic data, along with geographic information to support regional balance. The goal was to intentionally engage communities that reflected the diversity of Minnesota’s young learners—spanning urban, rural, and suburban areas.

The team divided the state into distinct geographic “zones” and began outreach to afterschool childcare programs within those areas. The team continually updated its list of preferred sites throughout the recruitment process, prioritizing those that were both representative of their local communities and logistically positioned to support the engagements.

This strategy, while deliberate and data-informed, came with its own set of challenges. In many cases, potential host sites were unable to participate due to timing, capacity, or administrative barriers. In others, slow response times required the team to pivot and move down the list to identify other viable options within the same geographic zone. Throughout the recruitment process, the team used emails, phone calls, and text messages to connect with a total of 145 potential sites.

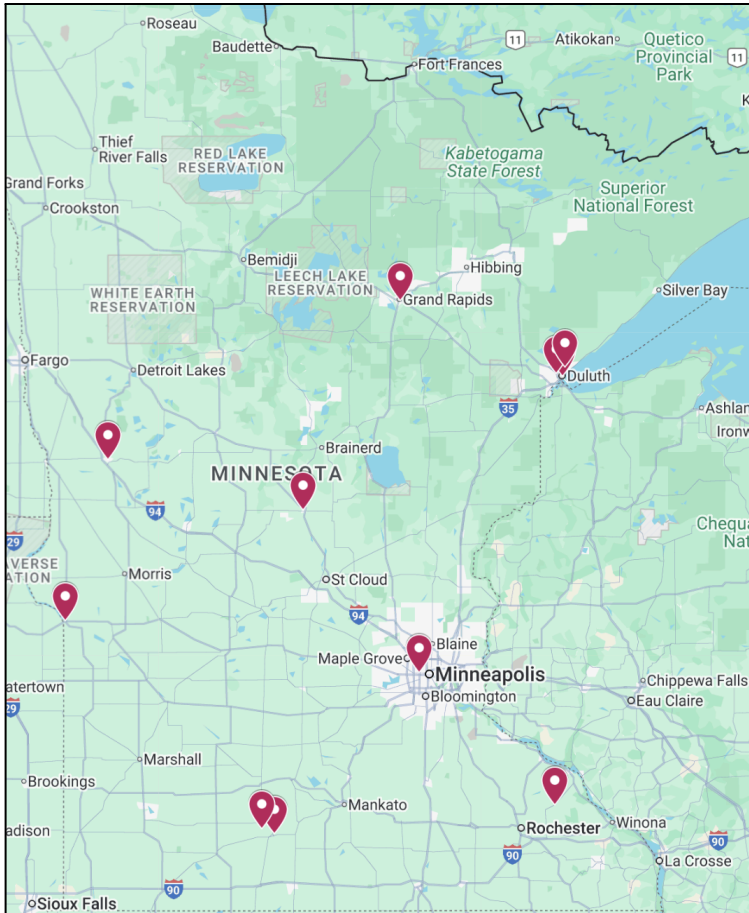


Figure 2: Locations of Afterschool Program Focus Group Facilitation Sites

When a first-choice site in a target area was unavailable, the team expanded its search to include additional afterschool programs nearby, ultimately ensuring that representation goals were still met. Despite the complexities of coordinating across such a broad geography, the team was able to secure host sites in each of the geographic zones (Figure 2)—resulting in a rich, regionally balanced view of the kindergarten experience across Minnesota.

*Why Afterschool Childcare Environments?*

The Creation in Common team chose to partner with afterschool childcare programs for a simple but important reason: these were spaces where children already felt comfortable. These settings were familiar, low-pressure, and full of people and routines the children already knew. By meeting them in a place where

they felt safe, the team hoped to encourage

more open, honest conversation without the formality or pressure that might come with being pulled out of class or speaking in a new setting.

Afterschool programs also matched children’s daily rhythms. The sessions didn’t feel like a disruption—they were more like a natural extension of a part of the day that already felt relaxed and playful. These environments gave children room to be themselves while still offering enough structure to support focused conversation. Additionally, utilizing afterschool programs also meant that there would be little to no disruption to parent childcare schedules—a consideration that was critical to ensuring inclusive, accessible engagements.

# Findings: Child and Parent/Caregiver Perspectives

The following section shares what emerged from conversations with kindergarteners and their families. These reflections are drawn from children’s own words, parent and caregiver input, and notes from the team members who listened closely during each session. The goal throughout this work was to center children’s lived experiences—to hear directly from them about what it’s like to start school, learn new things, and build relationships in a new setting.

Of course, no single project can fully capture everything children carry with them—their cultures, their communities, or the many ways they make sense of the world. What’s shared here is a starting point: a collection of stories, themes, and insights meant to inform, invite reflection, and support continued listening to Minnesota’s young learners.

It is also important to note that, through analysis, there was no discernable difference or unique themes in kindergarteners’ responses based on race or ethnicity—despite substantial evidence of educational disparities that exist before, during, and after kindergarten. Further exploration of kindergarteners’ early school experiences by race and ethnicity (as well as by other characteristics and identities) could be helpful in understanding, addressing, and eliminating early disparities.

## Young Learner Perspectives

### The Kindergarten Experience

When children described what it felt like to start kindergarten, they painted a wide emotional picture—part excitement, part nervousness, and often a bit of both. Some talked about looking forward to learning and social opportunities, naming things like “playing outside,” “math,” or “seeing friends.” Others shared memories of the beginning of kindergarten being hard or scary, especially when they didn’t know anyone or weren’t sure what to expect. A few noted that missing a parent or caregiver made the early days particularly hard, even when they liked school overall.

Children’s sense of confidence and comfort in kindergarten is deeply tied to the people around them—both adults and peers. Having a familiar person in the room usually eases their nervousness and helps them feel more ready to participate and try new things. Children who had attended structured programs prior to kindergarten (e.g., preschool, child care center, Head Start) tended to describe feeling a stronger sense of confidence about the kindergarten transition. When asked why,

they frequently pointed to familiarity: “I already knew people, so it wasn’t scary” or “I had friends in my class.”

Some children spoke with pride about “getting big” or getting ready for “first grade.” For many, being a kindergartener seemed to carry real weight—a sense of identity and progression. Even at these young ages, many seem to understand that kindergarten is part of something bigger. “I have to do good so I can go to first grade,” one explained. Others talked about “being ready for harder stuff” or learning “big kid things.” However, while this awareness can spark motivation, it also appeared to bring pressure for some students. This is an important reminder for adults working with young learners—children may already feel the weight of academic progression, and it’s critical to be mindful of how adult expectations, language, or actions can ease or add to that pressure.

When asked how they felt about school, “happy” came up again and again. But in some cases, that answer seemed more like a default than a full reflection. With more time and encouragement, many children were able to move beyond “happy” and used physical metaphors to describe more complex feelings—“my tummy hurt a little,” “I felt squirmy,” “I felt shy in my belly.” This illustrates how, at these ages where emotion-related vocabulary is still emerging, children may use a familiar word like “happy” even when there are deeper, more complex feelings involved.

For some multilingual learners, those early feelings were also shaped by language uncertainty. A few children shared that they felt more nervous about participating in class when they weren’t sure how to say something in English. Some multilingual learners shared how they sometimes stay quiet—not because they don’t have the knowledge, but because they couldn’t find the words.

## Learning and Assessment Preferences

Across the focus groups, children offered remarkably consistent—and at times surprisingly nuanced—insights into how they like to learn and show what they know. What stood out most wasn’t any one specific activity or subject, but a clear throughline: children are drawn to learning that feels active.

