
EARLY EDUCATION

KEY ISSUES

The most rapid period of development in human life occurs from birth to age eight. In fact, 90% of critical brain development happens in the first five years of life. What happens in these first eight years sets the foundation for all of the years that follow.

Less than half of pre-kindergarten aged children in North Carolina are enrolled in regulated early learning programs in North Carolina.

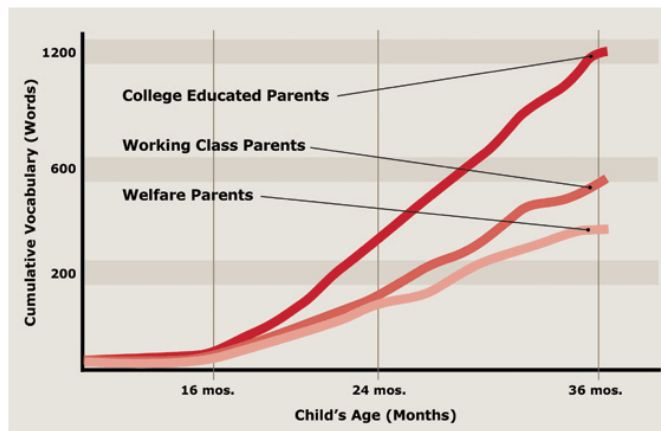
THE CASE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

A wealth of research has documented the importance of the early years of a child's life and development, and the potential for quality early education programs to promote strong trajectories for a child's life and success in further education, health, and later employment. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University has compiled many of the most prominent studies on early education and some of the most poignant data on the value of investment in a child's early years.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY YEARS

The early years matter because, in the first few years of life, 700 new neural connections are formed every second, a higher rate than at any other time of life.¹ Neural connections are formed through the interaction of genes and a baby's environment and experiences. These are the connections that build brain architecture – the foundation upon which all later learning, behavior, and health depend. Early experiences and the environments in which children develop in their earliest years can have lasting impact on later success in

18 18 MONTHS: AGE AT WHICH DISPARITIES IN VOCABULARY BEGIN TO APPEAR



school and life. In fact, by about age five, the brain has reached 90 percent of its adult volume, creating 85 percent of the intellect, personality, and skills that a child will carry through life.² Barriers to children's educational achievement linked to their environment and experiences start early, and continue to grow without intervention. Differences in the size of children's vocabulary first appear at 18 months of age, and vary based on family education and income. By age 3, children with college-educated parents or primary caregivers have vocabularies 2 to 3 times larger than those whose parents did not complete high school. Children who lack a language-rich environment early in life reach kindergarten already behind

¹ Harvard University Center on the Developing Child. Available at <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/>.

² From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. Available at <http://www.nap.edu/read/9824/chapter/1>.

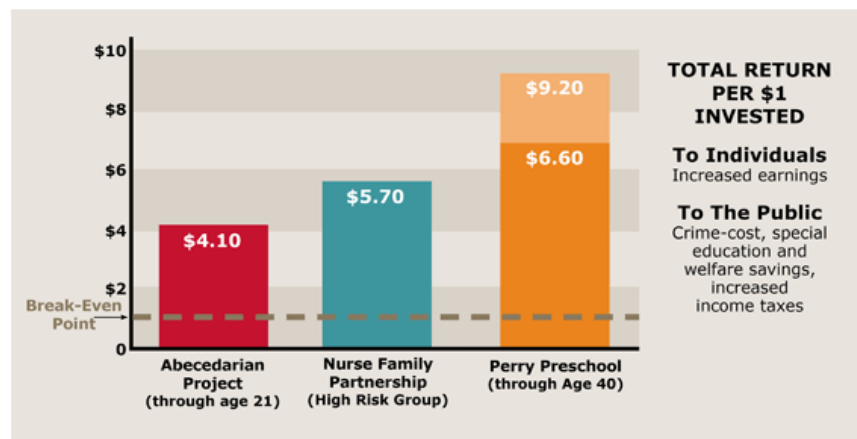
their peers, and some will never catch up.³

