

Ensuring a Strong Foundation for Early Care and Education

Smart Start improves the quality of early learning practices and environments for children by offering professional development, technical assistance, and other support to teachers and directors. In North Carolina, licensed child care centers and homes have star ratings between 1 and 5 stars, with 5 stars being the highest. During the pandemic, the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) paused assessments for star ratings due to safety concerns, and in 2022-2023, many centers and homes have not yet received a star level assessment.

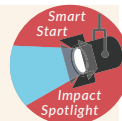
The Smart Start Network continues to improve the landscape of early care and education in the pandemic's aftermath regardless of these delays in assessments. In the past year, 1,654 child care facilities or 28% of all North Carolina's facilities participated in Smart Start technical assistance to improve child care quality.

1,102 child care facilities received teacher support in the form of technical assistance, mentoring, and education to increase star ratings.

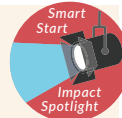
The Smart Start Network found innovative ways to continue to support providers as the state recovers from the pandemic. Local Partnerships helped providers access needed supplies and stay up-to-date on health and safety regulations. The Network also provided support for providers seeking financial assistance.



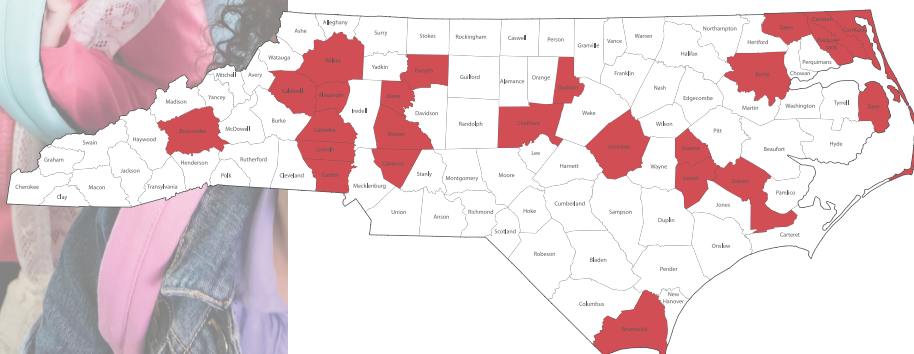
Albemarle Alliance for Children and Families raised the quality of early care and education in Bertie, Camden, Currituck, Gates, and Pasquotank Counties through technical assistance. Because of this support, three new child care facilities opened their doors and three more moved from provisional status to a 3-star rating!



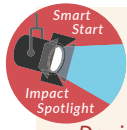
Cabarrus Partnership for Children assisted child care teachers in creating nurturing classroom environments through the support of an Education Specialist that provided technical assistance. The Education Specialist supported teachers in decluttering and restructuring their space for a better classroom environment, and teacher classroom management improved!!



Spotlights on:



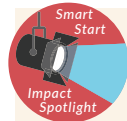
Smart Start works to create a strong foundation for programs and services to achieve successful outcomes, recruit and retain educated and qualified teachers, promote physical health and activity, and engage families. NCPC works with statewide partners to ensure the latest research and evidence-based and evidence-informed programs are offered across the state, while Local Partnerships work directly with early learning sites in each county to support teachers and ensure high-quality. Smart Start also works to bring together communities to support early education. This goes beyond working with individual centers and homes to ensuring positive transitions for children to kindergarten and raising local awareness about how critical early education is to economic development.



Smart Start of Davie County shared information on how child care is impacting the workforce with the Davie County Chamber of Commerce. After learning about the number of children on child care waitlists, one local business leader shared that they have realized the need to be more flexible with work schedules to accommodate employees who have child care issues.

Infrastructure Support for NC Pre-K

The NC Pre-K Program is designed to provide 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. Across the state, Smart Start Local Partnerships help provide the infrastructure that supports NC Pre-K.



Smart Start of Forsyth County used American Rescue Plan Act funds to champion the cause of a Pre-K Priority coalition for the school years of 2023-2024 and 2024-2025. This collaborative venture aims to transition kids seamlessly into kindergarten within 30 Pre-K classrooms. With services ranging from coaching to family engagement and professional development, participating children are expected to witness remarkable growth, particularly in reading and math proficiency.

