

Smart Start Impact Report · **FY 2024-2025**

Presented by The North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC)



Dear Members of the North Carolina General Assembly,

It is my honor to share the FY 2024–2025 Impact Report for the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC) and Smart Start. This year's report highlights a network that not only delivers results but also stands ready to respond in moments of challenge and change.

Smart Start is the backbone of North Carolina's early childhood system. NCPC provides guidance and support to 75 Smart Start Local Partnerships, which deliver programs and services tailored to the needs of their communities.

Local Partnerships enhance early care and education by connecting families to a high-quality early care and education mixed-delivery system and by supporting child care providers. They also partner with families for parent support and opportunities for family engagement, as well as to improve children's health and development.

In FY 2024–2025, Smart Start invested \$150 million to strengthen the system. From health and safety to early learning, the network ensures children thrive in their earliest years. Its collective impact was especially evident in responding to Hurricane Helene, demonstrating Smart Start's critical role in both everyday support and in extraordinary circumstances.

The Smart Start Network remains well-positioned to respond to emerging needs, explore new leadership opportunities, and maximize impact—serving the state as the comprehensive infrastructure for North Carolina's youngest children and their families.

I invite you to explore this report to see how Smart Start investments are creating measurable change for children, families, and communities across the state. Thank you for your leadership and investment in the early years, the foundation for all future learning and success.

In Partnership,




Amy Cabbage
President, NC Partnership for Children



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Recommendations for Legislative Action

During the 2026 legislative session, Smart Start will continue efforts to strengthen the network's early care and education infrastructure. The 2026 Smart Start Legislative Agenda is a continuation of the unmet needs outlined in the 2025 agenda. It is based on existing requests, outstanding legislative proposals, and a pending 2025 NC Appropriations Act.

Smart Start requests include:

Increased annual appropriation of \$15 million general, unrestricted funds to support Smart Start Local Partnerships in meeting statewide and communities' needs.

Smart Start did not receive an increase in its general appropriation during the 2023–2025 biennium, despite an early childhood crisis fueled by inflation and rising costs, the expiration of federal pandemic funding, NC's growing population of children and families, and more businesses coming to the state in need of child care assistance.

With increased funding, Smart Start can invest in evidence-based and informed solutions, support community needs, and advance the well-being of children, families, providers, and the business community—thus serving as a key contributor to NC's economy.

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

Smart Start receives a total appropriation of \$7 million, recurring for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL). During the 2023–25 biennium, with an additional \$1.5 million, nonrecurring, Smart Start served approximately 50% of the state's eligible children ages 0 to 5.

The majority of Local Partnerships fund DPIL through private funding, paired with the recurring legislative support. To increase enrollment and provide programmatic support, recurring legislature funding is required to help offset the need.

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 to serve the same number of children and, as possible, to expand to include more eligible children and families.**

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

Smart Start requests a recurring appropriation from the state legislature to support the Child Care WAGE\$ Program, an education-based salary supplement, in all 100 counties.

WAGE\$ incentivizes early educators to pursue education and remain in the field, thus fostering greater stability and professional growth within the workforce. During FY 24-25, 51 Smart Start Local Partnerships supported 4,075 teachers with WAGE\$ supplements. A recurring appropriation can help ensure the program can be available statewide. Smart Start also supports funding for health care benefits for ECE teachers. Additionally, Child Care WAGE\$ can decrease teacher turnover. In FY 24-25, teachers participating in WAGE\$ had an average turnover of 13%. In FY 23, the statewide average for all teachers, regardless of WAGE\$ participation, was 38%.

Increased compensation and health care benefits are needed to help ensure recruitment and retention of a stable and qualified early care and education workforce to help support employers, employees and the state's economy.

Increase NC Pre-K administrative funding to at least 10%.

Smart Start is requesting administrative rates of no less than 10% for NC Pre-K, as the current federal de minimis was increased to 15% in October 2024.

Currently, 46 Local Partnerships administer NC Pre-K in 55 counties through separate contracts with DCDEE, which is approximately half of the program's contract administrators. All seventy-five (75) partnerships' Board Chairs (or designees) serve as co-chair of their counties' NC Pre-K Committees across the state. **Smart Start supports the state legislature exploring alternative funding models and fully funding NC Pre-K to reach more eligible children in communities across the state.**

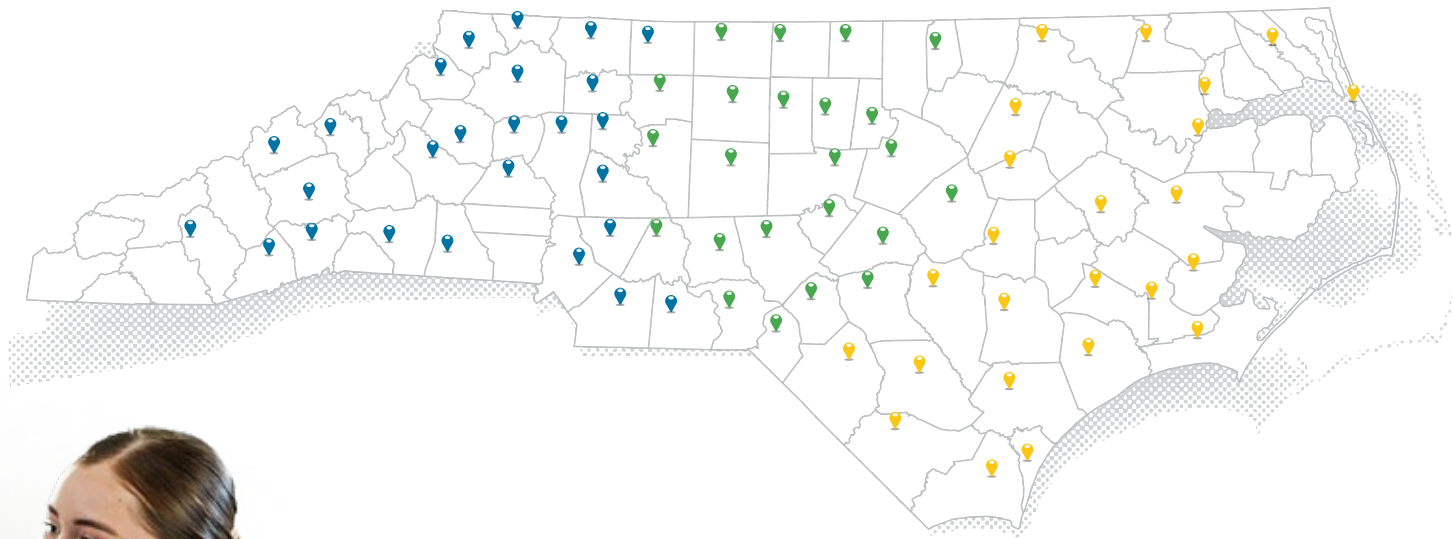


Smart Start in Every County

Smart Start is North Carolina's pioneering early childhood system, leading the nation in building a future where every child—from birth to age five—has the foundation to thrive in health, learning, and life.

Through a network of 75 nonprofit Local Partnerships, Smart Start reaches all 100 counties, connecting families to essential early care and education, health, and family support services.





Smart Start provides the statewide framework, Local Partnerships bring it to life, and NCPC ensures that every effort is coordinated, evidence-based and informed, and impactful. Together, this network builds the foundation for lifelong learning, health, and success.

Smart Start Local Partnerships are the voice of early childhood. Smart Start leaders across the state coordinate services, close service gaps, and promote positive childhood experiences.

Smart Start provides a statewide vision for early childhood, and Local Partnerships convene partners across communities and sectors to implement that vision in a way that meets the unique strengths and challenges of their communities.

NC Partnership for Children (NCPC)'s Role

The North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC) is the lead organization and backbone of the Smart Start Network, setting statewide vision, policy, and funding priorities. While Local Partnerships translate the statewide vision into community action, NCPC strengthens that work through guidance, coordination, and support. NCPC connects Local Partnerships to the broader early childhood ecosystem and equips them with the tools, policies, and resources to be effective, ensuring that children benefit from coordinated, high-quality care and services.

As the lead organization, NCPC strengthens the Smart Start Network by:

- Setting policy and strategic direction to ensure Smart Start delivers meaningful outcomes for children and families.
- Maintaining fiscal and programmatic accountability and effectiveness.
- Equipping Local Partnerships with data portal and county-level data measures as well as a centralized accounting and contracting system.
- Facilitating the sharing of resources, best practices, and ideas across the statewide Smart Start Network so every county benefits from collective knowledge.
- Connecting Local Partnerships with state and federal early childhood systems so local efforts align with broader goals.
- Engaging and partnering with government agencies, philanthropic organizations, and private sector leaders.

Through these effort NCPC supports implementation, provides training, collects data, and convenes partners across communities.

