

PATHWAYS to GRADE LEVEL READING POLICY & PRACTICE ACTIONS TOOLKIT



PART ONE

STRENGTHENING NORTH CAROLINA'S EARLYCARE and LEARNING SYSTEM

in ways that are
RESPONSIVE to the
**STATE'S CULTURAL
DIVERSITY**

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ADVANCING ACTION along the Pathways to Grade-Level Reading

This five-part toolkit is designed to provide guidance for how policymakers, advocates, community non-profits, the business community, and other stakeholders can support the wellbeing of all NC children.

The guidance highlighted in this five-part toolkit are the result of asking what would be possible by coordinating policies and strategies across all levels of state government and types of organizations to support optimal development from birth through the end of third grade with one central outcome: reading at grade-level by the end of third grade.

The guidance targets three interdependent components of children's developing environments:

1. Supporting parents to ensure that health and development is on track beginning at birth
2. Ensuring that families feel supported and live in supportive communities
3. Ensuring that all children have access to high quality birth-through-age-eight learning environments

Eight years ago a broad tent of stakeholders from across North Carolina started meeting and developed NC's Pathways to Grade-Level Reading (Pathways) over a [process of three years](#). They aimed to tackle one of the greatest challenges facing the state: the need to create a statewide, whole-child, developmentally supportive ecology that would ensure that the majority of our children, including those from low-income and racially and ethnically marginalized families, would be reading proficiently by the end of third grade. This milestone was chosen because [research informs us](#) that reading well in the early grades predicts high school graduation, college success, engagement in criminal activity, becoming an economically self-sufficient adult, and many other important life outcomes.

Stakeholders created a coordinated [birth through end-of-third-grade framework](#) that focuses on children's health and development, families and communities, and high quality learning environments with regular attendance. They used this framework to create the [Shared Measures of Success](#) that has increased alignment in the efforts of stakeholders across the state by identifying quantifiable measures of progress and connecting those measures to a [data dashboard](#), thereby increasing transparency in assessing progress toward creating a developmentally supportive ecology.

Finally, stakeholders identified [44 Pathways Actions](#) that provide evidence-based guidance for how policymakers, advocates, community non-profits, the business community, and other stakeholders can support the wellbeing of all NC children.

It is these actions that we now advance through this five-part Pathways to Grade Level Reading Policy & Practice Actions Toolkit. Each part of the five-part toolkit will provide evidence-informed guidance and recommended practices and also highlight organizations and initiatives across the state that are already taking action to move the needle.

Pathways stakeholders could not have predicted the pandemic which has had a negative effect on early literacy. Especially on increasing the percent of students that are not displaying even the most basic level of reading proficiency. The statewide average shows that, in 2022, 37% of fourth graders were below basic reading skills, an increase from 32% in 2017, based on NAEP data.

Stakeholders also could not have predicted the extent of harm the pandemic would have on historically marginalized racial and ethnic minority children. In 2022, 56% of Black, 50% of Latinx, 45% of multiracial, 26% of white, and 19% of Asian/Pacific Islander fourth grade students were below basic reading skills.



Thankfully, Pathways stakeholders had the foresight to utilize an explicit, but not exclusive, racial equity lens when they identified the 44 Pathways Actions. Race in America plays a large role in determining children’s life outcomes and interventions that target racial inequities can also reduce disparities in children’s outcomes based on income, ability, language of origin, geography, gender, and age. Children who cannot read proficiently will be left out of North Carolina’s growing knowledge economy.

The six Pathways Actions highlighted in *Part One* of the Toolkit can strengthen NC’s early care and learning system in ways that are responsive to the state’s cultural diversity:

- Support Families in Advocating for their Children
- Require Linked Strategies Across Programs to Engage and Learn from Families
- Ensure Assessment Instruments are Culturally and Linguistically Relevant
- Ensure Education Accountability Systems are Culturally Relevant
- Provide Professional Development for Teachers on Cultural Competency and Working with Families
- Support Schools and Child Care Programs to Engage Deeply with Families

The 2022 statewide average shows that **37% OF 4TH GRADERS WERE BELOW BASIC READING SKILLS,** a 5% increase from 32% in 2017.

OVERVIEW OF PATHWAYS

Pathways to Grade Level Reading (Pathways) began in 2015 as a uniquely North Carolina, statewide collaborative focused on creating a shared whole child, birth-to-end-of-third-grade framework outlining the developmental experiences and contexts that can significantly increase the likelihood that children will be reading at grade-level by the end of third grade.

Stakeholders identified coordinated strategies that can support children’s optimal development beginning at birth and aligned policies and practices that are rooted in the science of how children develop. [Pathways has grown into a partnership of hundreds of diverse leaders from across the state](#) who have worked across sectors, geographies, and the political aisle with the goal of building a comprehensive, publicly-funded early childhood system for North Carolina and improving outcomes for young children.

Equity of opportunity is central to Pathways and its guidance for implementation. Stakeholders believe that attending to equity is the only way to achieve the singular vision that aligned their efforts:

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 is comprised of three core interdependent components:

1. Health and development on track beginning at birth
2. Supported and supportive families and communities
3. High quality birth-through-age-eight learning environments

Each component is as important as the other because successful achievement of one facilitates success in the other two. Each component includes five research based [Measures of Success](#) that specify the experiences and developmental environments that children need to thrive. These measures are not an exhaustive list of all that matters to create the conditions that place children on the pathway to grade-level reading. However, they are the ones that have strong research-based connections to early literacy.



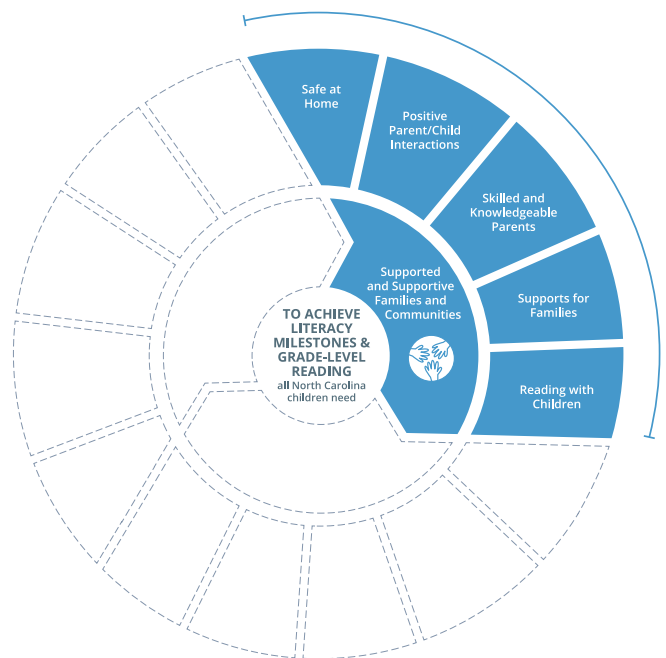
The first component is Health and Development on Track Beginning at Birth. Both physical and emotional health form the building blocks for a child's development, and prioritizing these from the earliest years lays the foundation for children's wellbeing in later years. This component is achieved when infants are born with a healthy birth weight, experience good physical health, are showing positive social emotional health, have good oral health, and receive early intervention when they have characteristics that place them at risk for poor developmental outcomes.

