

**ALIGNING EARLY CHILDHOOD
STRATEGIES SO**

EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS

IN NORTH CAROLINA



**Bridging Systems to Create
Lasting, Positive Change**

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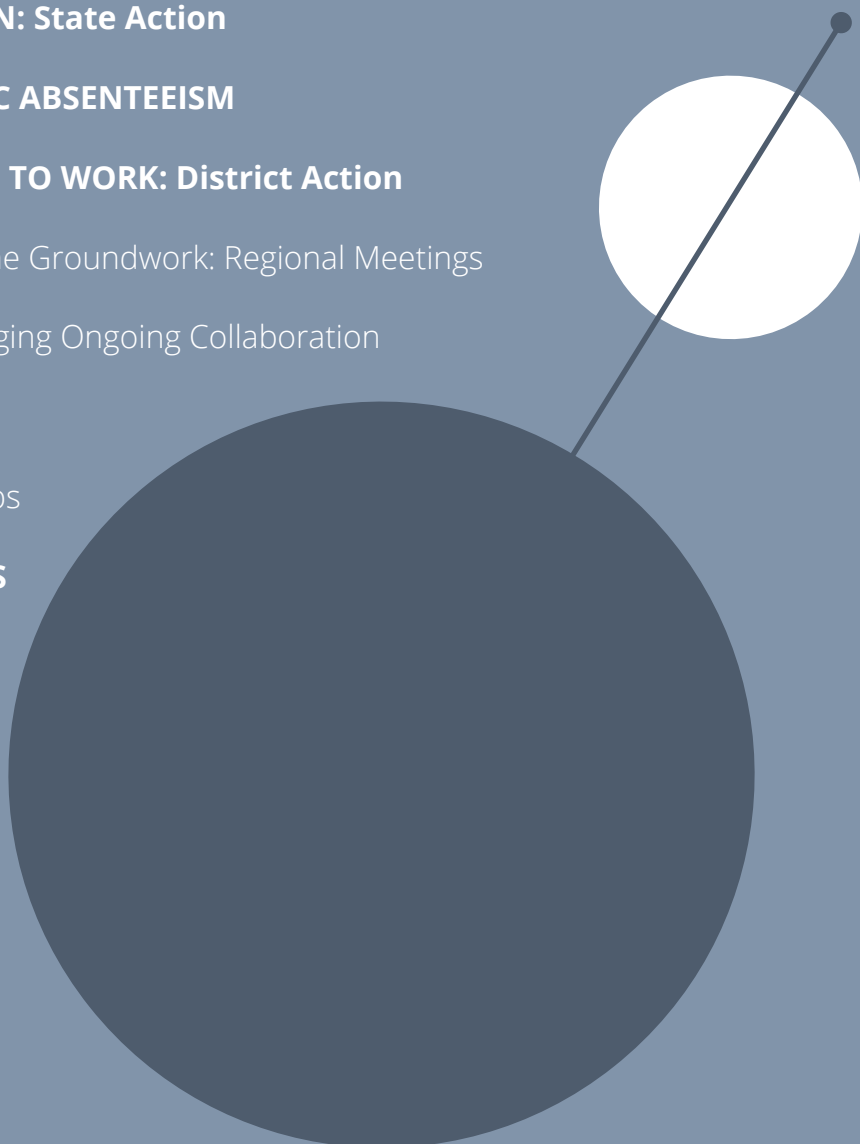
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THIS REPORT



This report highlights more than two years of work to foster better birth-through-third grade alignment across North Carolina by encouraging inclusion of early childhood strategies in the North Carolina state and local district plans for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

But more than that, this report is a story about how the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF), the NC Head Start Collaboration Office, the Office of Early Learning at the NC Department of Public Instruction, and EducationCounsel created a partnership that bridged systems, departments and agencies to unite diverse stakeholders around a singular vision to create lasting, positive change.

The impact of this work to date has been tremendous.

- Thanks to overwhelming support from early childhood advocates across the state, more than two thirds of comments received by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) on draft state ESSA plans were about early childhood or birth-to-eight strategies.
- The North Carolina state ESSA plan includes birth-to-eight recommendations developed at two convenings of local and state leaders led by NCECF.
- 80 district and two charter teams attended regional meetings and developed shared commitments for birth-through-third grade strategies in their local work. Four months later, 87 percent of districts have included early learning in their plans and report making progress on their commitments, according to a survey of attendees.
- Birth-to-five and school leaders are collaborating across the state.

The true impact will be felt over time as newly formed relationships between school systems, local Head Start and Smart Start organizations and early childhood leaders create and implement meaningful, measurable birth-to-eight strategies throughout our state. As the next phase of the initiative—ongoing support to districts and state leadership—begins, we look forward to building upon these early successes and working toward an even more robust and seamless birth-through-third grade system across the state.

Our success is a result of a strong team of partners from the public and private sectors who came together under a shared vision to strengthen birth-to-eight systems and support children's school success. The core team included Tracy Zimmerman from NCECF; John Pruette, Karen McKnight and Carla Garrett from the NC DPI Office of Early Learning; and Danielle Ewen from EducationCounsel.

