

OUR EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM IN DURHAM COUNTY



The “Early Learning System” refers to the network of support and resources available to families to support their children’s learning from birth through third grade.

90% of brain development happens before age 5, so learning at home, in the community, in early care and education settings, and in elementary school through age 8 sets the foundation for the rest of a child’s life.

The earlier that concerns with how a child is developing are identified, the easier it is to address them to support that child’s later development and learning.

**EARLY LEARNING
AT HOME AND IN
COMMUNITY**



**EARLY
INTERVENTION**



**EARLY CARE AND
EDUCATION**



**KINDERGARTEN
THROUGH THIRD
GRADE**

Through conversations with parents and early childhood providers, analysis of our local data, and workgroup discussion, strengths, challenges, and opportunities were identified in 4 areas:

- [Early Learning at Home and In Community](#)
- [Early Care and Education](#)
- [Early Intervention](#)
- [Kindergarten Through Third Grade](#)

EARLY LEARNING AT HOME AND IN COMMUNITY

Parents are a child's first teacher—they are at the center of a child's healthy development, exploration, and school readiness. Children spend much of their time out of formal learning environments, so the role of parents in early childhood learning and brain development cannot be understated or undervalued.

Strengths

Parents Appreciate the Programs in Durham that Empower Parents with the Knowledge and Tools to Support Their Children's Early Learning

Parents expressed appreciation for programs like Early Head Start home visiting, Book Harvest's Book Babies, Durham Partnership for Children's Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and Healthy Families Durham for supporting parents as teachers.

"We have Book Harvest giving children all over Durham free books because we know the value of early reading" - Durham parent

"Now that my kids are older I don't really know of any places in the community that help out. Except for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library which I just signed up for my youngest and the Book Harvest that we got books from when the girls had appointments." - Durham parent

"There's a lot of help from agencies. They give you classes on how to raise babies, how to read to them, how to manage every stage of a baby's life and it personally helped me a lot." - Durham parent

"Reading programs how to read to their children" - Durham parent

Abundance of Public Spaces for Gathering and Learning

Parents mentioned the public spaces in Durham that support early learning and social development at playgrounds, libraries, swimming pools, museums, sports facilities, and green, outdoor play areas were applauded by many families. Families appreciate free and low-cost programming from the Museum of Life and Science and Durham Parks and Recreation in particular. More museums and activities or programs for children and parents are desired by the majority of families because the current options are very popular.

"Many parks and libraries" - Durham parent

"I think the library and other venues provide opportunities for learning and enrichment activities (if you have time off of work and transportation)." - Durham parent

"Some programs through the Durham library, parks and rec, and city for children to participate in and socialize in, pre-covid" - Durham parent

Challenges

Barriers to Participating in Learning and Enrichment Activities and Programs

Parents want their children to participate in learning, enrichment, and extracurricular activities offered in the community, but find they are too expensive and the timing makes it hard to accommodate for working parents. Parents also felt like there are not enough programs and activities for younger children. Through ECAP workgroup discussions, programs expressed that there are many free or low-cost activities through programs like Durham County Libraries, YMCA, Durham Parks and Recreation, and more, but perhaps they are not advertised well enough.

"Wider range of programs that are free or have the scale for reduced cost be wider - Especially need free after school care, camps & tutoring." - Durham parent
"I wish they would provide affordable resources for other programs like karate, ballet or soccer. These kinds of sports are not affordable...it would cost you a two-week paycheck to pay for them. You would have to work 80 hours to pay for 4 hours of these programs. It is not something affordable and I wish they would change that." - Durham parent
"More opportunities for working mothers. Most things I have found are usually in the middle of the week when I am at work." - Durham parent/caregiver
"Opportunities outside of work hours for working parents" - Durham parent/caregiver

"Having group activities for children between the ages of 2-5." - Durham parent
"More activities for 2 year olds, they seem to be forgotten." - Durham parent
"More free or low cost options for entertainment for kids under 3" - Durham parent

Parents Feel That There Is Not Enough Support with Early Learning

Parents shared that they want to be empowered to support their children's early learning and development at home, but don't always know where to start.

"Help the parents with reading and games for children" - Durham parent
"Parents are the first educators of our children which is why we have a difficult task but very important so that we can have future generations raised in a healthy and clean home" - Durham parent
"Teaching and upbringing groups" - Durham parent

74.64% of parents who responded to the ECAP survey with children aged 0-4 said they would be extremely likely or somewhat likely to participate in free programs that provide individual and/or group support for parenting strategies, early childhood learning strategies, and preparation for Kindergarten. **67.83%** of ECAP parent survey respondents who have children in Kindergarten through 3rd grade said they would be extremely likely to participate in free programs that provide individual and/or group support for parenting strategies, transition to elementary school, and learning and homework strategies. For both questions, parents with low-incomes regardless of race and ethnicity were more interested in participating in the listed programs, with Black and Hispanic parents with low incomes more interested than white parents with low incomes.

Opportunities

See [Durham ECAP recommendations](#) (documents 6a-6e), which seek to leverage our strengths to address our challenges:

- 6. Expand opportunities for accessible, inclusive, safe, and family-friendly enrichment activities and public spaces.
- 13. Promote preventive and responsive approaches to foster social-emotional, mental health, and resilience of young children and their families.
- 21. Promote and support early literacy and play for young children starting at birth in partnership with families and caregivers.

EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Early care and education, including infant-toddler care, child care and preschool, are critically important to our children's early learning and social-emotional development. The quality of these settings, especially related to developmentally-appropriate practice, warm and positive interactions with caregivers, and child safety, are critical to supporting healthy child development and providing a strong foundation for later success in school and life. There are a number of teacher preparation and technical assistance efforts active in Durham to support improving the quality of child care in Durham.

The network of early care and education is also fundamental to family economic prosperity and workforce participation. As has been highlighted in recent national discourse and in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, child care is infrastructure that is absolutely essential to a functioning economy. The women of color who predominantly care for our young children allow parents and families to go to work and school.ⁱ

In our community, and across the country, child care is provided in diverse settings, and many families often use more than one type of care. Families choose care based on a number of factors, including cost, location, hours, educational philosophy, cultural values, and more. In June 2021 in Durham, 6,161 birth to five year olds and 2,237 school-age children were enrolled in licensed centers and homes. However, some parents expressed distrust in the early care and education programs in Durham and prefer to keep their children at home.ⁱⁱ

"To be honest I do not trust child care centers. My kids are taken care of by my mother. I trust my family." - Durham parent

"I homeschool. I feel more comfortable having my children with their parents until they can talk" - Durham parent

"In our hispanic culture, in our home countries, it is our families who help us raising our children." - Durham parent

The types of child care settings include licensed and regulated full-day child care offered in child care centers or in Family Child Care Homes (FCCH); unlicensed, regulated half-day child care programs, offered by churches and in other community or home settings; and family, friend, and neighbor care, which is unlicensed and unregulated, and involves care being provided by a family member, a friend, or a caregiver in the child or caregiver's home. These settings vary in quality, cost and accessibility; we know more about the quality and cost in licensed and regulated settings than we do in other settings. In NC, technical assistance, quality

improvement, and funding supports, including the ability to accept subsidies, are generally limited to licensed and regulated child care settings. This web of early care and education options is made up of distinct yet interdependent parts of Durham's early childhood education ecosystem that work to meet varying needs and preferences of families.

