

Wake County Smart Start

FY27 Budget Development Update



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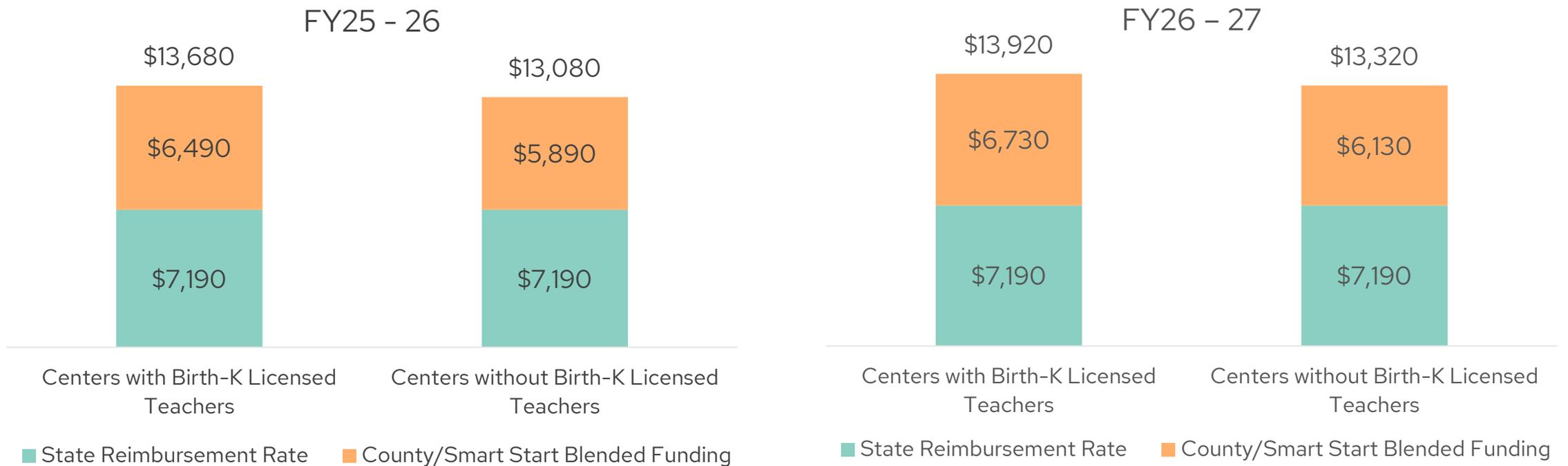
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Agenda

