



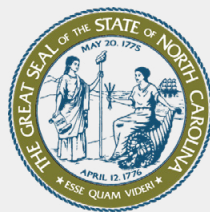
**NORTH CAROLINA TASK FORCE on
CHILD CARE & EARLY EDUCATION**



NORTH CAROLINA TASK FORCE ON CHILD CARE & EARLY EDUCATION

2025 Year-End Report / December 2025

As directed by [Section C of Executive Order 10](#)



**NORTH CAROLINA
DEPARTMENT of
COMMERCE**

*Task Force photos courtesy of Liz Bell, EducationNC; Katie Dukes, EducationNC;
Margaret Seets, Office of the Lieutenant Governor.*



NORTH CAROLINA
DEPARTMENT of
COMMERCE

Josh Stein
GOVERNOR

Lee Lilley
SECRETARY

December 31, 2025

Dear Governor Stein,

This year, the North Carolina Task Force on Child Care and Early Education has continued its work to identify and advance strategies that expand access to affordable, high-quality child care and early education across our state. Since submitting our interim report six months ago, the Task Force has deepened its understanding of the challenges facing families and child care providers, monitored emerging trends in child care availability, and highlighted promising ideas that can be transformed into practical solutions.

Recent Task Force meetings included guest experts who underscored that child care is essential economic and community infrastructure. Child care providers impacted by Hurricane Helene described extraordinary efforts to reopen child care programs that affected families and recovering economies depend on. Leaders from military communities emphasized how reliable child care directly supports mission readiness. Representatives from statewide youth-serving organizations described how afterschool care improves academic and behavioral outcomes and strengthens workforce participation. The Task Force also noted innovative local models and municipal partnerships as examples of how communities can address child care needs creatively and sustainably.

The Task Force's three Work Groups continued developing plans to advance the six recommendations the Task Force released in June 2025. These groups consulted national experts, analyzed feasibility and cost considerations, and identified concrete action steps that can help expand access to child care and early education in North Carolina.

At the same time, North Carolina's child care system faces mounting pressures. Between January and October 2025, 280 licensed child care providers closed. Federal- and state-level Child Care Stabilization Grants, a critical support for providers and early educators during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, ended in March 2025. Investing in child care by increasing child care subsidy reimbursement rates, a key Task Force recommendation, was proposed in the 2025–27 budget but has not yet been enacted. In August 2025, [more licensed child care providers close than opened in our state](#).

These challenges highlight the need for renewed urgency and coordinated action to expand access to child care and early education in North Carolina. Workers, families, children, and businesses rely on a stable child care system, and the Task Force remains committed to advancing data-driven, actionable solutions. In 2026, we will continue to provide research, analysis, leadership, and partnership to support practical steps that make child care and early education more accessible and affordable for families across North Carolina.

Lieutenant Governor Rachel Hunt

Co-Chair
North Carolina Task Force on
Child Care and Early Education

Senator Jim Burgin

Co-Chair
North Carolina Task Force on
Child Care and Early Education

TASK FORCE MEMBER LIST



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Task Force Co-Chair Senator Jim Burgin asks panelists a follow up question on school-age care at the Task Force’s December 2025 meeting. Photo credit: Liz Bell, EducationNC.

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Executive Summary

The North Carolina Task Force on Child Care and Early Education was created by Governor Josh Stein in March 2025 through [Executive Order No. 10](#). Chaired by Lieutenant Governor Rachel Hunt and Senator Jim Burgin (NC-12) and administered by the NC Department of Commerce, the Task Force is charged with identifying and analyzing opportunities to expand access to affordable, high-quality child care and early education across North Carolina.

This report includes findings from subsequent Task Force meetings and reports on the progress of the Task Force's three Work Groups – the Child Care and Early Education Finance and Funding Work Group, the Child Care and Early Education Workforce Compensation and Supports Work Group, and the Child Care and Early Education for Public Sector Workers Work Group – which are developing implementation plans for the following Task Force recommendations issued in June 2025:

1. Set a statewide child care subsidy reimbursement rate floor
2. Develop approaches to offer non-salary benefits to child care professionals
3. Explore partnerships with the University of North Carolina System, North Carolina Community Colleges, and K-12 public school systems to increase access to child care for public employees and students
4. Explore subsidized or free child care for child care teachers
5. Link existing workforce compensation and support programs for early childhood professionals into a cohesive set of supports
6. Explore the creation of a child care endowment to fund child care needs

Governor Josh Stein greets the Task Force at its August 2025 meeting.

Task Force Background

Since being sworn in in April 2025, the Task Force has held six in-person meetings in Raleigh, North Carolina. Meetings are open to the public in person and online at the North Carolina Department of Commerce's [YouTube channel](#), where meeting recordings remain available. According to the terms of [Executive Order No. 10](#), the Task Force will operate from March 10, 2025 to March 9, 2027, unless otherwise amended. The Task Force's in-person meetings drive exploration of issues listed in Executive Order No. 10. Task Force discussions are shaped by the expertise and perspectives of guest presenters and panelists from child care and early education, government, policy, nonprofit, and business backgrounds.

Task Force members include bipartisan members of both chambers of the North Carolina General Assembly, leaders from state agencies including the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), experts from child care and early education-focused nonprofit organizations, child care providers, executives from private sector employers, and representatives of North Carolina's business community. Many Task Force members and staff are also parents or grandparents of young children.

Executive Order No. 10 requires the Task Force to:

- Examine the role of financing in North Carolina's early childhood education system, including strengths and gaps in the current funding model and system infrastructure;
- Review and evaluate policy solutions that strengthen the supply of accessible, affordable, safe, and high-quality child care and early education by reviewing and establishing strategies to recruit and retain a strong child care and early education workforce, expand child care supply for the public sector workforce, and maximize compensation, opportunities, and additional supports for early childhood education providers and teachers;
- Identify opportunities to maximize the impact of existing funding and develop recommendations to direct new public and private investment towards gaps in system infrastructure, especially engaging with the business community;



Task Force Co-Chair Senator Jim Burgin leads a Task Force meeting on child care and disaster recovery in August 2025. Photo credit: Liz Bell, EducationNC.

- Submit a preliminary report describing Task Force activities and recommendations to the Office of the Governor by June 30, 2025 and a year-end report by December 31, 2025 and annually thereafter by December 31 of each year; and
- Provide advice and guidance on any other matter the Governor refers to the Task Force

Executive Order No. 10 also charges state agencies with carrying out specific responsibilities. The North Carolina Department of Commerce should work with businesses, philanthropic organizations, and communities to encourage employers to provide child care-related benefits and support to their workers and explore economic development programs that incentivize employers to provide child care or family-friendly policies. NCDHHS is tasked with reviewing and revising its multi-year implementation plan to strengthen the Child Care Subsidy Program, including transitioning from the current funding model based on local market rates to a model based on the true cost of providing child care and early education.

How We Work

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Continuous progress: Task Force members are encouraged to make impact and take steps toward expanding access to child care on an ongoing basis.

Solutions-based approach: Significant challenges affect North Carolina's child care and early education system, but Task Force members are advised to remain focused on opportunities for improvement.

Considering both public and private solutions: The Task Force studies, evaluates, and recommends both public and private solutions, ensuring consideration of a broad spectrum of opportunities to broaden and strengthen access to affordable, high-quality child care in our state.

WORK GROUPS

The Task Force includes three Work Groups, which explore areas of focus named in Executive Order No. 10:

- The Child Care and Early Education Finance and Funding Work Group;
- The Child Care and Early Education Workforce Compensation and Supports Work Group; and
- The Child Care and Early Education for Public Sector Workers Work Group

While the Task Force evaluates policy solutions, develops recommendations, and issues reports, the three Work Groups primarily develop implementation plans for recommendations developed by the Task Force. Work Groups focus on turning recommendations into action and determining partners that should be involved and what resources may be required to advance progress. Work Groups held virtual meetings every other month.

Senator Ralph Hise (center), Lori Jones-Ruff (right), and Beth Messersmith (left) of the Task Force's Child Care and Early Education Finance and Funding Work Group collaborate in a work session in the Task Force's August 2025 meeting. Photo credit: Liz Bell, EducationNC.



KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

- [Licensed Child Care](#): Child care delivered by a provider that is licensed and regulated for quality and safety by NCDHHS Division of Child Development and Early Education. North Carolina state law requires that people who care for more than two unrelated children for more than four hours per day to be licensed, with some exemptions.
- **Unlicensed Child Care**: While child care is often delivered in regulated settings like licensed child care centers and licensed family child care homes (FCCHs), it is also often delivered in unlicensed or unregulated settings, including through a family member, nanny, friend, or neighbor.
- [Child Care Center](#): Defined by NCDHHS DCDEE as a child care arrangement where, at any one time, three or more preschool-age children or nine or more school age children are receiving child care. This also includes a center located in a residence, where the licensed capacity is 6 to 12 children, or up to 15 school-age children.
- [Family Child Care Home \(FCCH\)](#): Defined by NCDHHS DCDEE as a child care arrangement located in a residence where at any one time, more than two children but fewer than 11 children receive child care.
- [Family, Friend, and Neighbor \(FFN\) Care](#): Defined by the Child Care Resource Center as regular, non-parental care that is based on an existing relationship with the child's family either as a relative, a friend, a neighbor or other unrelated adult. It is sometimes referred to as "informal care," "kith and kin care," "relative care," "license-exempt care," or "unlicensed care."
- [School-Age Care](#): Defined by NCDHHS DCDEE as child care provided for children who are in school, typically ages 5 through 12, when they are not attending their regular school day. Care is provided during hours outside the school schedule and can include before- and afterschool programs, summer camps, and care on school holiday breaks and teacher workdays. Not all child care programs serving school-aged children are licensed in North Carolina, but those that participate in North Carolina's Child Care Subsidy Program must be licensed.

Task Force member Rhonda Rivers asks panelists follow up questions during a discussion on child care needs of military servicemembers and their families at the Task Force's October 2025 meeting. Photo credit: Katie Dukes, EducationNC.





Task Force member Amy Cabbage (right) guides a discussion with guest experts including Rebecca Hammond (center) and Cheryl Leonhardt (left) on child care and recovery from Hurricane Helene at the Task Force’s August 2025 meeting. Photo credit: Liz Bell, EducationNC.

Task Force Progress

The North Carolina Task Force on Child Care and Early Education met monthly from April – June 2025 and every other month thereafter to explore challenges and opportunities in North Carolina’s child care and early education landscape.

Deep dives into special topics and emerging issues during regular meetings drive the Task Force’s progress and deliver opportunities for continued learning, engagement, and leadership for Task Force members, staff, guest experts, stakeholders, and members of the public. This section includes updates and key findings from full Task Force meetings held in August, October, and December 2025.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SYSTEM FINANCING STUDY

In June 2025, the Task Force commissioned a study by Afton Partners on the role of financing in the state’s early childhood education system. The study is in progress with an expected release in spring 2026 and will include the following components:

- A map of the current financing infrastructure for the early childhood education system, including the relationships between different funding streams and the services provided through those funding streams;
- Strengths and gaps in the existing financing infrastructure; and
- A brief analysis of the current federal landscape and impacts on funding in North Carolina

Findings from the study will inform future recommendations of the Task Force.

NC COMMERCE CHILD CARE BUSINESS LIAISON ROLE

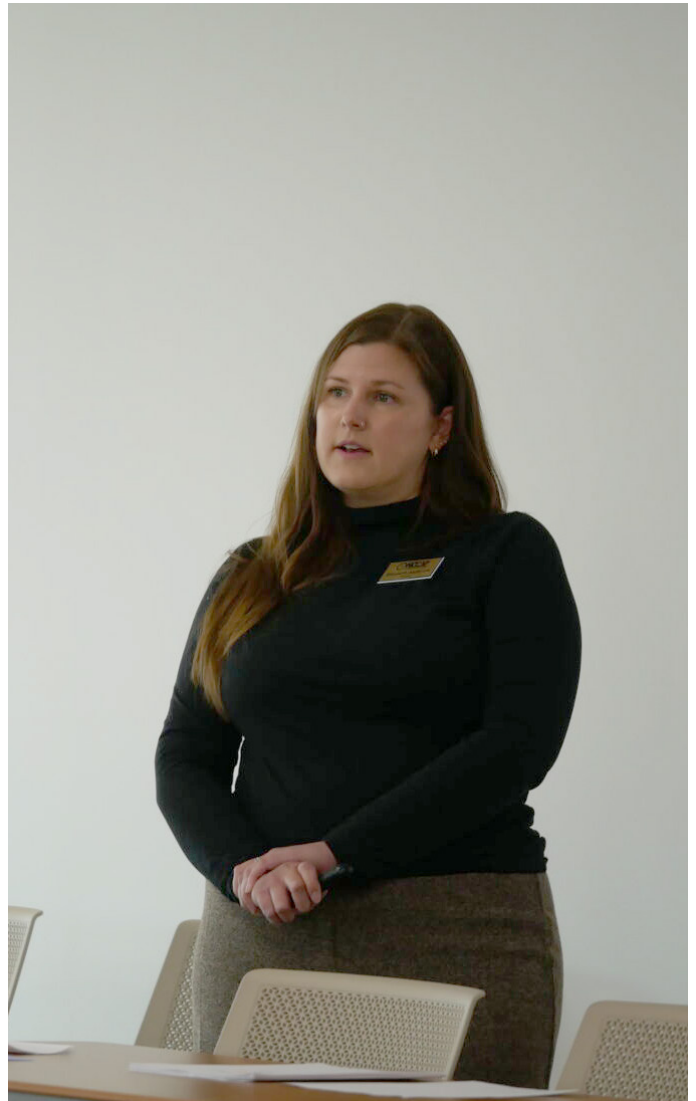
In 2023, the North Carolina Department of Commerce developed a child care business liaison role in partnership with Invest Early NC and NCDHHS to ensure child care access is central to the state’s economic and workforce development strategy. Since the role was [appointed in April 2024](#), NC Commerce’s child care business liaison has facilitated coordination on child care initiatives across state agencies, early childhood education leaders, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropic partners. Having this position and strategic focus within state government has helped bolster efforts led by other partners in workforce and economic development to frame child care access as an economic development issue. Additionally, the child care business liaison regularly brings valuable information about various engagement options directly to workforce and economic development leaders, chambers of commerce, and employers in various industries located across the state.

RECENT CHANGES IN STATE AND FEDERAL POLICY LANDSCAPES

Since the June 2025 report, there have been some important changes in the state and federal policy landscape for child care and early education.

At the state level, recent legislative action has taken some steps toward expanding availability of child care. Governor Stein signed [House Bill 412](#), Child Care Regulatory Reforms, into law on July 1, 2025. The law sought to expand administrative flexibility by allowing larger group sizes without changing staff/child ratios, created new pathways to transition individuals into lead teacher roles, created a liability insurance workgroup, and simplified licensing and building code requirements for family child care homes and after-school programs. While these reforms have potential, additional investment in early childhood education is needed to fully address the underlying challenges of affordability, workforce retention, and quality.

A federal government shutdown stretched from October 1, 2025 to November 12, 2025, creating the longest federal funding lapse in American history. This shutdown had significant impacts on several early childhood education programs in North Carolina – in particular, [Head Start and Early Head Start programs](#). The shutdown affected six Head Start and Early Head Start programs that were due to receive funds on November 1, 2025, resulting in several programs closing temporarily, furloughs of hundreds of staff, and [thousands of North Carolina children](#) and their families scrambling to find alternative child care options. It exposed vulnerabilities of programs like Head Start that receive annual federal appropriations and may face funding shortfalls during prolonged government shutdowns. Ultimately, these programs had to make difficult decisions about whether and how to keep their doors open during the uncertainty of the shutdown, which had ripple effects on families, employers, and economies. Looking ahead, it is important to consider how the state, localities, and communities can prepare for potential federal cuts to early childhood education in the future.



Elizabeth Anderson, Director of the North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs, delivers a presentation on the landscape of school-age care at the Task Force's December 2025 meeting. Photo credit: Liz Bell, EducationNC.

MEETING NOTES, AUGUST 2025:

CHILD CARE AND DISASTER RECOVERY

The Task Force's [August 2025](#) meeting explored the ways North Carolina's child care system was affected by recent natural disasters and the role child care access plays in community and economic recovery in disaster-impacted areas.

On September 27, 2024, Hurricane Helene brought historic rainfall, winds, flooding, and landslides to Western North Carolina, damaging thousands of miles of roads and bridges, destroying residents' access to water, sewer, electricity, phone service, broadband, health care, education, and taking more than 100 lives. Helene also impacted entire industries, devastated thousands of families' abilities to earn income, and hobbled child care programs that enable labor force participation. The North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management [estimated](#) Helene-related damage and needs at nearly \$60 billion, which included costs associated with significant damage and delayed reopening of at least 55 licensed child care programs.

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[conversations with leaders of two western NC child care programs hit hard by Helene](#). The discussion highlighted the benefit of the Smart Start and Child Care Resource and Referral network infrastructure, which are public-private partnerships that can nimbly leverage public and private funding to support local organizations trusted by child care providers and families. Participants in the panel discussion included representatives of Southwestern Child Development Commission, Inc., the Western Region of NCDHHS Division of Child Development and Early Education, the Western North Carolina Recovery and Rebuild Network for Child Care, and the Governor's Recovery Office for Western North Carolina (GROW NC).