### *“Show Me, Let Me Try”*

Again and again, the children returned to a learning process of: see it first, then try it. Whether it was drawing a picture, solving a math problem, or putting something together, they leaned toward learning by watching, mirroring what they observed, and experimenting. They often said things like, “I want the teacher to tell me,” but deeper follow-up and observation suggested what they really meant was: show me.

This was repeatedly exemplified during the focus group sessions. The facilitator would use the art supplies to make something simple, like glasses out of pipe cleaners. The children would get excited and want to learn how to do it too. The facilitator would ask, “Do you want me to tell you how to make it, or show you how to make it?” Many would respond, “Tell me.” But as soon as the facilitator began explaining without showing, they would jump in and say something like, “Make another one *while* you tell me. And I’ll do it too.” They didn’t just want to hear instructions—they wanted to watch and actively follow along at the same time.

### *Learning Through Creativity, Play, and Autonomy*

When asked about their favorite parts of the day, children were quick and clear: recess, free choice, building, drawing, art. But these aren’t “breaks” from learning.

*In these moments, children aren’t just playing; they are creating, experimenting, problem-solving, and sharing knowledge in ways that make sense to them.*

One of the most commonly mentioned highlights was free choice time—a part of the day where fun and learning naturally came together. As one child put it, “I like free choice because I can build stuff or do art.” Others shared how they frequently chose activities based on how they were feeling. “When I’m mad or sad, I like to do art. But when I’m happy, I like to make things with blocks,” one young learner explained. For many, it wasn’t just about having freedom—it was about following their curiosity, going deeper into something at their own pace, and expressing themselves in ways that felt comfortable and meaningful. Young learners often proudly described what they had built or created during free choice times when they were able to choose their own materials or activities.

Children routinely expressed that they feel more engaged and confident in their understanding when they can move, handle materials, or explore something in a hands-on way. Play-based learning through blocks, loose parts, drawing, or imaginative play feels more engaging to them. It gives children space to try, mess up, try again, and feel good about their progress. As one child put it, “I showed you how to make a rocket. I’m good at that.” These hands-on activities are particularly important for multilingual learners. Many shared that they prefer to show their thinking through actions or visuals, saying it feels easier and less intimidating than speaking aloud in English.

One of the clearest shared highlights across groups was how much children loved getting to “be the teacher.” As one child said, “Being the teacher is fun. I showed you how I draw a frog!” Having an opportunity to explain something they felt confident about—like being a kindergartener—didn’t just showcase what they knew. It allowed them to step into a position of leadership, which many

appeared to find both affirming and motivating. Facilitators also noticed that these invitations to teach often helped set the tone. When children got to start with something they felt confident in, they seemed more open to trickier tasks or questions later on—an insight with potential implications for instruction and assessment alike.

### *Assessing for Understanding*

Children didn't talk about "assessment" as a technical process or tool—they talked about how it made them feel. To them, these moments aren't just about checking for knowledge; they are personal and emotional. And when things don't go well, they usually stick with children long after the task is done. This emotional weight was even more pronounced among multilingual learners. Some explained that while they understood the content, being assessed was stressful because they weren't sure how to respond in English. They emphasized that being able to show knowledge in ways besides "sitting at a table" was critically important.

Many children described feeling "happy", "excited", and "dancey" when they get something right, especially when their teacher notices and responds with a smile or kind words. "I know I did a good job because my teacher smiles at me like this [shows a big smile].", one child shared, "Sometimes even if I get it wrong, she'll say I did good and then I'll just try again. And it's okay." Their experiences underscored that praise and recognition aren't just nice extras; they are central to how children define and experience success in the classroom.

However, there often may be a steady undercurrent of nervousness present. Several children said they felt hesitation when they didn't know the answer or when they weren't sure if they were "doing it right." Some worried about disappointing their teacher or having to redo something if they made a mistake. One young learner explained, "I think my teacher will be mad if I mess up. I don't know for sure, but I think so." Another noted, "When I feel lazy, I really don't want to have to do it again. So I want to get everything perfect and right and then I can be done."

When asked about their preferred ways of showing what they know, responses echoed what was shared regarding learning preferences: children want to do something, not just say or write an answer. Drawing, building, storytelling, and acting out ideas made them feel more confident and helped their thinking come through. One child explained, "I like to show by drawing. Then my teacher or mom knows what I mean." Another shared, "I learn and can draw and tell it in a story. Then my teacher sees what I know, and I can see it too."

Some children mentioned worksheets or verbal answers, but their comfort with or preference for these seemed to depend heavily on the situation. A few expressed appreciation for the clarity and

routine of structured tasks. One shared, “I like sitting down and doing my math sheet.” Preference for worksheets was strongest when children already felt confident about the material and had learned the content in a similar format—allowing them to show their knowledge through a familiar, predictable task. This illustrates how concrete, well-defined activities can support a well-rounded learning experience, particularly when children already feel confident with the material. For others, though, worksheets were frustrating or “too hard when it’s loud.” In most cases, it was the setting, the level of choice, or the availability of adult support that mattered more than the activity itself.

### *Barriers to Effective Assessment*

Children named several things that made it harder for them to show what they know:

- Feeling rushed or like they have to answer quickly
- Not understanding exactly what is being asked
- Feeling like there is only one “right” way to do it
- Not being allowed to try again if they didn’t get it right the first time

Some said they enjoyed using digital tools, often describing them as fun or exciting at first. But when asked more in-depth questions about those experiences, it became clear that these activities also came with limits. Technology-based tasks tended to be more rigid, leaving little room for creativity or flexibility in how they could show what they knew. One child explained, “I like to do math on the iPad, but it also gets kind of boring because it’s always the same. And sometimes I need to write stuff down too because you can’t write [on the iPad] and play the game at the same time.” Other students shared similar frustrations of how these types of activities don’t let them fully explain their thinking or approach a problem in their own way. Rigid, fast-paced formats—digital or otherwise—frequently leave them feeling boxed in, without enough space to work through ideas at their own pace.

## **The Learning Environment**

The young learners had a lot to say about their surroundings—what made them feel good, what didn’t, and how it all affected their day. From how the room was set up to how loud it got, these elements clearly shaped how safe and settled they felt.

### *Physical Spaces and Sensory Experiences*

Many children described the parts of their classrooms that help them feel more comfortable and in control. They liked being able to get their own materials, move around, and choose what to do—especially during free choice time. One child said, “I like when I can get the toys I want without help,” while another mentioned, “I like the reading corner and how soft it is.”

They also shared what didn't work. Some said certain spaces feel too loud or too distracting—often places with little structure or where classmates were being unpredictable. One child explained that they didn't like art class—not because of the art itself, but because “everyone is wild and one of the kids eats the glue.” That kind of chaos makes it harder for some children to stay focused or feel safe to fully engage in their learning. These kinds of comments highlight how much the setup of the room and how adults help guide it really matter. These young learners tend to do best when expectations are clear and their environment is calm and predictable.

### *Structure, Routines, and Transitions*

Children also spoke about how the flow of the day shapes their experience, especially the transitions from one activity to another or from home to school. Though they didn't use the word “transition,” they were able to describe how those moments made them feel. Leaving a fun activity can be disappointing—“I don't like when I have to stop playing and go to lunch.” Getting ready to go home can feel exciting—“I like going home because I get to play video games with my brother.”

