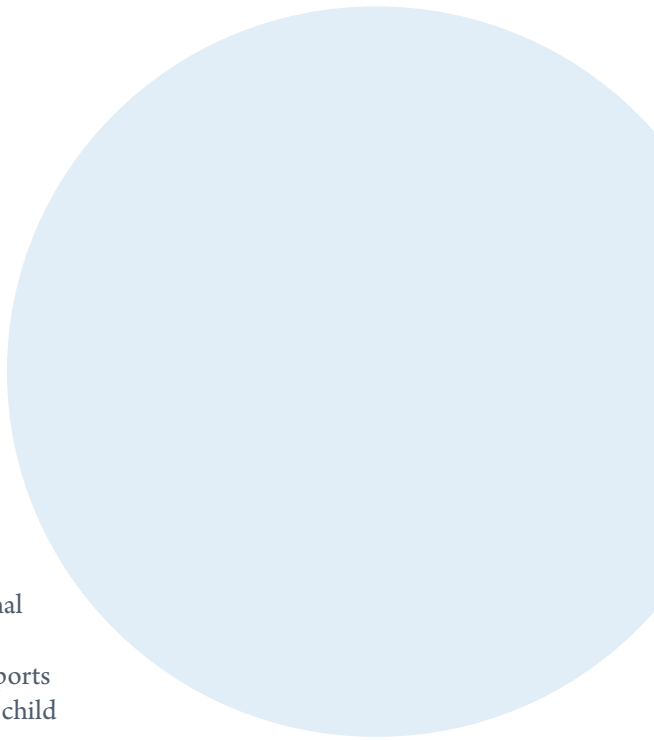


Building High-Quality Early Care and Education Environments for North Carolina Babies and Toddlers

Children's learning and development in the first three years lay the foundation for all of the years that follow. High-quality child care prepares babies and toddlers for school and life success, and appropriate early intervention supports and services in the early years can help children with special educational needs be ready for school. Though children from low-income backgrounds benefit the most, middle-income children benefit substantially from high-quality early education, and benefits outweigh costs for children from both middle- and low-income families.





Babies and toddlers need strong, effective early childhood teachers and leaders who are well-educated and well-trained in child development and child mental health, and who tailor learning experiences to meet each child's needs. The quality of early care and education young children receive is most closely tied to the quality of the teachers in the classrooms. Research demonstrates that when early childhood educators have specialized knowledge of child development and early childhood education, it impacts young children's educational outcomes. High-quality programs employ qualified early education teachers, are culturally competent, work to fully understand and adapt to the home cultures of the children in their care, and use effective, developmentally-appropriate curricula to build foundational learning skills. Effective child care classrooms also foster students' social-emotional development by engaging authentically with families and maintaining positive classroom climates. High-quality programs provide needed supports and resources to educators to ensure high-quality, consistent teaching in child care classrooms.

Research demonstrates the role high-quality early learning environments and effective early intervention services play in preparing babies and toddlers to meet a critical developmental benchmark—reading on grade-level by the end of third grade.

The Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Measures of Success Framework outlines research-based measures that impact early literacy. Early education measures from the Pathways Framework that are relevant for babies and toddlers include the quality of child care and early education (including the quality of educators and leaders), maintaining a positive school climate, and early intervention outcomes. Factors that research has shown impact these critical education measures include:

- Developmental screening, referral and access to effective early intervention services
- Teacher and child care director education and compensation
- Teacher and child care director knowledge of child development, trauma and infant and toddler social-emotional health
- Training and coaching for teachers working with special populations, including English language learners and children with disabilities
- Access to programs in children's native languages
- Affordability of high-quality child care, including access to child care subsidies
- Stability of child care placement, including eliminating suspensions and expulsions

*This report is based on **Zero To Three's Infants and Toddlers in the Policy Picture: A Self-Assessment Toolkit for States**. The NC Department of Health and Human Services and the NC Early Education Coalition provided information in 2018 on North Carolina's early intervention and early education policies, which are shared [here](#). The self-assessment also includes questions about children's health and supports for families. NCECF is producing two additional briefs sharing those policies.*

Specific state-level policies can support young children’s early learning. National experts have found that when states have the following policies in place, babies and toddlers are more likely to thrive.

