



Evaluation of Georgia's Quality Rated Nutrition and Physical Activity Endorsement Pilot for Child Care Programs

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Executive Summary

In 2024, Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), in partnership with Child Trends, launched and evaluated a pilot Quality Rated Nutrition and Physical Activity (N&PA) Endorsement for a subset of child care centers. The initiative, funded by the Georgia Foundation for Early Care and Learning, aimed to recognize and strengthen early care programs' nutrition and physical activity practices through structured training, resources, and financial support. Fourteen centers participated in activities, including an in-person Physical Activity Learning Session (PALS) training, online Go Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (Go NAPSACC) training modules, a DECAL-hosted virtual training series, and one-on-one technical assistance. Participants also received stipends and mini-grants to support implementation of nutrition and physical activity practices. Child Trends conducted a mixed-methods evaluation of this pilot endorsement—including surveys, interviews, and pre-post self-assessments—to assess center administrators' participation and satisfaction with, and the effects of, the N&PA Endorsement on their programs.

Key findings

The evaluation's key findings address six main research questions. Below, we highlight the main findings by question.

1. Who participated in the N&PA Endorsement Pilot?

- Fourteen center administrators (with an average of 16.6 years in early childhood education) participated, most with prior training in nutrition or physical activity. All programs reported implementing N&PA Endorsement practices with children, especially toddlers and preschoolers; fewer programs extended these practices to staff and families.

2. What are administrators' perceptions of the N&PA Endorsement overall and of each component?

- Administrators viewed the N&PA Endorsement positively and felt it met their expectations. They especially valued the in-person PALS training and mini-grant funding for practicality and impact, while they appreciated the online training for its convenience. Participants suggested expanding support to more staff and families.

3. How did administrators' self-reported N&PA practices change?

- Most administrators reported increases in both nutrition and physical activity practices, including starting or improving food preparation activities, physical fitness lessons, and family engagement. Although implementation was sometimes challenging, many administrators planned to sustain changes like gardens, taste testing, and permanent play equipment.

4. What effects did the N&PA Endorsement have on programs, staff, families, and children, according to administrators?

- Administrators reported that the N&PA Endorsement provided mechanisms to improve nutrition- and physical activity-based offerings by providing opportunities for gardening, taste testing, or purchasing new equipment; encouraged healthier habits among staff and children; contributed to program marketability; and made programs feel more prepared for future Quality Rated assessments. Administrators also indicated that families showed increased interest in and incorporation of healthy eating and active play at home.

5. Did programs face any challenges or difficulties in participating in the pilot or implementing new strategies?

- Program administrators described facing challenges with feeling overwhelmed, time constraints, staff and parent buy-in, and timing of the Endorsement during seasons with limited gardening opportunities.

6. Are there additional supports, resources, or improvements that could address barriers to the pilot?

- Participants recommended expanding the N&PA Endorsement to more programs, emphasizing the need for funding, flexible implementation options, and training and resources to ensure access and buy-in for staff and families.

Key recommendations

The following recommendations highlight some of the key considerations for strengthening and expanding the N&PA Endorsement based on the pilot evaluation findings:

Expand access and engagement.

- Involve all staff (e.g., teachers, cooks) and families by offering tailored and free training and take-home resources.
- Continue to offer flexible formats (in-person and virtual) to support programs with varied needs and staff availability.

Strengthen support structures.

- Increase access to technical assistance, including on-site visits.
- Facilitate peer learning networks for shared problem-solving and exchange of ideas and best practices.

Clarify and align implementation.

- Maintain flexibility in content and modality (in-person vs online) to best support programs' unique needs.
- Ensure that licensing consultants, Quality Rated assessors, and all technical assistance providers are in agreement regarding best practices for nutrition and physical activity—including food preparation and outdoor equipment—so they do not provide conflicting guidance.
- Provide clear guidance on timelines, expectations, and how activities align with Quality Rated and licensing standards.

Sustain incentives and plan for growth.

- Continue mini-grants and public promotion to encourage nutrition and physical activity practices in child care programs and increase interest for other programs.
- Adapt the model for broader, equitable statewide implementation.

The pilot N&PA Endorsement demonstrated strong potential to enhance nutrition and physical activity practices in early childhood settings through practical training, funding, and tailored support. Building on its success, future efforts could focus on expanding access, deepening engagement with families and staff, and emphasizing practice supports—such as ongoing technical assistance, peer learning, and alignment with quality standards—to help programs embed these practices sustainably.

Introduction

In 2024, Child Trends partnered with Georgia's Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) to evaluate the pilot of a new Quality Rated Nutrition and Physical Activity (N&PA) Endorsement for center-based child care programs participating in Georgia's Quality Rated System. The N&PA Endorsement was designed to recognize and promote nutrition and physical activity practices by providing professional development opportunities, materials, and financial grants to child care providers. The purpose of this report is to summarize evaluation findings and provide DECAL with recommendations to inform future implementation of the N&PA Endorsement components.

DECAL offered the N&PA Endorsement to a pilot group of 14 center administrators. The N&PA Endorsement activities included an in-person Physical Activity Learning Session (PALS) training, online Go Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (Go NAPSACC) training modules, and additional online resources, with DECAL supporting programs through technical assistance (TA). Programs also completed independent assignments throughout the N&PA Endorsement period and received funds for improvements to their program related to nutrition and physical activity.

About the Quality Rated Nutrition and Physical Activity Endorsement

Goals and pilot development process

N&PA Leadership Perspective

DECAL leadership launched the pilot to explore the efficacy of a nutrition and physical activity endorsement within Georgia's Quality Rated system. The aim was to integrate health-focused practices into early childhood education settings, enhancing child well-being while evaluating the feasibility of a health-related endorsement.

Goals:

- Understand how a nutrition and physical activity endorsement could fit into the Quality Rated framework
- Support programs in implementing best practices through training, funding, and technical assistance
- Build confidence and understanding in how to integrate nutrition and physical activity in daily routines not as extra tasks, but as part of a holistic approach
- Test the pilot development process and outcomes to inform future endorsement strategies

Pilot Development Process:

- Planning included finding available training models like Go NAPSACC and mapping out the timeline and details to launch the endorsement.
- Child care center selection included identifying sites and coordinating the launch (i.e., orientation, training, paperwork, and funding distribution).
- Implementation and ongoing support included in-person and virtual training sessions, technical assistance, and ongoing guidance.
- Evaluation included partnership with Child Trends to understand changes pre- and post-endorsement and examples of implementation practices.

Quality Rated N&PA Endorsement components and activities

Below we describe the main N&PA Endorsement activities in which administrators participated. DECAL leadership had experience with and knowledge of the training to be able to provide additional guidance and support throughout the Endorsement period. The first training occurred in June 2024, and participants had access to Go NAPSACC and other training materials through March 2025. Administrators were required to use their funding by May 2025.

Physical Activity Learning Session training

The one-day, in-person Physical Activity Learning Session (PALS) training was developed by Nemours Children's Health and funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The PALS training describes best practices for physical activity across eight areas and addresses the challenges early care and education (ECE) providers face in supporting active play. The PALS training uses self-assessments and content is focused on the best practices, policies, and environments related to physical activity. DECAL required administrators to attend this training and allowed them to invite other staff from their programs to join.

Online nutrition and physical activity training

- **DECAL's Virtual Training Series.** DECAL hosted four 30-minute Zoom-based training calls on taste testing, menu changes, gardening, and N&PA in the classroom. Administrators were required to choose at least two of the four training calls to attend. The sessions were recorded, and participants were able to view additional trainings at their convenience.
- **Go NAPSACC.** DECAL provided participants with access to the Go NAPSACC online portal which allowed administrators to access 1) a self-assessment that determined their action plan and 2) trainings with resources and materials on various topics to support their action plan. The trainings included knowledge quizzes, evaluations, and a certificate for each topic. Topics focused on child nutrition included beverages, feeding environment practices, and menu variety. It also included education and professional development on physical activity practices, indoor and outdoor play and environment, and policy.