Pathways stakeholders identified 18 factors that influence or increase the likelihood that children will have these positive developmental experiences beginning at birth. Some of these influencers include pregnant women receiving timely prenatal care, children who are screened for social-emotional needs, and children receiving regular well-child visits. The others can be found on pages 15 to 18 of the [Measures of Success](#).



The second component is Supported and Supportive Families and Communities. A stable and nurturing environment for young children cultivated by caregivers is a critical factor in supporting optimal development and overall wellbeing. This component is achieved when children are safe at home, have positive parent-child interactions, are being read to by their caregivers, learn from skilled and knowledgeable parents, and have parents who receive sufficient social support. Resources and services that recognize the crucial role caregivers play help to improve their capacity to effectively parent and improve children's early literacy outcomes.

Stakeholders identified 10 factors that influence the likelihood that children will grow up in supportive developmental contexts. Some of these influencers include families screened for poverty at well-child visits, parents with access to mental health, domestic violence and substance abuse services, and families having access to the Family Medical Leave Act. The others can be found on pages 22 to 24 of the [Measures of Success](#).



The third component is High Quality Birth-Through-Age-Eight Learning Environments with regular attendance. It is well established that high quality early learning environments are a huge factor in preparing children for success by providing a strong cognitive foundation. This component is achieved when children have quality early care and education settings, experience a positive school climate, have regular school attendance, meet the requirements for grade level promotion, and have summer learning experiences that enable them to maintain literacy gains. Adequate supports and resources for educators and caregivers work to ensure that all children’s needs are met in the learning environment.

Stakeholders identified 13 factors that influence the likelihood that children will have these positive learning experiences. Some of these influencers include minimizing suspension and expulsion from programs and schools, ensuring students have access to programs and learning materials in their native language, and maximizing the number of eligible children under age six receiving child care subsidies. The others can be found on pages 28 to 32 of the [Measures of Success](#).

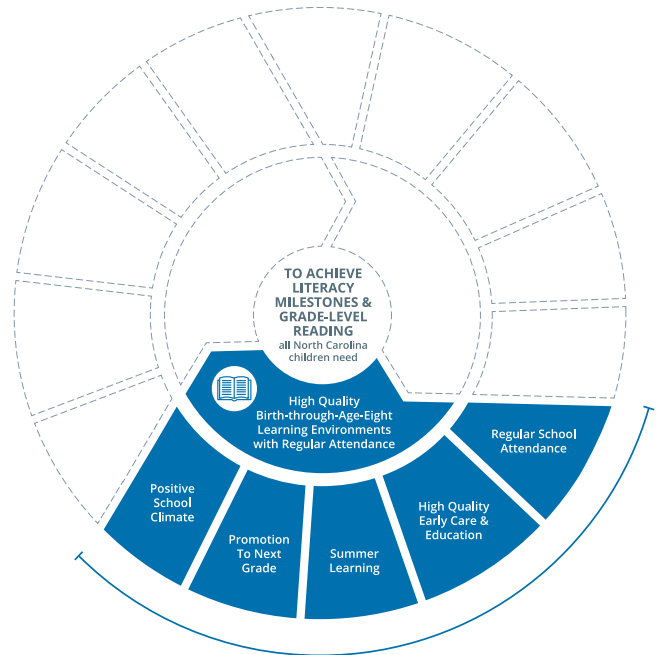
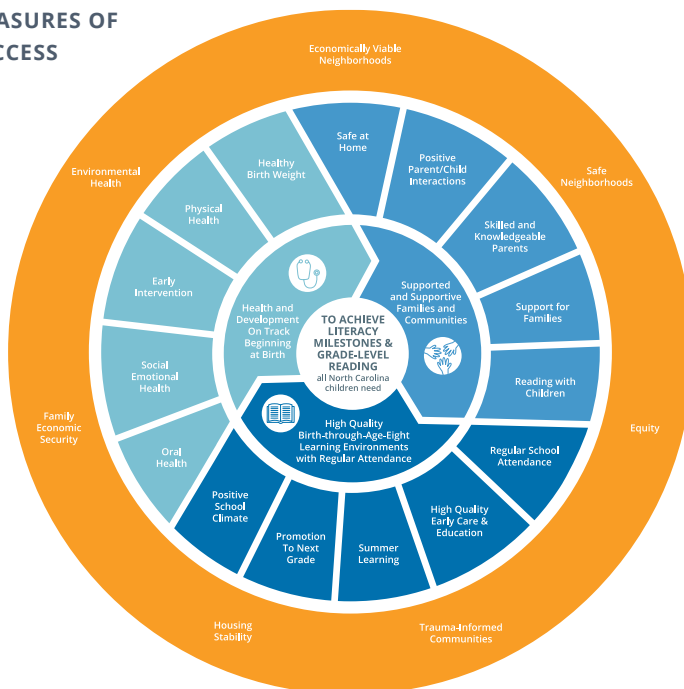


Figure 1 illustrates how these [three components create a whole-child multisystem framework](#) for creating the environments and experiences that can set all children on a pathway to reading at grade-level by the end of third grade.

FIGURE 1: CORE COMPONENTS AND CORRESPONDING MEASURES OF SUCCESS



LEADING WITH RACIAL EQUITY

Pathways stakeholders identified racial equity as a critical lens that can aid in understanding and improving outcomes for children. This is because race in America plays a large role in determining children's life outcomes. As stated by Tamika Williams, associate director of child care with The Duke Endowment: "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."

Leading with racial equity means prioritizing strategies that specifically work to improve outcomes for children of color. It also involves giving special consideration to the wisdom and innovation of people of color to develop responses that are lasting and reach all children. Convening a broad tent of stakeholders enables North Carolinians to learn together, support each other, and partner to advance racial equity work for young children. As stated by those who came together to develop Pathways: "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."

Pathways is evidence-based and enables stakeholders to see with a racial equity lens by [disaggregating data](#) so that we can clearly see and then address racial disparities in developmental experiences and outcomes.

