

**Child Care WAGES® Program
Statewide Final Report
Fiscal Year 2026**

REPORT CONTENTS

The Child Care WAGES® final report includes a detailed narrative, data tables to support many of the findings discussed and appendices that showcase participant feedback. Please see below for more information on the report's contents, which are listed in the order they are presented.

Program Description – Includes a brief overview of the program and its funding support.

Program Eligibility – Highlights primary requirements to participate in the Child Care WAGES® Program.

Program Overall Impact – Reviews the WAGES\$ impact by providing a summary and select tables for the following categories:

- Participation Overview (Table A: Tier and Income Cap Selections)
- Turnover (Table B: Turnover Rate Comparison, Table C: Turnover by Education)
- Compensation (Table D: Compensation by Tier)

Outputs – Includes the contracted outputs in table format with additional information on the activities that supported output achievement. (Table E: Outputs)

Outcomes – Includes the primary program outcome in table format. (Table F: Outcomes)

Program Evaluations – Highlights from the WAGES\$ surveys for recipients and their employers.

Program Challenges – Summarizes the primary challenges faced within the reporting year.

Smart Start – Describes the notification procedures for recipients regarding Smart Start's supplement funding.

Table 1 – Provides a demographic profile of active participants. Active participants are those who have been paid at some point in their participation and are still eligible based on their most recent employment confirmation.

Table 2 – Lists the participation results of active participants by the star rating or license status of employing child care facilities.

Table 3 – Identifies the number of participants funded at each education level by general position category and indicates the percentage of participants at permanent levels *or* who have submitted coursework during the reporting period.

Table 4 – States the number of individuals paid, their programs and the number of children impacted. Please note that these individuals may or may not still be eligible at the end of the year, so this number will likely be different than the number of active participants represented on other tables.

Table 5 – Describes turnover reporting methods, summarizes turnover data and provides the demographic overview of those who left their programs.

Partner Organizations – Lists funders for the reporting year.

Appendix A – Presents sample survey feedback regarding the WAGES\$ impact on retention.

Appendix B – Presents sample survey feedback regarding the WAGES\$ impact on education.

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Appendix D – Presents sample survey feedback regarding the WAGES\$ impact on recognition.

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PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Child Care WAGE\$® Program is an education-based salary supplement program for teachers, directors and family child care home providers. The education, position and work schedule for each applicant are assessed to determine the annual award. To encourage consistency, installments based on half of the annual award are issued after each six-month period the participant completes in the same early care and education program. Because these supplements reward teacher education and continuity of care, children ages birth to five benefit from more stable relationships with better educated teachers. WAGE\$ provides compensation that helps build quality. In FY26, WAGE\$ was a partnership between participating local Smart Start partnerships, the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC) and the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE).

GENERAL PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY

To be eligible for at least one six-month payment during the fiscal year, applicants must:

- work in a county that uses Smart Start funds to support the Child Care WAGE\$® Program
- work in a licensed child care program (center, home or public school site); GS-110 sites may also be eligible dependent upon partnership choice
- work at least 10 hours per week with children birth to five
- earn at or below the income cap selected by the funding partnership (out of available options)
 - \$25 per hour
 - \$23 per hour
 - \$19 per hour
- have a level of education funded on the Child Care WAGE\$® scale (from regionally accredited schools)
- work at least six months in the same child care program
- be employed at this same child care program when funding is available and a final confirmation has been completed

PROGRAM OVERALL IMPACT

The Child Care WAGE\$® Program impacts the community by improving the quality of early care and education for young children. Most evidence suggests there are three primary factors associated with teacher quality: education, stability and compensation. WAGE\$ addresses all three. Through graduated salary supplements, the program helps decrease turnover and encourages the continued educational pursuits of the child care workforce. While supplements alone cannot solve the workforce compensation crisis, they are a critical strategy until early educators receive the base pay, benefits and respect they deserve for the important work they do. As of June 2026, 3,378 child care professionals in 1,607 child care programs from 68 North Carolina counties were active participants in the Child Care WAGE\$® Program. Bladen County returned to WAGE\$ this year.

As of June 2026, 625 of the active participants were reported by their employers as being NC Pre-K teachers and assistants. Of this group, 162 are teachers and 463 are assistant teachers in NC Pre-K classrooms. These individuals work in 184 different child care programs in 66 counties.

Participation Overview

Smart Start partnerships were given options for their participation that included tier selection (award amounts increase with higher tiers) and income cap requirements. Forty-three (43) of the participating counties (63%) funded Tier Two or higher for at least half the year.

Table A below depicts the breakdown of the partnership choices for their counties.

Table A: Tier and Income Cap Selections*

	\$19 per hour	\$23 per hour	\$25 per hour	Totals
Tier One	20	4	1	25
Tier One / Tier Two Split	0	1	0	1
Tier Two	10	19	8	37
Tier Two / Tier Three Split	0	0	1	1
Tier Three	0	3	1	4
Totals	30	27	11	68

**Numbers represent unduplicated counties participating in each category. Three counties listed as \$25 per hour increased their cap as of January 2026.*

Out of the new applicants from participating counties that did not qualify for WAGES, 41% did not yet have the education needed to participate, and 23% were over the income cap for their county or region.

To help partnerships handle budget constraints and keep the WAGES opportunity in place for early childhood professionals in their counties, the Education and Compensation Advisory Committee approved several county-level eligibility and/or payment options. Partnerships may:

- Fund only those working in sites with at least three stars.
- Eliminate funding for administrator/director time. Directors are still eligible for time spent in the classroom.
- Eliminate funding for participants for the entry level of education on the WAGES scale (which includes, for example, the CDA and 12 semester hours of birth to five focused coursework).

Twenty-eight (28) counties implemented one or a combination of these strategies. Please note income caps are not discussed here; partnerships *must* choose an income cap each year. See below for additional information on the eligibility cuts applied for FY26.

- Cut administrator time only – four counties
- Cut those working in sites with fewer than three stars only – 14 counties
- Cut administrator time and those working in sites with fewer than three stars – seven counties
- Cut administrator time and those at level two on the scale – two counties
- Cut those working in sites with fewer than three stars and those at level two on the scale – one county

Turnover

Turnover numbers for the Child Care WAGE\$® Program reflect active participants who left their child care programs, as identified in confirmations completed with employers during the fiscal year.

If participants leave their program and resume eligibility at a new site, they will not be factored into the report at all until they have completed a full six-month period at their new site. Once participants receive a supplement, they will again be recognized as an active participant. Only participants for whom WAGE\$ could have impacted the decision to stay or leave are factored into the turnover data. For example, participants who become ineligible for reasons other than leaving their child care programs (i.e. change of position within the program, center closure) are not considered turnover.

The turnover rate of WAGE\$ participants for FY26 was only 14%, a significant overall improvement compared to the 31% full-time teacher turnover rate in North Carolina prior to WAGE\$ becoming a statewide opportunity (Early Years, 1998). This rate is also below the program goal of 25%. The turnover rate among WAGE\$ NC Pre-K teachers and assistants was 10%.

The participant turnover rate compares favorably to the 38% turnover rate of full-time teachers and assistants in the state's early childhood workforce overall, captured in 2023 workforce data (Early Years, 2024). Continued efforts to make it possible for teachers to stay are essential.

Given the low compensation for early educators, the rate of departure would likely have been much higher without the workforce supports available in North Carolina, including WAGE\$, Infant-Toddler Educator AWARD\$® Plus (contract ended January 2026), STEP\$ and the TEACH Early Childhood® Scholarship Program.

The WAGE\$ turnover rate covers all eligible positions, including part-time employees, and is not a straightforward comparison to the workforce study data in general. Additionally, it is expected that the WAGE\$ population of educated professionals would typically have more job opportunities than the child care workforce at large. A comparison of turnover data can be seen in Table B below.

Table B: Turnover Rate Comparison

	Statewide Workforce Pre-Program	Statewide ECE Workforce 2023	Program Goal	WAGE\$ FY26
Turnover Rates	31%	38%	25%	14%

While the stabilization grants helped to increase the pay for many early educators, those funds are no longer being issued by the state. To keep teachers, many employers are struggling to offer the best pay they can without grant assistance. WAGE\$ supplements are a crucial support for early educators and enhance the compensation employers can provide, making it more feasible for educated professionals to afford to teach children.

Of all WAGE\$ participants statewide with an associate degree with at least 24 birth to five focused semester hours or higher, only 11% left their programs this past year. Of all participants with less education, 22% left their programs. This figure may differ for the workforce not receiving higher compensation through supplements, but it appears that if salaries are supplemented or teachers are more fairly compensated, those with higher education will not leave at a higher rate, which is a common belief. In fact, for the past several years, retention has been *better* among the more highly educated participants, as shown in Table C below.

Table C: Turnover by Education

	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY26
AAS ECE or higher	13%	13%	12%	11%	11%
Below AAS ECE	19%	21%	26%	22%	22%

Research makes it clear that children need stable and engaging relationships with the best-educated teachers to help facilitate their development during these most critical years. The higher retention of this educated group of WAGE\$ participants is key; the field must aspire to stabilize this group to provide children and families what they really need.

In addition to statistical data showing an impact on retention, WAGE\$ evaluation respondents shared that supplements play a role in the decision and ability to stay in the field. See Appendix A for selected survey comments regarding retention.

“WAGE\$ is an incentive to stay in child care. I love working with children, but other jobs pay more. WAGE\$ fills the gap and makes it easier for me to stay with the children.”
(Brunswick, teacher)

Education

The WAGE\$ population is well educated, with the bulk of participants having at least a two-year degree. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the active FY26 WAGE\$ participants whose counties have participated two or more years (and 92% of those participants working in NC Pre-K classrooms) are being funded for having an associate degree with at least 24 birth to five focused semester hours, its equivalent or higher based on the WAGE\$ scale *or* have submitted documentation during the year to verify their pursuit of additional coursework. The WAGE\$ Program has several temporary award levels which require that participants with lower education advance up the scale to remain eligible.

Many participants at temporary levels were surveyed during the year to learn more about their educational plans and potential barriers (321 completed calls). Seventy-seven percent (77%) indicated that they do still intend to take coursework to remain eligible for their WAGE\$ supplements and 62% said they had completed new coursework since their last submission. WAGE\$ also called a number of recipients to follow up on their original survey and update their education status. Out of those who identified barriers, 48% (13) said financial constraints prevented them from pursuing additional coursework. Information about TEACH Early Childhood® scholarships was shared.

