

From: Marta Hester <mhester@smartstart.org>

Subject: Smart Start Network Public Policy Update for Week of September 15 - 19, 2025

Good morning,

I am pleased many members of the Smart Start Network were able to join the Early Childhood Caucus Virtual Town Hall last Friday. I am attaching an overview of the responses from the participating state legislators and a list of issues and questions Smart Start Local Partnerships can use to create town halls within your own communities across the state. We are extremely appreciative to state legislators who took time out of their schedules to join us: Representatives David Willis, Brandon Lofton, Donnie Loftis, Julie von Haefen, Cynthia Ball and Diane Wheatley, and Senator Jay Chaudhuri. Town Halls offer a great opportunity to hear from elected officials while also educating participants about the Smart Start Network. More opportunities will be available to hear from elected officials at different levels of government in the near future.

The NC General Assembly is scheduled to convene on Monday, September 22, 2025, at 12:00 noon for a few days and reconvene on October 21, 2025. While I understand a final budget is still pending and may not be presented by next week, there are conversations about public safety legislation being introduced. There's a new call to action to provide more funding for law enforcement and mental health resources, to increase the expansion of involuntary commitment and early intervention mental health strategies and to stipulate stricter rules to prevent crime resulting from the recent fatal stabbing on the Charlotte commuter train. Of course, there's also several bills pending veto overrides on the House calendar. Legislative Alerts will be issued to the Smart Start Local Partnerships as soon as further action is taken.

In case you haven't already heard, there's some exciting news about New Mexico offering no-cost universal child care regardless of income beginning November 1, 2025. For more information, see the links below.

- [New Mexico is first state in nation to offer universal child care - Office of the Governor - Michelle Lujan Grisham](#)
- [Universal Child Care | Early Childhood Education & Care Department](#)

STATE UPDATES

QRIS Training

The Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) will be hosting community meetings to provide an update on the modernization of North Carolina's Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS). Meetings will be held at the following four locations across the state from 6:30pm – 7:30pm.

- 9/23/25 – Charlotte – Leaf Spring School at Matthews – 3420 Pleasant Plains Road Stallings, NC 28104
- 9/25/25 – Morganton - Foothills Higher Education Center, 2128 S Sterling Street, Morganton, NC, 28655
- 9/29/25 – Greenville - Pitt County Agriculture Center – Auditorium – 403 Government Circle, Greenville, NC 27834
- 10/1/25 – Raleigh – Wake County Smart Start – 4901 Waters Edge Drive #101, Raleigh NC 27606

Please share this information with families, child care educators and other early care and education stakeholders.

NC Division of Child Development Update on the federal Administration on Children and Families (ACF)

At the state ECE advocates meeting this week, Candace Witherspoon, Director, NC DCDEE, shared that DCDEE would be having a meeting with their federal partners from ACF yesterday, Thursday, September 17, 2025. Witherspoon further advised ACF's mission, vision, values, priorities, and guiding principles have been updated; please see the new [ACF Vision, Mission, Values, Priorities, & Guiding Principles | The Administration for Children and Families](#). We will continue to keep you posted and look forward to hearing more soon from DCDEE.

State ECE Advocates Shared Agenda Update on Child Care Subsidy

The advocates landed on a public facing option of a floor for all ages, all providers using the "state rate" from the 2021 Market Rate Study as the floor (minimum) with the rates from the 2023 Market Rate Study (MRS) as the maximum, and a hold harmless policy ensuring that providers get the highest rate available between the floor and 2023 MRS with no one seeing a decreased rate. The cost estimate is \$145 million.

FEDERAL UPDATES

Federal Appropriations (Budget) Process

The end of the federal fiscal year is September 30, 2025. The U.S. Congress must approve a new government funding package for FY 2026 or pass a continuing resolution (CR) to keep the government operating at current funding levels for a specified period in order to avoid a government shutdown. While some of the twelve appropriation bills have been approved in the House and Senate in the Appropriations Committee, none have been considered in the full House and Senate for floor votes. A continuing resolution is imminent.

Update on New Interpretation of "Federal Public Benefit" under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and Head Start

Several months ago, the Trump Administration's issued a new interpretation of "federal public benefit" under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) restricting the eligibility of non-U.S. national (non-alien) for many federal benefit programs. On September 10, 2025, a preliminary injunction was granted advising the Trump Administration's new interpretation **may not be enforced or implemented** in the plaintiff states while the case works its way through the judicial system. U.S. District Judge Ricardo Martinez in Seattle at the request of Head Start associations in several states issued a nationwide injunction barring the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) from enforcing the new immigration-related restrictions anywhere in the United States.

