Annual Report 2024-2025



First Start Partnerships *for* Children & Families

Growing Hearts & Minds

The annual report is shared with the public through the First Start Partnerships for Children and Families website, firststartpartnerships.org.

A Message from the CEO



Annette Searfoss Ph.D.
CEO

The 2024 - 2025 school year was a year to remember! After setting One Goal in 2018, to be nationally accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), First Start was READY! We completed the Self-Assessment process and requested the NAEYC Validation Visits in December 2024.

What does it mean to complete this process? It means rigorously studying our systems, policies, procedures and practices against nine NAEYC Standards: 1. Relationships; 2. Families and Community; 3. Curriculum; 4. Teaching; 5. Assessment; 6. Health; 7. Physical Environment; 8. Professionalism; 9. Leadership & Management. In other words, EVERYTHING it takes to operate a high quality program.

Each year, we observed classrooms with an Accreditation Facilitation Project Partner (First Up), collected evidence that supported our meeting and exceeding the standards criteria, and presented those results to our Board of Directors, Policy Council (elected family leaders), and our entire staff. We then "rated" ourselves on where we agreed we were exceeding, meeting, or needing improvements to meet our goal. This resulted in Program Improvement Plan that guided our work forward each year.

Why would First Start embark on a years-long journey towards NAEYC Accreditation?

It's simple.

Our children and families deserve a *great* early childhood program. Not just a good one, meeting the high standards of federal Head Start and state Pre-K Counts programs.

As NAEYC explains, "By offering clear definitions of quality, NAEYC's Early Childhood Program Standards help families make informed decisions about their child's early education, and help programs ensure they are safe, well-prepared, and intentional about fostering the joy, development, and learning of every child."

By completing the NAEYC Self-Assessment process after years of annual study, learning, and improving, we could confidently say we KNEW we were a high quality program - and we could PROVE it when the Validators visit us in 2025.

It's been a privilege to lead us through this process, but as we all know, one can only lead if others are willing to follow. Our incredible teachers, family support staff, administrators, governing board and community partners believed we could be Franklin County's FIRST nationally accredited program (other than the military-sponsored Letterkenny program).

Thank you to all of those stakeholders for their unwavering faith, even, and especially during the challenging times. The military, and now First Start, have set the bar high for the care and education of our youngest citizens. Our children deserve it. Our families deserve it. Our communities deserve it. And you deserve it.

In gratitude,
Annette

Our Core Values



We value **family**

as children depend on family for love, safety, health and learning. We nurture a family-friendly workplace so our staff can be there for their families too.

We value **compassion**

dedicated to love, joy, empathy and hope necessary to support children, families and our selves to be come who we want to be.





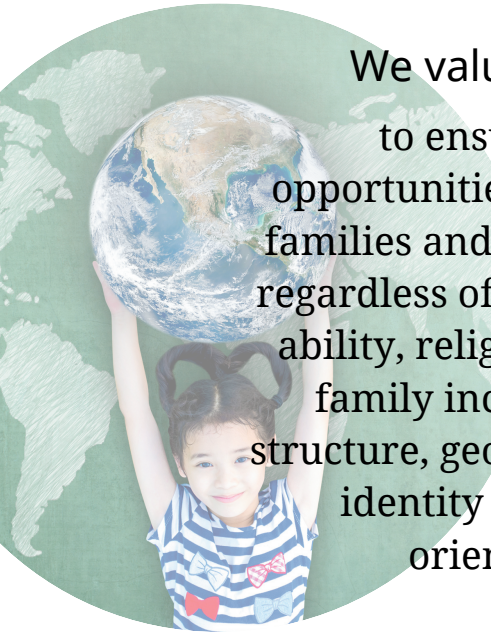
We value **excellence**

and the continuous process of setting goals, reviewing progress, and planning for improved outcomes for children, families, and our organization.

We value **partnerships**

for the connections to others that allow us to serve our children, families, and communities better than we can serve them alone.





