

PATHWAYS to GRADE LEVEL READING POLICY & PRACTICE ACTIONS TOOLKIT



PART TWO

**ATTENDANCE IS
KEY to MAXIMIZING
THE BENEFITS of**
North Carolina's
**INVESTMENTS in
HIGH QUALITY
EARLY LEARNING
ENVIRONMENTS**

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INTRODUCTION

ATTENDANCE IS KEY to MAXIMIZING THE BENEFITS of North Carolina's INVESTMENTS in HIGH QUALITY EARLY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

This five-part toolkit is designed to provide guidance for how policymakers, advocates, community non-profits, the business community, and other stakeholders can support the well-being of all North Carolina children. Eight years ago, a broad tent of stakeholders from across the state started meeting and developed [NC's Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Initiative \(Pathways\)](#) over the course of [three years](#).

The guidance in this second part of the toolkit prioritizes [increasing the percent of young children in North Carolina who are present and engaged in learning](#), which is a central aspect of the NC Campaign for Grade-Level Reading that has been led by the staff here at the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF) since 2015. NC has invested heavily in strengthening the quality of early learning environments, and early childhood educator professionalization to provide high quality learning environments. However, this is only beneficial to the extent that children have high rates of attendance.

More than three years after the start of the pandemic, unprecedented high rates of chronic absenteeism persist [at about three times higher than it was before the pandemic](#). Turning the tide will require rebuilding many children's connections and engagement with schooling. Given NCECF's focus on birth through third grade, this means rebuilding parents' connections with their school community and strengthening their belief that being in school is central to their children's healthy development.

Refusing to Accept the New Normal

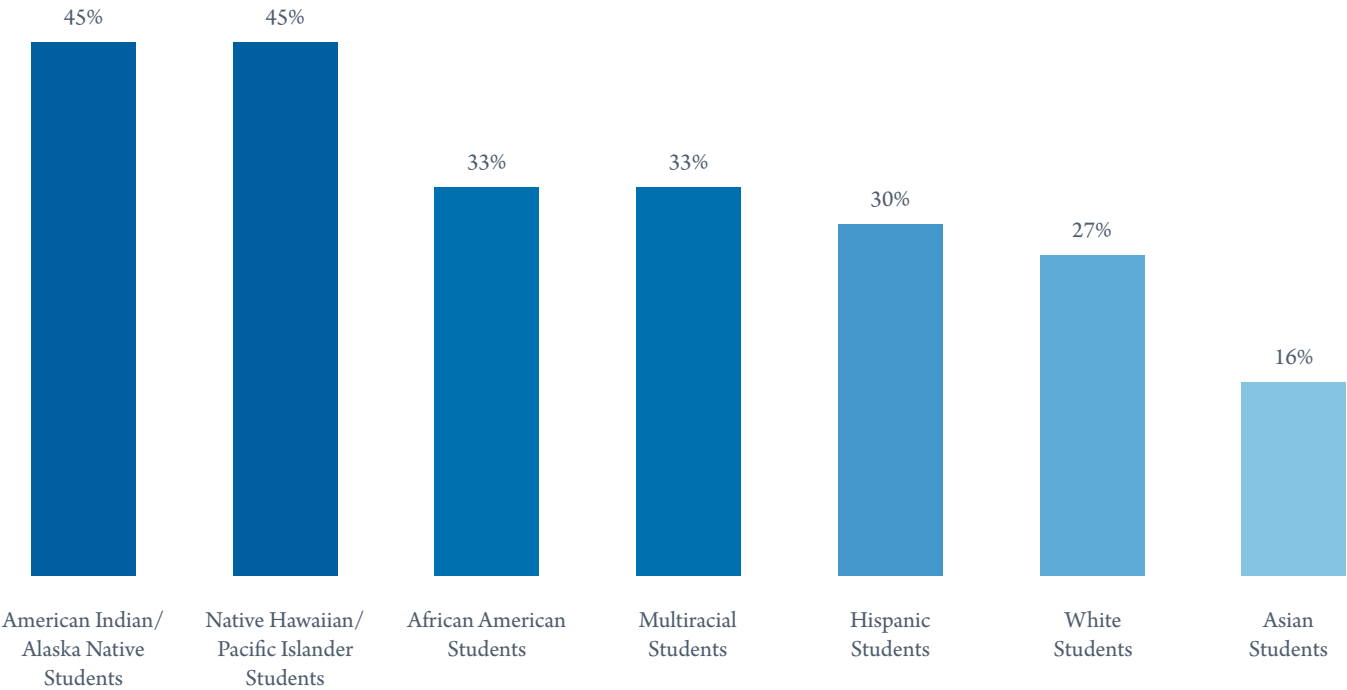
In the years before the pandemic, North Carolina policymakers were concerned about schools and districts that had a chronic absenteeism rate of 10% or more, which equals to 1 in 10 students missing 10% or more of the academic year. [Now, North Carolina has an average chronic absenteeism rate of 31%](#); that is 3 of every 10 students missing 10 or more days of school. This is detrimental to their educational and broader life outcomes because, as research shows, students who are chronically absent are at [higher risk of falling behind, scoring lower on standardized tests and leaving school altogether](#).



**3 OUT OF EVERY
10 STUDENTS ARE
MISSING 10 OR MORE
DAYS OF SCHOOL**

It is important to note that absenteeism is not equally distributed across race and ethnicity and, as *Figure 1* below shows, children from historically marginalized groups are much more likely to miss school. This indicates the need to understand and respond to group level differences in barriers to attendance.

FIGURE 1: CHRONIC ABSENCE IN THE EARLY GRADES IN NC BY RACE AND ETHNICITY, 2021-2022 ACADEMIC YEAR



Note: Figure shows the percent of students from each racial and ethnic group that missed 10% or more of the academic year.



Every NC school district has work to do to reduce its chronic absenteeism rate. **Nearly three out of every four school districts across the state reported that 23% to 39% of their elementary school students were chronically absent during the 2021-2022 academic year.** [Data for individual school districts can be found in the North Carolina School Report Card breakdown.](#)

As expected, some districts need much more targeted support than others to ensure that students are present and able to benefit from high quality instruction. Chronic absenteeism is highest in chronically under-resourced school districts.

Of the 25 districts where 40% or more of students were chronically absent, 15 of them are also districts where 25% or more of public school children live in families with incomes below the poverty level. In comparison, an average of 16% of families across the state have incomes below the poverty level, based on data from the National Center for Educational Statistics. **The district with the highest chronic absenteeism rate of 60% also had the highest poverty rate of 50%.**

The association between absenteeism and poverty means that many of our most vulnerable students are missing out on a positive developmental environment that can support their healthy development. A report by the National Center for Children in Poverty states that the effects of missing at least 10% of the school year in kindergarten [extend to the end of elementary school, for children in poverty](#).

