BUILDING BETTER EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS THROUGH DATA
Data are just summaries of thousands of stories—
tell a few of those stories to help make the data meaningful.

— Chip and Dan Heath, authors of "Made to Stick" and "Switch"
In 2019 we gathered data to help us tell the story of early childhood systems in NC and find ways to build them better together.
We’re writing this, in our new normal, reflecting on the year that was 2019—a world that now seems light years away. The packed meeting rooms, the coffee chats, the volunteer opportunities (with books and kids—our favorite). Greeting friends and colleagues with hugs or handshakes, facilitating all-day meetings with sticky notes on the walls, laughing (and sometimes crying) together.

Now that our community is strictly virtual, we are all using different tools, connecting in new ways, and adjusting our focus to meet the most urgent needs of our communities. This new virtual community has helped us understand how very relational our work is. We are all components of a much larger whole, and each component, each partner, is critical to the work. NC Early Childhood Foundation is proud to be one patch in the tapestry of early childhood advocates, service providers, families, funders, and researchers that, knit together, makes a beautifully designed, cohesive quilt. We need one another to achieve our goals for a more equitable, whole child approach to early childhood system-building. And we need data to guide the direction and durability of the stitching.

This report outlines the work of the NC Early Childhood Foundation in 2019, when we took a deep dive into data. Together with our partners, we grounded our data work in equity, recommending more inclusive population-level measures for child development at kindergarten entry and for young children’s social-emotional health and development.

We convened the Early Childhood Data Advisory Council with our partners at DHHS and DPI, where we worked together to improve the collection, analysis, and use of early childhood data in our state. The Family Forward NC initiative released the Guide to Family Friendly Workplaces, which tripled the number of visitors to our website. Web analytics helped FFNC understand employers’ needs and deliver what they were seeking most.

But data also goes beyond numbers—to lived experience and the wisdom of families and communities. As the NC Early Childhood Foundation grows and evolves in our role of supporting the early childhood ecosystem in NC, we are reminded that assumptions are a roadblock to achieving a more equitable early childhood system. So, we ask families and communities about their strengths, their resources, their burdens, and what they want to see in a transformed system, and we are directed by those truths.

This is a moment of rapid change and crisis triage, which is teaching us how to apply data-led solutions to adaptive challenges. This is also a time of reckoning and of hope for racial justice. We are working, all of us together, to move our early childhood system towards equity, using data as our guide.

In hope and solidarity,

Muffy Grant & Easter Maynard
The North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF) is tackling one of the greatest challenges facing our state: the majority of our children are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade.

Furthermore, child outcomes data make it clear that race is a ubiquitous factor in perpetuating inequities on the measures that matter for third-grade reading proficiency and overall child well-being.

Research shows that improving third grade reading takes aligned policies and practices all working toward a common vision of optimal child development beginning at birth with a focus on children’s health and development, families and communities, and high-quality learning environments.

It also takes an intentional focus on equity to ensure that those children and families furthest from opportunity have access to the most supports.

Our work is based on the foundational belief that sustainable and lasting progress will take collaborative action, recognizing that together we can realize greater outcomes for young children than any of us can produce on our own.

Our vision is that each North Carolina child has a strong foundation for lifelong health, education and well-being supported by a premiere birth-to-eight system.

Our mission is to marshal 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.

www.buildthefoundation.org
DEFINING SUCCESS

Building a successful foundation for each child in North Carolina depends on the collaboration and coordination of our state’s people, agencies and organizations. As such, we define success as:

- North Carolina’s people, agencies and organizations work collaboratively towards a common goal, agreeing on how to measure progress, coordinating strategies for shared measures that consider all aspects of children’s healthy development, and aligning policies and practices with those measures and along the developmental continuum, starting at birth.

- Government, policy, and nonprofit leaders make policy, practice and program decisions based both on research, data and analysis about what improves outcomes for children birth-to-eight and their families, and on the experiences of those who shape children’s environments.

