

This monograph is a publication of Smart Start's National Technical Assistance Center, a center with a mission of advising and assisting those attempting to develop comprehensive early childhood initiatives in their own communities and states. The purpose of this monograph is to share the stories and lessons learned of three successful Smart Start Partnerships.

We thank many people who have made this monograph possible including:

- Our funders, without whom there would be no monograph. They include: The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Park Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York.
- The many people across the state of North Carolina who have shared their stories. Among those that we interviewed for this document are:

Edgecombe and Nash Counties (Down East Partnership for Children):

Pat Allen, Bobbie Giles, Francis Harrison, Sylvia Harriss, Rusty Holderness, Marie Inscore, Linda Mann, Debra Pace, Theresa Shaw, Shelly Willingham, and Henrietta Zalkind.

Randolph County (Randolph County Partnership for Children):

Marissa Benton-Brown, Cleo Brooks, Mimi Cooper, John Freeze, Diane Frost, Phil Kemp, Tommy McDonald, Reid Pollard, Janice Scarborough, Janet Smith, Kathy Vuncannon, and Pauline McKee.

Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Macon, Swain, Jackson, and Haywood Counties and the Qualla Boundary (Region A Partnership for Children):

Lee Crites, Janice Edgerton, Gail Findlay, Bill Gibson, Howard Hill, Sheila Hoyle, Teresa Mallonee, Gene Perrotta, and June T. Smith.

- The individuals who gave their time to edit, proof and design this publication, including Gerry Cobb, Monica Dood, Jessica Mollet, Karen W. Ponder, and Geelea Seaford, among others.

Amy Laura Dombro
April, 2002



Smart Start began as a bold experiment, under the leadership of Governor Jim Hunt, to build a statewide system of coordinated services where none existed for North Carolina's children from birth through age five, and their families. Its overall goal: to ensure all children in the state enter school healthy and ready to succeed.

At Smart Start's heart are 82 public-private non-profit partnerships representing all of North Carolina's 100 counties. These partnerships share the mission of promoting school readiness. Each has its own leadership and locally developed plans to fulfill the mission.

Across the state, Smart Start partnerships are successfully moving forward in their efforts to create positive change for children and families. To that end, we could easily have given you 82 different stories of how each local partnership evolved and responded to the unique issues in each of their regions of the state. To keep this monograph a manageable length, it will focus on three examples of local Smart Start partnerships, each with its own challenges and successes. Traveling from east to west across North Carolina they are: the Down East Partnership for Children, the Randolph County Partnership for Children and the Region A Partnership for Children.

Each of the three stories you are about to read is based on numerous interviews conducted during site visits. Partnership staff, local government, business, education, and religious leaders, heads of local health departments, mental health services and social services, as well as parents and

caregivers shared their experiences with Smart Start. Thanks to their openness, we can offer you this behind-the-scenes look at how these three partnerships came into being and the factors that make each effective.

Karen Ponder, Executive Director of the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC), the state-level nonprofit organization with oversight and administrative responsibility for Smart Start, explains, "Smart Start's success isn't a mystery. There's no better way to find this out than by hearing from people across the state who are making it work day in and day out. We hope by sharing some of their stories that you will find lessons learned to borrow, adapt, and build upon in your work to improve the lives of young children and families."

As you will see in these three examples, there is great diversity among each of the 82 local Smart Start partnerships and the strategies they have chosen to implement. There are also numerous commonalities that are essential to developing a successful community-based partnership—whether the region is rich or poor, rural or urban.



Each successful partnership:

- emphasized from the outset the need to identify resources, needs and a common vision for children and families;
- has a committed and strong executive director, staff and board of directors;
- builds on the strengths of individuals and its community;
- focuses on creating a system rather than providing a series of unconnected services;
- understands the vital on-going link between setting goals, planning, evaluation and accomplishments;
- appreciates that creating change takes time and can be “messy”; and
- moves ahead not always knowing where each step will lead but trusting they will find the way.

At the same time, each is uniquely shaped by such varied factors as community assets and needs, demographics, leadership style, politics, personalities, history—even by geography.

We’ll start at the beginning with a brief overview of Smart Start.¹ Then turn our attention to the three stories of success.



¹ This discussion is based on *What is Smart Start?* which is one in a series of monographs published by the North Carolina Partnership for Children.

"Today, I am issuing a challenge to anyone who cares about our children and our future. Help us meet the needs of North Carolina's children. But help us do it in a new way, a better way." - Gov. Jim Hunt, March 31, 1993

Unlike many other states' efforts to improve the lives of young children and families by cutting and pasting together existing structures and services, Smart Start looked beyond "quick fixes" and created a new structure with state and local partners. The North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC) at the state level and local partnerships out in the counties are each private, non-profit 501 (c) (3) organizations with an executive director and Board of Directors.

"Smart Start is about wanting the best for all North Carolina's young children and families—those in child care and those who aren't. We're teaching people that a child's education begins at birth. We're creating a new way of doing business in a culture where children and families come first," says Karen Ponder, NCPC executive director.

"Smart Start is about local folks making decisions about what happens to the children and families in their own communities," adds Mary Jo Deck, Smart Start's first manager. "It offers a vehicle for creating services to meet the needs locally. It is about people believing they can make a difference in their communities."

Smart Start encourages people to dream, and they do. "We dream big," says one local Smart Start leader. "We're often without a road map and we sometimes get lost, but we're convinced the chance of succeeding is well worth the journey."

What Smart Start is and what it is not²

Smart Start is

- A community-based initiative to serve all North Carolina's children ages 0-5 and their families
- Taking a comprehensive approach to ensure that children enter school healthy and ready to succeed
- Providing activities in three major service areas: child care (affordability, accessibility, and quality), family support, and health
- Creating systemic change by bringing stakeholders to the table, building on existing services and filling in gaps as needed
- A public-private partnership at state and local levels

Smart Start is not ...