Some children identified specific transitions, like right after snack time, as especially hard. This may relate to sensory needs or how quickly those transitions are expected to move along. Either way, these parts of the day clearly have an impact. When transitions are handled gently and with support, children stay more focused. One child reflected, “I feel better when we don't rush,” while another shared, “Sometimes I'm having a bad day and then I really don't like it [having to make a transition] and might act mad. I don't like it when my teacher gets mad that I'm mad because then I just want to go sit down alone with my feelings.”

Several children also commented on classroom order and predictability. While they value free play and choice, too much unpredictability—especially when classmates are “wild” or “not listening”—makes it harder to focus. “Sometimes I don't like when it's loud. It makes me not want to do stuff,” one child shared. Classroom routines were identified as one way to build a sense of comfort and predictability. As one child explained, “I'm not [nervous when I come to school] because when I get there we always do Welcome Circle.”

Across these conversations, the common thread was clear: children benefit when classroom adults, transitions, and routines that are both steady and flexible—grounded in clear expectations but responsive to how they're feeling in the moment.

### *Creating Balance*

Beyond physical spaces and routines, children's reflections revealed how the right balance of freedom and structure plays a key role in learning engagement. Certain conditions predictably led to

disengagement: unclear instructions, tasks that felt rushed, long periods of sitting still, or chaotic classroom dynamics. Several children mentioned moments when these factors led them to shut down or lose interest.

While creativity and autonomy were key themes of their learning preferences, their desire for freedom had clear limits. Without enough adult support or structure, too much choice sometimes led to overwhelm. Several children described chaotic moments where too little guidance left them feeling lost or frustrated. Their stories emphasize the importance of balancing freedom with consistency, especially in high-energy settings.

#### *The Role of Adults: Creating Emotional Safety and Supporting Confidence*

Almost every child wanted to share about their experiences with the teachers or other adults in their classroom. What comes across as mattering the most is how those adults make them feel—when they stay calm, give students time, or help without taking over, it makes a big difference. One child shared, “My teacher is fun and nice. She lets me pick how I want to do it.” When asked what “fun” and “nice” meant, they added, “She doesn’t get mad at me when I’m trying my best but not doing good. And she’s funny too, which is good.”

Children were highly aware of the emotional aspects of learning and were able to describe, in concrete ways, what it felt like to succeed or to get stuck. Several mentioned feeling “embarrassed” when they don’t know something or when they “get it wrong” in front of others. This sensitivity seemed especially strong among multilingual learners, who shared that they sometimes preferred to stay quiet or not try at all, especially when mistakes might be noticeable to both their peers and adults. For many young learners, there was a strong sense of discomfort that seemed to come from not wanting to disappoint a teacher.

For others, their frustration was more about not being offered a second chance. “I felt sad that I couldn’t do it. I didn’t know how,” one child explained, “I was sad at myself because I didn’t think I would ever get asked to do it again.” Interestingly, few children used terms like “wrong” or “incorrect.” That may reflect their developmental stage, or perhaps the classroom cultures they’ve been part of. Either way, it raised a question:

*How are young learners being supported to see mistakes as part of the learning process, not the end of it?*

Children made it clear: how adults respond matters deeply. They described feeling more confident when adults stayed calm, offered encouragement, and helped them break tasks into smaller

steps—working with them, not just providing answers. This kind of support, especially during tricky moments, seemed to give them the courage to keep trying and boost their willingness to take risks. One child explained, “I try again if my teacher helps me and doesn’t get mad.”

Conversely, when children sensed pressure to get things right immediately or picked up on adult frustration, they often shut down. A few said they didn’t want to try again if they thought the teacher was upset. One child shared, “I got really sad because I didn’t know what she wanted so I couldn’t do it. I didn’t understand. But she thought I did so she got a little mad at me.” These moments show how easily pressure and unclear communication can impact a child’s confidence and learning experience.

For multilingual learners, emotional safety often depends on whether they are allowed to use their home language or have other ways to express their thinking. Several said they felt less stressed and more likely to participate when they could answer in Spanish or another familiar language, illustrating how flexibility with language can have a direct impact on a student’s engagement. Strong relationships between the multilingual student and their teacher are fundamental to creating a supportive learning environment where they can thrive.

Some children spoke about linking success with notions of being “good” or not “quitting,” while others shared how discouraging it felt when they didn’t understand something right away. One said, “If you quit or give up, it’s not fun.” Another shared, “Sometimes I feel tired or like this [balls hands into fists] when I don’t know things.”

These responses highlight that in an emotionally safe environment, where encouragement and reassurance are present, children are eager to learn and keep trying—even when things are hard. It’s not just about what children asked to do, it’s also about how it’s asked and how adults respond. Calm, patient, supportive adult presence helps children feel brave enough to take risks, and that makes all the difference.

#### *Peer Dynamics and Social Climate*

The topic of “friends” came up regularly during discussions. For many children, they see their friends and peers as the best part of school. Positive interactions—like playing together, helping one another, and feeling included—clearly shape how they feel about being at school. As one child explained, “The whole class are all my friends. Even though one of them kicked me, he’s still my friend too because we all have to be friends and learn together. It’s nice to have so many friends.”

But when peer relationships break down, the impact is noticeable. Some children talked about times they felt excluded and how it affected not just their emotions but also their learning. One child

shared, “One time my friends decided they didn’t want to be my friends anymore and they wouldn’t let me play with them or anything. It made me really sad. I liked to read about history in class, but after that I didn’t want to read anymore and not do math either. I just wanted to play with them again.” Their stories show the deep connection between their emotional and academic experiences.

Many children made note of their tendency to ask friends and peers for help just as frequently as asking teachers. “I ask my friend if I don’t know,” one explained, and several others echoed similar sentiments. This highlights how essential a strong classroom culture is—when children feel safe with each other, they’re more likely to take risks, ask questions, and persist. This theme was especially strong among multilingual learners, many of whom said they lean on friends for both language and academic help. One child shared how watching a friend respond gives them the confidence to try too, showing how peer modeling can be particularly important in linguistically diverse classrooms.

In the focus group sessions, children also demonstrated a strong understanding of kindness and fairness—things like taking turns, helping others, and listening. Whether or not those rules were always followed, children knew they mattered. When adults in the classroom take time to consistently support these values, it doesn’t just create a kinder environment—it also helps foster a learning community where children have access to the peer support they naturally lean on to learn and grow.

## Parent and Caregiver Perspectives

To better round out the picture of children’s experiences, surveys were sent to parents and guardians whose children participated in the engagement sessions. With a 95% response rate, these reflections added meaningful context to the kindergarten experience—and at times, surfaced clear points of alignment or contrast with what children shared directly.

### Transition to Kindergarten

Most families described their child’s transition into kindergarten as generally positive, though not without challenges. While 42% of parents rated the transition as “very easy” (1 on a 5-point scale), another 34% selected a “2,” indicating a more mixed or moderately difficult experience. Fourteen percent reported more significant difficulty. By the time of the survey, which aligned with the end of these students’ kindergarten year, 72% of parents said that attending school was now “very easy,” reflecting meaningful growth in their children’s adjustment over time.

Parents routinely credited a few key factors with helping ease the transition: strong teacher relationships, pre-existing friendships, and familiarity with the school setting. “Having friends from pre-K in class” and “feeling excited and welcomed by teachers” were frequent themes.

That said, several families—especially those of multilingual learners and children with disabilities—described transitions that were challenging. One parent reflected, “The start of the year was really hard, but his teacher helped him build confidence. It’s still a work in progress though.”

