

North Carolina Early Childhood Education: History & Evolution, 1990–2026

NOTE: The timeline prioritizes general childcare and education system milestones.

It does not include every Head Start, IDEA/Part C, or special-education policy change affecting young children.

Developed a National Model: 1990 - 1999

Year	Key Development	Significance	Possible Sources
1990	T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood begins in North Carolina	Umbrella for scholarships for early childhood educators & admin. Becomes a national model Followed the state's first early childhood educator workforce study in 1989 by CCSA, Child Care Resources Inc., and the Frank Porter Graham (FPG) Child Development Center	creates T.E.A.C.H. scholarship <i>*operated in 23 states in 2020</i> Early Years history NCDHHS/FPG ECE history
1990	Federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act	Strengthens the federal role in helping families afford childcare Supports state quality-improvement activities	42 USC 9857: Short title purposes ACF- CCDBG reauthorization CCDBG In Brief
1991	Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) (<i>access & affordability</i>)	Initial funds are distributed Oct. 1-Sept. 30, 1991 1991 Total funding = \$1.1 billion (all states, tribes & territories) Primary childcare funding source for low-income families	CCDF Understanding Funding Specifics 2003-current year allocations
1993	Gov. Jim Hunt launches Smart Start	Ensure all children enter school healthy & prepared to succeed. Establishes a public-private, locally driven birth-to-five system focused on school readiness and child/family well-being (Eventually served all 100 counties through local partnerships)	Smart Start 2020 report NCDHHS/FPG ECE history
1993	NC creates the Division of Child Development (DCDEE)	Consolidates childcare functions within a dedicated state division--Strengthened statewide early childhood infrastructure	NCDHHS/DCDEE history
1993	Smart Start expands statewide	Demonstrates emerging NC model - combines state investment with local decision-making and public-private partnership	Smart Start NCDHHS/FPG ECE history
1997	NC creates voluntary QRIS	NC implements a voluntary childcare star-rated QRIS (Quality Rating & Improvement) system	142nd Session Laws '97 Volume II Scroll (p.853) Star-Rating system history
1998	Child Care Services Association creates WAGE\$	Provides education-based salary supplements to address educator compensation and retention	NCDHHS/FPG ECE history Child Care WAGE\$
1999	Five-level Star Rated License is implemented	Moves beyond minimum health and safety licensing by recognizing programs that meet higher voluntary quality standards	NCDHHS/DCDEE history (1999)

Shift from Child Care to Early Education: 2000 - 2008

Year	Key Development	Significance	Possible Sources
2000	Star-rated licenses integrated into statewide childcare landscape	Quality ratings become connected to licensing, parent information, and subsidy policy (different payment rate)	NCDHHS/FPG ECE history NCDHHS/DCDEE history

2001	More at Four is established	Creates a state-funded voluntary Pre-K program (NCDPI) for at-risk four year olds, adding a major public preschool component to NC's early childhood system Continues to be "mixed delivery" within public schools, Head Start programs and/or private childcare centers	NCGA - More at Four authorization More at Four Report Smart Start and More at Four
2001-02	First More at Four program year	Begins implementation of the program primarily based on family income. Funding to local contractors: public school districts or Smart Start partnerships (<i>later becomes NC Pre-K</i>)	NCGA - More at Four authorization NCDHHS/FPG ECE history
2003	Child Care Resource & Referral system is restructured	Strengthens regional coordination, technical assistance, core services, and professional development infrastructure	NCDHHS/DCDEE history CCR&R Workforce Survey
2004	More at Four operates across all 100 counties	Shows how existing Smart Start, public school, Head Start, private child-care, and quality rating infrastructure supported relatively rapid statewide expansion	NCDHHS/FPG ECE history Year 4 Evaluation
2005	Foundations: Early Learning Standards for NC Preschoolers (NC FELD)	Formalizes expectations for preschool learning and development and reinforces early childhood as an educational field	NC Foundations NCFELD (2013 version)
2006	Star Rated License is revised	DCDEE updates quality ratings increasingly emphasize staff education and program standards, with compliance serving as the baseline	NCDHHS/DCDEE history 2006 State Fact Sheets (p.67 scroll)
2007	Infant-Toddler Foundations are released (NC FELD)	Extends developmental and learning guidance from preschool downward to children from birth through age three	NC Foundations NCFELD (2013 version)

