



North Carolina Focusing on **Strengthening the Birth-through-Eight Continuum**

North Carolina's leaders recognize that the years from birth through age eight are a unique developmental continuum and that an aligned system is needed to ensure children's optimal development and school success. Legislative, government and nonprofit leaders have identified and/or created the following opportunities to build a comprehensive birth through third grade system.

- Every Student Succeeds Act
- Session Law 2016-94, Section 12B.5.(a) and (b), titled State Agency Collaboration on Early Childhood Education/Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten
- Birth-3 Interagency Council
- NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading
- My Future NC
- State Board of Education

Why Birth-through-Eight?

In the words of Harvard University pediatrician Jack Shonkoff, "Brains are built, not born." Scientists have discovered that during children's earliest years, their experiences are built into their bodies – shaping the brain's architecture and impacting how biological systems develop. Positive early experiences build a strong foundation for learning and future health. Everything a child experiences from birth impacts that child's ability to fulfill his or her potential.

- Child development is a dynamic, interactive process that is not predetermined. It occurs in the context of relationships, experiences and environments.
- Every experience a baby has forms a neural connection in the brain at a rate of more than a million synapses per second in the early years.
- Not all will last. Connections that get used more strengthen, and those used less fade.
- Just like building a house, what comes first builds a foundation for all that comes later.
- Positive early experiences build a strong foundation for learning and future health.
- Reading proficiency is a cumulative process that is rooted in early brain development.
- The early years are so defining that by the time a child turns eight, his or her third-grade outcomes can predict future academic achievement and career success.

High Quality Teachers, Beginning at Birth, Essential to Building Strong Brains

- The interactions young children have with their early childhood (birth- through 3rd grade) teachers play an essential role in determining how their brains are wired.
- To build strong brains and support children's optimal development, early childhood teachers need specialized knowledge and skills.

Decades of research have established what children need to build strong brains—health and development on track from birth, supportive and supported families and communities, and high-quality birth-through-age-eight learning environments with regular attendance.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Highlights of North Carolina's plan that speak specifically to creating an aligned birth-through-eight system include:

Theory of Action. Early learning is a component of North Carolina's theory of action. The plan states, "Early experiences shape brain development and early learning provides a foundation for later learning. To make the most of the unique opportunity early education offers to improve future lives will require a transformation of early learning." The state's newly formed Birth through Third Grade Interagency Council is recognized as part of the state efforts for continuous innovation. Also in this section, both Smart Start and NC Pre-K are recognized as proven programs that improve learning.

Professional Development. The plan notes that the Department of Public Instruction and the Department of Health and Human Services will work to develop a birth-to-eight professional development system that will strengthen both teacher and administrator skills and knowledge to support young children's learning, including:

- Improving teaching professionals' understanding of appropriate developmental expectations of young children and the components of high quality birth-through-eight early learning environments and instructional practices;
- Developing principals' and school leaders' understanding of child development, high quality early learning and best practices in prekindergarten through third grade classrooms.
- Identifying strategies and resources for birth-to-eight professionals to support the social and emotional development of children;
- Operationalizing developmental standards that cross the range of domains for children from birth through third grade.

The plan encourages districts and communities "to provide professional development opportunities that are focused on an aligned and coherent birth-through-grade-three continuum that is inclusive of both public schools and community provider teachers and leaders."

Transitions. While the federal ESSA submission form asked states to describe transition plans particularly for middle and high schools., North Carolina called out the need to pay attention to young children's transition into kindergarten. The plan notes that work underway is intended "to create shared understanding among early childhood programs, schools, administrators and parents of what children should experience between early childhood programs and schools and between kindergarten, first grade, and second grade."

This work referenced being led by the Department of Health Human Services (DHHS), in consultation with the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), to develop a planning template and guidance for developing a local transition plan. Local NC Pre-K committees will be responsible for developing and implementing local transition plans for their communities and are encouraged to:

- Address expectations

- Support and promote multiple modes and opportunities for communication among stakeholders, primarily parents, prekindergarten teachers, and kindergarten teachers
- Address issues of ownership of the transition process

Also noted in the state's ESSA plan is that DHHS, in consultation with the NCDPI, is developing a standardized method for Pre-K teachers to collect evidences of learning and document children's learning statuses in the five domains of learning and development.

