

Community Engagement and Development Committee

Thursday, October 2, 2025 ▪ 8:30 – 10:30 am. ▪ Via Teams

The Community Engagement and Development Committee (CED) leads the Board's participation in community engagement and fund development. The CED Committee recommends policies for community engagement and fund development and provides opportunities for Board involvement in these activities. The committee will recommend plans and procedures, advise and support staff in their efforts to strengthen the early childhood system through stewardship of local resources, community engagement, strategic communication, volunteer recruitment and opportunities, outreach and education, plans, procedures, and community relations.

- 1. Determination of Quorum (5 Members) & Call to Order***
 - a. Welcome/Chair Comments
 - b. Icebreaker Activity - **May**
- 2. Review and Approval of Minutes* 05/02/2025 & 08/07/2025**
- 3. Board and Committee Engagement**
 - a. Events – **Daniele & May**
 - i. Kindness Awards 2025 Recap – **Daniele & Mary**
 1. Closeout Highlights
 2. Highlight Story – **Elizabeth**
 - ii. Grilled Cheese Festival – define committee and board engagement
 - iii. Giving Tuesday – 12/02/2025
 - iv. Little Land – define committee and board engagement
- 4. Philanthropy mapping article – Mary & May**
- 5. Off-Month Workgroup - May**
- 6. General Reports (see attached)**
 - a. President's Report[△]
 - b. Community Engagement Team Updates[△]
 - c. Grant Report[△]
- 7. Other business**
- 8. Adjournment***

Meeting Schedule: 1/8/2026, 3/5/2026, 5/7/2026

* Needs Action [△] Information Only / Possible Conflict of Interest (Recusals)



Partnership for Children of Cumberland County, Inc.
Community Engagement and Development Committee Meeting Minutes
May 29, 2025 (8:36 am to 9:27 am)



MEMBERS PRESENT: Patricia Fecher (Chair), Amanda Klinck, Maybelyn Rodriguez Laureano, Paige Ross, Elizabeth Stiff, Dorothy Strahley MEMBERS ABSENT: Erica Little, Bersuada Saunders-Clarke, Jenny Teague, April Venegas, Pamela Federline, Daniele Malvesti NON-VOTING ATTENDEES: Sharon Moyer, Mary Sonnenberg, Elizabeth Simpler			
AGENDA ITEM	DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATION:	ACTION	FOLLOW-UP
1. Determination of Quorum & Call to Order a) Welcome/Chair Comments	Dr. Patricia Fecher called the meeting to order at 8:36 am. A quorum was established. Welcome by Dr. Fecher	Called to Order	None
2. Review and Approval of Minutes*	Patricia Fecher called for review and approval of the March 6, 2025, minutes. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The committee reviewed and approved the minutes from the previous meeting. - Dorothy motioned to approve the minutes, and May seconded the motion. - The motion passed unanimously 	Minutes Approved	None
3. Event Updates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Kindness Awards nominations starting next month. - Grilled Cheese Festival, ticket sales will start on July 15, and 1700 people will already be interested. - Little Land Down on the Farm and Little Land: Big Play for Families will be during the Cumberland County Fair 	None	None
4. Board and Committee Learning Tracks a) Update on how we move forward in training our board and other committee members	Review of the attached document, "Board Community Engagement Strategy Meeting Recap." <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Update on how to move forward in the training board and with other committee members. - Engagement strategies include elevator pitches and authentic communication. - Plan a session with Mary and the board development committee to align efforts. 	None	Schedule a planning meeting with Board Development
5. Moving into FY25/26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Short brief from incoming chair, Maybelyn Rodríguez Laureano, "May". - Review of FY25/26 meeting dates. 	None	None
6. General Reports a. President's Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mary Sonnenberg provided an update on the organization's budget and funding challenges, noting potential cuts and shifts in funding sources. - She emphasized the importance of advocacy and community awareness to secure continued support. - Updates were shared on the construction project funded by city CDBG money and a construction loan, with a goal to complete it by December. 	None	None



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<p>b. Community Engagement Team Updates</p> <p>c. Grant Report</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workforce development efforts were discussed, including a cohort funded by city ARPA money, with requirements like background checks and TB tests. - The team emphasized the importance of advocacy and community engagement, especially in light of potential funding cuts. - They are developing a toolkit to support advocacy efforts, enabling board members, committee members, and parents to effectively contact lawmakers. - The team reiterated the need for board members to act as ambassadors for the organization’s mission, helping to build public support and visibility. <p>Sharon presented the grant report, noting that we did not get the Camber grant and the county manager did not recommend us for funding in the County Budget.</p>		
<p>7. Other Business</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discussion on the need for a culture shift in board members' roles and the impact of potential budget cuts on programs. - Advocacy for funding and the importance of community engagement. 	<p>None</p>	<p>Asked committee members to reach out to County Commissioners to advocate for funding for Family Connects</p>
<p>8. Adjournment</p>	<p>Patricia Fecher motioned to adjourn. The motion passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 9:27 am.</p>	<p>Adjourned</p>	<p>N/A</p>

Submittal: The minutes of the above-stated meeting have been submitted for approval. _____
Secretary of Meeting Date

Approval: Based on Committee consensus, the minutes of the above-stated meeting are hereby approved as presented and/or corrected. _____
Committee Chair Date



Partnership for Children of Cumberland County, Inc.
Community Engagement and Development Committee Meeting Minutes
August 7, 2025 (8:36 am to 9:22 am)