Smart Start 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 \$8,193,401 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.

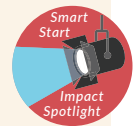
Because there is local flexibility in how NC Pre-K is administered, Smart Start can support the program in ways that best meet the needs of families and school systems.



Smart Start of Brunswick County recognized a growing number of Spanish-speaking children and families in NC Pre-K. To foster effective communication and gather more accurate data, they onboarded a skilled bilingual volunteer. This dedicated individual visited multiple child care sites, interacting with children and gathering essential insights into their development. There was improved engagement from the children, enhanced assessment results, and strengthened trust and rapport between families and staff.

A Value-Add to Subsidy Funding – Supporting Both Children and Parents

Child care subsidies provide financial assistance to help children and families access early care and education. Subsidy funds ensure that parents can enter or remain in the workforce, gain skills, work through times of crisis, and address the special needs of their children.



Rowan Smart Start provided subsidy funds through a Star License Enhancement Program to increase quality of early learning for children in Rowan County. With the funds provided to a family child care home provider, the director was able to purchase books and other supplies to add to a bookmobile to promote a love of learning and parent-child engagement in literacy.

The Smart Start Network manages over \$65 million in subsidy funds locally to boost early education effectiveness while increasing access for children who are most under-resourced. NCPC supports subsidy innovation by sharing successes and best practices across the Network.



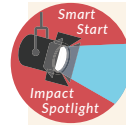
Some Local Partnerships also have scholarship funds that they provide to children and families to increase access to quality care and education.



Durham's Partnership for Children used the *Child Care Scholarship program in collaboration with Child Care Services Association (CCSA) to provide financial assistance to 665 children across Durham County. This funding facilitated families' participation in high-quality child care.*

Coaching for Technical Assistants

Technical assistants are essential early childhood professionals who work with teachers and caregivers in early learning sites, ensuring educators have the tools, resources and support they need to provide high-quality care and early learning.



Chatham County Partnership for Children recognized a *communication barrier with a non-verbal toddler in a family child care program. By introducing a Technical Assistant specialist fluent in sign language, the previously non-verbal child was able to communicate using signs!*

Coaching for Technical Assistants is a Smart Start Initiative that focuses on working with Smart Start Local Partnerships, technical assistance providers, and early learning programs to implement best practices.

This initiative aims to expand coaching and professional supports for technical assistants in the Smart Start Network, providing coaching and consultation to providers towards implementation of healthy best practices in early care and education settings.

The Initiative includes resource creation, the development of a technical assistant resource repository, and the creation of professional



development and training opportunities to enhance teacher practice and effectiveness, as identified as needed by the Smart Start Network.

Coaching for Technical Assistants focuses on creating connections between peers and creating well-being and skill building opportunities. Peer support is critical for ensuring technical assistants can effectively support child care providers. NCPC offered peer support through a Smart Start Technical Assistant Peer Connection & Well-Being Community of Practice to professionals. Through this Community of Practice, over 140 technical assistants collaborate around supporting early childhood education! These technical assistants receive needed resources, share valuable stories, and offer critical feedback and support to each other on a regular basis.



Early Care & Education Compensation

The early childhood field is experiencing many challenges, particularly with recruiting and retaining teachers. These challenges have existed for years, but the COVID-19 pandemic shone a bright light on the workforce crisis, with centers struggling to find and retain qualified caregivers.

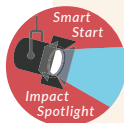
Many early childhood professionals receive wages that are not nearly enough to make ends meet. North Carolina early education teachers make an average of \$12 per hour. Many professionals do not have access to health insurance or other benefits, and early education teachers are seven times more likely to live in poverty than public school teachers.

The Smart Start Network has successfully implemented strategies to improve recruitment, retention, and workforce development for professionals throughout the state. One way Smart Start increases workforce retention is through supplemental compensation through scholarships and incentives.



