



YEAR ONE REPORT



BUILDING CAPACITY

in Buncombe County to
Expand NC Pre-K
Availability & Accessibility

Year One Report



Buncombe
Partnership
for Children

July, 2023

a partner in the
Smart Start network 

Brief Background

In January of 2021 at a budget retreat, in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Buncombe County Commissioners identified *pre-k expansion* as a local priority, in order to support a greater number of underserved families and increase kindergarten readiness. That call to action passed to Buncombe's Early Childhood Education and Development Fund Committee (established in 2018 to oversee county investments in early childhood), who explored possible models and avenues for expansion. After 6 months of research and deliberation, they recommended investing in NC Pre-K to leverage state pre-k funds and grow capacity for an established program with years of positive outcomes.

That summer, county staff approached Buncombe Partnership for Children (BPFC), the local NC Pre-K administrator, about preparing a formal set of recommendations toward expanding NC Pre-K capacity. In December 2021, BPFC submitted a report with six strategic recommendations, based on extensive stakeholder input. These strategies focused heavily on stabilizing the program post-COVID, and on building capacity to be able to expand enrollment in the coming years. In May of 2022, County Commissioners appropriated COVID Recovery funding for a two-year pilot of BPFC's recommendations.

This report provides a brief overview of the three strategies that began implementation in the first year of the local pilot (in **blue**), with key data points and lessons learned, as well as a preview of the work that will start in year two (in **green**).

Pilot strategies to build local NC Pre-K capacity

Barriers to PROVIDING

Fully funded NC Pre-K

- Supplement slots by 36%
- Pay licensed teachers on parity with K-12
- Ensure quality supports

ECE Education & Career Pipeline

- Ed Advancement Coach
- Cohort model
- Logistical/retention supports

Ramp up to NC Pre-K Program

- Admin & teacher coaching
- NC Pre-K tools and PD
- Logistical/retention supports

Barriers to ACCESSING

Coordinated Outreach & Enrollment

- Online application portal
- Outreach & navigation
- Coordinated placement

Expanded access to wrap-around care

- Pilot innovations
- Demand & feasibility study

Expanded access to transportation

- Pilot innovations
- Demand & feasibility study

Strategy 1:

Fully Funding NC Pre-K

The Problem

In February of 2017, a state-wide report concluded that the state reimbursement for NC Pre-K slots covered just 61% of the actual average cost of care (calculated then as \$9120/child/year).

In 2021, private centers in Buncombe County said they could not afford to meet the higher standards of NC Pre-K, especially employing Birth-Kindergarten (B-K) licensed teachers, at the state's low reimbursement rate. No providers at that time expressed interest in opening a new NC Pre-K classroom, and a few NC Pre-K providers were considering dropping the program for financial reasons.

Our Approach

This first core strategy aimed to make the state's NC Pre-K program a more cost-effective, sustainable program for local private providers. We addressed this fundamental challenge in several ways:

- Increased the per-slot reimbursement by 36% to more fully cover costs
- Required that B-K licensed teachers be paid on the local K-12 salary scale
- Required that assistant teachers with associate degrees be paid a minimum of \$15.80 per hour



Lessons Learned

- Lead teacher pay parity with K-12 was impactful, as 73% of lead teachers reported that the raise *increased their intention/ability to remain in NC Pre-K*.
- Local investments in NC Pre-K are still limited by what can become center-wide practices. For example, programs asked that the required NC Pre-K assistant pay be no higher than \$15.80 because they couldn't pay other assistants with similar qualifications any higher. Notably, NC Pre-K assistant teacher retention was just 81%, and less than half of assistants reported that their raise increased their intention/ability to remain in NC Pre-K.
- Private centers were the main beneficiary of this funding strategy, and they experienced the most stabilization.
 - All NC Pre-K classrooms in private centers stayed open, child enrollment averaged 97%, teacher retention was 97%, and four new private sites applied for NC Pre-K slots.**
- Teachers and directors have pointed to classroom behavioral health supports as another needed teacher retention strategy.

Strategy 2:

Providing Higher Education Supports



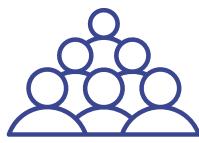
The Problem

In Buncombe County, where there is no university that offers a B-K licensure program and no real “pool” of licensed ECE teachers, we rely on full-time teachers to simultaneously pursue ECE education to reach NC Pre-K’s lead and assistant teacher education requirements. In 2021, directors reported that their teachers needed significantly more support than they could provide to enroll in and complete college courses.

Our Approach

Building on BPFC’s Workforce Development Program (which recruits and trains new teachers in the field) this project provides supports for veteran teachers pursuing a variety of ECE certificates, associate and bachelor’s degrees and B-K licensure to grow our pool of educated professionals. Core elements include:

- Higher Education Coach (navigator, accountability coach, emergency resource, and empathetic ear for participants)
- Leveraged local, state, and federal funds (T.E.A.C.H.™ Early Childhood Program, Child Care WAGE\$™ Program, Pell grants, AB Tech’s Blazing Trails scholarship, etc.)
- Cohort model for increased social supports
- Individual financial incentives and barrier reduction (laptop lending, gas cards, etc.)



26

participants
enrolled (avg. years
experience: 10.7)



54

additional
teachers have
expressed interest



100%

responded they are
more likely to keep
teaching in ECE
because of supports.

This program has made it possible to take more classes in school.”

