

Recruiting and Retaining Early Childhood Staff in a Workforce Crisis

RFP for Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds

Buncombe County Partnership for Children

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Application Form

Question Group

Buncombe County requests proposals for projects to help the community recover from and respond to COVID-19 and its negative economic impacts.

Buncombe County has been awarded \$50,733,290 in Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (Recovery Funding), as part of the American Rescue Plan Act. This infusion of federal resources is intended to help turn the tide on the pandemic, address its economic fallout, and lay the foundation for a strong and equitable recovery.

Buncombe County is committed to investing these funds in projects that:

- Align to county strategic plan and community priorities
- Support equitable outcomes for most impacted populations
- Leverage and align with other governmental funding sources
- Make best use of this one-time infusion of resources
- Have a lasting impact

Proposals shall be submitted in accordance with the terms and conditions of this RFP and any addenda issued hereto.

[Click here for the full terms and conditions of the RFP](#)

Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds*

Name of Project.

Recruiting and Retaining Early Childhood Staff in a Workforce Crisis

Amount of Funds Requested*

\$7,576,800.00

Recovery Fund Eligible Category*

Please select one:

Small business and non-profit support

Brief Project Description*

Provide a short summary of your proposed project.

COVID-19 led to a crisis in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) workforce, which was tenuous before the pandemic. ECE programs are open, but classrooms remain closed across the county due to a lack of staff, not a lack of families seeking care. This project will infuse needed funds into ECE small businesses, which operate on incredibly tight margins, for the purpose of recruiting new teachers and retaining current employees,

many of whom worked through the pandemic in an industry that rarely provides health insurance. Buncombe Partnership for Children (BPFC), through a grant process, will allocate funds to ECE programs based on total staff numbers, and programs will be able to use those funds on a menu of activities that support staff recruitment and retention (from offering signing and retention bonuses to paying for substitutes so staff can take vacation). BPFC will monitor grantees' use of funds and collect recruitment and retention data to measure the impact of strategies used.

Project Plan*

Explain how the project will be structured and implemented, including timeframe.

BPFC will initiate and administer a 2-year grant process for ECE programs based on the number of staff employed. All licensed child care centers and family child care homes in Buncombe County serving birth-age five will be encouraged to apply. Facilities will use grant funds for up to two of the following activities to support staff recruitment and retention:

- Signing bonuses
- Retention bonuses
- Salary adjustments toward the state model ECE salary scale
- Stipends for mentors supporting new teachers
- Increased employer-provided benefits (health insurance, retirement, paid time off, tuition for staff children)
- Increased substitutes/floaters to allow for more paid planning time and/or time off
- Paid training time for new teachers – state-required 20-hour training series

The program includes an annual application. Grants will be provided twice per year based on the number of employees. Each year, child care centers will receive \$4,000 for each full-time employee and \$2,000 for each part-time employee. Family child care homes will receive \$8,000 for each full-time employee and \$4,000 for each part-time employee.

BPFC will conduct data collection, monitoring, and evaluation to identify which of the strategies is most effective in reducing staff turnover. BPFC will require that grantees provide data about employees, including dates of employment, hourly rate of pay, hours worked per week, education levels, and race/ethnicity. Grantees will also be asked to complete workforce surveys, participate in technical assistance, and attend special meetings for quality improvement, monitoring and data collection. Program staff will collect feedback from grantees via surveys, required group meetings, and one-on-one technical assistance. Data received from grantees will be analyzed for retention effectiveness every six months.

Based on grantee input, BPFC will provide additional supports such as: a Community of Practice or cohort model for new teachers, NC DCDEE file preparation for new hires, professional development sessions on the state model ECE salary scale, and broker presentations on health insurance topics.

Timeline for implementation (repeat yearly):

September: Program staff create and advertise application process

October: Information sessions held for applicants; Applications due

November: Applications reviewed; Contracts created

December: Contracts executed with grantees; First grant payments processed

January: Program staff provide technical assistance for monitoring

February: Monitoring process begins with grantees

April: Retention/recruitment data collected from grantees prior to second payment

May: Second payments made to grantees

June/July: Evaluation report created

Support for this program will be provided by BPFPC's Assistant Director and Finance Director. A contracted program coordinator with experience in program design, monitoring, and evaluation will be hired on a time-limited basis. This program is ready for immediate implementation.

Statement of Need*

Describe the need that this project will address. Include data to demonstrate the need, and cite the source of the data.