Task Force member Amy Cabbage, President of the North Carolina Partnership for Children and leader of North Carolina's Hurricane Helene Child Care Task Force, [led a powerful](#)

Key Takeaways:

- Like roads, electricity, and clean water, child care is critical infrastructure and is an essential component of economic recovery from natural disaster
- There are opportunities to improve data collection on the effect of natural disasters on child care programs

Panelists Cheryl Leonhardt, director of Quaker Meadows Generations child care in Burke County, and CiCi Weston, chief executive officer of Christine W. Avery Learning Center in Buncombe County, explained their commitment to children and families during Hurricane Helene response and recovery. In the aftermath of the storm, they found temporary locations to continue delivering child care services, even while struggling to keep staff employed and paid without tuition flowing in, and securing approval from the state for emergency operation plans to allow reopening using alternative sources of clean water. Several of their staff continued coming to work to provide care, education, and stability to students despite experiencing damage or total loss of their own homes. Leonhardt and Weston encouraged state agencies to continue to address community-identified needs and focus on swift removal of barriers to aid and recovery resources.

Task Force member Lori Jones-Ruff, regional programs manager at Southwestern Child Development Commission, Inc., described ongoing efforts to wrap support around Helene-impacted children, families, and child care providers through coordination of essential supplies, services, and financial support from state agencies and philanthropic partners. Rebecca Hammond, western regional manager at NCDHHS Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE), and Desiree Kennedy, program officer at the Governor's Recovery Office for Western North Carolina (GROW NC), emphasized that child care should be considered critical infrastructure alongside roads, power, water, and broadband, and described child care as essential to both disaster response and long-term economic recovery.

Laura Hewitt, child care and development fund coordinator at DCDEE, delivered a presentation on North Carolina's [Child Care Disaster Impact Portal](#), which helps leaders in state government collect data from child care providers affected by natural disasters. To date, the portal has collected data from child care providers affected by Hurricane Ian, which struck eastern North Carolina in

September 2022, and Hurricane Helene, which devastated Western North Carolina communities in September 2024. The portal asks child care providers to share organizational information including operating status, assessments of sustained damage, details about pending or necessary renovations, insurance information, and details about financial assistance needed or already received. The portal also aids data collection to support state applications for potential federal funding opportunities.

NCDHHS indicated that the portal received a low response rate from Helene-impacted child care providers, but DCDEE expects to see an increase in responses if funding becomes available for specific disasters. Child care providers participating in the August 2025 Task Force meeting indicated challenges compiling and submitting data to the Child Care Disaster Impact Portal, including difficulty sourcing missing records following major flooding related to Hurricane Helene, administrative constraints related to disaster response and recovery, and duplicative requests for information that had been provided in other applications. Task Force members identified opportunities to improve and streamline data collection from child care providers impacted by natural disasters. DCDEE will continue strategic outreach through the Smart Start and Child Care Resource and Referral networks to disaster-impacted child care providers to increase participation.



Guest experts *Desiree Kennedy* (left) and *CiCi Weston* (right) discuss impacts of Hurricane Helene on children, families, and child care providers in Western North Carolina at the Task Force's August 2025 meeting. Photo credit: Liz Bell, EducationNC.

MEETING NOTES, OCTOBER 2025: EMERGING CHILD CARE SUPPLY CHALLENGES

North Carolina's Child Care Stabilization Grants program, which offered critical support for child care staff wages and child care capital expenses during the COVID-19 pandemic, concluded at the end of March 2025. No new state investment in child care and early education followed, and North Carolina remains the only state in the nation without a state budget. Access and affordability have been long-standing issues impacting the child care and early education industry, and a lack of state funding is another variable making it more difficult for child care providers to open and continue serving children and families. [Child care program closures outpaced new child care program openings in fall 2025](#), with 47 licensed child care programs closing in August 2025 alone and only 22 opening that month. [Reports](#) indicate that North Carolina has lost 6.1% of licensed child care programs since the end of stabilization

[Child care program closures outpaced new child care program openings in fall 2025, with 47 licensed child care programs closing in August 2025 alone and only 22 opening that month.](#)

of Child Care Stabilization Grants. Task Force member Candace Witherspoon, director of the DCDEE, [guided a vital conversation](#) with two child care providers and a working parent whose employment may be impacted by the impending closure of her children's child care program.

grants, with family child care homes making up 97% of that net loss.

The Task Force's [October 2025 meeting](#) explored recent trends in our state's child care supply following the end

Key Takeaways:

- Many variables affect child care providers' ability to open or continue operating child care programs, including inability to earn sufficient income relative to the cost to provide care, rising costs of consumer goods and labor, lack of access to affordable non-salary benefits, and employee burnout
- Child care providers and working parents urge additional state funding to stem child care and early education program closures

Citing financial challenges and burnout associated with providing high-quality child care without adequate support, [panelists](#) Cassandra Brooks, Owner and Director of Little Believer's Academy in Wake and Johnson Counties, and Angelia Shipp, Owner and Operator of Doletta Learning Center, a licensed family child care home in Forsyth County, said providing child care and early education had become so challenging that they could not encourage aspiring child care professionals to enter the industry at this time.

Panelists encouraged leaders to pursue the Task Force's recommendation to create a statewide floor for child care subsidy reimbursement rates, a policy solution aimed to address differences in subsidy reimbursement rates among child care providers in urban and rural communities that is expected to help sustain the state's child care system more broadly. Panelists warned that without meaningful public investment in our state's child care and early education system, the state would likely see more closures of child care programs that are critical for our children, working parents, and our state's economy.



Guest expert Erin Trant, a Hatteras Island small business owner and parent of three young children, [shared the experience](#) of being notified that her family's child care provider – Hatteras Island's only licensed child care center – would close. Trant explained that the impending loss of child care access forced her and her husband to consider difficult options: moving away from their chosen community for better access to child care, or leaving the workforce and possibly closing the small business she runs with her husband to care for her children full time. Trant and some fellow Hatteras Island parents affected by the forthcoming child care closure began working with county commissioners and community leaders to identify solutions, though they have hit dead ends pursuing use of vacant church facilities, school property, or local government property suitable for child care or licensed family child care homes on the island. Trant encouraged Task Force members and state leaders to consider child care as essential community and economic infrastructure that enables families like hers to live, work, and raise families in our state.

MEETING NOTES, OCTOBER 2025: CHILD CARE FOR MILITARY FAMILIES

North Carolina is home to [one of the largest military populations in the country](#). Major installations like Marine Corps Air Station New River, Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, Fort Bragg, Camp Lejeune, Air Station Elizabeth City, Air Station Cherry Point, United States Coast Guard Sector North Carolina, and the North Carolina National Guard drive economic activity and [employ about 94,000 active-duty military service members](#) in our state. Many military service members in North Carolina are parents of young children who depend on access to child care.

Task Force member Susan Gale Perry, chief executive officer of Child Care Aware of America, delivered a presentation on the [Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood-PLUS Program](#) (MCCYN-PLUS) at the Task Force's [October 2025 meeting](#). Administered by Child Care Aware of America in North Carolina and 19 other states, MCCYN-PLUS offers up to \$2,000 per child per month in child care tuition assistance to eligible military families to offset the cost of community-based child care when on-base child care is not available. Eligible families pay a share of their child care tuition costs to their provider based on their income, and Child Care Aware of America pays the remaining tuition amount to child care providers each month at a rate approved by the U.S. Department of Defense. In North Carolina, Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, or Space Force families are eligible to enroll in MCCYN-PLUS and can use the child care fee assistance to cover the cost of tuition at licensed child care providers in their communities rated 3, 4, and 5 Stars through North Carolina's quality rating and improvement system.

[The unemployment rate among military spouses is 20%, and lack of access to child care is one of the most significant barriers to military spouse employment.](#)

Families, [led a discussion](#) about unique child care needs and opportunities for child care access for military communities with Roderick White, military and family services coordinator at the North Carolina Department of Military and Veterans Affairs; Dawn Rochelle, chief executive officer of One Place, Onslow County's local partnership for children; Staci Davis, youth and family services coordinator

Task Force member Jenny Akin, vice president of strategic alliances and the White Oak Collaborative at Blue Star

Key Takeaways:

- Child care access is key to mission readiness for military servicemembers
- [A 2024 report from the U.S. Department of Defense](#) found an unemployment rate of 20% among military spouses – [more than 4 times higher than nationwide unemployment rates](#) that year
- North Carolina is one of 20 states where the [Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood-PLUS program](#) delivers child care fee assistance to military servicemembers who do not have access to child care on base
- Child care resources available to military servicemembers and their families vary significantly between different branches of the military

at the New River YMCA; and Sarah Williams, compliance coordinator at Camp Lejeune-Marine Corps Air Station New River. The wide-ranging conversation explained ways child care access and delivery in military communities diverge from care in civilian communities.

