

2024 North Carolina State Office Candidate Questionnaire

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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 native of Wilson County, I am proud to be from the home county of Gov. Jim Hunt, a trailblazer for early childhood education. Focusing on early childhood development and education is one of the most important things we can do as a state. We know that investment in young children not only builds the foundation for educational achievement but also presents a significant return on investment to the state. As a former board member of the Wilson County Partnership for Children, I fundamentally believe that we have to get serious about our commitment to young children. We must recruit qualified and talented early childhood educators, and pay them as such. We must open more pre-K classrooms so that children have the opportunity to learn and prepare for K-12. We must focus on lowering the costs for early childhood education and child care so that working parents can afford it. Cross-community collaboration is critical to addressing child care challenges and building community solutions. When we have quality child care, our children can thrive in a safe and positive environment, while parents can enter the workforce and earn a living for their families.

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?

What we have found in Wilson County that applies to the state is that we have a workforce issue. We desperately need more early child educators so that we can increase the supply of high-quality and affordable early learning programs. In our county, waitlists for a spot in an early learning program can be extensive and that is because we do not have the number of classrooms to support the demand. We have to increase the number of programs that are available and state funding is a critical part of that. As a state, we have to make a commitment to fund early learning programs to help bridge the gap for working families.

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?

My grandmother was an early childhood educator. She kept children for decades because she understood the importance of the early childhood period in a child's life. She developed strong relationships with families and built the trust to work together for the child. Perhaps it is because of her that I feel so strongly about early childhood education, but I believe that funding of early childhood education has to be a top priority. That means sustained funding at the state level is needed. Early childhood education does not exist without early childhood educators. North Carolina needs to commit to recruiting and retaining the very best to teach our children and prepare them for school. This issue is directly tied to the lack of early childhood classrooms that are available to families.

Whether in the form of grants or direct state appropriations, support for the child care workforce is something that is needed. This investment is worthwhile and the return on that investment is substantial.

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?

One of the important lessons from Gov. Hunt has been the importance of bringing the public and private sector together to ensure we prioritize our youngest children. We must invest and create more early childhood classrooms. While we need an increase in Title I Pre-K and NC Pre-K classrooms, we also need to make sure that we prioritize quality and affordable options for middle class families. The cost of child care causes many parents to make the decision to opt out of the workforce when they would otherwise participate. Focusing on recruitment of quality educators to create more classrooms is essential.

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?

As a former member of the Wilson County Partnership for Children, I have seen up close how we are missing the mark in adequately funding early childhood programs. The need for access to these programs is immense for working families, but the state has not properly invested in our children. I believe that we need to expand the number of NC Pre-K slots in every county. In Wilson County, we are only scratching the surface of the need that exists and that is because of inadequate funding. I strongly support increasing the investment in early childhood education in this state so that our children are ready to learn when they enter K-12. I truly believe that focusing on serving more children at the Pre-K level will lead to improvement of education at the K-12 level.

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

Increasing public education funding, expanding affordable health care access, expanding pre-k and early child programs, promoting economic development, and lowering costs.