Turning the tide on absenteeism is actionable. We support myFutureNC's [statewide goal of reducing chronic absenteeism to 11% by 2030](#). To achieve this, policymakers and educators will need to understand and respond to the fact that reducing chronic absenteeism is about reducing the [many barriers to attendance](#), such as:

- Poverty, unstable housing, and frequent moves
- Parent mental health and well-being
- Lack of reliable transportation
- Involvement with the child welfare system
- Child health and well-being
- Lack of culturally welcoming and engaging school climate

Prioritizing Early Grades Absenteeism

While efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism typically focus on adolescents, we now know that the early grades are the place to start, because as many as 25% to 50% of children in pre-kindergarten programs are chronically absent. However, it is often dismissed as an issue for immediate concern because [5-, 6-, and 7-year-olds who aren't at school aren't immediately disruptive for society](#) in the ways that adolescents are. This lack of foresight limits investment in preventative measures.

Chronic absenteeism among children during the earliest grades should be seen as a critical and actionable warning sign of later academic distress. The later grades build on skills and information learned in earlier grades, and if young children aren't there they can't learn the content. It is unwise to wait until students take their first standardized tests in the third grade to identify those in need of more intensive support.

Research suggests that [chronic absenteeism in the early grades is a fast moving snowball that quickly increases to substantial academic challenges](#). Kindergarten readiness scores are lower among students who are chronically absent in preschool, and this lower level of readiness for school is linked to academic challenges as students progress through their academic careers. Research by the National Center for Children in Poverty shows that [the same risk factors that make students more likely to become chronically absent, such as poverty-related mobility or an unstable home life, only serve to intensify the problems caused by missing school](#).



CONNECTING ATTENDANCE

[NCECF's Pathways to Grade Level Reading](#) is the result of asking what would be possible by coordinating policies and strategies across all levels of state government and types of organizations to support optimal development from birth through the end of third grade. Pathways stakeholders identified three interdependent components of children's developing environments:

1. Supporting parents to ensure that health and development is on track, beginning at birth
2. Investing in families, so that they feel supported and live in supportive communities
3. **Ensuring that all children have access to high quality birth-through-age-eight learning environments**

Consistent school attendance in the early grades is necessary for building children's sense of themselves as part of a community of learners, as well as their academic motivation and achievement. These connections can help close achievement gaps for vulnerable students. Young children, particularly those with multiple risk factors, benefit from regular attendance at high quality early education programs, where they learn to work on tasks independently and learn other behaviors that are important for school success. Strong attendance, in preschool programs, also provides opportunities to identify early warning signs of developmental and academic delays, which are much easier to remedy when identified early.



CONSISTENT SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IN THE EARLY GRADES IS NECESSARY

for building children's sense of themselves as part of a community of learners, as well as their academic motivation and achievement.

Many of the [Measures of Success shown on the Data Dashboard](#) that were identified by Pathways stakeholders are connected to school attendance. A few of the critical measures are physical health, social and emotional health, safety at home, parents' access to formal and informal supports, and school climate.

Physical health, asthma in particular, has been shown to be a strong factor in chronic absenteeism, with the severity of the asthma impacting the degree of absenteeism. Children from poorer families are both more likely to suffer from these types of chronic health issues and more likely to miss school because of these issues, than their wealthier peers.

Social-emotional health and self-regulation are closely tied to regular school attendance through multiple pathways. Children who struggle with social-emotional skills early in schooling are more likely to become chronically absent. This is, in part, because they are more likely to be disciplined in ways that remove them from the classroom, through mechanisms like suspensions and expulsions, further contributing to chronic absence.

Lack of safety at home can sometimes be the underlying cause of chronic absenteeism, which may be viewed by the child welfare system as “educational neglect.” However, it is critical to not respond to parents and caregivers with punitive actions and instead view chronic absenteeism as a symptom of broader family challenges, such as the stressors of poverty, mental health challenges, domestic violence, or substance use, that may require intervention and support.

Parents' access to formal and informal supports is critical to enabling them to cope with life's stressors in healthy ways, thereby helping them to prioritize things that are important for children's healthy development, such as school attendance.

School climate includes the extent to which the many interpersonal interactions between students, educators, administrators, and families are positive and welcoming. Schools that successfully engage with students and parents, operate as places of belonging, successfully manage transitions, and address students' non-academic barriers to learning are likely to have low levels of chronic absenteeism.

NCECF directs [North Carolina's Campaign For Grade Level Reading](#), which places attendance as one of the pillars of disrupting generational cycles of poverty by increasing the likelihood that children growing up in economically challenged, fragile and otherwise marginalized families will experience success at school. Our list of resources to advance regular school attendance provide meaningful action steps because research shows that [improving attendance is actionable](#).

IMPROVE THE ECOLOGY TO REDUCE ABSENTEEISM



The importance of viewing absenteeism through the lens of prevention is illustrated in [what Baltimore officials found when they sought to understand what's behind pre-kindergarten absenteeism](#). They found parents and caregivers who were struggling to cope with life's challenges and stressors, such as children being placed in or moved to a different foster-care placement; sick at home with asthma; the family moving out of a given school's attendance zone and not knowing that they can or how to access the program in their new neighborhood; lack of access to reliable transportation; or the child exhibiting a behavior challenge that is causing them to be excluded from school.

This complex set of barriers indicates that school districts need to utilize macro strategies that require policymakers and educators to move beyond targeting individual families to targeting the ecosystem in which families are raising children.

Creating an ecology that facilitates regular school attendance and participation for at-risk children starts with reorienting from the negative framing of managing truancy to the positive framing of promoting attendance. This shift in framing means going from nudging, demanding, and punishing families for non-attendance to asking deeper questions about the underlying reasons why children in that district and school are chronically absent.

Once we see chronic absenteeism as more than an individual student or individual family problem, a broad range of interventions that focus on how families and children are impacted by life's stressors are opened up. Even when the interventions are delivered at the individual level, they are done with consideration of the bigger picture. Let's take physical, emotional, and mental health challenges, for example. Low-income children, who suffer from physical health challenges such as asthma, are much more likely to miss school than (1) those without health challenges and (2) those with health challenges, who have access to high-quality health care. A comprehensive understanding of the challenges and policy and practice guidance are provided in [Addressing the Health-Related Causes of Chronic Absenteeism: A Toolkit for Action](#).

School climate and the extent to which children and families feel a strong sense of belonging to the school community matters tremendously in the ecology of factors that can compel high rates of attendance. They won't want to miss out on a welcoming school that supports them by problem-solving attendance challenges, and will respond to the pull of maintaining relationships with educators who make them feel like their child's presence is missed when they aren't in the classroom.

Schools with a welcoming climate will be most successful at increasing attendance when they are in districts and cities that address the logistic and material barriers to attendance. Young children at-risk for chronic absenteeism are often in households with parents who work long and nonstandard hours for low pay and are often also coping with transportation challenges and housing instability. These larger structural factors must be addressed simultaneously with any individual student-level interventions when a school district or school as a whole has a high absenteeism rate.

In some cities, crosscutting organizations like the United Way have done the work of coordinating across school, local government, and community organizations to orchestrate interventions and resources across all levels of the system. FutureEd's [Smart Strategies For Reducing Student Absenteeism Post-Pandemic](#) playbook provides a range of attendance focused interventions that can improve all aspects of the environment, in which families are attempting to raise children.

