

Compensation Matters: A Q&A with Down East Partnership for Children's Executive Director, Henrietta Zalkind

The **Child Care WAGES® Program** is an education-based salary supplement program for teachers, directors and family child care providers. WAGE\$ is centered on increasing the compensation of educators working in licensed child care programs by providing salary supplements based on their education level and their continuity of care. By offering these supplements after six-month periods completed in the same child care program, **WAGE\$ incentivizes early educators to pursue further education and remain in the field, thus fostering greater stability and professional growth within the workforce.** The program's design reflects an understanding of the critical role that well-compensated and qualified educators play in the healthy development of young children.

The program currently operates as a collaboration between local Smart Start partnerships that choose to participate, the North Carolina Partnership for Children and the Division of Child Development and Early Education. Those partnerships that opt in cover the cost of the supplements, and currently, 52 are participating. The Down East Partnership for Children, which serves Nash and Edgecombe Counties, is among them. Overall, **these partnerships serve 68 of North Carolina's 100 counties.**

Down East WAGE\$ FY25 Data:

8%

turnover rate of WAGE\$ participants

\$1,320

average six-month supplement

100%

of survey respondents reported satisfaction with WAGE\$ and its administration

100%

of participants had an associate degree with at least 24 semester hours of birth to 5 focused coursework or submitted education during the year its administration

100%

of survey respondents indicated that receiving a WAGE\$ supplement helps ease financial stress

Henrietta Zalkind, Executive Director of the Down East Partnership for Children, is a strong advocate for WAGE\$, both locally and in efforts to make the program available statewide. We sat down with her to find out why.

You and your partnership have been long-time supporters of WAGE\$. When did you begin funding WAGE\$ in your region? What made you want to fund this program in the beginning?

It was one of the first activities we funded. We did some data collection first and then very early on, we realized what teachers were paid and we knew we needed to supplement their pay to attract them to the profession and then do work to increase quality. That investment was critical because you need teachers that are compensated and well trained and that takes a salary that makes them interested in coming and staying in the profession. We've never regretted that decision. Systematically we understand that parents aren't going to pay for care that is provided by teachers who don't have the skills and experience to make it a worthwhile investment. We need stable teachers that continue their education.



Henrietta Zalkind

Does it surprise you to learn that we have participants who received the first payment back in 1996 that are participating today?

It does not surprise me. You have to believe that it is a testament to the fact that it works. If people are committed and you compensate them fairly, they will stay. They understand how important this job is. I just wish more could benefit from it. Early childhood is a calling for people, and they shouldn't have to put themselves in poverty every day to raise up the children of North Carolina who will be our future workforce.

Why do you continue to support WAGE\$? Why do you think it is important?

Because it is a system investment that should be available statewide for all teachers. Without having qualified, fairly compensated, stable teachers, you can't stabilize the system. Parents are not going to spend their hard-earned money on something that is not stable and high quality. WAGE\$ addresses both of those, and it helps centers and providers stay in business.

How do you think WAGE\$ has directly helped your workforce? What have they shared with you?

People leave because they have to take care of their own basic needs, and they cannot afford to stay and raise up the next generation of North Carolina leaders. We see year after year how important WAGE\$ is when we get thank you notes about how it helped participants to pay bills and buy groceries. They are not making a good salary by any means, but WAGE\$ allows them to stay in the profession and keep their own lights on and tend to their own families. This honors their commitment to the young kids and families of the state. People are so grateful.

It has slowed our turnover. Parents are thankful when their teachers stay because it is so disruptive for kids to lose their teachers when they can't afford to stay and can make more at a grocery, retail or convenience store. People are committed to being teachers and want to stay but often it is a choice between feeding their own families and helping others. That's going to be more true than ever as we see cuts in Medicaid and SNAP. People are really struggling. Lots of early education teachers are very much afraid of the looming Medicaid cuts because they were part of the expansion. They are afraid they are going to lose that, and it will force them into another job. Without WAGE\$, it could cause the whole early education system to collapse. To me, it is the biggest opportunity we have to stabilize what is already there in 68 counties, but that still leaves 32 not covered. Many people would like to subsidize the teacher workforce more robustly. The goal in Leandro was to have them in parity with public school teachers. That was the benchmark.

