Early Childhood Education Committee

Focused Investment Plan

June 2, 2026

FOCUSED INVESTMENT PLAN

Creating a refined investment approach that with sharpened goals and focused resources to strengthen early care and education for lasting impact



Aug 2024
Project launched

Aug 2025
Project relaunched post-Helene

May-June 2026
Determine focus area(s) to be scoped

July-Dec 2026
Design program scope(s)

Jan-June 2027
Identify contractor(s) for new focused funding

July 2027
Begin new funding

RECAP

- During the May workshop, the Committee:
  - Received resource info (child care survey results, best practice manual for funding touchstones, kindergarten readiness data)
  - Reviewed **16 potential investment ideas across 5 categories**
- As a follow-up, committee members responded to a survey to weigh in on:
  - Proposed **Goal** & **Strategies**
  - Potential **Funding Priorities**

PROPOSED GOAL

Expand access to reliable, high-quality child care to promote healthy child development and support working families.

Indicate your level of support for this as an overall goal for the committee's work

Strongly Support	**76.9%**
Moderately Support	**15.4%**
Neutral	**7.7%**
Moderately Oppose	
Strongly Oppose	

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS

- Emphasize the importance of prioritizing high-quality early education, especially for the most at-risk and under-resourced children
- Important to keep “expand access” but clarify what constitutes high-quality beyond star ratings, such as emotionally responsive caregiving, well-educated and regulated staff, and support for all domains of early development—not just increasing the number of slots
- Adjust terminology, such as “early education” rather than “child care” to stay aligned with a long-term vision focused on learning and development

GOAL UPDATES

PROPOSED: Expand access to reliable, high-quality child care to promote healthy child development and support working families.

MODIFIED: Expand access to reliable, high-quality early care and education that:

- **optimizes children's learning and development;**
- **is delivered by well-prepared and adequately compensated educators;**
- **enables families to fully participate in the workforce; and**
- **prioritizes those with the greatest needs.**

PROPOSED STRATEGY (1 OF 3)

Provide grants to expand the availability, accessibility, and quality of licensed child care.

Strongly Support	**76.9%**
Moderately Support	**15.4%**
Neutral	**7.7%**
Moderately Oppose	
Strongly Oppose	

PROPOSED STRATEGY (2 OF 3)

Partner with community leaders and other investors to build a coordinated, cohesive system.

Strongly Support	**76.9%**
Moderately Support	**15.4%**
Neutral	
Moderately Oppose	**7.7%**
Strongly Oppose	

PROPOSED STRATEGY (3 OF 3)

Advocate for state and federal policy solutions to strengthen early childhood education and development.

Strongly Support	**69.2%**
Moderately Support	**30.8%**
Neutral	
Moderately Oppose	
Strongly Oppose	

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS

- Current granting approach is burdensome with unclear impact
- Important to enhance partnerships with business leaders and local organizations, but there is some concern about the committee's capacity to effectively carry out this strategy
- Important to include advocacy efforts because of state influence in early care & education, but unclear whether committee is best positioned to take this on

STRATEGY UPDATES

- **PROPOSED:** Provide grants to expand the availability, accessibility, and quality of licensed child care.
- **UPDATED:** Provide grants to expand access to reliable, high-quality early care and education.

- Partner with community leaders and other investors to build a coordinated, cohesive system.
- Advocate for state and federal policy solutions to strengthen early childhood education and development.

HIGHEST RANKED FUNDING PRIORITIES

Potential Focused Investments	Avg Rating
Infant & Toddler Slots	4.54
Teacher & Staff Supplements	4.38
Grants for Workforce Programs	4.23
NC Pre-K Enhancement	4.15
Pyramid Model	4.15
Innovation Grants	4.15

LOWER RANKED FUNDING PRIORITIES

Potential Focused Investments	Avg Rating
Child Care Subsidy Enhancement	4.00
3-Year-Old Slots	4.00
Child Care Provider Supplements	4.00
Child Care for Child Care Professionals	3.92
Head Start Local Match	3.85
Pre-k Slots	3.85
Teacher Mental Health Support	3.85
Community of Professionalism	3.69
Family, Friend & Neighbor Care	3.46
Parenting Support	3.31

1 RANKED FUNDING PRIORITY

Infant & Toddler Slots: Funding for slots to subsidize enrollment for infants & toddlers [to extend access to middle-income families?]



