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Wake County Smart Start
Executive Committee Meeting
March 25, 2026

A meeting of the Wake County Smart Start (WCSS) Executive Committee was held on Wednesday, March 25, 2026, with Chair Katherine Williams presiding. The meeting was held via Zoom conference call.

Committee members present: Nikia Coates, Matt Glova, Katherine Williams, Matthew Ellinwood, Ariel Ford

Committee Members absent: Tonya Venable

Staff members present: Gary Carr, Carol Orji, Alex Livas-Dlott, Gayle Headen, Rob Linens

Guests present: Teyana Hunt

Call to Order/Announcements

At 8:47 AM, Nikia Coates announced a quorum was present and officially called the meeting to order. She noted the meeting was being recorded and drew attention to the presence of staff.

Nikia Coates states to hold the adoption of the agenda and the adoption of the consent agenda should be held until later in the meeting when more members join. Nikia asks Rob Linens to take Veronica Creech's portion of the Committee Reports. Rob Linens agrees. (3-25-19)

Advancement Committee

Rob Linens reported that host committee invitations have been sent and received, with several new members joining. The first official meeting will be in April, and a casual gathering is scheduled tomorrow at Veronica Creech's house for members to mingle and learn more.

He shared that PNC is returning as a major sponsor, with strong additional corporate support from MERS, Pennoni, Town Bank, Truist Bank, Western Wake Pediatrics, and others. The advancement team is working hard to make this 30th anniversary year special.

The April 16th event at Jack Nichols' house is moving forward, with invitations sent to about 140 corporate and elected officials. Katherine Williams asked about preparation for that event, and Rob confirmed that a script with key talking points will be sent to the board in early April.

Board Governance Committee

Katherine Williams updated the executive committee on the 2026 board slate. Kelsey Camarena has resigned due to relocation, and formal acceptance has occurred. The board currently has 16 members.

Four members' terms are ending in 2026. Matt Glova will not seek reappointment, and his transition is supported by Andre Anthony. The other three members—Commissioner Evans, Renetta Pearsall, and likely Tony Pedrosa—are expected to return.

The committee aims to recruit three new members, prioritizing expertise in finance, business, and community engagement. Outreach is underway with organizations such as the NC Chamber, SECU, Carolina Small Business Fund, Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation, and United Way.

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The process includes identifying candidates, requesting applications, initial screening by Gayle Headen, and interviews by the governance committee. The goal is to present a full slate for board approval in June.

Members are encouraged to suggest potential candidates, especially those with corporate, financial, or foundation experience.

Nikia Coates motions for Kelsey Camarena's resignation letter. Veronica Creech approves. Katherine Williams seconded the motion. Calling for a vote and with none opposed, the vote on Kelsey Camarena's resignation was unanimous. (3-25-20)

Nikia Coates then goes back to the top of the agenda to go ahead and adopt the agenda for today's meeting. Katherine Williams moved to adopt the agenda. Matt Glova seconded the motion. Calling for a vote and with none opposed, the vote to adopt the agenda was unanimous. (3-25-21)

Nikia Coates asked for a motion to adopt the January 28, 2026, minutes. Matt Glova moved to approve the minutes. Matthew Ellinwood seconded. The motion was approved with no opposition. (3-25-22)

Finance Committee

Finance Committee Chair Matt Glova reported that the Finance Committee met last week. The Finance Committee has a new responsibility not only to help implement the endowment with Wake County Smart Start, but also to oversee ongoing important compliance and monitoring as this effort gets up and running. More details to come.

Chair's Report

Nikia Coates provided an update on the pending cease and desist order for Jamal Black, who had previously sent disturbing emails to individuals from several partner organizations, including John Rex Endowment, Kaleidoscope Project, Roots of Wisdom Scholars, and Wake County Smart Start. The John Rex Endowment's attorney prepared the order, which will also cover Wake County Smart Start staff and board members. If any further messages are received, members are advised not to engage.

For the second item, the chair opened a discussion on potential venues for the August in-person board meeting. The goal is to hold it at a funded partner site that reflects Wake County Smart Start's community impact and can accommodate 25–30 people. The Lucy Daniels Center was suggested, and members were invited to share additional ideas with Katherine Williams or Gayle Headen via email.

Executive Director's Report

Executive Director Gayle E. Headen reported that a previously noted legal case involving an NC Pre-K child has been voluntarily withdrawn and dismissed. The child is now receiving support through Wake County Public Schools.

The Early Childhood Initiatives team continues to support providers through classroom coaching, quality improvement, and health-focused programs. In March, they launched a virtual curriculum fair with over 10 sessions highlighting DCDEE-approved curricula; recordings will be available on the training portal next month.

At the Board of Commissioners Education Committee meeting, a $10.8 million funding request was presented, including expansion of Wake ThreeSchool from 300 to 400 children and a 3% pay increase for teachers. Commissioners showed interest in teacher wage comparisons, transportation barriers, and social-emotional learning efforts.

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It was noted that county budget growth in recent years may not be sustainable.

For NC Pre-K, 2,430 applications have been received, consistent with prior years. Screenings are underway, and placement projections will become clearer in April, with current trends indicating confidence in meeting expected enrollment.

With no additional business for discussion, Nikia Coates moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:40 AM. Matt Glova seconded the motion. Calling for a vote and hearing no objections, the motion carried. (3-25-23)

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