

Experts make the urgent case: ‘Child care is a public good’

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At Bonnie Sanders Burney Child Development Center, early childhood students at Cape Fear Community College can observe classroom instruction through a one-way window. Photo by Liz Bell/EducationNC. Photo illustration by Cheyenne McNeill/EducationNC

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- Child care is still mainly considered a private commodity. And the public subsidies that do exist are outdated. “It’s really the perfect storm that is almost collapsing the system right now.”

- Like communities across the state, Ashe Co. is struggling to find workers. "We would have more of a labor pool if we had more child care." Early care and education is limiting the state's economy — and its future, experts say.

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Highlights

- Communities across North Carolina have been innovating solutions to market failures in early care and education, but the system remains in crisis.
 - Proper investment in the care and education of North Carolina's youngest residents can have a positive impact on two generations simultaneously, both in the short and long term, research says.
 - The system is kept afloat by high prices for parents and low wages for teachers.
 - North Carolina once was a leader in early care and education policies, but those 20th century innovations haven't kept up with the needs of the 21st.
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As the world shut down in 2020, visitors escaped to the beautiful mountains of Ashe County. With its recreational tourism and wide open spaces, Ashe was one of a handful of counties in North Carolina where visitor spending increased during the first year of the pandemic, said Kitty Honeycutt, executive director of the Ashe County Chamber of Commerce.

Yet the service industries could not keep up with that demand, Honeycutt said. And in the years since, it's been a struggle to find workers — a challenge familiar to communities across the state.

"It would be easier if we had more of a labor pool," Honeycutt said. "And we would have more of a labor pool if we had more child care."

Several businesses in the area expressed a willingness to provide stipends to employees or pay higher taxes to fund more child care access, in a survey by the Partnership for Ashe, the local Smart Start affiliate.

Leaders across sectors in Ashe have created a task force and are planning creative solutions to the child care shortage. This spring, a training facility and lab school for early childhood teachers will open through a partnership with Appalachian State University.

But the task force has found “there are so many edges to the problem,” Honeycutt said. Even with stipends from employers, many families can’t find or afford care. Many facilities are struggling to find teachers. And local investments like theirs can only go so far.

“That’s where the legislature has to step in and fund this for us, so that we can start to make a difference — a fundamental difference ... and not just try to put a Band-Aid on it,” she said.

Despite the best efforts of communities throughout the state, the early care and education system remains in crisis.

Without access to affordable child care, parents can’t run the businesses that provide the services upon which we all depend. Experts point to this as a cause of current worker shortages, the costs of which get passed to consumers in the form of longer lines and higher prices at the grocery store.

Without early childhood care and education being high quality, we risk the health and well-being of the children who will become the next generation of workers. The effects of this are already being felt in high costs of health care, public safety, and public assistance programs.

Experts across the state — from parents and educators to business leaders and policymakers — agree that nothing less than North Carolina’s economic future is at stake without investment in early care and education.



Daniel Cook is a student at the Regional Center for the Advancement of Children at Haywood Community College. Photo by Liz Bell/EducationNC. Photo illustration by Cheyenne McNeill/EducationNC

Investing in our future

Research shows that investing in the care and education of North Carolina's youngest residents has a positive impact on two generations simultaneously, both in the short and long term.

In the short term, the state's economy is stronger when parents can earn family-sustaining wages knowing their children are safe and cared for while they work.

Those children benefit in the short term too. Evidence shows their brains thrive when they have caring adults around them who know how to support their development.

In the long term, investing in our state's infants and toddlers leads to their improved health, lower incarceration rates, better educational outcomes, and greater workforce readiness.

The economic benefits from these short-term and long-term outcomes are lower burdens on the state's systems and a higher tax base to pay for them. Investments in early childhood bring a higher return than investments at any other point in a lifetime, economists argue.

‘Moving for work’

A big part of Mike Cline's job as the state demographer in the Office of State Budget and Management is to think about how the decisions policymakers make now will affect the state's population and financial outlook in the future.

In an interview with EdNC, Cline explained that while the fertility rate in North Carolina has held relatively steady over the last decade — about 60 live births per 1,000 women ages 15 to 44 — the number of births annually has decreased.

