



**The ECE Business
Collaboratory**

Strengthening Child Care Systems

Tribal Ties: Weaving Stronger Child Care Systems

Lessons from the Collaboratory



2024



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Strengthening Child Care Systems

Introduction

Available data shows that Tribal Nations are experiencing a child care crisis impacting the health and success of all aspects of Tribal Nations. According to a study done by Morningstar for the Bipartisan Policy Center, 77% of unemployed Native American households reported a lack of child care influenced their decision not to work. Morningstar found that less than half of Native American parents can access Tribal child care programs. Those without access reported relying on a patchwork of resources, which included personally providing child care and relying on family/friends, school, or community resources.

The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is the federal block grant that provides funding to states, Tribes, and territories to assist low-income families with access to child care. Tribal Nations face systemic disadvantages regarding federal funding for child care initiatives. Tribal CCDF dollars are based on a flat percentage, while states receive grants based on population. While the use of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding provided temporary supplemental dollars for Tribal child care programs, the expiration of these funds has left many

Tribal Nations to face significant hurdles in sustaining and expanding their child care systems. When leaders of Tribal Nations lack an understanding of how existing policies, practices, and funding streams can be optimized or reformed to support the business side of child care, the shortage of child care slots in Tribal communities is perpetuated. FCF believes that the sustainability of care in Tribal communities hinges on Tribal leaders' comprehensive understanding and strategic reform of the child care business ecosystem.



First Children’s Finance (FCF) believes an intervention is needed in which Tribal Nations are supported in identifying and reforming their child care business ecosystem coupled with a dramatic, sustained increase in investment in child care. Therefore, FCF has developed the ECE Business Collaboratory of Tribal Nations (Collaboratory) to help ensure that Tribal children are ready for school, Tribal parents can pursue work and continuing education, child care workers are able to afford their basic needs, and Tribal businesses are able to attract and retain employees. The long-term goal of this initiative is for Tribes to effectively leverage available funding sources to fully finance their child care systems and increase the supply of Native-led, culturally relevant child care supply. Participating Tribes increase their capacity to understand the gaps in their child care ecosystem, develop a plan to address them, and receive technical assistance from FCF to achieve the goals in their plans.

During 2023–2024, FCF recruited cross-sector teams representing 10 Tribal Nations to participate in the collaboratory. Participating Tribal Nations are listed in Table 1.) The teams were from Tribal Nations located primarily in the Upper Midwest but also hailed from other locations, as illustrated on the map below.

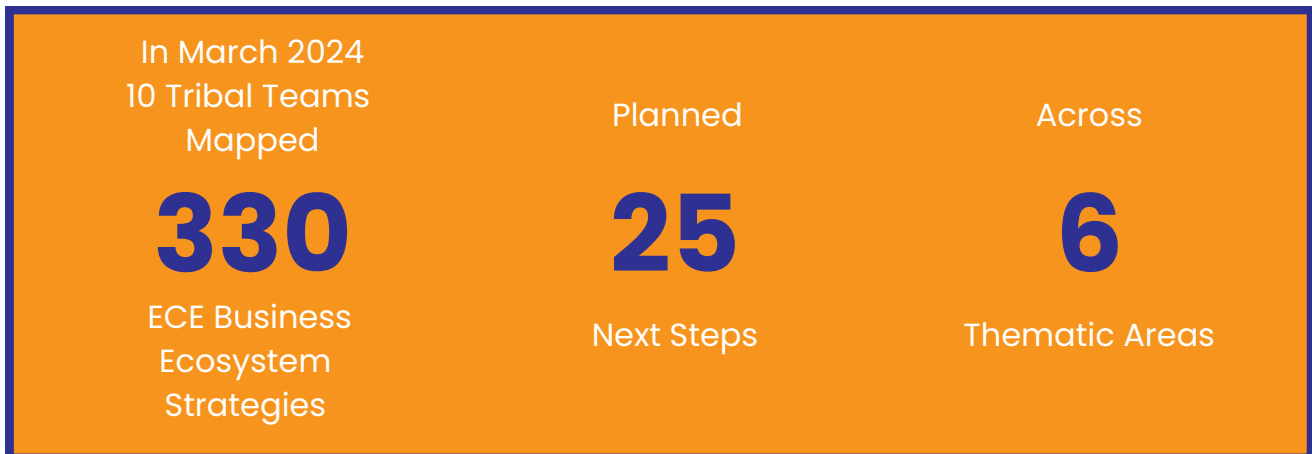


Table 1: Tribal Team Participation

2023 Cohort	State with which Tribes Shares Geography
Bois Forte Band of Chippewa	Minnesota
Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe	South Dakota
Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe	South Dakota
Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa	Minnesota
Northern Cheyenne Tribe	Montana
Seneca Nation of Indians	New York
Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan	Michigan
Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community	Minnesota
Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate	South Dakota
White Earth Nation	Minnesota

This Convening gathered Tribal teams to share, learn, and plan strategies to improve their ECE systems, emphasizing financial sustainability and operational capacity. Attendees had the opportunity to connect with national experts and other Tribes to share proven and promising practices. Tribal teams used FCF's Child Care Business Ecosystem planning and assessment tool to map, assess, and explore solutions to ensure that they can meet the child care needs of every child and family within their communities.

