A Year of Intentional Listening, Data-Driven Action, and Stories of Change
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.

www.buildthefoundation.org

Our vision is that each North Carolina child has a strong foundation for life-long health, education, and well-being supported by a comprehensive, equitable birth-to-eight ecosystem.

Our mission is to marshal North Carolina’s great people, ideas, and achievements to ensure equitable access to opportunity and success for every child by the end of third grade.
NOTHING IN LIFE IS TO BE FEARED; IT IS ONLY TO BE UNDERSTOOD.

Now is the time to understand more so that we may fear less. — Marie Curie
This year, more than ever before, we listened to parents, child care providers, small businesses, communities, and families most proximate to the painful systemic inequities made more apparent by the events of 2020.

Motivated and guided by their stories, we kept our focus on data-driven action as we pushed toward a more equitable early childhood system in North Carolina.
There’s no denying it—2020 made us sit back (literally) and forced us to redesign and rethink a future so that we could respond to the many critical needs in our community. It brought our partners and friends together in earnest to move our early childhood system towards equity and to determine better results for young children and their families.

In the following report, you will learn about how listening was an important theme in 2020. Listening to parents, child care providers, small businesses, communities, and families most proximate to the painful systemic inequities. With the disruption brought about by COVID-19 and the racial awakening in the aftermath of the horrific footage of George Floyd’s murder, NC has a mandate to reimagine a more equitable early childhood system. We are heartened by the silver threads of possibility imagined in the wake of disaster and endeavor to support transformation so that all NC children are given an equitable shot for success.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that the spread of a virus can be reduced through committing to a series of actions as we go about our normal lives—social distancing, hand washing, and wearing a mask. Racist policies are a virus, too, and racism will be eradicated only when each of us acknowledges its existence, learns about how it works, identifies our sphere of influence, and commits to daily actions to change the environmental conditions that allow it to flourish.

The NC Early Childhood Foundation is here to listen. We are here to learn. We are here to apply what we learn to help be the change. We are here to be messengers. We are here to be a bridge. We are more resolute in this now than ever and invite you to join us in being messengers of change.

In hope and solidarity,

Muffy Grant
The Year 2020
A SNAPSHOT BY THE NUMBERS

1 COVID-19 Web Page
WHERE WE REGULARLY SHARE THE NEWEST FEDERAL AND STATE POLICY UPDATES, ALONG WITH NCECF’S COVID-RELATED BLOG POSTS

106 Publications
LIKE BLOGS, REPORTS AND EDITORIALS WENT OUT THROUGH OUR WEBSITE AND OTHER NEWS OUTLETS AS WE WERE TURNED TO AS A TRUSTED PROVIDER OF EARLY CHILDHOOD RELATED FACTS

1 Data Dashboard
ORGANIZED INTO 3 GOAL AREAS THAT RESEARCH SHOWS ARE CRITICAL FOR IMPROVING EARLY LITERACY.

14 Data Measures
CHOSEN BY 30 EXPERTS FROM NORTH CAROLINA’S LEADING UNIVERSITIES, RESEARCH INSTITUTES, GOVERNMENT AGENCIES, BUSINESSES AND THINK TANKS

100,000,000 Zoom Calls
OR AT LEAST THAT’S HOW IT FELT
Family Forward NC has been an incredible partner in educating the Greensboro business community on best practices. We have seen a culture shift in the community since the launch of our partnership—including improving our own workplace policies. — Cecelia Thompson • Executive Director, Action Greensboro

The COVID-19 crisis impacted all industries, but particularly Family Forward NC’s target industries of hospitality and manufacturing. As businesses have worked to adapt, we did too—reshaping our strategies to offer support to employers to come back strong and continue to support working parents and their children, which has arguably become even more important now than ever. Extra emphasis shifted to paid leave, schedules and child care workplace policies.
By listening to the challenges within our employer network, we established a **Rapid Response** program, which provides no-cost access to human resource experts in hospitality, manufacturing and small business, to assist employers in identifying industry-appropriate, family-friendly workplace benefits during re-tooling and re-opening. The program was presented to local chambers, economic and workforce development agencies, professional associations and small business support centers in NC. We worked through these organizations’ existing communications channels and member support resources and services to offer webinars, virtual panel discussions, town halls and blogs, starting in group settings before transitioning to one-on-one support for interested employers.