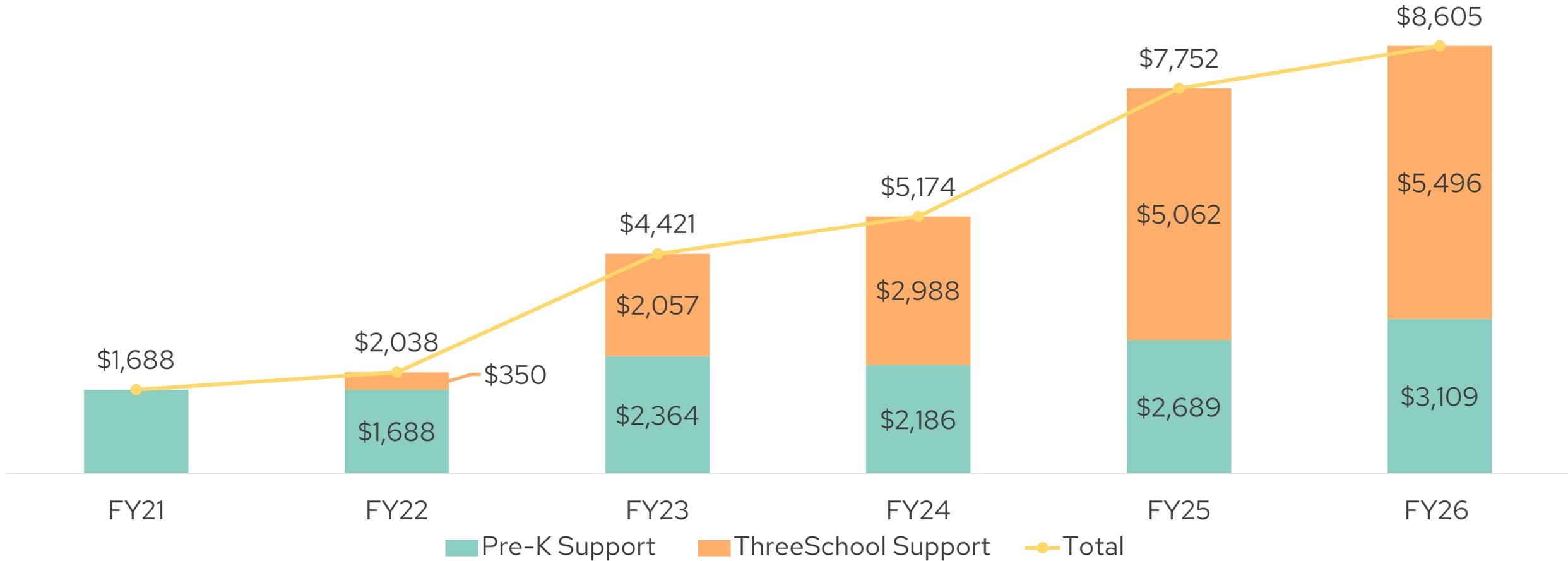
- **Gap between State Funding and Total Reimbursement Rate**
- **County's Historical support for Smart Start**
- **Program Wide Updates**
- **Pre-K**
 - Program Updates
 - Projected Population and Population Served
 - Children's Progress
 - FY27 Pre-K Needs
- **ThreeSchool**
 - Program Updates
 - Projected Population and Population Served
 - Children's Progress
 - FY27 ThreeSchool Needs
- **Questions and Discussion**

Gap between State Funding and Total Reimbursement Rate

- County allocation blended with Smart Start funding covers the gap between state reimbursement rates and total costs per slot annually
- NC Pre-K reimbursement rates vary based on teacher certifications



County's Historical support for Smart Start, in thousands



FY26 Funding

- **Wake County Smart Start received \$8,207,464 in FY26 County Funding to be used to support existing slots, programmatic cost escalations, and to increase support for teachers and providers**
 - \$3,109,012 for Pre-K
 - Increased Support for and availability of Providers and Sites
 - BOC also approved expanding eligibility to children whose families are between 76 - 85% of the State Median Income
 - \$5,098,452 for Three School
 - Added capacity for Smart Start to address rising concerns from Providers and Teachers in identifying and managing disruptive social/emotional behaviors
 - The ThreeSchool team has made significant strides in the past nine months to address these needs



Program Wide Updates

Wake County Smart Start Pre-K & Wake ThreeSchool

Program Wide Updates - Impact of FY26 Funding

- **Wake Smart Start has worked to address concerns of providers and improve safety of students by:**
 - Leveraging Community Partnerships,
 - Addressing Staffing Capacity,
 - Implementing Coaching Support, and
 - Build sustainable teaching strategies and social-emotional competencies
- **However, barriers to participation remain for both Families and providers**

Emotional & Behavioral Supports

- **Leverage Community Partnerships** to provide targeted individual support for students and expand resources available to families
- **Address Staffing Capacity** by recognizing high levels of need by strategically working with sites in placing additional staff to mitigate capacity challenges and ensure program effectiveness
- **Implement Coaching Support** that addresses the need for more intense classroom support while still addressing needs of all programs – consistently assessing the needs and modifying when necessary
- **Build sustainable teaching strategies and social-emotional competencies** over time through continuous observation, anecdotal data, and improved scores from needs assessments to positively impact student outcomes

Barriers to Participation

- **Staffing - Turnover has improved over previous years, but staffing and recruitment remains a priority due to systemic challenges:**
 - Low wages and workforce burnout
 - Limited pool of qualified candidates and Difficulty retaining staff
 - Challenging Child behaviors identified as of the most significant factors affecting staffing
 - Ongoing Apprenticeship Program with Wake Tech Community College
- **Family Hesitancy or Resistance**
 - Families may be fearful of the process for various reasons, which can limit effective support for the child without full family participation

