

looking toward 2024 education



Education has the power to unleash the potential of opportunity for everyone.

Few things contribute to our well-being more than education. Learning enhances our earning power and enables us to enjoy all aspects of life more fully. It is no surprise, then, that education has always been a primary focus of Dogwood Health Trust.

Dogwood addresses the full spectrum of education – Early Childhood, K-12 and Post-Secondary – understanding that each component, while distinct, builds on and connects to the others.

In its early years, we worked to fully understand the education landscape in Western North Carolina, not just at the regional level but at the county and community levels. Armed with that understanding, we have made significant investments in areas that are critical to student and family success. We make our investments to build the strength and resiliency of learners of all ages, their families and communities.

Early Childhood Education

In late 2021, Dogwood asked Child Care Services Association, Chapel Hill, to assess the state of early childhood education in Western North Carolina. Their report, released in 2022, showed that about 50,000 children under the age of six live in our region. Sixty percent had working parents, leaving them in need of child care.

Yet the report showed that between 2019 and 2022 the number of early childhood education programs in Western North Carolina dropped 7% – from 480 to 447. A key reason for this decline was the shortage of early childhood education professionals – in part due to the pandemic, but also due to other factors such as low wages, lack of benefits and limited career opportunities.

We recognized that we must address the early care and education workforce. Issues related to the availability and affordability of childcare in our region almost always come back to workforce issues.

We knew those in our early childhood education community had creative and forward-thinking ways to enhance the recruitment, retention and advancement of professionals in the field. In 2022-23, we invested \$12.9 million over five years to support 17 partners seeking to achieve those goals. The efforts ranged from offering interventions to support early childhood education teachers' mental health and reduce burnout, to translating a college's early childhood education curriculum into Spanish to make it accessible to a wider audience of potential adult learners.

The partners participated in the Start With Equity Academy led by the Equity Research Action Coalition at UNC Chapel Hill. The academy provided participants with a community of practice to support their equity-centered approaches to sustaining and growing the early childhood education workforce.

In addition to analyzing data, we took time to listen to families in the region through a listening tour conducted by Care and Learning Coalition (CandL). Those conversations validated, among other things, the critical role staffing plays in the availability and affordability of early childhood education.

K-12 Education

Healthy communities are places where school-aged learners thrive socially, emotionally and academically. In 2022, we commissioned a report assessing the educational outcomes of all students across Western North Carolina by the Education Policy Institute of Carolina. Ultimately, we determined that our efforts toward healthy communities and thriving youth might be most effective when focused on activities outside the school day or the "After 3 p.m." window – that period known as out-of-school time.

We began by working with the NC Center for Afterschool Programs to develop an inventory of out-of-school time providers in the region. Our aim was to sustain and/or offer high-quality, accessible after-

school and extended-learning programming to every child in the Dogwood area. After requesting proposals from nonprofit organizations, agencies, educational institutions and others who serve the region, we selected 48 applicants in the late summer of 2023 to be funded with \$15 million over five years. Our goal is to expand learning programs through advocacy, professional development, research and evaluation, which will lead to healthier ecosystems for K-12 learners. As with the early childhood grantees, these grantees will become part of a learning collaborative.

Our team also addressed challenges and opportunities in K-12 education. Working collaboratively with the Economic Opportunity team, we engaged in listening sessions with Career and Technical Education (CTE) Directors from traditional public-school units across our region. We invested \$5.6 million over five years in 15 school districts to help increase students' attainment of a high-quality, industry-recognized certification or credential, ensuring that students graduate from high school globally competitive for post-secondary career and college learning.

Post-Secondary Education

Some of our post-secondary education investments are made in collaboration with Dogwood's other areas of interest. For example, we have supported efforts between public schools, community colleges and the affordable housing field to train students in the construction trades, thereby increasing the pool of trained workers who can help develop affordable housing in communities.

In addition, we have looked at the unique needs of certain student populations: first-generation students and ethnically, economically and linguistically diverse students.

Currently, we are working to introduce area colleges and community colleges to an effort that supports adult learner populations through the challenges of post-secondary education. Called Upswing, this wrap-around services platform provides real-time tutoring, counseling and student support to adult learners.

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Looking Toward 2024

Dogwood's Education agenda for 2024 mirrors the work of recent years, maintaining our three areas of focus.

Early Childhood Education

Research shows that about 11% of the formal early childhood education in Western North Carolina takes place in home-based centers. In addition, there are more than 20,000 young children who have at least one at-home parent, meaning their education may take place in their home.

Building on investments made in 2023, we will remain curious about the home, family and/or community spaces that support family-centered efforts aimed at enhancing children's learning and preparing them for kindergarten.

K-12 Education

After deep investments in out-of-school time programs across the region, we plan to look carefully to ensure all locales are well covered. While every county received some portion of out-of-school time funding, some rural counties were not as well-represented in the cohorts. We will look to deepen appropriate investments in those geographic areas.

In addition, our team will look for opportunities to strengthen investment in programs that focus on adolescents (grades 6-12) and linguistically, ethnically and economically diverse student populations.

Post-Secondary Education

As community campuses connect with Upswing, Dogwood will be watching for innovative efforts resulting in gains and/or promising practices for retaining first-generation and underserved learners.

And we hope to learn more about ways community colleges are collaborating with K-12 systems to build sustainable pathways from K-12 to college and onward through career and life.