



# **Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education**

## **Final Recommendations**

**Approved January 23, 2020**

The Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education was created by Governor Roy Cooper in July 2017 through Executive Order 10 (later amended by Executive Order 27). The following members<sup>1</sup> served on the Commission:

- **Dr. Fouad Abd-El-Khalick** – Dean, School of Education, UNC Chapel-Hill
- **Hon. Charles Becton** – Retired Judge, NC Court of Appeals
- **Ms. Melody Chalmers** – Principal, E.E. Smith High School, Cumberland County Schools
- **Mr. Jim Deal** – Attorney at Law, Deal, Moseley & Smith, LLP
- **Mr. Alan Duncan** – Chair, Board of Education, Guilford County Schools
- **Hon. Rick Glazier** – Executive Director, North Carolina Justice Center
- **Mr. Mark Jewell** – President, North Carolina Association of Educators
- **Ms. Leigh Kokenes** – School Psychologist, Wake County Public Schools
- **Dr. Helen "Sunny" Ladd** – Susan B. King Professor Emeritus of Public Policy, Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University
- **Dr. Patrick Miller** – Superintendent, Greene County Schools
- **Mr. James Moore** – Police Chief, City of Rocky Mount
- **Mr. Mark Richardson** – Commissioner, Rockingham County Board of Commissioners
- **Mr. Nick Sojka** – School Board Attorney, Cumberland County Schools
- **Mr. Fernando Solano Valverde** – ESL Kindergarten Teacher, South Lexington School, Lexington City Schools
- **Mr. Michael Williams** – Director, Turning Point Workforce Development Board
- **Dr. Stelfanie Williams** – President, Vance-Granville Community College
- **Mr. Brad Wilson (Chair)** – Former CEO, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of NC
- **Hon. Leslie Winner** – Former Executive Director, Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation
- **Ms. Henrietta Zalkind** – Executive Director, Downeast Partnership for Children

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<sup>1</sup> Commission members' positions and organizations are from the time of appointment in November 2017.



STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA  
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

ROY COOPER  
GOVERNOR

Governor Cooper,

On behalf of my eighteen colleagues on the Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education, I am pleased to share with you our recommendations on actions the state must take in order to meet its constitutional obligation of ensuring all students have access to a sound basic education.

Since November 2017, the Commission has worked diligently to develop these recommendations, meeting fourteen times as a full group and numerous times in work groups. We have heard from dozens of local, state, and national experts who have provided invaluable information and recommendations on the key areas outlined in the courts' rulings in the *Leandro* case.

Throughout our work, the Commission has been guided by the belief that a strong public education system is the key to a well-educated workforce and a well-informed citizenry. The success of North Carolina, economically and as a society, depends on a public education system with adequate resources to prepare our students to contribute to society. Providing a sound basic education is not just our constitutional obligation; it is our moral obligation to our children and their future.

In developing these recommendations, the Commission was organized into five work groups focused on the areas critical to ensuring a sound basic education: Finance and Resources; Teachers; Principals; Early Childhood and "Whole Child"; and Assessments and Accountability. Thus, the Commission's recommendations are organized across these five areas.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve our state's public school students through our work on the Commission. Your leadership has created a unique opportunity for our state to create a robust, collaborative plan of action to ensure every student is guaranteed access to a sound basic education. My Commission colleagues and I stand ready to continue our partnership with you to ensure constitutional compliance for all children in our state.

Sincerely,

Brad Wilson  
Chair  
Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education

## Finance and Resources Recommendations

Core values that should be reflected throughout a constitutionally compliant public school finance system:

- To ensure that LEAs have sufficient personnel and the best, most qualified staff possible to provide a sound basic education, the state should maintain some form of an allotment system, including position allotments, for staffing K-12 public schools and funding school systems.
- To ensure that educators are compensated adequately across the state and across experience levels, the state should set and maintain a robust statewide salary schedule that is sufficient to attract and retain high quality educators in districts throughout the state.
- To account for the diversity of costs, student needs, and revenue-raising capacity in LEAs across the state, the state's school finance system should include mechanisms to ensure that each LEA has enough (adequate) funding to provide a sound basic education to all of its students. Resources should be continually adjusted so that a student's race and ethnicity, geographic location, and family income level do not limit his or her access to a sound basic education.
- The state's school finance system should provide public schools with adequate funding and appropriate flexibility in ways that will best meet their needs, while also ensuring accountability and transparency in how those funds are spent.
- The state's school finance system should be designed to meet the funding needs of schools and LEAs today and include a process for updating funding so that the system is effective and adequate in the future.

