



## NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading

### November 22, 2019 Stakeholder Meeting Report

One hundred Pathways Partners packed into a sold-out room to think together about how to operationalize the [Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Action Framework](#) at the fifth annual Pathways stakeholder meeting on Friday, November 22.



Pathways Partners are endorsing the Framework! If your organization is ready, [complete this short survey to give a thumbs-up to the Pathways Measures of Success Framework and the Pathways Action Framework](#).

See Appendix A for the agenda for the day. Attendees:

- Grounded the conversation in racial equity, learning from and engaging with families as genuine partners in systems change, and taking a cross-sector, birth-through-age-eight approach to early literacy.
- Heard updates on early childhood data development work facilitated by Pathways in 2019.
- Learned about statewide initiatives to operationalize portions of the Action Framework, including building a comprehensive social-emotional health system for young children and co-creating a shared structure for listening to and learning from families.
- Shared their knowledge on what is already happening in NC on the Pathways Actions, including key players and barriers to moving forward.
- Heard from candidates in the 2020 race for NC state superintendent of public schools on how they could see NC moving forward on operationalizing the education system Actions in the Action Framework.

Attendees represented government agencies, nonprofit organizations, the private sector, foundations, and research institutions. Expertise spanned health, family support, early learning environments, K-12, policy, and a broad array of disciplines. See Appendix B for the registration list.

This report shares an overview of the meeting and the results of a full group action mapping activity.

Thanks to Blue Cross Blue Shield NC for hosting the meeting at their offices in Durham.

## Welcome



Muffy Grant, Executive Director of the NC Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF), welcomed attendees with a story about Nakala, pictured below at three months of age.

A resident of Flint, Michigan during the water crisis there, Nakala was exposed to lead through the tap water used to mix her infant formula. Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, Nakala's doctor, also pictured below, is the pediatrician who broke the story about lead in Flint's water, after conducting her own hastily-designed study of her patients' lead levels before and after the city switched from one water source to another to save money. Dr. Mona has since been awarded MIT's Academic Disobedience award, because she said Flint babies didn't have the months it would take to have her research peer-reviewed and published in an academic journal. Instead, she put on her white coat and held a press conference to share her findings.



Muffy shared that Dr. Mona was right – brain development in young children happens fast and environments matter. Whether it's being safe from abuse and neglect, having safe and stable housing, having access to doctors and dentists, getting good early care and education, living in a family and a community whose basic needs are met, or – like Nakala – having clean water to drink, what happens to young children impacts the development of their brains and bodies.

Through the Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative, we – together – focus on third grade reading proficiency as a proxy of overall child and family well-being. Because we know reading on grade level takes not just a great reading teacher, but a whole range of health, education and family supports, and a system based in equity that works intentionally to ensure that every child – particularly those facing the most structural barriers to opportunity – is supported for school and life success.

Muffy shared the latest data on end of third-grade reading outcomes in North Carolina, including some concerning trends:

- NC's proficiency scores put us in the middle of the pack, compared to other states
- Scores have declined over the past five years
- The status quo system is failing some groups of students, particularly Black boys

She reminded attendees that there is reason for hope and excitement. We understand child development and brain science more than ever before, and research has shown us what works for improving early literacy – a broad portfolio of investments in:

- Health and Development on Track, Starting at Birth
- Supported and Supportive Families and Communities
- High Quality Birth-through-age-Eight Learning Environments, with Regular Attendance

Finally, Muffy invited Pathways partners to spend a few hours learning about and celebrating the progress we have all made together through the Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative, and to think about how to operationalize the Action Framework going forward.

## Pathways 101: How We Got Here



Mandy Ableidinger, Policy and Practice Leader for NCECF, has guided the Pathways initiative over the last three years. She gave an overview of the work to date.

Pathways' vision is that all North Carolina children, regardless of race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status, are reading on grade-level by the end of third grade, and all children with disabilities achieve expressive and receptive communication skills commensurate with their developmental ages, so that they have the greatest opportunity for



life success. Pathways is an initiative of the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, in collaboration with NC Child, The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc., and BEST NC.

When Pathways began, at a [stakeholder meeting in 2015](#), we asked if there was interest in pursuing possibility. What would be possible if . . .

- We adopted shared, whole-child, birth-to-eight measures that put children on a pathway to grade-level reading?
- We coordinated strategies to support children's optimal development beginning at birth?
- We aligned policies and practices that were rooted in how children develop?