Additionally, the Alliance for Early Success provided in-kind support for the work, and the North Carolina Head Start Collaborative Office and the Belk Foundation provided financial support for the initiative as did the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation's general operating funders.

It is our hope that this report will be a celebration of the incredible synergy that has happened across the state, along with a playbook for other states and districts to use for their own work. As we continue to confirm and understand more about how early childhood experiences shape our children through their school years and beyond, it is imperative for advocates of early childhood and the K-12 education community to work together to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed.

ABOUT US

About NCECF

Founded in 2013, the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF) marshals North Carolina's great people, ideas and achievements to build a foundation of opportunity and success for every child by the end of third grade. NCECF has a bold and achievable vision that each North Carolina child has a strong foundation for lifelong health, education and well-being supported by a premiere birth to eight system.

In addition to the ESSA initiative, NCECF leads five core initiatives:

- The Campaign for Grade Level Reading is mobilizing communities to ensure that more children from low-income families succeed in school and graduate prepared for college, a career and active citizenship.
- Family Forward NC is an innovative, business-led initiative to improve children's health and well-being and keep North Carolina's businesses competitive by increasing access to family-friendly workplace practices.
- First 2,000 Days is an open source campaign that allows communities across North Carolina to download presentations and supporting materials to start an early childhood engagement campaign.
- Local Financing for Early Learning is the first toolkit nationwide to support communities in pursuing investments in early childhood.
- NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading is a collaborative of more than 200 organizations working together to ensure that all North Carolina children are reading on grade-level by the end of third grade.



ESSA and its Connection to Birth-Through-Third Grade

OVERVIEW AND HISTORY

Signed into law by President Obama in 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is a bipartisan measure that reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) created by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 as part of his administration's War on Poverty. ESSA's goal, like ESEA before it, is to close achievement gaps and provide all children with a fair, equitable, high quality education.

ESSA includes nine titles, each of which emphasize a different aspect to strengthen and support state educational systems and Local Educational Agencies (LEAs). ESSA devolves authority for educational reform and improvements to states, who must set achievement goals for all students. The expectation within the law is to achieve faster improvement for students who have traditionally been left behind, including minorities and low-income students, in order to close gaps between groups. Required indicators for goals include:

- academic achievement, measured through annual tests on math and English for students in grades three through high school;
- another state-designed academic indicator, such as graduation rates or individual student growth;
- English-language proficiency; and
- an optional additional indicator of school quality

ESEA has been reauthorized eight times, most recently by President Bush as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001. ESSA differs from NCLB, which was widely perceived as a "one size fits all" approach, in a number of ways. Most notably:

- **Accountability.** ESSA places accountability in the hands of the states, while No Child Left Behind used a federal accountability model.
- **Testing.** NCLB required mandatory student testing each year in grades three through eight. With ESSA, states have flexibility in when and how they administer tests.
- **Standards.** ESSA requires the U.S. Department of Education to remain neutral on standards. NCLB allowed the department to use waivers to encourage states to adopt college and career-readiness standards.
- **School Accountability.** Under NCLB, states were required to report progress on federal goals. After five years of interventions, schools had limited options. ESSA eliminates annual reporting but requires states to create a plan for schools in the bottom five percent; high schools where fewer than 67 percent of students are graduating; and schools where subgroups are consistently underperforming.

Because ESSA requires states to create and implement new accountability systems, most schools and districts did not see any changes or impact from the new law until the 2017-18 school year.

HOW ESSA STRENGTHENS FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

Early childhood experiences shape a child's brain architecture and create a foundation for future learning. Everything a child experiences from birth impacts that child's ability to fulfill his or her potential. The early years are so defining that by the time a child turns eight, his or her third-grade outcomes are highly predictive of future academic achievement and career success.

Early childhood education enhances children's learning and development in elementary school and beyond, helping to close achievement gaps and improve learning and life outcomes. However, many children—especially those who live in low-income families—are left without opportunities to participate in high quality programs, which leads to significant consequences for their future academic and developmental outcomes.


Early childhood education has long been an allowable activity under various titles of the federal education law, although there has never been a specific section dedicated to serving young children. For a guide on how ESSA can be used to support early learning, go to: <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essaelguidance10202016.pdf>.

Funding can be used for the following:

- classroom-based instructional programs;
- salaries and benefits for teachers and other staff;
- home visiting programs;
- extended day programs in Head Start or community-based child care programs;
- professional development for early childhood professionals, including providers in non-school settings and school and district leaders;
- support services, such as nutrition, vision, dental, and counseling services;
- screening and diagnostic assessment;
- summer enrichment programs for young children and their families;
- targeted supports for young children who are English Learners;
- supports for children who are homeless; and
- programs to transition students from early childhood programs to kindergarten.