We value **equity**

to ensure equal opportunities for children, families and staff members regardless of race, ethnicity, ability, religion, language, family income, family structure, geography, gender identity and sexual orientation.

Our Mission:

We partner with families, schools, and communities to ensure that each child arrives ready for kindergarten

Growing **Hearts & Minds**

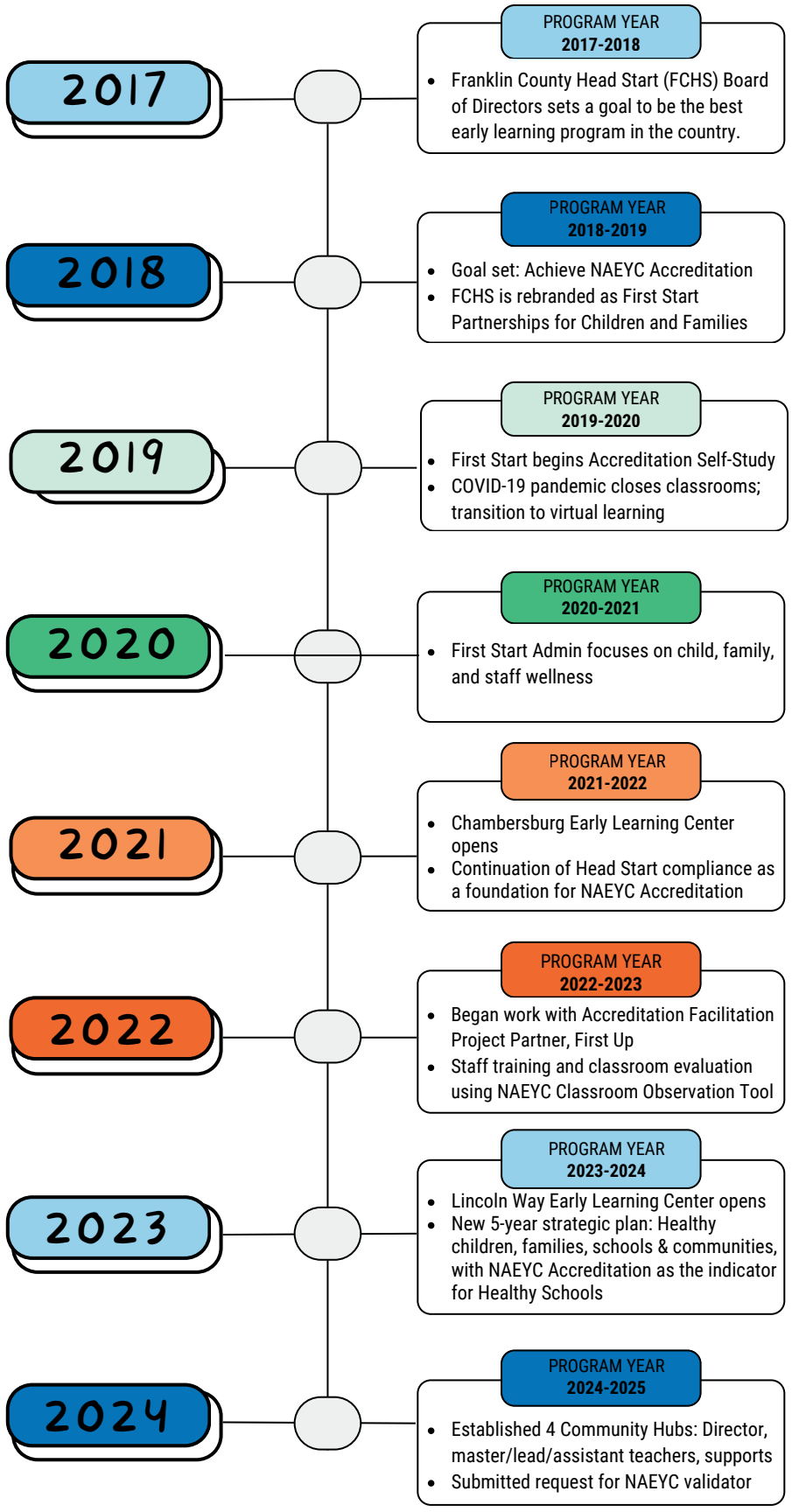
Journey to Excellence

It all started with the response made by Franklin County Head Start Directors of the Board in 2017 when asked: “What is your goal for (then) Franklin County Head Start?”

