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# 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.

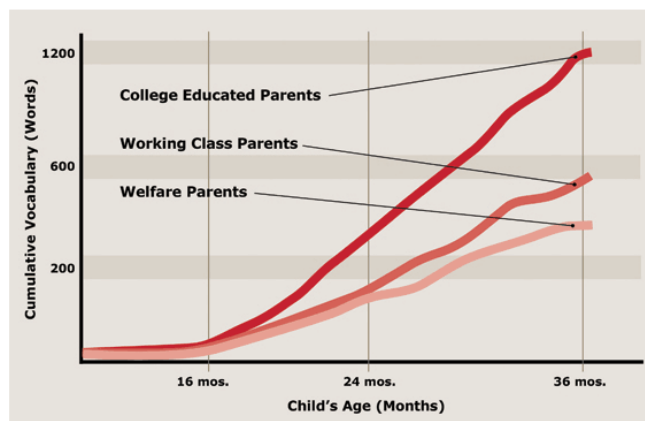
## THE CASE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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 compelling 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 a lasting impact on later success in school and life. In fact, by about age five, the brain has reached 90 percent of its adult volume, creating 85

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



percent of the intellect, personality, and skills that a child will carry through life.<sup>2</sup> 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 their peers, and some will never catch up.<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> 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>.

<sup>3</sup> Harvard University Center on the Developing Child.

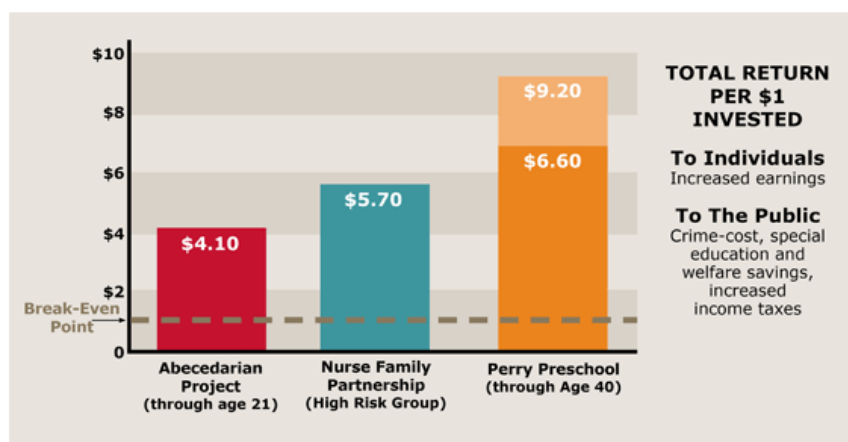
## RETURN ON INVESTMENT IN EARLY EDUCATION

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.<sup>4</sup>

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

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.<sup>5</sup>

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



## 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 Estimates 2017

Total Population	10,273,419
Children under 5 years old	606,131
Total children under 18	2,301,245
Children under 5 as percent of population	5.9%
Children under 18 as percent of population	22.4%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts, 2017 Estimates.

Available at <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/nc.US/PST045217>.

<sup>4</sup> Perry Preschool Study, Heckman & Masterov.

<sup>5</sup> Harvard University Center on the Developing Child.

<b>Child Care Highlights 2017</b>	
Number of Regulated Child Care Centers	4,607
Number of Children Enrolled in Child Care Centers	246,622
Number of Regulated Family Child Care Homes	1,878
Number of Children Enrolled in Family Child Care Homes	11,820
Number of Children Served by Subsidy	63,509
Total Number of Regulated Facilities	6,485
Total Number of Children Enrolled in Regulated Facilities	252,442

Source: NC Division of Child Development and Early Education, Monthly Statistical Summary Report - May 2017. Available at [http://ncchildcare.nc.gov/general/mb\\_snapshot.asp](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, nearly 20,000 children are currently receiving services through the state’s Preschool Exceptional Children program. <sup>6</sup> 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.
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

<sup>6</sup> NC DPI Exceptional Children Division. Available at <https://ec.ncpublicschools.gov/reports-data/child-count/reports/december-1/2017/3-5-by-lre-disability-race-and-sex.pdf>.

