

Toward Equity in Durham PreK

Addressing the Accessibility of Wraparound Care
as a Barrier to Universal PreK in Durham



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Executive Summary

Since its founding in 2018, Durham PreK has remained deeply grounded in Durham County's commitment to creating, sustaining, and building upon an equitable society in which all residents have the tools, supports, and opportunities for success in school and life. Public pre-K, so full of promise for future generations' educational and life outcomes, offers benefits for children and alleviates child care costs for families. Durham PreK is one of only two universal pre-K programs statewide, and North Carolina's pre-K program is one of few in the U.S. to offer six-and-one-half hours of care per day, matching a typical school day. While these facts place both North Carolina and Durham County in a pioneering position on public pre-K nationally, the hours of care provided still fall short of many parents' working hours, which prevents some families from participating in pre-K if they cannot find or afford wraparound care to cover that gap.

Amid the unforeseen challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Durham PreK Governance Committee called upon its Quality Subcommittee to develop a plan to identify and address key barriers to access and participation for families of four-year-olds in the county. The first goal in [the resulting plan](#) (Durham PreK Quality Subcommittee, 2021) aims to address the availability and accessibility of wraparound care.

This report, "Toward Equity in Durham PreK: Addressing the Accessibility of Wraparound Care as a Barrier to Universal PreK in Durham," draws on parent application data, provider surveys, one-on-one interviews with early childhood experts, and other relevant writing and research to provide a comprehensive summary of the issues related to wraparound care need, availability, and access.

Specifically, the report does the following:

- 1** Examines the current wraparound care landscape from various perspectives
- 2** Identifies key program participation challenges tied to wraparound care access and availability
- 3** Offers conclusions and recommendations for addressing these challenges now and in the future

The Current Wraparound Care Landscape

Although wraparound care is necessary for pre-K participation for many families, it is not naturally embedded in the pre-K system. Instead, wraparound care is provided as a separate service, primarily in participating private child care or Head Start facilities, with more limited availability in participating public school classrooms. The wraparound care that is available remains largely a product of the private child care marketplace, meaning that the hours covered, the cost, and the consistency of the service are subject to wide variations across the constellation of pre-K providers.

As small business owners, private child care providers must assess parent demand for wraparound care to calculate their staffing and financial capacity to meet that demand. Most providers say that they would like to offer wraparound care service to families but cannot always guarantee its availability. Even when the service is available, not all families find it affordable. Families whose incomes already require assigned parent fees to participate in pre-K may be unable to pay more or may find that the combined cost of pre-K and wraparound care is a disincentive to move their child from their existing full-time care. For families with incomes low enough to attend pre-K for free, some will not qualify for subsidies and even those that do will find subsidies limited, hard to obtain, or disconnected from their pre-K placement.

These issues are not new but have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving weary parents struggling more than ever to find and afford care. Many parents—especially mothers and disproportionately women of color—have sustained losses in available work, wages, and career advancement, either because they assumed additional child care responsibilities by default or because they had few or no other choices for care. Service industry jobs were especially hard hit, including child care, which has experienced severe child care staffing shortages in North Carolina and across the country, resulting in classroom or facility closures. Families of children too young to be vaccinated who have been able to sustain or regain employment at some point during the pandemic have had a hard time finding or remaining consistently in care through wave after wave of emerging variants of the coronavirus. And even as COVID cases ebb and public health precautions begin to ease, the availability of child care has not sufficiently recovered to meet the demand and may not do so for some time.



Key Challenges to Wraparound Care Access and Pre-K Participation



SUPPLY AND DEMAND DILEMMA

The availability of wraparound care is dependent on the marketplace and is further complicated by the timing of Durham PreK seat offers. The result is a supply and demand dilemma for both providers and parents. Funding mechanisms, developmental screenings, and other factors result in seat offers being made during the summer prior to the approaching pre-K year, but private child care providers often require enrollment commitments in the preceding winter or spring. Parents hoping to transition from private child care to pre-K must either decline to commit to their current provider for the upcoming school year and risk receiving a pre-K seat offer that does not include wraparound care or re-commit to their existing child care provider and forego the opportunity to participate in pre-K. These conditions may deter some families from applying to pre-K in the first place or cause them to withdraw their application before seat offers are even made. The choice to secure full-time care and avoid the risk of pre-K without wraparound care for those families who can afford to do so unwittingly places the burden of generating sufficient demand for wraparound care on those pre-K applicant families with fewer options for full-time care.



DISCONNECTION FROM SUBSIDY

For some families that accept a pre-K seat and do have the opportunity to use wraparound care, the cost will exceed their financial resources. Child care subsidy in the form of either state-funded vouchers or Smart Start-funded scholarships introduces a third party into a family's pursuit of wraparound care. However, county child care voucher programs currently do not identify or prioritize pre-K families that need wraparound care, and the eligibility criteria for vouchers and the pre-K program differ, leaving some families to rely on chance that they will be pulled from the waiting list for subsidy or face having no help paying for wraparound care. Smart Start-funded scholarships have higher income eligibility criteria and do identify and prioritize pre-K families for wraparound care—but with far more limited funding and with other types of restrictions on eligibility or hours covered, which does not always serve families' or providers' needs.



DIMINISHED POOL AND PIPELINE OF CHILD CARE PROFESSIONALS

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, child care educators often struggled to make ends meet. Low pay and a lack of benefits, including health insurance, contributed to high poverty rates for child care professionals and, unsurprisingly, high turnover in the field. The pandemic revealed the essential nature of child care work while also introducing new health hazards and hardships for those educators who were also caring for loved ones at home or were at heightened risk for COVID themselves. Yet wages for child care educators often remain below those working in grocery, retail, and other more profitable industries. Large numbers of child care educators have left their jobs and even the field to seek better pay and working conditions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The promise of pre-K can be fulfilled if programs are built to be sustainable and to attract and retain all kinds of families regardless of individual resources. Preschool-aged children do not enter pre-K as individual entities; these children are an extension of the families in which they live. The only way to make pre-K truly universal and accessible to all is to support not only the child but the family, which means providing support for the ability for parents to work full-time. Equally important is providing the respect, compensation, and career pathways that will incentivize early childhood professionals to return to or choose early childhood education. The care children need and deserve simply will not exist without them. To address these needs, this report offers the recommendations outlined below.



STABILIZE DEMAND FOR WRAPAROUND CARE

Elevate family wraparound care need indicated in the universal pre-K application in the selection criteria for pre-K seats.

Streamline services so that families do not have to navigate two separate systems to seek pre-K and wraparound care. Restructure seat offers to meet stated family needs, such as differentiating between school-day and extended-day seats.

Eliminate means-testing and apply one measure for income and eligibility thresholds to determine what, if anything, families will pay for the amount of care they need.

Set standards for facilities that offer wraparound care so that service hours and costs are more consistent across the system.



AMEND THE WAY WRAPAROUND CARE IS REIMBURSED

Pursue a pre-K priority designation and identify a minimum number of seats to be served through the local child care voucher program to facilitate pre-K program participation.

Restructure the Smart Start scholarship funding set aside for wraparound care to support extended-day seats for qualifying families.

Support state-level initiatives aimed at raising provider reimbursement rates and bestowing presumptive eligibility for subsidy on families that qualify for the state pre-K program.



STRENGTHEN PATHWAYS TO THE EC PROFESSION WITH EQUITY IN MIND

Partner with colleges and universities that offer early childhood education degree programs to offer paid student placements with Durham PreK facilities. Such a pilot program will build and nurture the early childhood workforce while providing the staffing levels needed to meet demand for wraparound care service.

Tap into T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® North Carolina scholarship programming to create pathways to degree attainment and support recruitment of a workforce representative of the pre-K population. This recommendation supports early childhood students and can be tailored to meet an additional Durham PreK equity goal aimed at increasing the number of Spanish-speaking teachers of Latinx/Hispanic background.

Introduction

Consider the afternoon bell. The universal sound that marks the end of the school day is a familiar one. For most school children, the bell signals the weekday transition from an intentional learning environment to something else. For some children, this is the moment to shed their backpacks and enjoy supervised play with friends, support with homework, and an afternoon snack. For others, the end of the school day means a ride to a local child care facility or afterschool program where a similar experience may await. For yet another group, the moment marks the transition from school to home or perhaps to an informal arrangement for child care. Whatever this transition looks like, it marks a change not only for school children but also for parents. Children in school-calendar preschools like Durham's universal pre-K program may not yet be familiar with the sound of the afternoon bell, but their day—and that of their parents—is no less governed by the public school schedule.

Proper preparation for school in the form of a high-quality preschool environment is widely viewed as a prerequisite for school success, which in turn is expected to yield increased high school graduation rates, greater potential for post-secondary degree attainment, and

ultimately work and career opportunities that support the community and growing families. This cradle-to-career view of how we prepare children for school and life success begins in the classroom and ends in the workplace, but noticeably absent from the conversation is what happens to many of those successful, productive workers when they become parents themselves and face the glaring disconnect between the operational schedules followed by pre-K-12 schools and most employers.

In this report, we will delve into the issues and complexities that arise from a world in which parents are left to stitch together the resources and supports needed to care for their young children during the times when school and work schedules do not align. Keeping equity as a core component, it is important to consider on whose shoulders this kind of uncompensated labor typically falls and how that invisible labor has combined with the stress and hardship imposed by the pandemic to impact the larger workforce.

1 We will examine how communities around the state and country are delivering pre-K and addressing wraparound care, before focusing our attention on the current system of wraparound care delivery in Durham County, including the availability of financial assistance for families who need help paying for care.

2 We will look closely at parental need for pre-K wraparound care and consider not only what is gained from full-day care but also what is lost when parents are unable to access care beyond the pre-K day.

3 We will consider feedback from pre-K child care providers about the factors that support or hinder their ability to offer wraparound care and highlight the conditions under which they must make these business decisions.

4 We will devote attention to the key factors that stymie local efforts to extend wraparound care to every pre-K family that needs it, as well as the larger issues at play that threaten progress in addressing this barrier to pre-K.

Based on this review of wraparound care, we will present recommendations for supporting the needs of families and child care providers and for stabilizing wraparound care delivery for participants in Durham's universal pre-K program.

Wraparound Care as Part of Durham’s Commitment to Equity

The desire to study and improve local wraparound care delivery originated with the Durham PreK Governance Committee’s focus on equity in service delivery for families. That focus stems, at least in part, from Durham County’s wider commitment to realizing full racial equity for its residents across all aspects of civic life. In recent years, Durham’s leadership has examined in depth how the county’s economy; legal, community health, environment, housing, and education systems; and history have served its populace—and perhaps more importantly, how they have not—and recommended changes to bring Durham closer to its vision for racial equity. The City of Durham’s Racial Equity Task Force, formed in 2018, invested months of study, reflection, and collaboration to produce and present a [final report](#) in 2020 (Durham Racial Equity Task Force, 2020) detailing what a racially equitable Durham would look like and how it would operate. Integral to the recommendations for education, one of six major areas on which the task force focused, was a commitment to “comprehensive services to support the whole child,” which included both universal, high-quality preschool and the provision of before-and-after care for all families.

Durham PreK’s Equity Plan

The Durham PreK Governance Committee formed its Quality Sub-Committee to take up the task of incorporating Durham County’s focus on equity with relevant early childhood research on this topic. The result was the [Durham PreK SY21-22 Equity Plan](#) (Durham Pre-K Quality Subcommittee, 2021), which identifies four initial areas of focus, the first of which is addressing access to wraparound care. The plan’s initial goal is to “expand access to before-and-after care by supporting programs in offering the services and [to] support the affordability for before-and-after care for families.” Strategies include the provision of financial resources for both child care providers and families, as well as staffing and transportation supports for providers. The report also addresses potential revisions to the Child Care Scholarship program’s eligibility criteria that may prevent some families from accessing needed financial assistance for wraparound care.



Alignment with State and Local Educational Equity Goals

The goals put forth by Durham County and the Durham PreK program of expanding family access to needed child care services and supporting providers in the provision of those services strongly align with other state and local efforts to bring equity to our education systems. These efforts have taken shape concurrently with Durham County and Durham PreK's plans, and taken together, they coalesce into a comprehensive plan for addressing the needs of Durham's youngest learners.

EARLY CHILDHOOD ACTION PLANNING

In 2019, North Carolina established a plan to measurably improve outcomes for children birth to age 8 by 2025. The resulting state [Early Childhood Action Plan](#) (ECAP) (NCDHHS, 2019) is formed around 10 goals that aim to provide a fair opportunity for North Carolina's children to "grow up healthy in safe and nurturing families, schools, and communities so that they are learning and ready to succeed." One of the goals centers on high-quality early learning, with specific aims to increase access to and participation in NC Pre-K and to address the affordability of child care for families. The state of North Carolina clearly recognizes not only the lifelong benefits of high-quality early childhood care and education but also the struggles families face in finding, accessing, and paying for this care. Alleviating inequity is cited as one of the guiding principles behind the ECAP and is addressed directly in the strategy to prioritize racial equity, cultural competence, and family engagement in child and family systems.

Following the establishment of the state ECAP, Durham County emerged as the first to form its own ECAP to achieve an "aligned and sustainable early childhood ecosystem that addresses disparities in early childhood outcomes." Durham's ECAP came about through a public-private partnership between Durham County and the Durham Children's Initiative and involved early childhood systems leaders, as well as parents, early childhood service providers, and interested community members. Through a [well-defined process](#) (ECAP, 2021), planning leaders formed four workgroups that collected early childhood stories, data, and resources from the Durham community and produced 21 recommendations. Over the next year, action planning teams worked to develop strategies for implementing these recommendations, ultimately producing [Grown in Durham: Durham's Early Childhood Action Plan](#) in September 2021.