Districts that use Title I funds for early childhood are required to follow Head Start Performance Standards to develop agreements with early childhood education programs, and to describe how they will support, coordinate and integrate services with local early childhood providers.

ESSA also includes the new Preschool Development Grant program, jointly administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education, which is designed to help states create systemic approaches to serving children from birth to five.



OUR OPPORTUNITY

Using ESSA to Advance Birth- through-Eight Strategies in North Carolina

As the only organization in North Carolina focused on children birth through age eight, NCECF was uniquely positioned to understand and advance the opportunities outlined in ESSA. Because ESSA focuses on K-12 education, it is not typically on the radar of most early learning organizations.

At the same time, traditional education organizations have a long list of priorities to tend to, and the new early learning opportunities outlined in ESSA were just that—opportunities, not mandates. Therefore, as the NC Department of Public Instruction began its work to develop the state plan, early learning was not top of mind.

So when NCECF Executive Director Tracy Zimmerman approached John Pruette, Executive Director, Office of Early Learning at the NC Department of Public Instruction, with the idea to work together, he was all in.

“From my perspective, I think the partnership with (NCECF) really created the synergy within the departments to pay attention to the possibilities,” Pruette said.

UNIQUELY SITUATED TO LEAD

Widely viewed as state and national experts, NCECF staff are known for their strong relationships with stakeholders across the state and country. NCECF also has extensive experience mobilizing a diverse group of stakeholders and advocates and accelerating collaboration toward a shared vision and course of action.

“People trust the (NCECF) and the work they do,” said Danielle Ewen, a consultant with EducationCounsel, a national education policy consulting firm, who worked with NCECF and NC DPI throughout the initiative. “We didn’t have to jump through a lot of hoops.”

Additionally, the organization’s leadership on its NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative, a collaborative of more than 200 organizations working together to ensure that all North Carolina children are reading on grade-level by the end of third grade, gave NC DPI insight into how successful NCECF could be at tackling large-scale, multi-faceted initiatives.

“NCECF has a strong history through the Pathways work with taking a multi-pronged approach that includes business, community and civic leadership,” said Carla Garrett, Title I preschool consultant for the NC DPI Office of Early Learning. “We’ve been intricately involved with that project, and we’ve seen how the Foundation has been able to pull that off.”

Pathways also gave NCECF robust data on whole child measures that lead to improved student success, which was helpful for state and district leaders as they began making their plans, Ewen said.

Equally important was NCECF’s ability to act as a neutral leader, Garrett said.

“I think really it’s the ability to have this neutral perspective to help connect the dots. I think that’s been extremely helpful.”

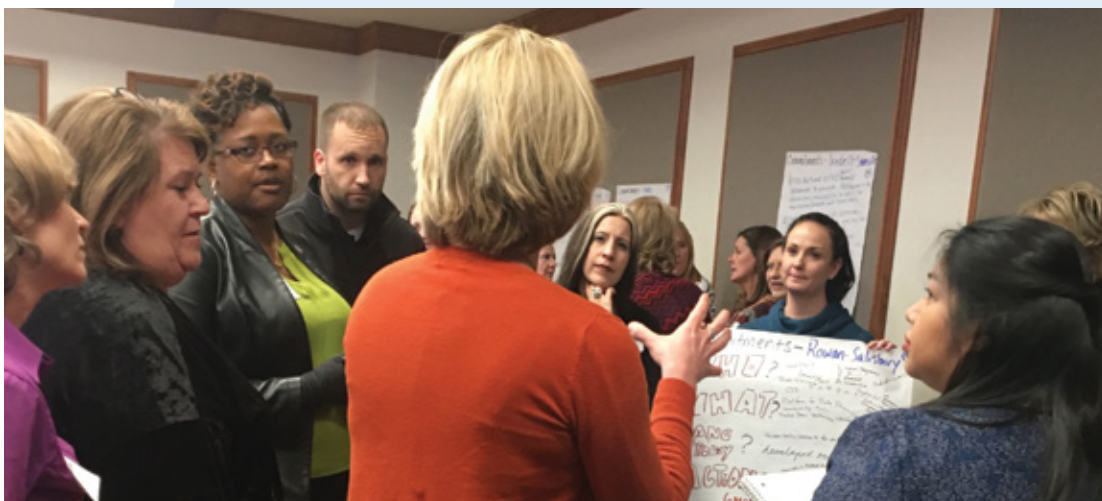
Further, NCECF staff and leadership remained fully committed to the work throughout the process, Ewen said.

“The NCECF staff was fully bought in, so all the pieces—and there were a lot of pieces—came through,” she said. “So many logistics, and it all just flowed as smoothly as it could have.”

“I think the partnership with NCECF really created the synergy within the department to pay attention to the possibilities.”

● **John Pruette** Executive Director,
Office of Early Learning at the NC
Department of Public Instruction





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Carla Garrett ●

Title I Preschool Consultant, Office of Early Learning at the NC Department of Public Instruction



THE PLAN

State Action

While all partners agreed that implementation of ESSA provided an important opportunity to focus state and local efforts on building and enhancing a birth-to-third-grade system, there were several questions about how to make that happen.