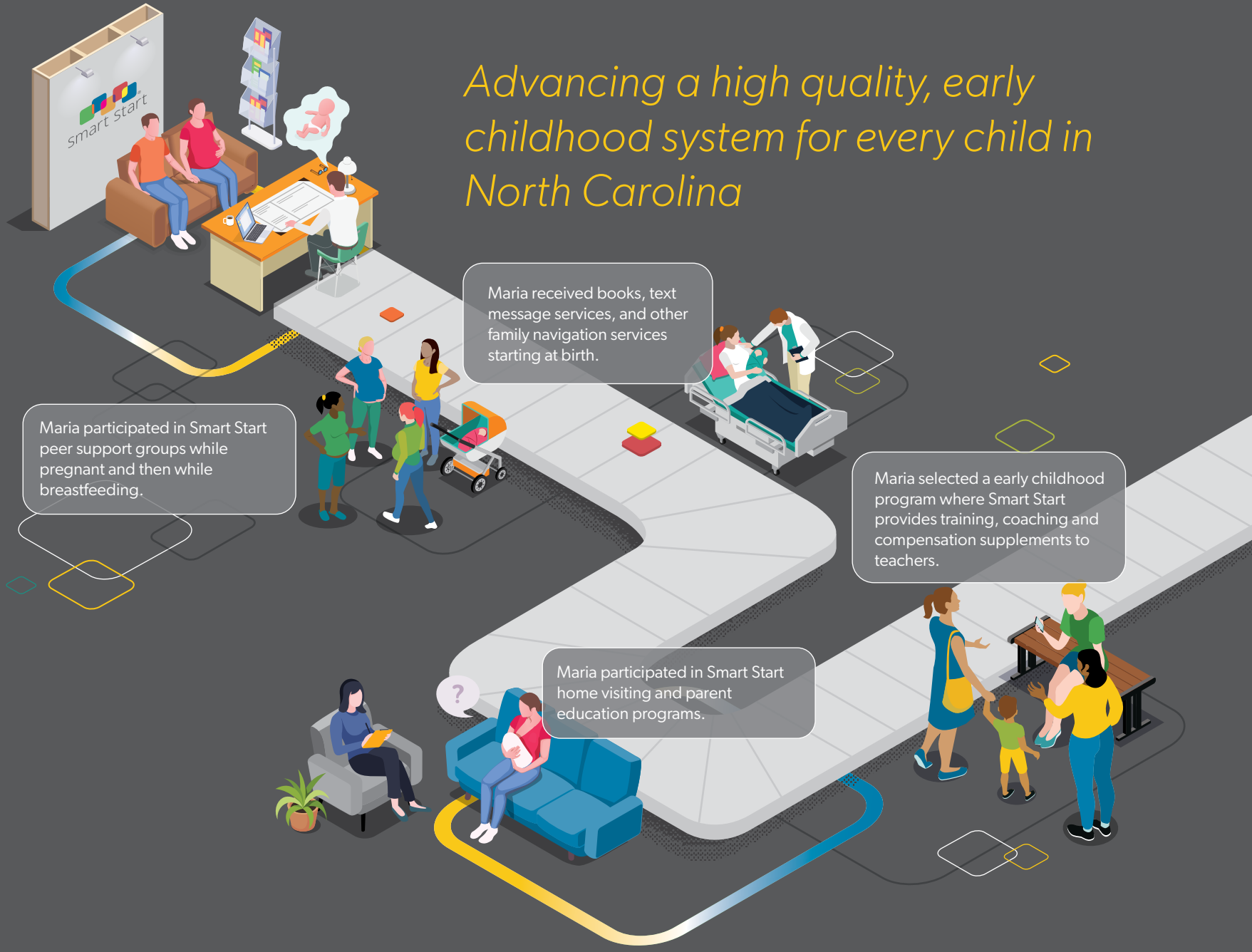


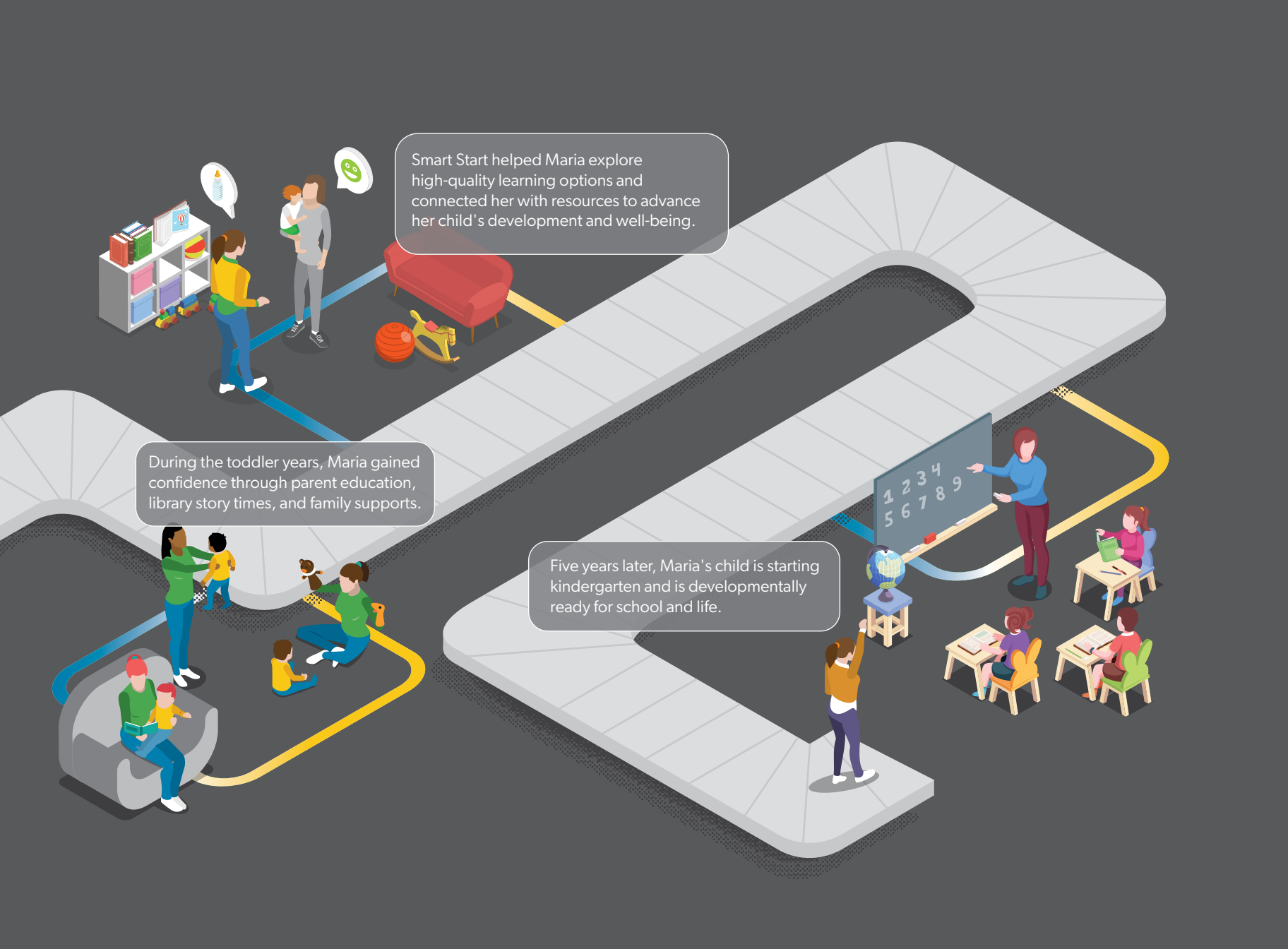
Why Smart Start Matters

By equipping Local Partnerships to act effectively, NCPC helps ensure that the first 2,000 days of a child's life—a critical window of development—are strengthened through high-quality early care and education, child and family health services, early literacy, and family support.



Advancing a high quality, early childhood system for every child in North Carolina





Smart Start helped Maria explore high-quality learning options and connected her with resources to advance her child's development and well-being.

During the toddler years, Maria gained confidence through parent education, library story times, and family supports.

Five years later, Maria's child is starting kindergarten and is developmentally ready for school and life.

Smart Start Shows Up for Families

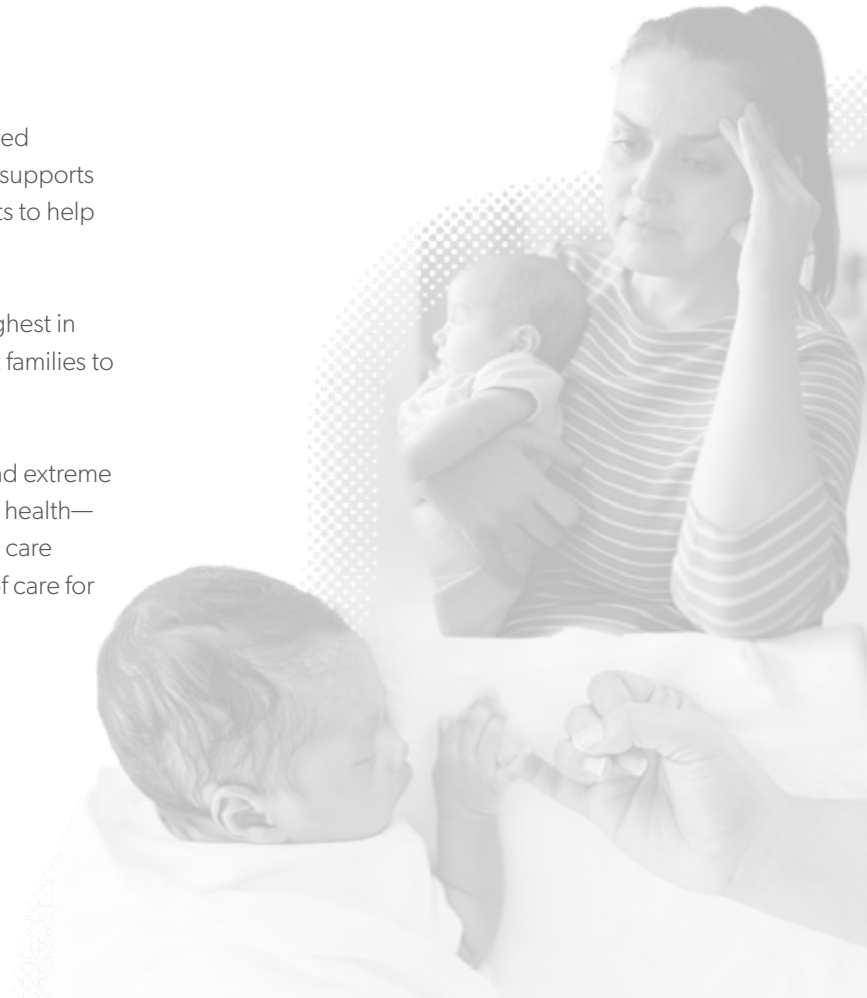
While these early years are so important, far too many children in North Carolina experience challenges that make opportunities for healthy development out of reach.