When given a list of possible benefits resulting from WAGE\$, 88% of participants overall who responded to the annual survey agreed that the supplements provide an incentive to seek additional coursework or help make the pursuit of that coursework more financially feasible.

Through survey feedback, participants and directors with participating staff took the opportunity to express the importance of education and how WAGE\$ has made a difference in their educational pursuits. See Appendix B for samples.

“The WAGE\$ Program absolutely incentivizes teachers to further their education, in turn building skills, confidence, and a sense of pride and professionalism. Thank you for offering this to our employees!” (Buncombe, director)

Compensation.

The Child Care WAGE\$® Program increases the compensation of participants through salary supplements. Despite obtained education, compensation in the field continues to be low and is not competitive with many other professions. In FY26, 27% of the WAGE\$ participants earned \$15 per hour or less compared to 29% in FY25. Looking only at those participants working in NC Pre-K classrooms, 6% earned \$15 per hour or less. Regardless of position, early educators are underpaid for the work they do, but family child care providers are far more likely to fall into this category. In FY26, 91% of the participating family child care providers earned \$15 per hour or less compared to 23% of the participating teachers and directors.

The median hourly rate of active WAGE\$ participants is only \$17, which is well below the living wage of \$22.47 necessary for one adult in North Carolina to cover basic, fundamental needs. The living wage increases to \$37.54 per hour if that adult has one child (Living Wage Calculator, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2026).

The poor compensation across the board highlights the need for salary supplements to attract and retain qualified staff. WAGE\$ survey results support this. Ninety-six percent (96%) of the respondents stated that WAGE\$ encourages them to stay with their current child care programs.

The average six-month supplement issued statewide during FY26 was \$1,285. The average payment amount includes all participating counties and all applicable tiers. Since the supplements are based on the education earned, the average will vary by county even within the same tier category. The average six-month supplements statewide ranged from \$704 to \$2,472. The highest average supplement was in one of the smallest participating counties, where only six early educators were paid. The average six-month supplement at each tier level can be seen in Table D below. Forty-seven (47) participating counties were able to fund an increase over their base tier and/or provide year-end enhancements.

Table D: Compensation by Tier

Tiers Funded FY26	Number of Participating Counties by Tier	Average Six-Month Supplement
All Tiers	68	\$1,285
Tier One	25	\$941
Tier One/Tier Two Split	1	\$1,042
Tier Two	37	\$1,335
Tier Two/Tier Three Split	1	\$1,635
Tier Three	4	\$1,771

Ninety-eight percent (98%) of evaluation respondents statewide indicated that receiving a WAGES supplement helps ease financial stress. When asked about the financial impact, recipients selected from a list of potential benefits. A sample of responses is below:

- 80% are better able to pay their bills
- 69% are more able to address the basic needs of their families (food/housing)
- 58% rely on the supplements to help address transportation costs
- 54% use the funds to provide additional resources for their classrooms or child care programs

In a separate question, a greater number of respondents (90%) stated that providing resources for their programs is a benefit of WAGES.

Economic insecurity impacts teacher well-being, and can have consequences for the quality of interactions they have with the children in their care. Stress and adversity can affect the health of teachers and thus how effective they can be in promoting the supportive environments and engaging interactions children need. Easing financial stress is critical for the participants, their families and for the children they serve.

Throughout the survey, respondents discussed the importance of this additional compensation. Please see Appendix C for sample comments.

*“WAGES is very important to me and my family, because without it I would not be able to pay my bills or have food on the table. WAGES helps my day to day life tremendously.”
(Randolph, teacher)*

OUTPUTS

This section highlights the projected outputs of the Child Care WAGES® Program across all participating counties for FY26 and the program’s effectiveness in reaching these goals. Primary results are shown in Table E below followed by additional detail as applicable.

Table E: Outputs

	Projected Output	Results
1	Approximately 3,317 eligible participants will receive WAGE\$ payments as of June 30, 2026.	Output exceeded. As of June 2026, 3,991 applicants had received WAGE\$ payments.
2	Child Care WAGE\$® staff will conduct 25 outreach opportunities to child care professionals to offer information about the program.	Output exceeded. WAGE\$ conducted 39 outreach sessions.

WAGE\$ payments: Three thousand nine hundred ninety-one (3,991) participants were paid for completing at least one six-month period on the Child Care WAGE\$® Program during FY26. These participants worked in 1,794 facilities serving approximately 83,785 children. This number is an unduplicated count of supplement recipients. Of these, 713 were NC Pre-K teachers or assistants. Please note that these paid individuals may or may not still be eligible at the end of the year, so this number is different than the number of active participants discussed elsewhere in this report. More than 700 applicants are currently on the waiting list, either waiting for funding and/or completing their initial or reactivated six-month commitment period.

Outreach and recruitment: Thirty-nine (39) outreach sessions, both virtual and in-person, were done upon request or because of WAGE\$ solicitation during the year. WAGE\$ representatives also discussed opportunities available through Infant-Toddler Educator AWARD\$® Plus until December 2025, through STEP\$ as of spring 2026 and the TEACH Early Childhood® Scholarship Program, thus giving audience members an opportunity to learn about all these workforce supports. In some cases, staff from the supplement and scholarship programs provide joint outreach sessions.

In addition to the outreach listed above, 4,313 recruitment emails or mailings were sent to 2,992 sites. WAGE\$ also sent recruitment information to Smart Start partnerships, resource and referral agencies, community colleges and Head Start grantees in participating counties. Follow-up calls were made to many of the non-participating sites to verify receipt of the email/packet, answer questions and encourage participation. During each employment confirmation completed with a participating site, the specialist inquired about any possible eligible staff not yet accessing a supplement.

WAGE\$ worked with multiple partners to ensure that information about the supplement opportunity was shared as widely as possible, including TEACH Early Childhood®/Pathways, CCR&R, the Statewide Technical Assistance & Professional Development Specialist, DCDEE consultants, Raise NC Newsletter, Elevate Family Child Care Home Project and Child Care Academies.

WAGE\$ continued its efforts to highlight the voices of participants. The I am WAGE\$ campaign features a monthly Facebook post with testimonials from participants who have benefitted from the program. In addition, WAGE\$ participant stories have been highlighted in blogs shared on the Early Years website and social media platforms; these stories were also

shared directly with their local and statewide funders. WAGE\$ conducted an interview with the Executive Director of a participating partnership, [Henrietta Zalkind](#), who explained the importance of WAGE\$ locally as well as the need to move the program statewide. Links for sample posts/blogs are shared below:

<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1ES9VRKeiX/>
<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1cr6qY4z5V/>
<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/19MkSPsiRk/>
<https://www.earlyyearsnc.org/blog/i-am-wage-with-erin-drye>
<https://www.earlyyearsnc.org/blog/dont-give-up-i-am-wage-with-margaret-simerly>

OUTCOME

Table F below details the primary outcome of the Child Care WAGE\$® Program.

Table F: Outcome

Projected Outcome	Results
By June 30, 2026, the turnover rate of WAGE\$ participants will be less than 25%.	Outcome met. The turnover rate for WAGE\$ participants was only 14%, well below the benchmark of 25%.

This is a positive, strong outcome. The WAGE\$ supplements are essential to help teachers who want to work with young children be able to do that and still take care of themselves and/or their families.

This outcome is measured through employment confirmations completed as each participant concludes a six-month commitment period on the program. The information regarding turnover is entered into a database that produces the percentage.

PROGRAM EVALUATIONS

The information below reflects the impact of WAGE\$ from the perspectives of participants and their employers. Salary supplement recipients and center directors who did not receive supplements but who had recipients among their staff participated in an annual evaluation of the Child Care WAGE\$® Program. WAGE\$ created a new page on the Early Years website to provide in depth answers to many of the commonly asked questions from the survey.

Survey samples were created based on the number of potential respondents by position in each county. If the pool of participating teachers in a county was between 1 and 50, the entire teacher recipient population was mailed a survey. A 40% sample was drawn when the teacher recipient population was between 51 and 100 and a 25% sample was drawn if the teacher population was 101 or more. All participating directors were also surveyed. Directors in counties funding WAGE\$ who were not personally participating but who had staff members on WAGE\$ were also sent a survey to assess the impact of salary supplements. They were sampled using the same protocol described for teachers and responses have been integrated into the director feedback.

All participants in the sample who had email addresses on file with WAGES were invited to complete the survey online. Reminder emails were sent to encourage online response. Those who did not participate online or who did not have email addresses on file were mailed surveys. One final attempt was made to secure non-respondent surveys via phone in counties with low response rates. All respondents were given the opportunity to be entered into a drawing for professional resources.

Overall, 72% of the sampled population completed surveys (1,819 of 2,517), which included the following:

- 73% of participating teachers/family child care home providers (1,112 of 1,513)
- 79% of participating directors (206 of 262)
- 68% of non-participating directors with staff receiving salary supplements (501 of 742)

Sample responses

Ninety-eight percent (98%) of responding WAGES participants indicated that their receipt of a supplement had an impact on either their inclination to stay in the field *or* on their pursuit of further education. When asked to examine a list of possible benefits resulting from the Child Care WAGES® Program and indicate whether or not they are true for the respondent, nearly 98% indicated that WAGES either encourages them to stay in their current programs or to pursue further education. Responses to the individual options were as follows, listed in survey order:

- WAGES helps me feel more satisfied with my job. – 95%
- WAGES is an incentive for me to seek additional education and/or it helps make pursuing coursework more financially feasible. – 88%
- The WAGES supplement helps ease financial stress. – 98%
- WAGES encourages me to stay with my current program. – 96%
- The WAGES supplement helps me to provide more resources for my program or classroom. – 90%
- Receiving the WAGES supplement makes me feel more appreciated and recognized for my work. – 97%

Ninety-three percent (93%) of responding directors indicated that staff participation in WAGES benefits the children in their centers in some way. When asked to select from a list of options explaining how participation may be beneficial to the children in their programs, including an option stating that no benefits have been noticed, 93% of responding directors indicated that staff participation in WAGES benefits the children in some way. The two most popular examples of impact were that improved morale has created more positive child-teacher interactions and that staff members are seeking more education, which leads to higher quality care for children.

Ninety-nine percent (99%) of all respondents stated that they are satisfied with the program and its administration.

Nearly 100% of responding directors reported positive attitudes toward WAGES in their child care programs.

