WAKE COUNTY
Smart Start

Wake County Smart Start

Strategic Plan 2027-2030

A Letter From Our Executive Director and Board Chair

Gayle E. Headen
WCSS Executive Director

Nikia Coates
WCSS Board Chair
2025-2027

Dear Wake County community members,

Every child in Wake County deserves the chance to grow, learn, and thrive. Every family deserves to find the support they need when they need it. When children and families have access to strong early learning experiences, trusted resources, and communities that support their well-being, the benefits reach far beyond childhood. They strengthen neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and the future of our county.

Wake County is fortunate to have a broad network of early childhood programs, services, and dedicated professionals working on behalf of children and families. Yet many families still face barriers when trying to connect with that support. Programs may be available, but they can be difficult to find, access, or afford. Providers work tirelessly to serve families while navigating challenges of their own. The reality is that having services in place is not the same as ensuring every family can reach them.

This strategic plan is our response to that reality. It reflects a commitment to focus on what matters most, strengthen connections across the early childhood system, and make thoughtful choices about where we invest our time, energy, and resources. The work ahead calls on us to look beyond individual programs and organizations and strengthen the entire system that supports children and families.

What makes this plan different is not only what it says, but how it was created. More than 200 families, educators, and service providers shared their experiences through surveys, interviews, and focus groups as part of our Community Needs Assessment. Eighty-eight percent of all WCSS staff members contributed their perspectives through an all-staff survey. A dedicated sensemaking group met across eight working sessions to interpret findings and identify what they meant for our community. Board members, community representatives, funded partners, and staff worked side by side throughout the process, engaging in planning committee meetings, interviews, and conversations that challenged us to think differently and stay grounded in community experience.

Throughout this work, one message remained clear: meaningful progress requires partnership. No single organization can meet the needs of all children and families alone. Lasting change happens when we listen, build trust, share responsibility, and align our efforts around common goals. We are especially grateful to our Board of Directors, whose members served

not simply as reviewers of this work, but as active partners in shaping it. That spirit of collaboration is one we intend to carry forward throughout implementation.

This plan is not a document to be placed on a shelf. It is a commitment to action and to accountability. It is also an invitation. Whether you are a funded partner, educator, community leader, advocate, policymaker, parent, or supporter of young children, we invite you to stay connected and help shape what comes next. The next phase of this work will be built alongside the community, not handed down to it.

Together, we can create an early childhood system that is easier to navigate, more responsive to families' needs, and stronger for everyone it serves. Most importantly, we can help ensure that every child in Wake County has the opportunity to thrive from the very beginning.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wake County Smart Start (WCSS) invests in young children, their families, and a connected early childhood system that supports and prepares them for school and life ahead. As the local Smart Start partnership, part of the statewide network led by the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC), we administer programs, fund community organizations to deliver services, and work to connect those services for children and their families from before birth through age five.

The plan sets out what we will hold ourselves to, both in what we value and where we will focus over the next three years. Our core programs are the vehicle by which we will enact our plan and remain central to the work. This is the work we do every day regardless of what else changes. The priorities in this plan represent thoughtful consideration of previous lessons learned and the strategic shifts WCSS is choosing to make over the next three years. The priorities aren't new programs, and they don't sit beside the everyday work. They are the changes in how the work gets done, and they apply across all of it. Both are the plan, and both are essential.

What guides us

Four values set the standard against which we test our choices, partnerships, and investments.

- **We center children and families** facing the greatest barriers to opportunity.
- **We treat families and funded partners as leaders**, recognizing that the people closest to the work help shape its direction.
- **We show up as partners** to strengthen the early childhood system.
- **We steward public and private trust** through transparency, learning, and accountability.

What we learned

This plan is rooted in what more than 200 families, educators, and providers told us through a Community Needs Assessment and the strategic planning process that followed. Their message was consistent: families and educators know what young children need; the hard part is everything around it. Finding help means finding the right person, not following a referral. For some families, engaging at all feels unsafe.

Everyone is doing what they can inside systems that are stretched thin. This plan turns WCSS toward the conditions around the programs it funds and runs: how families find their way in, who they trust, and whether anyone notices when the path breaks.

