

2024 North Carolina State Office Candidate Questionnaire

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Party Affiliation: Democrat

Current Occupation: Non-Profit Executive

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?

The earliest years have lifelong impacts on physical, social, and emotional development. What children experience during this time shapes their brains. Positive experiences and environments can set families on a stronger path, while traumatic experiences can have long-lasting negative effects. Therefore, the state has a #1 responsibility to reduce poverty and ensure access to healthcare, stable housing, food security, education, and community assets regardless of census tract. The needs of infants and toddlers are particularly important and as a society we must do more to ensure quality of life for the youngest residents. The well-being of the youngest children determines the well-being of any community. This includes economic mobility for families and access to quality early care and education, and sufficient green and play spaces.

Investing and prioritizing the early years--supporting children and the adults who care for them (family, teachers and other professionals)-- generates a triple bottom line: intergenerational social returns, economic returns, and academic returns. I have been leading in the early childhood industry for nearly 20 years and now dedicated to leading on this issue from public office. My career has demonstrated leadership across industries, including museums, preschools, early elementary schools, higher education, philanthropy and now, state systems.

North Carolina can learn from other states that are investing in family education and navigation programs, like Family Connects Inc. (developed in NC). I support legislation to establish and implement a statewide post-natal comprehensive screening and connection program. Screening for indicators of health beyond behavioral and biological issues not only helps families, it also encourages providers to take a more holistic approach to the many factors affecting a child's health and wellbeing. As your state representative, I will promote solutions that prepare children to succeed in life and in school. NC can reclaim its standing as one of the best states to be born and raise a child by looking at the intersections of early childhood experiences with all other areas of policy: for example, small business and economic development, housing, environmental, and/or tax policy.

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?

Our public narrative and public policy around child care must undergo a significant mindset shift from child care as babysitting infants and toddlers while their parents work to child care as providing essential nurturing environments that support solid foundations for life and K-12 school. Through my candidacy and service in public office, I will be a voice of the science of the early years. We must create greater public will that demands early childhood education starting with infants. K-12 conversations are incomplete as long as early childhood education isn't included.

I will ALWAYS advocate for steps toward universal access to early care and education. In order to meet this level of demand, we start with increasing subsidy and NC PreK rates to reflect the true cost of care. This will incentivize entrepreneurs and public schools to provide child care for all 4 and 5 year old's. To address the infant-toddler desert (a much greater problem for our state) I will advocate for housing policy that promotes greater home

ownership for early childhood teachers. Home-based child care is a critical child care program required for developmentally appropriate environments for children under three.

Ultimately, solving for the child care desert will require a public - private approach to scale the current mixed delivery system of home-, community-, and school-based programs. This requires small business policy solutions as well as public school policy solutions. The state has a primary responsibility (as codified in our state constitution) to provide access to education and learning environments for ALL, starting at birth--not just starting at the arbitrary age of kindergarten and certainly not only for families living with poverty wages. If our state wouldn't ask families to pay for 2nd grade, then we shouldn't be asking families to pay the average cost of \$10K for their 2 year old.

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?

Listen to the advocates and providers who are telling elected officials what is needed. Invest to maintain federal investments over the past three years. Halt the plummet to zero corporate taxes. Start funding/implementing recent study and calculations of the true cost of care by setting child care subsidy rates accordingly so that these rates reflect the actual cost of child care for providers (this includes compensation and benefits for teachers). Creating new financing strategies that moves the state toward universal access for early childhood education. This may include reallocations in the current budget to reflect what should be our states value in universal access. Families will always have a choice to home school or attend a private school of their affording. The goal is to provide families with the comfort of knowing that when they give birth and return to work, there will be a well-compensated early childhood educator that will provide continuity of care and education by staying on the job and not leaving to earn \$17 or \$20 at gas stations or retail stores. Also critical to stabilizing and sustaining the workforce is their access to child care for their own children. This type of bill was presented to the current NCGA and it failed to pass. This campaign is one step toward a stable workforce. We need to elect full champions of education and early childhood education. Champions that value the teaching profession and are willing to put money toward this value.

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?

Providing a stable child care system is a two generational solution. It helps children with a strong foundation for life and school and it allows their parents to pursue careers, education, or vocational skills. This 2-gen solution contributes to the overall productivity of the workforce--the workforce of today and the workforce of tomorrow. The economic returns of a functioning early child education system "yields 13% return on investment per child, per annum through better education, economic, health, and social outcomes."

When the childcare system breaks down, it deprives children of valuable opportunities and disrupts the participation of parents in the workforce or educational achievement. The impact of the childcare problem costs our state and nation billions. These economic impacts have been studied by economists and Business Chambers across the county.

To ensure that our early childhood care and education system keeps pace with current and growing demand across the state, I would: (1) Engage stakeholders to develop a vision for universal child care (2) Support small business policy to expand home- and center-based early childhood programs and promote shared services alliances (3) Set subsidy reimbursement rates based on actual operating costs (4) advocate for greater federal investment (like Build Back Better Act) and federal policy (like the CHIPS Act child care requirements) (5) invest in higher ed solutions to ensure recruitment and preparation of early childhood professionals through accreditation and other initiatives.

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 goal is fully-funding universal access to early childhood education, starting with the youngest learners--infants through kindergarten. All types of early childhood programs require investment in order to meet this goal. Home-, School-, and Community-based early childhood programs should be able to cover their program costs when participating in any of the state's subsidy programs, including Tri-Share, NC PreK, state and federally funded Child Care Subsidy Assistance. I am also a huge advocate for state funding to expand Head Start and Early Head Start.

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

(1) Reproductive Freedom: I will always champion and fight for reproductive health and family planning. I will oppose all legislation that attempts to restrict a person's ability to make their own reproductive health care decisions, including the decision to have an abortion, in vitro fertilization, or contraception.

(2) Public Education: I will advance any bill that ensures every North Carolinian receives their constitutional right to high-quality free and basic education for all, starting at infancy. I will work to ensure the North Carolina legislature complies with the 2022 N.C. Supreme Court Leandro decision and fulfills its constitutional obligation to release funding. I will work to reverse efforts to defund public schools and eliminate Head Start. This includes ensuring well-compensated PreK-12 teachers and pay parity across early childhood teachers--between PreK teachers and K-3 teachers.

(3) Learning environments: I will challenge North Carolina's ranking as last in the nation for funding public school and I will strive to make North Carolina a national leader in public education investment, starting with early childhood education. I will vote for funding for more school nurses, counselors, social workers, psychologists, and support youth mental health, including expanding infant-early childhood mental health practice.

(4) Tax Policy: I oppose the supermajority plan to raise family taxes so they can do a big tax giveaway to large corporations--and even the chamber of commerce says that's a bad idea. At the same time, I will push for the reinstatement of the state's Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit so the lowest-income families in North Carolina can have access to resources to put food on the table.

(5) Poverty Reduction: North Carolina's minimum wage has been stuck at \$7.25 an hour for the last 15 years. I applaud employers who choose to more fully compensate their labor force affording them live in Wake County. When employers don't fully cover the cost of their workers' ability to live moderately on 40 hrs of work, it becomes the state's responsibility to mitigate the impact of poverty wages. Working people can't afford another 15 years of an unlivable minimum wage. When elected, I will support a widely-accepted living wage of \$15 an hour to ensure all working people can afford to live in our state.

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