Discussions among the partners suggested that a necessary first step would be to encourage inclusion of early childhood strategies in the state ESSA plan.

“Working with (NCECF) added pressure on the department by bringing to light what the possibilities were to the early childhood community,” Pruette said. “NCECF was really strategic about putting it out there and adding some pressure.”

CRAFTING THE MESSAGE, RALLYING SUPPORTERS AND CREATING DEMAND

In April of 2016, NCECF launched an advocacy campaign with a multipronged approach: webinars, e-newsletters, blog posts, and direct partner outreach. The goal of the campaign was to rally early childhood advocates and supporters, educate them on the new early childhood opportunities in ESSA, and create demand to include birth-to-eight strategies in the state plan.

NCECF and NC DPI convened a group of state and local leaders to develop recommended birth-to-eight strategies to include in the state’s ESSA plan. NCECF leveraged a relationship with the Alliance for Early Learning, a national organization that supports advocacy and other policy work in early childhood issues across the country, to bring Danielle Ewen to the team. Ewen, a nationally renowned early childhood expert, would provide national context and a wealth of experience connecting early childhood and K-12 communities to build a continuum of learning, with a particular focus on equity.

Throughout the campaign, NCECF encouraged supporters to offer comments on the state plan through the NC DPI website or at one of six public comment sessions across the state. It also provided specific recommendations for the plan from the convenings.

Campaign messaging across all channels focused on including early childhood in the state ESSA plan as essential to three main areas:

- advancing an earlier General Assembly mandate to develop a comprehensive approach to early childhood education birth through third grade;
- investing in policies that have widespread, bipartisan public support;
- and promoting evidence-based approaches that support children reading at grade level by the end of third grade.

“We knew we needed to demonstrate that inclusion of birth-to-eight strategies was a value-add to other work already happening at the state level,” Zimmerman said.

The team knew they had to act quickly. NCECF’s knowledge of advocates across the state and the organization’s ability to rally those advocates to mobilize was essential to achieving the goal, Ewen said.

“We knew we needed to demonstrate that inclusion of birth-to-eight strategies was a value-add to other work already happening at the state level.”

Tracy Zimmerman

Executive Director, North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF)

The campaign was highly successful. Two-thirds of public comments on the state plan focused on early learning, and though earlier drafts of the plan did not include birth-to-eight alignment as a strategy for achieving the state’s goals, the final North Carolina state plan submitted in September 2017 to the U.S. Department of Education did include birth-to-eight and reflected comments from the early childhood community.

The team immediately began preparing for the next, step—working with districts to incorporate birth-to-eight strategies in local plans.

“The state has a responsibility in setting a stage and modeling through its actions what collective impact can be,” Pruette said. “The real difference you can make is what’s happening at the local level.

“Working with NCECF added pressure on the department by bringing to light what the possibilities were to the early childhood community. NCECF was really strategic about putting it out there and adding some pressure.”

John Pruette

Executive Director, Office of Early Learning at the NC Department of Public Instruction



A Future Opportunity: Chronic Absenteeism

As part of the advocacy campaign, NCECF and its partners stressed the importance of including school quality indicators such as chronic absenteeism, school climate or school discipline in the state's proposed accountability systems.

The effort successfully encouraged the State Board of Education to adopt a standard definition of chronic absenteeism. And though North Carolina was one of only nine states that did not include overall well-being indicators in its ESSA plan, and one of 16 states that did not specifically call out chronic absenteeism, there's still an opportunity for the state to add overall well-being indicators in the future. States can revise their plans as they begin to implement them, and Zimmerman said NCECF and others will continue to encourage the state to join the rest of the nation in holding schools accountable for providing a healthy school environment.

WHY CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

Starting as early as pre-kindergarten, students who are chronically absent, or miss 10 percent of school days or more within one academic year for any reason, are less likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade and are more likely to be retained. Kindergartners who are chronically absent are less likely to develop the social skills needed to persist in school, and the problems multiply when students are chronically absent several years in a row.

Chronic absenteeism is a critical indicator to track for a variety of reasons:

- **It's an early warning indicator.**
Since testing does not begin until third grade, schools can use chronic absence data to find students who need help long before test scores or grades are available. Using chronic absence as a trigger for early interventions can help close the achievement gap for low-income children and affected racial minorities.
- **It puts focus on the early grades.**
Indicators like chronic absence, which is measurable for all children, shifts district accountability focus to the early grades (PK-2), which are largely ignored when testing is used as the main indicator of school quality. Including the early grades in measurements of school quality allows for intervention as needed during crucial early years.
- **It's an actionable way to improve student outcomes.**
Chronic absence data is an efficient way for states and districts to identify schools and districts that need support and technical assistance. Coupled with student and parent/teacher surveys, chronic absence data is also an efficient way for districts and schools to support parent and teacher engagement, to better understand students' barriers to attendance and work with families and community partners to remove those barriers, to request resources and to communicate the importance of daily attendance.