The challenge: *“To be the best early childhood education program in the country.”*

With the destination selected, the only task remaining was to determine the path.

Setting the gold standard for excellence in early childhood education, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) was the obvious choice. The NAEYC accreditation process became the road map to guide Franklin County Head Start, as it was named at the time, from a GOOD program, to a GREAT program.



What makes a GREAT Early Learning Program?

First Start Facts: Program Year 2024 - 2025



CONSISTENT, HIGHLY QUALIFIED, AND COMPENSATED STAFF

- First Start staff retention rate: 90%
- 63% of teachers with degrees
- Master Teacher pay increased to match public school teachers - 32% raise

ACCESSIBLE HIGH-QUALITY FACILITIES

Community Hub Model:

Chambersburg Early Learning Center
Lincoln Way Early Learning Center
Waynesboro Area Senior High School
Greencastle/Tuscarora (with 2 satellite sites)





HIGH-QUALITY PROGRAMMING WITH CONTINUED QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

2022-2023	2023-2024	2025
71%	72%	83%

Average ratings of First Start classrooms in unannounced, external observations, using the NAEYC Accreditation Classroom Observation Tool (% of assessment items met)

More First Start Facts...



INTEGRATED CLASSROOMS

Increased full day options to meet varying needs of families.

Classroom lists intentionally and confidentially integrated children with varying abilities and funding streams to promote inclusion, equity, and a sense of belonging for all learners.

CALM, NURTURING, AND ENGAGING ENVIRONMENTS

Classroom observations using the Teaching Pyramid Observation Tool (TPOT) highlighted supportive environments:

- 93% of supportive conversation indicators met
- 89% of child engagement indicators met
- 93% of collaborative teaming indicators met





LEADERS WORK AS A TEAM

First Start leaders engaged in a year-long Community of Practice with the focus of supporting staff to:

1. Be present (with children)
2. Connect (with children)
3. Extend learning (with children)

PRE-K COUNTS QUICK FACTS

- 365 Children and 343 Families were served in 2024-2025
- 99% Average Monthly Enrollment
- 13% (365/2790 children in county) of Franklin county's eligible children served
- 68% of children (250/365) received Physical Exams, and 47% of children (171/365) received Dental Exams

A Defining Moment

First Start Reaches Major Milestone in Accreditation Process

December 20, 2024 marked a significant milestone in First Start's continuous quality improvement journey with the formal submission of ther request for an accreditation validation visit.

As the nation's largest professional organization dedicated to advancing high-quality early learning, the National Association for the Education of Young Children's accreditation process is rigorous and comprehensive. It evaluates early learning programs across nine standard areas that reflect all aspects of quality program implementation and operation. Steps in this process include conducting a program-wide self-study, developing and implementing a program improvement plan, and thoroughly documenting the policies, procedures, and practices that support a strong foundation for a thriving early learning program. The final step in the process in the accreditation process is to request a review visit from an external evaluator.

Even with ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and funding uncertainties, First Start's dedicated staff demonstrated perseverance, professionalism, and commitment. Using data to track progress and measure readiness, the leadership team convened in the fall of 2024 to determine next steps. The outcome was clear: **First Start is ready to move forward!**

On December 20, 2024, the program formally submitted its request for an external validation visit by a certified NAEYC Assessor. This step reflects not only our readiness for external evaluation, but also our commitment to excellence across every dimension of our work.

While the review visit is set to occur in September 2025, First Start continues to demonstrate that **quality is not a single achievement, but a continuous process—embedded in every decision, practice, and interaction that supports children, families, and staff.**

Quotes from First Start Staff

"I feel that I have grown a lot professionally over the last few years as a result of going through the NAEYC accreditation process... I continued to grow and my scores continued to improve... I am proud to say that my classroom scored 100%."

