

Conversations on the Child Care Crisis: Summary and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear to everyone that child care is essential – for children's healthy development, for working families, and for our economic recovery from this crisis and future prosperity. But child care is not funded like it's essential, and this crisis has devastated the child care industry in North Carolina and across the country. Even before the pandemic, child care was unavailable and unaffordable for parents, providers operated on razor thin margins, and early education teachers were woefully underpaid for their important work.

In order to address these challenges and to help guide and inform our work to support, stabilize, and ultimately transform the child care system, the NC Early Education Coalition hosted two virtual Conversations on the Child Care Crisis in October 2020. The conversations were designed to shed light on the current conditions across the child care landscape, the immediate needs of the child care community and the strategies needed to build a better child care system. These interactive conversations provided an opportunity for Coalition members and the broader early childhood community to share concerns and challenges, strategize with colleagues and partners, and provide input about the early education policies that should be top priorities in 2021 and beyond.

A diverse group of 40 stakeholders from all across the state participated – including child care providers and teachers, Child Care Resource and Referral staff, local Smart Start partnerships, and other early childhood organizations, community college faculty, and parents – and together they offered a clear view of the crisis from multiple perspectives.

The following questions were discussed in small groups:

- *Question #1: Where are we now? What does the COVID-19 child care crisis look like from your perspective?*
- *Question #2: What are the urgent policy, program, and/or funding needs that are required now to stabilize the child care system?*
- *Question #3: How do we build a stronger, more effective child care system that is centered on equity and expands opportunities for every child and family?*

The following themes and recommendations emerged:

Current Conditions

- Funding conditions continue to be dire, and child care providers reported that they are unable to maintain services without additional financial support. There is also an ongoing need for health/safety supplies.
- Staffing needs vary greatly across the state. In some counties, programs are challenged with finding qualified staff and substitute teachers to be able to increase enrollment and meet the demand for services. In other counties, programs have had to let staff go because enrollment is so low.
- This variation has huge implications for families and has exacerbated existing child care deserts. In some counties, parents now have only one program available to meet their needs.
- Child care directors, teachers, and families find themselves in a very unpredictable state, feeling as though they are always in a “planning mode” with lots of uncertainty and constantly changing roles and responsibilities and funding. Families feel uncertain about their children’s health and safety, their work and family finances, and their decision about whether or not to place their child in care.



- Staff reported challenges with their own mental health, stress, and morale. *“Everyone is on edge. Working with children is hard enough under normal circumstances.” – Child Care Center Director*
- Difficulties persist with the provision of professional development at the community college level and by technical assistance providers. Participants reported that they struggle with getting resources to students and with providing hands-on experiences in the classroom.

Immediate Needs

- Funding continues to be an immediate need. Child care owners shared that they operate on impossibly thin margins without a reserve built up, and vacancies are high. Therefore, they are not able to withstand the emergency closures and additional funding is needed to operate during COVID.
- Teachers reported that compensation is a huge issue and that they should be paid a livable wage, with health care, paid sick days and the ability to get tested for COVID. Many child care teachers and staff do not have health insurance or other key benefits. *“We are essential. Don’t forget us after COVID is over.” – Child Care Teacher*
- Families expressed the need for family-friendly policies, such as giving parents additional paid leave or paid sick days if they need to stay home with their child when their child care program closes due to COVID cases.
- Directors also reported staffing needs and are concerned by the delays that COVID has caused for things that are required for hiring, such as background checks, orientation and trainings.
- Participants reflected that there seems to be some public awareness about importance of child care, but unless people experience the challenges first-hand, they don’t necessarily know about the severity of the crisis. Participants unanimously agreed that high-quality child care should be viewed as a necessary component of economic recovery.



Participant Recommendations to Build a Better Child Care System

- Deliver equitable access to quality child care so that every child can benefit from the long-term positive outcomes of early childhood education. *“Let’s build on the momentum of this moment as people think about child care being essential.” – Child Care Center Owner*
- Many of the funding strategies that the state put in place with federal funding from the CARES Act were found to be highly successful. Participants recommended the continuation of those strategies, including:
 - Operational grants to child care programs
 - Waiving parent co-pay fees
 - Bonus/hazard pay for teachers
 - Subsidy stabilization and subsidies for essential workers
 - Increased subsidy eligibility for families with school-age children
- Provide additional opportunities for teachers to reach higher education goals through increased standards that reward educational accomplishments and through salary scales based on educational attainment.
- Strengthen engagement with the business community so that they understand the importance of the field and the need to adopt more family-friendly policies. Business leaders need to hear from parents about how it mattered to them when their child care program closed or stayed open and how it’s impacted their family.
- Ensure that every child care facility has access to health resources and technical support, including child care health consultants, to support children with special health care needs and to implement health and safety guidelines during the pandemic and beyond.
- Consider innovative ways to think about rules and regulations in order to increase sustainability for programs but still keep programs safe for children and families.

- Increase collaboration across the state to provide model sites for high-quality child care, family engagement services and supports, and training centers for the child care workforce. Consider models from other states that leverage shared investments and shared services for common goals.
- Ensure that people who are the most directly impacted – families, teachers, providers – are involved from the start in identifying both problems and solutions for the early childhood system.
- Explore new cost models for child care in order to ease the financial burden on families and the child care workforce. For example, pay child care subsidy payments to programs based on enrollment rather than attendance. This would improve financial stability for programs, and in turn, teachers could be paid wages comparable to the public school system, recognizing their value and worth for the whole community. *“We need a new way to pay for child care that doesn’t put the cost on the backs of families or teachers.” – Smart Start Partnership Executive Director*



Families rely on our early education system in order to keep working, and our state’s economy does, too. Child care has a critical role to play in our efforts to recover from this crisis and to build a better economy and thriving communities. The insights gained from the Conversations on the Child Care Crisis this fall made it clear that our child care system – including the children and families it serves – cannot hold on much longer without significant support and funding.