Science is clear on what our youngest children need to thrive: consistent, nurturing relationships and safe, stimulating, environments. As we emerge from 15 months of limited social interaction and increased family stress, those things are even more important. During the pandemic, what we knew became clear to employers and the general public: child care is an essential service. However, COVID-19's impact on the ECE workforce has reduced the capacity of many programs to meet children's and parents' needs.

According to NC's Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE), Buncombe's ECE workforce totaled 902 in February 2020, and now is 789, a 13% reduction. In May 2021, 65% of respondents to a survey of Buncombe ECE directors stated the #1 reason they are not serving more children is staffing. Many open-ended responses echoed this one: "It has been hard to even get people in to apply. If I could hire 3 more teachers I could reach my desired capacity. Most people are not wanting to go back to work or feel that the pay is too low." The same survey noted that inquiries from families seeking care have sharply increased, with several programs reporting more than 50 calls per week.

A 2019 Buncombe workforce study put the average ECE teacher wage at just \$13.37/hour--far below Asheville's \$17.30/hour living wage. Program directors constantly talk about their desire to better compensate staff, and they are desperate to attract quality teachers. However, the economics of this field are constrained in ways other employers are not. Any cash reserves programs had on hand were depleted during the pandemic due to low enrollment and increased facility costs. And because families are paying more for child care than they can afford already, and student-teacher ratios mean providers can't just enroll more students for more income, it is almost impossible for these mostly small, independent businesses to increase their net revenue to pay more toward personnel.

Link to COVID-19*

Identify a health or economic harm resulting from or exacerbated by the public health emergency, describe the nature and extent of that harm, and explain how the use of this funding would address such harm.

A synthesis of 76 national, state and local studies published June 2021 concluded, "The pandemic increased the complexity of early educators' jobs across all program types, in ways that negatively impacted teachers' mental health... more challenging working conditions, financial concerns, and mental health struggles may have contributed to programs' challenges recruiting and retaining teachers." Locally, though K-12 schools were closed for months, ECE programs were urged to stay open as an essential service (despite low health insurance rates and paid time off). For many ECE professionals, this was a statement of their worth, and morale plummeted. The first round of state stimulus funding included ECE teacher bonuses, but NC decided against staff bonuses with future rounds, further lowering morale. In addition, many long-time teachers left the classroom because their own school-age children were at home, or because they or their family members were high-risk. For those who remained, the job got more stressful. With substitutes and "floaters" restricted, educators had longer days, fewer breaks, and less peer interaction. Health protocols complicated schedules, added hours of cleaning and sanitizing, and also banned the use of "sensory items" fundamental to ECE, like sandboxes and play-dough. These increased stressors, combined with the fact that other industries like retail and hospitality are actively increasing wages and signing bonuses, have put pressure on the ECE workforce from all sides.

According to a 2018 ECE workforce study, among ECE teachers planning to leave the field within 3 years, 82% responded that higher wages would make them stay; 57% said better benefits; and 46% said more respect. The goal of this project is to address all three of those teacher-identified retention drivers to stabilize the current ECE workforce and recruit new employees to restore child care availability to pre-pandemic levels.

Population Served*

Define the population to be served by this project, including volume and demographic characteristics of those served.

According to Buncombe's 2018 workforce study, the ECE teaching staff is comprised of 98% women, with an average age of 38 years; 21% are people of color, 62% have children, and 44% have an annual family income below \$30,000. From February 2020 (pre-pandemic) to May 2021, Buncombe County's ECE workforce decreased from 902 to 789, a loss of 113 employees. While only one child care facility closed permanently due to the pandemic, most programs have closed individual classrooms due to the workforce shortage. Current classroom closure has resulted in an 11% reduction of children ages 0-5 served, or a loss of 460 child care slots. This is an ECE workforce crisis, but it also directly contributes to the larger community workforce shortage, since several hundred parents cannot return to jobs without those 460 child care slots.

This grant project aims to support 99 child care centers and 13 family child care homes (FCCH). Licensed child care centers serve anywhere from 15 children to 300+. Centers in Buncombe County have a range of 1-38 employees at each licensed site. Some providers, like Head Start, have multiple sites across the county. A FCCH license is issued to an individual provider in their home for up to 5 children aged 6 weeks to 5 years, with the option for 3 additional school-aged children. FCCHs have long been a staple of care for children under 3, as they provide a smaller, more home-like atmosphere than a traditional center. Family child care homes are at highest risk of closure due to their small operating budgets. This project provides enhanced grant payments to licensed FCCH.