As stated on our promoting attendance page, [improving absenteeism is actionable](#), and we are learning that many of those actionable items are about much more than getting families and children to believe in the importance of schooling. It is about real-time collection and use of actionable data to identify families and at-risk children, identifying and responding to barriers to attendance with wraparound services, and utilizing family- and child-level interventions that have demonstrated effectiveness and adapting them to the cultural needs of the specific school community.

The four Pathways actions highlighted in the remainder of this *Part 2* of the five-part Toolkit are structural interventions in the education system can help to ensure that children in historically under resourced communities and members of marginalized populations are benefiting from the investments that NC has made in strengthening early learning environments:

- Recruit and Retain Educators and School Leaders of Color
- Adjust Hiring Practices to Ensure High-Quality Educators
- Eliminate or Minimize Suspension and Expulsion
- Invest in School Health and Mental Health Staff and Clinics

See Appendices A & B for a review of the core components of Pathways to Grade Level Reading and its emphasis on advancing racial equity in children's developmental outcomes.



Chronic absenteeism among children during the earliest grades should be seen as a **CRITICAL AND ACTIONABLE WARNING SIGN** of later academic distress.

PATHWAYS ACTIONS

To facilitate improvement in children's developmental contexts and experiences, Pathways stakeholders identified [44 Pathways Actions](#) that policymakers and practitioners can take to improve outcomes. These actions are the result of asking what would be possible by coordinating policies and strategies across all levels of state government and types of organizations to support optimal development from birth through the end of third grade with one central outcome: reading at grade level by the end of third grade. Pathways Actions are comprehensive and multisector because despite the focus on one shared, tangible, and galvanizing goal, Pathways is undergirded by a whole child approach with the understanding that reading scores are a transparent proxy indicator for overall child well-being and a critical predictor of future outcomes.

To ensure that the Design Team's work was grounded in the local realities across North Carolina, Pathways created a feedback loop between communities and the state-level Design Team. Participants included pediatricians, superintendents, early educators, social services providers, community college and university representatives, principals, child care center directors, and more. These conversations resulted in the creation of a matrix of hundreds of possible actions for improving outcomes in the prioritized areas of focus, with these recommendations shared with the Design Team to provide local input as they made final decisions about which actions to recommend.

This five-part toolkit will highlight several interconnected Pathways Actions in each part. *Part 2* includes the following Pathways Actions:

Expectation 3 • Education System is Accessible and High-Quality

- Action 3.6—Recruit and Retain Educators and School Leaders of Color
- Action 3.14—Adjust Hiring Practices to Ensure High-Quality Educators
- Action 3.17—Eliminate or Minimize Suspension and Expulsion
- Action 3.21—Invest in School Health and Mental Health Staff and Clinics

ACTION 3.14

Examine hiring practices and other human resources policies and adjust as needed to ensure vacancies are filled with high quality educators.

ADJUST HIRING PRACTICES to ENSURE HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATORS

Teacher vacancies impact student learning and achievement. They also require schools and districts to expend more resources on hiring and training new staff from year-to-year. It is critical that child care programs and school districts keep pace with innovative human capital innovations and best practices. Providing a livable wage is central to hiring and retaining high quality child care staff and preschool teachers and many organizations are advocating for these improvements in North Carolina. There are several ongoing initiatives to increase educator compensation and create better working environments for educators across the state. These resources are compiled by the Institute for Child Development Professionals initiatives like WAGES, which supports low-income teachers and family care providers, and reports from the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment that highlight racial wage gaps in early childhood employment.

While those efforts push forward, reviewing and adjusting hiring practices and professionalization opportunities can help to minimize vacancies and ensure students have consistent access to high-quality teachers and caregivers.

WHAT WE KNOW

Teachers are among the many factors that significantly impact student learning. Recruiting and then retaining quality candidates are key parts of a strong, professionalized workforce. Research shows that when recruitment efforts fall short, schools address teaching vacancies with options that have negative consequences for the quality of teaching—hiring individuals who are insufficiently prepared, increasing class sizes, canceling classes, using short-term substitutes, or assigning teachers from other specialties or grade levels.

Two months into the 2022-2023 fiscal year in North Carolina, there were still **MORE THAN 5,000 VACANCIES**, which is a **58% INCREASE** since 2020-2021 and a **200% INCREASE** over the 2018-2019 school year.

An important first step in recruitment is identifying vacancies early, by motivating staff to announce their intention to leave by providing a monetary incentive for early notification of resignation or retirement and a monetary penalty for late notice. This helps to ensure that late hiring timelines are not a barrier to recruitment.

A critical second step is generating a high quality candidate pool that reflects the diversity of the student population. When students see themselves among the educators in their school they are more likely to feel a strong sense of school belonging, which increases their level of engagement in learning.

A necessary third step is investing in retaining these quality educators once hired. School districts can do this by providing a livable wage and positive school climate where educators feel like they have a voice in the change and improvement process.

Dive Into the Data

Explore the need for actionable data indicators, related to policies that help retain high quality educators, such as [paid leave](#) and other metrics on the [Pathways Data Dashboard](#).

WHAT WE NEED

The critical role that staff in early childhood programs play in providing high quality education and care is under acknowledged. Public investments in early childhood education programs that acknowledge the crucial role our educators play in forming the foundation for children's success will help lessen teacher turnover and enable students to form stronger relationships with their educators.

These investments should align with strategies identified by researchers and practitioners that have been shown to [lessen teacher turnover and strengthen retention](#).

Child care and preschool classrooms across the country are [experiencing the strain of being understaffed](#) because the pipeline of trained educators and caregivers just isn't there. The result is large class sizes and burnt out educators.

Some strategies, in addition to ensuring a living wage, include:

- Changing the narrative around early childhood education jobs by promoting their status in popular discourse.
 - » NC Child is doing this by ensuring that the general public understands the importance of educators in shaping the foundation for the future.
- Boosting staff qualifications through professional development initiatives.
 - » NC's Division of Child Development and Early Education is doing this by investing in skills training that enable early educators to enhance their competencies and qualifications.
- Increasing emphasis on applied experiences during teacher training to prepare candidates for their positions.
 - » NC's statewide apprenticeship programs are doing this by providing applied learning in settings that reflect the reality of circumstances they will encounter once employed.

INITIATIVES WORKING IN THIS AREA



[Child Care Services Association](#)

is committed to ensuring accessible, affordable high-quality care for all

children and families. They improve the quality of child care in North Carolina for all children by helping families find child care, offering informational events for families, professional development opportunities and programs for providers and comprehensive child care research for policymakers.



The [Child Care WAGES® Program](#) is an education-based salary supplement program for teachers, directors and

family child care providers working with children from birth to age five, in licensed settings. The program provides financial awards after six-month periods completed in the same child care program, thus increasing the retention of participants. It rewards attained education and encourages additional coursework, supporting the professional development of the early childhood workforce.

[Visit the Pathways Action Map](#) to learn more about these and other initiatives leading efforts in this area.

