



# Smart Start Impact Report

2023 - 2024



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Dear Members of the North Carolina General Assembly,

It is my honor to present the 2023-2024 Impact Report for the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC) and Smart Start. Your continued commitment have made the progress in this report possible, and we are grateful.

Through leveraging public and private investments, Smart Start provides high-quality early care and education, family support, and health services to North Carolina's young children, ensuring they are healthy and ready for kindergarten. Smart Start, in collaboration with partners from across the public and private sectors, delivers services tailored to local needs through a network of 75 Local Partnerships using data and community resources to maximize impact.

During the 2023-2024 fiscal year, Smart Start invested \$156 million to improve outcomes for young children across North Carolina. Of this, NCPC dedicated \$1.9 million to help Local Partnerships build capacity, while another \$5.2 million covered operational expenses for fiscal and programmatic accountability to ensure every dollar is used efficiently, and every child is supported effectively.

Highlights of these investments include Smart Start's assistance to 1,262 early care and education programs, enhancing quality through training, consultation, and coaching to improve teacher knowledge, teacher-child interactions, and overall quality of care. Smart Start also partnered with thousands of families to support parent-child interactions and parental knowledge. This impact continues with nearly 300,000 children receiving a free book through Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, as well as investments in child and family health programs, including screenings for oral health and developmental delays.

Smart Start also provides infrastructure for many early childhood initiatives, including NC Pre-K with each Local Partnership co-chairing every county NC Pre-K Committee. Additionally, partnerships administered NC Pre-K in 55 counties. Many also continued to fund WAGE\$, a compensation support program for early childhood teachers, reaching 4,079 teachers statewide and supporting teacher retention. The recent \$10 million appropriation to assist with the recovery of child care programs affected by Hurricane Helene also highlights the ongoing need for Smart Start's robust system of state to local support.

I invite you to read more about Smart Start's impact as we support families in raising their children during the most critically important period of human development, birth-to-five. Again, thank you for your wise investment to ensure North Carolina's youngest have comprehensive care and education to reach their full potential.

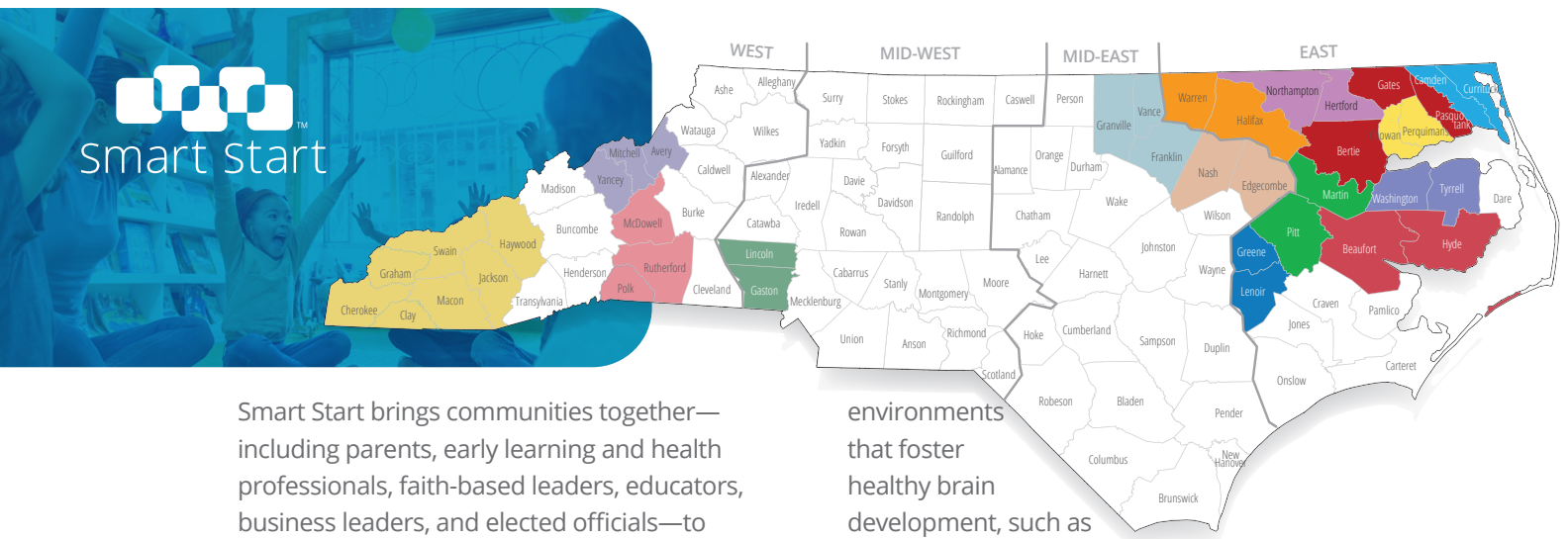
In partnership,  


Amy Cubbage

# The Smart Start Network

Smart Start is a network of 75 nonprofit partnerships serving all 100 North Carolina counties. The Network is led by The North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC), which ensures fiscal and programmatic accountability and comprehensive, long-range strategic planning for the statewide Network to create better outcomes for children and families.

Smart Start works across the state to increase access to quality early care and education, collaborate with families to reach their goals, improve child health and development, and support early literacy for children birth-to-five. The Network also works statewide to provide vital workforce support as well as critical system-level supports. It administers other state, federal, local, and private programs and services, such as NC Pre-K, child care subsidy, and Head Start, serving as North Carolina's system for early childhood development.



Smart Start brings communities together—including parents, early learning and health professionals, faith-based leaders, educators, business leaders, and elected officials—to coordinate services and address service gaps to support children. This support can start at birth within the hospital and continue in the home and at school.

The Network provides tools and resources to expand learning opportunities for young children so they can grow to be healthy, productive, and well-rounded students, parents, workers, and leaders.. This support is crucial as many children do not have access to the experiences or

environments that foster healthy brain development, such as supportive child-parent interactions, effective early education, and reliable health care.

Smart Start's structure provides statewide governance and local flexibility. Each Local Partnership is supported by NCPC, and through the collective power of the Network, each Local Partnership is better equipped to support children, their families, and the professionals and community members that support each child.



# How Smart Start Works

## NCPC Supports Local Partnership Infrastructure and Capacity

Smart Start's unique structure allows for statewide coordination and local innovation. NCPC ensures that every dollar spent produces measurable outcomes and holds accountability for the entire Network, while Local Partnerships use data to tailor services that meet the unique needs of their communities. In addition, continuous fiscal and quality monitoring ensures effectiveness and efficiency.

### NCPC activities that support Network capacity include:

- ✓ Training partnership board members and staff on fiduciary oversight, protecting accountability in financial processes from budget oversight to contract management
- ✓ Monitoring partnerships to ensure compliance with state and federal laws, legislative mandates, and state policies
- ✓ Supporting centralized accounting and contracting that promote efficiency
- ✓ Helping partnerships in selection of and implementation of evidence-based and evidence-informed programs to achieve positive outcomes for children, based on assessments identifying community needs
- ✓ Facilitating the sharing of resources, best practices, innovative ideas, and solutions across the Smart Start Network so that individual counties benefit from collective knowledge
- ✓ Maintaining a centralized portal for collection of programmatic data including children served and outcomes for each activity
- ✓ Providing county-level measures of child well-being collected from state agencies to inform community planning
- ✓ Providing and organizing shared services for the Network which supports programming, administration, data collection, and daily operations



## Local Partnerships Create Community Impact

Local Partnerships have the flexibility and data to determine how to improve the health, well-being, and development of children based on local needs and resources. They use a combination of state, federal, local, and private funds to provide comprehensive services and programs that support and strengthen early development by:

- ✓ Working with community organizations to improve coordination and alignment of services for children and families
- ✓ Ensuring early education is high quality, child-focused, family-friendly, and more easily accessible to families
- ✓ Providing financial assistance to help families access early education
- ✓ Increasing the compensation of the early childhood workforce, particularly child care teachers
- ✓ Strengthening the local infrastructure of NC Pre-K with financial resources and training
- ✓ Advancing child health and development through partnerships with early care and education programs and medical practices
- ✓ Supporting families with programs that improve parenting skills and encourage engagement in children's development and education
- ✓ Promoting early literacy with programs that assist parents, teachers, and medical providers



# July 2023 - June 2024 Highlights

Statewide and local efforts combine to create a powerful, coordinated system that addresses early childhood needs across North Carolina. Below are some highlights from the fiscal year that demonstrate how this system has created real change:

Supporting the design and planning phases of the NC Tri-Share Child Care Pilot Program through key fiscal, programmatic, and administrative support.

Declaring the ***Smart Start Network Position on Newborn and Family Home Visiting Programs*** to highlight Network-wide support in moving the needle forward on the infant and maternal health crisis.

Transforming Smart Start data collection and contracting through ongoing development of a contract and data management system.

Investing in a series of projects to increase Smart Start capacity for early childhood system leadership.

Building resilience across the state through the NC Healthy and Resilient Communities Initiative (NC HRCI).

Living into the collective power of the Network and fostering a culture of leadership and growth by developing a regular ongoing space for Smart Start Peer Networking on key topics.

Centering and elevating family voice through training and consultation as part of the Federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) B-5 priorities.

Promoting racial equity in the state's early childhood system.

***Launching Smart Solutions: Effective Prenatal-to-Five Investments***, a searchable catalog of evidence-based and evidence-informed programs, interventions, and strategies that support young children, their families, the professionals that care for them, and the community served by Local Partnerships.

Convening and managing a Technical Assistant Community of Practice (CoP) to support consultation and coaching for child care programs.

Updating Smart Start Community Indicators, a dashboard providing data on early childhood indicators at the county, Local Partnership, and census-tract levels to support birth-to-five investments to ensure data is accurate for early childhood professionals.



# Funding

Smart Start is a national model of a successful public-private partnership. Public funding flows to each county quickly and efficiently, delivering significant impact to children and families based on each community's need. Private fund development is passed from NCPC to Local Partnerships as well or raised and developed at the local level.

In the 2023-2024 fiscal year, Local Partnership expenditures of state Smart Start funds totaled \$156 million. Of this \$156 million, Smart Start invested \$65.3 million on subsidy; \$41.0 million towards early care and education services such as technical assistance and professional development supplements; \$3.4 million on health-related services; and \$24.5 million on family support programs and strategies.

NCPC utilized \$7.1 million to fulfill its role at the state level. NCPC invests these funds in capacity-building for Local Partnerships and meeting legislative requirements, including fiscal and programmatic accountability through monitoring, data management, and financial audits.

In addition to the state Smart Start funds, federal, local and private funders invested millions of dollars in Smart Start to support children and families. In the 2023-2024 fiscal year, NCPC and Local Partnerships leveraged an additional \$63.3 million for the state's young children, including \$56 million in cash contributions and \$7.3 million from in-kind contributions.





# Increasing Access, Affordability, and Quality of Early Care and Education

Early care and education are vital to a child's lifelong success, providing the foundation for their learning, health, and overall well-being. However, finding affordable, high-quality child care is becoming increasingly challenging throughout North Carolina.

## The Challenges:

Smart Start plays a vital role in North Carolina's early care and education infrastructure amidst significant challenges.

The early childhood sector struggles to recruit and retain qualified teachers, a challenge intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from the NC Child Care Resource and Referral Council (CCR&R) and Division of Child Development and Early Education revealed that nearly 5% of licensed child care programs in North Carolina closed since the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> These closures were largely driven by low wages which then led to staffing shortages.

Notably, the early care and education workforce, as a whole, earns less than 97% of all other occupations in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

**Awareness of this is growing across the country, including in North Carolina. In fact, a 2023 NC Chamber Foundation poll showed that 89% of North Carolina voters consider low wages for child care teachers a serious problem.<sup>3</sup>**

These challenges are continuing to persist into FY 2024-2025, with crucial, albeit temporary, support in the form of pandemic-era federal Child Care Stabilization Grants. These funds have been essential in maintaining teacher compensation and keeping the doors of child care programs open. However, long-term solutions are necessary for the workforce.

<sup>1</sup>Ferrel, A. (2024, May 8). North Carolina loses licensed child care programs since pandemic. EdNC. <https://www.ednc.org/05-08-2024-north-carolina-loses-licensed-child-care-programs-since-pandemic/>.