Technical assistance

DECAL provided a one-on-one virtual technical assistance call to administrators to answer questions specific to their unique needs related to incorporating and implementing N&PA policy and practices and using their funding. They also provided ongoing communication with the administrators through emails and phone calls to answer specific questions or concerns.

Mini-grant funds and stipend

DECAL awarded grants for centers to purchase equipment or supplies to facilitate N&PA practices. DECAL also provided a stipend for participating in the in-person PALS training to attendees through the Tremendous platform which could be used for travel expenses, lodging, paying substitutes, or other costs related to participating in the PALS training.

Research Questions and Methods

Research questions

1. Who participated in the N&PA Endorsement pilot?
2. What are administrators' perceptions of the N&PA Endorsement and of each component?
3. How did administrators' self-report N&PA practices change?
4. What effects did the N&PA Endorsement have on programs, staff, families, and children, according to administrators?
5. Did programs face any challenges or difficulties in participating in the pilot or implementing new strategies?
6. Are there additional supports, resources, or improvements that could address barriers to the pilot?

Methodology and data

Quantitative data collection

Evaluation activities included surveys to understand program perceptions and progress. For each survey, the research team calculated averages and counts for all multiple-choice questions and coded the open-ended questions to group similarly themed responses.

Pre- and post-Endorsement surveys. Prior to the start of and following the N&PA Endorsement, Child Trends distributed a survey to administrators of all participating programs. In the pre-Endorsement survey, we asked about administrators' professional and educational experiences and basic information about their program. We also asked about their expectations for the N&PA Endorsement and their current N&PA practices. In the post-Endorsement survey we asked about their experience, reflections on their knowledge and attitude changes, and changes in their N&PA practices. The pre-Endorsement survey was launched in May 2024 and all 14 administrators completed it. The post-Endorsement survey was launched in November 2024 and completed by 13 administrators.

PALS feedback survey. The PALS feedback survey was an anonymous online survey administered following PALS training that asked participants about their demographic characteristics and their perceptions of the PALS in-person training. It also included open-ended questions for written feedback. Forty-two participants responded.

Go NAPSACC data. Administrators completed a self-assessment through the online platform, Go NAPSACC, at the start of the Endorsement and then again once the Endorsement was ending. There were three subscales: Child Nutrition, Outdoor Play and Learning, and Physical Activity. Administrators were asked to answer questions about the use of related practices in their program and received a score indicating the percentage of the best practices that their program met.

Qualitative data collection

Child Trends completed a series of semi-structured interviews with center-based administrators several months after the main components of the N&PA Endorsement had ended. Questions focused on their

experience with the N&PA Endorsement pilot, changes they made because of the pilot, how the pilot impacted their program, challenges they encountered, and suggestions for improvements. Interviews were conducted in March 2025. We completed interviews with 12 of the 14 center administrators who initially started with the N&PA Endorsement.

Additionally, Child Trends conducted an in-depth semi-structured interview with the Nutrition & Physical Activity Supervisor at DECAL who led the implementation of the N&PA Endorsement pilot. Questions focused on the process of developing the N&PA Endorsement pilot, challenges and successes, and future plans. DECAL leadership's perspectives are highlighted in blue call out boxes throughout the report.

Findings

Who participated in the N&PA Endorsement pilot?

Center administrators were primarily directors, and most had been in the early learning field for over a decade. Most center administrators identified as Black/African American or White and over three-quarters identified as female. All center administrators reported they had either enrolled in or completed a post-secondary course of study. More information about the participants appears in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information about the N&PA Endorsement participants

Participant characteristics	N	%
Role (select all that apply)		
Director	9	64%
Assistant director	1	7%
Owner/Owner and director	2	14%
Another administrator role	2	14%
Race/ethnicity		
Black/African American	8	57%
White	5	36%
Hispanic, Latino, or another Spanish origin	1	7%
Gender		
Female	11	79%
Male	3	21%
Education		
Some college	2	14%
Bachelor's degree	6	43%
Some graduate coursework	2	14%

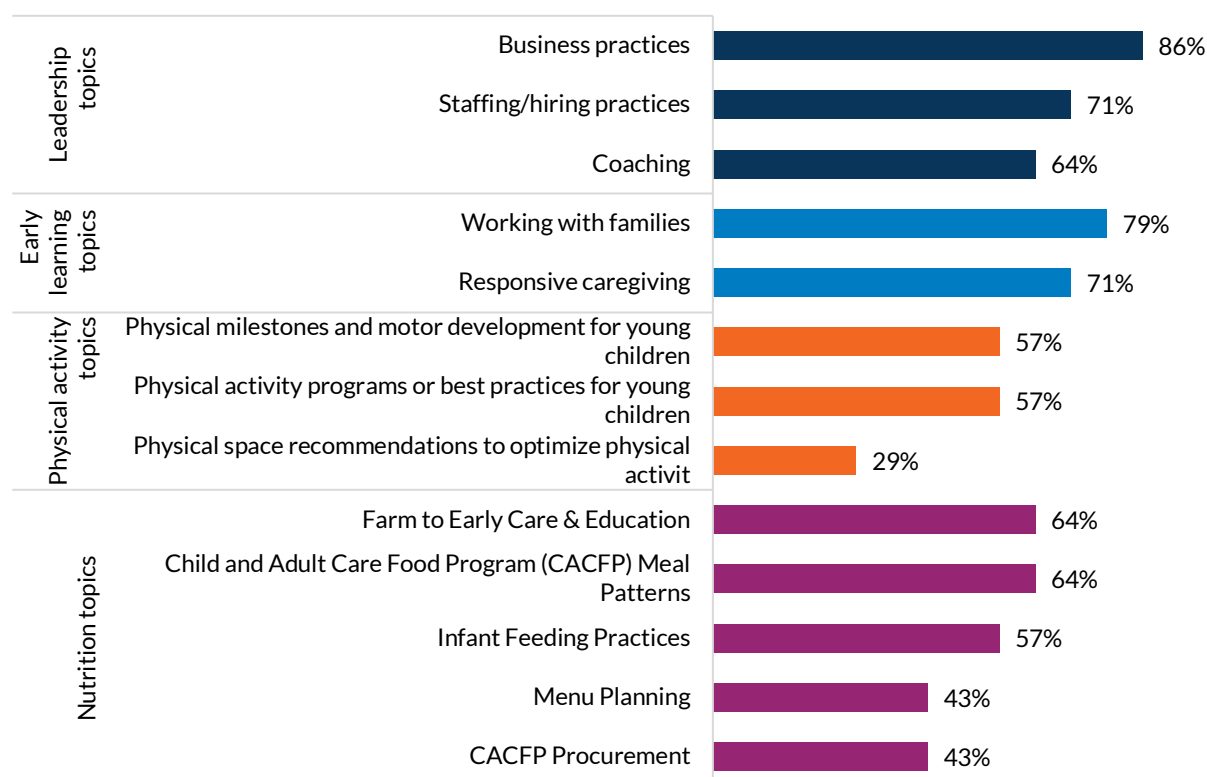
Participant characteristics	N	%
Specialist degree	3	21%
Doctoral degree (EdD/PhD)	1	7%
Language		
English	13	93%
Spanish	1	7%
Years of experience in ECE		Average
Years in the field of early learning, any role	16.6	
Years in current position	10.7	

Source: N&PA Pre-Endorsement Survey (2024)

Note: Data based on responses from 14 center administrators.

Administrators reported completing training in nutrition or physical activity within the year prior to taking part in the N&PA Endorsement, with most trainings focusing on topics like Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Meal Patterns, Farm to ECE, physical activity programs, and engaging parents. Twelve center administrators reported that they had completed training related to nutrition or physical activity in the past year prior to taking part in the N&PA Endorsement. Figure 1 shows the percentage of administrators who completed each training topic within the last year.

Figure 1. Training topics administrators completed in the year prior to taking part in the N&PA Endorsement



Source: N&PA Pre-Endorsement Survey (2024)

Note: Data based on responses from 14 center administrators.

