

**Wake County Smart Start  
Executive Committee Meeting  
January 28, 2026**

A meeting of the Wake County Smart Start (WCSS) Executive Committee was held on Wednesday, January 28, 2026, with Chair Nikia Coates presiding. The meeting was held via Zoom conference call.

Committee members present: Nikia Coates, Veronica Creech, Matthew Ellinwood, Ariel Ford, Matthew Glova, Tonya Venable, and Katherine Williams.

Committee Members absent: None.

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

Guests present: Roberta Hill

**Call to Order/Announcements**

At 8:30 AM, Chair Nikia Coates announced a quorum was present, officially called the meeting to order, and drew attention to the presence of staff and guests.

Ms. Coates asked for a motion to adopt the agenda. Matthew Glova moved to adopt the agenda. Veronica Creech seconded. The motion passed with no objection. (1-28-13)

Ms. Coates asked for a motion to adopt the Consent Agenda. Veronica Creech moved to approve the Consent Agenda. Ariel Ford seconded. The motion was approved with no opposition. (1-28-14)

**Advancement Committee**

Veronica Creech reported that the Advancement Committee met, and she asked Rob Linens to report on the end-of-year giving campaign. Mr. Linens said WCSS received around \$2,612 between December 23 and January 3. For the 2025 calendar year, WCSS raised \$63,529 compared to 2024's donations of \$19,026, nearly a \$45,000 increase. Mr. Linens thanked Ms. Headen, the Directors, and Board Members, for their assistance and dedication. Mr. Linens shared a draft sponsorship brochure for the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year, which included different sponsorship levels and lengths of giving. He also shared that the Advancement Committee discussed creating a fundraising host committee and began a list of people to approach for involvement. Ms. Creech shared the theme for the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration and ideas that have been discussed. The attendance goal for the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Event is 300 people, and she outlined how the number of members of the host committee would be determined. Mr. Linens said he would share the list of recommendations so far and requested that the committee members send other recommendations to him.

**Finance Committee**

Matthew Glova brought several Finance Committee recommendations to the Executive Committee. The first was a recommendation for a budget increase in salaries for merit increases and salary range adjustments, as well as an increase in the budget for health insurance. Katherine Williams seconded the motion for budgeting a 4% increase in salaries for merit increases and salary range adjustments for FY 2026-2027. Budgeting a 20% increase in employee health insurance cost for calendar year 2027. The motion passed with no opposition. (1-28-15)

The second recommendation from the Finance Committee was for approval of the new rates for commercial insurance policies. Veronica Creech seconded the Finance Committee recommendation for:

- Renewal of Commercial Package and Umbrella Coverage with West Bend effective February 5, 2026, with no changes in coverage limits at an annual premium of \$11,896, an increase of \$1,164. West Bend property insurance rates for the state of NC increased this year.
- Renewal of Employment Practices and Fiduciary Liability with Selective Insurance effective February 5, 2026, with no changes in coverage limits at an annual premium of \$4,522, an increase of \$1,041.
- Renewal of Directors' and Officers' Liability with West Bend effective February 5, 2026, with no changes in coverage limits at an annual premium of \$1,125, no change from last year.
- Renewal of ERISA Bond coverage with The Hartford effective February 5, 2026, with no change in coverage. The annual premium is \$114, no change from last year.
- Renewal of Workers Compensation insurance with Accident Fund Insurance Company effective February 5, 2026, with no changes in coverage limits at an estimated annual premium of \$10,599, an increase of \$386 from last year. Premium is subject to adjustment for actual salaries paid.
- Renewal of Cyber Liability coverage with West Bend effective February 5, 2026, with no changes in coverage. The annual premium is \$8,176, no change from last year.
- Renewal of Business Auto coverage with West Bend effective February 5, 2026, with no changes in coverage. The annual premium is \$4,080, an increase of \$307 from last year. Increase due to an increase in premiums in the State of NC.
- The total premium renewal cost for current coverage is \$40,512. This is an increase in cost of \$2,898 from the prior year.

With no opposition, the motion passed. (1-28-16)

The third recommendation from the Finance Committee was regarding a one-time longevity payment to staff. Ariel Ford seconded the recommendation to approve a one-time longevity payment to staff based on years of service as of December 31, 2025. The proposed payments amounts are:

|                                                        |                |
|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| <u>Greater than 1 but less than 5 years of service</u> | <u>\$1,500</u> |
| <u>5 years but less than 10 years of service</u>       | <u>\$2,000</u> |
| <u>10 years but less than 15 years of service</u>      | <u>\$2,500</u> |
| <u>15 years but less than 20 years of service</u>      | <u>\$3,000</u> |
| <u>20 plus years of service</u>                        | <u>\$3,500</u> |

The motion approved unanimously. (1-28-17)

The final recommendation from the Finance Committee was the addition of Christmas Eve as the beginning of the Winter Break. Veronica Creech seconded the recommendation for Designating Christmas Eve as a WCSS paid holiday and making 12/24 the start of our Winter Break. The recommendation was approved unanimously. (1-28-18)

## Chair's Report

Ms. Coates shared the success of the first Wake Up and Connect coffee series held at Sola and asked other attendees to share their experiences. Ms. Coates concluded that it is a way to foster rapport and build relationships that allow trust while doing Board business.

