



NC Apprenticeships in Early Childhood

PLAYBOOK

Developing and Scaling
Early Childhood Education
Registered Pre-Apprenticeships & Apprenticeships
in North Carolina

2025



NC DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES
Division of Child Development
and Early Education



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of its response to North Carolina's severe child care workforce crisis, North Carolina launched Building Bright Futures (BBF) in 2023, an innovative apprenticeship support program that allows aspiring early childhood educators to earn while they learn. Rather than expecting new hires to arrive fully trained, apprenticeship creates structured pathways from high school through advanced degrees, combining classroom instruction with hands-on experience under mentor guidance. In under three years, BBF has increased credential- and degree-seeking ECE apprentices statewide by 650%.

BBF's comprehensive support system sets it apart. The program provides technical assistance to help small providers navigate apprenticeship requirements, financial support including up to 50% wage matches for employers and wraparound services for apprentices, and mentor stipends to support the experienced educators who guide new professionals. This multi-layered approach addresses both systemic barriers and individual needs. The mentorship component has proven particularly crucial, with experienced educators averaging 15 years in the field, providing not just technical training but modeling professionalism and passion for early childhood education. This creates meaningful relationships that extend far beyond basic job training.

As BBF transitioned from pilot to established program, North Carolina has positioned itself as a national leader in early childhood workforce development. Governor Josh Stein's commitment to doubling apprenticeships statewide reflects growing recognition that these programs create sustainable solutions to persistent workforce challenges. BBF demonstrates that comprehensive, well-funded apprenticeship programs can effectively address child care workforce shortages while creating respected career pathways. The program's success offers other states both inspiration and a practical model for building stable, skilled early childhood workforces that benefit children, families, and entire communities.

This playbook outlines the history of early childhood education (ECE) apprenticeship in NC, its evolving journey toward quality statewide apprenticeship standards, and BBF's recommendations for developing and maintaining a quality ECE apprenticeship program.

BACKGROUND

North Carolina has established itself not only as a thriving center for innovation and business, but also as a trailblazer in early childhood policy, with investments that have become a model for states nationwide. As more families settle in the state, the demand for reliable, high-quality child care continues to grow. At the same time, our early childhood education (ECE) workforce is strained. With only 55 child care workers¹ available for every 100 open jobs, North Carolina (NC) faces a pressing challenge: how can we continue to build a stable, skilled early care and education workforce that supports our children and our economy?

Insufficient access to child care has a steep cost in NC—over \$5.65 billion per year in lost economic activity² due to reduced workforce participation, employee turnover, and absenteeism. High-quality early childhood educators play a vital role in child development and school readiness, yet recruiting and retaining them remains difficult.

We are also in the midst of a paradigm shift in how we grow and retain talent. The dynamics of today's labor market are different—employees have more choices, and employers must demonstrate real value and support to attract and keep staff. This is especially true for the ECE workforce. Gone are the days of expecting applicants to be fully trained and ready to go. Instead, employers must be willing to invest in their people, offering clear career pathways and support systems that help individuals succeed.

ECE Workforce Needs

According to the *Child Care Services Association's 2023 Workforce Study*, **child care administrators would be motivated to stay in the field if they could:**

- Find **qualified teachers** (67%)
- Receive **more respect** for the profession (57%)
- Receive **better pay** (55%)

Recognizing this, NC's early childhood leaders turned to a proven workforce strategy: **Registered Apprenticeships**. By offering structured pathways to education, experience, and long-term employment, apprenticeships can help develop a pipeline of highly qualified educators, while also increasing access to quality child care.

Apprenticeship programs flip the script by focusing on long-term employee development, not just short-term staffing needs. They allow individuals to learn while they earn, receive mentorship, and work toward meaningful credentials—all while contributing to their workplaces. This supportive model creates positive outcomes for employers, staff, children, and families as apprentices gain essential skills and knowledge in the field.



An early childhood educator prepares her class for the outdoors at Little People Preschool in Raleigh, NC

Early childhood education is a relatively new occupation in apprenticeship, and in North Carolina, it is still an evolving effort. Discussions began in 2019, with NC's first programs registered in 2021—a pre-apprenticeship model that aligns with the high school Career and Technical Education (CTE) curriculum, as well as a small employer-sponsored apprenticeship program.

The introduction of BBF in 2023 made an incredible impact on the education of stakeholders about ECE apprenticeship and the recruitment of apprentices. In NC and across the nation, ECE apprenticeship is an evolving landscape, with new programs and pathways developing in real time. This playbook serves as a living document to North Carolina's challenges, progress, success stories, and work going forward.

Registered Apprenticeship

A Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) is a formal, structured training program that blends classroom instruction with hands-on experience. While employer-driven and customizable, all programs must meet rigorous national standards. In NC, RAPs are registered with [ApprenticeshipNC](#), NC's State Apprenticeship Agency based out of the [North Carolina Community College System](#). Employers can develop and register their own customized program, or join an already existing registered group program.

ECE RAPs include several key components:

- **RELATED TECHNICAL INSTRUCTION (RTI):** *High school and/or college courses and training aligned to real-world job demands.* This component outlines in detail the required instruction/coursework an apprentice must complete and which instructional or educational institutions will provide it.
- **ON-THE-JOB LEARNING:** *Apprentices are paid employees working toward a set of competencies with guidance from an experienced mentor.* These standards, called the Work Process Schedule or Competency Checklist, provide employers with an approved set of work activities upon which to base their programs. These activities are overseen by a mentor, and apprentices must demonstrate proficiency in each activity listed to complete the program.
- **PROGRESSIVE WAGE SCALE:** *As apprentices gain skills, their pay increases over time.* Employers must define a progressive wage scale for the apprentice that includes a starting wage, ending wage, and an increase during the apprenticeship that reflects the knowledge and skills gained along the way. This wage scale is a minimum, and employers may choose to pay more.
- **CREDENTIALS AND DEGREES:** *ECE apprentices work toward credentials and degrees.* At completion of the apprenticeship, apprentices receive a nationally recognized US Department of Labor "journeyworker" apprenticeship credential, in addition to industry-recognized credentials and/or degrees.