These challenges include:

A deepening **child care crisis**, with rising costs, long waitlists, and limited availability—especially for infants and toddlers in rural areas. Smart Start supports stabilization funding, workforce pay initiatives, and quality improvements to help address these gaps.

A **maternal and infant health crisis**, with mortality rates among the highest in the nation. Local Partnerships strengthen perinatal support and connect families to health resources.

Increased **weather-related disruptions**, such as hurricanes, floods, and extreme heat, which threaten child care infrastructure, family stability, and public health—particularly in under-resourced areas. Smart Start helps strengthen child care infrastructure, coordinate emergency response, and ensure continuity of care for children and families in times of crisis.




 **Smart Start of Davidson County** maximized its reach by partnering with trusted local groups—including parent support networks and literacy circles operating in libraries, community centers, and faith-based settings. By connecting with families in these existing, familiar venues, Smart Start introduced essential childhood resources like scholarships, parenting workshops, and early literacy programs. The result: Librarians, church volunteers, and local nonprofits are now active advocates, ensuring parents are consistently connected to support and resources throughout their parenting journey.

Smart Start’s model of statewide governance and local flexibility makes Smart Start uniquely positioned to meet families where they are and address the full scope of young children’s needs through these priority areas:

Early Care and Education

Family Support and Early Literacy

Child, Family and Community Health

 Smart Start supports children and families from the first days in the hospital through the moment they enter kindergarten.





Smart Start as the State's Early Childhood Infrastructure

Smart Start is the backbone of North Carolina's early childhood system, linking statewide priorities with local solutions.

Smart Start efficiently administers statewide programs, pilots innovative initiatives, and leverages state and private dollars to create lasting system-level change in communities.



NC Pre-K

The NC Pre-K Program provides high-quality early learning experiences to prepare eligible 4-year-olds for success in kindergarten and beyond.

Smart Start plays a vital role in this statewide system by contributing funding, coordination, and local oversight that strengthen both access and quality. Local Partnership's serve as co-chairs of NC Pre-K Committees and collaborate with school districts, child care providers, and community partners to ensure that classrooms reflect the unique needs of their communities.



Currently, **46 Partnerships administer NC Pre-K in 55 counties through separate contracts with DCDEE, directing an additional \$7,652,440 in funding** for classroom operations and support. This structure — statewide consistency paired with community-driven leadership — ensures NC Pre-K expands access while delivering high-quality instruction in every setting.

NC Tri-Share

The NC General Assembly created the **NC Tri-Share Child Care Program** to make child care more affordable by sharing the price of care equally among three partners: eligible employees, their employers, and the state. NC Tri-Share was launched publicly in August 2024 after months of programmatic and administration preparation.

NCPC serves as the backbone support for the pilot, while a third-party administrator manages applications and payments. Three Regional Hubs located in Cleveland, Moore and Martin-Pitt counties were also selected to coordinate local implementation.

This investment has generated interest from employers and state partners. Already, the program is making child care more affordable for families and helping businesses retain a focused, productive workforce.



The Basics NC

The Basics, NC is a statewide initiative that empowers families with five easy, science-based parenting and caregiving principles to boost children's social, emotional, and cognitive growth from birth to age five.

The Basics serves as a powerful public awareness tool — uniting coalitions, establishing a common language, and sparking cross-sector conversations about the importance of early childhood experiences. By leveraging Smart Start's strong local presence, The Basics NC can help ensure that families across the state have practical, everyday strategies to help children build a strong foundation for lifelong learning and success.

Participating counties receive support through technical assistance, community workshops, and partnerships with hospitals, pediatricians, child care systems, faith communities, and neighborhood organizations.

Families in select counties can also enroll in Basics Insights, a free text-messaging program that delivers age-appropriate tips three times per week. Currently, nearly 1,000 North Carolina families are subscribed to Basics Insights, with a third weekly message tailored specifically for NC families launching in 2026.



WAGE\$

WAGE\$ supplements are provided to increase teacher salaries based on a teachers' level of education.



Smart Start invested **\$8.9 million** in WAGE\$ salary supplements for early care professionals.

51 Smart Start Local Partnerships supported 4,075 teachers with WAGE\$ supplements.

Smart Start's infrastructure allows for statewide coordination with local investment, ensuring funds are directed where they are most needed.



An Early Head Start educator in Alexander County has received WAGE\$ supplements since 2019, enabling her to stay in her position while pursuing higher education. "WAGE\$ is so important to me because it adds financial security. It helps incentivize education and quality," she explained. She credits the program and her Local Partnership for empowering professional growth.



NCPC's Strategic Roadmap

In 2019, the NC Partnership for Children (NCPC) set a ten-year Strategic Roadmap to guide NCPC as it leads the Smart Start Network and expands impact. **Now in its sixth year, the roadmap continues to focus on achieving two long term goals:**

- 1** Local Partnerships are sustainable and impactful for young children, families, and professionals in their communities.
- 2** NCPC is a trusted and valued catalyst for action and alignment to ensure better outcomes for young children and their families.

These goals reflect NCPC's commitment to ensuring every child in North Carolina has the foundation to thrive.





Building Sustainable and Impactful Local Partnerships

NCPC focuses on ensuring Local Partnerships are sustainable, stable, and capable of meeting the unique needs of their communities.

Several initiatives helped to advance this goal in FY 2025:

Maximizing Impact by Streamlining Operations

A new Contract and Data Management System (CDMS) enhances operational efficiency and accountability across all 75 Local Partnerships. Designed as a one-stop-shop, this system streamlines reporting, improves data integrity, and promotes transparency.

CDMS was designed to reduce administrative burden and contracting time, allowing staff to dedicate more energy to programs and services as well as sharing knowledge across the Network. This transition was one of the most significant system updates in Smart Start's history, engaging nearly 1,000 staff statewide.

Maximizing Impact through Local Innovation

Building on these operational improvements, NCPC secured a three-year, \$931,080 grant from The Duke Endowment to expand the availability of innovative, evidence-based and evidence-informed programs within the Smart Start Network. This new investment underscores NCPC's role in helping Local Partnerships deliver locally driven, high-quality solutions while contributing to a stronger statewide early childhood system.

Key features include:

- ✓ ***Providing dedicated evaluation leadership:*** A full-time Rapid Cycle Innovation Officer will guide program testing, adaptation, and evaluation.
- ✓ ***Building strategic alliances with state and local social service leaders:*** These collaborations can help maximize support for children at risk of maltreatment or family separation.
- ✓ ***Expanding Smart Solutions:*** Local Partnerships may contribute proven programs to Smart Solutions after rapid cycle testing of innovations and adaptations.

Ensuring Sustainability through Economies of Scale

NCPC reduces Smart Start operational costs through a centralized, shared-services model. By leveraging strategic partnerships and collective purchasing, NCPC secures discounts and private funding to cover costs. This allows Local Partnerships to dedicate all funds and staff directly to local programming and community impact. In FY24-25, NCPC invested in the following initiatives to support the Smart Start Network:

NC Center for Nonprofits (NCCNP) Membership

NCPC invested \$48,000 in a network-wide membership with the NC Center for Nonprofits.

Through this investment, Local Partnership staff and board members have full access to Center trainings, the NC Center Annual Conference, the Center's Associated Health Plan, and more.

Since September 2021, benefits of this partnership include:

62

Local Partnerships

participating in trainings offered by the Center to build knowledge and skills

27

Local Partnerships

participating in the Center's Nonprofit Management Institute to build stronger nonprofit organizational leadership

15

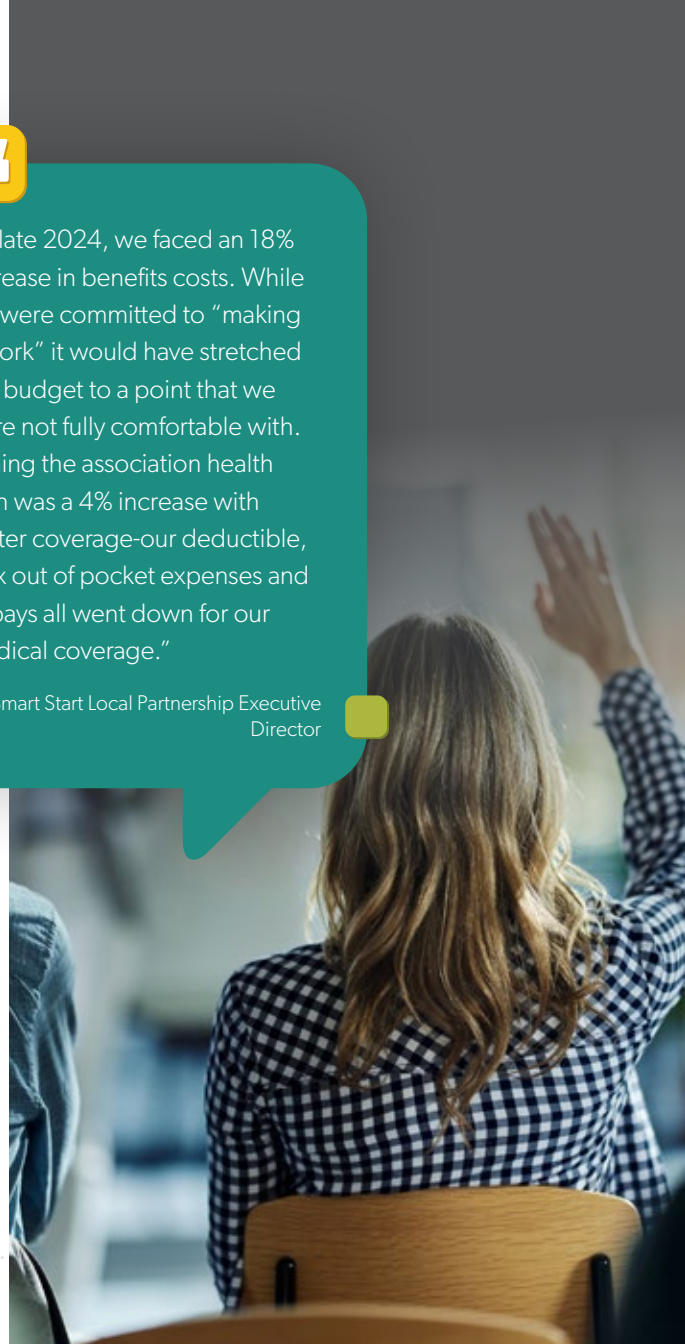
Local Partnerships

attending the 2025 NC Center for Nonprofit Conference



"In late 2024, we faced an 18% increase in benefits costs. While we were committed to "making it work" it would have stretched our budget to a point that we were not fully comfortable with. Joining the association health plan was a 4% increase with better coverage-our deductible, max out of pocket expenses and copays all went down for our medical coverage."