What we'll prioritize

We are making targeted and strategic shifts guided by four priorities:

1. **Ground the work in what children, families, providers, and funded partners are actually navigating.** Keep a current picture of what people across Wake County are dealing with, and decide from that picture rather than from assumptions.

2. **Treat relationships as essential sources of knowledge.** Build relationships that carry information in both directions, so what people are experiencing reaches the decisions we make.

3. **Tell a more complete story of early childhood in Wake County.** Bring together numbers, observations, and lived experience to show how children, families, and providers are actually doing, so that public understanding and decision-making are driven by a fuller picture.

4. **Define our role in leading the early childhood system, and build what it takes to sustain that role.** Use our position to convene, connect, and broaden where our funding comes from so more of our resources can go where the community tells us they are needed.

These four priorities reinforce one another and are intended to shift how the organization approaches every part of its mission.

Three years from now, WCSS will be able to say clearly who it serves and why, funded partners will describe the relationship with WCSS as collaborative rather than transactional, and Wake County will have a fuller picture of how its youngest children are doing, built from the collective knowledge and experiences of families, providers, and partners across the community.

WHAT IS THE STRATEGIC PLAN FOR?

This strategic plan is a decision-making tool that clarifies what WCSS exists to do, the values that guide our work, the role we play in Wake County's early childhood system, and where we will focus our attention and resources over the next three years.

This plan is built to be used. For staff, it's what every team should consider when evaluating their current work or starting new work. If you're a funded partner or are seeking funding for the first time, this plan is also designed for you to use. It tells you what we are paying attention to over the next three years and what we are asking of ourselves. You will see it show up in how we structure funding, what we ask of you, and how we spend time together.

WHO IS WAKE COUNTY SMART START?

We are a Smart Start Local Partnership, part of the statewide network led by the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC). Smart Start is a statewide commitment to giving every child a strong start from before birth through age five. Our job is to make that commitment real in Wake County. We do it three ways: we fund community organizations to deliver services, we administer some programs ourselves, and we work to connect those services so families aren't left to piece the system together alone.

What we're working to achieve together

Everything in this plan is in service of a larger purpose. While our priorities and strategies may evolve over time, our mission and vision provide a constant reminder of why the work matters and the future we are working to build together.

MISSION

Wake County Smart Start (WCSS) invests in young children, their families, and a connected early childhood system that supports and prepares them for school and life ahead.

VISION

Together as a community, we envision a bright, prosperous future for Wake County where all young children are happy, healthy, and able to reach their full potential.

What guides us: Our values

Our values are the benchmark we use to determine what we must do to achieve our mission and vision.

VALUE 1 We center children and families facing the greatest barriers to opportunity.

WHAT IT MEANS

Who we work for shapes every priority we set. We support care that reflects families' languages, cultures, and circumstances, and we respond to what families are actually dealing with, not what we assume they need.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

We make decisions by asking who is furthest from opportunity. We measure success by whether those families are better off.

VALUE 2 We treat families and funded partners as leaders.

WHAT IT MEANS

The people closest to the work shape direction, not just inform it. Trust is how we see clearly and how real change happens.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Families and partners help set priorities rather than reacting to ours after they're set. We build the time, structures, and follow-through that real relationships require, instead of treating contact as a box to check.

VALUE 3 We show up as partners to strengthen the early childhood system.

WHAT IT MEANS

We are not apart from the system; we are accountable for helping build it. We use our position to convene, connect, and strengthen it.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

We invest in relationships across agencies, funders, and providers. We make space for others to learn from one another.

VALUE 4 We steward public and private trust.

WHAT IT MEANS

We honor the trust placed in us by families, partners, funders, and communities by acting with integrity, transparency, and accountability. We look honestly at what our work is producing, document what we learn, and explain our choices openly, including when the results are not what we hoped.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

We make information usable, seek feedback to name what's working and what isn't, and then make adjustments together.