<sup>2</sup>Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. (2024). Early educator pay & economic insecurity across the states. Workforce Index 2024. <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2024/the-early-childhood-educator-workforce/early-educator-pay-economic-insecurity-across-the-states/>

<sup>3</sup>North Carolina Chamber. (2023, May 10). NC Chamber Foundation child care survey findings summary. <https://ncchamber.com/2023/05/10/nc-chamber-foundation-child-care-survey-findings-summary/#:~:text=Child%20care%20is%20a%20nonpartisan,is%20extremely%20or%20very%20serious.>



## Smart Start Supports Child Care Quality

Smart Start's infrastructure provides essential support to enhance child care quality.



*23.7% (1,262) of North Carolina's child care programs worked to improved quality of care in FY 2023-2024 by increasing teacher knowledge and enhancing effective teacher-child interactions.*

Smart Start partners with early care programs to enhance teacher recruitment and retention, promote child health and well-being, and strengthen family engagement.

NCPC collaborates with partners across the state to ensure the latest research and evidence-based programs are available for Local Partnerships to use

as needed across the state. Partnerships then work directly with early learning programs, ensuring teachers have the resources, training, and technical assistance needed to provide high-quality care.

### Technical Assistance

Smart Start technical assistance can support child care program quality, children's physical health and safety, children's mental and behavioral health, and provider professional development.

Smart Start leveraged its infrastructure to enhance the capacity of early care providers across the state as part of a project called **Coaching for Technical Assistants**. Through professional development, resources, and peer support to these essential professionals, this work plays a critical role in improving quality of care.

**A TA community of practice** was built with **140 technical assistants** regularly collaborating, sharing resources, and providing feedback. Professional development continued at the 2024 Smart Start Conference where 83 TAs received support and training.



**Alexander County Partnership for Children** supported a new teacher during the pandemic, helping improve areas like routines, sanitation, learning center organization, and family engagement. Follow-up visits showed progress, with children becoming more engaged, following routines like handwashing, and demonstrating improvements in health and wellness.



*Having open discussions with other TA providers was helpful and validating for the work I strive to do."*

## Health and Safety within Child Care Programs

In addition to technical assistance to support quality, Smart Start also ensures health and safety are prioritized within child care programs through technical assistance.

### Child Care Health Consultants (CCHC)

**Child Care Health Consultants (CCHCs)**, trained health professionals, work closely with child care providers to assess, plan, implement, and evaluate strategies to ensure high-quality, safe, and healthy environments for children.

Since 2013, CCHCs have been instrumental in fostering safe child care environments. NCPC staff provide leadership through the **CCHC System Workgroup** and the **CCHC Governance and Financing Subcommittee**, driving a sustainable, statewide approach to child care health and safety.

Through the combined efforts of Smart Start, the North Carolina Child Care Health and Safety Resource Center, and other partners, **all counties in North Carolina have access at some level to CCHCs, working towards sustainable, statewide improvements in child care health and safety.**



**The Stanly County Partnership for Children**, through its Child Care Health Consultant (CCHC) program, recently helped address a potentially dangerous health issue at a child care center. After being alerted to a concern about a child's skin infection, the CCHC visited the center and **provided guidance** on enhancing its cleaning protocols to prevent further spread. Continuous monitoring and intervention helped protect both the individual child and the center from a potentially communicable illness. The CCHC continues to work with child care centers to establish good practices and to prevent future health and sanitation issues.



**Alliance for Children's Child Care Health Consultants (CCHC)** in Union County spearheaded an initiative to protect early childhood professionals from pertussis, following an uptick in whooping cough cases in North Carolina. The CCHC nurses approached the Union County Health Department's Communicable Disease Division to **collaborate**. Thanks to the CCHCs' strong relationships with local child care centers, the health department was able to access 26 facilities, administering 120 Tdap vaccines to teachers. Additionally, 27 teachers were referred to a Medical Home for ongoing support, and 20 received blood pressure screenings. This effort protected educators and children served.

## Subsidy Funding and Scholarships

In FY 23-24, Smart Start managed over \$65.3 million in local subsidy funds, helping families afford child care and remain in the workforce. Smart Start also shares best practices for subsidy management, ensuring families receive consistent and effective support.

Smart Start operates a dual subsidy model that includes both state and federal funding sources, allowing for broader reach and flexibility in addressing family needs. This dual approach helps mitigate funding gaps and ensures that families across North Carolina have access to quality early childhood education.

Many Local Partnerships tailor their use of these funds to address specific acute needs within their communities, such as families with limited financial resources, children with special needs, or families in underserved rural areas. Using data-driven approaches, they identify critical gaps in child care access and affordability and allocate resources accordingly.

This targeted approach helps ensure that the most vulnerable populations receive the support they need to thrive.



**Smart Start Rowan** utilized a portion of its **Dual Subsidy** funding to implement a **Star License Enhancement activity**. This initiative provided monthly payments to 4- and 5-star child care facilities and family child care homes for the subsidized children they served. One particular child care center saw significant success through this support and was able to give incentives to their teachers and staff in various ways, helping to offset the costs of delivering high-quality care.



After a major shift in his household, a father of three young daughters—ages two, three, and six—suddenly found himself as their primary caregiver. Thanks to the support from the **Chatham County Partnership for Children** and the **Child Care Subsidy program**, he was able to maintain steady employment and provide for his family without the financial strain of covering child care costs on a single income. This assistance has enabled his children to attend a quality child care facility, giving them the stability they need and deserve.



## Teacher Compensation

Many early childhood teachers are not paid a living wage. In fact, according to the 2019 NC Child Care Workforce Study, the median average salary for child care teachers in 2023 was \$12.00 per hour—far below the living wage of \$29.32 for an adult living with one child in North Carolina.<sup>4</sup>

Smart Start plays a key role in addressing this issue through Smart Start’s investment of the Child Care WAGE\$® Program, which offers financial incentives to teachers.

Beyond WAGE\$®, some Local Partnerships offer scholarships and other compensation to support the early care and education workforce.

**In 2023-2024, over 4,300 teachers received salary supplements through these programs and other compensation supports. Of this amount, over 82% remained in their positions for a full year.** This helps stabilize the workforce and retain skilled teachers.



**Brunswick Smart Start** awarded an **Education Bonus** to a single mother working in early childhood education, helping her manage the challenges of balancing her job with her children’s needs. The financial relief from the bonus has been a tremendous help. She described the bonus as both rewarding and encouraging, especially for teachers pursuing further education. She also praised Smart Start for consistently offering resources, support, and training to educators.



**Cabarrus Partnership for Children** funds the **Early Education Liaison Program** at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College. Recently, a student reached out to Cabarrus for tuition support after using her allotted financial aid and T.E.A.C.H scholarship funds. With the addition of help from Smart Start funds, she was able to cover her tuition and is now in her final semester. Many child care workers have successfully completed their education thanks to this program.

<sup>4</sup> Child Care Services Association. (2019). *Working in Early Care and Education in North Carolina Report* [https://www.childcareservices.org/wpcontent/uploads/CCSA\\_2020\\_Statewide\\_WorkStudyRprt-FINAL-web.pdf](https://www.childcareservices.org/wpcontent/uploads/CCSA_2020_Statewide_WorkStudyRprt-FINAL-web.pdf). Data in this fact sheet was obtained from this source unless otherwise noted.





## Local and County Early Care and Education Champions

Smart Start builds meaningful relationships with families, teachers, and local leaders across communities to advocate and work towards policies and practices that support early care and education learning.

Whether it's securing private funding for new projects, creating workforce pipelines, or expanding support to include more settings in the mixed delivery system, Smart Start advances early care and education in North Carolina through both private and public funding.



**Smart Start of Forsyth County** used ARPA funds from Winston-Salem and Forsyth County to **improve quality** in 32 Pre-K classrooms through the two-year Pre-K Model Cohort Classroom Pilot. In partnership with six organizations, the program supported educators, children, and families with teacher training, compensation, family engagement specialists, and equity-focused policies. In its first year, it reached 347 students in 28 classrooms, awarded \$418,000 in bonuses to 44 providers, and saw 90% of students improve in language, literacy, and math.



**Smart Start of New Hanover County** formed a local committee to address **early care and education needs**. Meanwhile, New Hanover County Schools launched a "Turn Around Task Force" focused on equity and literacy. The two groups merged to unite elected officials, philanthropists, educators, and nonprofits to improve equity, readiness, and informal care. A comprehensive systems analysis is being conducted to gather data from parents, educators, and child care providers, with the goal of identifying root causes and driving lasting change.



**Wake County Smart Start** launched ThreeSchool in 2020 to serve **3-year-olds from low-income families**. Growing from 100 children in 2022-2023 to 300 by 2024-2025, the program builds on the county's success in pre-K for 4-year-olds. Parents praise it as a "positive experience" benefiting their children.





**Buncombe Partnership for Children** secured a \$50,000 annual grant from The Biltmore Company to **expand infant and toddler care**. Addressing a critical shortage, the funds support renovations, supplies, and educator salaries, creating 35 slots in nine months and 61 by year-end. Biltmore employees receive waitlist priority, as the Partnership seeks more employers for its expansion pilot.



**Rockingham County Partnership for Children**, faced with the child care shortage, teamed up with CTT Productions and set out to demonstrate how the issue affects the economy for everyone in their community through a documentary. In doing this project, they reached out to government officials, child care facility owners, families, employers, and other experts about the issues. Rockingham County, like many other rural and economically depressed communities, is tackling this issue through continued **advocacy work on both local and state levels**.



In 2024, **Smart Start of Transylvania (SSTC)** launched the NC FFN Advocacy Coalition, uniting early childhood professionals, caregivers, and advocates to promote policy and organizational advocacy for Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care as part of a privately funded initiative. The coalition's mission is to establish FFN care as a recognized, legitimate child care option in North Carolina, equitably funded and supported like other care settings. The coalition is collaborating on a **statewide advocacy plan to spread awareness and ensure consistent recognition of FFN care**.

# Partnering with North Carolina Families

Smart Start recognizes parents as children's first and most important teachers. To ensure every child has a strong start, families must be respected in their roles from the very beginning. Additionally, with fewer than 25% of North Carolina's children enrolled in licensed child care, essential supports for children are needed at home.<sup>5</sup>

## The Challenges Families Face

Many families face significant challenges, including poverty, limited resources, and concerns surrounding maternal and infant physical and mental health. Ongoing economic uncertainty, coupled with a nationwide child care crisis and inadequate public policy responses, further intensifies these struggles. North Carolina is deeply impacted, facing a severe shortage of child care options. The state also faces a maternal and infant health crisis.

The weight of these challenges often falls on children, creating toxic stress that can undermine their long-term well-being and development. These issues are not isolated—they are widespread and deeply systemic—making Smart Start's role in supporting families across the state more critical than ever.



The **Anson County Partnership for Children** is a beacon of connection and support, transforming the lives of families seeking community. One young mother, feeling alone in a new town, found the **Early Childhood Resource Center**, where she and her 2-year-old son were warmly embraced. Through weekly programs and meaningful connections, the Partnership opened doors to local resources, like the literacy council and Safe Kids program. Today, this family thrives, finding joy and stability through the supportive community that welcomed them with open arms in Anson County.

## Smart Start's Response: Comprehensive Family Support

Smart Start partners with families to overcome these challenges together. Throughout the state, the Network offers evidence-based and evidence-informed, family-focused programming and services to increase parent knowledge, build parent confidence, and promote positive parenting practices.

Smart Start also connects families with vital community resources, ensuring they have the relational and concrete support needed to thrive. The Network's infrastructure allows it to tailor solutions to local needs quickly and effectively, positioning it as a partner, ready to meet the needs of families statewide.



<sup>5</sup>Ferrel, A. (2023, June 13). A stable system of birth-to-five child care and early learning. EdNC. <https://www.ednc.org/brief-a-stable-system-of-birth-to-five-child-care-and-early-learning/>



*74 Local Partnerships provide family support services in local communities. At these Partnerships, Smart Start partners with families through 33 different programs!*

Home visiting and parent education programs include Parents as Teachers, Nurturing Parenting Program (NPP), Positive Parenting Program (Triple P), Healthy Families America, and others.



**Johnston County Partnership for Children** played a key role in helping a couple referred through their Child Protective Service Plan. Through **Triple P**, which focused on stress management, the couple shared their challenges and aspirations, including a desire to return to school. The Partnership connected them with NC Works for college guidance. By the end of the program, one of them had enrolled in college classes for the spring semester, marking significant progress in their journey toward reunification, effective stress management, and further education.



**Albemarle Alliance for Children and Families (AACF) (Bertie, Camden, Currituck, Gates, Pasquotank Counties)** recently received a heartfelt donation from a former participant in one of its **parenting programs**. A single father in the U.S. Coast Guard initially enrolled in a parenting program to help secure full custody of his child. Soon after, he even took additional classes! He now holds a leadership role in the community and is grateful for Smart Start's lasting impact on his family and others in the community.