This plan expressly addresses early childhood education under two of its five goals. The first of these goals is [Learning and Ready to Succeed](#), which addresses the sustainability of the child care system, the affordability of high-quality care, coordination between the early childhood and elementary education systems, support for families of children with developmental delays or disabilities, and promotion of early literacy starting at birth. Among the strategies for achieving this goal are raising public awareness of the critical role high-quality early childhood education plays in children's futures; increasing child care provider reimbursement rates; expanding subsidy eligibility and affordability for families; supporting universal, affordable infant and toddler care; and securing greater investments in Durham PreK for the purposes of program sustainability and expansion to three-year-olds.

The second goal where high-quality early childhood education plays a crucial role is [Systems Strengthening](#). This goal is focused on rooting out institutional racism in our existing systems, re-shaping those systems through an anti-racist lens, and ensuring that power is shared with families and community members who interact with these systems. One way to share power with families is to listen to and value their lived experiences in the face of a community problem—in this case, to learn more about whether those who need wraparound care are able to access it. Additionally, one recommendation under this goal involves addressing early childhood professionals' unmet needs for respect, compensation, professional development, and diversification so that the workforce reflects the communities it serves and has access to pathways for career advancement.

NORTH CAROLINA'S LEANDRO PLAN

Concurrent with the development of Durham's Racial Equity Task Force report and the state and local ECAPs, the state of North Carolina was also laying the groundwork to address historic inequities in the state's education system, inclusive of preschool. The Leandro Plan stems from a court order that reaffirmed North Carolina's constitutional duty to ensure all children have access to a sound basic education. Formed in 2017 by Governor Roy Cooper, a 19-member [Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education](#) (Cooper, 2017) worked with an appointed consultant on recommendations to the state to ensure it meets its constitutional obligations. Published in January 2020, the Commission's [recommendations](#) (Cooper, 2020) include, among other elements focused on NC Pre-K, more state funding to expand the program to all eligible four-year-olds; higher payments to participating facilities that reflect the true cost of care, including pay parity for preschool teachers on par with public schools; and programs that allow for full-day, full-year care for NC Pre-K participants, with program eligibility aligned between NC Pre-K and state subsidy.

The Link Between Equity and Quality

A central theme among these reports and plans is the intrinsic connection between a quality education—starting before kindergarten—and equitable opportunities and outcomes for all. This connection does not flow in only one direction, however. Equity is, in and of itself, a marker of quality in our educational systems.

Halley Potter, senior fellow with The Century Foundation, a think tank that focuses on economic, racial, and gender equity in education, health care, and work, summarized in a May 2021 article much of the [research over the last decade on the benefits of racially and socio-economically diverse classrooms](#) (Potter, 2021) for students of all backgrounds. She writes of intentional design elements that work to ensure pre-K classroom quality: "Racial and socioeconomic integration is one of the [pre-K] design elements that can lead to quality. Children of all backgrounds learn more on average in racially and socioeconomically diverse preschool classrooms, and diverse early learning settings can help reduce prejudice among young children." She adds, "Children typically develop awareness of racial and social categories by kindergarten, and exposure to peers helps shape these perceptions."

Universal pre-K plays an important role in creating socio-economically diverse classrooms in the way it reduces or eliminates the effects of means testing on families who participate in pre-K. Much has been made over the recent study of Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K (TNVPK) program, which showed worse outcomes in 6th grade for children who participated in the program in 2009 and 2010. Some reviews that followed publication of these findings pointed

out that [low per-child spending and poor-quality classroom practices](#) (Mader, Behind the findings of the Tennessee pre-K study that found negative effects for graduates, 2022) may have impacted children's outcomes. Other reviews also highlighted the fact that there are generally differences in outcomes between targeted and universal pre-K programs. Both now and [in 2009](#) (NIEER, 2009), Tennessee's pre-K program imposed an income eligibility cap of 185% of the federal poverty level. New America's review of the TNVPK study cites the greater [academic gains made by children in universal versus targeted programs, particularly for those in low-income families](#)



(Loewenberg & Sklar, 2022), and a [Brookings Institution review of the Tennessee pre-K study](#) (Weiland, et al., 2022) mirrors those thoughts while noting that means-testing may harm the same children it is purported to prioritize. Breaking down barriers to racially and socio-economically well-integrated universal pre-K yields benefits to children and families in the short term and to society in the long term. Making pre-K accessible to all families in Durham will move the county closer to its goal of becoming a racially and economically balanced community.

Threats to Equity

Both Durham County's population and racial diversity have increased in the last decade. By all accounts, greater racial diversity stands to enrich the Durham community as it welcomes new residents. Lurking behind the numbers, however, are a few warning signs. In an [article for the Duke Chronicle published in October 2021](#) (Pashankar, 2021), Sana Pashankar reported on changes to Durham's population over the last decade. Notably, even as racial diversity grew, the proportion of Black residents in Durham County fell by almost 4 percentage points. Pashankar also notes that the percentage of Durham County households in the lower-income bands fell, while those in higher-income bands rose. [Rapid gentrification has taken place in Durham's historically Black neighborhoods](#) (Brown, 2021) over the last few years. But the trend of rising housing costs is a harbinger of future affordable housing woes. The median sale price of a home in Durham County [rose from \\$295,963 in September 2020 to \\$369,400 as of July 2021](#) (Parker, 2021). Due to low inventory and a lack of new construction, this increase outpaced national trends, even as a pandemic raged over that same time period. Additionally, the population of Durham is expected to [double in the next 25 years](#) (Lavigne, 2021), leading to increased demand for housing. With recent announcements that both Google and Apple plan to expand to the Triangle area, it seems likely that affordable [housing will grow even more scarce](#) (Korn, 2021).

Durham County's government places a high value on progressive policy and community dialogue. These values will be put to the test as leaders seek to successfully align a high rate of growth with the county's racial equity goals, while remaining a community that offers high-quality education and equal opportunity for all.

How the Pandemic Has Re-shaped the Landscape

The examination of wraparound care, as described in this report, was conducted at a unique moment in history, two years into a public health crisis unprecedented in living memory. In early 2020, COVID-19 moved like a tidal wave over the country, impacting all aspects of American life and redefining who and what was considered essential to our functioning as a society. For this reason, before we consider changes to improve access to preschool, we must examine how well preschool and child care met families' needs before the pandemic—and we must consider how those needs have changed over the past two years.

Women and Mothers in the Workforce

The standard "eight"-hour workday was established in [the early twentieth century](#) (Ward, 2017) and a [nationally aligned school year was standard in most places by the 1960s](#) (Voght, 2018). At neither of these points in history were women, particularly mothers, well represented in the workforce. The persistence of the American workday remaining out of sync with the typical school day suggests that, as a society, we are long overdue for accommodating women's workforce participation, despite its steady rise over the second half of the twentieth century. A [Bureau of Labor Statistics report](#) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019), published just three months before COVID-19 reached

pandemic proportions, noted that in March 2018 the labor force participation rate of all women with children under 18 years of age was 71.4%, with unmarried mothers more likely to be working than married mothers, by more than 8 percentage points. The report noted that all mothers, even those with children under school age, were more likely than not to work outside the home. For mothers with children under six years of age, the workforce participation rate was 64.7%, and for women with children under three years of age, the rate was 62%.

In January 2020, just weeks before COVID-19 would alter American life in every conceivable way, [Time Magazine reported](#) that for the first time, women represented the majority of workers in the U.S. (Law, 2020). The article concedes, though, that “more women have been forced to choose more flexible work, which may be part time and closer to home, because they need or are expected to provide care for their families.” The article cautioned, with what in retrospect looks like prescience, that assumed child care responsibilities and “conventions in the workplace and at American schools” warrant reevaluation if society is to adequately support women’s workforce participation.

More than two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, our national response has thoroughly betrayed any notion that women might have gained equal footing in the workforce, and instead it has shone a spotlight on our national reliance on women to fulfill the majority of child care needs. Mother Jones magazine [interviewed a labor economist](#) (Rosenberg, 2022) in January 2022 to dig into some of the ways female workers have been hardest hit. One finding is that “disproportionately, those who work in care—from child to elder—are women and they’ve lost or left their jobs at alarming rates. And as the care economy worsened under the stress of the pandemic, women have also been the ones typically to pick up the unpaid labor, filling in the gaps at home or with family when paid care is hard to find.” Some of women’s work-related losses are more nuanced, however. The economist notes that women “reduce work or quit their jobs; that was more likely to be what women did than men. But parents also declined promotions, turned down training opportunities, changed to more flexible work. Those are career sacrifices. They come in missed opportunities for wage increases, for taking on more responsibility, for getting higher pay, but they don’t show up as being in or out of the labor force.”

In February 2022, Child Care Aware of America published [Demanding Change - Repairing our Child Care System](#), a report that breaks down the pandemic’s impact on child care into the areas of supply, demand, affordability, and the child care workforce. In the section on supply, the report acknowledges that “at the beginning of the pandemic, women’s jobs were most at risk because women are disproportionately represented in sectors most affected by shutdowns—including leisure, hospitality and education.” Addressing the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on women and mothers of color, the report adds that “Before COVID-19, nearly half of all working women worked in jobs paying low wages. Black women (54%) and Latina women (64%) compose the largest share of low-wage workers.”

Child Poverty on the Rise

Soon after March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic brought on historic worldwide shutdowns—closing schools, canceling sports, restricting travel, and sending workers home—the federal government acted to blunt the impact on American workers and families. The Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation program offered unemployment benefits for up to 39 weeks between



January 27 and December 31, 2020. Along with these benefits, qualifying families received stimulus payments three times between April 2020 and March 2021. Recognizing the need for continued efforts to shield families and children from financial hardship imposed by the ongoing pandemic, the American Rescue Plan included an expanded Child Tax Credit that increased in size for 2021 and, for the first time, became available to families that did not earn income from employment.

According to a [February 2022 policy brief](#) (Parolin, Collyer, & Curran, 2022) from Columbia University's Center on Poverty and Social Policy, expanded Child Tax Credit payments, delivered monthly between July and December 2021 (instead of the usual annual lump sum following tax filings) "kept 3 million children from poverty in July; by December, [the payments were] keeping 3.7 million children from poverty and reducing monthly child poverty by 30 percent." The report summarizes research on these payments by noting that they "increased families' abilities to meet their basic needs, reduced child poverty and food insufficiency, and had no discernible negative effects on parental employment." But in January 2022, when the expanded Child Tax Credit was allowed to expire, child poverty skyrocketed from 12.1% to 17%, equating to 3.7 million children.

By contrast, in June 2021, months after stimulus payments and pandemic unemployment benefits had ended but just prior to the rollout of the new monthly Child Tax Credit, the child poverty rate was 15.8%. Tragically, that puts [child poverty above the 2019 rate of 14.4%](#) (Children's Defense Fund, 2019). Considering that the Omicron variant surged at the same moment that the monthly expanded Child Tax Credit payments ended, the free fall left the lowest-income families in the sharpest decline. Analyzing census survey data, The Washington Post [reported on the impact of these concurrent events](#) (Bhattarai & Fowers, 2022) in February 2022, noting that "low-income parents have been hit disproportionately with a double whammy in recent weeks – losing both child care and income at much higher rates than their wealthier counterparts." On a more granular level, the Center on Poverty and Social Policy's recent brief points out that "one in four Black children in the U.S. lived with a monthly income below the monthly poverty line in January 2022, an increase of more than 600,000 Black children from the month prior (a 30% rise). Latino children experienced the largest percentage point increase, seeing a 7.1 percentage point (43%) increase in child poverty from December 2021 to January 2022; this increase amounted to more than 1.3 million additional Latino children in poverty in January 2022 compared to December 2021. Asian children experienced a 27% rise in their child poverty rate."

Social-Emotional and Academic Setbacks for Children

[Lower-income families were struggling before the pandemic](#) (Sherman, Zippel, Gordon, & Trisi, 2021), but COVID has laid previously unimagined obstacles in their paths over the last two years. In October 2021, [The Hechinger Report](#) noted that "over the course of the pandemic, it's been apparent to anyone who works with or parents small children how deeply the nation's difficulties have been felt by its youngest citizens" (Mader, 2021). Findings from Rutgers' [National Institute for Early Education Research](#) December 2020 Preschool Learning Activities Survey support this assertion, noting that "[many more young children had high levels of social and emotional difficulties than expected](#)" (Barnett & Jung, 2021). More recently, in March 2022, the [Brookings Institution reviewed findings](#) that indicate "[disruptions to learning have continued to negatively impact students well past the initial hits following the spring 2020 school closures](#)" (Kuhfeld, Soland, Lewis, & Morton, 2022). Even [children ages 5-11 are at heightened risk for self-harm and suicide](#) (Sparks, 2022), and their caregivers and teachers are ill-equipped to assist them with a trauma-informed approach due to the concurrent stress and upheaval they have also experienced during the pandemic.

Throughout this report, the term “wraparound care” is used to describe the time gap between a child’s school day and a parent’s workday.

The Need for a National Response

HISTORIC NATIONAL CHILD CARE INITIATIVES

A federal response is needed to overhaul a child care system that is not working well for parents, care providers, or the economy. Such a response would not be entirely unprecedented. In 1942, when many men were serving overseas in WWII, record numbers of women, including mothers, entered the workforce to perform jobs that aided the war effort. To support working mothers, [the federal government, under the Lanham Act, created universal child care facilities in 49 states](#) (Cohen, 2015). Once the war ended, many women were forced to relinquish their jobs to the men returning from war. Only once more, in 1971, did the government attempt to re-instate universal child care with the [Comprehensive Child Development Act](#) (93rd U.S. Congress, 1973), which received bipartisan support in Congress but was vetoed by then President Nixon, who cited the dangers of abandoning caring for children at home for “communal approaches to child rearing.” More than 50 years later, many families are still waiting for improvements to the child care system that will allow parents to more easily enter or re-enter the workforce.