RETURN ON INVESTMENT IN EARLY EDUCATION

Fifty years of research prove that students in high-quality preschool programs score significantly higher in reading and math when they enter school. Those children are less likely to drop out, repeat grades or need special education, and they are more likely to attend college. A study of 111 North Carolina children in a high-quality full-day, year-round, birth-to-kindergarten program found that 67 percent of participating children graduated from high school by age 19, compared with 51 percent for the control group. What's more, 36 percent of children enrolled in the program attended a four-year college, versus 14 percent among those who did not enroll in the program.⁴

Providing young children with a healthy environment in which to learn and grow is not only good for their development—economists have also shown that high-quality early childhood programs bring impressive returns on investment to the public. Three of the most rigorous long-term studies found a range of returns between \$4 and \$9 for every dollar invested in early learning programs for low-income children. Program participants followed into adulthood

4-9 \$4 - \$9 IN RETURNS FOR EVERY DOLLAR INVESTED IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS



benefited from increased earnings while the public saw returns in the form of reduced special education, welfare, and crime costs, and increased tax revenues from program participants later in life.⁵

CHILD CARE IN NORTH CAROLINA

Compared to the national average, North Carolina has one of the highest rates of working mothers with young children, making the need for child care one of the state's top priorities. Almost 250,000 children spend part or all of their day in regulated child care arrangements. The need and availability of child care is essential for the State of North Carolina's economic development and stability.

North Carolina Census Data 2014	
Total Population	9,943,964
Children under 5 years old	606,581
Total children under 18	2,287,112
Children under 5 as percent of population	6.1%
Children under 18 as percent of population	23%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts, 2014.
Available at <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/37.00>.

³ Harvard University Center on the Developing Child.

⁴ Perry Preschool Study, Heckman & Masterov

⁵ Harvard University Center on the Developing Child.

Child Care Highlights 2014	
Number of Regulated Child Care Centers	4,763
Number of Children Enrolled in Child Care Centers	234,911
Number of Regulated Family Child Care Homes	2,407
Number of Children Enrolled in Family Child Care Homes	14,743
Number of Children Served by Subsidy	83,700
Total Number of Regulated Facilities	7,140
Total Number of Children Enrolled in Regulated Facilities	249,654

Source: NC Division of Child Development and Early Education, Monthly Statistical Summary Report - July 2014. Available at http://ncchildcare.nc.gov/general/mb_snapshot.asp.

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS IN NORTH CAROLINA

A variety of programs and funding streams come together to make up North Carolina's early childhood education system. Federal funding supports North Carolina's Head Start program and a variety of other programs. State funding supports NC Pre-K and other specific programs targeted for children with disabilities. North Carolina's early childhood system includes the following programs and departments:

NORTH CAROLINA INFANT TODDLER PROGRAM

Children aged zero to three with certain levels of developmental delay or established special needs conditions, and their families, are eligible for the Infant Toddler Program (ITP). No family is denied services because of the inability to pay. Services are provided in children's homes or community settings such as parks, playgrounds, or child care facilities. The North Carolina Infant Toddler Program addresses requirements under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that states must provide early learning support for individuals with documented disabilities.

NC OFFICE OF EARLY LEARNING

The Department of Public Instruction's Office of Early Learning is a state office that supports children's success from Pre-K through third grade by administering state and federally funded programs, including:

FIRSTSCHOOL	FirstSchool is a Pre-K through Grade 3 initiative to promote public school efforts to become more responsive to the needs of an increasingly younger, more diverse population. FirstSchool unites the best of early childhood, elementary and special education.
PRESCHOOL EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN	Since 1991, all three- four- and pre-k five-year-old children with disabilities in North Carolina have been entitled to a free and appropriate public education mandated through the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In 2015-16, over 19,000 children are currently receiving services through the state's Preschool Exceptional Children program. ⁶ Coordinators through the program work directly with children and families to ensure proper program placement and to support the family in finding other necessary health and education services.

⁶ NC DPI Exceptional Children Division. Available at <http://ec.ncpublicschools.gov/reports-data/child-count/reports/december-1>.