Based on those core values and the Commission's work over the past 18 months that has determined that the state's current funding formula is not sufficient to ensure every student has access to a sound basic education, the Finance and Resources Work Group recommends the following adjustments:

1. Determine an adequate level of funding in order to provide a sound basic education to every student, accounting for individual student needs, the concentration of high-needs students in schools and LEAs, and the importance of high quality early childhood education.
2. The state has the obligation to provide sufficient resources to districts to allow them to attract and retain principals, teachers, and staff who are able to deliver a sound basic education to the students in the district. This requires a determination of the appropriate balance between state and local funding, and a consideration of the capability of the county, particularly low-wealth counties, to provide local funding.
3. Adjust the allotment system with the goals of providing more funding to support high-needs students and of consolidating allotments to provide appropriate flexibility to LEAs so that they can effectively meet the needs of students.

4. To meet the academic, physical, and mental health needs of students and to ensure that our schools are safe and supportive learning environments, the state should provide sufficient funding to ensure that schools are staffed with specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) at the nationally recommended ratios. School districts should be given appropriate flexibility in SISP position allotments so that they may strategically hire SISP staff to best meet the needs of their students. Such allotments should not be used for other purposes.
5. Child nutrition is an integral aspect of a sound basic education, and the state should ensure that adequate funding and effective delivery systems are available to provide access to free breakfast and lunch programs for all students with needs.
6. A safe, healthy, and secure learning environment is a critical and necessary part of a sound basic education. Under current statutes, the state is responsible for fully funding the operational expenses of public schools, and local governments have the responsibility to provide for capital and infrastructure needs to the extent they are capable. The decline in state funding support for our public schools has resulted in local governments having to cover the costs of more operational expenses, which has led to a strain on their ability to cover capital and infrastructure needs. The state must fully fund the operational expenses of public schools to ensure every student has access to a sound basic education as required by the Court. Since some local governments are not fully capable of providing for capital and infrastructure needs, the state should develop robust and dedicated sources of funding for recurring statewide support for capital, infrastructure, and technology needs, especially for school districts in low-wealth counties.
7. Implement statewide salary schedules for teachers, school administrators, and instructional support personnel to ensure that they are adequately compensated and given the necessary incentives and professional development opportunities to grow professionally, to remain in the profession, and to work in high-needs schools and districts.
8. Ensure that districts have sufficient funding, staff capacity, and access to professional development and technical assistance for district and school administrators to make evidence-based, informed decisions and to ensure they have the operational capacity to effectively utilize local, state and federal sources of funding.
9. Ensure that the Department of Public Instruction has sufficient funding and staff capacity to enable the agency to support school districts in providing a sound basic education to all students.
10. Public charter schools were created to be laboratories of innovation to help improve public education and provide alternative learning environments for students. There is a concern that the expansion of charter schools has begun to place a financial and planning burden on public schools in school districts. Given that the state is obligated to ensure that every public school student has access to a sound basic education, the state should provide adequate funding for all students in a way that does not have an adverse effect on the ability of school districts to provide a sound basic education. To achieve this goal, the state should conduct a study on the best and most appropriate ways to fund charter schools while maintaining the opportunity for every student to have access to a sound basic education as required by law and the Court.

## Teacher Recommendations

Recommendations regarding *Leandro's* mandate to staff every classroom “with a competent, certified, well-trained teacher who is teaching the standard course of study by implementing effective educational methods that provide differentiated, individualized instruction, assessment and remediation to the students in the classroom.”