Strongly Support	**61.5%**
Moderately Support	**30.8%**
Neutral	**7.7%**
Moderately Oppose	
Strongly Oppose	

2 RANKED FUNDING PRIORITY

Teacher & Staff Supplements: Payments to ECE professionals to aid in the recruit/retention of early educators in Buncombe County



Strongly Support	**61.5%**
Moderately Support	**23.1%**
Neutral	**7.7%**
Moderately Oppose	**7.7%**
Strongly Oppose	

3 RANKED FUNDING PRIORITY

Grants for Workforce Programs: Fund programs that recruit, train, develop, support and retain the ECE workforce at the system level

→ Medium Cost

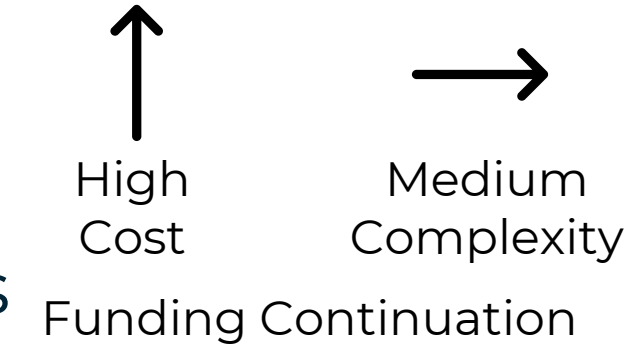
→ Medium Complexity

Funding Continuation

Strongly Support	**46.2%**
Moderately Support	**30.8%**
Neutral	**23.1%**
Moderately Oppose	
Strongly Oppose	

4 RANKED FUNDING PRIORITY

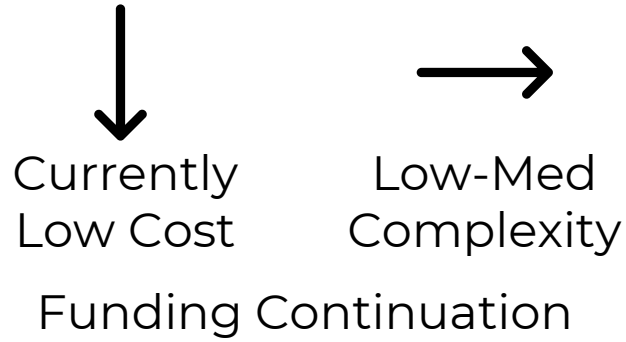
NC Pre-K Enhancement: Slot rate supplement for eligible 4-year-olds plus workforce supports and enhanced standards, such as lead teacher pay rates on par with K-12



Strongly Support	**61.5%**
Moderately Support	**15.4%**
Neutral	**7.7%**
Moderately Oppose	**7.7%**
Strongly Oppose	**7.7%**

#5 RANKED FUNDING PRIORITY

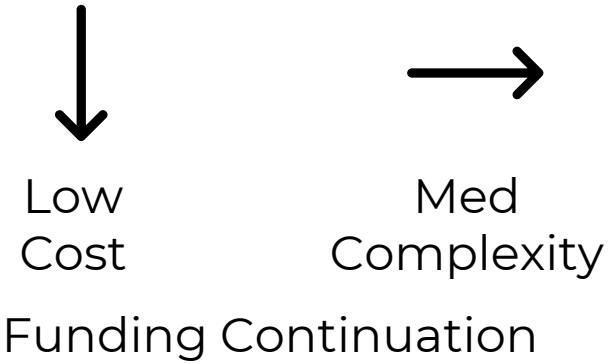
Pyramid Model: In-classroom support to address the behavioral health needs of children across the system following an evidence-based framework



Strongly Support	**30.8%**
Moderately Support	**53.8%**
Neutral	**15.4%**
Moderately Oppose	
Strongly Oppose	

6 RANKED FUNDING PRIORITY

Innovation Grants: Funding for projects to support creative ideas and provide seed funding or support one-time needs



