

August 26, 2021

## **Re: Adopting the House Budget Proposal to Expand the Child Care WAGES Program**

Dear Conference Committee Members,

Early educators are the workforce behind the workforce, and they have been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 crisis since day one. Our state's future prosperity depends on working families, who depend on quality child care programs and teachers in order to work.

Young children need experienced, well-educated, and well-compensated teachers to support their healthy development and early learning. Not just anyone can do this important job. Just like K-12 teachers, early educators need specialized education, skills and training to support the social, emotional and cognitive development of very young children.

North Carolina is facing an unprecedented workforce crisis, with fewer people entering the early childhood field and qualified teachers leaving the field at high rates due to low compensation. This workforce crisis exists because child care teachers are paid poverty-level wages and few benefits for the critically important work they do. Child care programs pay teachers an average of \$12.00 per hour, and in 71 counties, the average pay is even lower. But child care programs operate on razor-thin margins and don't have the financial resources to pay teachers better. They simply can't compete with Amazon, Walmart and other retailers that pay \$15.00 per hour, and they can't raise their fees because parents can't afford to pay more.

Consequently, child care programs are struggling to find qualified staff and are forced to turn working families away because they don't have enough teachers to meet the demand as people return to work.

The Child Care WAGE\$ program is an evidence-based, long-standing salary supplement program in North Carolina that supports child care teacher compensation, education, and retention. Making the Child Care WAGE\$ program available in all 100 counties will allow child care programs to attract and retain a qualified early childhood workforce and keep their programs operating without increasing parent fees.

The House Budget contains \$35 million to expand the Child Care WAGE\$ program statewide and will make it available in all 100 counties. The House budget also includes funding to build the supply of qualified teachers through bonuses, apprenticeship programs, and fast-track college courses, which will help attract new people into the field. We urge you to adopt the House proposal for Child Care WAGE\$ and the early childhood workforce in the final budget.

Please invest in the Child Care WAGE\$ program to help address the child care workforce crisis and increase access to child care across the state. Doing so will ensure that working families can return to work and provide their young children with opportunities for quality early learning experiences that will support their healthy development and future success in school and in life.

*Sincerely,*

*Michele Rivest  
Senior Campaign Director, NC Early Education Coalition*