FY2026 Early Childhood Site Visits

Organization: AB Tech

What information would you like to share with other committee members?

- The visit was very informative. They're trying to educate the Early Learning workforce in spite of many challenges.
- Like us, they are struggling to attract and retain educators who will complete degrees or diplomas to build a stronger workforce. They struggle with how to attract students, how to keep students, and when to schedule classes for the most effective learning.
- AB Tech has received funding from Dogwood on a 3 year grant
  Faculty would love to have the ability to offer continuing ed on how to deal with challenging behaviors in the classroom for ECE teachers as they feel this is a large reason for burn out of current teachers.

What challenges is the organization currently facing?

- Lack of support from the school and the business community.
- How to educate students who are in the field in ways that allow them to receive the best developmentally appropriate education while they are working in the field. Also, how to get coverage for students in centers so they can attend classes in the afternoon, and also begin to see best practices in other settings besides where they are already employed. It felt like the education staff were on a hamster wheel, trying to solve such a massive challenge while needing more time with students, but the Early Learning Centers need coverage and more staff. Also, the staff are trying to figure out the best way to support teachers with children who have challenging behaviors. The field loses good teachers regularly due to a lack of technical assistance in the classroom and training for educators in behavioral guidance.
- Current challenges include: Decreasing interest in enrollment and students working in early childhood education. They are not sure how many students continue to take classes after taking EDU119.
- Students tend to need to take classes at night.
- Lost one faculty member since last year and uncertainty in funding with 1 year grant cycle makes it difficulty to recruit new faculty.

Organization: Buncombe County Schools

What information would you like to share with other committee members?

- The learning lab not only provides an opportunity for high school students to have hands on learning as part of their child development courses but it provides needed child care to the staff of the schools. This helps with K-12 teacher retention. Students that finish their child development courses have met the requirements to be employed in early childhood education.

- 1. The Learning Labs program includes 4 preschool classrooms across 4 of the Buncombe County Schools (BCS) high schools, serving approximately 60 3 and 4 year old children.
  2. Their enrollment has been stable over the years, and their numbers are ideal for their staffing, i.e., they do not seem to have the challenges of under-enrollment (like many other preschool programs).
  3. This may be because approximately 75% of the enrolled preschoolers are children of Buncombe Co Schools staff. This is a priority because it helps to attract and retain BCS staff. Only about 25% of their enrolled children are not children of BCS staff, and they pull these from their long waiting lists.
  4. The preschool staff engages several interns who are high school sophomores, juniors and seniors who are generally interested in child-centered careers.
  5. Buncombe Co funds essentially pay the salary of the coordinator of the 4 preschool programs

What challenges is the organization currently facing?

- Since the salary of the coordinator is paid for with annual grant $, they feel somewhat insecure about how they would staff this position if the County stopped funding it
- Enough substitute teachers to fill in for staff absences and director must step in. Having a one year grant funding cycle makes funding decisions challenging - without the current grant, this learning lab would have to close.

Organization: Buncombe Partnership for Children

What information would you like to share with other committee members?

- They do have an increase in the NCPK workforce cohort of 9-10 people (started with 22). Providing a highly qualified substitute pool through Stanly County, Blue Ridge, Haywood, and Southwest community colleges. They had 160 ED participants in the 2025 Q1 for professional development. The new center on Sweeten will provide 3 classrooms for infants/toddlers.
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What challenges is the organization currently facing?

- Increasing teacher to a professional level is still a barrier. Behavior management training still a difficulty challenge.

Organization: Community Action Opportunities

What information would you like to share with other committee members?

- I love how they include pre-k classrooms in Buncombe County and Asheville City schools because I think it's a great opportunity for the kids to get more accustomed to kindergarten and help with the transition. Also the parents have more familiarity with how the school is run and I think it provides a huge advantage to the children. Their toddler program is shut down because of funding.