For those respondents who had the opportunity to speak with the WAGES staff, nearly 100% of those who have had interactions found the staff to be pleasant and helpful. Many respondents took the opportunity to share additional comments about their interactions with staff. Not only did the respondents report that they received helpful and pleasant customer service, but many also talked about how important the encouragement from staff has been in terms of participation in the program and pursuit of education. A few examples of participant feedback are listed below:

“The WAGES staff has always been knowledgeable and willing to help with any questions I have had and are also very encouraging and congratulatory when an academic goal is accomplished.” (teacher)

“The staff at WAGES have helped me navigate through the program with comfort and ease and ensured that communication was always top priority.” (teacher)

“Everybody I spoke to was informative and helpful with the process. They were able to bring clarity to the process and it’s nice to speak with people who genuinely care.” (teacher)

“The staff is wonderful. Everyone that I have ever had an interaction with has been so very helpful and nice. The customer service is top tier.” (teacher)

“The staff of the Child Care WAGES® Program at Early Years are consistently amazing and provide reliable, supportive assistance to child care programs whenever help is needed.” (director)

Ninety-seven percent (97%) of responding participants indicated that, as a result of WAGES, they feel more appreciated and recognized for their work. Recipients and directors with participating staff continue to emphasize the importance of the recognition and appreciation associated with the receipt of the WAGES supplements and the impact this has on self-esteem, professionalism and morale. Not only are these things significant in themselves, but they enhance the likelihood that participants will stay in the field and seek additional education. See Appendix D for examples of feedback regarding recognition and appreciation.

“WAGES makes our work meaningful. We feel seen, heard, and valued.” (Alexander, teacher)

PROGRAM CHALLENGES

In recent fiscal years, WAGES operated with a special stabilization grant policy that expired June 2025 since those funds were no longer available in the state. Because the stabilization grants were temporary, they did not impact participant eligibility. The income eligibility for most active participants was retained; new applicants were assessed based on their hourly rate without grant money applied. As of July 2025, participant eligibility was again strictly tied to the income cap selected by their funding partnership.

During FY26, including those that lost eligibility when the special policy expired, 394 became ineligible due to income. While this does mean that they were earning more than the applicable income cap, most were still earning less than other fields and less than a thriving wage. During the grant period, participants still indicated they were experiencing financial hardship so moving forward without this additional support will be a challenge for those who can no longer participate. Others not included in this number *regained* eligibility in counties that increased their income cap in January.

Several survey respondents took the opportunity to share concerns about the income caps. Sample director comments are below:

“This is a hard profession and across the board I do not feel like we get paid what we deserve. I feel there should be a cap but a reasonable cap for receiving funds. These funds help in a lot of ways and it’s sad that all teachers and admin cannot receive them.”

“I would love to see the bracket changed in order to benefit the long-term staff with education regardless of their income.”

“All staff deserve the WAGE\$ Program no matter the pay as everyone receives low pay in this field.”

“With the change in the cost of living, the salary/hourly rate teachers can make should be changed to a higher rate.”

Center and home closures also impacted WAGE\$ participants. More than 130 lost their WAGE\$ eligibility over the past two fiscal years due to closure.

SMART START

The Child Care WAGE\$® Program works hard to publicize the collaboration with local partnerships and identifies the funding sources in a variety of ways. Special notices are sent in conjunction with payments which explain the funding collaboration between their local Smart Start partnership, DCDEE and NCPC. The county/region partnership is listed on hard copy check stubs and labels are attached to payment letter envelopes to identify the funder. Emails are sent to recipients to inform them when payments have been mailed or deposited, crediting the funders. The Child Care WAGE\$® fact sheets, application-based program agreements and letters clarify the funding arrangement for the program and WAGE\$ representatives explain the funding for the program in presentations. Finally, the program evaluations state that the funds for the Child Care WAGE\$® supplements are provided by local Smart Start partnerships and respondents are given the opportunity to share messages regarding the supplements with their local Smart Starts. See Appendix E for a sample of those messages for FY26. Please note that, in addition to the sample comments included, many recipients shared their gratitude through “thank you” messages that are not listed.

“The WAGE\$ Program is important because it supports early childhood educators, helping us stay in the field and provide quality care. It has given me financial stability, encouraged me to finish my degree, and allowed me to focus more on the children while supporting the early childhood community.” (Alamance, teacher)



Table 1
Profile of the 3,378 Participants in North Carolina
Child Care WAGES® Program
July 2025 - June 2026



	# of Participants	% of Participants
Position		
Teacher	1942	57%
Teacher (Head Start In Home Educator)	8	0%
Assistant Teacher	786	23%
Director	191	6%
Director (Owner)	60	2%
Assistant Director	196	6%
Small Home Provider	195	6%
Ages of Children Served*		
Birth up to Three	870	26%
Three to Five	1757	52%
Mixed Ages	751	22%
Education Level		
CDA Credential	35	1%
12 birth to five sem. hours	23	1%
18 general sem. hours including 4 birth to five sem. hours	14	0%
Early Childhood Education Certificate	1	0%
16 birth to five sem. hours	59	2%
24 general sem. hours including 6 birth to five sem. hours	78	2%
70 general sem. hours (less than 6 birth to five sem. hours)	10	0%
AAS (less than 6 birth to five sem. hours)	25	1%
36 general sem. hours including 12 birth to five sem. hours	50	1%
70 general sem. hours including 6 birth to five sem. hours	10	0%
AAS including 6 birth to five sem. hours	18	1%
45 general sem. hours including 18 birth to five sem. hours	77	2%
AAS including 12 birth to five sem. hours	14	0%
57 general sem. hours including 24 birth to five sem. hours	114	3%
AAS including 18 birth to five sem. hours	19	1%
BA/BS (less than 6 birth to five sem. hours)	75	2%
MA/MS (less than 6 birth to five sem. hours)	10	0%
AAS including 24 birth to five sem. hours	1580	47%
BA/BS including 6 birth to five sem. hours	83	2%
MA/MS including 6 birth to five sem. hours	17	1%
90 sem. hours toward BA/BS including 18 birth to five sem. hours	192	6%
BA/BS including 12 birth to five sem. hours	70	2%
BA/BS including 18 birth to five sem. hours	695	21%
MA/MS including 12 birth to five sem. hours	18	1%
MA/MS including 18 birth to five sem. hours	91	3%

*Combination classrooms including two and three year olds are included in the category "Mixed Ages."

Participants are identified by their primary position. Directors or assistant directors may only be funded for time in the classroom depending on county choice.

Table 1 (cont.)
Profile of the 3,378 Participants in North Carolina
Child Care WAGES® Program
July 2025 - June 2026

	# of Participants	% of Participants
Wage Rate**		
Below \$7.25 per hour	141	4%
\$7.25 - \$10.00 per hour	78	2%
\$10.01 - \$13.00 per hour	257	8%
\$13.01 - \$15.00 per hour	426	13%
\$15.01 - \$17.00 per hour	881	26%
\$17.01 - \$19.00 per hour	771	23%
\$19.01 - \$21.00 per hour	425	13%
\$21.01 - \$23.00 per hour	295	9%
\$23.01 - \$25.00 per hour	104	3%
Years in Child Care Program: Participant's Start Date to Report End Date		
0 to .99 Years	73	2%
1.00 to 1.99 Years	276	8%
2.00 to 2.99 Years	388	11%
3.00 to 3.99 Years	382	11%
4.00 to 4.99 Years	339	10%
5.00 or More Years	1920	57%

**The first category under Wage Rate reflects those earning below North Carolina's minimum wage, typically home providers or owners whose income is dependent upon revenue.



Table 2
Child Care Center Profile for North Carolina
Child Care WAGES® Program
July 2025 - June 2026



	Programs	Participants
Center	1,406	3,173
1 STAR	14	27
2 STAR	1	2
3 STAR	155	246
4 STAR	318	662
5 STAR	866	2,130
GS-110	41	77
PROV	2	6
Temporary	9	23
Family Provider	201	205
1 STAR	2	2
3 STAR	15	15
4 STAR	122	123
5 STAR	60	63
PROV	1	1
Temporary	1	1
TOTALS	<u>1,607</u>	<u>3,378</u>



Table 3
Educational Levels Profile of the 3,378 Participants
in North Carolina
Child Care WAGES® Program
July 2025 - June 2026



88% have a permanent level on the scale (AAS ECE or above) or are continuing their education as documented by coursework taken since original application to WAGES submitted in the current fiscal year. Participants need time to continue their education and move up the supplement scale, thus the percentage includes only those counties who have participated for two or more years.

The numbered categories on the left below correspond to their education levels on the salary supplement scale.

	# of Participants	% of Participants Out Of Position	% of Participants Out Of Active
Teacher	2736	100%	81%
Two	68	2%	2%
Three	125	5%	4%
Four	78	3%	2%
Five	23	1%	1%
Six	82	3%	2%
Seven	119	4%	4%
Eight	1396	51%	41%
Nine	80	3%	2%
Ten	203	7%	6%
Eleven	510	19%	15%
Twelve	52	2%	2%
Director	447	100%	13%
Two	3	1%	0%
Three	11	2%	0%
Four	5	1%	0%
Five	3	1%	0%
Six	9	2%	0%
Seven	12	3%	0%
Eight	182	41%	5%
Nine	12	3%	0%
Ten	48	11%	1%
Eleven	142	32%	4%
Twelve	20	4%	1%
Family Child Care Provider	195	100%	6%
Two	1	1%	0%
Three	3	2%	0%

Positions are categorized into the groups listed above. For example, both assistant teachers and teachers are shown in the teacher category.

Table 3 (cont.)
Educational Levels Profile of the 3,378 Participants
in North Carolina
Child Care WAGES® Program
July 2025 - June 2026

	# of Participants	% of Participants Out Of Position	% of Participants Out Of Active
Four	2	1%	0%
Five	2	1%	0%
Seven	3	2%	0%
Eight	87	45%	3%
Nine	7	4%	0%
Ten	11	6%	0%
Eleven	60	31%	2%
Twelve	19	10%	1%

Positions are categorized into the groups listed above. For example, both assistant teachers and teachers are shown in the teacher category.



Table 4
Total Participants that Received a Supplement in North Carolina
Child Care WAGES® Program
July 2025 - June 2026



3,991 unduplicated participants received a supplement for completing a six-month period that ended during this reporting period; these participants worked in 1,794 different child care programs serving approximately 83,785 children.