This is due to the state's aging population.

“The first group of baby boomers turned 65 in 2011, and since that time, every year there's been about 100,000 people turning age 65,” Cline said. “We expect that to continue over the next several years, so the fastest-growing population group is 65 years of age and older.”

An aging population can lead to a natural population decrease (more deaths than births).

But according to census data, North Carolina's population *increased* by 9.2% between 2010 and 2020, even while the number of births decreased by 4.5%.

Cline attributes this to migration, people moving into North Carolina and establishing lives here for themselves and their families.

“Even though there are certainly people who move here for retirement, most of that is people moving for work, looking for opportunities,” Cline said.

Migration accounted for 95% of population growth between July 2021 and July 2022, he said. And that will likely increase in the coming decades.

“Our latest projections show that between 2040 and 2050, *all* of our growth will be due to net migration,” Cline said.

That migration will happen only if the state remains attractive to workers and their families. Accessible, affordable, high-quality early care and education is an important factor in recruitment.

“Certainly, you want to make sure that there is infrastructure available in the future to support all types of education,” Cline said. “I think there is an argument for making sure those opportunities are there to continue to attract folks.”

Keeping our economy going

A recent [report](#) from the [North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation](#) (NCECF) shows the state's economic future is "inextricably linked" to child care.

[According to the report](#), the limited accessibility of child care contributes to "divergent economic futures for families."

The authors found that parents are making decisions about their participation in the workforce and postsecondary education based on the availability and affordability of high-quality care and education for their young children.

In a recent panel discussion about the report, J.B. Buxton, president of Durham Technical Community College, described the child care challenges students face.

"For a lot of community college students, time is the enemy," Buxton said. "They're working part time, they're fitting in school along with life and work responsibilities, and when child care arrangements don't work for them or they don't have access to good, affordable care, it's often education that loses out and has to take a backseat."

In an interview with EdNC, NCECF executive director Muffy Grant stressed the importance of creating a high-quality, nurturing environment where young children get the focused attention they need to thrive.

"Parents need to work in order to keep our economy going, in order to keep their household going, and to make themselves less dependent on social safety nets," Grant said.

Grant pointed to lack of child care as a threat to the [myFutureNC](#) goal of ensuring that by 2030, 2 million North Carolinians have a high-quality credential or a postsecondary degree.

As part of monitoring progress toward that goal, myFutureNC — a statewide nonprofit organization focused on educational attainment — operates a [dashboard](#) tracking labor force participation. The goal is to have 86% labor force participation for people ages 25 to 44 by 2030. In 2019 (the most recent year for which data are available) the participation rate was 83%.

While it may seem the state is on track, there is a worrisome gap between participation rates for men and women. The rate for men was 88%, but for women it was 79%.

[Carolina Demography](#) looked at labor force participation in 2021. Among people ages 25 to 44, they found lower participation rates among women, in rural counties, and among "American Indian residents compared to other racial/ethnic groups."

Last year, Gerald Cohen, chief economist of the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise, offered one explanation: “The gap between male and female is much smaller in countries such as Sweden, which have universal child care and generous paid leave programs.”

One potential challenge to North Carolina — or the United States — developing a more comprehensive approach to early child care and education is the traditional belief that mothers should stay home with children to provide their care and education.

While it is true that infants and toddlers benefit from bonding with their primary caregivers (regardless of that caregiver’s gender), evidence shows they also benefit more generally from any relationship with a caring adult who knows how to support their development.

‘Reaping economic and societal benefits’

The vast majority of human brain development occurs in the first three years of life. During this time more than 1 million neural connections are formed each second. Strengthening these connections during the 2,000 days between birth and kindergarten leads to improved outcomes in education, health, employment, and economic stability.

“Investing in our little ones is investing in their high school graduation, too,” said Ariel Ford, director of the Division of Child Development and Early Education for the state Department of Health and Human Services. “It just makes sense all around for us to do this.”

Despite the evidence for the importance of early learning, North Carolina and most other states do not treat education as a public good until children reach the age of 4 or 5. Many experts are urging policymakers to rethink that approach.