Durham County has recognized the importance of universal child care as a multi-generational approach to addressing inequities in education, improving outcomes for young children, and increasing economic security and mobility. As research has shown, communities can expect a 7% to 13% return on investment for every dollar spent on high quality early care and education programs.ⁱⁱⁱ

By the numbers:

- In Durham County, there are **158 child care centers** and **108 family child care homes** that are licensed by the state.^{iv}
- A map of Durham County showing the child care centers per square mile as of 2020 can be found [here](#).^v

Strengths

Commitment to Implementing and Expanding Universal Pre-K in Durham

As a result of a large-scale planning effort involving many partners, Durham PreK was established to ensure more 4-year-olds in Durham County have access to high quality pre-K, with the goal of eventually expanding to 3-year-olds.^{vi} Durham County funds Durham PreK and Child Care Services Association (CCSA) manages the expansion of Durham PreK in collaboration with Durham's Partnership for Children, Durham Public Schools, Families and Communities Rising (Head Start), and other community partners. In addition to the goals of increasing quality of and expanding access to pre-K, the program is also focused on increasing wages for pre-K teachers and creating more economically-diverse classrooms.

Durham PreK serves as an umbrella for the three publicly funded pre-K programs in Durham (Head Start, Durham Public Schools, and NC Pre-K) as well as slots that are funded by Durham County. Durham PreK provides a universal pre-K application that is meant to streamline enrollment for families and allow Durham PreK partners to maximize braided funding and move toward more diverse classrooms. Pre-K slots are available at no cost and at sliding scale fees depending on need and family income, and are subsidized by the County to reduce costs. Since 2016, Durham County has invested around **\$15 million** to support the implementation of Durham PreK.^{vii}

In the 2019-2020 school year, **1,486 four-year-olds** were enrolled in Durham PreK (this number includes the number of children served by other publicly funded pre-K programs).^{viii} See pages [8-9](#) for a detailed breakdown.^{ix}

The program was widely praised by parents through ECAP outreach, but there are equity concerns related to lack of transportation and wrap-around care for before and after program hours to work through that are discussed further in the Challenges section. Parents would like to see the program expanded to provide pre-K at every elementary school and to serve 3-year-olds. Finally, there is more work to do to secure the funding and facilitate the related planning with partners like the school system and private child care sites to make the program available and accessible to all interested families.

“The improved availability of pre-K through Durham public schools” - Durham parent
“Collaborative effort towards a Universal pre-K” - ECAP Participant
“The support of the Board of Education for Durham Public Schools to expand pre-K” - ECAP participant
“[A strength is the] Higher salaries for lead teachers in Durham PreK” - ECAP participant
“The Durham PreK program has been a good first step, but I would love to see the program extended for younger children. “ - Durham parent

Engaged and Active Community of Early Childhood Educators

Durham has an active and engaged network of early childhood educators who have been advocating for system-wide change for decades. Many of these educators receive less than a living wage to do critical work to support healthy development and learning of our youngest children.^x

“Committed early childhood teachers and directors who want to be an active part of systems change to help children succeed” - ECAP participant
“Early childhood professionals are the key component for growing the talent and the technology of our next generation. Early investments in brain development will yield significant gains to society.” -Durham Early Childhood Educator

Challenges

There are Disparities in Access to High Quality Care (and Challenges with the Ways We Measure and Indicate Quality)

There are many components of quality in child care settings, different ways to assess the levels of quality, and some challenges and unintended consequences with those assessments. Warm, responsive interactions between children and their caregivers is arguably the single most important component of quality. Other important components include the knowledge and skills of teachers (and strong support for teachers including compensation and mentoring/coaching), developmentally-appropriate and culturally-affirming curriculum and practice, and genuine family engagement efforts. Research tells us that children, especially children from marginalized communities, receive the most benefits from child care when it is high quality.^{xi} ^{xii}Unfortunately, children from families with lower incomes tend to have less access to high quality care because it is usually more expensive, and there aren't enough seats in subsidized programs to meet the need.

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS; star-rating system) is the primary way that we measure quality in North Carolina, and it has been critical to driving quality improvements over time. It is important to know that QRIS is more focused on environmental and teacher credential/education factors, rather than on relational ones like child/teacher interactions. We heard from some child care providers that the standards are not always fully informed by the unique strengths and needs of smaller settings, including family child care homes, and the requirements can conflict with components of Montessori and Reggio programs. While the program is voluntary, many incentives are tied to participation. Programs that opt-out of the star-rating system, or that have lower star-ratings, are left out of many opportunities for funding and technical assistance. Overall, there is a desire in the field to expand access to high-quality early learning, and also improve how we assess quality to address barriers and to ensure that early learning settings can focus on the components of quality that benefit children most.^{xiii}

^{xiv}

Child Care is Too Expensive for Many Families to Afford

High-quality early child care and education remains expensive for many families in Durham. As of August 2021, Durham families spend more than the state average of their household income on child care, and these figures greatly exceed the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services child care affordability benchmark of 7 percent.^{xv} The child care affordability challenges mirror similar findings of the "State of Durham County's Young Children" report that was released in 2017.^{xvi}

[Document Revised: October 2021]

Figure 1: Percent of Family Income Spent on Child Care in Durham County, 2021^{xvii}

