



Durham PreK: A Caring Community’s Vision for High-Quality Early Education

In 2016, a diverse group of caring and committed Durham citizens set out to discover how they could improve and expand preschool options to families with young children. A decade later, Durham is the proud home of a national model for how communities can braid local, state, and federal resources to support preschool offerings available that are among the best in our state and nation.

The Durham PreK universal preschool program is thriving today, providing the best quality of education possible for more preschool children than ever before, thanks to the support of a community that fully understands the connection between educating young children and securing a successful future. The number of seats supported by DPK has increased sevenfold, boasting dozens of fully credentialed educators and many high-quality programs focused on preparing young children for success in kindergarten and beyond. And Durham County now commits more than \$10 million each year toward this effort.

Durham Community Early Education/Preschool Task Force lays groundwork for change

The Durham Community Early Education/Preschool Task Force was formed in 2016 by unanimous resolutions from the Durham County Commissioners, Durham City Council, and the Durham Public Schools Board of Education. Ellen Reckhow, a Durham County Commissioner from 1988 to 2020, had served as co-chair of the State of Durham County’s Young Children, which made [recommendations](#) for the improvement of services to young children, including more access to preschool programs.

Reckhow worked with the Early Education/Preschool Task Force and currently serves on the Governance Board of Early Years, which oversees DPK programs. She had been involved in a number of initiatives to support early childhood development for many years prior to this Task Force.

“I was seeing all these initiatives, but one thing that just struck me ... was the fact that I wasn’t sure that a scattershot effort where kids are getting help periodically but not in a more comprehensive approach throughout their lives was working,” said Reckhow. “The goal (with the

Task Force) was to get more of our 4-year-olds, particularly from low-income families, into high-quality PreK programs, because what we had seen there was a gap among incoming kindergartners depending on whether or not they'd had good quality PreK services."

Dr. Linda Chappel, currently Senior Vice President for Early Years, was a co-chair of the Task Force. She said that the establishment of the Task Force was the culmination of a groundswell of support for young children that had been happening in the Durham community for quite some time.

"This was the result of more than 20 years of deep and meaningful advocacy - grassroots as well as institutional power - working together to push this as a priority," said Dr. Chappel. "There were many wonderful community members advocating and working toward it, but what Durham did was a good job engaging elected officials as partners in this work as well."

Task Force Charge and Structure

The Early Education/Preschool Task Force was charged with:

- Identifying evidence-based practices of high-quality preschool and assessing Durham's capacity to provide it;
- Exploring methods and financial models for offering expanded access to high-quality preschool; and
- Recommending an implementation timeline.

"We had eight months to look at capacity, to more deeply look at evidence-based practices, how much it would cost, what kind of financial models were even feasible, what was the current capacity to even start something, and what could be an appropriate implementation timeline," said Dr. Chappel. "We were charged to have a report to outline specifics and to look deeply at public preschool as a strategy."

The public bodies assigned 17 members from diverse social and professional backgrounds to the Task Force. These members recruited more community leaders, and the Task Force membership grew to 52. Subcommittees were formed to examine high-quality preschool best practices and capacity, explore financing options, gauge public support and expand outreach, and evaluate the groups' efforts.

Research Findings and Community Needs

The Task Force concluded its work in spring 2017. Its research found that the average cost of child care in Durham greatly surpassed the federal benchmark of 7 percent of a family's income. They also discovered that seats in licensed centers and home-based care were available for fewer than half of infants and toddlers and only two-thirds of preschool-aged children.

In addition, they discovered that nearly 4 in 10 of Durham's children were entering kindergarten

with reading proficiencies, but that there was a significant gap in proficiency between white children and minority children. Their research found that high-quality preschool programs could address these findings regardless of poverty level.

Investing in Teachers and Program Quality

DPK has grounded its program with the teacher as the core for our theory of change. Investments in highly-trained educators with sound foundational requirements, certifications, and continuing professional development are crucial to success for students. In addition, high-quality curriculum, high facility and material standards, and low student-teacher ratios are required.

