



2024-2025 Annual Report

Columbus County
Partnership for Children



a partner in the
smart start network.™

Columbus County Partnership for Children

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Greetings from the Executive Director



As we close another remarkable year of service in Columbus County, I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to every one who made our mission possible. Thanks to your unwavering support—both financial and in-kind—we've been able to reach hundreds of families with young children, laying the foundation for brighter futures and stronger communities.

This year, we saw incredible growth in our outreach efforts, connecting with families across the county to ensure they had access to the resources, guidance, and encouragement they need during the critical early years of childhood. Our literacy programs flourished, with more children engaging in reading activities, story times, and book distributions than ever before—planting seeds of curiosity and lifelong learning.

We also deepened our partnerships with child care facilities, working hand-in-hand to promote high-quality early childhood experiences. These collaborations have helped elevate standards, enrich environments, and support educators in delivering nurturing, developmentally appropriate care.

Our teacher support initiatives provided financial assistance, professional development opportunities, and workshops that strengthened the skills and confidence of educators while empowering them to thrive—and in turn, help our children thrive.

In addition to our local efforts, we've forged relationships with regional organizations and coalitions to amplify our collective impact. By aligning goals, sharing resources, and advocating together, we're building a more connected and resilient early childhood ecosystem—one that benefits every child, every family, and every educator across our region.

As we look ahead, we are hopeful and determined. The coming year holds even greater promise for innovation, expansion, and impact. Together, we will continue to champion the needs of young children and their families, ensuring that every child in Columbus County has the opportunity to grow, learn, and succeed.

Selena B. Rowell

Dr. Selena B. Rowell

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Early Learning & Family Resource Center (ELF) Coordinator

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Outreach Support Specialist (Bilingual)
Ready & Resilient Families & Communities Support Specialist

Early Learning & Family Resource Center (ELF)

ELF is a lending library that provides child development resources in English, Spanish, and Braille that parents and providers can use to enhance the early care and education of young children. A variety of children's books, videos, topic resource books, theme kits, toys and other resources are available for checkout to ELF members. ELF also offers in-person Story Time sessions every Wednesday. Stories are also posted to our YouTube channel, @ColumbusCountySmartStart.

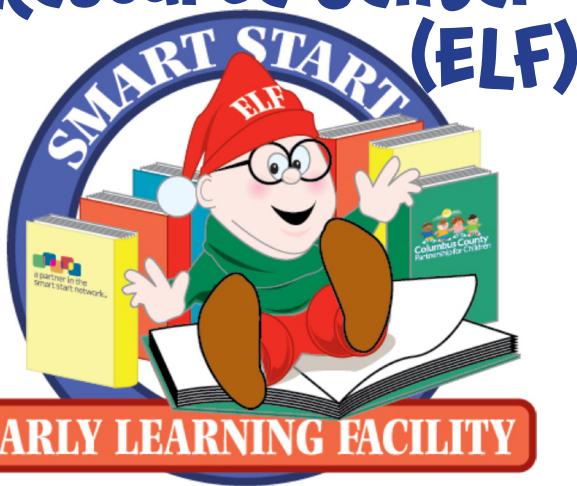


100%

of teachers and parents surveyed indicated a way the toys and materials helped them with their children.

IMPACT

- **157** adult utilizations of ELF resources
- **285** children attendance at Story Times
- **485** visits made to the ELF
- **5,710** YouTube views of ELF Story Times



Families said:

"Easily accessible opportunities at low to no cost for my under school age child to socialize in a productive learning environment without having to go to daycare, as well as access to teacher-quality resources that fit the proper development stage of my child."

"My child is 16 years old. As an early college student, I attribute much of her success to her early foundational skills from ELF. If you want a good ending, then you must have a good start. Sarah loved to learn because she was introduced to new concepts, social skills and cultural diversity at ELF. Today, she is a straight A student and SkillsUSA state officer. As a result of her experience at ELF, she introduced her cousins to ELF. These children are members of a Native American community (Waccamaw Siouan). Opportunities are limited. We love and appreciate the ELF! Thank you for this unique and quality learning environment!"

"I am a grandmother of a 1 year old. Since attending ELF, he is excited when I tell him the morning we leave. He recognizes the teachers' names, shows excitement and has learned to sit in a chair during Story Time. He is learning social skills he wouldn't be exposed to otherwise. We need this program in Columbus County. Thank you!"

Quality Enhancement Project



Child care providers enjoy Columbus County Partnership for Children's annual Provider Appreciation Banquet.

100%

of teachers evaluated said they gained skills they can immediately use in their jobs

This Smart Start funded project helps licensed childcare programs increase the level of star-rated licensure and the level of provider education by providing free trainings and workshops as well as professional development services for facilities that complete an Educational Facility Plan.

