SMART START OF MECKLENBURG COUNTY

2026 Advocacy Toolkit

Everything you need to speak up for Mecklenburg's youngest children, whether you have two minutes or two hours.

Inside

- Talking Points
- Email Templates
- Business Leaders Guide
- Issue Briefs
- Resources & Contact

smartstartofmeck.org/advocacy · October 2026

Smart Start of Mecklenburg County is a nonpartisan nonprofit. This toolkit is provided for public education and does not endorse candidates or take positions on specific legislation.

How to Use This Toolkit

Your voice is the foundation of change. Elected officials, employers, and community leaders listen to the people they serve. This toolkit gives you the facts and the words to make your voice count.

Have 2 minutes?

Share one of our social graphics, or send a short email using a template.

Have 20 minutes?

Read the Talking Points, personalize an email with your own story, and send it to your NC House member and Senator.

Have 2 hours?

Invite a local official to visit an early learning program, or bring the Business Leaders Guide to your employer or chamber of commerce.

Three Principles

- **Lead with a story.** A real experience is more memorable than any statistic. Use one number to show your story isn't unique.
- **Be specific and brief.** Pick two or three points that fit your audience. Under 200 words is ideal for emails.
- **Keep it nonpartisan and respectful.** Childcare matters to families across the political spectrum. Courteous messages build lasting relationships.

Find your NC legislators at **ncleg.gov/FindYourLegislators**. Find the latest version of every tool at **smartstartofmeck.org/advocacy**.

Talking Points

Quick, data-backed messages for conversations with elected officials, community leaders, and anyone who cares about Mecklenburg's youngest children.

$5.65B
Lost in NC each year

Childcare is economic infrastructure

Say it like this: "When childcare breaks down, the workforce breaks down. North Carolina loses an estimated $5.65 billion every year because parents can't find reliable care."

About $4.29 billion falls directly on employers through turnover and absenteeism; the rest is lost tax revenue.

Source: U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, *Untapped Potential in NC* (2024)

37%
Of NC parents of young children

Parents are leaving opportunity on the table

Say it like this: "More than one in three North Carolina parents of young children have turned down a job, a promotion, or a job change because it would raise their childcare costs."

That's talent employers can't hire and income families never earn.

Source: NC Chamber Foundation Child Care Survey (2023)

$12.31
Median hourly wage, NC early educators

Early educators are the workforce behind the workforce

Say it like this: "The people who care for our youngest children earn a median of $12.31 an hour, well below the $15.82 an hour a single adult needs to get by in North Carolina."

NC early educators are 4.8 times more likely to live in poverty than elementary and middle school teachers.

Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2024 Early Childhood Workforce Index

13%
Annual return on investment

Early investment pays off for everyone

Say it like this: "High-quality early childhood programs can return up to 13% per year through better education, health, and earnings outcomes."

This research comes from Nobel Prize–winning economist James Heckman.

Source: The Heckman Equation

1 of 6
States that reduced their own funding

North Carolina is falling behind

Say it like this: "North Carolina was one of only six states that spent less of its own money on childcare and preschool in 2026 than in 2025."

Across states, funding ranges from under $500 to over $5,000 per child under five.

Source: Child Care Aware of America, *An Uneven Start 2026*

Answering Common Questions

"Isn't childcare a family's responsibility?"

Families already carry most of the cost. But when parents can't find care, employers lose workers too, which costs NC employers an estimated $4.29 billion a year. Childcare is a family issue and an economic one.

"Why don't programs just pay their teachers more?"

Most programs run on very thin margins. Teacher pay comes almost entirely from tuition, so raising wages usually means raising prices families already struggle to afford.

"Why should businesses care?"

They're already paying for it through turnover, absenteeism, and positions they can't fill.

"What does Smart Start do?"

Smart Start of Mecklenburg County mobilizes resources, forges partnerships, and supports families to improve early childhood health, education, and development.

Closing the Conversation

- **Invite a visit:** "Would you be willing to visit an early learning program in our community?"
- **Ask what they're hearing:** "What are you hearing from families and employers about childcare?"
- **Offer a resource:** "Smart Start of Mecklenburg County is a great local resource. I'm happy to connect you."
- **Follow up:** Send a short thank-you note within a few days using the templates in this toolkit.

Email Templates

Choose the template that fits you, replace the **[bracketed]** details, and add a sentence or two of your own story. Always include your home address so the office can confirm you're a constituent. Prefer to fill them in online? Visit **smartstartofmeck.org/advocacy/email-templates**.