– Smart Start Local Partnership Executive Director





I am very grateful for the partnership that NCPC has brought to the Local Partnerships with the NC Center for Nonprofits. It has been very beneficial, and I really appreciate having the membership services that they offer.”

– Smart Start Local Partnership Executive Director

One major benefit:

access to the NC Center for Nonprofits Associated Health Plan. Through Smart Start’s connection to the Center, NCPC and **six Local Partnerships joined the Center’s health plan in January 2025.**

The **estimated total savings** from Smart Start’s partnership agreement and group membership discount is **\$74,227.**

Centralized Network Resources

NCPC provides the Smart Start Network with key digital tools to streamline operations and improve efficiency.

Qualtrics, survey platform, enables Local Partnerships to conduct effective and efficient data collection and analysis at no cost. The platform allows Partnerships to share templates and survey resources with one another, fostering collaboration across the Network. Currently, **75% of Local Partnerships are set up to use this shared service offered by NCPC.**

To support seamless and secure document management, NCPC provides a shared DocuSign account at no cost to Local Partnerships. This tool allows Partnerships to generate and process agreements electronically, reducing administrative burden and enhancing security. **68% of Local Partnerships currently use the shared DocuSign system.**

Sparking Lasting Change for Children

The Smart Start Network is dedicated to achieving deep, lasting systemic change, moving beyond merely treating the immediate symptoms faced by children and families. Using grant funding, NCPC invested to help Local Partnerships and their community coalitions build capacity in two recognized approaches: the ABLe Change Framework and Systems Thinking. These tools are specifically designed to leverage past learning and transition away from short-term fixes toward long-term systemic solutions. This approach equips staff and community leaders with the skills to:

- ✓ Identify and address the root causes of persistent issues
- ✓ Craft long-term strategies with measurable goals
- ✓ Track progress and adjust strategies for greater impact

Understanding Smart Start's Workforce: A Compensation Study

Recognizing the critical role of a strong, stable workforce NCPC invested in a Network-wide workforce study to better understand and address workforce challenges. The report informs strategies to attract, support, and retain talented professionals who are at the heart of Smart Start's success.

Smart Start and its local coalitions are engaging in deliberate efforts to shift structures, policies, and power dynamics to ensure that progress for children is not only achieved but sustained for generations.





The Sampson County Partnership for Children participated in Trauma-Informed Training to strengthen its organizational climate and community relationships. Staff increased their coping skills and worked to create a more welcoming workplace environment. The tools from this training improved communication with contracting partners and fostered stronger community connections. These changes reflect the partnership's commitment to supporting staff well-being and building a positive, trauma-informed culture.

Promoting Trauma-Informed Practices

NCPC is committed to increasing individual, organizational, and community level resilience across the state with NCPC's **NC Healthy and Resilient Communities Initiative (HRCI)**.

NC HRCI, funded by the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust (KBR) and in part by DHHS Department of Mental Health, offered an opportunity for nine Local Partnership teams to participate in a 2-day training and engage in a 10-month long process towards moving their organization to be more trauma-informed, embedding new policies and procedures into their organizations.

The comprehensive training series covered three key areas: education and pre-implementation planning, implementation strategies, and sustainability. Participating teams gained the knowledge, skills, and insights needed to build organizations that prioritize staff well-being and create positive outcomes for those they serve. This series established a solid foundation for their trauma-informed transformation efforts, guiding teams through assessment and change processes while encouraging collaboration and shared learning across organizations.

Because of this work, Local Partnerships are better positioned to support trauma-informed policies and practices and, in turn, can support communities in doing the same.

2 NCPC as a Trusted Catalyst for Action

NCPC connects Local Partnerships to statewide systems, policies, and evidence-based and informed practices. By fostering collaboration, alignment, and access to critical resources, NCPC ensures Local Partnerships remain connected, data-driven, and ready to implement statewide priorities.

Supporting Data-Driven Investments

The Smart Start Community Indicators Dashboard delivers data insights and visualizations to support county-level planning and investment decisions across North Carolina. Developed by NCPC, the dashboard equips Local Partnerships with the metrics they need to amplify impact.

NCPC continues to maintain and update this tool, ensuring Local Partnerships have access to the most relevant data to guide their work and strengthen outcomes in their communities.



Enhancing Transparency and Integrity through the Smart Solutions Catalog

NCPC launched *Smart Solutions: Effective Prenatal-to-Five Investments*, a searchable catalog of effective programs, interventions, and strategies that support Smart Start goals for children, their families, communities, and the professionals that care for them. Each solution has been evaluated and meets NCPC's board-approved criteria for evidence.

These solutions are designed to strengthen early care and education, promote positive outcomes for family support, literacy, child and family health, and early childhood systems. Local Partnerships and community partners use *Smart Solutions* to identify and implement strategies that best address the needs of their communities.



Promoting A Seat at the Table

A Seat at the Table was designed as a national Family Engagement Hub, connecting families and parent leaders with leadership opportunities in early childhood systems.

Created by the National Center for Family and Parent Leadership, A Seat at the Table provides a nationwide platform that enables early childhood organizations and state agencies to collaborate authentically with family leaders. Families can sign up at no cost and are matched with opportunities that reflect their interests and expertise. Likewise, organizations may post opportunities free of charge to engage family leaders whose lived experiences strengthen and shape the early childhood system.

NCPC is committed to sustaining platform access, elevating its visibility with state system partners, and fostering ongoing opportunities for families to engage in meaningful leadership roles.

At the close of FY 2025, Smart Solutions included over 110 programs and services for Smart Start Local Partnerships to select when serving their county.

Driving Change through Statewide Collaboration

NCPC participates in more than **30 state-level committees** to foster collaboration and align efforts across communities and systems. Through these partnerships, NCPC helps shape policies and practices that benefit young children while ensuring the Smart Start Network remains aware and connected to evidence-based, effective tools and strategies.

Our efforts include:



Smart Start expanded Smart Solutions and explored new ways for Local Partnerships to support a Safe Babies Court and its broader launch. Safe Babies Court is a specialized, collaborative approach to the child welfare system designed to improve outcomes for infants and toddlers (birth to age three, and sometimes older) who have been removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect.

By engaging at the state level, NCPC amplifies its impact, drives system-level changes, ensures local Smart Start partners have access to resources and tools, and supports better outcomes for children and families across North Carolina.



NCPC partnered with the DHHS Division of Child and Family Well-Being to align data collection and support a new cross-agency governance structure for Positive Parenting Program (Triple P). Triple P provides flexible parenting support and practical strategies to strengthen family relationships.

Highlighting Collective Impact: Smart Start Month

In September 2024, NCPC led the statewide recognition of the first Smart Start Month. Governor Roy Cooper issued an official proclamation, and NCPC developed a toolkit to help Local Partnerships share stories, engage communities, recruit families, and highlight the importance of early childhood. This initiative amplifies Smart Start's visibility and reinforces the Network's collective impact.



Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL)

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is an early literacy program that mails age-appropriate books monthly to registered children from birth to age 5.

By June 2025, Smart Start delivered more than **25 million books to children across the state**. This success demonstrates how Smart Start can administer and manage large-scale initiatives while maintaining high-quality, community-specific support.



State funding has been a critical component of this work. The North Carolina General Assembly currently provides **\$7 million annually, plus \$1.5 million in nonrecurring funds for FY 2023–2025**. In 2025, state funding reached its capacity due to Smart Start outreach and recruitment efforts. As a result, in February 2025, the Network temporarily

closed new registrations for state-sponsored accounts to ensure every enrolled child continues to receive books.

Smart Start remains committed to early literacy through a combination of state support, local leadership, and private investment. Smart Start Local Partnerships are continuing to promote literacy to families and are working in the community to raise private funds for DPIL to expand enrollment locally.


★ When statewide enrollment for DPIL reached capacity, **Smart Start of Brunswick County** responded by creating a local account and raising money in their county to keep registration open. With Brunswick County's efforts, new families who live in the county can still access the program. Now 1,000 more children are receiving books each month!



Subsidy Funding and Scholarships

In FY 24-25, Smart Start contributed **\$64.68 million** in 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.



Smart Start of Davidson County (SSDC) highlights the impact of its Child Care Scholarship program through one parent's story: "I became a single mother of 3 unexpectedly, and thanks to getting on the SSDC Child Care Scholarship program, I was able to get reliable job that benefits me and my children. I moved into our apartment, and they started their new daycares. It has truly helped me be able to afford daycare for them and still be able to put a roof over our heads."



The Partnership for Children of Cumberland County's Parents for Higher Education program provides financial assistance for to parents who meet specific eligibility criteria. One parent shared, "Balancing work, school, and parenting felt like an impossible juggling act. My dream had always been to earn my nursing degree, but with my kids depending on me, that dream seemed out of reach. That all changed when I received the Parents for Higher Education grant. It wasn't just money—it was hope."