DEFINING WRAPAROUND CARE

As a nation, however, the U.S. does not have a single approach—or even a single name—to address these schedule gaps. Wraparound care goes by a variety of labels, and there are similar terms used frequently in early childhood discourse that have ambiguous or entirely different meanings. Some states, for example, use the phrase “full-day care” to describe the length of the school day. In other states that already use a school-day basis for pre-K, “full day” is more likely to mean hours added to the school day. Similarly, “wraparound” can also refer to services offered to a family in addition to child care or pre-K, such as health or development screenings or parenting groups. Often, the term “extended day” is used in place of “wraparound” care. School systems and some pre-K programs also use the phrase “before-and-after care” to define these hours, which offers the reminder that families may need support in the mornings, possibly in addition to the afternoons, to accommodate parents’ work schedules. This point arises for practical purposes—defining exactly what we mean when we refer to wraparound care—and philosophical purposes—considering how our lack of consistent language in this area is both a symptom and a cause of our collective inability to grasp the importance of families’ needs during these hours or to shape a suitable response.

Extended hours of high quality preschool care can provide benefits to children in learning gains and preparedness for K-12 schooling in addition to benefits from the additional nutrition received after the school day ends.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO EXTENDED DAY PRESCHOOL FOR CHILDREN

One of the major points of focus in this report is parental need for additional hours of care beyond the pre-K day in order to gain or sustain employment or to pursue a degree, both goals that help to financially sustain families. The question of what benefit, if any, these extra hours of care hold for children is an important one as well. Wraparound care for preschool-age children is not well understood or supported, so perhaps the fact that there's little research on the effects of extended-day preschool is not surprising. But there are two potential benefits to preschool-aged children in extended day pre-K that are supported by research and worthy of consideration.



[One 2006 study by the National Institute for Early Education Research \(NIEER\) at Rutgers Graduate School of Education](#) (Robin, Frede, & Barnett, 2006) set out to study whether learning increases as time in preschool is increased. This preschool study compared 85 children assigned to an eight-hour program for 45 weeks to 254 children assigned to a two-and-one-half to three-hour program for 41 weeks. The [results](#) suggest the extra hours of care do, in fact, bestow benefits for preschoolers, especially those from low-income families. The researchers reported that “even students who are far behind at entry to preschool can develop vocabulary, math, and literacy skills that approach national norms if provided with extended-duration preschool that maintains reasonable quality standards.” Additionally, the report notes that “extended-day preschool of good quality had dramatic and lasting effects on children’s learning across a broad range of knowledge and skills,” and that students in the extended program continued to outperform children in the control group in follow-up testing through 1st grade. The authors concluded that because many families need full-day programs for their four-year-olds to accommodate parent work schedules, “the evidence that full-day preschool education can meet child care needs and benefit children’s learning should be of high interest to parents and policymakers.”

Beyond learning gains and preparedness for K-12 schooling, another benefit to extended preschool hours for some children may be the additional nutrition received after the school day ends. Even before the pandemic, [one in seven children lived in food-insecure households](#) (Children’s Defense Fund, 2021), with Black and Hispanic children facing food insecurity at twice the rate of White children. No Kid Hungry’s Center for Best Practices [reports among the major findings from its national afterschool survey](#) that low-income parents “indicated a strong need for afterschool meals: 59% of parents reported that they have tight household budgets, making it difficult to provide food after school is out, and 25% worry that their children do not have enough to eat between lunch and breakfast the following day” (No Kid Hungry, 2013). While these data were applicable to families with school-age children, preschool-age children’s school readiness is at risk when families suffer from food insecurity. A [study published in February 2021 in the journal Public Health Nutrition](#) looked at data from more than 15,000 three to five-year olds from the 2016–2018 National Survey of Children’s Health. The study reported that for preschool-age children, not only are there poor health outcomes resulting from food insecurity, but also that “both mild and moderate-to-severe food insecurity are associated with an increase in needing support or being at-risk in each of the four school readiness domains” (Jackson, Testa, & Semenza, 2021), especially in the domains of self-regulation and social-emotional development. Additional nutrition delivered between the school day and the transition to home could help to offset food insecurity experienced by children in lower-income families.

National, State, and Local Wraparound Care Delivery

Pre-K Around the Country

[The State of Preschool Yearbook 2020](#), (Allison H. Friedman-Krauss, et al., 2021), the latest in a series of annual reports by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), offers a state-by-state look at preschool child enrollment, funding, staffing, and quality standards, with detailed information about operational schedules and other program features. This volume in the series focused on the 2019-2020 school year, forming a snapshot of preschools across the country immediately prior to the pandemic. Given the timing of the publication, NIEER also included information on how the pandemic has impacted national preschool funding and delivery.

Defining not only wraparound care but also terms related to quality and full- or half-day programs becomes especially important when reviewing the available research and reporting in the early childhood education and pre-K fields. NIEER details the full spectrum of pre-K programs across the U.S., comparing each to a set of 10 minimum standards of quality that include appropriate expectations for children’s learning and development, curriculum supports, teacher and assistant teacher degrees, as well as specialized training for teachers and professional development for staff, class size and staff-to-child ratios, health screenings, and state requirements for continuous quality improvement. The report also takes care to define each program in terms of its operational hours. Those programs with a minimum operating schedule of fewer than four daily hours are referred to as “part-day”; those offering at least four daily hours but fewer than six-and-one-half as “school-day,” and those offering six-and-one-half or more daily hours as “extended-day.”

The report profiles all 50 states and also treats the District of Columbia as a state. These 51 profiles show that six states still have no state-funded pre-K programs of any kind. The remaining 45 profiles cover 62 state-funded pre-K programs, with some states offering multiple programs. Of these 62 programs, only 11 offer a school-day pre-K program (from four to fewer than six-and-one-half hours) and only six offer extended-day programs (six-and-one-half hours or more), including North Carolina. These numbers are based on the required minimum hours and days of operation for each program, so in some cases, local decision making may mean there are more hours of care available than is noted in the profiles. Only one state-funded pre-K program in the country offers care for a full calendar year—the Connecticut Child Day Care Contracts (CDCC) program—along with 10 daily hours of care, five days per week. Of these 62 programs, 27 (44%) do not use means testing to determine eligibility, leaving 35 that offer pre-K only to families living on lower incomes or those that have a child with a developmental need.



STATE PROGRAMS COMPARABLE TO NORTH CAROLINA'S

Nationally, 17 states offer at least some extended-day service within each state’s unique mix of available seats. For the purpose of evaluating wraparound care offerings, in this report we examine the eight states that have pre-K programs with substantially similar operational schedules to the state and local program offered by Durham PreK. Only eight states offer a required minimum of at least six hours per day over five days per week for all participating children in state-funded pre-K. Besides North Carolina, these states are Alabama, Arkansas, District of Columbia, Georgia, Hawaii, Louisiana, and Rhode Island.

Similar to North Carolina, in [Alabama](#), [District of Columbia](#), [Georgia](#), [Hawaii](#), and [Rhode Island](#), wraparound care services may be available on a case-by-case basis but are not provided by the administering agency for pre-K programs. In the places where wraparound care financial assistance is mentioned, funding appears to come separately from the administering state pre-K entity. For example, Louisiana’s pre-K program runs on a six-hour day and offers [“before- and after-school enrichment if funding is available”](#) (Jefferson Parish Early Childhood Collaborative, 2022), but it is not clear whether that funding is administered by the pre-K program or a separate entity. Arkansas’ Better Chance pre-K program runs from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. each weekday, and not only is there no mention of wraparound care or after-school in the [current parent handbook](#) (Arkansas Better Chance Coordinator Handbook Committee, 2021-22), the document notes that late pick-up will trigger calls to a child’s emergency contacts and, if those are unsuccessful, additional calls to “appropriate authorities.”

All seven of these states, as well as North Carolina, met 7.9 or more of NIEER’s 10 quality standard benchmarks. While these benchmarks do not consider universal eligibility or preschool lead teacher pay parity with the K-12 education system, the report does offer state-by-state information about both of these elements of quality pre-K. Therefore, comparisons can be made to the state and local program offered by Durham PreK using these variables. Half of these states—Alabama, Georgia, Hawaii, and Rhode Island—had pay parity between pre-K teachers and those teaching K-3. The remaining four either left that decision to local authorities (Arkansas) or had a mix of programs, some of which offered parity while others either did not or left that decision to be made locally. Additionally, half of these state programs—Alabama, District of Columbia, Georgia, and Rhode Island—were universal, meaning they set no income requirement for eligibility. Among those state programs that were not universal, only Hawaii set a higher-than-typical income cap at 300% of the federal poverty level. Louisiana and Arkansas used the more standard measure of low income, at 200% of the federal poverty level, while North Carolina used 75% of state median income. A few local programs within certain states offer similar operational schedules or have innovative features as noted below.

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

The City of Seattle offers three programs for three and four-year-olds, one of which is the [Seattle Preschool Program](#) (SPP). This universal program offers six hours of care per day, five days per week over 10 months, and tuition is either free or charged on a sliding scale based on income. The SPP website offers a tuition calculator that estimates tuition for one child and notes that a second child may attend at a 10% discount if the family’s income requires tuition. Participating sites, divided into four regions, are listed on the program website, and each site name links to a page with program hours and information about transportation, language, and the availability and cost of extended-day services. Extended care is available at some sites, and the cost is determined by and paid to individual providers. Families apply online and are considered only for the sites they select. A subset of sites requires families to apply directly to the site.

MULTNOMAH COUNTY, OREGON

Multnomah County, Oregon’s [Preschool for All](#) program was the result of work by [Early Learning Multnomah’s Parent Accountability Council](#) as well as [Universal Preschool Now](#) (UP NOW), a grassroots coalition of parents, child care providers, preschool workers, unions, and community groups “who understand that universal preschool is a fundamental part of the fight for social, racial, and economic justice.” Universal pre-K planning in Multnomah County centered heavily on parent voices and included a 10-year phase-in that would incorporate culturally relevant care options, expanded hours to accommodate parents’ work schedules, fair pay for child care staff, and full universality for all families of three and four-year-olds.



Multnomah County Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson took up the cause in 2018, forming the [Preschool for All Task Force](#). The task force met for a year to study the community needs and craft a universal pre-K measure to take to Multnomah County voters. During the planning, [parents successfully lobbied to have before and after care included](#) in the plan (Suddath, 2021), finally reaching a compromise to offer free preschool, with parents paying for the additional hours of care on a sliding scale basis. The Preschool for All Task Force ultimately merged with UP NOW and was able to place universal pre-K on the Multnomah County ballot in November 2020. The measure passed with approval by 64% of voters and is now in the early stages of implementation.

DENVER, COLORADO

Started in 2007, [the Denver Preschool Program](#) (DPP) is a universal pre-K program that works differently from most programs in that it assigns monthly tuition credits to applying families based on annual income, family size, quality rating of the chosen preschool, and amount of care needed. Families that qualify for other available subsidies may combine these with their DPP credits to try to cover the full cost of extended-day care. The program has no predetermined number of seats offered each year, and instead operates on the calculation of a likely average payment per child to determine how many children might be supported by funding allocated to the program in a given year.

One foundational element of DPP is offering parents their choice of providers. For this reason, there is no set level of quality child care supported by the program. To qualify, participating programs must either be licensed at quality levels of three or higher (out of five) or sign up to participate at quality levels one or two, with the promise that they will work toward a higher level with the support of quality improvement dollars. Providers are incentivized to participate in the program in part because this funding model ensures that every seat in their program is eligible for funding.

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

San Antonio, Texas offers universal pre-K through the [Pre-K 4 SA Program](#). Children eligible to attend for free must meet the [Texas Education Agency](#) (TEA) requirements related to family income or educational risk factors and live within the City of San Antonio or participating school districts. Families may qualify for the expanded access initiative if their annual income is between 185% and 250% of the federal poverty level. Children who live outside of the City of San Antonio or a participating school district—even those who may qualify by income or risk factor—may still attend but will pay tuition on a sliding scale. Care is provided from 7:45 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. each weekday in four centers, each located in one quadrant of the city. For parents who need care outside of the pre-K day, Pre-K 4 SA provides an extended-day program from 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. This expanded care is free for all qualifying families. Neither the [Extended Day Agreement](#) nor the [Parent Handbook](#) mentions an income requirement.

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

The New York City Department of Education administers [the city's universal pre-K program](#) and promises a pre-K seat for every four-year-old. Seats are located in NYC Early Education Centers (NYCEECs), District Schools, and PreK Centers. The program's full-day seats operate for six hours and 20 minutes daily over the school year. Extended-day and extended-year seats and those in Head Start settings offer up to 10 hours per day of care year-round, but eligibility for these seats is based on family income and needs.

LACK OF UNIFORMITY NATIONWIDE

This bird's eye view of pre-K programs around the country reveals a picture of puzzle pieces that don't seem to belong to the same puzzle. There is little uniformity in pre-K service or data collection, no alignment of pre-K teacher qualifications, and little emphasis on pay parity with K-12 teaching professionals. NIEER points out that preschool "often falls between the cracks—not quite K-12 education and not quite child care" and will therefore need federal attention and funding to deliver on its promise of setting children on a path to success for their K-12 years. Federal resources, according to NIEER, have the potential to "reduce policy conflicts across child care, Head Start, and the public schools while offering financial incentives for states to prioritize quality and access."

Pre-K in North Carolina

North Carolina's pre-kindergarten program was started in 2001 as the More at Four program, now known as NC Pre-K. The program's operational hours parallel the school system at six-and-one-half hours per day, over 10 months of the year. NC Pre-K eligibility imposes an income cap of 75% of state median income with exceptions for certain risk factors such as developmental need or limited English language proficiency. Throughout the state, NC Pre-K programs are administered through either the county Smart Start program or the local school system. While NC Pre-K funding is not used for wraparound care services, its [program manual](#) (NC DCDEE, NC Pre-K, 2014) advises that "sites should attempt to meet the needs of families and children for full day care," meaning beyond the pre-K day of six-and-one-half hours, but adds that "instructional staff's (teacher and teacher assistant) 40-hour work week should not include before and/or after care services." The program manual further indicates that for teachers and teacher assistants in NC Pre-K

Both the cost of administering a before-and-after care program and the difficulty of securing the necessary staffing present sometimes insurmountable challenges, despite the clear need for the service.

classrooms, 32.5 of those 40 hours should be spent in direct contact with children, while the remaining 7.5 hours should be focused on related instructional activities for NC Pre-K.

