WHAT DO NORTH CAROLINIANS WANT FOR THEIR CHILDREN?

A SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS OF THE STATEWIDE SMART INVESTING FORUMS AND SUMMITS

SMART Investing

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A MESSAGE FROM NORTH CAROLINA LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR WALTER DALTON

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May 24, 2010

Dear Reader,

As a supporter of The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc., I would like to take this opportunity to recommend this report on the Smart Investing Initiative to you. Over the past months, individuals from around the state have met to discuss the needs of the children of North Carolina and how we can work to improve their quality of life. This work culminated in three regional summits and the report referenced above.

Through the work of more than 800 people, it was agreed that all North Carolina children need to have their basic needs met; access to high quality early care and education; and involved and engaged parents and families who are supported through training and educational opportunities. These are certainly areas in which North Carolina has made some progress, but it is understood that more work needs to be done in order for all children to be served.

I applaud the work that The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc., has done in the operation of the Smart Start program for the past seventeen years, and know that they will continue to work to serve the children of North Carolina in the best manner for many years to come.

Most Sincerely,

Walter Dalton

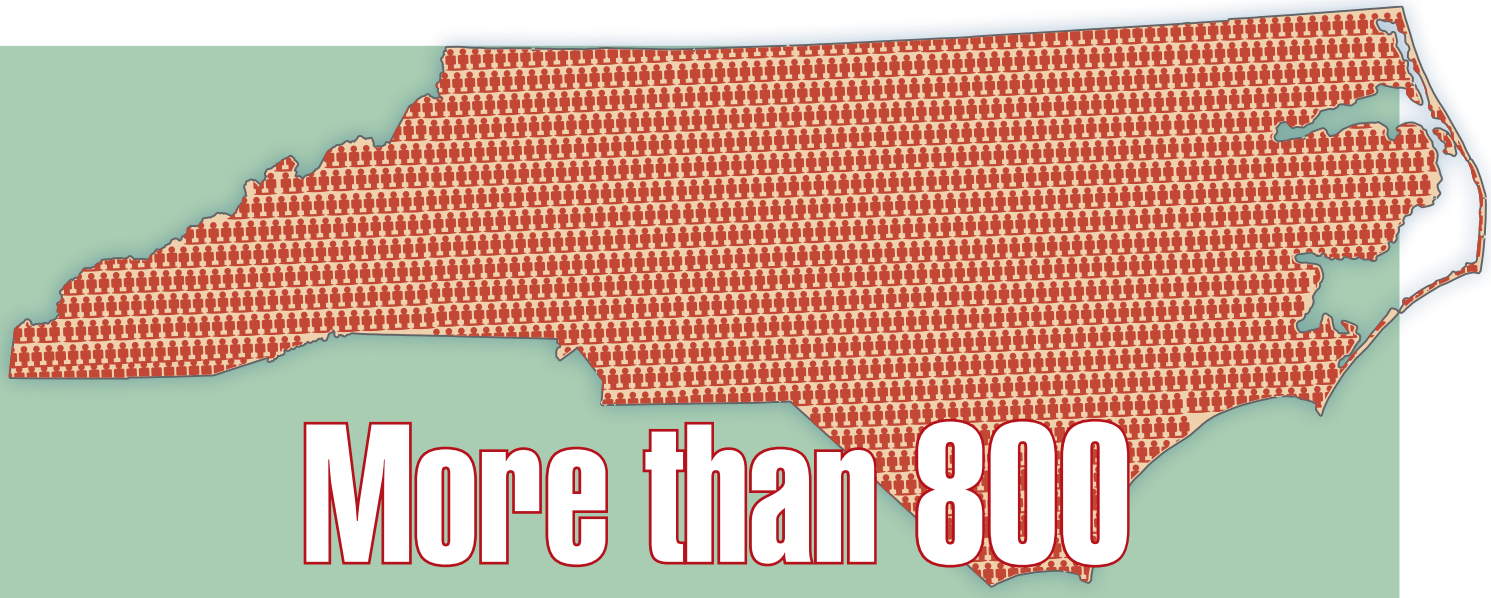
INTRODUCTION

What do North Carolinians want for their children?

Specifically, what can we as individuals, communities, and policymakers do to ensure North Carolina's children grow into successful adults?