## Learning Preferences and Knowledge Demonstration

Parents largely echoed what children shared about their preferred ways of learning and showing what they know. Movement, visuals, hands-on engagement, and creative formats were consistently described as effective and enjoyable. “My child learns best when he can move around and actually use his hands,” said one parent.

Roughly two-thirds of caregivers selected multiple supports that help their child feel confident when demonstrating learning—most frequently identifying adult scaffolding, familiarity with the task, and access to expressive tools like art or blocks. “She was so proud to show me how she solved the math problem using her blocks,” one parent noted.

Over 50% of parents also voiced concerns when tasks became too rigid or overwhelming. “When he feels like something is too hard and he can’t get help, he shuts down,” one shared—mirroring many of the frustrations children expressed about unclear expectations or a lack of second chances.

## Emotional and Social Wellbeing

Parents’ reflections strongly aligned with what children said about the role of relationships and emotional safety in learning. Supportive teachers and positive peer interactions were seen as foundational to engagement. “She talks mostly about friends and how she helps other kids,” said one parent. Another wrote, “My child talks all the time about her teacher. She feels safe asking questions.”

At the same time, some families pointed to persistent stressors—particularly for children with sensory sensitivities or specific learning needs. “Sometimes he says it’s too loud, and he just wants to go home,” noted one caregiver.

## Alignment with Children’s Perspectives

Hearing the voices of both young learners and the adults closest to them offered a more complete picture of the kindergarten experience. While many themes aligned, key differences also came forward—revealing how children and adults might frame the same experience in different ways.

*Emotional Adjustment and Transition Experience*

Children tended to use simple or metaphorical language to describe the start of kindergarten: “happy,” “squirmy,” “my tummy hurt.” Most didn't explicitly label the transition as hard. In contrast, 34% of parents said the beginning was moderately or very difficult for their child. This might simply reflect a gap in the children's ability to articulate their emotions, or perhaps children felt early discomfort but no longer focus on it after adjusting.

#### *Learning Preferences and Instruction*

Parents reinforced children's enthusiasm for play, creativity, and movement. But they also referenced progress with more structured tasks—worksheets, routines, and skill-based milestones that children themselves were less likely to name as favorites. This could reflect different vantage points: children prioritize joy and expression, while adults may lean toward indicators of success in school and growth.

#### *Social Dynamics and Peer Belonging*

Friendship and inclusion were core themes for both groups. Children often emphasized connection—talking about who they played with or helped. Parents, however, were more likely to raise concerns about exclusion, especially for children with disabilities or those new to the classroom community. This might reflect children's desire to see things positively or possibly parents noticing patterns that their children don't or can't yet put into words.

#### *Assessment and Confidence*

Children described feeling discouraged when they didn't get to try again or when expectations were unclear. Many parents echoed this, saying their child “melts down” or gives up when feeling overwhelmed. Yet some families described their children as confident in class—even when those same children expressed shyness or fear of mistakes in focus groups. This may suggest a possible gap between children's internal experiences and how they present externally. It may also be the case that these two seemingly opposite perspectives are occurring concurrently—a child can feel capable and confident about something in the classroom, while also feeling shy or having a “melt down”.

#### *Additional Insights from Parents*

Parents also added layers of complexity that broadened the overall picture:

- **Learning Beyond the Classroom**  
Many described their children learning through everyday life—cooking, imaginative play, or storytelling. These experiences reinforced the idea that learning doesn't just happen at a desk.
- **Emotional Spillover**  
Several noted how school affects home life. “After school, she needs quiet time. It's like the day was too big for her,” said one parent. These reflections underscore how school-based stress, overstimulation, or joy can follow children home.

- **Linguistic and Cultural Identity**  
Parents of multilingual children offered important nuances. One caregiver noted, “My child is bilingual and sometimes needs more time to process questions in English, but she’s very bright and expressive when she feels understood.”
- **Equity and Access**  
A few families described challenges related to language access, individualized education plan (IEP) navigation, or school decision-making. While not visible in children’s direct reflections, these systemic barriers shape how supported families feel—and by extension, how their children are able to engage with their educational experiences.

## Implications of Young Learner and Parent Perspectives

The voices of children and their families offer an important reminder: by slowing down and listening, we don’t just learn more about what students are experiencing—we learn how to do better for them. These engagements focused on kindergarteners, but the themes that came through speak to something bigger. They point to real, everyday opportunities across schools, programs, and systems to make choices that help students feel confident, curious, and cared for. And that starts by putting their lived experiences at the center of how learning and assessment are designed and delivered.

### For Assessment, Including the MnKFA

When children and families talked about how students show what they know, they weren’t just focused on the right answers. They talked about how it *feels*—what helps them stay open, be willing to try again, and feel good about their learning. Their reflections challenge us to think about assessment not just as a check on progress, but as a mode to provide students multiple opportunities to feel proud of what they can do. A few things stood out:

- Children benefit from different ways to show what they know. Drawing, building, talking it out, or pretending to teach—it all helps students shine in ways that reflect their strengths.
- The setting matters. Calm, caring environments help children feel more comfortable taking risks and trying new things.
- Choice and support go hand in hand. Children feel confident when they can pick how to show their learning, but still need adults nearby to guide and encourage. Scaffolding helps prevent them from feeling overwhelmed.
- Simple, clear directions helped. Children respond better when they know what is being asked and can see or touch examples. Utilize child-friendly language and visual supports.
- Opportunities to try again are important. When students are told it is okay to make a mistake or take another turn, they are more likely to keep going. Normalize a learning process that emphasizes growth, revision, and second chances.

- Feelings were part of it. If a child feels nervous or unsure, this impacts how much they are able to show their knowledge. Recognize that how a child feels about being assessed is just as important as what they're able to demonstrate.
- Routines made a difference. When assessment moments were woven into daily routines, children were more likely to open up and engage.

These insights are especially important as tools like the MnKFA continue to take shape. They remind us that assessment can become a moment of connection and that when designed with care, it can help students feel seen, supported, and proud.

### For Kindergarten Transition Supports

These children's stories and experiences remind us that starting kindergarten isn't just one day—it's a process. It takes shape slowly, through new routines, new people, and the big emotions that come with a big change. While many children spoke with excitement and pride about becoming kindergarteners, others remembered feeling unsure, nervous, or sad. What seemed to help most:

- Early relationships matter. Children feel more comfortable when they already know a teacher or have a friend in the room. Adults should support young learners by helping them build connections before and during school.
- Simple check-ins made a difference. Early conversations or small group activities help children feel seen and supported.
- Naming the emotions helped normalize them. When adults acknowledge that it's okay to feel nervous, students seem to relax and open up. Young learners are still developing emotional vocabulary, and adults should be prepared to provide support in recognizing, naming, and expressing feelings. Additionally, they should remember that simple responses cannot always be taken at face value and may require thoughtful, understandable follow-up questions.

These young learner perspectives highlight the importance of giving children time to adjust, building connections early, and supporting them both emotionally and logistically through times of transition.

### For Classroom Culture and Instruction

One critically important theme that children's reflections pointed to is just how much the feel of a classroom matters. Whether a space felt calm or chaotic, welcoming or tense—it shaped how willing they were to speak up, try something new, or just be themselves.