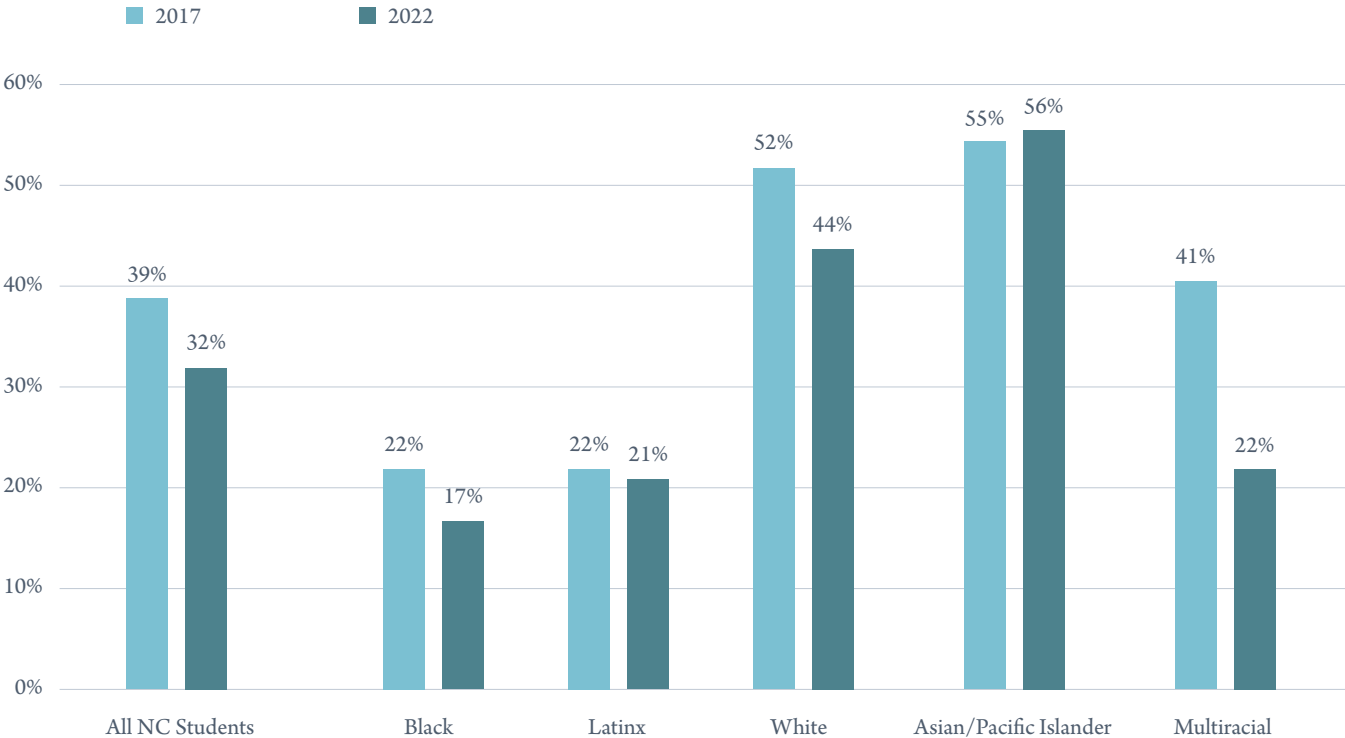
When Pathways was being developed, too many children in North Carolina from all racial groups were not meeting the critical developmental milestone of reading on grade level by the end of third grade, and there were vast differences between racial groups. Students' [National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\) scores](#) showed that in 2017, 20 percent of white children in North Carolina were not meeting this benchmark, compared to 44 percent of Black and 43 percent of Latinx children.



If we're going to be talking about need, then we need to know the folks who are in need. If we have any hope of changing population level outcomes, **WE HAVE TO KNOW THE TRUE DATA AND WHO IS MOST IMPACTED.**

As shown in *Figure 2* below, the latest NAEP scores reveal the need to maintain our focus on creating the contexts and experiences that will increase all children’s likelihood of reading at grade-level. In addition, they highlight the need for new urgency regarding the aim of narrowing racial and ethnic gaps. In 2022, 44 percent of white fourth graders were meeting the benchmark of being proficient in reading, compared to 17 percent of Black and 21 percent of Latinx children.

FIGURE 2: PERCENT OF STUDENTS READING PROFICIENT AT THE START OF FOURTH GRADE, 2017 AND 2022

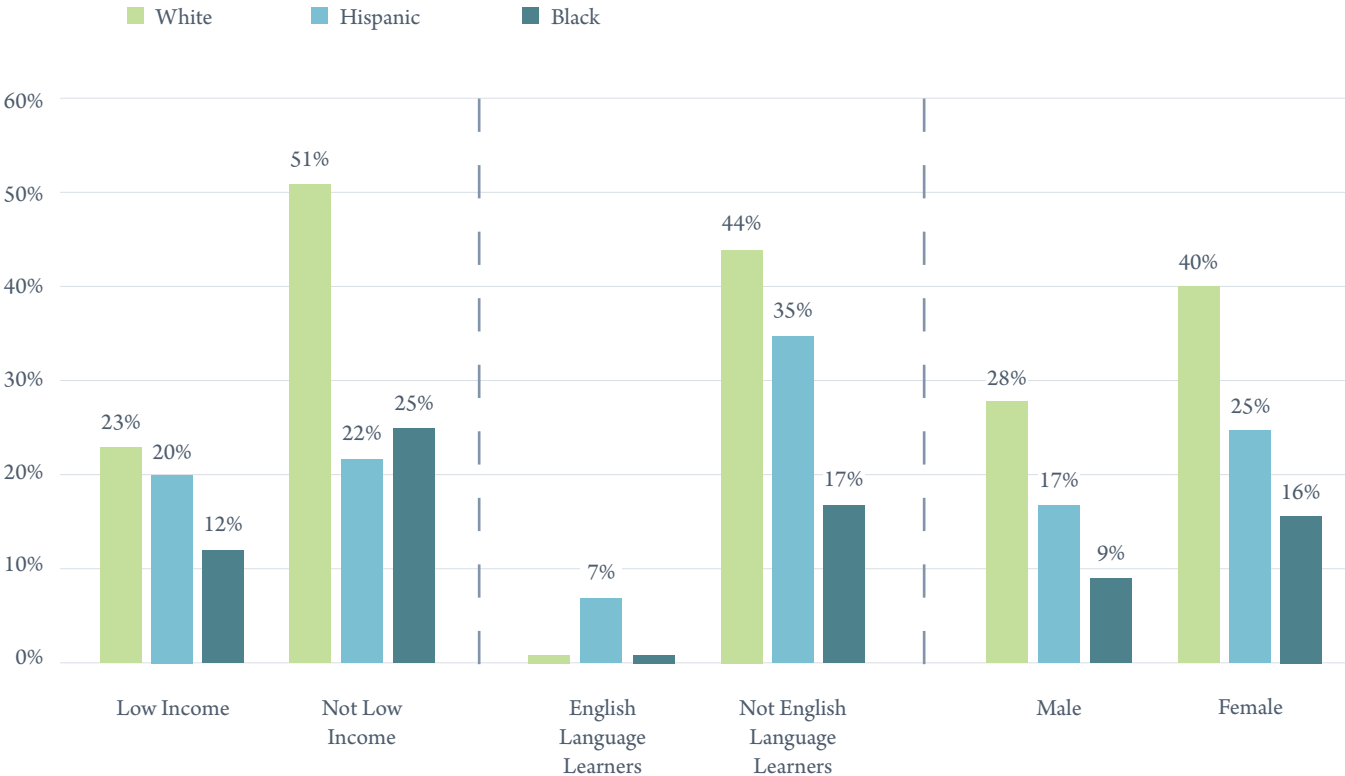


Note: Missing data on American Indian/Alaska Native students.