#### **Partnership for Children of Wayne County**

supported a military family after they moved to North Carolina. The mother enrolled in the **Parents as Teachers (PAT)** program, where she gained knowledge about child development, positive parenting, and the local community. Her parent educator encouraged her and her spouse to join the **Incredible Years** program, further boosting her parenting skills and self-confidence. She expressed gratitude for the support, saying it filled the gap left by not having extended family nearby during their transition to a new area.

Mutual support groups like Circle of Parents and Kaleidoscope Play and Learn are also utilized by Partnerships to support families.



#### **At Down East Partnership for Children (Nash and Edgecombe Counties),**

a mother received support through **Circle of Parents** program, a support group for families with children with special needs. The next day, the mother expressed deep gratitude for the follow-up, calling the program “heaven sent.” Through programs like these, the Partnership connects families with vital resources to strengthen community health and resilience for years to come.

# Smart Start's Family Engagement Efforts

## Our Approach

Smart Start partners with families through:



### Community Connections:

Linking to peers and resources to support concrete needs



### Parent Education:

Strengthening parent-child relationships



### Leadership Opportunities:

Supporting advocacy capacity

Smart Start recognizes the importance of engaging families throughout the family engagement continuum.

Continuum Level	Involvement	Engagement	Leadership
Parent Role	Recipient	Consultant/Partner	Change Agent
Level of Partnership	Participate in services and is given information about available services and ongoing efforts.	Asked for feedback and is involved in discussions about problems and which change strategies should be used. Provides information that is used to make decisions.	Influences decisions and takes part in implementing actions, collecting and analyzing data, and strategic planning.

## Impact of Smart Start's Family Engagement Efforts

- ✓ Increasing parental resilience and positive parenting practices
- ✓ Fostering social connections among families and their communities
- ✓ Expanding knowledge of parent and child development
- ✓ Improving access to essential resources for families
- ✓ Enhancing social and emotional development for children
- ✓ Building pathways for family leadership and advocacy
- ✓ Providing family support



## Building Family Engagement and Leadership Capacity

Smart Start empowers families by involving them in decisions that affect their communities. With the support of Preschool Development Grant Birth-to-five (PDG B-5) funding, NCPC provided **over 100 technical assistance opportunities, hosted monthly Community of Practice meetings, and supported Local Partnerships in expanding family engagement and leadership efforts.** NCPC also continued partnering with CounterPart Consulting to provide training and coaching on racial equity.




10 Smart Start Local Partnerships received training in Fall 2023 on **Train the Trainer** with another thirty participants receiving training at the Smart Start Conference.

NCPC collaborated with MomsRising to create **Starting Strong**, a comprehensive set of tools to help agencies form cross-sector coalitions and amplify family voices. Many parents who completed the Starting Strong training are now serving on local advisory boards, shaping the future of early childhood policies.

NCPC and MomsRising also developed **Starting Strong: Train the Trainer** to train staff and parents in local communities about the Starting Strong tools with the goal of increasing local and regional capacity.

### Goals of the trainings included:

- ✓ Increasing capacity within local agencies and coalitions to utilize family engagement and leadership tools
- ✓ Supporting and empowering family leaders to participate in decision-making processes
- ✓ Providing a foundation for early childhood systems advocacy



Smart Start focuses on capacity-building efforts, ensuring that the Network does not just provide services to families but partners with them to build advocacy and leadership skills.



In **Columbus County**, the role of family leaders has taken on new dimensions. Leaders of our **Parent Advisory Committee (PAC)** engage in training that allow them to explore their individual strengths, as well as collaborations to help strengthen the entire community. Supported by our Partnership, PAC collaborates with Columbus Regional Healthcare System and Cooperative Extension Services around a community garden project. The garden is becoming more than just a place to grow vegetables and flowers. It has the potential to feed with physical food, to educate on how to grow the food and health on a level that is deeper than the outward scars treated by the hospital.



*"My journey to parent leadership started with speech screening and therapy for my son 10 years ago. Since joining the **Partnership for Children of Johnston County (PFCJC)**, I have found mentors for myself and local friends for my children. From providing child care to speaking before statewide early childhood leaders, the Johnston County partnership has helped me learn and grow. They fanned the spark of hope and inspiration that I intend to spread far and wide. I am proud to continue the mission of strengthening families and raising capable kids. Thank you, Johnston County Partnership, for helping me become a happier, healthier mom who is empowered to bring positive change to my community."*

- Allison Boyd, PFCJC Parent Representative



At **Person County Partnership for Children**, a parent's leadership and engagement helped transform their playgroup program into a thriving resource for families, serving nearly 50 families. Initially facing low attendance and health concerns, the parent worked with the Partnership to create a welcoming space for children and families to connect, learn, and grow. Her personal experience as a parent fueled her passion for **advocacy and community-building**. She stated, *"Through the Partnership I have found my avenue to advocate for families with young children, to help them find resources, to help them meet other families who are walking this same journey in life, to bring quality learning opportunities to families who might otherwise be isolated."*

# Promoting and Strengthening Early Literacy

A child's early years are critical for language development, and Smart Start plays a vital role in promoting literacy from the start. This support starts at home and literacy development and promotion is a critical part of supporting families.

Smart Start supports a range of programs aimed at building the skills children need for success in school and life. Programs like **Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL)**, **Raising a Reader**, **Motheread/Fatheread**, and **Book Babies** foster language-rich interactions, enhance reading frequency, and strengthen relationships between children and their families.



Nearly 300,000 children participated in DPIL, Raising a Reader (RAR), Motheread/Fatheread, and other programs!



**Chatham County Partnership for Children** successfully integrated Family Child Care Homes (FCCH) into the **Raising a Reader (RAR)** program, promoting literacy among children. Recognizing that FCCHs often miss out on opportunities available to larger child care centers, the Partnership customized RAR to address the unique challenges of mixed-age groups and limited resources. With many FCCHs serving low-income, rural, or marginalized communities, this collaboration enables the Partnership to provide these children with access to a variety of high-quality, age-appropriate books, enhancing early literacy opportunities.



**One Place (Onslow)** partnered with Onslow County Public Library for **Raising a Reader (RAR)** Library Connection events, marking the first year they hosted story times in each classroom. Staff from One Place and the library visited nine classrooms, engaging children with stories and activities. Teachers received library information packets, and on-site library cards were provided for staff and families. The children enjoyed the story times, and families received RAR Blue Library Bags filled with information from both the library and One Place.



The **Blue Ridge Partnership for Children** has outstanding saturation rates for **Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL)**. Avery County was recently ranked as having the highest saturation rate across NC, enrolling 83% of eligible children into DPIL!





## Advancing Child, Family, and Community Health

Smart Start connects families with vital resources to support the whole health of the child which includes maternal, perinatal, and postpartum health. Through these connections, the Network addresses key social drivers of health—such as education and access to nutritious food—that profoundly impact family well-being.

Additionally, Smart Start equips families with essential tools to foster healthy behaviors. This includes nutrition education, wellness programs, and the encouragement of physical activity in both child care settings and homes.

The Network plays a crucial role in supporting screening for developmental delays. Early intervention connects families with needed resources before children enter school, fostering stronger developmental outcomes.

Smart Start connects families with vital resources to support the whole health of each child. This begins with maternal health, including prenatal and postpartum health.



**Carteret Partnership for Children** delivers **home-based family therapy** and case management for children facing various risk factors, promoting long-term support systems. Recently, a family with six risk factors joined the program. With the Partnership's assistance, the mother was able to maintain stable employment, housing, and child care, while also committing to breaking a family cycle of abuse and neglect. As a result of the program, the family's identified risk factors have been reduced to two, highlighting the transformative impact of the support provided.



#### **Sampson County Partnership for Children's**

Baby LINKS program provided vital support during a recent home visit with a Spanish-speaking mother and her newborn. Although the mother was successfully breastfeeding, she faced challenges with the baby's latch. The **Baby LINKs** nurse offered hands-on guidance to improve feeding. Noticing signs of jaundice in the infant, the nurse promptly contacted the pediatrician and advised the mother to seek urgent care, ensuring the baby received immediate attention for their health.



At **Smart Start Rowan**, a 4-year-old from Honduras faced severe anxiety after a traumatic journey. Through the **Healthy Beginnings** activity, the child was referred to Pre-K, counseling, and dental care. This support addressed emotional, physical, and developmental needs, providing relief for the family.



The **Cabarrus Partnership for Children's Dental Services** program helped a 4-year-old in severe dental pain. The child's mother, anxious about sedation due to past experiences, was relieved when a trained dentist performed the procedures without sedation, ensuring comfort and safety.



**Partnership for Children of Wayne County** helped a family ensure their newborn's car seat was safely installed. **Certified Child Passenger Safety Technicians** guided the family through adjustments and procedures. After hands-on training, the father successfully reinstalled the seat, leaving the family confident, appreciative, and assured their baby was securely fastened.





## Smart Start Network Position on Newborn and Family Home Visiting Programs

In 2023, North Carolina had the 8th highest infant<sup>6</sup> and maternal mortality rate<sup>7</sup> in the country. In response, Smart Start established the *Smart Start Network Position on Newborn and Family Home Visiting Programs*<sup>8</sup> in November 2023. This statement underscores Smart Start’s commitment to universal newborn and family home visiting programs as well as our dedication to whole-family well-being, local coordination, and strengthening community connections.

### Recognizing Health Disparities

Smart Start acknowledges the significant health disparities that disproportionately impact Black and Brown mothers, both nationally and within North Carolina. **North Carolina has the 8th highest infant and maternal mortality rate in the country and is 4 times more likely to lose a child before their 1<sup>st</sup> birthday.**<sup>9</sup> Smart Start is working to reduce these inequities through new programs aimed at addressing these disparities.



*In FY 2024-2025, Smart Start will introduce 16 new health programs and services for children and families for Local Partnerships to select from, ensuring every county can offer the right support for children and families.*

<sup>6</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022, November 17). *Infant mortality rates by state.*

<sup>7</sup>Kaiser Family Foundation. (2023). *Maternal deaths and mortality rates per 100,000 live births.*

<sup>8</sup>NC Partnership for Children. (2023). *Smart Start Network Position on Newborn and Family Home Visiting Programs.*

<sup>9</sup>Foundation for Health Leadership & Innovation. (2023, March 17). *Progress and opportunities: Maternal and child health equity in North Carolina.*

Local Partnerships address community perinatal health disparities through programs that offer breastfeeding support or healthcare services with local health departments as well as through newborn home visiting. By offering focused support during pregnancy and the postpartum period, Smart Start is committed to creating equitable health outcomes for all families, regardless of background.

### **Social and Emotional Health for Children and their Teachers**

Local Partnerships support not only families with young children, but also the educators who shape young children's futures. Early Childhood Educators face stressors similar to the families they serve, which can affect classroom dynamics and child behavior if not addressed.

A new program offered by Smart Start, *TA Coaching and Consultation: Infant Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH)*, focuses on building educators' capacity to understand young children's social-emotional development and how their own mental health affects classroom interactions. IECMH Consultants promote nurturing relationships and supportive environments, helping educators increase healthier learning environments.

Equipping early childhood professionals with the tools to support infants' and young children's social-emotional development will help reduce expulsion rates from early childhood programs. Supporting the mental health of children and the adults in their lives remains a priority.

### **Smart Start's Health Commitment**

Ensuring the whole health of children takes place in many different avenues—at home, in the doctor's office, within child care settings. Smart Start is committed to building a healthier future for children and families across North Carolina through a continuum of services—from perinatal health support to early intervention and child care health consulting. In response to the infant and maternal health crisis, health disparities throughout the State, and an overall need for health support, Smart Start has intensified its focus on health outcomes.





## Smart Start as the State's Early Childhood Infrastructure

The Smart Start Network provides a coordinated vision for early childhood in North Carolina locally and statewide.

Smart Start's infrastructure enables it to effectively administer statewide programming while managing innovative pilot programs and initiatives to meet community and state needs. These efforts are funded through State and private dollars leveraged together to create system-level and systemic change in communities.

Ultimately, the Network plays a vital role in the infrastructure of many North Carolina early childhood initiatives and stands committed to being the backbone of support that North Carolina children need.

“My baby loves when I read to her and it makes life a little easier to get books for her at no cost because books can get pricey depending on where you get them. It's also very important that I know my baby is starting early with learning. I really appreciate the programs that are out there.”

### Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL)

The General Assembly allocated funding to NCPD in 2017 to increase access to DPIL, an early literacy distribution program that mails age-appropriate books monthly to registered children. The General Assembly's investment leveraged Smart Start's community roots and resulted in rapid expansion of the program.

In less than two years, every child under the age of 5 in North Carolina had access to DPIL, and by June 30, 2024, **the Smart Start Network distributed more than 18.9 million books to North Carolina children. The percentage**

**of eligible children grew to 50% in 2024, reaching the maximum number of children possible with the current allocated funding.**

This expansion would not have been possible without Smart Start's statewide infrastructure.

In 2023, the North Carolina General Assembly allocated an additional \$1.5 million, non-recurring each year for the FY 2023-2025 biennium. With increased book and shipping costs, the additional funding allowed Smart Start to continue serving approximately 50% of North Carolina's eligible children 0-5 each month.



## NC Pre-K's Infrastructure

The NC Pre-K Program provides effective educational experiences to enhance school readiness for eligible 4-year-olds. Funding for NC Pre-K is made possible through a blend of federal, state, and local funds, including funding from Smart Start. Local Partnerships help provide the infrastructure that supports NC Pre-K statewide.

Local Partnerships collaborate with NC Pre-K providers and serve as co-chairs on local NC Pre-K Committees. **46 Partnerships administer the NC Pre-K program in 55 counties** through separate contracts with DCDEE, providing an additional \$7,976,190 in funding for NC Pre-K classroom support. This collaboration and funding across the state helps to ensure high quality services and increase access for children.

Because there is local flexibility in how NC Pre-K is administered, Smart Start supports the program in ways that best meet the needs of families and school systems throughout the state.



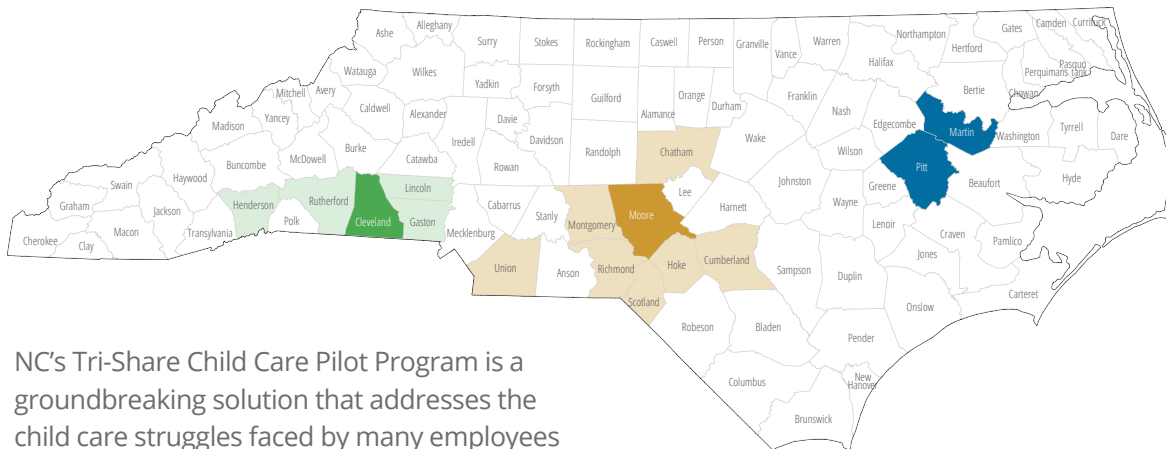
In Stokes County, a mother shared her story about her 22-year-old son, who was born with a profound hearing impairment. After moving to Stokes when her son was 4, she sought resources to help prepare him for school and enrolled him in the More at Four program, now known as **NC Pre-K**, which was administered by the **Stokes Partnership for Children**. She credits his success in school and college, where he graduated summa cum laude, to his quality early education in NC Pre-K.



**Buncombe Partnership for Children** addressed barriers to **NC Pre-K** access, including transportation, scheduling, and location issues. They provided monthly gas cards to 45 families, extra car seats to 7, wrap-around care for 6 families, and ensured 24 children received summer care who otherwise would not have had access.



## NC Tri-Share Child Care Pilot Program



NC's Tri-Share Child Care Pilot Program is a groundbreaking solution that addresses the child care struggles faced by many employees and families. NC Tri-Share creates a public-private partnership to share the cost of child care with employees. Employers, eligible employees, and the State equally split the price of child care for working families.

NCPC and DCDEE selected **Cleveland County Partnership for Children and Families** to serve Cleveland, Rutherford, Henderson, Lincoln, and Gaston Counties; **Martin-Pitt Partnership for Children** to serve Martin and Pitt Counties; and **Partners for Children and Families of Moore County**, to serve Moore, Chatham, Cumberland, Hoke, Montgomery, Richmond, Scotland, and Union Counties. Additional counties may also join Tri-Share as the Pilot grows.



The North Carolina General Assembly allocated \$900,000 for NCPC to divide among three Regional Hubs (Local Partnerships) for FY 2023-2024 and FY 2024-2025 to implement NC Tri-Share.

NCPC and the three Regional Hubs were in the planning stage of the Pilot Program for a large part of FY 2023-2024. Efforts included hiring a third-party administrator to support a streamlined system for applications and for collecting funds and administration fees from employers, employees, and NCPC. Local Partnerships also focused on local business recruitment for the program.

The Smart Start Network was selected for these efforts due to its leadership within early care and education, programmatic and fiscal integrity, strong community ties, and the ability of Local Partnerships to collaborate towards change. **The Smart Start Network was able to standardize and streamline the NC program for optimal quality and efficiency, preparing for expansion should additional funding become available.**

### Child Care WAGE\$ Implementation

The Child Care WAGE\$ program takes place in collaboration with the Child Care Services Association (CCSA). WAGE\$ supplements are provided to increase teacher salaries based on a teachers' level of education, encouraging increased education.



*"WAGE\$ is a consistent program that helps me and it encourages me to hang in there. I really appreciate WAGE\$ and how it has helped my family child care home. The extra funds are such a blessing and are needed to help with so much."*

*– Rowan County child care provider.*

In FY 2023-2024, **64 Smart Start Local**

**Partnerships invested in WAGE\$,**

**supporting 4,079 teachers** with WAGE\$ supplements. Smart Start's infrastructure allows it to both efficiently partner with a state level organization and effectively invest in the program locally.

### Family Connects Universal Newborn Home Visiting Pilot Sites

Smart Start and Family Connects International, an evidence-based universal newborn home visiting program, launched a 3-year pilot program in eight counties to serve families of newborns in October 2021. In fall 2023, the participating pilot counties included **Watauga, Ashe, Avery, Henderson, Polk, Cumberland, Hoke, and Robeson.**



Through the programs, **96% of families within these communities' identified catchment area had access to home visits for their newborn.** Funded by the federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) B-5, the pilot sites combined the benefits of the Family Connects model and Local Partnerships with key community relationships and the ability to coordinate locally. The pilot sites offered a regional approach (covering multiple counties), specifically targeting rural areas where access to health care resources is often challenging.

**3,630**  
families served  
through  
**5,987**  
visits.

Nurse home visitors shared valuable information with families about the care and development of their newborn, creating critical connections to community resources; assessed and offered social-emotional support to families; and shared mental health resources. Children and families also received valuable referrals to community agencies and programs.

The Family Connects-Smart Start Pilots also made a difference at the community level by identifying health and medical trends or resource gaps and working with the local cross-sector Community Advisory Board to determine solutions. By utilizing Family Connects as a home visiting model while leveraging the impact of the Smart Start Network, children and families received the support they needed to thrive, right from the start.



In one Family Connects community, a young woman became the caregiver for her two younger half-siblings while navigating the challenges of motherhood after a sexual assault. Overwhelmed by caring for three young children and her mental health, she found steadfast support through Family Connects, receiving essential service referrals and emotional reassurance. Months later, both she and the children were thriving. The older children had adjusted well, the baby was flourishing, and she was working on her education while continuing to prioritize her mental well-being. Her resilience shines through her journey.



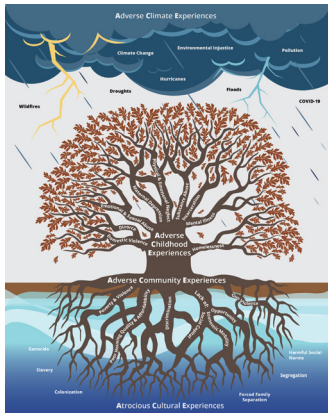
A new mother tried to soothe her congested infant while struggling with a malfunctioning breast pump. Through a Family Connects Telehealth visit, a nurse was able to guide her through supporting her infant. The nurse was also able to facilitate a three-way call that resulted in a new pump being expedited to her home. The relief and gratitude in the mother's voice were palpable, knowing she could return to work with one less worry on her mind.



A single mother of three, faced overwhelming challenges after a traumatic birth, including language barriers and lack of transportation, did not have medical care or a car seat for her newborn. Through collaboration with community partners, Family Connects helped her secure insurance, arrange medical appointments, and provide a car seat, ensuring she and her children could begin this new chapter with the support they needed. This collective effort provided her with the resources to overcome barriers and move forward with confidence.

## NC Healthy & Resilient Communities Initiative (NC HRCI)

NCPC is committed to increasing individual, organizational, and community level resilience across the state, serving as the backbone agency of the **NC Healthy and Resilient Communities Initiative (NC HRCI)**.



Funded by Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, (KBR), NC HRCI focuses on decreasing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), negative drivers of health, and other forms of trauma and adversity which pose significant risks to young children and their families. This includes addressing any/all of the 4 Realms of ACEs—Adverse Childhood Experiences, Adverse Community Environments, Adverse Climate Events, and Atrocious Cultural Experiences.<sup>10</sup>

► NCPC secured additional funding from DHHS for eight community organizations, including three Smart Start Local Partnerships, to provide resilience-focused trainings to various sectors in their communities to develop trauma awareness and self-regulation skills. Participating organizations are building their infrastructure and capacity to reach new community members.

Smart Start leverages its deep local roots, bringing together **more than 40 multi-sector community** collaboratives together as part of the NC HRCI, to increase capacity and best implementation strategies towards achieving resiliency. Smart Start created a NC Healthy & Resilient Data Dashboard to support planning and decision making for county-level investments around resilience. NC HRCI also hosted trainings focused on creating trauma-informed organizations.

Of these 40 collaboratives, some are Local Partnerships, serving as resiliency leaders, educating, training, and organizing community members to prevent ACEs. These



### **Bladen Smart Start, Columbus County Partnership for Children, and Robeson County Partnership for Children**

are part of the Tri-county Regional Resiliency Workgroup of Southeastern North Carolina. In 2023, the Workgroup hosted the 2023 Resilience Summit. The summit brought together coalition partners from Bladen, Columbus and Robeson counties. Over 150 participants worked to build greater awareness of the 4 Realms of ACEs (adverse childhood, community, climate, and atrocious cultural experiences) and to strengthen community-level, shared protective factors of connectedness and shared resources and services.

<sup>10</sup>North Carolina Partnership for Children. (2024.). *Resilience. Smart Start*. Retrieved October 28, 2024, from <https://www.smartstart.org/resilience-intro/resilience-home/>





## Advancing Leadership and Collaborative Systems

In partnership with state agencies, philanthropy, and other organizations, NCPC collaborated on statewide projects and initiatives to enhance the state's ability to support children and families.

### **Capacity and Sustainability through Shared Services**

NCPC established a Shared Services Department in 2022 to enhance the collective power of the Smart Start Network. Shared Services Department goals include 1) increasing purchasing power, 2) improving efficiency, 3) providing access to quality resources, 4) increasing organizational stability, and 5) increasing equity.

Since the department's inception, NCPC has been able to offer a variety of shared service opportunities to the Network. Shared services have included the implementation of a Network-wide survey platform allowing for more effective and efficient data collection to support children and families; a resource bank for hiring critical consultants; curation of translation and interpretation services across the state; and a collection of resources for building capacity with Local Partnership staff board members. This includes training opportunities, sharing events, and the sharing of resources.

Through Shared Services, the Network has also explored enhancements for Network-wide health insurance for employees and played a large role in the re-design and overhaul of the Network's intranet to ensure more effective resource sharing, communication, and collaboration across all 75 Smart Start Local Partnerships.



*50+ Local Partnership staff participated in 17 Peer Networking hours on topics like Communications & Outreach, Family Support, Programming, and more from September 2023-June 2024.*

Through Shared Services, NCPC created Smart Start Local Partnership Peer Networking—a space for Smart Start Local Partnership staff to connect, discuss, and explore early childhood related opportunities and challenges together.

