# ECE Trends and Focused Solutions

Buncombe County Early Childhood Committee Update

October 7, 2025

Buncombe Partnership for Children

a partner in the Smart Start network

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## Current State of Child Care

| Current Priority Issues |
| --- |
| **1) Impacting classrooms:**<br>• Teacher and director turnover<br>• Mental health/challenging behaviors |
| |
| **2) Impacting finances:**<br>• End of DCDEE Stabilization Grants<br>• Open slots (primarily preschool, ages 3-5) |
| |
| **3) Impacting families:**<br>• Cost of care & "cliff" between public funding eligibility and ability to pay<br>• Reduced hours of care<br>• Infant & toddler slots |

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# Teacher and Director Turnover

The last statewide Workforce Study completed in 2023 reported turnover as:

- **39% - Full-time teachers**
- **33% - Full-time assistant teachers**
- 17% of directors said they are considering leaving the field in 3 years

| WAGE$ Turnover (n=149) | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Year** | **20-21** | **21-22** | **22-23** | **23-24** | **24-25** |
| Buncombe | 19% | 18% | 19% | 15% | 18% |
| NC | 12% | 14% | 14% | 15% | 13% |

| BPFC/DCDEE Director Turnover (n=86) | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Year** | **20-21** | **21-22** | **22-23** | **23-24** | **24-25** |
| Buncombe | 4 | 4 | 6 | 7 | 19 |

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# Mental and Behavioral Health Supports

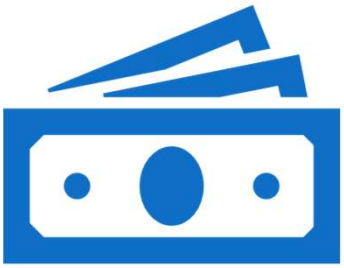
In a June 2024 Buncombe County listening session on challenging behaviors in ECE, the following needs were identified: 1) **Training programs** for teachers focusing on trauma-informed care, social-emotional learning, and behavior management; 2) TPOT (Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool) **training** for child care center directors; 3) Pyramid Model **training** for teachers and directors; 4) **Coaching** to use new skills in the classroom; 5) Use of reflective supervision.

| The Sunshine Project – FIRST WNC | FY 2022-23 | FY 2023-24 | FY 2024-25 |
|---|---|---|---|
| # TOTAL Children served | 114 | 215 | 485 |

| Percent of children ages 3-5 who receive early intervention or special education services | FY 2021-22 | FY 2022-23 | FY 2023-24 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Buncombe | 4.3% | 5.4% | 6.0% |
| NC | 5.1% | 5.0% | 7.0% |

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# Loss of DCDEE Stabilization Grants



Stabilization grants came from American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) in response to COVID-19. $805M in grants were administered statewide by DCDEE to licensed child care providers in NC. Quarterly payments began Oct, 2021; reduced several times; ended Mar, 2025.

- Total Buncombe jobs impacted = 1,144
- Total Buncombe child care capacity impacted = 6,855

**Buncombe dollars paid through September 2024:**

- **All payments = $24,964,343**
  - **Fixed cost payments = $11,030,144***
  - **Compensation supports = $13,934,199**

**Grants based on capacity, subsidized child care enrollment, program star rating, infant/toddler enrollment, and community context using Social Vulnerability Index*

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# Shifts in 3- 4-year-old slots

- ACS enrollment was 41% 3-year-olds in FY22; 16% in FY25
- Total Head Start slots (3- and 4-year-olds) reduced from 478 to 361 this year; # dually enrolled with NC Pre-K (186) did not change.
- Verner EHS: 14 children applied to HS; 7 have been placed

In March 2025, a NAEYC study showed **59%** of NC ECE directors were experiencing under-enrollment. Top reasons *(not lack of demand):*

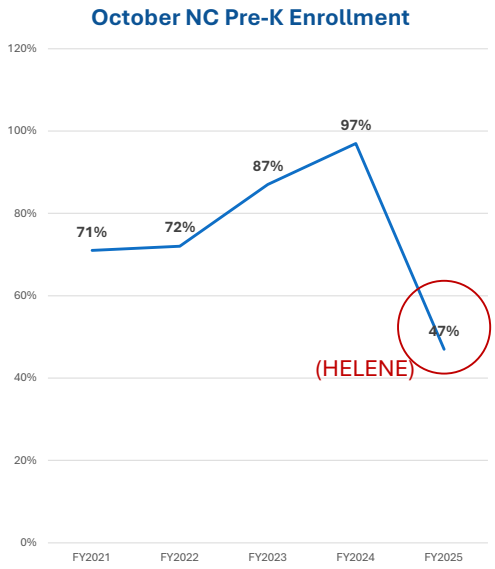
- Affordability
- staffing challenges



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## Buncombe NC Pre-K Enrollment

- Increases in NC Pre-K enrollment are attributed to the ARPA & BC ECE local slot supplement and the teacher support payments.
- Recovery interrupted by Hurricane Helene last school year.