"Honestly, our journey to NAEYC accreditation has been the driving force behind what I would consider my professional growth. It has challenged me... to learn and understand the 'why' behind NAEYC standards and why they are so important to our classrooms."

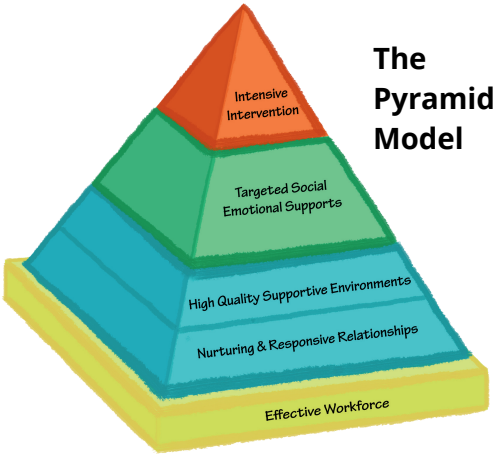
First Start Leads the Way in Prioritizing Mental Health

Serving children and families in a high-quality early learning program is demanding and intense work. As such, it is essential for early childhood professionals to prioritize the social and emotional development of young children, as well as their own mental health and wellness. In September 2024, First Start launched two internal initiatives to proactively support the well-being of chilren, families, and staff.

Pyramid Model Implementation

Mental Health for First Start Children and Families

Developed by the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI), the Pyramid Model is a comprehensive, evidence-based framework designed to promote the social and emotional development and mental health of young children. It is the early childhood version of the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model used in Franklin County schools and 27,000+ schools nation-wide. When implemented, the Pyramid Model creates a culture of emotional safety and inclusion, helping all children thrive while supporting the overall mental health of families and educators.



The Pyramid Model

A systems approach to fostering emotionally healthy children, empowered educators, and thriving communities.

An implementation team of First Start teachers, coaches, administrators, home visitors, and families, was formed and met monthly in 2024-2025 to lead the organization-wide adoption of the Pyramid Model. Using data from the *Benchmarks of Quality* developed by NCPMI, the team's role is to make recommendations to First Start's Leadership and Executive Teams. Full implemention will span over several years using an implementation science approach.

HEAD START AND EARLY HEAD START QUICK FACTS

Head Start

- 329 Children and 336 Families were served in 2024-2025
- 95% Average Monthly Enrollment
- 12% (329/2790 children in county) of Franklin County's eligible children served
- 78% of children (257/329) received Physical Exams, and 36% of children (118/329) received Dental Exams

Early Head Start

- 117 Children and 98 Families were served in 2024-2025
- 90% Average Monthly Enrollment
- 4% (117/2790 children in county) of Franklin County's eligible children served
- 86% of children (101/117) received Physical Exams, and 50% of children (59/117) received Dental Exams

Healthy teachers build healthy classrooms. By prioritizing educator mental wellness, we create stable, supportive spaces where children can learn, grow, and thrive — academically and emotionally.

Mental Health Coaching and Education

Mental Health for First Start Staff

Early childhood education is a physically, mentally, and emotionally demanding profession, making teacher wellness essential to student success. When educators are mentally well, they create stable, supportive classrooms where children feel safe, engaged, and ready to learn. Lower stress levels lead to stronger academic outcomes, improved classroom management, and the modeling of emotional resilience. Prioritizing teacher mental health also reduces burnout and turnover, increasing job satisfaction and fostering school stability. Ultimately, investing in educator wellness strengthens both the academic and social-emotional growth of students, reinforcing the critical link between healthy teachers and thriving classrooms.

To support staff wellness, First Start partnered with Thriving Thoughts Global (TTG), a local organization dedicated to preventing mental ill-health by bringing awareness to, and educating, adults through thought change.