Strengthening Communities Through Collaboration

Across North Carolina, Local Partnerships bring together public agencies, nonprofits, businesses, and families to address complex challenges, close service gaps, and strengthen the early childhood system.





Community Collaboration in Action:

Iredell County Partnership for Children collaborated with the Statesville Chamber of Commerce to host a Child Care Crisis Summit, **educating the community about challenges in accessing affordable, high-quality care.** The event highlighted statewide initiatives—subsidy increases, stabilization grants, improved provider compensation, and streamlined regulations—alongside local strategies to expand access, support families, and strengthen providers.

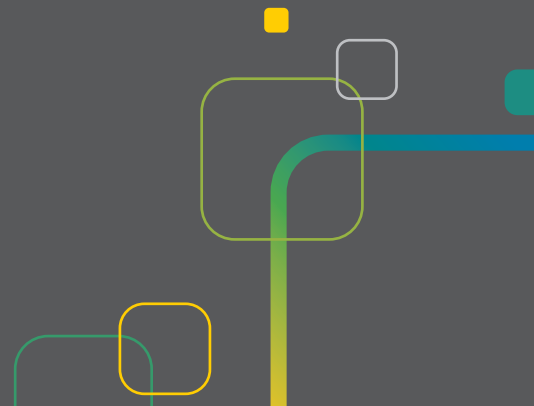


Smart Start of Davie County partners with a variety of community agencies, including the Davie County Senior Center (intergenerational events), the Davie County Public Library

(playgroups), Davie County Recreation and Parks (Storybook Trail), the Downtown Merchants Association, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Davie County Sheriff's Department (Public Safety Day). It brings together more than 25 child-serving agencies to host KidsFest, a free annual event reaching over 800 children and families, made possible through grants from multiple partners.

Franklin-Granville-Vance Smart Start co-founded the Prevention and Thrive Team (PATT) with local health and safety partners to prevent youth violence, address social determinants of health, and meet community needs. The team now includes 30+ partners across sectors.

Catawba County Partnership for Children launched the RISE Resilience Center to support families impacted by trauma. In collaboration with DSS, Public Health, and other partners, it offers trauma-informed playgroups, parent education classes, and caregiver-child support while convening quarterly partners such as early educators, healthcare workers, and housing advocates to promote school readiness.





Stronger Together: Supporting Communities After Hurricane Helene

In September 2024, Hurricane Helene devastated western North Carolina, leaving families, child care programs, and entire communities reeling. Smart Start's statewide network and local connections allowed it to respond immediately, serving as community hubs, distributing resources, and supporting recovery.

Local Partnerships mobilized quickly, securing over **\$5 million in private donations and additional in-kind resources** to meet urgent needs. Smart Start also supported providers in applying for aid and shared mental health resources to address both practical and emotional recovery. This is in addition to NCPC securing additional funding and in-kind donations to support affected counties.

Recognizing child care as critical infrastructure, the NC General Assembly allocated **\$10 million in Hurricane Helene relief** to be distributed by Smart Start Partnerships in the hardest-hit counties.

Thirteen Local Partnerships have since:

- ✓ Repaired and replaced storm damages not covered elsewhere
- ✓ Compensated providers for lost revenue
- ✓ Supported staff to maintain operations
- ✓ Helped centers serving 4,500+ children reopen and remain open

These actions reopened child care, allowing children to learn safely and parents to work, stabilizing families and the economy.

Hurricane Helene reaffirmed Smart Start's role in supporting child development, family stability, and community resilience in times of crisis and beyond.



Blue Ridge Partnership for Children provided critical support to child care programs affected by Hurricane Helene in Avery, Mitchell, and Yancey counties. Twenty-two licensed centers and three unlicensed programs faced closures due to structural damages, intensive flooding, and critical infrastructure failures such as municipal power and water systems. Most centers were closed for weeks, with two centers unable to reopen for four months. Through coordination of volunteers, emergency funding, and in-kind support—including \$1.3 million distributed for hurricane recovery—centers replaced lost furnishings, repaired HVAC systems and outdoor play areas, and recovered lost revenue, reopening to continue their nurturing care for the impacted children and families in their community.



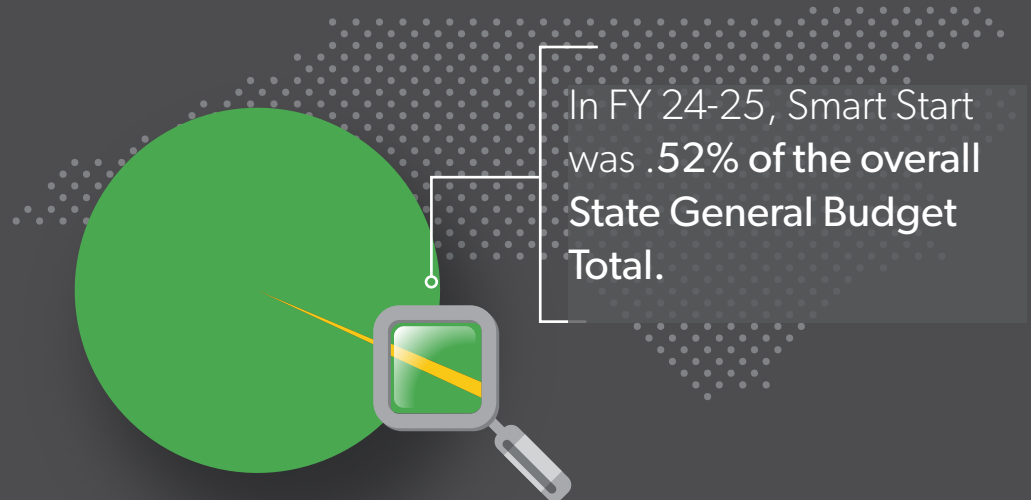
Partnership for Ashe supports families facing financial stress by providing essential resources. In 2024, the Partnership organized community-wide diaper drives, ensuring that children in need after Hurricane Helene had access to this basic necessity.



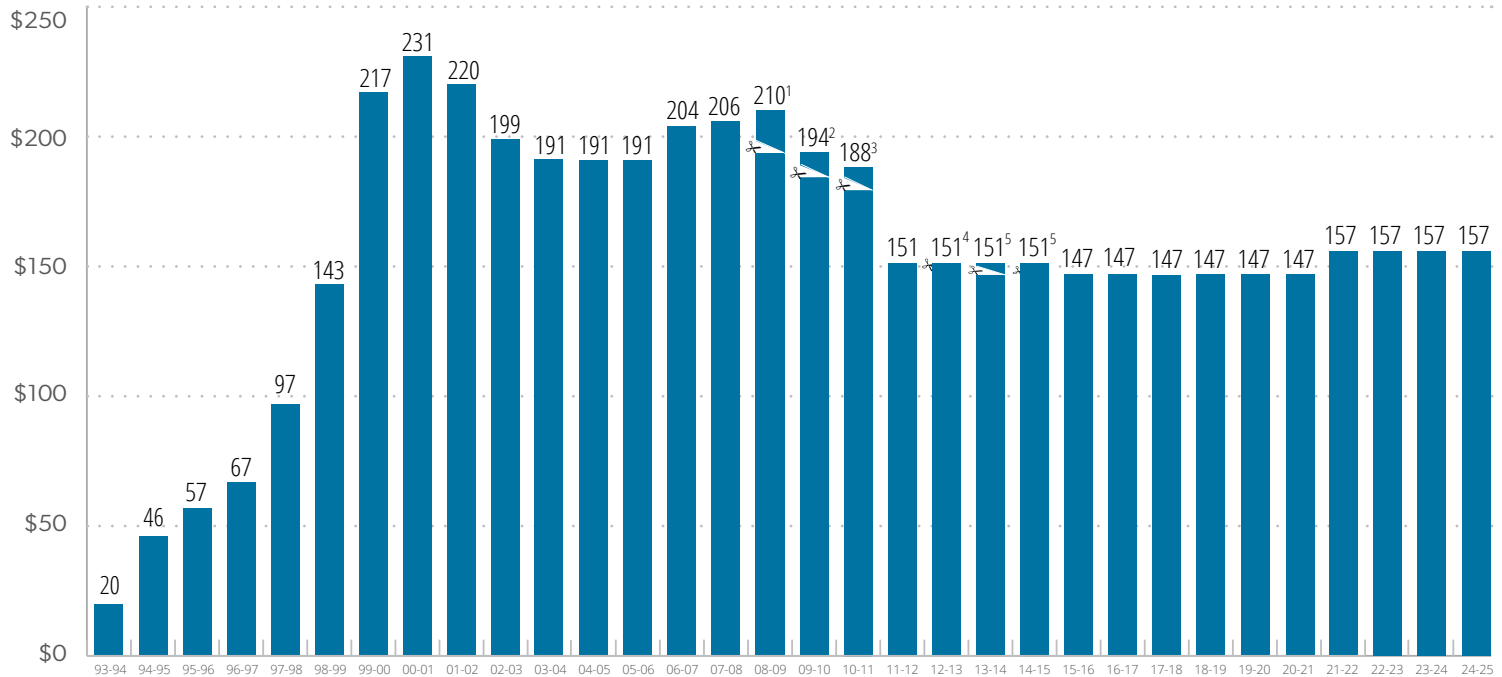
Fiscal Year 2024-2025 At a Glance

Smart Start has represented North Carolina's commitment to giving every child the best start in life. Over three decades, funding has grown and shifted in response to changing state priorities and economic conditions.

In FY2001-2002, Smart Start's budget was 2.1% of the overall State General Budget Total.