Barriers to Participation Continued

- **Impact of Increasing 3-Year-Old Enrollment**
 - Expanding the number of 3-year-olds served increases staff capacity demands; sites may struggle to participate fully if support is not sufficient.
- **Staff Overload**
 - Site directors and teachers sometimes feel overwhelmed and anticipate that program participation will add to already heavy workloads.
- **Limited Capacity & Transportation Barriers**
 - Transportation challenges exist due to site locations within a 10-mile radius, and some applicant areas (e.g., Zebulon, Wendell, Knightdale, Garner, Wake Forest) are childcare deserts, limiting access.
- **Access to High-Quality Care in High-Need Areas**
 - Families in high-need communities face challenges in finding equitable access to quality early childhood programs.



Pre-K

Pre-K Program Updates

- **1,532 total slots available through blended funding sources**
 - 999 private slots supported by Wake County Annual Funding
 - 126 Head Start Slots
 - 407 Wake County Public Schools
- **Smart Start has served 1,698 children as of February 28th, 2026**
 - 160 children are on the NC PreK waitlist
 - Children from the waitlist are put in slots as they open
 - There are no site/provider shortages, so all 1,532 slots are assigned to a classroom
 - Children's attendance has been steady with an attendance rate of 97.7%
 - Transportation continues to be a barrier for families

Pre-K Program Updates

- **Children who have applied and whose families are below 76% of the State Median Income continue to be prioritized in the application process**
 - 121 of the 160 Children on the waitlist
- **Eligibility for Children who have applied and whose families are between 76% and 85% of the State Median Income with one additional Risk factor continues**
 - 39 of the 160 Children on the waitlist

Pre-K Program Updates

- **Increased capacity** in childcare centers this year to serve 999 children, supporting private businesses and helping families access the NC Pre-K program closer to their homes
- **Held Annual Pre-K Application Event** that connected families not only to Pre-K enrollment but also to 27 local community agencies, strengthening the whole family
- **Streamlined the Pre-K application** system through troubleshooting, technical support, and a clearer process, resulting in more applications being completed for the 2025-26 School Year