Indicator of School Quality or Student Success. ESSA requires that states include a school quality of student success indicator in their school accountability plan. Chronic absenteeism serves as an early predictor of student performance and is one of the few available measures of school quality for the early (untested) grades. Including the early grades in measurements of school quality encourages investment and continuous improvement in early learning. Thirty-four states and DC chose chronic absenteeism as their additional indicator. NC's plan does not currently include chronic absenteeism as a measure, but it notes that the State Board of Education and the State Superintendent will continue to determine the feasibility and appropriateness of incorporating it in the future.

North Carolina's ESSA plan is online at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/succeeds/essa-state-plan.pdf>.

Session Law 2016-94, Section 12B.5.(a) and (b), titled State Agency Collaboration on Early Childhood Education/Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten,

In 2016, the North Carolina General Assembly mandated state agency collaboration on early childhood education, including requiring:

- The Department of Health and Services in consultation with the Department of Public Instruction and other agencies/organizations that administer, support or study early education in the State to collaborate on an ongoing basis to develop and implement a statewide vision for early childhood education.
- The agencies to develop a comprehensive approach to early childhood education, birth through third grade, including creating cross agency accountability with a comprehensive set of data indicators, including consideration of the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading, to monitor and measure success of the early childhood education systems.
- The agencies report findings and recommendations, including legislative proposals, by January 1, 2017 with a follow-up report by January 1, 2018.

The Departments recommendations are online at https://simbli.eboardsolutions.com/meetings/TempFolder/Meetings/SLA%201%20-%20Attachment%201%20-%20Report_120009pk33u0eyjvxrym1itke2bxvd.pdf.

Birth-3 Interagency Council

This Council was established by the NC General Assembly to be led jointly by the NC Department of Health and Human Services and the NC Department of Public Instruction. Its charge is to establish a vision and accountability for a birth-through -third-grade system of early education that addresses:

- standards and assessments

- data-driven improvement and outcomes, including shared accountability measures such as the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading
- teacher and administrator preparation and effectiveness
- instruction and environment
- transitions and continuity
- family engagement
- governance and funding

The legislation establishing the Council is online at <http://buildthefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/B-3-Interagency-Council.pdf>.

NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading

NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading is bringing together diverse leaders working across disciplines, sectors, systems, and the political aisle. Since launching in 2015, Pathways stakeholders have:

- Identified shared birth-through-eight, whole-child measures of success to put children on a pathway to grade-level reading.
- Learned how children are doing on those measures, including where the biggest inequities lie.
- Developing a data advocacy agenda to support the collection of the best data that shows if children are on a pathway to grade-level reading, including health and development, family and community support and high-quality learning environments.
- Determined where to move to action first.

Now, state-level Design Teams are working to create policy, practice and program/capacity-building agendas to improve outcomes for young children.

Information about Pathways is online at <http://buildthefoundation.org/pathways/>,

My Future NC

My Future NC is a statewide commission on educational attainment. It was created by the President of the University of North Carolina, the Acting President of the North Carolina Community College System, and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. The Commission will:

- Develop a comprehensive statewide education plan, from early childhood through postsecondary education, which recommends clear attainment goals, identifies key benchmarks, and proposes promising reforms to guide the future of education in North Carolina.
- Break down silos and coordinating key stakeholders to make the best use of all educational resources in the state.
- Debate the key issues and needs of the state to garner higher levels of public awareness and engagement.

Information about My Future NC is online at <https://www.myfuturenc.org/>.

NC State Board of Education (SBOE)

Strategic Plan and Whole Community, Whole School, Whole Child Model

The SBOE is prioritizing the building of connections to the broader early childhood community and its infrastructures as a necessary condition of educating the whole child.