Some key takeaways:

- Relationships matter. Students feel more confident and capable when adults are patient, encouraging, and close by, especially when something is hard.
- Kindness and fairness go a long way. Children notice when classroom norms make space for everyone. Being kind, taking turns, and feeling heard help them feel safe.
- Children need both freedom and structure. They value being able to make choices and share their ideas, but they also need clear expectations and steady routines to feel grounded. Unstructured free choice often causes feelings of overwhelm and stress.
  - Example of a supportive practice: Offer art time where students can choose their project direction, but within clear boundaries. The structure comes from having a set amount of time, a specific selection of materials, and clear, modeled behavior expectations.
  - Example of a less supportive practice: Art time where every child is expected to make the exact same project limits creativity and personal expression. Conversely, offering art time with too many supplies, no time limits, and no clear behavioral expectations can lead to chaos and disconnection.
- In classrooms serving multilingual learners, these lessons take on additional meaning. Supporting students in using their home languages, encouraging peer collaboration, and offering multiple ways to participate aren't just best practices—they are essential strategies for supporting belonging and engagement.

The way a classroom feels isn't just "extra"—it's part of how learning happens. These takeaways are a reminder that connection, identity, and emotional safety are just as important as what's being taught.

## Additional Findings

### Recruitment and Methodology Insights

This section shares key lessons learned about how to design and facilitate meaningful engagements with young children. From recruitment strategies to facilitation techniques, these insights reflect what worked well and where future efforts might improve. The goal is to support others in creating more inclusive, responsive, and developmentally appropriate engagement practices with early learners.

#### Navigating Recruitment Challenges

During the outreach window, the Creation in Common team contacted 145 potential host sites via phone and email. In the end, 11 sites were able to participate. While several programs expressed interest but couldn't commit, the majority simply did not respond—even after multiple follow-up

attempts. Recruitment was especially difficult in certain regions, with the upper Northwest and the Twin Cities standing out as the hardest areas to secure program collaborators.

For those who did respond, a few common barriers came up again and again:

- Nearly all programs cited a lack of staff capacity.
- Many were navigating end-of-year responsibilities and couldn't take on anything additional.
- Some needed district or school-level permission they weren't able to secure in time.
- Others weren't confident they could recruit families quickly enough.

These patterns reflected just how stretched early learning providers are and highlighted the importance of building more flexible, low-barrier ways for programs to participate in engagement efforts like this. Timing matters. Trying to conduct work like this near the beginning or end of the school year, or close to seasonal breaks, only adds pressure to already overextended programs. While the \$125 honorarium offered to program collaborators was appreciated, it didn't offset the larger challenge of limited capacity.

## What Made an Ideal Setting for Focus Groups

Afterschool programs emerged as some of the best environments for the focus groups. These spaces struck a useful balance: familiar and relaxed for students, but still grounded in enough structure to support meaningful conversation. Children in these programs generally seemed comfortable sharing their ideas and reflecting on their kindergarten experiences. Familiar routines, supportive adults, and a flexible pace made these settings feel approachable and supportive.

That said, not all environments functioned the same way. At a couple of the sites, for example, the tone was looser and more high-energy. Kids often arrived ready to blow off steam, and staying focused was more challenging. In contrast, some sites, especially the school-based afterschool programs tended to cultivate a calmer setting and were more routine-based—helping create the conditions needed for the discussions. The takeaway: kids' expectations of a space matter. If they associate a setting with high energy and freedom, they will likely carry that energy into your session. Rather than working against that, facilitators should plan with it in mind.

## The Role of Program Staff

Program staff played a key role in making this work possible. They helped with family outreach, coordinated logistics, and supported children throughout the sessions. Their presence was especially critical in areas where direct recruitment by the team had been more difficult.

That said, how staff engaged during the sessions varied widely. In most sessions, staff quietly supported focus and redirected attention when needed. In others, however, they were more hands-on, sometimes stepping in to guide children’s responses or inadvertently derailing the discussion. Future sessions would benefit from a more structured, shared understanding of staff roles—supportive but not directive, balancing support with space so that children feel heard without interruption.

## Facilitation Approaches

The team utilized multiple facilitation formats:

- One-on-one interviews created space for students to go deeper. Without the group around, some children shared more detail, more emotion, and more personal insight.
- Group conversations offered a different kind of energy. Children bounced off each other’s ideas, built on shared experiences, and seemed to gain confidence watching other children’s responses.

Ultimately, both formats proved valuable in different ways. A mix of approaches helped capture a wider range of voices and created more ways for children to participate in whatever way felt most comfortable for them.

Facilitators used familiar games and art to help children settle in, and they stayed flexible as conversations shifted. Children often wanted to talk about what they were drawing or building, and those detours were part of how they processed and expressed their ideas. Balancing developmental appropriateness with open-ended data collection was key. While leading questions were avoided, it was often necessary to offer examples or scaffolds. Young children sometimes needed a concrete jumping-off point in order to understand what was being asked and to feel confident sharing their perspective.

## Future Areas of Exploration

The focus groups brought forward several ideas for where future work could go. These ideas reflect both gaps in this round of engagement and promising areas to learn more about.

- Talk to first graders at the start of the year. First graders may have fresh insights about how kindergarten prepared them. Speaking with them early in the school year could highlight what stuck, what surprised them, and what they wish they’d known.
- Engage kindergarten summer prep programs. Students in kindergarten transition or summer prep programs may offer a unique view into how children are thinking about school before it

begins. These conversations could deepen our understanding of how students experience the lead-up to kindergarten.

- Include immersion and Montessori schools. Immersion schools offer an opportunity to better understand multilingual learners in spaces intentionally built around language development. Similarly, Montessori programs emphasize student choice and agency. Learning from children in these environments could help bring forward differences and similarities in how young learners experience school.
- Reach underrepresented regions and populations. The upper Northwest region of the state was not represented in this engagement. Future efforts should aim to fill in regional gaps and explore how place-based factors may influence children's school experiences. Additionally, further exploration of kindergarteners' early school experiences by race and ethnicity (as well as by other characteristics and identities) could be helpful in understanding, addressing, and eliminating educational disparities.
- Consider disability status during participant selection. Knowing in advance whether a child has a disability could allow facilitators to better monitor for patterns in how those children engage and what they share. This would support more inclusive analysis and could reveal important differences or similarities in perspective.
- Pay attention to space and setting. Where a session is held, and how the child usually uses that space, matters. Future work could explore outdoor settings which, especially for children who feel constrained inside, could create new avenues for engagement.

## Consultant Reflections

Throughout these sessions, we were continually struck by the nuance, honesty, and clarity young learners brought to the conversation. While this report focuses on their insights about learning, assessment, and classroom dynamics, our facilitation experience surfaced a few additional reflections.

- Children read the room. Children's willingness to engage was often shaped by how they perceived the environment. Structured, familiar spaces made it easier for them to focus and participate. In contrast, high-energy settings, such as those they associated with unstructured play, often made reflective conversations harder to sustain.
- Energy levels are clues, not problems. When children were distracted or restless, it usually signaled tiredness or a need for movement rather than disinterest. Responding with flexibility instead of pressure helped us collect more authentic input.
- The way we ask matters. Open-ended questions rarely worked without scaffolding. Props, visuals, and rephrased prompts helped make abstract questions more concrete, supporting children to better express what they knew and felt.

- Trust builds fast, but so does hesitation. Children were quick to engage when adults maintained a calm, playful presence. However, unclear instructions or perceived frustration from adults could just as quickly cause them to withdraw. The young learners are consistently attuned to adult tone, even when they couldn't name it directly.
- There is still more to learn. In addition to what is listed in the Future Areas of Exploration section, future efforts could focus on:
  - Exploring interconnected factors. Findings from this and previous early learner engagement work (such as the 2024 Kindergarten Attendance Report) highlight how family health, housing, early learning access, and school relationships all shape student engagement. Future research could intentionally explore how these factors intersect.
  - Following students over time. Tracking the same students from preschool to kindergarten to first grade could show how experiences and perceptions evolve, offering insight into what kinds of support matter most during key transitions.
  - Comparing early learning pathways. Exploring the differences between children who attended preschool or Head Start and those who did not could reveal important patterns in confidence, readiness, and approach to learning.