TITLE I PRESCHOOL	A Title I Preschool is a program of high-quality educational experiences designed to enable young children to meet challenging state standards. Although Title I legislation allows its preschool programs to serve children from birth up to age five, most North Carolina Title I Preschools serve four-year-olds only. These programs usually follow the school calendar and school day, and are staffed with both a licensed teacher and highly qualified teacher assistant. Curricula used in Title I preschools must be comprehensive, research-based, and aligned with North Carolina's early learning standards. The learning experiences offered in a Title I preschool promote growth in all developmental domains, including language, literacy, math, physical, emotional, and social development.
HEAD START	Head Start is a federally funded, comprehensive preschool program designed to meet the emotional, social, health, nutritional, and psychological needs of children aged 3 to 5 and their families. Head Start helps develop social competencies in children and promotes self-sufficiency through a comprehensive family-focused approach.
EVEN START FAMILY LITERACY	Even Start is a comprehensive family literacy program intended to help break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy and improve the educational opportunity of low income families. North Carolina's Even Start Program focuses on the educational needs of the whole family. It supports the philosophy that the educational attainment of children and their parents are interrelated, and that improving the literacy skills of parents results in a positive effect on the educational experiences of their children.
GOVERNOR MOREHEAD PRESCHOOL	The Governor Morehead Preschool (GMP) provides community-based early intervention and preschool services to children ages birth through five years with diagnosed visual impairments. GMP places a strong emphasis on serving children in settings that are familiar and comfortable.
EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN WHO ARE DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING	The Early Intervention Program for Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing provides services to children who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf/blind, ages birth to three and their families. Concentrating on language and communication skill development, itinerant professionals provide family-centered intervention in home and child care settings. At age three, the program works to establish a smooth transition to the local education agency.

DEVELOPMENTAL DAY CENTER PROGRAM

Developmental day funds are made available through the State Board of Education to assist in providing special education and related services to eligible children with disabilities who are placed in accredited development day centers by local education agencies. The program serves children with disabilities ages 3 through 21 in a developmental day center approved by the NC Department of Health and Human Services' Division of Child Development and Early Education.⁷

⁷ NC DPI Exceptional Children Division.

Available at <http://ec.ncpublicschools.gov/finance-grants/applications/developmental-day-center-program>.

NORTH CAROLINA PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM (NC PRE-K, FORMERLY MORE AT FOUR)

North Carolina's More at Four program was initiated in 2001-02 as a state-funded initiative for at-risk four-year-olds that aimed to prepare them for success entering elementary school. During the 2011-2012 school year, administrative control of the program was relocated from the Department of Public Instruction to the Department of Health and Human Services, and the program was renamed the NC Pre-Kindergarten Program.

The NC Pre-K Program delivers a high-quality educational experience during the year prior to kindergarten entry, enrolling at-risk 4-year-olds from low-income families who have not participated in other early childhood programs. At-risk children are distinct based on a number of factors, which include having a developmental delay or identified disability, coming from a family with an income at or below 75% of the state median income, having a chronic health condition, or limited English proficiency. Similarly, children whose parents are active duty military personnel are automatically eligible for the program.

The NC Pre-K Program is required to meet the same high-quality program standards that were in place for the More at Four Pre-Kindergarten Program. NC Pre-K operates on a school day and school calendar basis for 6.5 hours per day for 36 weeks per year.

Approximately \$18.8 million in one-time funds that were available for NC Pre-K in FY 2011-2012 were not available in FY 2012-2013; however, in 2013-2014, \$12.4 million in recurring funds were added to the program, making it possible to serve more children than originally anticipated for that year.