EARLY INTERVENTION POLICY

POLICY	NC HAS POLICY IN PLACE?	# OF STATES WITH POLICY IN PLACE	POLICY AND PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS
State includes at-risk children in the definition of eligibility for Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C Early Intervention program.	NO	6 states	To be eligible, babies and toddlers must have either a developmental delay in one or more areas, or a diagnosed physical or mental condition that is highly likely to result in developmental delay.

CRITICAL QUESTION

- In some states, children who are *at risk* of a delay based on factors like homelessness, food insecurity or substance abuse in the home are eligible for early intervention services. How could broadening North Carolina’s early intervention eligibility to babies and toddlers with risk factors ensure that more young children get the services and supports they need to succeed?

THINK BABIES™ NC

Think Babies™ NC, funded by the Pritzker Children’s Initiative and Zero To Three, aims to improve outcomes for North Carolina’s babies and toddlers by advancing policies that support their healthy development. Think Babies™ NC is aligned with the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative and the NC Early Childhood Action Plan. The initiative is led by the NC Early Education Coalition with support from the NC Early Childhood Foundation and a Leadership Team of state and local organizations focused on advancing public awareness and policy solutions for infants, toddlers, and their families. The Think Babies NC policy agenda includes three policies focused on babies' and toddlers' care and education.

- Increase child care subsidy funding to expand access to high-quality, affordable infant and toddler child care for low-income families.
- Make sure families living in child care deserts have access to high-quality infant and toddler child care.
- Ensure infants and toddlers have well-educated and well-compensated teachers with the skills needed to support healthy development.

WHAT IS A CHILD CARE DESERT?

Infant and toddler child care deserts are communities where there is not enough infant and toddler care available to meet the needs of the families in that area. A recent Center for American Progress study found that across North Carolina, there are enough slots for just under 19 percent of infants and toddlers, while 67 percent of children under age six in the state have all available parents working. In 99 of North Carolina's 100 counties, there are three or more young children for each licensed child care slot.

CHILD CARE POLICIES

POLICY	NC HAS POLICY IN PLACE?	# OF STATES WITH POLICY IN PLACE	POLICY AND PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS
Family eligibility for child care subsidies is at or above 200% federal poverty level (FPL).* <i>*\$42,560 for a family of three</i>	YES	13 states	For children birth through age 5.
State child care reimbursement rates are at or above the recommended 75th percentile of the market rate.	YES	One state meets criteria for all programs; some states meet these criteria for certain quality-rated programs.	NC reimburses at the 75th percentile for infants and toddlers in 3-, 4-, and 5-star child care programs, and at the 100th percentile in Tier 1 and Tier 2 (economically-disadvantaged) counties.
States offer higher subsidy reimbursement rates to programs providing infant/toddler care than to programs serving older children to help defray the higher cost of care.	YES	21 states	NC provides differentiated rates based on the star-rating of licensed child care programs and also provides higher rates to programs serving infants and toddlers in Tier 1 and Tier 2 counties.

POLICY	NC HAS POLICY IN PLACE?	# OF STATES WITH POLICY IN PLACE	POLICY AND PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS
<p>State keeps copayments for child care subsidies below 7% of family income for families of three at 150% FPL.* *<i>\$31,920 for a family of three</i></p>	<p>NO</p>	<p>26 states</p>	<p>Copayment is set at 10% of family income for families at or below 200% FPL.* *<i>\$42,560 for a family of three</i></p>
<p>State offers a refundable state dependent care tax credit.</p>	<p>NO</p>	<p>12 states</p>	
<p>State meets recommendations of <i>Stepping Stones to Caring for Our Children</i> in group size and ratio requirements for infants and toddlers in licensed center-based and family child care.</p>	<p>NO</p>	<p>Three states meet recommended ratio of 3:1 for infants in centers 12 states meet the recommended ratio of 4:1 for toddlers in centers</p>	<p>NC requires 5:1 ratio for infants, and 6:1 ratios for toddlers. Child care providers can receive additional points in the star-rated licensing system if they reduce these ratios further.</p>
<p>State has implemented a statewide early care and education QRIS* that includes quality indicators specifically for programs serving infants and toddlers.</p>	<p>YES</p>	<p>39 states</p>	
<p>State policy requires that there is a primary caregiver for every infant and toddler in child care centers.</p>	<p>YES</p>	<p>24 states include this requirement in licensing; one state also addresses this through QRIS*</p>	
<p>State policy promotes or requires that child care centers offer activities that actively encourage and support infants' and toddlers' exploration of the environment.</p>	<p>YES</p>	<p>14 states include this requirement in licensing; four states address this through QRIS*</p>	
<p>State policy promotes or requires that center-based programs offer a variety of opportunities for interaction with parents throughout the year.</p>	<p>YES</p>	<p>Two states require this through licensing; 20 states address this through QRIS*</p>	<p>QRIS* requires regular meetings and parent participation, but centers have a choice about what types of activities and opportunities they provide. Head Start requires extensive, specific activities.</p>

