



**GROWTH AND
IMPACT IN EARLY
CARE AND LEARNING**

State Snapshots

What does early care and learning look like in your state?

Policymakers who wish to have an impact on the care and learning that occurs in early childhood education programs in their states must consult multiple sources to find current information on key issues influencing early care and learning, like access, affordability, quality, and funding. With support from Blue Meridian Partners, The Hunt Institute developed a one-stop scale for policymakers to measure growth and impact on 20 key early indicators across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Building on The Hunt Institute's founder, former four-term North Carolina Governor Jim Hunt's advocacy for strong early learning policy initiatives, the goal of this scale is to provide current snapshots of states' early care and learning landscapes for children under five years of age, to inform initiatives supporting young children, their families, and the economy.

The Importance of Early Care and Learning

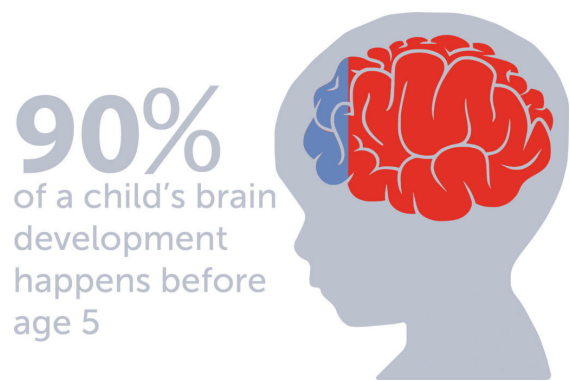
According to the [Center on the Developing Child](#), the brain is most flexible during the earliest years. The cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional and other capacities that develop in the early years directly contribute to success in school, the workplace, and the community. There are over [23 million](#) children under five years of age in the United States. With [65](#) percent of the nation's caregivers in the workforce, there is a great need across the nation for quality, affordable child care and preschool access to support the following:

- The **early learning imperative** to provide young children with enriched opportunities at home, in child care settings, and preschool supporting optimal learning and development.
- The **economic imperative** to capitalize on the rich returns and savings on investing early.
- The **workforce imperative** to ensure that caregivers of young children continue to work, take care of their families, and contribute to the economy.

THE EARLY LEARNING IMPERATIVE

Policies that intentionally support optimal conditions for early learning of children under five can positively influence the trajectory of their school and life outcomes, as well as build a skilled workforce for the future. [Figure 1](#) shows that **90 percent of a child's brain develops during the first five years**. This development happens iteratively through interactions with family members and early educators. With consistent exposure to language-rich environments, nurturing adults at home, and in child care and preschool settings, young children develop robust networks of neural connectivity that undergird their academic and life [success](#) for decades to come. A cited [intergenerational](#) analysis of the outcomes stemming from High-Scope's Perry Preschool Project, a high-quality preschool intervention, found that the intervention improved participants' employment, health, and cognitive and social-emotional skills, and reduced criminal activity. The positive effects continued to benefit the academic and social development of participants' children.

■ **Figure 1: The Developing Brain**

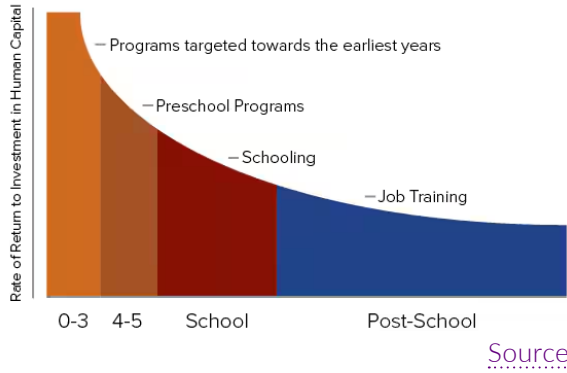


- 90% brain development before age 5
- 10% brain development after age 5

[Source](#)

Figure 2: Return on Early Investment

Returns to a Unit Dollar Invested are Highest in Earliest Years



THE ECONOMIC IMPERATIVE

The absence of stimulating early care and learning experiences can have adverse results. [Studies](#) show that disparities in the cognitive development, health, and social-emotional development of young children are evident at nine months of age and increase by 24 months. The Heckman Equation [demonstrates](#) how policies that prioritize early learning can minimize [adverse](#) childhood experiences and enhance the potential of an individual to contribute positively to their family, society, and the economy, with the greatest return on investment associated with programs at the earliest stages of life ([Figure 2](#)). Recent meta-analyses continue to show childhood access to robust early learning results in [savings](#) across education and social service systems in the form of reductions in grade retention, special education, welfare supports, and incarceration, as well as taxpaying ability.