Students who are chronically absent are less likely to be reading on grade level by the end of third grade and are less likely to develop the social skills necessary to persist in school.



GETTING TO WORK

District Action

With the state plan submitted to the U.S. Department of Education, it was time to focus on encouraging the state's 115 school districts to include birth-to-eight strategies in their local ESSA plans. The NC Head Start Collaboration Office saw the importance of building on the momentum created and provided funding, along with expertise, to ensure the work continued.

Leveraging Strengths and Setting Goals

To build on the success of the state plan, the core team knew they would need to leverage their strengths and set clear goals.

"NCECF gave credibility to the effort within early childhood, and the Office of Early Learning's participation gave credibility to Title I schools," Pruette said.

The individual core team members, who were deeply committed to the work, also brought a wealth of experience and knowledge that provided balance among the team, Garrett said.

"Danielle brought her phenomenal knowledge and national perspective. Tracy brought her leadership and her connections and relationships. I brought my knowledge of Title I, and Karen brought her depth of experience with Head Start," Garrett said. "Each of us have been able to come together and are like minded and understand the importance of all of our partners. We've had to move forward so fast, and we've had to connect immediately, and the four of us have been really committed to that and to the work."

Together, the partners determined other organizations to engage, including the Department of Health and Human Services Division of Child Development and Early Education, the North Carolina Homeless Education Program, and the NC Partnership for Children, and they developed two main goals:

- To encourage local education agencies to include birth-to-eight strategies in their district ESSA plans.
- To strengthen collaboration across birth-through-five and K-12 systems in districts throughout the state.

With a strong team in place and a clear direction for the work, it was time to begin the next phase.



“(The partners) got some successes in putting in some elements related to early learning into the state plan,” said Albert Wat of the Alliance for Early Success. “Then it shifted into implementation phase. I think NCECF is one of the few early childhood advocacy organizations in the country really pushing at the implementation level. It’s been generally a big lift to help advocates get engaged in implementation of these plans, partly because of capacity issues but also I think it just sometimes takes more efforts because ESSA is not an early childhood lever per se.”

Unlike the state campaign, which focused on a broad communications strategy, the team wanted district-level efforts to be both broad and deep, with a concentration on leveraging existing work in each community and on providing the education and support districts would need to formulate and implement early childhood strategies as part of ESSA.

“As we started to work with communities—because the rubber really meets the road at the district level—the strategy shifted to leverage resources at the community level in a very positive way,” Pruette said.

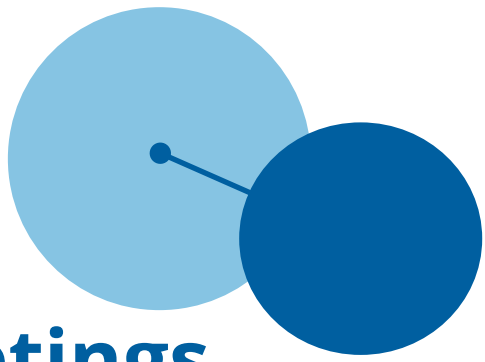
“NCECF is one of the few early childhood advocacy organizations in the country really pushing at the implementation level.”

Albert Wat

Senior Policy Director, Alliance for Early Success



Laying The Groundwork: Regional Meetings



The first step was to get the right people at the table in each district. To do this, NCECF and partners hosted day-long regional forums in four cities across the state—Greenville, Fayetteville, Asheville and Winston Salem—in January 2018.

To encourage participation from diverse stakeholders, NCECF and partners worked with key organizations and people across the state such as Head Start agencies, Smart Start local partnerships, Title I directors, the North Carolina School Board Association and North Carolina Association of School Administrators to get the word out.

The goal for each meeting was to promote action at the district level by providing time, data, guidance and support so each district in attendance could leave the meeting with specific commitments for how a birth-to-eight vision could be advanced in their community, using ESSA as one tool for support.



Three key factors were essential to success:

1. REQUIRING CROSS-SECTOR TEAMS

To create the best conditions for action, NCECF and partners knew each district should come to the meeting with the right players to inform decisions and enact change. They required each district to bring a team of people that included a Head Start director, a Title I director or representative, a Smart Start partner and a superintendent or representative from the district Superintendent's Office. Additionally, they encouraged teams to include two members of the early childhood landscape in their communities, such as elementary school principals or teachers, families, representatives from health systems, school board members, child care resource and referral, or child care administrators/teachers.

In particular, bringing Head Start directors to the conversation was key, said McKnight, because Head Start is often underrecognized as a valuable resource for data.

"Head Start brings a lot of value to the early learning community that people often underestimate," she said. "Head Start programs are required to collect a lot of data, complete community needs assessments while tracking health, family and school

“They gave us a lot of working time as a group to begin to lay the foundation for what we wanted to do.”