Pre-K Program Updates

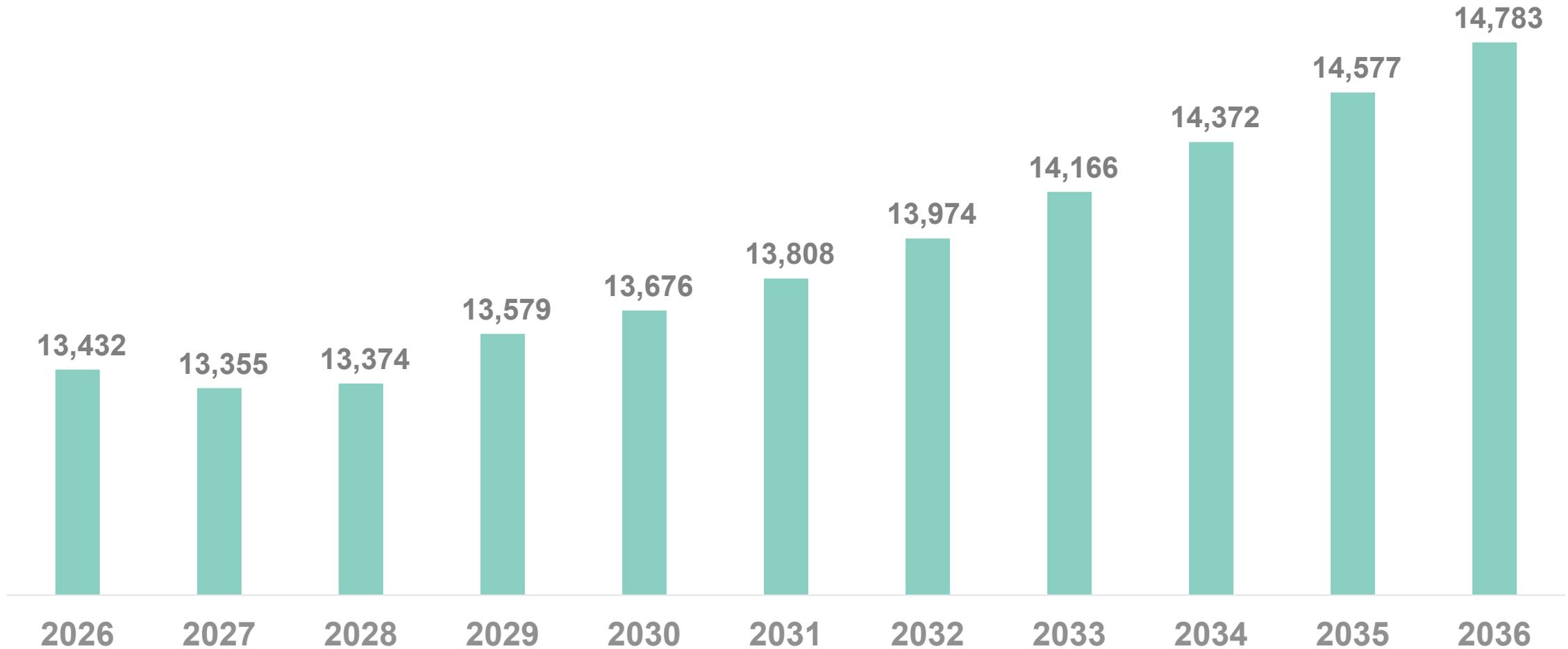


- **Connected classrooms to enrichment programs**, such as the Zoo and the Museum of Science, to enhance children's learning experiences
- **Hosted Professional Development** for teachers and teaching assistants on data collection/observation, and social-emotional learning to better support kindergarten readiness

Pre-K Projected Population and Population Served

- **Population Updates based on:**
 - Wake County 4-Year-Old Population Estimates and Projections
 - Wake County, age-group specific, poverty estimates to inform eligibility calculations
 - Income eligibility data for population served through Wake County Human Services, Telamon Head Start, and Wake County Public Schools Pre-K programs

Projected Four-Year-Old Population

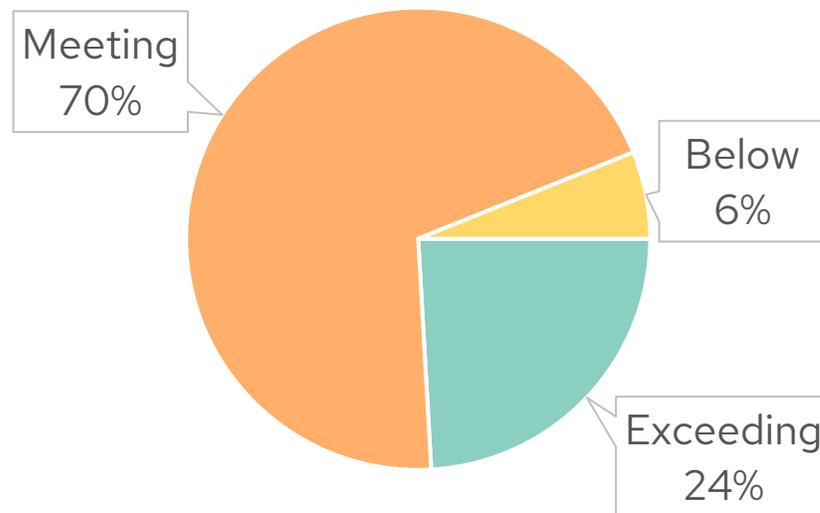


Source: [NC Office of State Budget and Management, Population Projections \(By Sex and Age\) - Vintage 2024](#)

