

BRIDGING SECTORS TO  
CO-CREATE **NC PATHWAYS**  
**TO GRADE-LEVEL READING**

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NORTH CAROLINA EARLY CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION



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

# BRIDGING SECTORS TO CO-CREATE **NC PATHWAYS TO GRADE-LEVEL READING**



4	Executive Summary
6	Moving Forward Together
8	About North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation
12	Paving the Way for Pathways
18	Phase 01 Engaging Partners & Defining Measures of Success
24	Phase 02 Learning Teams
26	Phase 03 Design Teams and Family & Community Input
30	Pulling it Together: The Pathways Action Framework
34	The Ripple Effect: Pathways Impact
38	Sources



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

North Carolina has long been recognized for its commitment to ensuring that our state’s young children have the opportunity to succeed.

We launched NC Pre-K (formerly More at Four) to provide at-risk children with high-quality learning environments. Our state was also the first in the nation to:

- Make full-day kindergarten universally available
- Pioneer a comprehensive early childhood initiative to improve the quality of child care
- Provide access to health screenings and offer support to families

As a result, more North Carolina children are in high quality child care, our state’s prekindergarten program is among the best in the country, and we have among the highest rates of developmental screenings in the nation.

These success stories did not happen by chance—in each case, citizens, policymakers, state leaders, organizations and others took bold action in unprecedented ways.

In November of 2015, North Carolina once more took bold action on behalf of young children when more than 85 representatives from government agencies, nonprofits, the private sector, foundations, research institutions and members of the North Carolina General Assembly came together to launch Pathways to Grade-Level Reading. Pathways is an initiative of the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF) in collaboration with NC Child, The North Carolina Partnership for Children and BEST NC.

Since that first meeting, a growing partnership of hundreds of diverse leaders from across the state has worked across sectors, geography and the political aisle with the goal of building a comprehensive early childhood system for North Carolina and improving outcomes for young children.



We have done this by aligning around a common set of measures and strategies to achieve a singular vision:

**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 to Grade-Level Reading partners have worked together to answer three questions critical to the Pathways vision—all of which are rooted in creating possibilities for young children across the state.

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

As a result, this diverse group has recommended a set of research-based, whole-child, birth-through-eight measures—the Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Measures of Success—to help North Carolina determine if our state’s young children are on the path to literacy.

Pathways partners also have created and are endorsing the Pathways to Grade Level Reading Action Framework, which proposes actions in the areas identified as priorities—children’s social-emotional health, high quality early care and education and regular school attendance.

The impact of the Pathways work is widespread, creating a ripple effect that will lead to better outcomes for all North Carolina children. By creating shared agreement around a set of measures and actions to drive early childhood outcomes, NCECF, Pathways partners and other stakeholders have helped ensure that early childhood is in the spotlight in NC. The Pathways work continues to drive content for other early childhood initiatives and planning processes across the state. Though the full impact of the initiative will be measured over time, the Pathways ripple is already visible at the legislative, community and Pathways partner levels.

This ripple effect will create change for children and families throughout North Carolina and even across the country as the Pathways measures are shared nationally and used by communities in other states. We encourage partners to continue to adopt the Pathways model to support collaborative planning in the service of improving early childhood outcomes.





# MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

This report celebrates what can happen when a large group of diverse partners come together, rally around a common vision and create shared success measures, goals and actions to move forward toward positive change. The success of the Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative is a testament to our Pathways partners, who have attended the meetings, done the homework, supported the Pathways vision and remain committed to improving outcomes for North Carolina's young children. Success is also a result of the partnership and leadership of the Pathways Accelerators—NC Child, The North Carolina Partnership for Children and BEST NC.

## LEGISLATIVE AND ADMINISTRATIVE IMPACT

- State leaders identified shared birth-to-eight, whole-child measures of success to put children on a pathway to grade-level reading.
- The NC General Assembly highlighted Pathways in the 2016 and 2017 budgets when it passed and updated provisions calling for greater birth-to-eight coordination across agencies and organizations, “including consideration of the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading.”
- Pathways serves as a foundation of prominent state-level early childhood initiatives like:
  - » The NC Department of Health and Human Services’ Early Childhood Action Plan, which outlines DHHS’ vision for early childhood in North Carolina.

- » The Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education, appointed by Gov. Roy Cooper to determine a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach to meeting the requirements of the Supreme Court Leandro ruling that all children, including those from at-risk or rural and underserved communities, have access to a sound basic education.
- » The myFutureNC Commission, a statewide, cross-sector initiative focused on increasing post-secondary educational attainment.
- » The B-3rd Interagency Council, which is co-led by the NC Department of Health and Human Services and the NC Department of Public Instruction and tasked with creating a vision and accountability for a birth through grade three system of early education.

## COMMUNITY IMPACT

- Local communities across the state are using the Pathways Measures of Success Framework for collaborative community planning—identifying which of the Pathways shared measures to focus on locally and developing strategies for action to improve child and family outcomes.
- Communities outside of North Carolina are also using Pathways as a model. One example is the Gila River Indian Community outside Phoenix, Arizona, where community leaders are using the Pathways Measures of Success Framework and associated research to build a case for focusing on early literacy in their community and to organize for action.

## PATHWAYS PARTNER IMPACT

- In a Pathways partners survey, 95 percent of respondents said they “felt confident that if the state made progress on these measures, we would improve third grade reading outcomes.”
- Collaborative partner organizations have incorporated the Pathways measures into their own data tracking and reporting, and are adopting a racial equity lens.

