

# WAKE COUNTY NORTH CAROLINA

**PROGRAM** Prekindergarten

**FUNDING MECHANISM** County Budget

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## OPPORTUNITY

There are approximately 4,600 four-year-olds eligible for NC Pre-K in Wake County. In Fiscal Year 2014-15, 25 percent (1,174) of eligible children in the county were served through the state's public prekindergarten program. An additional 36 percent (1,645) of eligible children were served by other publicly funded preschool programs, including programs funded by Title I, Child Care Subsidy and Head Start. This left close to 40 percent of eligible children not being served.

## SUMMARY

The 2015 budget for Wake County included \$325,728 to expand NC Pre-K classrooms to serve more children. Between 2018 and 2020, the budget ranged from \$500,000 to \$600,000.

## RESULTS

With the support of key County Commissioners, Wake County SmartStart presented the County Manager with three options for investment and provided specific numbers for expanded prekindergarten service. The County Commissioners initially committed \$325,000 to serve 144 more children. Since 2015, the county investment has continued to grow. In 2021, 86 percent of eligible children attended NC Pre-K in Wake County, up from 25 percent in 2015.

In April 2021, the Board of Commissioners announced the launching of ThreeSchool, a high-quality child care program for three-year-olds in 2022. The initial investment in 2021 was \$350,000 for planning and capacity building.

## CHALLENGES

**Early Learning Lifetime Benefits Not Well Understood** // Key stakeholders were often unfamiliar with research and evidence regarding the substantial lifetime benefits of high quality early childhood education.

**Shifting Political Sands** // Change in leadership in both elected bodies and professional staff (Wake County and school system) necessitated education of new stakeholders and cultivation of new champions.

**Early Learning Not Prioritized** // Many who are supportive of early childhood education did not necessarily see it as a top funding priority.

**Advocates Lacked Coordination** // Community education advocates were united in support of early childhood investments, but there was a lack of coordination in terms of strategy and tactics employed by various groups to achieve the same ends.

## GETTING TO ACTION

The effort began over a decade ago when Wake SmartStart and Wake County Public Schools partnered to educate the public and community leaders about the importance of providing young children from economically disadvantaged families with high quality early learning experiences.

This collaborative effort to engage community leaders on the importance of early childhood policies and investments resulted in a historic action. For the first time, the Wake County Board of Commissioners pledged additional dollars to the NC Pre-K program and the School District has agreed to allocate those funds to give more four-year-olds a high quality prekindergarten experience that will prepare them to be successful in school.

## KEYS TO SUCCESS

- ▶ *Made the case for early childhood investments as a benefit to everyone in the community*
- ▶ *Created an ally in the school system by articulating a prekindergarten through 12th grade continuous system*
- ▶ *Focused on the child's experiences and what they needed for lifelong success, instead of specific services*
- ▶ *Connected early learning to economic outcomes, participated in conversations about the community's economic potential and served as an active member of the local Chamber of Commerce*
- ▶ *Built relationships with local appointed and elected officials*
- ▶ *Recruited local leaders for its Board of Directors*