Chatham County Partnership for Children

Chatham Kids Matter

Early Childhood Action Plan

2024

INTRODUCTION

Chatham County, like much of North Carolina and the rest of the nation, is in a child care crisis. Too many families can't find, nor afford, high-quality care and early childhood education for their children. Child care providers face constraints that make it difficult to maintain their businesses and to recruit and retain teachers and caregivers.

During the past 18 months, the Chatham County Partnership for Children, with generous support and collaboration from our funders and community partners, has conducted an assessment of the needs of children and families in our communities.

We sought to document these challenges, with an eye toward developing recommendations that can help our community meet these unmet needs and embrace new opportunities.

We studied population and economic data, making projections around expected future needs for our rapidly growing county.

We spoke with parents and caregivers, community members, and child care providers, seeking a better understanding of the challenges they face.

We conducted community meetings and feedback sessions to capture their concerns, challenges, and suggestions.

We reinforced those stories with data that quantifies the gaps. This Early Childhood Action Plan outlines those needs and opportunities.

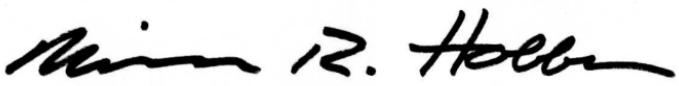
This document also contains a set of recommendations aimed at building a more resilient and effective early childhood education environment in Chatham County.

Many of the challenges are at federal and state policy and investment levels. But there are others that we can address at the local level.

Some of our recommendations can provide immediate help to our neighbors and their children. Others will require a longer-term commitment of effort, time, and funds.

The issues we've uncovered are multi-faceted and resolving them will require coordinated and sustained effort. We need stronger partnerships among Chatham's child care providers, educational leaders, representatives, and business people to address these challenges.

High-quality, accessible, and affordable child care is a requirement for a resilient community that seeks continued growth and expanded opportunity. For Chatham County to continue thriving and providing a caring and supportive environment for our families and children, we need you to join our work in carrying forward this Action Plan.