Not an easy question. Yet, more than 800 North Carolinians representing every county in the state invested two days reviewing data, working together, and making tough decisions, to answer this question.

They came from diverse political parties, demographic backgrounds, and life experiences. They were parents and business leaders, health care providers and elected officials, early childhood professionals and faith leaders, K-12 educators and workforce development experts. Altogether, they invested more than 8,000 hours of time.



More than 800

parents, business leaders, health care providers, elected officials, early childhood professionals, faith leaders, K-12 educators and workforce development experts from every county in North Carolina participated in this process.

Participants concluded that all children needed to have:

- **Basic needs met, such as food, shelter, and health.**
- **Access to high quality early care and education.**
- **Involved and engaged parents and families who are supported through training and education opportunities.**

At first glance, these conclusions may seem obvious. Yet consider that regardless of what county they were from, who they voted for, or what their income was, more than 800 people came to consensus that North Carolina—through its citizens, communities, and government—had a responsibility to advance these three priorities.

Given the breadth of the state, some regional differences did emerge. A different fourth priority was identified for each region of the state.

- Eastern counties wanted community organizations that prioritize collaboration.
- Piedmont counties felt children needed exposure to enriching experiences such as museums, parks, and libraries.
- In the West, safe and secure places for children to live were a high priority.

For each priority identified, participants came up with specific strategies to advance it.

This report shares what North Carolinians had to say, and how they came to those conclusions.

SMART INVESTING was made possible by generous funding from the Z. SMITH REYNOLDS FOUNDATION.

ANY TIME THIS SYMBOL APPEARS, IT INDICATES THAT MORE INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE ONLINE.

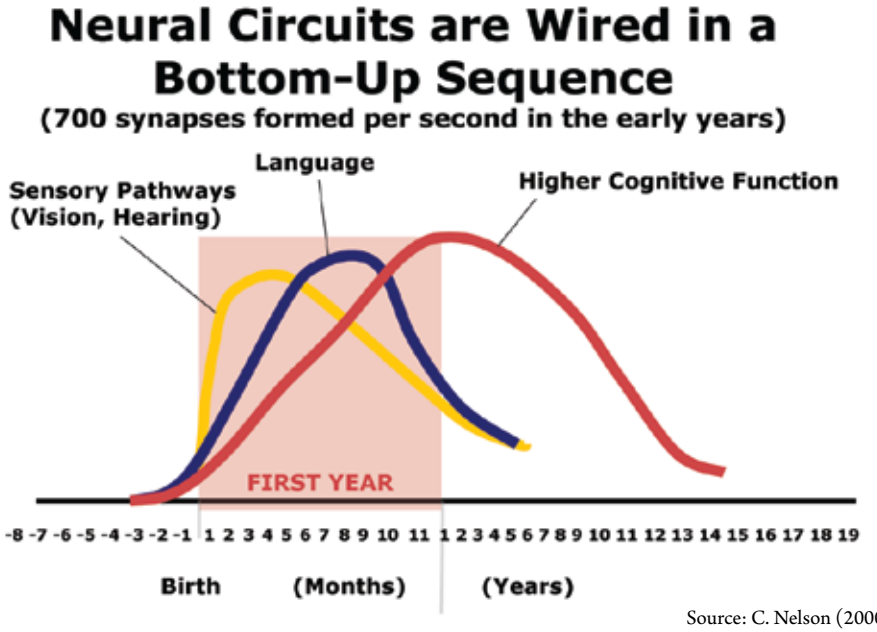
THE EARLY YEARS

The earliest years of childhood are critical. Experiences during this time literally shape the structure of the brain. For young children to thrive they need their physical, emotional and social needs met.

Because today's children are tomorrow's leaders, parents and workers, everyone has a stake in making sure all children have the experiences they need to succeed.

Beginning with the leadership of Governor Jim Hunt in the early nineties, North Carolina has led the way in early childhood. With Smart Start, North Carolina became the first in the nation to create a statewide early childhood system. It was one of the first to create a statewide, high-quality pre-kindergarten program, More at Four. And, it was the first in the nation to develop a Quality Rating and Improvement System—the star-rating system. All are now national models.

