

Buncombe County Early Childhood Committee
Workforce Development in Early Childhood Education Series, 2023

Summary & Takeaways:

This was a 4-part series hosted by Buncombe County's Early Childhood Committee focused on workforce challenges and opportunities in the field of early care and education.

Session 1: Setting the Stage (August 2023)

What do we mean when we say "workforce crisis" in the field of early childhood education? We spent this session focused on defining the issue. We heard about the challenges related to recruitment, compensation, development and retention of teachers and staff to work in early care and education settings. A presentation by our local Child Care Resources team was followed by a panel discussion with representatives that brought day-to-day experience navigating workforce issues.

Presenter:

- Jenny Vial, Director of Child Care Resources, Buncombe Partnership for Children

Panelists:

- Aimee Spooner, Children's Services Director, Irene Wortham Early Learning Center
- Amy Sosebee, Acting Director, Regent Park Early Childhood Development Center
- Tameka King, Executive Director, Children's Center at Gracelyn
- Melissa Wilson, Early Childhood Specialist, Buncombe Partnership for Children

Takeaways:

- We learned about drivers of the workforce challenges, such as:
 - Low compensation & benefits
 - High expectations (education, standards, licensing rules)
 - High stress environment
- We heard about the impacts this is having, such as:
 - Reduced slots due to staffing
 - Reduced childcare hours available for families
 - Limited slots for families who use subsidy vouchers, may need to travel farther
 - Fewer providers who can support children with developmental/behavioral needs
 - Less support available, less time out of the classroom for planning/time off, less attention to proactive mental health supports
 - Increased teacher and administrator burnout

Session 2: Current Landscape (September 2023)

What efforts are underway in our community to address the workforce crisis in early care and education? Buncombe County staff presented an overview of the current landscape of workforce development in the field of early childhood, from what it takes to be qualified to work in the field, options for education, financial aid and ongoing training to an overview of programs and initiatives aimed at addressing workforce challenges. This was followed by a panel of representatives from workforce-focused projects currently funded by Buncombe County's Early Childhood Fund.

Presenter:

Rachael Sawyer Nygaard, Strategic Partnerships Director, Buncombe County Government

Panelists:

- Betsie Stockslager, Preschool Director, Buncombe County Schools
- Tamara Reynolds, Chair of the Education Department, A-B Tech
- Marcia Whitney, President and CEO, Verner Center for Early Learning

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- Tasha Lewis, Director of Workforce Development Program, Buncombe Partnership for Children
- Deanna Lamotte, NC Pre-K Expansion Director, Buncombe Partnership for Children

Takeaways:

- We learned about what it takes to be qualified to work in the field, options for education, financial aid and ongoing training.
- And we heard from representatives from workforce development programs that we are funding to address ECE workforce needs.

Session 3: Promising Practices (October 2023)

How do we build on what we've learned so far? Buncombe County staff shared a recap of the prior two sessions and presented information about workforce impacts on early childhood grantees. This was followed by conversation among committee members reflecting and looking ahead.

Presenter:

Rachael Sawyer Nygaard, Strategic Partnerships Director, Buncombe County Government

Takeaways:

- We learned about current workforce impacts on Early Childhood grantees (survey results showing high vacancy rates for early learning teachers/assistants & correlating low enrollments at childcare centers).
- Reflection on what stood out as key issues and promising practices during the workforce development series, such as:
 - Concern about one-time COVID investments sunsetting
 - Salary as key issue
 - The need for more incentives for ECE licensure and/or degrees
 - Figuring out how to utilize our limited funds to the greatest extent
 - The need for more engagement partners, including private partners

Session 4: Recommendations (November 2023)

How do we apply what we've learned to the next funding cycle? Buncombe County staff shared a recap of the prior three sessions and presented follow-up information about credentialing and investment related to the early childhood workforce. Staff provided a recommendation on the project, "Building Capacity in Buncombe County to Expand NC Pre-K Availability and Accessibility," which had previously been funded as a pilot program with one-time COVID funds. This was followed by a vote from the committee to invite the submit a proposal through the FY2025 grant application process as well as a conversation about prioritizing workforce development within the annual grants.

Presenter:

Rachael Sawyer Nygaard, Strategic Partnerships Director, Buncombe County Government

Takeaways:

- We learned about the Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential and about Dogwood Health Trust "Care and Learning (CandL) Data on Early Care and Education" report and their current grants to address early childhood educator workforce recruitment, retention and attrition.
- The committee voted to invite Buncombe Partnership for Children submit a proposal through the FY2025 grant application process for the continuation of their Pre-K Expansion project that is currently funded with one-time federal grant funds.
- The committee discussed the benefits and risks of prioritizing the workforce strategy by requiring all projects to have a workforce component. There was overall agreement about the need to fund workforce to the fullest extent possible as well as acknowledgment of other critical operational needs for grantees, as well as discussion about sustainability. Staff agreed to prepare draft Grant Guidelines for the committee's review at the next meeting.