Michael Hobbs

Chair

Chatham County Partnership for Children

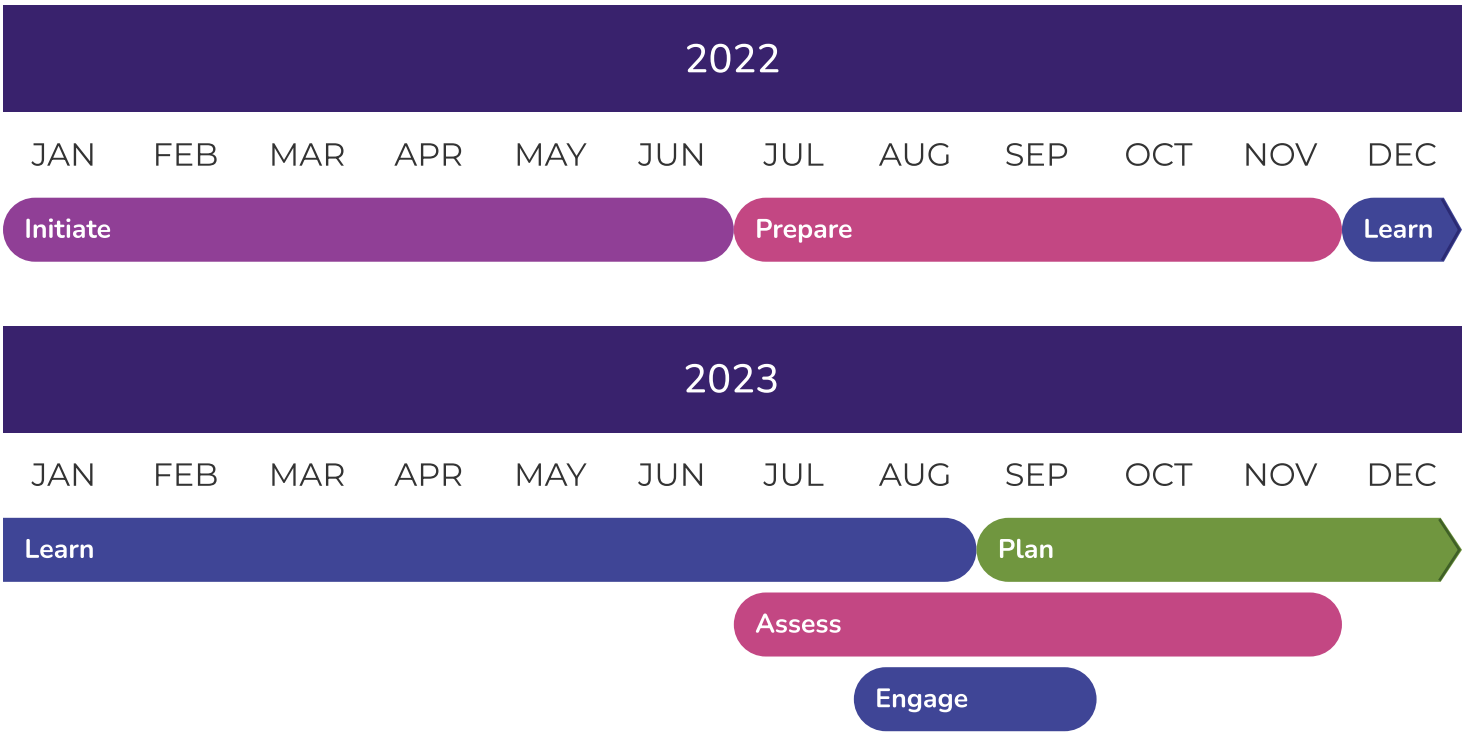
EARLY CHILDHOOD ACTION PLAN

The Chatham Kids Matter Early Childhood Action Plan (ECAP) is a comprehensive blueprint guiding collaborative action to address opportunities and challenges in the Early Child Care System in Chatham.

This Action Plan is guided by the findings of the Early Childhood Community Needs Assessment (ECCNA) conducted prior to action planning, and integrates recommendations from the Fiscal Analysis.

As Chatham County continues to recover from the pandemic and prepare for a period of sustained economic growth, this ECAP will be a living, practical document to support fostering an Early Childhood System that enables all of Chatham's youngest residents and their families to thrive!

TIMELINE



PROCESS OVERVIEW

Initiate

- Chatham County Partnership for Children (CCPC) and Kidscope begin developing a county-wide Early Childhood Action Plan based on North Carolina's 2019 ECAP.
- Chatham Education Foundation hired CCPC to conduct a Pre-K Supply & Demand Study.

Prepare

- CCPC hired Partners for Impact LLC and Community Voice Consulting to conduct an Early Childhood Community Needs Assessment (ECCNA), with Hilary Pollan Facilitation providing project direction, and Renee Paschal Consulting performing a fiscal analysis.
- Partnered with subject matter experts and community stakeholders to form an Advisory Committee and Community Collaborative.

Learn

240	*Parents & Caregivers Surveyed*
29	*Participating Child Care Providers*
24	*Community Interviews*
4	*Focus Groups with Key Stakeholders*

- Collected, analyzed, and mapped secondary local, state, and national data.
- Explored early childhood funding models in comparative counties.

Assess

- Synthesized source data for the ECCNA.
- Produced the Chatham Kids Matter Film.
- Analyzed funding solutions to address Chatham's urgent Early Childhood challenges.

Engage

5	*Community Conversations*
100+	*Participating Chatham Residents*

- Interpreted findings from the ECCNA and film.

Plan

4	*Focus Areas*
10	*Key Critical Needs*
5	*Initial Action Steps*

- Presented funding solutions at the Board of Commissioners Budget Retreat.
- Generated and prioritized five action steps for implementation based on focus areas ECCNA.

Implement

5	*Work Groups Recruited*

CONTRIBUTORS

Chatham Kids Matter is a project led by Chatham County Partnership for Children and would not be possible without the support of the many funders, community partners, and consultants who contributed to the ECAP and enabled this to be a community-driven, equity-oriented action planning process.

Our generous funders are:

This process was informed by the contributions of more than 30 community partners, including:

Blue Cross NC
Central Carolina Community College
Chatham Community Library
Chatham Community Church
Chatham County Board of Commissioners
Chatham County Economic Development Corporation
Chatham County Manager's Office
Chatham County Public Health Department
Chatham County Social Services
Chatham Court Program
Chatham County Schools
Chatham Education Foundation
Communities In Schools of Chatham County
Families and Communities Rising
Love Chatham
Michele Rivest Consulting
N.C. Division of Child Development and Early Education
N.C. Partnership for Children
Pittsboro Police Department
Pittsboro Presbyterian
Telamon
The Local Church
United Way of Chatham County
Vaya Health

Our dedicated consultants throughout this process include:

We are also grateful for the more than 450 Chatham County parents, caregivers, child care providers, and community leaders who participated in the Early Childhood Community Needs Assessment.