“Learning doesn’t start at 5 or 4 — it’s beginning in utero,” Grant said. “It’s our job to ensure that while parents are expecting babies, they’re not afraid about the fact that there’s no one to help care for them.”

And learning isn’t the only concern.

According to an action guide for policymakers created by Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child, “Experiences during the prenatal period and first 2-3 years after birth affect lifelong health at least as much as they affect school achievement.”

Researchers studying the lifelong health impacts of participation in the Carolina Abecedarian Project — a long-running and oft-cited program of high-quality early care and education operated by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at UNC-Chapel Hill — found participants had “significantly lower prevalence of risk factors for cardiovascular and metabolic diseases in their mid-30s.”

Additional studies of participants in the Abecedarian Project — along with two similarly well-known projects based in Ypsilanti, Michigan, and in Chicago — also found that impoverished children who received high-quality early care and education were less likely to be incarcerated later in life.

The potential of early care and education to prevent crime has been embraced by police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors, and violence survivors who have joined forces for more than 25 years under the “Fight Crime: Invest in Kids” initiative organized by the bipartisan Council for a Strong America.

In their 2021 report titled “Preschool Works,” members of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids state their support for:

investments in policies and programs that put kids on the path toward productive lives. In particular, by providing access to high-quality early education for kids today, we can see less crime and incarceration in the future, while reaping economic and societal benefits.

Those economic and societal benefits are directly attributable to the brain development that takes place in the first 2,000 days of life.

According to a 2022 brief from myFutureNC:

During these early years, children begin to develop the skills they will need for later success in school and afterward as citizens and employees. These include attention, persistence, self-regulation, emotional balance, strong interpersonal abilities, curiosity, and critical thinking.

Proper investment in early care and education for North Carolina’s youngest residents not only enables their parents to fully participate in the labor force, but also improves the children’s health outcomes, reduces their likelihood of being incarcerated, and provides the foundation for their educational and economic futures.



Bryson Smith and Morgan Varner, pre-K students at Regional Center for the Advancement of Children, play in centers. Photo by Liz Bell/EducationNC. Photo illustration by Cheyenne McNeill/EducationNC

Reckoning with our present

Though investments in early care and education have the highest return of any point of life — and serve as a two-generational support — they compose just over 1 percent of North Carolina’s state budget.

That includes three main early childhood programs: child care subsidy, Smart Start, and NC Pre-K. Each of these programs struggles with limited reach relative to the needs of children and families.

Early care and education is particularly inaccessible and unaffordable for families with children in the first three years of life. That’s also the period most critical for brain development, research says.

The pandemic has provided a temporary lifeline to the state’s early care and education network in the form of stabilization grants.

Those funds will run out at the end of the year. This cliff has experts and on-the-ground providers worried that the early childhood landscape will come out of the pandemic even more broken than before.

‘Several market failures’

A lack of public support leaves the early care and education landscape mostly dependent on parents’ pocketbooks.

But the prices are burdensome for most and impossible for many. The average price for infant care in the state is \$9,480 per year — 29% higher than in-state college tuition, the Economic Policy Institute estimates. Average care for a 4-year-old costs \$8,113 per year.

This price almost always comes when families can least afford it. A 2021 report by the U.S. Treasury described this as one of “several market failures” that “help explain why the current system is unworkable.”

“Even though most families’ incomes and savings increase as their children age, they are unlikely to be able to borrow against their future savings to cover the costs of care for young children,” the report says. “This is an example of what economists describe as liquidity constraints, a classic market failure, which argues in favor of government support.”

Even with prices so high, the true cost of high-quality early care and education is higher.

For an infant, the true cost of meeting base licensing standards in North Carolina is \$13,900 per year, the Center for American Progress estimates. If you add quality factors, such as decreasing the child-to-teacher ratio and paying teachers the same as kindergarten teachers, that cost goes to about \$25,000 a year.

The largest existing public support to help working families afford child care is the child care subsidy program, which is mostly funded with federal dollars. Parents qualify through financial and situational criteria to have a portion of the price covered, if there are enough funds available.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were thousands of children on local waitlists for subsidy assistance. Waitlists are lower than ever, said Henrietta Zalkind, executive director of Down East Partnership for Children, a Smart Start site that covers Nash and Edgecombe counties.

