

History and Organization of Early School Preparation Programs in North Carolina

North Carolina has a strong history of quality initiatives that aim to better prepare preschoolers for kindergarten. These initiatives have a common goal of improving the quality, accessibility and affordability of early education and care in North Carolina, in order to help children succeed in school.

Smart Start Early Childhood Initiative

Smart Start, the state's nationally recognized and award-winning early childhood initiative, was launched in 1993 by then-Governor Jim Hunt. Smart Start's reach extends to all children from ages birth to 5 years in each of the state's 100 counties. Smart Start takes a comprehensive systems approach to ensuring that children arrive at school healthy and ready to succeed: funds are used not only to improve the quality, affordability and accessibility of child care, but also to provide access to health services for preschoolers and offer other family supports, such as literacy and parent skills training. A statewide public-private partnership organization, The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc., distributes state funds to local partnerships covering all 100 counties and provides oversight and technical assistance. Local partnership boards include representatives from the health, social services, K-12 education, community college and university systems, as well as private child care providers and parents. North Carolina's Smart Start initiative is considered nationally to be a successful model for assuring comprehensive services that prepare children for school.

More at Four Pre-Kindergarten Program

The More at Four Pre-Kindergarten Program is the state's targeted early education program for at-risk 4-year-olds. Implemented in 2001 by Governor Mike Easley as a 1,200-child pilot project, the program now serves over 28,000 children in all 100 counties. The program is administered locally, with about half of the programs operated through the public school system and the other half through the local Smart Start Partnerships for Children. More at Four slots can be located in preschools operated by the local public school district or Head Start, or in private child care centers. Eligibility for funds is largely income-driven—children must be from families making less than 75% of the state's median income—with some exceptions for children with special needs, such as disabilities, chronic health problems or limited English proficiency. Children of military families are automatically eligible for enrollment in More at Four. More at Four mandates high quality standards in the programs it funds, which increases the number and affordability of high-quality child care slots for low-income children in the state. The More at Four program has also received national recognition as one of only two state early education programs in the country to meet all ten benchmarks for quality set forth by the National Institute for Early Education Research.¹

More at Four funds cover about half of the cost of an allocated full-day child care slot, so federal, state and local funds must be leveraged to cover the other 50 percent. Some of

this funding comes from Smart Start and the Subsidized Child Care program. Federal funds used to support More at Four include:

- **Head Start:** Since 1965, this federal program has provided educational, health, nutritional, social and other services to low-income children and their families, with a special focus on early reading and math skills. In 1995, the Early Head Start program was established to serve children from birth to 3 years of age.
- **Title I:** These federal funds for public school districts can be used for early education, but recent changes in federal education policies (No Child Left Behind Act) have largely redirected these funds more toward disadvantaged students in the K-12 system.
- **Exceptional Children:** Funds from the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) can be used to fund early education for 3- to 5-year-old children with disabilities.
- **Even Start:** This family education program enrolls children in high-quality preschool while parents obtain literacy, high school equivalency, parenting, English as a Second Language and/or work skills. Eligibility is income-driven.

Five Star Rated Child Care License

North Carolina's Five Star Rated License for regulating the quality of early education and care providers was the first in the country to implement a system of tiered licensing that is also tied to reimbursements. Childcare providers receive a rating of one to five stars, and the higher a provider's rating, the higher the childcare subsidy payment rate they are eligible to receive. More at Four providers must maintain at least a four-star rating to continue their participation in the program. Stars are awarded based on points for program standards—including lower staff/child ratios, smaller group sizes and a formal assessment of program quality—and for staff education and experience. The Five Star system was put into place in 2000 in an attempt to raise the quality of child care in North Carolina without pricing parents out of the system, and evidence suggests that it has worked. Compared with 2000, more providers today have higher-rated licenses, more caregivers have obtained further education in their field, overall program quality has increased steadily, driven by parental demand, and a greater percentage of children in childcare are in four- and five-star centers.

