

2024 North Carolina State Office Candidate Questionnaire

Name: Leigh Coulter

District or Office: NC House District 69

Party Affiliation: Democrat

Current Occupation: Hospitality, entrepreneur

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?

As a former elementary educator and parent, I am very well aware of the crucial needs of young children. I have long been a strong advocate of exceptional early childhood education for all of North Carolina's children. We know that the dollars invested in the youngest of our children pay the highest dividends for families and for the state overall. The very first thing I would do is FULLY fund Leandro and get this in motion. Next, I would be the loudest advocate for the improvement and expansion of our state funded childcare centers around the state. We know most of our state struggles with an extreme lack of quality care for our youngest children. Our kids deserve so much better. We are a wealthy state and we can and should do this.

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?

This is a budget question. Our NC state budget has not valued children in a long, long time. This needs to change. Today.

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 would work as hard as humanly possible with the House Democratic Caucus to make sure this grant funding stays in the budget and is expanded. My goodness. We should be arguing over how best to improve the care and education provided to our children. NOT whether or not they deserve this care and education. I made calls this summer and encouraged all the advocates in my circle to call the NCGA about this issue. Everyone loses when we do not take care of our kids.

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?

I am not as knowledgeable about specifics on this issue as I would like to be. But, as long as the majority of decision makers in the NCGA would rather fund vouchers for rich families over supporting ALL the children in our state: my specific step would be to help elect better decision makers.

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?

I support all of the above listed programs and I am interested in every creative idea that may come across my desk. I am very well aware of the number of children who need these services and are not able to access them.

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

Funding Leandro, eliminating private and religious school vouchers, expanding early childhood education and childcare in every county in the state.