	Total Paid*	Total Programs	# Of Children 0 to 5
Center	3,764	1,567	82,845
Family Provider	230	227	940
<u>Total</u>	<u>3,994</u>	<u>1,794</u>	<u>83,785</u>

* This may reflect a duplicated number of people paid if participants moved between a center and a home and were paid from both locations. Refer to the number at the top for an unduplicated count of people paid.



Table 5
Annual Turnover Summary of the 3,909 Participants
in North Carolina
Child Care WAGES® Program
July 2025 - June 2026



The annual turnover percentage is based on an overall population of 3,909 participants. This population includes those individuals that were active during the reporting period of July 2025 - June 2026 (3,378) and those whose turnover was reported during this time (531). Active participants meet all eligibility requirements and have worked at least six months in their child care programs. Active participants might also include individuals who have left a child care program, but have since worked six eligible months in a new site. (These “reactivated” participants are not factored into the report at all until they have completed this six month period.) The annual turnover percentage is obtained by dividing the total number of participants who left their center into the total number of participants.

People who became ineligible for other reasons (i.e. position change within center, became over-income due to raise, center closure, noncompliance with the program’s income documentation guidelines, failure to obtain necessary coursework) are not included in the table. They have been removed from the overall total and the turnover numbers since they were no longer eligible for the Child Care WAGES® Program, and the supplement could not have been an incentive for them to stay.

Individuals who left their child care programs and those who became ineligible due to other reasons may or may not have been paid during the current fiscal year for completing one or more commitment periods. However, they have all been paid at some time during their participation on WAGES and thus earned active status prior to becoming ineligible.

Annual Turnover July 2025 - June 2026

Total Participants	=	3,909
Active Participants	=	3,378
Left Center	=	531
Turnover Percentage	=	14%



Table 5
Profile of Participants who Left their Programs in North Carolina
Child Care WAGES® Program
July 2025 - June 2026



	# of Participants	% of Participants
Position		
Teacher	346	65%
Assistant Teacher	110	21%
Director	21	4%
Director (Owner)	7	1%
Assistant Director	28	5%
Small Home Provider	19	4%
Education Level		
CDA Credential	4	1%
12 birth to five sem. hours	2	0%
18 general sem. hours including 4 birth to five sem. hours	6	1%
16 birth to five sem. hours	13	2%
24 general sem. hours including 6 birth to five sem. hours	10	2%
70 general sem. hours (less than 6 birth to five sem. hours)	3	1%
AAS (less than 6 birth to five sem. hours)	7	1%
36 general sem. hours including 12 birth to five sem. hours	10	2%
70 general sem. hours including 6 birth to five sem. hours	6	1%
AAS including 6 birth to five sem. hours	6	1%
45 general sem. hours including 18 birth to five sem. hours	13	2%
AAS including 12 birth to five sem. hours	5	1%
57 general sem. hours including 24 birth to five sem. hours	27	5%
AAS including 18 birth to five sem. hours	6	1%
BA/BS (less than 6 birth to five sem. hours)	27	5%
MA/MS (less than 6 birth to five sem. hours)	6	1%
AAS including 24 birth to five sem. hours	212	40%
BA/BS including 6 birth to five sem. hours	12	2%
MA/MS including 6 birth to five sem. hours	4	1%
90 sem. hours toward BA/BS including 18 birth to five sem. hours	26	5%
BA/BS including 12 birth to five sem. hours	15	3%
BA/BS including 18 birth to five sem. hours	87	16%
MA/MS including 12 birth to five sem. hours	5	1%
MA/MS including 18 birth to five sem. hours	18	3%
PhD/EdD including 18 birth to five sem. hours	1	0%
Wage Rate		
Below \$7.25 per hour	14	3%
\$7.25 - \$10.00 per hour	7	1%
\$10.01 - \$13.00 per hour	63	12%
\$13.01 - \$15.00 per hour	80	15%
\$15.01 - \$17.00 per hour	145	27%
\$17.01 - \$19.00 per hour	115	22%
\$19.01 - \$21.00 per hour	65	12%
\$21.01 - \$23.00 per hour	39	7%
\$23.01 - \$25.00 per hour	3	1%

Table 5 (cont.)
Profile of Participants who Left their Programs in North Carolina
Child Care WAGES® Program
July 2025 - June 2026

	# of Participants	% of Participants
Years in Child Care Program: Participant's Start Date to Date Ineligible		
0 to .99 Years	45	8%
1.00 to 1.99 Years	80	15%
2.00 to 2.99 Years	87	16%
3.00 to 3.99 Years	68	13%
4.00 to 4.99 Years	44	8%
5.00 or More Years	207	39%
Regulation Type		
1 STAR	7	1%
2 STAR	1	0%
3 STAR	52	10%
4 STAR	138	26%
5 STAR	314	59%
GS-110	15	3%
Temporary	3	1%
PROB	1	0%

* The first category under Wage Rate reflects those earning below North Carolina's minimum wage, typically home providers or owners whose income is dependent upon revenue.



**54 Partner Organizations
Child Care WAGES® Program
July 2025 - June 2026**



Alamance Partnership for Children
Alexander County Partnership for Children
Alleghany Partnership for Children
Alliance for Children (Union County)
Bladen Smart Start: A Partnership for Children, Inc.
Blue Ridge Partnership for Children
Buncombe Partnership for Children, Inc.
Burke County Smart Start, Inc.
Cabarrus County Partnership for Children
Caldwell County Smart Start
Catawba County Partnership for Children
Cleveland County Partnership for Children, Inc.
Columbus County Partnership for Children, Inc.
Craven Smart Start, Inc.
Down East Partnership for Children
Duplin County Partnership for Children
Durham's Partnership for Children
Franklin Granville Vance Smart Start, Inc.
Guilford County Partnership for Children
Halifax-Warren Smart Start Partnership for Children, Inc.
Harnett County Partnership for Children, Inc.
Hertford-Northampton Smart Start Partnership for Children, Inc.
Iredell County Partnership for Young Children, Inc.
Lee County Partnership for Children
Martin-Pitt Partnership for Children, Inc.
Montgomery County Partnership for Children
North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education
North Carolina Partnership for Children
Partners for Children & Families Inc. (Moore County)
Partnership for Children of Johnston County, Inc.
Partnership for Children of Lenoir and Greene Counties
Partnership for Children of Lincoln/Gaston Counties
Partnership for Children of the Foothills
Randolph County Partnership for Children

*Henderson County



**54 Partner Organizations
Child Care WAGES® Program
July 2025 - June 2026**



Region A Partnership for Children
Richmond County Partnership for Children
Robeson County Partnership for Children
Rockingham County Partnership for Children, Inc.
Sampson County Partnership for Children
Smart Start of Brunswick County, Inc.
Smart Start of Davidson County, Inc.
Smart Start of Davie County, Inc.
Smart Start of Forsyth County
Smart Start of Mecklenburg County
Smart Start of Transylvania County
Smart Start of Yadkin County, Inc.
Smart Start Partnership for Children, Inc.*
Smart Start Rowan, Inc.
Stanly County Partnership for Children
Surry County Early Childhood Partnership
The Partnership for Children of Cumberland County
The Partnership for Children of Wayne County, Inc.
Wilkes Community Partnership for Children
Wilson County Partnership for Children

*Henderson County

Appendix A: Retention

Feedback Collected from WAGES Surveys FY26

“The WAGES Program¹ is important because it supports early childhood educators, helping us stay in the field and provide quality care. It has given me financial stability, encouraged me to finish my degree, and allowed me to focus more on the children while supporting the early childhood community.” (Alamance, teacher)

“The WAGES Program has helped me stay working as a child care provider!” (Avery, teacher)

“WAGES is an incentive to stay in child care. I love working with children, but other jobs pay more. WAGES fills the gap and makes it easier for me to stay with the children.” (Brunswick, teacher)

“WAGES allows us to continue our meaningful work in the field of child care without as much of the financial stress and burden!” (Buncombe, teacher)

“Any increase in salary for early childhood educators is crucial to keep qualified and competent individuals in the field.” (Cabarrus, director)

“WAGES is important because it helps make up for teachers not getting paid enough for the cost of living. WAGES helps me provide for my family. It also helps me stay in the work I do, because you can get paid more at McDonald's. I am thankful I get to stay at a job I love.” (Caldwell, teacher)

“The WAGES Program is extremely helpful to me. The current rate of pay for my position is too low for me to make ends meet, but WAGES gives me the extra funds I need to stay passionate and remain working with children.” (Catawba, teacher)

“I would not be able to do the job I love without WAGES.” (Cherokee, teacher)

“Receiving a WAGES supplement is important because it recognizes the education, experience, and commitment of early childhood educators in a field that is often undercompensated. For participating staff, it provides financial relief, boosts morale, and validates their professionalism, which increases job satisfaction and retention.” (Cleveland, director)

“The WAGES Program has meant greater financial stability for me and affirmation that my education and commitment matter. It has helped reduce stress and made it possible for me to remain in a field I am passionate about. Knowing that my work is valued allows me to focus more fully on the children and families I serve, rather than worrying about whether I can afford to stay in this profession.” (Columbus, teacher)

¹ Respondents referred to the Child Care WAGES[®] Program in a variety of ways. Throughout the quotes, the name has been corrected when necessary. Abbreviated references have been retained.

