Buncombe County Early Childhood Committee

Potential Focused Investments for Early Childhood Funds

May 2026

As part of refining investment priorities, the Early Childhood Committee is exploring potential focus areas. This list was generated during previous committee meetings and expanded through individual discussions with staff. Details about each investment idea as outlined on the following pages are intended for discussion purposes only and not the official position of the county or Early Childhood Committee.

Supplements to State/Federal Programs
Invest funds to augment state and/or federal child care programs to extend and enhance impact

1) NC Pre-K Enhancement
2) Child Care Subsidy Enhancement
3) Head Start Local Match

Subsidized Child Care Models
Invest funds to establish & operate local program(s) to provide subsidized child care for children that don't qualify under existing state/federal programs

4) Pre-k Slots
5) 3-Year-Old Slots
6) Infant & Toddler Slots

Behavioral Health
Invest in mental/behavioral health support services to enhance early childhood education and development

7) Pyramid Model
8) Teacher Mental Health Support

Workforce
Invest in programs that enhance the workforce of professionals in early childhood education, including teachers and staff

9) Grants for Workforce Programs
10) Teacher & Staff Supplements
11) Child Care for Child Care Professionals
12) Community of Professionalism

Miscellaneous
Investment ideas not fitting into one of the above groupings

13) Child Care Provider Supplements
14) Parenting Support
15) Family, Friend & Neighbor Care
16) Innovation Grants

1) NC Pre-K Enhancement (Supplements to State/Federal Programs)

Description	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
New or Continuation?	Continuation (Funded since FY23) of locally created model, currently known in the community as "Buncombe Pre-K"
Potential Impact	For FY26, this program supports 427 slots & 25 teachers participate in higher education supports
Cost	High ($709,432 for FY26; $1,056,539 requested for FY27)
Complexity	Medium (Program already designed & implemented, requires annual re-alignment and ongoing program administration)
Notes	Does not increase the number of NC Pre-K slots in the community but stabilizes the program by providing reimbursement rates for providers pay and retain teachers and expands the number of providers participating in the program
Considerations	+ Strong, longitudinal evidence base supporting the benefits of high-quality prekindergarten (including specific studies on NC Pre-K) + Pre-K is specifically identified as a priority in the Committee's enabling charge from County Commission. + Slot rate supplements help to support/improve salary parity for lead teachers across settings. - Compared to other programs in the NC early childhood ecosystem, NC Pre-K could be considered comparatively well-funded, independent of supplements. - A wealth of published economic and brain science evidence suggests greater return on investment from programs targeting children at a much earlier age (prenatal and during the first 12 months of life). For high-risk learners, particularly those from deeply impoverished backgrounds, prekindergarten may be an intervention that comes too late to prevent developmental, linguistic, and other disparities.
Examples and/or Resources	• Perry Preschool Project: https://highscope.org/project/perry-preschool-study/ • NC PreK: https://childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/NC-PreK-has-School-Wide-Benefits.pdf • Heckman Curve: https://heckmanequation.org/resource/the-heckman-curve/

2) Child Care Subsidy Enhancement (Supplements to State/Federal Programs)

Description	Supplemental per-slot funding above state reimbursement rate to get closer to the true cost of care
New or Continuation?	New
Potential Impact	Currently 1,007 children participating with subsidy in Buncombe County
Cost	High (Amount would vary depending on level of supplement, estimate $1.2 M for every $100/child/month + program delivery & admin costs)
Complexity	High (Would require significant program design, e.g. varying supplements by age or star rating. Structure for any local supplements would need to be adjusted annually depending on amount and use of federal/state and Smart Start subsidy funds.)
Notes	Does not increase the number of Subsidy slots in the community but increases operating funds for providers and increases ability to fully utilize all state funding (~$1.75M unused funds in 2024-2025).
Considerations	+ Child care subsidies routinely fail to account for the full cost of quality. Supplements may allow programs to deliver higher-quality services and to supplement staff wages. + Higher subsidy rates may encourage new participation among providers, creating greater parental choice. - Reporting on use of funds would be limited. - The field's foundational studies (and their associated outcomes) are premised on high-quality, intensive interventions – not on access to child care writ large – making it difficult to assess/predict specific child outcomes. This concern might be mitigated by directing supplements only to high quality programs.
Examples and/or Resources	• In NC, child care subsidies are funded through federal Child Care Development Fund (CCDF)/state matching funds, and Smart Start funding. Both Smart Start and Non-Smart Start funding can be used to fund child care voucher payments at the same established rates. In Buncombe County, Non–Smart Start funding is currently sufficient to cover all voucher payments, so Smart Start funds are being used for Smart Start Enhancement payments instead. Supplements range from $150 to $350/slot/month with highest payments for infant/toddler slots. • NC Child care Subsidies: https://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/Services/Financial-Assistance