The preliminary injunction is applicable **in plaintiff states** (including New York, Washington, Rhode Island, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Vermont and Wisconsin), absent further order of the court. No further information on the Trump Administration's plan for enforcement and/or implementation in

states not covered by the court's order is currently available as it is not explicitly cited.

The court's order specifically halted enforcement of the notices in the U.S. Departments of Justice, Health and Human Services, Education, and Labor. Additionally, the court specifically identified the following programs (among others) as not covered by PRWORA based on the court's "best reading" of the statute: *Head Start*, *The Health Center Program*, *Block Grants to States*.

- [new-york-et-al-v-united-states-department-of-justice-et-al-memo-and-order-2025.pdf](#)
- [Court Rulings Maintain Access to Critical Programs for Immigrant Families | CLASP](#)
- [PRWORA's Restrictions on Noncitizen Eligibility for Federal Public Benefits: Legal Issues | Congress.gov | Library of Congress](#)
- [Judge blocks Trump policy ending Head Start for immigrants | AP News](#)
- [Trump policy barring migrants from Head Start blocked nationwide](#)

Make Our Children Healthy Again: US Department of Health and Human Services

The Trump Administration released its "Make Our Children Healthy Again" [strategy report](#), on September 9, 2025. The report was created to address childhood chronic diseases by highlighting findings from the Make America Healthy Again Commission related to poor diet, exposure to environmental chemicals, lack of physical activity, stress and overmedicalization.

- [MAHA – The White House](#)

Child Care Modernization Act

On Wednesday, September 17, 2025, the Child Care Modernization Act was introduced to help with reauthorizing and enhancing the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). Senators Deb Fischer, (R-Nebraska), Kirsten Gillibrand, (D-New York), John Hickenlooper, (D-Colorado), and Susan Collins, (R-Maine), are sponsoring the Child Care Modernization Act. This legislation seeks to address the accessibility and affordability of child care for working families. The bill has already received support from Child Care Aware, First Five Years Fund, National Association of Counties, National Child Care Association, and others.

More specifically, the bill is designed to:

- **Strengthen child care services** by moving states to use cost estimation models for setting provider rates, which will adequately compensate child care providers.
- **Ensure parental choice** by allowing states to develop a mixed delivery system of child care and preschool for children up to age 5 and before-school, after-school, and summer care for school-age children.
- **Increase child care supply** by introducing a new grant program within the CCDBG framework to assist providers in creating and expanding the supply.
- **Improve state child care plans** by improving support for families and communities, reducing barriers to the program, and increasing access and affordability to serve more families.

- **Assist in-home and rural child care providers** by providing technical assistance, including strategies to support best business practices, and the development and use of shared services initiatives such as family child care home provider networks.
- **Reduce duplicative regulatory burdens on child care providers** by ensuring states review their State and local health and safety requirements to determine redundancies and oversights that may exist.
- [Bipartisan Senate group releases bill to help increase affordable child care](#)
- [Child Care Aware of America Supports Introduction of the Child Care Modernization Act](#)
- [Fischer, Colleagues Introduce Bipartisan Bill to Expand Working Families' Access to Child Care - Press - United States Senator Deb Fischer for Nebraska](#)

RESOURCES

October: Farm to School and Early Care and Education Month

North Carolina Crunch promotes healthy eating and supports farm to school, farm to early care and education (ECE), and other local food initiatives throughout the state. On October 22, 2025, at 12:00 noon, specifically, and throughout the month of October, North Carolinians are encouraged to crunch on some local produce to promote healthy eating and learn where food comes from. Find out more at [North Carolina Crunch - Growing Minds](#)

- [Mark Your Calendar for North Carolina Crunch - North Carolina Field and Family](#)

NC Council for Women's Report on Investing in Economic Opportunity for Women in NC

The report examines key childcare and labor market indicators by race and ethnicity to offer a full understanding of the economic and workforce disparities by gender and race that persist. The report also highlights areas for improvement and recommends ways to increase opportunities.

- [North Carolina Women Make Economic Gains, But Disparities Persist | NC DOA](#)

NC Budget and Tax Center Webinar on State Budget

- [Preparing to push for a people-first state budget](#)

Thank you for helping celebrate Smart Start Month. We cannot wait to hear how Smart Start Local Partnerships have used the month of September to collaborate with families, child care educators, early care and education advocates, elected officials, business leaders and local chambers. Looking forward to hearing your stories about all the celebrations and community engagement activities.

Finally, please mark your calendars for the upcoming **Smart Start Network Public Policy Meetings** scheduled for **Friday, September 26 and October 10, 2025 at 10:00am to 11:00am.**

Thank you,

Marta