Apprenticeship RTI

In NC, apprentices are typically working toward one or more of these credentials/degrees:

- Required health and safety training
- Introduction to Early Childhood Education (community college or high school class)
- Child Development Associate (CDA)
- Certificate – Infant/Toddler, Preschool
- Associate Degree
- Bachelor's Degree

Pre-Apprenticeship

Pre-apprenticeships are an optional, short-term precursor to an ECE apprenticeship, designed to allow high school students or adults new to the field an opportunity to explore a potential career path, merging essential instruction with elective work experience and optional wage structures. It also serves as a way to jumpstart progress toward earning credentials while providing an opportunity for employers to recruit and train potential educators.

In a high school pre-apprenticeship in NC, students either enroll in a CTE class at their high school, or dual enroll and take the aligned class at their community college through the [Career and College Promise](#) program.



A high school pre-apprentice is at work in the classroom

Either option is at no cost to the student. While taking the class, the pre-apprentice also completes work-based learning with an employer who has a Registered Apprenticeship Program.

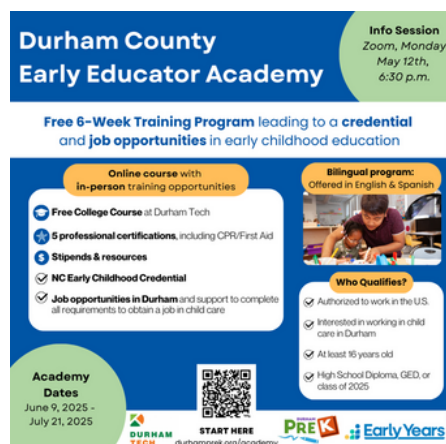
Some employers will create customized pre-apprenticeships for adults who require additional training before starting an apprenticeship. Instruction might include, for example, ECE professionalism, digital literacy, or English as a Second Language.

Child Care Academies

In addition to pre-apprenticeships, NC has recently introduced Child Care Academies. These range in length from 2-6 weeks, and serve as another on-ramp to apprenticeship.

The 2-week model includes required training and tests for working in a child care program, introductory information about early childhood, and observations of a child care environment.

The 6-week model includes the same as the shorter model, but with the EDU 119 class and more hours on-site at several child care centers. One recent academy included a job fair as part of its academy graduation ceremony, where recent graduates could meet and learn more about opportunities at local apprenticeship employers. This more comprehensive model is being considered for pre-apprenticeship.



Recruitment flyer for 6-week Child Care Academy in Durham, NC

"The support of Building Bright Futures has allowed us to give our budding educators the attention, access, and motivations they need to go to school and dive deeper into the profession with confidence. We believe programs that focus on removing barriers for apprentices and empowering our teacher-leaders to become mentors is growing our school culture and individual teachers in the best ways!"

CORRIE PRICE, Director
Evolve Early Learning Center, Asheville

Benefits of ECE Apprenticeship

Implementing an apprenticeship program provides significant returns for both individuals and employers. ECE apprenticeships result in high-quality educators who are well-versed in the critical development that occurs during the earliest years of a child's life. This positions children for academic success and allows small businesses, families, and the community to thrive.

...for the ECE WORKFORCE

- Apprentices gain real-world experience while under the guidance of seasoned mentors.
- They earn industry-recognized credentials that translate into higher wages, stronger job security, and ongoing career opportunities.
- Apprenticeship pathways lead to college credits, certificates, and degrees—offering both immediate skill-building and long-term growth.

...for EMPLOYERS

- Apprenticeships create a talent pipeline of trained, committed educators.
- Programs increase retention, reduce turnover, and support workplace culture.
- Mentorship fosters strong relationships and reinforces the value of collaboration and professionalism in early education settings.
- Stronger talent pipelines and relationships with community partners create a more stable employment environment.

...for the COMMUNITY

- High-quality educators mean better outcomes for children and families.
- Programs help address persistent workforce gaps in both rural and urban areas.

BUILDING BRIGHT FUTURES



The Building Bright Futures (BBF) initiative began in January 2023 after NC's Division for Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE)

tapped the North Carolina Business Committee for Education (NCBCE) to lead an ECE pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship workforce-building initiative. NCBCE is the business-led workforce and education 501(c)3 non-profit that has been operating out of the Office of the NC Governor since 1983. NCBCE's goal is to connect NC businesses with educators and students through work-based learning opportunities.

BBF was designed to support and scale registered pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships in ECE throughout North Carolina. BBF offers technical assistance, financial support, and resources to participants of an ECE apprenticeship program, ensuring early educators are positioned for academic and career success. BBF's mission is to increase the number of high-quality early childhood educators in NC by providing employers a proven tool—Registered Apprenticeship—for recruiting and retaining quality talent and removing barriers to successful post-secondary attainment.

Participants in BBF receive support for wages, wraparound services, and mentorship, as well as access to a network of industry professionals and enrichment opportunities to advance knowledge in the ECE field.



BBF attends a high school career fair in Charlotte, NC

Building Bright Futures' Goals

- Create a talent pipeline for ECE employers, increasing the credential- and degree-seeking early childhood educator workforce
- Provide future educators with exposure to real world application of educational theory, under the guidance of a mentor
- Upskill the current early childhood workforce, allowing employers to grow and scale their businesses
- Elevate the profession and enhance the apprentices' knowledge and skills with more professional development and enrichment activities
- Reduce prohibitive costs for participants, filling in some financial gaps
- Offer opportunities for networking and sharing of experiences and best practices
- Provide an environment of stability for employers and families

Investing in child care benefits everyone. When children grow up in a supportive and nurturing environment, it sets them on the trajectory to thrive as adults. We must come together to make child care more accessible and affordable so that we can secure a brighter future for North Carolina's children.

NC GOVERNOR JOSH STEIN

Piloting Apprenticeship: 2023-2024

BBF's pilot initiative ran from January 2023 - December 2024. Based on data and historical information about apprenticeship, and understanding that ECE apprenticeship had only just been introduced to NC, BBF set a goal to support 200-275 pre-apprentices and apprentices across at least 3-5 of NC's 100 counties. For child care providers, many of whom are overworked and operating on razor-thin margins, apprenticeship might be a daunting endeavor. BBF aimed to provide the support and incentives these valuable employers needed to take the leap into apprenticeship.

After the development of the statewide ECE pre-apprenticeship and NC's first registered ECE apprenticeship program, participants had some immediate supports, particularly with the new TEACH apprenticeship Associate Degree scholarship and the ApprenticeshipNC expansion funds. The introduction of BBF in 2023, however, resulted in a rapid growth of new employer participation.