Teachers said:

"Facilitating content that is effective and engaging can sometimes be a hard task to achieve when communicating to both virtual and in-person groups at the same time but Ms. Williams achieved this outstandingly."

"This was not my first time taking this training, but this was the most informative and easy to follow and understand IT-SIDS training I've taken."

"She provided constructive and positive feedback before, during, and after training. Clear explanations and practical examples were provided during the training. She was respectful, laid back, and explained things in a positive way."

IMPACT

- **58** teachers attended quality-related workshops
- **13** quality-related workshops were conducted
- **71** in-person visits were made to take information or materials to child care facilities

WAGE\$

The Child Care WAGE\$ Project is an education-based salary supplement program for teachers, directors and family child care home providers. Because these supplements reward teacher education and continuity of care, children ages birth to five benefit from more stable relationships with better educated teachers. WAGE\$ provides teachers with compensation that helps build quality. Through graduated supplements, the program helps decrease turnover and encourages the continued educational pursuits of the child care workforce.



Impact Goal Impact Achieved

25%

TURNOVER RATE

9%

TURNOVER RATE

WAGE\$ targets three factors associated with teacher quality:

- **Education**
- **Retention**
- **Compensation**

"WAGE\$ is a wonderful program. It helps staff gain the knowledge they need in the classroom to do their jobs the right way and address the developmental needs of the children."



IMPACT

- **100%** of participants said the WAGE\$ supplement encourages them to stay with their current program
- **93%** of participants said WAGE\$ is an incentive for them to seek additional education and/or it helps make pursuing coursework more financially feasible.
- **97%** of participants said the WAGE\$ supplement helps them to provide more resources for their program or classroom.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library



Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is funded by Smart Start and provides books to children living in Columbus County. Each month, children ages birth to 5 who are registered for the program receive a brand new book mailed directly to their homes, at no charge to the family.

19,069 5,223

books were mailed directly to children's homes this year.

children have been served in Columbus County since the program began in 2017.

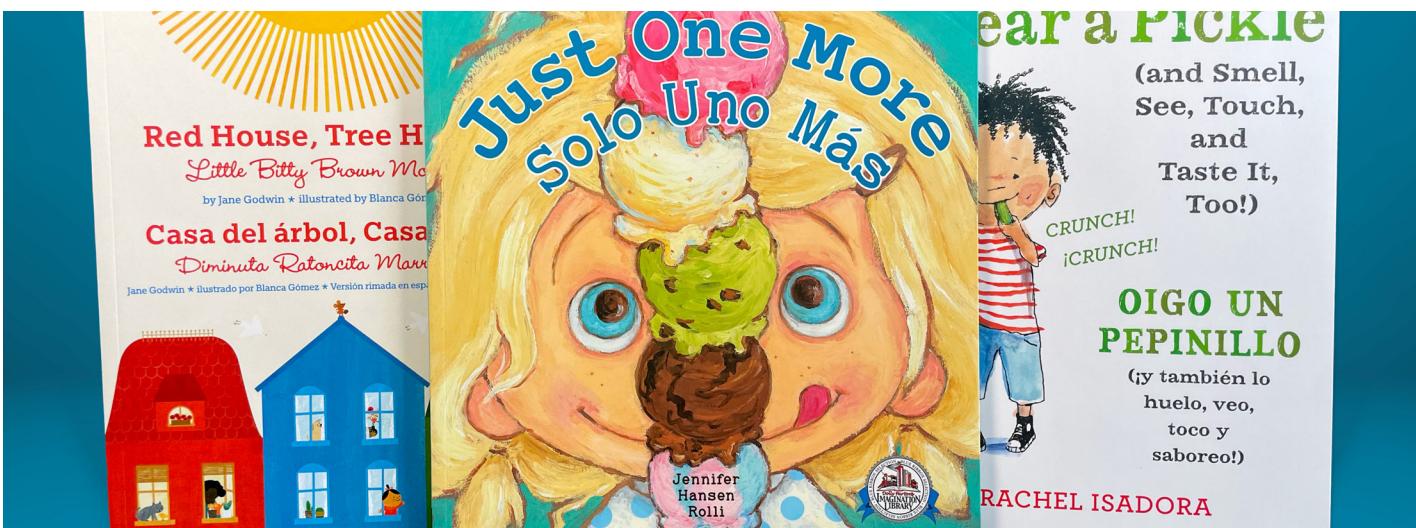


Bilingual Books Available

"I am so grateful for the Dolly Parton Imagination books for my children."

This mother shared photos of her 3-year-old daughter reading Imagination Library books to her 6-month-old brother. She said that her daughter has developed a love of reading at a very early age, and she attributes that to the Imagination Library books she always reads to her.