Reduction, Reorganization and Alignment: 2009 - 2017

Year	Key Development	Significance	Possible Sources
2007-08 onward	Great Recession begins a period of funding pressure	Begins a longer period of constrained early childhood financing and increasing reliance on federal resources From 2007-08 to 2019, total early childhood dollars (state & federal funding) declined by 26%, state funding reduced by ~53% (more reliance on federal funding)	NC Justice Center funding trends NC Newsline – The Pulse
2011	More at Four moves from DPI to DHHS and becomes NC Pre-K	Places the state pre-K program within the division responsible for childcare marking a significant governance change	NCDHHS/DCDEE history
2011	Division of Child Development becomes DCDEE	Division of Child Development and Early Education (new name) reflects increasing integration of care and education	NCDHHS/DCDEE history
2013	NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development released (updated version)	Combines infant/toddler and preschool guidance into one birth-to-five learning and development continuum	NC Foundations NCFELD (2013 version)
2014	Federal CCDBG is reauthorized	Federal reforms emphasize health and safety, continuity of assistance, parent information, quality, and workforce development, requiring state implementation changes	CCDBG Reauthorization Act

2015	Pathways to Grade Level Reading launches	Led by NC Early Childhood Foundation under Tracy Zimmerman & Mandy Ableidinger Helps connect early childhood policy with a broader birth-to-eight framework and third grade reading outcomes	NCECF Pathways
2017-18	State increases NC Pre-K investment and slots	Continues efforts to expand access and reduce waitlists for eligible four year olds	NCDHHS/FPG ECE history NC EarlyEd Coalition Fact Sheet

Integration of Birth-to-Eight System: 2018 - 2019

Year	Key Development	Significance	Possible Sources
2018	Infant-Toddler Educator AWARD\$ is created	Extends education-based salary supplements to infant/toddler educators, keeping compensation and retention central to quality	NC Early Ed Coalition
2018	Statewide early childhood articulation agreement is approved	Creates clearer pathways from community-college early childhood degrees into UNC System bachelor's programs and B-K licensure	UNC System articulation agreement
2018	Gov. Cooper directs creation of Early Childhood Action Plan	Broadens the policy lens from individual programs toward measurable statewide outcomes for birth through age eight	NC Early Childhood Action Plan
2019	NC Early Childhood Action Plan launches	Establishes 10 data-informed goals encompassing health, safety, family well-being, learning, and school readiness through age eight.	NCDHHS — ECAP launch NC Early Childhood Action Plan
2019	Early childhood financing shifts further toward federal funds	NCGA shifts \$50 million (TANF) from subsidy program to NC Pre-K; Uses \$50 million (new federal CCDF) - replace the subsidy funds; Takes \$50 million (NC Pre-K state funds) - spend elsewhere Illustrates the continuing tension between expanding expectations for the system and developing sustainable state financing	NC Justice Center funding trends TANF

Crisis, Stabilization & Search for Sustainability: 2020 - 2026

Year	Key Development	Significance	Possible Sources
2020	COVID-19 disrupts early care and education	Childcare's role as essential infrastructure becomes highly visible as programs support essential workers, families, and the broader economy	NCDHHS Birth-to-Five Needs Assessment NC Early Childhood Foundation
2021	ARPA directs approximately \$1.3 billion to North Carolina childcare	Provides an unprecedented temporary federal infusion for provider stabilization and supplemental child-care investments Included two streams – stabilize providers and help parents afford	NCDHHS Birth-to-Five Needs Assessment EdNC: ARPA
2021	Stabilization grants support providers and workforce compensation	Federal relief helps programs address operating costs, recruitment, retention, wages, and benefits at a scale not available through normal financing	NCDHHS/FPG ECE history ; NCDHHS Birth-to-Five Needs Assessment
2021	Build Back Better Act	Request of \$3.5 trillion (including childcare as one of five items) Advocates are hopeful about childcare and preschool provisions	US Build Back Better Act Build Back Better FAQ
2022	Build Back Better Act does not pass	Build Back Better falls through, stabilization grants uphold programs	

