

**Wake County Smart Start
Board of Directors Meeting
October 22, 2025**

A meeting of the Wake County Smart Start (WCSS) Board of Directors was held on Wednesday, October 22, 2025, with Chair Nikia Coates presiding.

Board Members present: André Anthony, Kelsey Camarena, Nikia Coates, Veronica Creech, Susan Evans, Ariel Sky Ford, Matthew Ellinwood, Matthew Glova, Jason Horton, Nikki Leonard, Kerry McCarthy Adams, Ronetta Pearsall, Stephanie Shell, Joe White, Katherine Williams, Michele Woodson.

Board Members absent: Antonia Pedroza, Tonya Venable.

Staff Members present: Gayle E. Headen, Gary Carr, Joan Crutchfield, Sasha Gomez, Rob Linens, Alex Livas-Dlott, Lynn Policastro, Carol Orji.

Guests present: Roberta Hill.

Call to Order/Announcements

At 9:00 AM, Chair Nikia Coates recognized a quorum and called the meeting to order. She called attention to the presence of staff members and guests.

Ms. Coates requested a motion to adopt the agenda. Nikki Leonard moved to adopt the agenda. Jason Horton seconded the motion. Calling for a vote and with none opposed, the motion carried. (10-22-05)

Mission Moment

Ms. Coates introduced Alex Livas-Dlott, WCSS Director of Strategy and Impact, to present the Mission Moment. Ms. Livas-Dlott stated that the launch of the new agency website was imminent and shared a video preview of the new site. Board Members shared their congratulations to all the team members who worked on the new website.

Consent Agenda

Ms. Coates requested a motion to adopt the consent agenda. Katherine Williams moved to adopt the consent agenda including the Minutes of the August 27, 2025, Board of Directors Meeting, September 2025 Financial Reports, and Mickey Holt Resignation. Michele Woodson seconded the motion. Calling for a vote and with none opposed, the motion carried. (10-22-06)

Committee Reports

Advancement Committee

Advancement Committee Chair, Veronica Creech, reported to the Board that exploration continues on an endowment fund and how it could benefit the agency. She also announced that the Save the Date emails have been sent for the WCSS 30th Anniversary Celebration on September 26, 2026. She asked Board Members to think about potential sponsors and connect them with Rob Linens, Director of Advancement.

Ms. Creech also reminded Board members about the annual Pastries with Partners event to be held on November 18th from 8:00 AM – 9:30 AM. The event will still be at the Gateway Shopping Center as in years past; however, it will be held at Natural Science instead.

Finally, Ms. Creech presented an updated Committee Description for the Advancement Committee. Staff suggested retooling the language to update the committee's purpose and make duties more specific. Ms. Coates asked for a motion to approve the new Advancement Committee Description presented by the

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committee. Kerry McCarthy Adams seconded the motion to approve the updated Advancement Committee Description. Hearing no objections, the motion was approved. (10-22-07)

Finance Committee

Finance Committee Chair, Matt Glova, shared the Conflict-of-Interest Summary and Master List for the Board of Directors. He also informed the Board that there was a third-party data breach by an agency vendor that included some WCSS files, including some names and data of NC Pre-K children. Mr. Glova stated that the agency was informed earlier in the year, and all appropriate steps have been taken with cyber security and attorneys. The matter was handled as transparently and professionally as possible, and he will update the Board with any further developments.

Mr. Glova submitted two committee recommendations to the Board for approval. The first was a range and merit increase pool of 4.0% of wages for permanent positions as of June 30, 2025, excluding the Executive Director. This increase was budgeted and funded through NCPC, DCDEE and the County. Ms. Coates asked for a second to approve the committee recommendation. André Anthony seconded the motion for the Finance Committee Recommendation of a range adjustment and merit wage increase pool of 4.0% of wages for permanent positions as of June 30, 2025, excluding the Executive Director. The motion was approved unanimously. (10-22-08)

The second recommendation from the Finance Committee to the Board of Directors was approval of the final 2024 Form 990, Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax. Mr. Glova explained that Form 990 is an information tax return that tax-exempt organizations must file annually with the IRS. It provides transparency and compliance and helps the agency maintain tax exempt status. Mr. Glova shared that the first page of Form 990 is similar to a personal Form 1040 in that it has the information that relates to the financials. The second page provides a summary of the programs the agency provides. There being no questions, the motion coming from the Finance Committee to approve the 2024 Form 990, Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax and to approve its electronic submission to the IRS as required was seconded by André Anthony. Hearing no objections, the motion was approved. (10-22-09)

Chair's Report

Ms. Coates reported that after a review of the trajectory of the makeup of the Board, the resignation of Mickey Holt, and other factors, such as compliance and Board Member strengths in alignment with the work of the Board, André Anthony is moving from the Allocations Committee to the Finance Committee. She thanked Mr. Anthony for his flexibility. Mr. Anthony said he is looking forward to working with the Finance Committee.