MEMBERS PRESENT: Maybelyn Rodriguez Laureano (Chair), Amanda Klinck, Erica Little, Paige Ross MEMBERS ABSENT: Bersuada Saunders-Clarke, Jenny Teague, April Venegas, Elizabeth Stiff, Dorothy Strahley NON-VOTING ATTENDEES: Sharon Moyer, Mary Sonnenberg, Elizabeth Simpler, Pamela Federline, Daniele Malvesti, Steven Gipson			
AGENDA ITEM	DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATION:	ACTION	FOLLOW-UP
1. Determination of Quorum & Call to Order a) Welcome/Chair Comments	<p>Chair Maybelyn Rodriguez Laureano called the meeting to order at 8:36 AM. Quorum was not present at the time of the call to order, so no formal actions were taken.</p> <p>Chair May expressed enthusiasm for the committee’s work and upcoming initiatives. She introduced herself as the new CED Chair and shared her commitment to advancing the committee’s mission.</p>	Called to Order	None
2. Review and Approval of Minutes from May 29, 2025*	As quorum was not met, minutes will be deferred to the next official meeting on October 2, 2025.	Minutes Deferred	None
3. Announcement a) Committee Support for staff	<p>Sharon Moyer announced her departure from the Partnership effective August 26, 2025, to assume a new role as Director of Regional Development, Philanthropy, and Partnerships with The Assembly NC. She will continue to support the committee as a volunteer during the transition.</p> <p>Discussion focused on how committee members can support staff during Sharon’s transition. Daniele Malvesti will assume interim responsibilities and will report to Mary Sonnenberg. A job posting for Sharon’s replacement is expected soon.</p>	None	<p>Daniele is to send an email to the committee on how she needs their support.</p> <p>Also, a consolidated list of past sponsors for events.</p>
4. Board and Committee Engagement a) Review of board activity orientation b) Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recap of the recent board orientation and “exploring your why” exercise led by Patricia. - Flip chart notes from the session will be consolidated and used in December’s strategic planning. - The Grilled Cheese Festival is scheduled for November. - Three food trucks are confirmed; the goal is seven. Committee members are encouraged to help recruit vendors. - The event page (ccpfc.org/cheesy) includes applications for food trucks, vendors, and sponsors. - Promotion and outreach are key priorities. The Facebook event has 3,800 interested participants. 	None	



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<p>c) Cross Committee Engagement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Volunteers and board presence are encouraged for both events. - A cross-committee meeting with Board Development is being scheduled to align efforts. 		<p>May to keep CED aware of upcoming dates.</p>
<p>5. Intro to philanthropy mapping</p> <p>6. Off-Month Workgroups</p>	<p>Chair Maybelyn proposed forming a working group to explore sustainable funding strategies beyond federal sources.</p> <p>The group will ideate on sponsorships, donor engagement, and long-term philanthropic planning. Volunteers from the committee are invited to join.</p> <p>Emphasis was placed on stakeholder-led fundraising and reducing repetitive asks through consolidated annual appeals.</p>	<p>None</p>	<p>May to keep CED aware of upcoming dates.</p>
<p>7. General Reports</p> <p>a. President's Report</p> <p>b. Community Engagement Team Updates</p> <p>c. Grant Report</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mary Sonnenberg shared updates on funding challenges, including delays in regional contracts and legislative uncertainties. - Local funding from the City of Fayetteville and County Commissioners was secured for Family Connects and building renovations. - Advocacy efforts are ongoing, especially around eligibility guidance from DHHS. - Sharon highlighted improvements in Google Ad Grant metrics due to new optimization tools. - Pamela Federline's grant report showed performance for FY24/25 was strong: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o 91% overall performance o 93% cash funding success o 77% Google Ad Grant performance 	<p>None</p>	



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8. Other Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Committee members were encouraged to personally thank local officials for their support. - Sharon shared a draft statistic showing that approximately 72% of children birth to five in Cumberland County are impacted by Smart Start programs. This figure is expected to rise once NC Pre-K data is added. 	None	Asked committee members to reach out to County Commissioners to thank them for funding for Family Connects
9. Adjournment	The meeting adjourned at 9:22 AM	Adjourned	N/A

Submittal: The minutes of the above-stated meeting have been submitted for approval. _____
Secretary of Meeting Date

Approval: Based on Committee consensus, the minutes of the above-stated meeting are hereby approved as presented and/or corrected. _____
Committee Chair Date

President's Report
Executive Committee (Acting on Behalf of Board)
Charles Morris Room
Thursday, September 25, 2025

A. NCPC/DCDEE Updates / Legislative Updates

1. NCPC

- This month we are featuring the recipients of the 2025 Kindness Awards.
- NCPC Monitoring will occur November 12-13.
- NCPC's [Public Policy Update](#) with information from the Virtual Early Childhood Caucus is attached.

2. DCDEE

- **Region 5** contracting: CORE is executed. Subcontracts are in development. Budgets have decreased for the special projects (HSB and B3QI), and we are in the process of finalizing budgets for HSB and B3QI. The Summary of Notice for the RFPs for the special projects have been released. The full RFPs will be in the weekly newsletter sent out by DCDEE.
- **NC Pre-K contract has been executed.** Advance has been received. The majority of providers are in contract. August payments have been processed for those in contract. The process of evaluating requests for extension for Long Term Substitutes has not been released.

3. State Level

- To date, only a series of "mini-budgets" have been enacted to keep state operations afloat, leaving early childhood programs reliant on temporary or reduced funding.
- For details of the session thus far and federal updates, refer to the NC Center for Nonprofits' [September 19th Public Policy update](#).

4. Federal Level

- Child Care of America report on Funding – <https://info.childcareaware.org/hubfs/An-Uneven-Start--2025-State-Funding-for-Child-Care-Early-Learning.pdf>.
- NC continues to benefit from the Preschool Development Grant Birth-5 (PDG B-5), which supports system-building, coordination, and quality improvements across early childhood programs. Family Child Care initiatives and the Child Care Academies have emerged as activities funded by PDG B-5.

5. Local Level

- The quarterly collaborative meeting between DSS, the Health Department, and PFC was held on August 22nd. DSS now has a waiting list for Subsidy. The Health Department has a number of vaccination clinics occurring, particularly to address vaccination requirements for children entering school. PFC reported on the Workforce Development Activity and Family Connects.
- We follow the work of the Joint City and County Liaison Committee. Brenda Jackson, DSS Director and PFC Board Member, is coordinating a PFC and Tri-Share presentation about child care access and affordability.