“The Child Care WAGES® Program is important because it recognizes and supports the value of early childhood educators, helping to improve stability and retention in the field. It has provided financial support that helps reduce stress and allows me to stay focused on delivering high-quality care. That stability directly benefits the children in my care by ensuring consistency, strong relationships, and a nurturing learning environment. The program strengthens the early childhood community by honoring educators’ commitment and encouraging long-term professional growth.” (Cumberland, family child care home provider)

“WAGES has helped me financially by supplementing my pay at my job so that I can continue to work where I am currently employed.” (Davidson, teacher)

“WAGES represents recognition and respect for the work early educators do every day. Early childhood education is emotionally demanding, physically tiring, and deeply important, yet it is often undervalued. Receiving support from WAGES helps relieve financial stress, making it easier to stay in the profession and continue pursuing further education.” (Duplin, teacher)

“The Child Care WAGES® Program is important because it supports and values early childhood educators and helps to address low wages and high turnover in the field. It has provided financial stability and motivation for me to continue growing professionally while reinforcing that my work matters. WAGES supports consistency and strong relationships for the children in my care, which are essential for their development. The program strengthens the early childhood community by improving retention, professionalism, and the quality of care children receive.” (Durham, teacher)

“As a lead teacher, the Child Care WAGES® Program is important because it helps me remain committed to my role and to the children and staff I support each day. The financial support eases stress and allows me to focus on creating a positive, structured, and nurturing classroom environment. This stability helps me be more present, patient, and intentional in my teaching, which directly benefits the children in my care. Overall, the WAGES Program supports teacher retention and leadership in early childhood education, strengthening the workforce and ensuring children receive high-quality care from experienced, committed educators.” (Forsyth, teacher)

“WAGES is important in addressing the need for consistency regarding children. The children work well when a face is consistently available, and parents are more at ease with the care and the center!” (Franklin, teacher)

“WAGES is important because it helps with financial needs and provides an incentive to continue working.” (Gaston, teacher)

“WAGES is very important, because teachers who receive the supplement stay in early childhood education longer due to the financial help.” (Granville, director)

“WAGES is important because it provides education-based salary supplements to teachers, which reduces staff turnover and improves the quality of early childhood education. Keeping educated professionals in our classrooms allows our children to receive consistent and nurturing

care that is essential for development and improved learning outcomes. ... The WAGES Program has helped me to continue pursuing my passion for teaching and my dedication to the development of young children.” (Guilford, teacher)

“WAGES is important because it keeps me working in the child care field.” (Harnett, teacher)

“WAGES has produced very positive outcomes to keep staff in the field since pay is so low.” (Haywood, director)

“WAGES provides an additional supplement to the inadequate salary of child care staff. The market rates do not cover the cost of high quality child care. Teachers are going to other workplaces because of higher salaries and benefits. By offering WAGES, we can show them they are earning a higher annual salary. It also encourages staff to continue education for a higher supplement. The children benefit because we have lower staff turnover and higher qualified teachers.” (Henderson, director)

“WAGES is an incentive to stay at your center.” (Hertford, teacher)

“Receiving a WAGES supplement is important because it recognizes and values the hard work, education, and dedication of early childhood professionals. It helps reduce financial stress for participating staff, allowing them to focus more fully on providing consistent, high-quality care rather than worrying about financial instability. The WAGES supplement has been meaningful in boosting staff morale, encouraging continued education, and supporting long-term commitment to the field. Staff feel seen and appreciated, which increases retention and stability within our program. WAGES supports continuity of care for our program. Children benefit from strong, trusting relationships with familiar caregivers when teachers are able to stay longer in their roles. Consistency strengthens classroom routines, emotional security, and overall learning outcomes. Most importantly, the children in our care benefit from educators who feel supported, valued, and motivated. When teachers are stable and invested, they are better able to create nurturing, engaging, and responsive learning environments where children can truly thrive.” (Johnston, director)

“WAGES is a great incentive to increase your education and remain at a location.” (Lenoir, teacher)

“WAGES is important because teachers need extra incentives to continue working, because they are not paid a fair salary.” (Lincoln, teacher)

“WAGES has been a great help for me to stay in this field. I like that you get an increase as your education increases.” (Martin, teacher)

“The Child Care WAGES® Program is important because it supports early childhood educators who do meaningful work but are often underpaid. WAGES helps recognize our education, experience, and commitment to the field. WAGES has been a real support for me. It has helped ease some financial stress while I continue working and going to school, and it has reminded me that my work and dedication matter. That encouragement has motivated me to stay in the field I

love. The program also benefits the children in my care. When teachers are supported and able to stay in their positions, children experience consistency, strong relationships, and a stable learning environment. WAGE\$ strengthens the early childhood community overall by helping educators remain in the field and continue growing professionally, which ultimately improves the quality of care for children.” (Mecklenburg, teacher)

“The Child Care WAGE\$® Program is important because it helps support and retain dedicated early childhood educators. It has made a positive difference in my life by providing financial stability and making me feel valued for the work I do.” (Moore, teacher)

“WAGE\$ has helped me financially. It has helped me feel less stress and motivates me to keep working in child care.” (Randolph, teacher)

“The WAGE\$ Program has provided me with financial relief and a sense of appreciation for my work. Knowing that my education, experience, and commitment are acknowledged has increased my motivation to continue growing professionally. This support helps me focus more fully on providing high-quality care rather than worrying about financial strain. The impact is just as meaningful for the children in my care. WAGE\$ helps educators stay in their positions longer, so children benefit from consistent relationships with trusted caregivers. This stability supports their emotional security, learning, and overall development during their most formative years. The WAGE\$ Program strengthens the child care workforce by encouraging professionalism.” (Robeson, teacher)

“WAGE\$ has helped me to be more stable and form loving relationships with the families and children I serve.” (Rockingham, teacher)

“WAGE\$ has meant stability and affirmation for me. Working in early childhood education is a calling, but it is not always financially easy. The WAGE\$ Program acknowledges the hard work, certifications, and years of experience that educators invest. It has helped me continue doing what I love, supporting children’s growth, without feeling overlooked.” (Rowan, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helps teachers afford to do what they love.” (Rutherford, teacher)

“WAGE\$ gives teachers an incentive to continue in child care and in their education.” (Sampson, director)

“WAGE\$ is important to me because it makes me feel appreciated and helps me stay with my job.” (Surry, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helps me stay in one center.” (Union, teacher)

“The WAGE\$ Program helps me to keep doing what I love and what I am good at doing. Being a teacher assistant is not the most well-paid job, so any extra help is greatly appreciated.” (Warren, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helps staff pay bills that their salary may not cover. It keeps staff working in my center.” (Wayne, director)

“WAGE\$ has helped encourage me to keep working in my position.” (Wilkes, teacher)

“Child care is a highly underappreciated career that pays low wages, but I love it. The WAGE\$ supplement helps me stay at a job I love.” (Wilson, teacher)

Appendix B: Education

Feedback Collected from WAGES Surveys FY26

“I can finish my early childhood education degree because of WAGES¹.” (Alamance, teacher)

“WAGES keeps teachers attending school and more likely to keep working in a career where we need more money for what we do.” (Alexander, director)

“WAGES is very important, because it allows teachers to be compensated for working hard to obtain their degrees, and for the difficult work they do as child care providers each day. The staff at my program have all excelled in their coursework, and their morale has been boosted.” (Bladen, director)

“WAGES is important because working in child care does not make much money, especially if you are in school at the same time. It can cause a lot of stress, so WAGES really helps.” (Brunswick, teacher)

“The WAGES Program absolutely incentivizes teachers to further their education, in turn building skills, confidence, and a sense of pride and professionalism. Thank you for offering this to our employees!” (Buncombe, director)

“WAGES has been incredibly helpful and life changing for many teachers by allowing them to further their education and create a career.” (Catawba, director)

“WAGES has helped me financially while I am in school. The extra benefits help keep your passion going.” (Cleveland, teacher)

“The money from WAGES helps us as students and teachers, to be able to continue school and help with different bills.” (Columbus, teacher)

“I would not be taking classes to finish my degree without the WAGES Program. ... WAGES has helped me understand how to teach the children in my classroom by paying for my classes. It helps pay for my education so I can become the lead teacher in the classroom. It helps me with food and gas so I can drive to work. It is a great program.” (Craven, teacher)

“WAGES encourages me to take more classes in early childhood education.” (Cumberland, teacher)

“WAGES is significant because it encourages educators to expand their knowledge. It creates a desire to continue with education in order to meet the needs of the children and families we serve.” (Durham, teacher)

¹ Respondents referred to the Child Care WAGES[®] Program in a variety of ways. Throughout the quotes, the name has been corrected when necessary. Abbreviated references have been retained.

“I like that the WAGE\$ Program offers incentives for people in school. WAGE\$ helps people to go to school. I appreciate them for offering money to further education and for working with kids.” (Edgecombe, teacher)

“The encouragement from WAGE\$ to expand or begin your education in the first place is huge. The children need the best level of education that they can get in all of the forms of care they receive. There is also a shortage of teachers right now, so adding this incentive can increase the chance of getting more teachers.” (Forsyth, teacher)

“WAGE\$ is an incentive to continue your education.” (Franklin, teacher)

“Since I self-pay for my college classes, the WAGE\$ supplement has helped me tremendously. ... I was discouraged that my job wants me to have a degree but will not pay for me to go back to school. I will be 58 years old this year and I am still in school, and it is expensive!!! Knowing I have WAGE\$ as a resource encourages me to continue.” (Gaston, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helps me to continue my education.” (Greene, teacher)

“WAGE\$ means a lot to me. It encourages me to go to school and gives me something to look forward to!!” (Guilford, teacher)

“Education is very important to our program. Families look for programs that have educated staff, but the children are the ones that benefit the most from teachers being positive and confident in their roles as teachers. They can provide quality care and developmentally appropriate experiences for the children in their care as they continue to learn all about early childhood education. The extra income, as a bonus, is always important for them.” (Henderson, director)

“WAGE\$ is important to me because it helped pay for some of my education when I thought I would not have a way. It also helped me start a small savings for myself when I received it.” (Hertford, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helps me stay debt-free when enrolled in school.” (Iredell, teacher)

“WAGE\$ has helped me work my way up in my education and keep going.” (Johnston, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helped me stay in school.” (Lee, teacher)

“The WAGE\$ supplement is very important for me. It was one of the biggest reasons that I started school again, and it helps me a lot with my professional development.” (Mecklenburg, director)

“WAGE\$ helps me financially and also encourages me to finish school.” (Moore, teacher)

“The WAGE\$ Program has an education-based connection. This promotes growth in our staff, which benefits the children in our care.” (Nash, director)

“It helps to know that someone out there thinks about child care teachers, since we are not highly paid for our work. The only thing asked of us by WAGE\$ is to continue our education, which helps us as teachers and also improves the lives of the children we care for and teach.” (Pitt, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helps support me and my child, and it helps me be the best teacher I can be by supporting my education.” (Randolph, teacher)

“WAGE\$ motivated a participant to pursue their bachelor’s degree and encouraged the participant to remain with the center.” (Robeson, director)

“WAGE\$ is a wonderful program that encourages growth within child care and shows appreciation to those who have already put themselves through a four-year degree and struggled to pay for it.” (Rowan, teacher)

“WAGE\$ is a great incentive for child care workers to receive extra monetary benefits based on our education level. This program has helped me very much as a single mother working and going to school full time.” (Rutherford, teacher)

“WAGE\$ makes it worth going to college and getting that degree.” (Sampson, teacher)