- 1. County funds 2 Pisgah View and one Johnston Elementary Preschool classrooms. These are serving children from low income families who are all in HeadStart.
  2. Community Action Opportunities (CAO) offers preschool programs across approximately 15 Buncombe County elementary school sites. this is an extraordinarily complex undertaking involving several different Federal, State and local funding streams (including Dogwood and Buncombe County).
  3. Increasing costs of childcare and funding challenges have forced decisions to decrease # of classrooms, and also to cut back from full-day and full-year preschool programs. Consequently, CAO is scaling back future enrollment across all their preschool classrooms from 478 to 361 (a decreased enrollment of about 25%)
  4. Across all their preschool programs, CAO staff are implementing the Creative Curriculum and Teaching Strategies Gold as observation-based child assessment tool. They shared impressive data regarding progress in meeting or exceeding developmental expectations among all enrolled 3 year old and preK kids

What challenges is the organization currently facing?

- Increased costs and decreased funding are forcing significant cuts in classrooms and future enrollment.
  With their complex funding streams, there are big burdens on teachers and administrators in meeting federal and state requirements - for quality, accreditation, outcomes, etc. It seems unsustainable without significant increase in funding.
- I'm a little unclear as to why they didn't receive any funding from the partnership. It seems like due to ARPA funding being lost they are not expanding, just trying to keep spots open.

Organization: Donald S Collins Early Learning

What information would you like to share with other committee members?

- The facility was clean and well-appointed. The director was very knowledgeable about her staff, programming, families, and financial position. When asked about the ability to find the $350,000 to replace the BCECE grant, she said they wouldn't be able to do so. She pays her staff from $15-25/hour. Has a good tie-in with hiring interns who stay on to gain more education and better positions at the center. They work with ABTech, McDowell and Stanly colleges for early childhood degree-seeking students. They have a full-time mental health professional. As noted with the other locations, all students fall within the ACE indicators - have some type of ongoing trauma in their lives. About 65% of students are receiving CC subsidies. Most staff live in McDowell County and a lot of children are also from McDowell. They have a full kitchen and provide meals for the children. They provide family group meetings that are well-attended and use that as a tool for ensurng that parents are reinforcing the skills (educational, social, and emotional) the children

learn at school. They partner with ABTech psychology department for student interns/practicums.
What challenges is the organization currently facing? • Lack of consistent funding. The gap between true cost and subsidy; some parents aren't able to even afford the "gap" amount. Staffing - although it seems to be less severe at this location than others I've been to.

Organization: FIRSTwnc

What information would you like to share with other committee members? • Seems to be a very utilized organization in the preschool community with a lot of helpful resources and supports. I'm wondering how they choose the preschools that are funded with ECE grants and if they're based on the highest level of need in the community? • This is a research-based program available to all child care centers to help students, families, and teachers address social/emotional/behavioral issues affecting a child's effective classroom learning. They have a program for college and master's students in this field of study (interns receive a stipend). Most children in child care have some indicators of trauma in their lives. Part of the issues of the child's behavior in the classroom is due to high teacher turnover (the positive relationship with the teacher is the #1 indicator of quality child care) and poor classroom management (teachers are ill-equipped to deal with certain behaviors). A mentoring program for new teachers will be highly beneficial.
What challenges is the organization currently facing? • They want to hire more coaches to be in whole classrooms. The preschool teachers having a high turnover means there are a lot of new teachers who have less tools and skills to successfully help high needs students. • All of the centers I visited (except Collins, which has an on-staff mental health professional) mentioned Sunshine and the help they receive from them. This is a highly needed systemic program that requires more funding in order to meet the needs of the families and centers.

Organization: Irene Wortham Center

What information would you like to share with other committee members? • With the funding from the Buncombe County Early Childhood Grant, the staff have refurbished many of their classrooms, which is also helping them meet their ITERS and ECERS rating scales, which define appropriate materials for early childhood classrooms. I also appreciated hearing about ways they want to continue supporting their classrooms with mental health for both typically developing and the Developmental Day children. The Director informed our group that social-emotional learning with children is one of the best predictors of Kindergarten Readiness. Through the Early Childhood Grant, teachers are receiving additional training in strategies and language to assist children. With

appropriate learning activities in the classroom and additional training, children can be more successful.