# ABOUT THE NORTH CAROLINA EARLY CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION

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's bold and achievable mission is for each North Carolina child to have a strong foundation for lifelong health, education and well-being supported by a premiere birth to eight system.

Decades of research show that strong brains and bodies are built when children have:

- **Health and development on track from birth**
- **Supported and supportive families and communities**
- **Access to high-quality birth-to-eight learning environments with regular attendance**

As the state's only organization focused exclusively on children from birth through age eight, we work to promote understanding, spearhead collaboration and advance policies to ensure each North Carolina child is on track for lifelong success by the end of third grade.

We do this by:

## PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING

We engage business, faith, law enforcement and community leaders as early childhood champions to effectively communicate the broad societal impacts of policies that affect early development and learning.

## SPEARHEADING COLLABORATION

We bring together health, family support and birth-to-eight education leaders across the government, policy, private, nonprofit, philanthropic and research sectors to lead and support state and local collaborations that advance a shared vision and course of action for maximum impact for children and families.

## ADVANCING POLICIES

We provide policymakers, advocates, business leaders and the public with research and analysis about the impact of federal and state birth-to-eight policies and innovations proven to achieve results for young children.

PATHWAYS ACCELERATORS

Pathways is supported by the following organizations, which have acted as the Accelerator team, providing strategic thought partnership and helping to move the work forward:

- NC Child, which advances public policies to ensure all children—regardless of race, ethnicity, or place of birth—have the opportunity to achieve their full potential
- The North Carolina Partnership for Children, which advances a high quality, comprehensive, accountable system of care and education for each child beginning with a healthy birth
- BEST NC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan coalition of business leaders that works to unite an engaged and informed business perspective to build consensus toward dramatically transforming and improving education in North Carolina

PATHWAYS PARTNERS

The success of the Pathways initiative is directly related to the commitment of the organizations and people who have signed on as Pathways partners. Pathways partners are state or local entities and individuals who have been involved in at least one of the following activities annually:

- Attending a Pathways partners meeting
- Serving on a Pathways Action Team (e.g., Data Action Team, Learning Team, Design Team)
- Using the Pathways Measures of Success Framework to engage partners in aligned local action
- Sharing data with Pathways
- Serving as an advisor to a Pathways process
- Providing in-kind or financial support to Pathways
- Aligning organizational/agency policies, practices, programs, and/or funding to advance any of the shared success measures and articulating the connection to Pathways
- Advocating for the policies, practices and programs recommended by the Pathways Design Teams and finalized by Pathways partners

Pathways Partners include:

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| • Ashe County Partnership for Children  | • NC Child  | • NCaeyc  |
| • BEST NC   | • NC Council of Community Programs/Child First  | • North Carolina Child Treatment Program                |
| • The Belk Foundation   | • NC Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child Development and Early Education                                     | • NSO Associates  |
| • Beth Meyer Preschool  | • NC Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health   | • Onslow County Partnership for Children                |
| • Book Harvest  | • NC Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health, Essentials for Childhood                                   | • Parents as Teachers Guilford County                   |
| • Buncombe Partnership for Children   | • NC Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health, Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program | • Partnership for Children of Cumberland County         |
| • The Cemala Foundation   | • NC Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health, Early Intervention Branch                                  | • Partnership for Children of Johnston County           |
| • Child Care Services Association   | • NC Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health, Children and Youth Branch                                  | • Perry Memorial Library                                |
| • ChildTrust Foundation   | • NC Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Social Services   | • Project Enlightenment Foundation                      |
| • Chowan/Perquimans Smart Start Partnership                                   | • NC Department of Public Instruction   | • Project Impact, Winston-Salem/ Forsyth County Schools |
| • Community Foundation of Western North Carolina                              | • NC Department of Public Instruction, K-3 Literacy/Read to Achieve   | • Reach Out and Read                                    |
| • Craven Smart Start  | • NC Department of Public Instruction, Office of Early Learning, Head Start State Collaboration Office                              | • Read Wayne – Wayne County Library                     |
| • Down East Partnership for Children  | • NC Early Childhood Foundation   | • Read WS   |
| • The Duke Endowment  | • NC Early Learning Network   | • Ready for School, Ready for Life                      |
| • Exchange Family Center  | • NC Partnership for Children   | • SAS   |
| • FPG Child Development Institute   | • NC Pediatric Society  | • Skeebo Foundation                                     |
| • Guilford Child Development  |   | • Smart Start of Forsyth County                         |
| • Helps Education Fund  |   | • Smart Start of Hanover County                         |
| • Infant Mental Health Association  |   | • Smart Start of Mecklenburg County                     |
| • Institute for Emerging Issues   |   | • Triangle Community Foundation                         |
| • Iredell County Partnership for Young Children                               |   | • United Way of North Carolina                          |
| • Language and Literacy 365   |   | • United Way of the Greater Triangle                    |
| • Marbles Kids Museum   |   | • Wake County Public Libraries                          |
| • MDC, Great Expectations Initiative of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust |   | • Wake County Smart Start                               |
| • Motherread, Inc.  |   | • WAKE Up and Read                                      |
| • Nash-Rocky Mount Schools  |   | • Western NC Conference UMA                             |
| • National Campaign for Grade-Level Reading                                   |   | • Winer Family Foundation                               |
| • NC Alliance of YMCAs  |   | • The Winston-Salem Foundation                          |

Many people also signed on as individual partners. Your organization can sign up to be a Pathways partner [here](#).



