A Systematic Best-Practice Manual for Committee Funding, Prepared for Buncombe County Early Childhood Development Committee

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Overview of Events:

In Spring 2019, the Buncombe County Early Childhood Education and Development Committee was established by the County's Board of Commissioners. The goal was to structure, invest in, and enhance the field of childhood education. Resolution #18-10-16 was validated on October 30th, 2018, with an initial contribution of $3.6 million. There was a perceived 2% annual increase for the upcoming fiscal year. As outlined in the Board of Commissioners' Strategic Priority, the committee seeks to "ensure that every child in Buncombe County has an equal opportunity to thrive during their first two thousand days, including access to quality early childhood education."[1]

In assessing the Committee's *Early Childhood Education and Development Fund Grant Award Recipients'* public documents for the 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025 fiscal years, a subjective budgetary analysis compared grant applications against the Committee's five core strategies. Upon review, the Committee awards an average of nineteen grants per grant application cycle and an average investment of $3,828,500.00. With this understanding, the subjective data indicates the goal of "increas[ing] the availability of high-quality early childhood care and education with an emphasis on pre-k programs" received the highest percent of allocated funds as well as the number of grants awarded. Opposingly, the goal "addresses issues of affordability, both for providers in a sustainable business model and for families in access to care" received the lowest percent of allocated funds and grants awarded.

Therefore, it is important to recognize that among the 2021, 2022, and 2023 fiscal years, the Committee funded a majority of grants addressing availability; wherein, following the 2024 and 2025 terms, the number of applications seeking to collaborate with community leaders and foster a robust career track grew. At present, the Committee is engaging in an eight-month-long investment plan that seeks to address the following:

- Funding Prioritization
- Strategy and Goal Alignment
- Grant Application Review
- Quantification of Existing Policy's Language

In finalizing the investment plan, the Committee is seeking to develop a precedent and culture of intentional, innovative, and efficient grant awarding.

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[1] Buncombe County. (2019). Buncombe County Early Childhood Education and Development Committee By-Laws – DRAFT June 2019. Asheville.

Introduction of Ideas:

Following the Spring of 2026, the Early Childhood Education and Development committee sought information on diverse funding programs in counties across the continental United States. The intention was to gain greater awareness of supplemental programs that strengthened the fund's regional impact. In doing so, Western Carolina University's Master of Public Affairs Graduate candidate Sarah Tisinger was tasked with discerning complementary programs that would be reviewed by Committee members for consideration and/or adoption. In doing so, Sarah Tisinger met with Buncombe County's Director of Strategic Partnerships, Racheal Sawyer, weekly from January 2026 to April 2026 to discuss opportunities for improvement, areas of focus, and points of development.

Throughout meetings, Sarah posed a range of questions that challenged the Committee's strategies, goals, program reliance, and data logging. In addressing these early lessons, Sarah redefined their responsibilities to define best practices that would bolster and reinforce the committee's commitment to developing intentional and mindful grant-funded programs.

Methodology

In addressing the examination of Buncombe County Early Childhood Education and Development's funding allocation, determinants for support, and exemplary approaches to grant applications, a quantitative case-study analysis was completed. Of note, ten varying policies were reviewed, analyzed, and considered. Their names and affiliated counties are as follows:

Criteria Matrix				
Title of Case Study		**Criterion 1: Innovation**	**Criterion 2: Applicability**	**Criterion 3: Desirability**
Alameda County Early Childhood Workforce Program[2] Location: Hayword, CA ***Annual, Single-Year, Multi-Year, and One-Time Funds	Case Study 1	**2**	**1.5**	**2.5**

[2] Education, A. C. O. of. (n.d.). *Alameda County Office of Education*. Alameda County Office of Education - Alameda County Early Childhood Workforce Pathways Program. https://acoe.org/23613_4.

ECHO Early Childhood Grants[3] Location: York County, Pennsylvania ***Single-Year	Case Study 2	**3**	**3**	**3**
Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Grant[4] Provider: U.S. Department of Education ***Four-Year Funding Commitments	Case Study 3	**2.5**	**2.5**	**3**
FIRST 5 of Alameda County[5] Location: Alameda, CA ***Multi-Year Commitment ***Emergency Grants (Rolling)	Case Study 4	**3**	**3**	**3**
Birth to Five Illinois[6] Location: "Region 21", Franklin, Johnson, Massac, Williamson County, IL ***Single-Year Cycles that can last up to two fiscal terms	Case Study 5	**3**	**3**	**3**

[3] *Every child has opportunities*. ECHO. (2025, November 7). https://echoyork.org/.