In general, participating programs served a wide range of age groups, were larger centers, and had been operating for nearly 20 years. Nearly all of the programs (93%) served toddlers and preschoolers not in Georgia's pre-K program. Table 2 shows the number of programs that served various age groups. Programs also reported on the number of classes, children they served, and staffing, and operation years. On average programs had about 98 children in their centers (range: 11-205), 18 full-time staff (range: 8-38), and had been operating for just under 20 years (range: 4-50).

Table 2. Ages served by number and percent of programs in the Endorsement

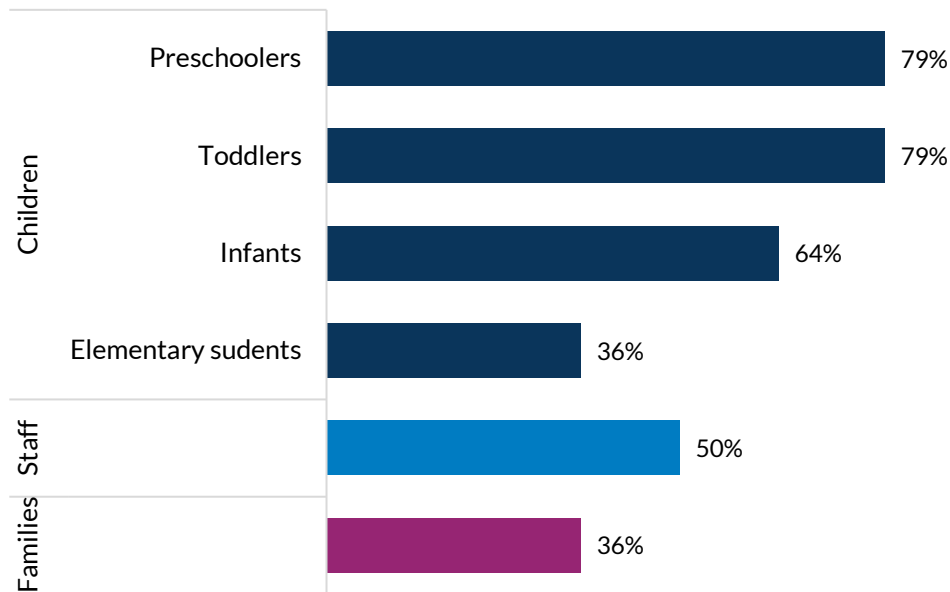
Ages served	N	%
Infants (0-11 months)	11	79%
Toddlers (12-35 months)	13	93%
Preschoolers, not in Georgia's Pre-K (36 months to 5 years)	13	93%
Georgia's Pre-K	5	36%
School age (kindergarten and above)	10	71%

Source: N&PA Pre-Endorsement Survey (2024)

Note: Data based on responses from 14 center administrators.

All programs implemented the N&PA Endorsement training content or resources with children, but only about half of programs implemented the content or resources with their staff and one third of programs implemented the content with families in their program (see Figure 2). Of the administrators who implemented the content with their staff, they most commonly engaged them through training sessions (71%), demonstrations or events (71%), and/or a collaborative activity (71%). Among administrators who engaged families, all did so through a collaborative activity or project.

Figure 2. Percentage of programs that have implemented training content with children, staff, and families



Source: N&PA Post-Endorsement Survey (2025)

Note: Data based on responses from 14 center administrators.

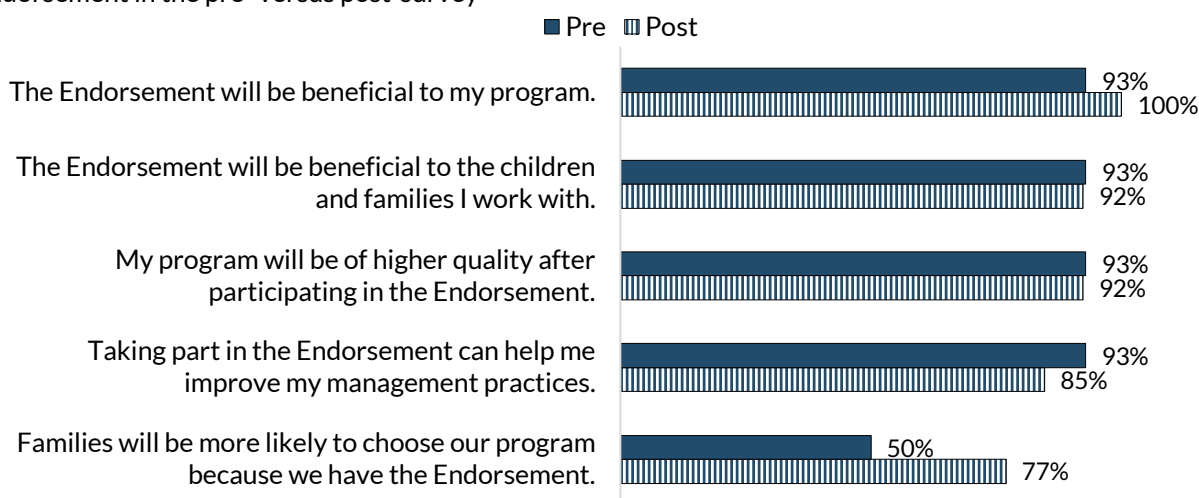
Centers had multiple reasons for participating in the N&PA Endorsement, most of which focused on improving the quality of their program. In general, administrators were eager to ensure that their children were receiving the best possible care. Administrators talked about exposing children and their families to healthy habits and meals, noting that families do not always engage in physical activity or healthy eating. Several administrators emphasized the importance of introducing children to these healthy habits at a young age, with one administrator saying, *“We’re trying to get them to see these things at a stage in life where normally no one’s even having that conversation with them.”* Other reasons administrators said they were drawn to the endorsement included the mini-grant funds, increasing the marketability of the program, and trying to continue N&PA efforts from previous partnerships.

What are administrators’ perceptions of the N&PA Endorsement overall?

Most administrators had a very positive impression of the N&PA Endorsement, finding it informative and helpful for assessing and improving their programs. In the post-Endorsement survey, a majority of administrators reported a very positive impression of the N&PA Endorsement, and about a quarter said it was somewhat positive. When asked to elaborate in an open-ended response, most found the training and activities informative for their program and practices, and a few mentioned that it helped them assess and improve their programs. One administrator said, *“It really makes you take a deep look at your program. What is going well, where you can improve.”* Another administrator wrote about the importance of the individual support they received. Administrators also enjoyed the small, collaborative nature of the pilot and appreciated that it could be tailored to their individual program. Although it could sometimes be challenging to fit the N&PA Endorsement activities into busy schedules, it did not usually feel overwhelming and the workload did not feel overly burdensome.

Figure 3 also shows how strongly administrators agreed with a series of statements related to the goals of the N&PA Endorsement before and after the training. Overall, the majority agreed or strongly agreed with the positive statements both before and after the N&PA Endorsement. After taking part in the N&PA Endorsement, many more administrators (77%) agreed that families would be more likely to choose their programs because of the N&PA Endorsement compared to prior to the Endorsement (50%).

Figure 3. Percentage of administrators who agreed or strongly agreed with statement about N&PA Endorsement in the pre- versus post-survey



Source: N&PA Pre- and Post-Endorsement Surveys (2024-2025)

Note: Data based on responses from 14 center administrators for the pre-Endorsement survey and 13 center administrators for the post-Endorsement survey.

Overall, administrators felt that the Endorsement met their expectations. In the post-Endorsement survey, the majority of administrators said the N&PA Endorsement met their expectations very much and a quarter said somewhat. These findings were echoed in the post-Endorsement interviews with administrators. As one administrator said, *“We were thrilled to be asked to be in this pilot program, and it turned out to be better than we thought...We hope we get asked to do this again.”* Most administrators felt that there was a good balance of nutrition and physical activity content in the Endorsement, and that there was no content missing from the Endorsement. However, one administrator we spoke to had hoped for a more even balance in content focused on nutrition and physical activity and they felt that the N&PA Endorsement primarily focused on physical activity.

Most administrators appreciated the blend of in-person and online training supports.