# PAVING THE WAY FOR **PATHWAYS**

In early 2015, NCECF hired consulting firm DCA to conduct interviews with philanthropic, nonprofit and government leaders across the state to better understand the North Carolina early childhood landscape, identify opportunities for statewide impact and determine the role that stakeholders in early childhood outcomes wanted NCECF to play.

During interviews, state leaders agreed that third grade literacy proficiency should be the focus of attention across the state.

Leaders interviewed shared that the importance of third grade literacy is understandable to policymakers and the general public. They stressed that improvement on early literacy depends upon a holistic view of children's and families' strengths and needs.

Leaders also expressed a sense of urgency around literacy as a result of the state's 2012 Read to Achieve legislation, which requires that third grade students who are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade remain in third grade or be placed in a transition class or accelerated fourth grade class to receive additional support. In 2014, this impacted 12.7 percent of third grade students, which meant a substantial number of North Carolina children and families were affected.

Interviewees also agreed that North Carolina needed leadership to establish a unified vision for progress on third grade reading scores and child outcomes from birth-through-eight. According to DCA's final report to NCECF, leaders called for alignment of early childhood system-building efforts and a raised focus "beyond debates about funding, the role of government and dismantling or preserving the status quo."

"This gave us a clear direction moving forward and was the impetus for Pathways—an initiative that would rally and bring together the diverse stakeholders who were focused on addressing third grade reading and improving child outcomes," said Tracy Zimmerman, director of external affairs for the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, who served as the executive director of NCECF at the time.



WHY BIRTH THROUGH EIGHT?

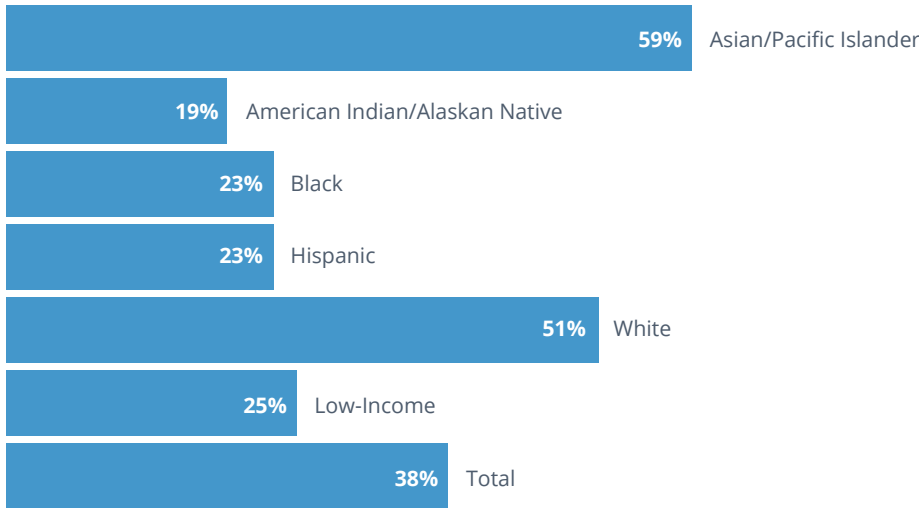
The first eight years of a child’s life are a critical time that build the foundation for all future learning. In fact, by the time a child is in third grade, his or her reading outcomes can predict future academic achievement and career success. Research is clear that achieving grade-level reading and overall well-being is possible, if we ensure that children have:

- Health and development on track from birth
- Supportive and supported families and communities
- High quality birth-through-age-eight learning environments with regular attendance

EARLY CHILDHOOD EFFORTS & OUTCOMES • 2015

In North Carolina, only 38 percent of fourth graders and 25 percent of those from economically disadvantaged families scored at or above reading proficiency on the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). And significant gaps existed by race, ethnicity and income.

NC ACHIEVEMENT-LEVEL PERCENTAGES BY RACE, ETHNICITY, AND INCOME



Though North Carolina’s numbers did not differ significantly from national numbers at the time—the state’s score was higher than 23 other states or jurisdictions, lower than only four and in the same performance category as 24—consensus was building among political, business and community leaders that it was time to take action.

“Though North Carolina had a number of support systems in place for children and their families, the efforts were siloed—operating on their own, even though their desired outcomes were the same,” said Mandy Ableidinger, NCECF’s policy and practice leader. “Pathways invited stakeholders to step outside our silos and work together to meet our common goal.”

LEADING THE WAY

As the only organization in North Carolina focused on building a comprehensive state-level birth-through-eight early childhood system, NCECF was uniquely positioned to facilitate the Pathways work. Through its First 2000 Days Campaign, an open source campaign that allows communities across North Carolina to download presentations and supporting materials to start an early childhood advocacy campaign, NCECF had earned a reputation for convening diverse stakeholders and inspiring them to take collective action. NC Child brought data, research and advocacy experience; the North Carolina Partnership for Children brought its programmatic experience and its state-wide local Smart Start network; and BEST NC added its private sector, business and legislative connections.

“Each of the partner organizations brought something critical to the table,” Ableidinger said. “This work would not have been so successful without all of these components in place.”

The leadership team was intentional about leveraging each other’s strengths and recognizing that there was not a “cookie cutter” approach for each organization’s participation and contribution, said NC Child Executive Director Michelle Hughes.