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## The Child Care Benefits Cliff

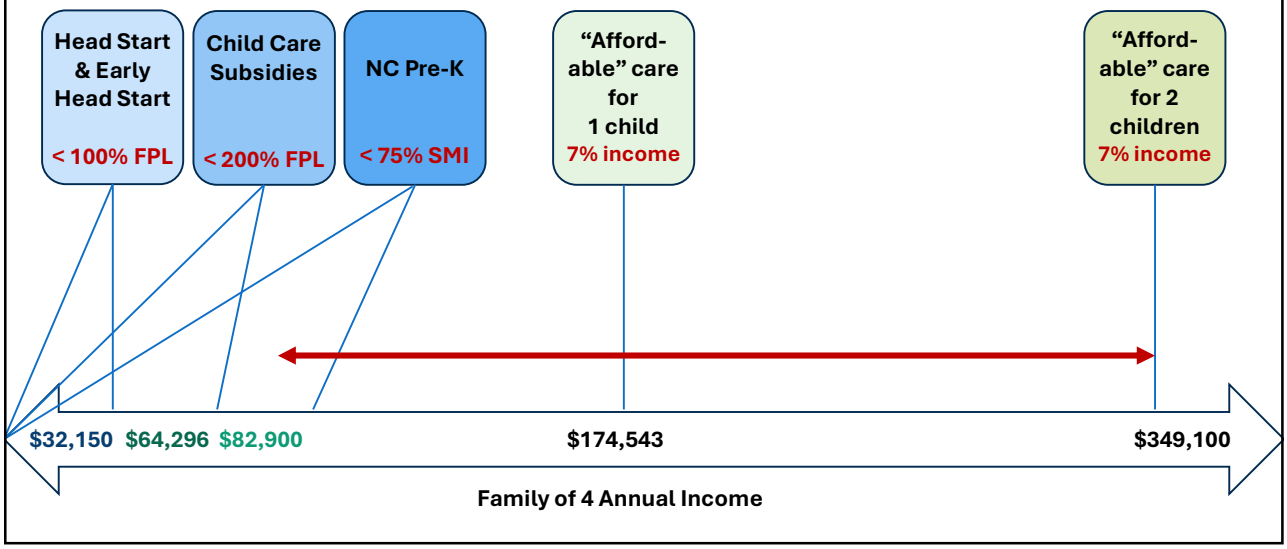
| Buncombe median family income with children under 18 years | $69,516 | 100% |
|---|---|---|
| Average cost of annual child care (1 infant, 1 preschooler) | $24,437 | 35% |
| Average annual cost of housing (family of #4) | $19,324 | 28% |
| Average annual cost of food | $14,249 | 20% |
| Average annual cost of transportation | $15,342 | 22% |
| Remaining annual budget | -$3,836 | -5% |

**This family of 4 is $5,793 *over income* to qualify for child care subsidies.**

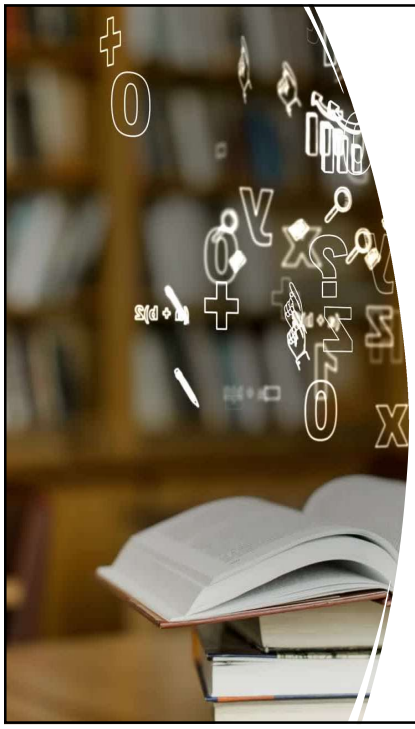
The maximum annual income (family of 4) to qualify for child care subsidies is $64,296.
As of July 2025, there are 26 children on the waitlist for subsidy.

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## Which families get access to child care?




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### Dispersed Investments

**Pros:**
- Flexible, responsive
- Open to all providers
- Transparent, accessible process
- Encourages broad community engagement

**Cons:**
- Diluted resources--hard to measure impact
- Few programs have capacity to apply
- Duplication & competition--not a *systems* approach
- 1-year grants make planning, hiring and retention difficult

### Focused Investments

**Pros:**
- Fill *system* gaps
- Easier to measure success/impact
- Incentivize increased quality
- Expand accessibility of care
- Can add new slots

**Cons:**
- Less responsive to novel needs
- Limited scope
- Some current grantees would lose operational funding

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# Recommended Focused Funding Priorities

- **Fund pre-k slots for 4-year-olds from middle-income families based on Durham & Meck Pre-K models**
- **Fund preschool slots for 3-year-olds from middle-income families based on Wake Three-School Model**
- **Continue BPFC's successful NC Pre-K slot rate supplement** so as not to undermine NC Pre-K with new program
- **A more coordinated system** of behavioral health, workforce, professional development, and higher ed supports focused on recruiting and retaining teachers and directors at all skill levels



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# Potential Impacts

- Prepare more children for kindergarten
- Increase preschool accessibility & reduce financial strain on families
- Measure impacts of funded preschool on K readiness
- Fill vacant preschool slots and stabilize programs (beyond NC Pre-K providers)
- Add NEW preschool slots
- Support increased teacher education
- Decrease teacher turnover
- Strengthen child mental/behavioral health supports for all




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## What about our need for infant care?

- Difficult to tackle infant care
  - Few public models exist
  - Can't ensure continuity of care
  - Funding doesn't go as far/impact as many families
- **Required classroom renovations can't be supported with county funds**
- Could leverage some funds to build upon successful Biltmore-funded Infant/Toddler Expansion Program and create **Business Challenge Fund** to create slots???
  - $50,000/year for 3 years has resulted in:
    - 4 new infant/toddler classrooms
    - 52 new infant/toddler slots



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## THANK YOU!

Inviting reflections and recommendations from the field

Desire to hear directly from providers and families

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