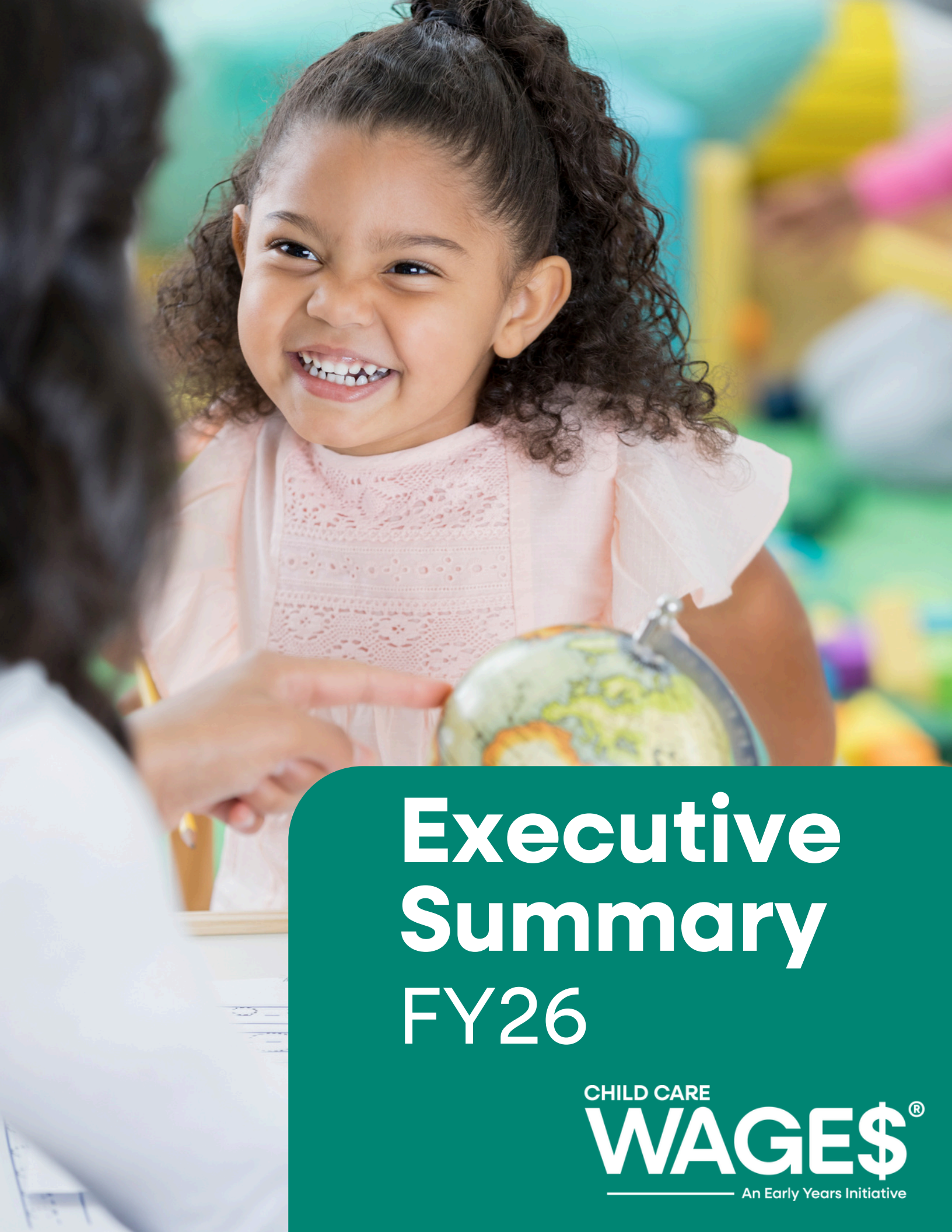




Executive Summary FY26

CHILD CARE
WAGES[®]
An Early Years Initiative

Introduction

The Child Care WAGE\$® Program was created in response to research-based evidence showing that the quality of care children receive is lowered by high turnover rates and inadequate teacher education. The combination of a lack of resources and efforts to maintain affordability for parents means many early childhood teachers are often severely underpaid and leave the field for better-paying jobs, and others never consider the profession as an option.

The median hourly rate for active WAGE\$ participants in FY26 was \$17, which is far less than North Carolina's \$22.47 living wage for one adult.¹



MEDIAN HOURLY RATE

\$17

The median hourly rate for active WAGE\$ participants in FY26 was \$17, which is far less than North Carolina's \$22.47 living wage for one adult.