ACTION 3.6

Develop a state plan to recruit and retain birth-through-third-grade educators and school leaders of color, using a variety of strategies, including financial incentives, recruitment legislation, recruitment centers, pre-college programs, and alternative certification programs targeting substitute teachers and mid-career paraprofessionals.

RECRUIT and RETAIN EDUCATORS and SCHOOL LEADERS of COLOR

Recruiting and retaining educators and school leaders of color has been shown to improve academic achievement and reduce suspension and expulsion, especially for students of color. When schools have educators and administrators that bring with them lived cultural experiences that align with the cultural diversity of the students they serve, those schools are more likely to provide culturally responsive teaching and a diverse learning environment that is inclusive for a broader range of student backgrounds.

WHAT WE KNOW

The impact of having diverse faculty and staff benefits not only students of color, but students of all backgrounds. Research illustrates how educators of color are linked to positive academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes; their use of culturally responsive pedagogical practices is a driving factor in these results. Culturally responsive teaching includes viewing student capacity as not static, prioritizing building relationships with students' families, and specializing instruction to fit individual student needs. A study by The Learning Policy Institute reports that all students, including white students, report feeling academically challenged and cared for by their teachers of color.

These benefits of having educators and school leaders of color are only available for a limited fraction of students because many barriers to recruiting and retaining educators of color still remain. These include the disproportionate burden of student loan debt, narrowly targeted teacher preparation programs, and a lack of professional support networks for educators of color.

79.5% OF NORTH CAROLINA'S K-12 TEACHER WORKFORCE IS WHITE, which is not representative of NC's student diversity in which 47.7% of students are white.***

Dive Into the Data

The most recent breakdown of educator racial and ethnic diversity across the state is based on the 2017-2018 academic year, and shows that 15% of teachers were Black, 4% were Latinx, 1.5% were American Indian/Alaska Native, and less than 1% were teachers identified as Asian and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Explore other indicators on the [Pathways Data Dashboard](#).

WHAT WE NEED

Statewide investment in programs aimed at recruiting and retaining a diverse educator workforce is crucial to minimizing the **variation in expectations for hiring qualifications and standards** across geographic areas and across early learning program types within and across states.

HOW TO SUPPORT

North Carolina's DRIVE taskforce, established in 2019 to develop an inclusive educator workforce, has come back with a **clear set of recommendations for recruiting and retaining educators of color**. Some of these recommendations include:

- Offer affordable postsecondary access through scholarships, loan forgiveness, and tuition reimbursement programs to encourage a more diverse candidate pool for teachers.
- Expand and develop entry points into the educator pipeline that are based on models with proven success in recruiting racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse educators.
- Provide sustainable investments in educator preparation programs at North Carolina's Historically Minority Serving Institutions to elevate and build capacity for increasing their impact as leaders in equity-minded educator preparation.
- Invest in state- and district-level initiatives that increase sustainability of the education profession by strengthening support networks for educators of color and providing professional development to enhance practice and foster inclusive school environments.
- Develop and sustain pathways for advancement, tailored to the needs of educators of color.
- Release an annual statewide Educator Diversity Report that tracks North Carolina's progress in developing and sustaining a representative educator workforce.

This taskforce has also drafted a **clear set of action steps** that, if implemented, will lead to an increasingly diverse educator workforce in the state of North Carolina. These recommendations and action steps can be adapted to the needs of the early care and learning workforce. For example, as policymakers make decisions about the qualifications required for prekindergarten teachers, it is important that they consider how increasing education requirements may reduce workforce diversity.

Research shows that **states that add one additional year of required education and training are less likely to have Latinx pre-kindergarten educators**. This tells us that there are structural barriers like financial support for postsecondary education and training that may make it more difficult for aspiring Latinx educators to enter—and stay—in the early learning workforce.

INITIATIVES WORKING IN THIS AREA



Profound Ladies leads in diversifying the teaching force by recruiting and retaining women who identify as Black, Indigenous, and people of color, also known as BIPOC). Teachers are supported as early as their sophomore year in college, through their critical years in education, and prior to the five year attrition mark. They center elements in their core programming to create Trauma Informed Spaces for Black, Indigenous Educators of Color and use the Transformational Coaching Approach with their educators.



NC State University's Educational Leadership Academy (NELA) seeks to increase student achievement by preparing and retaining principals in high-poverty, hard-to-staff, and historically low-performing schools. NELA creates a comprehensive leadership development and succession plan for high-need NC school districts. Each component is anchored in research-based best practices in leadership preparation and is designed to meet the specific contextualized needs of schools across the state.



The Educators of Color Network is a school-university partnership initiative created to help build a more diverse teacher workforce in North Carolina. University of North Carolina at Wilmington's Watson College of Education launched the EOC Network in 2022. The group is comprised of current and retired P-12 teachers and school leaders, university faculty, and students who work collaboratively to envision and facilitate activities to recruit students of color into the teaching profession, retain current educators of color, and engage school partners in advocacy efforts to establish a broader, more diverse network of professionals.

Visit the Pathways Action Map to learn more about these and other initiatives leading efforts in this area.

ACTION 3.17

Eliminate or minimize the use of suspension and expulsion in birth-through-third grade classrooms. Assess, identify, and address needs; screen for disabilities and refer for supports; include cultural competency into disciplinary policy; and recognize the impact of trauma on many children.

ELIMINATE or MINIMIZE SUSPENSION and EXPULSION

Suspension and expulsion in the early grades contributes to chronic absence, social-emotional health concerns, and other issues that impact children's learning and success in school. Exclusionary practices in early learning environments have the potential to set children on a path of negative developmental outcomes. As they progress through school, they are more likely to experience poor academic outcomes, increased behavior challenges, and are at higher risk for dropout and criminal-legal system involvement.

Suspensions and expulsions result in children being away from developmentally supportive learning environments. When a child is suspended or expelled, they fall behind in learning, their development of social and emotional skills may be hindered, and the experience of being excluded can create feelings of alienation from school environments. Exclusion also causes substantial harm to family economic stability because parents may lose their jobs while searching through the long waiting lists among the few alternatives for care. In many cases, the increased household financial and emotional stress leads parents to adopt harsh and punitive parenting practices, which then increases young children's display of behavioral challenges.

**BLACK CHILDREN
ACCOUNT FOR 18% OF
CHILDREN ENROLLED
in preschool but are 43% OF
CHILDREN SUSPENDED
and 38% OF CHILDREN
EXPELLED from preschool.**

WHAT WE KNOW

There is clear evidence, nationally and in North Carolina, that students of color, particularly Black students, are disproportionately suspended and expelled starting as young as preschool. There are even disproportionate rates among students based on gender and ability status. Research also shows that implicit bias plays a role in creating these disparities. They found that race and gender matter for preschool teacher's expectations of challenging behaviors. Teachers more closely observe Black students, and especially Black boys, to watch and punish for challenging behaviors. Additionally, when the preschool teacher and child were of the same race, knowing about family stressors led to increased teacher empathy for the preschooler and decreased how severe the behaviors appeared to the teacher. However, when the teacher and child were of a different race, the same family information seemed to overwhelm the teachers and the behaviors were perceived as being more severe. This finding confirms the importance of ensuring that we are training and hiring a diverse pool of early childhood educators that are representative of the students they serve.