Strongly Support	**46.2%**
Moderately Support	**30.8%**
Neutral	**15.4%**
Moderately Oppose	**7.7%**
Strongly Oppose	

FOCUS AREAS TO BE SCOPED

July – December: design program scope for potential funding priorities, including costs

- Infant & Toddler Slots
- Teacher & Staff Supplements
- Grants for Workforce Programs
- NC Pre-K Enhancement
- Pyramid Model
- Innovation Grants

GRANTEE ENGAGEMENT

- Purposed is to gain feedback from grantees on the focus areas selected
- June-July = survey (no July meeting)
- August = virtual engagement at August 4, 2025 committee meeting

APPENDIX

Full comments on proposed goals & strategies and potential focused investments

COMMENTS ON PROPOSED GOAL

- Maybe "optimal" rather than "healthy."
- I'd like to see the funds focused on the most at-risk children. I'd like the funds to prioritize underprivileged children having access to high-quality childcare because I think that will make the most impact on their future success in the school system.
- Should we be using more of our language around "early education" as opposed to "child care". I know they are eggs in the same basket, but I'm thinking that if we lean more into a consistent language around "early education", we are staying central to our north star.
- I think the key words here are reliable, high quality. Is there a way to enhance lower-quality centers by designating funding for high-quality ones? Funding centers that are 4 to 5 stars????
- expand access...and meet the needs of working families.
- We should include learning/education in our goal- maybe (....promote healthy child development, quality learning and support working families...)

COMMENTS ON PROPOSED GOAL

- More new slots get more financial support from the business community.
- I think we the Commission needs to have a clear understanding of what is meant by "high-quality" child care.
- I would support this as-written but would love, if possible, to add 2 points. 1. Something about, "care that meets children and families' needs" to remind us the importance of family engagement and understanding what parents need. 2. Is there any way to talk about target populations? The 2018 reads "Cultivate a system that responds to the needs of families, such as those impacted by trauma, poverty and addiction." - maybe this will come later in the survey.
- I think it is very important to define high quality ECE settings beyond the 5 star system. By this I mean that all development for a child occurs within the context of their caregivers. This means that infants/toddlers/children need emotionally responsive adults caring for them and that these adults are educated to provide opportunities for all domains of development from infancy forward. Emotionally Responsive Practice ERP is an important component of high quality caregiver interactions. We need emotionally regulated adults to correlate this vulnerable population. Paying any warm body to show up as an ECE provider is not enough. Thus, increasing slots alone does not address the issues. We need to increase access for infant/toddler care and also increase the quality of the workforce.

COMMENTS ON PROPOSED STRATEGIES

- "- The Committee's strategy of annual competitive grant cycles since 2019 is of uncertain impact and has proven onerous for ECE providers- Low ECE availability and affordability impact employment and business development. System-wide approaches to supporting the ECE ecosystem must include partnership with community and business leaders.- Advocacy and lobbying efforts to support H800 and other proposals to raise the subsidy floor are important - but not sure what success the Committee can achieve in this strategy. "
- I think state and federal collaborations are critically important to sustaining successful early childcare centers. I hope there are qualified community organizations who are specialized and prioritizing this advocacy work.
- It is going to take partnerships with business leaders to grow the system. Do we have those business leaders ready to commit?
- I rated the other areas lower because there are entities in the community BPFC and WNC Early Childhood Coalition who work in these capacities. Would like to see stronger alignment and partnership with those groups.
- In order to support the above strategies, we need to ensure that Commission members are able and willing to devote the additional time required for the strategies