Smart Start General Appropriation History



¹ One-time budget reduction of \$16M reduced available 08-09 budget to \$194M

² One-time budget reduction of \$7M reduced available 09-10 budget to \$187M

³ One-time budget reduction of \$6M reduced available 10-11 budget to \$182M

⁴ One-time budget reduction of \$1M reduced available 12-13 budget to \$150M

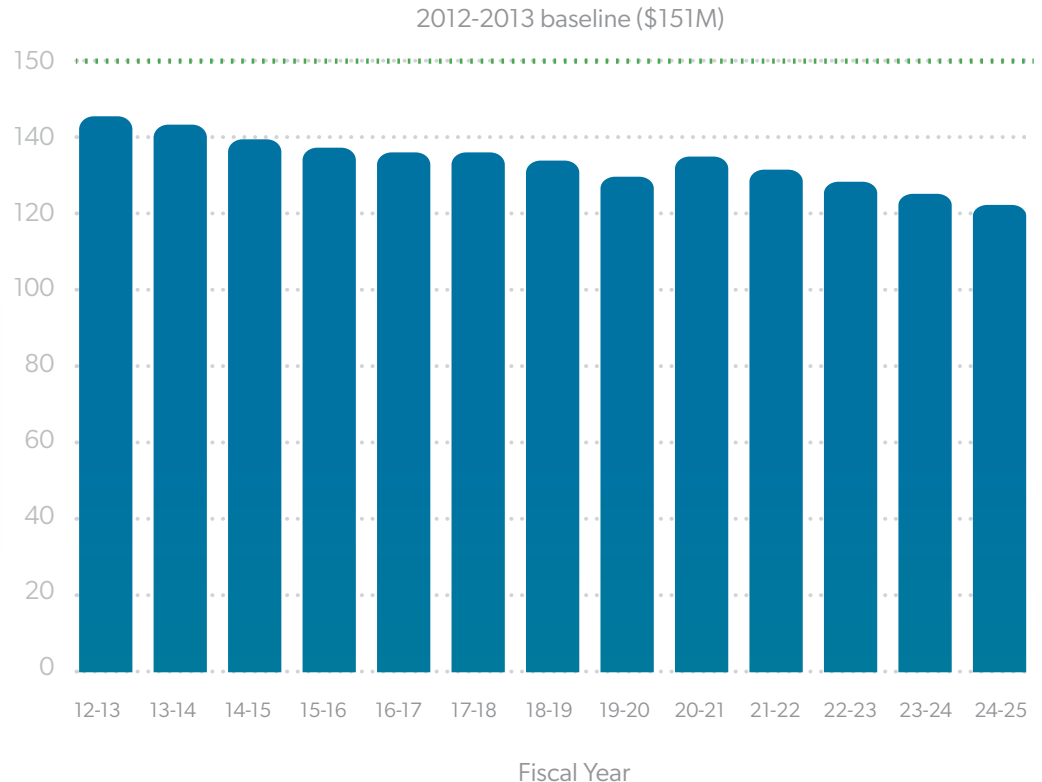
⁵ Recurring budget reduction of \$3.7M reduced available 13-15 budget to \$147.3M

Funding grew through the early 2000s, particularly as Smart Start expanded to serve every county. After the recession, funding leveled off and has remained stable for more than a decade. Today, Smart Start's state appropriation totals **\$157 million for FY 2024–2025**.

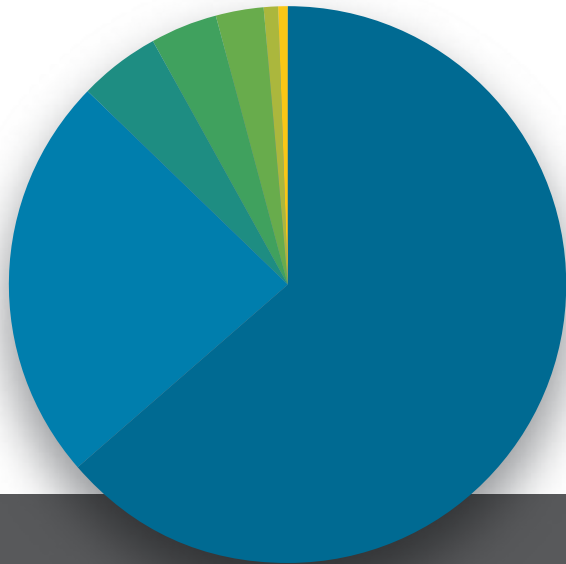
Although nominal funding has remained fairly consistent, Smart Start's purchasing power has declined over time. **What was \$151 million in FY 23-24 is equivalent to about \$123 million dollars in FY 24-25—a 20% decrease in real value.**

Despite these shifts, Smart Start continues to maximize every dollar, ensuring that children, families, and communities across North Carolina continue to benefit from essential early childhood supports.

The Estimated Buying Power of Appropriated Funds Since FY 2012-13



NCPC Managed FY 24-25 Expenditures for Smart Start and Other Funds



Smart Start Activities, including WAGE\$	\$112.0M
Smart Start Subsidy Set Aside, via DCDEE	\$41.6M
DPIL	\$8.3M
NCPC Operations	\$7.0M
Other Government Grants	\$4.8M
Private Donor Restricted	\$1.5M
Private Smart Start Conf and Other	\$0.6M

Private Investments to Support the Public Goal

In FY 24-25 fiscal year, NCPC and Local Partnerships leveraged an additional \$63.85 million for the state's young children in federal, local, and private funds.



\$63.85 million
in cash contributions



\$7.26 million
from in-kind contributions

Of this amount, NCPC contributed **\$1.6 million** from cash contributions and **\$83,543** from in-kind contributions.

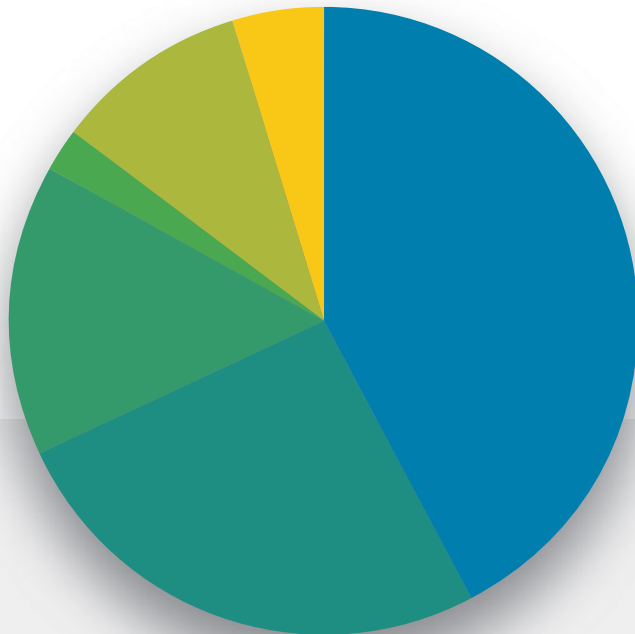
NCPC Invested in Capacity Building and Administration:

NCPC invested **\$6.98 million in capacity building and administrative support**, supporting Local Partnerships' sustainability and effectiveness.

Smart Start Priority Area Expenditures:

FY 24-25 Total Expenditures with Smart Start Funding:

Local Partnerships Invested over \$150 million into communities.



Child Care Subsidy Investments***	\$64.68M
Early Care and Education Investments*	\$38.86M
Family Support Investments	\$22.78M
Health-related Investments	\$3.37M
Administration	\$14.84M
Program Support**	\$7.17M

***Early Care and Education Investments:** This includes services such as technical assistance and professional development supplements. This includes \$10.9M in WAGE\$ salary supplements for early care professionals.

****Program Support:** Program Support includes program planning such as conducting community needs assessments, strategic planning and researching evidence for effective program selection, as well as

coordination activities such as technical assistance and oversight to service providers and evaluation and data collection of programs, and more.

*****Child Care Subsidies:** Of the \$64.68M, \$41.6M is managed by Smart Start in coordination with DCDEE. The remainder of these expenditures are direct investments by Local Partnerships in subsidy with allocated Smart Start funds.

Family Support Investments:

Local Partnerships invested **\$22.78 million** in family support programs and services, helping parents build strong foundations for their children.

Community Outreach and System Building

\$7.81M

Community Outreach

Connecting with people in a community by listening to their needs, sharing information about available services or programs, and building relationships and trust.

Systems Building

Longer-term efforts to change how organizations, policies, and services work together to address community solutions for positive early childhood outcomes.

Home Visiting

\$6.52M

Home visiting programs offer a variety of in-home assessment and family-focused services to expectant parents and families with new babies and young children to promote infant, maternal, and child health; safe home environments; and access to services.

Parent Education

\$5.05M

Parent education programs empower parents by increasing their knowledge of early childhood development and positive parenting practices.

Early Literacy

\$1.89M

Programs to develop and promote emergent literacy skills of children by encouraging family book sharing and other reading strategies.

Other Family Support Expenditures

\$1.51M

This includes services that ensure families with children 0-5 are safe and healthy and have the opportunity for educational attainment and advancement. This also includes time-limited support to help families in times of crisis.



Early Care and Education Investments:

Local Partnerships invested over **\$103 million** in early care and education

Subsidy	\$64.68M
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Subsidy aims to help families afford child care and remain in the workforce.

Accessibility Initiatives	\$8.01M
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These services aim to improve access to early childhood education and resources for families and children.

Affordability Initiatives	\$11.91M
----------------------------------	-----------------

These services help reduce financial barriers for families and providers.

Quality Initiatives	\$18.94M
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These services focus on improving the quality of care, education, and health in early childhood settings.

Child, Family, and Community Health Investments

Local Partnerships invested **\$3.37 million** on health programs and services.

Prenatal/Newborn Services	\$1.48M
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Health care and support services provided to expectant mothers and their babies, from the start of pregnancy through birth and the first few months of a child's life.