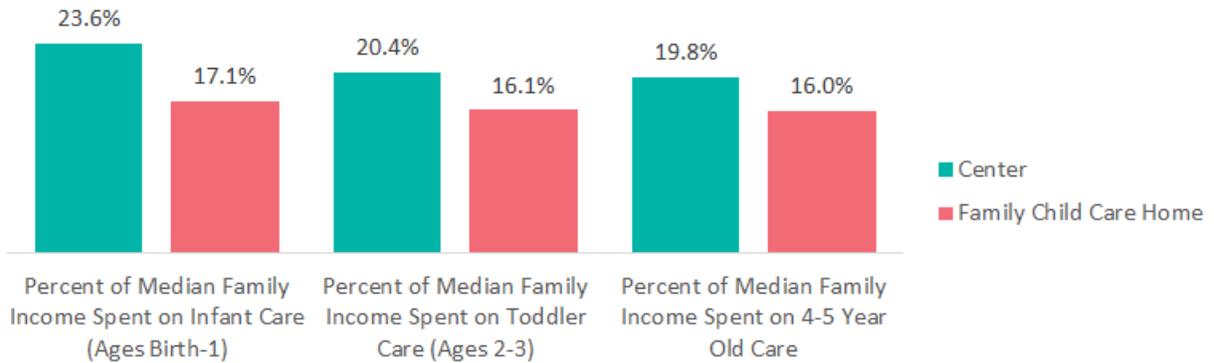
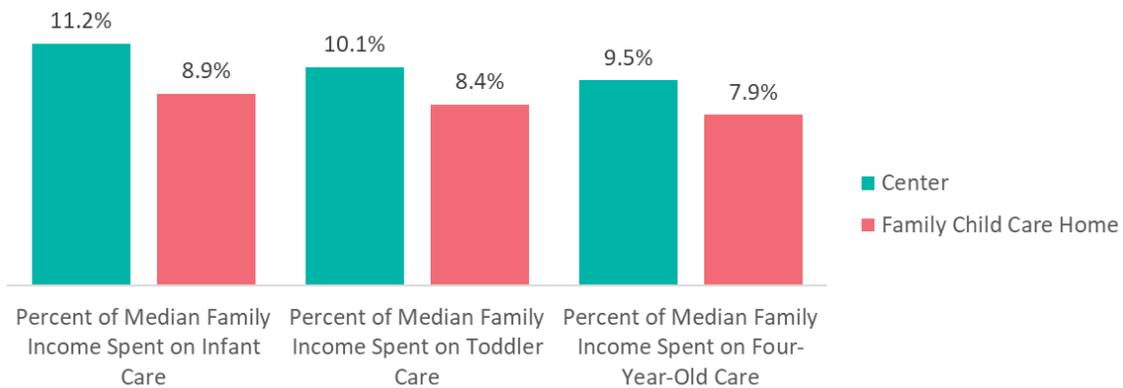


Figure 2: Percent of Family Income Spent on Child Care in North Carolina, 2019^{1 xviii}



"Emphasis on affordable truly high quality child care. We make a relatively high income and should not be struggling like this." - Durham parent

"More access to free child care." - Durham parent

"I have family support to babysit. Child care is very expensive." - Durham parent

Child Care Subsidies Are Not Available to All Families Who Need Them

Federally and state-funded child care subsidies, administered through the Durham County Department of Social Services (DSS), are available for eligible families to help families pay for child care for children aged 0-5 years and for before- and after-school care for children aged 6-12 years at 3-, 4-, or 5-star sites.^{xix} Families with children younger than 12 years old and who are

¹ Technical Note: The percent of Median Family Income is calculated using the average monthly rate of full-time care (provided by Child Care Services Association) divided by the Median Family Income, using U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-year Estimates: 2014-2018.

employed or in school and living below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) are eligible for child care subsidies.^{xx}

Additionally, CCSA administers a child care scholarship program that provides eligible families with assistance in paying for the cost of child care for children aged 0-12 years at 4- and 5-star care. Families must meet specific income-eligibility guidelines and must be working, looking for work, in school, unable to work, or have a child with a documented developmental need.^{xxi}

However, due to funding constraints, there is often a waitlist for these subsidies. The demand for child care subsidies generally continues to outweigh the supply. As of April 2020, there were **110 children** on the DSS waitlist in total.² As of June 2020, there were over 2,000 children on CCSA's Scholarship waiting list.^{xxii} Waitlist numbers at DSS have reduced during the pandemic, but the impact of the pandemic on child care availability means that some families have subsidies but cannot locate a place to enroll that works for their family. Additionally, families with infants and toddlers can have a particularly hard time accessing care, and there is not currently a subsidy priority for infants and toddlers.

Parents are frustrated by the subsidy eligibility criteria, especially parents who are seeking work who don't qualify for DSS child care subsidies which would support their job search and parents who make too much money to qualify, but are still crushed by the costs of child care.

"I make too much money to get any subsidy. I went into debt paying for daycare and pre-k." - Durham parent

"Provide a little more help for parents who need to go to work and sometimes it's not so easy to qualify for daycare" - Durham parent

"I didn't work for two years because of an injury. I was able to get services then. When I started trying to find a job (and needing help with child care) those same services were

² Note: DSS and CCSA have different practices to maintain waitlists which impacts these numbers.

- DSS occasionally clears the waitlist by contacting everyone, but if a family does not respond and/or follow through, they are removed from the list. CCSA's Scholarship Program will keep a family on the waiting list who requests to stay or who is hard to reach for at least three tries before removing them.
- DSS requires an application have proof of income in order to get on the waiting list, whereas families are added to the CCSA wait list through a phone call and basic screening.
- CCSA has higher income caps, so some families eligible for the CCSA wait list will have higher income than those added to the DSS wait list.
- CCSA's waitlist will include Durham children in only the 0-5 age group, whereas DSS will include children through age 12.

Because of these different practices in building and maintaining the lists, CCSA will have a fair number of families on the list who are not actually currently waiting, whereas DSS's waitlist will not necessarily reflect the true number families that are actually in need.

denied to me. One tries to get ahead, but when my income was too high I couldn't get support." - Durham parent

"I wanted to seek child care for my children to be able to look for work and they denied it because one of the requirements to apply was that I should be working." – Durham parent/caregiver

"How can you get a job if you have no child care? The social worker told me she found me daycare but that I have 2 weeks to find a job...but how if I have no child care? Then the pandemic hit and all was lost. This is what I do not like about that system." – Durham parent/caregiver

Child Care Does Not Meet the Needs of all Working Parents

Child care options are often limited for parents who do not work a set schedule, have traditional business hours of 9am-5pm, or who work third shift. Lack of transportation provided by child care facilities also presents a challenge to working parents or parents with limited access to transportation.

There are 108 licensed family child care homes in Durham County. Of those, only 14 (**13%**) offer transportation to/from a child's home. There are 158 licensed child care centers in Durham County. Of those, only 21 (**13%**) offer transportation to/from a child's home.^{xxiii xxiv}

"Funding for child care for school age children; many support 0-5, but lack for 5-12. Only child care subsidy dollars and there is a waitlist. Especially a challenge because of the pandemic/virtual learning." - ECAP participant

"Offering before and after care for pre-k in all programs at below cost rates" - ECAP participant

"Transportation to high quality ECE programs and pre-k"

There are Waiting Lists to Enroll Children in Child Care

In addition to the inadequate supply of child care subsidies, there is also a limited supply of child care openings, which has only been worsened by the pandemic. As of 2017, 59 percent of all child care programs have a waiting list.^{xxv} 78 percent and 52 percent of programs have waiting lists to accept new infants and toddlers and 3-5 year olds, respectively.^{xxvi} Waiting lists for infant and toddler care are particularly long.

Durham Head Start and Early Head Start programs are unable to serve all eligible families and have waiting lists each year. As of October 2020, there are 216 Head Start children and 182 Early Head Start Durham children on the waiting list for programs operated by Families and Communities Rising.