B. Grant Opportunities/Updates/RFPs

- Cumberland County contract for the Family Connects program has been executed. Reimbursements will be on a quarterly basis.
- City of Fayetteville CDBG Grant for Building Renovations: The estimated date for construction to start is still November and is contingent on materials arriving.

- The City of Fayetteville ARPA: The initial Workforce Development Project served 4 participants. Those who have been part of the initial cohort are excited about the training and opportunity provided by this project. We will work with NC Works to recruit additional students to reach our 15 participants for this project.
- Grant requests have been submitted to the Cannon Foundation and Golden *LEAF* for capital funding for Phase III of the Building project.

C. Staff Updates

- **NC Pre-K Caseworker, Early Literacy and Play Coordinator, Communications & Digital Media Specialist – now recruiting.** If you are interested in or would like to refer a candidate for these full-time positions, please contact Anthony Ramos (aramos@ccpfc.org) for more information.
- **Welcome to Ever Aguero Aranda, Program Specialist for NC Pre-K. Ever started Monday, September 22.** Ever recently completed his BA in Management Information Systems at UNC Charlotte. As an administrative professional, Ever brings international experience in data management, logistics, and office administration. We are excited to see Ever join the Partnership and grow with us. We know that he'll have great contributions to the team.
- **Staff Development Fundraiser: Hot Dog / Chili Plate Sale, October 30.** Help PFC staff raise funds for team development opportunities. Team building is a critical aspect of our ability to collaborate and build lasting partnerships. It begins in-house with the respect, trust and rapport that we have for one another. Stop by PFC on October 30 for grilled hot dogs or a bowl of chili. Plates will come with a bag of chips, dessert and drink. Plates will be \$10.

D. Events/Recognitions

- **NC Pre-K Let's Get Enrolled – Applications for the 2025-2026 school year are still being accepted.** Please share the URL: [LetsGetEnrolled.com](https://letsgetenrolled.com). We still have spaces available in our private child care NC Pre-K sites. Contact Ar-Nita Davis (adavis@ccpfc.org) if you have questions.
- **Kindness Awards Recipients** – Awards were presented individually by Board Members and Mary Sonnenberg. In addition, recipients were recognized at the Executive Committee meeting on September 25.

Friends of the CC Public Library, Inc: Advocates & Partners to the Public Library for Nearly 50 years

Andrea Garner: Mom & Mentor to Many

Ashley Glenn: Special Security Patrol; One-on-One Personal Care Assistant

Sweet Carolina Delights (Bobbie and Alana Johnson): Promoters of Literacy & All Things Sweet

Annie P. Kelly: Community & Child Advocate

Sharon Moyer: Community Advocate & Champion for Children

Ryu's Taekwondo NC (Master Choung Hwan Ryu): Youth Development

Brittney Turner: Tomorrow's Inspiration Academy; Think Positive, Live Life Happy

- **PFC United Way Campaign/Food and School Supply Drive** – Our campaign kicked off on September 24. We are proud supporters of United Way. Please donate to the Food and School Supply drive.
- **Grilled Cheese Festival**—Save the date for November 15, 2025, at Dirtbag Ales. We are excited about this new event. Ticket, vendor, and sponsorship information is available at ccpfc.org/cheesy. Table Tops are \$100. Event Sponsorships are \$200. More information to come on Grilled Cheese tickets to go along with Table Tops and Event Sponsorship. Look out for a Family Pack contest. Share our event on social media AND purchase tickets!
- **Barnes and Noble Book Drive** – The dates for this year's book drive are November 1 – December 15. We are thrilled to be recipients of the local store's book drive.
- **Giving Tuesday: We are proud to be part of the Cumberland Community Foundation's Giving Tuesday event again this year. Giving Tuesday donations are amplified through generous donors to the Cumberland Community Foundation. Giving Tuesday is December 2, 2025. More details will be coming on the process and time period for donations.**
- **Little Land 2026** – Save the date for March 14, 2026. More details to come.

From: Marta Hester <mhester@smartstart.org>

Subject: Smart Start Network Public Policy Update for Week of September 15 - 19, 2025

Good morning,

I am pleased many members of the Smart Start Network were able to join the Early Childhood Caucus Virtual Town Hall last Friday. I am attaching an overview of the responses from the participating state legislators and a list of issues and questions Smart Start Local Partnerships can use to create town halls within your own communities across the state. We are extremely appreciative to state legislators who took time out of their schedules to join us: Representatives David Willis, Brandon Lofton, Donnie Loftis, Julie von Haefen, Cynthia Ball and Diane Wheatley, and Senator Jay Chaudhuri. Town Halls offer a great opportunity to hear from elected officials while also educating participants about the Smart Start Network. More opportunities will be available to hear from elected officials at different levels of government in the near future.

The NC General Assembly is scheduled to convene on Monday, September 22, 2025, at 12:00 noon for a few days and reconvene on October 21, 2025. While I understand a final budget is still pending and may not be presented by next week, there are conversations about public safety legislation being introduced. There's a new call to action to provide more funding for law enforcement and mental health resources, to increase the expansion of involuntary commitment and early intervention mental health strategies and to stipulate stricter rules to prevent crime resulting from the recent fatal stabbing on the Charlotte commuter train. Of course, there's also several bills pending veto overrides on the House calendar. Legislative Alerts will be issued to the Smart Start Local Partnerships as soon as further action is taken.

In case you haven't already heard, there's some exciting news about New Mexico offering no-cost universal child care regardless of income beginning November 1, 2025. For more information, see the links below.

- [New Mexico is first state in nation to offer universal child care - Office of the Governor - Michelle Lujan Grisham](#)
- [Universal Child Care | Early Childhood Education & Care Department](#)

STATE UPDATES

QRIS Training

The Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) will be hosting community meetings to provide an update on the modernization of North Carolina's Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS). Meetings will be held at the following four locations across the state from 6:30pm – 7:30pm.