After a pilot experience with directors and coordinators in 2023-2024, First Start expanded its partnership with Thriving Thoughts Global to offer an online mental health course (*7 Truths to Think By*) and in-person group coaching with Dr. Sherri Yoder, Founder and CEO of Thriving Thoughts Global.

To fully integrate the tools and strategies into organization-wide culture, this partnership is intended to continue for at least two more years as we build the capacity of our First Start leaders to develop, teach, and encouarge these life-changing skills.



- 70 First Start staff voluntarily registered in the online course
- 45 First Start leaders regularly participated in group coaching
- 96% of First Start staff who participated in group coaching report tht they would recommend it to their peers and colleagues.

Data compiled in June 2025

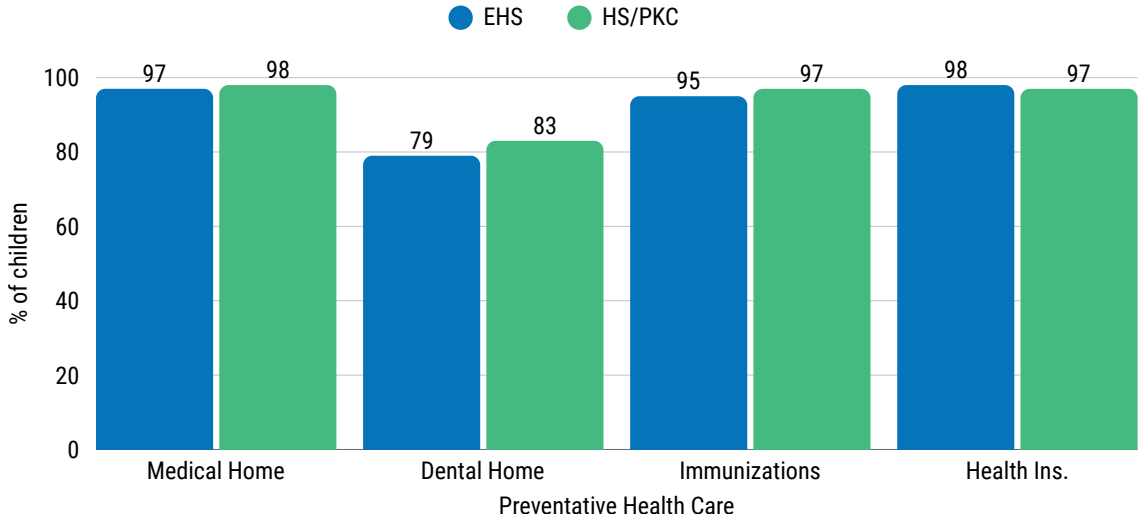
Strategic Plan Goals

First Start Partnerships for Children and Families
2023-2028 Strategic Plan

Healthy children, families, schools, and communities

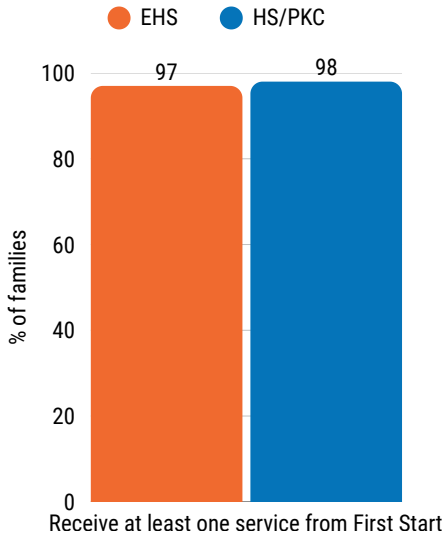
Healthy Children

Families have health care partners for children's preventative health care



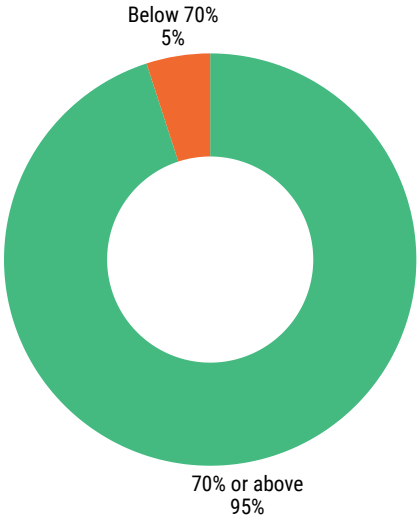
Healthy Families

Families receive at least one service from First Start



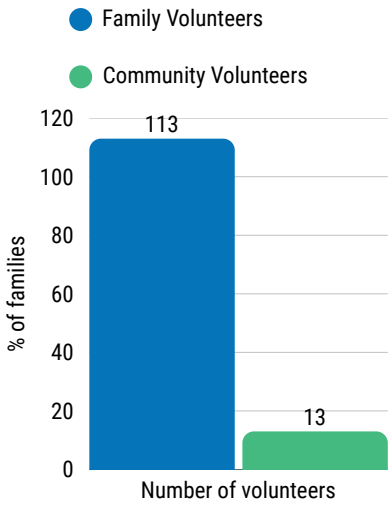
Healthy Schools

Classrooms meet at least 70% of assessment items in the NAEYC Accreditation Observation Tool



Healthy Communities

Active family and community volunteers





BOARD OF DIRECTORS

BOARD CHAIR
Jennifer Hawbecker

BOARD VICE CHAIR
Ann Spottswood

BOARD SECRETARY
Mike Ross

BOARD MEMBERS
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Tabitha Curtis
Ryan Fritz
Eric Holtzman
Dr. Tod F. Kline
Kathy Estep
Dr. Jose Ricardo Osario
Dr. Lura Hanks

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Dr. Annette Searfoss
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Melisa Ostrowski
President

Jessica Kreigline
Finance Director (contracted)

Kim Holtry
Human Resource Director

Shannon Rudy
Chief Analytics Officer

Jessica Hatch
Chief Operating Officer

A Message from the Board Chair



Jennifer Hawbecker
Board Chair,