"I've been on the early headstart waitlist for months now" - Durham parent
"More child care options - waitlists are way toooooo long for quality child care." - Durham parent
"When I went to apply there was a one year waitlist for a daycare. We decided to wait for my child to be older and to wait [for me to go back to work so I could care for my child at home]."
- Durham parent

Child Care Margins Are Thin and COVID-19 Made It More Expensive for Child Care Providers to Care for Children

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it more expensive for child care providers in Durham to provide care for children as there have been new sanitation requirements, reduced teacher to student ratios, and more. At the same time, fewer families sent their children to child care during the pandemic due to the health concerns, unemployment, and stay-at-home orders that provided new flexibility in working and care arrangements for families. Child care profit margins are already very thin so this reduction in income and increased operating costs have put child care facilities in very challenging economic positions.

There have been some permanent child care closures in Durham—between January 2020 and July 2021, **10 family child care homes** and **9 child care centers** closed due to COVID-related reductions in enrollment. This equates to a total of **531 lost child care slots** (the majority in the 27713 zip code).^{xxvii}

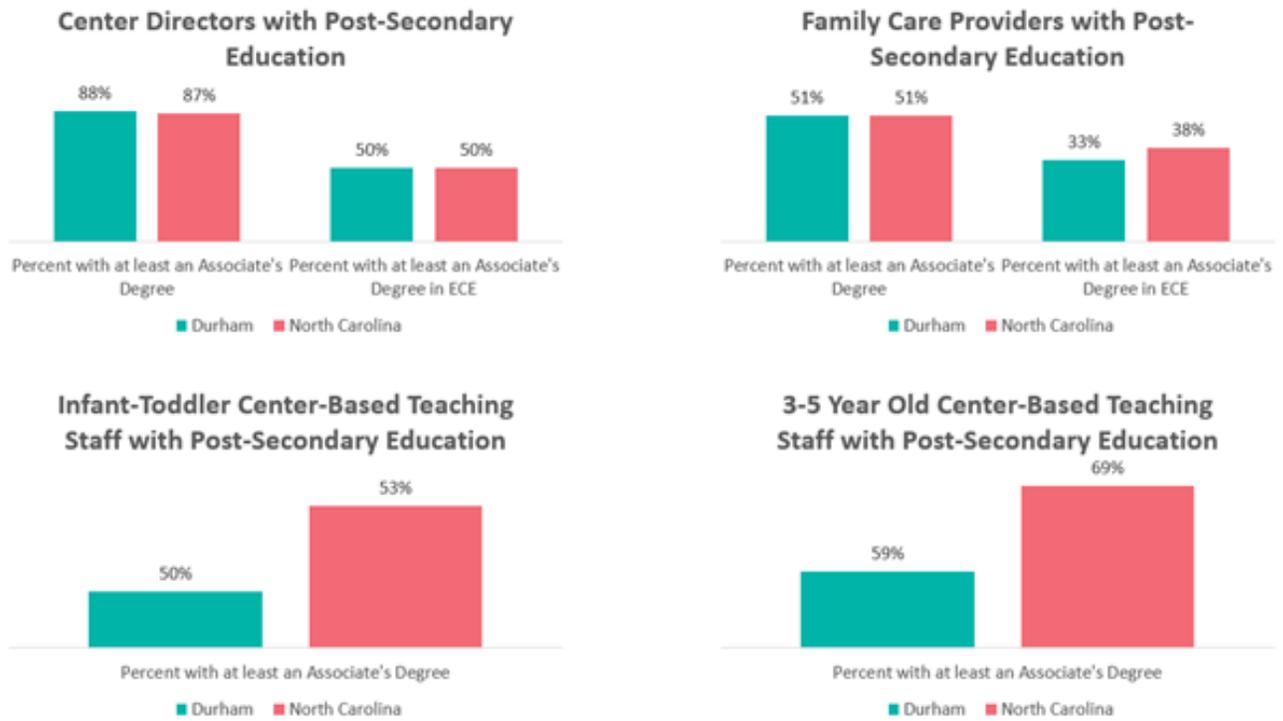
"Inadequate supply of child care programs. Worsened by CV-19. Could soon become a crisis of little availability as programs close." - ECAP Participant
"Example of having to decide between the good of the kids and business. When you get DSS involved you no longer have income. Need safety net like public schools for this." -Durham Early Childhood Educator

Undervalued and Underpaid Early Childhood Educators

In focus groups and ECAP workgroup and action planning conversations, educators shared that the administrative and educational demands on their profession do not come close to matching the pay. Many do not feel respected and expressed that their work is not often well understood by parents.

Research shows that early childhood educators' education levels are critical to quality, yet post-secondary education remains an expensive and time-consuming endeavor. There are significant barriers to increasing educational attainment (as is identified as an ECAP sub-target) in this essential profession.

Figure 3: Post-Secondary Attainment of Early Childhood Educators in Durham and NC, 2020^{xxviii}



[Document Revised: October 2021]

Figure 4: Racial Demographics of Durham County's Early Childhood Educators, 2020^{xxix}

Early childhood educators are notoriously underpaid and undervalued despite the known importance of early childhood education and child brain development in the earliest years. Historically, domestic workers in the United States, who were disproportionately women of color, have been systematically underpaid stemming from centuries of systemic racism.^{xxx} Women of color are still disproportionately represented in the early childhood profession and continue to fight for fair protections and wages.^{xxxi}

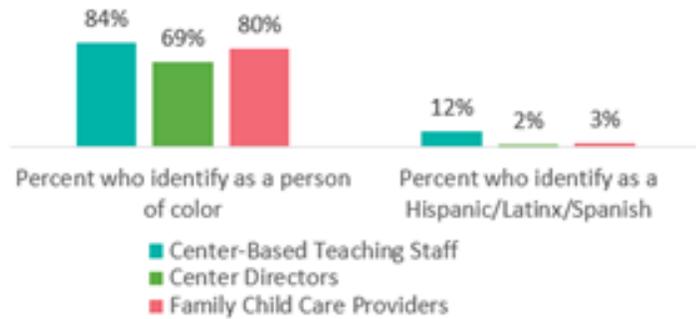
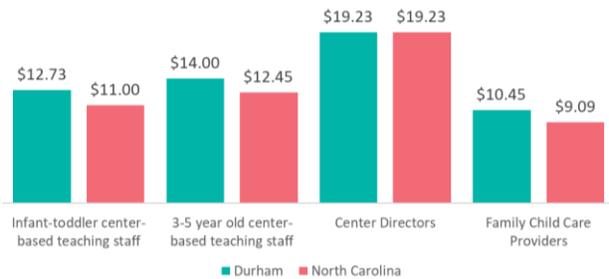


Figure 5: Average Hourly Rates for Early Childhood Educators in Durham and NC, 2020^{xxxii}



There is a significant wage penalty for this work – women are paid at least **26% less** than they could earn in occupations that require similar levels of education, experience, and skills.^{xxxiii} In addition to being paid below poverty level, this field is often provided less access to paid sick leave,

paid time off health insurance, and opportunities for growth. Many early childhood educators in Durham expressed deep frustration at not being able to afford healthcare for themselves and their own young children or child care for their children at the very facility they run or work for. In Durham, **13%** of family child care providers had no health insurance from any source and **29%** of center-based teaching staff had no health insurance from any source.^{xxxiv} National research has shown that poor compensation and benefits are felt most acutely by Black women in the early childhood workforce as evidenced by the **16% wage gap** between white and Black female child care teachers.^{xxxv}