FRAMEWORK

Vision & Values

What we envision for Chatham's young children birth to age five, their families, and our Early Child Care System and the fundamental beliefs guiding this process.

Framing the System

Strengths and challenges in our Early Childhood System.

Focus Areas

4 focus areas emerged from the Community Needs Assessment:

1. Health, Safety, & Wellbeing
2. Child Care Access
3. Child Care Infrastructure
4. High Quality Early Learning

Key Critical Needs

10 specific critical needs identified in these focus areas and are addressed throughout the action plan.

Supporting Data

Supporting quantitative and qualitative data from the Community Needs Assessment.

Strategies & Recommendations

Potential strategies and recommendations to address critical needs in the Early Childhood System

- **Collaborative** — *Involves collaboration among organizations, agencies, and sectors.*
- **Equity-Oriented** — *Addresses barriers, improves access, and empowers communities.*
- **Fiscal** — *Requires public and private funding.*

Action Steps

5 initial steps to begin implementation of the ECAP.

VISON AND VALUES

"Working together, families and organizations will create a healthy and wholesome environment in which all young children in Chatham County can reach their highest potential."

The six fundamental principles guiding this action plan include:

1 Equity & Accessibility	We apply an equity lens to all approaches and decisions, and promote multiple forms of accessibility: language, geographic, family-friendly, and economic inclusion.
2 Achievable & Measurable	Action steps in our plan are achievable and measurable.
3 System-Level Change	We want to ensure that our interventions address root causes and target changes that address multiple levels of the Early Childhood System.
4 Cross-Sector Collaboration	Our interventions require collaboration from all impacted by the Early Childhood System.
5 Trust	We are committed to building and maintaining trusting relationships throughout the development and implementation of the ECAP.
6 Quality	Our actions will be evidence-based, trauma-informed and developmentally-appropriate for young children.

FRAMING THE SYSTEM

3,514 *Children age 5 and under live in Chatham County.*

1,300 *Gap in child care slots to serve children age 0 to 5.*

15.7% *The expected growth rate of children under 5 over the next 5 years.*

Informed by the N.C. Early Childhood Action Plan, the Chatham Kids Matter ECCNA explored the following challenges and opportunities in the Early Childhood system for children under age 5:

Healthy Children

Children are healthy and have access to high-quality comprehensive health care starting at birth.

Safe & Nurturing Relationships

Children grow up with safe and nurturing family and caregiver relationships.

High Quality Early Learning

Children have access to high-quality opportunities to engage in early learning.

KEY FINDINGS OF THE ECAP NEEDS ASSESSMENT

- Many families struggle to find affordable, quality child care with schedules that meet their needs. Shortages of care are acute for infants and toddlers.
- The cost of care is not affordable for many families. Combined costs for housing and child care exceed half of household budgets.
- Access to care is inequitable, with fewer options in rural western and southern parts of the county. Latinx families face additional barriers.
- Health and social services, especially for mental health, are limited and often require out-of-county travel.
- NC Pre-K has limited accessibility for qualifying parents due to the program's schedule and lack of transportation.
- Independent child care providers are struggling to survive financially.
- Child care workforce shortages stem from low pay, limited benefits, and lack of respect. Program enrollment for Community College Early Child Education is declining.
- Kindergarten readiness expectations vary between academic, social, and developmental milestones. Assessments are inconsistently applied.

FOCUS AREA 1:
HEALTH, SAFETY, & WELLBEING

1 Access to health care is inequitable.

- Specialized care–especially mental health services–for children, mothers, and families is not available.
- There is a need to promote early intervention.
- Transportation barriers exist.
- There's a desire for more recreation options for young children.
- The lack of health care access is experienced most significantly in southern and western areas of the county due to the distance to centralized care in regional metropolitan areas.

Supporting Data

- In 2021, fewer children were receiving early intervention services for ages birth to three, than any previous time in the last 10 years in Chatham County.
- Siler City census tracts have the lowest median household income in Chatham County at $33,875 per year.