*An apprentice reads to her class at
A Safe Place Child Development Center in Raleigh, NC.*



*BBF participants listen to a research scientist speak
about the impact of their work at the
Frank Porter Graham Institute in Chapel Hill, NC*

BBF understood that creating a system of support that was efficient and effective would be the foundation for building valuable partner relationships, helping employers and sponsors develop quality apprenticeship programs across the state, and building long-term sustainability post-pilot.

BBF focused its efforts first on outreach and education of ECE stakeholders across the state about the benefits of apprenticeship. Through virtual and in-person meetings, BBF connected with statewide, regional, and local organizations, building relationships that would provide a bridge to employers.

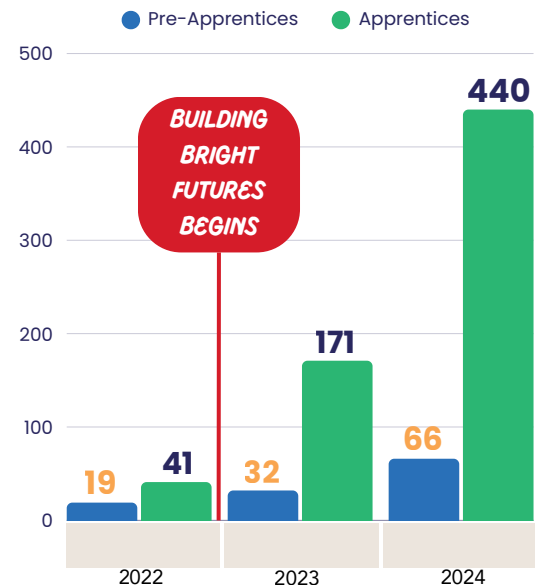
From the outset, the response to BBF's efforts was overwhelmingly positive. ECE professionals were ready to consider a new and innovative solution to the child care crisis—one that had long-term strategies in mind. In tandem with these outreach efforts, BBF developed a strong internal system for providing financial and technical support, creating initiative policies and procedures, financial payment and billing processes, educational and support resources, and a strategy for building quality programs.

In 2024, BBF continued to recruit programs and pre-apprentices and apprentices, create meaningful resources for its participants, and worked on strategies to make it easier for small businesses to participate in ECE apprenticeship. BBF employed flexible funding and customized support to meet the needs of a diverse group of providers. This strategy helped identify the gaps in funding that child care providers and apprentices needed to provide the most effective support.

At the end of the pilot in December 2024, BBF had grown to support 245 child care sites and over 400 apprentices and pre-apprentices across 62 of the 100 NC counties.

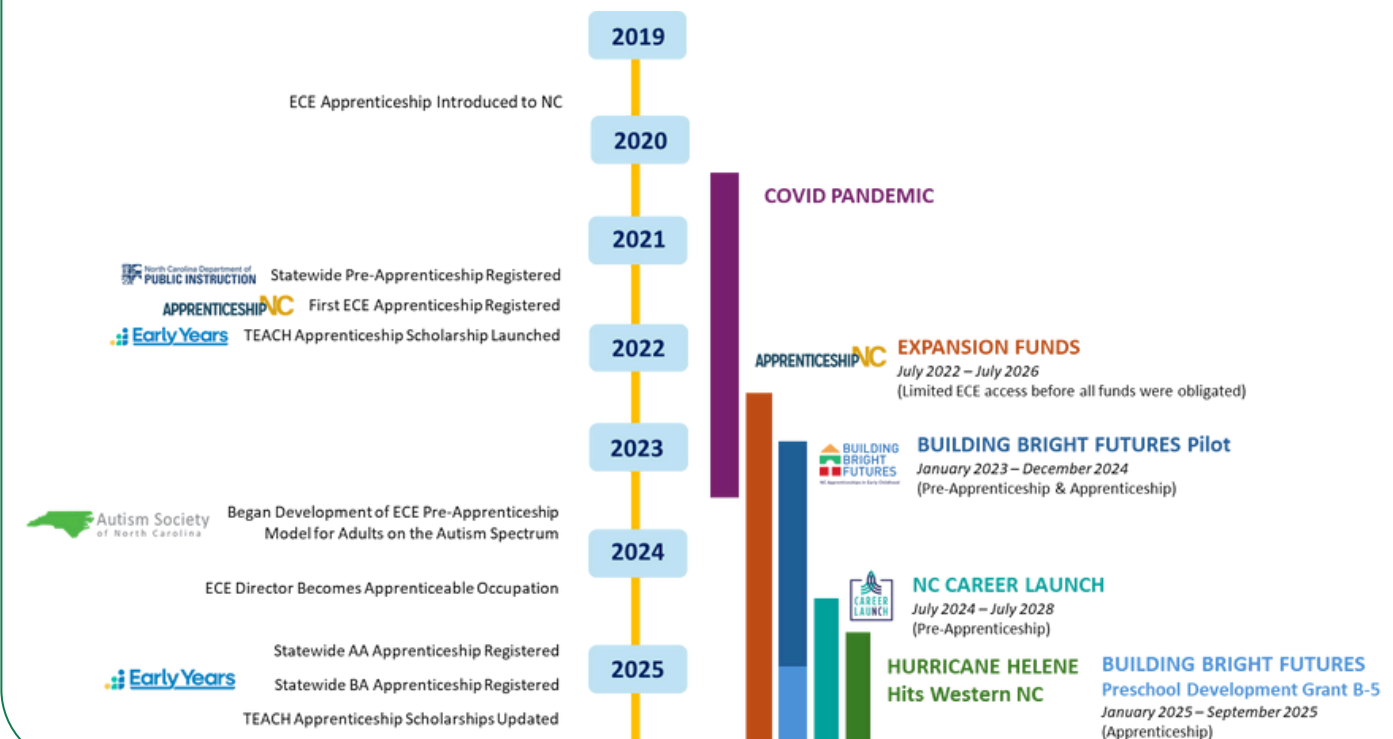
Together with statewide and national partners, the pilot helped increase the number of credential- and degree-seeking ECE apprentices in North Carolina by over 650%.

Total Pre-Apprentices & Apprentices in NC Per Year Over Time*



*Total Numbers in NC Over Time include those who are actively participating in apprenticeship, as well as apprentices who have completed their programs. Not all pre-apprentices and apprentices participate in BBF.