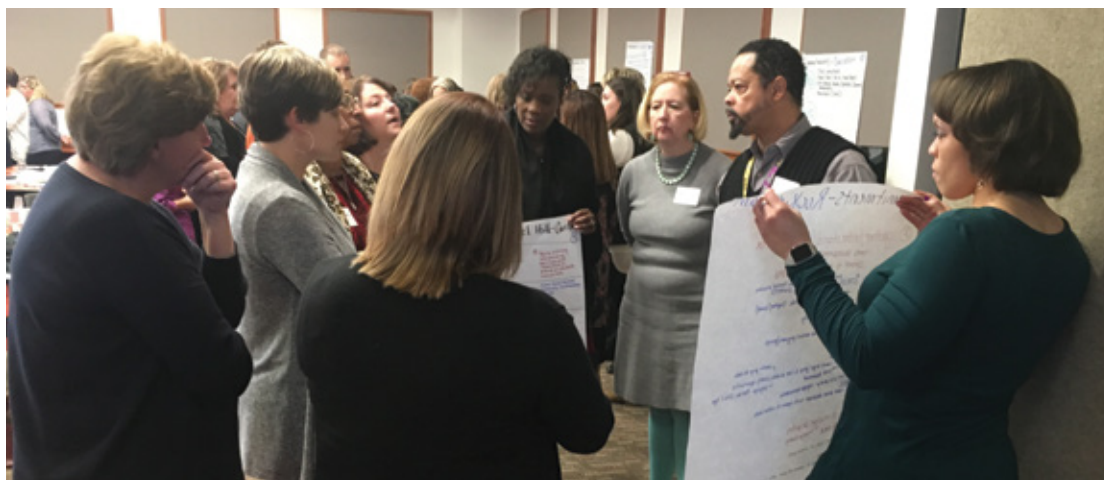
Tammy Cullom ●

Quality Enhancement Coordinator, Craven County Smart Start Child Care Resource and Referral Program

readiness outcomes. I asked each local Head Start representative to bring that information so their local community leaders could see what Head Start does. It just really allowed some directors to shine where maybe before they weren't at that table to be given the opportunity.”

“Having diverse teams representing the full birth-to-eight spectrum was also important,” said Tammy Cullom, a quality enhancement coordinator in the child care resource and referral program for Craven County Smart Start, who attended the Greenville meeting to represent Craven County Schools. Cullom’s team included the local Head Start director, the local NC Pre-K contact, a kindergarten teacher, a Pre-K teacher and the assistant superintendent for curriculum in the school system.

“It was good for me to hear the big picture of what the vision was. For me that was brand new,” said Cullom, who spent 31 years as a teacher, assistant principal and elementary director at Craven County Schools before joining Smart Start in November. “We just had a great conversation.”



2. BUILDING TRUST

To be successful, Ewen said she and her colleagues knew district teams would need to trust each other. Though Ewen and her colleagues assumed team members would already have relationships, they learned quickly that wasn't always the case.

“We assumed team members knew each other, and sometimes they didn't. If they start the day not knowing each other and you're asking them to make commitments, you're not going to get there,” Ewen said. “So we started each day by having people introduce each other, making them laugh together and taking them through trust exercises.”

Even when team members did know each other, they may have built barriers in their relationships over time that were preventing them from really coming together, Pruette said.

“Relationships that weren’t already there are building. Getting all the players in the same room at the same time sharing what they could do together—it really was heartwarming to see these folks start to talk to each other.” **Karen McKnight** *Director, NC Head Start State Collaboration Office*

“I know from having worked in early childhood for a long time, that the conversation can be really political,” he said. “People may not be aware of each other or they may have built barriers over time. I think this created a climate for a new conversation.”

Ewen said she and the leadership team were very careful to frame conversation around assuming positive intent.

“One of the norms we added was ‘give people the benefit of the doubt and assume the best. You don’t know what the people across from you are thinking,’” she said.

And the relationships built during the regional meetings have lasted. In a survey of forum attendees, the majority of teams mentioned improved communication with partners and stakeholders as a result of attending.

“Relationships that weren’t already there are building,” McKnight said. “Getting [all the players] in the same room at the same time sharing what they could do together...It really was heartwarming to see these folks start to talk to each other.”

3. CREATING A SUPPORTIVE STRUCTURE

Beyond relationship building, having time and space to focus on the issue at hand was important, said Cullom. She appreciated the balance between presentation about ESSA and early childhood and the time groups had to work together.

“They gave us a lot of working time as a group to begin to lay the foundation for what we wanted to do,” she said. Her team left the meeting with three “pretty big goals” and plans for how to move forward with their work.

Carla Garrett of NC DPI agrees. “I think people want to do good things, I think sometimes just providing the time and support is important,” she said.

Though the agenda was packed, the leadership team also reacted quickly to feedback from participants, adjusting the tone and tasks as needed based on in-the-moment surveys happening throughout the day. “For instance, the first day of the first forum, there were some who felt that we did not address funding issues, so we were able to adjust and change that feeling,” Ewen said.