Unsurprisingly, we see high turnover amongst child care staff. As of 2019, **21 percent** of full time teaching staff left their early care and education program.^{xxxvi}

Early childhood educators, many of whom have remained in the classroom throughout the pandemic, are experiencing burnout and continue to suffer from low wages and lack of

benefits. Child care programs continue to report difficulty in fully staffing their programs, which is creating more challenges with access.^{xxxvii}

Figure 6: Percent of Early Childhood Educators in Durham County Who Plan to Leave the Field in the Next 3 Years, 2020^{xxxviii}



“We are required to have more paperwork, more certifications, more notes on development, a lot more additional work outside the classroom, but we do not get the same kind of pay [as elementary teachers].” – Durham Early Childhood Educator

"When parents walk into a classroom all they see is playing and toys. They don't think this makes a difference for kids or they feel they are not learning. As a teacher, I see how all the toys have a purpose and I can see how they develop the child, their language, their mind.... But as parents we all need more parent education to understand the value of the classroom and the value of playing." - Durham Parent

“Expertise of early childhood professionals isn't valued or widely known” - ECAP participant

“Child care system rests on the shoulders of a workforce that does not have much agency in terms of power of their voice - underpaid, undervalued, many demands without benefits and pay on par” - ECAP participant

“Let's just strike. Who is going to come in and teach these kids? Sometimes it will take some radical and revolutionary change.” -Durham Early Childhood Educator

“We are just as important as elementary school teachers because we lay the foundation, but are not seen as such. Training shouldn't be out-of-pocket and we need access to the same training public school teachers have.” -Durham Early Childhood Educator

“Mental health would be better for ECE's if we felt more supported in training and finances” - Durham Early Childhood Educator

Family Child Care Home Providers Are Consistently Undervalued in Policy and Practice

Family Child Care Home (FCCH) providers expressed that through policies and practice they are often treated as lesser-than center-based care and education even though they are a critical part of the early childhood education system. These policies and practices lead to disparities in cost of care and in cost margins for family child care home providers, and more.

Another key concern shared by FCCH providers is the challenges that are presented by the voluntary star-rating system. In North Carolina, the Division of Child Development and Early Education uses star rated licenses with the number of stars reflecting indicators of a program's quality. Child care centers and family child care homes are evaluated on factors like health and safety, staff education, and other program standards.^{xxxix} In Durham, **72%** of child care centers have a 4- or 5- star rating. The star-rating system requires compliance in ways that FCCH providers say limits their ability to provide culturally competent care and creates inequities in funding, continuing to disproportionately hurt Black providers.^{xi} There is concern that in an effort to improve quality, there are measures that unintentionally cause child care providers to shift focus away from developmentally-appropriate, play-based, culturally competent early education. FCCH providers and center-based providers alike also shared that there is not a shared understanding of the [true cost](#) required to provide "high quality" care.^{xli}

An unintended consequence of preschool initiatives across the country is that community-based child care providers struggle to stay afloat due to the loss of revenue from preschool enrollment.^{xlii} FCCH providers in Durham report that this has been a challenge as Durham PreK is implemented.

"Because of Durham PreK, FCCH are losing their 3- and 4-year-olds and some are having to close down. This creates a real problem since many of those FCCH are the only options for 2nd and 3rd shift care, so now that leaves a shortage of care options for families." - Durham FCCH Provider

"We need to keep in mind family choice. Black families may choose FCCH because they want that cultural congruence." - Durham FCCH Provider

"Barriers from systems and agencies that dont allow us to treat children (or teachers) as individuals." - Durham FCCH Provider

"How can I be culturally responsive without being penalized financially? How you define high quality is not how I do or how my families do." - Durham FCCH Provider

"It's really a punitive system to provide care in your home. There is so much risk and not enough reward." - Durham FCCH Provider

"We're looked at as small businesses and yet we can't access the resources of small businesses. We're segregated by our language. The legislators making policies need to sit

with those experiencing it.” – Durham FCCH Provider

“Family child care receives less than half of the money. FCCHs are disrespected at the highest level even though we have to have the credentials.” – Durham FCCH Provider

Classroom Practices in Early Care and Learning Environments Can Be Harmful to Black and Brown Children

Children come to child care not only to learn in a safe, nurturing environment, but also to develop critical social-emotional skills and healthy identities, which includes forming positive associations with their race, culture, and gender. In particular, Durham parents and providers alike expressed concern with any practices in child care that exclude children who are having difficulty regulating their emotions, including “time outs,” suspensions, and expulsions. These practices can cause harm to young children’s healthy social-emotional and academic environment, and research shows that developmentally-appropriate behaviors are more likely to be viewed negatively when expressed by BIPOC children and children who speak languages other than English. Nationally, children of color are more likely to be excluded or expelled from child care.^{xliii}

“Child care center directors to have training in addressing racial bias classroom responses/expulsions” - ECAP participant

“More emphasis on training for different cultures and backgrounds. There are teachers who are ready to dismiss a child without understanding the environment they come from and the needs they have.” - Durham Early Childhood Educator

“Need a better understanding of the children’s culture. Especially when this impacts children of color who are being expelled from preschools. We are seeing infants being turned away.” - Durham Early Childhood Educator

“The "quality" of interactions between children and teachers is highly varied and it hurts my heart to see when children are not seen or respected.” - Durham Early Childhood Educator

Opportunities

See [Durham ECAP recommendations](#) (documents 6a-6e), which seek to leverage our strengths to address our challenges:

- 2. Ensure early childhood professionals across sectors are respected, well-compensated, highly trained, and reflect the communities they serve.

- 3. Increase resource awareness and create an easily navigable service system for families with young children.
- 12. Provide reliable and free or low-cost transportation to early childhood services.
- 15. Ensure birth through 3rd grade learning environments are trauma-informed, culturally affirming, gender affirming, and focused on social-emotional health.
- 18. Invest in a sustainable child care system to provide high quality, culturally affirming, and developmentally appropriate early learning experiences that are affordable and accessible to all.
- 20. Ensure children with developmental delays and/or disabilities learn in environments where they can thrive and their families have the support they need to advocate and care for their children.
- 21. Promote and support early literacy and play for young children starting at birth in partnership with families and caregivers.