- Private sector leaders engage in practices and policies that improve outcomes for children and families and use their voices to call for birth-through-eight investments and policies.

- North Carolinians support and expect early learning investments and policies that are rooted in how children develop and that support each child in fulfilling his or her potential.

- All recognize that literacy is rooted in birth-to-age-eight child development, and includes health and development on track beginning at birth, supported and supportive families and communities, and high-quality birth-through-eight learning environments with regular attendance.

To achieve these results, we work at both the state and local levels. We recognize that communities are often hubs of innovation when it comes to early learning. Local innovation can be leveraged to promote stronger state policies and investments. At the same time, state leaders play the vital role of creating an environment that fosters innovation and policies that prioritize children.

TO ACHIEVE THESE RESULTS, WE WORK AT BOTH THE STATE AND LOCAL LEVELS. WE RECOGNIZE THAT COMMUNITIES ARE OFTEN HUBS OF INNOVATION WHEN IT COMES TO EARLY LEARNING.
In 2019 our work impacted children and families as well as non-profits, businesses, and agencies in government and public health.
NCECF ENGAGES BUSINESS, FAITH, AND COMMUNITY LEADERS AS EARLY CHILDHOOD CHAMPIONS TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE THE BROAD SOCIETAL IMPACT OF POLICIES THAT AFFECT EARLY DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING
“The North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation is the engine driving change in early childhood initiatives across the state. The NCECF team does this in a variety of ways, but most notably as expert conveners, gatherers and connectors. Incredible, incredible work that is much needed across the state and across the country.” — state-level partner
Early childhood leaders from many sectors, including health, early education, K-12 education, and family and community supports, gathered on November 22 to move North Carolina forward on the Pathways Action Framework. One hundred attendees representing government agencies, nonprofit organizations, the private sector, foundations, and research institutions met at the Blue Cross Blue Shield NC offices in Durham to:

- Hear updates on early childhood data development work facilitated by Pathways in 2019
- Learn about statewide initiatives to operationalize portions of the Action Framework, including building a comprehensive social-emotional health system for young children and co-creating a shared structure for listening to and learning from families
- Share their knowledge on what is already happening in NC on the Pathways Actions, including key players and barriers to moving forward
- Hear from candidates in the 2020 race for NC state superintendent of public schools on how they could see NC moving forward on operationalizing the education system actions in the Action Framework

NCECF staff shared that Pathways will support the formation and facilitation of a Pathways Action Council and undertake Action Mapping. The goal is to take stock of the work currently being done in North Carolina to move the Pathways Actions forward and to illuminate where further action is needed.

The day was grounded in racial equity, learning from and engaging with families as genuine partners in systems change, and taking a cross-sector, birth-through-age-eight approach to early literacy.

More than 45 representatives from 13 NC Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (CGLR) communities gathered in Durham in July 2019 for their annual meeting led by NCECF staff. Participants built relationships and shared knowledge in various areas of interest including Pre-K to kindergarten transition, collaborating with school districts, and using informal learning spaces such as barbershops and laundromats to encourage reading.

Communities also worked together to begin developing a shared vision and messaging strategy to reach new audiences and expand their outreach. This included reflecting on the long-term vision of NC’s Campaign and identifying key messengers to help promote their efforts. NCECF worked with Triangle-area Campaign communities to continue building on this work and support community efforts with collective impact training.

We were excited to welcome Ready for School, Ready for Life in Guilford County to the growing family of Campaign communities in 2019. WAKE Up and Read was recognized by the national CGLR as a Pacesetter community. The full list of Campaign communities can be found on the NCECF website.
Representatives from the Gila River Indian Community outside Phoenix, Arizona visited with us to learn about Pathways, visit a local Campaign for Grade-Level Reading community, and share the early literacy work going on in their Community. NCECF staff, the Gila River representatives, and Chatham Reads representatives were hosted in Pittsboro by the Chatham County Partnership for Children for a day of shared learning.