Henrietta Zalkind is an expert on early childhood education, having served as executive director of the Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC) for 28 years, preceding the advent of the NC Pre-K program. DEPC has been the contract administrator for NC Pre-K in Nash and Edgecombe counties since the program's inception in 2001. Zalkind was appointed to Governor Cooper's Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education in 2017, and her long view of North Carolina's pre-kindergarten program history is of great value to the discussion of what barriers lie between families and accessible pre-K services.

Zalkind notes that even as the NC Pre-K program was rolled out more than 20 years ago, care that aligned with the school day and calendar

was a problem for families with low incomes, many of whom worked non-traditional hours, irregular schedules, or more than one job, often without benefits or paid leave. Because these families needed—and most child care facilities provided—full-day care for the full year, DEPC had trouble filling NC Pre-K seats unless a child was already attending a participating facility and could access the additional hours of care. While subsidies in the form of child care vouchers from the Department of Social Services (DSS) were available to some families that needed assistance paying for additional hours of care, not all families could demonstrate eligibility for these subsidies, and at times, long waiting lists hindered access.

Like Child Care Services Association, DEPC uses local Smart Start funding to administer a child care scholarship program. DEPC's program prioritizes families of infants and toddlers where parents are working or in school full-time and are not served by another state or federal child care assistance program. The focus on infants and toddlers is due to the scarcity of programs and resources for this age group as compared to availability of programs for families of preschoolers. To help ensure families can move smoothly onto state child care subsidies when their children age out of the infant and toddler program, DEPC has a practice of encouraging participating families to apply to the DSS waiting list well before their child is age-eligible for NC Pre-K. This process is fraught with difficulty, however, because acting on an additional application process that does not convey any immediate benefit can feel cumbersome to families, especially for those who are also learning to navigate complicated systems of social support. Even when families can access subsidies or pay outright for wraparound care, that care is not always available.

Comparable Programs to Durham County PreK

Below are descriptions of pre-K services in counties around North Carolina with populations of 250,000 or greater. Durham County falls within this group along with Wake, Mecklenburg, Guilford, Forsyth, Cumberland, and Buncombe counties.

WAKE COUNTY

Wake Pre-K is administered by Wake County Smart Start (WCSS), offering 1,532 seats at public school, Head Start, and private child care sites. Currently, WCSS supports wraparound care delivery by helping to make the additional hours more affordable for families that qualify for assistance. To that end, WCSS provides a funding allocation to Wake County Human Services (WCHS) to be distributed as child care vouchers for families that qualify through the typical state child care subsidy process. Families in Wake Pre-K are notified by their designated pre-K facility of their acceptance into the program. At that time, the facility provides information about wraparound care and may refer the family to WCSS if they will need assistance paying for the additional hours of care.

Like most providers of state child care subsidy funds, WCHS operates independently of other subsidy programs. Even though families may



identify themselves as pre-K participants at the time of application, those families still flow through WCHS' regular application process. Some families will qualify, and depending on funding, some of those may be placed on the standard waiting list. For qualifying families who can receive assistance right away, they may choose any eligible child care provider and are not limited to the facility at which their child receives pre-K. For these reasons, there may not be a natural process by which the agency can easily queue up families participating in pre-K and attach that participation to particular funding sources. This seems common to most counties around the state.

Data collection for various program elements is important to Wake Pre-K, as officials build on the relatively new pre-K program for four-year-olds and they develop Wake 3-School for three-year-olds. Wake Pre-K officials plan to continue supporting the availability and affordability of wraparound care while also developing systems for tracking need and usage. Toward that end, WCSS is building an online application process that includes a question about the need for wraparound care. In addition, there will be a point in the electronic application process when child care providers register a family's decision, and if a family declines care because wraparound care was inaccessible for any reason, the provider will be able to indicate that fact. These changes will be in effect for the 2022-2023 Wake Pre-K application.

MECKLENBURG COUNTY

MECK Pre-K is the universal pre-K program for four-year-olds in Mecklenburg County, the second-largest North Carolina county by population (but first in population density). Implemented in 2018, MECK Pre-K was the first universal pre-K program in North Carolina and supports seats in private child care facilities, public school classrooms, Head Start programs, and programs that host NC Pre-K. MECK Pre-K has expanded seats in each year of service, supporting 1,890 seats in 46 child care programs in the 2021-2022 school year, which is triple the number of seats from four years ago. With full funding from Mecklenburg County, starting in 2022-2023 MECK Pre-K will be offered free of charge to all participating families, regardless of income. The MECK Pre-K program offers pre-K teacher pay parity with the public school system and recently [made strides to maintain that parity even as the school system paid teacher retention bonuses](#) (WBTB Web Staff, 2022).

As with most other pre-K programs in the state, wraparound care provisions for MECK Pre-K families is left up to participating child care providers. Families are informed about how wraparound care works during the enrollment process and can identify MECK Pre-K locations that offer wraparound care through the program's online application. Most wraparound care service is offered by private child care providers participating in MECK Pre-K, but a limited number of participating public schools offer wraparound care as well.

Mecklenburg County operates a single-payer system for all local, state, and Smart Start child care subsidy dollars. These funds run through the local Child Care Resource and Referral agency, Child Care Resources, Inc. (CCRI). While the subsidy program observes no specific priority to serve families participating in pre-K who need wraparound care, there has been a focus on meeting the needs of families of four-year-olds where the adult caregiver(s) in the home demonstrate full-time activity in work, school, or a combination of the two, with some exceptions to serve families of children with special needs. Given the level of investment, including from Mecklenburg County, and the streamlining of all subsidy dollars through a single channel, CCRI was able in a recent year to address all families of four-year-olds waiting for subsidy assistance. By default, wraparound care need for qualifying families may have been met. However, with no formal system to track families outside the subsidy eligibility guidelines, forming a full picture of need and service for all families in the program is not possible.



GUILFORD COUNTY

Guilford County Partnership for Children administers the NC Pre-K program in participating Guilford County Schools classrooms and through Head Start programs and private child care providers. NC Pre-K service in Guilford County encompasses primarily Greensboro, which is the county seat, as well as High Point, Jamestown, and a few other locations. For the 2021-2022 school year, there were 2,196 NC Pre-K slots open in Guilford County across more than 80 facilities, making it one of the largest programs in the state.

Information about wraparound care need is contained in the NC Pre-K application, which is offered in both print and electronic format and accepted on a rolling basis throughout the school year. Wraparound care is offered most regularly at private facilities, dependent on demand and at the discretion of the facility. Head Start facilities in Guilford offered wraparound care at one time but have not done so in at least four years, and there are no pre-K wraparound services in the public school system. While a number of participating private child care providers offer wraparound services, the pandemic has made doing so more challenging. While financial assistance for wraparound care is provided through the local DSS child care voucher program for qualifying families, Guilford, like many counties, has had families decline their offer of an NC Pre-K seat when wraparound care was unavailable.

FORSYTH COUNTY

Smart Start of Forsyth County (SSFC) administers the NC Pre-K program in private child care facilities, public school classrooms, and Head Start sites. Wraparound care is referred to as extended-day care in Forsyth County, and like most counties, the service is available at the discretion of participating child care providers. Families that need extended-day services indicate their need during the pre-K application process. SSFC makes an effort to accommodate site placements that offer extended-day service for those who need it.

Even though enrollment in NC Pre-K for the 2021-2022 program year was up significantly over last year in Forsyth County, extended-day care services have remained more limited due to the pandemic. Some private sites and one public school classroom currently offer extended-day service. The primary impediment to offering the service more widely is staffing availability.

Financial assistance for extended-day services is offered through the local DSS child care voucher program. While SSFC does maintain a child care scholarship program using Smart Start child care subsidy funds, the program exists solely to support families needing full-time care and cannot be used for wraparound care. Regardless of the form of financial assistance a family may be using at the time a pre-K seat is offered, there are instances when families turn down a pre-K seat offer in order to retain their full-time scholarship or voucher-supported care. This is the case especially when a family has another child or children using the same scholarship or voucher program. SSFC has acknowledged the need for more wraparound care to better support families.

Forsyth County is committed to expanding access to pre-K for all families, and SSFC plans to implement a new database and offer a more convenient online application. In addition, The Pre-K Priority, a coalition of community

organizations convened by Family Services, has made recommendations for the implementation of universal pre-K for all four-year-olds in Forsyth County. Work groups continue to develop plans for expanded pre-K service to the full community.

CUMBERLAND COUNTY

The Partnership for Children of Cumberland County (PFC), the local Smart Start agency, serves as the county's administrator for NC Pre-K in the public schools, Head Start, and private sites. The school system and Head Start do not offer wraparound care, so the agency uses available Smart Start dollars to assist families at private sites in paying for this extended care. Most recently, the process for identifying families for wraparound care service involved notifying participating facilities of available funding and offering eligibility information the sites could share with families. Providers would then submit contact information to PFC for any family that accepted a seat and expressed interest in applying for financial assistance for wraparound care. PFC would then contact the family directly to offer an application and determine the family's eligibility for Smart Start funding.

While this process worked for some families, the multiple steps and the additional application proved to be an obstacle for others. Recognizing this, PFC is streamlining the process for identifying families' need and eligibility for wraparound care service. Cumberland County is a dual-subsidy county, so the Smart Start subsidy funds run through PFC, which allows the agency flexibility to shape a process that meets the needs of the families they serve. For the 2022-2023 program year, the agency is offering an online universal application so that families can apply electronically for the first time.

In addition, coordinated communication between PFC and the local DSS allows that agency to send letters to the families of all four-year-old children on its waiting list, and PFC's consumer education program refers NC Pre-K applicant families to DSS at the point in time when they are applying for the program. The agency sees its Smart Start subsidy as a short-term service for those who cannot yet access vouchers, and the staff members work to move qualifying families onto vouchers so they might be positioned to access help paying for care once their child enters kindergarten.

BUNCOMBE COUNTY

Buncombe Partnership for Children (BPFC), a Smart Start agency, administers the NC Pre-K program in six participating private child care facilities, Asheville City Schools pre-K classrooms, and Head Start sites. A collaborative effort among multiple partner organizations, Buncombe Pre-K offers a single online portal through which families of four-year-olds may apply for pre-K without having to navigate eligibility or applications for each entity offering pre-K seats separately.

Recognizing that pre-K in Buncombe County could build capacity to better serve the community, in December 2021 BPFC completed a [report on the need for and strategies to implement pre-K expansion](#) (Buncombe County Partnership for Children, 2021). Buncombe County seeks to have an NC Pre-K program that is more fully funded, supports pre-K teacher professional development and pay parity with public schools, provides supports for child care facilities working to meet requirements for NC Pre-K participation, reaches more eligible families, and addresses barriers to pre-K access, such as wraparound care and transportation.

In its report, BPFC notes that eight out of 29 NC Pre-K sites offer an extended day. Families that cannot afford to pay privately for full-day care must apply to the local DSS child care voucher program to access state subsidy dollars. Understanding that service and subsidy will not fully meet wraparound care needs in Buncombe County's pre-K program, BPFC proposed a pilot program that would deploy local funding to support 30 full-day, full-year seats for children who meet NC Pre-K eligibility requirements but are not eligible for subsidy. The report also proposed studying the demand for and feasibility of more expanded full-day, full-year pre-K service.

Wraparound Care Delivery in Durham County

As the universal pre-K program for Durham County, Durham PreK is supported by Durham County government and involves intensive collaboration among Child Care Services Association, the Head Start program of Families and Communities Rising, Durham Public Schools, and Durham's Partnership for Children, the local Smart Start agency.

SEAT-BASED MODEL

Durham PreK offers services to families by the offer of seats distributed throughout Durham Public Schools, Head Start facilities, and private child care providers approved to participate in the program. Each seat is funded by one or more of these pre-K partners, each with its own priorities and some with income eligibility criteria. A family offered a seat is not always aware of whatever mix of funding supports the seat they accept.

As Durham PreK strives to achieve socio-economic diversity in classrooms, seats of different types are mixed at some facilities, making it difficult even for providers to discern which child has which type of seat. This model of blended funding by seat makes for complications when only certain seats are eligible for certain kinds of financial assistance with wraparound care.

FUNDING AND DELIVERY

Besides the rare in-house scholarship or sliding scale at individual child care facilities or employer benefits for individual families, the only two regular sources of financial assistance available to help qualifying families pay for wraparound care are Durham's DSS child care voucher program and CCSA's Child Care Scholarship program.

To obtain assistance from DSS, a family must either already have a voucher in use that can be adjusted to help pay for wraparound care hours or they must be sufficiently close to the top of the DSS' waiting list to be invited to apply for a voucher. Durham DSS' child care voucher program does not observe a priority for serving pre-K families' wraparound care needs and does not require families participating in pre-K to remain at their pre-K site or one with a comparable star rated license for wraparound care service. As with the other counties profiled in this study, Durham's DSS also does not have a system for tracking which children are participating in the local pre-K program. DSS simply pays at the state subsidy rate based on the hours of care a family qualifies for and uses.

