

## 2024 North Carolina State Office Candidate Questionnaire

Name: Maria Cervania

District or Office: NC House District 41

Party Affiliation: Democrat

Current Occupation: Legislator

### 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?**

North Carolina must commit to and take action on the North Carolina First 2000 Days Initiative (or something similar that considers the prenatal period). This is when a child's health and well-being are at their pivotal developmental stage.

I serve on the House Health Committee, the Early Childhood Caucus, and the North Carolina Institute of Medicine Essentials of Childhood Update Committee. In each space, I have actively advocated for investment in early childhood education, health, and support services to ensure all children have the best start in life.

Together, we will find ways to:

- 1) Provide resources and support for parents and caregivers
- 2) Promote prenatal care and maternal health (including mental health)
- 3) Ensure proper nutrition, healthcare, and support for the child and family
- 4) Implement policies to protect children
- 5) Create nurturing and safe environments
- 6) Support Early Childhood Education
- 7) Open opportunities for Inclusive and Equitable Access

My commitment is to promote policies and fund mandates that foster a nurturing environment for children by supporting parents, caregivers, and communities. This will ultimately lead to a healthier, more educated, and economically stable population.

**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?**

To ensure families have access to high-quality and affordable early learning programs, we need to:

- Expand government funding at the federal, state, and local levels.
- Explore partnerships with the private sector for quality early learning programs
- Offer subsidies, tax credits, and vouchers to reduce family childcare costs.
- Expand the programs to include early learning centers and home-based and community-based childcare options.
- Strive for the highest quality by updating and enforcing quality standards, providing accreditation, and offering professional development for educators.
- Enact solutions to workforce challenges, including improvements to compensation, benefits, and career development opportunities for early childhood educators.
- Increase public awareness about the availability and benefits of high-quality early learning programs and the access to financial assistance available to those who need it.
- Make early childhood education a policy priority and support family-friendly policies.

**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?**

At the end of the 2024 Short Session, the North Carolina General Assembly passed emergency childcare compensation grants—about 67 million dollars. While we took a step in the right direction, these grants are not recurring and do not adequately support our childcare facilities and caregivers. This is a pressing issue as these funds are just meant to keep the doors of childcare facilities open until the funding runs out again in December. Once this funding runs out, about 3 in 10 childcare centers expect to close.

We need to:

- Appropriate recurring funds to support our childcare facilities and caregivers.
- Enact laws and policy reforms that ensure sustainable funding and reduce administrative burdens.
- Develop public-private partnerships for additional funding and support.
- Provide a thriving wage for educators to retain a qualified workforce.
- Respect and revere our childcare providers.
- Increase public awareness about the importance of early education.
- Encourage innovative and diverse service delivery models, including home-based childcare.

**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?**

Our state's childcare system faces high costs, limited access, and a shortage of qualified educators, which significantly impact the state's economy. When families struggle to find affordable, high-quality childcare, parents—especially mothers—are often forced to reduce work hours or leave the workforce, reducing overall productivity and economic growth. We are in a critical crisis. As members of the House Economic Development Caucus, childcare is one of the top issues for which we seek solutions, yet we are having difficulty agreeing on a resolution.

One of the primary reasons large organizations have headquartered and small businesses have planted roots in North Carolina is our robust public educational system. Inadequate early childhood education will affect the workforce pipeline, especially in children's future academic and career success, limiting the development of a skilled workforce. Investing in a robust childcare system is essential for supporting working families, fostering economic stability, and ensuring long-term economic growth in the state.

**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 early childhood funding are to secure sustained, increased investment in programs that provide high-quality, accessible, and affordable early education and care for all children in North Carolina. As a former Wake County Commissioner, I sat on Smart Start and NC Pre-K boards, respectively. During my time, I advocated

and passed an increase in wages for childcare providers, the pilot of Three School, and many more programs that uplifted our young children and families. At the state level, I support investing in the same efforts, including universal pre-K, expanding childcare subsidies for low- and middle-income families, enhancing home-based and community-based childcare options, and providing professional development and fair compensation for early childhood educators.

I will continue to work for programs that address the diverse needs of all children, including those with special needs, to ensure equitable access to quality early learning opportunities, especially in underserved communities. Also, I will continue to fight for professional development and fair compensation for early childhood educators to ensure quality and stability in the workforce.

All of the above is the least we can do to build a strong foundation for children's future success and support working families across the state.

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

If re-elected, my top 5 priorities include:

- Ensure affordable healthcare for all, including reproductive healthcare.
- Advocate for fair elections, expanding access to voting, and opposing voter suppression.
- Increase funding for public schools, educators, early childhood education, and childcare.
- Increase job creation, implement a thriving wage, and foster economic growth that benefits all communities.
- Maintaining sustainable energy policies and protecting North Carolina's natural resources.