**PROGRAM LAUNCH**

Initial response was strong, reaching nearly 600 employers, through webinars and presentations, and nearly 400 people, through our website in a few weeks. Rapid Response assisted employers in rethinking employee support critical to both continued viability of businesses and continued health and well-being for parents and their children.

Ultimately, the program has helped employers:

- Open earlier, with a strategic advantage
- Bring employees back to work more quickly and more fully
- Provide an ongoing sense of workplace safety for employees and families

In addition to direct support to business organizations’ members, our HR consultants, Performentor, also created Return to Work Toolkits for hospitality and manufacturing that included tools, resources, and companion webinars including:

- Employee surveys
- Family-friendly workplace assessment tools
- Cost of turnover calculators
- Best practices on industry-appropriate benefits
- Local Smart Start organizations and Child Care Resource and Referral agencies

**SURVEY OF THE EMPLOYER LANDSCAPE**

Working in partnership with Capital Associated Industries, now known as Catapult, we released survey results from 359 NC employers to understand changes made to workplace benefits as a result of COVID-19. There’s some good news and room to do more. Employers in a variety of industries across the state reported that they’re proactively changing their workplace benefits to enhance flexibility and add more paid leave and health insurance for employees because of COVID-19. Our advisor, Dr. Nina Smith, NC Central University Assistant Professor of Human Sciences, reviewed the survey results and recommended the key findings to highlight, shown in this survey result infographic.

**RAPID RESPONSE PARTNERSHIPS & PRESENTATIONS**

The Economic Development Partnership of NC partnered with Family Forward NC to promote Rapid Response. Family Forward NC gave presentations, or participated in panel discussions with 1240 participants including the Small Business and Technology Development Center (SBTDC), which has 15 offices, supporting approximately 5,000 employers each year. The UNC System hosts the center which operates in partnership with the US Small Business Administration. Working with the SBTDC, we expanded the COVID-19 Rapid Response program to include a small business module.

**CASE STUDIES**

As a key part of our strategy is to celebrate and inspire employer action to create family-friendly workplaces, we published nine case studies in 2020.
We have used it to help us think about the whole child, so that we are remembering that a child is more likely to be successful when they are safe, secure, healthy, nutritiously fed, loved, and appreciated. It has been invaluable to network with other partners and exchange feedback, opinions, and ideas on how to help children fulfill their potential. — Debra Lanham • Research & Development Director, DEPC

NCECF stayed true to our commitment to drive data-informed decisions and prioritized actions that support every child in North Carolina, reading on grade-level by the end of third grade. NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Initiative (Pathways) partners said they wanted the fruits of their collaborative efforts—the Pathways Measures of Success Framework and Pathways Action Framework—to be used to move this vision forward, and we listened.
In 2020, NCECF focused on advancing early childhood data development and visualizing the Pathways Measures of Success; more than 60 measures that matter for moving the needle on third grade reading outcomes. Highlights of our data work include:

- Convening the NC Early Childhood Data Advisory Council, in partnership with the NC Department of Health and Human Services and NC Department of Public Instruction, to create an Early Childhood Data Development Strategy for the state

- Sharing the results of an NCECF-led data workgroup in our report: Filling the Data Gap: Recommendations for Population-Based Measures of Young Children’s Social-Emotional Health

- Releasing the Pathways Data Dashboard; an online platform that visualizes North Carolina data for the Pathways Measures of Success

As a part of our policy work, we began developing the Pathways Action Map; an online tool that will provide a snapshot of NC initiatives that are currently leading in one or more of 44 actions. The actions represent the areas that Pathways partners said North Carolina needs to work on first to improve grade-level reading, particularly for overburdened and under-resourced children.