"You don't want to have to wait like months to get them in to see a good doctor.... Especially trying to find behavioral stuff for kids–like for ADHD, autism screening–it's been hard to find Medicaid providers."

Michelle Holland, Parent

Strategies & Recommendations

Collaborative — *Health & Mental Health Care*

- Recruit Mental Health Professionals with birth to 5 developmental expertise.
- Create continuing education opportunities for professionals to expand skill sets.
- Reduce stigmas around accessing care/early intervention to increase early detection and awareness.
- Educate the community about specialized care and mental health supports available in the county.
- Collaborate with cross-sector partners to expand healthcare access.

Equity-Oriented — *Health & Mental Health Care*

- Incentivize certain specialists to relocate to Chatham, specifically Western Chatham and other under-served communities.
- Provide mobile healthcare units with translators in predominantly Latinx and African American communities.

Collaborative — *Recreation*

- Libraries and Parks Department collaborate to provide educational recreation programs.
- Team up with organizations to offer recreational opportunities to providers and care takers.
- Increase access to nature and active living.

Equity-Oriented — *Recreation*

- Improve public transportation to recreation areas.

Fiscal — *Recreation*

- Increase public funding for transportation and recreational opportunities that benefit children and families.

2 Latinx and African American families are less well-served.

- Latinx parents expressed less connection to and awareness of early childhood resources.
- Latinx parents expressed distrust of child care providers and tend to rely on informal networks (friends and family) for child care support.
- Health disparities are highest among the African American population.

Supporting Data

- Based on the community needs assessment survey responses, only 41% of Hispanic children reported to be enrolled in formal care for 20 or more hours per week, compared to 62.6% of White children.
- African American infants are dying at 5.33 times the rate of White infants.

"If you don't hear something from your neighbors or from your acquaintances about a safe place for your child, or that there is one nearby, you don't feel safe to take him to a place, with all the things that happen these days. No. I have to take her to my mother-in-law's for care. That's where I take her every morning. I have to get ready at 4 o'clock in the morning to take my daughter–because I feel safer with a family member."

Maribel Nolasco, Parent

Strategies & Recommendations

Collaborative

- Collaborate with people and entities who already have a connection with the Latinx community to provide trusted information and connections to the ECE system of care.
- Expand access to and awareness of socialization opportunities for those in informal care.
- Create bilingual training for those considering starting a child care program.

Equity-Oriented

- Hire Latinx parents, educators, and organizations to conduct outreach with the Latinx community about child development, school readiness, and community needs and resources.
- Recruit providers from the Latinx community into the Early Child Care System.
- Host events focused on needs within the Latinx community and building trust.
- Create targeted outreach materials in Spanish.
- Ensure those most impacted by systemic racism are included in all levels of the process.

Fiscal

- Fund and build a Spanish immersion child-care center in the Western part of the county.

FOCUS AREA 2:
CHILD CARE ACCESS

3 There is a child care availability crisis.

- Many families struggle to find affordable, quality child care with schedules that meet their needs.
- Shortages of care are acute for infants and toddlers.
- There are several child care deserts in rural areas of the county.

Supporting Data

- Only 26% of parents of infants reported having “plenty or a satisfactory number of child care options”, compared to 42% of parents of four- to five-year-olds, according to ECCNA survey responses.
- 69% of respondents indicated they had “excellent or satisfactory quality” child care.

“It just doesn't make sense to me that we have all this growth, we're building these beautiful houses, and every week on social media there's a new mom popping in “I’m moving in! Can you tell me about child care? I'm moving in! Like, what should I know?” And every time I'm like, “you should know that there is no child care here, unfortunately. Good luck!”

Jessica Merricks, Parent

Strategies & Recommendations

Collaborative

- Create a recognition program to promote local employers who offer child care support.
- Promote Child Care Resource & Referral Agency for information sharing and referrals.
- Collaborate with high schools and the community college to identify, encourage, and train those who may be interested in a career in Early Childhood.

Fiscal

- Work with Chatham County to build an early child care center and pre-K at Parkers Ridge in Moncure as a model for future centers.*

**As indicated by the Chatham Kids Matter Fiscal Analysis.*

4 Families struggle to afford child care.

- The cost of care is unaffordable for many families.
- Combined costs for housing and child care exceed half of household budgets.
- Many families rely on a “hidden workforce” (informal child care arrangements with family members, friends, and neighbors) to make ends meet; this may have implications for kindergarten readiness.