Many children have benefited from these programs. Unfortunately, North Carolina has been cutting back on these investments for the past several years, leaving significant numbers of children without the quality experiences and services they need to thrive.



Source: C. Nelson (2000)

The above graph shows that brain development, especially related to vision, hearing, language, and cognitive functions, is extremely fast in the early years of life, especially the first year.

HOW THEY GOT THERE: THE PROCESS

In November of 2009, The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc. (NCPC), the organization that leads Smart Start, began an intensive civic engagement process to gain consensus on early childhood priorities. Designed by The Lee Institute and funded by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, ***"Smart Investing: Communities Thrive When Children Thrive"*** aimed to bring together North Carolinians to make recommendations to support the well-being of young children.

Smart Start's 77 local partnerships each recruited a diverse group of approximately ten people (referred to as a delegation) to participate in local forums and regional summits. Between November of 2009 and January of 2010, eight local forums were held across the state. At the beginning of each forum, participants learned about the current status of young children in their counties and across the state, and about early childhood brain development and its impact on the economic vitality of communities. Then, delegates generated ideas about what would make the biggest positive impact for North Carolina's children.

All of the ideas gathered at the forums were organized into topic-focused priority areas. Delegates then attended larger, regional summits in March 2010 where they voted to determine the top priorities for their region. Delegates developed specific recommendations for each selected priority.

"It was important for this initiative to tap the involvement of a wide cross-section of county leadership that could look at the myriad of issues affecting young children and their families with fresh eyes."

Marsha Basloe,
Executive Director of the Durham's Partnership for Children

DELEGATION:

A group of parents, business leaders, health care providers, elected officials, early childhood professionals, faith leaders, K-12 educators, and/or workforce development experts representing their local communities. Delegations were organized by Smart Start local partnerships and represented every county in the state.

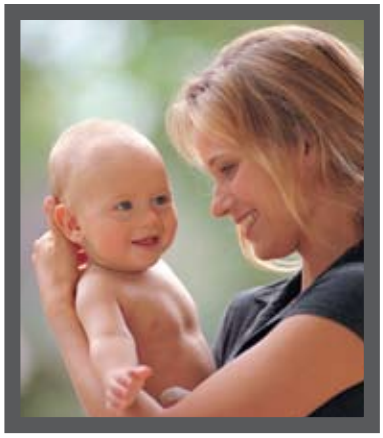
www.smartstart.org/smartinvesting

» PRIORITY AREAS VOTED ON AT THE SUMMITS
» ACTION PLANS FOR EACH PRIORITY

PRIORITY 1:

BASIC NEEDS MET, SUCH AS FOOD, SHELTER, AND HEALTH CARE

More than 68% of delegates indicated basic needs as one of their top four priorities—60% in the East, 60% in the Piedmont and more than 80% in the Mountains. There was slight variation by region regarding how basic needs were defined. For example, one region included healthcare and safe living environments.



The recommended strategies focused on:

- **Making affordable housing for families a priority.**
- **Ensuring access to food.**
- **Increasing access to and awareness about resources.**
- **Establishing public policies to assist communities.**
- **Expanding early health care services.**

Why Does it Matter

The very term "basic needs" denotes the urgent nature of food, shelter, clothing, and healthcare to the foundation of a child's early experiences. In other words, basic needs are the essential things that all children need to thrive. In addition to the obvious risks such as malnutrition and disease, when these needs are not met, children experience "toxic stress."

Over time, toxic stress actually damages the architecture of the developing brain, leading to long-term effects such as greater likelihood of anti-social behavior, lower achievement in school and at work, and poor physical and mental health. Young children exposed to the intense and prolonged stress associated with cyclical or generational poverty, military deployment, sudden parental unemployment, and other like conditions require comprehensive intervention to ensure their healthy and productive development. Well-targeted, research-based early childhood interventions are proven to deliver both lifelong participant outcomes and long-term taxpayer savings.

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» LIST OF ALL RECOMMENDATIONS AND INITIAL ACTION PLANS

» VIDEO: IMPACT OF ADVERSITY ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

"When you realize we are losing the battle to develop the children of poverty in our state as early as age two, you then appreciate why it becomes important to begin group discussions on how we can influence the change of policy in order to correct the situation."

