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The Pre-K Priority and its Community Partners Approved for \$3.7 Million ARPA Grant to Support High-Quality Pre-K Classrooms and Educators in Forsyth County

WINSTON-SALEM, NC (Sept. 23, 2022) – The Pre-K Priority, a collaborative of more than 80 Pre-K leaders and advocates in Forsyth County, will receive its first public funds in support of local Pre-K classrooms and educators. At its Sept. 22 meeting, the Forsyth County Board of Commissioners approved a \$3.7 million ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) grant request to Smart Start of Forsyth County on behalf of The Pre-K Priority for a two-year project supporting 30 Pre-K classrooms and educators with specific high-quality resources and supports that are currently limited or nonexistent. The project will impact 540 Pre-K students and their families in addition to 60 Pre-K educators.

“Smart Start of Forsyth County is proud to administer the approved grant funding on behalf of The Pre-K Priority initiative and the multiple local partners involved. We thank the Board of Commissioners for its investment in the children of Forsyth County,” said Dr. Louis Finney, President & CEO of Smart Start of Forsyth County.

The two-year project will involve several organizations in Forsyth County who are part of The Pre-K Priority, including Smart Start of Forsyth County, Family Services of Forsyth County, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools (WS/FCS), Child Care Resource Center, Latino Community Services and Forsyth Futures. In addition, the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust has provided support for The Pre-K Priority since 2016.

“It’s vital that every four-year-old in our county have access to high-quality, affordable Pre-K if we want to realize the educational and economic goals we’ve set for our community. The future of our community are these children, and we need to give them the best start in life possible,” said Traci Ross, CEO of Family Services of Forsyth County. Family Services has convened of The Pre-K Priority since the collaborative was established in 2015 and runs the local Head Start program.

The Pre-K Priority outlined six primary outcomes to improve Forsyth County’s Pre-K system that the collaborative expects to achieve with the ARPA funding:

- establish a high-quality Pre-K foundation using the project’s model cohort of 30 Pre-K classrooms and educators;
- address challenges within the Pre-K landscape and set standards for future expansion;
- maximize the unique strengths and collaborative effectiveness of Forsyth County’s early childhood education partners;
- invest in the development and retention of Pre-K educators through coaching, technical assistance and salary parity within the project’s 30-classroom cohort to help inform scaling those aspects across the full Pre-K landscape;

- support parents and families of the cohort classrooms using evidence-based programs and engaging Family Advocates/Specialists; and
- track outcomes, monitor fidelity of implementation and develop an integrated data system to connect early childhood education networks in the community.

More than 2,700 children attend Pre-K in Forsyth County, including those who participate in the NC Pre-K Program, in the Family Services Head Start program, in WS/FCS classrooms and in private community child care centers. The project's model cohort will represent this varied landscape with classrooms located in licensed, private/independent child care businesses, Head Start, WS/FCS and community child care centers who participate in the NC Pre-K Program.

Over the last year, the Forsyth County Early Childhood Education Task Force partnered with The Pre-K Priority to develop and adopt 19 recommendations to serve as a roadmap for structuring an accessible, equitable, high-quality Pre-K system. Later this fall, the Task Force will issue a final report outlining the series of recommendations for expanding high-quality Pre-K in Forsyth County, reflecting much of what will be piloted in the two-year program funded by the ARPA grant.

"Pre-K can be a community game changer, especially as we strive to achieve educational equity, but it will take a significant investment of local dollars to make this a reality. Receiving this grant is a major step and we look forward to demonstrating the value of high-quality Pre-K with this two-year project," said Dr. Finney.

Forsyth County joins a growing list of counties across North Carolina who invest local dollars in expanding access to high-quality Pre-K, including Mecklenburg, Buncombe, Durham and Wake.

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