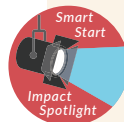
The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® North Carolina Scholarship Program and The Child Care WAGE\$® Program, which provides education-based salary supplements to teachers, are implemented in collaboration with Child Care Services Association (CCSA) to support teachers.

The Partnership for Children of Johnston County supported a teacher with 30 years



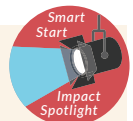
of experience in her educational journey. The Partnership provided her with a laptop, professional development planning, and enrolled her in a program to receive funding for continuing her education. She has completed the Infant, Toddler, and Two's Certificate at Johnston Community College!

Children & Youth Partnership for Dare County forged a collaborative relationship



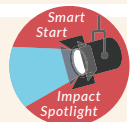
with the local Community College to elevate educational standards of child care professionals. Participants receive application and enrollment support, scholarships, and incentives. Through this program, a family child care home provider enrolled and earned an A in a course and is now working on earning a 5-star license and an Early Childhood Certificate!

The Partnership for Children of Lincoln & Gaston Counties used



WAGE\$ to financially reward child care professionals taking college classes. Because of additional funding, a teacher was able to complete her Associate's in Early Childhood and is progressing towards a Bachelor's degree.

Caldwell County Smart Start



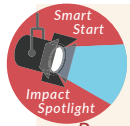
directed an assistant NC Pre-K teacher to needed resources after she lost her financial aid. After earning her degree, she then used Child Care WAGE\$ and the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Scholarship to obtain a bachelor's degree. Through these resources, she was able to earn her degree without financial instability holding her back!

In 2022-2023, 4,534 child care teachers received an education-based salary supplement. Of these teachers, over 84% remained in their positions throughout the year!

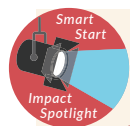


Engaging Early Childhood Champions

Local Partnerships are also taking innovative approaches to support early learning through private funding, beyond fiscal support. Partnership staff serve on county and state early childhood taskforces, support future teachers as early as high school, help open new facilities and homes, and create workforce pipelines to increase teacher recruitment!



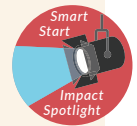
Buncombe Partnership for Children (BPFC) created *The Early Childhood Workforce Development Program*, an 8-week program with 24 hours of pre-service training, guided classroom observations, and other employment requirements with private funding. By offering the program in Spanish, providing meals and child care during training, and stipends for program completion, they have recruited and trained diverse cohorts. Graduates receive support to enroll in an introductory ECE course at a local community college. Staff provide ongoing coaching, access to wage supplement programs, continued training, and higher education support. Graduates have been employed by BPFC as substitutes and are now employed as full-time teachers! The program has been a success for child care providers, new early educators, families in need of child care, and local employers!



The Partnership for Children of Lenoir and Greene Counties championed the Lenoir County Teacher Compensation IDA Initiative, funded by the Lenoir County Board and a \$50,000 ARP grant. The program encourages low to moderate-income early educators in 3 to 5 Star facilities to cultivate saving habits and enhance financial literacy. After committing \$200 and attending financial classes, educators are rewarded with \$1,150 in matching funds. There were 16 graduates in the first year!

Catawba County Partnership for Children launched the R.A.I.S.E.

(Recognizing And Investing in Supporting Early Educators) Task Force with community partners to develop creative ways to increase the number of early childhood teachers. R.A.I.S.E. created the *Early Childhood Academy* in collaboration with **Alexander County Partnership for Children and Catawba Valley Community College**, a 2-week, 32-hour opportunity for potential new teachers to obtain required trainings, plus background checks and fingerprinting, making them eligible for employment in a child care classroom. Participants receive training from local experts and connections to community resources and support networks.

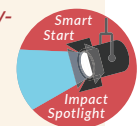


Craven Smart Start has seen a continuing decrease in the number of family child care homes (FCCs), creating a shortage of licensed facilities. Craven Smart Start was awarded a \$20,000 grant from the Harold H. Bate Foundation earlier to fund a project to open three new FCCs. With this funding, they can increase access to quality care and education!