“Everyone brought deep expertise and experience to the team and initiative, and we took different angles,” Hughes said.

USING A RACIAL EQUITY LENS

Throughout the Pathways process, initiative leaders and Pathways partners used a racial equity lens to inform the work. The racial equity lens was identified by partners as one of the most important and meaningful parts of the work.

Grounding the work in equity encouraged Pathways leaders and partners to stay focused on children who need the most support, said Tamika Williams, associate director of child care with The Duke Endowment. Williams was involved with Pathways from the beginning of the initiative.

“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.”

During the Pathways initiative, a small group of partners met with equity consultants Kathleen Crabbs and Sterling Freeman to craft a statement that explains Pathways’ approach to racial equity and why partners believe it is a critical lens. That statement is presented below in its entirety as a testament to the importance of equity in the work.

**Since its adoption in 1893, our state motto, ‘To Be, Rather Than to Seem’ has both inspired and challenged North Carolinians to go beyond just speaking our values and truly live them. We pride ourselves on being a state that is a leader in creating opportunities for people to live with dignity, realize their potential, and achieve their greatest dreams. Yet current and historic laws, policies and practices—both official and unofficial—have created and maintained widespread barriers to opportunity and success for children and families of color. Today in North Carolina, too many children from all racial groups are not meeting a critical developmental milestone—reading on grade level by the end of third grade. However, there are vast differences in outcomes between racial groups, with 52 percent of white children meeting this benchmark, while only 22 percent of Black and 22 percent of Latinx children do. These disparities in outcomes are the result of systemic barriers both current and historic.**

**Ensuring that all our children and families have high quality child care and early education, effective public elementary schools, high quality health care and well-paying jobs that can support a family is the key to improving third grade reading proficiency—and the key to prosperity for all of us.**

**To get there, Pathways focuses explicitly on racial equity, since race in America plays such a large role in determining children’s life outcomes. This racial equity lens guides Pathways to recommend dedicating more and different resources to support children and families of color and creating systems that work for all.**

**Leading with racial equity means prioritizing strategies that specifically work to improve outcomes for children of color and giving special consideration to the wisdom and innovation of people of color to develop responses that are lasting and reach all children.**

**Targeted interventions that account for structural racism benefit all children. The Pathways Action Framework also aims to reduce disparities in children’s outcomes based on income, ability, language of origin, geography, gender or age.**



Pathways uses a racial equity lens by:

- Disaggregating data so that we can clearly see and address the racial and other disparities in outcomes among groups of children
- Ensuring that people of color and white people work together to make decisions about what to prioritize and how
- Encouraging and supporting partner organizations and agencies to lead with a racial equity lens
- Convening organizations so they can learn together, support each other, and partner to advance racial equity work for young children. 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

## PHASE 01

# ENGAGING PARTNERS & DEFINING MEASURES OF SUCCESS

The inaugural meeting of the Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative took place November 13, 2015. Eighty-five attendees representing government agencies, nonprofit organizations, the private sector, foundations, research institutions and the North Carolina General Assembly attended. Participants' experience spanned disciplines: health, family support, early learning environments, K-12 education, policy and a broad array of additional fields.

The initial kick-off Pathways Partners meeting was exciting because stakeholders from different sectors—many of whom don't get to work together as often as they like—were in the room, said Michelle Hughes of NC Child.

"Partners were excited and relieved to broaden the lens on third grade reading scores to look at the range of issues that impact children's learning and development, and that play a role in third grade reading proficiency," she said.



### Defining the Guiding Principles and Success Metrics

During the launch meeting, partners worked to define the guiding principles of the Pathways work, along with success metrics. They did this by defining desired outcomes for children in North Carolina. As a basis for their discussion, they used goal areas that have a direct research basis for improving health and well-being outcomes for children:

- Health and development on track, starting at birth
- Supported and supportive families and communities
- High quality early care and education and effective teaching and learning in K-3 classrooms

**"I think there was a deep appreciation for the intentional focus on the whole child—child health, family support and early learning—in improving third grade reading scores in NC," Hughes said. "And there was also an understanding that third grade reading scores are an important proxy indicator for child well-being overall."**



Outcomes were framed as aspirational, and therefore led with the word “all.” Examples for each of the goal areas are as follows.

**To ensure that health and development are on track, starting at birth, which included such outcomes as:**

- All babies are born at a healthy gestational age and birth weight.
- All children are on track developmentally.
- All children have access to early intervention as needed.
- All parents have access to needed health, substance use disorder, and domestic violence services.

**To ensure that families and communities are supported and supportive, which included such outcomes as:**

- All children have safe, stable, nurturing relationships with families/parents/caregivers and other adults.
- All families have access to home visiting, family support and parenting education programs.
- All families have access to paid sick, maternity and paternity leave.
- All families have access to stable, safe, affordable housing and transportation.

**To ensure high quality early care and education and effective teaching and learning in K-3 classrooms, which included such outcomes as:**

- All children are prepared to succeed in school.
- All children have access to affordable, high quality early education beginning at birth.
- All children attend school regularly.