N&PA Leadership Perspective

When developing the Endorsement pilot, DECAL leadership was aware of the importance of hosting an in-person training as well as offering virtual trainings in order to meet the various needs of administrators. In future work, DECAL leadership finds it important and beneficial to add in-person opportunities for nutrition-related training and expressed interest in facilitating other face-to-face opportunities such as a lunch and learn, orientation, or final celebration to acknowledge accomplishments.

Although the online training portion was more convenient to fit into schedules, multiple administrators emphasized the benefits of the in-person PALS training. One administrator noted that it was an opportunity to learn from others and feel less alone. Several administrators wanted additional in-person opportunities, particularly an in-person training that focused on the nutrition component or gardening methods. Several administrators also enjoyed completing the self-paced Go NAPSACC trainings on their own time, and administrators saw the technical assistance calls as helpful for both planning purposes and accountability. Overall, administrators acknowledged the benefits of having a mix of formats for training and support.

What are administrators’ perceptions of each component of N&PA Endorsement?

Administrators found the mini-grant funds and PALS training to be the most helpful aspects of the N&PA Endorsement, valuing practical resources and staff engagement opportunities. Survey results revealed that administrators found the mini-grant funding to be the most helpful component of the N&PA Endorsement. Administrators also highly valued the PALS training. The remaining components—Go NAPSACC self-assessment, training materials, TA calls, and DECAL’s training—received similar mid-range rankings. In open-ended responses, administrators shared that they most appreciated the funding, practical resources, and new ideas to enhance their programs, as well as opportunities to involve staff and families in engaging activities. Several noted that the N&PA Endorsement was motivating and helped spur positive changes. Although most did not mention any least favorite aspect, **a few administrators expressed interest in more in-person training, on-site visits, and additional nutrition-focused resources, such as menu ideas.**

Below we include positive perceptions of each of the endorsement components and suggestions for improvement (Table 3)

Table 3. Successes and challenges of each component of the N&PA Endorsement

Component	Successes & Positive Experiences	Challenges/Areas of Improvement
Physical Activity Learning Session (PALS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High satisfaction and engagement • All agreed they would use what they learned • Participants noted that the trainers were effective and knowledgeable and enjoyed the interactive format • Participants felt motivated and confident to implement physical activity and engage family and staff and made action plans to do so 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About half of participants wanted additional support to implement what they learned • Participants requested more content and resources on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Physical activity with children with special needs ○ Incorporating family and staff in physical activity • Participants wanted more overview of the Endorsement itself during PALS
Go NAPSACC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All agreed that the platform was easy to use • Administrators appreciated the ability to choose modules and topics that aligned with their goals • The self-assessment helped them consider which areas to improve, new areas they had not considered, and what goes into implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some encountered technical issues with the platform that affected their experience • Some found the online self-paced modules helpful but wanted accompanying support to implement practices or in-person nutrition education options
DECAL Virtual Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All administrators agreed or strongly agreed that they learned something new and could apply it to their programs • Many appreciated the practical recommendations of books, food displays, and applicability of content • The trainings were short, easy to attend, and could incorporate other staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During the training series, many were managing Hurricane Helene recovery, limiting their ability to engage with these sessions. • Some requested ongoing support to keep staff motivated, especially when activities don't work out as planned • Some are interested in learning how to better engage the broader community in N&PA efforts
Technical Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most found the TA call engaging and a good way to keep them moving forward • Participants appreciated the structured call to ask questions and brainstorm on problem-solving • Administrators found the discussion relevant and appreciated the focus on action planning. • Many gained a better understanding of the resources available to them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some wanted additional supports and continued feedback beyond the TA call • A few described a lack of follow-through on resource sharing and consistent follow-up from DECAL • Some requested more hands-on support such as an on-site TA visit or a cohort to share ideas • Some want free, easily accessible training for all program staff (sharing recorded sessions could be an effective solution)

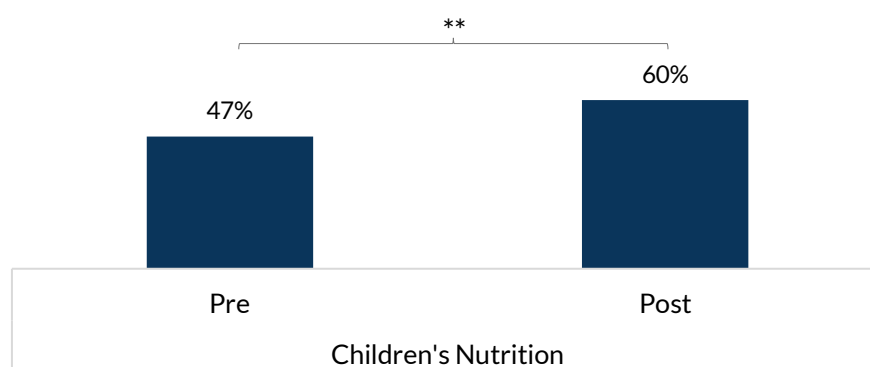
The mini-grant funds encouraged participation and offered flexibility in spending, which allowed programs to address unmet needs, especially in engaging families in physical activity- and nutrition-related events. Administrators primarily put funds toward outdoor play equipment and materials, cooking supplies and tools, taste-testing items, and gardening activities and education. Many programs used the funds to address specific gaps, such as purchasing playground equipment, tricycles, or gross motor room items like activity mats and kickballs. Others enhanced hands-on nutrition and wellness education through gardening, including hydroponic systems and raised garden beds, often with the intent to create sustainable gardening projects that could benefit children for years to come. The funds also allowed for the purchase of materials not typically covered by other funding sources, such as plates and cups, canopies for family events, and appliances like food choppers and vacuum sealing machines to support efficient meal preparation. Programs appreciated the flexibility of the mini-grant, particularly compared to those like Head Start, which often face restrictions on related spending. Technical assistance and tools like the Go NAPSACC self-assessment helped programs align purchases with their goals, and involving teachers in decision-making fostered strong buy-in. Moving forward, participants expressed interest in being able to use funds for fresh produce for their standard mealtimes. Overall, participants viewed the mini-grant as helpful, enticing, and a valuable support encouraging participation.

How did administrators' self-reported N&PA practices change?

Nutrition-related changes

As a result of the N&PA Endorsement, most programs reported that they started, improved, or increased their nutrition practices, including cooking or food preparation activities, educational lessons about healthy eating, and involving families in nutrition-related activities and education. The Go NAPSACC self-assessment data indicated that programs made changes to their nutrition-related activities and policies after completing the N&PA Endorsement. Figure 4 shows that programs increased the percentage of best practices that they reported meeting related to children's nutrition. Additionally, programs whose pre-Endorsement scores were lower than the average score showed the greatest improvement.

Figure 4. Percentage of best nutrition practices met, pre and post N&PA Endorsement



Source: Go NAPSACC self-assessment data (2024-2025)