THE WORKFORCE IMPERATIVE

[The Heckman Equation](#) illustrates how early investment in early care and learning can secure the future workforce. Policies that increase the supply of high-quality, affordable child care are also essential to the current workforce. In the United States, [65 percent](#) of children under five have working caregivers. The lack of access to high-quality early care and learning opportunities inhibits consistent parental participation in the workforce which in turn stresses family finances. It also leads to an annual loss in national gross domestic product of [\\$122 billion](#). [Figure 3](#) shows why early educators are the “workforce [behind](#) the workforce.” They allow caregivers to stay in the workforce, even as they support the learning and development of young children. However, early educators are paid an average of about [\\$13.95](#) per hour, which makes them one of the lowest paid workers in the country. In contrast, the average living wage for an individual in the United States is [\\$25.02](#) per hour. Policies that help with recruitment and retention of early learning educators through supplementing wages and provision of benefits are needed to address widespread burnout of early learning educators and [attrition](#) across the sector.

Critical Components of Growth and Impact in Early Care and Learning

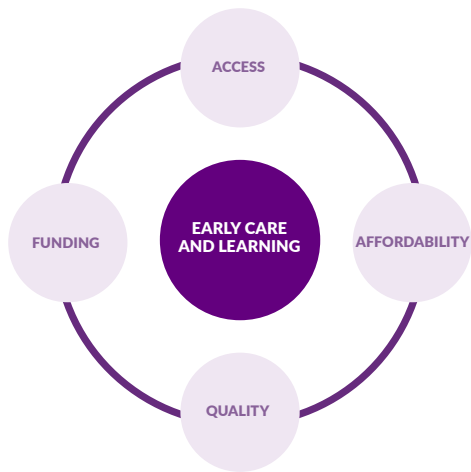
The child care access gap results from the lack of child care programs for children under five, relative to the demand for such programs by working caregivers. The child care gap functions as a leading

Figure 3: The Workforce Behind the Workforce



©The Hunt Institute 2024

Figure 4: Critical Components of Growth and Impact



©The Hunt Institute 2024

indicator predicting the potential for educational as well as economic setbacks. Policies that increase access to high quality, affordable child care can close the child care gap and mitigate its developmental and economic fallout. The Hunt Institute conducted a scan of literature on recent data on early care and learning programs to develop state snapshots of growth and impact for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. While health and social indicators (like infant mortality and access to social services) are very important, the scale includes indicators that directly [buoy](#) positive outcomes like school readiness and workforce participation, and mitigate losses to the state economy.

The Hunt Institute identified 20 core indicators and relevant comparisons from [2023 data sources](#) under four main categories: Access, Affordability, Quality, and Funding (Figure 4.) A fifth category dedicated to the early care and learning workforce was considered; however, it was ultimately decided that embedding key workforce drivers across the existing four categories best captured the interconnectedness that inherently exists.

ACCESS

Access, according to [Administration of Children and Families](#), means that caregivers, with reasonable effort and affordability, can enroll their child in an early care and learning program that supports the child’s learning and development, and meets the family’s needs. In this analysis, access includes the number of licensed spaces available in center-based and Family Child Care (FCC) homes. The three access indicators are:

- The extent of the child care gap, estimated based on the number of children in a state with all caregivers working and the number of licensed child care spaces in center-based care and FCC homes available to families. A limitation of the analysis is that spaces in unregulated care are not factored in due to lack of reliable state-by-state data on this indicator.
- The percentage of eligible children served by public programs including Early Head Start, Head Start, and public preschool.
- The average hourly wage of early educators compared to the living wage calculation for an individual in the state.

AFFORDABILITY

A widely applied affordability criterion is the “seven percent of family income” [guideline](#) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Though [meant](#) for working families eligible for child care subsidies, it is a useful baseline for gauging affordability across the income spectrum. The scale lists the average price of care for infants and toddlers in centers and FCC homes, with three affordability indicators:

- The price of center-based infant care as a percentage of the median income of single-income families.
- The price of center-based infant care as a percentage of the median income of two-income families.
- The cost to the economy of the lack of affordable child care, in billions.