*Note: Excellent principal leadership; social, emotional, and health support for students; and a reasonable, lower pressure assessment system are all necessary to improve teacher retention and are being addressed by other working groups.*

An adequate number of teaching positions, teacher assistants and instructional support personnel<sup>2</sup>

- The State should fund enough teacher positions to allow for differentiated, individualized instruction depending on the needs of the students attending each school.
- The State should provide enough teaching assistants and instructional support personnel to enable each student to receive appropriately differentiated, individualized instruction and to adequately support teachers.
- Each school district should have adequate flexibility in allocating these resources to enable the district to meet the needs of the particular students and teachers in each school.

## Recruitment

### 1. Expand the North Carolina Teaching Fellows Program

- a. Over the next four years, increase the NC Teaching Fellows Program funding annually from the current 200 slots per year to 1,000 per year. If there are more applicants than available slots, priority should be given to students who agree to teach in content areas with the most severe shortages and students who agree to teach in low wealth school districts or high poverty schools<sup>3</sup> for the payback period<sup>4</sup>.
- b. Provide scholarships to significantly more prospective teachers but keep the program prestigious.
- c. Ensure that no Teaching Fellow has a payback period of more than 1 year for each year he/she receives the scholarship.
- d. Expand the program beyond the current focus on science, mathematics, and special education to all areas of certification.

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<sup>2</sup> By “instructional support personnel,” we mean media, reading or math, and technology specialists, etc., not student support personnel such as social workers, psychologists, nurses, etc., who are being addressed by other working groups.

<sup>3</sup> By “high poverty school” we mean a school in which 75% or more of the students qualify for free or reduced priced lunch or a school meeting such other future equivalent definition as The State Board of Education may determine. The state should closely monitor any attempt by an LEA to alter the student enrollment of a school in an effort to meet this threshold for eligibility to receive to additional benefits under these recommendations. Any such efforts, especially those that might result in the increased segregation of schools, should be prohibited if it is determined that an effort has been made to increase the concentration of poverty in order to qualify for benefits.

<sup>4</sup> This preference would be given to certified teachers who agree to teach or are teaching in charter schools with high concentrations of poverty but not to teachers who agree to teach, or are teaching, in low wealth districts in charter schools that do not have high concentrations of poverty.

- e. Expand the program beyond the five current institutions of higher education (IHEs), particularly to minority serving institutions, and to additional regions of the state. Maintain the program’s focus on the most effective, high quality teacher education programs in the state that, at a minimum, should be fully accredited programs based at IHEs.
  - f. Provide multi-year state planning and implementation grants to enable IHEs to improve their preparation programs. Interested IHEs would submit applications and improvement plans to the Teaching Fellows Commission.
  - g. Provide resources for a statewide network to provide supplemental programming for Teaching Fellows at all participating IHEs.
2. Create and fund a statewide entity to coordinate and enhance efforts to recruit, place, and retain teacher candidates and beginning teachers among IHEs and school districts.
- a. Establish as a separate entity, as in South Carolina, or house it within an existing entity selected through a Request for Proposal (RFP).
  - b. Major tasks could include:
    - i. developing and implementing a plan to recruit competent college students and graduates into effective, high-quality, accredited teacher certification programs; and develop and place more teachers of color, teachers committed to rural areas of the state, and teachers committed to teaching in low wealth, low performing, and high poverty schools;
    - ii. implementing evidence-based, credit-awarding programs that encourage high school students to prepare for careers in teaching; and
    - iii. operating, maintaining, and expanding the TEACH NC website developed by DPI and BEST NC.
3. Provide multi-year innovation grants to IHEs or IHE-school district partnerships to experiment with ways to encourage non-education majors and students majoring in high-need academic areas to become education majors or add teacher certification to their current major. Provide funds to evaluate these experiments and disseminate lessons learned.