Dive Into the Data

Explore the need for actionable data indicators related to practices that can reduce suspension and expulsion such as **social emotional screening, referrals and services** on the **Pathways Data Dashboard**.

WHAT WE NEED

North Carolina's Division of Child Development and Early Education has provided **guidance to prevent, severely limit, and work toward eventually eliminating the expulsion and suspension**. Among their recommendations is the suggestion that early childhood programs implement evidence-based practices to prevent challenging behavior including, conference with the family, and consultation with early childhood mental health specialists, behavioral consultants, and licensed therapists. NC's Partnership for Children of Cumberland County and the NC Pre-K Committee **created minimum expectations for NC Pre-K sites to prevent the suspension and/or expulsion of children with unique needs/challenging behaviors**.

HOW TO SUPPORT

Early learning educators need capacity building resources and supports that enable them to respond to challenging behaviors with developmentally supportive practices and recognize signs of developmental delay that require early intervention. One example is NC's Child Care Resource & Referral Council statewide **Healthy Social Behaviors Initiative** that helps teachers in any licensed child care center serving children ages 0 to 5 years old.

There is hope for change on the horizon, as many states, including North Carolina, take on the challenge of reducing and hopefully eliminating suspension and expulsion from early learning environments.

INITIATIVES WORKING IN THIS AREA



The **Healthy Social Behaviors Project** supports early childhood educators in birth-five classrooms in licensed child care centers to develop prosocial early childhood learning environments that help to prevent suspension and expulsion related to challenging behaviors. Behavior Specialists, Pyramid Model Fidelity Coaches and an Education Specialist serve all 100 counties across NC. Utilizing the evidence-based Teaching Pyramid Model as its framework, the project offers consultation and individualized coaching to support teachers' development of nurturing and responsible relationships, high quality supportive environments, targeted social and emotional supports and intensive interventions for those children needing additional supports to develop social-emotional competencies.

The **NC Pyramid Model Leadership Team** is tasked with creating alignment and collaboration amongst pyramid implementers (DPI Preschool Exceptional Children, DHHS Infant-Toddler Program (Part C), Healthy Social Behaviors (HSB) in Child Care), as well as advocating for a more comprehensive and seamless implementation in NC. The Team's vision is to ensure that the NC birth to eight system promotes social emotional well-being for families with young children, beginning at birth, particularly those with or at risk for disabilities, and to assure children and families have access to anti-biased, inclusive, and natural learning environments. They aim to achieve this vision by: promoting and sustaining high fidelity implementation of high-quality Pyramid Model practices through a comprehensive professional development network, prioritizing intentional family collaboration and empowerment, intentionally addressing systemic inequities in early childhood intervention and education, and supporting monitoring and evaluation systems to ensure fidelity and outcomes.

Visit the Pathways Action Map to learn more about initiatives leading efforts to advance this action.

ACTION 3.21

Invest in school physical health and mental health professionals and school health clinics. Increase school nurse ratios to the national standard in order to identify health issues early, manage connections with community providers, and serve students' families.

INVEST in SCHOOL HEALTH and MENTAL HEALTH STAFF and CLINICS

Children's mental, physical, and emotional health greatly impacts their success at school. School-based health professionals and clinics increase student access to primary and preventative health care, particularly children of color and children living in low-income households. When children can access health care, at school, many barriers, such as lack of financial resources, transportation, and scheduling conflicts for parents, are removed.

Given that during the 2021-2022 academic year, North Carolina, along with many other states, had a statewide average chronic absenteeism rate that was 3x higher than before the start of the coronavirus pandemic it is more important than ever to consider ways that schools can address the strong link between poor health and chronic absenteeism.

Only 55% of public schools reported providing diagnostic mental health assessment services to evaluate students for mental health disorders, and only 42% offered mental health treatment services, during the 2019–2020 school year.

WHAT WE KNOW

Despite the known high prevalence of trauma and mental challenges that children face, access to services is limited. The CDC reports that 1 in 6 children aged 2–8 years had a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder. In light of the increasing number of young students reporting challenges, the need for comprehensive school mental health systems that are accessible and effective for all students is clear. Without access to preventative and early-intervention services, symptoms of mental illness often escalate and become clinical conditions in later years. Schools can play a critical role in addressing this crisis.

The most comprehensive solution is school-based health centers that offer preventative and early-intervention primary, physical, dental, and mental health care. When properly staffed, these centers help treat conditions that keep children from attending school, such as asthma, diabetes, depression, and anxiety. The best estimate is that there are over 140 school-based health centers across 28 NC counties; they collectively deliver services to over 130,000 students. Though substantial, many more centers are needed in more schools to meet the number of children who lack access to preventative health care. Government, nonprofit, and private sector organizations are joining forces to increase the number of children who have access to health centers in their schools.

Dive Into the Data

There is limited availability of timely and actionable statewide data on children's physical and mental health and their access to doctors and dentists. Using [untreated tooth decay in kindergarten](#) as a proxy indicator for early health disparities, we see that 29% of American Indian, 23% of Asian, 18% of African American and Hispanic, 15% of multiracial, and 13% of white children have untreated tooth decay. Explore other indicators related to the health and well-being of NC's children on the [Pathways Data Dashboard](#).

WHAT WE NEED

Access to a school nurse has steadily improved since the 2019-2020 school year, when there were 1,399 school nurses across the state; by the 2021-2022 school year, this had increased to 1,630 school nurses. Ensuring that each school has at least one nurse is an important investment because, as reported in the [North Carolina Annual School Health Services Report](#), when a student with a health concern sees a school nurse they are more likely to remain in school.

EdNC's [landscape analysis of the ways that schools across North Carolina deliver health services](#) identified five broad categories of health service delivery in schools: school nurses, school health centers, telehealth, university partnerships, and other miscellaneous programs. They detail how these programs are operating across the state and opportunities to increase access. Telehealth was identified as an emerging model with great potential for North Carolina schools, particularly those located in rural areas. Telehealth minimizes the costs associated with maintaining a large physical space and enables advanced and specialized practitioners located in one facility to provide services to many schools.

HOW TO SUPPORT

In March of 2023, The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, in partnership with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, released the [North Carolina School Behavioral Health Action Plan](#) to address the urgent mental and behavioral health crisis facing youth through key investments in our schools.

They estimate that more than half of its youth with mental health disorders do not currently receive necessary care and more than half of the state's counties do not have a child psychiatrist. The best way to remedy these gaps in service is to meet students where they are—in their schools.