Results*

Describe the proposed impact of the project. List at least 3 performance measures that will be tracked and reported. If possible, include baselines and goals for each performance measure.

This two-year infusion of funds will support ECE programs and their staff through an unprecedented disruption in the larger workforce, enabling programs to return to pre-COVID staffing levels and full child enrollment so that families in our community can return to work. We know that compensation is key to recruiting and retaining teachers, and that teacher retention has a ripple effect on the quality of care, financial stability of programs and programs' ability to meet families' child care needs.

This program will specifically impact teacher retention and teacher hiring rates as follows:

- Of the current workforce of 789 staff, 85% will remain in the workforce.
- Increase the current workforce of 789 staff by 75% (85 teachers).
- Of the 85 teachers hired, 80% (68 teachers) will remain in the workforce.

Evaluation*

Describe the data collection, analysis, and quality assurance measures you will use to assure ongoing, effective tracking of contract requirements and outcomes.

At the time of annual application (fall), participating facilities will be required to submit the names of all employees, hours worked, date of hire, and other demographic and education information about their staff. All supporting documentation will be submitted with the initial application. Applicants will also be asked to select up to two allowable recruitment and retention strategies where grant funding will be used for the current year.

Technical assistance and training for required monitoring documentation will be provided in group and individual settings for all grantees by the contracted program coordinator. The Coordinator will be responsible for collecting, reviewing and verifying all monitoring documentation.

Prior to the second payment of grant funds (spring), grantees will be required to report the same information and back-up documentation for their ECE employees. The contracted program coordinator will track and monitor the strategies used for each employee at each facility over the course of the year.

We will learn the following information:

of facilities

of FT/PT staff

Retention rates of employees who receive hiring/signing bonuses

Retention rates of employees who receive salary supplements

Retention rates of employees who receive assistance for their own child care

Retention rates of employees who received classroom substitute supports for sick/vacation time

Retention rates of employees who receive enhanced health care benefits

The same process will be reported in year two. At the end of each year, we will be able to identify which of the allowable retention and recruitment strategies was most effective based on workforce data provided by the grantees. The Assistant Director will be responsible for reviewing data collection methods, outcomes and the annual evaluation report with the Coordinator. The Finance Director will ensure contracts and payments are executed according to fiscal and program guidelines.

Equity Impact*

How will this effort help build toward a just, equitable, and sustainable COVID-19 recovery? How are the root causes and/or disproportionate impacts of inequities addressed?

There are many inequities in the ECE field directly linked to low compensation and exacerbated by COVID-19. Across the state, ECE teachers are seven times more likely than K-12 teachers to receive public assistance. In Buncombe County, 39% of teachers had received some type of public assistance in the previous three years. The compensation strategies in this project will add financial security to a workforce that is disproportionately women living below the federal poverty line. In addition, by stabilizing and growing this workforce to pre-pandemic levels (480 additional slots), hundreds of Buncombe residents, mostly women who left work due to pandemic child care needs, can return to the workforce.

This grant program also attempts to rectify inequitable COVID-19 funding practices for ECE programs in the last year. Smaller ECE programs, which are often closer to children's home and more reflective of their own communities, were especially vulnerable to the financial pressures of the pandemic due to higher costs of providing care on smaller scales. Unfortunately, COVID-19 emergency funding was often based on enrollment. Larger programs had access to significant federal Payroll Protection Program loans and state ECE emergency operational grants. This means that FCCHs (5-8 children in a caregivers' home) and programs with infant classrooms, which cost more to run (8-10 children and 2 teachers) received significantly less funding than programs with more lucrative preschool classrooms (18-20 children and 2 teachers). By focusing on the number of staff working in each program, this project aims to put COVID relief funds directly into the hands of the ECE workforce.

Beyond this short-term workforce stabilization and getting back to pre-pandemic slots, BPFC will leverage this grant project to introduce a comprehensive salary scale and other longer-term, more sustainable workforce retention strategies, so that gains can be maintained beyond the two funded years.

Project Partners*

Identify any subcontractors you intend to use for the proposed scope of work. For each subcontractor listed, indicate:

- 1.) What products and/or services are to be supplied by that subcontractor and;
- 2.) What percentage of the overall scope of work that subcontractor will perform.