### Preparation

- 1. Adopt and follow a strategic, long-term plan for preparing highly qualified teachers that relies on available empirical evidence. The plan should prioritize direct investments in teacher education programs at IHEs across the state that are fully accredited, or to institutions that are partnering with those IHEs, and should hold those IHEs accountable for preparing teachers that are ready to teach a broad array of students. The state should move away from short-term, “put warm bodies in schools at any costs” approach. The State should:
  - a. Increase the percentage of the teacher workforce produced by public and private North Carolina IHEs to 70 percent within 6-8 years;
  - b. Provide adequate funding to IHEs to increase the number of NC prepared teachers committed to teaching in NC;

- c. Work with IHEs to right-size their teacher education faculty to accommodate increased enrollments in teacher education programs following a decade of severe declines in enrollments, and provide resources needed to enable IHEs and their LEA partners to improve the quality of their teacher preparation programs;
  - d. Define the necessary characteristics and support for high quality programming delivered in cooperation between bachelor's degree granting IHEs and community colleges.
2. State-funded or approved preparation programs should prepare all their teacher-graduates to be able to effectively deliver differentiated, culturally relevant instruction within their certification areas to all students. Coordinate an effort to develop common guidelines for preparing teachers, especially at the elementary level, to be able to teach reading and mathematics effectively to a broad array of students.
  3. Develop, fund, and evaluate a pilot program that provides teachers with education degrees a high-quality post-BA residency in low wealth districts or high poverty schools. Teachers would receive a stipend, additional mentoring support, and complete their master's degree in exchange for 3 additional years of service in a low wealth school district or a high poverty school.

### Placement

1. Provide annual recruitment bonuses, totaling \$10,000 over four years, to new certified teachers who commit to teach in a low wealth school district or high poverty school for four years. This recruitment bonus should also be paid to a certified teacher who meets current established indicators of high quality, transfers from a school that does not have a high concentration of poverty to a high poverty school and commits to staying there for four years. At district's election, bonuses may be paid in even increments (\$1,250 per semester) or in graduated amounts after the teacher successfully completes each semester (ex. \$500 after each semester in year one, \$1,000 after each semester in year two, \$1,500 after each semester in year three, and \$2,000 after each semester in year four). The State should fund these bonuses on a sliding scale depending on the resources of the school district, with the State paying between 50 percent and 100 percent of the cost.<sup>5</sup>
2. Develop and fund a state loan repayment program, into which prospective education students can be accepted as early as college sophomores or second year community college students, that repays 20 percent of a certified teacher's student loans each year for up to five years, for teachers who teach in a high poverty school or a low wealth district. First generation college students should be prioritized. Teachers who are in their first five years of teaching who are teaching in high poverty schools or in a low wealth district would also be eligible for this state loan repayment program<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> See explanation of sliding scale below.

<sup>6</sup> Certified teachers who teach in high poverty charter schools are also eligible for this state loan forgiveness program.



3. Issue an RFP and provide funding to support up to four long-term, strategic Grow-Your-Own-Teacher partnerships. The RFP would be competitive, and proposals would be evaluated on merit, as well as the geographic area served. Partnerships could include school district(s)/local communities and community colleges and/or IHEs. Each proposal would integrate best practices for the recruitment, preparation, induction, professional development, and retention of their teachers; as well as explicitly target increasing the diversity of the teaching workforce. Partnerships would be funded for 5 years, and funding would include annual formative assessments and formal evaluations at appropriate intervals conducted by external evaluators.

### Induction

1. Expand the North Carolina New Teacher Support Program (NC NTSP). Provide full NC NTSP services to all beginning teachers in low wealth school districts and in all high poverty schools<sup>7</sup>, for each teacher's first three years, with state funding provided on a sliding scale depending on the resources of the school district, with the state paying between 50 percent and 100 percent of the cost<sup>8</sup>.

### Teacher Compensation

1. Eliminate the "teaching penalty" across NC over the next five years. Commission an NC-specific wage comparability study to determine comparable pay for teachers in comparison to other professions which require similar education, credentials, responsibilities, skills, etc. Given the results of similar studies, it is highly likely the study will find a significant gap in earnings of K-12 teachers in NC compared to workers with similar education and work experiences, who work in comparable careers.
2. Pending the recommended study, the state should move teacher pay (including teachers who are paid by district funds) to the level of other college graduates in NC.
3. Provide increased compensation for advanced credentials that are correlated with more effective teaching (e.g. National Board Certification, content-based master's degrees).
4. Provide incentive pay for teachers with certification areas in which there are severe shortages, and for teachers in low wealth school districts or high poverty schools<sup>9</sup>. This incentive pay should be on a sliding scale between 20% and 10%.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> High poverty charter schools should be eligible to enroll their certified beginning teachers in the NC NTSP with funding provided by the State in accordance with the sliding scale explained below.

