Early Childhood Committee

Minutes
Virtual Meeting
August 4, 2026

Board members: Adrian Sandler, Al Whitesides, Beth Sherman, Emily Nicholson, Jennifer Horton, Jo Jamison, Kara Lauffer, Maia Sloan, Martin Moore, Maura Davis, Sarah Kabourek, Stacy Anderson, Stephanie Jones

Staff members: Angelyn Johnson, Nick Jaeger, Rachael Sawyer

Others in attendance: Amanda Berry, FIRSTwnc, Anya Robyak, Buncombe Partnership for Children; Beth Hacker, Irene Wortham Center; Brian Repass, Community Action Opportunities; Caroline Rodier, Buncombe Partnership for Children; Corrie Price, Evolve Early Learning; Dan Wuori, Early Childhood Policy Solutions; Emilina Smith, YWCA; Geny Hernandez, El Telar; Janet Price-Ferrell, FIRSTwnc; Jennifer Reed, Buncombe County Schools; Kaitlyn Guyer, Verner; Karla Martinez, El Telar; Loura McRae, Buncombe County Schools; Marcia Whitney, Verner; Skyler Naya, YWCA; Tamara Wolfe, A-B Tech; Tameka King, YTL Training Program; Cenzontle interpreter services

Welcome
New committee members Kara Lauffer, Maura Davis and Stephanie Jones were introduced.

Cenzontle provided instructions for how to access interpretation during the meeting. Simultaneous English-Spanish interpretation was available via Zoom's language channels.

Minutes
Stacy Anderson made a motion to approve the minutes from June 2, 2026. Al Whitesides seconded the motion. The vote to approve was unanimous.

Community Partner Engagement on Focused Investment Plan
- Overview/Review
    - Rachael Sawyer provided an overview of the Focused Investment Plan, including purpose, deliverables, approach, timeline, committee focus, and potential funding priorities. There was a community partner survey where applicants and grantees were asked to share their thoughts. The survey was open for 5 weeks, and we received 31 total responses. The Partner Survey Results were included in the meeting packet. In follow-up to that survey,

the committee invited community partners to this meeting to discuss the proposed focused areas.

- Discussion with Community Partners

  Martin Moore facilitated a discussion with attendees. He began each section by reviewing the sentiment from the partner survey: Infant/Toddler slots (84% support, no opposition); NC PreK enhancement (74% support, two opposed); Teacher supplements (81% support, four opposed); Pyramid Model (81% support); Innovation grants (lowest support among the set).

- Infant/Toddler Slots discussion
  - Early intervention is imperative and sets up children for long term success.
  - The wait lists for infant/toddler slots are extensive.
  - Only 7-8% of infants in Buncombe County are enrolled in licensed care.
  - Many households need two working parents because of the cost of living, so there are economic benefits to available slots.
  - Infant/toddler slots are the most expensive to provide.
  - Trends show centers are having a hard time staffing rooms even if they have space.
  - Need supports in place for new slots, so can't focus specifically on just increasing slots.
  - Partners emphasized the local living-wage context (> $24/hour) and the need for staffing supports (subs/floaters) to make new infant/toddler rooms viable.
- NC Pre-K Enhancement discussion
  - If the current model is continued, the committee is encouraged to invest enough funding to include all NC PreK providers. Head Start is excluded from the current model.
  - The level of funding determines the amount and types of support that can be included, and this program has been partially funded.
  - Partners cautioned that uncertainty or reductions in local supplementation can cause providers to exit NC Pre-K; one major provider dropped when continuation was unclear.
  - If the program is not continued, there would be a loss of staff and slots as some providers opt to no longer participate in NC Pre-K.
  - Even with the current supplements, providers lose money on NC Pre-K slots.