Pathways stakeholders identified income, ability, language of origin, geography, and gender as important status categories that are also associated with disparities in children’s developmental opportunities and outcomes. Consequently, the framework and associated policy and practice recommendations identify interventions that aim to minimize the negative effects of these inequities. The figure below shows that race and ethnicity matters as a stand alone category for targeted intervention and in combination with the other status categories.

Figure 3 below illustrates that race is a key stratifying factor in relation to all of the other status categories. For example, even among not low-income students a significantly higher percentage of Latinx and Black students are not reading at grade level compared to white students. The results in the figure also allow us to see that race intersects with the other status categories to create some highly vulnerable groups, such as English learning Latinx students (only 7% of fourth graders are reading proficient), low-income Black students (12% are reading proficient), and Black male students (9% are reading proficient).

FIGURE 3: PERCENT OF STUDENTS READING PROFICIENT AT THE START OF FOURTH GRADE, 2022



CONNECTIONS TO THE CANDL COALITION



NCECF and many of the stakeholders who came together to develop Pathways have continued to work diligently towards these goals, and one of the emerging initiatives is the [Care and Learning Coalition \(CandL\)](#). During the height of the coronavirus pandemic when the fragility of the nations’ and North Carolina’s child care system was highlighted, stakeholders were spurred into initiating the process of reimagining a state-wide “publicly funded system in NC, where early childhood education (ECE) is a public good and is equitable, culturally responsive, and relevant to parents, teachers, and providers.”

[NC’s child care system was under strain long before the pandemic](#), with low wages making it difficult for providers to keep the staff needed to provide high quality reliable care and working parents struggling to bear the high cost of care. Federal pandemic relief funds stabilized the system by distributing more than [\\$834 million to child care facilities across North Carolina](#), with many providers using those funds to hire more staff and increase wages. Now, as that funding runs out, providers in North Carolina, along most states across the nation, are [struggling to figure out how to maintain the salary supplements that enabled them to raise staff wages to slightly higher than the average fast food worker](#).

CandL is undergirded by the ambitious vision to revolutionize the early care and education system in North Carolina so that it is accessible, affordable and responsive to the needs of all families, particularly families of color. Coalition members aim to achieve this by centering the lived experiences of parents, providers, and educators. A transformed system will require the input of parents on the demand side (including those facing the highest barriers to accessing quality child care) and on the supply side (including child care center directors, educators, family child care home providers, and those who provide informal care).

The work that CandL is doing is integral to strengthening Pathways to Grade Level Reading because without a robust child care and early learning system trusted by parents, and sustainable for providers, too many NC children, especially those from low-income and racial and ethnic minority families won’t have the high quality developmental environments that are predictive of early literacy.

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The first phase of CandL involved hearing from over 500 North Carolinians through 55 listening sessions across 34 counties. Deliberative efforts were taken to ensure that voices from a broad range of racial and ethnic groups were heard, including those of parents/ caregivers and child care providers. This resulted in a deep and culturally rich understanding of what quality child care means both to families and providers.

They shared that quality child care is defined by three core factors:

1. The first is trust, which is rooted in the quality of the parent-provider relationship. It enables parents to feel assured that they are leaving their children in a nurturing environment and that their children are learning new things, especially skills that they may not feel equipped to teach themselves.
2. The second is availability, which emerges from the intensifying shortage of child care providers and spaces in relation to the growing number of working families who need care. Families with the fewest resources (often those working early mornings or late nights) are also the ones with the least child care options because few providers have non-traditional hours.
3. The third is affordability, which is the portion of parents' paychecks that is consumed by the high cost of child care. For some families the cost of child care is the deciding factor of whether a parent (most often, the mother) can work or not.

It is also important to recognize that these factors are interdependent—if any one of them is missing quality child care may be unattainable to families or they might have to sacrifice other aspects of family wellbeing. Without trust, parents don't feel confident they are leaving their child in safe care; without affordability or availability, child care is inaccessible. There was strong alignment between parents and providers in that these three factors represent both what providers strive to offer and what families desire for their children in the early care and education setting.

The six Pathways Actions detailed in the remainder of this toolkit can aid in strengthening an early care and learning system that is responsive to North Carolina's cultural diversity.

PATHWAYS ACTIONS

To facilitate improvement in children's developmental contexts and experiences, Pathways stakeholders identified [44 Pathways Actions](#) that policymakers and practitioners can take to improve outcomes. These actions are the result of asking what would be possible by coordinating policies and strategies across all levels of state government and types of organizations to support optimal development from birth through the end of third grade with one central outcome: reading at grade level by the end of third grade. Pathways Actions are comprehensive and multisector because despite the focus on one shared, tangible, and galvanizing goal, Pathways is undergirded by a whole child approach with the understanding that reading scores are a transparent proxy indicator for overall child well-being and a critical predictor of future outcomes.

To ensure that the Design Team's work was grounded in the local realities across North Carolina, Pathways created a feedback loop between communities and the state-level Design Team. Participants included pediatricians, superintendents, early educators, social services providers, community college and university representatives, principals, child care center directors, and more. These conversations resulted in the creation of a matrix of hundreds of possible actions for improving outcomes in the prioritized areas of focus, with these recommendations shared with the Design Team to provide local input as they made final decisions about which actions to recommend.

This five-part toolkit will highlight five to six interconnected Pathways Actions in each part. Part 1 includes the following Pathways Actions:

Expectation 1 • Systems are Family-Driven and Equitable

- Action 1.1—Support Families in Advocating for their Children
- Action 1.2—Require Linked Strategies Across Programs to Engage and Learn from Families
- Action 1.5—Ensure Assessment Instruments are Culturally and Linguistically Relevant

Expectation 3 • Education System is Accessible and High-Quality

- Action 3.10—Ensure Education Accountability Systems are Culturally Relevant
- Action 3.8—Provide Professional Development for Teachers on Cultural Competency & Working with Families
- Action 3.22—Support Schools and Child Care Programs to Engage Deeply with Families

ACTION 1.1

To strengthen families' understanding of their own power, invest in family education about how to understand and navigate through child and family systems, and be a voice (advocate) for their own and their children's needs at child care, in school and in health care settings.

SUPPORT FAMILIES in **ADVOCATING** for their **CHILDREN**

Parents and caregivers are children's first and most important teachers, nurturers, and advocates. They are the experts on their children. Children thrive when families are valued and supported in advocating for their family's needs and accessing available resources. Family engagement and leadership during the earliest years of a child's life are some of the most powerful predictors of a child's development and success in school.