<sup>8</sup> See explanation of sliding scales below.

<sup>9</sup> This increased compensation will increase the LEA ADM amount, and charters will automatically benefit from these funds that go to the LEA (even if they are not serving any high needs students), so teachers in charter schools, even those who are not required to be certified, and who are not paid on the teacher salary schedule, should not also receive this incentive pay.

<sup>10</sup> See explanation of sliding scales below.

## Teacher Support and Retention

1. Respect teachers as professionals by engaging them in shared decision-making and leadership at the school- and district-levels and empowering them at the classroom-level to meet the needs of their students. Train and develop administrators so they have the capacity to create these positive teaching and student learning conditions.
2. Provide adequate funds to school districts for relevant, integrated teacher professional development and enough paid teacher work days in the calendar for school districts to provide collaborative teacher and principal professional development without removing teachers from the classroom during instructional time.

## Career Pathways

1. Expand grant funding for school districts to develop, implement, and scale career pathways plans. The following actions should be taken to enable the successful development of career pathways programs:
  - a. Provide class size waivers and other flexibility as necessary for school districts to implement career pathways experiments or plans.
  - b. Continue to provide/expand funding for formative assessment and evaluation of career pathways programs and the dissemination of lessons learned.
  - c. Provide ongoing funding to low wealth school districts for salary supplements or the support personnel necessary to sustain implementation of successful career pathways plans.
  - d. Provide the resources for school districts that are experimenting with career pathways to collaborate with each other.
  - e. Provide grant funding for LEAs that have successfully implemented career pathways programs to partner with smaller LEAs that do not have the resources to develop these programs.
  - f. Provide funding for teacher and principal leadership development to increase the pool of teachers and principals who can successfully implement leadership roles in career pathways plans.

## Sliding Scales

The sections on the New Teacher Support Program, placement bonuses, and incentive pay all recommend that the State fund them in low wealth counties, and high poverty schools that are not in low wealth counties, on a sliding scale.

We recommend the following framework for the sliding scales, based on using the State's current method for determining low wealth counties for purposes of the Low Wealth School Fund. A three year rolling average of the county's percent of average county wealth should be used to provide predictability and stability:

1. The counties that have <75% of the average county wealth, will get 100% of the assistance that is being proposed (100% of the cost of NTSP, \$10,000 placement bonus, 20% incentive pay).
2. For the counties that are >75% and <100% of wealth, the assistance will be reduced by 10%, in four 6-percentage points of wealth increments, thus avoiding a cliff. A county with 75-81% of average wealth would get 90% of the assistance, one with 81-87% of average wealth would get 80%, one with 87-93% would get 70%, one with 93-<100% of wealth would get 60%.) For example, a county with 83% of average wealth would get 80% of the cost of NTSP, an \$8,000 placement bonus, and 16% incentive pay.
3. If a county has 100% or more of the average wealth (and therefore is not considered a low wealth county), it will get 50% of the assistance, but only for those schools in that county that have high concentrations of poverty (50% of the cost of NTSP, \$5,000 placement bonus, 10% incentive pay.)