HISTORY OF ECE APPRENTICESHIP IN NC



Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five: 2025

With the pilot and pandemic-related grants ending, BBF's program continued in 2025 with funding from the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five (PDG B-5) through DCDEE. The role of the PDG B-5 is to support states in building and strengthening their early childhood systems for children from birth through age five. This investment helps North Carolina create a stronger foundation for young children's future learning and success, and build on the promise of creating a talent pipeline for ECE employers, increasing the credential- and degree-seeking early childhood educator workforce. Faced with the challenge of providing valuable support with less money, BBF reduced its staff and support for wraparounds for apprentices and mentor incentives, allowing wage matching to continue, but capped. Of course, *all participants* were still able to access BBF's non-financial resources.



An apprentice works with children at
Little Sunshine Academy in Greenville, NC

The first priority for BBF was to create a more streamlined process for its participants. Apprenticeship is an employer-driven model, and BBF worked to meet each employer where they were. Based on its experience during the pilot and with an established system already in place, BBF identified ways to reduce administrative time on both the participant and in BBF's financial and onboarding processes.

BBF 2025 Goals

BBF focused its 2025 efforts on:

- Refining and streamlining its processes;
- Strengthening relationships with its partners and participants;
- Braiding funding;
- Providing no-cost professional development opportunities online, if not in person;
- Identifying lessons learned and best practices; and
- Continuing to reduce barriers for participants.

Apprenticeship sponsorship can require a significant amount of coordination and administrative work. When BBF first began recruiting employers to participate, no group sponsored programs existed, and many employers designed and administered their own programs. BBF worked with community colleges and other organizations to promote several group apprenticeship programs developed during the pilot, including the Early Years statewide apprenticeship pathways for earning an Associate and/or a Bachelor's Degree. These group programs have been able to provide additional staff, mentoring, and funding resources for participants.

BBF, in partnership with ApprenticeshipNC and the Autism Society of North Carolina (ASNC), successfully developed and piloted an innovative ECE Teacher Aide pre-apprenticeship model for high-functioning adults on the autism spectrum or with mild intellectual disabilities (IDD). This groundbreaking initiative creates opportunity for meaningful employment while addressing critical workforce needs in early childhood education.

A SYSTEM OF SUPPORT

The Reality of Being a Child Care Provider

BBF designed their program with the typical early childhood educator in mind, recognizing the need for a simple, streamlined system to support its ECE apprenticeship participants. These employers, who are most in need of a structured framework for recruiting and retaining high quality educators, are also those with the fewest resources, including time. Directors might never sit down at a desk or computer, may do most of their work on a smart phone, be pulled constantly into classrooms to help, or have little time for a simple phone call or to attend a webinar. BBF's processes and activities are designed to accommodate such needs.



An early childhood director is busy in the classroom at Little People Preschool in Raleigh, NC

BBF Program & Provider Support

BBF provides technical assistance, enrichment activities, and industry resources to help employers, apprentices, and mentors successfully navigate apprenticeship. From education and recruitment efforts to professional development, BBF recognizes early childhood educators as respected professionals caring for and educating our future generations.

Technical Assistance

Child care programs need assistance navigating the world of apprenticeship—understanding the concepts, managing the administrative work, and developing and maintaining quality programs.

BBF manages several roles in its mission to support its participants:

- Serves as a point-of-contact for providers every step of the way, from the spark of interest, through development of an apprenticeship program, to implementation of best practices;
- Connects its participants to a variety of resources and industry experts to answer questions and guide providers;
- Develops digital and printable resources to explain ECE career pathways and how pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship align and support them; and
- Keeps participants abreast of the latest developments in ECE apprenticeship.

Enrichment Activities

Apprenticeship participants are dedicated to honing their skills and knowledge, and BBF provides additional opportunities for learning and growth. Participants also value the ability to connect in-person or virtually with other apprenticeship programs across the state.

- In-person “field trips” have been instrumental in providing participants with new perspectives and knowledge, as well as a renewed passion for their field. During the pilot, BBF hosted on-site sessions with ECE research and policy institutes and DCDEE.
- In 2024, BBF hosted a one-day in-person Apprenticeship Summit for participants—Directors, Mentors, and Apprentices—to gather and learn new skills at no cost to attendees. Keynote speakers included national intermediaries and statewide leaders. Breakout sessions provided insight and activities related to topics such as mentorship, advocacy, reflective supervision, and mindfulness.
- BBF also offers early childhood educators an array of online live webinars offered to provide education on apprenticeship, pre-apprenticeship, best practices, how to advocate for the profession, how to receive an education without debt, and more. Webinars are recorded and posted on the web site so that busy educators can access them at their convenience. They have also been used by schools to educate their students.

Mentoring Community of Practice

Mentors are the lynchpin of any apprenticeship, and is what sets apprenticeships apart from other career programs. BBF partnered with Early Years to create a Mentoring Community of Practice: "Mentoring Apprentices and Pre-Apprentices Program" (MAPP) via bi-monthly live webinars. Participants learn tips and tricks for mentorship in an ECE environment. These webinars also include breakout sessions for participants to discuss topics and reflect on their own mentoring experiences and challenges. Like all of its online sessions, BBF posts recordings and materials on its web site for mentors who are unable to attend live.

Community of Practice Virtual Meeting
"Seeds and Weeds: Examining Biases in Mentorship (Part 2)"
Thursday, March 20, 2025

[View Recording of Session](#)

🔗 Iceberg Graphic: [Iceberg Effect Graphic](#)

🔗 Mentoring Competency Assessment Tool: [Mentoring Competency Assessment](#)

🔗 Presentation Slides: [MAPP Presentation Slides - March 20, 2025](#)



*A mentor meets with an apprentice
at Sunny Side Academy in Blowing Rock, NC*

BBF Financial Support

In addition to its guidance and non-financial resources, Building Bright Futures has built a successful system for supporting apprentices, mentors, and child care employers to help fill some financial gaps, incentivize participation, and reduce barriers to entering or continuing the field. Pilot funding was significantly greater than in 2025; however, BBF used its experience to ensure its new process remained as seamless as possible for participants, and focused its more limited resources on where participants needed them most.

Employers

BBF provides critical support to employers as they build their business and their talent pipeline. This includes up to a 50% wage match for apprentice hours worked, onboarding expenses, and programmatic support. Receiving support for wages means that employers can earmark those savings in their budget for other projects or essentials, whether it's helping an apprentice with a special need, repairs to the playground, additional professional development for staff, or saving for future emergencies.