Keeping teachers in the classroom is a challenge, particularly when other jobs pay more, often without the same expectations regarding what you must know and be able to do. WAGE\$ supplements are a crucial support for early educators and enhance the best compensation employers can offer, making it more feasible for educated professionals to afford to teach children.

WAGE\$ provides tiered education-based salary supplements to teachers, directors and family child care home providers working with children from birth to five with the goal of improving the retention, education and compensation of this workforce. While supplements alone cannot solve the 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 child care programs struggle to attract and retain staff, WAGE\$ can help turn the tide on turnover and decrease the financial stress experienced by an essential workforce.

In North Carolina, WAGE\$ is made possible through a collaboration between local Smart Start partnerships that elect to participate, the North Carolina Partnership for Children and the Division of Child Development and Early Education. Early Years administers the program for participating counties across the state and extends gratitude on behalf of the participants to these supportive funders. Please see pages 10 and 11 for a 2025-2026 funder list.

¹Amy K. Glasmeier and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Living Wage Calculation for North Carolina, MIT Living Wage Calculator (2026), <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/37>

WAGE\$ benefits recipients, their employers, the children and families they serve and the communities in which they live

WAGE\$ supplements are issued directly to eligible early educators in participating counties, and they can use those payments in any way that meets their needs. This enhanced compensation helps participants in their daily lives and makes it more feasible for them to stay in the early childhood field. They can contribute to a high-quality learning environment for children and employers can spend less recruiting and training new staff. Communities flourish when families, employees and businesses are supported.

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“Signing people up for WAGE\$ is just part of our program. I hope other directors realize how much this helps with morale, retention and quality. The overall morale of the organization goes straight down to the kids. We've experienced continuity of care for the children and that stability has brought what we believe to be stronger outcomes. ... I truly feel like we need WAGE\$ for the support and encouragement and the retention rate for educated teachers in a world where teachers are leaving. We need WAGE\$ to make sure they are compensated, valued and seen for what they are worth. That directly strengthens the quality of child care that families receive. It keeps our community going. Early childhood is a difficult business right now and WAGE\$ just makes you feel like you are being loved on for your hard work and your passion for working with children.”

”

Aurora and Spencer Swain have multiple staff members participating on WAGE\$ at their child care program. They are strong advocates for their teachers, for education and for workforce supports.



Aurora and Spencer Swain*

*To learn more about highlighted programs or participants, full stories are posted [here](#).

WAGE\$ participants experience less financial stress and are more satisfied with their jobs

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.

Participants report using their supplements in a variety of ways. Eighty percent (80%) use the supplements to help pay bills. Others pay for basic needs like housing or food, transportation, classroom resources and health care.



3,991

paid in 68 participating counties

\$1,285

average six-month supplement

(\$1.24 more per hour for full-time employment if viewed as an hourly increase)

98%

of survey respondents said WAGE\$ helps ease financial stress

95%

of survey respondents said WAGE\$ helps them feel more satisfied with their jobs

Stories of Resilience Through WAGE\$



Jennifer Sink, a teacher assistant in an NC Pre-K classroom, wants to provide the best possible experience for children before they enter school. The WAGE\$ supplement has relieved financial stress, especially while increasing her own education.

“WAGE\$ has helped provide peace of mind during a stressful season of being in school and raising a family while working full-time. As a teacher assistant, the pay does not reflect what the job is really worth. North Carolina is one of the lowest paying states for education as a whole. It’s not all about a pay check, but that’s why these supplements are so important. We lost two appliances within three days! WAGE\$ allowed me to replace them so we didn’t lose our food. WAGE\$ recognizes the value of early childhood educators and helps address the long-standing issue of low wages in the field. In my life, it has provided financial stability and motivation to continue working in early childhood education. It has reduced stress related to income and allowed me to focus more fully on my work.”

“When you are going through things and you don’t know which way to turn, programs like WAGE\$ give you a sense of relief. You don’t know where your next meal is going to come from or if you are going to be able to make a payment. With WAGE\$, you don’t have to worry as much. You don’t have to worry about something as simple as a bill. When you don’t have it, it’s a big thing. I had children to take care of, and I was a single mom. These programs are very, very important. I pray that they are always around for people like me that need that extra money to make ends meet. To know that your family will be able to eat; to know you can walk in the house and turn your lights on.”



Early childhood teacher **Laverne Beazer** worked hard to obtain her associate degree while struggling with family tragedies and financial hardships. WAGE\$ has been a lifeline for her.