- 9/23/25 – Charlotte – Leaf Spring School at Matthews – 3420 Pleasant Plains Road Stallings, NC 28104
- 9/25/25 – Morganton - Foothills Higher Education Center, 2128 S Sterling Street, Morganton, NC, 28655
- 9/29/25 – Greenville - Pitt County Agriculture Center – Auditorium – 403 Government Circle, Greenville, NC 27834
- 10/1/25 – Raleigh – Wake County Smart Start – 4901 Waters Edge Drive #101, Raleigh NC 27606

Please share this information with families, child care educators and other early care and education stakeholders.

NC Division of Child Development Update on the federal Administration on Children and Families (ACF)

At the state ECE advocates meeting this week, Candace Witherspoon, Director, NC DCDEE, shared that DCDEE would be having a meeting with their federal partners from ACF yesterday, Thursday, September 17, 2025. Witherspoon further advised ACF's mission, vision, values, priorities, and guiding principles have been updated; please see the new [ACF Vision, Mission, Values, Priorities, & Guiding Principles | The Administration for Children and Families](#). We will continue to keep you posted and look forward to hearing more soon from DCDEE.

State ECE Advocates Shared Agenda Update on Child Care Subsidy

The advocates landed on a public facing option of a floor for all ages, all providers using the "state rate" from the 2021 Market Rate Study as the floor (minimum) with the rates from the 2023 Market Rate Study (MRS) as the maximum, and a hold harmless policy ensuring that providers get the highest rate available between the floor and 2023 MRS with no one seeing a decreased rate. The cost estimate is \$145 million.

FEDERAL UPDATES

Federal Appropriations (Budget) Process

The end of the federal fiscal year is September 30, 2025. The U.S. Congress must approve a new government funding package for FY 2026 or pass a continuing resolution (CR) to keep the government operating at current funding levels for a specified period in order to avoid a government shutdown. While some of the twelve appropriation bills have been approved in the House and Senate in the Appropriations Committee, none have been considered in the full House and Senate for floor votes. A continuing resolution is imminent.

Update on New Interpretation of "Federal Public Benefit" under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and Head Start

Several months ago, the Trump Administration's issued a new interpretation of "federal public benefit" under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) restricting the eligibility of non-U.S. national (non-alien) for many federal benefit programs. On September 10, 2025, a preliminary injunction was granted advising the Trump Administration's new interpretation **may not be enforced or implemented** in the plaintiff states while the case works its way through the judicial system. U.S. District Judge Ricardo Martinez in Seattle at the request of Head Start associations in several states issued a nationwide injunction barring the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) from enforcing the new immigration-related restrictions anywhere in the United States.

The preliminary injunction is applicable **in plaintiff states** (including New York, Washington, Rhode Island, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Vermont and Wisconsin), absent further order of the court. No further information on the Trump Administration's plan for enforcement and/or implementation in

states not covered by the court's order is currently available as it is not explicitly cited.

The court's order specifically halted enforcement of the notices in the U.S. Departments of Justice, Health and Human Services, Education, and Labor. Additionally, the court specifically identified the following programs (among others) as not covered by PRWORA based on the court's "best reading" of the statute: *Head Start, The Health Center Program, Block Grants to States*.

- [new-york-et-al-v-united-states-department-of-justice-et-al-memo-and-order-2025.pdf](#)
- [Court Rulings Maintain Access to Critical Programs for Immigrant Families | CLASP](#)
- [PRWORA's Restrictions on Noncitizen Eligibility for Federal Public Benefits: Legal Issues | Congress.gov | Library of Congress](#)
- [Judge blocks Trump policy ending Head Start for immigrants | AP News](#)
- [Trump policy barring migrants from Head Start blocked nationwide](#)

Make Our Children Healthy Again: US Department of Health and Human Services

The Trump Administration released its "Make Our Children Healthy Again" [strategy report](#), on September 9, 2025. The report was created to address childhood chronic diseases by highlighting findings from the Make America Healthy Again Commission related to poor diet, exposure to environmental chemicals, lack of physical activity, stress and overmedicalization.

- [MAHA – The White House](#)

Child Care Modernization Act

On Wednesday, September 17, 2025, the Child Care Modernization Act was introduced to help with reauthorizing and enhancing the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). Senators Deb Fischer, (R-Nebraska), Kirsten Gillibrand, (D-New York), John Hickenlooper, (D-Colorado), and Susan Collins, (R-Maine), are sponsoring the Child Care Modernization Act. This legislation seeks to address the accessibility and affordability of child care for working families. The bill has already received support from Child Care Aware, First Five Years Fund, National Association of Counties, National Child Care Association, and others.

More specifically, the bill is designed to:

- **Strengthen child care services** by moving states to use cost estimation models for setting provider rates, which will adequately compensate child care providers.
- **Ensure parental choice** by allowing states to develop a mixed delivery system of child care and preschool for children up to age 5 and before-school, after-school, and summer care for school-age children.
- **Increase child care supply** by introducing a new grant program within the CCDBG framework to assist providers in creating and expanding the supply.
- **Improve state child care plans** by improving support for families and communities, reducing barriers to the program, and increasing access and affordability to serve more families.

- **Assist in-home and rural child care providers** by providing technical assistance, including strategies to support best business practices, and the development and use of shared services initiatives such as family child care home provider networks.
- **Reduce duplicative regulatory burdens on child care providers** by ensuring states review their State and local health and safety requirements to determine redundancies and oversights that may exist.
- [Bipartisan Senate group releases bill to help increase affordable child care](#)
- [Child Care Aware of America Supports Introduction of the Child Care Modernization Act](#)
- [Fischer, Colleagues Introduce Bipartisan Bill to Expand Working Families' Access to Child Care - Press - United States Senator Deb Fischer for Nebraska](#)

RESOURCES

October: Farm to School and Early Care and Education Month

North Carolina Crunch promotes healthy eating and supports farm to school, farm to early care and education (ECE), and other local food initiatives throughout the state. On October 22, 2025, at 12:00 noon, specifically, and throughout the month of October, North Carolinians are encouraged to crunch on some local produce to promote healthy eating and learn where food comes from. Find out more at [North Carolina Crunch - Growing Minds](#)

- [Mark Your Calendar for North Carolina Crunch - North Carolina Field and Family](#)

NC Council for Women's Report on Investing in Economic Opportunity for Women in NC

The report examines key childcare and labor market indicators by race and ethnicity to offer a full understanding of the economic and workforce disparities by gender and race that persist. The report also highlights areas for improvement and recommends ways to increase opportunities.