Supporting Data

- On average, 27% of a household’s income at the Living Income Standard for 1 Adult and 1 Child in Chatham County ($61,260) is used to cover child care costs.

“We're above low income, but right under middle income.... There's not a lot of help for us because we don't qualify for certain things because we make a little too much and then we can't afford certain things because we make too little.... Working within the community, we hear similar stories about other families going through the same thing, and what they do is, luckily, most of them have families just like my wife does. We have families here who are able to take care of the child. But then again, when we have family members, usually we lose the aspect of that head start learning.”

Delfino Benitez, Parent

Strategies & Recommendations

Collaborative

- Provide community resources through a central platform/ dashboard.
- Increase awareness of existing database of child care funding streams and other resources to better educate parents of resource's available to them.
- Launch a community outreach and communications effort on child care funding sources, and distribute materials through pediatricians.

Equity-Oriented

- Explore expanding Early Head Start to family child care centers.*

Fiscal

- Expand child care subsidy at DSS by increasing the child care subsidy income threshold to 300% of the Federal Poverty Limit.*
- Eliminate the subsidy waiting list by locally funding slots.*

**As indicated by the Chatham Kids Matter Fiscal Analysis.*

5 Economic growth and child care shortage are on a collision course.

- Rapid residential development is occurring in eastern Chatham.
- Major industrial employment centers are being developed, many in locations with little child care available.
- Child care will get harder to find, while the cost of living continues to rise.
- Child care availability will constrain workforce availability.

Supporting Data

- Nearly 10,000 new jobs are expected in Chatham County due to major economic development projects, including with Wolfspeed, VinFast, FedEx and Coca-Cola.

"If the county wants to grow and attract business, we've got to offer better benefits, and child care is the big one right now."

Wade Stauffer, Gilero

Strategies & Recommendations

Collaborative

- Encourage companies and industries to invest in a child care co-op or fund to help close the funding gap faced by child care facilities.
- Develop marketing campaign to promote child care as a career option to address lack of respect, along with coincide with efforts to boost pay and benefits.
- Make child care shortage a key fixture/priority when discussing economic development and growth in the county with: industry leader, small businesses, and policy makers.
- Encourage companies & industries to have family friendly employment practices, such as those recommended by Family Forward NC.
- Target Small Business Loan program for new and expanding child care centers.*
- Create a position to provide technical assistance for private centers wanting to expand.*

Fiscal

- Work with Chatham County to build an early child care center and pre-K at Parkers Ridge in Moncure as a model for future centers.*
- Incentivize private companies to offer onsite daycare or provide funding through county's economic development incentives policy.*

**As indicated by the Chatham Kids Matter Fiscal Analysis.*

FOCUS AREA 3:
CHILD CARE INFRASTRUCTURE

6 Providers are struggling financially.

- There is a gap between the real cost of child care and education and the funding available to providers.
- Independent child care providers are struggling to survive financially.

Supporting Data

- From 2020 to 2023, four child care providers and four family child care homes in Chatham County have closed, representing a loss of 296 child care slots.

"A lot of people see, oh, they're daycare centers, they got all these kids, you making this money, but they don't look at what's going out.... We're losing all the way around."
Mona Scotton, Child Care Provider

Strategies & Recommendations

Collaborative

- Create communication tools detailing funding resources available to child care centers to better inform operators about funding sources available to them.
- Convene a cross-sector group of stakeholders to support collaborative implementation of solutions that support providers.

Fiscal

- Incentivize businesses to contribute to early childhood education/child care fund through the county's economic development incentives policy.*
- Solicit private revenues to pair with Chatham County funds for an Early Childhood Education Fund that supports child care quality, workforce, and facility expansion.*
- Identify ongoing public source of financing for early childhood education.

**As indicated by the Chatham Kids Matter Fiscal Analysis.*

7 The workforce pipeline is broken.

- Child care workforce shortages stem from low pay, limited benefits, and lack of respect.
- College program enrollment is declining.

