

Smart Start Talking Points on the *Leandro* Case

A sound, basic education begins at birth.

The court in *Leandro* has affirmed what educators and the early childhood community know: “a high-quality early foundation for learning is critical for later success in school and beyond.” To meet its obligations, the state must maintain a robust system of early education, health, and family support beginning at birth. The court has specifically identified Smart Start as central to this effort.

Quality early childhood programs improve outcomes in school, especially for disadvantaged students like those in *Leandro*.

High-quality early childhood programs prepare children for school by improving their physical and mental health, developing their socio-emotional and cognitive skills, and providing critical support for their parents and families. All these factors are linked to increased educational attainment for students and cost savings for schools. Studies show that the return on early childhood investments are at least two to one, with figures even higher for disadvantaged student groups.

North Carolina has the infrastructure for quality early childhood programs, but more resources are needed to reach all children and provide a sound basic education.

Smart Start and NC Pre-K have a long track record of positive impact on children’s readiness for school, but access to high-quality early childhood programs varies, with low-wealth and rural counties most negatively affected. Access is even more challenging due to reduced or stagnant funding in recent years:

- Total state investment in Smart Start has declined by approximately 35% since its peak in FY 2000-01, and the state has not appropriated new, unrestricted funds for Smart Start since 2007-08, despite continual increases in the birth to five population served.
- Smart Start was designed to fund 25% of the estimated need for children aged 0-5 (based on population, poverty levels, cost of care, and the amount of other funds available), but in 2018-19, the system received only enough appropriations to fund ~5% of need.
- An estimated 33,000 children—more than half of the eligible population—are unserved by NC Pre-K because counties are unable to afford expansion costs. Since 2012, the state has funded NC Pre-K at an average of \$5,200 per slot, which only covers about 60% of the estimated cost of the program. Low-wealth counties struggle to meet the funding match requirements and have greater difficulty recruiting qualified teachers, securing facilities, and providing transportation.
 - Smart Start administers NC Pre-K in approximately half of the state’s counties, and local partnerships frequently direct their own funds to NC Pre-K.
- Low compensation has contributed to a shortage of qualified early childhood educators in the state. The median pay for an early childhood educator is around \$22,800, compared to the median base pay of \$35,000 for public school teachers. Because of this workforce scarcity, 42% of North Carolina children below the age of 5 live in a childcare desert.

The time for North Carolina to improve its early childhood system is now, and your support can ensure that the state acts to meet its obligations in *Leandro*.

Early childhood is an investment that produces continued returns over time. The sooner the state makes improvements and new investments in Smart Start’s programs and services, the sooner North Carolina’s students will see their right to a sound, basic education fulfilled.

For more information on *Leandro*, visit <https://governor.nc.gov/issues/education/commission-access-sound-basic-education>.