- [North Carolina Women Make Economic Gains, But Disparities Persist | NC DOA](#)

NC Budget and Tax Center Webinar on State Budget

- [Preparing to push for a people-first state budget](#)

Thank you for helping celebrate Smart Start Month. We cannot wait to hear how Smart Start Local Partnerships have used the month of September to collaborate with families, child care educators, early care and education advocates, elected officials, business leaders and local chambers. Looking forward to hearing your stories about all the celebrations and community engagement activities.

Finally, please mark your calendars for the upcoming **Smart Start Network Public Policy Meetings** scheduled for **Friday, September 26 and October 10, 2025 at 10:00am to 11:00am.**

Thank you,

Marta

Early Childhood Issues and Questions for 2025 Nonpartisan Candidate Forums, Town Halls and Candidate Surveys

Smart Start

Smart Start is a public-private partnership serving young children from birth to five and their families statewide. Smart Start also supports the adults in children’s lives, including teachers and providers in a variety of ways, including providing technical assistance and funding for early care and education programs.

Potential Question(s):

- How familiar are you with Smart Start?
- We’d love to know what you already know about Smart Start?
- Can you share a personal story or a specific experience you've had—whether as a parent, grandparent, or in your community—that made you realize the importance of early development and the challenges families face?

Early Childhood Workforce

Like many other industries, child care has faced difficulties in recruiting and retaining well-qualified staff. We understand there are workforce shortages in other sectors at the state and local level, in county Departments of Social Services, state psychiatric hospitals and even within correctional facilities. However, the early childhood workforce in North Carolina was struggling even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The early childhood education system cannot continue to be sustained as the industry struggles to recruit teachers with median wages of \$14 per hour.

Potential Question(s):

- What steps do you recommend the state take to attract and retain more early childhood educators?
- As you know, Smart Start has partnered with Early Years to fund the WAGE\$ program that provides stipends twice a year to early childhood educators who are continuing their education/training in child development. How might we get this tried and true compensation support and quality initiative over the finish line to full statewide funding with support from NCGA instead of relying only on the allocations to local partnerships that have many demands on their funds?

Tri-Share

NC’s state legislature created the Tri-Share Child Care Pilot Program within the 2023 Appropriations Act. Tri-Share creates a public-private partnership to share the cost of child care equally between employers, eligible employees, and the state. Tri-Share’s goals include making high-quality child care affordable and accessible for working families, helping employers retain and attract employees, and supporting the stabilization of child care businesses across the state.

Early Childhood Issues and Questions for 2025 Nonpartisan Candidate Forums, Town Halls and Candidate Surveys

Potential Questions:

- Have you heard of the Tri-Share model here in NC or its use in another state?
- How do you think a program such as Tri-share will help to benefit our state and economy?
- How do you recommend marketing or advertising the program to new businesses coming into the state?

Family Support

The COVID-19 pandemic and beyond have increased burdens and stresses on families in ways that can negatively impact children's development. Parents have struggled with disruptions to work, child care arrangements, and family life as a result of the pandemic and the aftermath.

Potential Question:

- What policies or programs do you support to help parents meet their families' needs and provide children with a nurturing home environment?

Maternal and Infant Health

North Carolina continues to have one of the highest overall rates of infant mortality in the U.S., and the state's mortality rates for Black and American Indian infants are more than twice as high as the rates for other races/ethnicities.

Potential Question(s):

- How can North Carolina address this challenge?
- Are you familiar with what other states with similar challenges are doing?

Home Visiting and Parenting Education

Voluntary home visiting and parenting education programs are research-backed strategies to promote child wellbeing, maternal, health and school readiness. The North Carolina Partnership for Children and the Smart Start Network supports universal newborn home visiting and parent education services for each family in every community in North Carolina. The term "universal" refers to the idea that the program or service is available to all individuals or households within a specific community.

Potential Question:

- How would you work to expand access to these programs for new families, ensuring that families have the support in the spots where they are most comfortable- some don't want it at home, just as families need different settings for their child care?

School Readiness and Early Grade Transitions

Early Childhood Education includes more than just child care. Studies reveal that over 90% of language development occurs in the first few years of life. Smart Start provides

Early Childhood Issues and Questions for 2025 Nonpartisan Candidate Forums, Town Halls and Candidate Surveys

programs that develop early literacy skills needed for success in school, work, and life, such as Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library. Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library provides a free, age-appropriate book each month to children ages birth to 5.

Potential Question:

- What are ways the K-12 and early childhood systems can work together to ensure that students succeed as they transition into the early grades?

Smart Start and Economic Security

Many families are struggling to make ends meet especially now due to impending cuts to programs such as Medicaid and SNAP. While providing more unrestricted, general funding to Smart Start is one way the state legislature can provide a vehicle allowing more support to children, families, and providers.

Potential Question:

- What **other** policies and **support** will you champion to build families' financial stability and economic mobility due to inflation, a difficult job market, etc., such as expanding the Child Tax Credit or other programs that put money directly in the hands of parents?

Smart Start Network Virtual Town Hall Friday, September 12, 2025

10:00am – 11:15am

Questions and Participant's Responses

While the questions were developed in advance, they were directly derived from comments and questions asked during ED Forums, Smart Start Network Call Meetings and Smart Start Network Public Policy Meetings. See the three questions asked below:

I. Smart Start

Smart Start is a public-private partnership serving young children from birth to five and their families statewide. Smart Start also supports adults in children's lives, including teachers and providers in a variety of ways, including providing technical assistance and funding for early care and education programs.