Parent

Subject: A Mecklenburg parent on the importance of childcare

Dear **[Official's Name]**,

My name is **[Your Name]**, and I live in your district. I am the parent of a child aged **[Your child's age(s)]**, and I am writing to share what childcare means for my family.

[Your Story]

My family is not alone. Insufficient childcare costs North Carolina an estimated $5.65 billion in lost economic activity each year, and 37% of NC parents of young children have turned down a job, promotion, or job change because of childcare costs.

I hope you will keep families like mine in mind as you serve our community. I would welcome the chance to tell you more about our experience.

Thank you for your time and service.

Sincerely,
[Your Name]
[Your Address]

Early Educator

Subject: An early educator in your district

Dear **[Official's Name]**,

My name is **[Your Name]**. I live in your district and have worked in early childhood education for **[Years working in early education]** years.

[Your Story]

Early educators are often called the workforce behind the workforce. When centers cannot hire and keep qualified teachers, classrooms close, and the parents who depend on them cannot get to work. Many of my colleagues love this work but struggle to make ends meet doing it.

I would be glad to invite you to visit our program and see the work we do with young children every day.

Thank you for your time and for your service to our community.

Sincerely,
[Your Name]
[Your Address]

Business Leader

Subject: Childcare and our workforce in Mecklenburg County

Dear **[Official's Name]**,

My name is **[Your Name]**, and I am **[Your title and company]**. I am writing as an employer and a constituent to share how childcare affects our workforce.

[Your Story]

Our experience reflects a statewide pattern. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation estimates that childcare-related turnover and absenteeism cost North Carolina employers $4.29 billion each year. When working parents cannot find reliable care, businesses lose talent and productivity.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss how childcare affects employers in our community.

Thank you for your time and service.

Sincerely,
[Your Name]
[Your Address]

Community Member

Subject: Supporting young children in our community

Dear **[Official's Name]**,

My name is **[Your Name]**, and I live in your district. As a **[Your connection to young children]**, I care deeply about the young children in our community and the families raising them.

[Your Story]

The first five years are when the foundation for lifelong learning and health is built. Research from Nobel laureate James Heckman finds that high-quality early childhood programs can return up to 13% per year through better education, health, and earnings outcomes.

I hope you will keep our youngest residents in mind as you serve our community.

Thank you for your time and service.

Sincerely,
[Your Name]
[Your Address]

Thank You / Invitation

Subject: Thank you for your attention to young children

Dear **[Official's Name]**,

My name is **[Your Name]**, and I live in your district. I am writing to thank you for the attention you have given to young children and working families in our community.

[Your Story]

I would also like to invite you to visit **[Program or event to invite them to]** to see high-quality early learning in action. Seeing a classroom firsthand is the best way to understand what children and educators experience every day.

Thank you again for your service.

Sincerely,
[Your Name]
[Your Address]

Business Leaders Guide

Childcare is a workforce issue. Here's how Mecklenburg employers can support working parents, strengthen their teams, and help build a stronger local economy.

The Business Case

$4.29B
Cost to NC employers each year from childcare-related turnover and absenteeism

37%
Of NC parents of young children turned down a job or promotion over childcare costs

$5.65B
Total annual economic loss to NC, including lost tax revenue

Sources: U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, *Untapped Potential in NC* (2024); NC Chamber Foundation survey (2023)

Step 1: Support Parents Inside Your Company

Join NC Tri-Share SHARED COST

Split an employee's childcare cost three ways with the employee and the state. Employers in all 100 NC counties can now take part. The pilot currently runs through 2026.

Get Family Forward NC Certified FREE

Earn recognition for family-friendly policies like paid leave, flexible schedules, and childcare support. Learn more at familyforwardnc.com.

Offer a Dependent Care FSA LOW COST

Starting in 2026, employees can set aside up to $7,500 a year in pre-tax dollars for childcare, up from $5,000. Employers also save on payroll taxes.

Use the Federal Childcare Tax Credit TAX CREDIT

Beginning in 2026, the expanded Section 45F credit can cover up to 40% of qualified childcare expenses (50% for small businesses), up to $500,000 a year ($600,000 for small businesses).

Build Flexibility Into the Workday FREE

Flexible start times, predictable schedules, and remote options where possible help parents manage pickups, sick days, and closures.

Help Employees Find Care FREE

Share local resources in onboarding and benefits materials, including MECK Pre-K, which is free for every four-year-old in Mecklenburg County.

Tax and benefit information is for general reference only. Consult your tax or benefits advisor.