3) Head Start Local Match (Supplements to State/Federal Programs)

Description	Funds to contribute to local match for Head Start & Early Head Start federal grants
New or Continuation?	New
Potential Impact	500 total slots Head Start: 361 funded enrollment (pending federal approval) Early Head Start: 139 funded enrollment
Cost	High (Total current local match = $2,277,901) Head Start current local match: $1,479,852 Early Head Start current local match: $798,049
Complexity	Low (2 providers in Buncombe: Community Action Opportunities & Verner Center for Early Learning)
Notes	Head Start requires 20% local match, contributes to stability and ability to increase enrollment
Considerations	+ Federal regulations require local Head Start grantees to document a 20% non-federal match. + Biden-era updates to the Head Start performance standards elevate expectations related to both teacher qualifications and compensation. Direct cash match could be used to help fulfill these requirements while serving a comparable number of children. + Strong longitudinal outcomes and school-day, school-year programming for the community's most impoverished children and families. - While Head Start's high standards make the need for sufficient funding a critical issue, Head Start grantees are already generously funded in comparison to other service providers in the early education field. - Most HS grantees already meet their 20% local match and can utilize in-kind donations of space, volunteer labor, etc. to meet this federal requirement without local cash match.
Examples and/or Resources	• Head Start Outcomes: https://nhsa.org/about-nhsa/our-impact/ • Head Start Non-Federal Match: https://headstart.gov/fiscal-management/article/non-federal-match-narrative • Head Start Final Rule Updates (2024): https://www.ffyf.org/2024/08/22/head-start-final-rule-makes-big-changes-to-staff-compensation-program-eligibility-and-more/

4) Pre-K Slots (Subsidized Child Care Models)

Description	Funding for slots to provide free pre-k for 4-year-olds (rising kindergarteners) to extend access to middle-income families
New or Continuation?	New
Potential Impact	Currently 1,414 of 3,248 4-year-olds and 5-year-old preschoolers in the community participate in licensed child care
Cost	High (No state or federal funding to match, estimate $13-15 K annually per child served depending on parent fees + program delivery & admin costs)
Complexity	High (would require significant program design and ongoing administration)
Notes	Could set income eligibility criteria as anything above existing subsidized child care (e.g. NC Pre-K) or could limit to middle income families with an income cap. Could define program design to mimic NC Pre-K, Buncombe Pre-K's enhanced standards, or other custom criteria.
Considerations	+ Would enable additional students to access pre-k, extending eligibility to more middle-income families. + Strong evidence of efficacy for enrolled students (see #1 above) - Service to more middle-income families may come at the cost of serving high-need families earlier and more comprehensively.
Examples and/or Resources	• Durham PreK: https://www.durhamprek.org/ • MECK Pre-K: https://meckprek.org/ • Buncombe County PreK reports: https://buncombepfc.org/reports/

5) 3-Year-Old Slots (Subsidized Child Care Models)

Description	Funding for slots to provide free enrollment for 3-year-olds to extend access to middle-income families
New or Continuation?	New
Potential Impact	Currently 901 of 2,440 three-year-olds in the community participate in licensed care
Cost	High (No state or federal funding to match, estimate $13-15 K annually per child served depending on parent fees + program delivery & admin costs, 3-year-old slots cost more than pre-k based on teacher/student ratios)
Complexity	High (Would require significant program design and ongoing administration)
Notes	Could set income eligibility criteria as anything above Child Care Subsidy income eligibility or could limit to middle income families using an income cap
Considerations	+ Providing licensed care to more Buncombe County 3-year-olds holds the potential to improve school readiness among participating children and increase the workforce participation of parents. - As referenced above, there is limited data on the child outcomes associated with (generalized) child care enrollment, with most of the field's landmark studies focused on intensive, high-quality programs.
Examples and/or Resources	Wake Three-School: https://wakesmartstart.org/wake-threeschool/

6) Infant & Toddler Slots (Subsidized Child Care Models)

