

Dalton touts Smart Start funding

Thursday, April 21, 2011



Lt. Gov. Walter Dalton (second from right) speaks during a roundtable discussion at White Rock Baptist Child Development Center on Wednesday. Listening are Kathy Hoffmeier (from left), the Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce's director of talent and workforce development; Angie Welsh, senior vice president at Triangle United Way; and Laura Benson, executive director of Durham's Partnership for Children.

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DURHAM -- Drawing a comparison to an Olympic ski jumper with the misfortune of taking off from slushy snow, Lt. Gov. Walter Dalton on Wednesday stressed the importance of early childhood education programs such as Smart Start in giving young North Carolinians a fair shot.

With majority House Republicans proposing a 20 percent cut to Smart Start's \$188 million in state funding, Dalton spoke out in support of such programs at a roundtable with community leaders and parents at White Rock Baptist Child Development Center.

He said there's a clear link between early childhood education and North Carolina's economic future.

"That's what Smart Start is about -- building stronger families ultimately leads to building stronger communities, ultimately building a stronger economy," he said.

Smart Start is a public/private partnership that provides high-quality child care, health

screenings and parental training. Former Gov. Jim Hunt worked to create the program in the early 1990s and has remained a champion of it since leaving office.

Dalton said Hunt has suggested that the program might be able to survive with a 10 percent reduction, but that a 20 percent cut would be "very, very deep."

"We understand we're in a budget crisis, we understand that we're having these shared responsibilities, but a program like this ... anybody that's talking about eliminating these programs really doesn't know what they're talking about," he said.

He highlighted a recent Duke University study that found higher reading and math scores and lower special education placement rates among third-graders in North Carolina counties receiving high levels of funding for Smart Start and More at Four, a program for at-risk 4-year-olds.

Denise Zavaleta sung the praises of early childhood programs. The mother of twins, she said one of her sons "wasn't relating very well" as a 2-year-old and the teachers at his child care facility "really didn't know how to work with him."

After getting involved with Smart Start, it was determined that her son had some sensory-based issues and an occupational therapist began working with him.

A comprehensive evaluation of her son recently showed that he did not have autism, yet upon reviewing notes from the year before, evaluators said that they would have diagnosed him with autism at that time.

Noting the difficulty of being a first-time mom raising twins with special needs, she said "any support that I could get was critical, because I really had no idea where to go. I don't know how we would have done it without these programs."

Kathy Hoffmeier, the Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce's director of talent and workforce development, said the chamber is a staunch supporter of early childhood education programs.

"If a child's in a good, quality day care, we can have the parents working, and that helps up today and tomorrow," she said.

Dalton agreed that such programs make economic sense, saying that in addition to the jobs created by child care providers, parents' employers benefit by having happy, productive employees.

"Somehow we have to get around politics, we have to get around ideology," he said in stressing the need for more moderate cuts. "I think we need to make sure that everyone understands that this is a very business-friendly program that we are talking about -- it is a model for the nation. It doesn't take brain surgery to figure out that it's the right thing to do."