Ms. Coates also reported that the Strategic Framework is moving forward with Jeong Collective. The Community Needs Assessment has been completed, and two of the consultants from Jeong Collective will be present at the Board Retreat in February to get thoughts and feedback from the Board.

### **Executive Director's Report**

Gayle E. Headen shared that there will be a business reception on April 16 from 4:30 to 6:30 PM and asked committee members to save the date on their calendar. This will be a more casual event for the business community. The event will give attendees the opportunity to get to know WCSS and what the agency has done over the last 30 years. It will also highlight our goal and the necessity to establish an endowment.

Ms. Headen's opportunity to speak at the Cary Rotary Club was canceled due to weather. Ms. Headen and Ms. Orji attended a Chamber event and had the opportunity to talk with members about WCSS.

Ms. Headen, Mr. Carr, and Mr. Linens have continued exploration of an endowment with Sabrina Slade of the John Rex Endowment (JRE). After an introduction by Ms. Slade to Zenith Wealth Partners (Zenith), Ms. Headen, Mr. Carr and Mr. Linens met with Zenith, and Zenith suggested setting up a quasi-endowment so the Board would have greater flexibility for any distributions in an emergency. It would also create a structurally strong fiduciary stewardship. Zenith can work with the Board to create policies for investment and that govern the endowment. Mr. Carr shared that there is a fee for their services of 1% annually, and the initial setup fee is \$4,000 to \$7,000. Zenith and JRE are discussing the possibility of JRE paying the setup fee for WCSS.

Ms. Headen continued her report with an update that the NC Pre-K seats continue to be full, and vacancies are being filled as they occur. Attendance has been at 99% each month thus far. Ms. Ford praised WCSS staff for creating a program that parents want their children to go to every day and for helping parents understand that attendance impacts positive outcomes for children. Ms. Headen praised Ms. Orji, Joan Crutchfield, and their team for their continued efforts. The 2026-27 application was released in the first week of January, and more than 1,000 applications have been received.

Ms. Headen shared DCDEE was asked to review funding for counties that were not fully enrolled and to make a decision about redistributing those funds. After conversation between WCSS and DCDEE, DCDEE awarded \$209,000 in additional administrative dollars to WCSS to be used primarily for temporary staff and materials. A contract is forthcoming.

Ms. Headen reported that Wake ThreeSchool is 100% full and filling vacancies as they occur. The application for 2026-27 has been released and enrollments are on track for 2026-27.

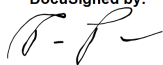
Ms. Headen continued her report with an update on the Langdon and Companies (Langdon) system breach in 2024. As background, she shared that Langdon is the vendor WCSS uses to monitor funded partners in the NC Pre-K program. WCSS was notified of the breach in May of 2025. Mr. Carr has taken all steps to confirm there were no exposures to the WCSS system. Because Langdon's system was compromised, WCSS was required to report the breach to NCPC and the State. From their perspective, the matter is closed. There were a small number of Lucy Daniels Center families who needed to be notified of the breach. WCSS worked with its attorney to craft the language, and the Lucy Daniels Center made the notification. The matter is not included in the draft audit report for FY2025-26, but it may show up in a management letter as a closed matter.

Wake County Smart Start has been included in a summons by the family of a child who applied through WCSS last year and is currently enrolled in a Title I classroom. Ms. Headen shared that WCSS is the NC Pre-K application center for the county, which means that any child applying through WCSS is applying for Title I, Pre-K

and Head Start. The attorney representing the family is the child's grandmother. The summons was received on January 13, and Ms. Headen is in conversation with legal counsel. The concern listed in the summons is that the child has not been evaluated for additional educational needs in a timely manner.

Ms. Headen has been in contact with the attorney for WCPSS, as well as the attorney handling the matter for WCSS. The attorney for WCSS has researched the deadlines and next actions on our part and has spoken with the attorney for WCPSS. The WCPSS attorney believes the matter will be settled and not move forward. Ms. Headen will keep Ms. Coates informed.

With no further business to discuss, Ms. Coates asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Ariel Ford moved to adjourn the meeting. Matt Glova seconded the motion. Calling for a vote and hearing no objections, the motion carried. (1-28-19) The meeting adjourned at 9:59 AM.

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9/10/2026 | 7:12 AM EDT