Supporting Data

- Full-time child care providers in Chatham County earn an average annual salary of $26,310.
- Only five providers who participated in the ECCNA survey reported being able to fully pay for health insurance benefits.
- Post-COVID, it takes providers an average of 55 days to fill a teacher position, compared to only 24 days before the pandemic.

"There were a lot more early childhood teachers coming out of Chatham County, and now there's none. And it shows!"
Heidi Lineberry

Strategies & Recommendations

Collaborative

- Engage Central Carolina Community College (CCCC), Chatham County Schools (CCS), and Chatham Health Alliance to develop career exposure and information about careers in early childhood sector.
- Promote career expansion opportunities (i.e. professional development) to attract more people to enter the child care workforce.
- Work with CCCC and CCS to develop a pipeline of early child care workers, leveraging Chatham Promise.*

Fiscal

- Establish financial incentives and/or scholarship for people to achieve a degree in ECE to increase the pool of potential workers.
- Promote Chatham Promise to pay for the first 2 years of a BS Teaching degree with BK Licensure.
- Using NC Early Childhood Compensation Collaborative Model Salary Scale, test pilot compensation program with limited number of centers, including an allowance for benefits.*

**As indicated by the Chatham Kids Matter Fiscal Analysis.*

FOCUS AREA 4:
HIGH QUALITY EARLY LEARNING

8 There are concerns about the quality of care.

- Some parents have a view that children are safer with their family.
- There's skepticism about quality of care.
- Providers want better public understanding and support for their work.

Supporting Data

- Only 61% of respondents who do not use formal care for their children reported having access to the quality care and education option they wanted for their child, compared to 89% of all survey respondents.
- 62% of surveyed child care providers (11 child care centers and 7 family child care homes) indicated a desire to increase their quality.

"They need to get it set up where all children can go to some form of a program.... A lot of children don't know how to be social with other kids. You know, they've been enclosed with their families–older people."

Nora Palmer, Child Care Provider

Strategies & Recommendations

Collaborative

- Promote positive outcomes that result in having a quality child care experience to improve families' trust in the Early Child Care System.
- Feature child care centers in the local newspaper.

Equity-Oriented

- Coordinate with staff at Chatham Literacy, Communities In Schools, Chatham Education Foundation, Hispanic Liaison, parent groups and CCS to bring all voices into efforts to make change.
- Establish a Parent Council.
- Create a bilingual public awareness campaign to increase trust of formal child care among parents of young children.

Fiscal

- Support workers to slow turn over in child care facilities by focusing on Key Critical Need #7.

9 Understandings of Kindergarten readiness vary.

- There's a wide range of perspectives on what "Readiness for Kindergarten" means: Is it Academics? Social skills? Developmental milestones?
- Parents feel pressure and uncertainty.
- There's a need for a consistent definition and measures, along with community education.

Supporting Data

"They need to be able to regulate their emotions to a degree that's age appropriate, of course. But there's a maturity–I think that that's important. More important than knowing how to read and write."

Lori Lay, Child Care Provider

"Since I'm a reading intervention teacher, I work with a lot of our students who are not quite ready. The biggest thing is a lot of our parents don't realize that they're expected to know a lot of their letters and to write their name and things like that."

Cindy Klaus, Parent

"I remember talking to other moms and things and they're like, Well, we're just kind of playing and doing whatever at home, and we don't really know what we're supposed to be doing to get her ready for kindergarten. So it would be great if–I don't know if that needs to come from the schools–if your kid is three or four, mailing something to the parents and saying, Hey, your kid will be in kindergarten soon, here are some things you should know, or here are some things you should be working on, whether your kid's in daycare or not."

Parent focus group participant

Strategies & Recommendations

Collaborative

- Collaborate with community partners (CCPC, CCS, Child Care Centers, parent groups, etc.) to develop a universal definition of “Kindergarten Readiness” for stakeholders.
- Collaboratively create, publish and distribute a Kindergarten Readiness guide and additional resources that includes academic, developmental, and social domains so families “know” how to work with and prepare their children while teaching important developmental skills.
- Libraries collaborate with CCPC, CCS and Chatham Reads to develop a library of Kindergarten Readiness programming.
- Create accessible resources for developmentally and age appropriate skills and behaviors for families and caregivers, that includes activities that are easy to do and do not require purchase of toy or equipment.
- Plan and present at community events focused on “hidden workforce” and share information about Kindergarten Readiness.
- Send home activity sheets to parents during well-child visits to prepare for kindergarten.
- CCPC and CCS hold Kindergarten Readiness session for parents with children between ages 3 and 4.