[4] Race to the top - early learning challenge. (n.d.). https://www.ed.gov/media/document/rtt-early-learning-challenge-glancepdf-44260.pdf.

[5] *Every child counts*. First 5 Alameda County. (2026, February 10). https://www.first5alameda.org/.

[6] *Birth to five Illinois*. Birth to Five Illinois. (n.d.). https://www.birthtofiveil.com/.

First Five Years Fund[7] Supporter: Federal Child C.A.R.E. Coalition ***Single Year Planning Grants w/ a 3-year Renewal	Case Study 6	**3**	**3**	**3**
Best Starts for Kids[8] Location: King County, Washington ***Six-Year Levy Cycles	Case Study 7	**2.5**	**2.5**	**3**
MECK Pre-K and Child Care Subsidy Support for Working Families[9] Location: Mecklenburg County, NC ***Single-Year	Case Study 8	**2**	**3**	**3**
Texas Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five (PDG B-5) [10] Location: State of Texas ***Multi-Year (Renewal Grant)	Case Study 9	**2.5**	**2.5**	**3**

[7] *Home*. First Five Years Fund. (2026, April 13). https://www.ffyf.org/.

[8] *Best starts for kids*. King County, Washington. (n.d.). https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dchs/human-social-services/community-funded-initiatives/best-starts-for-kids.

[9] Menjivar, O. (2023, December 5). *How Meck Pre-K supports families*. K. https://meckprek.org/how-meck-pre-k-supports-families/.

[10] *Texas Preschool Development Grant Birth through 5 (PDG B-5)*. Texas Workforce Commission. (n.d.). https://www.twc.texas.gov/programs/child-care/texas-preschool-development-grant

Child Care Grant Program: State of Alaska Department of Health[11] Location: State of Alaska ***Monthly	Case Study 10	**1.5**	**0.5**	**3**

In appraising the policies against the lenses of innovation, applicability and desirability, the definitions, criteria, and measurability standards are described:

Criteria Definition	
Innovation	(Def.) The act of creating and developing funding strategies that offer uniformity and data observability.
Applicability	(Def.) The engagement of appropriate, intricately connected, and functional funding strategies.
Desirability	(Def.) A presentation of desired and well-established funding strategy(ies) that represent the preferences of Buncombe County Early Childhood Development Committee.
Concept of Criteria	
Innovation	Grant application offers "new" measures to develop early childhood education strategies, engage(s) in emerging technology, and capture(s) interdisciplinary collaboration.
Applicability	Grant application meets eligibility requirements, invests in capacity building, and pursues opportunities for data reporting.
Desirability	Grant application targets the proposed population, can provide authentication of credibility, and retains involvement in various community initiatives.
Measurability of Criteria	
Innovation	Grant application aligns with a minimum of three Committee strategies, engages in one technological advancement, and participates in one interdisciplinary collaboration.
Applicability	Grant application meets all eligibility requirements, invests in one capacity building initiative, and is willing to engage in data reporting.
Desirability	Grant application targets and/or interacts with the proposed population, provides authentication of residential support, and retains involvement in at least one community initiative.

[11] *Child care grant program*. State of Alaska | Department of Health. (n.d.). https://health.alaska.gov/en/services/child-care-grant/.

Upon review of the following policy's program execution, subsidy systems, and budgetary appropriations, various thematic, fiscal adjustments, and implementation recommendations were considered. In doing so, the study's objective was to evaluate the impact and/or validity of local, state, or federal early childhood development funding on the given community, workforce, and affiliated stakeholders, over a given fiscal period. Preceding the next section, the following recommendations are subject to the case studies outlined and seek to be considered by Committee members. Of significance, recommendations are subject to personal biases and opinions.

Appropriate Finding Recommendations

Subject Area #1: Opportunities for Growth

The subject area detailed below encapsulates three recommendation strategies for the Committee's current application, awarding, and reviewing processes.