Akin shared that [the unemployment rate among military spouses is 20%](#), and lack of access to child care is one of the most significant barriers to military spouse employment. Panelists reminded Task Force members that military careers often involve frequent relocation, sometimes preventing military families from being able to rely on family members to provide child care and often keeping military families at the end of lengthy child care waitlists. Panelists also emphasized that military child care resources vary significantly between branches of the military. On-installation child care providers can earn significantly more competitive pay and benefits than community-based child care providers can afford, which can create unique child care and early education workforce challenges in communities with military installations.

MEETING NOTES, DECEMBER 2025: CARE FOR SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

Child care needs continue long after children enter kindergarten and often continue through age 12, but demand for afterschool and summer care programs in North Carolina far exceeds supply. At the Task Force’s [December 2025 meeting](#), Elizabeth Anderson, director of the North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs, presented data on the landscape of care for school-aged children. According to the Afterschool Alliance’s [North Carolina After 3 PM Report](#), more than 188,000 students in North Carolina participate in afterschool programs, but more than 664,000 additional students, or 4 in 5 students in our state, are missing out on afterschool programming. This gap is not only challenging for students in need of care and enrichment but is a hardship for working parents and our economy and poses safety concerns, particularly for younger children. Anderson also indicated that North Carolina is one of 23 states that lacks state-level funding for afterschool care.

According to the Afterschool Alliance’s [North Carolina After 3 PM Report](#), more than 188,000 students in North Carolina participate in afterschool programs, but more than 664,000 additional students, or 4 in 5 students in our state, are missing out on afterschool programming.

of Southeast Raleigh Elementary School; Erica Simmons, vice president of youth development at the Catawba Valley YMCA and Commissioner at the North Carolina Child Care Commission; Heather Brosz White, director of the NC Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs; and Jon Williams, statewide school age project manager at Southwestern Child Development Commission, Inc.

Panelists described school-aged care as a patchwork system dependent upon partnerships between public and private schools, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, private child care programs, and other stakeholders. They shared that while care for school-aged

Task Force member Dan Tetreault, assistant director of early learning at the NCDPI, [moderated a panel discussion](#) with experts on care and enrichment of school-aged children, including Lamar Hill, principal

Key Takeaways:

- Child care needs often extend beyond age 5 and through age 12
- Only about [1 in 5 school-aged children in North Carolina](#) are participating in afterschool programs
- Cost is a common barrier to accessing high-quality afterschool care

children is rewarding for students and essential for many working parents, cost is a frequent barrier to accessing high-quality aftercare. Licensed school-age care providers can participate in the state’s Child Care Subsidy Program, but household financial eligibility requirements differ for school-age children relative to children ages 0 – 5. Families earning 200% or less of the federal poverty rate can qualify for child care subsidy for their children ages 0 – 5, but only household incomes of 133% or less of the federal poverty rate can qualify for child care subsidy for care of children ages 6 – 12, causing some families to become ineligible for child care subsidy once their children enter kindergarten.

Panelists also helped the Task Force understand that providers of care for school-aged children face similar financial and workforce challenges to those experienced by providers of care for children under age 5. Guest expert Erica Simmons shared that the Catawba Valley YMCA anticipated a 44% increase in the cost of their liability insurance, a sign that the costs of delivering care continue to rise across the industry. Simmons and Williams both indicated that a subsidy reimbursement rate floor, one of the Task Force’s recommendations, would help afterschool care providers as well as early education providers in addressing the lower subsidy reimbursement for rural providers relative to those in urban counties – especially given that about a quarter of children receiving school-age care receive subsidy.



Panelists Jon Williams (right), Erica Simmons (center), and Lamar Hill (left) discuss care of school-aged children at the Task Force’s December 2025 meeting. Photo credit: Liz Bell, EducationNC.

Ideas into Action

TASK FORCE WORK GROUPS

The Task Force’s three Work Groups began meeting every other month in the second half of 2025. Work Group meetings are open to the public through livestream on the North Carolina Department of Commerce [YouTube channel](#).

Each Work Group leads implementation plan development for Task Force recommendations in their areas of focus:

WORK GROUP	TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION
Child Care and Early Education Finance and Funding Work Group	Set a statewide child care subsidy reimbursement rate floor
	Explore the creation of a child care endowment to fund child care needs
Child Care and Early Education Workforce Compensation and Supports Work Group	Develop approaches to offer non-salary benefits to child care professionals
	Explore subsidized or free child care for child care teachers
	Link existing workforce compensation and support programs for early childhood professionals into a cohesive set of supports
Child Care and Early Education for Public Sector Workers Work Group	Explore partnerships with the University of North Carolina System, North Carolina Community Colleges, and K-12 public school systems to increase access to child care for public employees and students

Work Groups conduct original research, connect with experts to learn about promising models and initiatives in other states and in communities across North Carolina, and consider cost, feasibility, and partnerships needed to increase access to affordable, high-quality child care and early education in North Carolina. This section includes key findings and opportunities for action identified by Work Groups for each of the Task Force’s six recommendations from [June 2025](#).

TASK FORCE WORK GROUP: CHILD CARE AND EARLY EDUCATION FINANCE AND FUNDING

Task Force recommendation: Set a statewide child care subsidy reimbursement rate floor

In North Carolina, child care subsidy reimbursement rates are set by the North Carolina General Assembly based on county-specific market rates that represent what families can afford to pay for child care services, rather than the actual cost of providing child care services. On average, current child care subsidy reimbursement rates in North Carolina only cover about half of what it costs providers to deliver child care services. High-quality child care is expensive to provide in both rural and urban counties, but market rates and child care subsidy reimbursement rates are lower in rural counties. As a result, many child care providers in rural and economically distressed counties receive significantly lower reimbursement rates than providers in urban counties despite providing similarly high-quality care and early learning experiences. In some cases, [rural counties](#) receive hundreds to thousands of dollars less per month than their neighboring urban counties – further exacerbating the difference between reimbursement and actual cost to provide services for rural providers.

A statewide child care subsidy floor would set a minimum reimbursement rate based on a statewide average market rate. Child care providers would receive either their current subsidy reimbursement rate or the statewide floor reimbursement rate, whichever is higher. This would help ensure that child care programs in all 100 North Carolina counties receive a minimum child care subsidy reimbursement rate without penalizing counties that already receive subsidy reimbursement at rates at or above the floor.

From the outset, the Finance and Funding Work Group identified a central question: How can North Carolina implement a statewide child care subsidy reimbursement floor rate that reflects the true cost to provide child care services? The Work Group explored options to establish a subsidy model that reimburses providers based on expenses involved in providing high-quality early childhood education, like pay and benefits for teachers and staff, rent and utilities, and classroom materials. Work Group members agreed on the need to consider an incremental approach that focuses on the impacts of each step, from reimbursement increases for child care providers in rural counties to county- and state-level economic impacts.

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The Work Group considered outcomes anticipated from a child care subsidy reimbursement rate floor, how it would relate to the true cost of providing child care services, and ways it would affect child care providers, working families, and our state’s child care system. Given that child care subsidy reimbursement rates vary significantly between urban and rural counties, the Work Group considered how a child care subsidy reimbursement rate floor would affect child care providers in counties with subsidy reimbursement rates that would be above or below the floor rate, and how much funding would be needed to maintain support for existing child care slots. Finally, the Work Group explored how a child care subsidy reimbursement floor rate could be calculated, immediate and long-term steps to bridge the gap between reimbursement rates and the true cost of providing care, how to align these steps with North Carolina’s biennial budget process, and how rates should be adjusted for inflation over time.

In the Work Group’s [November 2025 meeting](#), Neil Harrington, research director at NC Child, and Leanna Martin, early childhood education policy analyst at NC Child, delivered a valuable presentation of their forthcoming research brief, *A Roadmap to the True Cost of Child Care*. The brief explains the need for a child care subsidy reimbursement rate floor, outlines incremental steps needed to ultimately offer providers subsidy reimbursement at the true cost of care, and the economic impact of such investments. The research brief also encourages consideration of fluctuations in enrollment, effects on care for children across age groups, possible legislative impacts, and the use of “hold harmless” policies to avoid unintended challenges for child care providers in counties receiving subsidy reimbursement rates higher than a possible statewide subsidy rate floor amount.