NCPC has offered increased opportunities for statewide collaboration, access to resources that otherwise may be inaccessible, and support to ease the overall administrative burden of Local Partnerships.

## Leadership Development through System Building

NCPC embeds system change and advocacy strategies in the practice of Smart Start leaders through training and coaching.

As part of Shared Services, NCPC created a Smart Start Local Partnership Peer Networking group for Program Coordination and Systems Building. This group offers space for Local Partnership

program staff to support each other through their understanding of systems building within the Smart Start Network as well as sharing tools and resources to enhance local systems building efforts.

Select NCPC staff are also being trained to adaptively plan and implement training and coaching processes that embed systems change approaches. This training will help NCPC shift practices with Smart Start Local Partnerships and resilience community coalitions.

### Smart Start Leadership Development Towards Building Strong Nonprofits

Smart Start has continued its partnership with the NC

Center for Nonprofits. Local Partnerships have full access to membership benefits, providing the opportunity to increase nonprofit leadership skills.

**From this partnership, the Network has saved over \$64,147 in Network capacity building since September 2021. Benefits of this partnership include:**

- ✓ 52 Local Partnerships participating in Center trainings to build skills
- ✓ 46 Smart Start Network staff members participating in the Center's Nonprofit Management Institute to build stronger nonprofits.

► Smart Start provided the Summer Institute for Systems Change, a free training series for Smart Start Local Partnerships and resilience/ACEs/Trauma coalitions, and partners in NC who are directly working with them. This series kicked off in June 2024 into the next fiscal year and will provide a variety of practical ideas, tools, and methods to help collaborative groups pursue systems change to improve outcomes for children and families.

### **Smart Solutions: Effective Prenatal-to-Five Investments**

NCPC launched *Smart Solutions: Effective Prenatal-to-Five Investments* in FY 2023-2024. Smart Solutions is a searchable catalog of effective programs, interventions, and strategies that support children, their families, communities, and the professionals that care for them.

Solutions are focused on enhancing early care and education, family support, literacy, and child and family health outcomes as well as early childhood system building. Children are supported right from the start within homes, early learning environments, and in each community.

Local Partnerships and community partners can search Smart Solutions and select options for implementation based on community need. Smart Solutions is updated regularly and Local Partnerships can submit additional solutions for consideration for the next fiscal year.

**As of October 2024, Smart Solutions includes information on over 130 programs and services for Smart Start Local Partnerships to select when serving children and families!**





## Creating Countywide Changes

In addition to supporting children and families at the individual level, Local Partnerships are reshaping systems and driving impactful changes across the state. The Network convenes and coordinates across agencies, collaborating with county, state, and national organizations.



**Smart Start of Yadkin County**, the Yadkin County Economic Development Partnership, and local leaders have been working with the Shallow Ford Foundation to **address the county's child care crisis**. Ranked 3rd worst in NC for infant/toddler-to-licensed slot ratio in 2019, Yadkin has seen a 56% decrease in licensed child care centers over 12 years. The foundation proposed the EarlyEd Flex Plex concept, a building housing six separately licensed child care facilities, sharing resources like playgrounds and training rooms to reduce costs. Smart Start would manage the facility, owned by the Economic Development Partnership, offering training and support. A petition to create a multi-unit licensing lane was approved in September 2023, and construction funding is being sought.



**Wilkes Community Partnership for Children**, in partnership with The Health Foundation, **leads a cohort of eight local organizations working to become more trauma-informed**. As part of the Wilkes Resiliency Collaborative, the initiative fosters relationship-building, offers educational resources on trauma, and hosted an annual conference on burnout and compassion fatigue. This work aims to support individuals affected by trauma and strengthen the community.



In 2023, **Smart Start of Mecklenburg County** awarded Safe Alliance an Innovation Grant to establish a **trauma-informed child care center** at The Umbrella Center, opening in 2025. The center will support children affected by domestic violence, sexual assault, and other traumas, offering a safe space while parents access services. Survivors helped shape the center's design, which focuses on reducing toxic stress and promoting healing for children and families.





## Recommendations for Legislative Action

Smart Start builds a family-focused environment in which families can flourish in North Carolina by providing stability and quality care for children and families through a whole-child, mixed delivery approach focused on their total well-being.

In many cases, Smart Start is a key administrator or funder of statewide programs such as Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, WAGE\$, and NC Pre-K. Smart Start works in partnership with other non-profits and advocacy groups, businesses, chambers of commerce, and government agencies to coordinate an effective system of care for families statewide and to avoid duplication of services. Smart Start also serves as a conduit for the transmission of financial resources and programmatic support to direct service providers, supporting a seamless system of care.

During the 2025 legislative session, Smart Start will continue efforts to strengthen a robust early childhood system by building on past achievements and addressing unmet needs both statewide and within local communities.

Smart Start requests:

### **1 Increased unrestricted, general funding to support Smart Start Local Partnerships in meeting statewide and communities' needs.**

Smart Start did not receive any additional funding during the 2023-2025 biennium. However, the needs of the birth-to-five population and their families have increased greatly post-COVID. These needs will only continue to increase for families, especially those affected by Hurricane Helene. Families face specific obstacles such as:

1. increased child care costs and fewer child care options due to increased operational expenses and the expiration of the pandemic's federal emergency funding;
2. greater behavioral, mental, and physical health challenges; and
3. increased need for family support services such as home visiting and parent education.

**With increased funding, Smart Start can invest in evidence-based and informed solutions; meet community needs; and support children, families, providers, and the business community.**

## 2 Additional, funding for Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library (DPIL) to expand and promote literacy development for young children.

Smart Start received \$1.5. million, nonrecurring for each year of the 2023-2025 biennium for DPIL, bringing the total appropriation for this period to \$8.5 million. DPIL began offering the bilingual (English/Spanish) book collection to NC in June 2024, expanding opportunities to even more children. Additional investments during the 2025-2027 biennium are needed to maintain the program’s enrollment, provide programmatic support, and offer new opportunities for enrollment to communities.

Research continues to show the importance of literacy for young children in the first five years of life and its role in ensuring children are ready for kindergarten. **NCPC requests additional recurring funds to continue reaching this same number of the state’s young children as well as to expand further.**

## 3 Support for long-term options and initiatives to address compensation supplements for the early childhood education workforce.

Support for long-term options and initiatives to address compensation supplements for the early childhood education workforce. Research shows that inadequate teacher education, low compensation, economic insecurity, and high teacher turnover rates within centers and homes reduce the quality of child care. The Child Care WAGE\$® Program improves early care and education quality by addressing education, stability, and compensation. Currently, Child Care WAGE\$ is not available within all NC counties, as Smart Start Local Partnerships elect whether to fund the program based on their availability of funding resources. Smart Start is requesting additional funding for effective compensation programs, such as WAGE\$, to support the early childhood workforce. **Child Care teachers are the workforce. Increased compensation is needed to help ensure recruitment and retention of a stable and qualified early childhood education workforce to help support employers, employees, and boost NC’s economy.**

## 4 10% NC Pre-K administrative funding increase.

Smart Start is requesting administrative rates be no less than 10% for NC Pre-K. This is based on the previous federal de minimis rate of 10%, as the current federal de minimis rate increased to 15%, effective October 1, 2024. Currently, forty-six (46) Smart Start Local Partnerships serve as NC Pre-K administrators, which is half of the program’s contract administrators. All seventy-five (75) partnerships’ Board Chairs (or designees) serve as co-chair of their county/ies’ NC Pre-K Committees. **Without additional state investments, the entire NC Pre-K Program is gravely at-risk and will serve fewer children across the state, with some communities no longer able to offer the program.**

## Supporting Data | Finance and Appropriations

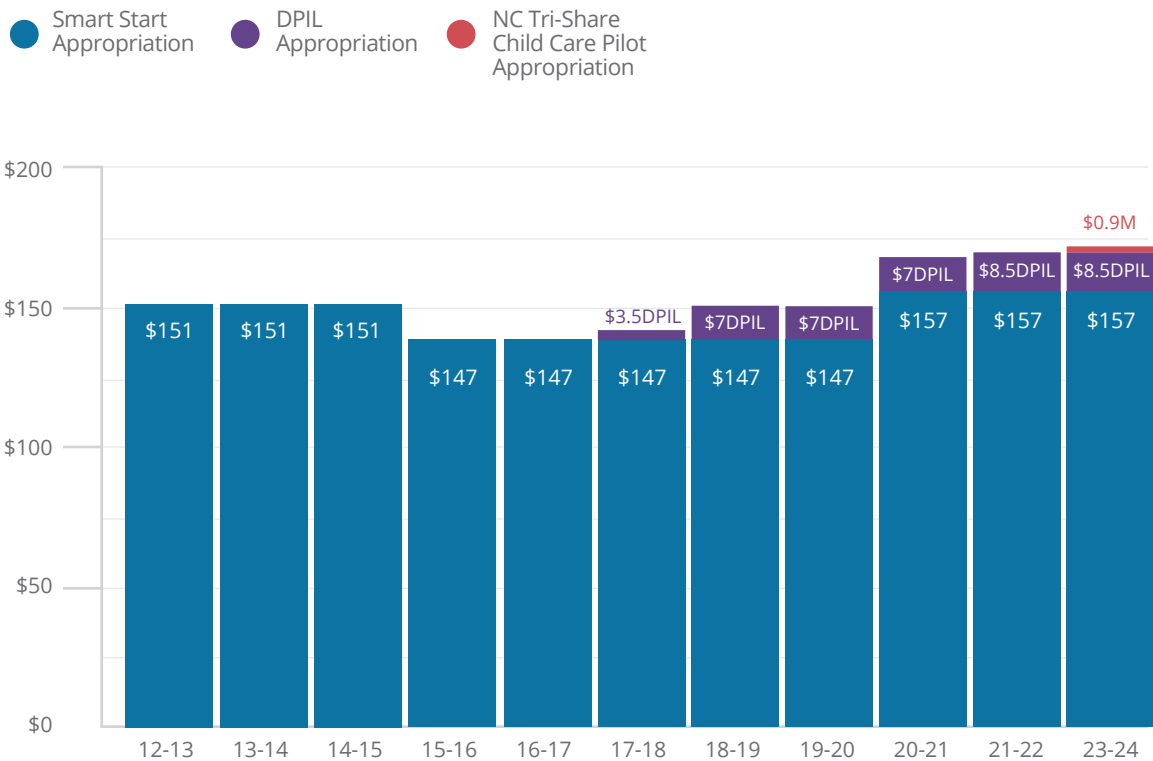


Total LP Expenditures **\$156.36 Million**

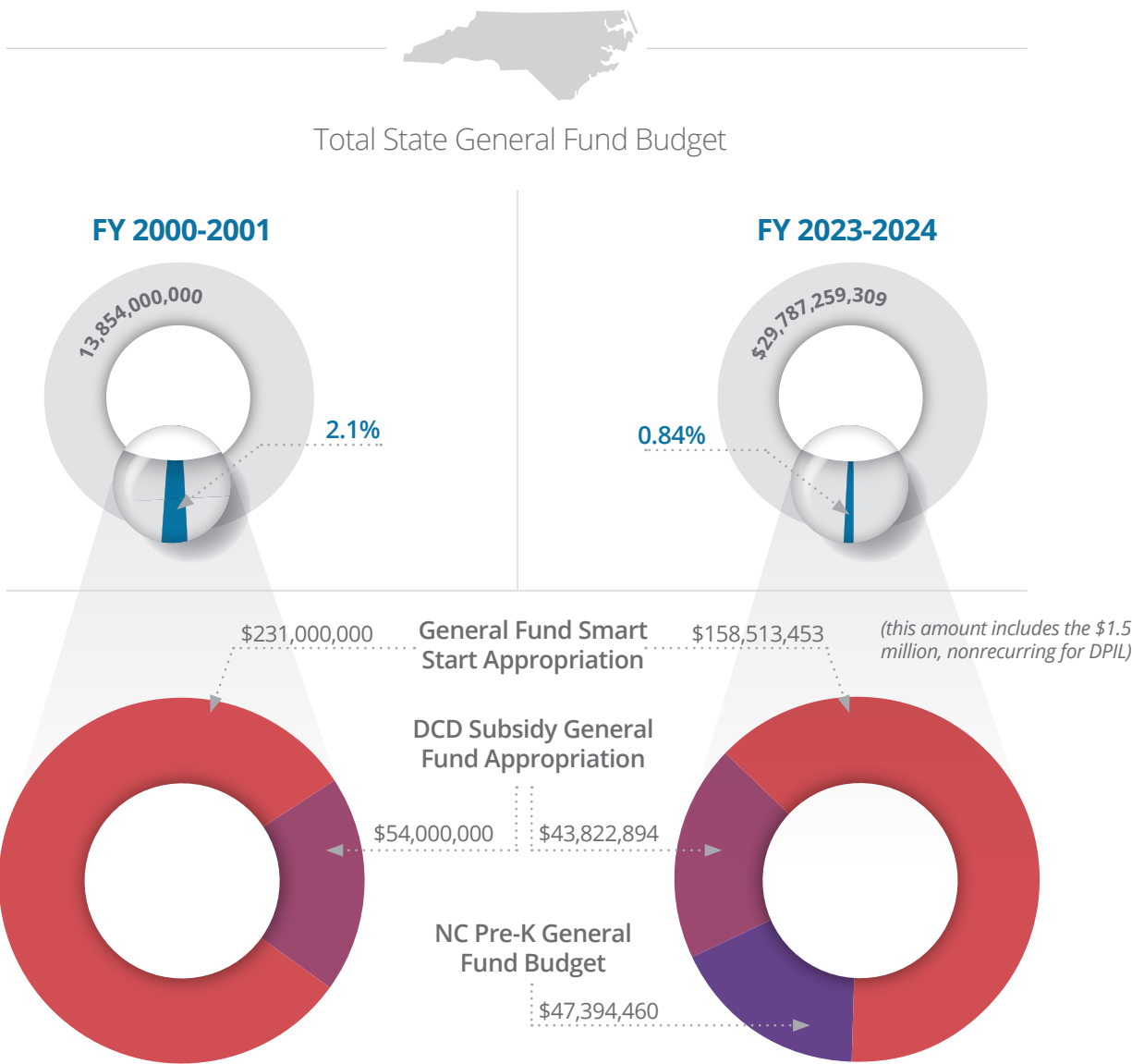
Appropriations	Categories
\$3.40	Health Support
\$7.58	Program Support
\$14.56	Administration
\$24.51	Family Support
\$40.97	Other Early Childhood Related Expenses
\$65.34	Child Care Subsidy

