

NC Partnership for Children (Smart Start)

OVERVIEW

What is it?

Smart Start is a program designed to give every young child in North Carolina birth through age five access to high quality, affordable child care, health care and other critical services to ensure that they begin school healthy and ready to succeed.

Who is it for?

All young children, birth through age five, may benefit from some of the programs funded through local Smart Start programs, although some services may be targeted to certain children based on the family's income or the medical or psycho-social needs of the children.

Where are applications taken?

Smart Start agencies fund different services offered to young children by local governmental agencies or non-profit organizations. Typically, the agency that operates the program will take applications for the services offered (if an application is needed). Decisions about which services are provided in a community are made by a local planning board, the Local Partnership for Children.

INTRODUCTION

The Smart Start program began in 1993, as a comprehensive public-private initiative to provide every young child in North Carolina with access to high quality, affordable child care, health care and other critical services. The program targets children birth through age five, to ensure that these young children begin school healthy and ready to succeed. Local Smart Start partnerships have community boards to guide the program, which include parents, educators, child care providers, non-profit agencies, churches, business and government leaders. Each local partnership must conduct a needs assessment to determine the needs of young children in their area and to develop a plan to address those needs. By law, most of the funds must be spent on improving access or quality of child care services available to young children. Smart Start partnerships operate in all 100 counties.

BENEFITS/ SERVICES

Smart Start partnerships have implemented programs in three areas to help prepare children for school: Child Care and Education, Health Care and Education, and Family Support Services. Under state legislation, local Smart Start partnerships must spend 70% of all direct service dollars on child care related activities (in the aggregate across all Smart Start partnerships) of which, at least 30% in each county must be spent to expand child care subsidies. Each area is discussed below:

Child Care and Education

One goal of the local partnerships is to improve the quality and accessibility of child care services. The child care services funded include:

- *Paying child care subsidies*, for example, by increasing the maximum rate paid by the Child Care Subsidy Program (see Chapter 4), raising the eligibility limits for subsidies, or increasing the availability of subsidies to cover more working poor families;
- *Increasing the accessibility of child care services*, for example, by paying for transportation, funding Child Care Resource & Referral organizations, and helping to target child care spaces for children with special needs;
- *Improving the quality of child care*, for example, by assessing the quality of care provided in child care classrooms and providing funds to purchase needed equipment and materials, or by special initiatives to improve the training and pay of child care teachers; and
- *Working to meet the unique requirements of children with special needs in traditional child care settings*, for example, by providing teachers with technical assistance to work effectively with children with disabilities.

Health Care and Education

Another goal of the Smart Start program is to ensure that children are healthy. To accomplish this goal, Smart Start partnerships help fund:

- *Needs assessments* regarding the health of young children and their families;
- *Health consultations* with child care facilities to develop systems to ensure that children have medical homes and receive appropriate preventive care and immunizations, and that children with special needs are linked to early intervention services;
- *Parenting and health education* for families with young children;
- *Home visitation and family support services* (if other funding sources are not available); and
- *Direct care services*, such as vision screenings, developmental screenings, prenatal care, dental care, or immunizations (if other funding sources are not available; these funds are generally in the form of start-up funding until other funding is secured).

Family Support Services

Smart Start partnerships also provide families with information, education, and other services to ensure that the needs of their young children are met. These services include:

- *Child Care Resource & Referral Services* which help families locate available and quality child care;
- *Family Resource Centers* which help increase the availability of services for children and families, typically by offering a variety of services to families in one convenient location;

- *Family Literacy Programs* which help family members learn to read and encourage them to read to their young children; and
- *Transportation* to enable children and families to obtain needed services.

APPLICATIONS

Each Smart Start partnership operates differently, depending on the needs and resources available in the community. Some of the partnerships fund other agencies to deliver programs and services while other partnerships provide many of the services in-house. Typically, the agency that operates the program or provides the services will take applications for the services offered (if an application is needed).

Smart Start partnerships usually have a listing of the programs and services available to meet the needs of young children in their community. For more information about the array of services offered, and where applications are taken, contact the local Smart Start partnership. A complete listing of partnership offices is provided in Appendix A.

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

The eligibility requirements for different programs vary. Some services are available on the basis of the family's financial needs, some services are provided based on the medical or psycho-social needs of the child or family, and some services are available to any family with a young child.

NUMBERS SERVED

As of June 1998, Smart Start had an impact on the following services and/or families:

- 38,500 new child care spaces were created;
- 60,000 families received child care subsidies;
- 121,000 children received early intervention or preventive health screenings;
- 130,000 children received child care in programs with quality enhancements;
- and
- 77,000 parents received parenting or health education.

PRIORITIZATION SYSTEM

Priority systems vary depending on the type of services offered and the agency that provides the services.

FINANCING

In SFY 1998-99, the NC Partnership for Children received \$150 million in state appropriations, \$20 million in cash and in-kind donations.

ADMINISTRATION

The program is administered at the state level by the NC Partnership for Children, a statewide nonprofit organization that provides oversight and technical assistance for local partnerships and sets guidelines for Smart Start programs and services. The program is administered at the local level by local Smart Start partnerships, each of which is governed by a board comprised of community, business, religious and governmental leaders, parents, educators and child care providers.

SOURCES OF LAW State law: Sec. 11.55 of SL 1997-443 (Appropriations Act)
NCGS 143B-168.12(a) (NC Partnership)

**FOR MORE
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