Question:

How familiar are you with Smart Start? We would love to know what you already know about Smart Start?

State Legislators:

- Representative David Willis
 - Representative Willis asked to pass on the question, advised he is a child care owner/provider, and he's familiar with Smart Start.
- Representative Brandon Lofton
 - Smart Start is a public/private partnership and helps to administer/implement Tri-Share.
- Senator Jay Chaudhuri
 - Smart Start is responsible for many great programs and emphasized the importance of home visiting.
- Representative Donnie Loftis
 - Smart Start is a great investment as it helps children with early literacy by preparing them to read on a third grade competency level by the time they reach 3rd grade.
 - Rep. Loftis also mentioned the NC Chamber Study (Untapped Potential in NC) and how important it is to invest in child care as it helps boost NC's economy.
- Representative Cynthia Ball
 - Rep. Ball thanked Smart Start for the money provided to Western NC to help children and families during Hurricane Helene. While Rep. Ball recognized the funding was appropriated by the NC General Assembly, she acknowledged Smart Start's role in community awareness, connections, etc., to help use the allocation to help meet community needs.

- Representative Diane Wheatley
 - Smart Start helps both children and families to stay engaged and learn, and the site here in Cumberland provides many great programs for families.

II. Early Childhood Workforce

Like many other industries, child care has faced difficulties in recruiting and retaining well-qualified staff. We understand there are workforce shortages in other sectors at the state and local level, in county Departments of Social Services, state psychiatric hospitals and even within correctional facilities. However, the early childhood workforce in North Carolina was struggling even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The early childhood education system cannot continue to sustain as the industry struggles to recruit teachers with median wages of \$14 per hour.

Question:

As you know, Smart Start has partnered with Early Years to fund the WAGE\$ program that provides stipends twice a year to early childhood educators who are continuing their education/training in child development. How might we get this tried-and-true compensation support and quality initiative over the finish line to full statewide funding with support from NCGA instead of relying only on the allocations to local partnerships that have many demands on their funds?

What **other** steps do you recommend the state take to attract and retain more early childhood educators?

State Legislators:

- Representative David Willis
 - Child Care staffing shortages must and can be addressed through programs such as Tri-Share to get businesses involved in the solution.
- Representative Brandon Lofton
 - Supports expanding WAGE\$ and sponsored a bill previously with Rep. von Haefen. He believes state legislators will eventually support the increase.
- Senator Jay Chaudhuri
 - Child care workers are severely underpaid. Therefore, wages for child care teachers must be addressed in addition to teacher's benefits.
 - Suggested NC should look at approaches in two states: Kentucky and Texas.

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- Representative Donnie Loftis
 - Emphasized investing in the first 1000 days of a child's life and helping those most socioeconomically challenged; look at a tiered system and long-term returns on investments in child care.
- Representative Julie von Haefen
 - The public needs to ensure they ask candidates about their position on early care and education and increase the number of advocates in the public policy arena.
- Representative Cynthia Ball
 - Many women are leaving the workforce to stay home with their children. We need to make the case to employers to help women to remain in the workforce by providing incentives such as on-site child care. Women in the workforce helps to boost the economy.
 - Child tax credits are also important.
- Representative Diane Wheatley
 - We need to bring private partners in and develop stronger partnerships with businesses, offer incentives to businesses, and look at having on-site child care.

III. Smart Start and Economic Security

Many families are struggling to make ends meet, especially now due to impending cuts to programs such as Medicaid and SNAP. While providing more unrestricted, general funding to Smart Start is one way the state legislature can provide a vehicle allowing more support to children, families, and providers.

Question:

What **other** policies and **support** will you champion to build families' financial stability and economic mobility due to inflation, a difficult job market, etc., such as expanding the Child Tax Credit or other programs that put money directly in the hands of parents?

State Legislators:

- Representative David Willis
 - In households with children with absent fathers, more programs are needed to educate young men to be positive role models and step up if they are fathers and take more accountability for their children and their roles as fathers.
- Representative Brandon Lofton
 - It is important for children to be in a high-quality center.

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Questions and Participant's Responses

- We must meet families where they are regardless of income.
- Suggested legislators can address family economic security/child care issues through lowering subsidies, offering child tax credits, and increasing housing/homeowner's access.
- Senator Jay Chaudhuri
 - Mentioned the importance of child care slots for working families.
- Representative Donnie Loftis
 - Using Opportunity Scholarships or a system like an Opportunity Scholarship tiered system to help address child care issues for families most in need. We also may want to look at tax credits even though it is not a favored approach in the legislature.
- Representative Julie von Haefen
 - People do not look at child care as a right. However, child care is education and not babysitting.
 - Child care is only one part of helping families to maintain or achieve economic stability. Help is required for other supports such as raising NC's minimum wage.
 - Rep. von Haefen mentioned more information to help families to achieve economic stability is available through her proposed legislation, [HB 786, Working Families Act.](#)
 - Note: The Working Families Act was also sponsored by Representatives Ball and Lofton.
- Representative Cynthia Ball
 - No response as Representative had to leave the town hall early.
- Representative Diane Wheatley
 - Child tax credit
 - Funding for training child care teachers
 - Using an opportunity scholarship type system
 - State legislators should also look at families who do not take their children to child care facilities, especially examining/addressing transportation issues young mothers may experience transporting their children to child care facilities in rural areas. Transportation-related issues present a hardship in some rural areas.

There were two questions from Smart Start Local Partnership Executive Directors

- I. What is the most impactful thing needing to be addressed now as it relates to early child and education and to address teacher turnover:
 - Representative Loftis:

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Questions and Participant's Responses

- The paradigm must be changed to show early childhood education is an early investment that pays off later by resulting in more successful outcomes in education, jobs, etc.
- II. State-funded NC Pre-K is underfunded and will collapse if more funding isn't appropriated? How should this issue be addressed?
 - Representative Willis:
 - Funding for NC Pre-K does need to be addressed through a voucher, opportunity grant or a different model to offer families some financial assistance. However, NC Pre-K should not be fully funded at 100% by the state.