“WAGE\$ has helped me by pushing me to keep taking classes and not give up when things get hard or I feel like I need to take a break. ... The WAGE\$ Program is important because it is like a little extra ‘thank you’ to the people in the program who are continuing their education to become better educators in the early childhood field.” (Surry, teacher)

“WAGE\$ is important because it encourages you to further your education and better yourself to move up the ladder in the field of early childhood education.” (Union, teacher)

“WAGE\$ has encouraged me to keep going to college and get my degree.” (Wilkes, teacher)

“I have found WAGE\$ funding extremely beneficial for as long as I have been in the early childhood education field. The funding is not the only reason I stay in the field, but it is an incentive to continue my education and pursue my passion of working with young children. It feels great to be acknowledged for my dedication to my work.” (Wilson, teacher)

“WAGE\$ has kept me encouraged while going to school and trying to work at the same time. It makes you feel rewarded after completing your goals.” (Yadkin, teacher)

“The First 2000 Days research has brought to light the importance of early education and how those first few years are key to optimal learning for all children. There is a growing need for staff to receive formal education and to be compensated as professionals to provide the best educational experience during this time. Child care facilities are now basically competing with

school systems, charter schools, and private schools for quality staff, and the WAGE\$ Program helps to level the playing field for early education. Additionally, many child care facilities have excellent teachers who are natural born teachers but may not have formal education. WAGE\$ helps incentivize enrolling in and completing education programs to enhance their natural abilities.” (Yancey, director)

Appendix C: Compensation

Feedback Collected from WAGES Surveys FY26

“The Child Care WAGES[®] Program¹ is important because it recognizes and supports the essential work of early childhood education providers. Quality child care is foundational for children to develop and learn. This program helps to ensure that providers can focus on giving their best care without the constant stress of financial strain. This program has made a significant difference in my life by providing financial stability, allowing me to invest in professional development, and reducing stress so that I can focus on the children and staff.” (Alamance, director)

“WAGES gives me peace of mind with no financial concerns for my family.” (Alexander, teacher)

“WAGES has helped lower my stress level. I am more relaxed knowing that I am getting financial support.” (Avery, teacher)

“My company does not offer much paid leave time, especially considering child care centers bring in a ton of germs and illnesses. Once PTO is exhausted, sick days are unpaid. The WAGES benefit helps offset this financial burden.” (Brunswick, teacher)

“The Child Care WAGES[®] Program helps me take care of my family. The supplemental pay helps me afford necessities that are rising in price, and it keeps me motivated to stay in the field. I enjoy the kids, but I have kids of my own to support. WAGES helps me pay for necessities as well as recreational things. Thank you!” (Buncombe, teacher)

“WAGES helps teachers catch up with finances, so they are more focused on the children due to not stressing over finances. It encourages staff to further their education and could potentially inspire new teachers to apply.” (Burke, teacher)

“Receiving the WAGES supplement is important because it boosts financial stability, recognizes hard work, motivates performance, and increases overall job satisfaction and retention. It helps employees meet needs and feel valued beyond base pay, while also attracting talent and ensuring fair compensation.” (Cabarrus, director)

“WAGES is very important to me. I have received my supplement at times when I had only a few dollars in my account. I was able to get minor repairs done to my car which allowed me to have transportation. I am so grateful for the supplement, and I look forward to receiving it every six months. It gives me an opportunity to catch up on bills and have a little financial freedom.” (Caldwell, teacher)

¹ Respondents referred to the Child Care WAGES[®] Program in a variety of ways. Throughout the quotes, the name has been corrected when necessary. Abbreviated references have been retained.

“The money from WAGE\$ helps me and other child care professionals to make ends meet in spite of how underpaid and overworked we are.” (Catawba, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helps with financial hardships.” (Cherokee, director)

“WAGE\$ has helped me pay my bills and survive. ... WAGE\$ is important because no one in this field makes a livable wage. It helps a lot.” (Clay, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helps with rising costs of living for staff, increases teacher morale and longevity. Happier teachers are better for all children who need loving, caring staff.” (Cleveland, director)

“WAGE\$ provides additional support in the financial areas that I need the most! As a result, I am able to focus more positively on my job.” (Columbus, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helps me provide for my financial needs in and out of my classroom.” (Craven, teacher)

“Child care is one of the lowest paying jobs that a person can have. It is very important to have a love for it, but all the love in the world will not stop bills from coming. WAGE\$ is a blessing!” (Cumberland, teacher)

“The Child Care WAGE\$® Program matters because it strengthens the foundation of early childhood education, the people who show up every day for young children. Its impact is deeply practical, deeply human, and deeply stabilizing. WAGE\$ plays a vital role in strengthening the early childhood workforce by offering meaningful financial stability and professional recognition to educators. In a field where compensation rarely reflects the depth of skill, emotional labor, and expertise required, WAGE\$ serves as a tangible acknowledgment that early childhood educators matter. By rewarding education and continuity, the program helps reduce turnover, which is one of the biggest challenges in early childhood settings. It also encourages teachers to pursue ongoing professional growth. This stability directly benefits children, who thrive when they can build secure, consistent relationships with the adults who care for them each day. WAGE\$ has become a source of encouragement and validation for many educators who are balancing demanding work with continued education and family responsibilities. It eases financial strain, supports long-term career goals, and reinforces a sense of purpose in a profession that is often undervalued. For the children and families served, this translates into more experienced, confident, and emotionally grounded teachers who can focus on creating nurturing, high-quality learning environments. WAGE\$ contributes to a more stable, educated, and respected early child care workforce, strengthening the foundation of early learning across the state.” (Davidson, teacher)

“The cost of everyday living has risen so much, and my pay has not. The WAGE\$ supplement has helped me buy everyday essentials that I would not be able to afford otherwise.” (Davie, teacher)

“WAGE\$ has helped me to keep my doors open and sometimes keep my heat on.” (Duplin, family child care home provider)

“WAGE\$ helps fill financial holes left by my pay that does not provide a living wage. ... The WAGE\$ Program is necessary for early childhood educators to survive.” (Durham, teacher)

“WAGE\$ has helped me keep my bills afloat and made me feel secure. ... WAGE\$ has meant a lot to my program. It takes the burden and worry away by providing an extra cushion to get the things that are needed.” (Edgecombe, director)

“WAGE\$ is very important because it helps teachers pay for supplies without taking it from their regular income. The incentive that is given allows teachers to create a more efficient and qualified classroom. It allows me to change the look of my classroom twice a year. The children are always overwhelmed with joy to see a new look.” (Forsyth, director)

“The WAGE\$ Program is important because it relieves financial stress from underpaid early educators. It has helped me with bills and to give back to my students and the community.” (Franklin, teacher)

“The teachers who receive WAGE\$ are happier with their pay, therefore they are less stressed and happier in the classroom.” (Gaston, director)

“WAGE\$ bridges financial gaps during hard times. It is a huge motivation to staff, and it also helps put supplies in the classroom.” (Granville, director)

“WAGE\$ gives us a voice and helps to bridge the gap between the earnings we get and what we actually deserve while working in child care.” (Guilford, teacher)

“WAGE\$ makes my small early childhood income a little more bearable and sufficient. ... WAGE\$ helps me meet all my needs, because without it something would go lacking.” (Halifax, teacher)

“The WAGE\$ Program has helped me countless times when I needed to feed my children and pay bills to stay open.” (Harnett, family child care home provider)

“WAGE\$ is extremely important in an early childhood educator’s life! We are highly underpaid, and this bit of extra income is a huge deal for a lot of us!” (Haywood, teacher)

“WAGE\$ has helped me keep bills paid and feed my children for the past few years. Often the supplement has come right when my family has seemed to need it the most, and we have been extremely thankful.” (Iredell, director)

“Child care is a demanding profession that involves physical, emotional, and mental labor, and typically low pay. WAGE\$ provides more income, which helps cover living expenses and provide the kids with more books and activities.” (Jackson, teacher)

“The extra funding from WAGE\$ has helped me be better for the center! It has helped with financial stress!” (Johnston, director)

“WAGE\$ has helped purchase classroom materials so the children can have hands-on items to play and learn.” (Lenoir, teacher)

“We cannot always meet the needs of our staff financially, so WAGE\$ is a huge blessing for them. Our children need and deserve dependable, educated, and loving staff.” (Macon, director)

“WAGE\$ has been there for me when I needed something to see my way through.” (Martin, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helps me meet my financial needs better. This takes some stress away and helps me worry less so I am more present, peaceful, and happy at my job and in my life.” (Mecklenburg, teacher)

“Since staff pay is tied to tuition, it is a delicate balance between affordable tuition and living wages for staff. WAGE\$ helps to bridge that gap for those staff who qualify. For those who do not, it is still a financial stretch.” (Mitchell, director)

“WAGE\$ helps with financial stress.” (Montgomery, teacher)

“WAGE\$ is important because it helps people get on their feet. It has helped me with mortgage payments and helped get my finances back on track. As a single parent, you can only find so much support in the community.” (Moore, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helps me personally, especially with what I make each month. It is not a lot, but with the WAGE\$ payments twice a year I can catch up on anything that is lacking. Thank you everyone!!!! I am very grateful.” (Nash, teacher)

“The Child Care WAGE\$® Program is important because it is that extra missing piece that early childhood educators need to take care of things that their regular income cannot. It has meant a lot to me and the students I serve, because I was able to purchase and do so much more.” (Northampton, teacher)

“The Child Care WAGE\$® Program has shown an awesome amount of support for all of us in early childhood education. It has helped me get through some rough times when I did not know where my next pennies were coming from. In a child care home, it gets tough sometimes because you cannot have a lot of children like the centers can. WAGE\$ helps provide healthy food for the children in my program. It helps with transport for picking up and dropping off children. WAGE\$ helps with child care training because you have to pay for most of the trainings now. Food is getting expensive and it is hard to maintain. That is where WAGE\$ helps, and I thank each and every one of you for your help and support. Thank You!!!” (Pitt, family child care home provider)

“WAGE\$ is very important to me and my family, because without it I would not be able to pay my bills or have food on the table. WAGE\$ helps my day to day life tremendously.” (Randolph, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helps financially and provides an incentive to be and do your best as an educator.” (Richmond, teacher)

“WAGE\$ benefits all--the children, families, and staff! If teachers are supported, they are better able to provide a good environment for the children.” (Robeson, director)