Even small moments throughout the sessions reminded us that young children are not only capable of sharing their perspectives and experiences, but can truly help reshape how we think about early learning.

# Appendix

- A. Foundational Literature Review for Ethical, Inclusive, Developmentally Appropriate Early Childhood Research
- B. Overlay of Community Outreach Geographic Zones and Final Focus Group Engagement Locations
- C. Engagement Methodology (Continued)
- D. Young Learner Parent/Guardian Consent Form
- E. Young Learner and Parent/Guardian Participation Honorarium Agreement
- F. Young Learner Collaborator Honorarium Agreement
- G. Focus Group Discussion Guide
- H. Post-Focus Group Parent/Guardian Survey Questions

# Appendix A : Foundational Literature Review for Ethical, Inclusive, Developmentally Appropriate Early Childhood Research

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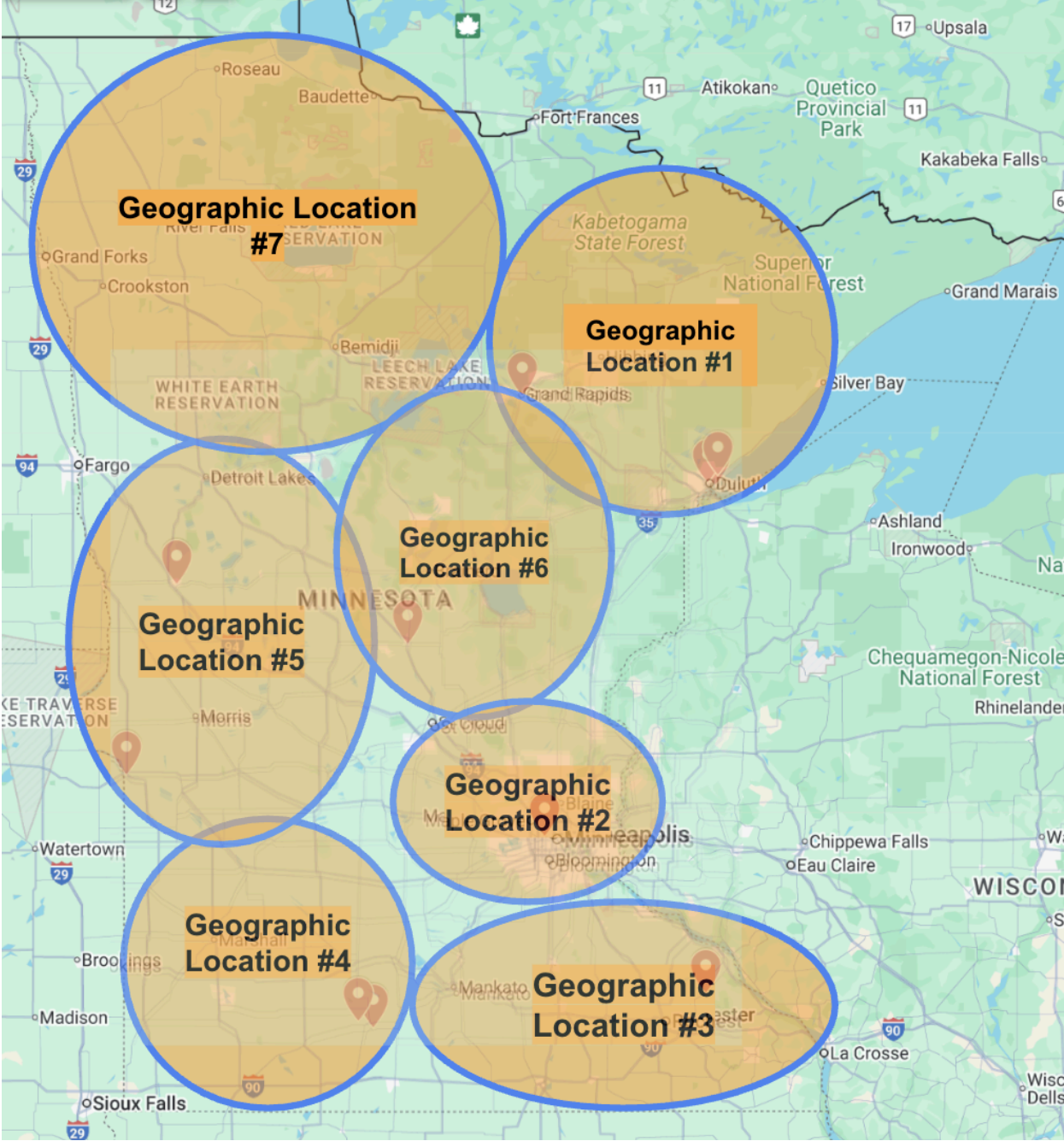
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# Appendix B: Overlay of Community Outreach Geographic Zones and Final Focus Group Engagement Locations



# Appendix C: Engagement Methodology (Continued)

## Methodology

### *Program Outreach Methods*

The Creation in Common team sought to collaborate with host sites from all across Minnesota—programs that not only had capacity but could also help reach a broad and diverse group of children. Outreach efforts focused on programs in key geographic areas, and team members contacted directors and site staff directly by phone and email. Initial outreach included an overview of the project, a description of what participation would involve, and a question about timing. If a site didn't respond after several attempts, the team would reach out to another staff person or move on to the next site on the list.

Once a site agreed to participate, the team shared a set of materials to support the process, including:

- A participation agreement and honorarium form for the program
- Consent and honorarium forms for families

Team members stayed in close contact with the sites to confirm logistics and offer support along the way.

### *Consent Process*

Parents or guardians of all children who took part in the engagements gave written permission for their child to participate. In advance of the focus groups, they were provided with a detailed consent form explaining the purpose of the project, what participation involved, and how information would be collected and protected. This included clear information about:

- The voluntary nature of participation, with the option to withdraw at any time.
- What children would do during the focus groups, including group discussions, optional one-on-one conversations, and interactive activities.
- How information would be collected through notes and video recordings for analysis, with no identifying information shared in reports.
- The confidentiality of all responses and the secure handling of data.

### *Honorariums*

Participating families received a \$95 honorarium, either as a mailed check or an electronic gift card, once their child completed the focus group and a parent or guardian completed the post-focus group survey. Like the consent form, families completed the honorarium agreement in advance.

Host sites received a \$125 honorarium for helping organize the session and supporting recruitment. Site staff were asked to:

- Recruit four to six children and their families.
- Provide a space for the session.

- Ensure a staff member was present to support the group.

If additional staff were needed, those individuals also received a \$40 honorarium. These stipends were one way of honoring the time and effort families and staff contributed to the process.

### *Focus Group Structure*

Each of the twelve focus groups followed a shared structure, but no two were exactly alike. Sessions were shaped by the energy of the group and the personalities of the children, but the team worked to keep the format consistent so the insights could be compared across sites.

Sessions combined structured dialogue with open-ended play. Children were invited to draw, build, or play simple games like Jenga® while answering questions. These materials weren't just for fun—they were a way to help children express themselves, especially when words alone weren't enough. Each session started the same way: the facilitators and children introduced themselves to one another, and then the children were told they were the “teachers” for the day. Framing them as the experts helped set the tone for the conversation, helping children feel a sense of ownership and reminding everyone in the room that their ideas and experiences mattered.

