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Wake County Smart Start Welcomes Gayle E. Headen as New Executive Director

RALEIGH, NC – Wake County Smart Start (WCSS) is pleased to announce the selection of Gayle E. Headen as its next Executive Director. Headen comes to WCSS with a unique blend of corporate and nonprofit leadership experience. She honed her financial management and analytical skills during her corporate career at Procter & Gamble. Then, after “finding her passion” in early childhood education took her to Head Start, she entered her nonprofit career as only the third Executive Director in the 50+ year history of Union Baptist-Harvey Johnson Head Start in Baltimore, Maryland.

“We are thrilled to welcome Gayle E. Headen as the new Executive Director of WCSS,” said Angie Welsh, WCSS Board Chair. “Gayle has a combination of passion, insight, and proven leadership in early childhood that will allow WCSS to continue as a leader in addressing the challenges young children face.”

Headen succeeds Pam Dowdy, who has been WCSS’s Executive Director for the previous 18 years. Dowdy pioneered WCSS’s creation and led its growth in serving children and families while raising awareness of the importance of early childhood education. As an advocate for young children and families for more than twenty years, Dowdy began her active involvement with WCSS when Gov. James Hunt launched the Smart Start initiative in 1993. Most recently, she has served on a state committee to develop recommendations for Gov. Cooper’s NC Early Childhood Action Plan and on the Social-Emotional Design Team for the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative.

“Pam leaves an incredible legacy here at WCSS,” said Welsh. “Her strategic vision and commitment to strengthening the early childhood system has helped make Wake County a leader in our state. We are grateful for her leadership, leaving behind a foundation we’re excited to build on.”

During her tenure with Union Baptist-Harvey Johnson Head Start, Headen participated in the UCLA Head Start Management Fellows Program and received a Weinberg Fellowship. She engaged a diverse community collective to advance Head Start’s strategic plan with an eye on shared goals for children, and she brings a passion for partnerships to this new chapter.

“Wake County Smart Start is committed to the success of our children,” said Headen. “Working together to impact children and families is one of the smartest and most important ways we can support society. It is a privilege to join Wake County Smart Start with its talented staff and dynamic board. I look forward to building upon the work of my predecessor and what they have done to be an asset to the community.”

Headen will begin her role as Executive Director on February 25, 2019.

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Wake County Smart Start works to ensure each child, in every community, is ready for school and life. This mission is carried out in four goal areas: children are in safe, supportive home environments, are in high-quality care that contributes to positive child outcomes, are healthy and ready for school, and children and their families are supported by a strong, diverse, integrated early childhood system. Through community collaborations and funding of local partners, we expand the support available to children and their families. To learn more about our mission, visit wakesmartstart.org.