That’s not because of a lack of demand, but a flaw in how the program is structured, Zalkind said.

“The paradigm for subsidizing child care is outdated,” she said. “It’s really the perfect storm that is almost collapsing the system right now. The economy has gotten to the point where the people who need help paying for child care are making more than what the income

standards allow. The way to work on that is deeper, more permanent child care tax credits.”

Not only does the program have limited reach, but the funds do not cover the full cost of care and are distributed unevenly across the state. The rates the program provides to facilities, set by the state legislature, are based more on what parents in each county can afford than what it costs to provide high-quality care, experts say.

‘Teachers can’t afford to keep teaching’

The market is kept afloat by expensive rates and low teacher wages.

“I think the biggest challenge in front of us with access to child care right now is the workforce issue that we’re having,” said Rep. Ashton Clemmons, D-Guilford, on an NCECF webinar last week. “And that is very closely tied to an unsustainable funding model that is really asking the workers of the system to subsidize the model by not being able to provide for their own families in choosing to be an early child care worker.”

In 2019, North Carolina child care teachers were seven times more likely to live in poverty than K-12 public school teachers.

In May 2021, the median hourly wage for child care teachers was \$11.23 an hour, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Low pay, a lack of benefits, and a taxing environment — plus a pandemic — have left the early childhood teacher workforce in crisis mode.

“The demand is definitely there, but finding the staff to help meet that demand has been an ongoing problem,” said Denise Worley, director of the Regional Center for the Advancement of Children, a child care center on the campus of Haywood Community College.

In the last five years, the number of early childhood programs has dropped by 10% and the number of staff has dropped by 3%. There’s capacity for about 18% of all infants and toddlers, and 27% of infants and toddlers with working parents.

“This current system does not work for a single person involved,” said Elaine Zuckerman, policy and communications director at the NC Early Education Coalition. “Children are missing out on opportunities. Parents can’t afford it, or they can’t find it. Teachers can’t afford to keep teaching. Providers are telling us they’re going to have to close if things don’t change.”

Stabilization without a permanent fix

Though providers are struggling to find teachers now, they’re worried about what’s around the corner as pandemic relief funds run out at the end of the year.

The pandemic was a double-edged sword for the early childhood teacher workforce.

On one side, early childhood educators were recognized as “essential” next to health care workers and first responders.

The pandemic even prompted some unprecedented public funding. In North Carolina, the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) distributed federal relief funds in the form of stabilization grants, encouraging providers to spend the money on increasing teacher pay.

Programs did just that. More than 90% of providers had used the funds to increase compensation in April 2022. It was necessary in order to keep teachers in place, fill empty classrooms, and compete with other employers.

“Child care providers are competing against Target, Hobby Lobby, Starbucks, the grocery store,” said Ariel Ford, DCDEE director. “Twelve dollars an hour is not competitive anymore.”

The state has distributed more than \$740 million to over 4,300 child care centers and family child care homes. In September, DCDEE announced they would be using another \$150 million in federal dollars for programs to support teacher compensation through December 2023.

On the other side, child care programs were expected to remain open as schools and everything else closed, often without access to health insurance.

And all of the stabilization funding will run out in December 2023. Advocates are scrambling to put stopgap measures in place this legislative session to avoid the upcoming cliff.

Ford said she has three main concerns without investments to maintain the current landscape: the quality of environments suffering, teachers leaving, and providers having to raise rates, pricing out more families.

“And so what we’ll see is that child care is unattainable for most working families across North Carolina,” Ford said.

Without urgent action, the state will likely step backward, Ford said. When EdNC asked her to imagine a future where the state does not invest in high-quality early care and education, she paused for a moment, then pointed to the past.

“There was a time in North Carolina where people in my role had stacks of child fatality cases on their desks,” Ford said.

These supports should be permanent, Zalkind said.

“Some of the things we piloted and did with rescue money need to become sort of permanent pieces of the system ... if we want people to say, ‘Yeah it’s worth it to me to go to work,’” she said.

‘We’re stepping backwards’

The current teacher workforce is unstable. So is the incoming pipeline.