"The financial, educational, and professional support provided by BBF gave us a path to be able to support our educators to gain valuable training and to obtain credentials that not only support their professional growth, but also improve the overall quality of our program."

MEGAN McCURLEY, Executive Director
*Latino Educational Achievement Partnership (LEAP),
Durham*

Apprentices

Apprentices participating in BBF are eligible to receive financial support to cover costs associated with wraparound services, including, but not limited to:

- transportation;
- child care;
- onboarding costs;
- educational and professional materials and supplies;
- technology needs;
- professional development, and
- training.

BBF does not pay tuition.

Mentors

BBF provides stipends to those who mentor apprentices. Stipends provide financial recognition for the significant time and effort mentors invest in training apprentices, making it more attractive for experienced professionals to take on the additional responsibilities of teaching, guidance, and supervision that effective mentorship requires.

Braiding Funding

Financial supports such as waivers, grants, and scholarships make participation more accessible for apprentices and employers alike.

Apprentices

Although BBF does not provide financial support to apprentices for tuition, several resources in NC cover the majority, if not all, of those costs.

NC Youth Apprenticeship Tuition Waiver

Students are eligible for the youth apprenticeship waiver if they register for an ECE apprenticeship before high school graduation, **or** complete an ECE pre-apprenticeship and register with an ECE apprenticeship within 120 days of their high school graduation date.

Tuition and registration fees at any NC community college up to the completion of the Associate Degree in early childhood education are included. Books, lab fees, campus resources, and ancillary fees or expenses are not included as part of the waiver.

The Early Years TEACH program offers a version of its traditional scholarship and working scholars program customized for apprentices pursuing the Associate Degree or Bachelor's Degree pathways.

BBF participants have also looked to their local workforce development boards and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding for eligible apprentices. The key to this support is starting early, preferably before a new apprentice is hired.

In its work on the pre-apprenticeship model for adults on the autism spectrum or with mild IDD, BBF learned more about how **vocational rehabilitation** services through the Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities (EIPD) office can provide financial and coaching support.

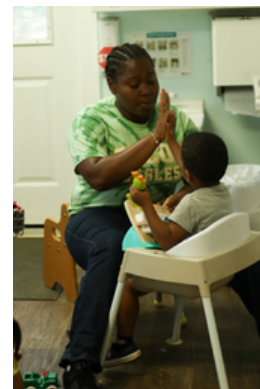
Community Colleges are another important resource, especially for wraparound services. They often have a wealth of programs for their students, such as scholarships, technology help, tutors, mental health resources, emergency funds, a food pantry, and more.

Participants can also partner with their local Smart Start to access funds to support apprenticeship.

Pre-Apprentices

In NC, pre-apprentices can receive ECE instruction at no cost through their public school's CTE program, or at their local community college through the Career and College Promise program.

They can also be supported through NC Career Launch (NCCL), a NCBCE-led program designed to increase statewide postsecondary credential attainment and connect high school students to high-demand jobs. Students receive assistance with transportation costs and other wraparound services, and a stipend at completion of the pre-apprenticeship. In addition, their mentors receive a stipend for their work in guiding and supporting pre-apprentices, and there is funding available to help employers with other costs associated with supporting pre-apprentices.



A high school pre-apprentice interacts with a child as part of her work-based learning

Tips When Considering Financial Incentives and Grant Funding

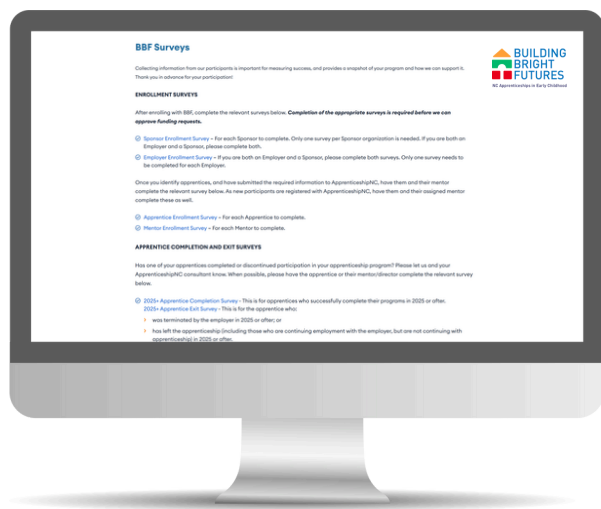
- Participate in apprenticeship for how it benefits your organization and the children and families you serve.
- Incentives are often short-term. Consider how funding available now can help you meet your long-term goals.
- Not all programs apply to everyone. Identify what suits each individual's needs and braid funding sources.
- Consider the requirements of the funding, such as reporting and what the funds can be used for.
- Keep connected via newsletters, social media, and web sites to stay informed of the status of existing and new opportunities.
- Data collection from these programs is key to their sustainability. Complete requested surveys and share your work and experiences with them—lessons learned, barriers, and success stories.

Data Collection

Building Bright Futures Data

Data collection and analysis serve as critical foundations for demonstrating program effectiveness, informing evidence-based decision-making, and ensuring long-term viability. BBF collects data about its participants through online surveys for sponsors, employers, pre-apprentices, apprentices, and mentors. These surveys include:

- **Enrollment Surveys** – All sponsors, employers, pre-apprentices, apprentices, and mentors complete a survey when enrolling with BBF to gather demographic data as well as information on the individual's previous experience and education in the ECE field.
- **Completion Survey** – When an apprentice completes their program, BBF asks that they complete this survey to gather data about their experience and their plans moving forward.
- **Exit Survey** – When an apprentice leaves apprenticeship, BBF asks the apprentice or their employer/mentor to complete this survey to gather perspective on why the apprentice left. For example, is the apprentice still employed in early childhood, still enrolled in early childhood classes, or has the apprentice left the field entirely?



BBF also asked pilot participants to complete an **End-of-Pilot** survey to help assess BBF's initiative and to gather information on recommendations or additional needs participants had.

Completion of data collection surveys is always a challenge. BBF determined that completion of its enrollment surveys would be required for processing of any financial requests, and this policy helped ensure that the majority of programs regularly engaged with BBF were providing data. Completion and Exit Survey completion rates are subsequently low; however, even the small number received, as well as phone interviews with employers, has helped identify trends.