First Start Partnerships

At First Start Partnerships for Children and Families, our mission is to partner with our families, schools, and communities to ensure every child arrives ready for kindergarten. Everything we do is guided by this mission and grounded in the organization's vision and core values.

In 2018, our primary goal was to achieve Accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). This accreditation ensures that programs are safe, well-prepared, and focused on children's success - leading to greater school readiness, improved educational attainment, and healthier long-term outcomes for children.

After many years of preparation, ongoing quality improvement, and thorough self-assessment, First Start was ready to formally request an accreditation validation visit from NAEYC. While we look forward to the formal review, our staff continue to demonstrate the program's quality each day through interactions that support children and families.

Serving children and families in a high-quality early learning program is demanding and intensive work. It is essential for early childhood professionals to support the social and emotional development of young children while also caring for their own mental health and wellness. This year, First Start launched two internal initiatives designed to proactively strengthen the well-being of children, families, and staff.

Some highlights from the 2024-2025 program year:

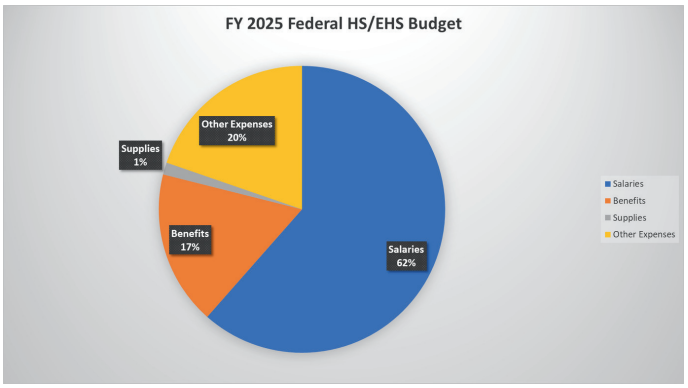
- Established four Community Hubs staffed with a director, master, lead, and assistant teachers, along with additional supports to meet the needs of children and families. These Hubs also foster stronger collaboration among teachers, enhancing daily interactions with children.
- First Start Partnerships increased master teacher salaries to align with public school teacher pay, helping support a staff retention rate of 90%.
- Expanded full-day program options to meet the diverse needs of families, ensuring access to high-quality care while parents work.
- On December 20, 2024, the program formally submitted its request for an external validation visit by a certified NAEYC Assessor.