NC Pre-K classrooms are available statewide in private licensed Head Start programs, child care centers, and public schools. All programs must earn high-quality ratings under the state child care licensing system to qualify for participation in NC Pre-K and the state's child care subsidy system. Program standards set for NC Pre-K must be met in both public and nonpublic settings.⁸

NC Pre-K has served over 292,000 children since its inception. In 2013-2014, the program served approximately 30,000 students in 2,000 classrooms located at more than 1,000 sites.⁹

In 2010, an evaluation of the More at Four program found that economically-disadvantaged children who attended the program achieved statistically significant higher third grade math and reading scores than economically-disadvantaged children who did not attend More at Four programs.¹⁰ In 2013-14, children enrolled in the NC Pre-K Program made significant gains from pre-k through kindergarten across all domains of learning. Children showed gains in language and literacy skills, math skills, general knowledge, and behavior skills.¹¹

⁸ National Institute for Early Education Research, The State of Preschool 2015 (North Carolina, p 127-128). Available at <http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/2015%20Yearbook.pdf>.

⁹FPG Child Development Institute at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Executive Summary, Children's Kindergarten Outcomes and Program Quality in the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program 2013-14. Available at <http://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/reports-and-policy-briefs/NC%20Pre-K%20Eval%202013-2014%20Exec%20Sum.pdf>.

¹⁰ Peisner-Feinberg, E. & Schaff, J., 2010.

¹¹ FPG Child Development Institute at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Executive Summary, Children's Kindergarten Outcomes and Program Quality in the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program 2013-14.

SMART START

Smart Start is North Carolina's nationally-recognized public/private partnership to help every child reach his or her potential and be prepared to succeed in a global community. Smart Start aspires to help working parents pay for child care, improve the quality of child care, and provide health and family support services in every North Carolina county. Smart Start was created in 1993 as an innovative solution to the problem of children entering school unprepared to learn. The initiative is funded by the NC General Assembly and several prominent foundations and operates through independent, private organizations working in all 100 North Carolina counties through The North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC) and 75 local partnerships.

Smart Start's purpose is to increase the well-being of children birth to five by:

- Increasing the quality of early care and education across the state, promoting high quality early care that is child-focused, family-friendly and fair to providers
- Offering family-focused programs that improve parenting and promote involvement
- Improve outcomes for children by increasing young children's access to healthcare
- Providing programs that develop early literacy skills needed for success in school, work and life.

North Carolina's Smart Start Program has contributed to:

- More children attending high quality care (rated as 4 or 5 stars by the Division of Child Development and Early Education Child Care Licensing Program) — from 33 percent in 2001 to 73 percent in 2014.
- 2,447 child care facilities received child health consultation services funded by Smart Start in FY2015. This is an increase from 2,303 in the prior fiscal year.
- Improved early literacy rates – programs like Raising and Reader and Reach Out and Read have shown improvement in developing language and literacy skills.¹²

NORTH CAROLINA EARLY LEARNING NETWORK

The North Carolina Early Learning Network, administered by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, provides early learning communities with professional development and technical assistance to support preschool children with disabilities and their families.

Goals of the Early Learning Network:

- Provide support and training to the NC Preschool Exceptional Children Coordinators.
- Increase the knowledge, skills, and capacity of early learning communities across the state through evidence-based training and technical assistance.
- Develop and disseminate evidence and research-based materials.
- Contribute to the development of state level guidance documents, processes, and training materials.
- Scale-up multi-tiered systems of support to ensure early childhood learning through program wide implementation.
- Collaborate among and within agencies to maximize resources.¹³

¹² Smart Start, Why Smart Start Works. Available at <http://www.smartstart.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Why-Smart-Start-Works-June-2015.pdf>.

¹³ North Carolina Early Learning Network. Available at <http://nceln.fpg.unc.edu/>.

RECENT INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE NORTH CAROLINA EARLY EDUCATION

NORTH CAROLINA EARLY CHILDHOOD ADVISORY COUNCIL

In early 2014 Governor Pat McCrory reinstated the North Carolina Early Childhood Advisory Council and announced the appointment of 23 council members, including two current state lawmakers. The body is tasked with creating a comprehensive system of family services, while overseeing North Carolina's federal Early Childhood System Building Grant. Previously, the Council oversaw implementation of North Carolina's Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant. Members serve at the request of the Governor. Alongside the reestablishment of the Council, the Governor announced a new website, www.earlychildhood.nc.gov, to serve as a resource for parents and families to find programs and services, and to learn about early childhood development.