Todd Hildebran, Rowan County business owner

Strategy	Examples of Specific Recommendations by Delegates (Verbatim)
Make affordable housing for families a priority.	♦ Increase and/or create short-term and transitional housing paired with case management for children and families in crisis. ♦ Identify and implement best practice models for ensuring access to safe and affordable housing for every family.
Ensure access to food.	♦ Undertake a statewide assessment of nutrition and hunger needs among children birth to five. ♦ Establish community gardens in child care and community settings to increase access to fresh vegetables.
Ensure access to resources.	♦ All children birth to five and their families have access to community resources. ♦ Create a public awareness campaign to educate families on how to access available services to meet basic needs. ♦ Develop an interactive directory of available service providers and services for children birth to five and place accessible kiosks in strategic locations.
Establish public policies to assist communities.	♦ Establish funded public policies to insist that local communities ensure all children birth to five have access to healthy food, adequate shelter and appropriate healthcare.
Expand early health care services.	♦ Create a statewide program to promote social/emotional development screenings for children birth to five in healthcare agencies at well check visits. Action after screenings is required. ♦ Every newborn has access to prenatal screening and post-natal screening. ♦ All high-risk pregnancies will be evaluated for services.

PRIORITY 2:
ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

More than 78% of delegates selected access to high quality early care and education as one of their top four priorities—80% in the East, 90% in the Piedmont, and 60% in the Mountains.

The recommended strategies focused on:

- **Raising standards for quality.**
- **Ensuring access.**
- **Investing in teachers.**
- **Educating the public.**

Why Does it Matter

Neuroscience has changed how we think of the earliest years. Images of the brain clearly show that the brain of a child who has had positive early childhood experiences looks different from one who has not. The structure and wiring are visibly and significantly different. Science also shows that a child's development is influenced by more than their family. The environments in which they live, and the relationships they have with neighbors, caregivers and other adults have a direct effect on how their brains develop.

This is why economists now recognize that investments in young children are one of the strongest economic development investments our society can make.

Today's children are our future leaders, parents and workers. Our state's prosperity depends on their healthy development and growth. Quality early childhood experiences are the key to ensuring that healthy development and growth.

Dr. Jack Shonkoff — founding director of Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child and co-editor of the groundbreaking report, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* — explains that all children are born "ready to learn," and that the earliest years of infancy determine the architecture, the actual structure, of the brain.

"The science of child development tells us that significant variations in the quality of early care and education programs have the potential to produce lasting repercussions for both children and society as a whole. Evidence points to the beneficial impacts at the highest end of the quality spectrum and to detrimental impacts at the lowest end."

Author of *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, Dr. Jack Shonkoff

Strategy	Examples of Specific Recommendations by Delegates (Verbatim)
Raise standards for quality.	♦ The minimum standard for regulated childcare for children birth to five will be at least three stars.
Ensure access.	♦ Within five years, every family within 200% of poverty will have subsidized access to a four or five-star facility. ♦ All children birth to five at risk for developmental delays will have access to all-inclusive, quality early childhood programming. ♦ Increase More at Four slots by 20% within four years, double per-pupil allotment, and expand to three-year-olds. ♦ Ensure all children birth to three have access to quality early care and education supported through community business/industry partnerships. ♦ Provide tax credits for parents and facilities that choose or provide high quality care.
Invest in teachers.	♦ Develop a professional wage structure for early childhood educators tied to formal education in early childhood education and ongoing specialized training. ♦ All lead teachers serving children birth to five will have a two-year degree or its equivalent (from an accredited institution) within three years. ♦ Within the next five years, 50% of lead teachers of children birth to five will have an Early Childhood Bachelor's Degree.
Educate the public.	♦ Establish a public awareness campaign of research-based best practices in early childhood education. ♦ The NC Chamber of Commerce will embrace early education and will advocate for it to be a vital part of the state economic development agenda.

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» VIDEO: THE GAP BETWEEN WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE DO
» VIDEO: INTERVIEW WITH JAMES HECKMAN
» VIDEO: HOW THE BRAIN FORMS
» PDF: SCIENCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD
» PDF: PERSPECTIVES ON AMERICA'S FUTURE WORKFORCE

PRIORITY 3:

ENGAGED FAMILIES WHO ARE SUPPORTED THROUGH TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Half of those in the East, and nearly 60% of those in the West, selected family as one of their top four priorities. More than 60% of delegates in the Piedmont said parents and parent education was a top priority.

