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Contact: Laura Burrows, Two B Public Relations
laura@twobpr.com, 336.575.6757

Strong Student Achievement and Educator Retention are Hallmarks of The Pre-K Priority's Final Report on 2-Year Initiative to Establish a Model for High-Quality Pre-K in Forsyth County

Results of \$4 Million Investment from County and City Point to Improved Kindergarten Readiness

WINSTON-SALEM, NC (January 14, 2026) – A 2-year initiative sparked by the work of The Pre-K Priority and led by a collaboration of community partners has shown to deliver powerful results for Forsyth County's youngest learners, their families and early childhood education teachers. The final report presented by The Pre-K Priority's community partners showed that due to increased supports for teachers and classrooms, student performance in the 36 Pre-K Model Cohort Classrooms exceeded NC Pre-K statewide averages in 4 of 6 categories aligned with kindergarten readiness based on classroom assessments comparing school year growth.*

The initiative was administered by Smart Start of Forsyth County and involved resources, expertise and supports from community partners including Family Services, Child Care Resource Center, Hispanic League and Forsyth Futures alongside Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools (WS/FCS). These partners collaborated on a comprehensive effort to invest in Pre-K educators, support families and enrich the student experience to improve kindergarten readiness. Financial support for the initiative came from \$4 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding from Forsyth County and the City of Winston-Salem and impacted 710 Pre-K students in 36 Pre-K Model Cohort Classrooms in NC-Pre-K, private centers, Head Start and Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools.

“With this collaborative initiative, we've shown that when we invest in our youngest learners and their families, and invest in their teachers, we can generate significant and lasting results,” said Glynnise Highsmith, vice president of Early Childhood Initiatives at Smart Start of Forsyth County. “Through our united resources – Success Coaches, Family Advocates, professional development, family supports and classroom assessments – we're helping children accelerate their path to kindergarten success.”

The Pre-K Priority [Final Report](#) highlights results for the Pre-K Model Cohort Classrooms in three key areas:

Student Performance

Student growth was based on assessments conducted by Success Coaches at the beginning, middle and end of each school year using Teaching Strategies Gold® (TS GOLD).

- Across Year 1 and Year 2, student growth in the **Pre-K Model Cohort Classrooms exceeded NC Pre-K statewide averages** in 4 of the 6 TS GOLD categories and were on parity in the remaining 2 categories. For example, students in the Pre-K Model Cohort Classrooms showed 64 percentage point growth in Math (Year 2) compared to 31 percentage point average growth in Math for NC Pre-K statewide. Additionally, student performance gains improved from the Year 1 to Year 2 cohorts as teachers had an additional year of coaching and supports. (see Educator Support).

Educator Support

- 76 Pre-K teachers and assistant teachers participated in the initiative. **The overall retention rate for these educators was 83%, far exceeding state retention statistics of 68%.****
- Over the two years, these **educators received more than 1,850 hours of coaching** from Success Coaches working at Smart Start of Forsyth County and **professional development** through classes offered by Child Care Resource Center. Strengthening the skillsets of the 76 educators through this 2-year initiative will continue to benefit our community's youngest learners for years to come.
- Participating teachers received financial support in the form of retention bonuses and salary parity payments (based on WS/FCS salary schedules to ensure pay equity across the Pre-K landscape).

Family Engagement

- 710 individual Pre-K students and their families were served by the 2-year initiative.
- Over two years, **Family Advocates working through Family Services of Forsyth County, held conferences with 114 families, conducted 107 home visits and helped families set 127 specific goals.**
- Families accessed translation and interpretation services through the Hispanic League 95 times in 5 languages for support with enrollment, family engagement events and school conferences.

“Ensuring that all Forsyth County children enter kindergarten ready to learn delivers a lifetime of dividends for those students and our community as a whole,” said Leslie Mullinix, project director for The Pre-K Priority. “For that reason, it’s important to consider that only 45% of Forsyth County four-year-olds are currently enrolled in a licensed Pre-K program. Our community research says a majority of families prefer a Pre-K setting, but the lack of affordable options leads to many of our young learners starting their K-12 journeys without the benefits of Pre-K to help them succeed. This 2-year initiative demonstrates the power of Pre-K to provide children a more equitable opportunity to enter kindergarten ready and excited to learn.”

The Pre-K Priority will continue its commitment to high-quality Pre-K opportunities for all four-year-olds in Forsyth County through ongoing advocacy work and community collaboration. Goals for the next 12-18 months include developing a community-wide children’s health and assessment fair to bolster Pre-K enrollment, establishing principles for a Pre-K to Kindergarten transition framework and conducting listening sessions with families and educators around pathways for creating greater equity within Pre-K settings. Longer term goals could include scaling the model and successes demonstrated by the Pre-K Model Cohort Classrooms with additional local or state funding.

To learn more about the ongoing work of The Pre-K Priority, visit prekpriority.org.

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*Source: Smart Start of Forsyth County analysis comparing Pre-K Model Classroom data from 2024-2025 Academic Year to NC PreK Benchmark Data from 2023-2024 Academic Year.

**Source: 2023 Workforce Study by nonprofit Early Years, formerly known as Child Care Services Association, published in February 2024.