QUALITY

Quality in child care and early learning [includes](#) qualifications and professional development of early educators, staff to child ratios, class sizes, early assessment and intervention, standards, and licensing and regulation of care to ensure adherence to minimum standards. A respected body of research shows that early intervention for young children with developmental delays and disabilities is highly [effective](#) in addressing setbacks and supporting healthy development and school readiness. [Research](#) also shows that staff to child ratios, educator qualifications, and fair wages and benefits for early care and learning educators to counter attrition of this workforce are core indicators. Many of these indicators are included within the Quality category; wages are included under Access, as they determine the availability of staffed spaces.

[At least 45 states](#) adopted Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) to organize and improve child care. However, [QRIS](#) is currently being revised in some states and has not yet adopted in others; therefore, QRIS cannot be uniformly scored and was not included in this measure. [Accreditation](#) by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) and/or the National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA) is a strong signifier of quality in early learning. However, accreditation data are not published for all states. Future iterations of this scale will aim to include national accreditation, QRIS attainment, early learning standards, and early assessment. Quality currently includes 10 indicators:

- Early intervention policy levers and the number of levers adopted by the state.
- Reach of early intervention as compared to babies born with low birth weight.
- Staff to child ratios in an early care and learning program for infants.
- Staff to child ratios in an early care and learning program for toddlers.

- Staff to child ratios in an early care and learning program for preschoolers.
- Minimum credentials required for center directors.
- Minimum credentials required for teachers.
- Minimum credentials required for assistant teachers.
- Annual required professional development hours for directors.
- Annual required professional development hours for staff.

FUNDING

[Public](#) funding in early care and learning includes four major federal and state funding streams, including the Child Care and Development Block Grant, Early Head Start, Head Start and in many states, public preschool. These indicators were assessed by the percentage of eligible children served. Future versions of the scale will aim to address emerging funding streams like [braided](#) funding and subsidized preschool models, within limitations of data availability. The four indicators of funding are:





- Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)
- Early Head Start
- Head Start
- Public preschool



A growth-oriented scale





The four-point scale spanning Emerging (1), Evolving (2), Expanding (3), and Excelling (4) can capture progress year-on-year, and tell the story of growth and impact in early learning over time. The generative scale recognizes that states have multiple initiatives in play for improving access, affordability, quality, and funding. Instead of summative reports of each state’s progress, the scale provides diagnostic snapshots that can inform ongoing planning and decision-making. Please review the [scoring guide](#) to learn more about the approach.

The Scale: GROWTH AND IMPACT IN EARLY CARE AND LEARNING

	Emerging	The state plans or initiates programs and/or policies to improve access, affordability, quality, and/or funding in early care and learning.	1
	Evolving	The state’s early care and learning programs and policies to improve access, affordability, quality, and/or funding are gaining traction.	2
	Expanding	The state’s early care and learning efforts broaden their reach and consistently improve access, affordability, quality, and funding.	3
	Excelling	The state’s early care and learning programs and policies are established and show positive outcomes for children, families, and the economy.	4



The **Access** category is composed of three indicators including the size of the child care gap, percentage of eligible children served by public early learning programs, and the wages of early educators (a factor deciding availability of staff).





Access			
	Emerging	The state’s efforts to reduce the child care gap, increase access to public programs for eligible families, and improve wages and benefits for early educators (to strengthen this workforce) are in a planning/early phase.	1
	Evolving	The state’s efforts to reduce the child care gap, increase access to public programs for eligible families, and/or improve wages and benefits for early educators are gaining traction.	2
	Expanding	The state’s efforts to reduce the child care gap, increase access to public programs for eligible families, and improve wages and benefits for early educators are consistently broadening their reach.	3
	Excelling	The state’s efforts to reduce the child care gap, increase access to public programs for eligible families, and improve wages and benefits for early educators are approaching scale and demonstrate positive outcomes for children, families, and the state economy.	4

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

To sustainably increase access to child care, policymakers may consider the following strategies:

- Provide incentives to child care providers that will enable them to increase capacity in child care centers and Family Child Care homes.
- Supplement federal funding streams supporting Head Start and Early Head Start to increase the reach of these programs among eligible children.
- Build partnerships with philanthropic and business entities to develop braided funding to augment early educators’ salaries and provide benefits to stanch attrition.