Step 2: Lead in Your Community

- **Share your experience.** Tell community leaders and the media how childcare affects your hiring and retention.
- **Invite officials to your workplace.** Host local leaders and introduce them to working parents.
- **Bring other employers along.** Encourage peers and your chamber of commerce to explore Tri-Share and family-friendly policies.
- **Partner with Smart Start.** Sponsor, volunteer, or connect your team with our programs.

Quick-Start Checklist

This week

- Ask HR how many employees have young children
- Add MECK Pre-K and local childcare resources to benefits materials
- Share a Smart Start social graphic on your company page

This quarter

- Look into joining NC Tri-Share
- Review your Dependent Care FSA at the new $7,500 limit
- Survey parents on your team about childcare challenges

This year

- Apply for Family Forward NC certification
- Ask your tax advisor about the expanded 45F credit
- Invite a local official or Smart Start to visit

Issue Briefs

One-page summaries of the issues at the heart of our work. Each brief covers the issue, why it matters, what's working in Mecklenburg, and how you can help.

Childcare Accessibility
High-quality, affordable childcare within reach for every family.

Educator Compensation
Stable, fairly paid early educators as the foundation of quality care.

Maternal & Child Health
Healthy pregnancies, healthy births, and support through age five.

ISSUE BRIEF · OCTOBER 2026

Childcare Accessibility

Every family in Mecklenburg County deserves childcare that is high-quality, affordable, and within reach.

Smart Start
of Mecklenburg County

59,600+
Mecklenburg children under six whose parents are all in the workforce[1]

21,100
Mecklenburg children birth to five enrolled in licensed childcare[1]

37%
of NC parents of young children turned down a job or promotion over childcare costs[2]

The Issue

Access to childcare depends on three things at once: a program must have an open space, the family must be able to afford it, and the care must be high quality. In Mecklenburg County, tens of thousands of young children have every parent at work[1], and many families struggle to find care that meets all three needs.

Cost is a major barrier. The national average price of childcare reached $13,184 in 2025, and in most states infant care costs more than in-state public college tuition.[3] Supply is also strained: when programs cannot hire enough teachers to meet safe staff-to-child ratios, classrooms sit empty even when families are waiting.

Why It Matters

When families cannot find care, parents miss work, cut back hours, or leave their jobs. Childcare breakdowns cost North Carolina an estimated $5.65 billion in lost economic activity every year, including $4.29 billion in costs to employers.[4] For children, the stakes are just as high: the first five years are when the foundation for learning, health, and school readiness is built.

What's Working in Mecklenburg

MECK Pre-K, funded by Mecklenburg County and administered by Smart Start, offers free, high-quality pre-K to every four-year-old in the county. In 2025–26 it grew to 115 classrooms serving 2,070 children[5], and a record 1,913 children graduated in 2026.[6]

Child Care Resources Inc. (CCRI) provides free, personalized child care search, referral, and navigation services across North Carolina through Child Care Navigators and Find Child Care NC. Families can also text FINDCARE to 980-292-9496 to reach a Search Navigator.[7]

How You Can Help

- **Share your story.** Tell community leaders and elected officials how finding childcare has affected your family or workplace.
- **Invite a visit.** Ask a local official to tour an early learning program and see the need firsthand.
- **Help families find care.** Point parents to Child Care Navigators for free search help, and let families with four-year-olds know MECK Pre-K is free.
- **Engage employers.** Encourage businesses to explore Tri-Share and Family Forward NC certification.

Advocacy tools:
smartstartofmeck.org/advocacy

Support our work:
smartstartofmeck.org/donate

Sources 1. Child Care Services Association, *Child Care in Mecklenburg County* (2024). **2.** NC Chamber Foundation Child Care Survey (2023). **3.** Child Care Aware of America, *Child Care in America: 2025 Price & Supply*. **4.** U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, *Untapped Potential in NC* (2024). **5.** The Charlotte Weekly, "MECK Pre-K adds locations for coming school year" (2025). **6.** Mecklenburg County, "MECK Pre-K Graduates Record Number of Children in 2026." **7.** Child Care Resources Inc., childcarenavigators.org (2026).

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601 E. 5th Street, Suite 200, Charlotte, NC 28202 · 704.377.6588 · info@smartstartofmeck.org

ISSUE BRIEF · OCTOBER 2026

Educator Compensation

Stable, fairly paid early educators are the foundation of quality care and a working economy.