## Principal Recommendations

1. Align the state's school administrator preparation standards with the National Education Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards from the National Policy Board for Educational Administration.
2. Require full-time, year-long internships for students seeking a school administrator certification and provide stipends and/or salaries for these students.
3. Ensure that school administrator training includes information on:
  - a. Early brain development and appropriate practices for early childhood learning
  - b. Social-emotional needs of students
  - c. Role of specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) and how to effectively leverage SISP in supporting student health and wellness.
  - d. Teacher retention and support
  - e. Collaborative leadership and decision-making
  - f. Community engagement
  - g. Instructional leadership
  - h. School safety
4. Under the recently consolidated NC Principal Fellows and Transforming Principal Preparation Program, scale preparation programs like the Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) and Transforming Principal Preparation Program (TP3) pilot programs, such that every school district has a partnership with at least one principal preparation program. In scaling these programs, the state needs to ensure that the replicated programs are of the same quality as the pilot programs. These preparation programs should be focused on training potential school administrators selected by district leadership based on their leadership potential and ability to serve in high-needs schools. Programs should:
  - a. be of high-quality and renewed based on the quality of their graduates;
  - b. provide a full-time, full-year, paid internship and ensure that candidates will not be subject to a loss in pay during their internship year; and
  - c. be strategically focused on recruiting, preparing, and supporting a geographically and demographically diverse group of school administrators to help ensure that our state's school administrators are more representative of the students they are serving.
5. Create a formal statewide mentorship program for beginning assistant principals and principals. The program would provide opportunities for veteran principals on sabbatical or recently retired principals to coach beginning school administrators.
6. Expand professional development opportunities for superintendents, district administrators, and school administrators by providing state and/or federal funding for existing professional development opportunities and for the development of new professional development opportunities. Professional development for superintendents and district administrators should be focused on effective supports for school administrators and capacity-building around effectively utilizing resources to support schools.

7. Revise the principal salary schedule with more of an emphasis on experience and to provide more incentives for principals to pursue school leadership opportunities that best meet their leadership strengths (such as remaining as an elementary school principal or leading a low-performing school).
8. Revise the allotment formula for assistant principals to both increase the number of state-funded assistant principals and provide flexibility in the use of funds to build more school leadership capacity.

## Early Childhood / “Whole Child” Recommendations

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 . . .”<sup>11</sup> 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.

- Build the early childhood educator pipeline for birth through third grade.
- 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 access to early intervention.
- Scale up the NC Pre-K Program to serve all eligible at-risk four-year-olds.
- Ensure that elementary schools are ready to meet the needs of all children in the early grades.
- 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. Build the early childhood educator pipeline for birth through third grade.
  - a. 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.

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<sup>11</sup> *Hoke Cty. Bd. Educ. v. State*, No. 95 CVS 1158 (Oct. 25, 2000)

- b. 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.
  - c. Increase state funding for wage supplement programs for early childhood educators, including the Child Care WAGES and Infant-Toddler Educator AWARDS programs.
  - d. Increase the quality and stability of the public school educator workforce in the early grades and increase the number of educators of color.
    - i. 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.
    - ii. *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.*
  - e. 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.
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.
- a. 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.
  - b. Expand access to developmental screenings, including social-emotional screening, to ensure screening for all children birth to age 5.
  - c. Support high-quality early education programs.
  - d. 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.
3. Expand access to early intervention.
- a. 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.
  - b. 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.

4. Scale up the NC Pre-K Program to serve all eligible at-risk four-year-olds.
  - a. Increase state funding to serve all eligible at-risk four-year-olds.
    - i. Implement strategies to ensure equity of access in communities of color and in communities whose first language is not English.
  - b. Increase state per child payment rates and local administrative rates to support the true cost of providing NC Pre-K.
    - i. 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.
    - ii. The allowable local administrative rate should be at least the federal allowable administrative rate.
    - iii. Continue to maximize the public-private mixed delivery system responsive to community needs.
    - iv. End the TANF transfer and the resulting match requirement on Smart Start.
  - c. 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.
    - i. 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.
    - ii. 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.
  
5. Ensure that elementary schools are ready to meet the needs of all children in the early grades.
  - a. 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”*
  - b. 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.
    - i. This recommendation should align with Commission recommendations on principals, with an emphasis on the specific needs in elementary school.



