Early Childhood Committee

Minutes
Virtual Meeting
August 4, 2026

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

Staff members: Angelica Tyler, Rachael Sawyer, Angelyn Johnson (virtual)

Panelists: Josh Hallingse, Buncombe County; Greg Borom, WNC Early Childhood Coalition; Leanna Martin, NC Child; Samantha Cole, NC Department of Commerce; Amy Barry, Buncombe Partnership for Children

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

Minutes
Martin Moore made a motion to approve the minutes from August 4, 2026. Al Whitesides seconded the motion. The vote to approve was unanimous.

Reflections on August Meeting: Community Partner Engagement
- Committee members noted that the August session provided valuable community perspective. Several commented that the volume and candor of provider feedback underscored the need for clearer communication channels as priorities are refined. Members expressed interest in creating a more structured approach to gathering partner feedback ahead of major funding recommendations

Focused Investment Plan: Updated Project Schedule
- A Committee Project Schedule was included in the meeting packet. Upcoming planned activities include:
    - Public Policy Panel Discussion today
    - Review Program Design Options for Potential Funding Priority: Workforce in October
    - Review Program Design Options for Potential Funding Priority: Buncombe PreK in November

- Review Program Design Options for Potential Funding Priority: Infant/Toddler in December
- Review Scoping of All Potential Funding Priorities – in December
- Final Determination of Funding Priorities & FY2028 Funding Recommendations by Priority in January
- Application process to select vendor(s) for focused investment(s) in January – April 2027
- Commissioner Approvals of FY2028 Funding in June 2027
- Begin FY2028 Contracts in July 2027

Public Policy Panel Discussion

- The panelists introduced themselves and briefly discussed their organization and role.
- Josh Hallingse (Buncombe County Government) provided a comprehensive walkthrough of the county's public policy advocacy process. He explained that the annual advocacy plan is shaped through multiple layers of input: commissioners, department directors, public comments, and advisory committees such as this one. Key points included:
  - The Early Childhood Committee could eventually play a more formal role in shaping county advocacy priorities once its strategic direction is finalized.
  - The timeline for county policy planning: recommendations collected in fall, reviewed by leadership, adopted in December, and launched in January.
  - He emphasized the value of including clear, data-driven proposals from committees early in the planning cycle to ensure meaningful influence.
- Greg Borom (WNC Early Childhood Coalition) opened by celebrating major wins in the new state budget passed by the General Assembly, particularly the substantial federal recurring investment in the Child Care Subsidy program.
  - $97 million in federal recurring dollars allocated to boost subsidy rates statewide.
  - Starting in October, all providers accepting subsidy will benefit from a minimum subsidy rate floor, increasing payments by several hundred dollars per child.
  - The first enhanced payments will be reflected in November for October services.
  - Greg framed the win as "historic but incomplete," emphasizing the need for state investment to complement federal dollars.

    - He urged committees and coalitions to help communicate the significance of these changes to local providers and families.
- Leanna Martin (NC Child) provided deeper context to help the committee understand the projected subsidy rate increases under the new floor, acknowledging that official DCDEE numbers were not yet released.
    - Projected infant monthly rates for Buncombe County Centers:
        - 3-star Centers: projected to increase from $876 to $1153 per student
        - 4-star Centers: projected to increase from $960 to $1181 per student
        - 5-star Centers: projected to increase from $1100 to $1400 per student
    - Despite these increases, the true cost of care remains around $2000/month, creating an ongoing structural gap.
    - She highlighted that 120 infants in Buncombe currently receive subsidy.
    - The rate change will generate about $1.1M in additional annual reimbursement flowing into local centers.
    - The economic ripple effect: an estimated $7.1M GDP increase and 113 new jobs, 90 of which would be in child care.
    - Leanna encouraged the committee to monitor provider behavior (hours, enrollment, staffing) as indicators of how the rate floor affects operations.
- Samantha Cole (NC Department of Commerce) outlined the Governor's NC Task Force on Early Care and Education's work, including highlights of recommendations from the 2025 report.
    - Set a statewide child care subsidy reimbursement rate floor.
    - Explore the creation of a child care endowment to fund child care needs.
    - Develop approaches to offer non-salary benefits to child care professionals.
    - Explore subsided or free child care for child care teachers.
    - Link existing workforce compensation and support programs for early childhood professionals into a cohesive set of supports.
    - Explore partnerships with UNC system, NC Community Colleges, and K-12 public school systems to increase access to child care for public employees and students.
    - She emphasized the importance of multi-sector partnerships to achieve long-term workforce sustainability.
- Amy Barry (Buncombe Partnership for Children) provided updates on their role in the statewide Smart Start network, and how the NC Partnership for Children is playing an important role in allocating state funds for Helene

Recovery to our region. NC DHHS announced $75.8M in Federal Disaster Recovery Funding for Child Care. Buncombe received $2.4M in state recovery funding, and so far, just under $1.9M has been allocated to over 30 child care programs. These funds will impact 3360 kids.

- The panelists discussed other recent policy or funding wins.
    - $7.3M additional funding to NC Partnership for Behavioral Health support
    - $1.5M for Child Care Workforce Academy which is a training program (EDU119 CDA). It provides training, background checks, fingerprints, and a stipend if employed in the field.
    - $3.25M for FCCH pilot program in three counties.
    - Support for liability insurance for child care providers.
    - $75M Federal disaster funding for NC.
- The panelists discussed what key issues still need work.
    - FCCH providers address issues such as non-traditional hours, weekend care, culture, language, etc.
    - Even with the new floor, subsidy still falls short of actual cost of care.
    - Declining providers and reduced operating hours across the county continue to strain capacity.
    - Subsidy reaches only approximately 15% of eligible children.
    - Child care shortages directly affect labor force participation across Buncombe County.
- The panelists each provided the takeaway they would like the committee to remember from today.
    - Stay educated about the variety of funding streams to ensure no opportunities are missed.
    - Focus on continuous progress rather than being overwhelmed by the scale of need.
    - Advocacy resources (“Yes on Child Care” materials) are available for committee members.
    - Workforce investment is essential to long-term stability.
    - Early Childhood Education impacts every sector and should be treated as a universal priority.

Committee Follow-Up Requests:

- Local data measuring early impacts of the rate floor beginning November.
- Subsidy enrollment data: child counts, ages, provider types, star ratings.
- A list of legislators who championed the subsidy floor policy.

Public Comment

There were no public comments.

Announcements

The Hunt Institute implemented a Governor James B Hunt, Jr Leadership Award. Karen Ponder is the recipient this year and will be honored this month at their Early Childhood Leadership Summit in Colorado.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be October 6, 2026, from 1:00-2:30 pm at 200 College St, Room 310.

Meeting Adjourned

Martin Moore adjourned the meeting.