- Irene Wortham seems to have the energy and resources to be growing their program. They spent a lot of their funding from the ECE committee on materials and equipment. They do provide baby care starting at 6 months up to 5 years old. They are building a new facility to update their current building. They are not income based but do accept vouchers (are these only for children with special needs?)
- Announced that they have a $20M capital campaign for new administrative offices, school, and residential home. Campaign started before the pandemic and has been derailed. They noted that County money (we confirmed that the only County funding they received was from the ECE grant) provided on-site therapy, and supported teacher salaries. Pay is $16-$28/hour. They noted that their fundraising is down but they have reserves of $6M. They have 3-4 empty classrooms, serve about 50-60 kids who are typically developing, or have developmental disabilities or physical handicaps. They have 21 kids from the waitlist that they expect to start at their Center within the next couple of weeks.
- 1. Irene Wortham Center (IWC) includes one of very few licensed preschool programs for children with disabilities in NC. This serves children from Buncombe County. 60 children are currently enrolled across infant, toddler and preschool classrooms (20 with disabilities and 40 typically developing). During 2024/25, enrollment has been significantly below their optimal capacity of approximately 100, primarily due to difficulty hiring and retaining teachers.
  2. Their preschool program priorities going forward are:
  - enhancing their programs for social-emotional development, e.g., use of Conscious Discipline methods
  - providing resources and supports for staff development
  3. Their Buncombe County EC grant Total annual budget is approximately $490,000, of which $273,000 (55%) is spent on personnel, but I did not get a clear understanding of how those funds are spent. Staff indicated that much of the funding during this quarter has been on purchasing new furniture and equipment.
  4. The progress report shows that they have made limited progress in their goal of decreasing problem behaviors

What challenges is the organization currently facing?

- The continuing challenge is finding qualified teachers to staff the classrooms and providing them with the additional ongoing training they need. The waitlist is long, and they are hoping to set up a new classroom in the near future once teachers have completed orientation and onboarding. It's the same story. Children are waiting for classrooms to open, while Directors are searching for quality professionals to staff the classrooms and provide teachers with the professional compensation they deserve.

- Complying with state regulations on things like fences, mulch height, etc. Staffing seems to be an issue everywhere but our guide said she's excited about a group of teachers she's in the process of hiring.
- The backpack program (one of the funded projects in the grant) hasn't started yet. They also haven't started social/emotional learning, Conscious Discipline (teachers haven't been trained yet). they are using the Verner Resiliency program (funded by Dogwood). They mentioned the grant supporting teacher salaries at least 5 times. Adrian and I both clarified that the only county funds they receive come from our ECE grant. According to the summary we received, teacher salary funding is NOT part of the grant award. They need classroom support and more professional development.
- 1. They are preoccupied with a major capital campaign and a $20 million IWC campus rebuilding project
  2. They have had recent leadership change in the preschool program and continue to struggle with hiring and retaining teaching staff
  3. Enrollment numbers are suboptimal

Organization: The Christine Avery Learning Center

What information would you like to share with other committee members?

- As a new committee member, I was entering a NC Early Childhood facility for the first time not being a parent or working in a role in the industry and was very impressed with CALC. The amount of ingenuity used for funding was inspiring. It was a wonderful first experience and will serve as a great beginning baseline for the future facilities.
- Co-located with High School; free rent and pro-rated utilities. Teachers are paid $18-$25/hour. 3-4 yo -$180/wk; 2 yo - $190/wk; I/T - $215/wk. Is this the lowest scale in the system? The county pays for a curriculum specialist and a child advocate.
- 1. County funds are used across 3 Christine Avery centers to provide (a) quarterly bonuses to all teaching staff to provide living wage and (b) salaries for a Curriculum Specialist and a Child Advocate to improve learning and address challenging behaviors. This has improved staff retention
  2. The Center was closed for several months after flooding, but the re-opened space is fully functional and looks good. They are planning to hire additional teachers and open up additional slots for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. My impression was that enrollment is improving but still low.
  3. Most of the kids are on child care subsidies. They keep their tuition costs low - at the subsidy rate floor - to limit the affordability gap. The CEO and her team supplement the revenues with effective fundraising.
  4. They don't have a kitchen, and they pay Bunc Co Schools for food. This is relatively expensive and somewhat wasteful and unsatisfactory. An alternative food supplier might present a value-add opportunity.

5. They are providing some staff training with Bunc Co $ and are exploring opportunities to expand such trainings and become a training resource to others

What challenges is the organization currently facing?