Aligning compensation of DPK teachers with those in Durham's public schools was non-negotiable, said Dr. Iheoma Iruka, a public health professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who served on the initial Task Force and is a former chair of the Early Years Governance Board.

"You can't have a high quality program without meeting the emotional and financial needs of the workforce," said Dr. Iruka. "A lot of the funds that support DPK goes more to the actual compensation of the personnel, along with making sure they have the academic resources such as coaching and providing assistance so they can meet high quality marks."

Recommendations for Expanding Preschool Access

The Early Education/Preschool Task Force [recommendations](#) included:

- Serving all 3- and 4-year-olds in Durham County in high-quality preschool by 2023. The plan would first serve 4-year-olds, prioritizing children in low-income families, by August 2019.
- Conducting further study of services to 3-year-olds in Durham to better understand existing quality, best practices, and supports.
- Expanding services for 4-year-olds both in public sites (such as public schools and Head Start) and in private sites (such as licensed child care centers), while meeting at least the existing NC Pre-K standards.

The Task Force also called for program standards, including centralized administration of any new publicly funded pre-K services, funding new services to meet and exceed state child care standards, and implementing a sliding fee scale. These recommendations resulted in a commitment from the Durham County Commissioners to provide funding that would blend with other preschool resources such as Head Start, North Carolina Pre-K, Title I, and Exceptional Children's programs.

An indepth [Durham Supply and Demand Study](#) conducted in 2018 also found:

- There were six low-income preschool children in Durham for every one currently publicly funded preschool space in NC PreK, Durham Public Schools (DPS) and Head Start
- More than a quarter of Durham census tracts with more than 50 low-income preschoolers had no publicly funded preschool slots
- 92% of approximately 2,000 Durham parents who completed a random survey in 2018, rated cost-free preschool as desirable or essential.

Launching Durham PreK

The Durham PreK pilot program launched in the 2018-19 school year, in partnership with Durham Public Schools, Durham's Partnership for Children, and Durham Head Start. Over the last eight years, services to preschool-aged children have increased sevenfold, from the provision of 90 seats to nearly 700 seats. The investment by the Durham County Commissioners has grown to \$10 million per year.

Paying preschool teachers competitive wages is key to providing high-quality care. Durham PreK teachers are now compensated equally to teachers in the Durham Public Schools district. In addition, preschool teachers are supported with extensive professional development programs and are given scholarships to become credentialed, including certification and associate's degrees at Durham Technical Community College, with opportunities to pursue bachelor's degrees beyond that.

Key components of DPK include:

- Improved pay and professional development for teachers;
- Intensive coaching and technical assistance for classroom educators designed to raise instructional quality; and
- Partnerships with local educational institutions to increase and improve the supply of early education teachers.

Looking Ahead

Today, DPK is reaching 42 percent of 4-year-olds in Durham County across all public preschool programs. This includes Head Start, NC PreK, Title I, Exceptional Children's programs, and local seats. We have quite a way to go to reach our goal of 75 percent, but with the level of commitment this community has shown over the last 30 years, we are very optimistic that we can and will reach that goal.

"I feel like the growth Durham PreK has experienced is amazing; the fact they have been able to connect DPS, Head Start and a diverse array of partners ... that alone is pretty massive in a relatively short time to give so many options to families," said Dr. Ikura. "Being able to have that kind of reach with the program is tremendous."

Reckhow said that she and her colleagues are very pleased with the progress that has been made in a relatively short period of time.

“Durham PreK is not only expanding the number of seats but there’s also a goal to improve the quality of teaching, creating support for teachers to go back and get a degree in early childhood, take courses at Durham Tech or North Carolina Central University,” said Reckhow. “Our services are not just buying the seat, they’re also buying a higher quality experience. So it’s about providing the best support and the best education we can possibly provide the young people who need it the most.”