What we do every day: Our work

WCSS organizes its work into five areas to support Wake County's children and their families from before birth through age five. Much of our work is driven by our role as one of 75 Smart Start Local Partnerships (coordinated by NCPC) and the requirements that come with this role. Some of this work we fund through trusted organizations across Wake County, and some we run directly. NCPC provides an important foundation for our work, while Wake County's needs, relationships, and opportunities shape how we lead and partner locally.

Whether we run a program or fund it through community partners, our job is the same: to make the work possible, sustainable, and effective. To do that, we return to a guiding question: Is this helping us better serve children, families, and the people who support them? Every process we design, every meeting we hold, and every report we request should be in direct service of that work. When something falls short, we examine it and determine whether it can be simplified or improved. Some requirements attached to our funding cannot be changed on our own, and we name those plainly and carry them into the spaces where they can change over time.

Expanding Early Literacy

We fund programs that bring books and shared reading into the daily lives of young children and families, building the early language foundation children carry into school and throughout their lives.

Advancing Child Health

We support children's physical and social-emotional health through health consultation in early care settings, connection to local food systems, creation of outdoor learning environments, and early intervention for young children's development.

Increasing Access and Raising the Quality of Early Care and Education

We work to make early care and education more available, affordable, accessible, and higher in quality. We administer NC Pre-K and Wake ThreeSchool, the county-funded program for eligible three-year-olds, coach educators to strengthen their practice, and support the stability of the early childhood workforce.

Supporting Families

We fund home visiting, family navigation, and parenting support that meet families where they are, with particular attention to families facing the greatest barriers.

Systems Change

We convene partners, connect services, and engage the public to strengthen the early childhood system as a whole, so its parts work better together for children and families.

The work is how the values and priorities in this plan come to life. The five areas above are how we, along with our funded partners, support young children and families in Wake County.

WHAT IS THIS PLAN IN RESPONSE TO?

Before we set our priorities, we listened to what was needed in this moment. We began with a Community Needs Assessment (CNA) focused on social and emotional health (the foundation everything else in early childhood rests on) and asked families, educators, providers, funded partners, and staff what supports it and what gets in the way. **What we heard from the CNA shaped this plan across four main themes:**

1. **The adults around children are capable, but carrying too much.** Parents told us they feel able to support their children's development, and educators feel skilled and close to the families they serve. What weighs on them is everything around that: time, stress, and contradictory information. Teachers said they spend more time responding to stress than teaching, and asked for help with it more than anything else.

2. **Families find help through people, not systems.** They get where they need to go by finding the right person, not by following a referral. About half of parents said they turn to a family member or friend because the formal path is too hard or risky. This trust between people is a real strength. But informal networks only work for those who have them, and families with the fewest connections are the hardest to reach.

3. **Whether a family reaches help depends on how the system is built, not on how hard they try.** Cost, eligibility rules, and transportation came up as the top barriers in every part of the assessment. Families described reaching a service and then losing it because a rule changed or a schedule no longer fit. As one parent put it, “by the time you figure it out, the situation has already changed.”

4. **For some families, asking for help feels unsafe.** Families worry that saying the wrong thing, or letting someone evaluate their child, could come back on them later. More than a quarter of funded partners said families feel unsafe engaging with systems at all. Partners who work closely with immigrant families described what that looks like now: missed appointments, avoided programs, families staying home.

We then asked staff and funded partners where WCSS should focus and where it still needs to improve.

What we learned from our staff is that they are proud of the programs we fund and operate and the outcomes those programs help achieve. They want a stronger understanding of how families experience those supports, from first contact through ongoing participation. Their feedback identified that by combining outcome data with direct insight from families, WCSS can make better decisions, strengthen access, and maximize the impact of its work.

Funded partners also shared their insights, emphasizing that our funding rhythm should make it easier, not harder, for them to focus on families and children. WCSS funds on a three-year cycle, with a budget and forms submitted each year. Even so, partners described amounts that shift year to year and a rhythm that keeps them planning in twelve-month increments. That makes it harder to hold onto staff, sustain trust with families, and plan past the next submission. Partners said they want to feel supported through sustainable funding that focuses on relationships and process, not monitoring.