### NCPC Total Appropriation History

Fiscal Years 2012-2013 through 2023-2024 (rounded to millions)



# Early Childhood Allocations Within the Total State Budget





## Increasing Access, Affordability, and Quality to Early Care and Education

**Local Partnerships** invested **\$106.3** million on early care and education programs and services. An additional **\$65.3** million was invested specifically in subsidy!

### Early Care and Education Investments with State Funding:



Child Care Quality	\$14.4M
Provider Professional Development Supplements	\$9.4M
Child Care Resource and Referral	\$5.46M
Child Care Health Consultation	\$3.97M
Inclusive Child Care	\$2.14M
Other Early Care and Education Expenditures	\$6.56M

**23.7%**  
(1,262)

of North Carolina's child care programs participated in Smart Start programs that enhanced teacher knowledge and teacher-child interactions, thereby improving overall quality of care.

## Early Care and Education Program Quality

The average star rating for child care programs statewide improved from



Child care centers and homes receive regular quality assessments through the QRIS system, which evaluates programs on staff education and program standards.

Of the 154 child care programs that were evaluated for licensure status in FY23-24, the average star rating of those receiving Smart Start funded support increased from **4.31 in FY22-23 to 4.44 in FY23-24**.



## Physical Health and Safety

**365 unique child care programs** participated in at least one Smart Start early care and education service to enhance health and safety.

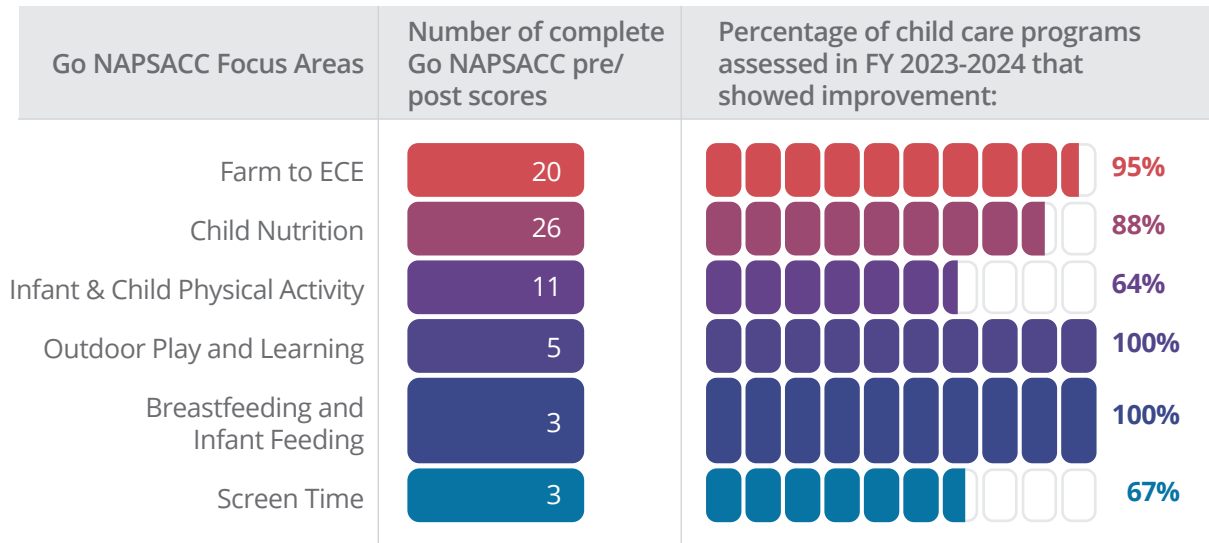
Smart Start Administered Programs and Services	Number of child care programs served:
Child Care Health Consultants (CCHC)	215
Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (Go NAPSACC)	106
Preschool Outdoor Environment Measurement Scale (POEMS)	52
Color Me Healthy	10
Farm to ECE	11

*Note: The child care programs listed in the chart add up to a number greater than 365 because 29 programs received more than one type of program/service.*

*Health and safety improved in CCHC supported child care centers.  
CCHC Pre-and Post-Test data increased in 13 assessment areas!*

Assessment Area	Number of child care classrooms with complete pre/post scores:	Overall Average Pre-Test Scores across the state	Overall Average Post-Test Scores across the state
Illness and Infectious Disease	49	86.1%	95.3%
Handwashing Diapering and Toileting	125	74.7%	90.4%
Children with Special Healthcare Needs	38	70.6%	86.5%
Medication Administration	35	62.1%	88.4%
Safety and Injury Prevention: Training, Policy, and Supervision	38	85.2%	95.5%
Environment including Safe Eating	23	88.3%	95.7%
Infant Safe Sleep	34	78.5%	95.7%
Outdoor Environment	22	87.7%	94.1%
Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery	23	77.1%	92.0%
Infant and Child Social Emotional Wellbeing	21	84.4%	94.7%
Child Abuse and Neglect	18	88.0%	96.3%
Physical Activity	27	73.3%	84.4%
Nutrition	26	77.1%	87.2%
Oral Health	9	64.5%	81.6%
Environmental Health: Hazards	17	90.2%	94.8%
Food Handling	19	93.1%	97.5%
Staff Health and Wellness	15	84.8%	94.8%
Policy Development and Implementation	7	62.3%	83.0%

*Health and safety improved in child care programs receiving Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (Go NAPSACC) services.*



## Supporting Social and Emotional Well-being

**26 Local Partnerships support 214 child care programs with supporting social and emotional well-being with TA consultation and coaching using the Pyramid model.** This TA improves positive teacher-child interactions and fosters a healthier mental and emotional climate in classrooms.

**In Both Infant/Toddler and Preschool Classrooms Coaches using the Pyramid model supported teachers to implement more positive key practices to support healthy social and emotional development and behavior in children. Additionally, potentially worrisome red flags were greatly reduced!**

CLASS Age Group & Subscale	Pre Score	Post Score	# of classrooms assessed for each age group
TPITOS- The Pyramid Infant Toddler Observation Scale			
Average number of Positive key Practices	67.14	71.10	33
Average number of red flags	10.93	6.68	33
TPOT- Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (Preschool)			
Average number of Positive key Practices	63.32	67.83	106
Average number of red flags	9.62	6.41	106



## Workforce Development

Over 19,000 teachers received support with higher education and training statewide.

- ✓ 19,706 teachers received early care and education training
- ✓ 46 child care staff members received early care and education mentoring
- ✓ 668 child care staff received higher education advising
- ✓ 447 child care staff attended a college course

**78.5% of the teachers** attending a college course with Smart Start support earning a B or better in their courses.

## Workforce Compensation

**Over 4,300 participants** received compensation support statewide. Participants receiving compensation include:

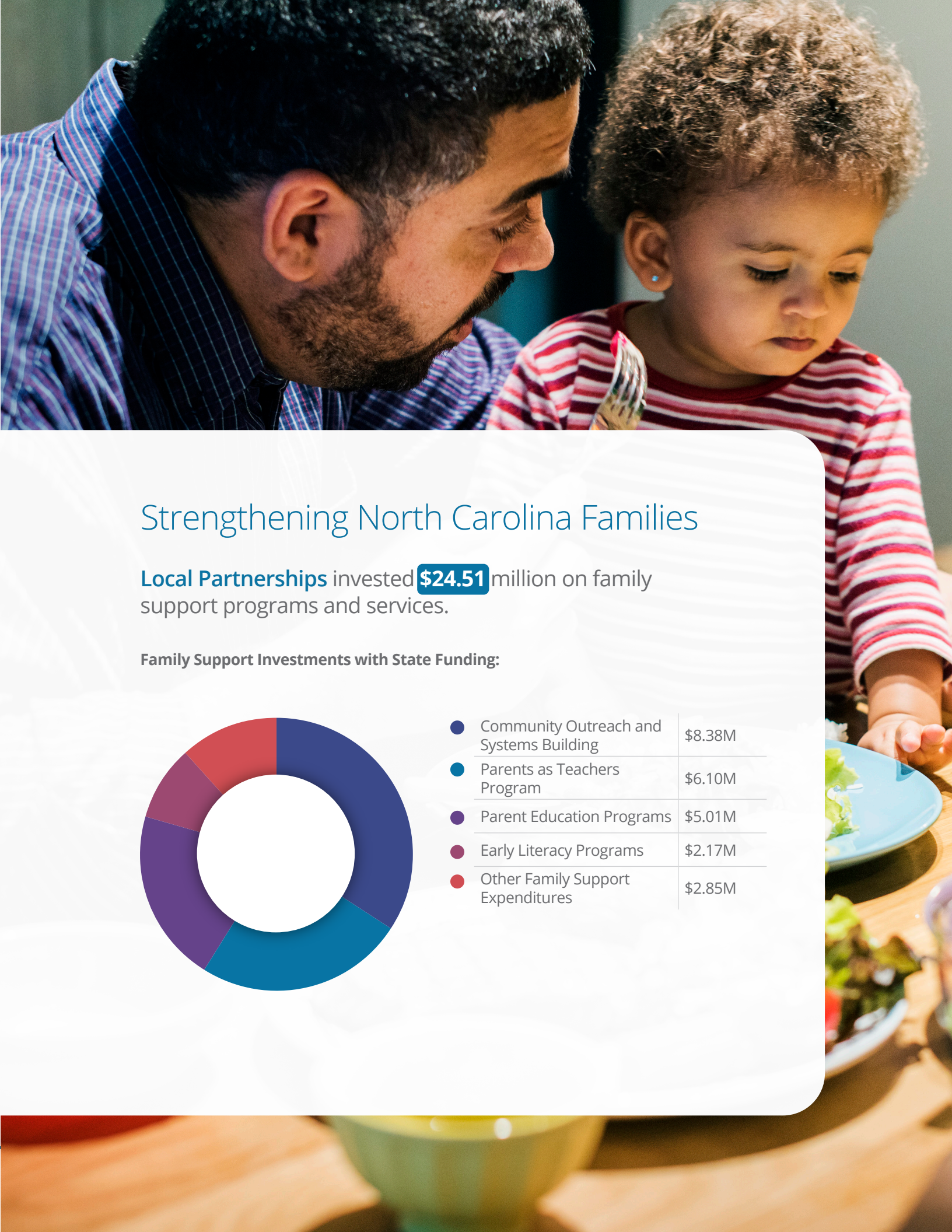
- WAGE\$ Participants- **4,079**
- ECE Professional Development Supplement Participants- **153**
- ECE Health Benefit Recipients- **146**

This contributed to

- A turnover rate of **17.4%** for teachers receiving this compensation. The overall turnover rate for the state was 38% in 2023.<sup>11</sup>

Keeping highly skilled and educated teachers in early childhood education classrooms ensures that children have consistency with their caregivers.