Like the state-level advocacy campaign, the regional meetings were highly successful—80 districts and two charter teams completed commitments for birth through eight strategies in their local work, and 87 percent of people who attended said the forums impacted their work.

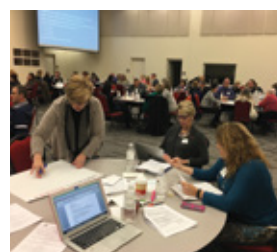
“We had 380 people who came to the work focused on the task at hand, and they left those meetings with commitments,” Ewen said.

***“People want to do good things—
I think sometimes just providing the
time and support is important.”***

Carla Garrett *Title I Preschool Consultant,
Office of Early Learning at the NC Department of Public Instruction*

Forum participants gave overwhelmingly positive reviews. Feedback from post-event surveys included the following:

- “This was a great starting point, as we learned that we have many of the same goals for the children in our communities!”
- *Anabel Melgar, Preschool Coordinator, Smart Start of Davidson County*
- “The guided discussion with folks from our school system, Smart Start, Head Start and key players in the early childhood system encouraged us to think of collaborative ways we can focus on children birth through 3rd grade. In a small rural county, we must find ways to stretch the resources we have. This can only be done with imagination, collaboration, and sharing across all programs working with these age groups. This conference supported looking beyond our own ‘turf’ and planning for the needs of all children within our county.”
- *Kae Parker, Board Member, Partnership for Children, Transylvania County*
- “Today was one of the best meetings I have attended in a really long time. Working with Washington County schools to set and implement goals to reach our students as early as possible has me excited about the collaboration and the work we can put in together to reach our goals.”
- *Sherri Gilliam, Program Manager, Tyrrell Washington Partnership for Children*
- “This was a valuable time of discussion and collaboration from stakeholders in our district to invest in the development and education of children.”
- *Katherine Morris, Teacher, Craven County Schools*
- “Great dialogue with colleagues and others across the district to determine next steps to fully expand early learning in Wayne County.”
- *Charlenna Bennett-Carter, Principal, Wayne County Schools*



Encouraging Ongoing Collaboration

As part of the regional meetings, NCECF and its partners wanted to encourage ongoing collaboration between school districts and early childhood advocates, such as Head Start and Smart Start, to help commitments become reality and to build long-lasting relationships with the potential for future impact.



Efforts to foster collaboration through the meetings have been successful. Surveys of attendees show that 70 percent of participants say their teams have met since attending the regional meeting, and the majority of teams mentioned improved communication among their community stakeholders as a direct impact of the regional meeting.

However, the leadership team also recognized that their work needed to continue long after the regional meetings to ensure long-lasting impact, Zimmerman said.

“We saw the commitments as the first step, albeit a very important one,” she said. “The next step was to build off the relationships that had formed at those regional meetings.”

Commitments included several general themes, including: transition to kindergarten, enhancing or improving data tracking and sharing, building partnerships, professional development, encouraging parental involvement, and improving literacy.

One of the ways the leadership team encouraged ongoing collaboration was to offer teams that attended a regional meeting the chance to apply for one of five \$1,000 stipends to continue the work they started. In addition to the stipend, chosen teams received coaching support from the leadership team, resources, a shared learning community and a review of each district’s plan. Twenty districts applied in February, and the technical support lasted through June.

“More than the stipend, which we knew was nominal, our goal was to provide the time and support from Danielle, Karen, Carla and me so the districts chosen would have the extra guidance and support they needed to turn their commitments into action,” Zimmerman said.

“I think for us, it’s good to have someone not from our county say, ‘I think this sounds good, have you thought about this?’ I think it’s given us focus.”

Karla Carpenter

Preschool Transition Specialist, Catawba County Schools

Tammy Cullom of Craven Smart Start, whose team was chosen for the technical assistance, said both the regional meeting and the support her district has received since have encouraged collaboration between the early childhood and K-12 communities that wasn’t there in as deep of a way before. “The school system has done their thing, and early childhood folks have done their thing, but there’s been nothing as coordinated as this,” she said.

The Craven Birth Through Eight Council, created as a direct result of the regional meeting and subsequent technical support, has met three times since February and has expanded its membership with every meeting. Together, the group is studying background information and data to formulate their action plan.

Though the money provided as part of the technical assistance has allowed the Craven team to provide substitutes for teachers who want to attend group meetings, the coaching support has provided much greater value, Cullom said.

“I do want to mention that the \$1,000 was a blessing. But way more valuable was the support from Tracy, Carla, Karen and Danielle,” she said. “They held our hands and yet they encouraged us to come to them with ideas and let us run with them. They were very dedicated to us. They listened to us. They would give us great constructive feedback. They let us be ourselves but they guided us. It was just absolutely invaluable—it was way more than the \$1,000. We would have these conversations with them, and then we would hang up and continue to talk because we were so inspired. I don’t think we would be anywhere close to where we are without them.”

Karla Carpenter, a preschool transition specialist for Catawba County Schools, agrees that the support from Zimmerman, Ewen, Garrett and McKnight has been incredibly valuable.