This feedback shaped the plan in two ways: it showed where we have direct leverage, and where we need to better understand how our role can influence the material conditions young children and families need to thrive. We heard that housing, transportation, and steady income weigh on families long before any program reaches them, and they sit largely outside what we focus on every day. This plan is a commitment to maximize the levers within our control, while maintaining complete honesty about those beyond our reach.

OUR 2027-2030 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

While our core work remains our foundation, the following four priorities represent the strategic shifts where we will focus our intentional efforts over the next three years. These priorities are not separate projects; they are a lens through which we will evaluate our ongoing work, refine our decision-making, and deepen our impact across Wake County. The priorities build on each other: grounding the work and the relationships that surface it are what make a fuller story and systems leadership possible.

Ground the work in what children, families, providers, and funded partners are actually navigating

WHAT THIS PRIORITY MEANS

We are dedicated to serving all families across Wake County while focusing our most intensive resources on those experiencing the greatest challenges at any given moment. This requires us to maintain an up-to-date understanding of the challenges that families and providers in Wake County are currently facing. Rather than relying on outdated assumptions or past data, we decide based on current information. As conditions change, so do the barriers that families face, and we continuously update our understanding to reflect that.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

We can say, with evidence and in specific terms, which families in Wake County are furthest from what they need right now, and can explain how that picture changed since the last time we looked.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE BY 2030

We are known for our precision about who we serve and why, and for updating that picture as conditions change. The question shifts from "everyone or highest need" to "how do we direct our deepest attention to the families navigating the greatest barriers right now?"

Treat relationships as essential sources of knowledge

WHAT THIS PRIORITY MEANS

We approach every interaction as a relationship first, whether with families, funded partners, providers, educators, or colleagues. This focus is both practical and principled: much of what we need to know about young children and families comes through people, and only those who trust us will share the honest details of their experiences. Building that trust takes years, but it can be lost in a single conversation. Therefore, before making any decisions, we consider how they will impact the relationships essential to our work. The exchange is reciprocal: what families and partners share influences our actions, and we make sure to communicate what we learn rather than keeping it confined to the discussions where it was shared.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

A funded partner identifies a pattern. Instead of remaining in the meeting notes, it shapes the design of the next reporting cycle.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE BY 2030

Funded partners describe their collaboration with us as a true partnership rather than just a transaction. Staff focus less on processing paperwork and more on having meaningful conversations with the people they serve. Families are treated as partners. Partners can identify specific decisions that have changed as a result of their input.

Tell a more complete story of early childhood in Wake County

WHAT THIS PRIORITY MEANS

We use our position to tell clear, specific, and timely stories about the experiences of young children, families, educators, and funded partners in Wake County. We treat data broadly, including staff's qualitative observations, the experiences of families and providers of care, and the patterns that funded partners are seeing, alongside quantitative measures. "Complete" also means honest. The story includes where our work is and isn't making a difference. This is how we make the case for early childhood to funders, legislators, and the public, and how we hold ourselves internally accountable for what we surface.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

A single WCSS report holds a county data set, a pattern several funded partners share, and what families said in their own words, including the parts where our work can improve.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE BY 2030

We produce a regular public account of Wake County's early childhood landscape, drawn from our unique vantage point. This becomes our signature contribution to the public conversation about early childhood.

Define our role in leading the early childhood system, and build what it takes to sustain that role

WHAT THIS PRIORITY MEANS

We use what we surface to take specific, intentional steps to shape the early childhood system in Wake County. This is work that positions us as the community steward for young children in the county, not only a program funder or administrator. It includes broadening where our funding comes from, so that more of our resources are flexible enough to direct toward what the community tells us it needs.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

When a decision about early childhood is being made in Wake County, we are in the room, and what we bring is a picture of the whole rather than an argument for our own programs.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE BY 2030

We will have shifted from running programs within the system to using our position to shape the system. The change is visible externally in how we show up in partner conversations, public communications, and funding relationships, and internally in how staff understand our role.

HOW WE CHOSE THESE PRIORITIES

Priorities are not intended to represent every facet of our work. They represent the areas where we believe focused attention, investment, and partnership can create the greatest impact over the next three years.