Meeting attendees also identified the following principles to guide the collective work:

- We will be data- and research-driven, and informed by developmental science.
- We are committed to acknowledging and eliminating systemic inequities and racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and ability disparities in early childhood experiences, opportunities and outcomes.
- We will focus on the whole child, birth through age eight, in the context of his or her family and community, using a multi-dimensional systems lens.
- We will be transparent, collaborative and accountable to one another.
- We will be informed by and hold ourselves accountable to families and communities.
- We will have a strengths-based approach, highlighting protective factors and preventative solutions and be guided by compassion.
- We will work to ensure that each child has the opportunity to fulfill his or her potential.
- We will prioritize solutions that are actionable and sustainable, and we will have high expectations of what is achievable.
- We will be results-oriented, embracing innovation and seeing change as opportunity.

“Because we had so many diverse stakeholders, setting the expectations about how we would work together was vitally important,” Ableidinger said.

**“We knew we needed to set clear expectations from the very beginning, and we needed the partners themselves to determine what those expectations should be.”**

# THE DATA ACTION TEAM

The final task for partners at the launch meeting was to inform the description of a Data Action Team. This would be a smaller group of experts whose mission would be to identify the whole-child, birth-through-eight measures that impact third grade reading proficiency, along with data sources for each of those measures, to guide the Pathways work moving forward.

Rooting the Pathways work in data was essential to determining possibilities for change and measuring future success, said Terry Stoops, vice president for research and director of education studies at the John Locke Foundation.

**“You cannot fix what you cannot measure,” said Stoops, who served on the Data Action Team and went on to participate in future Pathways work. “While the Data Action Team acknowledged the limitations of measurement, we also understood that data is a form of communication and, as such, the larger group of partners began to see data as a powerful tool for change. For the Data Action Team, it was never data for data’s sake. Instead, it was data for children’s sake.”**

Pathways partners recommended potential Data Action Team members, whom NCECF invited to join the effort. The Data Action Team included 30 data experts from early childhood organizations, the private sector, government and healthcare. Parent representatives were also included. The Data Action Team was split into three subject matter groups: health, families/communities and birth-to-eight education.

At first, the Data Action Team felt challenged about how to gather the necessary statewide data. During the first meeting, the team determined that while some early childhood data were readily available in North Carolina, other data were either not collected or were not easy to access.

“We approached the problem by asking two questions: What do we know? What would we like to know?” Stoops said. “The experts on the team were able to answer the former question with ease. The latter question, however, was much more challenging to answer, given the fact that local, state and federal agencies, early childhood organizations and advocacy groups have limited resources and divergent goals.”

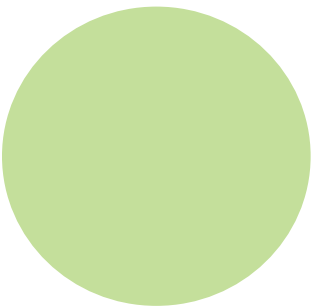
Given the limitations on amount and quality of data, Stoops said the team re-focused on how to make the available data as effective as it could be.

**► RESOURCES:**

- [The Pathways Measures of Success Framework](#)
- [Data Action Team Evaluation Report](#)



“Practically speaking, we understood that we would never be able to obtain all of the data that we would have liked,” Stoops said. “So, it became a question of how to improve existing data collection, dissemination and analysis while leveraging resources and strengthening partnerships whenever possible.”



The Data Action team met four times from January through April 2016. NCECF updated the larger group of Pathways partners regularly on the team’s work and solicited their feedback.

Team members established the following set of criteria to determine the measures they would recommend:

RESEARCH BASED

The measure must be connected clearly to the topline result through research.

ACTIONABLE

The measure could be reasonably impacted through state or local legislation; policy, program or practice change; or community action.

IMPACTFUL

The measure would positively impact the lives of a substantial number of North Carolina children and families.

EASILY COMMUNICATED

The measure could be easily understood by parents, policymakers and other key stakeholders.

EQUALIZING

The measure would reduce gaps and inequalities that currently exist among NC populations.

Together with initiative leaders, the team published the Measures of Success Data Action Team Report and Pathways Measures of Success Framework. These documents outlined the team’s findings and clearly laid out the recommended measures of success for endorsement by the full group of Pathways partners, which now numbered more than 100 organizations and individuals and growing.

NCECF hired evaluation firm Impact Thread to document and measure the effectiveness of the Data Action Team process, including the team’s effectiveness in engaging the larger Pathways partners group. Impact Thread determined that the Data Action Team and the Pathways leadership successfully kept the partners informed and engaged.

By the end of the Data Action Team process:

**100% OF PATHWAYS PARTNERS**  
said they planned to continue to engage in and support the work of the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative.

**91% OF PATHWAYS PARTNERS**  
said that they felt they were part of a team that was working towards completing the Pathways mission.

**96% OF PATHWAYS PARTNERS**  
considered themselves advocates of the Measures of Success.

On May of 2016, 90 Pathways partners, including Data Action Team members, met to review and adopt the Measures of Success Framework.

“As a group, we knew where we were starting. We knew where we wanted to go. The Measures of Success is a roadmap that connected the two,” Stoops said.

The next step was to prioritize a subset of the Measures of Success to determine where North Carolina should act first.

## PHASE 02

# LEARNING TEAMS

After endorsing the work of the Data Action Team, Pathways partners launched Phase Two of the Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative: Learning Teams. Learning Teams were charged with reviewing the North Carolina data behind the Measures of Success to answer the following questions:

**How are North Carolina’s children (and families) doing on the Pathways Measures of Success?**

**Based on NC’s strengths and opportunities for improvement, what measures should we prioritize to move to action on first?**

Pathways partners and leaders identified 73 people to serve on three Learning Teams, each based on one of the initiative’s goals:

- Health and Development on Track Beginning at Birth
- Supported and Supportive Families and Communities
- High Quality Birth-to-Eight Learning Environments with Regular Attendance

Each Learning Team included content experts, data experts and policy thinkers, and each team was led by two co-chairs.