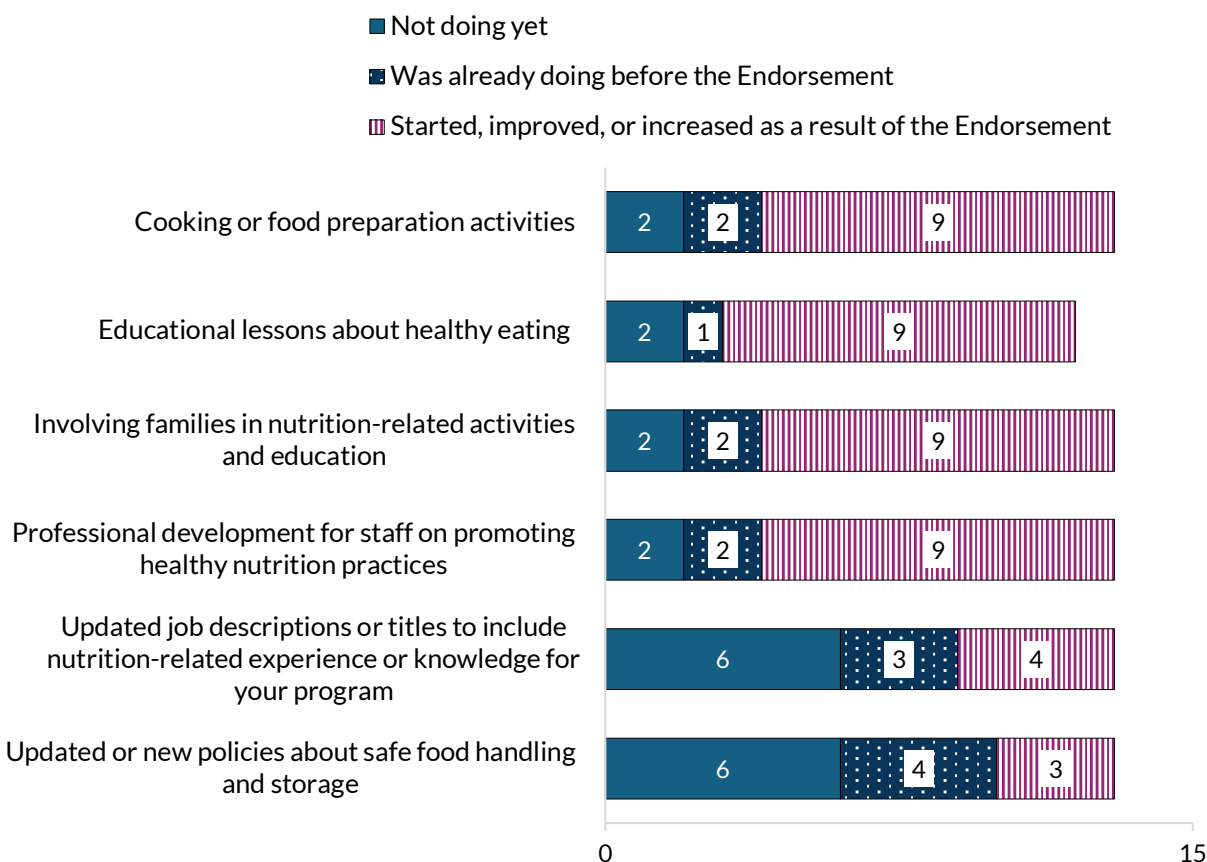
Notes: ** indicates a significant difference at the $p < 0.01$ level.

Data based on responses from 13 center administrators.

In the post-Endorsement survey, we asked administrators to report how their program has incorporated nutrition-related activities, practices, policies, or events because of the N&PA Endorsement. As noted in Figure 5 the most common strategies that programs started doing or improved or increased as a result of

the N&PA Endorsement are cooking or food preparation activities, educational lessons about healthy eating, involving families in nutrition-related activities and education, and offering professional development for staff on nutrition.

Figure 5. Number of programs implementing nutrition-related practices.



Source: N&PA Endorsement Post-Survey (2025)

Note: Data based on responses from 13 center administrators.

Similarly, in interviews, administrators shared that they now have their staff eat alongside the children and discuss healthy eating, share information about nutrition with families, and do taste-testing with the children and occasionally with their families during community events. A couple of administrators mentioned they also revised their menus to make them more nutritious as a result of what they learned during the N&PA Endorsement. Lastly, one administrator made changes to their employee and staff handbook to update policies and expectations about nutrition.

As shown in Figure 5, strategies that many programs had not yet adopted by the end of the Endorsement include updating job descriptions or titles to include nutrition-related experience or knowledge, and updating or adding policies about safe food handling and storage. However, some

Cultural Tailoring

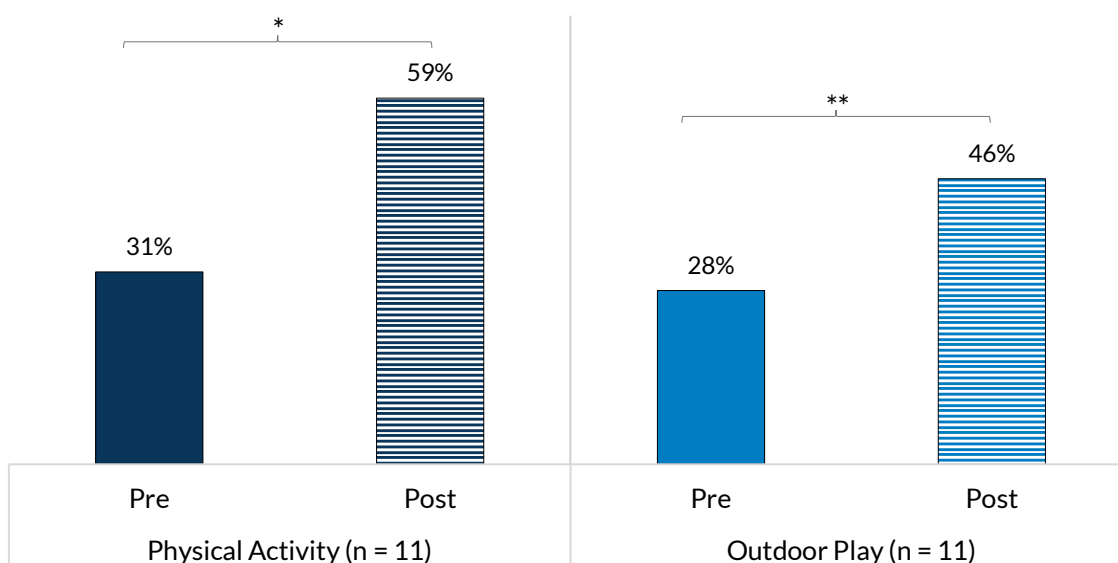
About half of administrators mentioned in interviews that they tailored or adjusted their new nutrition policies and practices to align with the unique backgrounds and cultures of families in their program or already were doing so before the N&PA Endorsement. Some administrators mentioned tailoring their menus or other nutrition practices to align with children and families' cultures. For example, one administrator commented that their program consists of mainly Hispanic children and families, so they plant cilantro, jalapenos, and tomatoes in their garden.

administrators had plans to implement these practices. In interviews, one administrator mentioned they plan to update the job description for their cook to include a focus on nutrition and another mentioned they plan to implement policies around safe food handling and storage.

Physical activity changes

As a result of the Endorsement, most programs reported that they started, improved, or increased physical activity practices, including activities that encourage families and staff to participate in physical activity together, dedicated lessons on physical fitness, and providing professional development for staff. Programs' average scores on the Go NAPSACC self-assessments increased for both Physical Activity and Outdoor Play after completing the N&PA Endorsement (see Figure 6). Several programs saw massive increases of 55 to 72 percentage points for Physical Activity, and for the Outdoor Play subscale, some programs improved as much as 39 percentage points.

Figure 6. Percentage of best physical activity practices met, pre- and post-N&PA Endorsement



Source: Go NAPSACC self-assessment data (2024-2025)

