WHY SMART START WORKS: The North Carolina Partnership for Children and Local Smart Start Partnerships

OUR WORK

Smart Start was created in 1993 as an innovative solution to a problem: Children were coming to school unprepared to learn. Policymakers recognized that progress would require tapping into the same innovative spirit that inspired private sector advances, and therefore, established Smart Start as a public/private partnership. Independent, private organizations work in all 100 North Carolina counties through The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc., and 77 Local Partnerships. The power of Smart Start is that it delivers outcomes by giving communities local control to determine the best approach to achieving them.

Smart Start measurably increases the health and well-being of young children, building the foundation for all future learning, by:

- Improving children’s early care and education programs so that they are safe, healthy and provide opportunities for children to learn skills they need for success in school.
- Providing parents with tools that support them in raising healthy, happy, successful children.
- Ensuring that children have access to preventive health care.

OUR PRINCIPLES

- All North Carolina children have the right to a chance at the American Dream.
- Early childhood investments are vital to our state’s economic security and prosperity.
- Families are our top priority. We put families first by giving them the tools they need to raise healthy, happy, successful children.

OUR PROMISE

The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc. (NCPC) ensures that Smart Start fully meets all legislatively mandated requirements and operates to the highest standards of effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, and integrity. NCPC is dedicated to inspiring excellence and innovation in Smart Start through public/private partnership and leadership in best practices and evidence-based programming.
NCPC establishes **measurable, statewide goals** for increasing the health, well-being and development of North Carolina’s children birth to five. Local Partnerships then take responsibility for making decisions about how best to achieve those goals based on the needs and resources in their local communities.

**OUR EFFECTIVENESS**

Smart Start’s nationally award-winning approach has resulted in:

- **More children attending high quality care**—from 33% to 64% since 2001, when Smart Start began tracking this data.
- **More children receiving developmental screenings**—98% of children received recommended screenings after Smart Start launched the Assuring Better Child Health and Development (ABCD) program (compared to 81% before ABCD) in participating counties.
- **More children succeeding in school**—third-graders have higher standardized reading and math scores and lower special education placement rates in those counties that had received relatively more funding for Smart Start when these children were younger. This is according to research released in March 2011 by Duke University, which found that **investments in Smart Start generate broad education benefits**.

**OUR EFFICIENCY**

- NCPC and Local Partnerships raise millions of dollars in private funds each year that directly benefit young children and families in North Carolina. In the 2009-10 Fiscal Year alone, **Local Partnerships raised $17.2 million in cash**. In addition, NCPC secures private funding for **services in local communities** such as a recent $3 million, three-year grant from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation to combat early childhood obesity using evidence-based strategies implemented through Local Partnerships.
- NCPC and Local Partnership staffs earn salaries comparable or below their counterparts inside government, without the added costs of the long-term health and pension benefits that government employees receive.
- NCPC provides cost effective tools and systems for Local Partnerships to do business—supporting centralized accounting, computer, and program reporting systems to ensure reliability, accuracy, and economies of scale. **It doesn’t make sense to reinvent the wheel 77 times.**
- NCPC’s administrative overhead is just 3% of the appropriated State funds. The other 97% is allocated to the 77 local partnerships that provide Smart Start services in all 100 counties in North Carolina.
OUR ACCOUNTABILITY

Smart Start is a trusted partner. NCPC manages risk and ensures high standards are met across the Smart Start system.

- NCPC conducts rigorous annual monitoring of Local Partnerships; delivers training and technical assistance; and holds Local Partnerships accountable for meeting performance standards in governance, fiscal, and programmatic operations.
- When problems are found, NCPC takes the necessary steps to correct them immediately.
- In the past ten years, NCPC and Smart Start local partnerships have been audited more than 450 times by State auditors and/or independent auditors hired by the State.
  - NCPC has had no audit findings for the past eight years.
  - In the past two years, all partnerships were audited, and had no findings.
- North Carolina is the only state to institute population outcomes for young children in every county. Smart Start measures large-scale changes in factors critical to children’s healthy development. Since 1996 there have been 37 independently conducted evaluations of Smart Start, all with positive results, including:
  - More children attend high quality care.
  - More working families receive help to afford high quality care.
  - More children with disabilities are identified at a younger age and are referred to early intervention services.
  - More parents are engaged in positive parenting practices.

OUR INTEGRITY

- NCPC ensures that all of North Carolina’s children have the opportunity to benefit from Smart Start. NCPC makes allocations of funding to all 100 counties based on available resources, current funding levels, and local communities’ growth and needs each year.
- NCPC and Local Partnerships operate with transparency – all are subject to the state’s Public Records and Open Meetings Laws and ensure all meetings, decisions, and financial information are available to the public.
- Smart Start works on the early care and education issues parents care most about. State and national polls show that parents of young children support government investments in early care and education. For example, a national poll of parents conducted in 2010 by the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRAA) found that:
  - Working parents believe child care is a necessity, especially in this economy. 57 percent of parents of young children reporting that child care was an economic necessity in 2010, versus 49 percent in 2006.
  - Despite the current economy, however, all parents consistently report that their greatest concern about their child care arrangements is quality, followed by cost. Their focus on quality holds true across differences in income, education, gender, and marital status and remains consistent year after year.