“I can hardly do without WAGE\$ in this economy. My pay from my job is not enough to live on, and even with WAGE\$ I still make less than \$40,000 a year. That is not a living wage. Sometimes the supplement is the only way I can cover basic needs. I cannot afford to replace clothing that has been torn or worn badly until I receive the WAGE\$ check. I also use it for Christmas for my family. ... WAGE\$ provides for basic needs and bills I otherwise could not afford.” (Rockingham, teacher)

“WAGE\$ has helped to ease financial stress for me. I want to make a difference in the lives of children, but the child care industry does not pay well in some areas. WAGE\$ allows me to be a better teacher because I am not carrying the burden of my expenses into the classroom. WAGE\$ has allowed me to purchase items for my classroom and help meet some of the basic needs of the children in my care.” (Rowan, teacher)

“WAGE\$ is important because it makes the child care profession more financially viable. It provides consistent support to combat low wages and economic insecurity in the field.” (Rutherford, family child care home provider)

“WAGE\$ gives me the desire to do better at my job. ... I have less stress knowing that the WAGE\$ supplement is coming.” (Sampson, teacher)

“WAGE\$ is important because it adds to our paychecks two times a year. It helps us buy things we would not be able to afford normally. It helps provide toys for the children and decorations for the classroom. If the children are happy, it encourages the community to come and learn at our center.” (Stanly, teacher)

“I depend on the WAGE\$ supplement to help get me through the summer without any income. It also helps me through the year when my paycheck does not go far enough to cover all of my bills. I am single and depend on my income alone, and as a teacher assistant it is not enough.” (Surry, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helps me and my family financially, which helps with my stress level.” (Transylvania, teacher)

“WAGE\$ is so important, because there are times as a provider when you are not getting paid because enrollment numbers are low. WAGE\$ helps keep us afloat.” (Union, family child care home provider)

“WAGE\$ provides a supplement for child care workers. It helps with my household finances and allows me to have some money to buy materials for my classroom too. It helps communities provide quality and affordable child care services.” (Vance, teacher)

“My job is stressful but rewarding. The Child Care WAGE\$® Program has eased some of that stress regarding finances. This program has allowed me to catch up on bills, purchase gifts for my students, and even purchase a much-needed pair of shoes so that my feet do not hurt.” (Warren, teacher)

“WAGE\$ provides security and relieves lots of stress from the worry of making ends meet for my program.” (Wayne, family child care home provider)

“WAGE\$ helps push us through those times when we feel like giving in.” (Wilkes, teacher)

“I have benefitted financially from receiving the WAGE\$ supplement in every way that counts. It has helped me take care of myself and my family, and it has allowed me to add materials to my classroom for my students.” (Wilson, teacher)

“The Child Care WAGE\$® Program is important because it recognizes the value of early childhood educators and helps address the long-standing issue of low wages in the field. The program supports educators remaining in their roles, growing professionally, and feeling respected for the important work they do. The WAGE\$ Program has provided me with financial stability and motivation to continue working in early childhood education. It has reduced stress related to income, allowed me to focus more fully on my work, and encouraged me to pursue ongoing education and professional development. The program supports consistency and quality for the children in my care. When educators are able to stay in their positions, children benefit from stable, trusting relationships, which are essential for healthy development. Reduced rates of turnover also mean a more nurturing and responsive learning environment. The WAGE\$ Program strengthens the child care workforce by promoting retention, professionalism, and higher quality care. It sends a clear message that early childhood educators matter, and that investing in them is an investment in children, families, and the future of the community.” (Yadkin, teacher)

Appendix D: Appreciation/Recognition Feedback Collected from WAGES Surveys FY26

“Receiving a WAGES¹ supplement is critically important because it affirms the value of early childhood educators and the essential role they play in shaping the foundation of lifelong learning and development. For our staff, WAGES is more than a financial supplement; it is an acknowledgment of their professionalism, expertise, and the significance of their work. It serves as both recognition and incentive, encouraging educators to pursue post-secondary coursework, earn degrees, and continue advancing through the WAGES tiers. This investment communicates that growth, education, and excellence in early childhood are not only encouraged but expected and supported. For our program, WAGES strengthens morale and reinforces a culture of professional growth. Our educators actively support, mentor, and motivate one another, often pursuing coursework together. This shared commitment fosters collaboration, accountability, and even healthy competition as teachers strive toward higher credentials. The result is a cohesive, highly skilled team that is invested not only in their own professional journeys but in the success of the program as a whole. Most importantly, the children in our care benefit profoundly. When educators feel valued and supported, they are more likely to remain in the field and be committed to their centers, classrooms, and children. Lower turnover allows children to form stable, trusting relationships with consistent caregivers, relationships that decades of developmental research, from Bowlby to Erikson, identify as foundational to healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development in the early years. WAGES directly supports these outcomes by stabilizing the workforce and honoring the educators who make this critical work possible. WAGES is an investment with a measurable return: stronger educators, healthier programs, and better outcomes for children. Continued and expanded funding is not only an investment in the early childhood workforce, but it is an investment in the future of our local communities and the state.” (Alamance, director)

“WAGES makes our work meaningful. We feel seen, heard, and valued.” (Alexander, teacher)

“WAGES is important because it helps to supplement the salaries of teachers in our profession, which we all know is so important due to the reality of what most centers are able to pay their teaching staff. This supplement allows those who choose to further their education to feel valued in a tangible way.” (Buncombe, director)

“The WAGES Program has helped me financially and emotionally by recognizing the importance of my work and supporting my commitment to early childhood education. ... It makes educators feel valued and respected.” (Cabarrus, teacher)

“WAGES is important because we are professionals, and increasing our pay helps us to feel more like professionals.” (Caldwell, teacher)

¹ Respondents referred to the Child Care WAGES[®] Program in a variety of ways. Throughout the quotes, the name has been corrected when necessary. Abbreviated references have been retained.

“WAGE\$ makes child care workers like me feel appreciated, cared about, and that our job matters.” (Catawba, teacher)

“WAGE\$ is a support team of cheerleaders on the side line saying, ‘We see you. We see you advocate for young children in your community. We see the long hours and the commitment to love, nurture, play, and prepare the children for the next year.’” (Columbus, teacher)

“WAGE\$ makes me feel important in the lives of the children and families I serve. I love my job. Thank you WAGE\$ for your support.” (Craven, teacher)

“WAGE\$ shows me that what I am doing does not go unnoticed.” (Cumberland, teacher)

“It is a relief to know someone sees child care providers as more than just babysitters. WAGE\$ sees us as teachers, and it makes me feel like we are not invisible.” (Davie, teacher)

“Income for early childhood educators is very low, but the field is very important because we shape the future. The WAGE\$ Program feels like a ‘thank you’ for what we do.” (Duplin, teacher)

“Receiving a WAGE\$ supplement is important because it recognizes and supports the valuable work early childhood educators do. For participating staff, it has meant increased financial stability, improved morale, and a greater sense of being valued and appreciated for their dedication and professionalism.” (Durham, director)

“WAGE\$ has helped staff to feel more professional as a result of being recognized for our hard work and education.” (Forsyth, director)

“WAGE\$ gives me a reason to feel appreciated and that my job is important.” (Franklin, teacher)

“WAGE\$ helps meet needs and makes me feel worthy.” (Granville, family child care home provider)

“WAGE\$ is amazing and makes me feel like my field is not overlooked. I am happy this program exists. I wish the world knew how much work we have to do on a daily basis in early childhood education.” (Guilford, teacher)

“The WAGE\$ Program recognizes what I do. I feel appreciated and encouraged to do my best.” (Harnett, teacher)

“It is important for teachers to feel that their efforts and hard work are valued. WAGE\$ is a huge help to teachers, because it means they can catch up on bills or have a little extra money to save or spend that they would not have otherwise.” (Haywood, director)

“WAGE\$ makes me feel appreciated and valued for my education and longevity.” (Henderson, teacher)

“WAGE\$ is an acknowledgement of my efforts.” (Hertford, teacher)

“WAGE\$ encourages qualified teachers to not give up. It acknowledges that there is a salary shortage but lets us know we are worth it.” (Iredell, teacher)

“The WAGE\$ supplement is foundational in making preschool staff feel valued and seen beyond what we as employers are able to do.” (Jackson, director)

“Receiving WAGE\$ makes me feel like I matter and that I am appreciated.” (Johnston, teacher)

“The financial help from WAGE\$ is important to me. Someone acknowledging my time with my center makes me feel appreciated.” (Lincoln, teacher)

“The Child Care WAGE\$® Program is important because it recognizes the value of early childhood educators, who are often underpaid despite the critical work they do. It has helped me feel more financially stable and more committed to my profession. The children in my care benefit when their caregivers feel supported and appreciated.” (Mecklenburg, teacher)

“WAGE\$ makes me feel like I am important. Sometimes I feel like people think we are just babysitters, but we are more than that.” (Montgomery, teacher)

“It is extremely important that employees in the early childhood education field feel worthy and appreciated. WAGE\$ goes a long way in ensuring longevity and positive morale.” (Moore, director)

“WAGE\$ has helped me build confidence in my work. It gives me hope to keep pushing through the rough times.” (Richmond, family child care home provider)

WAGE\$ helps educators feel seen and understood, and it overjoys them to see that extra money at just the right time.” (Robeson, director)

“The WAGE\$ incentive has boosted my confidence that I am valued as a child care provider.” (Rockingham, family child care home provider)

“WAGE\$ is an awesome program that shows appreciation for what teachers do and for continuing to work with our future leaders. I respect this program not just for the funding that helps those in need, but for caring for those who support our families and children and want to make a difference on a daily basis.” (Rowan, director)

“WAGE\$ shows appreciation for our profession in a monetary way. Teachers are not paid enough for the education we have earned and for the importance of our jobs. WAGE\$ is critical to our well-being as humans trying to survive in a career that we love in our hearts and souls. Thank you.” (Rutherford, teacher)

“The WAGE\$ Program values the time it takes actually going to college. It makes me feel appreciated because we do a lot for the students in our classrooms.” (Sampson, teacher)

“It helps me to know that someone cares about us. Teachers have a hard job and get paid very little. WAGE\$ is there to help us feel more appreciated by giving us a little help and we thank you for that.” (Stanly, director)

“The WAGE\$ Program is important because it is very beneficial to early childhood educators and supports our career. As an educator I feel seen, like I matter in this world. It is very heartwarming to have a program like this.” (Union, teacher)

