



Join the Listening Tour: A Mission to Transform Early Care & Education in NC

The Care and Learning (CandL) Coalition, which began to develop over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, has a vision to revolutionize the early care and education system in North Carolina so that it is accessible, affordable and responsible to the needs and desires of all families, particularly families of color. In order to do that, the leaders on this mission need to hear what the educators, parents, and providers have to say.

North Carolina’s Early Care and Education Challenges

North Carolina’s child care system was fragile, even before the pandemic. A system mostly financed by parent fees served only 40% of eligible young children and their families. Despite increasingly unaffordable tuition – even for middle class families, the fees do not fully cover the cost of delivering high-quality child care.

Child care centers, many of which are small businesses, are forced to operate on thin margins, which results in child care deserts, particularly for infants and toddlers, in all but one NC county. The biggest cost driver is educators, who make on average less than \$10/hour, compared to \$18/hour starting wage for public school teachers. Many do not even have benefits like health insurance.

Ultimately, the current model limits access to affordable, high-quality care, which hurts NC’s economy, primarily by hindering women’s – and increasingly, men’s – participation in the labor force. This pandemic is serving as a catalyst to reimagine child care in a way that is sustainable, equitable, accessible, and driven by parent choice, without sacrificing quality.

The Times Require an Equitable and Innovative Approach

Recognizing always, and particularly now, that transforming the child care system is about racial and economic justice, we need to be sure that our child care system continues to be high quality, retains educators of color, stays committed to family choice in setting, and builds capacity for cultural relevance and competence. Developing both the messaging and the plan for a transformed system will require the input of parents on the demand side (including those facing the highest barriers to accessing quality child care) and on the supply side, of child care center directors, educators, family child care home providers, and those who provide informal care.

Enter Care and Learning (CandL)

We are a cross-sector, multidisciplinary, inclusive coalition of families, communities, grassroots organizations, early childhood organizations, funders, businesses and early care and education providers. We are committed to **working with families and communities to engage their strengths and address their values** as we reimagine and rebuild early care and education in North Carolina **for all children, regardless of zip code.** We will secure additional funding and investment, ensure early childhood educators and providers **of all kinds** are compensated and supported as professionals and execute a strategic legislative and policy agenda to build a publicly-funded system where all children have access to safe, affordable, high-quality care. This work will be equitable and inclusive, **centered around family voice and lived experience,** and **will provide equitable access and opportunities to each North Carolina family, so that all children will be more successful in life.**

CandL Collaborates with Community Facilitators to Listen

We are partnering with The Link Group and would like to invite local community organizations to facilitate listening session focus groups with parents and child care providers. The Link Group will be training community organizations to conduct the focus groups. Focus groups of about 12 to 15 participants will spend about an hour and a half sharing their thoughts, in person or virtually over one to two sessions, on the early childhood resources available to them and needed for their families. Facilitators will be provided with pre-training templates to guide them through the process. Stipends will be provided to compensate facilitators and participants for their time and contributions to our work as we learn more about the care necessary to serve North Carolina children and their families.

After initial pilot listening sessions in Raleigh, Charlotte, and New Bern, NC, the listening tour will run through the end of September 2022. By helping fuel the CandL work, parent, child care provider and community organization participants will lend the guiding knowledge of the reality of what their early care and learning experiences are like. CandL strives to invest the time and resources into this listening tour to gather the insights necessary to advise policy and program leaders on the creation and implementation of better early childhood resources for North Carolina families.