

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

As Judge Manning noted in his order from October 25, 2000, “. . . the most common sense and practical approach to the problem of providing at-risk children with an equal opportunity to obtain a sound basic education is for them to begin their opportunity to receive that education earlier than age (5) five so that those children can reach the end of third grade able to read, do math, or achieve academic performance at or above grade level . . .”¹ Today in North Carolina, though, too many children are not reaching the end of third grade able to read or do math at grade level and there are vast differences in outcomes between racial and socioeconomic groups. To overcome this challenge, the State of North Carolina must work to build a stronger, more robust early learning continuum from birth through third grade that ensures children receive the academic, social-emotional, and physical health supports essential to the state’s obligation to provide a sound basic education. The work group has identified six key priorities on which the state should focus.

- 1. Build the early childhood educator pipeline for birth through third grade.**
- 2. Scale up Smart Start to provide early childhood system infrastructure and a continuum of services for children and families from birth to age five.**
- 3. Expand access to early intervention.**
- 4. Scale up the NC Pre-K Program to serve all eligible at-risk four-year-olds.**
- 5. Ensure that elementary schools are ready to meet the needs of all children in the early grades.**
- 6. 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.**

Listed below are specific strategies to accomplish each of the six priorities. These strategies are intended to detail a long-term vision for the policy framework the state needs to build a robust early learning continuum as the foundation for a sound basic education. Maximizing other public and private resources is required to accomplish these priority recommendations, but that does not relieve the state of its constitutional responsibility for providing every North Carolina child with a sound basic education. Several of these strategies are similar to other recommendations that the Commission has proposed, but are intended to highlight the specific needs of teachers and principals in elementary schools. In addition to these strategies, the work group also commends the NC Early Childhood Action Plan and the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Action Framework, both of which contain greater detail on specific policy and programmatic changes to strengthen the birth through age eight early learning continuum.

¹ *Hoke Cty. Bd. Educ. v. State*, No. 95 CVS 1158 (Oct. 25, 2000)

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

- Develop a salary and benefits scale for early childhood educators in programs for children birth to age five. The scale should support increasing qualifications, salaries, and benefits and provide salary parity with public school educators with comparable qualifications. Identify ways to incentivize and/or require the adoption of the salary and benefits scale in early childhood programs that receive state and federal funding.
- 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.
 - Provide incentives to 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.
- Support expansion of infant/early childhood mental health services in the community for young children not served by the Early Intervention Program to 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 resulting 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 should 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.
 - *This recommendation should align with Commission recommendations on principals, with an emphasis on the specific needs in elementary school.*
- Fund instructional assistants in the early grades, targeting first to high-need elementary schools. Include instructional 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 provide adequate, culturally inclusive contacts between the school and home so that families can access services and resources aligned with their child’s needs, including academic, health, mental health, and nutrition services and afterschool and summer learning opportunities.
- 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.
- Ensure schools have the resources and capacity to implement strategies within a multi-tiered system of supports and with SISP teams to ensure regular school attendance, reduce suspension and expulsion, and promote continuous school improvement.
- Ensure districts have the resources and capacity to support effective transitions and alignment of early learning 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.

- Ensure districts and schools have the resources and capacity to provide comprehensive, language-based teaching in every K-3 classroom that includes up-to-date, evidence-based practices that have been endorsed by a consensus of the leading researchers and practitioners in the field of teaching early reading.² Resources should include:
 - Structured literacy curricula and reading materials that are culturally relevant, address the learning needs of English language learners, and are aligned to strong evidence-based reading instruction;
 - Sufficient dedicated time during the school day focused on literacy instruction;
 - Training and support in analyzing 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;
 - Ongoing professional development on the science of reading and evidence-based reading instruction;
 - Resources for families to support a student’s literacy development at home, which could include trainings on the curricula used at school and on literacy strategies to use at home especially for the summer months to help minimize summer learning loss.
- Require low-performing school districts to 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.
- Require districts to incorporate early learning strategies into their district-level plans for state and federal funding 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. Require districts to obtain Smart Start sign-off on the early learning components of their plans for federal funding, 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.

² For example, the practices described in the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Science Practice Guide on *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade* (https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/wwc_foundationalreading_040717.pdf) and the National Reading Panel’s report *Teaching Children to Read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction* (<https://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/nrp/smallbook>)

- 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 and parents of students with disabilities 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.