We accomplished many important milestones this past year, and we look forward to achieving even more in the year ahead. Reaching our goals requires strong community support and committed partners who help ensure that our children and families have every opportunity to succeed. Thank you to our current partners - and welcome to those who will join us in the future.

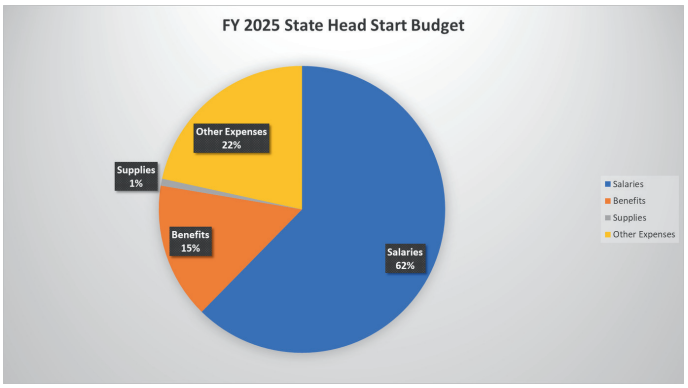
"Where would any of us be without teachers - without people who have passion for their art or their science or their craft and love it right in front of us? What would any of us do without teachers passing on to us what they know is essential about life?"
-Fred Rogers

Funding and Expenditures

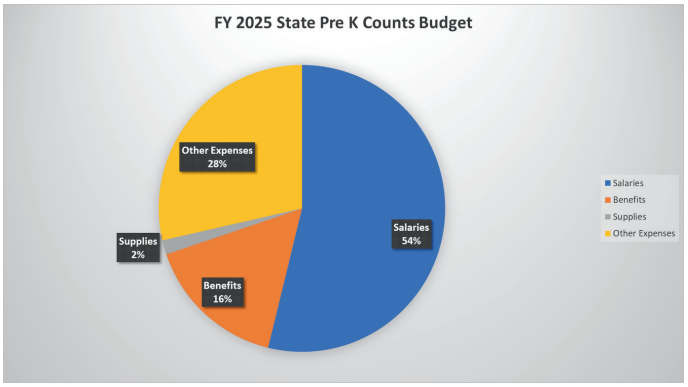
At the close of the 2024-2025 program year, First Start Partnerships for Children & Families (FSP), the grantee for the Head Start program in Franklin County, was funded to serve a total of 640 children with federal and state funds.



Combined, the organization received $9,771,142 to operate the Head Start, Early Head Start & PreK Counts programs. In both the Federal and State budgets, personnel wages and benefits assume the majority of expenses.



In FY2025 FSP received $4,152,763 in federal funding from the Administration for Children & Families to serve 246 children. FSP received $1,322,932 in Pennsylvania State Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program (HSSAP) funds to serve 75 children. Partnerships with five Franklin County school districts resulted in $3,340,721 in Pennsylvania PreK Counts (PKC) funds to serve 319 children.



FSP received CACFP funds from the US Department of Agriculture to support nutrition services for all children of $172,006. Additional revenue from partnerships, grants, and other revenue streams contributed an additional $782,720.

The most recent audit for the period August 1, 2024 - July 31, 2025 was performed by SEK CPA's and Advisors. In the independent auditor's report, the auditors expressed a "clean opinion" showing conformity with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States of America.

OFFICE OF HEAD START
An Office of the Administration for Children & Families
pennsylvania KEYSTONE STARS
PA pennsylvania PRE-K COUNTS
United Way OF FRANKLIN COUNTY
Funded by Summit Endowment
FRANKLIN COUNTY PENNSYLVANIA
CVSM CUMBERLAND VALLEY SCHOOL OF MUSIC



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