WAGE\$ was the number one recommendation to move us in that direction, to move us closer to parity. We don't want teachers to leave early education just because they have to meet their own families' needs for food, clothing and shelter.

How does WAGE\$ help you as a local Smart Start partnership? What would you say to other local partnerships who might be interested but are not currently funding WAGE\$?

We considered it in the beginning as a structural part of the system. It works so we've leaned into it. We have strong relationships with providers, and we make sure directors know about the program. When you hire teachers, get them on WAGE\$.

You have to address the context in order to get to the end goal of quality, affordability and availability. You have to have a stable workforce, and this has consistently been part of our strategic plan. You have to pay more for staff for that to happen.

We've chosen a higher income cap for WAGE\$ eligibility so folks can make more per hour and still participate. Sites have incentive to pay more so their staff will stay. Just like any market economy, you have to compete for talent and there is only so much parents can afford.

I would say to other partnerships that WAGE\$ is an essential component of a well-functioning early childhood system at the local level. It's easy to administer because you are outsourcing it to Early Years. It is a low-effort, high-impact system component, without which the other activities won't work. You have to have a stable workforce or you risk losing your other investments because teachers can go to a convenience store and earn more.

You are a champion and advocate for taking WAGE\$ statewide. Why?

Because I think the early education system requires that WAGE\$ be a consistent activity statewide to stabilize the teaching workforce so that people aren't moving around to counties that can pay more or leaving the profession altogether. It is an essential system component in order to have a stable workforce that isn't turning over because of low wages.

What do you see as the next steps for moving WAGE\$ forward?

We need to help people look at the big picture economically and put WAGE\$ in the context it deserves in terms of being part of a high-functioning early childhood system. If we don't do it, the low-wealth counties and counties who can't afford to put Smart Start funds in are not going to be able to compete for the talent that the bigger, wealthier communities can. We need every child in the state of North Carolina to have sound, basic education starting with high-quality early education, and that's going to take well-trained, fairly compensated teachers who are stable and committed to raising the kids in their communities.

Let's help leadership understand the full power of this intervention. This is the best strategy we can support to stabilize the most important part of the system, which is teachers. We have to support the teachers so they can give the kids and families what they need to be ready for school and be successful once they get there.

While we figure out what QRIS is going to look like, the first question parents should ask is, "How long do your teachers actually stay?" Just because it looks shiny, if their teachers are turning over because they can make a dollar more somewhere else, you don't have the longevity and stability that young kids need. It takes a while for young children to bond with their caregivers.

Parents need to know there is a teacher who knows what they are doing and can contribute to their child's healthy growth and development. It's a huge investment for parents, so we need to make an investment in teachers who can afford to teach. Let's get folks interested. Let's stop the churn and invest in people who are going to stay put and the turnover of our WAGE\$ participants shows it's possible. We have to see them as the essential component of the system that they are. Subsidy doesn't subsidize everybody, and it doesn't mean that the care is high quality. WAGE\$ helps everybody – teachers, kids, families and child care programs. Having teachers that can get children off to a good start is as essential as having a building that's safe. The private sector won't buy care that's not quality.

I really do believe that if we don't do this, the system can't recover. You have to go to the root cause of the problem in terms of quality, affordability and availability, which is low wages for teachers who have other choices, including the school system. If we really want the system to be strong, we have to have strong teachers who are supervised by strong directors, and that requires this investment.

Statewide WAGE\$ FY25 Data:

13%

turnover rate

nearly

\$9 million

invested in WAGE\$ salary supplements

1,806

early education programs with supplement recipients

4,075

supplement recipients

\$1,227

average six-month supplement

89%

of active participants whose counties have participated two or more years have AAS ECE or higher, or have submitted education during the year to document additional coursework