Policy makers, funders, community leaders and advocates will be able to use the Pathways Action Map to identify gaps and opportunities in each action area and help build capacity. Initiative leaders will also be able to highlight their work, make connections, and learn from each other. An ambitious project, we will create the Action Map over time with input from new and existing partners, as well as promote and use the Map to help drive equity and action.
I enjoy being at the table for sure—better than being under the table...which I feel I have been before. — Parent

NCECF worked closely with NC Child on their multi-year EarlyWell Initiative (previously called NC’s Initiative on Young Children’s Social-Emotional Health) to create a comprehensive social-emotional health ecosystem for infants and young children in North Carolina.
EarlyWell will help to implement Expectation 4 of the Pathways Action Framework: North Carolina’s social-emotional health ecosystem is accessible and high-quality.

EarlyWell engages—and listens closely—to over 100 early childhood stakeholders including service providers, clinicians, family leaders, and advocates.

In 2020, we shifted to the virtual space and co-led various processes with NC Child, including:

- Co-facilitating EarlyWell Steering and Leadership Committee meetings
- Visualizing the current early childhood social-emotional health ecosystem in North Carolina and co-creating a vision for the future
- Creating a toolkit to train and guide facilitators leading 12 cross-sector workgroups

From the beginning, EarlyWell has been focused on centering racial equity and family voices in its work. In 2020, we hired racial equity and family input consultants to support this process. Our priority was to listen to families, especially those most impacted by systemic inequities. To do this, we partnered with four local organizations to interview and survey parents whose young children have had experiences with the social-emotional health system in North Carolina. Their input and lived experiences—including more than 200 parents from 28 counties—will frame EarlyWell’s vision and help determine its future policy agenda.
Without access to high quality child care, families and children suffer, and businesses and our economy lose out too. Long-term studies find that the economic benefits of investments in early education easily exceed the program costs. By investing in these programs now, we can work toward a strong North Carolina in the future. — Dr. Clive Belfield • Economics Professor & Researcher, CUNY

NCECF released results from the state’s first survey on how families navigated child care and work before and during COVID-19. Data show that before the pandemic, North Carolina families, businesses and the economy were already losing $2.4 billion annually due to insufficient affordable, high quality child care. The pandemic made this crisis worse. Data show that annual losses due to inadequate child care approached $2.9 billion a year—and likely still rose.
Because more than 400,000 North Carolina parents were already struggling to find child care to empower them to work, build family stability and support a strong state economy before the pandemic:

Families were losing $1,548 million in current and future earnings and incurring additional job search costs. This number has jumped to $1,796 million mid-pandemic.

Businesses were losing $507 million in current and future revenue due to lower output and incurring additional hiring costs. This number has reached $579 million mid-pandemic.

The state’s economy was losing $414 million in current and future tax revenues and drawing from a smaller state and local tax base, reducing tax revenues equivalent to almost one percent of the state budget. That number increased to $472 million mid-pandemic.

Along with partners, we surveyed 802 working parents with young children in North Carolina. Survey participants’ characteristics correspond closely to North Carolina’s demographics, representing urban, suburban and rural populations well, along with the state’s racial demographics.

WHAT THE PARENTS SAID

BEFORE THE PANDEMIC:

• 44 percent of North Carolina families were already living in child care deserts.

• Less than half of employers offered at least one support for parents such as paid leave, flexible scheduling or an on-site child care facility.

• Women of color had access to fewer child care related employer supports.

MID-PANDEMIC:

• 55 percent of households report that at least one adult has lost a job, been furloughed or experienced reduced pay or hours due to COVID-19.

• Formal child care availability has fallen by approximately half since the pandemic began.

• More than 70 percent have had difficulty finding a satisfactory child care arrangement—and about 10 percent couldn’t find one at all.

• As the pandemic continued, 25 percent of working parents predicted their child care will disappear, and 30 percent predicted child care will be unaffordable or incompatible with their work commitments.