Pre-K – Children’s Progress

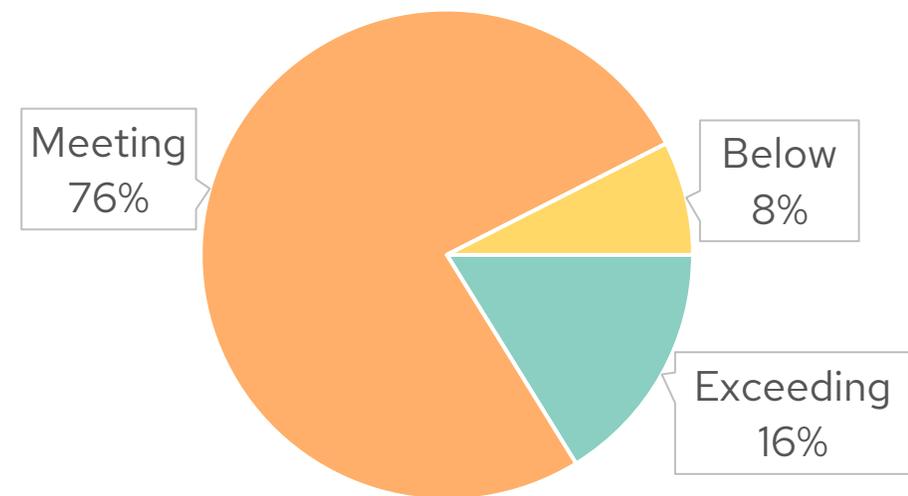
- Teaching Strategies Gold Assessments allows for individualized plans to enhance each child’s growth

Social-Emotional



94% of children in private Pre-K sites met or exceeded Social-Emotional expectations

Language



92% of children in private Pre-K sites met or exceeded Language expectations

Pre-K FY27 Budget Needs

- **WCSS is requesting \$3,752,955 in FY27**
 - Increase of \$643,943 over FY26
- **Funding would be used to:**
 - Maintain 1,532 slots
 - Providers and classrooms
 - Increase the reimbursement rate, allowing WCSS to achieve pay equity for Birth-K NC Pre-K teachers across the program
 - Providers are given a mandatory pay scale for teachers based on WCPSS pay scale. Pay scale will increase 3%.
 - Continued staffing challenges due to lack of competitive pay
 - Support current FTEs, Providers, and programmatic costs
 - Application Support and Coordination, and Program Outreach
 - Maintain online application database

Pre-K Wrap-Up



ThreeSchool

ThreeSchool Program Updates

- **Slot Utilization**
 - 300 full school year slots funded in County's FY26 Budget
 - Smart Start has served 348 children as of January 31st, 2025
 - 745 children are on the WTS waitlist as of January 31st, 2025
- **All slots and classrooms are currently filled, and any openings are filled as available by Children on the waitlist**
 - Staff review slot utilization and the waitlist on a regular basis
- **SY25–26 application count: 1,218 applications submitted as of 01/30/2026.**

ThreeSchool Program Updates

- **The SY26–27 application has been released to families**
- **As of 1/30/2026, 251 applications have been submitted**
- **Transportation continues to be an issue for families**

ThreeSchool Program – Current Status

- **WTS has addressed the issue of overwhelming classrooms with children requiring additional support by using developmental screenings**
- **The screenings are completed by WTS staff and Advance Community Health (ACH) by using the Brigance parent questionnaire**
 - Providers also support screening process
 - Questionnaire allows WTS Staff to make better informed placement decisions



ThreeSchool Program – Progress Update

- **We want to acknowledge the county commissioners as key partners in the success of the WTS program. Their commitment to children, families, and the program, along with the county's understanding of the issues and funding, has made many of these solutions possible**
- **Providers and teachers reported an improved overall classroom environment since the implementation of informed placement processes**

ThreeSchool Program – FY27 Next Steps



- **Establish procedures** with ACH that align with WTS program policies and operational needs
 - Most children will complete a Brigance screening prior to placement, further streamlining the informed placement process.
- **Conduct intentional recruitment** of interested 4- and 5-star sites through virtual and in-person site interest sessions, using census and application data to identify areas of highest need
- **Host biweekly walk-in application events and monthly collaborative missing-documents events** with Pre-K to support families in completing their applications.