CE Report:

Community Relations Specialist Update:

Social media: (Past 28 days)

- Followers: total followers: 7,777
- New Followers: 27
- New Page Likes: 33
- Views: 28.3K up 61.3%
- Reach: 7.3K
- Visits: 1K up 18.8%
- Content Interactions: 1.1K up 128.8%
- o Reactions: 389
- o Comments: 87
- o Shares: 57
- o Link Clicks: 28 down 43%
- Unfollows: 12
- Ranked 1 in Business Comparison, and we have 7.8K followers, which is more than 1.5K over our closest competition (NCPC) and 3.4K more followers than the #3 spot (Randolph Partnership)

Local Outreach/Engagement Opportunities:

- We have participated in and/or supported 9 outreach events in 1st QTR
- Engaged over 600 soldiers and their families at Fort Bragg
- Provided program and services information at outreach events or resource drops at Fort Bragg

Community Engagement Administrator Update:

- Improvements have been made to our Google Ad grant account, which has improved slightly. Algorithm shifts have impacted numbers. \$6,169
- The vacant position of Visual Communications Designer has been retooled into the Communications & Digital Media Specialist position. We have begun the interview process this week to hire for this position.
- Planning for upcoming events continues. We need support in selling event sponsorships, table top sponsorships, additional food trucks, and deepening reach of ticket sales for the Grilled Cheese Festival. ccpfc.org/cheesy, Barnes and Noble Book Drive, Giving Tuesday, Little Land 2026.

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

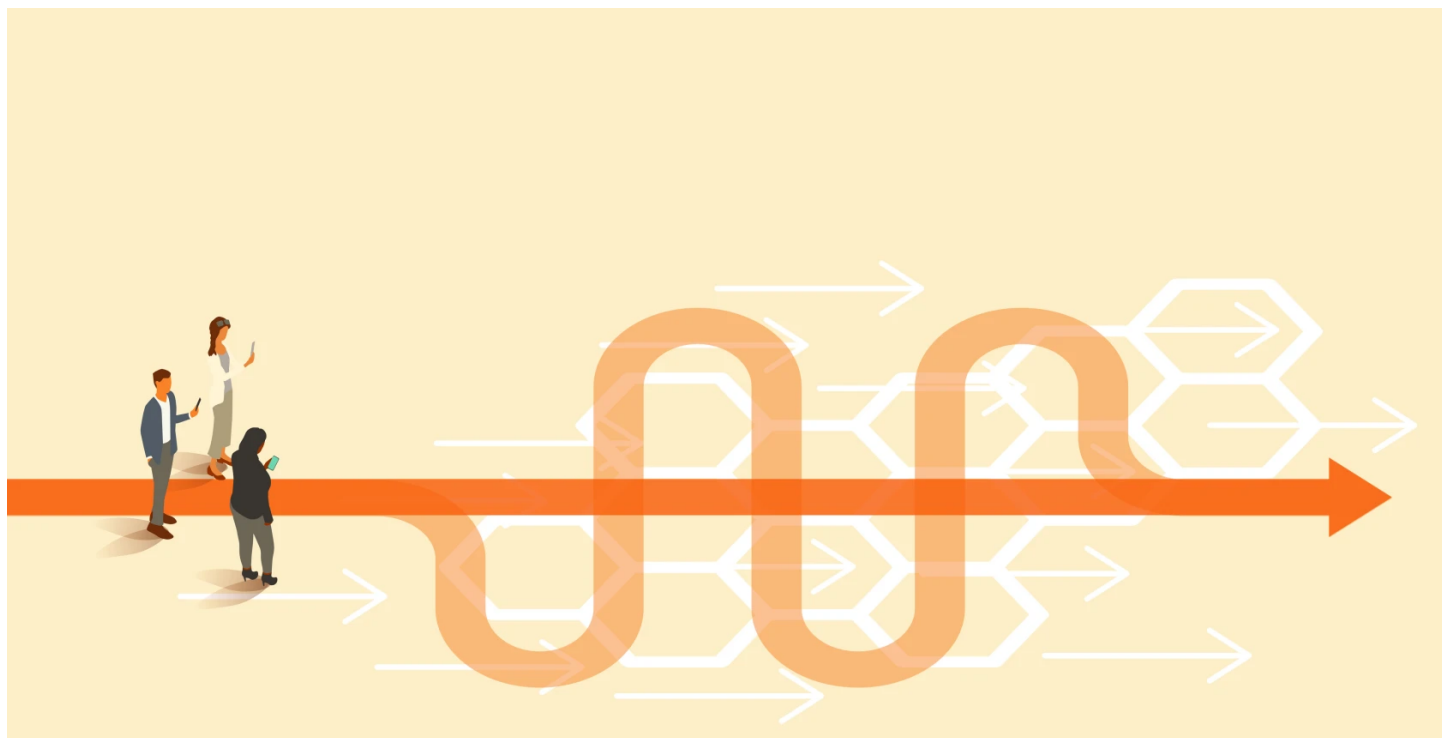


Strategic Planning Without the Stress: 6 Ways to Streamline

Experienced consultants and nonprofit leaders share their advice on optimizing the strategic-planning process.

By David L. Wheeler

AUGUST 26, 2025



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GETTY IMAGES

Nonprofit leaders, midlevel managers, and frontline staff sometimes view strategic planning as one more task heaped onto near-impossible workloads. After all, developing a strategic plan — by analyzing your organization’s current position, setting new long-term goals, and drawing a roadmap to achieve them — can be time-consuming.

“I think everyone has had terrible strategic-planning experiences,” says Preeta Nayak, partner and head of leadership and community services at the San Francisco office of the [Bridgespan Group](#), a nonprofit and philanthropic advisory firm. “I empathize with any apprehension people feel.”

Those negative associations, she says, often stem from the fear that an organization’s employees will be dragged through a long process that doesn’t yield worthwhile results. Nayak urges nonprofit leaders who have had poor experiences with strategic planning to be explicit with new advisers about what went wrong to avoid these pitfalls.