The books are bilingual, which helps Latino parents like her who are not fluent in English to read to their children.



Raising A Reader

Raising A Reader helps early childhood educators work with families to build and maintain the home-based language & literacy experiences young children need for academic success by distributing high-quality children's literature into homes each week. Families also build connections to libraries that result in lasting family literacy habits and improved outcomes for children.



RAISING a Reader

Students from Whiteville Primary School's Pre-K visits the Carolyn T. High Memorial Library for a Raising A Reader library connection event.



IMPACT

- **281** preschool children participated in the Raising A Reader Red Bag Program
- **17** NC Pre-K classrooms participated in the Raising A Reader Red Bag Program
- **38** teachers and aides implemented the Raising A Reader Red Bag Program

Before RAR

3

AVERAGE TIMES
PER WEEK CHILDREN
LOOKED AT BOOKS

After RAR

5

AVERAGE TIMES
PER WEEK CHILDREN
LOOKED AT BOOKS

Families said:

- "Helped my child want to read instead of me pushing him."
- "We have enjoyed having these books as a learning resource in our home."
- "I am very proud of the program. It's helping the children more than you know."
- "He is very excited when he brings a book home to read."
- "We love the program and the large variety of books provided!"
- "My child has shown growth in his reading and communication skills. He's beginning to have active listening skills while demonstrating each character in the book we chose together."

Parent Advisory Committee (PAC)

Vision: PAC ensures inclusive, integrative and easy access to information, resources & training that parents & caregivers need to support the healthy growth, development & academic success of young children.

7

family leaders

6

community stakeholders



"I know what it feels like to be unsure, to feel out of place, and to not always see yourself reflected in your school or community. That's why I work to be that bridge for others. I want to create spaces where families feel welcomed, respected, and supported—because when families are engaged, students succeed. I believe that no matter where you come from or what language you speak at home, every family has something valuable to contribute to a child's success."

Family engagement to me means showing up, building trust, and being culturally responsive. It means hosting events that honor different traditions, providing resources in multiple languages, and making sure that parents know they belong in our schools. It's about listening to families' stories, understanding their needs, and working together to create an environment where every student can thrive. For me, it's not just professional—it's personal. And I am committed to making a lasting impact in this community I proudly call home."



Smart Start Subsidy

This scholarship program provides assistance with the cost of child care to qualified parents with children ages birth to five.

506

children served by subsidies

Early Parenthood Program

IMPACT

- **16** families served by Parents As Teachers
- **243** personal/home visits conducted
- **20** home visits received per participant, on average
- **12** Group Connections sessions held

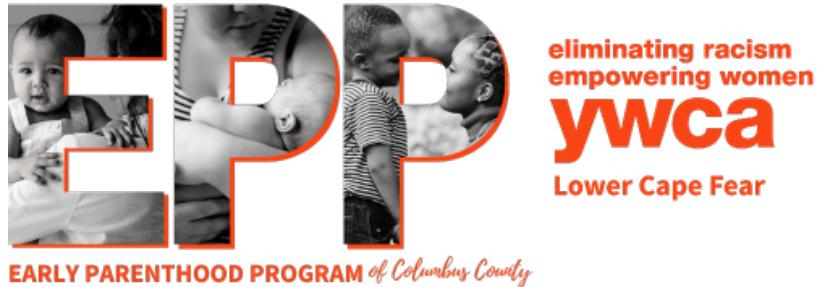
Moms Said:

"I'm so thankful for my participation in EPP. I was so nervous about becoming a mom. Through participating in home visits, I have learned about the baby's development and what to expect during pregnancy. Thanks for your support."

Expectant mothers and children ages birth to 5 who are not eligible for Medicaid-reimbursable transportation can be transported to and from medical appointments free of charge.

IMPACT

- **33** local trips made
- **12** out-of-county trips made
- **100%** of non-Medicaid children & pregnant mothers requesting transportation to medical appointments received transportation.



EPP provides support and resources to young women ages 12-19 who are pregnant or parenting, helping them to stay enrolled in school and graduate; receive access to prenatal resources, and develop parenting skills. Smart Start funds the Parents As Teachers curriculum for this project.



"The program has helped me in so many ways, a few being the mental, emotional, and physical support. Just receiving phone calls asking how I was doing had meant a lot. Then giving me stuff to look forward to as in Christmas that meant a lot to me because no one else got me anything even though it was for my baby. I was very appreciative. And last but not least, you all helping with diapers and a car seat and [other items] has helped me out so much. Y'all helped with things no one else has."