Ms. Coates thanked the Board Members who offered to participate in the Strategic Framework update process and stated that Ms. Headen would provide more details about the Strategic Framework process and Community Needs Assessment.

Executive Director's Report

Executive Director Gayle E. Headen reported that the agency is working on the new Strategic Framework and thanked the Board Members who volunteered to assist in the process. There were 14 responses to the agency Request for Proposal to support the Community Needs Assessment and develop our FY2027 – 30 Strategic Framework. The staff and ad hoc committee tasked with consultant selection chose Jeong Collective, and there has been a Community Needs Assessment kickoff meeting. Jeong Collective will work with WCSS for approximately 18 months to finalize the project. The Community Needs Assessment will focus on Social Emotional Wellness, as discussed at the February 2025 Board Retreat. The data for the Community Needs assessment should be collected and analyzed for presentation at the February 2026 Board retreat. Based on Board guidance, the Strategic Framework draft will be prepared for the in-person August 2026 meeting. The agency will then implement the Strategic Framework approved by the Board for the FY2027-30 cycle. Ms. Headen thanked Board Members who volunteered for the ad hoc committee that will be involved throughout the process.

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Ms. Creech mentioned that Wake County did a Community Health Needs Assessment, and Advance Community Health carried out a similar activity, as did Wake County, and asked if the various assessments could be leveraged in building the Strategic Framework.

Ms. Headen shared that Wake County has several other parallel processes, including Child and Maternal Health, and early childhood was one of the top four priorities expressed by community members. Ms. Headen, Carol Orji and two other staff members, as well as some of the agency's funded partners, are members of Live Well Wake, which identified mental health and wellness as one of their top three priorities and is advocating for starting a mental health focus earlier in childhood. Additionally, before the pandemic a state team began to review young child mental wellness. The team included pediatricians, early childhood practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. This team has population-level data the agency can reference, and the agency requested that the group add a population-level metric around young child wellness. The agency will use data from these sources as part of the Community Needs Assessment.

Ms. Headen thanked Jen McPherson for the work she did on the new website, as well as Alex Livas-Dlott for the continuity she provided on the project. She also shared her appreciation for all the staff involved in creating and reviewing the content, as well as for the finance team.

Ms. Headen reported that the Leadership Team completed its third annual retreat, which focused on thinking and acting strategically, work-life harmony, and strengthening team relationships. The two days the team had together resulted in deeper connections and greater comfort in sharing differing opinions. There was vulnerability, leading to deeper connections and feeling safer, which leads to more open communication to reach better solutions. Ms. Headen shared that the Leadership Team agreed that wellbeing is paramount for its amazing staff and will, therefore, be streamlining some of the ambitious work for this year. Implementation is being discussed and may need Board discussion and approval. Ms. Headen assured the Board that the agency's work will still be impactful and meaningful.

Ms. Ford thanked Ms. Headen for bringing up staff wellbeing and is hoping it can be incorporated into the Strategic Framework. Ms. Ford said a sign of a true leader is when a team feels safe and comfortable sharing differing opinions and for Ms. Headen to feel comfortable sharing with the Board.

Ms. Headen thanked the Board Members for volunteering for the Pastries with Partners event. All the volunteer slots are filled, and people are saying they will fill in if needed. She thanked Ms. Creech for her assistance in arranging the new space for the event. Ms. Headen and the staff are looking forward to seeing the Board Members there, as well as community partners and stakeholders. The event is on November 18th from 8:00 AM to 9:30 AM, and she invited Board Members to drop in any time during the event.

Ms. Headen also shared that the Save the Date emails have been sent for the WCSS 30th Anniversary Celebration on September 26, 2026. The time has not been determined. The staff is in the early stages of planning, and details will be shared as soon as they are available.

With no further business to discuss, Ms. Coates asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Veronica Creech moved to adjourn the meeting. Matt Glova seconded the motion. Calling for a vote and hearing no objections, the meeting was adjourned by Ms. Coates at 9:57 AM. (10-22-10)

Signed by:

Matt Ellinwood

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