



Small change, big impact: The sales tax will improve our schools

By Leah Carper, 2022 North Carolina Teacher of the Year and current director of Stakeholder Engagement for Guilford County Schools

As a ninth grader on reduced-cost meals, I entered the school cafeteria each day with just 40 cents clutched tightly in my hand. One day, my coins scattered across the floor, and a boy loudly pointed out that they were not enough to pay for lunch. My cheeks burned and my heart stopped.

But a school nutrition professional — a frontline worker — immediately stepped in. As I handed her my coins, she looked me in the eye and handed them right back to me, saying calmly but loudly enough for others to hear, “No, actually, Leah gave me too much money. Here’s your change.”

It was a simple exchange of coins, but in that moment, it felt enormous. It wasn't just a rescue from embarrassment; it revealed to me how a seemingly small gesture can profoundly shape a person's life and worldview.

This moment rippled through my life in ways I never expected. As a teacher, I found myself looking at my students through this lens of compassion, always searching for those moments when they might need someone in their corner. Now, I see my Guilford County Schools colleagues — our teachers and frontline workers — through these same eyes. Just as that cafeteria worker's small gesture made an immense difference in my life, a fraction of a penny could make a world of difference in theirs.

Sometimes the smallest changes create the biggest ripple effects. That's exactly what the proposed 0.25% sales tax increase — just a fraction of a penny — can do for our education system. This modest increase would generate approximately \$25 million annually for our schools, without affecting essentials like gas, groceries or prescriptions. With Guilford County's steady stream of visitors for sports tournaments, college events, entertainment and conferences, we're inviting tourists to help invest in our children's future through this fraction-of-a-penny contribution.

Currently, Guilford County's teacher salary supplement lags behind nearby counties by 35%, making it difficult to retain talent. Our frontline workers — the nutrition staff, custodians, bus drivers and others — create safe, nurturing learning environments for our students. Through countless small acts, they change students' lives daily. These vital contributors deserve competitive wages that reflect their transformative impact.

Just as that school nutrition professional returned my coins in a life-changing gesture, this fraction-of-a-penny tax will come back to our community in life-changing ways for our educators and students. This election season, let's invest in our teachers and frontline workers — and create ripples of positive change for generations to come. Sometimes the smallest changes, like a fraction of a penny sales tax increase, can make the biggest impact. #smallchangeBIGIMPACT

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