Recommendation 1: Vetting the Current Strategies

The term 'vetting' describes the actions involved in examining a piece of work with intended outcomes and analyses. An analysis can be conducted by reviewing, updating, and providing boundaries to the Committee's strategies and goals; all the while asking, "Are these targets subject to change in the upcoming years?" With this understanding, there are two areas that require consideration. First, allowing Committee members to recognize and create an accessible criteria matrix that incorporates the "concepts" of broad terminology, measurability standards, and resolute definitions of non-age-specific language. Thus, authorities can apply similar principles to their review processes.

Secondly, when allowing applications to be submitted, it is suitable for organizations to self-select their "strategy" of strongest support. As follows, the Committee will be afforded data that answers the question, "Of the strategies, which are of the highest importance to the Committee? Of the selected projects, where has the allocated money been spent? Do these applications align with the Committee's goals for the upcoming fiscal year?"

****For further contextualization, review Case 3, 4, 6, & 9.*

Recommendation 2: Determining the Committee's Perceived Funding Prioritizes

As described, a subjective analysis of the Committee's perceived funding priorities was completed. While the analysis provides a comprehensible overview of strategic preferences, a definitive measure to ensure a shared understanding among Committee

members is a collective consensus of the upcoming fiscal year's precedents. In fostering dialogue that ensures a collective consensus, ranking strategies "high, medium, and low" with assigned funding values, as well as the number of awardees, assures organizational capacity building. As the yearly budget averages $3.8 Million, an example of the priority index and monetary amount may include the following:

Ranking	Allotted Funding	Number of Awardees
High	$1,260,000.00	1
Medium	$1,688,000.00	12
Low	$84,4440.00	6

In determining these values, the "high" ranking received 1/3rd of the fiscal year's budget, wherein the remaining was dispersed among the values "medium" and "low". As it stands, the number of awardees and allotted funding align with the Committee's yearly budget (i.e., $3.6 Million of funds distributed and nineteen awardees).

****For further contextualization, review Cases 3, 5, 6, 7, & 9.*

Recommendation 3: Determinants of "Early Childhood"

In review of Buncombe County's Early Childhood Education and Development Committee By-Laws, it is crucial to recognize the following statement: "The purpose of the Early Childhood Education and Development Fund is to ensure every child in Buncombe County has an equal opportunity to thrive during their first 2,000 days, including access to quality early childhood education." Of note, those within the range of birth – to – 2,000 years of age are shy of five-and-a-half years old. According to the Children's Hospital of Orange County, there are nine child developmental measurements. These include:

- Newborn Development: 0 – 1 Month
- Baby Development: 1-3 Months
- Baby Development: 4-6 Months
- Baby Development: 7-9 Months
- Baby Development: 10-12 Months
- Child Development: 1 Year
- Child Development: 2 Years
- Child Development: 3 Years
- Child Development: 4-5 Years12

In analyzing these measurements, three developmental stages appear – newborn, baby, and child – all of whom require conscientious nurturing. With this insight, the question remains: "Of those born within the first two-thousand days, which sub-developmental stage is receiving the most support; and of these, which group requires the most assistance?" Posing this question, it is a recommendation for the Committee to distinguish which developmental stage requires the most consideration for the upcoming fiscal year.

****For further contextualization, review Case 3.*

Subject Area #2: Budgetary Allotment

The subject area detailed below encapsulates three budget management recommendations that seek to foster purposefulness when considering applications and awardees.

Recommendation 1: Thematic Funding Categories

Taking into consideration the perspective of a grant applicant, when presented with the opportunity to seek funding from Buncombe County's Early Childhood and Development Committee, several questions arise. Those that incorporate, "What is my institution eligible for, how much is my institution eligible for, and what are the minimum requirements to receive an award for my program's strategic discipline?" The phrase "thematic funding category" references individualized reserves that hold a specific dollar amount for applications that align directly with its objective. Illustrations of thematic funding categories, specific to Buncombe County, can align with its strategies. At present, Buncombe County's strategies are as follows: (1) develop an early childhood workforce, (2) maintain/enhance existing slots, (3) increase slots for enrollment, (4) increase quality, (5) support families, and (6) enhance the effectiveness of the overall system of early care and education. Given that these six disciplines become a thematic funding category, an example of allotted funding can be distinguished by a priority index, as indicated above, or by equal distribution in which each discipline would receive $600,000. In selecting equal distribution, the Committee would average three awardees per discipline, each of whom would receive $200,000.00.