Wilkes Community Partnership for Children participated in a community-wide research project focused on the issue of child care availability. A comprehensive study was carried out by a taskforce through funding by the Leonard G. Herring Family Foundation.

The Partnership's Executive Director served on the child care taskforce and the study's results have laid a foundation for the future of early childhood education.



See Charts and Tables on page 31

Ensuring a Strong Foundation for Early Care and Education

Quality Early Care and Education

28% of all North Carolina child care facilities participated in Smart Start programs to improve child care quality.

1,102 Child care facilities received teacher and classroom support to increase teacher knowledge, teacher-child interactions, and overall quality of care.

This contributed to →

- Facilities that received support and were assessed increasing their average rating from 4.31 to 4.40.*
- The average star rating for child care facilities statewide improving from 2.76 in 2001 to 4.27.



472 child care facilities participated in early care and education programs to enhance health and safety

Early Care and Education Programs Implemented by Smart Start

Smart Start Programs	Number of Child Care Facilities Served
Child Care Health Consultants	318
Nutrition & Physical Self-Assessment for Child Care (NAP SACC)	97
Be Active Kids (BAK)	47
Shape NC	30
Preventing Obesity by Design (POD)	24
POEMS	21
Color Me Healthy	19

This contributed to →

Child Care Health Consultants Increasing Health & Safety in Child Care Facilities

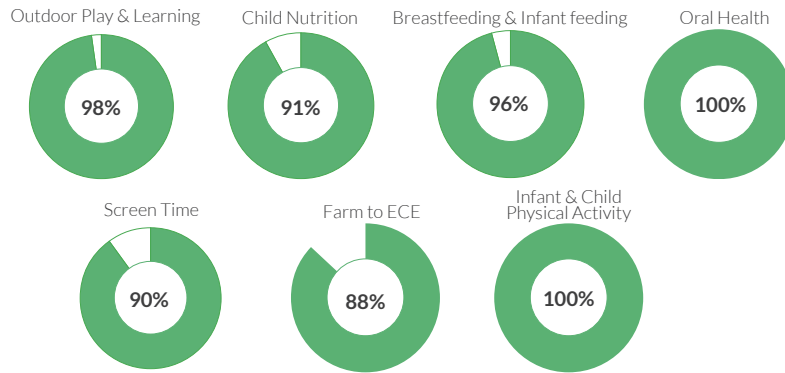
Increased Health and Safety Assessment Tool Results

Assessment Area	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Illness and Infectious Disease	82%	93%
Children with Special Healthcare Needs	68%	90%
Medication Administration	61%	87%
Safety and Injury Prevention: Training, Policy, and Supervision	90%	94%
Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery	82%	95%
Infant and Child Social Emotional Wellbeing	85%	92%
Child Abuse and Neglect	87%	95%
Physical Activity	77%	85%
Nutrition	81%	89%
Oral Health	44%	62%
Environmental Health	95%	97%
Staff Health and Wellness	78%	86%
Policy Development and Implementation	74%	81%

*The results are based on the 187 of the facilities supported by Smart Start that were assessed by DCDEE licensing consultants for Star level for 2022-2023

**Increased GO NAP
SACC Assessment
Results:**

Percentage of child care centers improving in:



Workforce Development

Over 21,000 teachers received support with higher education and training statewide.

- **21,242 teachers** received early care and education training
- **68 child care staff members** received early care and education mentoring
- **1,065 child care staff** received higher education advising
- **501 child care staff** attended a college course

This contributed to →

- Nearly **55% of children** enrolled in 1-5 star centers having at least **75% of their lead teachers** with college degrees
- **71% of children** enrolled in 1-5 Star centers have directors with college degrees
- Almost **74% of the teachers** attending a college course with Smart Start support earning a B or better

Workforce Compensation

Over 4,100 participants received compensation support statewide.

Participants receiving compensation include:	
WAGE\$ Participants	4,134
ECE Professional Development Supplement Participants	241
ECE Health Benefit Recipients	159

This contributed to →

85% of those receiving compensation remained in their position throughout 2023 to provide a consistent caregiver to children.