“I think for us, it’s good to have someone not from our county to say ‘I think this sounds good, have you thought about this?’ I think it’s given us focus,” she said.

Carpenter attended the Winston-Salem meeting with representatives from three districts—Catawba County Schools, Hickory City Schools and Newton-Conover City Schools—who decided at the meeting to work together as a county instead of creating three separate plans for each district.

Though some work had been done on a county level in the past, Carpenter said the group involved with this work was much broader, allowed everyone involved to really think about what is needed throughout the county.

One area of need that’s bubbled up is resilience and emotional development. “Emotional development is so crucial, and I think we’ve discovered that maybe we haven’t been as focused on that as we need to be,” Carpenter said.

Carpenter said her group meets monthly now, though they met more frequently in the beginning. They’ve hired Dr. Kim Mattox, who’s worked in the Gaston County, Allegheny County and Hickory City school systems, to facilitate the work.

Ongoing Impact

From the state to the district level, North Carolina has proven itself as a national leader through this initiative.

“I think what North Carolina did was groundbreaking,” Ewen said. “The work was thoughtful. There was a really clear timeline, and a really clear plan that had multiple strands. It’s new and different and meaningful, and it’s had incredible impact.”

Thanks to a history of connecting birth-to-eight work at a statewide level, education leaders in North Carolina were primed to take this opportunity and run with it, said Albert Wat of the Alliance for Early Success.

Though the NC DPI’s Office of Early Learning already had programming and personnel that span the birth-to-eight continuum, the ESSA initiative has added depth to the connections, Garrett said.

“There have been some conversations before, but not to this level,” she said.

Beyond ongoing impact at the state level, Wat said he is optimistic for systematic change thanks to the educators and advocates that are engaged at the district level.

“I think the other piece of this is that it hopefully supports the sustainability of this work to have the local buy in,” he said. “I think as you engage the educators themselves, even if people move around, they begin to have this sort of perspective that it’s not just about what happens in kindergarten and beyond. There’s a way to engage early childhood and work that’s happening outside of the school building.”

Those who attended the regional meetings report seeing a clear impact on their ongoing work. Representatives from 74 school districts responded to a follow-up survey four months after the meetings, and responses clearly show ongoing collaboration and work:

95% said that attending the regional meeting impacted their work.

86% said that their ESSA plan would include birth through eight strategies.

71% said that their team was working to implement the commitments identified at the regional meeting.

“We made connections and laid a foundation of collaboration by getting to know one another and learning about what each of our agencies is doing and where we intersect,” said one respondent.

“We have met several more times as a team and have planned and executed a Pre-K to K transition day with school, private, head start, and home daycare centers. We hope to tweak the plan for future years. We are currently planning an administrator academy for those administrators that have a Pre-K site located at their school to go over requirements, teacher observations and future transition days,” said another.

Next Steps

With funding secured to continue the work into the 2019-2020 school year, NCECF, EducationCounsel and the NC DPI Office of Early Learning launched an online tool in late June to support Local Education Agencies to incorporate early learning in their district plans.

The tool includes screenshots of information required in the state's online system (CCIP) and provides recommendations for how to include activities to support young children's development beginning at birth. Two webinars about the tool have been well attended, and participants expressed a high level of interest in using it.

Next up, the partners will focus their work on the following strategies:

1. **DEMONSTRATE** engagement and impact of the work to date to build momentum.
2. **FOCUS** on three areas for greater impact: family engagement, aligned birth-through-third grade professional development and transitions.
3. **SUPPORT** continued collaboration among communities at the district level through regional meetings and ongoing technical assistance.
4. **ENGAGE** state leadership in continued capacity building.

Additionally, North Carolina is one of seven states that will join a peer learning network created by EducationCounsel to develop ESSA implementation plans and policies that can promote birth to third grade systems nationwide.



"I think what North Carolina did was groundbreaking. It's really new and different and meaningful, and it's had incredible impact."

● **Danielle Ewen** Senior Policy Advisor, EducationCounsel

THE SOURCES

INTERVIEWS • conducted July and August 2018 •

- Tracy Zimmerman, *North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation*
- John Pruetto, *NC DPI Office of Early Learning*
- Danielle Ewen, *EducationCounsel*
- Carla Garrett, *NC DPI Office of Early Learning*
- Karen McKnight, *NC DPI Office of Early Learning*
- Tammy Cullom, *Craven County Smart Start*
- Karla Carpenter, *Catawba County Schools*
- Albert Wat, *Alliance for Early Success*

NORTH CAROLINA EARLY CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION WEB RESOURCES

- www.buildthefoundation.org
- <https://buildthefoundation.org/2017/07/will-nc-lead-or-lag/>

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION WEB RESOURCES

- <https://www.ed.gov/essa>
- <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essaelguidance10202016.pdf>
- <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essaelguidance10202016.pdf>
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www.buildthefoundation.org

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
UNDERSTANDING

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