- The main challenge is the food waste due to the facility not having a full kitchen and having to depend on supplied meals from BCS. The supplied meals are adult portion sized for each child headcount, including infants (<12mths), which is unnecessary. The estimated cost of hot meals a month is $3000 with a very large portion of the meals being discarded.
- Avery, since they are co-located with the Community High School, receive meals through Buncombe County Schools. This includes food for their infants and toddlers. The food received is not appropriate for that age group… but the Center is spending $3000/month for it. What can be done to fix this?
- 1. Enrollment is improving but still low
  2. Workforce/staffing challenges continue
  3. Long-term sustainability is a continuing challenge, since they are very dependent on fundraising and Bunc Co $ for bonuses and salary of 2 key staff

Organization: Verner

What information would you like to share with other committee members?

- Our visit to Verner included a focused conversation with site leadership and their Infant/Toddler Specialist, who they were able to bring on through the use of the Buncombe County Early Childhood Grant. The other half of the grant Verner has used to provide all teachers and aides with a $1/hr pay increase. Verner clearly has substantial experience in obtaining multiple sources of funding and braiding/blending/layering funds to provide high quality services. The impact of the Buncombe funds specifically was clear in their ability to support a much-needed I/T Specialist to support both teachers and children. For example, the Specialist has been able to work with teachers specifically on classroom organization and structures and developing approaches for children with additional needs. Through a partnership with AB Tech, Verner is working to support teachers in obtaining CDA training or working towards a degree.
- Verner is in great need of the continued multi-year funding support; there are no other sources for funding. Teachers are paid $16-$20+/hour (NCPK teacher receiving the highest level). Currently, the only Early HeadStart provider in the county; has one NCPK class per location. 82% of students receive some subsidy. Tuition for I/T is $1690 (might be one of the highest in the county). EHS provides professional development in order for teachers to get their CDA. Currently, several teachers are working towards their associate's degree. Verner provides time for teachers to do their schoolwork. They give a 60% for a teacher's child's tuition.

What challenges is the organization currently facing?

- Verner noted that their Early Head Start funds have typically been their "most reliable" source of funding, and that has changed significantly this year given uncertainties at the federal level and planned flat funding for 2026. They noted

feeling "financially tenuous." While Vernon is nimble in combining funds, it is challenging to do this yearly. Although they didn't say it outright, I believe a multi-year grant approach would be much appreciated. Vernon is using funds to invest in their workforce, and they note staffing difficulties including that applicants post-pandemic are less qualified, making partnerships such as the one with AB Tech especially important.

- Funding is more tenuous than ever. EHS does not provide a competitive increase.

Organization: YWCA

What information would you like to share with other committee members?

- I was really impressed with the scope of their programs. The YWCA is doing an excellent job blending many different programs to support the community.
- YWCA receives Buncombe County grant funds for their Early Learning Program and Empowerment Child Care. We received a tour of all classrooms and they were full of lively, engaging instruction. Most (if not all) classrooms were at enrollment capacity. The Director and Assistant Director of Early Childhood Education, who met with us during the visit, emphasized the importance of having their teachers of children at all ages use developmentally appropriate lesson plans and engagement with children. Their early care programs combine private tuition, subsidy, and NC preK (and the Buncombe County early childhood grant) to support operations. The Director highlighted a current partnership with The Sunshine Project to provide trauma-informed consultation, referrals, and support to their staff and the families served in the early learning programs.

What challenges is the organization currently facing?

- Staffing seemed to be the biggest issue.
- The primary concern raised by the Director and Assistant Director was around STAFFING. They are unable to fill teaching positions with qualified applicants. They have 5 vacancies in their Early Learning Program and if these were to be filled they could open 65 child care slots. They also have vacancies in the Empowerment Child Care program, which, if filled, they say could provide "unlimited" capacity (this program operates on rotating 4-hour blocks daily). YWCA is addressing this through building relationships with high school CTE programs and with AB Tech, although these partnerships are in early stages. The Assistant Director also said they would like to be able to invest more in sensory playground and classroom equipment to support their children, many of whom have behavioral needs. They have received recommendations for items from The Sunshine Project and are working to secure small grants to purchase.