The WNC Early Childhood Coalition (WNC ECC), a collaboration of Smart Start Partnerships, local providers like the YWCA and Verner Center for Early Learning, Head Start programs, and early childhood providers, is a region-wide group collaborating on policy advocacy to improve care and education of WNC’s young children. Children First/Communities In Schools (CF/CIS) provides staffing and coordination, and, in recent years, has assumed a leadership role. The effort evolved from a smaller, more informal partnership to an umbrella model that effectively elevates early childhood issues.

Excerpted from a Conversation with Greg Borom, Director of Advocacy, CF/CIS

“Our coalition of nonprofits gives us an 18-county footprint and a table that welcomes perspectives of the major funded programs for early childhood systems as well as of organizations that operate on a broader level. This group informs WNC ECC’s work around early childhood policies. There is a cost to participate in the Coalition, and engagement requires resources. From the beginning, our goal has been to share funds raised with participating nonprofits.

The expansion of this strong network is a success. We’ve been intentional about creating a space where we can explore and learn together. As a result, our work has attracted the attention of statewide policymakers. While some of our issues are unique to WNC, others are experienced across the state, enabling us to be part of broad conversations and wider early childhood efforts.

Understanding the potential of advocacy, CFWNC awarded the first grant to the WNC ECC. The Foundation has continued to invest in the Coalition and has been a strong partner for nearly a decade. With stronger relationships and networks, we have established a more powerful voice in the region and in Raleigh. Philanthropy was key to supporting our growth. Our long-term focus, however, is on policies with the potential to make substantial changes. The big dollars to be transformative in the early childhood space are at the federal and state levels, and the time horizon for policy success is long.

The fact that the Coalition expanded before the pandemic allowed us to act quickly and elevate our needs to the state level. The pandemic and ensuing economic crisis continue to affect early childhood. By necessity, we were in crisis response for the first ten months. With centers shut down, we gained an even stronger understanding of the challenges facing providers. Bringing centers back online was difficult, from sourcing PPE and cleaning supplies to hiring and retaining staff. The emotional, mental and physical effects on classroom teachers, center operators, parents and children are still unfolding.

As the state took control of some of the federal Covid-response dollars, the Coalition was an insistent voice for workforce support, income and bonuses for childcare providers, and capacity issues. We now have an effective stabilization grant program in place using federal dollars. Unfortunately, we have not been able to get North Carolina’s elected leaders to allocate funds to keep the program going beyond next summer, when the federal support ends.

Our upcoming work is to find a way to work with the state to ensure an extension, bridge or ramp. The limited childcare spaces available now are because of this stabilization program. We need the legislature to step up and find a funding mechanism to ensure that we don’t drop off a cliff next summer.
We are engaged in ongoing work to address significant problems with the NC childcare subsidy program, and we have work to do to get us where we hope to be in four years. Our providers are not reimbursed at the same rate as others, a problem that is not unique to the west. We continue to focus on that inequity and have been tireless, but we have yet to solve it. In 2021, a bill was introduced that used our research to educate a larger statewide audience. We hope it will be back on the table in 2023, because it did not pass in the most recent General Assembly sessions. We have been working on this market rate issue for more than 15 years. If we had a statewide market rate, we would see millions of dollars coming to Western North Carolina for early childhood.

The Coalition has years of experience working together. We have been growing advocacy skills, sharing analysis and data, and building awareness. We continue to build our team, including our Budding Futures Forum that provides leadership training for early childhood parent advocates. We finished our first year with parent advocates from three western counties who add parents’ lived-experience voices to this effort. We are positioned to take advantage of opportunities, whether it is a crisis or the introduction of proposed legislation in Raleigh.

Great promise and potential lie in these relationships and organizing efforts. While we find more allies and secure more funding, our focus remains on the policy work. The stakes are high, and we need policy changes to shore up early childhood in the region. The existential question is what early childhood care and learning will look like in this region, state and country in the next five years. This will be answered at a policy level, and our first indication will be what happens with the stabilization grants next summer. We will be paying close attention.

Our successes do not happen in typical grant cycle. While we can measure our capacity and the strength of our network, our work is iterative and creative. If something doesn’t work, we try something else. We are persistent. Advocacy can be very slow, years of hard work, but if you succeed the impact can be huge.”

**Make Your Voice Count For Kids:**

Learn more: childrenfirstcisbc.org/advocacy/

Follow CF/CIS Social Media to learn about opportunities to take action to support WNC families.

Sign up for “5 minutes 4 kids” Advocacy Email Alerts that provide education and action opportunities that make it easy to be an advocate.