



Think Babies™ NC 2020 Outstanding Baby Advocate Awards

STATE AND LOCAL POLICYMAKERS

Rep. Josh Dobson and Rep. MaryAnn Black

The Think Babies™ NC Alliance is honored to present the 2020 Outstanding Baby Advocate Award to two of North Carolina's outstanding state legislators: Rep. Josh Dobson, representing District #85, including Avery, McDowell, and Mitchell Counties, and Rep. MaryAnn Black, representing District #29, Durham County.

During the 2019 state legislative session, both Rep. Dobson and Rep. Black introduced numerous bills that fit the Think Babies™ Policy Agenda, including various bills to fund Smart Start, early childhood education and Child Care Subsidy Assistance, support for Nurse-Family Partnership and home visiting programs, and closing the health care coverage gap through Medicaid Expansion and the Health Care for Working Families Act.

But we are honoring them today for their bipartisan efforts to work together to advance the early childhood workforce. It's not every day that you will find state legislative leaders who are willing to work together across party lines to advance policy solutions for issues facing young children and families. Both Rep. Dobson, a Republican, and Rep. Black, a Democrat, did exactly that when they agreed to serve as co-chairs (along with Sen. Ralph Hise and Sen. Erica Smith) for the first ever Think Babies™ NC Legislative Briefing for state legislators. This event put a spotlight on what all babies and their families need to thrive and helped state policymakers understand the importance of making babies a top priority.

This dynamic legislative duo went on to become the bipartisan, primary sponsors of H882, the Early Childhood Recommendations bill, also known to many of us as the Early Childhood Workforce bill, along with 34 other sponsors from both parties. Rep. Dobson and Rep. Black heard the voices of hundreds of early education advocates across the state who called and visited their offices throughout the session. As a result of their leadership in one-on-one meetings with other legislators and several committee meetings, the House went on to pass this bill unanimously, a rare feat for any bill considered by the NC General Assembly. If you were in any of these committee meetings, you witnessed their steadfast leadership and advocacy for the early childhood workforce and efforts to make policy progress to address the workforce crisis and ensure that every young child has a well-qualified and well-compensated early education teacher in their classroom. In the words of one early childhood education advocate, *"It means so much to me as an early educator to know that legislators have my back and care about the work I do for babies and families."*



Brenda Howerton, Durham County Commissioner

Brenda Howerton is a recipient of the 2020 Outstanding Baby Advocate Award because of her outstanding leadership and advocacy to move the needle for babies and their families, not only in Durham County, but in all 100 Counties in North Carolina, and beyond.

As the President of the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners, Brenda launched the "100 Counties, Helping Our Children Thrive" initiative, which invited counties to find solutions to give all children the essentials to thrive by developing their own plans for innovative programs ranging from prenatal care to early childhood education. In launching this initiative, Ms. Howerton said, *"Our children are precious to us. They are everything to me. They are my motivation and my strength. I fought for them all my life, and it's a fight I will continue so that all our children can have the chance to THRIVE."* This work has inspired ongoing county teams throughout the state.

Brenda Howerton is also recognized for putting the spotlight on babies and families in her work with the Durham County Commissioners. She and her colleagues brought together a group of nonprofits to work with the County government to apply for a Pritzker Community Grant to become a County Pritzker Fellow. In addition, the Commissioners have funded a new position that will focus on early childhood and will be housed at Durham County Cooperative Extension.

The Durham County Commissioner's advocacy for babies extends beyond North Carolina's border. The Durham County Commissioners recently sent a proposed policy resolution to the upcoming National Association of Counties (NaCo) Legislative Conference. The proposed resolution calls on NaCo to: support legislation that would protect and increase investments in early childhood development to ensure that needed educational, nutritional and social services are available to children in the critical years of development between birth and age three. These investments include programs such as home visiting programs, child wellness, Head Start and Early Head Start, high-quality child care, and support for the early childhood workforce. By investing in and demonstrating leadership in these early childhood development programs, we can begin to fight poverty and reduce inequality.

Of course, we also deeply appreciate Brenda's service on our Think Babies™ NC Alliance Leadership Team from the very beginning, bringing the voice of County Commissioners to our work and reminding us to focus on children and families in communities across North Carolina. As a result of her leadership and inspiration, we have seen counties across the state provide local leadership and funding to help advance our policy agenda, including paid family leave, home visiting, and early learning.

State Organizations

Child Care Services Association

Child Care Services Association (CCSA) is a 2020 Outstanding Baby Advocate Award winner because of its outstanding leadership and advocacy to advance opportunities for babies, families, and their early educators through groundbreaking research and innovative, evidenced-based programs that have made North Carolina a national leader in early childhood education and an inspiration to states across the country.

We are indebted to CCSA for its extensive early childhood research, including numerous studies on the early childhood workforce. The landmark report "Who's Caring for Our Babies?" puts a dramatic spotlight on the education and compensation of infant toddler teachers and documents the extent of the current workforce crisis in our field.