Organization of Early Education Programs

Prior to 2005, the North Carolina Head Start State Collaboration Office was housed at the Division of Child Development (DCD) in the Department of Health and Human Services. Title I, Exceptional Children and Even Start funds were channeled through the Department of Public Instruction. In 2005, after a legislative study, the Office of School Readiness (OSR) was created to ensure coordination among the early education funding streams. In 2006, OSR was moved from the Governor's Office to the Department of Public Instruction, where it resides today.

OSR currently administers the More at Four program, manages the flow of federal Title I, Exceptional Children and Even Start funds to the localities and houses the Head Start State Collaboration Office. OSR, DCD and Smart Start collaborate on early childhood goals, representatives meet regularly to ensure coordination among the early care and education programs, and the organizations collaborate on many projects. The State Superintendent, the Executive Director of the Office of School Readiness and the Secretary of Health and Human Services sit on the Smart Start board. The director of the Division of Child Development often serves as a designee on the Smart Start board as well. A sample of the collaborations among OSR, DCD and Smart Start include the Early Childhood Collaboration Council, which addresses early childhood issues such as barriers, support and system organization, and the Outdoor Learning Environments Alliance, an effort to better integrate outdoor learning into the early education curriculum.

The North Carolina Division of Child Development administers the statewide system that helps provide child care **subsidies** to low-income families, **regulates** child care centers and family child care homes and monitors for a safe and educated child care **workforce**.ⁱⁱ

Subsidies. Thirty-six percent of children in regulated child care in North Carolina receive subsidies to help with child care costs. The average monthly subsidy payment in 2007-08 (YTD) was \$366 per child. Vouchers are provided to eligible families based on their need for care and income requirements—85 percent of families who receive vouchers have annual incomes under \$25,000 and 92 percent of them have their children in child care because they are either employed, in school or seeking employment. Subsidies are funded through state appropriations and Smart Start, as well as through a variety of federal sources, including Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) and the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF). These funds are not enough to cover the actual need, however. As of February 2008, the waiting list of children eligible for child care subsidies but not receiving them was 28,234.

Regulation. DCD regulates child care in the state by issuing star-rated child care licenses and permits, monitoring for compliance with state standards, providing technical assistance and training to child care providers and investigating complaints and abuse/neglect reports. There are approximately 9,000 regulated child care centers and homes, serving over 275,000 children statewide. About 8,000 child care abuse and neglect reports are investigated in child care settings statewide per year, and about one fourth of those reports are substantiated.

Workforce Standards. DCD ensures the attainment of child care workforce standards by conducting criminal background checks, verifying child care staff credentials and post-secondary education, and approving training and professional development opportunities for child care providers. Professional development programs are intended to reduce turnover rates among child care staff in order to provide children with more consistent teacher relationships and increased quality of care. Examples of these workforce support programs include:

- **Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood® Project:** The T.E.A.C.H. project began in 1990 to address issues of limited education, low compensation and high turnover among child care providers. The project, funded by state appropriations, the federal CCDF, private monies and recipients and their sponsoring child care facilities is administered by Child Care Services Association. The project provides scholarships to child care providers to obtain more education and helps fund the cost of their health insurance.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Child Care WAGES® Project:** WAGES provides education-based salary supplements to child care providers. It is funded through local Smart Start Partnerships and DCD and administered by Child Care Services Association.^{iv}
- **Child Care Resource and Referral agencies:** CCR&R agencies work with parents, child care providers, businesses, and community organizations to help promote the availability of quality child care services and to offer new and established child care programs access to training and support services.

ⁱ National Institute for Early Education Research (2006), *The State of Preschool 2006*. Available online at: <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf#page=36>.

ⁱⁱ All information and statistics about DCD and its activities come from the Division of Child Development, January 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Child Care Services Association. Available online at: <http://www.childcareservices.org/ps/teach.html#7>

^{iv} Child Care Services Association. Available online at: <http://www.childcareservices.org/ps/wage.html>