- c. Fund instructional assistants in the early grades, targeting first to high-need elementary schools. Include instructional assistants in schools' professional learning for literacy.
- d. 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.
  - i. 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.
- e. 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.
- f. Review and revise accountability measures in the early grades to ensure a culture of continuous quality improvement.
  - i. Ensure that the way effectiveness is measured is culturally relevant and meaningful to educators, families, students, and other stakeholders.
- g. Use a common, comprehensive formative assessment model in K-3. Methods of assessment should be appropriate to the developmental stages and experiences of students.
- h. 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.
- i. Ensure districts have the resources and capacity to support effective transitions and alignment of early learning experiences for children.
  - i. Support aligned, evidence-based, developmentally appropriate early learning curricula.
  - ii. Use transition planning for effective transitions from Pre-K and other early childhood programs into kindergarten and the early grades.
- j. 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.<sup>12</sup> Resources should include:

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<sup>12</sup> 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](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>)

- i. 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;
  - ii. Sufficient dedicated time during the school day focused on literacy instruction;
  - iii. 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;
  - iv. Ongoing professional development on the science of reading and evidence-based reading instruction;
  - v. 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.
- k. Require low-performing school districts to include an early childhood improvement plan as a component of their required plans for improvement.
  - l. The Department of Public Instruction should include an assessment of early childhood learning as part of its comprehensive needs assessment process for districts.
  - m. 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.
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.
- a. 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.
  - b. 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.
  - c. 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.
  - d. 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.

- e. 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.
- f. Connect the data systems for birth through age five programs to data systems for public schools to support vertical alignment and transitions.

## Assessment and Accountability Recommendations

The state's assessment and accountability system plays a critical role in monitoring whether students are receiving a sound basic education. The assessment and accountability system provides information on whether students are at or above grade level in the knowledge and skills outlined in the state's Standard Course of Study (i.e. proficiency, which is the metric identified by the court as sufficient for having received a sound basic education). Just as important, the state's system also provides information on how much a student has learned in a given school year compared to their knowledge and skills at the end of the previous school year (i.e. student growth). Both of these accountability measures are important for helping schools, districts, and policymakers better understand which schools are providing a sound basic education and which schools need additional supports and resources.

However, public education is about more than just student performance on standardized assessments. A strong public education system is also important for ensuring a well-informed and engaged citizenry, a prosperous and prepared workforce, and a robust and vibrant democracy. To that end, the state should consider making the following adjustments to its assessment and accountability system.

1. Take advantage of the flexibility granted under the *Every Student Succeeds Act* to include multiple measures of school performance in the state's accountability system to help provide a more balanced, data-informed, and student-focused look at how schools are performing. These measures could be focused on:
  - a. Chronic absenteeism
  - b. School climate
  - c. Student discipline (i.e. suspensions and other discipline actions disaggregated by various demographics and offenses not as a punitive measure but as a way to identify successes and areas for improvement)
  - d. Extended-year graduation rates (i.e. 6- and 7-year graduation rates)
  - e. College- and career-readiness
2. Create a plan for a more balanced statewide assessment system that can provide standards-aligned assessments to inform classroom learning and assist teachers in differentiating instruction, like NC Check-Ins and/or other formative assessments, as well as summative assessments for accountability. Assessments should be data-informed and student-focused.
3. Discontinue the School Performance Grades and create a new set of school and district accountability metrics that provide understandable and publicly available information on student performance and that includes information separately on the percent of students proficient and student growth on state assessments.

4. Ensure that the Department of Public Instruction has sufficient staff and resources to provide multi-year, data-driven supports for turning around low-performing schools and districts that includes:
  - a. A comprehensive needs assessment
  - b. School improvement planning with focus on continuous improvement
  - c. School leader and teacher professional development
  - d. School leader and teacher in-school coaching
  - e. Engagement of the school community, including families
5. Endorse the state's focus on improving 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading proficiency and the NC Early Childhood Foundation's Pathways to Grade Level Reading measures of success and action plan for ensuring that all 3<sup>rd</sup> graders are proficient in reading. To achieve those goals, the state must ensure that the state-supported K-2 literacy assessments currently being used in districts across the state remain formative assessments and are not used for accountability purposes.
6. The State Board of Education, in collaboration with the Department of Public Safety, should create a statewide definition of the roles and responsibilities for School Resource Officers (SROs) and implement statewide training to support SROs in carrying out those roles and responsibilities. The statewide definition and training should draw upon national and state-level models for effectively incorporating SROs in school environments.