The Child Care Scholarship program, administered by CCSA, uses Smart Start subsidy funding to assist qualifying families in certain seats in affording wraparound care. The scholarship program has an income cap that is higher than that of DSS and based on the differential between state and Durham County median income. For many years, the scholarship program offered wraparound care financial assistance to families with children placed in NC Pre-K seats for which a portion of monthly reimbursement, referred to as a “match,” was also paid through Smart Start subsidy funds. With the advent of Durham PreK, that funding structure persisted and eventually included NC Pre-K seats that receive their match funds through Durham PreK. That means seats supported solely with Durham PreK funds do not qualify for financial assistance with wraparound care, due to a lack of Durham PreK funds to cover the additional hours of care. Therefore, when families are considering pre-K seat offers, the scholarship team must first verify the funding supporting an inquiring family’s seat to determine if financial assistance might be available through the scholarship program. This can cause delays in determining eligibility and often results in frustration for families and providers, an issue that has the potential to worsen as classrooms incorporate more blending of seat types to increase socio-economic diversity. Additionally, the scholarship program has historically paid all wraparound care as one-quarter of a full-time day. This practice is a holdover from a time when the scholarship program issued full-time contracts for NC Pre-K participants who also had wraparound care. However, hours offered by facilities and used by families can vary across the program, meaning this structure may not always support the amount of care being provided.

Local Parental Need for Full-Day Care

In order to better understand the demand for wraparound care for children who might fill the roughly 1500 seats available across all settings in Durham’s universal pre-k program, it is important to hear how families define their own needs. This section of the report includes the voices of parents who are currently weighing decisions about their child’s pre-K year or who have made a decision about program participation based on wraparound care need or availability. The report also examines application data for families eligible for pre-K for the 2021-2022 year, both for an explicit indication of need and to learn what the data can tell us more generally about applicant families.





Parent Need by the Numbers

In the course of completing Durham’s 2021-2022 universal pre-K application, families encountered the following statement and question with regard to their wraparound care needs: “Certain, but not all PreK locations may offer additional hours beyond the 6.5-hour PreK day, known as before-and-after care. These additional hours would be at an added cost that families may be responsible for paying. Is the availability of before-and-after school care at the PreK location required for your family?” This report examines the responses to that question using data on applicants who either accepted or declined seat offers or who asked to be placed on the waiting list, most commonly in anticipation of a preferred location or service, such as transportation or wraparound care. These data are considered reliable because each applicant family represented in the data had the same choice—to accept, decline, or ask to be waitlisted—which also means each family had to complete the application in full, submit all necessary paperwork and documentation, and receive a determination that they were eligible for pre-K service. This data set also includes standardized responses—yes or no—for 1,017 applicants, only four of whom failed to respond to the question gauging wraparound care need.

While families that declined seat offers for the 2021-2022 program year were surveyed about the reasons for their choice, this report does not examine those records. Given the small sample size of parents who declined (5% of all eligible applicants), the confounding variable of some parents who declined but later accepted seats, and the potential prioritization of health and safety as a reason for declining due to the pandemic, using this method would not have yielded useful data. Additionally, using decline data would neither have accounted for families who indicated a need for wraparound care but chose to accept a seat that did not guarantee the service nor the considerable number of families that withdrew their applications at some stage of the process (most of whom did not give a reason for doing so).

TABLE 1: WRAP-CARE NEED FOR ELIGIBLE 2021-2022 DURHAM PRE-K PROGRAM APPLICANTS BY FAMILY STRUCTURE AND FAMILY SIZE



	TOTAL APPLICANTS	
	#	%
All Eligible Applicants*	1013	
Single-Parent Families	453	45%
Two- Parent Families	560	55%

	NO, WRAP CARE IS NOT REQUIRED				
	#	% of Total	% of Yes	Minor Children	
	#			#	Avg
All Eligible Applicants*	619	61%			
Single-Parent Families	238	53%	38%	529	2.22
Two- Parent Families	381	68%	62%	892	2.34
				1421	

	YES, WRAP CARE IS REQUIRED				
	#	% of Total	% of Yes	Minor Children	
	#			#	Avg
All Eligible Applicants*	394	39%			
Single-Parent Families	215	47%	55%	477	2.22
Two- Parent Families	179	32%	45%	419	2.34
				896	

**Excludes four applicants from the eligible applicant pool whose records do not indicate wrap need.*

From the 1,013 applicants who were determined eligible, offered seats, and answered the question about wraparound care need, 45% (453) indicated there was no other parent or guardian in the home and are defined hereafter as single-parent families. Those who indicated there was another parent in the home represented 55% (560) of all applicants and are hereafter referred to as two-parent families. Among applicant families overall, 39% (394) indicated they needed wraparound care in order to participate in the pre-K program. From the eligible applicant pool overall, single parents represented 47% (215) of families who indicated a need for wraparound care, and two-parent families represented 32% (179). Focusing on only those families who indicated a wraparound care need, single-parent families accounted for 55% of applicants vs. 45% for two-parent families.

In the 2021-22 school year, 394 families (39%) stated a need for wraparound care in order to participate in Durham PreK

Before drawing conclusions from these numbers, it is important to consider the timing of parent applications and responses about wraparound care against [COVID-19's trajectory](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). The universal pre-K application for the 2021-2022 program year opened in early 2021, roughly one year into the pandemic. At the time, parents who were employed in jobs that allowed remote work or those in college courses that had shifted to remote instruction were balancing work or study with caring for their very young children. They may also have been supporting older children in virtual schooling. Those parents employed in service-related industries may have been dealing with layoffs or, alternatively, with jobs that demanded their in-person presence. The application timing also coincides with the early roll-out of long-awaited vaccines prioritized for the elderly and healthcare workers, plus the ebbing of a surge in virus cases that followed the winter holidays. There is no way to know how these factors influenced parents' decision making about whether to apply for pre-K or what they thought their wraparound care needs might look like in the coming months. The timing of seat offers, too, coincides with both [rising cases following the introduction of the Delta variant](#) (Ritchie, et al., n.d.) into the U.S. and the delay in pediatric vaccine approval.

Regardless of how pre-K applicant families' decisions may have been shaped by the pandemic's concurrent evolution, there are some conclusions we can draw based on application data. For instance, the average number of children in single-parent applicant families is 2.22, regardless of whether an applicant indicated a need for wraparound care. The same is true for two-parent families, which averaged 2.34 children per family. This is an important point because it indicates that on average, applicant families with children who are age-eligible for pre-K are likely to have a slightly older or slightly younger child in the home. Those families with typical age spacing between children likely would be managing care not only for a pre-K child, but also for a sibling under age 4 or one who is elementary school age. This information helps us to understand the child care demands and expenses that pre-K applicant families may be facing, especially those experienced by single parents.

Children less than four years of age or four-year-olds not enrolled in a school-day pre-K program would typically have access to full-time child care that may more closely match parents' schedules for work, school or training. If a family with a child in full-time child care is offered a pre-K seat without access to wraparound care, that family may have to overcome the obstacle of having two children on different schedules and potentially at different facilities. Similarly, this means that some of the families needing wraparound care from their pre-K provider would be the same families seeking care from their older child's elementary before-and-after school program.



Parent Voices

In an effort to paint a more complete picture of the needs related to pre-K in our community, families of young children who applied for, enrolled in, or plan to apply for Durham PreK were interviewed for this report. Parents were recruited by word-of-mouth, parent social media groups, polls during Durham PreK parent information sessions, and through CCSA's Scholarship team. The voices of these parents breathe life into the data and remind us of that numbers alone cannot depict the variation and nuance in the wraparound care landscape.

2021-2022 APPLICANT PARENTS

Michelle R.

Single parent Michelle R. is a full-time mental health care coordinator at a local managed care organization for Medicaid. She works with children who are in the state hospital or in locked residential treatment facilities. She also has firsthand experience as a foster and adoptive parent. Michelle's son Jordan was placed with her not long after his birth. For the first three-and-one-half years of Jordan's life, his child care tuition was paid for by Durham's Department of Social Services due to his status in foster care. Michelle appreciated this support while she pursued Jordan's adoption, and when she applied to the Durham PreK program, she hoped for a seat offer that would provide access to wraparound care so she could continue to work full-time.

When Jordan's Durham PreK seat offer came through, though, Michelle realized that she could not accept the seat because she could not secure the additional hours of care she needed. At first, Michelle asked to be placed on the waiting list in hopes that another offer might materialize. Even though she received a second seat offer, accepting the placement would still have meant that no wraparound care was available.

She describes her employer as flexible but adds that regardless of how she might be allowed to shift her schedule, she's still a full-time worker. Her only other options were to continue to pay for full-time care for another year or find another job with fewer hours; both options represented considerable cost.

Michelle is a proud Durhamite and appreciates how the city tries to take care of its residents. When she was faced with the reality that, for her, the only option was to decline the seat and keep Jordan in full-time child care, she was disappointed to realize that Durham PreK wasn't really accessible to everyone. She feels that perhaps the program is suited only for those who have family nearby or who can afford to work part-time or not work outside the home.

Michelle had known there would be a period of time between Jordan's adoption and his age eligibility for the pre-K program, during which she would be responsible for covering monthly full-time child care tuition. She had budgeted enough funds to cover child care fees for four to five months but ultimately ended up paying the cost for 20 months. Michelle said that was "a big deal at \$1,000 a month and as a solo parent. It realigned our financial landscape. I can't say that it caused a true hardship for us. We were able to figure that out. But it definitely changed how we're living our lives."

When the time came for Jordan to go to kindergarten, Michelle found herself wishing there was a way to give her son, born on the very last day of kindergarten eligibility for the coming school year, one more year of child care to be sure he was ready, but the cost was beyond what she could manage. Jordan is now doing well in kindergarten, but when he first enrolled, Michelle ran into the same problem with needing wraparound care—this time before school—as she did with pre-K. Therefore, she had to send him to kindergarten without the additional hours of care. She describes this period as miserable. "I was trying to figure out how to work around the edges and working at night after he went to bed." Jordan is an early riser, so there were often four hours between the time he woke up and the time he would

go to school. At one point, Michelle hired a young woman to drive him to and from school to give her an extra hour in her schedule. When that was no longer feasible, she shifted her work hours and arranged for another parent to take him home for an hour after school, but multiple afternoon transitions proved to be hard on Jordan. Occasionally, when Michelle had a meeting she could not miss, she would arrange for a friend to care for him. Finally, after two-and-one-half months, she secured a spot in before-school care, a moment she describes with obvious relief.

Toward the end of her interview, Michelle added, “We have so many kids in the foster care system right now. This is what I do. We want more people to be foster parents.” She described the difficulty she and colleagues have experienced trying to place children in foster homes in recent months. Michelle estimated that in therapeutic foster care, the system has lost half of its foster families due to COVID. She points out that a lack of affordable options for child care hinders potential foster and adoptive parents from bringing children out of the foster care system.

Tiffany S. and Alicia L.

Tiffany and Alicia each have a child participating in Durham PreK in the 2021-2022 academic year. In each family, all available parents work full-time and use wraparound care supported by CCSA’s Child Care Scholarship program. Their interviews focused on the difference it has made for them to secure the extra hours of care.

When Tiffany applied to Durham PreK, she was working part time five mornings per week and did not indicate a need for wraparound care in her application. She was interested in pre-K for her child primarily due to the learning and socialization benefits that would prepare him for kindergarten. He is the youngest in her extended family, and with much older cousins and no real experience with child care before entering pre-K, Tiffany was happy he was offered a seat in the program.

Financially, Tiffany’s part-time hours did not add as much to the family income as she would have liked. She was glad that a free, high-quality pre-K program was available not only for her son but also for her family finances, given the high cost of full-tuition child care. Once her son transitioned into pre-K, and she knew he was in a structured learning environment and enjoying social time with peers, she felt confident in accepting more hours at work. Tiffany was glad wraparound care was available because it allowed her family to benefit from the extra income she earned through full-time employment.

Tiffany feels that without wraparound care, her household of two adults and two children still would have found a way to make her work goals and pre-K participation come together, but they would have had to lean more on family to make that happen. She points out that her older child is in high school and might have had to take on afternoon child care following her own school day. Her other option would have been to rely on her own mother for help, but she works as a teacher. Tiffany acknowledges that asking her daughter or mother to take on child care duties would take time away from these family members’ own responsibilities.

Alicia has a professional background in the early childhood field and, due to the pandemic, was working from home in the year before her daughter entered pre-K. Her daughter was frequently home with her that year, and Alicia was able to work with her on learning activities, so she felt her daughter’s early reading and math skills were on track. Participation in pre-K has helped to support her daughter’s further learning, but Alicia has seen the biggest change in her daughter’s social-emotional development. Alicia says that her daughter was always very verbal, but with pre-K, she

has seen her daughter open up to friendships with other children in a new way and enjoy a positive relationship with her teacher, both experiences she values in the year before her daughter enters kindergarten.

As a single parent working full-time, Alicia says that without the option to use wraparound care during her daughter's pre-K experience, she would have been unable to accept the seat without reducing work hours and losing income, which she could not afford. Alicia was using scholarship assistance through CCSA to pay for child care before her daughter was accepted to pre-K. Without wraparound care, her only other option would have been to decline the seat and keep the full-time care arrangement supported by scholarship assistance. Without that financial assistance, Alicia feels she likely would have accepted the seat with the understanding that she'd have to arrange for someone to pick up and care for her child in the afternoons. However, she feels that two afternoon transitions are too much for young children, who need routines and consistency.

Alicia has valued the opportunity to participate in pre-K for a few reasons. The money she was able to save from the lower parent fees for wraparound care has allowed her to enroll her daughter in beneficial activities outside of school, such as gymnastics. Besides freeing up income to give her daughter new extracurricular experiences, Alicia says pre-K has the advantage of focusing on kindergarten readiness with a distinct curriculum designed for children preparing to enter school. Alicia understands the ways in which pre-K benefits all children, and her hope is that more working parents will have the option to use wraparound care so their children can also benefit from pre-K.



2022-2023 APPLICANT PARENTS

Erin G.

Erin G. is a public school teacher in Durham and her husband is a nurse practitioner. They have two children: one who attends the elementary school where Erin works and one who is age-eligible for pre-K in the coming school year. Their youngest was born September 1, the day after the age eligibility limit. Erin laughs as she tells the story, emphasizing that “he missed the kindergarten cutoff by eight hours.” As she and her husband look to their younger son’s pre-K year, they are weighing multiple options.