“I think one of the things that was most impressive about the Learning Teams was the group of assembled people,” said Tamika Williams with The Duke Endowment, who co-chaired the Supported and Supportive Families and Communities Learning Team.

“They brought their expertise and experience and passion, and that was a part of the selection process. They were very reasonable people, and they had a belief that we can change outcomes.”

The teams met individually three times between August and December of 2016 to analyze trends, inequities, patterns and connections in the North Carolina data, and to identify data gaps.

NCECF supported the Learning Teams in part by providing the Measures of Success data not only at the state level, but also disaggregated by race and ethnicity, income, age and geography where available. Considering the data through the Pathways’ racial equity lens was critical to determining how to prioritize measures, Williams said.

“My group was very intentional about asking for that level of data and working with NCECF to bring that data to the table,” Williams said.

The Learning Teams used the information they had gathered to identify seven measures from the Measures of Success Framework that showed high need, high disparities and high impact on the other measures. They prioritized these as the measures stakeholders should act on first:

### **Health and Development on Track, Beginning at Birth**

- Healthy Birthweight: Percent of babies born weighing less than 2500 grams (5.5 pounds).
- Development (Early Intervention): Percent of children improving with early intervention services.
- Social-Emotional Health: Percent of children exhibiting self-regulation, good interpersonal skills and no behavior problems.

### **Supported and Supportive Families and Communities**

- Positive Parent and Child Interactions: Average number of minutes per day that parents talk or play with their children.

- Social Supports for Families: Percent of new mothers reporting access to sufficient social supports.

### **High-Quality Birth-through-Eight Learning Environments, with Regular Attendance**

- High Quality Birth to Eight Education: Percent of children birth-through-age-eight receiving high quality early care and education (centers, family homes and schools).
- Regular Attendance: Percent of children with regular attendance in early care and education programs and schools.

On an evaluation of Phase Two of the Pathways initiative, Learning Team members reported positive experiences, with 96 percent of team members saying that Learning Teams were productive and 96 percent reporting that they felt their contributions were valued.

In March 2017, the Pathways partners met to review the Learning Teams’ recommendations. Partners agreed that the seven measures identified by the Learning Teams offered important, timely opportunities to create impact and change for young children and their families.

Pathways partners kicked off the next phase of work— recommending policy and practice change on the priority measures of success. That work would be completed by Pathways Design Teams.

## PHASE 03

# DESIGN TEAMS AND **FAMILY & COMMUNITY INPUT**

The mission of the Design Teams was to recommend strategies for action. Design Team members supplemented their own considerable expertise with input from local providers of services for children and families in 14 communities across the state, feedback from parents, and national research on what moves the needle on each of the prioritized measures of success, specifically for children of color.

Pathways partners and leaders identified about 90 people to serve on three Design Teams. Design Teams aligned with the three areas of focus chosen by the Learning Teams:

- Children's social-emotional health, which included early intervention, positive interactions and supports for families.
- High quality birth-through-age-eight early care and education
- Regular school attendance

Since North Carolina already has a robust Perinatal Health Strategic Plan, the group determined it was not necessary to form a Design Team around the Healthy Birthweight measure.

Each Design Team included cross-sector content experts, data experts, policy thinkers and family representatives. Within each team, members served on workgroups focused on specific outcomes.

Having team members who represented the diversity of the early childhood field—covering health, education, child development, parent supports, community development and government—was important to the process, said Cyndi Soter O'Neil, senior policy advisor at the ChildTrust Foundation. Cyndi served as a co-chair of the Design Team tackling strategies for high quality birth-through-age-eight early care and education.

**“Because it’s such a wide-ranging field, it will take more than a single effort to move the needle on any one data point—thus the need to have lots of ‘different kinds of minds’ in the mix,” Soter O’Neil said.**

## RACIAL EQUITY LENS

During the Design Team process, Pathways leaders and partners recommitted to using a racial equity lens and deepened that work. NCECF brought in racial equity consultants CounterPart Consulting (also in business as OpenSource Leadership Strategies) to train the Design Team members in racial equity, implicit bias and the importance of using a racial equity lens. CounterPart worked with the Design Teams for the full year, serving as part of the leadership team that planned the meeting agendas, prepared materials, guided discussions during the meetings and followed up afterwards. They continuously asked the question “How is race operating here?” to encourage Design Team members to keep the “slippery fish of race” on the table.

According to the OpenSource evaluation, design team members consistently made it a practice to incorporate the language, tools and framework of a racial equity lens on all their work around strategies and tactics. This practice allowed for deeper consideration of the issues that surfaced and slowed the pace of the work, which resulted in more thorough analysis.

Design Team members reported that the racial equity lens was the most impactful and meaningful part of the work, and team members expressed plans to use a racial equity lens in their own work outside of Pathways in a variety of ways, including:

- Integrating it into strategic planning efforts of their own agencies
- Using the analysis to improve parent-teacher relationships
- Using the racial equity framework with their own families



## FAMILY & COMMUNITY INPUT

As Design Teams began their work, Pathways leaders worked with local organizations across the state to gather input from parents and from early childhood professionals who work with young children and their parents.