Smart Start
of Mecklenburg County

$12.31
median hourly wage for NC early educators, below the $15.82 living wage for a single adult[1]

4.8×
more likely to live in poverty than NC elementary and middle school teachers[1]

$14.00
typical starting hourly wage for NC childcare teachers[2]

The Issue

Early educators do some of the most important work in our community: caring for and teaching children during the years when the brain develops fastest. Yet in North Carolina, the median early educator earns $12.31 an hour, well below the $15.82 an hour a single adult needs to cover basic costs.[1]

The problem is built into how childcare is funded. Most programs rely almost entirely on tuition and run on very thin margins. Raising wages usually means raising prices that families already struggle to afford, so low pay and high costs exist side by side.

Why It Matters

North Carolina's 2023 workforce study found that many early educators earn too little to meet their basic needs, and more teachers are leaving their jobs, with many planning to leave the field altogether.[3] Every departure disrupts the relationships young children depend on, and when centers cannot hire, classrooms close.

This is why educators are called the **workforce behind the workforce**. When classrooms close, parents cannot work. Childcare-related turnover and absenteeism cost NC employers an estimated $4.29 billion a year.[4]

What's Working

The 2023 workforce study points to proven strategies: increasing compensation, expanding wage supplements that reward education and retention, and building clear career pathways into the profession.[2]

In Mecklenburg County, **MECK Pre-K** classrooms are taught by licensed teachers and highly qualified assistant teachers, showing what a well-supported early education workforce can look like.[5]

How You Can Help

- **Recognize educators.** Thank the teachers in your life, especially on Provider Appreciation Day each May.
- **Share the data.** Help neighbors and employers understand that low pay drives classroom closures.
- **Invite a visit.** Ask a local official to spend time in a classroom and meet the educators.
- **Tell your story.** If you are an educator, share what it takes to stay in the field you love.

Advocacy tools:
smartstartofmeck.org/advocacy

Support our work:
smartstartofmeck.org/donate

Sources 1. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, *2024 Early Childhood Workforce Index*, via NC Newsline (Oct. 2024). **2.** Child Care Services Association, *Working in Early Care and Education in North Carolina: 2023 Workforce Study*. **3.** NC Division of Child Development and Early Education, "North Carolina releases new ECE workforce study." **4.** U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, *Untapped Potential in NC* (2024). **5.** Mecklenburg County, "MECK Pre-K Graduates Record Number of Children in 2026."

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ISSUE BRIEF · OCTOBER 2026

Maternal & Child Health

Healthy children start with healthy pregnancies, healthy births, and support through the first five years.

Smart Start
of Mecklenburg County

5.0
infant deaths per 1,000 births in Mecklenburg, below NC (6.8) and the U.S. (5.6)[1]

3.7×
higher infant mortality for Black infants than white infants in Mecklenburg (8.8 vs. 2.4)[1]

1 in 5
women in Mecklenburg receive inadequate prenatal care[2]

The Issue

A child's health begins before birth. Prenatal care, a healthy delivery, postpartum support, and regular well-child care all shape how children grow and learn. Mecklenburg County has made real progress: infant mortality has declined to 5 deaths per 1,000 births, below both state and national rates.[1]

But progress is not shared equally. From 2021 to 2023, the infant mortality rate was 8.8 for non-Hispanic Black infants, 4.8 for Hispanic infants, and 2.4 for non-Hispanic white infants.[1] About one in five women in the county receives inadequate prenatal care.[2]

Why It Matters

Roughly 70 infants die in Mecklenburg County each year.[3] Perinatal conditions, such as those linked to preterm birth and low birth weight, cause nearly half of infant deaths, and sudden unexpected infant death is the leading cause of injury-related infant deaths.[1] Many of these outcomes can be improved through early, consistent care and education for families.

What's Working in Mecklenburg

Mecklenburg County Public Health supports breastfeeding and safe infant sleep initiatives as part of a community-wide effort to reduce infant deaths.[1] Community partners such as Care Ring work with expectant mothers to close gaps in access to care.[2]

Smart Start of Mecklenburg County supports families so every child can turn five healthy and ready to thrive.

How You Can Help

- **Share safe sleep basics.** Help new parents and caregivers learn how to reduce the risk of sudden infant death.
- **Connect families to care.** Encourage expectant parents to start prenatal care early and keep well-child visits.
- **Listen to mothers.** Support efforts that center the experiences of Black mothers and families.
- **Tell your story.** Share your family's experience with community leaders and health partners.

Advocacy tools:
smartstartofmeck.org/advocacy

Support our work:
smartstartofmeck.org/donate

Sources 1. Mecklenburg County Public Health, *2025 Infant Mortality Report*. **2.** WSOC-TV, "Mecklenburg County sees five-year low in infant mortality rate" (2026). **3.** QCity Metro, "Mecklenburg County infant mortality rate race disparity" (Mar. 2026).

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