

NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Linda Leonard
Smart Start of Davidson County - 249-6688



Smart Start Offers New Program Amid Funding Cuts

Lexington, NC – Smart Start of Davidson County, Inc., an early childhood initiative designed to ensure young children get the start they need to be successful in life, announced Monday that the North Carolina Partnership for Children, the state Smart Start agency, cut its annual allocation by 14 percent or nearly \$600,000 for Davidson County for the 09-10 fiscal year. These cuts resulted from reductions made by the General Assembly during the statewide budget crisis.

Legislative cuts and a difficult economy have come at the same time when families with young children's need for services have increased. Cuts of this nature make it difficult to meet on-going community needs. Cuts were also received last year, further reducing services for children.

"This is hard for all because more Davidson County families with young children as well as the child care community are facing financial hardship with the difficult economy. It is increasing the need for our funded services, such as child care scholarships, other family support programs, and child care technical assistance," said Linda Leonard, Executive Director of Smart Start of Davidson County. "These cuts are devastating as it means our programs are not able to meet the community's needs."

Anticipating these cuts, the Board of Directors for SSDC was forced to make some difficult decisions. Funds for long-time programs such as In Home Family Therapy through Family Services, Transportation and Car Seat Safety through the Health Department, and an early childhood instructor position at DCCC have now been eliminated at a time when demand for these services are at an all time high.

Even with these cuts, Smart Start has worked closely with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and Division of Child Development (DCD) to make funding decisions in order to match the federal requirement for stimulus dollars for additional child care assistance for the state of North Carolina. Because of these efforts, SSDC will begin offering low-income families a child care scholarship program, with increased funding towards helping parents pay for child care. The new program will seek to serve families through established eligibility criteria that include financial assistance for those working or going to school. Once families are enrolled in the program they will be allowed to maintain their scholarship for up to six months when they have received employer initiated reductions in hours or been laid off entirely. This will allow families to maintain continuity of care while searching for new employment. Families will be required to choose a high quality child care facility in order to receive their scholarship.

SSDC is appreciative that additional subsidy dollars will be made available to Davidson County families. "Without the support of Smart Start, North Carolina might not have had the opportunity to bring these needed resources to our state and to our county," said Leonard. "This is a positive outcome in the midst of difficult times."

The early years are among the most significant in shaping a child's academic and social skills providing the foundation for learning and school success. Research has shown that a child's learning begins at birth and develops as children are engaged and challenged in high quality learning environments and nurtured in relationships with parents and other caregivers.

Leonard added as the economy recovers, she hopes the legislature will support early childhood efforts. Research shows that children who enter kindergarten ready to succeed grow to be strong students, productive employees, and vital members of the community.