The Work Group identified additional information to include in future subsidy reimbursement rate floor proposals:

- A child care subsidy reimbursement rate floor for school-age care (children ages 6-12) in addition to infant, toddler, and preschool care (children ages 0-5);
- A proposed timeline for the implementation of each step in the proposal;
- Recent closure data on all types of child care facilities, including the potential impact of the subsidy rate floor recommendation on closures going forward;
- Research on economic impact of school-age care (children ages 6-12) in incremental steps toward the true cost of care; and
- Family stories, community needs, child care operator challenges, and unique ways our state's child care and early childhood system can set up children, families, and our economy for success, including the vital enhancements to rates provided by Smart Start, determined by unique county needs

Opportunities for Action

1. **Finalize A Roadmap to the True Cost of Child Care research brief by NC Child.**
2. **Ensure policymakers have clear and thorough foundation to act on developing a child care subsidy reimbursement rate floor.** The Work Group should remain focused on maintaining existing child care slots across all 100 North Carolina counties throughout the process, expanding child care access for working families, and accounting for ways future increases related to the cost of living and updated market rate surveys may impact the projected cost of providing child care.

Task Force recommendation: Explore the creation of a child care endowment to fund child care needs

States are increasingly using dedicated child care endowments and early childhood trusts to create stable, long-term funding for child care, early education, and workforce supports. In the 1990s and 2000s, states began channeling one-time or earmarked revenues like tobacco and lottery funds into early childhood programs, and this precedent has informed more formal endowments today. [Many states have moved to establish endowments or trusts to lock in predictable funding sources](#) through legislation,

ballot measures, or dedicated taxes and fees since the expiration of federal pandemic relief dollars for child care.

The Work Group has conducted a scan of ways other states have either structured child care endowments and trusts or implemented other financing mechanisms to fund early childhood education needs. Work Group staff also met with six states to discuss their financing models in detail. Findings from the scan and interviews with other states include:

- **Financing varies widely, though most states rely on state funding sources.** Some states use state budget surpluses or portions of existing revenue streams, while other states use voter-approved taxes. For example, [Connecticut](#) created an endowment in July 2025 with about \$300 million from its annual operating surplus, while Arizona uses a voter-approved tobacco tax that yields about \$150 million annually. [Montana](#) recently created a trust that includes an Early Childhood State Special Revenue Account and seeded the account with \$10 million in state funds. Work Group staff identified one state – [Nebraska](#) – that created an endowment in 2006 with a combination of \$40 million in state funds from an Educational Lands and Trust Fund and \$20 million in private funds.
- **Identifying a predictable, long-term funding source for endowments or trusts can be challenging.** Some states expressed uncertainty and/or challenges with maintaining a predictable funding source. For example, tobacco tax revenue in Arizona has declined significantly in recent years, and state legislation to expand the tax to include vaping and other nicotine products failed in 2025.
- States use endowment or trust funds to meet a variety of needs, including early educator compensation, child care subsidies, facility improvement/expansion, and quality initiatives. For example, Nebraska provides grants (~\$9.6 million in the most recent cycle) to school districts to support quality initiatives for infants and toddlers in centers and family child care homes. Both Connecticut and Washington, D.C. focus their funds on early educator compensation. By 2027, providers in Connecticut that receive state funding will be required to pay early childhood education teachers on par with public school teachers, and families with an annual income of \$100,000 or less will have a \$0 co-pay. In Washington, D.C., providers receive quarterly payments to support early educator compensation, and providers must meet minimum salary requirements to participate.

Opportunities for Action

- 1. Assess the feasibility of creating a child care endowment by examining several factors,** including potential revenue sources that could seed or sustain the fund, the projected long-term financial performance of different investment strategies, and the legislative changes that may be required to establish and govern a child care endowment. The Work Group can also consider which agency or external entity could manage and maintain fiduciary oversight of the fund.
- 2. Consider developing a blueprint for a child care endowment that best fits the child care and early education needs in North Carolina.** The Work Group can continue to discuss an approach best suited to North Carolina's early childhood education system that will result in a predictable, sustainable funding model. The blueprint could clarify the endowment's purpose and structure, define a governance and investment model, outline relevant statutory and/or budget actions, and map out timelines and resources as needed.



Panelists Jon Williams (right) and Erica Simmons (left) discuss care of school-aged children at the Task Force's December 2025 meeting. Photo credit: Liz Bell, EducationNC.

TASK FORCE WORK GROUP: CHILD CARE AND EARLY EDUCATION WORKFORCE COMPENSATION AND SUPPORTS

Task Force recommendation: Develop approaches to offer non-salary benefits to child care professionals

The Task Force’s [June report](#) emphasized the importance of offering non-salary benefits to improve recruitment and retention among child care and early education professionals, particularly in the context of low wages. Thus far, the Work Group has prioritized evaluating access to health insurance benefits for the child care workforce and has considered several avenues through which access to health benefits could be expanded for early childhood education professionals.

According to a [2023 child care workforce study conducted by Early Years](#), only about 49% of North Carolina child care centers surveyed in 2023 offered their employees either fully or partially subsidized health insurance. Many child care and early education teachers and staff alternatively [rely on the Affordable Care Act \(ACA\) marketplace and Medicaid](#) for health insurance access. With ACA enhanced premium tax credits set to expire on December 31, 2025 with no extension passed by Congress to date, over 888,000 North Carolinians are projected to see their ACA health care premiums double and more than 150,000 North Carolinians could become uninsured. Higher health insurance costs or loss of health insurance coverage altogether has high risk of pushing more early childhood education professionals out of the industry altogether and deepening the child care workforce crisis in our state.

The Work Group assessed the feasibility of adding child care professionals to the NC State Health Plan. Currently, child care professionals are not eligible for NC State Health Plan access in North Carolina [unless employed by a state agency, school system, or another employing unit](#). While expanding state statute to include more child care professionals could increase recruitment and retention, the Work Group was unable to find any other state that has added this workforce to its state health plan. Colorado [considered](#) this option, but determined it would likely be a “complex and time-consuming process carrying substantial administrative, political, and financial costs.” Covering the roughly 42,000 child care and early education professionals

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in our state is likely cost-prohibitive, as the current annual contribution from the NC General Assembly is [\\$8,500](#) per employee.

The Work Group also evaluated opportunities to subsidize child care professionals’ health insurance premiums by evaluating initiatives operating in other states. [Washington, D.C.](#) is operating a health insurance premium subsidy for employees of licensed child care programs who enroll in the ACA marketplace or in a participating employer’s health plan. This year, Connecticut’s legislature appropriated [\\$10 million](#) for a health insurance subsidy pilot program for early childhood educators in partnership with Access Health CT, the state’s ACA marketplace. [Washington State](#) also previously subsidized health insurance premiums for their child care workforce from 2021 to 2023. In North Carolina, subsidizing insurance premiums for ACA marketplace health plans for child care professionals would require additional state appropriations.

While exploring the idea of an association health plan, a recommendation from the [NC Chamber’s February 2025 report](#), the Work Group learned about [Carolina HealthWorks](#), a multiple employer welfare agreement (MEWA) launched on October 31, 2025 as a partnership between the NC Chamber and Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina. Like an association health plan, Carolina Health Works provides new health plan options for small businesses with 2 – 50 employees that are members of the NC Chamber or a participating local chamber of commerce. At the Work Group’s November meeting, Steve Garris, Senior Vice President of Business Operations at the NC Chamber, explained that there is not yet sufficient data to assess average cost savings Carolina Health Works plans offer relative to other options like the Small Business Health Options Program (SHOP) through the ACA marketplace. Additional data will help inform whether Carolina Health Works helps to increase access to affordable health

insurance for child care providers and their employees in North Carolina. Smart Start allows local partnerships across the state to allocate Smart Start dollars to support health insurance costs for child care teachers in their communities, but most local partnerships lack the amount of funding necessary to take it on.

Finally, the Work Group considered whether increasing awareness or navigation support for existing health insurance options like Medicaid and ACA marketplace plans could increase the number of child care professionals enrolled in health insurance. Leaders from Washington State’s Department of Children, Youth, and Families emphasized the value of navigation support in their [health insurance premium assistance pilot program](#), which helped many child care employees learn they were eligible for support through the state’s ACA marketplace or Medicaid. Washington, D.C. also has [three dedicated navigators](#) who are employed at D.C.’s ACA marketplace and assist child care workers as part of D.C.’s premium assistance program. The Work Group identified increased outreach and navigation support for child care businesses and child care professionals as likely beneficial, particularly amid significant changes and uncertainty in the health insurance landscape.