To address the low compensation of early educators and encourage the pursuit of higher education, CCSA partnered with the NC Division of Child Development and Early Education to launch the Infant-Toddler Educator AWARD\$ program. In the first year alone, CCSA provided scholarships to more than 1,100 infant toddler teachers in 87 counties who hold at least an Associate degree in early childhood education.

This program complements CCSA's WAGE\$ program and the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship Program, which have supported thousands of early educators across North Carolina and strive to address the early childhood workforce crisis and recognize early educators who are woefully underpaid for the important work they do.

North Carolina is known as a child care desert when it comes to quality infant-toddler care, and CCSA has long been a leader in trying to address this critical issue facing babies and their families. CCSA created the Babies First NC program to raise the quality of infant-toddler care- first in rural counties through the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant, and now in additional communities through the new 2020 Preschool Development Grant. This program builds on CCSA's Infant-Toddler Enhancement Project, which provides Infant-Toddler Specialists who work with child care programs to boost the quality of infant toddler care in every county.



MomsRising

MomsRising is receiving the Outstanding Baby Advocate Award for leading the charge for paid family and medical leave in North Carolina. As stated in their nomination, *"Seven years ago paid family leave was a concept that some people thought was a good idea, but for most people, it wasn't something that was really considered feasible here. Beth Messersmith, MomsRising members, and partners across the state changed the landscape of that conversation in NC with their persistent attitude and advocacy that said that it is not a matter of 'if' there will be paid leave accessible to all families, but instead 'when' paid leave will be available."*

MomsRising describes itself as an advocacy organization where moms and the people who love them go to change our world. Through MomsRising's tireless efforts, paid family and medical leave has been passed by state and local policymakers in North Carolina. In 2019, Governor Roy Cooper passed an Executive Order to extend Paid Family Leave to state employees, and the first model paid family and medical leave insurance bill was introduced at the NC General Assembly. Eighteen North Carolina counties and cities across the state and the UNC System have included paid leave in their own employee system and more are considering it now. The snowball effect of their hard work has provided paid leave to thousands of families across the state.

In the arena of advocacy, there are no stronger advocates than parents, and MomsRising and its sister organization MamasConPoder have lifted up the voices of thousands of families for so many issues. MomsRising has organized, supported and engaged parents in advocating for child health, family support, and early education issues through storytelling, petitions, videos, social media campaigns, and countless meetings with policymakers at home and in Raleigh. We are proud to call MomsRising a Think Babies™ NC partner and work alongside these supermoms and their relentless campaigns to improve the lives of our state's youngest children and their families.

Community Champions

Cassandra Brooks

Cassandra Brooks was nominated multiple times for the Think Babies™ NC 2020 Outstanding Baby Advocate Award in the Community Champions Category. If you know her, you know why. She is an amazing leader and advocate who is always stepping up to do one more thing for babies and families because she sees the challenges they face.

Cassandra inspired policymakers and communities to take action to provide hardworking parents with access to life-saving preventive care through Medicaid expansion. During the 2019 legislative session, Cassandra personally lobbied elected officials, conducted numerous media interviews, authored op-eds, participated in round tables with Governor Cooper.

If that wasn't enough, Cassandra also tackled the issues facing the early childhood workforce, advocating for early childhood teachers to be better qualified and compensated for the important work they do. She testified at the NC General Assembly, made dozens of visits to policymakers, and participated in a national conference on the early childhood workforce along with other workforce advocates. You'll soon see Cassandra as a spokesperson for families who need child care subsidy assistance in a video produced by the NC Early Education Coalition.

Her leadership and advocacy have been recognized and appreciated by numerous other organizations that have invited her to serve on their boards and within their organizations, including the NC Partnership for Children, the Johnston County Partnership for Children, and the Wake County Complete Count Subcommittee on Young Children, showing by example how child care centers can serve as a hub of information for parents in the upcoming Census.

We are all amazed and grateful that she does all of this while operating two five-star child care centers in Wake and Johnston Counties, serving hundreds of primarily low-income families with high-quality care, and going above and beyond to support each child, every family, and every teacher in her centers.



Crystal Kelly and the Watauga Children's Council

Crystal Kelly and the Watauga Children's Council are recognized for outstanding leadership and advocacy to advance better opportunities and outcomes for babies and their families in Watauga County and nationwide.

Crystal Kelly is the former Director of the Watauga Children's Council and a Pritzker Children's Initiative Fellow. Through her dedicated leadership and community engagement work, the Prenatal-to-Three Stakeholders Team was formed, which led to the creation of Elevate Watauga. This initiative brings together community leaders, early childhood advocates, policy makers, administrators, and parents dedicated to the primary goal of advancing promising policies and programs that ensure every parent has the support they need to give their children a strong start in life. Funded with support from the Pritzker Children's Initiative's National Collaborative for Infants and

Toddlers and the National Association of Counties, Watauga County is one of just 29 counties in the country to be selected as part of this national initiative to move the needle for babies and toddlers.