Early Intervention Services	\$1.04M
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Supports and services for families and their children, birth to five, who have special needs.

Other Health Expenditures	\$0.85M
----------------------------------	----------------

Health care and support services provided to parents/ caregivers and their children, from birth to five years old. This includes efforts to increase health care access and support, providing quality health services, and providing oral health services.



Investments in Action: Stories of Impact



Enhancing Child Care Quality

Wake Smart Start provided **technical assistance** to a new child care director who had never worked in child care or supervised staff before. Through ongoing guidance and coaching, she gained skills and confidence in leadership, curriculum, staff morale, and state licensing compliance. She transformed into a confident director, implemented positive classroom changes, and expanded the center by acquiring and renovating another building—increasing access to high-quality early care in her community.

Supporting Early Literacy

Chatham County Partnership for Children decided to bring *Raising a Reader* into **Kaleidoscope Play and Learn (KPL)** groups to increase access to early literacy for children not enrolled in child care. By adding weekly book rotations into KPL, families could experience the benefits of high-quality books. One parent shared that her child, who has a language delay, has already learned new words from the books they've been reading together!

Supporting the Workforce

The **Cabarrus Partnership for Children** funds the Early Education Liaison Program at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College. A student who had faced a setback in her associate's degree due to financial aid probation received academic guidance and financial support through the program. With this **advising to support higher education**, she is on track to graduate!

Increasing Access to Child Care

The **Chatham County Partnership for Children** supports Mrs. Smith through the **Child Care Subsidy Program**. Through a full-time voucher, Mrs. Smith has been able to work full-time and take the next steps in her educational journey as she enrolls in nursing school. With the help of the voucher, she will be able to further her education and ultimately gain new career opportunities and achieve financial stability.

Partnering with Families

Richmond County Partnership for Children provided hands-on **technical assistance, coaching, and professional development** to a local child care center that was at risk of closure. Through weekly visits, teachers refined lesson plans, created engaging learning centers, and strengthened language-rich interactions. Within six months, the center earned a 3-Star license, retained families, increased enrollment, boosted teacher confidence, and helped children make measurable progress, while the director became a peer mentor!





Partnering with Families

The Alamance County Partnership for Children provided **Triple P (Positive Parenting Program)**, connecting a mother with resources that strengthened her family. Through this support, Smart Start helped her enroll her child in speech therapy and submit a NC Pre-K application. Inspired by these connections, she also enrolled in community college, setting her family on a path to thrive.

Enhancing Health by Supporting Families

The Children's Council of Watauga County supports families through privately funded programs like the **Postpartum Support Group**, **Babes on Blankets** parent meetups, and the Maternal Mental Health Scholarship. One mother shared that the scholarship eased her anxiety about therapy, connected her with a caring therapist, helped her feel less isolated, manage daily challenges, and strengthen her marriage.

In Johnston County, a child with multiple special needs needed a car seat that fit her growing size and health requirements. With help from private donors and **Safe Kids Western NC, a Certified Child Passenger Safety Technician** worked with the **Partnership for Children of Johnston County** to provide a new adaptive car seat, ensuring the child's safety and giving the mother peace of mind.

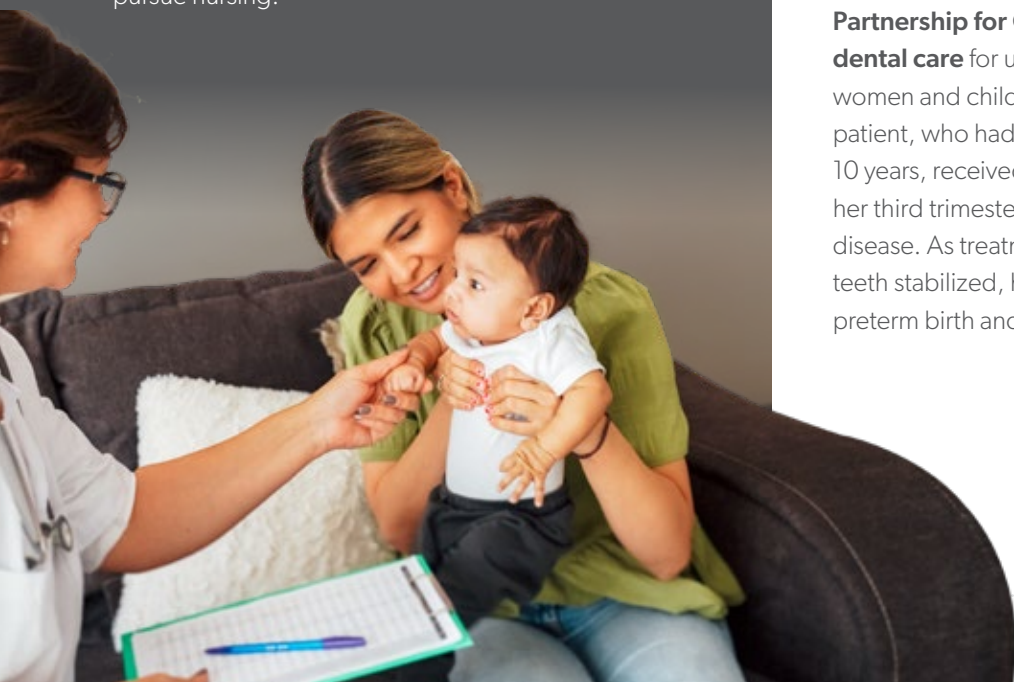
Supporting Early Literacy

Anson County Partnership for Children brings **Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL)** to families like the Joneses, who live in a rural area with limited internet and few books. With parents working opposite shifts and tight finances, books weren't always possible—until participation in DPIL. The family began a monthly "reading night" with dinner—filled with joy, learning, and lasting family connections.



Providing Health Support through Home Visits

Smart Start of Mecklenburg County connects families to programs like the **Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP)**, which provides first-time moms with regular home visits from a nurse from pregnancy through the child's second birthday. One teen mother, initially unsure how to navigate pregnancy and parenthood, received guidance on pregnancy, childbirth, and her child's development. With her nurse's support, she became more confident in parenting, graduated high school early, and plans to pursue nursing.



The Partnership for Children of Wayne County delivers **Parents as Teachers (PAT)**, a **home visiting program** that equips families with child development knowledge, screenings, and connections to community resources. One mother, experiencing homelessness and worried about her child's delayed development, received consistent support from a PAT educator. With tailored strategies and housing resources, she secured stable housing, gained confidence, and watched her child make progress—showcasing how PAT strengthens families and helps children reach their full potential.

Enhancing Oral Health Care

The Cabarrus Oral Health Services Program, funded by the **Cabarrus Partnership for Children**, provides **dental care** for uninsured pregnant women and children under 5. One recent patient, who hadn't seen a dentist in over 10 years, received deep cleanings during her third trimester to treat moderate gum disease. As treatment progressed, her teeth stabilized, helping reduce risks of preterm birth and low birth weight.



Partnering with Families

The **Stokes Partnership for Children** implemented **Nurturing Parenting Program (NPP)**, a prevention-treatment program for families referred by the Department of Social Services. One participant initially struggled, missing lessons and responding minimally. With support from her Parent Educator, she became engaged, set goals, and advanced professionally. Through NPP, she built positive parenting skills and stability for her family.

Providing Health Support through Home Visits

The **Anson County Partnership for Children** helps young parents continue their education, build job skills, and improve parenting abilities through the **Adolescent Parenting Program (APP)**, a home visiting program that supports teens. One participant, just 14 at enrollment, faced housing instability and health complications during pregnancy. With support from APP and local partners, she safely delivered her baby, reconnected with school, and gained access to stable housing and employment opportunities.

Partnering with Families

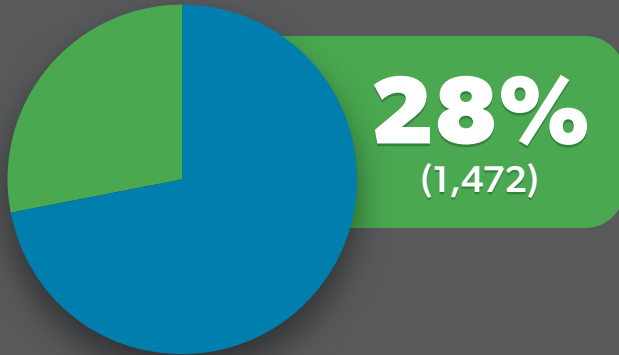
New Hanover County Smart Start's Circle

of Parents group helps families connect while children play in a safe, supportive environment.

One mother brought her 3-year-old, who struggled with separation anxiety. Through regular attendance, her child gradually grew more comfortable spending time away from mom, playing with peers, and engaging with staff. Meanwhile, mom gained peace of mind knowing her child was safe and cared for—showing how Circle of Parents strengthens both children and families in unexpected ways.



Investments in Action: Smart Start by the Numbers



28%
(1,472)

of North Carolina's child care programs participated in Smart Solutions that enhanced teacher knowledge and teacher-child interactions.

392
child care programs

participated in at least one Smart Solution to enhance health and safety, **an increase from 365 from last FY!**

41 of those programs received more than one Smart Solution support from Smart Start—an increase from 29 from last FY!

Smart Start Programs and Services that Enhance Quality: Focusing on Health & Safety

Smart Solutions	Number of child care programs served:
Child Care Health Consultants (CCHC)	293
Nutrition and Physical Activity Self-Assessment for Child Care (Go NAPSACC)	88
Preschool Outdoor Environment Measurement Scale (POEMS)	27
Programs in Collaboration with NC Extension (Farm to ECE & Color Me Healthy)	26

Workforce Development

15,000

teachers received support with higher education and training statewide.