The plan describes six investments in evidenced-based strategies and pilot programs to support the behavioral health of students:

- Increasing capacity of schools to identify and address behavioral health needs through student-focused prevention and support services.
- Training school personnel to better recognize and respond to emerging behavioral health issues.
- Establishing school-based telehealth pilot programs to expand behavioral health care access for approximately 10,000 students in high need and rural districts.
- Flexible funding to local School Health Advisory Councils to support coalitions of parents, school staff and community members investing in behavioral health resources to meet local needs.
- Connecting schools and families with behavioral health partners in their community.
- Funding a new statewide electronic health record system to secure student health records and enable records to transfer when students move.

INITIATIVES WORKING IN THIS AREA



The [Assessment, Support, and Counseling Center](#), coordinated by Appalachian State University, reduces

barriers to care across Alleghany, Ashe, and Watauga Counties, by providing high quality supervised mental health services embedded within schools. They provide services, on demand, regardless of the ability to pay, develop the school mental health workforce, and advance discovery of new knowledge about the provision of effective school mental health services, especially in rural or under-resourced communities.

[Visit the Pathways Action Map](#) to learn more about these and other initiatives leading efforts in this area.

THE COMPLETE PATHWAYS TOOLKIT

PART ONE ([Click Here to Access](#))

- Support Families in Advocating for their Children
- Require Linked Strategies Across Programs to Engage and Learn from Families
- Ensure Assessment Instruments are Culturally and Linguistically Relevant
- Ensure Education Accountability Systems are Culturally Relevant
- Provide Professional Development for Teachers on Cultural Competency/Working with Families
- Support Schools and Child Care Programs to Engage Deeply with Families

PART TWO

- Recruit and Retain Educators and School Leaders of Color
- Adjust Hiring Practices to Ensure High-Quality Educators
- Invest in School Health and Mental Health Staff and Clinics
- Eliminate or Minimize Suspension and Expulsion

PART THREE (*October 2023*)

- Create Family-Friendly Employment Policies
- Ensure Accessible Transportation to Early Care Programs, Schools and Health Services
- Increase Access to Infant and Toddler Care
- Increase Standards and Compensation of Birth-through-Age-Five Educators
- Expand Child Care Subsidies for Children; Raise Child Care Subsidy Rates; and Provide Higher Subsidy Rates to Providers in Underserved Communities

PART FOUR (*November 2023*)

- Address Barriers in Health Insurance Coverage of IECMH Services to Ensure Adequate Benefits
- Create a Mental Health Professional Development System Focused on Infant and Toddler Clinicians
- Expand the NC Child Treatment Program
- Increase Professional Development in MH Treatment for Pediatricians and Family Physicians
- Integrate Mental Health Providers with Pediatric and Other Primary Care Practices

PART FIVE (*December 2023*)

- Use Data to Track Community Needs and Service Provision
- Screen Children and Families for Social Determinants of Health and Connect them to Appropriate Services
- Expand Maternal Depression Screening and Treatment
- Invest in Two-Generation Interventions
- Increase Access to Affordable Housing
- Include At-Risk Children in Early Intervention

OVERVIEW OF PATHWAYS

Pathways to Grade Level Reading (Pathways) began in 2015 as a uniquely North Carolina, statewide collaborative focused on creating a shared whole child, birth-to-end-of-third-grade framework outlining the developmental experiences and contexts that can significantly increase the likelihood that children will be reading at grade-level by the end of third grade.

Stakeholders identified coordinated strategies that can support children's optimal development beginning at birth and aligned policies and practices that are rooted in the science of how children develop. [Pathways has grown into a partnership of hundreds of diverse leaders from across the state](#) who have worked across sectors, geographies, and the political aisle with the goal of building a comprehensive, publicly-funded early childhood system for North Carolina and improving outcomes for young children.

Equity of opportunity is central to Pathways and its guidance for implementation. Stakeholders believe that attending to equity is the only way to achieve the singular vision that aligned their efforts:

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 comprised of three core interdependent components:

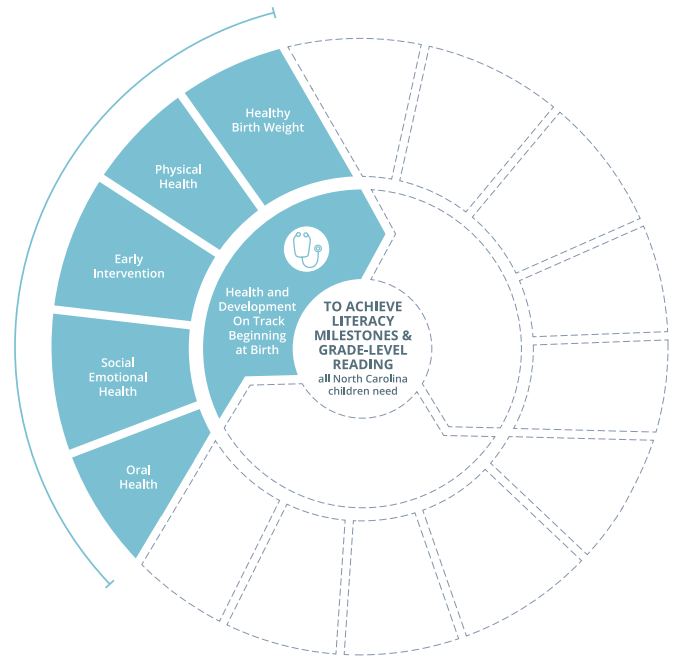
1. Health and development on track beginning at birth
2. Supported and supportive families and communities
3. High quality birth-through-age-eight learning environments

Each component is as important as the other because successful achievement of one facilitates success in the other two. Each component includes five research based [Measures of Success](#) that specify the experiences and developmental environments that children need to thrive. These measures are not an exhaustive list of all that matters to create the conditions that place children on the pathway to grade-level reading. However, they are the ones that have strong research-based connections to early literacy.



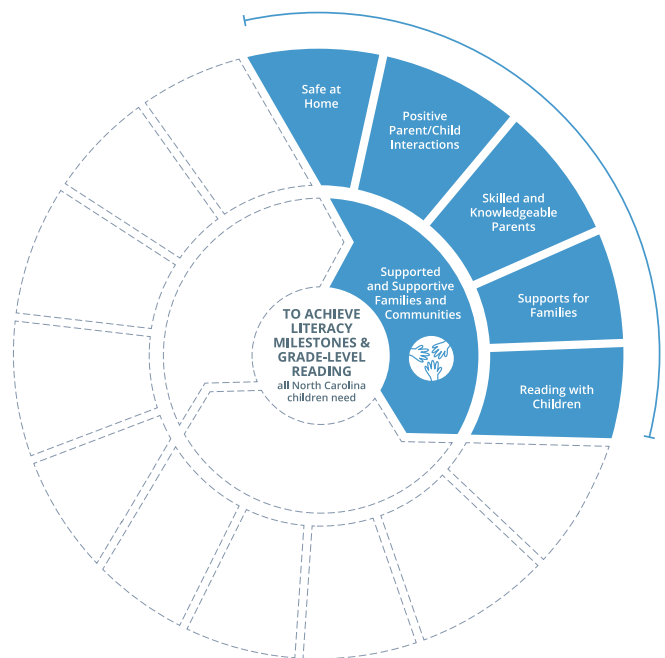
The first component is Health and Development on Track Beginning at Birth. Both physical and emotional health form the building blocks for a child's development, and prioritizing these from the earliest years lays the foundation for children's wellbeing in later years. This component is achieved when infants are born with a healthy birth weight, experience good physical health, are showing positive social emotional health, have good oral health, and receive early intervention when they have characteristics that place them at risk for poor developmental outcomes.