BBF Participant Data Highlights

Apprentices at Start of Apprenticeship

- 15-30 years old - 56%
- Highest level of education is a high school diploma or equivalent - 51%
- Black or African American - 49%

Mentors

- 15 years of ECE experience
- Bachelor's Degree - 40%

Other ECE Apprenticeship Data

Only a few other entities within NC collect data on apprenticeship and apprentices, and this aggregated data is shared among BBF and its partners. (Personal data is not shared.) The manner in which each organization collects its data does not always align, so BBF and its partners are working together to come up with solutions for this challenge:

- Reduce the burden on apprenticeship participants who are currently required to share the same information with multiple entities.
- Collaborate on the definitions of data terms to create more consistency across platforms.
- Identify challenges and successes based on data such as completion, cancellation, and retention rates.

Participants in apprenticeship programs in NC are not required to enroll with BBF, so BBF's scope is limited to those that do. However, approximately 98% of the apprentices currently active in NC as of July 2025 were enrolled with BBF.

BBF also relies on partners to assist with confirming apprenticeship registration for eligibility for financial support.

Partnership and Collaboration

An Ecosystem of Support

BBF has enjoyed success because it has designed a program to support partnerships, align efforts, and create a structured system for participants and child care providers. BBF meets bi-weekly, monthly, and quarterly with a variety of partners to communicate activity, policy, and other updates, as well as to make decisions about best practices. These partners have also proven to be one of BBF's key connections to potential employers.

BBF has strengthened these important relationships with key government and industry partners, creating a collaborative outreach, education, and recruitment strategy. Communicating a cohesive message is key to ensuring participants understand apprenticeship opportunities and requirements.

Including Worker Voices

A successful program includes a collected group of perspectives to guide its development, including the worker voice. As part of its PDG B-5 work, BBF has created the NC Early Childhood Apprenticeship Advisory Council, made up of four industry partners, four early childhood education employers, and four BBF apprentices.

The Advisory Council is designed to provide feedback and guidance on the early childhood education apprenticeship experience in NC to ensure program effectiveness, integrate participant perspectives, and develop partnerships to support sustainability. It will play an important role in helping BBF and its partners make informed decisions, navigate challenges, stay abreast of best practices, and cultivate commitment for new changes.

Statewide Focus

In under three years, Building Bright Futures has made a tremendous impact on early childhood education apprenticeship in NC, growing this important workforce of high quality educators. With the success of the BBF pilot and the PDG B-5 work, NC's leaders are recognizing how BBF's support of apprenticeship is impacting both the growth of the ECE workforce and the long-term effects on NC's working families and communities.

For example, a [2025 report³ from the NC Chamber Foundation](#) outlines potential workforce development strategies to expand the supply of accessible, affordable, high-quality child care in NC, including BBF as a potential solution. It highlights the employers' commitment to train the apprentice through completion of the credential or degree as a key component for reducing high turnover rates, and on-the-job training under the guidance of a mentor as an effective tool for developing talented and experienced professionals who understand the real world applications of the profession.

*"NC's children, families, and businesses need more early childhood education and care options, and **Building Bright Futures** is an innovative solution to increase access. By supporting and encouraging students to enter the early childhood profession, we'll help make sure more families and employers have the quality child care they need to thrive."*

Former NC Governor Roy Cooper

NC's state government efforts around workforce development have also taken notice of apprenticeship and BBF's impact. NC Governor Josh Stein identified apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships as critical initiatives to support the state's workforce. [He has a goal to double the apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships registered in the state in the next four years.](#) The NC Task Force on Child Care and Early Education has also highlighted BBF as a key program with which to partner in its *Interim Report – June 30, 2025* (See Recommendation 5: Link existing workforce compensation and support programs for early childhood professionals into a cohesive set of supports. Pages 12-14)⁴. The new [Governor's Council on Workforce Development and Apprenticeship](#) is also working on goals and strategies to support expansion of apprenticeship programs in critical sectors, including a potential focus on early childhood education.

These coordinated efforts demonstrate a growing momentum for ECE workforce development across the state. To continue meeting the needs of the industry and ensure long-term impact, continued investment is essential. Apprenticeship is more than just job training—it's about building a future where every family has child care that is affordable, reliable, and high-quality, and every educator has a pathway to thrive.

BEST PRACTICES

Over the last three years, BBF has worked with small and large child care providers spanning the entire state, in urban and rural communities serving a varied group of children and families. Significant challenges, such as lower levels of ECE and BBF funding and the impact of Hurricane Helene on western NC in 2025, required BBF to pivot and adjust. Based on its experiences during the pilot and as part of the PDG B-5, BBF has identified a set of best practices for ECE apprenticeship.

Laying the Groundwork for Quality & Success

Consider Your Workforce Goals

Apprenticeship is a long-term workforce strategy. Determine what level of education and training you want your apprentices to achieve. What roles do you need to fill to meet your workforce goals?

Identify Your Apprentices and Mentors

Begin by assessing your current workforce. Who among your staff might benefit from structured professional development? Are you looking to recruit new talent or upskill existing employees? Who among your staff has the time, education, and experience to mentor apprentices?

Understand the Needs

Each apprenticeship program is unique. Think through what your apprentices, mentors, and organization will need—logistically and financially. Identify what external resources can help (e.g., TEACH scholarships, apprenticeship incentives, industry intermediaries, workforce board support).

Build Your Budget

Outline the full scope of expenses, including training time, instructional costs, wages, and any administrative resources required to implement and sustain the program. Make sure to consider the required progressive wage scale.

Get Internal Buy-In

Before launching, ensure that your team is aligned. Leadership, mentors, and staff need to understand the goals, benefits, and expectations of apprenticeship.

Form Your Support Network

Apprenticeship works best when it's a community effort. In addition to your apprenticeship agency, identify partners such as:

- High school CTE educators and directors
- Local community colleges and training providers
- ECE coalitions, funders, industry intermediaries, and government entities
- Workforce development boards and career centers
- Local Partnership for Children/Smart Start
- Child Care Resource & Referral organizations

Develop a Recruitment Plan

Design your outreach to engage both current staff and new hires. Educate them about the benefits of apprenticeship and the career potential it offers. Consider starting as early as middle school and 9th and 10th grade to encourage students to plan high school coursework in early childhood education.



Navigating Challenges

Encountering obstacles and challenges is an inherent part of any new program development process, requiring flexibility and continuous refinement. Successful programs start with a strong foundation, incorporate thoughtful planning up front, and are prepared to evaluate and adjust.