WHAT WE KNOW

The more information parents and caregivers have about the actions they can take to foster healthy development the stronger their ability to fulfill their role as children's first teachers. Effective parenting is made up of many skills that can be developed through supportive interventions.

Parents and caregivers are the ultimate experts on their children and the more they know about the resources available through the broad range of health, child care, and educational institutions they encounter, the more empowered they will be to identify and request access to the supports their children need to thrive.

Dive Into the Data

One of the ways that parents and other caregivers can become better advocated for their children is through [home visiting programs](#). A statewide assessment showed that in fiscal year 2018-2019, over 16,000 NC families were served by home visiting programs and over 66,000 home visits were provided. However, there is a lot of variation in access to home visiting that is primarily determined by where families live in the state: 12 counties served zero families with evidence-based home visiting programs.

LESS THAN 5% of families who could benefit from home visiting services are supported by the existing availability of programs.

Many may think that home visiting programs are only needed during children's first year of life when first-time parents are learning how to navigate this new role, but Home visiting also plays a critical role helping parents having their second or third child learn how to balance the different developmental needs of multiple children. The most recent 2021 data from North Carolina shows that **53% of home visits were for families with children between 12 to 35 months of age**. This varies across racial/ethnic groups, with **34% of Black families participating in home visiting compared to 44% of white families; of families participating in home visiting 22% are Hispanic**. Explore this indicator and more through the [Pathways Data Dashboard](#).

WHAT WE NEED

We must approach this from a strengths and assets framework, which is rooted in the belief that parents want to do what is best for their children. What parents need is information, resources, and opportunities to cultivate the skills to become effective advocates.

Policymakers and administrators who are authentic in their desire to have parents and caregivers as partners in decision-making will receive the input needed to create initiatives that are culturally responsive and therefore more effective for the communities and constituents they serve.

HOW TO SUPPORT

The overwhelming majority of the funding (88%) for North Carolina’s home visiting services come from government funding sources, with the remaining 12% coming from philanthropic sources.¹ Philanthropic organizations interested in supporting families through advancing home visiting programs might want to consider targeting their efforts in the following **12 counties that currently have no home visiting services:**

- Alleghany
- Clay
- Graham
- Greene
- Lincoln
- Madison
- Montgomery
- Moore
- Stanly
- Transylvania
- Warren
- Wilkes

It is important to note that formal home visiting programs, which provide critical support for NC’s highest need families, are only one of **numerous ways that nonprofit and community organizations build the capacity of parents and caregivers** to advocate for their children.

Parents and caregivers’ lived experience gives them deep insight into their children’s needs. It is our job to strengthen their voices.

INITIATIVES WORKING IN THIS AREA



Empowered Parents in Community (EPiC)

aims to cultivate parent leadership and improve family engagement to better support students’ educational needs. Their mission is to dismantle systemic racial inequities in education. They advocate for high quality educational opportunities and equitable distribution of resources. They do this by intentionally engaging Black parents and empowering them through collective organization to advocate for accountability at all levels to close the educational opportunity gap.



Exceptional Children’s Assistance Center (ECAC)

is committed to improving the lives and education of ALL children with emphasis on children with disabilities and special health care needs. They affirm the right of all individuals, from all backgrounds and cultures, with or without disabilities, to an appropriate education and other needed services. They make that right a reality by providing information, education, and support to parents of children with disabilities and special health care needs.



Village of Wisdom (VOW)

organizes Black parent power by codifying their wisdom and expertise into tools and resources that support how parents and educators build culturally affirming learning environments. They design learning experiences that support how Black parents activate their agency in research, cultural organizing, leadership, and instructional liberation. Their ultimate goal is to position Black parents as experts in building the environments needed for Black children to thrive.

Visit the Pathways Action Map to learn more about initiatives leading efforts to advance this action.

ACTION 1.2

Require child and family systems and programs to use strategies that intentionally engage and learn from families, and connect those strategies across systems and programs.

REQUIRE LINKED STRATEGIES across PROGRAMS to ENGAGE and LEARN from FAMILIES

Families are a critical resource in planning and implementing services for children. Involving them as equal partners and leaders in decision making from the beginning is an equity strategy that can result in systems that are responsive to the immediate and emerging needs of children and families. To minimize the stress that families report when they have to navigate multiple systems that each have different and sometimes conflicting rules for eligibility and access, strategies that work well in one system can be replicated across child and family-serving systems to ensure they are family centered. Involving families as equal partners and leaders in decision making is a crucial strategy for advancing more equitable early childhood systems.

WHAT WE KNOW

It is crucial to involve families in designing how services are accessed from the beginning to minimize misunderstandings about eligibility and access. This looks like consulting families in all steps of their children’s education and healthcare—including deciding what is most important (agenda setting), planning, implementation, and evaluation—as well as providing support as needed to maintain involvement.

WHAT WE NEED

Strategies to engage and learn from families include: working with community-based groups to reach families where they are, asking families to share their knowledge, and becoming familiar with and supporting informal community-based family networks. The New Practice Lab provides numerous resources and ideas for how to design services “in partnership with the people who use them.”

THERE ARE 36 DIFFERENT FEDERAL PROGRAMS WITH DIFFERENT ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA that support child and family wellbeing. These are supplemented and complicated by numerous state and local initiatives with varying access rules.

HOW TO SUPPORT

Equity in the minimization of barriers to access needs to be a priority when developing family friendly systems and services. This means considering how race and ethnicity, immigration and socioeconomic status, literacy and disability, inflexible work schedules, transportation, and many other factors can affect family engagement with services.

Children and families can be supported at age-based transition points between systems, such as the transition into kindergarten. Children experience a smoother and more successful transition to formal schooling when kindergarten classrooms are connected with families through their child care and preschool programs, before they make the transition.

As part of the 2016-17 budget, NC Senate Bill 740 directs the Department of Health and Human Services, in consultation with the Department of Public Instruction and any other interested early childhood agencies, to devise a standardized process for preschool teachers to transition children into kindergarten. The North Carolina Early Learning Network provides a host of resources to support communities, schools and educators who want to improve this transition point for children and families.

Incorporating a diverse group of families in all stages of the planning process is the best way to ensure that the needs of all North Carolina’s caregivers and children will be at the forefront of policy implementation.

INITIATIVES WORKING IN THIS AREA



Family Support Network of North Carolina is a statewide organization committed to drawing on lived

experience of staff to help families with children with special healthcare needs navigate systems and overcome structural barriers. Family members in the FSN network are provided platforms to uplift their lived experience and wisdom by serving in state and local leadership opportunities.



Advocates for Medically Fragile Kids

NC is dedicated to advocating for the rights and needs of medically fragile

children and their families. Powered solely by volunteer family advocates who work with legislators and other policy makers, they work with individual families as well as collaborate with other organizations serving children to best educate and empower families to advocate for their medically fragile children.



ourBRIDGE for KIDS supports the education, acculturation, and resilience of newly arrived immigrant

and refugee children and their families in Charlotte, NC. They do so through full-day Out of School programs that support socio-emotional development, academic skills, and English language acquisition. Their Community-Based programs include cultural events, educational opportunities, connection to necessary resources, and overall family support.