The recommended strategies focused on:

- **Supporting new parents and parents of young children.**
- **Supporting school efforts.**
- **Increasing knowledge about how children develop.**

Why Does it Matter

Again, the research on brain development has changed how we think about the early years, and in turn influenced views on parenting. While we have always known that families are a child's first and most important teacher, science is showing how parents also can be a child's most effective teacher. Research is providing new insights that inform how to interact with a child, manage behavior and prepare children to enter school healthy and ready to learn.

According to the National Scientific Council on the Development Child, "Healthy development depends on the quality and reliability of a young child's relationships with the important people in his or her life… Even the development of a child's brain architecture depends on the establishment of these relationships."

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- » LIST OF ALL RECOMMENDATIONS AND INITIAL ACTION PLANS
- » VIDEO: CHANGE THE FIRST 5 YEARS AND YOU CHANGE EVERYTHING
- » VIDEO: SKILLS BEGET SKILLS

Strategy	Examples of Specific Recommendations by Delegates (Verbatim)
Support new parents and parents of young children.	♦ Provide a variety of networking opportunities for parents to share and support each other – including mentoring, support groups and family nights. ♦ Expand evidence-based education programs to reinforce parenting skills and collaborate with existing community systems. ♦ All families with children birth to five who receive support services (e.g., Medicaid) will have access to appropriate parenting and education skills for their children to succeed.
Support school efforts.	♦ Introduce family education curriculum in NC Standard course of study.
Increase knowledge about how children develop.	♦ Create an awareness campaign that enhances parents' knowledge of children's needs and how to access services to support parenting role. ♦ All new parents will receive child development information, a list of local child and family resources and parenting tools.

"After I saw how powerful the videos about early childhood were for those sitting at my table at the Forum, I decided to show 'Change the First Five Years and You Change Everything' to our county commissioners as part of our annual presentation to them. They were visibly moved by the video and could see the impact that early intervention can make in a young child's life."

Loretta Michael, Executive Director, Children & Youth Partnership for Dare County, Inc.

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» PDF: EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT BUILT INTO OUR BRAINS

» PDF: ENVIRONMENT OF RELATIONSHIPS

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

While North Carolinians had more in common than not, there were regional differences that emerged. These are highlighted below.

East: Community organizations that prioritize collaboration.

Specifically, delegates recommended:

- Establishing an accessible county and regional database of community resources, interagency councils, services and service providers.
- Bringing together community leaders and stakeholders to ensure all children birth to five are receiving services they need to become effective future leaders in the community.
- Identifying a regional facilitator for collaborative opportunities.

Piedmont: Exposure to enriching experiences such as museums, parks, and libraries.

Specifically, delegates recommended:

- Creating community hubs that provide enrichment activities that include learning, recreational, cultural and literacy experiences for all families.
- Establishing a Parks and Recreation Department in every county to offer enriching experiences for young children birth to five.
- Developing a community-based focus that provides a broad range of learning experiences and enrichment opportunities for all children.
- Providing all families with access to affordable and convenient cultural and recreational activities in a safe environment.

"The most important take-away from the forum was that while every county is unique, we all have the same common virtues and want the best for the children of North Carolina to succeed and critical development must start at an early age."

Tate Johnson, Director of Governor Perdue's Eastern Office

Mountains: Safe and secure places to live.

Specifically, delegates recommended:

- Establishing a program to educate health professionals to clearly identify and refer families with potential high-risk behaviors or conditions that affect the safety and well-being of children.
- Developing family dynamics curriculum beginning in ninth grade and focusing on the basic needs of care as well as the family dynamics that influence child behavior.
- Identifying all children by age two through a state-wide program linking their families to community resources that identify what a safe environment is for childhood development.
- Creating comprehensive neighborhood watch programs in every community that ensures safety of each child.
- Providing basic safety education to all children three to five.

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» COLLABORATION ACTION PLAN
» ENRICHING EXPERIENCES ACTION PLAN
» SAFE AND SECURE ENVIRONMENTS ACTION PLAN

WHAT'S NEXT?