Affordability is measured by three indicators including, price of center-based infant care as a percent of median income of a single-income household, price of center-based infant care as a percent of median income of a two-income household, and the loss to the economy due to the child care deficit.

Affordability			
	Emerging	The state's efforts to make child care affordable for single-income and two-income families and reduce losses to the state economy (because of unaffordable care) are in a planning/early phase.	1
	Evolving	The state's efforts to make care affordable for single-income and two-income families and/or reduce losses to the state economy are gaining traction.	2
	Expanding	The state's efforts to make care affordable for single-income and two-income families and reduce losses to the state economy are consistently broadening their reach.	3
	Excelling	The state's efforts to make care affordable for single-income and two-income families and reduce losses to the state economy are at scale and demonstrate positive outcomes for children, families, and the state economy.	4





POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

To reduce the burden of child care expenses on working families' budgets, policymakers may consider the following strategies:

- Develop cost models at the state and provider levels to reflect the true cost of care to help identify and develop strategies to make child care more affordable.
- With business and philanthropic partners, adopt and scale cost-sharing programs for child care between the state, employers, and working parents.
- Identify existing policies and licensing requirements that serve as cost burdens to providers and FCHs and determine if these requirements are necessary or can be offset by other funding sources rather than impacting the cost of care to families.



Quality is measured by 10 indicators including: percentage of children served by Early Intervention, number of Early Intervention policy levers, early childhood educators to child ratios for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, minimum credentials for directors, teachers, and assistant teachers, and professional development hours for directors and staff.





Quality			
	Emerging	The state's efforts to improve quality through increasing access to Early Intervention, adopting more Early Intervention policy levers, reducing staff to child ratios, and establishing minimum credentials for early educators are in a planning/early phase.	1
	Evolving	The state's efforts to improve quality through increasing access to Early Intervention, adopting more Early Intervention policy levers, reducing staff to child ratios, and establishing minimum credentials for early educators are gaining traction.	2
	Expanding	The state's efforts to improve quality through increasing access to Early Intervention, adopting more Early Intervention policy levers, reducing staff to child ratios, and establishing minimum credentials for early educators are consistently broadening their reach.	3
	Excelling	The state's efforts to improve quality through increasing access to Early Intervention, adopting multiple Early Intervention policy levers, reducing staff to child ratios, and exceeding minimum credentials for early educators are at scale and demonstrate positive outcomes for children, families, and the state economy.	4

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

To ensure that young children in the state experience optimal conditions for healthy development and learning, policymakers may consider the following strategies:

- Expand the reach of Early Intervention, a proven approach to address developmental delays and disabilities, for eligible children and support early learning and development for all children.
- Adopt standards-based staff-to-child ratios and class sizes to ensure children are safe and have access to age-appropriate interaction and education.
- Implement career lattice and credentialing programs to further develop the quality and capacity of the early education workforce.

Funding is measured by four indicators including, percentage of eligible children served by the Child Care Development Block Grant, Early Head Start, Head Start, and state-funded public preschool.

Funding			
	Emerging	Public programs like child care assistance, Early Head Start, Head Start, and/or public preschool serve ≤25 percent of eligible families.	1
	Evolving	Public programs like child care assistance, Early Head Start, Head Start, and/or public preschool serve 26-50 percent of eligible families.	2
	Expanding	Public programs like child care assistance, Early Head Start, Head Start, and public preschool serve 51-75 percent of eligible families.	3
	Excelling	Public programs like child care assistance, Early Head Start, Head Start, and public preschool serve 76-100 percent of eligible families.	4

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

To expand on promising public programs so that they can reach all eligible children, policymakers may consider the following strategies:

- Utilize cost models and asset mapping strategies to assess which funding streams could be used more effectively and/or combined to provide increased funding to critical public programs like Head Start and Pre-K.
- Draw on successful pilots in other states to create opportunities for braided funding and mixed-delivery models in child care and early learning.
- Develop greater coordination among public agencies governing child care and early learning to reduce inefficiencies and promote greater systemic coherence.

Growth and Impact in Early Learning: State Snapshots

Table 1 summarizes scores for each state in the four categories (and 20 indicators). Overall, the distribution points to the need for strategic investments in the early learning sector.