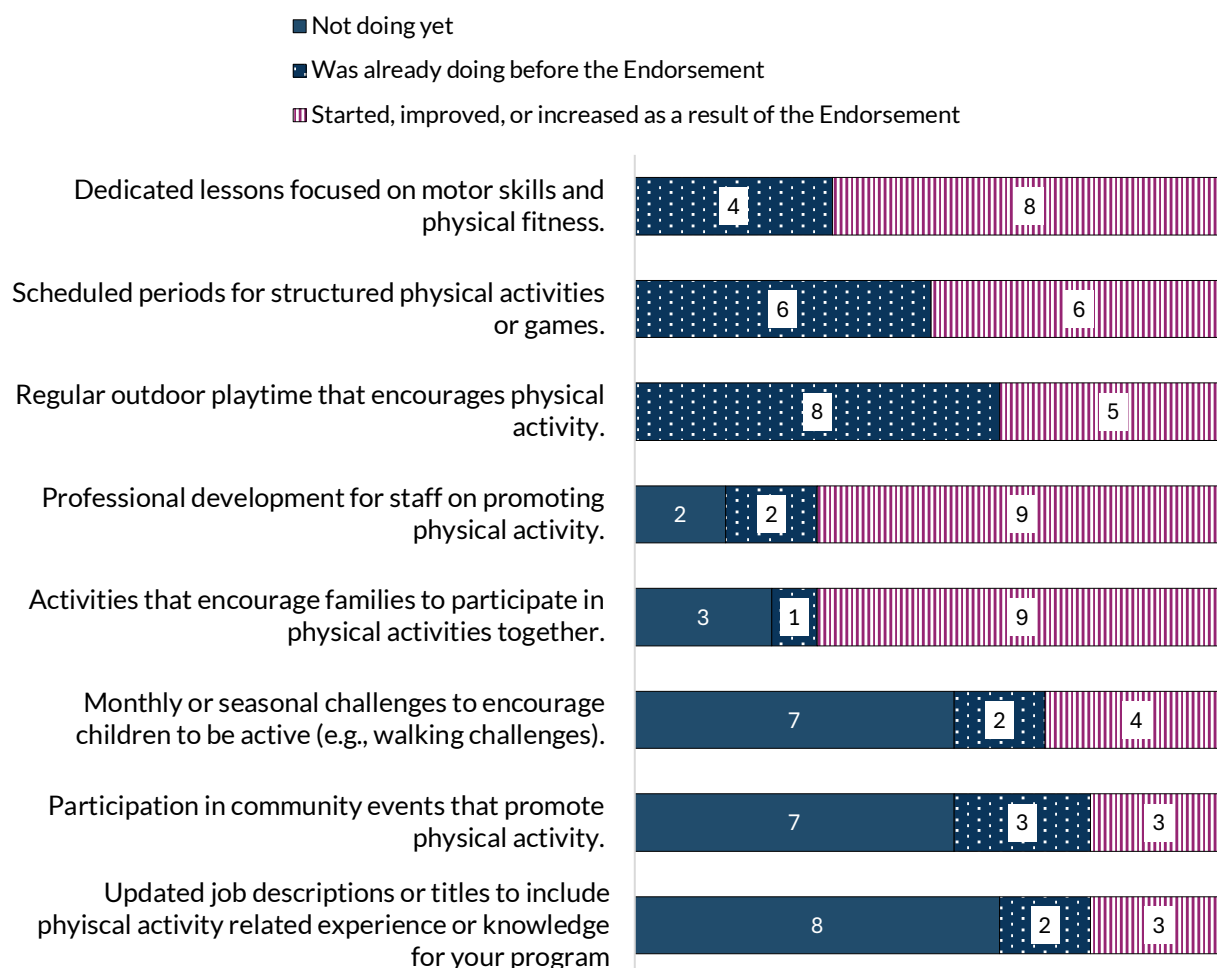
Notes: * indicates a significant difference at the $p < 0.05$ level.

** indicates a significant difference at the $p < 0.01$ level.

Data based on responses from 11 center administrators.

In the post-Endorsement survey, we asked administrators to report how their program has incorporated physical activity-related practices, policies, or events because of the N&PA Endorsement. As noted in Figure 7, the activities that programs most commonly started doing, improved, or increased as a result of the Endorsement were activities that encouraged families to participate in physical activities together, dedicated lessons focused on motor skills and physical fitness, and professional development for staff promoting physical activity. In interviews, administrators highlighted how the Endorsement gave them ideas of ways to encourage children to be physically active both outdoors and indoors when the weather was bad. One administrator noted that they also now encourage staff to be physically active alongside the children.

Figure 7. Number of center administrators implementing physical activity-related practices



Source: N&PA Endorsement Post-Survey (2025)

Note: Data based on responses from 13 center administrators.

As shown in Figure 7, by the end of the Endorsement, many programs had not yet 1) implemented practices to encourage children to be more active due to monthly or seasonal challenges, 2) participated in community events that promote physical activity, or 3) updated their job descriptions or titles to include physical activity-related experience or knowledge. However, as with nutrition practices, some administrators are planning to implement some of these practices. For example, one administrator said in an interview that they are planning to update their staff job descriptions to include expectations related to promoting children's physical development.

Sustaining changes

Most programs will work to sustain the changes they made to policy and practice, with a focus on gardens, taste testing, and lasting play equipment. In interviews, all administrators shared that they will sustain some of the policy and practice changes they made to their program during the N&PA Endorsement. For nutrition, administrators will sustain their gardening and taste testing.

"It's hard to get a child to eat healthy, nutritional food when they don't get it at home, so the taste testing kind of opened our parents' eyes to 'this is good, and this is simple.' We're going to use more food from our

garden as the items we're going to use for our taste testing so the parents can see the relevance between garden, table, nutrition. And again, having more activities to invite the parents out to help maintain the garden."

For physical activity, administrators will keep using the play equipment they bought as part of the Endorsement, including indoor activity equipment, which is especially useful if the weather is bad and children can't go outdoors.

"Keeping our gross motor room. When I was in the classroom, we didn't have anything like the gross motor room, so I used to take my kids in the hallways and we would do activities in the hallways. But now they have a set area to be able to do that stuff and you don't have to come out of your classroom into the hallway, you have a set room to go to."

One administrator also shared that they think their program will sustain the physical activity practices they implemented during the N&PA Endorsement because, with more physical activity, there will be a decrease in children's challenging behaviors. The administrator believed staff will see the connection between physical activity and behavior and be motivated to continue promoting children's physical activity.

What effects did the N&PA Endorsement have for programs, staff, families, and children, according to administrators?

Administrators felt that the Endorsement pilot had a positive effect on their program, including increasing their program's quality and marketability and encouraging staff to improve their own nutrition and physical activity. Taking part in the Endorsement served as a continuous reminder for the administrators and staff to emphasize nutrition and physical activity. One administrator noted that the pilot provided a scaffold upon which the program could continue to build and train teachers in nutrition and physical activity.

Additionally, several programs were already using the N&PA Endorsement in their marketing and outreach to families. They reported including the N&PA Endorsement in posts to their website or Facebook, literature they shared with parents, and even grant applications. Multiple administrators agreed it would affect their enrollment at their program by allowing them to "sell" their program. As one administrator said: *"It does [affect enrollment], it is one of things [parents] are always talking about. They look at the endorsements and the wall of awards and they go, 'wow.'"*

One administrator discussed how beneficial the N&PA Endorsement was for small, non-franchised programs: *"It gives us smaller businesses an opportunity to compete because we can offer something different."* Several administrators acknowledged that they had initially decided to participate in the N&PA Endorsement because they were hoping to have another marketing tool to encourage families to enroll.

However, some programs had not yet started using the N&PA Endorsement in marketing and were still considering how they wanted to approach it. Others had no need to market at all, as they were a Head Start program, one of the few child care programs in town, or already had a long waiting list. Administrators in these types of programs felt the N&PA Endorsement was unlikely to have any effects on enrollment.

On a personal level, a couple of administrators noted that their participation had led to changes in their own lives such as starting an at-home garden or making healthier eating choices. Administrators reflected on how staff were being introduced to new foods along with the children they taught and noticed that their teachers were becoming more active with their students. One program had added a walking trail for staff and felt that it had helped reduce their stress.

After participating in the Endorsement, administrators were generally more confident about their next Quality Rated rating, although a few were skeptical that the N&PA Endorsement would positively affect their rating. Nearly half of administrators reported in the interviews that they felt the Endorsement would help them in their next rating, particularly through enhancing their portfolio, allowing them to purchase new equipment, and providing new ideas for activities. One program was able to use the N&PA Endorsement mini-grant funds to address specific feedback from a previous rating cycle about age-appropriate playground equipment. Several other administrators brought up that the N&PA Endorsement helped improve the quality of conversations and interactions between teachers and children, which should help to increase their rating. One administrator explained:

"It also teaches our staff to get more involved in communication with [the children] and interaction with them, and it gives them more things to talk about. For example, with our school-age kids going out tending to the garden, that allows them to ask questions and it creates a monologue between the two a little more."