	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.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> 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 determined 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.

The state allocated \$9 million in FY 2017- 18 and \$18.3 million in FY 2018- 19 to NC Pre-K, with \$6 million in FY 2017-19 and \$12.2 million in FY 2018-19 coming from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. Increased funding will serve an estimated additional 1,725 children in FY 2017-18 and 3,525 children in FY 2018-19.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

NC Pre-K has served approximately 350,000 children since its inception. In 2015-2016, the program served approximately 28,757 students in 1,962 classrooms located at more than 1,000 sites.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> NC Early Childhood Foundation. Available at <https://buildthefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Final-2017-Budget-Summary.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> 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>.

<sup>10</sup>FPG Child Development Institute at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Effects of Participation in the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program at the End of Kindergarten 2015–2016 Statewide Evaluation. Available at <http://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/reports-and-policy-briefs/2015-16%20NC%20Pre-K%20Eval%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Peisner-Feinberg, E. & Schaff, J., 2010.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

In 2018, the U.S. Congress passed legislation, signed by President Trump, that assisted more working families in their ability to afford high-quality childcare. This legislation known as the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), also known as the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), doubled funding to \$5.8 billion over the course of two years.<sup>13</sup> North Carolina was provided with \$74 million to be utilized for PreK provisions, as outlined by the legislation. However, during the 2018 short session, North Carolina legislators accepted the \$74 million, but allocated the funding to other funding sources, rather than designating it directly toward child care as intended.

## SMART START

Smart Start is North Carolina's nationally-recognized public/private partnership that works toward helping 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;
- Improving outcomes for children by increasing young children's access to healthcare; and
- 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 centers (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.<sup>14</sup>

## 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.

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<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of Non-Public Education.

Available at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oie/nonpublic/childcare.html?exp=2>

<sup>14</sup> Smart Start, Why Smart Start Works. Available at <http://www.smartstart.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Why-Smart-Start-Works-June-2015.pdf>.

- 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.<sup>15</sup>

## RECENT INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE EARLY EDUCATION

### B-3 INTERAGENCY COUNCIL

The Birth through Third Grade (B-3) Interagency Council was established by the General Assembly in 2017. It is a joint council between the NC Department of Health and Human Services and the NC Department of Public Instruction. According to the Council's website ([www.b-3council.nc.gov](http://www.b-3council.nc.gov)) it has 12 voting members and four nonvoting members, and is tasked with creating a vision and accountability plan for a birth through grade three system of early education.

The B-3 Interagency Council is specifically charged with reviewing the recommendations developed by DHHS and DPI pursuant to Session Law 2017-57, Senate Bill 257, Section 7.23I.(a). Establish B-3 Interagency Council. The Council must submit a report by Feb. 15, 2019, to the legislature on the final results of the work of the Council, as well as progress on the development of a coordinated system of early care, education, and child development services.

### 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. 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; Governor Roy Cooper named his members to the Council in February 2018. Alongside the reestablishment of the Council, the Governor announced a new website, [www.earlychildhood.nc.gov](http://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.

### FEDERAL CHILD CARE AND DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANT (CCDBG)

In February of 2018, federal legislators along with President Donald Trump increased funding to the CCDBG to a historic level of \$5.8 billion over a two year period. The intent of the grant was to allow for additional funding for improvements and consistency in quality of child care for working class parents. This would increase support for child care subsidies, state and local administrative costs, and staffing needs. North Carolina received \$74 million from this federal grant for the intent of child care. However, North Carolina siphoned \$50+ million away from child care and supplanted those funds into other categories, including the N.C. Relief Fund. North Carolina then supplanted \$50+ million in TANF dollars into the child care fund.

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<sup>15</sup> North Carolina Early Learning Network. Available at <http://nceln.fpg.unc.edu/>.