NCECF has been in touch with the Gila River Indian Community for the last couple years, after they reached out to ask permission to use the Pathways Measures of Success Framework in their own work. They have been building up programming around early literacy using third-grade reading proficiency as a benchmark.

They used the Pathways Framework to have discussions in the Community with the Tribal Council and write grant proposals for early literacy programming, which they received.
NCECF LEADS AND SUPPORTS STATE AND LOCAL COLLABORATIONS—BRINGING TOGETHER BIRTH-THROUGH-EIGHT HEALTH, FAMILY SUPPORT, AND EDUCATION LEADERS ACROSS GOVERNMENT, POLICY, PRIVATE, NONPROFIT, PHILANTHROPIC AND RESEARCH SECTORS—TO ADVANCE A SHARED VISION AND COURSE OF ACTION FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
“Our involvement with NCECF has catalyzed important work at our organization. We’ve aligned our Community Prevention Action Plans with Pathways indicators and the Early Childhood Action Plan. We’ve also engaged formally with Sterling Freeman and Kathleen Crabbs to deepen the racial equity work at Prevent Child Abuse NC. Thank you for catalyzing work in various sectors to help all build safe, healthy environments so that children grow up thriving and ready to learn.” — Sharon Hirsch, President and CEO, Prevent Child Abuse NC
GOVERNOR'S COMMISSION ON ACCESS TO SOUND, BASIC EDUCATION

NCECF was represented on the Early Education and Whole Child workgroup of the Commission, which submitted final recommendations to the Commission that were based on the Pathways Action Framework. The final Commission recommendations, the WestEd consultant report, the judge’s consent order, and the 2020 Action Plan all align with the Pathways Framework.

EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (ESSA)

As part of our continued work to support local coordination and collaboration around the early learning portions of the ESSA, we worked with our partners in the Department of Public Instruction Office of Early Learning to host two sets of regional meetings across the state in February and November. Local teams of early learning partners came together to develop community action plans and MOUs for their work together. We hosted a series of webinars and virtual office hours throughout the year to support continued local planning, coordination, and collaborative action around ESSA.

EARLY CHILDHOOD ACTION PLAN

NCECF continues to partner with NCDHHS to support the NC Early Childhood Action Plan, which was founded on the Pathways data measures and action strategies. NCECF and NCDHHS presented together about the collaboration and alignment between Pathways and the Early Childhood Action Plan at the EducationNC Bridge Conference in April. NCECF’s work with the Preschool Development Grant supported further development of the NC Early Childhood Action Plan.

NORTH CAROLINA PRESCHOOL DEVELOPMENT GRANT (PDG)

NCECF partnered with NCDHHS to support the Preschool Development Grant activities, including:

- Gathering early childhood professionals’ and families’ voices to strengthen the PDG strategic plan, which is based on the NC Early Childhood Action Plan and the Pathways Frameworks.
- Facilitating a Data Advisory Council and a data working group on measuring child development at kindergarten entry at the population level.
- Ensuring PDG activities were undertaken with a racial equity lens.

NCECF PROVIDES POLICYMAKERS, ADVOCATES, BUSINESS LEADERS AND THE PUBLIC WITH RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF FEDERAL AND STATE BIRTH-TO-EIGHT POLICY AND INNOVATIONS PROVEN TO ACHIEVE RESULTS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN
“I love this report in so many ways. You were intentional about racial equity, noting that while it was central and the value of it being central, it was not exclusively about race. I also really appreciated that you made note of the different levels of measurements but also the potential gaps and pitfalls if NC wants to have a statewide system. A focus on Social Emotional Health would allow us to realize the resilience of children and the opportunity to do more beyond raising test scores.” — Dr. Iheoma Iruka, on the Children's Social-Emotional Health Data Workgroup report
PATHWAYS ACTION FRAMEWORK

NCECF supported implementation of the Pathways Measures of Success Framework and Action Framework in 2019, including by:

• Convening a Data Advisory Council to create a strategic vision for improving NC’s early childhood data collection and analysis on the Pathways measures.