Pathways Partners answered with a resounding "Yes!" and came to the table from all different types of agencies and organizations that impact children's and families' lives. From an original group of about 90 representatives, Pathways has grown to over 500 people having participated in some way. Pathways Partners include state and local child and family agencies, early educators, family services providers, pediatricians and other medical professionals, funders in the early childhood space, policy think tanks, universities, nonprofits, advocacy groups, businesses, and thinkers from both sides of the political aisle. NCECF has been and continues to be excited to be able to provide the space and facilitation to foster successful collaborative work across representatives from so many sectors.

There have been three phases of the work so far, each kicked off with a full Pathways Partners stakeholder meeting.

- What Should We Measure? A [Data Action Team](#) identified shared birth-through-age-eight, whole child measures that research has demonstrated can move the needle on third grade reading proficiency to create the Measures of Success Framework.
- Where Should We Focus? [Learning Teams](#) looked at the NC data around those measures and, based on overall need and equity considerations, recommended a set of measures to move to action on first.
- What Should We Do? [Design Teams](#) co-created the Pathways Action Framework to help North Carolina align around policy, practice and capacity-building strategies that will shift the prioritized measures of success, particularly for children of color.

Because research and data show that there are significant disparities in children's opportunities based on race and ethnicity, income, geography and age, Pathways uses an equity lens in our work. We focus explicitly but not exclusively on *racial* equity, because race tends to be the conversation that slips off the table. If we are not naming structural racism and under- and over-advantage, then we can't begin to address them.

The hundreds of Action Team participants co-created two Pathways products:

- The [Pathways Measures of Success Framework](#), which includes 50-60 whole child, birth-through-age-eight data measures in the areas of Health, Education and Family and Community Supports.
- The [Pathways Action Framework](#), which includes Expectations that North Carolinians hold for our child and family systems and Actions that we can take to move the needle on early literacy. The Action Framework includes input from service providers in 14 communities across the state, parent input, national research on what reduces structural barriers to opportunity, and the expertise of the Design Team members. The Actions in the Framework were prioritized from hundreds of proposed strategies.

Pathways measures and recommendations are serving as a foundation for the many state-level early childhood commissions and councils that are currently proposing policy and funding reforms in NC's systems, such as:

- Leandro Commission for a Sound, Basic Education
- NC Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC)
- NC Early Childhood Action Plan
- B-3rd Interagency Council
- Essentials For Childhood NC
- myFutureNC
- Think Babies™ NC

NCECF plans to continue supporting the integration of Pathways recommendations into early childhood councils and commissions. We are also hearing from local Smart Start partnerships and Campaign for Grade-Level Reading communities – as well as representatives from other states – that are using Pathways to inform their own work.

A complete and up-to-date background on the Pathways initiative is available on the [NC Early Childhood Foundation website](#).

Mandy shared that Pathways has two tracks of work – one focused on data, and the other on policy. The next presenters shared some exciting work happening in NC on both of those tracks.

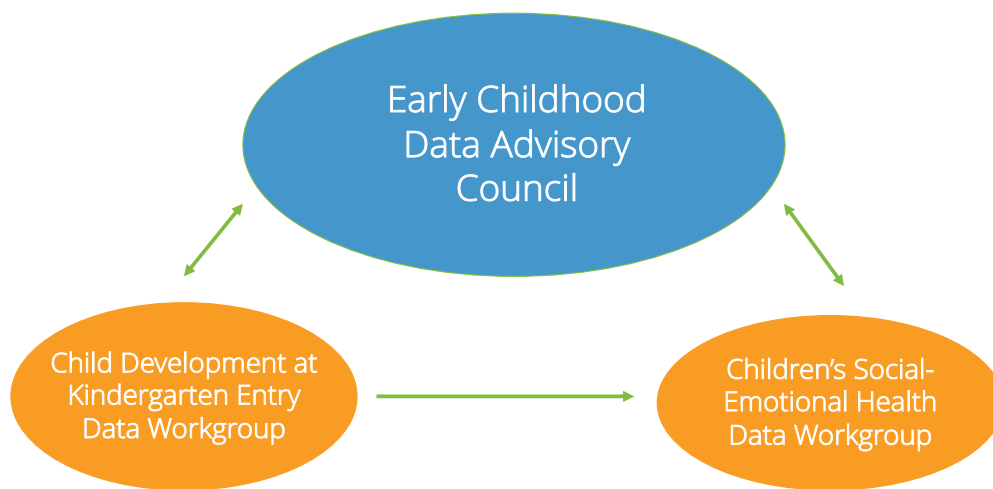
## Pathways' 2019 Data Development Work



Mary Mathew, Collaborative Action Manager with NCECF, next shared the highlights of Pathways' work this year to improve NC's early childhood data collection, analysis and use, and how an equity lens has been incorporated into that work. She shared details about the:

- NC Early Childhood Data Advisory Council
- Children's Social-Emotional Health Data Workgroup
- Child Development at Kindergarten Entry Data Workgroup

## 2019 Data Development



NCECF has joined forces with the NC Department of Health and Human Services to create and facilitate the NC Early Childhood Data Advisory Council as the responsible body for providing accountability around improving the state's early childhood data. The Council aims to continue momentum around NC's important work to improve the quality, collection, analysis and use of cross-sector early childhood data, including:

- NC Early Childhood Action Plan's measures, which are aligned with Pathways, and targets for improving outcomes by 2025
- NC's Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS), which includes longitudinal data on early childhood programs in the state
- Federal Preschool Development Grant, which included a requirement to develop an early childhood data strategy
- B-3 Interagency Council, which has shared recommendations around data improvement

As part of Pathways' data development agenda, NCECF has hosted two data workgroups in 2019 that have aimed to identify the best population-level measures of:

- Children's development at kindergarten entry
- Children's social-emotional health

The recommendations of both those workgroups will be used to inform the NC Early Childhood Action Plan's goals and targets (specifically, goals 7 and 9) and the Pathways Measures of Success.

## Policy: NC Initiative for Young Children's Social-Emotional Health



Morgan Forrester, Director of the new NC Initiative for Young Children's Social-Emotional Health at NC Child, updated attendees about her work to coordinate a collaborative response to the social-emotional health actions in the Action Framework. She laid out steps to the work, which will roll out over the next four years.

- Forming a Leadership and Steering Committee
- Co-creating a shared understanding of the social-emotional health system service pipeline for children 0-5
- Engaging stakeholders
- Reviewing literature and other states' systems
- Setting key priorities, such as building an enhanced infant and early childhood mental health workforce, improving system coordination, creating shared metrics, expanding services, and creating a policy framework
- Co-creating an Early Childhood Social-Emotional Policy Agenda
- Implementing priority actions

For more information on the initiative, Morgan can be reached at [Morgan@ncchild.org](mailto:Morgan@ncchild.org).



## Policy: Family Engagement and Leadership State and Local Coalitions



Safiyah Jackson, Early Childhood Systems Director for the NC Partnership for Children/Smart Start shared the work she is facilitating to expand family engagement and leadership at the state and local levels.

The Family Engagement and Leadership State Coalition is working to create a framework for genuine partnership with families in designing and improving early childhood systems in the state. Ten early adopter counties are piloting the work, including Beaufort-Hyde, Catawba, Guilford, Johnston, New Hanover, Orange, Randolph, Transylvania, Wake and Yadkin.

Safiyah shared that next steps in the work include:

- Aligning with NCCARE360 implementation
- Supporting three additional planning cohorts
- Supporting four new implementing cohorts
- Building a Parent Ambassador pipeline
- Supporting state-level Parent Councils

For more information on the initiative, Safiyah can be reached at [SJackson@smartstart.org](mailto:SJackson@smartstart.org).

## Operationalizing the Pathways Action Framework

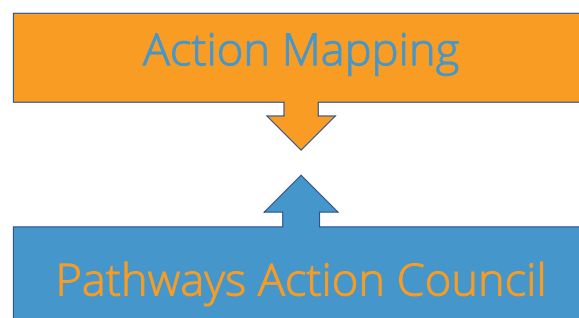
Mandy then shared some of the many ways the Pathways Action Framework is being operationalized, by NCECF and by Pathways Partners across the state, including:

- Improving early childhood data
- Fostering collaboration across state-level initiatives and embedding Pathways
- Supporting early childhood systems in learning from families and communities
- Keeping a sustained focus on racial equity in early childhood systems building
- Communicating strategically to keep Pathways relevant and valuable
- Tracking and sharing progress on how policies advance the Action Framework
- Supporting policy work on Actions in the Action Framework
- Convening Pathways Partners annually

She encouraged agencies and organizations that have not yet endorsed the Pathways work to do so, sharing that the more support that policymakers and other early

childhood leaders see behind the shared Frameworks, the more they will look to them to support their decision-making. By “endorse,” we mean that organizations recommend that the Measures of Success serve as a foundation for building North Carolina’s birth-through-age-eight system work and that the Actions be implemented. Organizations can endorse the Frameworks here: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/97K8PQX>

## Operationalizing the Pathways Action Framework



At last year’s stakeholder meeting, we asked Pathways Partners what NCECF’s role should be in moving the Pathways policy recommendations forward. Your request was that we hold the space for the expectations and actions recommended in the Action Framework and help determine where actions are moving forward and where there are obstacles and gaps.