This public engagement process, as evidenced by the priorities selected, is much larger than any one entity. As delegates deliberated on strategies, they were instructed to think about roles for individuals, communities, and government. This was intentional. Everyone has a stake in ensuring children have what they need to grow into healthy, productive, and successful adults. As the tagline says: Communities thrive when children thrive.

Involving citizens in answering the question—What do North Carolinians want for their children?—through the Smart Investing initiative provides a blueprint for action by local and state leaders as well as ordinary citizens. North Carolina has a rich and proud history of paying attention to our youngest citizens—a tradition upon which we must continue to build.

Moving forward, individuals, organizations, communities, and policymakers will need to take ownership of the pieces for which they can have the greatest impact. In addition to the work we already do every day, we at The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc., (NCPC) commit to the following based on the priorities identified. ▶▶▶

Smart Investing Priority 1: Basic needs met, such as food, shelter, and health care.

Smart Start local partnerships are early childhood community hubs. As such, they have built networks that cross disciplines and professions to bring together all of the people involved in a young child's life. They have a bird's-eye view of local services and are able to establish needed connections between community resources. At the state level, NCPC shares information about the challenges North Carolinians face and available state-level resources through its online sites.

NCPC Commitment:

NCPC will use its website, Facebook page, Twitter account, and the NC Children blog to raise awareness about resources to assist families in meeting their basic needs.

Smart Investing Priority 2: Access to high quality early care and education.

Raising Quality.

All Smart Start local partnerships are held accountable to a set of measures on how well children are faring in their communities. Since Smart Start put these measures in place in 2001, the quality of early care and education has increased dramatically. For example, in 2001, 33% of North Carolina children in child care attended four- and five-star centers; whereas by 2009 the number had jumped to 60%. Smart Start partnerships work with child care programs to increase and maintain their quality. The statewide organization, NCPC, holds them accountable for doing so.

NCPC commits to using these accountability measures to further raise quality in child care programs.

NCPC Commitment: The NCPC Board has begun using the accountability measures to determine a portion of the funding provided to Smart Start local partnerships. Meaning, those local partnerships achieving the highest levels will receive additional funding.

NCPC Commitment: The NCPC Board will undertake a review process to increase the accountability measures to which local partnerships are held, thereby supporting policies to raise the level of quality of child care programs.

NCPC Commitment: The NCPC Board will discuss collecting data specifically on infant and toddler care to determine if additional age-specific measures are needed.

Investing in Teachers.

North Carolina provides two significant supports to early childhood teachers: scholarships to help teachers afford additional education, and salary supplements to help teachers earn a living wage. As a result 72% of early childhood lead teachers have completed some college level coursework in early childhood development. In addition, staff turnover has gone down dramatically. Recently, the state launched the North Carolina Early Educator Certification® (EEC). EEC supports continued education and provides a new level of professionalism for early educators in the state.

NCPC Commitment: **NCPC will work with Smart Start local partnerships to promote certification to early childhood professionals. In addition, local partnerships will assist teachers with completing EEC applications.**

Educating the Public.

Increasing the public's understanding of early childhood development has always been an NCPC goal. The Smart Investing initiative is one of many efforts designed to inform and engage North Carolinians in early childhood issues. Policy leaders are already recognizing the significance of the work done by the Smart Investing delegations. Governor Bev Perdue intends to use the priorities to inform the work of the forthcoming Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC).

NCPC Commitment: **NCPC commits to partnering with the Early Childhood Advisory Council as it begins its work.**

Smart Investing Priority 3: Involved and engaged parents and families who are supported through training and education opportunities.

Supporting new parents and parents of young children.

NCPC works to improve outcomes for children by offering family-focused programs that improve parenting, promote parent involvement and impact the environment in which parenting takes place. In 2008, NCPC began using *The Incredible Years*, a program that empowers parents by increasing their knowledge of early childhood development and positive parenting practices. As a result, more parents are using positive practices and perceive their children exhibiting fewer behavioral problems after participating in the program.

NCPC Commitment: **NCPC will make *The Incredible Years* available to more local partnerships, assisting them in bringing this program to their communities.**

These commitments are just the beginning.

NCPC's board and staff will use these Smart Investing priorities and recommendations to inform its work moving forward. And we will support our local partnerships in their work to advance these priorities.