• Convening data workgroups to determine how best to measure children’s outcomes at kindergarten entry and children’s social-emotional health at the population level.

• Fostering collaboration across state-level initiatives and ensuring that the Pathways measures, actions and equity lens continue to be embedded in state efforts like the Early Childhood Action Plan, the Leandro Commission for Sound, Basic Education, the B-3rd Interagency Council, myFutureNC and more.

• Supporting early childhood systems in learning from and engaging families and local communities by gathering input from families and service providers on advancing the state’s Early Childhood Action Plan, which is built on the Pathways measures and actions.

• Keeping a sustained focus on racial equity in NC’s early childhood systems building by supporting the use of a racial equity lens in the data development work and stakeholder engagement around the Early Childhood Action Plan.

• Tracking and analyzing policy and sharing progress on how policies and practices advance the Action Framework, through regular updates on our website.

• Communicating strategically to keep Pathways relevant and valuable as an initiative, including with policymakers and Pathways Partners.

• Supporting policy work on some actions in the Action Framework, such as through our Family Forward initiative to encourage family-friendly workplace policies, and through the collaborative Think Babies™ NC initiative to improve health, education and family support outcomes for babies and toddlers.

• Convening Pathways Partners annually to support our collaborative work to put Pathways into action.

FAMILY FORWARD NC

At the Family Forward NC Summit on April 1, NCECF released the online companion to the Guide to Family Forward Workplaces. The online guide provides tools for employers with practical tips for choosing and implementing 16 family-friendly practices such as flexible and predictable scheduling, accommodations for pregnant workers, and paid parental leave. Employers can find resources to get started with surveys, planning tools, and case studies of North Carolina businesses that have implemented family-friendly policies. Family-friendly workplace policies help attract and retain talent and improve health and well-being for children across North Carolina.

At the Summit, more than 100 businesses and non-profit leaders explored ways to include family-friendly practices in their own workplaces and heard from keynote speaker Brigid Schulte, founding director of the Better Life Lab at the nonpartisan think tank New America, and business and community leaders such as Patrick Conway, president and CEO of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina; Lisa May, executive vice president of human resources at RTI International; and Anita Brown-Graham, director of ncIMPACT. Of participants responding to the post Summit survey, 75% said they would be taking action on family-friendly benefits in their workplace this year.
ATTENDANCE COUNTS

As part of our ongoing work on chronic absence, NCECF partnered with EducationNC to distribute a survey to learn from preschool, Head Start, and elementary school teachers, principals, staff, parents, and supportive local community groups about the underlying causes of chronic absence and what schools, early learning programs, and local communities are doing to address this issue. We reached out to our partners across the state to share the survey, and more than 1,500 people responded.

NCECF also worked with a team of Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy students to both help get the survey out across NC and to collect some “bright spots”—schools and communities that are either acknowledging that chronic absence is a problem and work is going on to address it, or are seeing reductions in chronic absence.

NCECF presented to the NC School Boards Association Policy Committee on chronic absence, sharing results of the NCECF 2018 survey of superintendents about their districts’ work on chronic absence. As a result, the Association shared our 2019 survey with its members to help get the word out in order to increase responses from communities across the state.

We released our school and community-level policy and practice attendance report in September 2019 to coincide with National Attendance Awareness Month. The report includes the survey responses of more than 1,500 principals, teachers, parents and community providers from across NC on various areas related to attendance, as well as best practices and case studies. In fall 2019, we partnered with EducationNC to run a monthly, five-part series further highlighting key findings from the report.

In addition to our new report, we updated and released our AttendaNCe Counts Community Toolkit. This is our second year of providing the toolkit to equip schools, community partners and local advocates with helpful resources to get the word out about the importance of regular school attendance in preschool and the early grades.