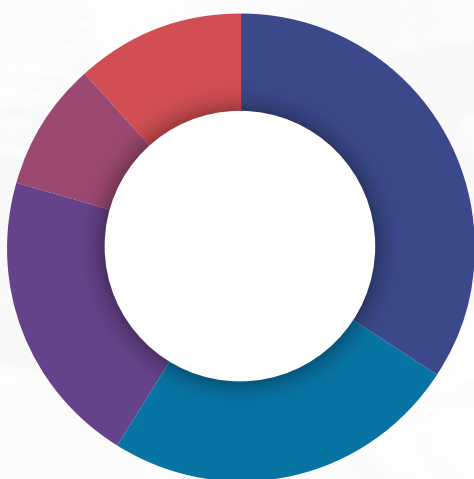
<sup>11</sup>Child Care Services Association. (2023). *Working in early care and education in North Carolina: 2023 workforce study*. <https://www.childcareservices.org/wp-content/uploads/Working-in-Early-Care-and-Education-in-North-Carolina2023-Workforce-Study.pdf>



## Strengthening North Carolina Families

**Local Partnerships** invested **\$24.51** million on family support programs and services.

**Family Support Investments with State Funding:**



Community Outreach and Systems Building	\$8.38M
Parents as Teachers Program	\$6.10M
Parent Education Programs	\$5.01M
Early Literacy Programs	\$2.17M
Other Family Support Expenditures	\$2.85M



# One-on-One Support

34 Smart Start Local Partnerships invested in increasing parent knowledge of positive parenting practices through home visiting and parent education programs.

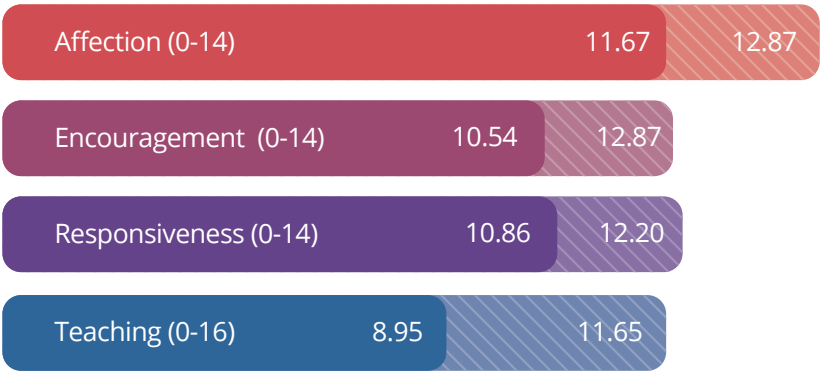
Home Visiting Programs Implemented by Smart Start Local Partnerships	Number of parents and guardians participating
Parents as Teachers (PAT)	1,490
Nurse Family Partnership (NFP)	224
Nurturing Parenting Program (NPP) - Parents and their Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers - Home Based	151
Intensive Home Visiting – Healthy Families America	18



Smart Start supported 1,490 parents and guardians through one-on-one parenting support through Parents as Teachers.

## Parents as Teachers: Increased Parenting skills (from 627 parents with completed pre/post tests)

Pre-Test Post-Test



Parents as Teachers uses the Parenting Interactions with Children: Checklist of Observations Linked to Outcomes (PICCOLO), a checklist of 29 parenting behaviors which are developmentally supportive and observable for evaluation. Behaviors are organized into four domains, as well as overall assessment score.



# Family Support in Group Settings

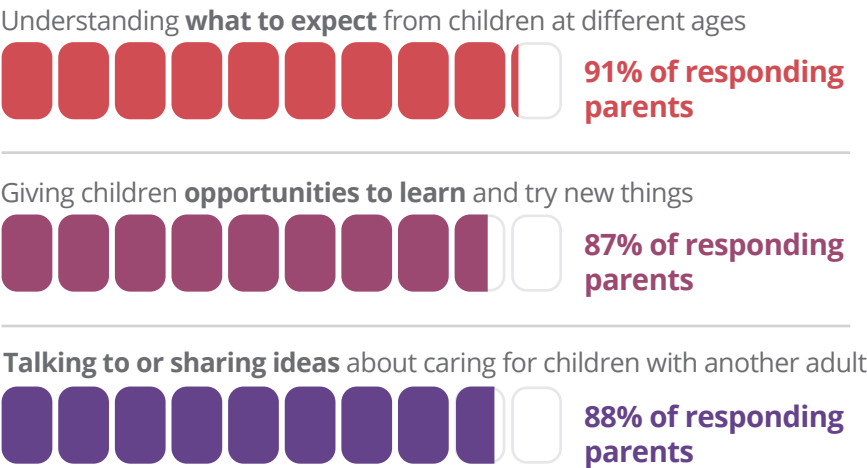
28 Local Partnerships provided family support through group settings.

These programs included parent-child playgroups and mental/emotional parent-to-parent support that build social connections between families and increase parent knowledge, leading to better outcomes for children and families.<sup>12</sup>

## Parent-Child Interactions:

Smart Start served 2,615 parents and guardian through Kaleidoscope Play & Learn, focusing on parent-child interaction and building social connections with other parents.

The Kaleidoscope Play & Learn Caregiver Feedback Form showed an increase among the 681 parents responding, doing either “a lot more” or “a little more” of the following when interacting with children:



## Parent Knowledge:

46 Local Partnerships increased parental knowledge through family support in group settings.

Family Support Programs Implemented by Smart Start Local Partnerships in Group Settings	Number of parents and guardians participating
Triple P Level 2-4	1,381
Nurturing Parenting Program (NPP) - Nurturing Skills for Families	125
Incredible Years (IY) – Preschool	93
Nurturing Parenting Program (NPP) - Parents and their Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers - Group Sessions	73
Circle of Parents	491

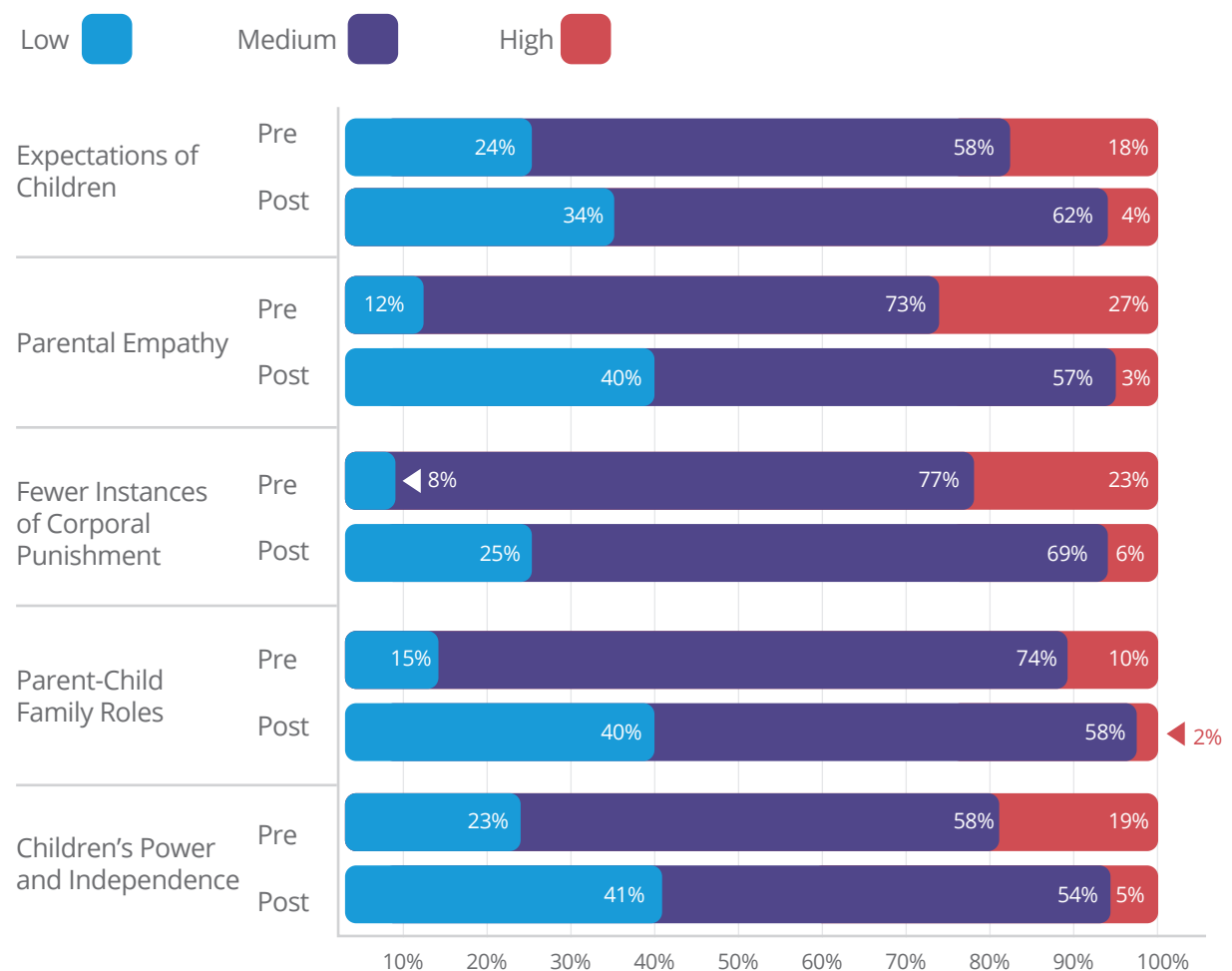
<sup>12</sup>Center for the Study of Social Policy. (2018). Knowledge of parenting and child development. Center for the Study of Social Policy. [https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/SF\\_Knowledge-of-Parenting-and-Child-Development.pdf](https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/SF_Knowledge-of-Parenting-and-Child-Development.pdf)



## Nurturing Parenting Programs (NPP) Nurturing Skills for Families Builds Parenting Capacity & Skills

The Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory demonstrated more adults at a low maltreatment risk after participating in Nurturing Parenting Programs (NPP) Nurturing Skills for Families.

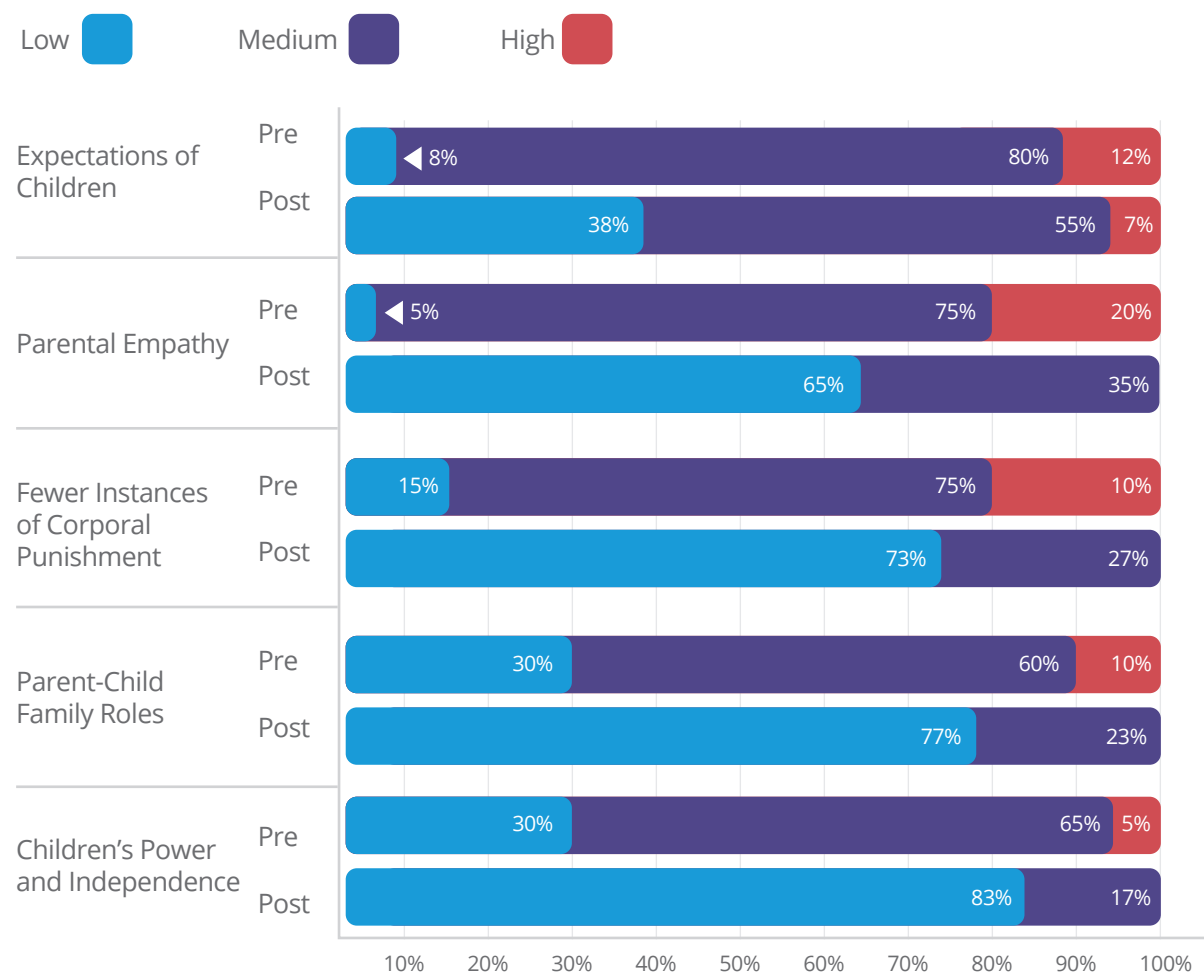
The chart below shows the number of parents assessed in each risk category for the assessment areas of the AAPI-2.