However, some programs were less certain that the Endorsement would help their Quality Rating. One program had already completed its re-rating for Quality Rated and received a lower score than they had before taking part in the Endorsement. A few other programs were unsure the N&PA Endorsement would have any effect on their Quality Rated rating. One administrator noted that it was difficult to gauge how helpful the Endorsement would be considering the various rules that govern child care:

"Between understanding the rules between Bright from the Start, Quality Rated, and the other rules needed to actually put in playground equipment or space and a garden are confusing. It happens that our space is big, but others don't know about the rules surrounding it. How do you know the licensing rules that are attached/connected to what you are doing."

I don't want to get a licensing person to say next time that my garden affects my playground space. That is stuff we think about. I put in a swing, a rope, and a rock-climbing wall, but lost points on Quality Rated because the rope wasn't nailed to the ground. I had two Bright from Start inspections and no one said anything, so those kind of things are frustrating...and people don't say a word and it's been okay for the last nine months. I was reading through it with my TA person from Quality Rated and they didn't even know about that policy. So I could have gotten a higher score if I knew those things. They told me my balance beam was unsafe, but how do I know what your records say."

The administrator agreed that it would be helpful to have a crosswalk of the different rules from various child care entities (e.g., licensing, TA specialists, Quality Rated). Additionally, a couple of administrators expressed that there was confusion when ensuring that their nutrition followed guidelines set by the Endorsement, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and CACFP, and Quality Rated, as these standards were not always in alignment. Nonetheless, in general administrators thought the N&PA Endorsement led to positive changes in programs that often increased the program's quality and boosted confidence for their next rating cycle.

Administrators reported that changes in policy and practice related to nutrition led to healthier meals for children and that both children and their families were becoming more open to trying new foods.

Programs were making more attempts to expose children to healthy options like fruits and vegetables and emphasized the importance of introducing them to good nutrition now: *"I think that's the biggest thing to get them to understand that there are things they can eat that are healthy, and early in life to get them used to them so they take this on in the later years of life."* Administrators saw changes in the eating habits of individual children; one program did a taste-testing session with one child with limited food preferences, and they discovered more options that they could eat. Another child in a different program initially only wanted to eat chips for snacks but eventually started eating healthier options after their teacher took the time to eat with them during snack time and discuss the food they were eating.

Gardens also provided opportunities for children to become involved in the nutrition process by showing them where their food came from and how they can grow their own food. Several administrators discussed how the gardens gave children the opportunity to take ownership of something and see the value in what they were growing, and one administrator believed that working in the garden was improving children's behavior.

This behavior extended out of the classroom into the home. One administrator reported that a child in their program had gone to a party with their family and wanted fruit instead of a cupcake. Another administrator shared: *"We talked to [parents] about the healthy plates, so a lot of them were telling us that it's helping them introduce the new foods to the children. The stuff they didn't think their kids would like, they actually are liking it because they're introducing it to them now. Because I'm seeing that feedback, it makes me want to do even more."*

Furthermore, the benefits of the Endorsement were not limited to the children, but many administrators noticed effects reverberating through the whole family, with parents learning alongside their children how to make healthy nutrition choices. Several administrators described the additional efforts they had made to engage and educate parents and the benefits they had seen arise:

"We decided to do [taste testing] during the cold months and we decided to do chicken soup, then potato soup because we want a meat and non-meat option. I put up the menus and [parents] were like 'can I get a copy of the recipes?' and they started doing it. It's a slow grind to change the mindset of some of the families, but I feel like we're making good progress."

"By being in this program and the family engagement program, I see more families coming together, sitting at the table, enjoying the meals, and communicating, and making better choices on the food that they eat."

Additional family engagement activities reported by administrators:

- Family event with various cultural food options to taste
- Holiday-themed healthy snack party to encourage parents to try new recipes
- Encouraged parent participation in the program garden and offered a free week of child care to any family that volunteered a certain number of hours
- Gifting plants and produce from the child care gardens to parents
- Opening up the garden for community involvement and selling excess produce to the community so they could get involved and see the child care program services for the community

In terms of physical activity, the equipment purchased with the mini-grant funds allowed programs to engage children in more physical activity year-round and emphasized the importance of staying active to both children and parents. Administrators felt they better understood what was needed to engage children in gross motor play, and how the new practices they implemented such as additional recess time kept children moving and active. Furthermore, some programs used their mini-grant funds to purchase indoor play equipment, which allowed them to keep children moving in the cold winter or hot summer months. This positively affected behavior in the classroom, as one administrator noted that *"keeping them busy helps discipline and order and everything in the class."*

Just like with nutrition, administrators believed that changes in children's physical activity in the classroom led to changes outside the classroom. As one administrator described: *"A lot of the parents have become more active also. They see the kids' behaviors are different when they're active. On the weekend, a lot of the parents involve their kids in recreational sports now."*

Overall, administrators articulated a number of positive effects the N&PA Endorsement had on their children and families, and they seemed to recognize the importance of introducing nutrition and physical activity at this stage of life. One administrator summarized: *“I think we’re going to have healthier children...Just getting the kids starting out at a young age to be healthy.”*

Did programs face any challenges or difficulties in participating in the pilot or in implementing new strategies?

N&PA Leadership Perspective

DECAL leadership faced their own challenges when supporting administrators. DECAL described various challenges they noticed in implementing the N&PA Endorsement:

- **Support within DECAL.** It is important to bring together various DECAL divisions to highlight that food education, nutritious meals, and physical activity is a baseline staple of a child’s life.
- **Program Experience.** Programs varied widely in their starting points, as some had extensive prior training with N&PA topics while others were new, lending to varied support needs. The N&PA Endorsement was more suited for advanced programs, but future efforts could include tiered support that accommodates varying levels of expertise and readiness.
- **Hands-on support.** DECAL recognized the importance of hands-on, in-person support and described that future efforts could focus on providing tailored support especially for nutrition topics
- **Scalability by program size.** DECAL noticed that larger programs face different challenges than smaller ones, particularly when trying to scale nutrition practices to more children. Tasks like prepping fresh produce or organizing family events are more logistically complex for bigger programs.
- **Capacity and follow-through.** DECAL described their limited capacity to provide ongoing follow up, especially when programs were requesting additional supports around what to purchase and additional resources. Future efforts could include more staff with expertise in nutrition, physical activity, and socioemotional development across all divisions to better support programs and DECAL’s capacity.

Programs faced challenges related to feeling overwhelmed, time constraints, staff and parent buy-in, and the timing of the Endorsement during seasons with limited gardening opportunities. In the survey responses before the Endorsement, only 14 percent of administrators reported feeling overwhelmed about making improvements to the student’s nutrition or physical activity; after taking part in the Endorsement nearly half (46%) of the administrators felt overwhelmed about making improvements, with about one third of administrators sharing in the interviews that they felt overwhelmed, noting that timing was a particular challenge for programs. Some programs struggled to stay on track with the N&PA Endorsement activities due to competing responsibilities, a lack of reminders, and unexpected disruptions such as hurricanes and snowstorms, which delayed activities like gardening. Programs noted that although the required time was manageable, juggling daily operations with the pilot’s demands was difficult, especially for larger centers with more complex logistics.

Administrators shared that getting started with implementing changes can be a challenge because it involves obtaining staff buy-in for making changes and some staff resisted changes due to perceived workload, low pay, or the belief that current practices were sufficient. One administrator also shared that making changes to their program is a very collaborative process, which involves other program leaders, their

board, staff, and parents, so making changes can feel overwhelming. Further, engaging parents—many of whom were hesitant to or unaware of the importance of nutrition and physical activity—required ongoing, creative strategies.

“The parents need to be involved too to get it at home too. That is the biggest hurdle too of incorporating it at home. Don’t know how we can do more or better so it can stem over into the home. We want to purchase some things to carry the lesson from the child care into the home. Yeah, so we are still figuring out policies for the parents.”

The timing of the pilot also posed challenges: some felt that launching implementation during the wrong season limited gardening efforts and they suggested aligning future training with the academic calendar to maximize seasonal growing opportunities.

When asked about what additional supports or training would help administrators feel less overwhelmed, one administrator mentioned that additional online trainings should be offered and another requested that training on nutrition be required for all staff, not just the program director and cook. One administrator also suggested a way to connect with other programs interested in improving their nutrition practices, specifically programs with a garden:

“Are there any tricks or methods that someone has? Almost like a community where they’re sharing information like ‘we did it this way.’ I think that would be good, to have a community of the people who are participating in the program, being able to have a place where we could discuss it. A way to reach out to each other. Maybe there’s an app or something we could get on and we could actually contact each other and get involved with each other.”