Lessons Learned

- Recruitment takes time. Many teachers have expressed enthusiastic interest but have needed several months to think and arrange life (child care, work schedules, etc.) before committing.
- Support is valuable at all levels. Roughly 44% of participants are seeking their A.A.; 24% their B-K licensure; 12% an ECE or admin certificate; 12% their Bachelor’s; 8% their M.A.
- The average years of teaching experience is telling—many participants are long-time professionals who *want* to improve their skills and status, teachers who have stayed through unprecedented COVID disruptions and challenges (in the classroom and at home).

The additional money is helpful... I do not feel as obligated to do extra work that overwhelms me and impacts school and teaching.”

Strategy 4:

Coordinated Pre-K Outreach and Enrollment

The Problem

The two pre-k programs that serve under-resourced families in Buncombe County (Head Start and NC Pre-K) are run by different agencies and have different eligibility criteria, application timelines, and processes. Often local families would only know of one, not realizing until it was too late that their chances of receiving a pre-k slot were better with the other program.

Our Approach

This strategy expanded our community's development of one online preschool application for all publicly funded preschool options in Buncombe County. This makes outreach and referrals much simpler across the community, and it also allows for unduplicated applicant and waitlist data, which we have never had before. Finally, it allows our community partners to work together to place children where their families' needs are best met and where public funds are maximized. Core components include:

- An online platform where preschool applications are submitted, communications with families are tracked, and cross-program data are collected
- A full-time, bilingual Buncombe Preschool Outreach & Enrollment Coordinator to assist families and promote the portal
- Promotional activities (print, radio, TV, social media, in-person)



638

apps submitted; goal for FY23-24 is 680, the pre-COVID high



88%

of applicants were placed at their first choice



17%

of applicants were English language learners

"It was so easy to use the portal and complete the application. I wish the charter schools did something like this too."

Lessons Learned

- Families we meet at public events enthusiastically celebrate all efforts to make this confusing process simpler.
- It has been difficult for Head Start to point all their families to the Buncombe Pre-K portal, since they also serve 3-year-olds and Madison County families.

"The process was so easy and self-explanatory compared to what I had to do when I applied in (neighboring county)."

Strategy 3: Ramp Up to NC Pre-K

The Problem

NC Pre-K requires teacher education, classroom practices, family engagement, and program accountability that are not familiar to many in private child care. Also, private centers can rarely afford the expensive curricula and assessments required by NC Pre-K. Once contracted as an NC Pre-K provider, however, a center is immediately held to all NC Pre-K requirements, including using those costly curricula and assessment tools effectively. Directors noted this as a significant barrier to providing NC Pre-K.

Our Approach

This strategy supports potential NC Pre-K providers to learn about NC Pre-K standards, build capacity and skills to meet those standards, and develop policies and procedures to successfully integrate NC Pre-K into center operations BEFORE they enter into an NC Pre-K contract. Components include:

- Regular, intensive coaching for directors and classroom teachers
- NC Pre-K core instructional tools and related trainings for participants
- Substitutes and participant stipends to ensure each educator's ability to participate fully

Early/Planning Successes

- New staff member hired in June 2023 to implement ramp-up coaching.
- This strategy leverages the funding streams, resources and expertise of BPFC's internal NC Pre-K Administration and Child Care Resources teams, as well as state programs like T.E.A.C.H. and WAGE\$.
- We are already working closely with the two NC Pre-K sites approved to open August 2023 to try out new ramp-up approaches and tools, the timing of supports, etc. to inform the bigger launch of this activity in July.



Strategies 5-6:

Wrap-Around and Transportation Access

The Problem

In Buncombe County and across the state, families have identified the schedule of NC Pre-K (6.5 hours/day, 10 months/year) and the lack of transportation as significant barriers to participation. Some families can qualify for child care subsidy to help pay for afterschool and summer care, but not all sites offer this. Historically, only Asheville City Schools and Head Start have offered (limited) transportation, but even that was severely disrupted during the pandemic. These barriers deter many families from even applying.

Our Approach

BPFC has identified no pre-k programs in NC (or beyond) that are systematically meeting these needs, nor any accepted “best practices” at the local level. Thus, we are taking an exploratory approach, using local funding to engage families more deeply in learning and to conduct small pilots to gauge the impact of possible solutions. Unfortunately, in the post-COVID staffing crisis, the most obvious approaches, like paying to significantly increase afterschool staff, or leasing vans to run pre-k routes, require part-time staff and have proven impossible. Working with local parents and educators, we have identified a list of supports that can be provided directly to families (monthly gas cards, bus passes, extra car seats, funding for afterschool slots when families do not meet the work requirements of child care subsidies, etc.).

Early/Planning Successes

- A work group with 8 parents and 4 early educators met monthly through FY23, brainstorming solutions and researching 50 local, state, and national options to help more families access NC Pre-K. This work group also helped conduct a family survey with 200+ respondents and a focus group of Spanish-speaking families with 25 participants. In the end, seven of the 50 research options were selected for pilot programming in FY 23-24. Work group members have requested quarterly meetings in FY 23-24 to help advise on implementation of pilot strategies.
- The creation of interactive maps for Buncombe County Pre-K helped us identify areas of highest need for summer programming and potential transportation routes.
- BPFC convened the YMCA and Head Start, who agreed to partner on a summer care program for NC Pre-K children at the Arden YMCA summer camp site (Jun-Aug 2023).
- BPFC has begun work with a consultant to lead a Community-Based Participatory Research study, focusing on BIPOC, English-learning, and rural families. This research will more deeply explore barriers to NC Pre-K as well as explore and prioritize a variety of community-generated solutions.