Each priority:

- **Advances our mission**
- **Reflects community needs and strengths**
- **Builds on existing assets**
- **Can be measured and learned from over time**

What this means for funded partners

These four priorities describe changes we're making to how we operate. Some of those changes will be visible to you. We'll ask you about what you're experiencing, not only what you delivered. The numbers still matter, and the reporting requirements that come with our funding still apply. But the conversations around them will more often be about patterns you're noticing, community strengths we're not making use of, families you can't reach, and what could work better.

We'll make what we ask of you proportionate to what it produces. If a requirement comes from NCPC or another funder, and we cannot change it, we'll say so plainly.

We'll be more specific about who we are trying to reach. Directing our deepest attention to families facing the greatest barriers is a choice with consequences for how funding is structured.

We'll bring what we learn from you back to you. If something you share with us shapes a decision, we'll tell you about it.

If you're considering partnering with us

Wake County Smart Start funds and works alongside organizations across the county, from large public agencies to congregations running a parenting group in a church basement. What we look for is not size. We look for whether the work reaches children and families who need it, whether the organization is honest about what is working, and whether it's willing to be in relationship rather than only in a contract. If this plan describes the way you already work, we'd like to know more about you.

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

We enter this strategic plan with significant strengths: strong, trusted relationships, deep community, knowledge, and a long-standing commitment to young children and families. This plan builds on those strengths and calls for greater clarity, intentionality, and focus in their application.

By the end of this strategic plan period, we will be known for our clear understanding of what children, families, and providers are navigating, our commitment to relationships as a source of learning and decision-making, and our ability to bring together data, stories, and community experience to strengthen the early childhood system. Families, providers, funded partners, and community leaders will see themselves reflected in our decisions and priorities. Most importantly, this work will make Wake County stronger. Resources will follow what communities tell us matters most, relationships across the system will be stronger, and more families will be able to reach what they need to raise happy, healthy children.

APPENDIX

WCSS-Funded Work and NCPC Priority Areas

This crosswalk shows how the work Wake County Smart Start funds connects to the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC) priority areas and the Smart Solutions catalog (smartsolutionscatalog.com/nc/) funded in fiscal year 2025-2026. Its purpose is to serve as a funder and compliance reference: it documents how WCSS meets NCPC's required areas. It is not the organizing structure of this plan. The plan is organized around WCSS's strategic priorities, and this crosswalk sits in the appendix so that alignment with NCPC is recorded.

Programs are drawn from the FY2025-26 Funded Partner Summary. Smart Solutions is the state's catalog of evidence-based programs; local partnerships select from it based on community need.

NCPC Priority Area	Smart Solutions Area	WCSS-Funded Work (FY2025-26)	FY2023-27 Plan Goal Area
Increasing access and raising the quality of early care and education	Early Care and Education	NC Pre-K (Wake County Smart Start) NC Pre-K Quality Enhancement (Wake County Smart Start) Quality Enhancement (Wake County Smart Start) Rebuilding Capacity for Quality (Child Care Services Association) Child Care Subsidy (Wake County Health and Human Services) Child Care Health Consultant Program (Wake County Health and Human Services)	*Goal 3, Early Care and Education: children are in high-quality care*
Expanding early literacy	Literacy	Raising a Reader (East Wake Foundation; Fiesta Cristiana Mission Congregation; StepUp Ministry)	*Goal 1, Child Focused: children are healthy and developmentally ready for school*