Equity-Oriented

- Create a bilingual marketing campaign to education the public on what kindergarten readiness means and how to achieve it.

10 There are barriers to accessing NC Pre-K.

- NC Pre-K schedules do not align with parents' work days.
- There is a lack of transportation.
- Classes go underutilized, but this may mask a latent demand.

Supporting Data

- Only one Chatham County School (Bennett Elementary) offers transportation for pre-K students.

"They get out at 2:30pm. So it's like trying to figure out, because your work day don't end till five. So you got to make sure you got somebody that can pick them up.... because you don't have reliable transportation."

Tasha Williams, Parent

"We have had to close two [NC Pre-K] classrooms this year for under enrollment and we no longer get paid for empty vacant spots. So we don't have the students and so we did have to close two classrooms."

Child Care Director

Strategies & Recommendations

Collaborative

- Collaborate with cross-sector partners to expand funding for after-school care at NC Pre-K sites.
- Gather public input to create a “bell curve” for hours that daycare should ideally be made available.
- Identify and fund needed wrap around services to increase pre-K participation for families who would like to participate but cannot.*
- Provide transportation and wrap around care for NC Pre-K students.

Equity-Oriented

- Create platform to share incidents when families of young children confront barriers to access of health care, child care, other related needs. Use these for quarterly or bi-annual case study review to ensure ongoing surveillance.

Fiscal

- “Maximize” existing NC Pre-K Programs before significantly expanding by building classroom space.*
- Increase income thresholds for NC Pre-K to 100% of Chatham’s median income.*
- Include funding for after school for families meeting income threshold.*

**As indicated by the Chatham Kids Matter Fiscal Analysis.*

ACTION STEPS

The Chatham Kids Matter Community Collaborative and ECAP Advisory Committee worked together to recommend five action steps for initial implementation. These five recommended action steps address the four focus areas (Child Health, Safety & Wellbeing, Child Care Access, Child Care Infrastructure, and High-Quality Learning), as well as the three types of recommendations and strategies (Collaborative, Equity-Oriented, and Fiscal).

The five action steps for initial implementation are:

Action Step 1

Establish an Early Childhood Education Fund and grant process to support providers .

Action Step 2

Initiate conversation with CCCC, CCS, Chatham Health Alliance, and the County to leverage and maximize Chatham Promise to address the workforce pipeline issue.

Action Step 3

Create a multilingual, parent-centered community campaign on the importance of early learning and kindergarten readiness.

Action Step 4

Define the role and responsibilities of a Parent Council, including through conducting discovery conversations with parents.

Action Step 5

Initiate conversations between CCPC, CCS, and Head Start about how to implement evidence-based solutions for child care system enhancements.

NEXT STEPS

The Chatham Kids Matter Community Collaborative and Advisory Committee, led by the CCPC, will begin implementation in Spring 2024 by:

1 Convening Stakeholders

Convening stakeholders relevant to each recommended action step.

2 Developing Implementation Plans

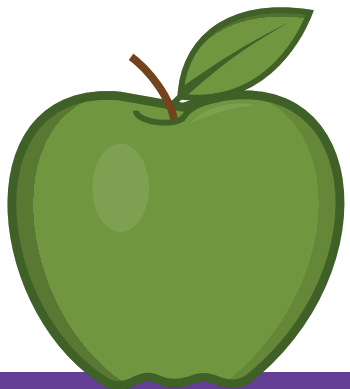
Working collaboratively with these stakeholders to develop Implementations Plans that will identify:

- Strategies to implement the Action Step.
- Short (1-2 year) and Long-Term (3+ years) Strategies.
- Progress Measurements.
- How the recommendation can build of existing work.
- Additional Potential Partners.

3 Respond to Emerging Opportunities & Challenges

Returning to the ECAP on a bi-annual basis to re-assess recommended actions steps to continue be responsive to emerging opportunities and challenges.

CONTACT

For questions about this report, please contact Heather St. Clair, Executive Director of Chatham County Partnership for Children, at **heather@chathamkids.org** OR Sheen Klaus, Program Director of Chatham County Partnership for Children, at **sheen@chathamkids.org**.

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