ThreeSchool Program – Challenges & Support Needed

- **Existing Challenges**

- Limited site capacity may impact program quality and long-term sustainability
- Ongoing communication challenges between partners
- Continue using developmental screening data to guide placement decisions and ensure balanced classroom composition
- Continue to explore transportation resources to support families in need and improve access to TS programs

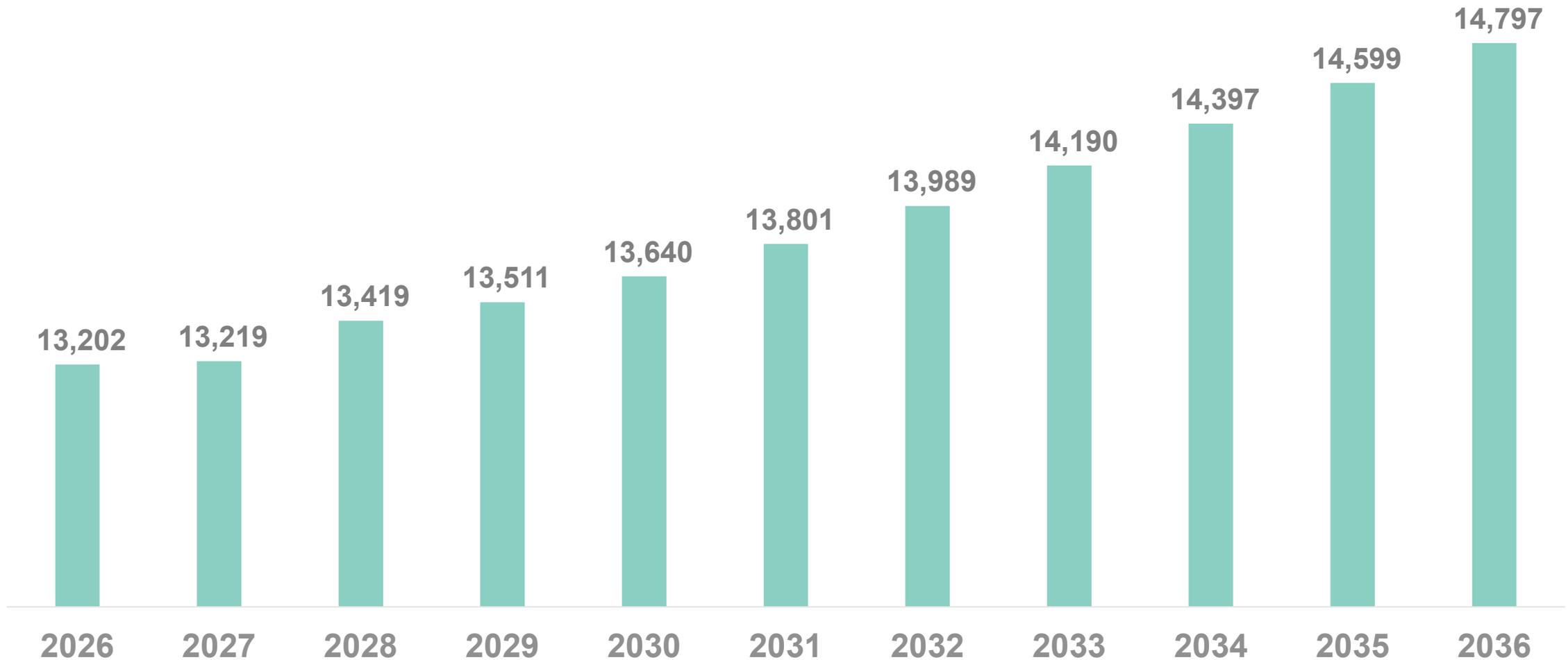
- **Support Needed**

- Assess current transportation resources, explore additional funding or partnerships, and prioritize solutions for families in high-need areas to ensure equitable access.

Three School Projected Population and Population Served

- **Population Updates based on:**
 - Wake County 3-Year-Old Population Estimates and Projections
 - Wake County, age-group specific, poverty estimates to inform eligibility calculations
 - Income eligibility data for population served through Wake County Human Services, Telamon Head Start, and Wake County Public Schools Pre-K programs