COMMENTS ON PROPOSED STRATEGIES

- I support the idea of partnering but would like to ensure it is inclusive of smaller ECE providers.
- We have other funders in our community who are providing grants to support high quality ECE. I wonder about bringing that info to the table as well as partnering with our orgs that have years of practice and wisdom to better understand how we can shape policy and create a mixed delivery system for ECE. Also, I think we should fill the gap (with our funds) which has gone largely unaddressed for 0-2 y.o.'s. Research shows us very clearly that high quality interactions/care/education dramatically affect development. Behavioral issues that emerge at 2-3 years of age could be dramatically altered if 0-2 y.o. have high quality ECE. For the past 15 years I have witnessed what happens when children 0-2 have low quality care environments and caregivers who are struggling. We have a very high level of mental health and substance use disorder in adult populations. These children are heavily affected by this and they are vulnerable. Caregivers can be physically present but emotionally gone. There are few "serve and return exchanges" that are building a little one's brain development. Sometimes this is occurring in homes, sometimes it is in the care of whomever a parent must leave their child with in order to work, and sometimes it is in the setting of a childcare center with a teacher who is undereducated, underpaid, and overwhelmed. It is a tragedy that can be addressed and prevented. Emotionally responsive caregivers and nurturing environments are protective factors; we can effect change with our county funds. Also, providing access to care for 0-2 brings more adults into the workforce when parents know that their child will receive high quality education which is affordable. This is a win/win.

COMMENTS ON FUNDING PRIORITIES

- "I really wanted to check ""highly support"" all, but then I thought you might not think I was taking this seriously. I am concerned that AB Tech is not doing more recruitment and training, and I wonder how that can be enhanced and supported? I don't know, but my visit there was very concerning. Can part of the grant money go to high-quality centers that can serve as training sites to support classroom work, or is this already happening, and I am just not aware?"
- Still split on the specific model but the two - three buckets I am behind most are: Supplements to existing systems, Support for the local ECE workforce, and Investments in novel/innovative solutions (which could include family, friend, neighbor care)
- Until we can get solid support, with more enrollment, in the early child care program at AB Tech, I am uncertain how the support for recruitment of new teachers is finanncially viable. ECE Commission has provided a lot of funding for this already only with minimal results.
- I strongly support supplements for federal funding sources, but the committee should consider how to make this directive flexible enough to respond to federal changes (for example, if federal programs are substantially reduced).

COMMENTS ON FUNDING PRIORITIES

- With regard to child care provider supplements, the direct support to providers is appealing, but is there risk of fraud and abuse? Can this be prevented by reporting requirements?
- My top buckets are subsidizing 0-2 y.o high quality childcare and building/educating/subsidizing a high quality workforce. I would be open to a smaller bucket option for innovative grants. I do see that funding behavioral interventions is important but am beginning to wonder if that needs to be a lesser priority for county funds. It may be that the need for this is better supported by mental health professionals, circle of security parenting, and other programs. For example, I believe that the Sunshine Project is primarily funded by (Smart Start... I think) and we have provided secondary funding for more staff. It may be that we need to focus our funds more strategically on preventive ECE that reduces the need for behavioral interventions.

COMMENTS ON FUNDING PRIORITIES

- A few notes about the reasons for my answers: I'm hesitant to support the supplement options (first three) as that ebbs and flows greatly with decisions by federal and state lawmakers. Therefore, we are always going to have a goal post moving on us which greatly impacts our ability to measure results consistently and fairly compare year over year. While I know the need is certainly there, as those subsidies don't cover the full cost, I think it's going to have more impact community-wide to assist families that don't qualify for these subsidies due to the archaic eligibility requirements. I really like the concept of child care provider supplements as this could also virtually impact every other prospective topic from teacher supplements to the pyramid model, to community of practice, mental health and more, and it allows providers to make decisions unique to their needs without the committee over-prescribing buckets and running the risk of pigeon-holing applicants. That could also address the potential for applicants to be unique in their request for any creative ideas. I don't necessarily support the idea of the innovation grants as its own bucket b/c those ideas can be incorporated in this provider supplement bucket (if we changed the language to be a bit looser and wasn't just for ""operational"" costs), and I also believe the one-time needs can be addressed by other funders whereas it doesn't really help us address the data problem that spurred this new grant focus to begin with. I feel like there are a lot of potential similarities between the FFN idea and workforce development and am wondering if there is a way we can somehow thread those two together b/c one of the goals with FFN is to give those prospective providers with training, and we should be holding grantees accountable to the same type of basic ECE training that has clearly equipped rising Kindergartners with the skills they need to start off on the right foot. Finally, with the areas I've supported in 3-5, I'm hesitant about the ""middle-income"" language. To different parties and even economists, this label can mean a lot of different things, and I fear that prescribing this access solely for families on a $ figure, we are putting families in the same potential conundrum that we're facing with state subsidies in that many deserving families aren't eligible.