EdNC visited all 58 community colleges in the fall of 2022 and asked about early education teacher preparation.

Enrollment in early education preparation programs declined by 22% from 2008 to 2017, the NC Early Education Coalition reported.

From 2017 to 2021, enrollment in early childhood education declined 16%, according to the community college system dashboard.

When asking about 2022 enrollment on our visits, some reported continued declines, while others reported slight upticks as the pandemic wanes.

“We’re trying to climb back,” said Eliza Dean, Haywood Community College early childhood program manager. Dean said the college’s preparation program was “huge” when she arrived 10 years ago. Enrollment is now half what it was four years ago.

During an interview with EdNC, Dean then turned to an early childhood instructor in her program, Lynn Kincaid. “Help me out, why are we so low?” she asked Kincaid.

“You’re going to invest in your education so that you can have a career where you can sustain your household,” Kincaid said. That’s often not possible for early childhood teachers.

In interviews with faculty, community college presidents, and students, the issue of low compensation for valuable work arose again and again.

“Until those people become professionals, and are recognized and paid as professionals, we’re never gonna solve this problem,” said Dale McInnis, president of Richmond Community College. “...You’re not going into this to get rich, but you can’t starve to death.”

Many said they felt a moral obligation to actually guide students away from careers in early care and education.

Even some early childhood faculty, many of whom have dedicated their entire careers to the field, mentioned encouraging students to continue education to get out of classrooms with the youngest children (and the lowest pay).

And some presidents, with post-graduate economic mobility in mind, reported struggling with the decision of whether to continue offering early childhood education programs.

The NC Early Education Credential, which is the minimum requirement to work in child care programs, requires just one course, EDU 119. Legislation was passed last year to add an option to test out of that course, raising concerns that the state was stepping backward in terms of teacher qualifications.

“We’ve been working so hard to elevate this field and elevate the perception of the folks who work in this field,” said Katie Mintz, director of the early childhood program at Brunswick Community College. “I just think we’re at a turning point where we’re going backwards. We’re stepping backwards. At the end of the day, it’s going to hurt children.”

Faculty across the state are trying various strategies to increase enrollment, make classes as easy to access as possible, and provide a solid foundation for those working with the youngest children. Some are planning early childhood apprenticeship programs. Some are working to offer trauma-sensitive and culturally relevant programs. And many are advocating for public investment and encouraging their students to become advocates too.

“Where I’m concerned is, right now, because they need people in the classrooms so desperately, that they’re lowering the bar instead of raising it,” Kincaid said.

Shelly Anthony, early childhood education instructor at Cape Fear Community College, described an interaction with a student during class after teaching about the Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, a well-known longitudinal study that has shown the lifelong impacts of high-quality early childhood education.

“And one of our students goes, ‘This study was done in the 1960s,’ and they go, ‘Then why are we still having issues with this today?’” Anthony said she responded: “That’s a very good question.”

“We want quality preschool,” added Marie Bergh-Cook, director of Cape Fear’s early childhood program. “We want preschool teachers who are paid what high school and college teachers are paid, who have to have a bachelor’s degree, who can’t walk in there with one four-credit class. That’s what I want for my grandchildren.”



Mary Ellen Naylor, dean of health and human services at Cape Fear Community College, oversees the on-site child care center. Photo by Liz Bell/EducationNC. Photo illustration by Cheyenne McNeill/EducationNC

‘It’s time to take the next leap’

North Carolina once was a leader in early care and education policies, establishing programs that others looked to replicate.

In 1993, Gov. Jim Hunt launched Smart Start, a network of 75 local nonprofits that supports early childhood development through local programs and partnerships. The state was considered a pioneer in this state-local model.

In 2000, the state was one of the first to establish a rating system for its child care programs — known as QRIS (Quality Rating Improvement System) — to give parents more information and incentivize higher quality care. Now every state in the country has one.

Then in 2001, the state established More at Four, now known as NC Pre-K, a high-quality preschool program that targets at-risk 4-year-olds.

“We did so much infrastructure-building in the very late ’90s, and through the early 2000s,” Ford said, adding that the community college system also ramped up its early childhood offerings then.

But in recent years, other states have taken the lead on innovations.