Critical observations included:

- State scores ranged from 26-48, out of a maximum of 80 points.
- On the four-point scale, there were no states at the Emerging (1) or Excelling (4) levels.
- Ten states were at the Expanding (3) level, and 41 states at the Evolving (2) level.
- The median state is at 37 points, or at the Evolving (2) level; 41 states are at the Evolving (2) level with scores ranging from 26-40 points.

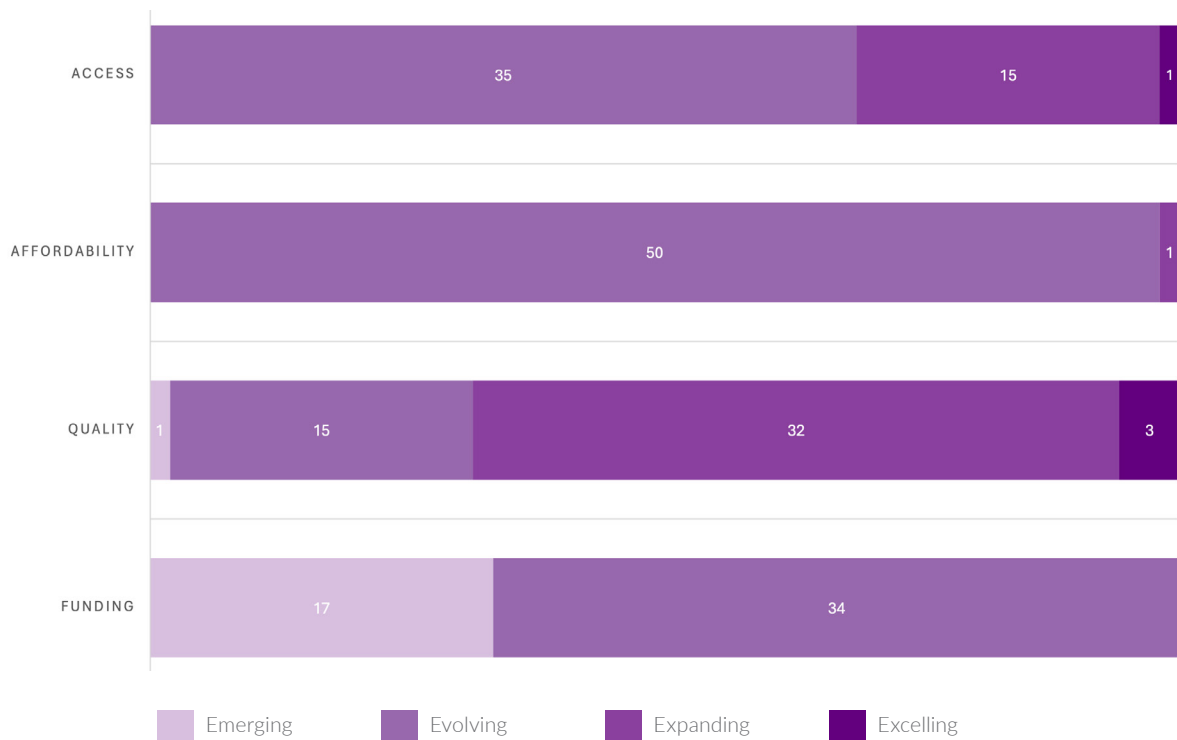
Table 1: State Snapshots

STATE	LABEL	LEVEL	SCORE	MAX
West Virginia	Expanding	3	48	80
Maine	Expanding	3	44	80
New York	Expanding	3	44	80
Rhode Island	Expanding	3	44	80
Vermont	Expanding	3	44	80
Massachusetts	Expanding	3	43	80
Connecticut	Expanding	3	42	80
Delaware	Expanding	3	42	80
District of Columbia	Expanding	3	42	80
Pennsylvania	Expanding	3	41	80
Illinois	Evolving	2	40	80
New Mexico	Evolving	2	40	80
California	Evolving	2	39	80
Hawaii	Evolving	2	39	80
New Hampshire	Evolving	2	39	80
South Dakota	Evolving	2	39	80
Kansas	Evolving	2	38	80
Minnesota	Evolving	2	38	80
New Jersey	Evolving	2	38	80
Virginia	Evolving	2	38	80
Colorado	Evolving	2	37	80
Michigan	Evolving	2	37	80
Montana	Evolving	2	37	80
North Dakota	Evolving	2	37	80
Oregon	Evolving	2	37	80
Utah	Evolving	2	37	80
Florida	Evolving	2	36	80
Indiana	Evolving	2	36	80
Iowa	Evolving	2	36	80
Maryland	Evolving	2	36	80
Wisconsin	Evolving	2	36	80
Arizona	Evolving	2	35	80
Mississippi	Evolving	2	35	80
Oklahoma	Evolving	2	35	80
Texas	Evolving	2	35	80
Alaska	Evolving	2	34	80
Missouri	Evolving	2	34	80