The ECE Business Collaboratory of Tribal Nations at a Glance



Laying the Groundwork

Relationship and trust building with Tribal Nations is an ongoing process requiring creative and flexible approaches that emphasize transparency, reciprocity, and flexibility.

Historically, Tribal Nations have maintained complex relationships with outside entities. As such, building trust and effective working relationships with Tribes can be a complex, slow-moving process that requires creative and flexible approaches. This was reflected in FCF's outreach and recruitment process for the ECE Business Collaboratory of Tribal Nations.

Building on pre-existing relationships and connections is key to successful partnerships with Tribes, so FCF focused on outreach to Tribes with which we had already worked or had connections. Initially, outreach efforts focused primarily on states in the upper Midwest and then expanded to include Tribes in Iowa, New York, Nevada, and California.



Over an eight-month period, the FCF team contacted representatives and leadership from across sectors at 66 Tribes. Our team conducted outreach to several Tribes we had worked with in the past, Tribes that had worked with partner organizations, and additional Tribes where we were not connected. Turnover in key positions can pose a challenge, but FCF's outreach efforts were diligent, and we utilized the contacts we had access to and reached out to our networks for referrals. When contact information was not available on Tribal websites, it was helpful to check Tribal Facebook pages and online flyers for contact information. Ultimately, we met with cross-sector teams from 15 Tribes via Zoom, which resulted in excited commitment to participate in the Collaboratory from 10 Tribal Nations.



During the recruitment phase, several insights were gained through our phone calls and virtual meetings with Tribes. We found that it was necessary to “translate” how we communicated about child care business sustainability by using language that was more familiar and accessible to Tribal Nations who run Tribally operated centers and licensed child care programs. Framing the work as efforts to support the financial and operational sustainability and growth of their ECE ecosystems was helpful. Additionally, we learned that for the Tribes who run Head Start and Early Head Start programs, it was necessary that our team emphasize how child care and Head Start constitute parts of a broader ECE system. We also learned that Tribes who were excited and expressed interest in participating needed several weeks to recruit cross sector teams and seeks necessary approvals from their Tribal administration and/or Tribal Councils before they could commit to participating in the Collaboratory.

Becoming familiar, establishing trust, offering transparency, and listening and responding to the needs of Tribes was critical to our relationship building and recruitment. This was accomplished through the establishment of an [information website](#), recruitment emails, a recruitment webinar, follow up telephone conversations, and Zoom meetings. Our team also heard from several Tribes that capacity limitations would prevent teams from successfully participating in regular meetings to map and assess their ECE ecosystems. Our team responded by modifying the Collaboratory experience and including all the Collaboratory activities into a two-day conference.

Pulling Back the Curtain

Systems change requires dedicated time for cross-sector leaders – including elected leaders – to gather, plan, and enact systems change.

The Collaboratory process was designed to be responsive to the unique needs and ways of being and doing while also honoring the capacity parameters of Tribal Nations. To accomplish this, the FCF team planned a two-day Convening hosted at the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank, which represented a departure from how the ECE Business Collaboratory was implemented with state teams in previous cohorts where ECE ecosystem mapping and analysis took place in monthly virtual meetings ahead of the Convening. During our time together, the FCF team facilitated mapping and analysis of Tribes’ ECE Business Ecosystems and prioritized goals and actions steps to improve their ECE business ecosystems. Invited content experts (table 2) presented on topics ranging from CCDF, child care systems thinking, strategic partnerships, land-based immersion child care, and data tools.

Table 2: Invited Speakers and Topics

Barb Fabre, CEO/President, Indigenous Visioning and All Nations Rise	Opening Plenary, Sovereign Steps: Enhancing Child Care Systems through Tribal Licensing and CCDF Funding Strategies
Kim Nall, Executive Director, & Frieda Bennett, Chairperson, Tribal Child Care Association of California	Weaving Connections for our Tribal Child Care Communities
Persia Erdrich & Nicole Kneeland, Gookonaanig Endaawaad (Grandma’s House)	Ancestral Echoes: Nurturing Ojibwe language and Culture at Grandma’s House- A Language Nest Experience
Elliott Charette & Amalea Jubara, Center for Indian Country Development	Native Economic Development Resources, Data-informed Decision Making

