



2025-2026 General Assembly

SENATE BILL 257: 2026 Appropriations Act, Sec. 9D.8: Career-Ready Lead Teacher Academy Pilot Program.

Analysis of: S.L. 2026-41, Sec. 9D.8

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Section 9D.8 of S.L. 2026-41 (Senate Bill 257) appropriates to the Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) \$1.5 million in nonrecurring funds from the General Fund for the 2026-2027 fiscal year to be allocated to the North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc. (NCPC) to provide the State match for implementing the career-ready lead teacher academy pilot program as follows: (i) \$1 million for the 2026-2027 fiscal year for the State portion of tuition costs and (ii) \$500,000 for the 2026-2027 fiscal year for the stipends described below.

These funds must be used as follows:

- The funds must be allocated equally among the local partnerships selected to participate in the pilot program.
- Local partnerships must provide documentation of a 25% local match to receive State funds.
- Any unexpended and unencumbered funds at the end of the fiscal year from these funds will not revert to the General Fund but will remain available for use in accordance with these provisions.
- The funds cannot be used for administrative costs.
- The funds are not subject to the administrative cost and the match requirements under this act, or the statutory child care services funding and child care subsidy expansion requirements.

NCPC, in collaboration with the North Carolina Community College System Office (NC CCS), must develop a two-year pilot program expanding the child care academies currently operating in Johnston and Wayne counties. The academies must provide free, comprehensive training and support to individuals with no child care experience or education who are interested in a career in child care. They must ensure graduates are able to be credentialled as lead teachers or group leaders in a licensed child care program upon graduation and meet certain requirements regarding program size and length.

NCPC, in collaboration with the NC CCS, must select 10 local partnerships for the program, in addition to Johnston and Wayne counties. There must be at least one in each local partnership region of the statewide Smart Start network. The local partnerships can offer each graduate a one-time stipend of at least \$150 for completing the course. Students are eligible to receive an additional \$500 stipend if they begin full-time employment as a lead teacher in a licensed child care center or home in the State within three months of graduating from the academy, and complete 12 consecutive months of employment at the same child care program. NCPC and local partnerships must also collaborate with community colleges and make information about the academies available to the public.

NCPC, in collaboration with the local partnerships and community colleges participating in the pilot program, must submit a progress report on the pilot program to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee

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on Health and Human Services and the Fiscal Research Division by March 31, 2027 which includes any concerns or recommendations for program expansion. A final report must be submitted by December 31, 2027, that includes, at a minimum, the following: (i) the local partnerships and community colleges participating in the pilot program; (ii) the number of students enrolled in each career-ready lead teacher academy (academy), by county; (iii) the number of students who successfully completed the academy, by county; (iv) the number of newly credentialed graduates employed as lead teachers in licensed child care programs, by county; (v) the outcomes achieved from the pilot program, including any recommendations for expanding the program statewide; (vi) the number of new child care slots available as a result of adding the new lead teachers; (vii) total program costs, including any administrative costs borne by the county; and (viii) the amount of funds needed to expand the program statewide.

DCDEE must establish a provisional early childhood credential for individuals who are 16 or 17 years old and are preparing to work in the child care field. The provisional credential will allow these individuals to work in certain out of school child care facilities and summer camps as a group leader when staff to child ratios and group size requirements are met. When the individual turns 18 and receives a high school diploma or its equivalent, the individual will be eligible to receive the full NC Early Childhood Credential and be employed as a lead teacher at any licensed child care program in the State. The NC CCS, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, the North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs, and DCDEE must ensure the required trainings to earn the provisional credential are accessible to interested individuals no later than March 31, 2027.

This section became effective July 1, 2026.