14,448 teachers received early care and education training



13 child care staff members received early care and education mentoring



582 child care staff received higher education advising



356 child care staff attended a college course

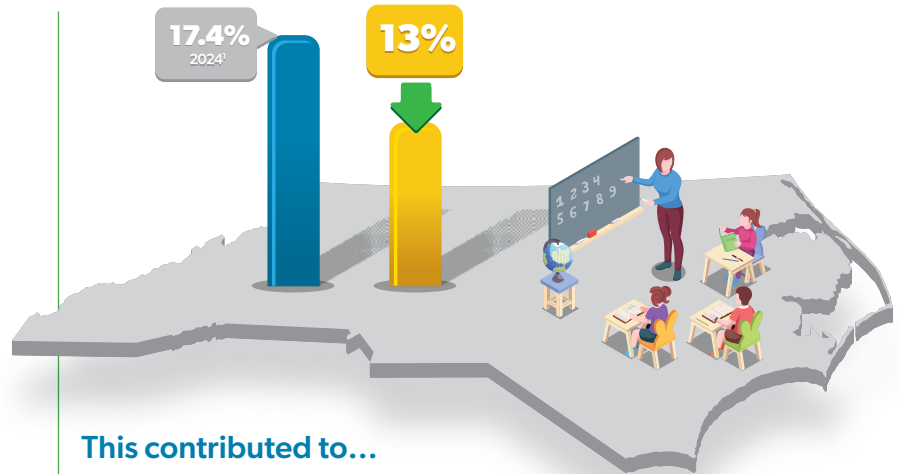
Among teachers who received support or advising to navigate higher education, **79.7%** earned a **B or better** in their courses.



Workforce Compensation

4,075
participants

received compensation support statewide through WAGE\$.



This contributed to...

A **reduced turnover rate of 13%** for teachers receiving this compensation. Over **82% of supported teachers** remained in their roles. Last FY for teachers receiving this support from Smart Start, the turnover rate was 17.4%.

The overall statewide turnover rate for all teachers, regardless of if they received WAGE\$, **was 38% in 2023**—showing the impact of WAGE\$ and Smart Start on workforce development.*

*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>

Partnering with North Carolina Families

One-on-One Support

One-on-One Support strengthens the relationship between parents and their children through individualized guidance. One-on-one support includes home visits, coaching, and personalized resource connections

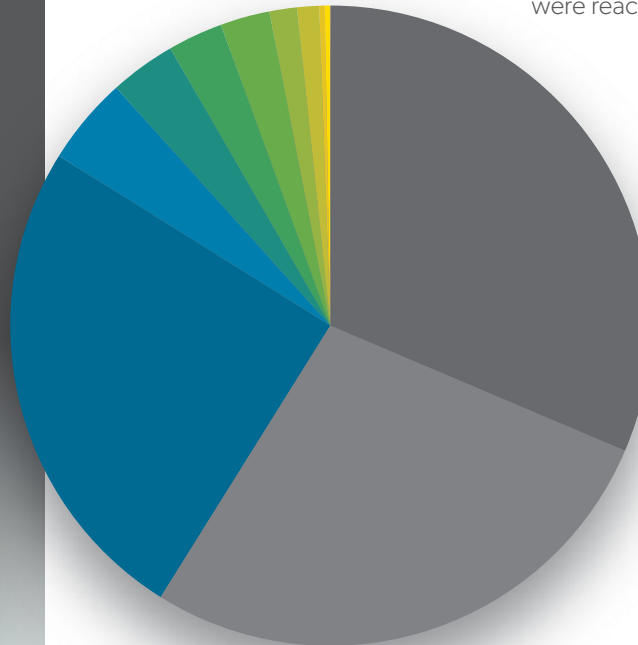













44

Local Partnerships

provided family support through one-on-one support.

Over 4,400 parents and guardians were reached through these initiatives!



Family Support Solutions Implemented by Smart Start Local Partnerships in One-on-One Settings		Participating Parents/ Guardians
	Family Connects	1,928
	Family Navigation	1,686
	Parents as Teachers (PAT)	1,543
	Nurse Family Partnership (NFP)	264
	Positive Parenting Program (Triple P) Level 2 Brief Primary Care	207
	Positive Parenting Program (Triple P) Level 3 Primary Care	168
	Nurturing Parenting Program (NPP) - Parents and their Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers - Home Based	165
	Positive Parenting Program (Triple P) Level 4 Standard	89
	Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY)	55
	Healthy Families America (HFA)	27
	Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-Up (ABC)	5

Parents as Teachers

29 Smart Start Local Partnerships invested in Parents and Teachers (PAT), supporting **1,543 parents and guardians**.

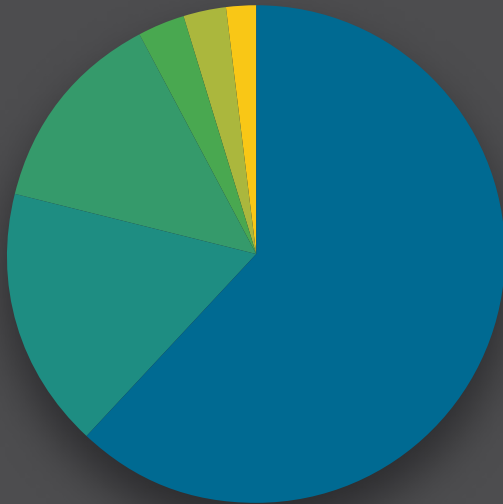
 Pre-Test  Post-Test



* Average Pre/Post Tests completed by 262 parents

Group Support

Group Support enhances parent child interactions and builds social connections among families. Group support includes parent-child playgroups and mental/emotional parent-to-parent support.



54







Local Partnerships

provided family support through group settings.

Over 4,700 parents and 3,300 children were reached through these initiatives!

Family Support Solutions Implemented by Smart Start Local Partnerships in Group Settings

Participating Parents/
Guardians

	Kaleidoscope Play & Learn (KPL)	2,997
	Triple P Level 2-4	817
	Circle of Parents	646
	Nurturing Parenting Program (NPP) - Nurturing Skills for Families	149
	Nurturing Parenting Program (NPP) - Parents and their Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers - Group Sessions	133
	Incredible Years (IY) - Preschool	88





Kaleidoscope Play & Learn (KPL) Partners with Families in Group Settings

30 Local Partnerships invested in *Kaleidoscope Play & Learn (KPL)* to strengthen early learning through shared play, partnering with **2,997 parents and caregivers**.

Kaleidoscope Play & Learn Enhances Parent-Child Interactions:

The Kaleidoscope Play & Learn Caregiver Feedback Form showed an increase among the 742 parents responding, doing either “a lot more” or “a little more” of the following when interacting with children:

Understanding what to expect from children at different ages:



Giving children opportunities to learn and try new things:



Talking to or sharing ideas about caring for children with another adult:






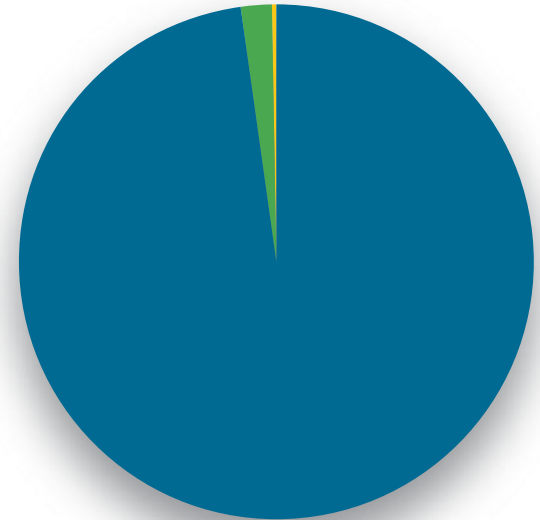
Promoting and Strengthening Early Literacy

Access to Books and Literacy Education

Literacy Programs Implemented by Smart Start Local Partnerships

Participating Children

	Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL)	253,257
	Raising a Reader (RAR)	5,280
	Motheread/Fatheread	266








DPIL Impact

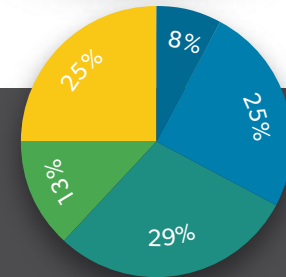
Nearly **17,000 families** currently receiving books from DPIL responded to the annual survey this year, representing over **37,350 children** across the state.

43.3% of families indicated they wouldn't be able to purchase the same number of books as provided by DPIL.

Percentage of participants who wouldn't be able to purchase books without DPIL, identified by education level:

-  Less than High School
-  High School Graduate
-  Some college (no degree completed)

-  2 year degree
-  4 year degree and postgraduate



DPIL and RAR Impact on Reading Frequency

Smart Start offers early literacy solutions that promote parent and child shared reading time.

Raising a Reader (RAR)

When asked how often their child looks at books per week, **1,388 parents** reported an average of the following:

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL)

Parents who participated in DPIL for any length of time reported an increase in reading to their children daily from **44%** before they began receiving books to **67%** after participating in DPIL. This improvement applies to families who had received books for years as well as those who had just received their first book.

Self-Reported Rate of Reading between a Parent and their Child Before and After Participating in DPIL:

Less than High School	Improved from 18% to 42%
High School Graduate	Improved from 22% to 49%
Some college (no degree completed)	Improved from 27% to 56%
2 year degree	Improved from 31% to 56%
4 year degree and postgraduate	Improved from 51% to 74%



Advancing Child, Family, and Community Health

22
Local Partnerships

invested in Smart Solutions that enhanced health outcomes.

13 Local Partnerships implemented Child Passenger Safety via Safe Kids Coalition.



1,219 families

received support across North Carolina

Top 3 Child, Family, and Community Health Solutions

of LPs implementing

Child Passenger Safety via Safe Kids Coalition	13
Psychological and Mental Health Services	5
Assuring Better Child Health and Development (ABCD)	4



700

safe car seats were provided through Smart Start funding

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

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