### Early Childhood Professionals Provide Feedback on Challenges and Opportunities

To collect input from early childhood professionals across the state, Pathways leaders partnered with Smart Start partnerships in 14 communities to host Community Conversations. Conversations were held in Bertie, Beaufort, Cabarrus, Chowan/Perquimans, Durham, Forsyth, New Hanover, Onslow, Orange, Union, Wake, Watauga, Yadkin and Yancey counties. The nearly 600 participants included birth to third grade teachers, elementary school principals and child care administrators, school district representatives, pediatricians, and service providers such as home visiting, early intervention, public health, social services and mental health.

Two conversations were held in each community. During the first round, participants shared what supports them and what gets in the way of their

work to advance the success of young children and their families. During the second round later in the Design Team process, participants gave input on which strategies the Design Teams should prioritize.

### Parents Add Wisdom and Experience

To include input from NC parents of young children, Pathways leaders collected data from about 20 parent surveys, focus groups and community cafes held by local organizations over the past few years that dealt with the Pathways areas of focus. NCECF published a meta-analysis of that data in 2017 called *Not About Me, Without Me: Raising Parent Voice to Guide Early Childhood Policy*. The report included feedback and perspectives from more than 2,000 NC parents and caregivers.

Having such a rich source of qualitative data from thousands of parents of young children ensured that the family representatives on the Design Teams did not have to speak for all NC families. “The family voices were critical to ensure that this work was ‘not about me without me’—otherwise, it would have been too easy to design something without keeping our focus on the people most directly affected,” Soter O’Neil said.

### ► RESOURCE

[Not About Me, Without Me: Raising Parent Voice to Guide Early Childhood Policy](#)



# PULLING IT TOGETHER: THE **PATHWAYS** **ACTION** **FRAMEWORK**

The Design Teams met individually and together in six sessions from June 2017 to August 2018. Participants brainstormed what current North Carolina policies and practices to keep, change, create or get rid of to see improved outcomes for children and families, and brought together the work on racial equity with input from parents, local providers of services for children and families, and national research to inform cross-sector actions. At the end of the year-long process, after considering hundreds of possible policy and practice changes, the Design Teams came to consensus on a path forward.

**“Design Team meetings were very productive: lots of good conversations—sometimes hard conversations—happening at tables and shared out with the group,” Soter O’Neil said. “[Throughout the process] NCECF did a great job of continually reminding us where we’d been, where we were heading and what our objectives were for each meeting.”**



The result of the Design Team process was the Pathways Action Framework, which lays out a series of expectations for state and local birth-through-eight child and family systems and recommends actions to realize those expectations. The Framework uses a racial equity lens, is grounded in family and is informed by community input.

The Pathways Action Framework was approved by the Pathways partners in October of 2018.

“To me, Pathways is the evidence base for our road map moving forward,” said Henrietta Zalkind, Executive Director for the Down East Partnership for Children and a member and a Commissioner of the state's Leandro Commission on Access to a Sound Basic Education.

Pathways partners and other organizations are endorsing the Measures of Success and Action Frameworks. They recommend that the shared Measures of Success serve as the foundation for building North Carolina's state and local birth-through-eight system and agree that the actions in the Action Framework, if well-implemented, can improve children's third grade reading and well-being outcomes.

► [Click here to add your organization, agency or business to the list.](#)

## ENDORISING ORGANIZATIONS INCLUDE:

- Alamance Achieves
- Alamance Partnership for Children
- The Arc of NC
- Ashe County Partnership for Children
- Bailey Elementary School
- BEST NC
- Blue Ridge Community College
- Book Harvest
- Buncombe Partnership for Children
- Catholic Charities
- Center for Child and Family Health
- ChildTrust Foundation
- Child Care Services Association
- Child First National Program Office
- Community Care of North Carolina
- The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina
- Communities In Schools of North Carolina
- Craven Smart Start
- Down East Partnership for Children
- Duke World Food Policy Center
- The Duke Endowment
- Duplin County Partnership for Children
- East Durham Children's Initiative
- Family Support Network
- Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute
- Govan-Hunt Staff Development, LLC & Critical Curriculum Consulting
- Growing Moore Readers
- Guilford County Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Division
- Helps Education Fund
- Hoke County Schools
- Institute for Emerging Issues at NC State University
- The Kaleidoscope Project
- Marbles Kids Museum
- MomsRising
- Montgomery County Partnership for Children
- Motherread, Inc.
- myFutureNC Commission
- National Black Child Development Institute – Charlotte
- NC Association for the Education of Young Children
- NC Child
- NC Child Treatment Program
- NC Department of Health and Human Services – Early Intervention Branch
- NC Infant and Young Child Mental Health Association
- NC Justice Center
- NC Partnership for Children/Smart Start
- NC Pediatric Society
- NC Rural Center
- NC School Superintendents' Association
- NC State Board of Education
- Onslow County Partnership for Children
- OpenSource Leadership Strategies
- Partnership for Children of Johnston County
- Partnership for Children of Wayne County
- Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina
- Reach Out and Read Carolinas
- Ready for School, Ready for Life – Guilford County
- Region A Partnership for Children
- Robeson County Partnership for Children
- Smart Start of Forsyth County
- Smart Start of Mecklenburg County
- Smart Start of New Hanover County
- Smart Start of Transylvania County
- Southwestern Child Development Commission
- Stokes Partnership for Children
- Triangle Community Foundation
- United Way of Alamance County
- United Way of the Greater Triangle
- United Way of North Carolina
- Wake County Smart Start
- Wayne Action Group for Economic Solvency, Inc. (WAGES)
- Wilkes Community Partnership for Children
- Winer Family Foundation

► **RESOURCE**  
[The Pathways Action Framework](#)



# THE RIPPLE EFFECT: PATHWAYS IMPACT

Though the true impact of the Pathways to Grade-Level Reading work will be felt over time as the actions are implemented and child and family outcomes improve, the work is already creating a ripple effect that is changing the early childhood landscape in North Carolina.