EARLY LEARNING INTERVENTION SERVICES FOR CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DELAYS AND/OR DISABILITIES

Strengths

Access to Screenings and Early Intervention Services for Parents Who Have Concerns About Developmental Delays and/or Disabilities

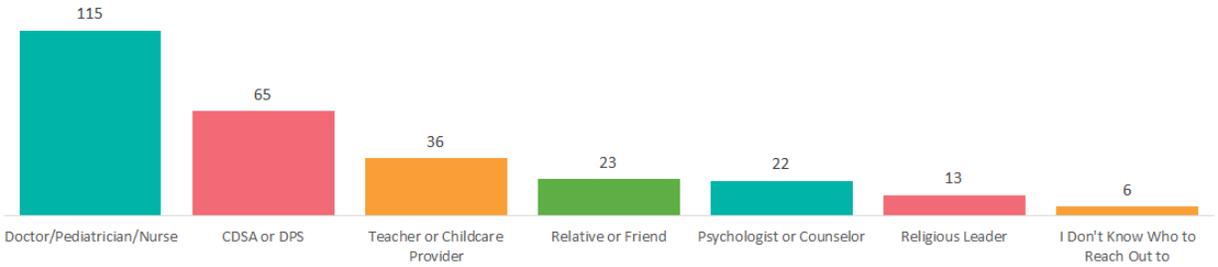
The North Carolina Infant-Toddler Program, operated locally at the Durham Child Developmental Services Association (CDSA), provides supports and services for families and their children, birth to three who have special needs including developmental delays or established conditions. Individualized services are provided within the child's natural environment as a part of the everyday routines and activities in which families participate and in places where families would typically be. Natural environments are settings that are natural or normal for the child's age peers who have no disabilities. The Durham CDSA provides early intervention service coordination, physical, occupational, and speech-language therapies, audiological services, family support, special instruction, assistive technology, and other services to eligible children and families.

During these formative early years, early intervention can make a positive difference in how a child develops and learns.^{xiv} Many parent survey respondents and parents who participated in a focus group for parents of children with developmental delays and/or disabilities praised CDSA as a strength of Durham's early childhood system.

The Exceptional Children Program, run by Durham Public Schools, provides services for students three years and over with disabilities to develop intellectually, physically, emotionally, and vocationally through the provision of an appropriate individualized education program (IEP) in the least restrictive environment.^{xiv}

Of survey respondents who had concerns that their 0-4-year-old might have a developmental delay or disability, most parents reported that they expressed these concerns to a child's doctor/pediatrician or nurse followed by CDSA or DPS to get help.

Figure 7: Who Parents Reached Out to for Help When They Had Concerns That Their 0-4-Year Old Might Have a Developmental Delay or Disability^{xlvi}



"Early access to CDSA services" - ECAP participant

"The CDSA coordinator has been so good and I wouldn't have been able to navigate without her. I was emotionally a wreck and she was the brain who pushed me to get things done. I wish more parents had the access to these resources as early as I did" - Durham parent

Challenges

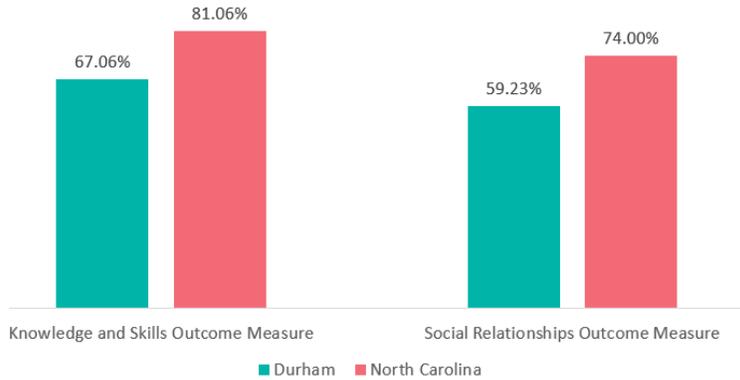
Durham Infant-Toddler Outcomes Lag Behind

A child's progress as a result of their participation in the NC Infant-Toddler Program can be measured by positive social-emotional skills and social relationships and by the acquisition and use of knowledge and skills, including early language and communication.^{xlvii}

Fewer children who received services through the NC Infant Toddler Program in Durham increased their rate of growth in both outcome measures (in the Knowledge and Skills measure and in the Social Relationships measure) in comparison to the state as a whole and to similar counties.

[Document Revised: October 2021]

Figure 8: Percent of Children Who Received Services Through the Infant Toddler Program Who Entered the Program Below Age Expectations in Each Outcome and Substantially Increased Their Rate of Growth by the Time They Exited the Program, 2019-2020^{xlviii}



Navigating Services for Children with Developmental Delays and/or Disabilities

Parents shared that it is hard to navigate the system of services for their children who have special needs. **17%** of survey respondents with a **child in Kindergarten through 3rd grade** had concerns that their child had a learning delay or disability. Of those respondents who had concerns, **43%** did not utilize any services or programs outside of your child’s school, and **62%** of them did not do so because they did not know where to go for help.^{xlix}

Similarly, **24%** of survey respondents with a **child 0-4-years old** had concerns that their child might have a developmental delay or disability. Latinx parents with household income above \$50,000 were most likely to have concerns about developmental delays and disabilities (**48%**), followed by white parents with low incomes (**29%**) and Black parents with low incomes. Of those who had concerns, **31%** were not able to have their child screened for supports or services. Parents with low-incomes, regardless of race, were more likely to not be able to have their child screened. The most common reason (**21%**) was that parents did not know where to go for help.ⁱ The time a child spends in the early intervention program appears to have an impact on outcomes, thus making early identification, screening, and determining eligibility for services critical.ⁱⁱ

“Navigating an autism diagnosis, learning how he processes information, emotions, and sensory input. We wanted to seek out thoughts and perspectives from autistic adults and children, which was tough at first.” - Durham parent

"Parents who already have it in their mind what to look for are able to get into the referral and care system to get diagnosed quicker. I wish more parents knew what to look for earlier to get their children the help they need." - Durham parent

"Our daughter has had speech issues since before she started school. We had no idea that there was pre-k speech therapy options offered through DPS. Our pediatrician is in Wake County and she did not know this either. Had we known sooner we would have definitely used this service. Make these programs more well known!" - Durham parent

Finding Inclusive Early Learning Opportunities is Particularly Challenging for Families Who Have Children with Developmental Delays and/or Disabilities

Parents identified that it is challenging to find child care, summer care, and enrichment activities outside of school for their children with special needs.

"Children with disability/special needs summer care. This is extremely hard for families to access." - Durham parent

"Better funding/research based training about disability inclusion in all school settings (leads to better inclusion in community settings)." - Durham parent

"My youngest has autism and developmental delays and is not yet potty trained, so there are very few no or low cost options for him outside of school." - Durham parent

Opportunities

See [Durham ECAP recommendations](#) (documents 6a-6e), which seek to leverage our strengths to address our challenges:

- 3. Increase resource awareness and create an easily navigable service system for families with young children.
- 6. Expand opportunities for accessible, inclusive, safe, and family-friendly enrichment activities and public spaces.
- 20. Ensure children with developmental delays and/or disabilities learn in environments where they can thrive and their families have the support they need to advocate and care for their children.