For the second year, at NCECF’s request, Governor Cooper declared September as Attendance Awareness Month in North Carolina. We also worked with Dr. Patrick Miller, Superintendent of Greene County, to engage his fellow superintendents across the state to sign the national Attendance Awareness Month Proclamation. Dr. Miller was named the 2019 A. Craig Phillips Superintendent of the Year by the NC Superintendents Association and the 2018 Greene County Chamber of Commerce Citizen of the Year.

As a result, 64 of the 115 NC Superintendents signed the proclamation, committing “to focusing on reducing chronic absenteeism to give all children an equitable opportunity to learn, grow and thrive academically, emotionally and socially.” This is a significant increase from previous years.
LOCAL FINANCING FOR EARLY LEARNING

Three new case studies about local financing for early learning have been added to the NCECF Local Funding for Early Learning: A North Carolina Community Toolkit. The case studies document local financing initiatives in Mecklenburg County, NC; Cuyahoga County, Ohio; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Each of these communities uses a different mechanism to generate local revenue to increase access to early learning programs.

Since 2016, NCECF has provided communities across NC with tools to consider early learning financing mechanisms at the local level. Through our guide and website, communities can learn about financing methods available in NC to generate local revenue for early learning, find case studies from across the country, and more.

Through a partnership with the UNC School of Government and the NC Budget and Tax Center, NCECF offers new case studies annually about local financing initiatives for early learning. Communities across the country use our case studies to inform their local funding initiatives.

Governor Cooper Extends Paid Parental Leave

NCECF joined Governor Cooper as he signed Executive Order No. 95 in May 2019 extending paid parental leave to cabinet-level agencies.

Governor Cooper’s decision to provide employees in his cabinet agencies with paid parental leave is commendable and will strengthen the state’s workforce. Research shows that family-friendly workplaces benefit employers, employees, and children’s health, education, and well-being.
Together we can realize greater outcomes for young children than any of us can produce on our own.
Community-based organizations and advocates can make sure decision-makers on the local, state, and federal levels understand families’ needs as working parents and how the current child care system is not working for them.

Employers can support working parents and caregivers by offering family-friendly workplace benefits. These benefits make businesses competitive and resilient and support the health and well-being of North Carolina’s children—our future workforce. And benefits such as child care stipends also support local child care programs and their workforce.

You can donate to NCECF to support our work bringing together leaders across sectors, geography, and the political spectrum to advance a shared vision and course of action to tackle one of the greatest challenges facing our state: the majority of children are not reading proficiently by the end of 3rd grade. As a result of this collaborative work, government, policy, and nonprofit leaders will make policy and practice decisions based on research, data and analysis about what improves outcomes for young children, centering racial equity.
DONORS

We are grateful to the organizations and individuals who invest in our shared vision to build a strong foundation for learning and life success for each North Carolina child.

- Alliance for Early Success
- Belk Foundation
- Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina
- The Cemala Foundation
- ChildTrends
- ChildTrust Foundation
- The Duke Endowment
- JB and MK Pritzker Family Foundation
- NC Department of Health and Human Services
- NC Department of Public Instruction
- The Goodnight Educational Foundation
- NC Institute of Medicine
- Oak Foundation
- Rockingham Partnership for Children
- Skeebo Foundation
- Triangle Community Foundation
- United Way of the Greater Triangle
- Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation
- Individual Contributors

WE ARE GRATEFUL TO THOSE WHO INVEST IN OUR SHARED VISION
FINANCIAL DATA

2019 REVENUE

- FOUNDATIONS (23%)
- PRIVATE BUSINESS (27%)
- GOVERNMENT (43%)
- PROGRAM (4%)
- INDIVIDUALS (2%)
- INTEREST (1%)
- MISC (<1%)
- INTEREST (1%)

2019 FUNCTIONAL EXPENSES

- MANAGEMENT & GENERAL (12%)
- FUNDRAISING (3%)
- PROGRAM SERVICE (85%)
### OUR BOARD

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<td>Easter Maynard</td>
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MEET OUR STAFF

NCECF is led by an inspired and diverse group of women. Our staff is fascinated by the development of language and communication in babies and urgent in our desire to promote the voices and needs of the under-represented and under-resourced. We work together to create an NC that fully supports the health, well-being, and education of each and every child, advocating for systemic change across sectors. And sometimes we throw axes.