South Carolina	Evolving	2	34	80
Tennessee	Evolving	2	34	80
Wyoming	Evolving	2	34	80
Kentucky	Evolving	2	33	80
Nebraska	Evolving	2	33	80
Nevada	Evolving	2	33	80
Ohio	Evolving	2	33	80
Alabama	Evolving	2	32	80
Arkansas	Evolving	2	32	80
North Carolina	Evolving	2	32	80
Louisiana	Evolving	2	31	80
Washington	Evolving	2	31	80
Idaho	Evolving	2	29	80
Georgia	Evolving	2	26	80

Figure 5 shows that the majority of states were stronger on Quality indicators than Access, Affordability, and Funding indicators.

Figure 5: Summary of State Snapshots



Within each category, the distribution of states is broader:

- On Access, 35 states are at Evolving, 15 at Expanding, and 1 state at the Excelling level.
- On Affordability, 50 states are at the Evolving level, and 1 state at the Expanding level.
- On Quality, 1 state is at Emerging, 15 at Evolving, 32 at Expanding, and 3 at the Excelling level.
- On Funding, 17 states were at the Emerging level, and 34 at the Evolving level.

[The map](#) features state-by-state data snapshots on all 20 indicators. States can consider using their individual snapshots in some of the following ways:

- Understand areas of strength and reflect on how to leverage strengths to approach or exceed standards.
- Identify gaps, as reflected by the data, and consider approaches that can mitigate them to better support children, families, and the economy.
- Understand patterning of indicators in other states within their early care and learning policy contexts, to assess policy levers that have supported growth and impact in varied contexts.

Reviewers of the scale

The Hunt Institute partnered with a bipartisan group of reviewers that included, lawmakers, state educational agency leaders, philanthropy, and early learning researchers and practitioners to provide feedback on the indicators and categories designed to create the Growth and Impact Early Care and Learning State Scale. The Hunt Institute hopes to expand the scale and develop issue briefs to address the following topics:

- Access: Expanded focus on Family Child Care and Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care (FFN).
- Access/Workforce: Progress on wages and benefits for early educators.
- Affordability: Use of cost models guiding public investment in child care sector.
- Quality: Percentage of center-based and FCC homes in national accreditation programs and QRIS.
- Funding: Per child state appropriations.

Reviewers of the scale

- Beth Bye, Commissioner | Connecticut Office of Early Childhood
- Dr. Barbara J. Cooper, Senior Vice President, Professional Learning | Start Early
- Marica Cox Mitchell, Senior Director of Early Learning | Bainum Family Foundation
- Dr. Philip A. Fisher, Professor | Stanford Graduate School of Education
- The Honorable Corey Paris, Connecticut House of Representatives | District 145
- The Honorable Brenda Shields, Missouri House of Representatives | District 11
- Dr. Eileen Storer Smith, Program Officer, Early Learning | W.K. Kellogg Foundation

The Hunt Institute can develop customized analyses for states. Please contact Dr. Javaid Siddiqi, President & CEO, The Hunt Institute at Javaid.siddiqi@hunt-institute.org for more information.



Established in 2001, [The Hunt Institute](#) honors the legacy of James B. Hunt, Jr., the former governor of North Carolina who distinguished himself as an ardent champion of education.

The Hunt Institute brings together people and resources to inspire and inform elected officials and policymakers about key issues in education, resulting in visionary leaders who are prepared to take strategic action for greater educational outcomes and student success.

In 2016, The Hunt Institute became an independent, nonprofit entity and joined forces with Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy to pursue research, educational partnerships, and events related to improving education policy.

Learn more at www.hunt-institute.org.



4000 Centregreen Way | Suite 301 |
Cary, NC 27513 | 984-377-5200