KINDERGARTEN THROUGH THIRD GRADE

Durham County is home to 45 public schools (31 district and 14 charter) and 44 private schools that serve students in the Kindergarten through 3rd grade range (some of these schools are K only).^{lii}

Strengths

Resources and Attention Focused on Racial Equity and Positive Racial Identity Development

Durham County has strong initiatives, efforts, and organizations focused on culturally affirming education and positive racial identity development, including Village of Wisdom, working together to extend anti-racism training (weare), Empowered Parents in Community, and ISLA. In addition, Durham Public Schools established an Office of Equity Affairs in 2017 and has sent all staff through initial levels of racial equity training.

“Wide reaching awareness of the racial disparities and inequities with beginning work to address them.” - Durham parent

Emphasis on Social-Emotional Learning and Trauma-Informed Classrooms

Durham Public Schools has a goal that, by 2023, 100 percent of Durham Public Schools will implement research-based cultural frameworks to support the social-emotional health of students and staff.^{liii} They have started the Panorama social-emotional learning assessment to better measure and understand social-emotional learning. Duke Center for Child and Family Health has supported 8 elementary schools to create Trauma-Informed Leadership Training (TILT) teams cultivating safe, supportive environments. School support staff are learning [Child-Adult Relationship Enhancement](#) (CARE), a trauma-informed way for adults to engage with students.^{liv}

Emphasis on Improving Third Grade Reading

Several ECAP participants and early elementary teachers identified the importance of new curriculum or technology available to early elementary students to improve reading.

“DPS purchased Letterland to place emphasis on Phonics Instruction” - ECAP participant
“DPS now has reading core curriculum resources for K-12” - ECAP participant

Challenges

Inequities in Access and Funding

Parents expressed concerns that the school system is not funded equitably and that the policies around school choice, both related to the DPS magnet system and to charter and private schools, exacerbate racial inequities.

"More equity in resources to make all schools high quality schools that engage all children within them." - Durham parent

"Push toward less private/charter schools more emphasis on public schools and allowing those children the same opportunities (clubs, language immersion etc) as non public/charter/magnet students." - Durham parent

"Overhaul of the public school magnet system that leads to racial inequities." - Durham parent

"There is so much funding going toward new housing, restaurants, revitalizing downtown, etc but it doesn't seem like these same efforts have been put toward improving the education system in Durham." - Durham parent

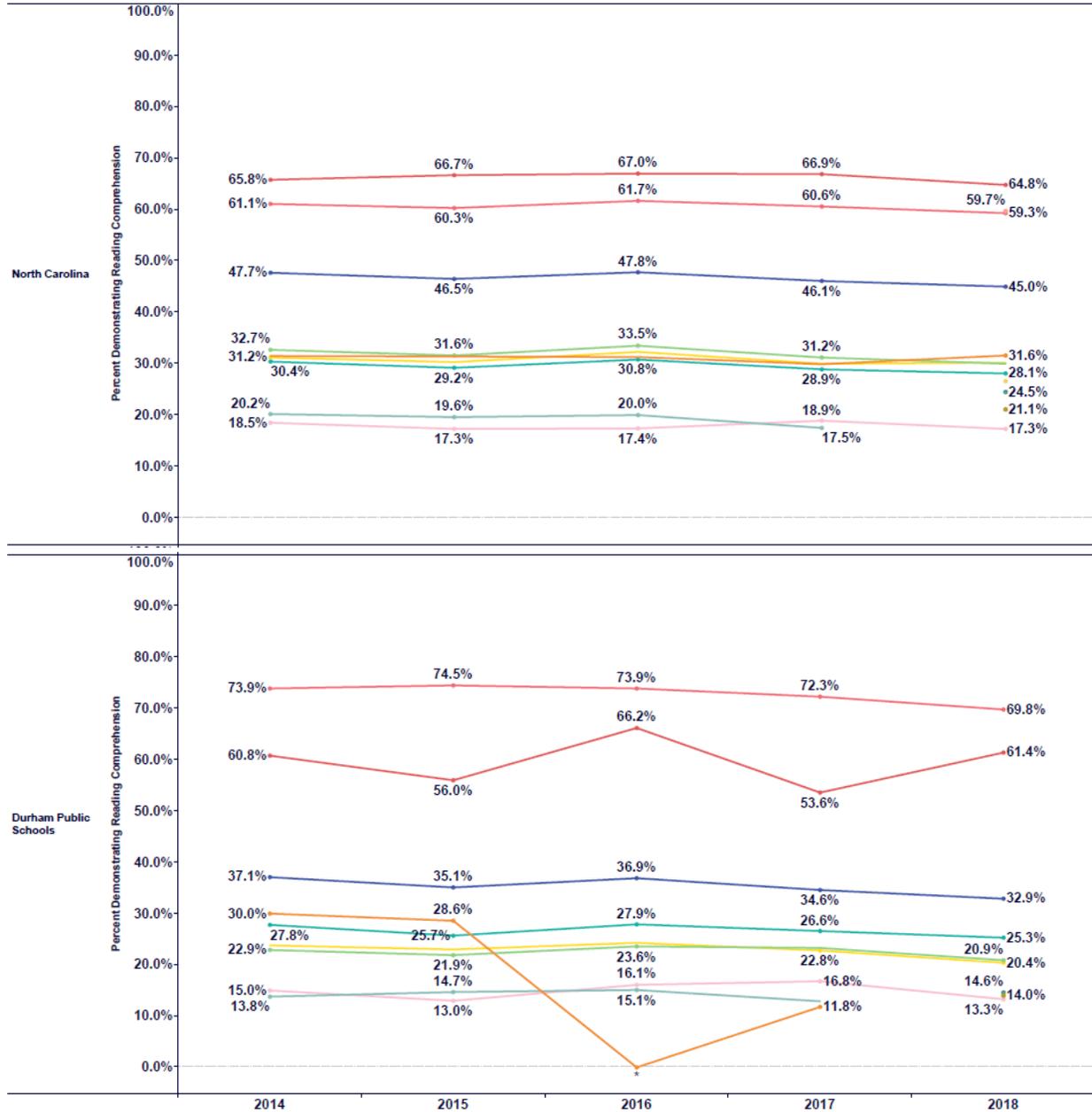
Inequities in Outcomes

There are stark racial disparities in academic outcomes. As classes have moved online during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is most likely that students from lower socio-economic and traditionally marginalized racial minority populations will be disproportionately impacted.^{lv}

As of the last time End of Grade scores were reported, there were wide disparities. Students' end of grade scores are considered above proficient if they are scoring Level 3 or above.

[Document Revised: October 2021]

Figure 9: Percent of Third Grade Students Scoring College and Career Proficiency on Third Grade End of Grade Assessments for Reading in North Carolina and Durham County by Subgroups³



³ **Technical Notes:** “Data collection and reporting for certain subgroups (Homeless, Foster Care, English Learner, Military-Connected) did not begin until 2018, as indicated by singular dots of data for these subgroups in 2018. Performance results greater than 95 percent are marked as “>95%” and are shown at the 95.0% value line. Results less than 5 percent are masked as “<5%” and are shown at the 5.0% value line. Data containing less than 10 scores/students are masked and are shown at the 0.0% value line and indicated by * in the chart. If no data for a particular subgroup was collected for a certain year, “No Data” is shown for that subgroup and year.” – Early Childhood Action Plan Durham County Data Report, 2019.