Due to their younger child’s age, he will be the oldest child in his kindergarten class. Erin and her husband have considered having their son screened for early kindergarten entry, although this comes with the drawback of expensive testing and prolonged uncertainty, since testing can’t begin before April, and there’s no guarantee he’d place in the required percentile for early entry. They have considered private school kindergarten and child care programs, and they have applied to Watts and Morehead, the two Durham Public Schools pre-K magnet programs that still operate outside of Durham’s universal pre-K application process. These schools each observe a walk zone, however, and as Erin’s family does not live in either zone, they are not placing much hope in gaining a seat at either school. Erin would like to be able to consider Durham PreK for her youngest child, but that comes with its own set of concerns.

Erin learned through the experience of other parents who’ve been through the pre-K application process that seat offers typically come in the summer before the approaching pre-K year. She points out that many private child care centers require a signed contract for the approaching school year as early as February. Erin volunteers on the board of her child’s current child care center and says, “When you sign the contract, you’re committing to a full year of tuition. And if we can’t fill your spot, you’re signing and saying, I will pay the tuition, even if my kid doesn’t go here.” That’s a significant commitment and one that makes choosing to wait for Durham PreK much more challenging.

Acknowledging her relative privilege in having options available for her son’s care, Erin says that even if she was able to wait for a seat offer, without wraparound care “we just wouldn’t do pre-K. It just wouldn’t work for us.” She points out that “even though I think [pre-K] would be more affordable than private care,” not having wraparound care would put her in the position of devising a separate child care solution to fit their work hours. Like many two-parent families with young children, both Erin and her husband work full-time, and in their case, both work in the service industry. Erin notes that she has to be at work at 7:15 a.m. and her husband by 7:30 a.m., but most options for care don’t open until 7:30 a.m. She points out that not only do their jobs not typically have flexible hours, but it’s also the case that “we don’t really have flexibility for not having childcare, so we know we need to have something lined up.”

Melissa B.

Melissa is a first-time mom who works from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. each weekday, and her daughter is in full-time child care. Her job as an accountant allows her some flexibility in working from home, but she’s bound by set work hours. She will be the only person responsible for taking her daughter to school and picking her up. Melissa notes that pre-K and wraparound care are all new to her. Depending on the hours of the pre-K program at which her daughter may be offered a seat, she could need care both before and after the pre-K day.

If Melissa were offered a seat in Durham PreK without wraparound care, she can imagine two possible options. One would be to accept the seat and appeal to her employer for enough flexibility in her work schedule to allow her to pick up her daughter during the work day. Even with that flexibility, however, she points out that having a young child at home is, in and of itself, a full-time job, so trying to combine that with full-time employment is not the best choice for anyone involved, especially with a young child transitioning to a new pre-K environment. Melissa's other option would be to keep her daughter in full-time care for an additional year at the same child care center she attends now. She's happy with her daughter's current care, but given the availability of wraparound care, Melissa would prefer to have her daughter attend the pre-K program. She considers the social-emotional learning and the focus on kindergarten preparation that pre-K provides to be real advantages. She says of her daughter, "I want the best for her. I want her to get a head start as much as she can."

Imani W.

Imani is a student who, for the last two years, has been balancing school with caring for her young son at home due to COVID. She sees the structured environment and kindergarten preparation offered by Durham PreK as especially useful for her son, for whom child care or pre-K would be a new experience and a big transition. She will finish her studies soon and plans to start looking for work in her chosen field, and she is hopeful that by the time seat offers are made for the Durham PreK program, she will have found full-time employment. While she would prefer a flexible position, and perhaps one that allows at least some remote work, she recognizes that she may not have that option.

If she is offered a pre-K seat for her son, Imani would need wraparound care to allow her to successfully take on a new job. Without it, she might consider full-time private child care, but she worries about the expense. She would lean toward accepting a seat in the program with or without wraparound care, but she knows that her options for doing so without wraparound care would be limited. Imani's mother lives nearby and works as a teacher. While her mother may be retiring soon, Imani is not certain that she would be able to depend on her for child care. Her other option would be to pay someone to pick up and care for her son during her work hours, but she acknowledges that this arrangement would come with its own logistical challenges.

Norma P.*

Norma and her husband have two children. Their son is in 4th grade and their daughter currently participates in Durham's half-day LEAP program. LEAP, or Latino Educational Achievement Partnership, is a high-quality, dual-language preschool. Norma works as a house cleaner and her husband is a driver. Currently, she works in the afternoons and is usually able to drop off the children at school or child care each morning, while her husband's work offers enough flexibility to typically allow him to pick them up in the afternoons.

The family plans to apply to Durham PreK for the 2022-2023 academic year for a seat for their younger child, but they need wraparound care for both children to accommodate their work schedules. Currently, the family is on a waiting list for after-school care for their school-age child. Besides having wraparound care to support employment, Norma feels that a wraparound care program would offer her children a structured learning environment with beneficial interaction with teachers and peers, plus support with homework for her school-age child.

Norma believes that if she and her husband are unable to secure needed wraparound care services, they will still accept a pre-K seat if offered. While this situation would be harder on the family, she says they would work together to figure out a solution, possibly soliciting help from family to care for the children after school.

Jessica L.*

Jessica and her husband are the parents of twins who will turn four in time for the family to apply for Durham PreK for the 2022-2023 academic year. Currently, her husband works in construction as a painter, and Jessica cleans large facilities such as gyms and offices. Jessica reported that she has been unable to secure child care for the twins, which has affected her ability to secure a regular work schedule with sufficient hours. She and her husband hope to secure seats for both children in the same facility and to be able to use wraparound care. This would allow them both to continue working and give Jessica the opportunity to increase her hours and earnings.

Jessica and her family need child care for the twins, so even if they are offered pre-K seats that do not guarantee wraparound care, they will accept those seats. Because they have no family in the area, however, Jessica will be faced with the choice of either limiting her work hours or finding someone she can pay privately to care for the twins. Jessica feels she would have greater peace of mind, however, if the children were able to stay in a licensed child care facility where caregivers have training and certifications in early childhood.

**These interviews were conducted with English and Spanish translation support from a bilingual family support counselor at CCSA.*

Parallel Need in the Public Schools

Suzanne Cotterman has served as the director of Durham Public Schools' (DPS's) Office of Early Education for most of the last decade. Her perspective helps to shed light on the school system's efforts to offer before-and-after care to families with children in public pre-K classrooms. She says that before-and-after care is available in only a small number of programs, for reasons primarily related to licensing.

The Whitted School, a DPS child care facility participating in Durham PreK, is able to offer before-and-after care for two primary reasons. The first is that the facility is licensed under child care regulations by the state Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE). These regulations are separate from the those of the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), which oversees the state's public schools. The second reason is that there is high demand among the families whose children attend the school, which is pre-K only. With 18 seats in each of six Durham PreK classrooms, there are enough families enrolled in Durham PreK who need the service to justify the expense of offering it. Due to these favorable conditions, Whitted School has been able to arrange staggered staffing that covers not only pre-K program hours but the additional hours needed by parents with full-time need.

Two DPS Montessori magnet elementary schools, Watts and Morehead, have in recent years offered before-and-after care as part of a pilot program. In the Montessori format, these programs are able to mix pre-K and kindergarten classrooms and, while they do fall under DPI's purview, they have not undergone separate DCDEE child care licensing. DCDEE licensing indicates that a program meets state child care guidelines. This state licensing must be in place for child care programs to be eligible to accept child care subsidy funds on behalf of families using child care vouchers.



Replication of these pilot programs would present an equity issue, since they would be unable to accept state subsidies that support low-income families' access to wraparound care.

All other DPS elementary schools that offer pre-K services do operate both under DPI and under DCDEE licensing regulations. Therefore, these programs can offer access to families that require financial assistance, but staffing requirements and sparsely distributed demand are barriers. Most elementary schools host only one to two classrooms with no more than 18 students in each. Cotterman reports that DPS has surveyed other school systems around the state and found they all face a similar set of obstacles. She points out that the few school systems that have been successful in offering some level of wraparound care have been able to do so largely by having multiple pre-K classrooms in certain schools, which helps to consolidate demand and meet staffing and cost requirements.

Tracey Super-Edwards serves as director of DPS's Office of Community Education, which oversees staffing, programming, and operations for before-and-after care as well as intercession and

summer camps for Durham's public schools. The before-and-after school program includes 25 elementary schools in addition to a special program for middle schools. Four of the 25 elementary schools have insufficient student enrollment to offer on-site before-and-after care, so students from these schools use before-and-after care programs at alternate DPS elementary sites. Super-Edwards has worked for DPS's Office of Community Education for 15 years and recalls that the discussion of before-and-after care service provision for children in public school pre-K classrooms began at least 14 years ago. At that time, the primary barrier was the fact that those classrooms had not yet undergone child care licensing. DPS gradually eliminated that barrier over time. But other barriers remained, including staffing requirements, transportation needs, and the effect on demand of having small pre-K classrooms distributed across the school system.

DPS's offices of Early Education and Community Education have worked for many years in collaboration to bring before-and-after care to DPS' pre-K families. Super-Edwards says this need has attracted attention and new energy in the last few years as DPS' commitment to expanding pre-K in its public schools has taken shape. Whitted School's success in offering before-and-after care for pre-K students serves as a model for potential replication and a reason for optimism. However, even the before-and-after care need for school-aged children exceeds the school system's current capacity, and that need will grow in the coming school year based on a change to bell schedules for many of Durham's elementary schools.

When schools re-opened in April 2021, demand for before-and-after care was low, owing to the late return to school and parents' trepidation due to the ongoing pandemic. But by August 2021, when most DPS students started a new school year, demand had risen sharply. The DPS webpage for [before-and-after care programs](#), as of the time of this report, shows that all elementary schools that offer wraparound care are operating with a waiting list. Super-Edwards estimates that there are currently about 700 families waiting for before- and/or after-school care. She believes that between the number of families currently served and those on the waiting list, demand for before-and-after care is now

In early April 2022, there were about 700 families on the wait list for school age before-and-after care programs in Durham Public Schools. “If I work an 8-to-5 job, and I’m a mom or a dad, and I have to leave work at 2:00 to pick up my child, what happens to my job?”

back to pre-pandemic levels. She says that she receives calls “all the time” from parents who are in dire straits and need to secure child care outside of school hours. She empathizes with their plight, saying, “If I work an 8-to-5 job, and I’m a mom or a dad, and I have to leave work at 2:00 to pick up my child, what happens to my job?”

The primary obstacle to serving more children in DPS’s before-and-after school programs is staffing capacity. Super-Edwards confirms that the Community Education program would be back to operating at pre-pandemic levels if it could serve all the families currently on the waiting list. She acknowledges that the staffing crisis is not unique to child care. From restaurants to retail, she sees examples all around her, and more than that, she realizes “we’re all fighting for the same people,” meaning that the same workers are being recruited for before-and-after school programs

and for schools, which also badly need qualified staff. Super-Edwards applauds the use of hiring bonuses and other measures to boost recruitment and retention, but she points out that without adequate child care, vacancies in all industries will continue to be a problem.

Finding staff for before-and-after care comes with special challenges due to the hours of care. Workers who meet the job qualifications and are also available for short morning and/or afternoon shifts are hard to find. Offering a general description of who is typically available to staff before-and-after school programs, Super-Edwards says, “We have some really good retirees who have been with us for a long time and work year after year,” but she notes that “the overwhelming majority [of our staff] are college students.” And because college students often have variable class schedules, this can lead to high turnover.

A high rate of turnover means that robust recruiting efforts are necessary to maintain staffing levels, and the Community Education team maintains relationships with college career placement offices, as well as schools of education, though the program will hire students from other disciplines as well. The team also attends local college job fairs, typically offered twice per year. Pre-pandemic, the team would canvass local schools to distribute recruitment information. As of this year, North Carolina Central University (NCCU) has offered the Community Education team a room on campus to conduct a full day of on-site job interviews for students. Community Education also maintains accounts for some local institutions of higher education on [Handshake](#), an app that helps college students find work.

Still, staffing levels do not meet the current need, and that need is expected to increase for the upcoming school year. In February 2022, the DPS Board of Education voted to support proposed changes to bell schedules aimed at streamlining transportation services to all elementary, middle, and high schools in the district. While the move cuts costs and increases capacity for DPS’s Office of Transportation, it means that all elementary school students will start the school day at 7:45 a.m. and end at 2:15 p.m. This is a shift from the current schedule for some elementary students who start the school day at 8:30 a.m. or 9:15 a.m. and end at 3:00 p.m. or 3:45 p.m., respectively. The shift to early elementary school start times means there may be no before-school care and much higher demand for after-school care. Durham families have voiced concerns about this development, especially given how quickly the change will go into effect. DPS addressed these concerns at the Board of Education meeting where the bell schedule change was approved and signaled its intent to develop solutions to meet the anticipated increase in demand.

Local Provider Capacity for Full-Day Care

As the school system works to expand before-and-after care service to pre-K families, Head Start and private child care facilities face a different but no less perplexing set of factors that complicate the provision of consistent and affordable wraparound care services.

The Supply and Demand Paradox

Private child care providers participating in Durham's universal pre-K program are far more likely to offer wraparound care services for their pre-K classrooms because most operate a full-time child care program for all other classrooms in their facilities. While the school system seeks to increase hours of care, private child care facilities, by and large, already operate with hours that offer full-time care. One impediment to consistent wraparound service that is common to both private care and public schools, however, involves demand. Like public schools, private facilities still tend to have only one to two classrooms per facility, on average, which at times fails to generate the demand for pre-K wraparound care that justifies the expense of the program. The question of why demand may be too low to justify service is a critical one, especially if the percentage of applicant parents who indicate that they need wraparound care to accept a pre-K seat is roughly consistent with the current year at 39%. The answer seems to lie in two variables that have a direct effect on demand.