WHAT WILL YOU DO?

These priorities will only become reality if we all take ownership of them. It will require action from individuals, communities, and government. Everyone has a stake in ensuring children have what they need to grow into healthy, productive, and successful adults. What will you do?

Please complete this form and share it with us. We will post commitments to the Smart Investing website, thereby encouraging others to join this effort. The form also is available online at www.smartstart.org.

☐ I commit to sharing this report with members of my community.

How? _____

_____

_____

_____

☐ I commit to advancing a priority.

- ☐ Basic needs met, such as food, shelter, health care and a safe environment.
- ☐ Access to high quality early care and education.
- ☐ Involved and engage parents and families who are supported through training and education opportunities.

I will do this by: _____

_____

_____

_____

☐ Other. Please describe. _____

_____

_____

_____

Name: _____

Title: _____

Organization: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____

RETURN THIS FORM TO NCPC BY:

FAX: 919-821-9564

MAIL:
ATTN: Tracy Zimmerman
The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc.
1100 Wake Forest Road
Raleigh, NC 27604

APPENDIX

BACKGROUND: LAUNCHING A MAJOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

In the fall of 2008, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation awarded a grant to The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc. to convene a series of meetings across the state to secure input into the development of the next phase of North Carolina's comprehensive early childhood system.

A collaborative group of partners began working together to organize these meetings and to begin discussions on recommendations for how to move forward with a new policy agenda for North Carolina's early childhood system.

In February, 2009, this group organized the *Leadership Forum on Preparing North Carolina for a Prosperous Future: Advancing Our Investment in Young Children*. The forum featured Dr. Jack Shonkoff, founding director of Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child and co-editor of the groundbreaking report, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development,* and included North Carolina Commerce Secretary Keith Crisco and Human Services Secretary Lanier Cansler.

It was the first public conversation on what then became Smart Investing.

Smart Investing, launched in 2009 and completed in March of 2010, was based on a civic engagement effort designed and facilitated by The Lee Institute. The Lee Institute is a nonprofit organization that serves people, organizations, and the community through leadership development, design and management of collaborative projects, support of community collaboration, and citizen involvement. The Smart Investing effort included eight local forums and three regional summits based on the following principles.

The initial planning group included representatives from:

- **Action for Children North Carolina**
- **Child Care Services Association**
- **Down East Partnership for Children**
- **FPG Child Development Institute**
- **North Carolina Child Care Coalition**
- **North Carolina Division of Child Development**
- **North Carolina Division of Public Health**
- **North Carolina Justice Center**
- **North Carolina Pediatric Society**
- **Office of School Readiness, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction**
- **The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc.**

First, recruit diverse delegations to represent communities.

Smart Start's 77 partnerships leveraged their networks to assemble local parents, business leaders, health care providers, education professionals and policy makers representing every community in the state.

Second, promote informed discussion.

This was done both through the Smart Investing website (www.smartinvestingnc.org) and at the forums. The website included video and print material highlighting brain architecture, early childhood development and their impact on workforce and economic development.

Between November, 2009 and January, 2010, eight local forums brought together community delegations from across the state to learn about and discuss the current status of young children birth to five and the cutting-edge research about brain architecture and the impact of early childhood development on the economic vitality of communities.

Third, let the people decide.

Each forum concluded with the delegates brainstorming then balloting to select initial ideas about what they believed would have the greatest positive impact on young children to become healthy, productive, fully engaged adults if implemented across the state.

By the end of all eight forums, there were 2,077 ballots cast for 260 separate actions, conditions, and behaviors or practices. The Lee Institute conducted a content analysis to identify what patterns emerged – that is, what items were similar enough to cluster into a grouping of their own. Fifteen priority areas emerged.

Delegates then attended one of three regional summits in March, 2010 where they narrowed the list to the top four priorities they believed would have the greatest positive impact on young children if implemented across the state.

Smart Investing employed a range of innovative public engagement processes ranging from one-on-one personal interviews at each of the eight forums to voting for priorities by texting on a cell phone.

Intrinsic in this effort was a hope for authentic engagement and ownership by people across North Carolina through a well-designed process that would create a powerful, easily understood agenda.

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