Description	Funding for slots to provide free enrollment for infants & toddlers to extend access to middle-income families
New or Continuation?	New
Potential Impact	Currently 1,194 of 7,277 children aged 2 and younger in the community participate in licensed child care
Cost	High (No state or federal funding to match, estimate $13-15 K annually per child served depending on parent fees + program delivery & admin costs, infant/toddler costs more than all other slots based on teacher-student ratios)
Complexity	High (would require significant program design and ongoing administration)
Notes	Could set income eligibility criteria as anything above Child Care Subsidy income eligibility or could limit to middle income families using an income cap
Considerations	+ The provision of high-quality infant programs may be considered particularly critical both because these programs align with a critical window of brain development and are traditionally the most costly and difficult for families to access. - As elsewhere, positive outcomes hinge on quality, nurturing relationships with highly engaged caregivers. While general infant care access can be seen as a benefit to adult workforce participation (and hence family economic stability), access to average (or substandard) programs is unlikely to yield desired child outcomes, making infant care expansion (like expansion in other age groups) highly dependent on the quality and stability of the EC workforce.
Examples and/or Resources	The key 1000 life-changing days: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2667009723000155

7) Pyramid Model (Behavioral Health)

Description	In-classroom support to address the behavioral health needs of children across the system following an evidence-based framework
New or Continuation?	Continuation, could be scaled up
Potential Impact	Total in system: Currently about 3,543 children 0-5 are served in 89 licensed child care centers or homes
Cost	Depending on scale. ECE Committee granted $120,712 to this priority in FY20 for FIRSTwnc for SUNSHINE PROJECT & FY27 request is $179 K. Could be significantly scaled up to serve more centers and children.
Complexity	Low to Medium (existing model and service providers already in place)
Notes	Technical assistance to programs who have children experiencing challenging social/emotional behaviors, potential developmental delays and/or specialized needs. There is also a pyramid model for family engagement.
Considerations	+ Child care providers overwhelmingly share that they are experiencing higher levels of children with very challenging behaviors. + Meeting the behavioral health needs of young children is a growing concern and a particular need within the child care sector, where teachers are routinely under-prepared and compensated, leading to high levels of turnover and a workforce without sufficient experience to meet these specialized needs. - Some estimates suggest teacher turnover in the child care field as high as 40% annually, possibly limiting the long-term effectiveness of professional development and technical assistance models in the absence of compensation and other supports designed to retain top-quality teachers in the field.
Examples and/or Resources	The Pyramid Model: https://www.challengingbehavior.org/pyramid-model/overview/research/

8) Teacher Mental Health Support (Behavioral Health)

Description	Support teachers with free mental health services
New or Continuation?	New
Potential Impact	Currently there are about 1,000 ECE professionals in Buncombe County, and there is no data available regarding insurance status & access to mental health services
Cost	Medium (Would depend on program design, recent local example mental health contract to provide mental health counseling for ~700 uninsured clients was $418 K)
Complexity	Medium (Would require program design and ongoing administration)
Notes	Options could include individual or group therapy in-person or in groups
Considerations	+ Teaching in the early childhood classroom is both mentally and physically demanding, making the availability of dedicated mental health supports an important net positive, particularly for a workforce that may lack robust, employer-sponsored health insurance. - Other community mental health supports are available in many communities to help address this need.
Examples and/or Resources	National League of Cities How to Support the Mental Health Needs of the Early Childhood Workforce: https://www.nlc.org/article/2025/05/09/how-to-support-the-mental-health-of-the-early-childhood-workforce/

9) Grants for Workforce Programs (Workforce)

Description	Fund programs that recruit, train, develop, support and retain the ECE workforce at the system level
New or Continuation?	Continuation
Potential Impact	Stability and/or expansion of workforce development for ECE
Cost	Medium to High (ECE Committee granted $728,733 to these programs in FY26)
Complexity	Medium (Existing model and service providers already in place, would require regular grant application and review process)
Notes	FY26 awards in this category include A-B Tech Early Childhood Collegiate Support Program; Buncombe County Schools Learning Labs; Buncombe Partnership for Children Professional and Systems Development & Early Childhood Workforce Development Program
Considerations	+ The quality of adult-child interactions and the professional knowledge of teachers are arguably the most critical dimensions of high-quality early childhood programs, making workforce training essential and well-advised. - As referenced previously, low compensation in the field is linked with recruitment challenges and extraordinarily high teacher turnover rates, threatening to minimize the impact of substantial investments in professional development in the absence of compensation supports and other retention efforts. This may put workforce investments into the category of "necessary but insufficient" when viewed in isolation.
Examples and/or Resources	Children's Learning and Development Benefits from High-Quality Early Care and Education: A Summary of the Evidence: https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/%232023-226%20Benefits%20from%20ECE%20Highlight%20508.pdf