In 2020, NCECF will support the policy track of the Pathways work by conducting and sharing action mapping on all the Actions in the Framework. There will be a specific focus on how racial inequities in early childhood are or are not being addressed in these areas.

NCECF will play a communications role by getting information from the action map out for advocates to use to decide what areas to focus on, based on where there are gaps; for funders to use to see where to fund; and for policymakers to use to see areas ripe for change.

NCECF will also create and facilitate a Pathways Action Council of experts in the action areas in the Framework to add to the action mapping, identify gaps, inform stakeholders, and point to where more action is needed to accomplish our shared goals.

Mandy invited attendees to recommend organizations or individuals to serve on the Pathways Action Council, and introduced a full group activity to add to the Pathways Action Map.

## Action Mapping Group Activity

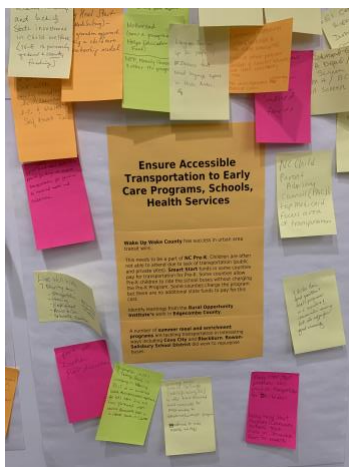
Using survey data collected from Pathways Partners last year and information contributed at the 2018 Pathways stakeholder meeting, NCECF created eight "stations" around the meeting room.

Each station included:

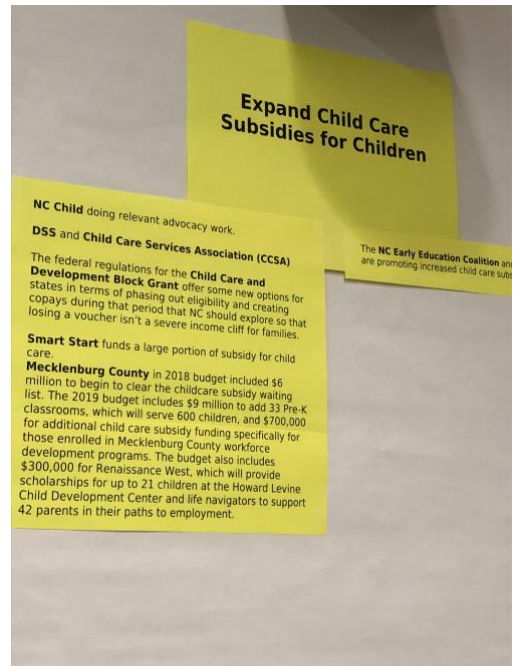
- An Expectation from the Action Framework
- A group of 5-6 related Actions from the Action Framework
- What we knew was happening already in NC to move the needle in those Action areas.

Mandy invited attendees to contribute to this Action Map by circulating around the room and adding sticky notes to each station, sharing:

- What you know is happening in these areas
- Who are the key players in these areas
- Barriers in the way of moving forward in these areas



Attendees coated the walls in sticky notes! Their input is shared in Appendix C.





*Attendees add to the Pathways Action Map.*





## Lunch, Networking, and a Surprise Visitor

After the group activity to add to the Pathways Action Map, attendees took a break to have some lunch and network. During lunch, we were delighted to get a visit from Read-a-Roo, UNC TV's Rootle mascot, and meeting attendees made sure to get their picture taken with her.

*Right: Marsha Basloe and Kristi Snuggs pose for a selfie with Read-a-Roo.*

*Below: The NCECF staff with Read-a-Roo.*





## State Superintendent Candidate Panel Discussion

After lunch, Susan Scott of UNC-TV moderated a panel of candidates for NC State Superintendent for Public Schools, who discussed their ideas on how the public school system could move forward on the Education Actions in the Pathways Action Framework. The panelists included the five Democratic candidates for the office and Representative Craig Horn, who has expressed interest in running but has not yet declared his candidacy. Catherine Truitt has also expressed interest in running and planned to attend the panel but was addressing a health issue. Since the panel was formed, several other Republican candidates have expressed their interest in running. Current superintendent Mark Johnson was invited to participate but declined.

