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**Recognizing High-Quality Pre-K Depends on a Strong Pipeline of Future Educators,
The Pre-K Priority Launches “*Be First*” Online Resources**

*Includes timely information on local early childhood educator options through WS/FCS,
Forsyth Technical Community College and Winston-Salem State University*

WINSTON-SALEM, NC (March 23, 2023) – Across North Carolina and the nation, the pipeline of future teachers is steadily draining. According to the N.C. Department of Public Instruction, between 2021-2022, the state experienced a 42 percent decrease in the number of students enrolled in schools or programs that train teachers, which could have a significant impact on Pre-K to 12th grade classrooms as early as the 2024-2025 school year.

To help build the teacher pipeline here in Forsyth County, The Pre-K Priority, a local collaboration of community organizations committed to early childhood education, launched its ***Be First*** initiative including online resources, community advertising and social media to encourage individuals to consider careers in early childhood education.

“In order for Forsyth County to be a leader in accessible, high-quality Pre-K, we need a strong pipeline of future educators,” said Leslie Mullinix, project manager for The Pre-K Priority.

“Whether you are a young person in high school or someone already in the workforce looking for a career change, we want you to consider the Pre-K educator pathway.”

Since launching earlier this year, The Pre-K Priority’s ***Be First*** webpage, www.prekpriority.org/befirst, has been viewed more than 44,000 times. Under **Paths to Licensure** is a wealth of information about local schools and programs for careers in early childhood education. This includes classes offered to high school students within Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools (WS/FCS) as well as degree programs at Winston-Salem State University (WSSU) and Forsyth Technical Community College.

A unique advantage for students in Forsyth County is that WS/FCS, Forsyth Tech and WSSU all offer complementing and supporting coursework and programs. For example, WS/FCS high school students can take an early childhood course and get college credit for EDU 119: Introduction to Early Childhood Education at Forsyth Tech. Students can also earn their early childhood education certificate offered through the Career Technical Education (CTE) program. With the certificate, a student can begin working in early childhood education or pursue an Associate or Bachelor of Science Degree. The two-year Associate Degree in Early Childhood Education offered at Forsyth Technical Community College gives students the opportunity to specialize in certain areas through its certificate programs in early childhood, infants and toddlers, and child care administration. Students who complete the two-year associate degree at Forsyth Tech can go directly into the classroom or opt to apply those credits toward earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Birth-Kindergarten Education at Winston-Salem State University.

“Forsyth County is a great place to be if you are interested in a career in early childhood education,” said Stephanie Lackey, Department Chair of Teacher Education and Program Coordinator for the Early Childhood Education Associate Program at Forsyth Tech. “Not only are there excellent options at every level, but each program offers opportunities for students to gain real-life experiences in actual settings with young children under the supervision of qualified teachers. Our goal is to ensure that every student is well-prepared to succeed in the classroom. Our partnerships with WS/FCS and WSSU have created seamless educational pathways between high school, community college and university for students to pursue the numerous career opportunities in the early childhood field.”

Spring is an important time for students and those already in the workforce to learn more about their early childhood education career options and begin registering for classes at both the high school and post-secondary level. The Pre-K Priority’s **Be First** webpage provides information about paths to licensure, registration windows and contact links for all of these local early childhood education pathways.

“To achieve our goal of every eligible child in Forsyth County having access to high-quality Pre-K, we need more people choosing early childhood education as a career,” said Mullinix. “We hope our work around **Be First** provides not only the information, but the inspiration, to those future educators considering a Pre-K teaching path.”

Through its upcoming model cohort of classrooms, The Pre-K Priority also is looking at ways to provide better pay, resources and training for educators which can be barriers to people choosing Pre-K as a career. The collaborative received more than \$4 million in combined ARPA grant funding from the Forsyth County Commissioners and the City of Winston-Salem to fund a two-year project supporting 30 Pre-K classrooms and educators in Forsyth County with specific high-quality resources and supports that are currently limited or nonexistent. The project will impact 540 local Pre-K students and their families in addition to 60 Pre-K educators. The pilot will begin with the 2023-2024 school year.

“One of the primary outcomes of this two-year project is to invest in the development and retention of those participating Pre-K educators through coaching, technical assistance and salary parity that will then inform scaling those aspects across the full Pre-K landscape,” said Dr. Louis Finney, President and CEO of Smart Start of Forsyth County. Smart Start is a community partner of The Pre-K Priority and administrator of the city and county ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) grant funds. “For our future Pre-K teachers, we hope our work signals the commitment of this community to be the best place to launch your early childhood education career.”

Visit www.prekpriority.org/befirst.

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