****For further contextualization, review Cases 5, 7, & 8.*

Recommendation 2: Development of Mini-Grant Programs

Upon electing to incorporate and/or adopt mini-grant programs, it is crucial to determine the "why" and cause for micro-investments. These determinants can range from increasing applicant morale, fostering innovative solutions, and strengthening awardee relationships. In determining the validity of mini-grant programs, there are a select number of questions to address. These questions incorporate:

- What is the mini-grant hoping to achieve?
- How many awardees will be provided with a mini grant?
- How much funding will be allocated per grant?
- Will mini grants be awarded once or multiple times throughout the year?

Once these considerations have been reviewed, the Committee will have a strengthened determination on whether to pursue this opportunity. Of note, examples of mini grants include facility upgrades, engagement / marketing initiatives to assist new families, and proposals that foster creative play.

****For further contextualization, review Case 2.*

Recommendation 3: Single - Stipend Payments

The inclusion of a single-stipend payment option seeks to recognize and bolster the Committee's goal of "support[ing] a robust career track in the field of early education, with development ladders from entry level to highly educated, credentialed, and seasoned professionals." Those receiving additional funds would embody Buncombe County employees who directly influence early childhood education and development, educators, administrators, and professionals. In selecting the number of candidates who would receive the award, a collective awareness of allocated funds will need to be considered, as well as the number of applicants per institution.

Nevertheless, in deliberating these factors, an additional element remains to be reviewed: What is the intention of the funding? Similar models indicate funding has been granted for outstanding contributions, first-year employees, and higher-education expenses. Of these, all would suggest a commitment to three of the funding strategies: (1) develop an early education workforce, (2) enhance the effectiveness of the overall system, and (3) support families.

****For further contextualization, review Cases 1 & 10.*

Subject Area #3: Process Improvement

The subject area outlined features two areas of development, following the Committee's eight-month investment pan. The consideration of these developments is rooted in public engagement and perception.

Recommendation 1: Defining Financial Success

Establishing financial success can be a comprehensive and intensive process, as there are several indicators that exhibit organizational achievement. Applicable examples include return on investments and cost per outcome. Relating to Buncombe County's Early Childhood and Development Committee and their perceived strategic priorities and goals, determining an application's return on investment would be compelling and informative. When posed with the question, "How is the fund's impact recognized?", there are a few defined measurement drivers. Such drivers incorporate the number of participating sites, children influenced, and employees supported. In assessing applications and the future of the Committee's funding, gathering substantial data, and further quantifying its value will provide members with a calculable assessment of impact.

****For further contextualization, review Cases 4 & 5.*

Recommendation 2: Expanding Marketing Strategies

Marketing, among grant applications, can be promoted and communicated on a range of diverse channels that target distinct audiences. By way of example, the Buncombe County Early Childhood Development and Education webpage is an excellent platform for those who have been pre-existing grant applicants; however, for new and developing organizations that may be unaware of funding cross-collaboration with partners and stakeholders, varied channels are crucial. Consideration for the following channels is as outlined:

- Regional news outlets
- Institutional social media platforms
- Higher Education Sites
- Inter-disciplinary nonprofit agencies

****For further contextualization, review Case 5.*

Application of Recommendations

Application of the material is conditional to the desires and expectations of committee members. Consideration for the recommendation's application is as follows:

- Item 1: Vetting the current strategies.
- Item 2: Determining the Committee's Perceived Funding Priorities
- Item 3: Determinants of "Early Childhood".
- Item 4: Thematic Funding Categories
- Item 5: Development of Mini-Grant Programs
- Item 6: Single-Stipend Payments
- Item 7: Defining Financial Success
- Item 8: Expanding Marketing Strategies

Following suit with the order of events, the Committee will distinguish current trends, clarify funding-centered language, enact budgetary boundaries with defined priorities, and seek new organized activities that enact program strategies. More thoroughly, when provided with an affirmed foundation, the Committee can further elaborate on data collection and return on investment principles that can be used for positive public perception.

Conclusion Statement

The proposed document serves as a best-practice manual for the current year – 2026. In detailing the Committee's history and strategic investment plan, a portion of the manual expands eight areas of recommendation. Recommendations are structured under three domains – opportunities for growth, budgetary allotment, and process improvements. Under this framework, Committee members are encouraged to address current, upcoming, and future challenges. Notably, recommendations are considerate of expansive topics and require in-depth discussions that foster dialogue and debate.