### *Facilitation Style*

Facilitators focused on creating a space where children felt safe, seen, and encouraged to share. They used open-ended questions and avoided pressure to give the “right” answer. When a child wasn't sure how to respond, facilitators offered gentle reassurance and let them take their time. Visual tools were used to help children identify their emotions, helping to ensure that their perspectives would be understood even if they did not have the vocabulary to be able to fully verbalize it. The team also used nonverbal strategies—such as calm body language, visual prompts, and soft transitions—to help keep the group focused and comfortable. These small choices added up. They helped build trust and made space for children's voices to come through clearly.

### *Implementation Constraints and Methodological Limitations*

While the project reached a wide range of children and communities, it wasn't without challenges:

- Recruitment and timing. The timeline for recruitment ended up being tighter than expected. Because many focus groups took place in May, some sites were too busy with end-of-year schedules to participate. Others expressed interest but couldn't commit due to staffing shortages or limited capacity. In many cases, programs simply didn't have enough people available to coordinate or host a session. The team had to be flexible and persistent, often reaching out to additional programs when initial contacts didn't work out.
- Variability in physical environment and group size. Sessions took place in a range of environments, from schools to community centers to YMCA sites. Each space had its own energy and routines,

which shaped how children engaged. In some places, it was harder to hold focus; in others, the space helped the group settle right in. Group sizes varied too. While the team aimed for four to six children per group, some were larger or smaller. In bigger groups, having multiple facilitators helped balance the energy and allowed for both individual and group conversations.

- Variation in program staff engagement . The level of support from site staff also varied. Some staff helped actively, offering gentle redirection or helping children stay focused. Others stepped back during the session, simply watching and providing assistance if asked to do so.
- Limits on understanding disability perspectives. Since participants' disability status was collected after the sessions through an optional question on the parent survey, facilitators were unable to make targeted observations about the experiences of children with disabilities during the engagement. These differences didn't limit the quality of the engagement but they did highlight the importance of thoughtful preparation, relationship-building, and flexibility when working in real-world settings.

# Appendix D: Young Learner Parent/Guardian Consent Form

## ***Why is this engagement being done?***

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) is partnering with [Creation in Common](#) to better understand young children's (ages 4-8) experiences related to kindergarten transition, instruction, and assessment. This work will inform MDE as it works to ensure that the transition to kindergarten is:

- (1) a positive experience,
- (2) inclusive of all kindergarteners, and
- (3) provides opportunities that allow a child to demonstrate what they know and can do in a way that works for them.

Creation in Common will prepare a report for MDE summarizing the engagement and key themes. This report will not include any identifying information about child(ren) or parents/guardians.

## ***Why is my child being asked to be a part of this engagement?***

It is important that young learners' perspectives and voices be part of the work that MDE does to support school districts and charter schools in educating Minnesota's youngest learners.

## ***What will participation involve?***

Your child's participation will include the following:

- **Focus Group (30 minutes)**: A small group session where 4 to 6 children will engage in interactive, play-based activities such as drawing, storytelling, or games to share their thoughts and experiences about kindergarten. While participating, they may answer questions like "What makes you happy in school?" or "When you play school, what do you like to do?"
- **Interactive Feedback Tools**: Children may use tools such as sticker charts, voting boards, or tokens to indicate activities they enjoy or feel confident in. These tools will provide accessible insights into preferences and engagement with different learning activities.
- **Visual Cues and Picture Cards**: A variety of visual supports may be available to help all children express their thoughts in ways that feel most comfortable to them.
- **One-on-One Interview (3-5 minutes, optional)**: If comfortable, children may take part in a brief individual conversation with a facilitator, responding to open-ended, playful prompts such as "What do you look like when you're learning something?" or "When you know something at school, what do you do to show your teacher?" through words, drawings, or demonstrations.
- **Parent/Guardian Follow-Up Survey**: A short online questionnaire will provide you with an opportunity to share your perspective on your child's kindergarten experience and school engagement.

As recognition for the time and effort involved, participating families will receive a \$95 honorarium upon completion of the focus group and follow-up survey.

## ***Will I be with my child during the engagement sessions?***

Parents/guardians are invited to observe the focus group from a nearby space. Parents/guardians will have the right to intervene or end their child's participation at any time. Childcare program staff will be present throughout the focus group facilitation.



**Consent and Voluntary Participation**

A parent/guardian may choose to provide their consent for their child to participate. Child participants may choose to assert their agreement to participate in the study by completing an Assent Form. They are not obligated to participate in any specific way or attend one-on-one interview sessions. If your child does participate, they can engage in ways that are comfortable for them. Children may choose not to answer any questions. A child, or their parent/guardian, can choose to stop participating at any point and for any reason.

**Participation is Confidential**

To protect the privacy of all children who participate, any information that could potentially reveal the identity of a child will be removed prior to any reporting.

**How will information be collected and used?**

The facilitators will record interactions throughout the engagement session with written observations and by video. Video recording will allow facilitators to document a child’s nonverbal cues (ex. body language, facial expressions) during activities to assess their engagement, comfort, and enthusiasm. Videos will not be shared with MDE. To protect the privacy of all children who participate, any information that could reveal who they are will be removed in reporting and discussions.

**What happens to the information collected?**

The information collected during the engagement sessions will be analyzed to identify themes and summarized in a report. The report will be shared with MDE by July 15, 2025. No child or parent/guardian identifying information will be included in the report. Names and identities will be stored in a secured digital file, and all collected data will be destroyed no later than July 31, 2025.

**Questions and Grievance Procedure**

If you have any questions, concerns or are dissatisfied with any aspect of this study, you may report your grievances anonymously using the Google Form that is linked here.

**Informed Consent**

I understand the information above and I give permission for my child to participate in the engagement sessions under the conditions stated above.

Child Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



# Appendix E: Young Learner and Parent/Guardian Participation Honorarium Agreement

First and Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Young Learner Parent/Guardian

Thank you for agreeing to participate, along with your child, in our Young Learner community engagement initiative. The following agreement outlines you and your child’s role, the honorarium for participation, and the terms of the agreement. Honorariums are being processed through Creation in Common, LLC.

This agreement is effective from \_\_\_\_\_, 2025 through May 30, 2025.

## **Role of Engagement Subjects**

Creation in Common is seeking Young Learners (ages 5 and 6) to participate in a focus group to inform the Minnesota Department of Education’s efforts to better understand kindergarteners’ unique perspectives and support their experience in school.

Young Learner participants will take part in a 30-minute focus group, engaging in simple, age-appropriate activities and answering questions about their experiences in their kindergarten classrooms, how their feelings about attending school have evolved over the course of the year, and their preferences for learning and showing their knowledge, abilities, strengths and assets. During the focus group, participants will also be invited to engage in a 3 to 5-minute, individual conversation with a Creation in Common facilitator - allowing them a space to share their thoughts one-on-one. A sample discussion guide is included as Attachment A.

Additionally, as the child's parent or guardian, you will receive a follow-up survey after the focus group. This brief online questionnaire will help us:

- 1) Gather important information about the child’s demographics and pre-Kindergarten education and/or childcare experience.
- 2) Offer you an opportunity to share your perspective on your child’s engagement with school and their kindergarten experience.