“Early childhood education teachers and staff have one of the most important jobs in the world. Children who spend 8–10 hours a day in a child care center need qualified teachers to not only love and nurture them, but to help them grow in all areas of development. The first five years of life set the foundation for a child’s success in school and everyday life experiences. WAGE\$ gives teachers encouragement that their job is more than babysitting. Preschool teachers’ pay and education do not match the many responsibilities and requirements to stay in an unappreciated job, but the WAGE\$ supplement gives us hope for the future.” (Vance, director)

“WAGE\$ is important because it makes teachers feel valued and appreciated.” (Wayne, family child care home provider)

“WAGE\$ is important because the work we do is critical, and the value of what we do is underestimated.” (Wilkes, teacher)

Appendix E: Smart Start Messages Feedback Collected from WAGES Surveys FY26

“I am very grateful for the support from the Smart Start partnership. The WAGES¹ supplement has made a real difference in my ability to continue working in early childhood education, focus on providing quality care, and pursue my degree. Your support is truly appreciated and valued by educators like me.” (Alamance, teacher)

“WAGES is great.” (Alexander, teacher)

“Your support is extremely beneficial to the child care community.” (Alleghany, teacher)

“Thank you for all your support. It means a lot to me.” (Avery, director)

“WAGES has helped me greatly to stay at my program. It helps with some of the financial burdens.” (Brunswick, teacher)

“These supplements help me afford the basic necessities for my family. I am so very thankful for the help. It allows me to retain staff members. We are a small business, and finances are always tight. I wish we were able to pay our staff more. These supplements are invaluable.” (Buncombe, director)

“I am so glad you chose to support us, so we are able to have better lives and help others in our community. Thank you so much!!!” (Burke, teacher)

“Thank you for investing in early childhood educators. The WAGES Program makes a real difference and helps retain dedicated professionals in the field.” (Cabarrus, teacher)

“The supplement is a vital part of my income. I have used it for car repairs, bill payments, and even a weekend getaway. It is one of the reasons I pursued a degree and why I have stayed at my center for more than 10 years. Thank you so much WAGES and Smart Start.” (Caldwell, teacher)

“This supplement helps to keep teachers on board when times are tough.” (Catawba, teacher)

“Thank you all so much for caring about the child care community.” (Clay, teacher)

“Thank you so much for all the support you give to educators.” (Cleveland, teacher)

“Thanks to your generosity, educators like me can provide materials for their classrooms and also use these supplements to pay for courses to further their education.” (Columbus, teacher)

¹ Respondents referred to the Child Care WAGES[®] Program in a variety of ways. Throughout the quotes, the name has been corrected when necessary. Abbreviated references have been retained.

“Thank you so much!!! Please continue this program to support the educators of North Carolina.” (Craven, teacher)

“I would like to thank our local Smart Start partnership for investing in WAGE\$ supplements and recognizing the essential role early childhood educators play in our community. This support makes a meaningful difference by helping educators remain in the field, reduce financial strain, and continue providing consistent, high-quality care for children and families. The supplement is not just financial assistance. It is a message that our work is valued and respected. Your continued investment strengthens the early childhood workforce and directly supports better outcomes for children.” (Cumberland, family child care home provider)

“I want Smart Start funders to know that the WAGE\$ supplement is far more than a financial incentive. It is an investment in stability, quality, and dignity within the early childhood education workforce. This supplement directly supports educators who are deeply committed to young children, but who often struggle to remain in the field due to low wages and high demands. By providing WAGE\$, you are helping retain experienced, educated teachers who create safe, nurturing, and developmentally rich environments for children. Your funding strengthens the emotional and relational continuity that children need to thrive, and it reinforces the message that early educators are valued professionals whose work matters. I would also share that the supplement has a meaningful impact on educators’ lives and well-being. WAGE\$ eases financial stress and supports continued education for many, and it allows them to stay in a career they love without sacrificing their own stability. It boosts morale, reduces burnout, and encourages long-term commitment to the field. The ripple effect reaches families, programs, and entire communities. Your investment is not just appreciated, it is transformative. WAGE\$ helps build a stronger, more stable early childhood system where children benefit from consistent, high-quality care and educators feel respected and supported.” (Davidson, teacher)

“Keep doing this for years to come. It is very helpful to teachers who are being underpaid.” (Davie, teacher)

“Thank you for your support. I have seen how the supplement has helped so many teachers with bills piling up.” (Duplin, teacher)

“Keep supporting teachers. If you support teachers, you are supporting all the children and families who get their education and support.” (Durham, teacher)

“The WAGE\$ Program is great. It helps with financial burdens and reduces stress of wondering how something will get paid.” (Edgecombe, teacher)

“This program is needed, so please keep it. Do not underestimate the power this supplement has in retaining professional teachers.” (Forsyth, director)

“The supplement is a great way to encourage continuing education.” (Franklin, teacher)

“Thank you so much for the WAGE\$ supplement! It really helps me with my bills.” (Gaston, teacher)

“Please continue what you are doing.” (Granville, family child care home provider)

“WAGE\$ supports low-paid teachers, directors, and family child care providers. It allows us to stay in our positions instead of leaving due to financial pressures, and it ensures our children are cared for by experienced professionals.” (Guilford, teacher)

“I am so thankful for WAGE\$ because it makes a difference in the lives of so many child care professionals financially, including myself, and that matters to us. THANK YOU!!!” (Halifax, teacher)

“I would like to send out a huge thank you, because WAGE\$ has made a great impact on the child care community.” (Harnett, teacher)

“These funds provide a safety net for my family against lower-than-average income. Without this bonus, I may not stay in this field.” (Henderson, teacher)

“Thank you so much for thinking of me. WAGE\$ helps me out a lot. I really appreciate my supplement.” (Hertford, teacher)

“These funds have been a lifeboat for my family the past few years. Thank you for funding this supplement each year and supporting child care workers in Iredell County.” (Iredell, director)

“Thank you so much. I really appreciate all the help and support you have provided me, and I hope to continue working in child care because of it.” (Jackson, teacher)

“WAGE\$ is a great incentive that helps teachers to further their education and stay in the education field, rather than hop from one establishment to another.” (Johnston, teacher)

“Thank you so much for sticking by us and supporting us. It is a financial breakthrough!!!” (Lee, teacher)

“Thank you very much for your generosity and providing this opportunity.” (Lenoir, teacher)

“Thank you so much for all the teachers you help with this money.” (Lincoln, teacher)

“Thank you so much for caring!” (Macon, teacher)

“I am so thankful for this program. It has helped me a great deal. I hope you will continue helping people with these supplements. Thank you!” (Martin, teacher)

“I would like to thank our local Smart Start partnership for investing in WAGE\$. This support truly makes a difference for early childhood educators who are committed to their work but often face financial challenges. The supplement helps relieve some of the stress that comes with balancing work, family, and continued education. It also encourages educators to remain in the field and continue growing professionally. Your support shows that you value the important role

early childhood teachers play in children's lives and in the community, and that recognition means more than words can express." (Mecklenburg, teacher)

"Thank you so much for your help. It has been a great help to me because I live by myself, so all the financial burden is on me. This helps a little with that weight." (Montgomery, teacher)

"Thank you for everything you do and for encouraging me to finish my schooling. WAGES gives me extra funding for my family and time to be a mother as well as a teacher." (Moore, teacher)

"Thank you all for ensuring that child care staff are compensated. I make just \$15 per hour, and when I get my paycheck it is not enough for my bills. I am grateful for the supplement from WAGES. I cannot thank you enough." (Nash, teacher)

"Thank you so much for caring and providing for us educators! We really appreciate it!" (Northampton, teacher)

"The WAGES supplement has made a meaningful difference for me. WAGES helps ease financial stress and allows me to stay committed to early childhood education, where consistency and experience truly matter for children." (Pitt, teacher)

"Thank you for what you do. My family depends on the supplemental pay each year. I am not sure what I would do without it." (Randolph, director)

"Thank you for all your help and encouragement to continue in this field." (Richmond, teacher)

"I am greatly appreciative and hope that the supplements will continue so that many of us will be able to continue in the child care profession." (Robeson, teacher)

"These supplements are crucial in keeping teachers in the field." (Rockingham, teacher)

"This supplement allows child care professionals to go above and beyond basic child care services for the parents in their communities. This supplement also encourages child care workers to further their education by providing a means to pay for school. WAGES helps professionals who are passionate about working with children to pursue their passion and not give up because they cannot make enough money to survive." (Rowan, teacher)

"WAGES is life changing for many of us." (Rutherford, teacher)

"WAGES is a big help with getting the materials I need for my classroom, and it helps me to meet the needs of children who are not as fortunate as others." (Sampson, teacher)

"I am very thankful to receive a supplement from WAGES. It helps with paying bills and providing for my family. Thank you so much for this opportunity and the stability it provides." (Stanly, teacher)

“Thank you so much for this supplement. WAGES is important to my own family and my work family.” (Surry, teacher)

“This program is amazing for early childhood educators, and I could not be more grateful!” (Transylvania, teacher)

“Thank you for understanding the importance of education, and for treating child care workers as professionals and showing appreciation for our efforts.” (Union, director)

“Thank you for helping with my financial struggles.” (Vance, teacher)

“I am very appreciative of the supplements that you have provided for teachers like me. I am not getting rich off this career, but it is what I love to do and what I am good at. This supplement helps me to enjoy what I am doing with a little less stress. Thank you so much for your generosity.” (Warren, teacher)

“It has been a blessing to receive funds from this beautiful program, and I would like to say thank you on behalf of providers.” (Wayne, family child care home provider)

“Thank you. We love you for doing this for us. Thank you for standing up for us, because without you we have no one.” (Wilkes, director)

“Thank you so much for looking out for teachers. We deal with a lot, and providing these funds to us shows that someone cares about our well-being.” (Wilson, teacher)

“I would like to sincerely thank the local Smart Start partnership for funding the Child Care WAGES® Program. This support makes a meaningful difference in the lives of early childhood educators and the children we serve. The supplement helps ease financial stress, increases job satisfaction, and allows educators to remain committed to the field they are passionate about. Because of this funding, educators are better able to focus on providing high-quality, consistent care and building strong, lasting relationships with children and families. The supplement also encourages professional growth and long-term retention, which strengthens programs and benefits the entire early childhood community. Your investment shows that you value early childhood educators and understand the critical role we play in children’s development. This support not only impacts educators today but also helps build a stronger, more stable early childhood system for the future. Thank you for recognizing our work and for continuing to invest in those who care for and educate young children.” (Yadkin, teacher)

“Thank you so much for the opportunity to have this extra income! I appreciate it very much.” (Yancey, director)