Visit the Pathways Action Map to learn more about these and other initiatives leading efforts in this area.

ACTION 1.5

Ensure that social-emotional health and educational assessment tools can work for and be understood by many cultures and by people who speak different languages—are culturally and linguistically relevant. This helps to ensure accurate mental health diagnoses and educational supports and services.

ENSURE ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS are CULTURALLY and LINGUISTICALLY RELEVANT



North Carolina’s population includes a rich tapestry of different cultures and languages. When culturally and linguistically relevant screening tools and assessments are used with young children and families in educational and mental health settings, they are more likely to be assessed correctly, receive the services they need, and feel positive about their experiences.

It is a myth to believe that most assessments are culturally neutral. This is because most assessments used in the U.S. were developed by people with a White middle- or upper-class background and used their cultural history and knowledge in determining the content of assessments. As Molly Faulkner-Bond, a Senior Research Associate with WestEd notes, “the tests that people often think of as ‘neutral’ are actually reflecting a single racial perspective: the White perspective.” Therefore, making assessments culturally and linguistically relevant is about ensuring that they are inclusive of the full diversity of the American population.

WHAT WE KNOW

Assessment practices and instruments that reflect students’ diverse experiences, interests, and values enable young children to be assessed more accurately and holistically. Allowing students to bring their home cultural practices into the educational setting and ensuring that assessments credit rather than penalize students cultural knowledge creates a more equitable learning environment as all students are given the opportunity to draw on their specific social and cultural literacies.

Culturally and linguistically relevant assessments afford students the space to draw connections between their learning and their direct, daily experiences with the world, and to see those experiences as an asset in and beyond the classroom.

OVER 30% OF CHILDREN enrolled in North Carolina’s state Prekindergarten programs **ARE DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS.**

Dive Into the Data

Though North Carolina doesn't collect data on the percent of students who have access to educational programs in their first language, there is data on the percentage of children across the state who identify as dual language learners. Duplin County has the greatest percentage of **dual language learners**, with 16% according to data collected in 2015. This compares to a **national percentage** of 11% from 2019.

WHAT WE NEED

Assessment instruments that reflect childrens' diverse life experiences and backgrounds are needed to reflect the way learning is embedded in broader social contexts and to illustrate how the larger communities that students exist within matter to their learning.

Culturally and linguistically relevant assessments enable students to draw connections between their learning and their daily experiences, and equip them to value those experiences as an asset in the classroom.

HOW TO SUPPORT

As part of the Every Student Succeeds Act, several states have incorporated language supporting culturally responsive curriculum and assessments into their state plans. In North Carolina's legislation, the text is as follows: "Steps taken at the local level to ensure equitable access may include, but are not limited to:...promoting responsiveness to cultural differences." Embedding this language into law is an important step, however more support for educators with implementation is needed to guide action.

It is important to couple culturally and linguistically relevant assessment and diagnosis with referring children in minority and immigrant families to interventions and treatments that are known to work for people from different cultures.

In order to best serve them, children across North Carolina need assessment instruments that reflect their diversity of backgrounds and experiences.

INITIATIVES WORKING IN THIS AREA



ISLA PADRES Research: Early Childhood is a community based participatory research initiative that

is designed to train parents of the Latinx community to create an information/advocacy program on Early Childhood (children ages 0-5) for the Latino community. By providing recommendations to ensure accountability for culturally and linguistically equitable practices, they are empowering the community, providing clear and useful information, and improving services.



The **Family Stakeholders Advisory Council (FSAC)** based out of Rockingham County Partnership for

Children was designed to elevate and amplify family voices within our agency and community as a whole. It focuses on increasing the resiliency of all community members, with specific initiatives targeting parents and caregivers of young children, early childhood professionals and communities at the intersection of race and poverty by ensuring that these individuals have a seat at the table.



Advancing Latinx Mental Health Access (ALMA)'s aim is to provide focused support to programs and

agencies who wish to increase access to culturally responsive mental health support for Latinx people. Trainings and coaching sessions are offered to programs, along with policy review and feedback sessions to identify and address topics such as social drivers of health, community engagement or adherence to best practices around cultural and linguistic accessibility.

Visit the Pathways Action Map to learn more about these and other initiatives leading efforts in this area.

ACTION 3.10

Ensure that the way effectiveness is measured in early learning programs and schools is relevant and meaningful to families, students, and other stakeholders. Engage people from low-income communities and communities of color in the design, reporting, and fine-tuning of accountability measures.

Ensure Education **ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS** are **CULTURALLY RELEVANT**

Accountability systems in early care and education—such as how student, educator, child care and school performance are measured—are most effective when they are relevant to the cultures of children, families, staff, and communities involved. Examples of this include assessing learning environments for their ability to accommodate different cultures, and evaluating how family-friendly practices are implemented. The National Association for the Education of Young Children’s states that a **providers’ level of cultural competency should be measured** by the extent to which they demonstrate valuing of the diversity of the families they serve. They list the following aspects of family diversity that should be considered:

"This structure encompasses family socioeconomic status, family composition, parent’s level of educational attainment, abilities of children and family members, family’s immigration status, family’s religion, family’s home and preferred languages, parent’s sexual orientation, and the way that a family classifies its race and ethnicity."

Across the USA, **CHILDREN IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES MAKE UP APPROXIMATELY 22% OF CHILDREN** ages birth to six **WHO ARE RECEIVING CARE AND EDUCATION SERVICES** from someone other than their parents.

WHAT WE KNOW

One approach to improving and maintaining high quality early childhood programs is through statewide assessment of each program using a quality rating and improvement system. **North Carolina's childcare Star Rating** was the first market-based rating system developed in the U.S. and has been replicated in other states. Programs applying for a Star Rating are assessed on the following indicators: licensing compliance, ratio and group size, health and safety, curriculum, environment, child assessment, staff qualifications, family partnership, administration and management, cultural/linguistic diversity, accreditation, community involvement and provisions for children with special needs. Given the diversity of young children in North Carolina, it is important to ensure that the Star Rating assessment measures quality in ways that represent a broad diversity of families' cultural values.

Based on input from numerous stakeholders, the National Association for the Education of Young Children developed a Quality Benchmarks for Cultural Competence tool. This tool includes ideas to **help childcare providers build their capacity** to be responsive to the cultural diversity of the families they serve, and **guidance for those assessing and evaluating programs** on how to determine the level of cultural competence within a program.