This kind of extraordinary community leadership and advocacy has led to a steady increase of funding commitment from both private funders and county government. While at the Children’s Council, Crystal led the organization in creating a special initiative, “Pathways to Accreditation,” which provides high-quality trainings, mentoring and professional development, pays early educators who achieved higher standards a living wage, and provides financial rewards to Watauga County early childhood programs. Recently, the Children’s Council launched the universal home visiting program Family Connects with a grant provided by the Appalachian Regional Healthcare Foundation. *“While much of the program’s success will come from the efforts of many people, it was Crystal’s energy and determination that brought the community together,”* said the Foundation’s President.

In her nomination it was said, *“Crystal may be small in stature, but she is mighty as an advocate for families and children. Crystal has been key in creating community collaborations. She is not one who seeks accolades but is pursuing a dream that every child, starting at birth, will have an opportunity to live, grow, and learn in a safe, nurturing, and stimulating environment.”*



The Partnership for Children of Johnston County

The Partnership for Children of Johnston County is recognized for its outstanding efforts to make sure all babies and their families thrive.

When the Partnership received the Think Babies™ NC Community Partner mini-grant, it launched an ambitious plan to put a spotlight on the issues facing babies and their families in the community. Collaborating with community organizations, parents, and child care providers, the Partnership hosted to a Think Babies™ Bus Tour for policymakers, business leaders, and community members to tour high-quality infant toddler child care programs and to explore the issues young children and their families face.

They are expert advocates who go above and beyond to engage parents and child care providers, sharing stories and experiences directly with state and local policymakers and bringing a skilled team to the Strolling Thunder Think Babies™ Advocacy Day in 2019. They continue to educate and engage policymakers and local leaders about the critical issues facing young by hosting community conversations and screenings of acclaimed documentaries such as *No Small Matter, Resilience, and Broken Places*. And they put families first by working with other Smart Start Partnerships and the NC Division of Child Development and Early Education to host the first Family Leadership Summit as part of a statewide effort to help families develop skills to be effective leaders and advocates.

We also applaud their own efforts to make the Partnership for Children of Johnston County a family-friendly workplace for staff. Their organization sets the Think Babies™ standard by providing new parents with 12 weeks of paid parental leave, allowing them to bring their baby back to work with them for up to six months after their paid leave, and providing new moms with a private, comfortable breastfeeding area onsite. In their own words, the Partnership is walking the talk. Partnership leadership Dwight Morris and Karen Mills said, *“We are all about creating a stronger family network within the community. So we need to practice the type of policies we advocate for within the community and align our employee policies with our family-first philosophy.” “The babies are just a joy to have around, and they make our employees happier. Everyone is just as, if not more, productive. We found the babies bring us all closer together.”*



The Randolph Partnership for Children

The Randolph Partnership for Children is recognized for its outstanding leadership and advocacy to advance better opportunities and outcomes for young children in Randolph County and North Carolina by promoting public awareness, engaging community members, and advocating with policymakers on issues affecting babies and their families.

As a Think Babies™ NC Community Partner, the Randolph Partnership created an extensive community education and engagement campaign that included seven roundtable discussions, a tour of high-quality infant-toddler child care programs in the county, and the launch of The Basics™ Randolph program. Through this work, the Partnership informed and engaged many state legislators, as well as local mayors and city council officials, about the issues facing babies and families, and provided the latest research and information about evidence-based programs.

Across the state, the Randolph Partnership for Children is recognized as a leader, not only as one of our Think Babies™ NC Community Partners, but also for their leadership on several other exemplary initiatives, including: KidsReady NC, to address early education in the birth-to-three space and positively impact third grade reading proficiency; Shape NC, to create outdoor learning environments and encourage healthy eating and physical activity practices in child care programs; and the Strengthening Family Engagement and Leadership project to support families in becoming leaders and advocates in their own communities.

Furthermore, the Randolph Partnership has been selected as one of three agencies in North Carolina to implement the Infant & Toddler Technical Assistance Model Pilot Project, funded by the NC Division of Child Development and Early Education, to create a transformative new coaching and mentoring model of technical assistance to enhance the quality of infant and toddler experiences in early child care and education settings.



Outstanding Baby Advocate Award Nominees

The Think Babies™ NC Alliance recognizes the following nominees for their leadership and advocacy on behalf of our state's youngest children and their families. Thank you for your dedication to making babies a top priority!

Alliance for Children
Ashe Partnership for Children
Ashley Marlow
Dr. Frances Jones
Dr. Lanier DeGrella
East Coast Migrant Head Start
Elizabeth Winer
EQuIPD
Ginger Young and Book Harvest
Greg Borom
Krycya Rojas and Thriving at Three
Michelle Kennedy
Norma Honeycutt and Partners in Learning
Rockingham Partnership for Children
Rosemarie Vardell
Smart Start of New Hanover County
The North Carolina Partnership for Children

More information about all of the nominees can be found online at:

<https://www.ncearlyeducationcoalition.org/events/outstanding-baby-advocate-award/>