MUFFY GRANT
Executive Director

Who do you do this work for? I do the work for Sister Francis Clare Ughast. She was a small but mighty Holy Cross nun who came to NC in the late 70’s to start a preschool program. At the time, there was only one program that accepted children with disabilities. She allowed my sister, Molly, who has cerebral palsy, including developmental delays and learning disabilities, to join the inaugural year of the preschool.

Sister Francis Clare was a woman ahead of her time in many ways, but her deep belief that a nurturing early childhood education is critical to success in life and should be universally accessible has always stuck with me. I hope to live up to the honor of her legacy.

Where are you found outside of NCECF? Mothering my four young children, which includes a lot of laundry. I also like to pull weeds, bake, and listen to podcasts.

What’s something interesting about you that doesn’t usually come up at work? I know all the words to “We Didn’t Start the Fire” by Billy Joel. I’m creeped out by nutcrackers.
LISA FINALDI
Community Engagement Leader

Who do you do this work for? I work for and with the people of North Carolina—emphasizing under-resourced parents, caregivers and young children.

Where are you found outside of NCECF? You can find me in the mountains, on a trail or paddling a river.

What’s something interesting about you that doesn’t usually come up at work? I love to refinish old furniture—from family heirlooms to hidden treasures found at yard sales.

MANDY ABLEIDINGER
Deputy Director

Who do you do this work for? All of us. Building an equitable early childhood system, where every child has genuine access to opportunity, will benefit every North Carolinian.

Where are you found outside of NCECF? Walking in the woods (or at a protest) with my family.

What’s something interesting about you that doesn’t usually come up at work? I love speaking other languages, and I want to learn to play bluegrass fiddle.
SUMERA SYED
Organizational Equity Officer

Who do you do this work for? I do the work so that all young children have the right to equitable outcomes and opportunities to achieve their full potential.

Where are you found outside of NCECF? Pre-COVID: taking a nap; during COVID: taking a nap; post-COVID: probably taking a nap.

What's something interesting about you that doesn't usually come up at work? I am terrified of water but am forcing myself to conquer this fear by learning how to swim before the end of the year.

MARY MATHEW
Collaboration and Policy Leader

Who do you do this work for? For overburdened and under-resourced children and families, and my Creator. They inspire me and call me to action.

Where are you found outside of NCECF? Enjoying nature, art or a meal with people I love in Durham.

What's something interesting about you that doesn't usually come up at work? I was elected Prime Minister of my middle school in Canada. My campaign slogan was "Don't Worry. Vote Mary. Be Happy." My song was "Mary, Mary—why ya runnin'?" inspired by Run DMC. My greatest achievement was a video dance party.
KAYLAN JOHNSON
Finance and Operational Manager

Who do you do this work for? As Finance and Operational Manager, most of my work is behind the scenes and directly supports my coworkers and NCECF as an organization. But by supporting them, I hope our work positively affects the lives of individual families and children now and sets up the next generations with more equitable and sustainable early childhood supports.

Where are you found outside of NCECF? You can find me outside in my yard (trying to grow things) or on a trail in the woods observing the plants and animals.

What’s something interesting about you that doesn’t usually come up at work? In elementary school, I spent most days after school at the Apex Library, back when it was housed at the old train depot downtown. Because my mother worked there, my sister and I had the privilege to freely roam the shelves and the back rooms, and we always had, no exaggeration, up to 100 books checked out at any one time.
Together, we can achieve a bold vision: a strong foundation for lifelong health, education and well-being for each child in North Carolina, supported by a premier birth-to-eight system.