10) Teacher & Staff Supplements (Workforce)

Description	Payments to ECE professionals to aid in the recruit/retention of early educators in Buncombe County
New or Continuation?	New
Potential Impact	Currently 818 teachers, 68 support staff, 87 administrators working in ECE
Cost	High (Amount would vary depending on compensation levels, estimate $1M for every $1,000/year + program delivery & admin costs)
Complexity	High (Program design would need to consider flat vs. varying levels, payment frequency, prorated payments, employment verification, payments to providers or professionals)
Notes	Buncombe County has an active WAGE$ program with waiting list that provides compensation supplements based on teacher pay, education & tenure
Considerations	+ The median wage of infant teachers in the United States is $13.22 an hour, currently lagging behind that of animal caretakers such as dog walkers and requiring a large percentage of the EC Workforce to access public benefits. This leads to extremely high turnover in the field. + Investment in workforce compensation holds the potential to improve workforce retention, maximize child outcomes (including secure attachment) and allow teachers to benefit from high-quality professional development. - Costly and potentially logistically difficult (though not impossible) - Direct pay supplements are only one way to impact pay rates. Other methods include enhancing reimbursement rates for programs like child care subsidy and providing operational grants to providers.
Examples and/or Resources	• Previous NC ARPA Child Care Stabilization Grants: https://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/Home/Stabilization-Grants • Outcomes from the DC Pay Equity Fund: https://wearedcaction.org/wp-content/uploads/Investing-in-Educators-Pays-Off-A-New-Analysis-of-DCs-Early-Childhood-Educator-Pay-Equity-Fund.pdf

11) Child Care for Child Care Professionals (Workforce)

Description	Fund child care slots for early learning teachers and staff
New or Continuation?	New
Potential Impact	An estimated 20% of the childcare workforce has children under 6
Cost	High (NC Child estimates roughly $2 M for direct program costs plus program delivery and administration costs)
Complexity	Medium to High (Could be designed based on model proposed in NC Task Force on Early Childhood recommendations)
Notes	YWCA is now piloting this locally now with a grant from Save the Children and having promising results with teacher recruitment & retention. $140,000 annual funding for 10 slots.
Considerations	+ Begun as a pilot program in Kentucky, the provision of child care subsidies for the children of early childhood educators is one promising approach to reforming teacher compensation, through the provision of a valuable workplace benefit, rather than direct cash payments/salary supplements. + Incentivizes teacher retention. - Potentially costly and not a benefit of value to all teachers.
Examples and/or Resources	• In Effort to Entice Child Care Staff, More States Follow Kentucky's Lead: https://earlysuccess.org/automatic-subsidies-for-child-care-workforce-2024/ • NC Task Force on Child Care and Early Education: https://www.commerce.nc.gov/about-us/boards-commissions/nc-task-force-child-care-and-early-education

12) Community of Professionalism (Workforce)

Description	Activities to promote and celebrate the profession of early care and education
New or Continuation?	New
Potential Impact	Would indirectly contribute to the ability to recruit, train, develop, support and retain ECE Workforce
Cost	Low (Flexible, can scale based on available budget and proposed activities)
Complexity	Low to medium depending on selected activities
Notes	Example activities could include a child care convening; a Teacher of the Year program; Connecting to the Week of the Young Child; and/or an Ad Council-style campaign celebrating the profession
Considerations	+ May support teacher retention and boost morale. - Comparatively smaller gestures (such as awards and celebrations) may remain insufficient to retain highly skilled staff (as compared to more tangible/high value supports such as direct compensation and/or the provision of child care subsidies). - Mostly anecdotal evidence of efficacy.
Examples and/or Resources	• National Association for the Education of Young Children, Week of the Young Child: https://www.naeyc.org/events/woyc

13) Child Care Provider Supplements (Miscellaneous)