Are there additional supports, resources, or improvements that could address barriers to the pilot?

Administrators suggested the pilot could be improved if there were more free training options available. Administrators’ most common suggestion for improving was for the Endorsement to incorporate more free training on nutrition, especially for teaching staff and cooks. For example, one administrator recommended adding training on how to garden for people with no prior gardening experience, and another recommended adding training on how to cook nutritious food at larger programs, such as programs with hundreds of children.

Administrators wanted more support to promote buy-in from staff about the value of nutrition- and physical activity-related practices. As described above, administrators mentioned it can be hard to obtain buy-in from staff, so any supports that could help them educate teachers about the importance of nutrition- and physical activity-related practices and help teachers implement these practices would be valuable. Resources or supports to promote families’ engagement in nutrition and physical activity, such as pre-made activity packets that could be given out to families, would also be helpful.

It might be helpful to have more opportunities to learn from other administrators with more nutrition and physical activity experience. One administrator shared that learning from other administrators who have successfully implemented some of these practices, such as starting a garden, would have been very valuable. This administrator suggested having an administrator with prior experience help lead the in-person training, as well as connecting online with a larger group of administrators with prior experience.

Pilot participants overwhelmingly supported expanding the N&PA Endorsement to more programs or even requiring it—highlighting its benefits for children and families—and recommended additional

training, tailored support, regulatory clarity, and resource flexibility to ensure successful and equitable implementation statewide.

N&PA Leadership Perspective

DECAL leadership is considering what scale-up will look like for this pilot. Although there are no official plans for the scale-up, DECAL leadership did describe some ideas and what to consider when implementing those ideas.

- Capacity building through community supports
 - Engage community partners to provide technical assistance and hands-on support so the state can focus on rules and regulations of the N&PA implementation
 - Establish a group of expert trainers who can deliver training across the state in smaller cohorts
 - Use expert input from child health professionals to determine and support the implementation of best practices
- Organizational and policy alignment
 - Collaborate across all DECAL divisions to form a cross-agency N&PA workgroup
 - Align and provide guidance of rules and regulations relevant across systems like licensing and Quality Rated
 - Understand N&PA efforts statewide to identify current program gaps and successes across the state
- Accessible resources
 - Develop and share a centralized library of approved, free resources and training materials for various staff levels in programs

When asked if the N&PA Endorsement training should be required or not, or used as an elective, the majority of pilot participants recommended that training should be required for other programs. Administrators emphasized the critical role of nutrition and physical activity in promoting healthy habits, not only for children but also for families. As one participant explained, supporting children's health while in care gives working parents peace of mind, reinforcing the program's broader value to families. However, a few participants expressed concerns about making the Endorsement mandatory. They noted that some programs may lack the capacity, time, or readiness to fully implement the requirements. These respondents suggested offering the N&PA Endorsement as an optional elective to avoid overburdening programs that are still building internal capacity.

Administrators also shared their suggestions to DECAL regarding program expansion, including components DECAL should keep:

1. Refine the training and create additional resources.

- Continue offering a comprehensive focus on nutrition, physical activity, funding resources, and family engagement.
- Highlight the developmental benefits of physical activity, such as improved motor skills, as part of the training and materials.
- Include a mandatory orientation meeting to help programs understand the full scope of the Endorsement and its components.
- Keep the Endorsement activities simple and manageable, especially given that many centers are understaffed and overwhelmed.
- Develop and maintain a state-approved training and resource library, accessible to all program staff.

- Provide pre-made N&PA activity packets and ideas for classroom and home use.
- Offer training components for staff in all roles across the center to ensure consistent understanding and application across the center programs.

2. Offer additional technical assistance services

- Continue offering in-person training and incorporate site visits to address on-the-ground logistical challenges and questions.
- Provide ongoing TA—especially tailored to small, locally-owned centers that may not have the same resources as large franchises.
- Introduce a cohort or peer buddy system to offer peer learning and support throughout the Endorsement.
- Create milestones and accountability checkpoints to help programs stay on track with implementation goals.

3. Align policies across units that visit programs and clearly communicate these policies

- Clarify and align Quality Rated, licensing, and other regulations to programs from losing points or receiving violations when implementing new features (e.g., gardens, natural play areas, or playground updates).
- Address confusion around how physical space improvements might affect scoring or compliance, and provide clear, consistent guidance across TA providers, inspectors, and Quality Rated assessors.

Discussion and Implications

The 2024 pilot of the Quality Rated Nutrition and Physical Activity (N&PA) Endorsement demonstrated clear value by supporting early childhood education programs across Georgia to strengthen their nutrition and physical activity practices. Administrators responded positively to the structure and content of the N&PA Endorsement, especially valuing the in-person PALS training and mini-grant funds, which helped bring tangible improvements to their programs. Most centers reported increased implementation of nutrition and physical activity practices and expressed a commitment to sustaining these efforts long-term. Participants also noted meaningful effects for programs, staff, families, and children, including healthier meals, increased physical activity, and greater awareness around wellness topics. For some programs, the Endorsement affected families by providing exposure to the importance of nutrition and physical activity and by offering fresh produce and opportunities for involvement through center gardens.

Given the positive perceptions of the pilot, administrators recommended scaling up the N&PA Endorsement so that more programs can participate in it. During the pilot, several challenges surfaced, such as time constraints, limited staff and parent buy-in, a need for more personalized support (e.g., receiving TA or on-site visit to discuss changes), and clearer guidance during implementation. Based on the evaluation findings, the recommendations below can guide future scaling and improvement of the N&PA Endorsement.

► Expanding access to more staff and promoting family engagement is essential.

The pilot demonstrated that while administrators led implementation of nutrition and physical activity-related practices, broader staff and family involvement varied. Expanding access to training and resources to all staff—and offering strategies for parent outreach—could enhance impact and sustainability. Administrators explained that it would be helpful to share free resources with other staff like cooks and teachers to get more buy-in into the changes. This could look like providing various options for training and resources to align with the program and staff's unique needs and readiness levels. Administrators also shared that it would be helpful to have resources for parents so they can begin incorporating practices at home.

► **Technical assistance and peer learning can improve adoption of N&PA practices.**

Administrators appreciated the one-on-one support from DECAL and thought it could be expanded. For example, some administrators suggested providing on-site TA visits to best align practices with quality and licensing standards and ensure proper implementation of new N&PA practices and policies. Furthermore, creating networks for peer learning among administrators may help programs adopt best practices and troubleshoot shared challenges.

► **Flexibility allows programs with varying needs to participate.**

Programs benefited from being able to select which N&PA Endorsement topics they wanted to focus on and to have one-on-one TA support tailored to their specific needs. Future efforts should maintain this flexibility, ensuring the approach meets programs where they are in terms of resources, staffing, and readiness. This would also include in-person and virtual options to fit the needs of programs and their staff.

► **Providing clear guidance about alignment between Endorsement activities and other standards may increase implementation of practices.**

Some participants struggled to align the N&PA Endorsement activities with licensing and Quality Rated standards. It is important to ensure that licensing consultants, Quality Rated assessors, and all technical assistance providers are in agreement regarding best practices for nutrition and physical activity, including food preparation and outdoor equipment, so they do not provide conflicting guidance. Providing clearer guidance on how N&PA efforts align with Quality Rated goals can improve implementation fidelity and reduce confusion. This could be done by creating clear guidelines and examples of how the lessons learned from the N&PA Endorsement align with existing Quality Rated goals and standards.

► **Sustained funding and recognition will encourage participation.**

Mini-grants were key drivers of engagement. Continuing these supports and recognizing programs publicly for their commitment to health and wellness may boost participation and long-term investment.

These implications can help DECAL to build upon the pilot's successes and move toward a more comprehensive and sustainable approach to promoting nutrition and physical activity in early care and education settings.