WAGE\$ encourages, supports and rewards continued education



88%

of WAGE\$ participants working in counties with two or more years on WAGE\$ have an associate degree with at least 24 birth to five focused semester hours or submitted coursework during the year to reflect their ongoing education.

According to 2023 workforce data, 57% of the early childhood center-based teaching staff had at least an associate degree in any field and 42% had earned these degrees specifically in the field.² WAGE\$ plays a role in encouraging, supporting and rewarding educational pursuits.

The education required to receive a supplement ranges from 12 semester hours of early childhood coursework or the National Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential all the way to a graduate degree. Participants with education below an associate degree with at least 24 birth to five focused semester hours are awarded temporarily and must make educational advancements in order to retain their eligibility. TEACH Early Childhood® scholarships may be available to provide financial assistance with the coursework needed. Participants are encouraged to access the benefits of both programs at the same time.



²Early Years. 2024. Working in Early Care and Education in North Carolina, 2023 Workforce Study. Chapel Hill, N.C.

Assistant teacher **Shea Corzine** is grateful for the support from WAGE\$ as she works toward her bachelor's degree and stays in the classroom.



SURVEY FINDING

88%

of survey respondents said WAGE\$ is an incentive to seek additional education and/or helps make it more financially feasible.



Shea Corzine

“

“I have been able to continue working in early childhood education while also putting myself through college. I am currently attending Western Carolina University and working toward my teaching license in birth through kindergarten education, with plans to graduate in the spring of 2027.

The financial support from WAGE\$ has helped make it possible for me to pursue my degree without having to take out student loans. My goal is to graduate with my degree and have no student loan debt, which is something I am extremely grateful for and do not take for granted.

This support also benefits the children in my care. I am constantly learning new strategies, ideas and best practices that I can bring back into my classroom. The children benefit from having a teacher who is committed to growing professionally and providing them with the best possible early learning experiences.

Programs like WAGE\$ strengthen the entire early childhood community by encouraging teachers to continue their education, remain in the field and provide high-quality care and education for young children.”

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WAGE\$ helps participants stay in the field, giving children stable and engaging relationships with educated professionals

WAGE\$ participants must work at least six months in the same child care program to be eligible for a supplement. As a result, children benefit in the years when stable and engaging relationships are most critical.



14%

average turnover rate

which 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 data³



96%

of survey respondents said WAGE\$ encourages them to stay in their current programs

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Family child care home provider **Phoince Green** sees WAGE\$ as an important support for retention.

“For me personally, the supplement has provided financial stability and relief, allowing me to focus more fully on providing high-quality care rather than worrying about basic expenses. This support has helped me remain committed to my profession and continue my education and professional growth. For the children in my care, WAGE\$ promotes consistency. When educators are supported and able to stay in their positions, children benefit from stable relationships, emotional security, and a nurturing learning environment. For the early childhood community as a whole, the program helps reduce turnover, supports workforce retention, and strengthens the quality of care being offered to families. Overall, WAGE\$ affirms that early childhood educators matter and that our work is essential.”



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³Early Years. 2024. Working in Early Care and Education in North Carolina, 2023 Workforce Study. Chapel Hill, N.C.

WAGE\$ recognizes the accomplishments of early educators

WAGE\$ and its funders know how important it is to have an educated teacher who stays in the field. WAGE\$ participants often juggle work, family and school all while trying to make ends meet on a minimal salary. As the essential workforce behind the workforce, early educators make it possible for parents to go to work and are the foundation upon which the nation can build economic success. Their dedication is recognized and rewarded through the WAGE\$ supplement.

“

“This is a great field, but it is not a profitable one. I have to work two jobs just to make ends meet. It’s a strain, especially when you are trying to get more education. WAGE\$ is important because it makes me feel seen. We need help and WAGE\$ offers that support. It helps you feel accomplished because you had to stay with your child care program to even receive your WAGE\$. You say, ‘I did these six months, I can do another six!’ Every time I got my WAGE\$, it was at the right time when I really needed that financial support. It helped me make it to the next pay check. It takes the stress off me. I needed a new car and didn’t know what I was going to do and then my WAGE\$ came and I was able to take care of that. I felt so thankful and appreciative.”

”



97%

of survey respondents said that receiving WAGE\$ made them feel more appreciated and recognized for their work.

Zakiyyah Aquil, an NC Pre-K assistant teacher, proudly holds an associate’s degree and appreciates the recognition and financial support WAGE\$ offers.