Also, list non-funded key partners critical to project.

This project will be administered by BPFC with some support from a contracted program coordinator. The BPFC Finance Director and Assistant Director will take on approximately two-thirds of the scope of work. Our contracted program coordinator will be responsible for the final third of the work.

Al Smith, long-time Program Evaluator with Burke County Smart Start, will serve as the contracted program staff. Mr. Smith has completed contracted program and fiscal monitoring for BPFC for the last five years and has more than 15 years of experience monitoring early childhood programs. We have found his services to be affordable and his attention to detail impeccable. Mr. Smith has a deep understanding of current theory and best practices in early care and education and will be responsible for performing the following tasks:

- Review of application eligibility based on written program guidelines created by BPFC
- General grants administration
- Data collection and outcomes oversight
- Technical assistance and training of grantees
- Fiscal and program monitoring
- Evaluation of program outcomes
- Program support to Al Smith will be provided by BPFC's Assistant Director. The Finance Director will be responsible for all grant payments and fiscal management functions.

Other partners critical to this work are the members of Asheville-Buncombe Preschool Planning Collaborative and several program directors and classroom teachers who came together to co-design this proposal. We heard from teachers what dollar amounts would be impactful on their lives; we heard from directors that they needed retention options beyond just signing and retention bonuses, depending on their staff characteristics and previous investments. The details of this proposal were designed by those most impacted, and BPFC will continue to be responsive to the needs of our local workforce and ECE experts.

Capacity*

Describe the background, experience, and capabilities of your organization or department as it relates to capacity for delivering the proposed project and managing federal funds.

As the longtime provider of Child Care Resources and the administrator of the NC Pre-K Program in Buncombe County, BPFC has connections with ECE programs and has built strong relationships with directors and teachers. This program is structured similarly to our Sustaining Facility Quality (SFQ) grant, a program we have successfully administered for 18+ years. SFQ provides direct grants to 4- and 5-star programs to support high quality practices and facilities. The same BPFC staff leading SFQ will be the lead staff on this new grant program, with similar application and monitoring processes that have been developed with ECE programs over many years. We will strengthen our capacity to administer this program by bringing on a contractor. BPFC has contracted previously with an individual with evaluation, monitoring and

programmatic expertise to conduct fiscal and programmatic monitoring of our in-house programs, including SFQ. The contractor has agreed to work on this project should funding be awarded.

Additionally, BPFC's Workforce Development Program (WFD), aimed at recruiting, training, and coaching new teachers, will be an important complimentary program as we work to increase the workforce and support teachers new to the field. The WFD program has expanded and strengthened the workforce pipeline locally. WFD staff have a keen sense of ECE programs' needs for substitutes and teachers and make the connection for newly trained early educators seeking employment and ECE programs actively seeking substitutes and teachers.

BPFC has experience managing federal funds, which make up most of the NC Pre-K funding and require detailed spending tracking, fiscal reporting and managing contracts with our NC Pre-K providers. The program is monitored and audited annually and has had no findings.

Budget*

Provide a detailed project budget including all proposed project revenues and expenditures, including explanations and methodology. For all revenue sources, list the funder and denote whether funds are confirmed or pending. For project expenses, denote all capital vs. operating costs, and reflect which specific expenses are proposed to be funded with one-time Buncombe County Recovery Funds.

Download a copy of the budget form [HERE](#). Complete the form, and upload it using the button below.

Copy of COVID Recovery-Funds-budget-Final.xlsx

Special Considerations*

Provide any other information that might assist the County in its selection.

If full funding is not available, the project budget may be reduced by 50% and the timeline of available awards decreased from two years to one. We will make every effort to maintain the dollar amount of grant payments to individuals in order to maximize retention and recruitment strategies. If further adjustments to the budget are needed, facilities with fewer employees will be prioritized.

Citations

From Historic Crisis, Historic Opportunity: Using Evidence to Mitigate the Effects of the COVID-19 Crisis on Young Children and Early Care and Education Programs, June 2021. Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan (a synthesis of 76 high-quality national, state and local studies)

Working in Early Care and Education in Buncombe County: 2018 Workforce Study. Commissioned by Buncombe Partnership for Children and produced by Child Care Services Association

File Attachment Summary

Applicant File Uploads

- Copy of COVID Recovery-Funds-budget-Final.xlsx

List expenses here			\$	-		
List expenses here			\$	-		
			Total	\$	7,576,800.00	