    - There was a recent study that shows students who participated in the Tennessee Voluntary PreK Program (TNVPK) showed that by the end of sixth grade, children enrolled in TNVPK had lower achievement test scores, higher rates of discipline infractions, and a greater portion had special education placements than their peers who did not participate in TNVPK. The evidence on this program is inconstant.
- Workforce Programs discussion
    - There is currently no pipeline for teachers. Students who take early childhood courses in high school don't generally continue to higher education and careers in the field.
    - Career & Technical Education programs at the high schools - especially those with onsite child cares – have good participation and success with pre-apprenticeships, apprenticeships and internships.
    - Centers are desperate for workers.
    - Many centers are unable to support their teachers with continuing their education by providing substitutes and/or floaters, and many teachers don't have computers.
    - BPFC's workforce laptop lending library was identified as a resource to reduce training barriers.
    - A permanent substitute pool would be helpful. These subs would be full-time employees who float between centers as needed. This could eliminate the issue of losing subs from the sub pool to full-time positions at the centers.
    - Low pay, lack of benefits and paid time off make it difficult to recruit workers.
    - Turnover continues to be high. SMART Start has a turnover goal of 25%. WAGES participants who receive a supplement have a slightly lower turnover rate of 23%. The WAGES program provides supplements of approximately $2,000 annually for qualified workers who earn less than $25 per hour and meet the education requirements. Buncombe PreK program has a turnover rate of 18%. With the salary supplement, the Buncombe PreK staff earn over $25 per hour, so they do not qualify for the WAGES program.
    - Practice-based coaching and in-class technical assistance were highlighted as effective for building teacher capacity which helps with workforce support and retention (i.e. Pyramid Model as a workforce strategy).

    - Suggestions included exploring free childcare for educators and prioritizing retention ("cheaper to keep teachers than to create them".)
- Teacher & Staff Supplements discussion
    - To truly supplement pay in a manner to make a difference, it would likely require the entire $4M fund.
    - In addition to decent pay, benefits such as health care, retirement and paid time off are often lacking.
    - It is important to build a positive culture and appreciation and respect for the field.
    - The high cost of living in our area has a negative impact on the workforce. Many people are living out of the area. Many work second and third jobs. Some center report that they have current full-time staff who are experiencing homelessness.
    - Salary supplements would need to be a long-term commitment instead of a yearly investment.
    - Educators stay where they are appreciated and paid well.
    - It is less expensive to keep teachers than to train new ones.
    - Partners urged designing supplements as multi-year commitments and exploring equitable, countywide per-slot distributions.
- Pyramid Model discussion
    - The Pyramid Model is widely accepted by evidence as effective but complicated.
    - There is a lack of resources and understanding of the model.
    - There is some uncertainty about how a local investment would help implement the model.
    - There would need to be support for full implementation for those that don't have staff and systems in place.
    - Partners asked that any local Pyramid investment fund comprehensive foundational and implementation supports (staffing, planning time, coaching) and flexible, hands-on assistance at the classroom level.
- Innovation Grants discussion
    - We have to innovate because the current system isn't working.
    - The committee could put some vetting in place to see who Is accessing the funds, what they are doing and how that lined up with the priorities. Need to have the right people at the table.

    - It could be a challenge balance the need for multi-year, sustaining funding with an innovation grant model that is designed to be one-time.
    - Some programs, such as El Telar are having to innovate to serve the members of their community, such as providing training for cooperative child care.
- General comments
    - Multi-year funding is imperative to sustain the work. It is extremely hard to recruit staff with one year funding.
    - Culture must be embedded into programs. People stay where they feel well. There is a need to support leaders in this industry in setting up programs and building systems to support education.
    - Informal models such as Family Friend and Neighbor (FFN), part-time, and cooperative care can be part of the solution.
    - Evidence supports that early interventions can help close the achievement gap.
    - There is an early learning model from Decatur that has been increasing access and getting good results.

Public Comment
There were no public comments.

Announcements
There were no announcements.

Meeting Adjourned
Martin Moore made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Adrian Sandler seconded the motion.