POLICY	NC HAS POLICY IN PLACE?	# OF STATES WITH POLICY IN PLACE	POLICY AND PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS
State has early learning guidelines for infants and toddlers.	YES	49 states	NC has developed and adopted Foundations for Early Learning and Development.
State has developed or adopted core knowledge and competencies for early care and education providers, including those who work with infants and toddlers.	YES	47 states Three of these states have developed or adopted specific knowledge and competencies for infant-toddler providers.	In NC, early educators must have a "child care credential," which requires one specific course at a community college or university. The core knowledge and competencies within community college courses are aligned with National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) competencies, as well as with the NC B-K educator license expectations.
State has developed or adopted an infant-toddler professional credential.	YES	31 states	NC has an Infant-Toddler Certificate. It is not required, however, and NC does not maintain data on how many infant-toddler teachers have this certificate.
State requires or encourages infant-toddler professional development that is credit-based and includes career pathways that lead to higher education degrees.	YES	<i>Data not available</i>	Infant-toddler teacher professional development is encouraged but not required. The Institute for Child Development Professionals has career pathways for infant-toddler teachers.
State has a workforce registry or other data system to track the qualifications and professional development of the early care and education workforce.	NO	43 states have a workforce registry	

* Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is a systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- What would be the broader economic benefits of supporting the cost of high-quality child care for working families, either through lowering co-payments for child care subsidies or offering a North Carolina tax credit to working families who are paying for child care?
- How can North Carolina increase the standards and compensation for infant and toddler early education teachers?
- North Carolina is one of only a handful of states that don't have a workforce registry. How could tracking the qualifications and professional development of the early care and education workforce improve the field?



Employers nationwide lose \$4.4 billion each year due to employee absences or loss of productivity related to child care issues. Subsidizing or reimbursing employees' child care expenses is a way that businesses can support children's health and education, improve families' economic security and improve the bottom line. Research demonstrates that supporting the cost of child care benefits employers by increasing retention, reducing turnover costs and reducing employee tardiness and absenteeism.

Family Forward NC is an innovative business-led initiative to improve children's health and well-being and keep North Carolina's businesses competitive. By increasing family friendly workplace practices, business, families and our state all win. Through research and the exchange of ideas among business leaders, employees and organizations, Family Forward NC promotes workforce investments that support children's healthy development and a competitive business environment, both in the short and long term.

Family Forward NC is an initiative of the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, supported by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina.



Pathways to Grade-Level Reading (Pathways), an initiative of the NC Early Childhood Foundation in collaboration with NC Child, The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc., and BEST NC, aims to improve third-grade reading outcomes in North Carolina by taking a coordinated birth-through-age-eight approach with aligned policies and practices that focus on:

- Children's Health and Development, Beginning at Birth
- Supported and Supportive Families and Communities
- High-Quality Birth-through-Age-Eight Learning Environments, with Regular Attendance

The Pathways Measures of Success Framework and Action Framework were co-created by hundreds of cross-sector early childhood leaders and stakeholders.

Some of the Actions recommended to support effective early intervention and high quality education for babies and toddlers include:

- Screen children and families for social determinants of health and parental depression and connect them to appropriate services, including two-generation interventions.
- Expand eligibility for early intervention to include at-risk babies and toddlers.
- Require linked strategies across programs to engage and learn from families, and support child care programs to engage deeply with families.
- Increase access to infant and toddler care.
- Expand child care subsidies, raise child care subsidy rates and provide higher subsidy rates to providers in under-served communities.
- Provide wrap-around services for high quality early care and education.
- Increase standards and compensation for infant and toddler teachers.
- Recruit and retain educators and administrators of color.
- Provide research-informed professional development for teachers, including on cultural competency, implicit bias, trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), child development, and social-emotional learning.
- Ensure that infant and toddlers teachers have a strong foundation in infant and early childhood mental health competencies.

SOURCES

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NORTH CAROLINA EARLY CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION • ISSUE BRIEF • MAR 2019



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