WHAT WE NEED

It is important to ensure that measures of childcare quality are inclusive of what counts as quality for a wide variety of families. NCECF, in partnership with the Care and Learning (CandL) Coalition, has led a year-long effort to understand the barriers and facilitators to quality child care from the perspective of a diverse group of over 500 parents and providers in 34 counties across North Carolina. These listening sessions have illuminated and reinforced that **quality child care is defined by three key components: trust, affordability, availability.**

Many caregivers noted that an obstacle to trust in the childcare setting included STAR ratings that create an inequitable system for both parents and providers as well as the absence of a centralized portal with information about childcare and parent resources. Lack of affordability also presents a key barrier, with ineffective voucher systems and grant opportunities being a determining factor in the availability of affordable child care centers. Further, the ability of parents and caregivers to obtain quality childcare for their children is impacted by the availability of child care facilities, and related factors including staffing shortages, nontraditional hours, and long distances to and from centers.

The lessons learned from these listening sessions will be used to inform the second phase of the ongoing CandL Coalition project, which will focus on drafting policy recommendations.

HOW TO SUPPORT

Policy makers and those charged with implementing North Carolina's measures of childcare quality, which includes Star Rating quality rating and improvement systems, licensing and monitoring systems, pre-kindergarten standards and monitoring systems, and other early learning guidelines can ensure that their measurements consider cultural diversity.

What counts as high quality child care may be different based on family background and characteristics. Therefore, quality rating systems must be intentional about functioning in ways that are responsive to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families and providers.

The Center for Law and Social Policy suggests that these various assessment, rating, and monitoring systems should consider measure the following aspects of cultural competence:

At a minimum measurements should include:

- Incorporation of children’s home culture in daily activities
- Support for home language development
- Percentage of staff who reflect the children and community served

Additional measurements can include:

- Staff fluency in languages other than English
- Staff understanding of cultural practices
- Staff proficiency in second language acquisition strategies
- Staff experience working with diverse families
- Staff engagement in professional learning on cultural competency, second language acquisition strategies, and opportunities for cross-cultural learning
- Classrooms, materials, and interactions reflect value for children’s home languages and culture
- Translation, interpretation of materials to facilitate communication with LEP families
- Opportunities for meaningful involvement by families whose language is other than English
- Use of cultural mediators to communicated with minority and immigrant families

INITIATIVES WORKING IN THIS AREA



Empowered Parents In Community

(EPiC) aims to cultivate parent leadership and improve family

engagement to better support students’ educational needs. Their mission is to dismantle systemic racial inequities in education. They advocate for high quality educational opportunities and equitable distribution of resources. They do this by intentionally engaging Black parents and empowering them through collective organization to advocate for accountability at all levels to close the educational opportunity gap.

Visit the Pathways Action Map to learn more about initiatives leading efforts in this area.

ACTION 3.8

Embed professional development opportunities that support a deeper understanding of race, culture and unconscious prejudices (implicit bias).

PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT for **TEACHERS** on **CULTURAL COMPETENCY** & **WORKING** with **FAMILIES**



North Carolina’s history and increasingly diverse population calls for cultural competency training and professional development for child care, preschool, and K-3 caregivers and educators. Such training would strengthen their knowledge and skills for partnering with families, particularly families from overburdened and under-resourced communities. Training and development in cultural competence can help educators recognize their own personal biases, apply their understanding of different cultures to classroom management, adapt curricula and activities to better connect with students, support learning by affirming students’ cultural backgrounds, and strengthen family engagement.

WHAT WE KNOW

Educator cultural competence is important for all children and in North Carolina it is particularly salient for American Indian and Indigenous children because North Carolina continues to be the state with the largest American Indian and Indigenous population east of the Mississippi River. As noted by the [State Advisory Council on Indian Education](#): “Culturally responsive teachers are the greatest assets in raising the achievement of American Indian students.”

When care providers and educators are culturally competent they create learning environments that enable

North Carolina is becoming increasingly culturally diverse. Since 1990, North Carolina's **HISPANIC POPULATION HAS GROWN BY OVER 400%** and the **ASIAN POPULATION HAS GROWN BY OVER 140%**

children to feel that their culture and beliefs are valued and accepted while also actively learning about others' cultures. Children who have these culturally diverse and welcoming experiences in their care and learning settings grow up learning to respect, accept, and celebrate people from different backgrounds who have different experiences than themselves. Researchers at the [American Psychological Association](#) report that children as young as three are aware of differences such as gender, ethnicity, and disability and can begin to internalize biases reflected by their family, school, community, and in general.

Dive Into the Data

The Education Trust has compiled the available information on the [diversity of North Carolina's educators](#) to help policymakers and advocates engage in data-informed efforts to develop policies that recruit, support, and retain a high quality and diverse educator workforce.

WHAT WE NEED

Building cultural competency among care providers and educators is of increasing importance as North Carolina continues to grow and increasing numbers of international and multinational companies establish offices/branches in the state. Currently, 8 percent of the state's population is foreign born and it is [becoming increasingly diverse](#).

Care providers and educators must develop the skills to create learning environments that provide children with both a mirror and a window. Children and their families should be able to see their own culture reflected through the activities, decorations, and materials in the classroom (the mirror) and they should also be able to see other cultures in the activities, decorations, and materials (the window).

HOW TO SUPPORT

Care professionals and educators need access to [professional development resources](#) such as evidence-informed self-assessment, reflection tools, and strategies that aid in identifying and overcoming cultural biases to strengthen relationships with families and children from racial and ethnic minority and immigrant groups.

These [competencies are best developed during preparation programs](#) as aspiring early care and education professionals are obtaining their B-K, and K-3 licenses. Training and education courses should include how to develop culturally diverse learning environments, and how to strengthen relationships with immigrant families,

There are four basic [cultural competence skill areas](#): valuing diversity, being culturally self-aware, understanding the dynamics of cultural interactions, institutionalizing cultural knowledge and diversity.

families of color, and families with home languages other than English. Head Start's [Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders](#) can be used as a model.

INITIATIVES WORKING IN THIS AREA



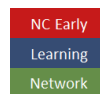
we are
working to extend anti-racist education

[we are](#) (working to extend anti-racist education) provides anti-racism training for children, families, and educators. They offer summer camps for children in rising 1st-5th grade, professional development for educators, and workshops for parents & families. They reimagine educational systems so that all children, particularly Black and Brown, can exist in spaces that affirm their identity and dignity, promote their educational advancement, and support their social and emotional well-being.



Catawba County
Partnership For Children

[Imagining Equity](#) is a series of four professional development modules for teachers of children ages 0-5. Utilizing children's books with a focus on equity, facilitators, Dr. Gail Summer and Ms. La'Gentry Ross, lead teachers through a series of group discussions on common myths on race and how we can dispel those myths. They prepare educators to teach even very young children in a manner that rises above racism and promotes an atmosphere of equity and social justice.



NC Early
Learning
Network

[NC-Early Learning Network](#) (NC-ELN) provides training, technical assistance, and program implementation coaching to state and program level leadership, trainers, and practitioner coaches to build and expand capacity for providing high-quality inclusive settings and practices to improve the outcomes of young children with developmental disabilities or delays. NC-ELN also designs, develops, and delivers training and technical assistance on evidence-based practices to improve equity and cultural responsiveness in the early childhood environment.