Subgroup		
■ All	■ English Learner	■ Military-Connected
■ American Indian, Non-Hispanic	■ Foster Care	■ Students With Disabilities
■ Asian, Non-Hispanic	■ Hispanic	■ White, Non-Hispanic
■ Black, Non-Hispanic	■ Homeless	
■ Economically Disadvantaged	■ Limited English Proficient	

A contributing factor to Durham's low third grade proficiency rates may be the relatively large proportion of students with limited English proficiency. Nearly 20 percent of Durham's third graders in charter and public schools are English Language Learners (ELLs), many of them from the Hispanic community.^{lvii} EOGs are only offered in English, not in other languages.

Lack of Alignment and Coordination Between Pre-K and Kindergarten

Parents recognize that there is a disconnect between early care and education, pre-K and Kindergarten and have expressed a desire to see Durham PreK better integrated in the K-12 system, while preserving the importance of play-based, developmentally appropriate learning in the early years. ECAP participants and K-3 classrooms teachers similarly identified a lack of alignment between pre-K and K-12 education.

"Make the kindergarten enrollment/ DPS lottery process less complicated and mystifying." - Durham parent

"An extension of time to make the transition between pre-K and kindergarten." - Durham parent

"Lack of alignment, communication, and collaboration between PreK and Kindergarten (teacher and provider level)" - ECAP participant

"More alignment in preschool, pre-K and K-3 curriculum and teacher training" - ECAP participant

"Pre-K at each elementary school" - Durham parent

"Universal pre-k at your base school." - Durham parent

"In a different state, I taught at a school that had four pre-K classes. We were able to bring more purposeful play into kindergarten because we had pre-K integrated. Once we started introducing purposeful play back into kindergarten that gap got a lot smaller." - Durham Public Schools Kindergarten Teacher

"The hope is we bring more purposeful play strategies back into kindergarten." - Durham Public Schools Kindergarten Teacher

"One thing that stands out is the eroding of play and how crucial that is to learning. Sometimes there's a sense that play isn't tied to early literacy, but it definitely is." - Durham Public Schools K-3 Teacher

No Shared Understanding or Definition of Kindergarten Readiness

As of 2017, **38%** of Durham students entered kindergarten with a reading proficiency at grade level, slightly above the state average of 36%.^{lviii} Durham has significant racial disparities. A higher percentage of white children (65%) enter kindergarten reading at grade level, compared to 38% of black students and 21% of Hispanic students.^{lix}

The concept of ready versus not-ready can be misleading, as an Education Week opinion piece by Deborah Stipek, professor and former dean of the Graduate School of Education at Stanford University, states: “The word ready suggests a dichotomous variable—children are either ready, or they are not... In reality, skills on any dimension are best measured continuously, and there is very little empirical evidence to support a particular cut-off score for kindergarten readiness. Despite being arbitrary, these scores can have significant consequences for a child...”^{lx}

The NC Early Childhood Foundation’s report on recommendations for assessing population-wide child development at kindergarten entry states: “Kindergarten entry is one point in a continuum of early childhood development that is interrelated and complex. It is a critical point because it marks the transition from one setting or system to another and provides an opportunity to assess children and use data for a variety of important purposes.”^{lxi}

The NCECF report also states: “A child’s early relationships, settings and experiences shape development in the key areas of cognition, approaches to learning, language and literacy, social and emotional development and physical development.”^{lxii} These areas are commonly referred to as domains of learning. Based on a number of factors, including genetics, environmental factors, and previous experiences and relationships, children enter kindergarten with a wide spectrum of capacities in each of those domains. Parent and caregiver support, and encouragement of child curiosity and engagement in their own learning, are critical to optimal child development, but structural factors like racism and poverty also play a significant role.

There was also discussion about how there is too much of an academic focus on kindergarten preparation and in kindergarten itself, and that students are being asked to learn skills that they are not developmentally ready for. This type of over-emphasis on academics can be harmful to child development and make later learning more difficult.^{lxiii} Teachers and ECAP participants both expressed concern about how free play and outside time are underemphasized.

“Some children might be entering elementary school without ever having gone to a formal environment. It’s not just preparing the child to be academically ready, but making sure the school is ready to meet the child where they are.” - Durham Early Childhood Educator

“Kindergarten environments in public school settings should follow developmentally appropriate practice and use a play-based curriculum. All personnel in school should be trained how to interact with young children.” - Durham Early Childhood Educator
“Pre-K needs to be pre-k not kindergarten preparation.” - Durham Early Childhood Educator

Racial Biases and Lack of Cultural Competence Impacts Black and Brown Student Learning

Parents expressed concern that teachers often have a “deficit mindset” when it comes to the success of students of color, particularly Black and Brown students. They want to ensure that the curriculum, the expectations, the culture, and the teachers themselves reflect their students. Recently, Village of Wisdom parent researchers learned from Black parents that the “curriculum used in schools omitted Blackness in the learning environment.” More inclusion and cultural humility and affirmation in the classroom are needed.^{lxiv}

“Being able to identify not just because you’re Black, but also where you come from. The culture of Black families - people coming from poverty stricken situations instead of just Black teachers.” - Durham parent

“Many trainings on implicit bias are offered and the teacher's always ask HOW?” - Durham Public Schools K-3 Teacher

“A weakness in our early childhood system is “addressing implicit bias, having high expectations and recognizing diverse strengths for all students” - ECAP participant

“Continuing to build culturally relevant curriculum” - ECAP participant

“We have a curriculum and no support to do it. Depending on the culture of the school, there’s a sense in some that you can’t teach on that positive identity development.” - Durham Public Schools K-3 Teacher

“Not necessarily training as much as embedding implicit bias and identity development in school/district culture so all teams (teachers, admin, etc.) are on the same page with it.” - Durham Public Schools K-3 Teacher

“Lack of male educators” - ECAP participant

“Need more teachers of color” - ECAP participant

“Recruit and retain more teachers in ECE and K-3 that have a shared lived experience with Latinx children and students” - ECAP participant

Opportunities

See [Durham ECAP recommendations](#) (documents 6a-6e), which seek to leverage our strengths to address our challenges:

- 2. Ensure early childhood professionals across sectors are respected, well-compensated, highly trained, and reflect the communities they serve.
- 15. Ensure birth through 3rd grade learning environments are trauma-informed, culturally affirming, gender affirming, and focused on social-emotional health.
- 19. Develop a coordinated transition between early childhood education and elementary school that emphasizes developmentally-appropriate practice, exploration, and play.
- 20. Ensure children with developmental delays and/or disabilities learn in environments where they can thrive and their families have the support they need to advocate and care for their children.

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