For Participants:

- Work-life balance can be a major barrier. Build in flexibility and support systems, such as release time for classwork and mentorship.
- Instructional alignment matters. Ensure courses are accessible in terms of timing, location, and language. Each semester, communicate with mentors which classes apprentices are taking.
- Family child care home providers may face unique challenges due to staffing limitations—look for creative mentoring and training options.

For Program Administration:

- Apprenticeships can bring added paperwork and coordination demands. Consider how you will track documentation, coordinate across partners, and manage funding streams.
- Consider larger group-sponsored programs – regional or statewide – for built-in support.
- Braiding funding is necessary but complex. Seek guidance on how to align short-term grants with long-term workforce planning.

For Stakeholders:

- Strong career pathways and robust system infrastructure form the foundation for program success. Incorporate cohorting for apprentices and mentors alike.
- Invest in staffing to manage outreach, compliance, and coaching.
- Education and Communication are essential. Everyone—from apprentices to directors—needs to understand the purpose and process of apprenticeship. Provide centralized, multilingual materials and clear messaging that aligns across agencies.

- Mentorship training helps ensure mentors are prepared and supported in their critical role. Create a community of practice for mentors to regularly learn and connect with one another.
- Recognition keeps morale high. Celebrate apprentices and mentors through ceremonies, stipends, or public acknowledgment.

Sustaining Success

Apprenticeship is not just a recruitment strategy—it's a long-term investment requiring regular oversight, communication, and celebration. Sharing lessons learned—challenges and wins—will improve practices and inspire others to join the effort.

Keeping Track

Develop a record-keeping system for logging on-the-job learning hours, competency completion, mentor feedback, and wage progression.

Lift Up Mentors

Consider how you will train, recognize, and incentivize mentors. They are taking on extra responsibility and will be setting the example for our future educators.

Recognize Achievement

Celebrate achievements from start to finish—signing ceremonies, credentials earned, program milestones, and completion.



Alongside community college leaders and support partners, including Early Years and BBF, apprentices sign their registration paperwork at a kickoff celebration at Durham Tech in Durham, NC

Communicate and Collaborate

Schedule regular check-ins with both apprentices and mentors to evaluate progress and adjust as needed. Keep your external partners in the loop with updates and data sharing. Make use of your support programs to help you navigate challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NC

BBF's experience during the pilot and its first year following brought to light both new challenges and strategies for providing optimal support with fewer resources. In 2025, BBF's priorities included: continued support for existing participants over recruitment of new apprentices; streamlining pilot processes; strengthening statewide partnerships; and identifying additional solutions for sustainability. While BBF continued its outreach and education efforts, it delved deeper into ways to expand its direct support to apprenticeship programs. Gathered from surveys, stakeholder and participant experience, partnership input, leading examples from other states, and its data collection, BBF identified recommendations for NC's ECE apprenticeship work going forward.

Minimize the Administrative Burden for Participants

The administrative requirements continue to be a barrier for potential and participating employers.

- Create toolkits and checklists to ease the onboarding processes.
- Continue to offer the statewide agreement and other group programs that provide built-in administrative and technical assistance.
- Use varied methods of communication to keep participants informed, including email and phone calls.

Define Clear Apprenticeship Pathways

Defining clear educational and professional pathways for apprenticeship participants creates flexibility and options for continued advancement.

- Scaffold credentials within agreements for buildable pathways.
- Incorporate entry-level programs such as child care academies and pre-apprenticeship.
- Explain how multiple pathways have a variety of options for entering and exiting.

Streamline BBF and Stakeholder Administrative Processes

Providing valuable support to child care programs, who are stretched thin, requires support programs such as BBF to be efficient and streamlined.

- Refine funding processes and procedures, templates, and standardized forms.

Identify Strategies for Sustainability

With both national and state focus on the child care crisis and apprenticeship as an important strategy, NC must continue to strengthen its support systems to build sustainability.

- Educate participants about how to braid funding and where to find additional resources during the education and onboarding stages.
- Find additional funding to:
 - Support more apprentices financially (only 60% are supported with PDG B-5 funding).
 - Support participants at a higher financial level more in line with the actual costs of participation.
 - Provide more system support staff for BBF to administer its services.

Prioritize the Mentorship Role

Participants have identified mentors as a crucial reason apprentices participate and continue to completion.

- Provide greater financial incentives.
- Create a toolkit/guide and online training options to assist with onboarding.
- Continue the Mentoring Community of Practice and provide training throughout.

"Being a mentor can both support and strengthen a program overall. You witness mentees gaining knowledge of the field and finding the joy of setting and meeting goals—all of which leads to a sense of fulfillment for both mentors and mentees. There are frequent learning opportunities to gain new perspectives, self-reflect, and sharpen leadership skills."

AMBER FAIRBETTER, Owner & Mentor,
Sunny Side Academy, Blowing Rock

Create a Cohesive Education and Outreach Strategy

Employers and other apprenticeship stakeholders need clear direction and a consistent message. When they fully understand requirements, they're more likely to follow procedures correctly and maintain compliance, reducing administrative burden and program delays.

- Determine outreach roles for partners, and create shareable, cohesive resources that send a consistent message to stakeholders.
- Continue to market the statewide agreement as a quality standard for participants.
- Use the BBF web site as a central hub for ECE apprenticeship information that can direct participants to stakeholder resources.

Strengthen Partner Relationships

BBF and its partners should continue to work together as apprenticeship evolves.

- Continue partnerships such as All Things Apprenticeship (quarterly meetings with NC ECE apprenticeship stakeholders) and the new BBF Advisory Council.
- Provide assistance to NC Task Force on Child Care and Early Education and other similar efforts.

Work on Strategies for Creating Consistent and Reliable Data Collection

To track trends and outcomes, data about apprenticeships needs to be consistently gathered and defined across partners.

- Continue to collect data at both the enrollment and completion stages.
- Identify incentives for participants to participate in data collection efforts.
- Work with partners to define uniform data points across data collection methods.
- Determine methods to best share data while maintaining confidentiality of all participants.

Consider Additional Pathways

BBF has built out pre-apprenticeship-to-apprenticeship pathways for early childhood education starting in high school, with multiple entry and exit points.

- Provide recommended competencies and related instruction for additional pathways, such as Director.
- Investigate further how apprenticeship can support pathways unique to home-based care, English Language Learners, and adults with disabilities.

