

2024 North Carolina State Office Candidate Questionnaire

Name: Jon Berger

District or Office: NC House District 20

Party Affiliation: Democrat

Current Occupation: Retired Civil Servant

Questions for 2024 Candidates for State Office in North Carolina

1. The most rapid period of brain development happens in the first five years of life, laying the foundation for all future learning, health, and success in school and life. What are your views on the needs of young children (prenatal to age 5) and what steps would you take to address these needs?

I recognize this is one of the key development periods over the lifetime of an individual, and so both as a member of our community and especially as a legislator, we must address: healthcare and nutrition, early childhood education, parental support and family leave, child welfare and protection, and, most importantly, accessible and affordable childcare.

If elected, I would support:

Legislation that ensures all pregnant women and young children have access to comprehensive healthcare, including prenatal and postnatal care, vaccinations, and regular check-ups.

Increased funding for programs like Early Head Start, Head Start and universal pre-K to ensure all children, regardless of income, have access to quality early education.

Allocation of federal and state funds to subsidize childcare costs for families in need and improve the quality of childcare services.

Ensure programs like WIC, child nutrition programs and school meal initiatives are adequately funded and accessible to all eligible families with particular attention to our working poor whose incomes just exceed these nutrition program eligibility requirements but are in desperate need of these programs.

Implement and support policies that provide paid family leave for parents to care for their newborns and young children.

Invest in community-based parenting support programs that provide resources and education to new and expecting parents.

Enforce and enhance regulations for childcare providers to ensure they meet high standards of safety and education.

Encourage businesses to adopt family-friendly policies, such as flexible work hours and onsite childcare.

2. Every county in North Carolina is considered a "child care desert" with not enough supply to meet the demand. When parents do find child care, the average cost is nearly \$10,000/year, which is higher than the cost of public college tuition. What steps would you take to ensure that families have access to high-quality and affordable early learning programs for their children?

Several comprehensive steps need to be taken to create a robust system that provides all families with access to high-quality and affordable early learning programs, laying a strong foundation for the future success of our children.

From a legislative and policy perspective, I will seek increased funding for programs like Head Start, Early Head Start, and other state-funded preschool programs and expand subsidy programs and childcare vouchers to make early learning programs more affordable for low- and middle-income families. We need increased support for family-run child care centers as well. I will also push for legislation that establishes universal pre-kindergarten for all 3- and 4-year-olds, ensuring access regardless of family income. I will also encourage public-private partnerships to increase the availability of pre-K slots and ensure diverse program options.

In order to ensure the quality of these programs, funding to support ongoing professional development for early childhood educators is critical. This requires the enhancement of credentialing and certification requirements, advocating for higher wages and better benefits to attract and retain qualified professionals, and implementing loan forgiveness programs particularly for those in underserved areas.

We must put into place quality standards and accountability frameworks and assessments to ensure quality services are being delivered. To support this, research into best practices in early childhood education and the long-term benefits of early learning programs must be ongoing to include frequent reviews of data published by The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) as well as other reputable organizations (e.g., The National Association for the Education of Young Children, EdNC). Research from these organizations can be used to then make data-informed policy decisions and program improvements, ensuring that resources are directed where they are most needed.

3. Currently, child care teachers in North Carolina earn an average of \$14/hour, less than most retail or service workers. Since 2021, federally-funded Child Care Compensation Grants have provided higher wages and bonuses to more than 40,000 North Carolina early educators, but that funding has expired. This summer, the NC General Assembly appropriated funds to extend the grants for a short time, while also recognizing the need to explore long-term solutions to attract and retain a qualified early childhood workforce. What steps would you take to stabilize and sustain North Carolina's early education system and child care workforce as we approach the end of Compensation Grant funding?

We must increase state budget allocations specifically for early childhood education and childcare subsidies, and engage local governments to allocate funds from their budgets to support early education programs. We must also request additional federal emergency relief funds, if available, to bridge the gap left by the end of Compensation Grant funding.

Governmental agencies alone cannot address this. We must also seek to partner with local businesses and corporations (e.g., Chambers of Commerce, companies with strong social responsibility programs, matching gift programs) to sponsor early education programs and childcare centers, and work with NGOs, foundations and philanthropic organizations (e.g., University partnerships, neighborhood organizations, local education and child focused organizations) to secure additional funding and support.

4. Working parents depend on child care, and businesses in nearly every sector have identified child care as a critical factor in their workforce challenges. A new study from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation found that insufficient child care is costing North Carolina about \$5.65 billion each year. What are your views on how the issues facing our state's child care system impact the state's economy? What specific steps would you take to ensure that our child care system can keep up with the demand as more working families need child care?

Lack of quality child care resources impacts our state's economy in several areas. It can lead to reduced workforce participation, particularly among women. Parents may be forced to reduce their working hours or leave the workforce entirely, which in turn reduces household income and overall economic productivity. If the situation persists, families will decide to leave the state or to not move here, further impacting the state's economic viability. Unreliable or unaffordable child care disproportionately impacts low-income families, exacerbating

economic inequality. To ensure that North Carolina's childcare system can keep up with the increasing demand, several policy and funding initiatives are required. As a legislator, I would advocate for:

Increased state and federal funding for childcare programs - this could include direct subsidies to families, grants to childcare providers, and funding for the expansion of public pre-K programs.

Expanded and increased childcare subsidies for low- and middle-income families, and introduce or enhance state-level childcare tax credits to make childcare more affordable for working families.

More incentives for employers to offer on-site childcare or subsidies for their employees' childcare costs - this could help reduce the burden on public childcare systems and increase employee retention and productivity.

In addition to these specific policy and funding efforts, we must increase access and capacity by encouraging development of childcare centers in underserved areas and streamline licensing and regulations to make it easier for providers to enter the market while maintaining high standards of care. In order to ensure effective care, we must invest in the training and development of the childcare workforce. This includes offering scholarships for early childhood education degrees, providing professional development opportunities, and ensuring competitive wages and benefits to attract and retain qualified staff. Finally, I would ensure the implementation and enforcement of quality standards for all providers and promote innovative models (e.g., Smart Start, shared services alliances) to address our state's early childcare issues.

5. North Carolina currently spends approximately 1% of the annual state budget on early childhood programs, including Smart Start, NC Pre-K, and Child Care Subsidy Assistance. Nearly all early childhood programs in every county of the state have waiting lists and only serve a fraction of eligible children and families. What are your goals for overall early childhood funding and/or what types of early childhood programs would you support making an investment in at the state level?

My goals for overall early childhood programs across North Carolina include:

Increase overall investment to match or exceed the national average
equitable distribution of funds to ensure that all children, regardless of their socio-economic status, geographic location, or background, have access to high-quality early childhood education and care

Investment in early childhood care and education workforce development to support a living wage across our state

Integrate health, nutrition, and family support services with early childhood education to address the holistic needs of children and families.

We must continue investing in our state's Pre-K program, increase funding for Smart Start, expand our Early Head Start and Head Start grant applications, and continue the provision of childcare subsidies and tax credits.

6. If elected, what would be your top 5 priorities for 2025?

- Roll back the current abortion ban and enshrine reproductive rights in law.
- Continue to expand access to Medicare, Medicaid and other health care options for the general population.
- Reinvest resources into K-12 public education, and support initiatives for universal pre-K for 3 & 4 year olds.
- Hold polluters accountable for the damages to our environment, specifically the dumping of PFAS contaminating our waterways, soil and air.
- Support incentives for increased affordable housing in our cities to attract more middle class and young families to our state.

As a tax-exempt organization under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, we do not support or oppose any candidate for public office.