[Visit the Pathways Action Map](#) to learn more about these and other initiatives leading efforts in this area.

ACTION 3.22

Support schools and child care programs in implementing best practices to create a welcoming environment, provide opportunities for families to form relationships with staff, engage in respectful, two-way communication with families, practice shared decision-making in planning services for children, and recognize and build family strengths and leadership.

SUPPORT SCHOOLS and CHILD CARE PROGRAMS to ENGAGE DEEPLY with FAMILIES

Strong relationships with families in early learning and education settings promotes family well-being, positive parent-child relationships, and the ongoing learning and development of children and parents, particularly for families living in overburdened and under-resourced communities. Family engagement happens when educators and families participate in an interactive process of relationship-building that is mutual, respectful, and responsive to each family’s language and culture. When families are engaged children are more likely to miss fewer days of school. Meaningful relationship-building is ongoing, and requires time and attention. Schools and child care programs need training and support in developing these relationships with families.

WHAT WE KNOW

Parental or family engagement in a child’s education contributes to improved test scores and academic achievement, attendance, and social skills. Research informs us that connecting with families early, such as during the transition to kindergarten creates strong parent-school relationships that fosters engagement. In addition, engagement early on empowers caregivers to advocate on behalf of their children, particularly in school and grade transitions.

Child care and school partnerships with families can take many forms including outreach from teachers or staff members to discuss student progress, relational home visits, and meetings with families in communities during the summer to ease the transition into the following year. All of these serve to strengthen attendance for students, a key factor in academic performance and learning.

**APPROXIMATELY 30%
OF NC'S ELEMENTARY
STUDENTS WERE
CHRONICALLY ABSENT**

during the 2021-22 academic year. This is a critical issue because students' physical presence in school is a critical precursor to learning.

Dive Into the Data

Chronic absenteeism affects all students because when a few students' in the class are chronically absent it takes time for the teacher to review missed assignments and catch them up, which limits their ability to keep the whole class moving forward. There are **substantial racial and ethnic differences in chronic absenteeism** that indicate the need for targeted examination of the challenges that families face: 45% among Native American and Pacific Islander; greater than 30% among Black, Hispanic, and Multi-Racial, 27% among white, and 16% among Asian students. Explore the **Pathways Data Dashboard** to learn more.

WHAT WE NEED

A holistic and **equitable approach to family engagement** involves meeting families where they are and utilizing a **wealth of strategies** to involve caregivers meaningfully in their children's learning. This includes taking a strengths-based approach, communicating in the parents' primary language, creating opportunities for ongoing dialogue with caregivers, engaging families early, and establishing a positive relationship such that communication doesn't only occur when there is something to be addressed.

Additionally, cultivating a **school-wide culture of respect and care** so students know that someone cares when they miss school creates the sense of belonging that research has **connected to increased attendance**. This may look like greeting children and families at drop-off and taking roll in a sensitive manner. Establishing a system of attendance incentives that recognize good/improved attendance in addition to perfect attendance helps incentivize parents and children to prioritize consistent attendance.

HOW TO SUPPORT

To ensure a transparent measure of **chronic absenteeism**, the NC State Board of Education approved a state definition of chronic absence in February 2018: a student who misses 10 percent of school days in a year, or about 18 days total. Following this, the NC General Assembly passed a bill during the 2018 short session encouraging school districts to adopt student attendance recognition programs to promote regular attendance. You can learn more in this report on **How Schools And Local Communities Are Reducing Chronic Absence In North Carolina** and in the **AttendaNCe Counts Community Toolkit**.

Many parents don't realize the critical importance of attendance during the earliest grades and that **missing just 10% of the academic year makes it difficult for students to keep up with learning**. A problem solving approach is the best way to engage parents as partners in reducing absenteeism.

Schools and communities can further these efforts by joining in and promoting National Attendance Awareness Month activities during September.

INITIATIVES WORKING IN THIS AREA



Read to Rise, an initiative of Down East Partnership for Children, provides support to elementary schools to identify school needs, strengthen family engagement, and connect schools to resources to help meet the needs of all children and families. In addition, the summer learning network provides technical assistance, planning support and learning materials to support sites in providing learning opportunities during the summer months.



The WHOLE Dad Lab, at NC State University, seeks to highlight the experiences of fathers in support of healthy and happy families. Their team examines barriers and facilitators to father involvement across a variety of domains with the goal of understanding how these factors impact fathers' health and well-being, child outcomes, community supports, and overall family functioning and engagement.



Guilford Education Alliance (GEA) is an independent nonprofit that galvanizes the community in support of quality public education for all students. They are an alliance of people and organizations investing time, talent and resources in support of Guilford County Schools. GEA has several programs and initiatives including the Did You Know series that provides information, graphics and videos and the Bright Futures podcast that offers 25 minute episodes to bring listeners into conversation with educational change-makers.

Visit the Pathways Action Map to learn more about these and other initiatives leading efforts in this area.

THE COMPLETE PATHWAYS TOOLKIT

PART ONE

- Support Families in Advocating for their Children.
- Require Linked Strategies Across Programs to Engage and Learn from Families.
- Ensure Assessment Instruments are Culturally and Linguistically Relevant
- Ensure Education Accountability Systems are Culturally Relevant
- Provide Professional Development for Teachers on Cultural Competency/Working with Families
- Support Schools and Child Care Programs to Engage Deeply with Families

PART TWO *(September 2023)*

- Recruit and Retain Educators and School Leaders of Color
- Adjust Hiring Practices to Ensure High-Quality Educators
- Invest in School Health and Mental Health Staff and Clinics
- Eliminate or Minimize Suspension and Expulsion
- Infuse Social-Emotional Health into Other Child-Serving Systems

PART THREE *(October 2023)*

- Create Family-Friendly Employment Policies
- Ensure Accessible Transportation to Early Care Programs, Schools and Health Services
- Increase Access to Infant and Toddler Care
- Increase Standards and Compensation of Birth-through-Age-Five Educators
- Expand Child Care Subsidies for Children; Raise Child Care Subsidy Rates; and Provide Higher Subsidy Rates to Providers in Underserved Communities

PART FOUR *(November 2023)*

- Address Barriers in Health Insurance Coverage of IECMH Services to Ensure Adequate Benefits
- Create a Mental Health Professional Development System Focused on Infant and Toddler Clinicians
- Expand the NC Child Treatment Program
- Increase Professional Development in MH Treatment for Pediatricians and Family Physicians
- Integrate Mental Health Providers with Pediatric and Other Primary Care Practices

PART FIVE *(December 2023)*

- Use Data to Track Community Needs and Service Provision
- Screen Children and Families for Social Determinants of Health and Connect them to Appropriate Services
- Expand Maternal Depression Screening and Treatment
- Invest in Two-Generation Interventions
- Increase Access to Affordable Housing
- Include At-Risk Children in Early Intervention

10 YEARS

NC EARLY CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION — EST. 2013

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
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