		Providers encouraged to use grants for compensation increases (base wage raises & bonuses)	
2022	Care and Early Learning (CanDL) listening initiative launches	Brings parent and provider perspectives into discussions about what a future childcare-and-education system should look like The insights are still informing the work of Afton and other leaders	EdNC: CanDL CanDL
2022	Hunt-Lee Commission recommendations elevate early care and learning	Connects early childhood more explicitly with education, workforce, and economic policy	EdNC: Hunt-Lee Commission Final Report
2022	Warnings intensify - childcare funding cliff coming	Shifts attention from emergency stabilization toward what will happen when temporary federal resources disappear	EdNC: Funding cliff warning
2023	State budget extends stabilization but no permanent replacement	Postpones the immediate cliff while leaving the longer-term financing question unresolved.	EdNC: 2023 budget EdNC: Compensation Grants
2023	Bipartisan Early Childhood Caucus & coordinated push for major new investment	Early childhood advocacy becomes increasingly coordinated around workforce, subsidy, and system sustainability- large NC rally Gov. Cooper includes stops at childcare programs in his statewide tour of public schools (23-24)	EdNC: 2023 \$300M push EdNC: Long Session EdNC: NC Rally Caucus
2023	Tri-Share pilot is created	Introduces employer-family-government shared financing model and reflects increasing business involvement in childcare	EdNC — 2023 budget SmartStart Tri-Share budget
2024	State provides temporary continuation funding for stabilization supports	Continued compensation-related supports at a reduced level rather than replacing pandemic funding with a permanent financing mechanism (short session) Lots of turnover in early childhood state-level landscape	NCGA Session Law 2024-40 EdNC: No new funds EdNC: stop-gap funds
Sept.–Oct. 2024	Hurricane Helene exposes childcare infrastructure vulnerability in western NC; relief funding follows	Connects disaster recovery with broader statewide concerns about child-care supply and sustainability State relief includes funding for affected childcare facilities NCGA allocates \$10 million	NC Helene Damage & Needs NCDHHS Child Care Commission -12/24 minutes
2024	Invest Early NC creates long-term vision	Began convening advocates to work behind the scenes to develop a long-term vision	EdNC: Invest Early NC Invest Early NC
2024–25	QRIS modernization moves forward	NC begins redesigning the quality rating architecture whose roots reach back to the 1990s	NCGA Session Law 2025-36
2025	Pandemic stabilization ends & ExCEL NC launches	Marks the end of the extraordinary federal stabilization period and intensifies the sustainability question ExCEL NC launches convening business community leaders to rally around childcare advocacy	ExCEL NC
2025	Gov. Stein establishes NC Task Force on Child Care and Early Education	Brings bi-partisan policymakers, state agencies, providers, business leaders, and advocates together around affordability, access, workforce, and financing for long-term solutions.	Governor Stein Task Force
2025	HB 412 becomes Session Law 2025-36	Makes significant childcare regulatory changes and directs planning related to QRIS, subsidy participation, and payment requirements. No new childcare funding.	NCGA Session Law 2025-36
2025	Invest Early NC & Afton Partners collaborate	Begin working on a 10-year strategic advocacy plan	Afton Partners EdNC: Data-driven decisions

2025–Jan. 2026	Task Force develops priority recommendations & moves toward implementation	Focuses statewide attention on subsidy reimbursement, workforce supports, affordability, supply, public-private approaches, and long-term financing	Governor Stein Task Force
2026	NC establishes a statewide childcare subsidy reimbursement floor	The FY2026-27 budget directs roughly \$97 million in recurring federal funds to higher subsidy reimbursement rates and establishes a statewide floor Additional investments target workforce, supply, mental health, and infrastructure	EdNC: 2026 subsidy floor Lt. Gov: 2026 subsidy floor