The current environment for nonprofits — with a combative administration, a volatile economy, and hesitant donors — could add to anxiety about strategic planning. “There is a lot of uncertainty, and uncertainty will continue, ” Nayak says, so data gathered in the past may not be an accurate bellwether of what is to come.

Eric Wilkerson, head of the consulting firm [WICO Strategies](#), acknowledges how hard it is to wrap your mind around planning when the world feels like it’s crashing down around you, but that mindset can set up organizations for failure. He urges clients to develop optimism, build adaptability into their plan, and generate multiple scenarios that consider economic and political turbulence.

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The *Chronicle* spoke to consultants and nonprofit leaders about how to streamline strategic planning. Here are their tips.

Consider a shorter horizon, and opt for a stabilization plan if facing existential threats.

LeeAnn Stivers, the executive director of [501 Commons](#), a Seattle-based nonprofit that advises other charities, believes that many of them now need “stabilization and growth plans,” rather than strategic plans. Sharp downturns in federal funding and corporate giving to nonprofits in the first half of the year, combined with other uncertainties, she says, have made planning for three- to five-year time frames unrealistic, even for 501 Commons itself. Strategic plans, she says, are more likely to assume steady conditions, pursue long-term visions and invest time in rethinking missions and values.

Stabilization plans, in contrast, can address immediate challenges and are focused on ensuring organizational survival and figuring out what near-term actions are needed.

Consider writing a ‘mini plan.’

Wilkerson urges CEOs considering strategic planning to take a day off and go to a neutral location — a one-day, one-person retreat. Write down two or three high-level priorities for the organization and a few sentences about how you arrived at those decisions, he advises. After sharing those priorities with the board and some key staff, he says, use them for a year or two while thinking about what a larger strategic plan and planning process would look like.

Strategic planning doesn’t need to be complicated, says Wilkerson. “Every institution has, or should have, a very simple, bold vision.”

Outline Your Most Important Decisions

Nayak's first request of leaders seeking strategic-planning assistance is to outline important decisions they face. Saying you want to develop a strategic plan, she says, is like saying, "I want to write a novel."

"Pick the one or two questions you really need to focus on," she says, "and the one or two areas where analysis and deeper dives are really important." Likewise, she says, figure out where stakeholder engagement is necessary. "You have to be strategic about strategic planning," she adds.

Sometimes the key questions can't be answered immediately but can be baked into the new strategic plan. For [Town Hall Seattle](#), a nonprofit event venue, the strategic plan it finished in March was a long-awaited opportunity to focus on its future, says its executive director, Kate Nagle-Caraluzzo.

The pandemic and a series of leadership transitions had left the group reeling. "The strategic plan was the first time in five years that we got to think strategically about our future," she says. "It finally felt like we were getting out of survival mode and into deep-thinking mode."

The strategic plan, she says, is focused on such important questions as, "How do we drive revenue? How do we drive audience numbers? How do we maintain and retain our audience and our patrons?"

Now the organization has a roadmap and new ways to think about its identity.

Try to use existing meetings for strategic planning.

Some organizations want to complete strategic planning in a three- to six-month time frame. They have urgent questions or want to move past planning and on to action.

Other organizations believe compressing strategic planning too much will add stress and make the process less thoughtful. At the [Cara Collective](#), a Chicago-based antipoverty nonprofit whose core program is job training, leaders decided to take a full year. “It’s important for us not to skip steps or skimp on engagement,” says Lauren Feldman, the organization’s chief operating officer, “because we know that that’ll come back to bite us in terms of building cohesion.”

When a new round of strategic planning is announced, many staff members dread the potential time commitment. “Everyone is looking at, ‘Where’s the time going to come from?’” says Feldman. “I’m already busy, how am I going to make the time for this?” To get around that, she expects to use existing meetings, such as quarterly staff meetings, to gather strategic-planning feedback.

Similarly, Town Hall Seattle used meetings already on the calendar of an existing board executive committee to do much of the strategic planning. Two staff members joined the executive committee to serve as staff liaisons. A survey and monthly staff-member huddles also help gather input, says Nagle-Caraluzzo.

Don’t let disagreements slow down your process.

When facing an organization’s hardest questions, disagreements are likely to surface, says Nayak. The temptation for leaders is to kick the can down the road by gathering more information or having more discussions.

But at some point, leaders need to be decisive. “You can be respectful and thoughtful about the variety of opinions you have and still make progress,” she says.

Leaders can make it clear they have studied data and listened to opinions but have a strong justification for choosing the path they have, consultants say. “In strategy

work, the goal isn’t to please anyone -- at all,” says Wilkerson. And I’d pay

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attention to that. The goal is to move a mission forward closer to the vision.”

Make sure your strategic plan doesn't sit on a shelf.

No matter how much organizations need to lighten the burden of strategic planning, it is essential to map out how the plan will be converted to action and how progress will be measured. Ideally, an organization's annual budgeting process should overlap meaningfully with strategic planning to make sure resources are allocated to key priorities.

When 501 Commons works with nonprofits on strategic planning, Stivers says nine times out of ten, the groups don't want to invest in corresponding implementation plans. Such plans, she says, help operationalize visions, document goals and objectives, and plot tactical moves. Dashboards or tracking mechanisms can measure if a plan's objectives are being reached. Implementation plans move strategic plans out of executives' offices and down to department heads, she says, where the plans can mold operations.

Wilkerson says he declines strategic-planning work that doesn't include an accountability component. “It is heartbreaking when nonprofit leaders are set up for failure,” says Wilkerson, “when they pay a strategic-planning partner and they walk away without a corresponding actionable work or business plan.”

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

NONPROFIT EFFECTIVENESS

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

David L. Wheeler

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He's a former managing editor of the Chronicle of Higher Education and founded and led Al-Fanar Media, a bilingual publication that covers education, research, and culture in the Arab world, for nine years. He was the recipient of a Vannevar Bush Fellowship at MIT for journalists interested in writing about science.

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