

## 2024 North Carolina State Office Candidate Questionnaire

Name: Marjorie Benbow

District or Office: NC House 62

Party Affiliation: Democrat

Current Occupation: Farmer and lawyer, former educator

### 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 children are the reason that I am running for office. We must allow them to have access to opportunity. To give them this access, we need to address health, education and more.

Healthcare, including preventative medical care is extremely important. My opponent voted against Medicaid expansion leaving hundreds of thousands of children and their families uninsured. Financially it sent billions of dollars to other states. Illness and death rates increased. If I am elected, I will help fund NCDHHS programs and will encourage its collaboration with partner agencies. Healthcare does not begin with the child - it also starts with maternal health and the provision of reproductive health. Vaccinations, wellness check-ups, and school healthcare resources are critical. I will never vote against Medicaid expansion (unlike my opponent-who voted against it several times). Such a vote put our most vulnerable populations at more risk. The vote against Medicaid expansion was cruel and inhumane.

He supports defunding public education. He is a champion of sending public dollars to private schools. Currently \$800,000,000 is budgeted to go to private schools through the voucher program. There is also no income cap on who can use this money. A millionaire can take your tax dollars and take it to the private schools to help pay for his/her child's education. Public dollars belong in public schools.

Biological needs must be met. These include, food, water, shelter, clothing, cleanliness, warmth and more. I have worked with organizations to provide food for children and it was great to see the impact. Their faces brightened and their ability to do academic tasks improved. After receiving an MS in Public Health from UNC Chapel Hill, I worked in a health department and closely with other agencies, I saw firsthand the impact of my colleagues who helped with what is now called FNS program and nutrition classes. I have volunteered with partners (i.e. 2nd Harvest) to get food to food insecure areas. There are some very scary statistics that must be reversed. One in four children are food insecure, and there are 24 food deserts in Guilford, and our area (Greensboro/High Point) ranks 14th in the nation for food insecurity.

Helping with access to food and healthcare will be supported by me if I am elected. But raising a child does take a village and coordination among many partner agencies. Using my public health degree, I did some studies for the state legislature and the data showed that higher disease burden was directly linked to lower socio-economic status. Since I have done the studies, when they are presented to me for consideration in the legislature - I will fund accordingly. If we do not have healthy children - parents miss work further contributing to financial insecurity.

Environmentally, we must ensure our communities are clean and our educational facilities are too. We cannot have contaminants that impede intellectual development (e.g. lead - Cabarrus County is home to a battery disposal site that resulted in a large number of individuals having lead poisoning which impacts us neurologically). In Iredell County there are clusters of childhood cancers from Duke Energy's waste. In our schools (preschool as well as through 12) we have the ability to improve oxygen levels which have been shown to improve test scores and grades by 10%!

Children need to feel safe to thrive. Safety has several components, such as shelter, public safety and fire protection. Safety begins at home. Parenting classes help teach parents parenting skills.

In addition to the basic needs outlined above - education is absolutely critical for neurological development. Early childhood, education is critical. It cannot be underestimated. Education is a tool for empowerment and develops the neurological pathways for life. Whether we are dealing with Birth-3, preschool, head start, smart start etc... it is all critical. I am proud to be from NC where access to good education is in our constitution - but there are so many threats like the defunding of public schools and sending our tax dollars to private schools and not using the educational lottery for its purpose. I am a champion of early literacy because if it were not for my reading skills - I could not have accomplished what I have today (including filling out this survey) If our children are fed, healthy, safe, educated they will be given the building blocks to have confidence to and be empowered to navigate their futures.

Last, I can only hope that all children as well as every adult feels accepted. I promise to access the issues based on my constituents, data and especially the impact on the children.

**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?**

I would like to provide business incentives to encourage companies in NC to be more like European companies -- where child care is part of the cost of doing business. I have seen success by providing mini grants to help neighborhoods provide child care. I believe in expanding early childhood education efforts and increasing teacher pay (childcare workers too) so that children can begin school earlier with the assistance of people trained in educating.

**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?**

I am going to get that 800,000,000 going to private schools (AKA VOUCHERS) back to critical initiatives in education like early childhood education. The minimum wage in NC needs to be increased and with it child care compensation grants. I will extend the grant and work with the experts in this area to find solutions and flex all my political energy to make it happen. If we do not - we will create children who have lost hope. Our future in NC is education because it propels our children future. Our children are our most important asset.

**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?**

There are many adults who stay out of the workforce because it is more expensive to enroll their children in child care and work than it is to stay out of work. To quantify the impact financially is only one dimension. We should also ask - how many people who want to work are not working because of the cost of childcare? or because they

do not have access to childcare? NC Pre-K does a good job as do other other programs in helping with childcare. The system can be strengthened and further coordinated among non-governmental organizations to empower working families. The current basis is a good start but more resources need to be provided. I believe in giving businesses incentives to establish childcare centers so they can attract and retain workforce. These incentives to businesses help to diversify workforce as women are the primary caregivers of children in NC. I also believe in providing mini grants to neighborhoods to provide solutions in their area. I will make sure the legislature goes after every single penny from the federal government to address early childhood education, healthcare and childcare. I am not going to turn any funds down because there may be conditions associated with the acceptance of it. I will not be an ideologue or party puppet that puts more children at risk or causes them to suffer. I will be a champion of the children. We have a lot to win or lose at the federal state and local elections for sure!

***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?***

When I volunteered as a social worker and went into peoples' homes, I worked with many people who worked two and three jobs and did not have the funds to buy food and live in decent conditions. And as a teacher, I continually saw how schools were the backbone of providing food, a safe place, education and a loving environment for children. They were often the conduit to other important services. The early childhood programs and education are absolutely critical to proactively address so many tough issues in our society including - homelessness, crime, unemployment. Early childhood support has been shown to:

- increases earnings,
- improve academic success,
- increase employment rate, and
- improve health and longevity improves.

Better employment builds a robust economy. Most of all supporting early childhood programs ensures we do not steal hope and opportunity from our children. It is my goal to influence others in the legislature to prioritize these multifaceted initiatives for the children. I would like to increase NC early childhood funding and K-12 funding too. You can count on me from the NC House. Under the GOP Supermajority, about 21% of the state's 4-year-olds were enrolled in NC Pre-K in 2023 - The state spent about \$6,672 per student, down \$1,178 from the previous year when adjusted for inflation. This should not be the case. Our spending should at least keep pace with inflation. Also, speaking of other issues regarding early childhood funding. The state just allowed the teacher / student ratio to slip from 1:18 to 1:20 in the classroom. This crowding is a sign of underfunding and more impetus to kill vouchers. With our constitution saying that every child is guaranteed access to quality education – it makes no sense that only 1% is addressing the constitutional imperative. Legislators should be running for office and acting to help our children not impair their potentials.

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

- Education - specifically public education including pre-K
- Women's Reproductive CHOICE (put this separate from health because I see reproductive health as two fold - one of equality and one of health / safety)
- Health - per the world health organization -- The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not just the absence of disease or infirmity.
- cost of living / how to help people make ends meet
- jobs

*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.*