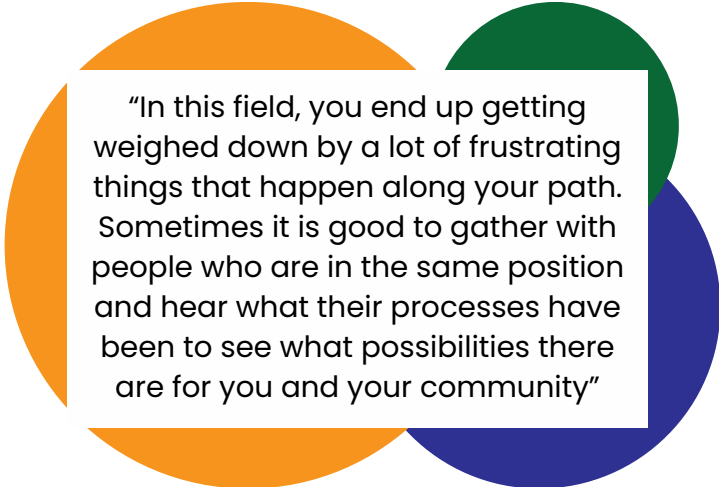
The Convening carved out dedicated time and space for cross-sector Tribal teams to break down siloes and collaboratively focus on child care. Teams from Tribes included representatives from diverse sectors including child care, 477 (Employment and Training), Education, Head Start, IT, Finance/Accounting, Social Services, and Tribal Administration. The opportunity that the Convening created proved to be valuable to attendees with one attendee reporting that “Today was the first time that we have met (out of all of these different disciplines)... we have this excellent power team that we can go forward with.”

The collaborative ecosystem mapping activity revealed the interplay between components of Tribal systems and how they impact child care at Tribes. One attendee reported “The mapping allowed me to see how the child care works within the Tribe. Most importantly, the value of collaborating with other programs within the Tribe.” As a result of the mapping activity, 77% of attendees surveyed indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that they had a better understanding of the financial investments within their Tribe’s ECE system. This understanding is a critical first step toward appropriate budgeting and financial planning, improved resource allocation, maximization of funding opportunities, improved advocacy and policy development, responsiveness to community needs, and assessment of the broader economic impact of child care such as job creation, support for working families, and the overall economic health of the community.

Peer learning and networking with other Tribal Nations emerged as an important benefit and impact of the Convening.

Peer-to-peer learning allows Tribal Nations to share best practices and successful strategies that have been implemented in their child care systems. By learning from each other’s experiences, Tribes can adopt and adapt proven methods that have worked well in similar contexts, improving the effectiveness and efficiency of their own child care programs. Additionally, Tribal Nations can be exposed to innovative approaches and creative solutions to common challenges in child care systems. This exchange of ideas can spark new ways of thinking and problem-solving, leading to improvements and innovations that benefit children and families across multiple Tribal communities. Tribal Nations have unique cultural contexts that influence their child care systems. Peer-to-peer learning also provides an opportunity to exchange ideas about how to integrate Tribal cultures and languages into child care programs. This ensures that child care services are not only high-quality but also culturally and linguistically relevant.

Providing Tribal Nations the opportunity to gather and engage in peer learning and networking is especially important because Tribal child care strategies are under-documented. Approved plans are not available on the Administration for Children and Families website like state plans are, they are often not made publicly available on Tribal websites, and Tribal child care strategies are otherwise under researched.



“In this field, you end up getting weighed down by a lot of frustrating things that happen along your path. Sometimes it is good to gather with people who are in the same position and hear what their processes have been to see what possibilities there are for you and your community”

Through our evaluation, FCF found that Tribal attendees recognized the benefits of the peer learning and networking opportunity the Convening offered. Eighty-one percent of Convening attendees reported being either very or somewhat satisfied with the networking opportunity with other Tribal teams, and 100% reported that they connected with another Tribe and learned a new strategy for their child care system.

When asked what attendees wanted to see more of at the Convening, one respondent shared “more time hearing from tribes as to what’s going on within their systems. I would have liked one more day or a reconvening of the same group so we could have further discussions.” When asked about significant takeaways from the event, one attendee indicated that they “need to meet with other Tribes more.”

Tribes recognize the importance of data-informed decision making and prioritizing up-to-date data to support child care systems planning.

According to bia.gov, “Ensuring quality data is available to inform policy making, resource distributions and effective program management is critical to advancing the well-being of Indian Country.” This is especially true for child care systems at Tribes, where understanding multiple data points is essential to effective planning. Unfortunately, Tribes experience systemic barriers to accessing accurate and comprehensive data. The Associated Press reported that recent methodology changes have reduced the quality of data Tribes receive from the U.S. Census. Data that can help Tribal leaders make important policy decisions about child care is often fragmented across sources which range from U.S. Census data, Child Care Aware, Tribal data, and research conducted by non-profits, consulting firms, and academic institutions.