Building Bright Futures: Looking Ahead

With the momentum gained through Building Bright Futures and its partnerships, NC is poised to be one of the leading states for workforce development in early childhood education apprenticeships.

- The demand is there: NC educators want to upskill and pursue advanced education and experience.
- Registered Apprenticeship is a successful tool for recruiting and retaining high-quality and dedicated professionals, creating a long-term talent pipeline for employers.
- This supportive career pathway framework provides flexible options and much-needed support and motivation for new and experienced professionals, with pre-apprenticeships drawing youth to the field.
- Continued collaboration among ECE and workforce partners is key to providing a robust and supportive apprenticeship system.
- Group programs will help create a standard for success and supportive options for all NC employers.
- Additional support is needed for both participants and the statewide systems supporting ECE apprenticeship.

By growing these programs statewide and supporting both individuals and the systems behind them, we can build a more equitable, effective, and sustainable future for early childhood education in North Carolina.

BBF DATA HIGHLIGHTS

2025: By the Numbers

Data as of September 2025.
Visit our web site for the latest numbers.

384 Apprentices Currently
in the Program

84 Completed Apprenticeship
& Are Working as Educators

9 Pre-Apprentices Currently
in the Program

78 Completed Pre-Apprenticeship &
Are Continuing Their Education or
Participating in Apprenticeship

70% NC Counties Served
By Apprenticeship Programs

3 Statewide Apprenticeship
Agreements Registered To Date

EMPLOYERS

Types of Participating Employers

- Public School Systems
- Community Colleges
- Private Child Care
- Faith-Based Child Care
- YMCA
- Montessori
- Family Child Care Homes

Programs Offered by Employers

- Early Head Start/Head Start
- NC Pre-K
- Infant/Toddler
- Bilingual
- Inclusive/Developmental Day

SPONSORS

- Early Years - Statewide Agreements
- Child Care Centers
- Community Colleges
- Public School Systems
- Partnerships for Children
- Other ECE Organizations

APPRENTICES

Age

- 15-20 – 19%
- 21-30 – 37%
- 31-40 – 26%
- 41-50 – 12%
- 51 and over – 6%

Highest Level of Education at Start

- Graduate Degree – 1%
- Bachelor's Degree – 3%
- Associate Degree – 6%
- Community College Diploma – 1%
- Certificate from Community College – 13%
- Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential – 11%
- High School Diploma – 51%
- Currently in High School – 14%

Race/Ethnicity

- White or Caucasian – 34%
- Black or African-American – 49%
- Hispanic – 10%
- Native American or Alaska Native – 2%
- Asian or Pacific Islander – 3%
- Multiracial – 3%
- Race Not Listed – 0.03%
- Participated in a Pre-Apprenticeship – 6%

MENTORS

Average Years of Experience

- 15 years in ECE

Highest Level of ECE Education

- Doctorate – 1%
- Master's Degree – 13%
- Bachelor's Degree – 40%
- Associate Degree – 29%
- Community College Diploma – 2%
- NC Early Childhood Credential (NCECC) – 6%
- Certificate – 6%
- Child Development Associate (CDA) – 2%
- High School ECE class or EDU 119 – 2%

Notes on BBF Data

Building Bright Futures collects demographic data when programs enroll. This data provides a snapshot of those participants in early childhood education apprenticeship in NC.

This demographic data represents approximately 98% of apprentices in NC.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Building Bright Futures collaborates regularly with a network of government, education, workforce, and early childhood organizations throughout NC and the country to provide valuable connections and resources to its participants. This important work would not be possible without the help of our partners.

- [ApprenticeshipNC](#)
- [Autism Society of North Carolina](#)
- [Dogwood Health Trust](#)
- [Early Care & Education Pathways to Success \(ECEPTS\)](#)
- [Early Childhood Workforce Connector](#)
- [Early Years](#) (formerly known as Child Care Services Association)
- [Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities](#)
- [Frank Porter Graham Institute](#)
- [The Hunt Institute](#)
- [Jobs for the Future \(JFF\)](#)
- [Office of the NC Governor](#)
- [Office of the NC Lieutenant Governor](#)
- [National Governors Association](#)
- [NC Community College System](#)
- [NC Department of Commerce](#)
- [NC Department of Public Instruction](#)
- [NC Division of Child Development and Early Education](#)
- [Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship \(PAYA\)/New America](#)
- [RTI International](#)
- [Smart Start and NC Partnership for Children](#)
- [Southwestern Child Development Commission](#)

"We are immensely grateful for the unwavering support Building Bright Futures has provided in helping us grow our team and shape the next generation of educators at A Safe Place. Their dedication to excellence and commitment to empowering future educators have been instrumental in creating a nurturing, inspiring environment for our staff and children alike.

Through their guidance and resources, we've been able to foster meaningful professional development and enhance our ability to make a positive, lasting impact on young learners. The profound difference they have made in supporting our goals and strengthening our mission is invaluable. We are excited to continue our partnership for many years to come, and we thank them wholeheartedly for all their glorious work. Together, we look forward to creating a brighter future for our staff, children, and the broader community."

CHARMAINE WINSTON, Director
A Safe Place, Raleigh

ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

ENDNOTES

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Resources

- ApprenticeshipNC - <https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/businesses/apprenticeships/>
- Find an Apprenticeship Program Near You - <https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/businesses/apprenticeships/explore-apprenticeship-opportunities>
 - Resources for Employers - <https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/businesses/apprenticeships/resources-for-employers>
- Early Years - <https://www.earlyyearsnc.org>
- ECE Apprenticeship Glossary - <https://www.buildingbrightfuturesnc.org/resources/glossary-of-commonly-used-apprenticeship-terms>
- NC Careers - <https://nccareers.org>
- North Carolina Business Committee for Education - <https://ncbce.org>
- North Carolina Career Launch - <https://www.nccareerlaunch.org>
- North Carolina Department of Instruction - <https://www.dpi.nc.gov>
- Career and Technical Education - <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/classroom-resources/career-and-technical-education>
 - Career and College Promise - <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/students-families/enhanced-opportunities/advanced-learning-and-gifted-education/career-and-college-promise>
- Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) - <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/about/department-initiatives/early-childhood/preschool-development-grant>

FOR MORE INFORMATION



www.buildingbrightfuturesnc.org



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NC Apprenticeships in Early Childhood

Building Bright Futures Playbook:

Developing and Scaling Early Childhood Education
Registered Pre-Apprenticeships & Apprenticeships in North Carolina

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