TIMING OF SEAT OFFERS COMPLICATES PRE-K ENROLLMENT

The application for Durham's universal pre-K program opens in the early months of the calendar year, but seat offers typically go out no earlier than eight to 10 weeks before the next academic year begins. Some parents interviewed for this report explained the various ways in which the timing of seat offers in the summer months might contribute to declined seats or withdrawn applications. Examining the program features that underlie summer pre-K seat offers is

an important step in fully understanding what changes, if any, might minimize attrition from the pre-K applicant pool and make pre-K seats easier to offer or accept.

Between the intensive program application review process and the timing of budget decisions that affect total seat count, pre-K program administrators cannot finalize the number and distribution of pre-K seats until the summer before school starts.

The roster of participating child care facilities is subject to change each year, primarily due to the required periodic re-application to remain a participating child care program. The re-application process helps to maintain quality standards among participating facilities, but it is intensive and time consuming. In addition, budgets at the local, state, and federal levels contribute to the number of pre-K seats available to Durham families each year. Between the intensive program application review process and the timing of budget decisions that affect total seat count, pre-K program administrators are typically unable to finalize the number and distribution of pre-K seats in time to make seat offers any earlier than the summer preceding a given school year. Moreover, placement in Title I seats in the DPS system requires developmental screening for potential learning delays. These screenings are required to be administered no more than six months before the start of the

approaching school year, which means they cannot begin before early March. Scheduling, administering, and scoring developmental screenings between March and the time seat offers begin in June for all the families that need them is a monumental task with very little flexibility in timing.

MEANS-TESTING DILUTES DEMAND

The challenges associated with the timing of seat offers also ensures that a supply and demand paradox is baked into the current system of wraparound care delivery. That is, providers need to see demand for wraparound care before they can make a business decision about whether to offer the service. Parents face a corresponding need to know whether wraparound care will be available before they accept a seat. This places parents in the position of having to generate demand for a service they are not guaranteed to receive. For providers, though, guaranteeing the service may place them in a financial and hiring bind just as they are gearing up to start a new pre-K year.

Parents with sufficient resources to consider options other than public pre-K are sometimes forced to decline their pre-K seat offer in favor of the certainty of full-time care, even if they would prefer the pre-K placement. Even if some of these families with the privilege of having other options do opt to accept their pre-K seats, it's not always a guarantee that the arrangement will work in their favor. Under the current system, higher-income families pay a modest percentage of household monthly income toward their pre-K seats. While many families are happy to pay these fees as part of their participation in the pre-K program, these same families would not qualify for assistance with wraparound care. When added together, program fees and the full cost of wraparound care can approach the cost of full-time child care. For some families, the cost-benefit analysis—plus the lack of provider choice—propels them toward full-time child care and away from pre-K, even when wraparound care is available.

Child care directors need to see demand for wraparound care before they can make a business decision to offer the service. Parents need to know whether wraparound care will be available before they accept a seat.



The attrition from the applicant pool of pre-K families with relative privilege then places the burden of generating sufficient demand for wraparound care entirely on the shoulders of families that have few or no other options for full-time care. Many parents in lower-income families work in service industry jobs that do not provide benefits or regular schedules but do require workers' in-person presence, making child care a critical factor for continued employment. Therefore, it is important to consider the possibility that means-testing—long supported as a way to ensure access to needed services for lower-income families—actually hurts those same families.

Provider Feedback

The six Head Start facilities and 19 private child care facilities currently participating in Durham's universal pre-K program were asked to complete a survey to help CCSA better understand the complex constellation of

challenges providers might face in planning for and offering wraparound care services. Because the school system (outside of Whitted School) does not offer wraparound care, these facilities were not included in the survey. Of the 25 facilities surveyed, 84% (21) responded, including five Head Start facilities and 16 private child care facilities. Responses are summarized below, with provider comments included.

WRAPAROUND CARE SERVICE RELIABILITY

Recalling their ability to offer wraparound care before the pandemic, 18 of 21 providers indicated they were usually able to offer the service. However, during the pandemic (2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years), fewer than half of the providers (10/21) said they offered wraparound care consistently.

Among the 11 providers that had not been able to offer wraparound care consistently over the two years most impacted by the pandemic, eight cited staffing levels as the primary problem. Among these eight providers, four said that hiring is difficult for wraparound care shifts. One of the 11 cited a cost-benefit problem, and the remaining two cited low service demand.

Providers were asked what factors they would consider in making the decision to offer wraparound care in the next school year. Responses came in the form of comments, without a restriction on the number of factors providers could name. Two thirds (14/21) referenced staffing; this number included providers that have been relatively consistent in offering wraparound care service. Just over one third (8/21) referenced parent demand, and five commented on some aspect of budgeting, such as program cost, expected revenue, availability of child care vouchers, and number of private-pay parents. Two sites that receive federal funding referenced policy considerations, and two referenced the pandemic, one of these specifically citing COVID-19 protocols. Only one provider mentioned space considerations.

PROVIDER COMMENTS ON WRAPAROUND CARE SERVICE RELIABILITY

"There is a lot more that goes into offering wrap care than is realized. Staffing is a big issue because it is almost impossible to find a person to work the short split hours. Another concern is enrollment for other classes. It's a balancing act. If you blend classes in the afternoon, class size limits must be maintained, preventing you from enrolling full-time students in other classrooms."

"Getting wrap care covered has been very challenging this year with the extreme shortage of workers."



"We have offered wrap care continuously since we first became a Durham PreK site. However, like many other programs, we are sometimes struggling with coverage if staff members are out sick or take time off."

"The most important factor is staffing: do I have the staff to be able to offer wrap care? Next [factor] is revenue."



PLANNING FOR WRAPAROUND CARE SERVICE

Providers were asked how long before the start of a PreK year they may determine whether to offer wraparound care. Of 21 providers, seven said they always or at least consistently plan to offer wraparound care. Three indicated they plan three to six months ahead to offer the service. Seven providers gave responses that suggested they make the determination to offer the service two months or less before the start of the school year or even as the school year is beginning. Two providers either could not remember or did not formally plan for wraparound care service, even though they sometimes offered it. Two responses did not reference time frame or service.

One provider that offered wraparound care service previously but stopped during the pandemic and has no plans to restart says that she previously made that decision “at the start of the school year when we knew for certain the number of families that needed it.” She adds, however, that, “this was also before the rule change on the teachers that are able to work wrap care.” Another provider offered a similar comment, saying “[assistant] teachers are not allowed to provide wrap services. If this barrier were removed, especially for morning wrap, it would be much easier to provide the service.” Required planning and professional development time for pre-K lead teachers and assistants is built into their full-time workday, which bars providers from having these teachers also staff wraparound care. Regardless of whether this rule can or should be amended, these comments underscore how having full-time staff, with availability during wraparound care hours, facilitates consistent service delivery.

Providers were asked to assume there was sufficient demand for wraparound care service at their facilities and comment on what changes to pre-K administration would help them to meet that demand. Of the 17 provider responses offering suggestions, eight referenced wanting to see more funding for wraparound care services, either as subsidies available to families or as a higher reimbursement rate. One additional provider mentioned budget. Five referenced addressing policy to make wraparound care easier to offer, and four reiterated staffing issues.

PROVIDER COMMENTS ON PLANNING FOR WRAPAROUND CARE SERVICE

“Parents are sometimes not able to take advantage of wrap care because they can’t afford the fees. Funding to help parents pay would be beneficial.”

“Wrap care is hard for families to pay for; therefore, funded wrap care would ensure the availability for the families.”

“The requirement that assistant teachers aren’t allowed to work wrap care directly impacted our ability to offer any wrap care services to families. ... The reimbursement for wrap care is not sufficient to cover the full cost of extended wrap care.”

“Reimbursement could improve teachers’ pay to remain before-and-after school.”

“An increase in funding would assist with hiring additional staff to cover wraparound care.” This same provider added, “I believe offering wrap care is a great benefit for families. This option provides families with the opportunity to secure gainful employment, further their education, and be productive members of the community.”

OPERATIONAL CAPACITY

Of the 21 responding providers, 20 detailed their wraparound care hours, which ranged from two to five-and-one-half hours with a median of three-and-one-half hours. Currently, the child care voucher program pays based on hours of care used, whereas the CCSA child care scholarship program pays for one quarter of a full-time day, which is less than the median number of hours offered for wraparound care.

Most providers want to offer wraparound care services to families because they understand the importance of this service to families' ability to participate in the workforce or gain education. The survey also suggests most Head Start and private child care facilities maintain sufficient operational hours to easily accommodate wraparound care service. The mean number of daily operational hours for these facilities was 10.5, as assessed through the survey or data from CCSA's consumer education and referral database.

Staffing Capacity as a Larger Workforce Issue

During the COVID-19 pandemic, supportive interactions between early childhood professionals and the children they cared for played an important role in reducing stress felt by children and families. However, the professionals who continued working through this public health crisis have done so at risk to their own health and well-being. They are not only essential workers themselves, but are also [critical to the ability of all other industries to retain workers](#) (Wallace, 2022). Yet these professionals typically lack health care benefits and earn wages that may not be high enough to keep them out of poverty.

Zero to Three, a national policy organization advocating for infants and toddlers, recently reported that "many early childhood teachers experience stress and demonstrate lack of well-being at rates and levels that threaten the quality and sustainability of the workforce." Additionally, research shows that "working with children exposed to trauma adds significant emotional and physical burden on teachers who already struggle with poor well-being and poor working conditions" (Kwon, Horm, & Amirault, 2021)

The cumulative effect of job stress, poor well-being, and low pay both before and during the pandemic has led to an exodus of early childhood workers, and there is little sign that they will return. In February 2022, Child Care Aware published [Demanding Change: Repairing Our Child Care System](#) (Child Care Aware of America, 2022), a report examining how the pandemic has affected the child care industry. Focusing attention on the child care workforce, the report reiterates that stressors on child care workers has led to a dramatic drop in the size of the workforce and warns that "there is growing evidence that the child care workforce will continue to shrink due to the stresses brought on by COVID-19."

How this shrinking national child care workforce shows up in North Carolina is the [subject of a February 2022 article](#) by Liz Bell, early childhood reporter for EdNC, which provides news, data, and analysis about education in the state. Bell points to the new [dashboard](#) maintained by North Carolina's Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) to demonstrate the declines in the number of children, child care facilities, and early childhood teachers, including those teaching in the state's pre-K program (Bell, 2022).

Reimbursement to participating NC Pre-K facilities pays only a portion of the true cost of care, which makes it difficult to pay teachers at a rate that inhibits turnover or draws new professionals into the workforce. Preschool teachers often

hold second jobs during the school year or take on additional work during the summer. Preschool teacher wages do not compare favorably to retail or other service industries, making retention difficult. Constantly hiring and training new teachers, which are drawn from a shrinking labor pool, is labor-intensive and expensive.

DECLINES IN EARLY EDUCATION DEGREE PROGRAMS

As experienced early childhood educators disappear in record numbers, it is important to examine who is preparing to enter this shrinking workforce. Cathy Collie Robinson, director of the Early Childhood Education Program at Durham Technical Community College (DTCC), has seen the number of early childhood degree candidates decline nationally since the start of the pandemic. “Across the country, we have higher ed programs that are shutting down because enrollments are low,” she says. As to the reason, she cites low enrollment and the desire of higher education institutions to “provide graduates with employment opportunities that will earn them more than \$7 to \$12 an hour.” She feels fortunate that DTCC fully supports its Early Childhood Education program. “Our county is very much invested in supporting early childhood.”



Collie-Robinson notes that “just as other job opportunities are becoming available, as Target and Amazon and all the other places are paying \$15 and up, we’re seeing folks leaving early childhood [education] and not wanting to come to early childhood [education].” She also indicates that some would-be early childhood teachers are being pulled toward elementary education due to the more attractive salaries. She adds, “They can’t afford to be in early childhood [education], especially if they have children of their own or they’re a single parent... It’s a real struggle to convince people that early childhood is the field for them.”

The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® program provides scholarship opportunities for the early childhood workforce in North Carolina, as well as 23 other states and the District of Columbia. Amy Duffy has managed the North Carolina program for many years and has noted the decline in program participants. She reports that before the pandemic, the average annual number of participants in the T.E.A.C.H. program was around 2200. Participation in T.E.A.C.H. fell about 14% in fiscal year 2020-2021, as compared to the prior year. Comparing the mid-points of fiscal years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022, she notes that participation continues to be down by about 10%, with the greatest decline at the Associate Degree level. Anecdotally, T.E.A.C.H. has collected feedback from program participants suggesting that they may be working more hours and have no time for school, working fewer hours due to their own health needs or those of their family, supporting children in virtual learning, or feeling generally more stressed or pressured due to the pandemic.

The T.E.A.C.H. program has begun considering ways to bolster recruitment to early childhood degree programs. Duffy says efforts are underway to support workforce development and other initiatives aimed at improving the pipeline of teachers for the early childhood education field. She adds, though, that “growing the EC workforce all comes down to improvements in compensation, which education, with the assistance of T.E.A.C.H. scholarships, can bring about.”