Thank you for your support of WAGES\$

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.
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 & Families (Lee 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

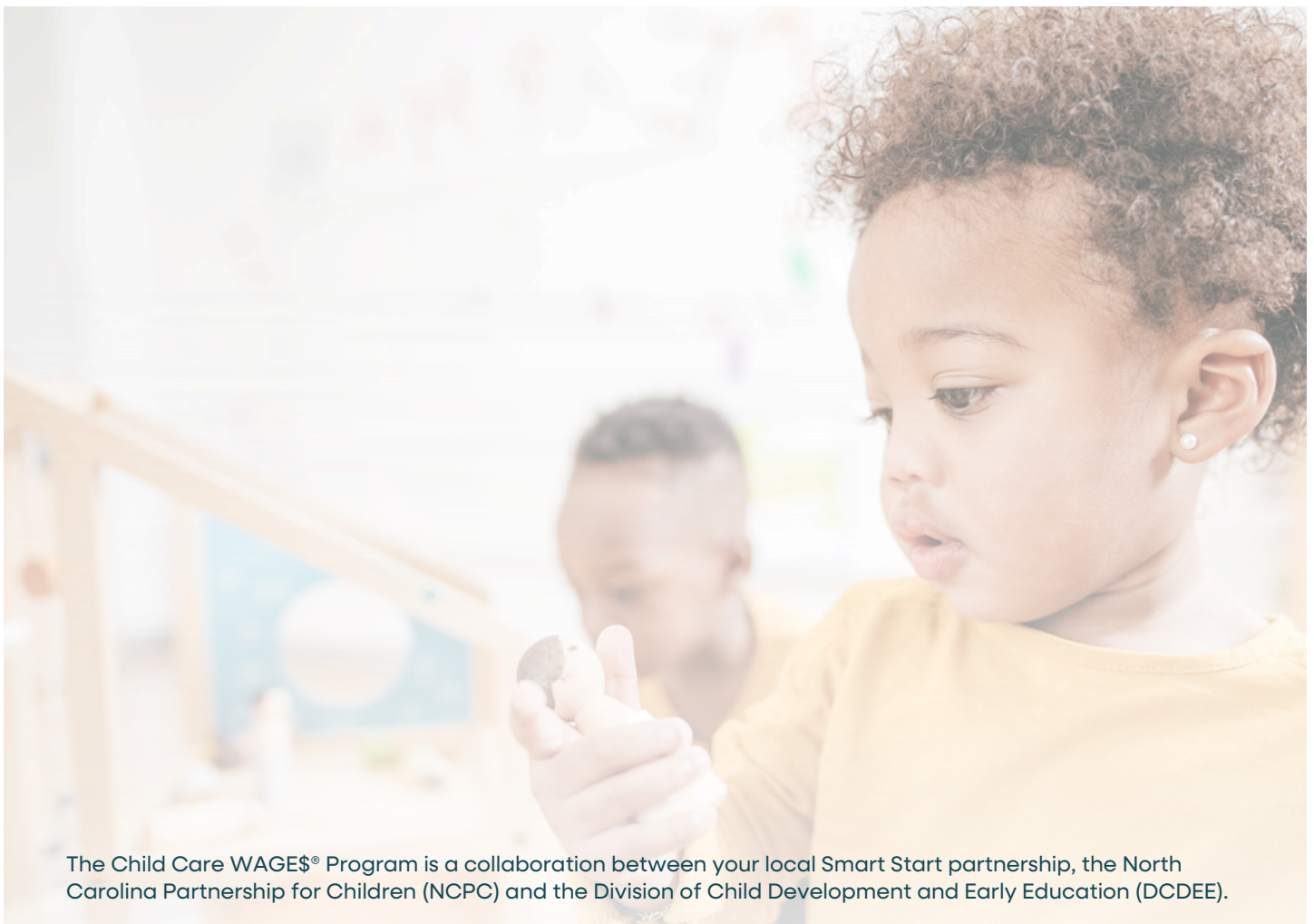
“I am very grateful for the support from the Smart Start partnership. The WAGES\$ supplement has made a real difference in my ability to continue working in early childhood education, focus on providing quality care, and pursue my degree. Your support is truly appreciated and valued by educators like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

Participating Teacher

Thank you for your support of WAGES\$

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. (Henderson County)
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



The Child Care WAGES® Program is a collaboration between your local Smart Start partnership, the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC) and the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE).