

**Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education  
Early Childhood / “Whole Child” Work Group  
Draft Priorities**

Today in North Carolina, too many children are not meeting a critical developmental milestone – reading on grade level by the end of third grade – and there are vast differences in outcomes between racial groups. The work group priorities below aim to reduce disparities in children’s outcomes based on race and ethnicity, as well as based on income, ability, language of origin, geography, gender and age and ensure that all children are reading on grade level by the end of the third grade.

The work group also endorses the NC Early Childhood Action Plan and the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Action Framework.

**Build the early childhood educator pipeline for birth through third grade.**

- Develop and implement a salary and benefits scale for early childhood educators in programs for children birth to age five that receive public funding. The scale will support increasing qualifications, salaries, and benefits and provide salary parity with public school educators for comparable qualifications.
- Increase State funding for early childhood programs birth to age five, including child care subsidy, and enhance payment rates to support increases in compensation and expanded access for children to early education programs staffed with a high-quality, stable workforce.
- Increase State funding for wage supplement programs for early childhood educators, including the Child Care WAGES and Infant-Toddler Educator AWARDS programs.
- Increase the quality and stability of the public school educator workforce in the early grades and increase the number of educators of color.
  - Reduce turnover, promote advanced degrees, and promote placements and retention in high-need elementary schools. Provide induction and mentoring programs for new educators as needed.
  - *This recommendation should align with Commission recommendations on strengthening the educator pipeline, with a focus on the specific need to increase quality and stability in the early grades.*
- Provide collaborative, research-informed birth through third grade professional development, including early learning standards, child development, implicit bias, cultural variations in communication and interaction, [NAEYC-endorsed programs that support](#) working with families, understanding of appropriate assessment and identification of disabilities, ACEs, trauma-informed care and schools, social-emotional development, and infant-early childhood mental health.

**Scale up Smart Start to provide early childhood system infrastructure and a continuum of services for children and families from birth to age five.**

- Expand evidence-based family/parent engagement, home visiting and other family support programs, identifying the most at-risk children and prioritizing services for them as young as possible where impact is greatest.
- Expand access to developmental screenings, including social-emotional screening, to ensure screening for all children birth to age 5.
- Support high-quality early education programs.
- Provide community-level flexibility to target Smart Start funding to the greatest community needs by removing the 70/30 mandate and the TANF match requirement.

**Expand access to early intervention.**

- Include at-risk children in North Carolina's definition of eligibility for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C Early Intervention Program (Infant Toddler Program), which provides supports and services for families and their children, birth to age three, who have special needs. Expanding eligibility would serve a broader population of infants and toddlers not meeting current criteria in order to prevent further developmental delays. Expanding eligibility would require significantly more capacity and resources for the state's early intervention system.
- Expansion of infant/early childhood mental health services in the community for young children not served by the Early Intervention Program would also help meet the needs of those most at-risk, ensuring interventions as young as possible where impact is greatest.

**Scale up the NC Pre-K Program to serve all eligible at-risk four-year-olds.**

- Increase State funding to serve all eligible at-risk four-year-olds.
  - Implement strategies to ensure equity of access in communities of color and in communities whose first language is not English.
- Increase State per child payment rates and local administrative rates to support the true cost of providing NC Pre-K.
  - The rates should factor in the cost of teacher salaries/benefits with parity to public school teachers, transportation, capacity building, program quality improvements, and child find.
  - The allowable local administrative rate should be at least the federal allowable administrative rate.
  - Continue to maximize the public-private mixed delivery system responsive to community needs.
  - End the TANF transfer and the \$52 million match requirement on Smart Start.

- Ensure all children enrolled in NC Pre-K have access to full day and full year programs to meet family and community needs and prevent summer learning loss.
  - Increase State funding to expand the NC Pre-K day and year or to provide access to quality afterschool and summer care and learning programs.
  - Children enrolled in NC Pre-K can also be enrolled in child care subsidy to support afterschool and summer care and learning through age twelve.

**Ensure that elementary schools are ready to meet the needs of all children in the early grades.**

- Reaffirm and recommit to North Carolina’s definition of school readiness:
 

*The condition of children as they enter school, based on the five domains of development (health and physical development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, language development and communication, cognition and general knowledge)*

*And, the capacity of schools to serve all kindergartners effectively (e.g. personnel, policies, practices, and physical resources) – “Ready Schools”*
- Provide strategies and invest in the recruitment, training and retention of high-quality elementary principals, increasing the number of elementary principals of color, incentivizing principals to stay in or move to high-need elementary schools, and providing professional development for effective leadership for early learning.
  - ~~Remove penalties/salary disincentives to becoming and remaining an elementary principal.~~
  - This recommendation should align with Commission recommendations on principals, with an emphasis on the specific needs in elementary school.
- Fund teaching assistants in the early grades, targeting first to high-need elementary schools. Include teaching assistants in schools’ professional learning for literacy.
- Improve and increase student access, including students with disabilities and students enrolled in NC Pre-K, to Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP) by funding school psychologist, school nurse, school counselor, and school social worker positions to a level that moves closer to or in alignment with nationally recommended ratios and include competitive salaries and benefits to fill positions.
  - Provide school systems with proportional staffing models in support of effective teaming of these specialized staff to meet the social and emotional, behavioral, mental health, physical health and safety of all students.
- Ensure sufficient elementary school staff, including Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP), in each elementary school to allow the capacity to reach all families with adequate contacts, home visits, and connections to needed resources, including health and mental health services and afterschool and summer learning opportunities, according to specific needs as monitored.

- Review and revise accountability measures in the early grades to ensure a culture of continuous quality improvement.
  - Ensure that the way effectiveness is measured is culturally relevant and meaningful to educators, families, students, and other stakeholders.
- Use a common, comprehensive formative assessment model in K-3. Methods of assessment should be appropriate to the developmental stages and experiences of students.
- Districts and schools should implement continuous school improvement through a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) which uses data-based problem solving to develop systems and structures to provide equitable access to evidence-based academic and behavior instruction, curriculum and environment.
- ~~Schools should implement strategies within a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) MTSS~~ and with SISP teams to ensure regular school attendance and reduction of suspension and expulsion.
- Districts should support effective transitions and alignment of birth through third grade experiences for children.
  - Support aligned, evidence-based, developmentally appropriate early learning curricula.
  - Use transition planning for effective transitions from Pre-K and other early childhood programs into kindergarten and the early grades.
- ~~Districts and schools should ensure that comprehensive, language-based teaching occurs in every K-2 classroom that includes explicit, systematic instruction in phonological awareness, phonics and word structure, fluent word recognition, vocabulary and language comprehension. Teachers should have structured literacy curricula aligned to the research on reading instruction and evidence based for every student and should have dedicated time during the school day focused on literacy instruction. Districts should ensure that teachers know how to analyze assessment data to specifically address who is responding and who is not responding to instruction and next steps and to ensure early identification and intervention for students with reading difficulties. Districts and higher education should provide ongoing professional development for instructional staff on the science of reading and evidence-based reading instruction. Districts and schools should provide families with resources to support a student's literacy development at home, which could include parent trainings on the curricula used in school or trainings on literacy strategies to use at home especially for the summer months to help minimize summer learning loss.~~
- Low-performing school districts should include an early childhood improvement plan as a component of their required plans for improvement.
- The Department of Public Instruction should include an assessment of early childhood learning as part of its comprehensive needs assessment process for districts.
- ~~Districts should incorporate early learning strategies into district-level plans for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and collaborate with other early learning leaders in the district, including Smart Start and Head Start, in developing and implementing these strategies, including effective transitions for children from early learning settings into~~

public schools. Districts should obtain Smart Start sign-off on the early learning components of their ESSA plans, at a minimum, to support a collaborative community approach to early learning for children birth through third grade.

**Improve cross-sector early childhood data quality, collection, analysis and use across the state and build a culture of continuous quality improvement (CQI) to support data-based decision making.**

- Support a standing NC Early Childhood Data Advisory Council to improve the quality and scope of early childhood data, facilitate better data sharing and public access to data, and provide guidance in grounding the state's early childhood work in data and research.
- Improve data collection on measures prioritized in the Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Measures of Success Framework and the NC Early Childhood Action Plan. Establish data collection for indicators with no available data.
- Collect and analyze disaggregated data to track community needs, available services, racial/ethnic, linguistic, income and geographic disparities in delivery of services, disparities for children with disabilities, and children's outcomes. Use these data to determine whether enough services are available and whether access to high quality services is equitable. Adjust delivery of services based on the findings.
- Ensure that educational and health assessment tools can work for and be understood by many cultures and by people who speak different languages (are culturally and linguistically relevant), in order to ensure accurate assessments and appropriate instructional supports and services.
- Ensure that the way effectiveness is measured in schools, general education and special education, and early learning programs is useful and meaningful to educators, families, students, and other stakeholders. Engage people from low-income communities and communities of color in the design, reporting, and fine-tuning of accountability measures.
- Connect the data systems for birth through age five programs to data systems for public schools to support vertical alignment and transitions.