In Washington state, the legislature invested \$1.1 billion in 2021 through the Fair Start for Kids Act to help families access and afford child care and support providers.

That same year, Michigan launched “MI Tri-Share,” a program designed to distribute the costs of early care and education among employers, employees, and the state.

In November 2022, 70% of voters in New Mexico approved an amendment to its constitution that guarantees a right to early childhood education. That right will be funded by money from the state’s permanent land grant.

The infrastructure North Carolina built at the turn of the 21st century provides the foundation on which counties like Ashe can build local initiatives.

“We stand on the shoulders of giants in this state,” Ford said. “... And now it’s time to take the next leap, both program- and policy-wise.”

This legislative session, Ashe County leaders have crafted a proposal for a \$5.5 million five-year pilot that would open high-quality child care classrooms for 42 children in the school district’s pre-K facility. Tuition would be subsidized on a sliding scale. Teachers would be paid on the district’s K-12 salary schedule. The center also would provide paid internships for college students studying to become early childhood teachers.

They’re hoping to study children’s outcomes over that period to create a proof point for a replicable model.

“How can we make a compelling enough argument that this is important, that this is really going to make a difference — in Ashe County, and in rural counties across the state of North Carolina for that matter?” said Eisa Cox, Ashe County Schools superintendent.

While local initiatives like Ashe’s may pave a path forward, there are still more than 300 babies being born each day. Proper investment in their immediate need for care and education would improve their health, reduce the likelihood of their incarceration, and improve their lifelong educational and economic outcomes.

One of those babies belongs to a former employee of Cassandra Brooks, owner and operator of Little Believer’s Academy. On a recent panel hosted by NCECF, Brooks described the challenges this working parent has faced since the start of the pandemic.

“I had a teacher who worked for me in the past, during COVID, and she had to leave and go provide school-aged care for her older child because they were doing virtual schooling,” Brooks said.

That teacher would like to return to working in child care, Brooks said, but she can’t find child care for her own baby.

“She has a great skill set, she has a degree, and she can’t work anywhere right now because she doesn’t have child care,” Brooks said. “And that keeps her in a cycle. She has to continue to rely on public assistance because she’s not able to get a job to provide for her family.”

This teacher has experienced the limits of early care and education as a provider, a worker, and a parent. This cycle that prevents parents from working in child care also prevents more parents from accessing child care. And that comes with a cost.

“Child care is a public good whether people see it or not,” Brooks said.

Behind the Story

The EdNC team visited all 58 community colleges this fall, asking about early care and education. That research informed this story.

Why study community colleges to learn about early care and education? Three reasons:

1. The state needs more early childhood teachers — the majority of whom are prepared at community colleges.
2. Child care access affects parents’ decisions and capacities to go to school and earn credentials and degrees.
3. We knew community colleges saw their roles as the economic engines of their local communities, responding to industry needs and preparing the workforce of tomorrow. Without adequate child care, a large portion of the workforce can’t participate.

In conversations throughout the state, a common theme arose: Community colleges are doing a lot to strengthen the state’s early childhood landscape — but they can’t solve systemic issues on their own.

In their efforts to attract students to the field and meet community and workforce needs, colleges are running into factors outside their control:

- Low pay for early childhood educators.
- Inadequate and unaffordable options for student-parents.
- Logistical burdens to providing child care.
- A lack of vision for the way forward.

These factors are playing out at community colleges in multiple ways. Enrollment in early childhood education programs is down overall. At the same time, presidents and faculty expressed hesitancy to do much to reverse that trend, citing the post-graduate reality for teachers of poverty wages. Why guide students into a field in which they won't be able to support themselves or their families?

Students struggle with child care needs while attending community college. Colleges told us about limited funds to help with the cost of care, students unable to find that care even with the support, and a lack of solid information on how often inadequate child care leads to students dropping out.

A handful of colleges have on-site child care centers that serve the children of community members, faculty, and sometimes students. Some of those centers are also lab schools for prospective teachers to gain hands-on experience and observe best practices in real time.

Our biggest takeaway is that community colleges are already playing an essential role in the early care and education landscape in North Carolina. And they could play an even bigger one if the systemic factors are addressed.

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