Opportunities for Action

- 1. Partner with the NC Chamber to ensure child care providers are aware of health plan options through Carolina HealthWorks**, including how they can access information on the cost of joining the NC Chamber (\$650 per year) or an affiliate chamber of commerce, as well as learn about individualized health plan options and costs. The Work Group should explore how to monitor future data on plan costs and the potential savings relative to other insurance options specifically for child care programs, as well as other Association Health Plan options, like [the plan offered by the North Carolina Center for Nonprofits](#).
- 2. Pursue enhanced navigation support and awareness raising options for existing health insurance options.** The Work Group can further explore what health insurance navigation support programs look like in North Carolina and options to enhance these activities for child care providers.
- 3. Collect data on child care professionals’ health insurance enrollment status and child care employers’ health insurance offerings as an update to Early Years’ 2023 Workforce Study.** Understanding the percent of

child care professionals who are on employer-sponsored insurance, Medicaid, a marketplace plan, or uninsured and what health insurance is costing both employers and employees will help inform strategies to increase access to health insurance for child care professionals. It will be important to stratify health insurance needs by centers versus family child care homes, given that centers are often needing to offer health insurance to employees while family child care home operators are often sole proprietors who need their own health insurance.

Task Force recommendation: Explore subsidized or free child care for child care teachers

The Task Force identified offering child care as a key non-salary benefit to improve recruitment and retention of the state’s child care workforce. [In a 2023 survey of child care providers](#), about 17% of centers said they offered free child care services to their staff and 55% said they offered reduced child care tuition as employee benefits. The Workforce Compensation and Supports Work Group reviewed initiatives other states are leading to connect child care and early education professionals with child care benefits and identified that thirteen states – Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, North Dakota, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Texas, and Washington – provide enhanced child care subsidy access to child care professionals. Utah [passed legislation](#) for a similar program, but has not yet implemented it due to [lack of funding](#). Georgia has also [piloted](#) a child care tuition assistance for early educators program outside of the state’s child care subsidy program.

Many of these states’ initiatives follow a [model](#) developed by Kentucky, which was the first state to offer child care for child care professionals. Kentucky initially [used federal American Rescue Plan Act dollars](#) to launch the program in 2022. Sarah Vanover, former director of Kentucky’s Division of Child Care, shared at the Work Group’s [September 2025 meeting](#) that Kentucky provides subsidy to child care professionals regardless of their income level. Federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) subsidy dollars continue to be used for child care professionals who would be income eligible regardless. After ARPA funding ended, Kentucky’s state legislature appropriated \$20 million to continue the program, with state funds covering child care subsidies for child care

employees who do not qualify for federal subsidy (i.e., income exceeds 85% of the state median income). To qualify, a child care employee must work 20+ hours per week at a licensed child care program. Eligible staff can apply through the state's centralized system for benefits like child care subsidy, SNAP, and TANF. As of December 2025, Kentucky served over 5,500 families and over 9,600 children.

Vanover explained how Kentucky had been struggling with workforce recruitment and retention issues in the wake of the pandemic and that providing subsidized child care for child care workers could help compensate for lower wages in the industry. When initial ARPA funding used for the program expired, the Division of Child Care leveraged compelling performance data from the first 18 months of the program to demonstrate the program's benefits and return on investment and convince the state legislature to provide additional funding.

In contrast to Kentucky's model, some states pursued models that did not require additional state funding. In 2024, [Arkansas](#) expanded their Child Care Assistance Program to include all child care professionals using a waiver to leverage existing federal funding, rather than allocating separate state funding. The waiver is necessary as federal funds for child care subsidies are otherwise limited to households with incomes at 85% or less of the [State Median Income](#) (SMI). In 2025, Texas passed [SB462](#) which grants priority on their subsidy waitlist to child care professionals who are already eligible for the subsidy program (e.g., have <85% SMI and work 25+ hours per week). Massachusetts follows a similar model as Texas; in 2023, the state launched a [pilot](#) (which was [codified in regulation](#) in 2025) that granted priority status on the child care subsidy wait list to any staff who works at a state licensed or funded child care program and who would otherwise be income eligible (<85% SMI).

In addition to different program funding models, the Work Group also identified and discussed specific program eligibility parameters that will need to be carefully considered in the design of a program offering child care for early education professionals. These parameters are detailed in [Appendix 1](#).

A local effort to offer subsidized child care to the child care workforce was piloted in fall of 2025 in North Carolina. Through a [privately funded pilot program](#), the Boone Area Chamber of Commerce provided one month of child care tuition assistance to 18 child care employees and their 22 children in Watauga County. Eligible employees could use child care tuition funds averaging \$684 per child for the month to cover tuition costs at any licensed child care program in the community. The response to the pilot was overwhelmingly positive from all who participated and additional impact data is forthcoming. Additionally, strong interest in the North Carolina Tri-Share Child Care Pilot Program among child care providers indicates a commitment to seek solutions for the child care workforce's needs for child care.

The NC Chamber Foundation, which listed subsidized child care for the child care workforce as a potential solution to help expand child care supply in its [February 2025 report](#), estimated that each additional child care lead teacher who was employed or retained would create capacity for up to five additional infants or 20 additional four-year-olds. While the impact on other families should be carefully considered in light of North Carolina's long subsidy waitlist (there were [18,556 children](#) ages 0-5 on the waitlist in September 2025 and 55,220 children being served by child care subsidy), this approach could be a beneficial way to recruit and retain a portion of the child care workforce in the short term and create additional child care slots across the state.

Opportunities for Action

- 1. Build support for legislation for the North Carolina General Assembly's short session that would establish a pilot to provide child care for child care professionals employed at licensed child care programs in North Carolina,** building upon legislative proposals like [HB 800: Review Effectiveness and Delivery of Child Care](#) and [SB 593: Grant Our Kids Care Act](#).
- 2. Continue developing the case for a child care for child care professionals program with the North Carolina General Assembly.** The Task Force can identify a partner to take forward the development of a proposed program design that covers all employees of licensed child care programs and cost estimate in partnership with DCDEE. The Work Group can also help identify bill sponsors to draft and champion the legislation.

Task Force recommendation: Link existing workforce compensation and support programs for early childhood professionals into a cohesive set of supports

The Task Force's June report highlighted support programs available to prospective and current members of North Carolina's child care workforce – including the Child Care WAGE\$ Program, the TEACH NC Early Childhood Scholarship Program, Building Bright Futures, and the Family Child Care Home Pilot Program – but these programs are not available across all 100 counties, and some may not remain available due to temporary funding. Child care providers and employees may not have capacity to map out and navigate the range of available state, local, and community-based supports, but connecting early childhood education professionals with a continuum of professional development support could improve career retention and strengthen the industry's workforce. There is an opportunity to better ensure that prospective early childhood education professionals, while recognizing the importance of education, compensation, and professional development supports, also understand where these programs exist and how to access them to build and sustain careers in the field.

In the Work Group's [November 2025 meeting](#), Ana Silva Rey and Brian Schultz of Charlotte Bilingual Preschool presented their successful efforts leveraging existing workforce compensation and support programs for their early childhood education teachers. Charlotte Bilingual Preschool has two workforce development staff who support the school's effort to build a living-wage career

pathway that keeps skilled bilingual educators in the field and strengthens instructional quality. Through their participation in the Building Bright Futures apprenticeship program (in which apprentices work and take classes at the same time), their pathways program (which supports adults seeking to become early childhood educators), and their program for home-based child care providers, Charlotte Bilingual Preschool provides or helps facilitate access to educational, financial, and workforce readiness related resources. This case illustrates the value of providing a more cohesive set of support for staff recruitment and retention.

Opportunities for Action

- 1. Work with stakeholders to create a single resource to represent all initiatives training and sustaining North Carolina's child care and early education workforce.** A monthly stakeholder convening is already assessing ways to aggregate information about available local and state child care workforce supports together in one place and develop greater awareness of the programs. The stakeholder group currently includes representation from NCDHHS Division of Child Development and Early Education, the NCDPI, the North Carolina Community College System, Apprenticeship NC, Early Years, and the North Carolina Business Committee for Education.
- 2. Partner with the Hunt Institute to map availability of existing early childhood education workforce supports by county in North Carolina.** In fall 2025, the North Carolina team for the national Early Learning Summit of the Hunt Institute has partnered with the Hunt Institute to determine feasible, useful components for a mapping tool that would illustrate available programs for the child care workforce by county. This work will continue in early 2026. Once completed, the Work Group recommends collaborating with Division of Child Development and Early Education licensing consultants and administrators of existing support programs to increase awareness and utilization of existing support services.

TASK FORCE WORK GROUP: CHILD CARE AND EARLY EDUCATION FOR PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS

Task Force recommendation: Explore partnerships with the University of North Carolina (UNC) System, North Carolina Community Colleges, and K-12 public school systems to increase access to child care for public employees and students

The public sector is an economic engine in North Carolina, employing more than 84,000 [federal workers](#), over 70,000 [state employees](#), and more than 473,000 thousand workers in [local governments and school districts](#). Public school districts are [the largest employer](#) in more than half of North Carolina's 100 counties. Despite their sizeable workforces, public sector industries like K-12 and higher education face [significant workforce challenges](#), including difficulty delivering pay and benefits that can compete with private sector employment, limited talent pools, and lengthy hiring processes that leave vacant positions unfilled. Improving access to affordable, high-quality child care and early education for workers in public sector industries like education is a meaningful step toward recruiting a talented, skilled public sector workforce, and ensuring experienced employees can live in and raise families in communities they serve.