Projected Three-Year-Old Population

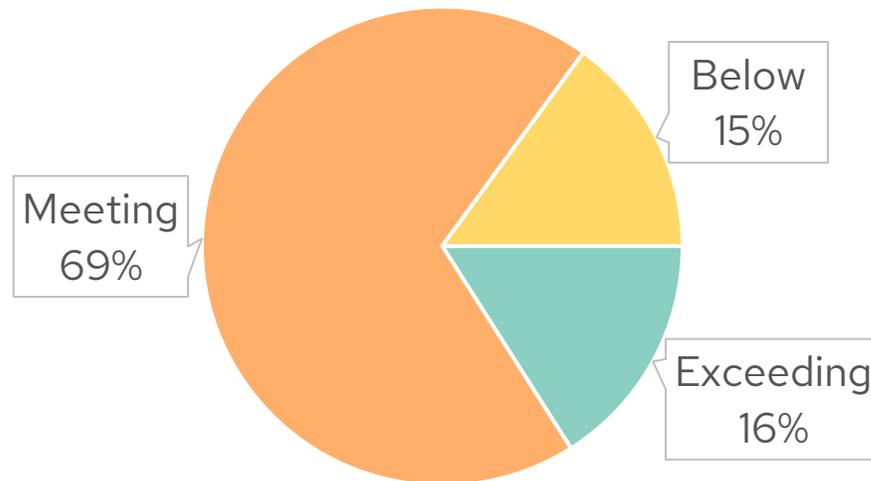


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ThreeSchool – Children’s Progress

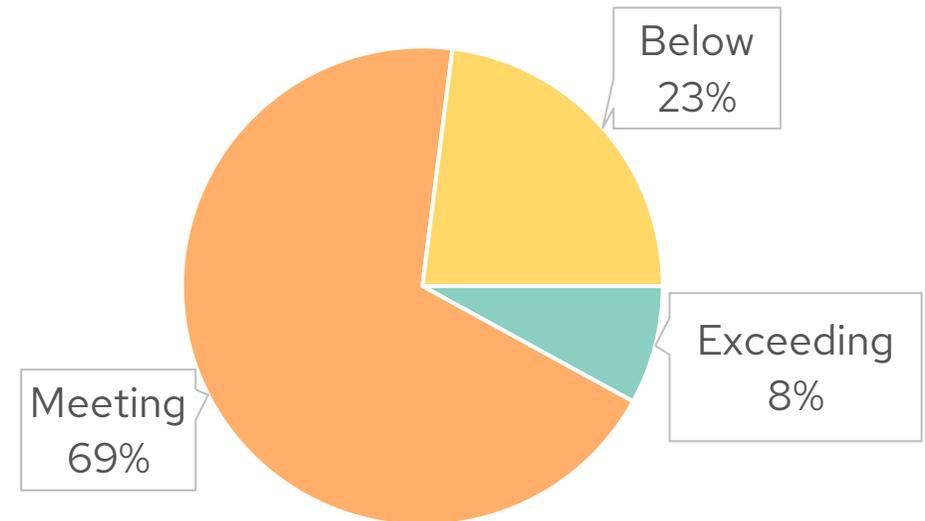
- Teaching Strategies Gold Assessments allows for individualized plans to enhance each child’s growth

Social-Emotional



85% of children in Wake ThreeSchool met or exceeded Social-Emotional expectations

Language



77% of children in Wake ThreeSchool met or exceeded Language expectations

ThreeSchool FY27 Budget Needs

- **WCSS is requesting \$7,411,270 in FY27**
 - Increase of \$2,312,818 over FY26
- **Funding would be used to:**
 - Support 100 additional Three School slots
 - Increase slots to serve more income eligible children on the waitlist
 - Slots will be placed in private childcare centers
 - Maintain and increase the reimbursement reports, maintain FTEs, and classroom supports
 - Increase teacher pay scale by 3%
 - Program Support, Training, Application and Enrollment Coordination, and Outreach FTEs
 - Maintain ThreeSchool Database

ThreeSchool FY27 Budget Scenarios

FY26 Adopted Budget	<i>FY27 Scenarios</i>		
	<i>No Additional Slots (300)</i>	<i>50 Additional Slots (350)</i>	WTS Request 100 Additional Slots (400)
\$5,098,452	\$5,561,140	\$6,330,152	\$7,411,270



Looking Forward

Upcoming Events

- **Wake County Smart Start will host a Get-to-know you event on April 16th**
- **A 30th anniversary Fundraiser will be held on September 26th**



Questions & Discussion



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