## NPP Parents and their Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers - Groups Builds Parenting Capacity & Skills

The Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory demonstrated more adults at low maltreatment risk after participating in NPP Parents and their Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers- Groups Sessions. These parents were referred to the program by social services.

The chart below shows the number of parents assessed in each risk category for the assessment areas of the AAPI-2.

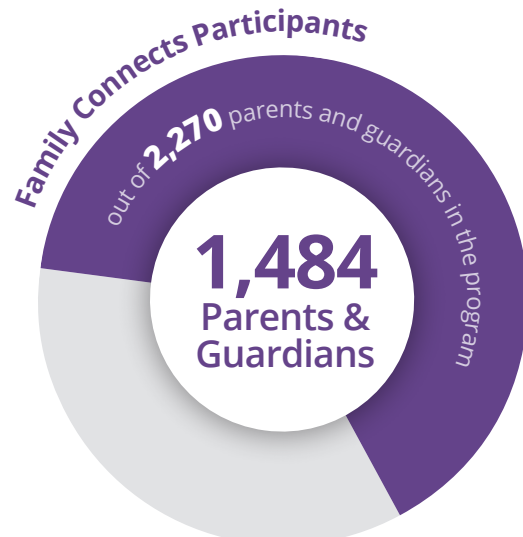
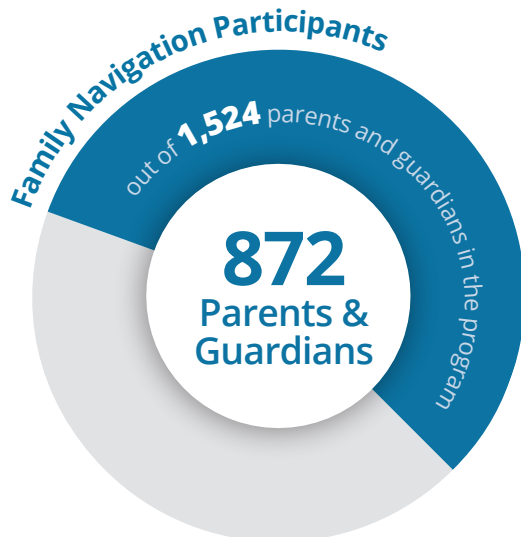




12 Smart Start Local Partnerships implement family support programs that primarily focus on referring parents and guardians to needed resources.

## Referrals and Connections to Critical Resources

While connecting families to resources is foundational to all family support programs, some programs focus specifically on referring families to community supports. Parents and guardians receiving these referrals include:



# Promoting and Strengthening Early Literacy

## Access to Books and Literacy Education

Nearly **300,000 children** participated in Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library (DPIL), Reach Out and Read (ROR), Raising a Reader (RAR), and Motherread/Fatheread.

Literacy Programs Implemented by Smart Start Local Partnerships	Number of parents and guardians participating
Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library (DPIL)	292,770
Raising a Reader (RAR)	5,128
Motherread/Fatheread	335



*\*Of the Approximately 27,000 parents who responded to the Annual NC DPIL Evaluation Survey,*

### Dolly Parton’s’ Imagination Library:

- 48.6%\*** of North Carolina children aged birth to five receive a free book each month through DPIL.
- 45.3%\*** of families indicated they wouldn’t be able to purchase the same number of books as provided by DPIL.
- 9%\*** of families indicated they would not have been able to purchase books at all.

Out of these families, some would not have been able to purchase books at all.

This is the percentage of participants who wouldn’t be able to purchase books without DPIL, identified by race:

- White: 7% of families**
- Asian: 10% of families**
- Multiracial or Mixed Race: 11% of families**
- Black or African American: 13% of families**
- American Indian or Alaskan Native: 14% of families**
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander and Other Race: 17% of families**



## Raising a Reader (RAR) and Reading Frequency

When asked how often their child looks at books per week, 1,608 parents reported an average of:

Before enrolling in RAR:

4.1

After Enrolling in RAR:

5.8

## DPIL and Reading Frequency

Parents who participated in DPIL for any length of time reported an increase in reading to their children daily from **45%** before they began receiving books to **67%** after participating in DPIL. This increase applies to families who have received DPIL books for years as well as those that have just begun and recently received their first book.

Across racial and ethnic groups, families reported similar rates of increase in reading frequency.

Parents/guardians who participated in DPIL for any length of time were able to read with their children daily:	Increased from 45% to 67%
White (Not Hispanic or Latino) Parents/guardians who were able to read with their children daily:	increased from 50% to 71%
Black/African American Parents/Guardians who were able to read with their children daily:	increased from 33% to 51%
Not Hispanic or Latino parents/guardians who were able to read with their children daily:	increased from 47% to 68%
Hispanic or Latino parents/guardians who were able to read with their children daily:	increased from 31% to 55%

*This is due to historical and ongoing systemic inequities that have deliberately marginalized people of color. Black and Hispanic families often face fewer opportunities to read daily because they have limited access to resources, are more likely to work multiple jobs or jobs with inflexible hours, and face other related systemic challenges.*

## Smart Start Supports Child and Family Health

**Local Partnerships** invested **\$3.4 million** on health programs and services.

### Health Investments with State Funding:



Prenatal/Newborn Services	\$1.35M
Early Intervention Services	\$1.15M
Other Health Expenditures	\$0.9M

## Partnerships Support Child and Family Health

Smart Start Local Partnerships self-reported participating in these child and family health outcomes areas:

Health Outcome Area	% of Partnerships Participating
Local Interagency Coordinating Council	80%
Early Intervention	72%
Child Passenger Safety	69%
Safe Sleep	69%
Breastfeeding Support	59%
Pregnancy Support – Prenatal Education	59%
Healthcare Navigation/Education	52%

*Percentages are calculated from 61 out of 75 Local Partnerships responding. Partnerships were asked if they were “participating” or “leading” in these areas. If they responded that they were doing either, they were counted as participating.*

## Early Childhood Health Referrals

**Smart Start is a key reason why children receive critical early intervention services across the state because of Assuring Better Health and Development (ABCD).**

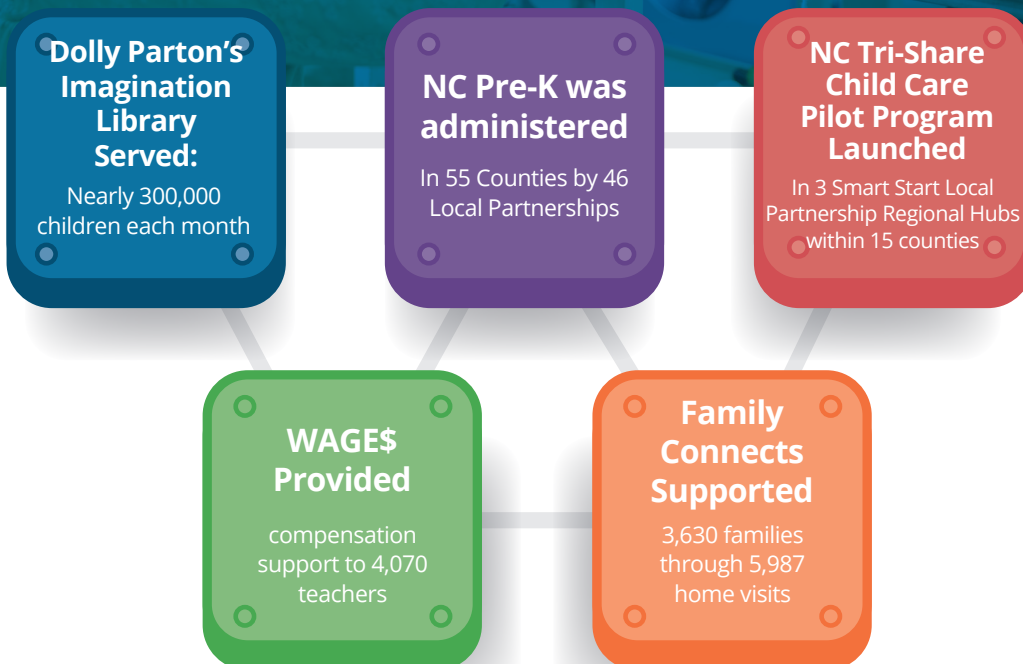
ABCD helps primary health care practices perform general developmental and autism-specific screenings and connects children to specialized therapies and other early intervention services. In FY23-24, ABCD served slightly under **56,000 children**.

## Smart Start Prioritized Health

**NCPC led, advised, and collaborated on child and family health priorities by serving on state and regional committees, including:**

- NC Perinatal Health Equity Collective
- NC Inter-agency Coordinating Council (NC ICC)
- North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force
- Infant Early Childhood Mental Health Cross-Sector Workgroup
- The North Carolina Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Association (NCIMHA) Statewide Advisory Committee on Infant Mental Health Endorsement(R)
- NC Breastfeeding-Friendly Child Care Designation Application Review Committee
- Early Well Coordinating Team (formally Social Emotional Health Initiative Leadership)
- NC State Health Improvement Plan- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) Subcommittee
- NC Violence Prevention Team
- Child FindACCESS State Leadership Team
- NC Coalition to Promote Children's Health Insurance
- Commission on Children with Special Health Care Needs
- NC Attachment Network
- Early Childhood Oral Health Collaborative
- Resilience Community Advisory Committee
- Resilience Local Coalitions
- Resilience Advisory Council
- Resilient North Carolina Community Collaborative (RNCCC)
- Essentials for Childhood – main group and data group
- And more!

# Smart Start as the State's Early Childhood Infrastructure



## Our Impact in the Early Childhood System

Number of Peer Connection gatherings hosted by NC Healthy & Resilient Communities Initiative (NC HRCI)	11 gatherings with at least 20 attendees each meeting
Number of counties with multi-sector coalition/collaboratives working to reduce and respond to Adverse Childhood Experiences, Adverse Community Environments, Adverse Climate Events, and Atrocious Cultural Experiences	40+
Number of counties with census-level data in the Smart Start Community Indicators Dashboard	100
Number of evidence-based and informed programs and solutions within Smart Start's Smart Solutions: Effective Prenatal-to-Five Investments	100+



# Advancing Leadership and Collaborative Systems

## Building a Sustainable Network through Shared Services

Number of Local Partnership staff who participated in the NC Center for Nonprofits trainings from Fall 2021- to June 2024.	340
Number of Network staff members participating in the Center's Nonprofit Management Institute to build stronger nonprofits.	46 staff from 27 Local Partnerships
Number of Local Partnership staff with active membership accounts with the North Carolina Center for Nonprofits	400+
Number of Partnerships that received training as part of a Smart Start Capacity Building Cohort by the NC Center for Nonprofits	11
Number of Local Partnerships that participated in the NC Center's Annual Conference in fall of 2023.	15
Number of Local Partnership staff participating in 17 Peer Networking hours on topics like communications and outreach, programming, finance and more from September 2024-June 2024.	50+
Cost Savings from Smart Start's Partnership with the NC Center for Nonprofit (since September 2021)	\$64,147

## Leadership Development through System Building

Number of Local Partnership staff participated in cohort learning opportunities focused on system thinking	90
Number of staff that participated in the Summer Institute for System Change, a free training series for Local Partnerships and resilience/ACEs/Trauma coalitions	122