Pathways stakeholders identified 18 factors that influence or increase the likelihood that children will have these positive developmental experiences beginning at birth. Some of these influencers include pregnant women receiving timely prenatal care, children who are screened for social-emotional needs, and children receiving regular well-child visits. The others can be found on pages 15 to 18 of the [Measures of Success](#).



The second component is Supported and Supportive Families and Communities. A stable and nurturing environment for young children cultivated by caregivers is a critical factor in supporting optimal development and overall wellbeing. This component is achieved when children are safe at home, have positive parent-child interactions, are being read to by their caregivers, learn from skilled and knowledgeable parents, and have parents who receive sufficient social support. Resources and services that recognize the crucial role caregivers play help to improve their capacity to effectively parent and improve children's early literacy outcomes.

Stakeholders identified 10 factors that influence the likelihood that children will grow up in supportive developmental contexts. Some of these influencers include families screened for poverty at well-child visits, parents with access to mental health, domestic violence and substance abuse services, and families having access to the Family Medical Leave Act. The others can be found on pages 22 to 24 of the [Measures of Success](#).



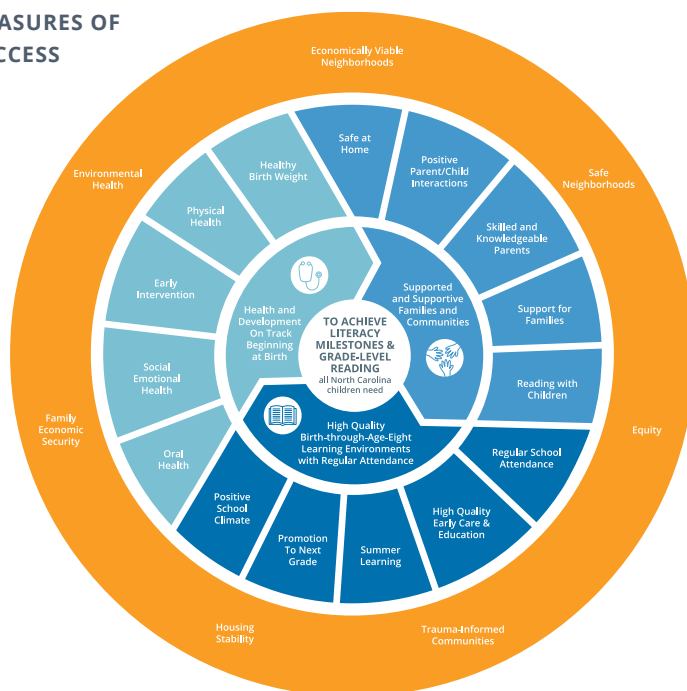
The third component is High Quality Birth-Through-Age-Eight Learning Environments with regular attendance. It is well established that high quality early learning environments are a huge factor in preparing children for success by providing a strong cognitive foundation. This component is achieved when children have quality early care and education settings, experience a positive school climate, have regular school attendance, meet the requirements for grade level promotion, and have summer learning experiences that enable them to maintain literacy gains. Adequate supports and resources for educators and caregivers work to ensure that all children's needs are met in the learning environment.

Stakeholders identified 13 factors that influence the likelihood that children will have these positive learning experiences. Some of these influencers include minimizing suspension and expulsion from programs and schools, ensuring students have access to programs and learning materials in their native language, and maximizing the number of eligible children under age six receiving child care subsidies. The others can be found on pages 28 to 32 of the [Measures of Success](#).



Figure 1 illustrates how these [three components create a whole-child multisystem framework](#) for creating the environments and experiences that can set all children on a pathway to reading at grade-level by the end of third grade.

FIGURE 1: CORE COMPONENTS AND CORRESPONDING MEASURES OF SUCCESS



LEADING WITH RACIAL EQUITY

Pathways stakeholders identified racial equity as a critical lens that can aid in understanding and improving outcomes for children. This is because race in America plays a large role in determining children's life outcomes. As stated by Tamika Williams, associate director of child care with The Duke Endowment: "If we're going to be talking about need, then we need to know the folks who are in need," she said. "If we have any hope of changing population level outcomes, we have to know the true data and who is most impacted."

Leading with racial equity means prioritizing strategies that specifically work to improve outcomes for children of color. It also involves giving special consideration to the wisdom and innovation of people of color to develop responses that are lasting and reach all children. Convening a broad tent of stakeholders enables North Carolinians to learn together, support each other, and partner to advance racial equity work for young children. As stated by those who came together to develop Pathways: "when our systems work collaboratively and are shaped using a racial equity lens, we ensure the best possible future for our children and North Carolina."

Pathways is evidence-based and enables stakeholders to see with a racial equity lens by [disaggregating data](#) so that we can clearly see and then address racial disparities in developmental experiences and outcomes.

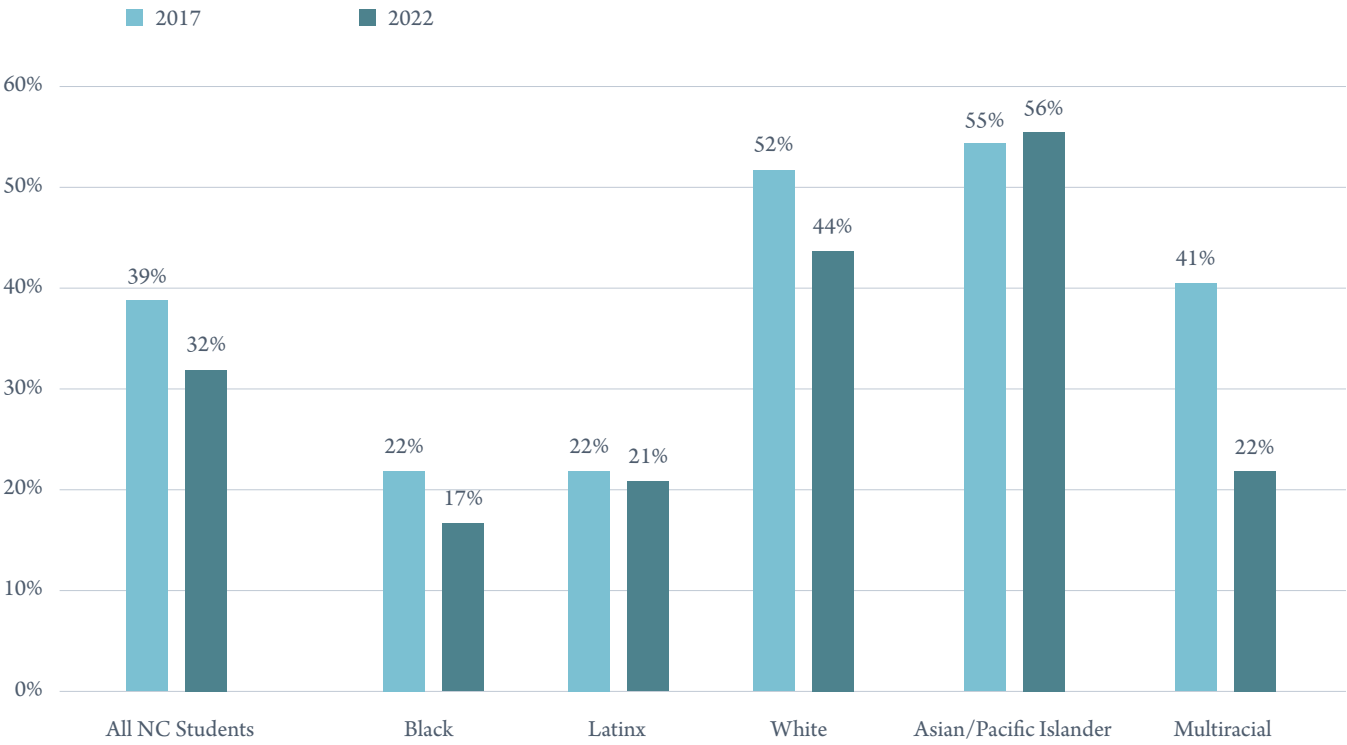
When Pathways was being developed, too many children in North Carolina from all racial groups were not meeting the critical developmental milestone of reading on grade level by the end of third grade, and there were vast differences between racial groups. Students' [National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\) scores](#) showed that in 2017, 20% of white children in North Carolina were not meeting this benchmark, compared to 44% of Black and 43% of Latinx children.