**We are thrilled that each of the candidates has endorsed the Pathways Measures of Success and the Action Framework.**

Panelists included:

- James Barrett
- Craig Horn
- Constance Lav Johnson
- Michael Maher
- Jen Mangrum
- Keith Sutton

Susan invited candidates to share their answers to questions that were based on the Education Actions in the Action Framework, including:

**NC Pre-K:** Brain science tells us that the early years are critical. We know it's important for young children to have genuine access – including availability, convenience and affordability – to early care and education programs prior to kindergarten entry, like NC Pre-K. Counties are turning down money for expanding their Pre-K programs, and the main barriers to expansion cited include that providers do not have sufficient resources – state dollars cover only half of each NC Pre-K slot – that there is not enough space in facilities or funds to create more space, and that providers are unable to provide transportation, which eligible families need. During the Pathways process, local level providers also spoke about the need for transportation, before- and after-care, summer care and meals in care to make NC Pre-K truly accessible for families.

***What can NC do to expand NC Pre-K to more eligible children?***

**Bias in Standards, Curricula, Materials, Assessments and Accountability Systems:**

There has been research on the importance of our schools being culturally competent and free of systemic racism. That is impacted by teaching standards, curricula, materials, assessments, teachers and school leaders, accountability systems and funding formulas. Studies link positive racial identity in students to social and academic success. In part, positive racial identity comes from seeing yourself reflected in your school – your culture or language honored, images of people who look like you in the materials you learn from, etc. Half of our young children in NC are of color, but standards, curricula, materials, assessments and accountability systems have mostly been created by the dominant (white) culture. ***What can NC do to ensure that every elementary school and school district is supported to be culturally relevant for every student?***

**Social-Emotional Development and Suspension and Expulsion:** Any kindergarten teacher would tell you that it is more important to have five year olds who can manage their emotions, play well with others, and control their impulses than that they know all their ABCs and 1, 2, 3s. Research is teaching us more every day about the importance of supporting and promoting children's social-emotional health and development and how to effectively do that in a school environment. Some people are surprised to learn that children in the early grades – and even in Pre-K and younger – are suspended and expelled from school. Research shows that suspensions and expulsions fall disproportionately on children of color – specifically Black boys – and on children with disabilities. Suspensions and expulsions impact children's learning by removing them from the classroom, creating negative attitudes towards school and can even increase behavior issues. ***What can NC do to minimize or eliminate suspension and expulsion in Pre-K and the early grades?***

**Teachers and School Leaders of Color:** Research has found that children of color are more likely to excel in school when they have at least one teacher of color in the early grades, yet 80% of our teachers in NC are white and more than 80% of our school principals are white. ***What can NC do to recruit, retain and support teachers and school leaders of color?***

**High Quality Educators and School Leaders in High-Need Schools:** Teachers and principals matter – a lot. In fact, research shows that teacher quality is the most important school-based factor in student achievement, followed by school leader quality. Our best teachers and school leaders are currently incentivized – at least in terms of money – to work at wealthier, whiter districts, which can often afford to supplement the basic salary scales. ***What can NC do to flip the script and ensure that the most qualified school leaders and teachers are in schools where students and families are facing the most barriers to success?***

**Professional Development:** Research has shown that much professional development is ineffective. Yet we often look to pre-service training and professional development to increase the skills of our teachers and principals and provide continued learning. Effective PD is usually job-embedded, continuous and includes coaching or mentoring. Pathways stakeholders have recommended that elementary school teachers and principals have continuous training on child development, cultural competency and implicit bias, trauma and adverse childhood experiences, social-emotional learning, working with families, and on building specific skills that children need like coping, decision-making and self-regulation. ***Given the challenge of providing high quality pre-service and in-service education for teachers and school leaders, what can NC do to ensure that they have these critical skills?***

**Funding formulas:** There are vast differences in funding among schools, based largely on where they are located and the wealth of the families who attend. And the schools with student populations facing the highest barriers to success are often the ones expected to operate with the least funding – an inequitable approach. ***How can NC change school funding formulas to take into account the extra costs in districts with high numbers of low-income students or students with special needs in order to ensure that those with the most barriers to success have the most supports?***

## Closing and Next Steps

Muffy Grant closed out the meeting by thanking the presenters, the panel moderator, and all the attendees; inviting attendees to nominate themselves or colleagues for membership on the Pathways Action Council; and asking attendees to complete a meeting evaluation.

Stay tuned for more information in 2020 about the Pathways Action Council and action mapping around the Actions in the Pathways Action Framework.



Above and below: The ripple effects of Pathways and the initiative's strengths and value-adds were shared by attendees at the 2018 Pathways stakeholder meeting.