NCPC Priority Area	Smart Solutions Area	WCSS-Funded Work (FY2025-26)	FY2023-27 Plan Goal Area
Supporting families	Family Support	Parents as Teachers (Wake County Public School System, Office of Early Learning) Nurse Family Partnership (Wake County Health and Human Services) Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, HIPPY (Family Resource Center of Raleigh) Baby Steps / Little Steps (StepUp Ministry) School Readiness Services for Hispanic Children (Catholic Charities) Crianza con Cariño: The Nurturing Program for Spanish-Speaking Families (SAFEchild) Circle of Security (Triangle Area Parenting Support) Building Family Support (Fiesta Family Services) SIPE (Systems Improvement and Public Engagement) Family Navigation (Wake County Smart Start)	*Goal 2, Family Focused: children are in safe, supportive home environments*
Advancing child health	Child and Family Health	Social Emotional Interventions for Young Children (Lucy Daniels Center) Breastfeeding Support and Education (Triangle Area Parenting Support)	*Goal 1, Child Focused: children are healthy and developmentally ready for school*
Systems change	Systems Building	Systems Improvement and Public Engagement, SIPE (Wake County Smart Start)	*Systems Goal: a strong, connected, integrated early childhood system*

NOTES ON THIS CROSSWALK

- This crosswalk reflects the programs documented in the FY2025-26 Funded Partner Summary.
- Some programs serve more than one area. The Child Care Health Consultant Program supports both early care and education quality and child health; the Funded Partner Summary groups it under child care quality. Social Emotional Interventions for Young Children is grouped under mental health in the summary and is mapped here to child health. This crosswalk maps programs to NCPC areas, which do not always match how the Funded Partner Summary groups them.
- Some work carries WCSS's name but doesn't appear as a separately funded program in the partner list. WCSS operates or delivers programs as part of broader work rather than funding them as stand-alone activities, for example, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, which WCSS operates, and Preventing Obesity by Design, which the Early Childhood Initiatives (ECI) Department within WCSS delivers under Healthy Initiatives.
- The prior plan goal areas (FY2023-27) are included to show continuity from the previous framework. They are not used to organize the new plan.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This plan was shaped by the people who do this work and the families who live it. It was built directly on the Community Needs Assessment, so that what families, educators, providers, and partners shared became the foundation for the priorities described here. We are grateful to everyone who gave their time, perspective, and leadership to this process.

Community Needs Assessment

More than 200 families, educators, and service providers shared their experiences through surveys, interviews, and focus groups as part of Wake County Smart Start's Community Needs Assessment on young children's social and emotional health. The insights gathered through this process provided the foundation for the strategic planning process, ensuring that the priorities in this plan are rooted in community voice, local data, and the realities families and providers experience every day.

Sensemaking Group

Special thanks to the Community Needs Assessment Sensemaking Group, which met eight times to interpret what the assessment surfaced, name the patterns in it, and carry what community members said into the direction of this plan.

- **Sasha Gomez**
- **Vanessa Guzman**
- **Ramona Maldonado**
- **Kimberly McNeil**
- **Alex Setzer**

WCSS Staff & Partners

Eighty-eight percent of staff contributed through an all-staff survey in the fall of 2025, helping connect organizational experience with community insights. Funded partners contributed through interviews and a partner survey. Their programs are the way most of this work reaches families, and this plan is stronger for what they shared. The following people from FY2025-26 funded partners or funded partner sites participated in interviews in spring 2026:

- **Rocio Anderson**, Fiesta Family Services
- **Maty Ferrer Hoppman**, Centro para Familias Hispanas at Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Raleigh
- **Ronetta Pearsall**, Little Hands N Feet Child Care Center
- **Byron McIntyre and Charmaine Winston,** A Safe Place Child Enrichment Center
- **Geraldine Pelaez and Monica Richardson,** Triangle Area Parenting Support

Strategic Planning Committee

The Strategic Planning Committee, including board members and community representatives, provided guidance through five planning meetings to shape, develop, and give feedback on this strategic plan.

- André Anthony
- Nikia Coates
- Veronica Creech
- Ariel Ford
- Jessica Harrison
- Gayle E. Headen
- Jason Horton
- Alejandra Livas-Dlott
- Bryce McClamroch
- Brenda McKenna
- Katherine Williams

WCSS Core Team

The Core Team partnered closely throughout the process, bringing organizational knowledge, testing emerging ideas, and helping translate what the community shared into priorities the organization can act on.

- Nikia Coates
- Gayle E. Headen
- Alejandra Livas-Dlott
- Bryce McClamroch

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Approved by the Wake County Smart Start Board of Directors on August 26, 2026