In its [September 2025 meeting](#), the Work Group explored topline data and child care information on the University of North Carolina System's 17 campuses, North Carolina's 58 Community Colleges, and [more than 2,500 district public schools](#) within North Carolina's 115 Local Education Agencies (see Appendices 2, 3 and 4). Many campuses across the state are operating child care and early education programs that are already preparing K-12 and higher education students for early childhood education career pathways while bolstering child care supply in their communities. Growing the footprint of these child care services will help improve child care capacity in each community and improve talent acquisition and retention in public sector employment.

In its [November 2025 meeting](#), the Work Group spoke with experts who each deliver child care services on a campus within a university in the UNC-system, a community college, and a K-12 public school system. Dr. Jawan Burwell, director of the [Child Development Laboratory](#) at NC Agriculture and Technical (NC A&T) State University, and Dr. Valerie McMillan, associate professor of child

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development, early education, and family studies at NC A&T State University, shared that their National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)-accredited child care and early education facility is highly sought-after by NC A&T faculty and staff, and is integrated into experiential learning opportunities with various academic departments. NC A&T employees who secure a slot at the Child Development Laboratory also pay \$380 per month per child, far below the market rate for child care tuition in Guilford County. With a waitlist of over 200 families and a current capacity of 36 students, the Child Development Laboratory is working to expand their program to serve more children and deliver child care to more parents who work at NC A&T.

Desiree Worley, director of the [Regional Center for the Advancement of Children](#) at Haywood Community College, shared that her Center not only serves children of Community College faculty, staff, and students, but also partners with the local public school system and county government to prioritize enrollment of children of public school teachers, law enforcement, and EMS personnel, in addition to military families and foster families. The Center offers both full-time and part-time care to meet the unique care needs of both Community College students and full-time workers. Worley explained that as an early childhood education (ECE) lab school training future early childhood educators, the Center has special workforce challenges; not all incoming child care teachers at the Community College's lab school have enough professional experience to train incoming students in the College's ECE program.

Loura McRae, Director of Buncombe County Schools' four BCS Learning Labs preschools, explained that a strategic and symbiotic partnership with the Buncombe County Schools Career and Technical Education department was critical to the success of her program. At BCS Learning Labs, high school students with career interests ranging

from early childhood education, medicine, social work, and psychology enter ECE 1 and ECE 2 courses and receive experiential learning opportunities alongside experienced early education professionals on site, while parents teaching and working at Buncombe Public Schools receive access to high-quality child care and early education for their children at just \$600 per month per child, well below the local market rate for child care tuition.

Guest experts explained efforts to blend and braid funding and resources to sustain child care and early education service delivery. They also indicated interest in greater connection and information among their cohorts in child care and early education on UNC System, Community College, or public high school campuses. Finally, they identified that campuses within their networks who are not yet operating ECE lab schools or child care programs would need more information and technical assistance to develop their own programs.

Opportunities for Action

1. Conduct landscape analysis of child care and early education services for the UNC System, Community College, and public high school campuses that includes on-campus child care services and other child care-related employee benefits. The analysis should also identify existing programs that support on-campus child care service delivery to aid the Work Group's effort to maximize their utilization. The Work Group should continue gathering information on best practices for operating early childhood education lab schools and on-campus child care programs on an ongoing basis to inform its efforts. The Work Group should also stay connected with efforts of Governor's Council on Workforce and Apprenticeships to advance sector-based workforce development strategies for North Carolina's education industry as identified [in its June 2025 report](#).

- 2. Create a step-by-step toolkit for developing on-site early childhood education lab schools or child care programs for UNC System, Community College System, and K-12 campuses.** The toolkit should identify opportunities to blend and braid funding with resources like physical space, custodial services, nutrition services, insurance coverage. For lab schools, the toolkit should include ideas for addressing worker experience gaps and should encourage interdisciplinary engagement with various academic departments beyond early childhood education and child development. Work Group members and stakeholders should collect and include impact data on talent acquisition and retention benefits associated with offering on-site child care for employees from campuses leading early childhood education lab schools or on-site child care centers.
- 3. Expand peer-to-peer networking and information sharing across campuses delivering child care and early education in UNC System, Community College, and K-12 environments.** The Work Group should work with representatives of UNC System, Community College, and K-12 campuses and champions already leading ECE lab schools and child care programs co-located on education campuses to create sharing and learning within these cohorts. These partners could leverage existing engagement opportunities like the UNC System's Professional Learning Community.



Task Force Co-Chairs Lieutenant Governor Rachel Hunt (right) and Senator Jim Burgin (left) lead the Task Force's December 2025 meeting. Photo credit: Liz Bell, EducationNC.

A Look Ahead

THE WORK OF THE TASK FORCE IN 2026

The Task Force on Child Care and Early Education has explored emerging issues in child care and early education access and affordability, as well as created a platform for diverse guest experts across NC to share innovations and opportunities from their communities with state leaders.

Upcoming meetings and work sessions may explore topics such as:

- Successful private-sector employer solutions to employee child care and state and local public-private partnerships that can be scaled and incentivized
- North Carolina Tri-Share Child Care Pilot Program optimization for children, families, employers, and child care providers
- Opportunities to leverage and maximize existing funding to support child care and early education
- Impact of federal funding on North Carolina's child care system, including Affordable Care Act (ACA) subsidies for child care professionals' health care costs
- Child Care WAGE\$ Program outcomes for the child care and early education workforce
- Impact of paid family leave on child care needs and access
- Developmental day services for children with disabilities
- Trends in liability insurance expenses for child care providers
- Mental health and burnout in the child care and early education profession
- Family, friend, and neighbor care

In 2026, the Task Force will also encourage members of the North Carolina General Assembly to prioritize child care and early education access for the well-being of children and families and the health of our economy.

In the last six months, Work Groups have dived deeper into specific topic areas and advanced research and analysis on these topics as reflected in this report. In 2026, the Task Force and its Work Groups will continue to meet, consult with experts, explore new ideas, and work to advance the Task Force's six recommendations from 2025.

Special Thanks

The North Carolina Task Force on Child Care and Early Education is grateful to the following experts in child care and early education, government, nonprofits, business leaders for sharing their perspectives and guidance in the Task Force's 2025 meetings:

April 2025

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Appendix 1

DESIGN PARAMETERS FOR CHILD CARE FOR CHILD CARE TEACHERS PROGRAMS

The Workforce Compensation and Supports Work Group identified and discussed specific program eligibility parameters that will need to be carefully considered in the design of a program offering child care for early childhood education professionals, as described below.

Teachers vs. All Staff: The Work Group recommended that such a program in North Carolina should cover all employees of a licensed child care program, not just teachers. The rationale is that all employees are essential for operations of a child care center. When there are absences or vacancies among non-teacher positions such as administrators and support staff, other staff fill in the gaps and take on multiple roles. Most states that have implemented child care for early education professionals have chosen to make all child care employees eligible, rather than just teachers.

Hours of Work required: States vary meaningfully in the minimum number of hours of working in a child care program to qualify for child care. For example, Kentucky, Rhode Island, and Maine only require 20+ hours per week whereas North Dakota and New Hampshire require 25+ and Iowa requires 32+. The Work Group discussed that the minimum number of work hours may be a parameter to narrow the scope of program eligibility and thus cost, but felt that 25+ or 30+ minimum work hours per week may be the most appropriate thresholds to consider.

Age of Children Covered: The Work Group has discussed that narrowing the age range of children eligible for child care is another parameter that can narrow the scope of program eligibility and thus cost. However, nearly all states with child care subsidy programs cover children under age 13 and some states cover children with special needs up to ages 16-19. To inform program design, it may be valuable to collect information on the age distribution of North Carolina child care professionals' children and age groups for which child care would be most compelling as a benefit to child care professionals.

Copay Amount: Several states which have implemented child care for child care professionals programs do not charge any copay to the child care workers (e.g., Rhode Island, North Dakota, New Hampshire). However, in some cases parents may still have to pay “overage”, or any difference between the subsidy provided by the state and the tuition charged by the center. In other states, child care professionals are still responsible for the same copay as if they were part of the broader subsidy program. The design of copays will also drive the cost of the program.

Statewide vs. Local: Based on our research, all states that have implemented such programs did so at a statewide level. However, North Carolina could consider piloting in a subset of counties. This would require fewer resources to start and could generate data to support further funding for expansion.