THE PANDEMIC HIT FAMILIES ACROSS NORTH CAROLINA, BUT HIT SOME EVEN HARDER:

• Only 15 percent of rural families were accessing formal child care mid-pandemic, down from 44 percent pre-pandemic.

• Women of color more frequently report that their provider is no longer open, they cannot find an alternative, and they cannot afford one because of reduced income.

To learn more, read the press release, review the full report or view and download an infographic overview.
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.

- Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina
- Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation
- The Cemala Foundation
- ChildTrust Foundation
- The Duke Endowment
- JB and MK Pritzker Family Foundation
- John Rex Endowment
- Joseph M. Bryan Foundation of Greater Greensboro
- NC Department of Health and Human Services
- NC Department of Public Instruction
- NC Institute of Medicine
- Pacific Western Bank
- Triangle Community Foundation
- United Way of the Greater Triangle
- U.S. SBA Paycheck Protection Program
- Winer Family Foundation
- Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation
- Individual Contributors
2020 FINANCIAL DATA

2020 REVENUE

- **GOVERNMENT (33%)**
- **FOUNDATIONS (63%)**
- **INDIVIDUALS (3%)**
- **MISC & INTEREST (<1% EACH)**

2020 FUNCTIONAL EXPENSES

- **PROGRAM SERVICE (78%)**
- **MANAGEMENT & GENERAL (19%)**
- **FUNDRAISING (3%)**
2020 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Dr. Jennifer Vu

2020 NCECF STAFF MEMBERS

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.

Muffy Grant  
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*Deputy Director*

Lisa Finaldi  
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Sumera Syed  
*Organizational Equity Officer*

Kaylan Johnson  
*Finance and Operational Manager*
Interview with 
BOARD MEMBER DR. JENNIFER VU

The year that was 2020 placed a heavy burden on many, most notably our healthcare workers. We asked our board member, Dr. Jennifer Vu, to reflect on her experience as a physician during the pandemic.

How have you maintained the connection between physician and patients throughout the pandemic?

As a physician, it has been difficult to maintain connections with our patients particularly at the beginning of the pandemic when there was a lot of uncertainty. We make sure to keep open lines of communication and let our patients know that we are available for care, both in person with safety precautions or via telemedicine. It continues to be important for our community to be aware that we are available for not only concerns regarding COVID-19, but also for all their routine care, including mental health care.

Despite the unpredictable turmoil of 2020, we all have a will for survival. Can you share any observations of resilience in children and families?

What I have observed over the last 18 months is that children may be the most resilient amongst us all. Many children adapted to the changes required of them for school and at home, with the support of their families. It was impressive to see the strength and adaptability in families, doing what they had to do to keep they children educated, supported and healthy.

In what ways did you see people succeed in advocating for children and families and what things do you think were the biggest missing pieces for children and families in 2020?

There is no doubt that children and families needed support in 2020. Parents needed support navigating virtual schooling for children. Families needed support for childcare as they transitioned to work from home or lost their jobs. Both children and their caregivers needed mental health support adjusting to life during a pandemic. As a primary care physician, one of the most significant issues that has been made evident from the pandemic is the increase in mental health care needs in the community.
How do you empower parents to make the best decision for their children?

The best way to empower parents to make the best decision for their children is to educate and create a safe space to discuss their questions. It can be difficult to navigate and sift through all the information that is available on the internet and media, but I recommend finding a healthcare provider or someone they trust in the community to comfortably discuss their concerns.

How have you maintained positive relationships with families over the course of the past 18 months?

As life changes during the pandemic, being available and supportive helps to maintain positive relationships with families. Acknowledging the difficulties and concerns of each individual family, and helping them determine what can keep them both mentally and physically healthy is important.
After a year that saw us all struggling to stay healthy and connected, we're celebrating the small moments, the innovation, the reflection, and the opportunity to continuing serving the children of North Carolina together.

We invite you to stay engaged with us and this important work.  
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