## BRINGING FOCUS TO THE WORK

Thanks to the leadership of NCECF and its partners, the Pathways initiative has coalesced early childhood efforts across the state by inspiring them to rally behind shared measures and actions to drive early childhood outcomes, said Cyndi Soter O'Neil of the ChildTrust Foundation.

"It has given focus to a lot of important but often disparate and disconnected work across the state," Soter O'Neil said. "I think it also revealed just how much is already happening in the state and where the critical gaps are, in addition to elevating local and family voices in a state-level conversation. The more that Pathways can help align all that work and ensure that decisions are made based on science, research, data and good policy, the better children and families will be served."

Pathways has also become the go-to data resource to help drive early childhood work forward at both the local and state level, Zalkind said.

"Pathways was such a long, intense, deliberate process that involved so many people and so much expertise that it accumulated an amazing amount of knowledge and planning for where we are now and where we need to move forward and how to prioritize those gaps," said Zalkind, who was involved as an original Pathways partner. "It was so cross sector that you always know when you're looking for something or you need some data, you'll find it in the Pathways work."



GRAPHIC RECORDING by @JimNuttie for @CrowleyandCo



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## INFORMING POLICY & PRACTICE

Pathways is informing and influencing policies and practice across the state.

- The NC General Assembly highlighted Pathways in the 2016 and 2017 budgets when it passed and updated provisions calling for greater birth-to-eight coordination across agencies and organizations, “including consideration of the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading.”
- Pathways serves as a foundation of prominent state-level early childhood initiatives like:
  - » The NC Department of Health and Human Services’ Early Childhood Action Plan, which outlines DHHS’ vision for early childhood in North Carolina.
  - » The Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education, appointed by Gov. Roy Cooper to determine a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach to meeting the requirements of the Supreme Court Leandro ruling that all children, including those from at-risk or rural and underserved communities, have access to a sound basic education.
  - » The myFutureNC Commission, a statewide, cross-sector initiative focused on increasing post-secondary educational attainment.
  - » The B-3rd Interagency Council, which is co-led by the NC Department of Health and Human Services and the NC Department of Public Instruction and tasked with creating a vision and accountability for a birth through grade three system of early education.
  - » Local communities across the state are using the Pathways Measures of Success Framework for collaborative community planning—identifying which of the Pathways shared measures to focus on locally and developing strategies for action to improve child and family outcomes.

## MOVING FORWARD

Though the Pathways Action Framework has been released, the work is far from over. Improving child outcomes in North Carolina will take time and continued commitment, Zalkind said.

“This process is right in the middle of where it needs to go,” she said. “We’re on the path, but people need to commit to staying on the path and prioritizing where we need to go on the action steps.”

As the work continues in North Carolina, Pathways leaders believe the initiative can serve as a model for other states who want to commit to changing outcomes for children.

**“We see Pathways as a model that other states can adopt to improve early childhood outcomes,” said NCECF Executive Director Muffy Grant. “In fact, we’ve already seen some success with other communities incorporating the Pathways process into their own work.”**

For example, representatives from the Gila River Indian Community outside Phoenix, Arizona, are using the Pathways Measures of Success Framework and associated research to build a case for focusing on early literacy in their community and to organize for action. They visited NCECF in North Carolina in August of 2019 to learn more about the Pathways process and the Framework.

“We are looking at strategies for improving outcomes for children and ensuring they are reading at grade level by the end of third grade,” said Bill Mehojah, a native consultant working with the Gila River community. “We sure do like this Framework. Showing all the data like this really helps to explain a lot.”

NCECF is thrilled that the Framework is resonating with different communities and is eager for it to be used broadly, Grant said.

“Through Pathways, we see potential to improve outcomes for even more children,” Grant said. “Our hope is to use what we’ve learned through this process to build a solid foundation for children not only in North Carolina but nationwide.”



# SOURCES

- [The Pathways Measures of Success Framework](#)
- [The Pathways Action Framework](#)
- [Not About Me, Without Me: Raising Parent Voice to Guide Early Childhood Policy](#)
- Data Action Team Case Study: [How to Create Lasting Change: Using Targeted Action Teams to Support Broad & Inclusive Social Policy Decision-Making](#)
- Pathways Evaluations:
  - » [Data Action Team](#)
  - » [Learning Teams](#)
  - » [Design Teams](#)
- Community Conversations
  - » [Round I](#)
  - » [Round II](#)

Many more Pathways process resources, including meeting reports from Pathways partners meetings, descriptions of each Action Team, team member lists and all meeting materials are available online at <https://buildthefoundation.org/initiative/pathways-to-grade-level-reading/>.





[www.buildthefoundation.org](http://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

**SPEARHEADING**  
COLLABORATION

**ADVANCING**  
POLICIES