Appendix 2

UNC SYSTEM CHILD CARE SNAPSHOT

- **17 campuses** – 16 colleges and universities; 1 high school
- **55,885 employees** living in North Carolina
- **10 of 17 campuses** may have some form of on-site child care
- **At least 6 institutions** host early childhood learning labs that train aspiring early childhood education professionals
- **Several campuses offer** other services and supports to connect students, faculty, and staff with child care
- **Child Care Academies Partner Grants:** In December 2025, NCDHHS awarded 16 higher learning institutions, including [3 UNC System campuses](#), grants to support delivery of on-campus Child Care Academies to train aspiring child care and early education professionals

UNC SYSTEM CAMPUS	CHILD CARE SERVICES / BENEFITS	DESCRIPTION
Appalachian State University	Lucy Brock Child Development Lab	Training program and child development provider
	App State Child Development Center	Serves children of students, faculty, staff, and occasionally non-university-affiliated parents
East Carolina University	Child Care on Campus: Maximizing Parents' Academic Support and Success (COM-PASS) Program	Includes weekday evening drop-off child care for faculty, students and staff; Funded by US Department of Education grant
	Nancy W. Darden Child Development Center	Training center serving children of students, faculty, staff, and members of the public
Elizabeth City State University	ECSU Lab School	Training center serving children ages 3 – 5 of students, faculty, staff, and members of the public
Fayetteville State University	Early Childhood Learning Center	Training center that provides care to children of students, faculty, staff, and members of the public; also an NC Pre-K site
North Carolina A&T State University	Child Development Laboratory	Training center that provides care to children ages 2.5 years – 5 years old of students, faculty, staff, and members of the public
North Carolina Central University	Child Development Laboratory	Training center serving children ages 2 years 10 months – 5 years old
North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics	No on-site child care programs	
North Carolina State University	Child Care Resources	Child care wait list priority and partial child care tuition subsidies for Bright Horizons Triangle-area locations for eligible employees; Discounted child care tuition at KinderCare, Lightbridge Academy, Goddard School, and independent licensed child care providers for eligible employees

UNC SYSTEM CAMPUS	CHILD CARE SERVICES / BENEFITS	DESCRIPTION
UNC-Asheville	No on-site child care programs	
UNC-Chapel Hill	UNC-Chapel Hill Child Care Scholarship Program	Financial assistance for full-time UNC-Chapel Hill employees and students with children under age 13 enrolled in 4- or 5-star licensed child care facilities; Administered by Early Years, this program concludes on December 31, 2025
	University Child Care Center	Serves employees of UNC-Chapel Hill and UNC Health; operated by Bright Horizons
UNC-Charlotte	No on-site child care programs	
UNC-Greensboro	Access to Child Care Enhances Student Success (ACCESS) Project Grant	Free child care for student-parents who receive or are eligible to receive Federal Pell Grants and/or are single parents
	Child Care Education Center (Carter Center; Curry Center; and North Drive Center)	Three child care centers serving children ages 3 months – 5 years that also train future early childhood education professionals
UNC-Pembroke	No on-site child care programs	
University of North Carolina School of the Arts	No on-site child care programs	
University of North Carolina – Wilmington	No on-site child care programs	
Western Carolina University	Kneeder Child Development Center	Serves children ages 1 – 5 of students, faculty, staff, and members of the public
Winston-Salem State University	Family Services Child Development Center	Serves children ages 1.5 – 5 years; offers Head Start and Early Head Start services

Appendix 3

NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM CHILD CARE SNAPSHOT

- **58** North Carolina Community Colleges
- Around **30,000 total North Carolina Community College employees**
- **16 of 58 colleges** may have some form of on-site child care; most are operated by campus staff, but several are operated by a third party like Head Start, Lifespan, or Boys & Girls Clubs
- **Child Care Academies Partner Grants:** In December 2025, the NC Department of Health and Human Services awarded grants 16 higher learning institutions, including [13 Community Colleges](#), to support delivery of on-campus Child Care Academies to train aspiring child care and early education professionals
- **North Carolina Community College Child Care Grant Program:** Operating since 1993, this program helps cover child care tuition costs for student-parents enrolled at North Carolina Community Colleges
 - In Fiscal Year 2024 – 2025, the North Carolina General Assembly [appropriated \\$3,038,215](#) to be spread among the 58 Community Colleges to fund Community College Child Care Grants to student-parents
 - **21 of 58** Community Colleges fully spent their funds for the fiscal year
 - [Community College System leaders recommend changes](#) like allowing upfront or direct payments to child care providers, earlier announcements of funding allocations, streamlined administrative requirements, expanding eligibility to Continuing Education students and military families, and clarifying DSS coordination requirements to maximize effectiveness of this valuable program

UNC SYSTEM CAMPUS	CHILD CARE SERVICES / BENEFITS	DESCRIPTION
Alamance Community College	Lifespan Early Learning Center	ECE lab school serving children ages 6 weeks – 5 years of students, faculty, staff, and the community
Blue Ridge Community College	Flat Rock Children’s Center	Early Head Start and Head Start program serving children ages 0 – 3
Cape Fear Community College	Bonnie Sanders Burney Child Development Center	NAEYC-accredited child care center and ECE lab school serving children ages 6 weeks – 5 years
	Drop-In Child Care	Serves children of students ages 6 months- 12 years
Central Carolina Community College	CCCC Child Care	Free drop-in care serving children ages 6 months – 12 years of CCCC students
Davidson-Davie Community College	Davidson-Davie Community College Child Development Center	ECE lab school licensed to serve children ages 0 – 5
Forsyth Tech Community College	Carol L. Danforth Early Childhood Lab	ECE lab school serving children ages 3 – 5
Halifax Community College	CADA Head Start at Halifax Community College	On-site Head Start program

UNC SYSTEM CAMPUS	CHILD CARE SERVICES / BENEFITS	DESCRIPTION
Haywood Community College	Regional Center for the Advancement of Children	ECE lab school delivering part-time or full-time care to children ages 0 – 12 of employees, students, foster families, military families, law enforcement families, and Haywood County Public Schools employees
Johnston Community College	Johnston Community College Child Development Center	ECE lab school serving children ages 1 – 5
McDowell Technical Community College	McDowell Tech Community College Child Development Center	Serves children ages birth through 5
Nash Community College	Betsy B. Currin Child Development Center	ECE lab school serving children ages 6 weeks – 5 years
Piedmont Community College	Piedmont Community College Child Development Center	Serves children ages 2 – 5; open to the community
Sandhills Community College	Sandhills Community College Boys & Girls Club	Afterschool and drop-in care for school-age children
Southeastern Community College	Southeastern Community College Child Development Center	ECE lab school serving children ages 6 weeks – 5 years of students, staff, and members of the public
Vance-Granville Community College	Main Campus Child Care Center	Serves children ages 1 – 5 of students, staff, board members, and members of the public
	Drop-In Child Care	Free drop-in child care serving children ages 3 – 12 of students
Wayne Community College	Wayne Community College Childcare Center	Serves children ages 6 weeks – 5 years of students, faculty, staff, and members of the public

Appendix 4

NORTH CAROLINA PUBLIC SCHOOLS CHILD CARE SNAPSHOT

- **115** Local Education Agencies (LEAs)
- **2,764 total** schools; 795 high schools
- More than **188,000 full-time staff**
- At least **13 high schools** in North Carolina have on-site child care services
- Many of these programs have partnerships with Career and Technical Education training in early childhood education for high school students

SCHOOL DISTRICT	SCHOOL	CHILD CARE SERVICES	DESCRIPTION
Alexander County Schools	Alexander Central High School	Alexander Central High School Child Development Center	Serving children ages 3 – 5
Buncombe County Schools	A.C. Reynolds High School	BCS Learning Lab	ECE CTE learning lab offered serving children ages 3 – 4
	Erwin High School		
	North Buncombe High School		
	T.C. Roberson High School		
Caldwell County Schools	Hibriten High School	Hibriten High School Early Learning Lab Preschool	ECE CTE learning lab serving children ages 3-4
	South Caldwell High School	South Caldwell High School Early Learning Lab	ECE CTE learning lab serving children ages 3-4
Catawba County Schools	Fred T. Foard High School	Fred T. Foard High School Pre-K	Serving children ages 3-4
	Hickory High School	Hickory High Pre-school	Serving children ages 3-4
	St. Stephens High School	St. Stephens High School Pre-K	Serving children ages 3-4
Madison County Schools	Madison High School	MCS Early Childhood Educational Program – Madison High School Center	Serving children ages 2 – 5
Nash County Public Schools	Nash Central High School	The Children’s Center	Serving children ages 2.5 and older
Rockingham County Schools	Reidsville High School	Reidsville High School Early Childhood Center	Serving children ages 3 - 5