If we're going to be talking about need, then we need to know the folks who are in need. If we have any hope of changing population level outcomes, **WE HAVE TO KNOW THE TRUE DATA AND WHO IS MOST IMPACTED.**

As shown in *Figure 2* below, the latest NAEP scores reveal the need to maintain our focus on creating the contexts and experiences that will increase all children’s likelihood of reading at grade-level. In addition, they highlight the need for new urgency regarding the aim of narrowing racial and ethnic gaps. In 2022, 44% of white fourth graders were meeting the benchmark of being proficient in reading, compared to 17% of Black and 21% of Latinx children.

FIGURE 2: PERCENT OF STUDENTS READING PROFICIENT AT THE START OF FOURTH GRADE, 2017 AND 2022

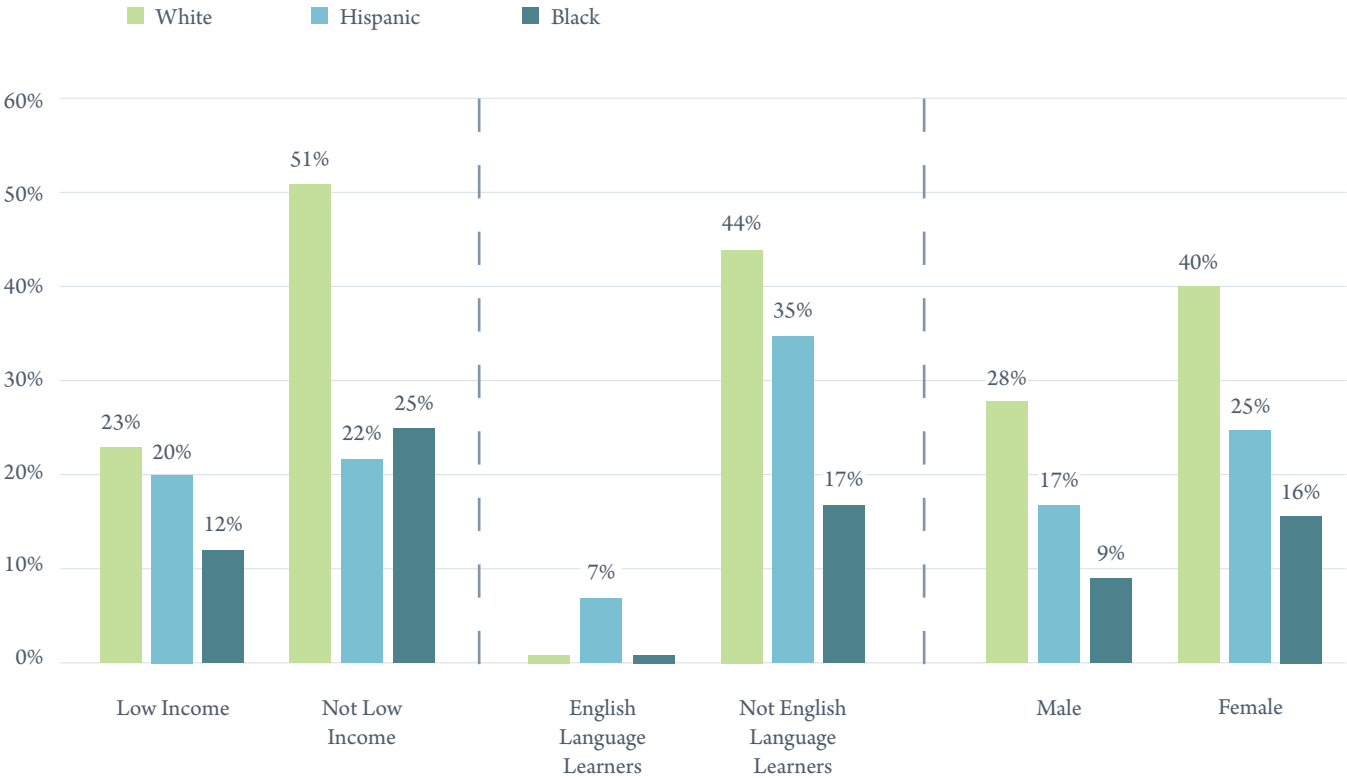


Note: Missing data on American Indian/Alaska Native students.

Pathways stakeholders identified income, ability, language of origin, geography, and gender as important status categories that are also associated with disparities in children’s developmental opportunities and outcomes. Consequently, the framework and associated policy and practice recommendations identify interventions that aim to minimize the negative effects of these inequities. The figure below shows that race and ethnicity matters as a stand alone category for targeted intervention and in combination with the other status categories.

Figure 3 below illustrates that race is a key stratifying factor in relation to all of the other status categories. For example, even among not low-income students a significantly higher percentage of Latinx and Black students are not reading at grade level compared to white students. The results in the figure also allow us to see that race intersects with the other status categories to create some highly vulnerable groups, such as English learning Latinx students (only 7% of fourth graders are reading proficient), low-income Black students (12% are reading proficient), and Black male students (9% are reading proficient).

FIGURE 3: PERCENT OF STUDENTS READING PROFICIENT AT THE START OF FOURTH GRADE, 2022





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The NC Early Childhood Foundation promotes understanding, spearheads collaboration, and advances policies to ensure each North Carolina child is on track for lifelong success by the end of third grade.

PROMOTING
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