Transportation



Ready & Resilient Families & Communities

The goal of this program, which is funded through a grant from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, is to build awareness of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and ways to mitigate their impacts by fostering resilience through the following trainings, workshops and information sessions:

- **Community Resilience Model (CRM)**
- **What You Do Matters**
- **Connections Matter**
- **The 5 Protective Factors Training**
- **Resilience Film Screening**
- **Community Cafes**

97% of community members
&
100% of parents/guardians

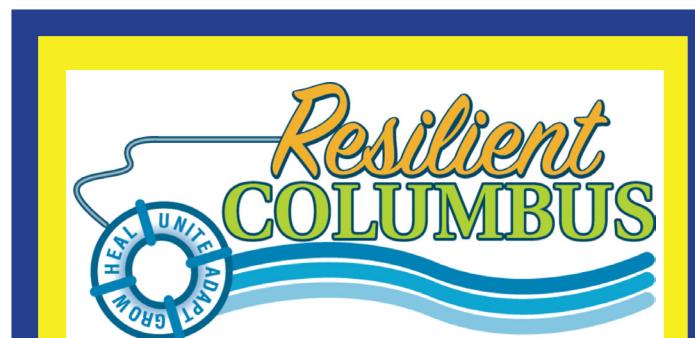
indicated that they increased their knowledge of the importance of early education, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and becoming resilient.

What participants learned:

- "How to deal with stress and how to back away from an altercation"
- "Stress can affect your immune system and that there are things you can do to relieve stress"
- "The development of my child's neurological pathways"
- "Understanding how my child thinks"
- "Intervene less in independent play"
- "About how my child processes anger"
- "Kids learn through trial & error"
- "Understanding & applying a better response to my child's behaviors"
- "The calm box idea"



The Faith and Resilience Summit brought together religious leaders in Columbus County to discuss ACEs, resiliency, and how they can get involved.



Resilient Columbus is a collaboration between agencies and individuals working to resolve issues related to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). It informs the community of best practices to advocate for families & children navigating traumatic experiences to create a more resilient community.

36 organizations in Columbus County serving on the coalition

214 attendees at coalition meetings



**International
Paper**

**CHAMPIONS
FOR LITERACY**

This eight-year-old was one of two students who logged the most books in their literacy passport during summer reading camp at Edgewood Elementary School. He also demonstrated the most improvement on his reading assessment and thus was awarded a new bicycle.



Sports Around the World Summer Reading Adventure was made possible through the Champions for Literacy Grant, which was funded by International Paper. This project was implemented as part of Edgewood Elementary's summer reading camp for students. During the camp, students read books about and played games of other cultures. The program challenged students to read and log into a "literacy passport" as many books as they could read.

86%

of students had increased their reading scores by the end of the program

100%

of students were promoted to the next grade

77%

of parents surveyed said they had noticed a difference in their child's ability or interest in reading after the program.

"What he enjoyed the most was being encouraged to read books. He had told me that he had to read books because it was going to help him learn, and he knew that the more he read, the more chance he had for [winning] a bicycle. He would come home and he would want to read to us like y'all read to them."

\$187,647 Total Contributions

Cash Donations

Academy Child Care, LLC
All Annie's Children
Apex Construction Group, LLC
Belk Charity Sale Donors
Boondock's Adventure Farm
Brent Lawson, DDS PA
Carol Caldwell - GHWMH&EC
CCPC Board Members
CCPC Staff Members
Centene Corporation
Champions for Literacy
Chapman Family Enterprises (McDonald's)
City of Whiteville
CNCM, LLC
Columbus County Manager's Office
Columbus County Agricultural Fair, Inc.
Columbus County Shrine Club
Columbus County Youth & Families Association
Columbus Regional Healthcare System
Early Learning & Family Resource Center Patrons
Fidelity Charitable
Golf Tournament Participants
Jenron, LLC DBA Pizza Village
Joe's Wrecker Service
Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust
Lee Otis Edge
Men & Women United for Youth & Families

Mr. Postman Print Shop
North Carolina Partnership for Children
Opening Doors Preschool II
Paul Gerald, Jr.
Ray's Seafood & Produce
State Employees Combined Campaign
Terry Mann
Theodore Singletary
Tonya L. Powell
Vann Underwood
Vulcan Materials Company
Whiteville Chapter of Las Amigas
Williamson, Walton & Scott, LLP
Worthington Funeral Home

In-Kind Donations

All About Books
AmeriCorps Seniors/RSVP
Barnesteed Family, LLC
Boondock's Adventure Farm
Chapman Family Enterprises (McDonald's)
Pizza Hut
Robinson's Produce
Community Volunteers
Vulcan Materials Company
YWCA of the Lower Cape Fear
Zaxby's

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Direct Service Providers

YWCA Lower Cape Fear
Early Parenthood Program

Columbus County Transportation
Medical Transportation

Columbus County Dept. of Social Services
Smart Start Subsidy

Early Years
WAGE\$