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AS A MATTER OF EQUITY

New America, a research and policy think tank, published a series of blog posts between January 2018 and May 2019 titled "[Moving Beyond False Choices for Early Childhood Educators](#)." The series was launched to delve into the "complexities, frictions, and mistrust embedded in the interplay among (1) preparation and education, (2) compensation and status, and (3) diversity and inclusivity" (New America, 2019). Aisha Ray, a 50-year veteran of the early education field who serves as professor emerita of child development at Erikson Institute and a distinguished fellow at the BUILD Initiative, authored "[ECE's Quintessential Equity Challenge](#)," an April 2019 post for this series. She says, "For me the critical questions that link workforce preparation, compensation, quality, diversity, and child outcomes are these: Are ECE preparation programs able to address the demands of a pre-service and in-service workforce responsible for the developmental and educational needs of culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse children, those in poverty, and those furthest from opportunity whose educational success may be most threatened by what we do and do not do in the preparation of the ECE workforce? If not, why not and how do we create the preparation programs our nation, workforce, children and families deserve?" (Ray, 2019)

One answer to these questions may lie in the strategies identified in "[Broader, Deeper, Fairer: Five Strategies to Radically Expand the Talent Pool in Early Education](#)," a 2021 report co-authored by the National Head Start Association and Bellwether Education Partners (Kornack & LiBetti, 2021). The report outlines strategies to redefine credentials, rethink degree attainment, optimize practice-based training, and expand job-embedded coaching. Both equity and educator voices are central to these strategies for re-shaping the early childhood workforce.

Refocusing the Lens: Limitations and Conclusions

Limitations

Even as pre-K has proven to offer children a strong start on their educational journey and boost the economy by increasing parents' workforce participation, there are drawbacks and limitations to focusing solely on pre-K growth and expansion without addressing unintended consequences.

DOES FOCUSING ON PRE-K HURT INFANTS AND TODDLERS?

In a 2018 report titled "[The Effects of Universal Preschool in Washington, D.C.](#)," the Center for American Progress notes that "Typically, infants are the costliest age group to serve, while preschoolers are the least costly. Private child care providers have traditionally cross-subsidized their smaller infant and toddler rooms by serving one or two full classrooms of preschoolers. Without that revenue, some providers may need to increase prices or enroll fewer children" (Malik, 2018).

Elaine Zukerman, advocacy and communications director for the North Carolina Early Education Coalition (NCEEC) is familiar with this kind of funding structure in early education settings. She notes that "this makes it important that other resources are funneled to infant and toddler programs, where vacancies are slim to none." NCEEC advocates for both infant and toddler care and the NC Pre-K program, so the organization has had to consider how prioritizing one group may impact another. Zukerman understands the push-pull that results from focusing on preschoolers as separate from infants and toddlers. The answer, she says, does not lie in giving a bigger piece of the pie to one program or another but instead "increasing the overall level of funding for our extremely interconnected system of early childhood

services.” As an example, she points out that raising state child care subsidy reimbursement rates for providers will make it easier for those providers whose services may be impacted by the growth of pre-K to be more financially sustainable. Zukerman says when people think of early education, it’s easy to imagine four-year-olds participating in what might be traditionally viewed as learning activities, such as drawing, singing, and story time. But it’s harder to picture learning as “the infant teacher holding a baby and interacting and feeding and changing diapers.” She offers the reminder that brains are built from birth and suggests that another way to mitigate the issues that arise from expanding pre-K is keeping a focus on how infant teachers are helping children build the connections that set them up for later learning.

IS PRE-K TOO LITTLE TOO LATE?

NC Pre-K is meant to be an intervention for children who may be at risk for learning or developmental delays that could impact their transition to kindergarten and hinder their schooling well beyond that time. Even for those families who access NC Pre-K, the age 4 entry point and the amount of time spent in an NC Pre-K classroom may be insufficient for the intervention’s intended purpose. Children need to learn a great deal in the year before kindergarten to enter school with confidence; they must develop social-emotional skills, such as cooperation, team participation, and emotion regulation; increase their abilities with self-help, communication, and following routines; build up a tolerance for transitions between school and home; and develop fine and gross motor skills by using school tools and running around the playground. When students do not spend sufficient time in a Pre-K classroom, efforts to adequately prepare them for kindergarten are diluted. When a child enrolls in NC Pre-K just one year before kindergarten and the program follows the traditional school calendar, disruptions to the learning process are virtually guaranteed. Summer learning loss for preschoolers may mean that a child develops a needed social-emotional skill or reaches an important developmental milestone during their pre-K year only to lose or suffer a setback with that skill when the intervention of pre-K is removed three months before the child starts kindergarten.

For families, NC Pre-K’s adherence to the school schedule—offering six-and-one-half-hour days over 10 months with no coverage for holidays, teacher workdays, or school breaks—can make for difficult choices. Those who qualify for NC Pre-K, especially if they are also able to access subsidies to help pay for additional care, may find their needs better met by a lower-quality child care facility that offers full-time care with few or no breaks in coverage and perhaps even transportation. These are families that may be already struggling and cannot arrange their lives around a mid-afternoon school pick-up and may find it impossible to coordinate safe and appropriate child care for the remainder of a typical workday. And even if they could meet the logistical challenges, the multiple daily transitions their child would face might work against the social-emotional and developmental gains they are likely to make during their hours in NC Pre-K.



Conclusions

WRAPPING THE FAMILY INTO PRE-K

Child care [pays for itself and boosts the economy](#) (Haspell, 2021) as long as it is offered in a way that is sustainable and attracts and retains families' participation. The rhetoric around pre-K tends to focus on its long-term benefits to children while rarely considering whether families can use the kind of pre-K that is offered. Pre-k programs that incorporate accessible wraparound care options are much more attractive to families with working parents. Preschool-aged children and their parents are not separate entities, but school-day educational programs ignore this fact. Children are an extension of the families in which they live, and supporting not only the child but the entire family is the only way to make pre-K truly universal.

As noted previously in this report, an important benefit to expanding access to pre-K is the impact on labor force participation for women. In its 2018 report on the effects of universal pre-K in Washington, D.C., the Center for American Progress explained that "in the years since Washington, D.C., began offering two years of universal preschool, the city's maternal labor force participation rate has increased by about 12 percentage points, with 10 percentage points attributable to preschool expansion." The report revealed that labor force participation for mothers of young children in both low-income and high-income families increased during the period of study and that mothers of young children in D.C. now participate in the labor force at the same rate as mothers of school-age children. The report concluded that "an inclusive, equitable policy agenda should consider maternal labor force participation as a major indicator of short-term and longer-term economic growth" (Malik, 2018).

PRIORITIZING FUNDING

In a [perspective piece for EdNC](#), UNC-Chapel Hill journalism professor Ferrel Guillory describes a K-shaped recovery for North Carolina's school children, in which the educational trajectory of students with access to supports and resources shows a recovery from the pandemic while others whose families lack access to these resources are falling further behind. Dr. Guillory asserts that North Carolina has moved into 2022 with the fiscal wherewithal to address the widening gaps in student achievement but can do so only with an "all-hands-on-deck" approach (Guillory, 2022).

Henrietta Zalkind of the Down East Partnership for Children would seem to agree. She says that families may not be applying for subsidy assistance right now for a variety of reasons. The pandemic has complicated the availability of and need for child care, and some families' desire for it may have changed as well. For other families, job loss, illness, and financial setbacks may have impacted their ability to qualify for assistance. Extra state subsidy dollars have been used to help pay parent fees to offset costs for those families that are using care on subsidy, and some state programs have offered financial relief to struggling providers. But more permanent changes to the system, such as those aligned with the Leandro commission's findings, are needed.



Zalkind points out that the state's subsidy spending coefficient in January 2022 was around 85% statewide, and waiting lists for counties that still had one were at a relative low level. Despite

the havoc wrought on children, families, and the early education system itself, she points out that the pandemic has managed to present a rare opportunity for using excess funding to effect system change. Zalkind advocates raising NC Pre-K provider reimbursement rates to adequately address the administrative and staffing costs associated with participating in the NC Pre-K program. Increasing teacher pay and benefits will contribute to stability in staffing NC Pre-K classrooms and will incentivize future teachers coming from early childhood degree programs. Additionally, Zalkind wants to see progress in establishing presumptive eligibility for child care subsidies for families that qualify for NC Pre-K so that assistance with wraparound care can be accessed more easily.

Recommendations

Stabilize demand for wraparound care

By and large, child care providers participating in Durham's universal pre-K program have the operational hours and desire to help families with their wraparound care needs. Many providers must rely on families to accept seats before they can determine if their business can support the expense of operating a wraparound care program, but when families with full-time care needs have options outside the pre-K system that guarantee to meet those needs, demand is diluted, leaving lower-income families in danger of losing out on wraparound care service.

ELEVATE WRAPAROUND CARE NEED IN SELECTION CRITERIA

While families are asked at the time of application to Durham's universal pre-K program whether they require wraparound care in order to participate in the program, there is currently no weight or priority placed on the need for this care during the seat assignment process. Amending the process so that the need for wraparound care is factored into seat assignments is a first step toward making sure families receive seat offers that more closely match their needs.

STREAMLINE SERVICES AND ELIMINATE MEANS-TESTING

For families whose incomes require fees to participate in pre-K, taking on the additional costs of wraparound care may approach or equate to the cost of full-time child care. Instead of having families' incomes assessed under one system for pre-K and another for wraparound care, consider streamlining the system by having families accept "school-day" or "extended-day" seats, reimbursed respective to their full cost, and apply one measure for income and eligibility thresholds to determine what, if anything, families pay for each type of care. Doing so may necessitate the standardization of hours offered as part of wraparound care. Most private child care providers participating in the program offer at least 10 operational hours of care, so standardizing hours would not require most providers to make accommodations outside their current business hours.

Expecting families with more resources to contribute to the universal pre-K system is a reasonable measure to ensure funding flows to those most in need. This system would allow for higher-income families to continue contributing to the pre-K system but eliminate the need for both lower- and higher-income families to apply, qualify, and pay for wraparound care separately from pre-K service, essentially including wraparound care in universal pre-K in Durham. Besides making things easier for all participating families, elimination of means testing also creates efficiencies of time and cost. An [October 2021 article in Vox](#), published at the time that free universal pre-K was being debated as part of a federal spending bill, offered the reminder that "means-tested benefits can actually be more expensive to provide, harder to sell politically, and less effective than universal social programs, and they can place both a social stigma and discouraging bureaucratic requirements on Americans in need" (Zhou, 2021).

...efforts should be made locally to coordinate with the county DSS to establish a priority for pre-K families to access wraparound care.

Amend the way wraparound care is reimbursed

Raising state child care provider reimbursement rates and bestowing presumptive eligibility for state child care subsidies on families that qualify for NC Pre-K are already topics of conversation or policy priorities at the state level. Locally, there's more that can be done.

PURSUE PRIORITY WITH THE LOCAL DSS CHILD CARE VOUCHER PROGRAM

There appears to be no formal connection between the NC Pre-K program in each county and that county's DSS, which is the entity

that administers child care vouchers. Along with presumptive eligibility at the state level, efforts should be made locally to coordinate with the county DSS to establish a priority for pre-K families to access wraparound care. This arrangement may also position families to receive continued assistance for before-and-after care once their children reach elementary school.

These changes would be in keeping with recommendations put forth by the Urban Institute in [Seven Ways States Can Make Child Care Subsidies More Accessible and Equitable](#), a report published in February 2022 and borrowing from their "previous research on how states can make child care more accessible and equitable for families and more efficient for agencies." (Adams & Hahn, 2022).

ALLOW CCSA'S CHILD CARE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM TO REDIRECT SMART START SUBSIDY DOLLARS FOR NC PRE-K SEATS INTO "EXTENDED-DAY" SEATS

Assuming that pre-K and wraparound care services can be integrated, Smart Start subsidy dollars currently administered by CCSA's Child Care Scholarship program for wraparound care could be re-directed toward the cost of "extended-day" seats for families that demonstrate full-time need and meet the higher income cap observed by the scholarship program. This strategy may also alleviate delays in determining whether a seat is eligible for wraparound care financial support because wraparound care would be rolled into the seat offer.

Strengthen pathways to the early childhood profession with equity in mind

PARTNER WITH LOCAL EARLY CHILDHOOD DEGREE PROGRAMS TO PLACE STUDENTS IN PRE-K CLASSROOMS

Professional development and coaching are already embedded in Durham PreK's program model, both for educators at existing Durham PreK sites and for those in the pipeline working toward the program's quality standards. Given the serious impact of the pandemic on the child care workforce, including enrollment declines in early education degree programs, efforts should be made to partner with local institutions of higher education to boost the number of qualified professionals entering the field.

CCSA has a long history of professional development and workforce supports for early educators. The Grow-a-Teacher program, which operated from 2008 to 2012, offered early childhood educators one-on-one coaching to help them

develop and attain educational goals. Increased educational opportunities helped teachers boost their qualifications and also helped facilities raise the level of their star rated licenses. CCSA also administered an AmeriCorps program that operated successfully for more than two decades. The program trained, placed, and supervised year-long volunteers in child care programs, where they gained early childhood experience and earned the Child Development Associate® (CDA) credential, while also providing release time for teachers participating in higher education activities.

Together with Durham Technical Community College and North Carolina Central University, Durham PreK could pilot a program that places early childhood education students in paid pre-K placements, which would help students earn income and give them experience in high-quality learning environments. Participating facilities would benefit from having the additional staff capacity that is needed to offer consistent wraparound care service and to provide general support. [Similar programs exist in North Carolina for K-3 education](#) and could serve as a model for such a pilot (North Carolina Education Corps, 2022).

TAP INTO T.E.A.C.H. EARLY CHILDHOOD® NORTH CAROLINA SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMMING TO CREATE PATHWAYS TO DEGREE ATTAINMENT AND SUPPORT RECRUITMENT OF A REPRESENTATIVE WORKFORCE

T.E.A.C.H. Scholarships offering financial support, coaching, and release time to early childhood educators aiming for higher educational attainment have long been woven into workforce development initiatives locally, statewide, and nationally. Durham PreK should work with T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® North Carolina to develop a program tailored to [Durham PreK's equity goals](#) (Durham Pre-K Quality Subcommittee, 2021). The provision of consistent, accessible, and affordable wraparound care for families is only the first of these goals. A partnership with T.E.A.C.H. could also spur progress toward meeting the program's second goal related to equity, which is to increase the number of Spanish-speaking teachers of Latinx/Hispanic background.

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