- A government program run out of Raleigh, NC or Washington, DC
- A single, easily defined intervention
- Aimed at only one population or one goal
- A clinical trial (there is no randomization)
- A quick fix



² Thanks to the FPG/UNC Smart Start evaluation team for this strategy of presenting a picture of Smart Start.

What impact is Smart Start having on North Carolina's children and families?

How does Smart Start work?

Smart Start local partnership boards assess the needs of children and families in their community as well as resources and services available to meet those needs. Based on this assessment, a comprehensive plan is developed to create a continuum of community-based services for children, ages 0-5. In each local partnership, planning teams make decisions about the kinds of programs that are developed using Smart Start funding and how to integrate existing resources with Smart Start funding.

NCPC board members, staff and state agency leaders review each local partnership's plan in depth. These stakeholders facilitate local efforts by identifying and coordinating available funding and other resources their agencies can offer. They also identify additional sources of funding, technical assistance and linkages that can help a county reach its goals.

As required by legislation, 30% of all Smart Start service funds are spent on child care subsidies. Other related services use 40% (e.g., child care resource and referral, quality improvement projects and teacher wage supplements) leaving 30% for health and family support activities. Typically, local partnerships contract with existing human service agencies in their area to provide the services they plan and design. If there is no appropriate agency for a particular activity, the partnership may provide that activity itself.

Smart Start is making a tremendous impact on children, families and communities in North Carolina. Major findings from the evaluation being conducted by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at the University of North Carolina and state data reveal that Smart Start:

Improves School Readiness

- Children who attend child care centers that are very involved in Smart Start quality improvement activities have better cognitive and language skills and fewer behavioral problems than children in centers not participating in Smart Start. (*FPG/UNC Evaluation, A Six-County Study of the Effects of Smart Start Child Care on Kindergarten Entry Skills*)

Improves the Quality of Child Care

- Family child care programs participating in Smart Start provide higher quality child care. (*FPG/UNC Evaluation report, Family Child Care in NC*)
- The percentage of high-quality child care centers has increased from 20% in 1993 to 66% in 2001. The percentage of poor-quality child care centers has decreased from 80% in 1993 to 34% in 2001. (*NC Division of Child Development data*)
- The quality of center-based care in NC has improved significantly over time because of Smart Start. Child care centers participating in more Smart

Start quality improvement activities provide higher quality care. (FPG/UNC Evaluation report, *The Effects of Smart Start on the Quality of Child Care*)

Improves Access to High Quality Child Care for All Families

- Since 1993, the quantity of high-quality child care centers in North Carolina has risen 283%—from 576 centers in 1993 to 2,210 in 2001. (NC Division of Child Development data)
- Since 1993, Smart Start programs created 56,455 additional child care spaces for working families. (Smart Start quarterly report data)
- More than 155,000 working families have received financial assistance to cover part of the costs of child care since Smart Start began in 1993. (Smart Start quarterly report data)

Supports Children with Special Needs

- Children with special needs are more likely to be in higher quality child care because of Smart Start. (FPG/UNC Evaluation report, *The Effects of Smart Start on Young Children with Disabilities and their Families, 1996*)
- From 1994 to 1999, the number of child care facilities enrolling children with special needs increased by 50% thanks to Smart Start training and resources. (FPG/UNC Evaluation report, *Smart Start and Quality Inclusive Child Care in NC, 2000*)

Improves Teacher Education

- In 2001, 83% of child care teachers had a college degree or received some college credits—compared to 41% in 1993. (Child Care Services Association, 2002)

Improves Child Care Teacher Retention

- In 1993, 42% of child care teachers left their classroom within one year. In 2001, 31% of child care teachers left their classroom within one year. (Child Care Services Association, 2002)

Improves Access to Children's Health Services

- Smart Start children are more likely to be immunized on time. In 2001, more than 50,000 children benefited from Smart Start immunization support services, compared to less than 8,800 in 1996. (FPG/UNC Evaluation report, *The Effect of Smart Start Health Interventions on Children's Health and Access to Care, 2001* and Smart Start quarterly report data)
- Smart Start children are more likely to have a regular source of health care than children who are not involved in Smart Start. (FPG/UNC Evaluation report, *The Effect of Smart Start Health Interventions on Children's Health and Access to Care, 2001*)
- Non-Smart Start children are more likely to use an emergency department as their regular source of health care. (FPG/UNC Evaluation report, *The Effect of Smart Start Health Interventions on Children's Health and Access to Care, 2001*)

- The number of children who received Smart Start health and developmental screenings has tripled since 1996—increasing from 40,000 in 1996 to 120,000 in 2001. (*Smart Start quarterly report data*)

Provides Support to Families of Young Children

- Over 90% of families participating in Smart Start activities read to their child at least once a week. (*FPG/UNC Evaluation report, Families and the NC Smart Start Initiative*)
- In FY 2000-2001, more than 28,700 parents participated in Smart Start parenting classes, support groups and home visiting programs, compared to 14,651 in 1996. (*Smart Start quarterly report data*)

Improves the Economy of NC Communities

- Nearly \$400 million has been added to the North Carolina economy through the creation of 56,455 additional child care spaces.
- Smart Start child care subsidies allow families to work, adding nearly \$590 million to our state's economy.

Improves Collaboration and Coordination of Child and Family Services

- Smart Start has improved the coordination and effectiveness of local service agencies and programs that serve young children and their families. (*FPG/UNC Evaluation report, Collaboration: A Smart Start Success, 2001*)

