Buncombe County Early Childhood Committee
Focused Investment Plan

PROJECT OVERVIEW

- **Project Title**: Early Childhood Committee Focused Investment Plan
- **Project Sponsor**: Martin Moore, Committee Chair
- **Project Dates**: August 6, 2024 – July 1, 2027

PROJECT PURPOSE

The purpose of this project is to define and implement a new focused funding strategy that:

- Aligns with Buncombe County Board of Commissioners Resolution # 18-10-16: To Create an Early Childhood Education and Development Fund in Buncombe County
- Maximizes local government opportunity to influence positive outcomes within the system of early care and education
- Responds to current conditions within the field of early care & education
- Is informed by community input
- Builds on results-to-date
- Is grounded in best practices from other communities
- Maximizes impact & sustainability

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

- Gather and analyze data on local needs, gaps and priorities
- Review models for local government investment in early care & education
- Engage impacted populations (families, providers, business community)
- Establish funding priorities (continued and/or new)
- Determine performance measures
- Develop a multi-year funding and implementation plan

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Committee Formation & Grantmaking: Buncombe County's Early Childhood Education and Development Committee was formed in 2019 with a primary purpose of making investment recommendations to the Board of Commissioners for the County's Early Childhood Education and Development Fund - roughly $4 Million annually. Since FY2020, the Committee has provided annual recommendations for grants to support early care and education for children birth through kindergarten across the following strategies:

- Develop early childhood workforce
- Maintain/enhance existing slots
- Increase slots for enrollment
- Increase quality
- Support families
- Enhance effectiveness of overall system of early care and education

Since its formation, the Committee has recommended funding for an average of 18 projects annually, ranging from $4,999 to $851,411 with an average award amount of $208,619. Funds have been invested in a blend of projects across various priority areas, supporting: operational costs; teacher salaries; behavioral health support; workforce development; expansion supplies; family engagement; and more. All grantees are held accountable through contracts that include reporting on grant spending, activities, and performance measures.

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Focus on Pre-K Expansion: In January 2021, the Board of Commissioners charged the Early Childhood Committee with developing recommendations by June 2021 for increasing access to quality pre-kindergarten (including exploring the goal of achieving universal pre-k in Buncombe County). An ad hoc sub-group of the committee worked over the next several months to review data, research models, and analyze options. The recommendation of the group was to invest county resources to enhance the local implementation of the state's NC Pre-K program – rather than to establish a new pre-k model for Buncombe County. The County then contracted with Buncombe Partnership for Children (BPFC) to work with the local preschool planning collaborative to develop a NC-PreK expansion model supporting the following outcomes:

- Increased kindergarten readiness
- Decreased achievement gaps
- More NC Pre-K providers
- More NC Pre-K spots & more children served
- Increased access to NC Pre-K for families/decreased barriers
- Strengthened workforce
- Enhanced data availability and analysis

BPFC conducted community engagement, research, and analysis and designed a program including cost estimates and implementation considerations. The model was presented to the Early Childhood Committee in January 2022, and the committee recommended that the Board of Commissioners fund it as a pilot initiative. BPFC was awarded a 2-year grant from County-directed federal funding (American Rescue Plan Act) to implement the NC Pre-K expansion program from July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2024. After the pilot funding expired, the Early Childhood Committee continued funding this project as a County-funded grant within its Early Childhood Fund recommendations for FY2025 and FY2026.

Consideration of New Focused Investment(s): In August 2024, the Early Childhood Committee launched a funding strategy series with a goal of affirming a funding strategy for the Early Childhood Education and Development Fund. Two sessions were held, then the work was paused as a result of Tropical Storm Helene then re-launched in August 2025. Topics included:

- A look at early care & education in Buncombe County, including - licensure, quality, data & context
- How early care & education is paid for: public funding streams for early care & education
- Review of current Buncombe County Early Childhood Fund investment strategy (funds invested in a blend of projects across various priority areas)
- Impacts of Buncombe's Early Childhood Fund & review of results to date (program-level & system-level)
- Exploration of various investment approaches and the impacts associated with each
- Review of trends in early childhood education & potential focused solutions

One theme of discussion was that there is little data to indicate the impact of Buncombe County's Early Childhood Fund at system or community-wide level, despite solid information about the performance of specific grant-funded projects.

- Percent of children 0-5 participating in licensed childcare started at 31.7% in 2019 and is at 28.5% as of 2025.
- Kindergarten readiness was not measurable until 2020 with the implementation of the NC Early Learning Inventory Tool. In 2020, 68% of incoming kindergarteners met or exceeded the majority of key objectives. The most recently available data is 2023, when 59% of incoming kindergarteners met or exceeded the majority of key objectives.

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Other drivers of the committee's decision to re-focus include:

- Shifts in early care & education from the impacts of COVID-19 and Tropical Storm Helene
- Significantly increasing levels of trauma, challenging behaviors & behavioral health needs
- Staff shortages, including under-enrollment and empty classrooms due to staff shortages
- Consistent declines in total 0-5 child pre-school aged population
- Variations in the cost of care and reimbursement rates

RESOURCES NEEDED

- Significant portions of this plan can be completed at no cost by members of the Early Childhood Education Committee and Strategic Partnerships staff.
- Items of cost include any contracts awarded to 3rd party contractors (e.g. program scope design, evaluation services).
- The intended funding source for items of cost is the Early Childhood Education available fund balance, which is $236,797 as of November 2025.

PROJECT SCHEDULE

Timeframe		Activities/Milestones for Continuity During Planning	Activity/Milestones for Focused Investment(s)
FY2026	November 2025	Develop draft grant guidelines for FY2027 funding	Host roundtable of experts in early care & education Vote to approve project plan
	December 2025	Approve grant guidelines for FY2027	Discuss focus area(s) to be scoped Engagement opportunity
	January 2026	Release FY2027 application (1/5/26)	Host other NC counties that invest in early care & education Engagement opportunity
	February 2026	FY2027 applications due (2/20/26 at 12:00)	Discuss focus area(s) to be scoped
	March 2026	Review FY2027 applications	n/a – reserve for application review
	April 2026	Make FY2027 funding recommendations (4/17/26)	n/a – reserve for application review
	May 2026		Determine focus area(s) to be scoped

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	June 2026	Commissioner funding approvals	Engage a 3rd party contractor to design scope(s) for any new focus areas
FY2027	July 2026	Begin FY2027 contracts	3rd party contractor to design program scope(s) Engagement opportunity
	August 2026		
	September 2026		
	October 2026	Quarterly reporting	
	November 2026		
	December 2026		
	January 2027	Quarterly reporting	Review program designs
	February 2027		Application process to select vendor(s) for focused investment(s)
	March 2027		Review proposals
	April 2027	Quarterly reporting	Make FY2028 funding recommendations
	May 2027		
	June 2027		Commissioner funding approvals
FY2028	July 2027	Closeout FY2027 contracts	Begin FY2028 contracts

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PROJECT ROLES

- **Early Childhood Committee:**
  - Approve focused investment project plan
  - Approve grant guidelines for FY2027
  - Review FY2027 applications & Recommend FY2027 awards
  - Select focus investments to be scoped
  - Approve the grant guidelines for FY2028
  - Review FY2028 proposals & Recommend FY2028 awards
- **Buncombe County Strategic Partnerships Staff:**
  - Develop FY2027 grant guidelines
  - Manage FY2027 grant cycle - including applications, contracts, monitoring, and closeout
  - Coordinate committee meeting agendas
  - Create surveys based on committee feedback & collect responses
  - Oversee outside bidding and contracting for services
  - Develop FY2028 grant guidelines to reflect focused investment

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EVALUATION

- The Early Childhood Education Committee commits to regular evaluation of the progress and results of this project and willingness to adjust project plans accordingly.
- Additionally, evaluation will be incorporated into the program design and multi-year implementation plan for the new focused investment(s).