Additionally, Tribes have remained under-resourced in terms of data collection and research infrastructure. Tribal Nations may be hesitant to commit resources to data collection. Tribal Nations often must prioritize immediate, pressing needs—such as health care and housing—over longer-term data collection efforts. While data is important, it may not always be seen as the most urgent priority, particularly when resources are stretched thin and other critical services need attention.

The Federal Reserve Bank’s Center for Indian Country Development has developed several data tools that compiled data from public sources into to support Tribes’ understanding of their communities’ unique needs and contexts. Two of these tools were presented by Center for Indian Country Development (CICD) including the [Native Community Data Profiles data tool](#) and the [Native American Funding and Finance Atlas](#). At the Convening, the CICD demonstrated for attending Tribes how to use the Native Community Data Profiles and how the Native American Funding and Finance Atlas might be utilized to assess potential funding opportunities to finance child care strategies.



Tribes recognized the value of the tools presented by the CICD and the importance of data-driven decision making to their child care systems improvement efforts. When Convening attendees were asked about what topics or information were priority for additional learning, the development of and resources for data on child care emerged as a top theme. Ultimately, one third of the Tribal Nations included conducting a community needs assessment as an action step in their plans.

Tribal leaders can make important impacts on systems change that dramatically increase operational and financial investments in the early care and education system resulting in increases to the supply and sustainability of child care.

Tribal leaders are responsible for the overall health and welfare of their nations. They have a key role in policy making, resource allocation, advocacy, and government-to-government relations. Therefore, it is imperative for elected Tribal leaders to be informed and engaged in order to champion child care systems change. By leveraging their authority, vision, and deep understanding of community needs, they can make impactful decisions that enhance the supply, quality, and sustainability of child care.

Attendees of the Convening indicated the importance of and need for involvement of elected Tribal leadership in efforts to make improvements to Tribal child care systems. One attendee lamented, "I wish my own Tribal Council attended." When asked about what challenges their teams faced in the implementation of their child care strategies, one Tribe indicated that turnover in its Tribal Council hindered system reform while another called out the need for Tribal Council approval and support for child care programming. Two Tribal teams prioritized meeting with their elected Tribal leadership in their action plans.

Tribal leaders can leverage their influential role in championing child care systems change. This can include supporting child care research and data collection. Tribal leaders can allocate resources to support data collection that reveals the unique context of child care supply, demand, resources, and outcomes in their communities. Tribal leaders might also consider partnering with academic institutions or research organizations to gain insights into the specific needs and challenges of their child care systems. This research can inform future policy and program development.

Tribal leaders can advocate for increased federal and state funding for child care through grants, subsidies, and other support. This includes pushing for more equitable funding formulas, recognition of Tribal sovereignty in child care governance, and the inclusion of Tribes in broader early childhood education initiatives such as Preschool Development Grants. It is important the Tribal leaders work government-to-government to ensure that Tribal Nations receive adequate resources.



Tribal leaders can also prioritize child care in Tribal budgets, allocating general funds to support ECE systems. This might include efforts such as construction, renovation, and maintenance of child care facilities and integration of language and culture into curriculum and teacher training, teacher education, and child care worker compensation strategies.

Tribal leaders are positioned to foster powerful partnerships and collaborations with local and state agencies and other Tribes. By forming partnerships with local, state, and federal agencies and other Tribes, Tribal leaders can access additional resources, technical assistance, and funding opportunities to support child care initiatives.

7th Generation Thinking: Looking to the Future

Many important insights and lessons were gained through this pilot effort with Tribal Nations. FCF will apply lessons learned to outreach and relationship building to future Tribal Collaboratory efforts. Because we have seen the importance of involvement of elected Tribal leaders, we will seek out their explicit approval and attendance in future Collaboratory Convenings. We plan to offer more rigorous TA based on the unique interests, needs, and goals of each Tribal Nation's team. We will also offer additional opportunities for tribe-to-tribe collaboration by establishing regular online peer networking opportunities. This would offer Tribes the opportunity to reflect, share, and collaboratively problem-solve the complex shared issues each of their nations face. Finally, we will continue to follow culturally relevant protocols in our interactions with Tribal Nations. We will continue activities such as opening and closing meetings in a traditional way and gift giving. Culturally relevant approaches help build and sustain trust by showing that FCF values and honors the cultures, languages, and sovereignty of Tribal Nations. Additionally, by taking a culturally informed and relevant approach to working with Tribal Nations, we will continue to ensure that the Collaboratory design is aligned with the values and needs of the Tribal Nations we serve.