## **Honorarium**

**Young Learners will participate in a 30-minute, play-centered focus group, with the option of also participating in a 3 to 5-minute individual interview during the same session. A parent and/or guardian of the Young Learner participant will complete an online survey within 1 week of the focus group’s facilitation.**



To recognize your and your child's time, expertise, and participation, you will receive a **\$95** honorarium. The participation requirements for the full \$95 honorarium payment are as follows:

- Your child’s presence and participation, to the best of their abilities, for the whole run-time of the focus group.
- Your completion of the online follow-up survey. Full completion includes providing an answer to all questions within 1 week of the focus group facilitation.
  - If you are unable to complete the online survey, we can arrange reasonable accommodations, such as audio-recorded or handwritten responses.

Honorariums will be issued via a business check within 1 week of full survey completion.

Any questions regarding this Agreement or you or your child’s role should be directed to the Creation in Common Project Lead, Lindsey Burdick ([lindsey@creationincommon.com](mailto:lindsey@creationincommon.com)).

**Agreement executed by:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Carlo Cuesta, Managing Partner of Creation in Common

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian of Young Learner Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



# Appendix F: Young Learner Collaborator Honorarium Agreement

First and Last Name of Collaborator: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for agreeing to be a Young Learner Staff Collaborator. The following Young Learner Staff Collaborator agreement outlines your role, your honorarium for participating, and the terms of the agreement. Honorariums are being processed through Creation in Common, LLC.

This agreement is effective from \_\_\_\_\_, 2025 through May 30, 2025.

## **Scope of Project**

Creation in Common is seeking 4 to 6 Young Learners (ages 5 and 6) to participate in a 30-minute, play-centered focus group to inform the Minnesota Department of Education’s efforts to better understand and support children’s early experiences at school. The Young Learner participants will engage in fun, age-appropriate activities—with the option of also participating in a 5-minute individual interview during the session, answering questions that relate to:

- 1) Their kindergarten experience.
- 2) How their feelings about school may have evolved over the course of the year.
- 3) Their preferences for learning and showing their knowledge, abilities, strengths and assets.

Their parent and/or guardian will be asked to complete an online follow-up survey, sharing the child’s demographic and Pre-K education/childcare experience, as well as their perspective of their child’s experience in and engagement with school. A sample discussion guide and survey are included as Attachments A and B.

## **Role of Young Learner Collaborators**

Creation in Common is seeking Young Learner Collaborators—i.e. school, childcare, and community program staff—to lead the communication of and recruitment for the Young Learner focus groups. Additionally, Collaborators will secure a space within their program’s building for the focus group and be present during the session to oversee facilitation.

## **Honorarium**

**Collaborators will work with Creation in Common to support the planning and facilitation of a 30-minute, play-centered focus group with Young Learner participants, in cooperation with their parents and/or guardians.**



As an honorarium for your time and efforts, you will receive **\$125**. The collaboration requirements for the full **\$125** honorarium payment are as follows:

- Sharing this focus group opportunity with kindergarten families and leading the recruitment of 4 to 6 Young Learner participants and their parent/guardian.
  - *This may also include connecting Creation in Common directly with families you believe could provide valuable perspectives.*
- Coordinate the use of a space within your program’s location for the focus group session.
- Be present on-location on the day of the focus group to help manage facilitation.
  - *If an additional staff member is needed to supervise non-participating children while the focus group takes place, Creation in Common will provide a **\$40** honorarium to compensate for their time.*

Honorariums will be issued via a business check within 1 week of the focus group.

Any questions regarding this Agreement or you or your child’s role should be directed to the Creation in Common Project Lead, Lindsey Burdick ([lindsey@creationincommon.com](mailto:lindsey@creationincommon.com)).

**Agreement executed by:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Carlo Cuesta, Managing Partner of Creation in Common

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Young Learner Collaborator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



## Appendix G: Focus Group Discussion Guide

These questions were used as a loose guide. Not every question was asked, and the wording often changed to match the conversation and what made sense for each group of children.

1. Did you go to preschool last year?
2. How was preschool different from kindergarten? What do you miss about preschool?
3. How did you feel about starting kindergarten? What did you think school would be like?
  - a. Follow up to learn why/how they felt that way.
4. How do you feel when you come to kindergarten now?
5. What does learning mean?
6. What do you do when you learn something?
7. What does it look like when you learn something?
8. Do you think learning new things is fun? Tell me about that...
9. What's your favorite part about kindergarten? What do you like to do for fun at school BESIDES recess/lunch/PE? Why do you think \_ is fun?
10. What are some of the best parts of being in your classroom and with your teacher?
  - a. Tell me more about what makes it the best or your favorite part.
11. What kinds of things do you like to do with your teacher? In your classroom?
12. What makes you happy in your classroom? What does your teacher do that makes you happy?
  - a. Why does that make you happy?
13. What's the best thing about your friends in your classroom/at school?
14. Pretend I'm going to start kindergarten next year. What would you tell me so that I can learn a lot and have fun in kindergarten?
  - a. If they don't respond to "you" as an example, sub in a little sister/brother, a stuffy, etc.
15. How does it feel when your teacher asks you to answer a question?
  - a. What does it feel like when your teacher asks you to do something you don't know how to do? When you don't know the answer?
  - b. What happens when you don't know the answer or when you get an answer wrong? Do you get another chance to answer later on?
16. What do you do when you need help? Who do you ask?
17. What's hard about being in kindergarten?
  - a. How do you like your teacher to help you when something is hard to do?
  - b. What do you do if you are having a hard time in your classroom/at school?
18. How do you feel when you have to try something new at school?
19. When you are learning something new do you like to be told how to do it, to try it with your hands, to have someone show you how to do it, or to write it down? Why?
20. What is something you would like your teacher to know about how you feel about school?
21. Can you tell me about a time your teacher asked you to show them something that you learned?
22. How do you show your teacher that you know how to do something?

## Appendix H: Post-Focus Group Parent/Guardian Survey

1. Child's Name
2. Have they attended the same school for the entire 2024-2025 school year, yes or no?
  - a. If no, how many other schools?"
3. If your child has been in childcare or preschool/prekindergarten program outside of your home:
  - a. Have there been any positive or negative experiences your child has had in their childcare, preschool, or prekindergarten program that stand out to you? If yes, please describe them.
4. Did you and your child do anything to try and prepare for kindergarten? For example: visit school before kindergarten started or participate in a kindergarten prep program during the summer.
  - a. If yes, please describe what you did.
5. Did your family receive any information or support to help your child get prepared for kindergarten?
  - a. If yes, who shared information or provided support?
6. What helped your child the most when starting kindergarten, if anything?
7. How do you find out what your child is learning in kindergarten?
8. What does your child typically tell you about their school days? Do they ever mention working or playing with particular things at school?
9. What is their favorite thing(s) to learn in kindergarten?
10. What are your child's favorite things about kindergarten in general (aside from your answer above, recess, lunch, etc.)?
11. Is there anything about kindergarten that makes your child feel uncomfortable, stressed, or not included?
  - a. If yes, please explain.
12. How does your child prefer to learn? Why do you think they prefer to learn this way?
13. What helps your child feel confident when showing what they know or can do?
14. What are your child's favorite activities or things to do at home?
15. How difficult would you say the transition to kindergarten and/or the first week of school was for your child?
16. In comparison to the first week of school, how difficult is attending school for your child now?
17. Child's Race/Ethnicity
18. Child's Date of Birth
19. What language(s) are spoken at home?
20. *Optional*: Has your child been diagnosed with a disability?
21. *Optional*: Are there any other factors or characteristics about your child you'd like to share?