Description	Direct payments to licensed providers to support child care operations including Centers & Family Child Care Homes
New or Continuation?	New
Potential Impact	Per NCDCDEE, there are currently 89 licensed providers serving 3,543 enrolled children
Cost	High (Cost would vary depending on supplement amounts, estimate $1.75 M for every $500/enrolled child annually + program delivery & admin costs)
Complexity	Medium (depending on program design such as differentiated payment amounts by age of children enrolled, frequency of payments, required reporting)
Notes	Funds would be limited for use on allowable expenses such as employee pay & benefits, facility costs, equipment/supplies, training, professional services/specialists, etc.
Considerations	+ Child care operates on a precarious fiscal model that is as costly for parents to access as it is unprofitable to provide, with a recent review from the Minneapolis Federal Reserve identifying profit margins of 1% or less, making generalized operating grants a prospective driver of everything from salary supplements to the replacement of classroom and playground equipment. + Would add fairness/equity so providers could access essential operating funds via a formula rather than competing. - These grants may support overall operational stability, but evidence on their direct impact on child outcomes and quality improvements is limited and indirect. Targeted investments (around teacher compensation, for example) may be a more impactful – and easily measurable - approach.
Examples and/or Resources	• Previous Smart Start program "Sustaining Facility Quality"; https://buncombepfc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/SFQ-Fact-Sheet-2425.pdf

14) Parenting Support (Miscellaneous)

Description	Parenting resources and programs aimed at parents of children under age 6 enhance early childhood development
New or Continuation?	New
Potential Impact	Currently about 13,000 children aged 0-5 in the community, 70%+ are not enrolled in a licensed early care & education program
Cost	Flexible (Can scale based on available budget and proposed activities)
Complexity	Low to Medium (depending on program design)
Notes	Could strengthen the child development ecosystem by helping families build the knowledge, confidence, and stability needed to nurture young children's healthy development
Considerations	+ Parents are their children's first and most important/stable teachers, making investments in their knowledge and skills arguably a safer investment than in strategies dedicated to teachers themselves (whose retention in the field is often short-lived as a function of their low wages). + There are a number of well-documented, evidence-based home visiting and other models from which to choose. - These evidence-based models can be costly and are often reliant on in-home visits which some parents are not interested in pursuing.
Examples and/or Resources	Current programs operated locally (not supported through Early Childhood Fund) include Circle of Security Parenting https://buncombepfc.org/for-families/circle-of-security/ & Conscious Discipline training https://consciousdiscipline.com/

15) Family, Friend & Neighbor Care (Miscellaneous)

Description	Resources, training and/or financial support to informal caregivers to enhance early childhood development
New or Continuation?	Expansion (FY27 funding recommendations include 1 program of this type: El Tolar)
Potential Impact	Program focus would include the 70%+ of children 0-5 that are not enrolled in a licensed early care & education program
Cost	Flexible (Can scale based on available budget and proposed activities)
Complexity	Medium to High (Would require program design and ongoing administration including a well-staffed lead organization to cultivate relationships and manage the program year-round)
Notes	Funds could be used toward educational materials, training, and/or stipends to support unlicensed home-based care. With state support, the model could also be expanded to provide subsidy payments for related caregivers.
Considerations	+ Family, Friend and Neighbor care providers are a critical, often under-considered part of the nation's early childhood ecosystem, often heavily accessed by low-income families. - These providers can be difficult to identify and make outreach to, and may be more reluctant than regulated providers to participate in formal training, etc. - This is an emerging topic currently being studied and piloted, and there are relatively few models of success for public investment in Family, Friend and Neighbor care.
Examples and/or Resources	Smart Start of Transylvania County Family, Friend and Neighbor Care research: https://www.smartstarttransylvania.org/family-friend-and-neighbor-advocacy

16) Innovation Grants (Miscellaneous)

Description	Funding for projects to support creative ideas and provide seed funding or support one-time needs
New or Continuation?	Refinement (one-time projects can apply under current structure but compete against operational program funding)
Potential Impact	Varies
Cost	Low (Smaller pocket of funding, can scale based on available budget)
Complexity	Low to Medium (Would require grant application and review process)
Notes	Intended to be one-time grants not to sustain any long-term projects. Could be designed as include Mini-grant model Could be expanded to include an emergency fund.
Considerations	+ Provide opportunities for innovation and to meet specific, unmet needs in the community. + Would allow for flexibility within the fund. + Could allow more organizations to participate in the fund. - Often lacking in formal efficacy studies as a result of their "newness" and small size.
Examples and/or Resources	Community Foundation of WNC Sudden and Urgent Needs https://cfwnc.org/grants/sudden-and-urgent-needs-sun