ISSUE BRIEF · OCTOBER 2026

Childcare Accessibility

Every family in Mecklenburg County deserves childcare that is high-quality, affordable, and within reach.

Smart Start
of Mecklenburg County

59,600+
Mecklenburg children under six whose parents are all in the workforce[1]

21,100
Mecklenburg children birth to five enrolled in licensed childcare[1]

37%
of NC parents of young children turned down a job or promotion over childcare costs[2]

The Issue

Access to childcare depends on three things at once: a program must have an open space, the family must be able to afford it, and the care must be high quality. In Mecklenburg County, tens of thousands of young children have every parent at work[1], and many families struggle to find care that meets all three needs.

Cost is a major barrier. The national average price of childcare reached $13,184 in 2025, and in most states infant care costs more than in-state public college tuition.[3] Supply is also strained: when programs cannot hire enough teachers to meet safe staff-to-child ratios, classrooms sit empty even when families are waiting.

Why It Matters

When families cannot find care, parents miss work, cut back hours, or leave their jobs. Childcare breakdowns cost North Carolina an estimated $5.65 billion in lost economic activity every year, including $4.29 billion in costs to employers.[4] For children, the stakes are just as high: the first five years are when the foundation for learning, health, and school readiness is built.

What's Working in Mecklenburg

MECK Pre-K, funded by Mecklenburg County and administered by Smart Start, offers free, high-quality pre-K to every four-year-old in the county. In 2025–26 it grew to 115 classrooms serving 2,070 children[5], and a record 1,913 children graduated in 2026.[6]

Child Care Resources Inc. (CCRI) provides free, personalized child care search, referral, and navigation services across North Carolina through Child Care Navigators and Find Child Care NC. Families can also text FINDCARE to 980-292-9496 to reach a Search Navigator.[7]

How You Can Help

- **Share your story.** Tell community leaders and elected officials how finding childcare has affected your family or workplace.
- **Invite a visit.** Ask a local official to tour an early learning program and see the need firsthand.
- **Help families find care.** Point parents to Child Care Navigators for free search help, and let families with four-year-olds know MECK Pre-K is free.
- **Engage employers.** Encourage businesses to explore Tri-Share and Family Forward NC certification.

Advocacy tools:
smartstartofmeck.org/advocacy

Support our work:
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Sources 1. Child Care Services Association, *Child Care in Mecklenburg County* (2024). **2.** NC Chamber Foundation Child Care Survey (2023). **3.** Child Care Aware of America, *Child Care in America: 2025 Price & Supply*. **4.** U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, *Untapped Potential in NC* (2024). **5.** The Charlotte Weekly, "MECK Pre-K adds locations for coming school year" (2025). **6.** Mecklenburg County, "MECK Pre-K Graduates Record Number of Children in 2026." **7.** Child Care Resources Inc., childcarenavigators.org (2026).

Smart Start of Mecklenburg County is a nonpartisan nonprofit. This brief is provided for public education and does not endorse candidates or take positions on specific legislation.

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