

Pathways to Grade-Level Reading: A Whole Child Approach to Literacy

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The Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative created partnerships among North Carolina's early learning and education, public agency, policy, philanthropic, and business leaders to define a common vision, shared measures of success, and coordinated strategies to support the optimal development of all North Carolina children beginning at birth to reach third-grade reading proficiency.

Introduction

North Carolina has long been recognized for its commitment to ensuring that our state's young children have the opportunity to succeed. We launched NC Pre-K (formerly More at Four) to provide at-risk children with high-quality learning environments. North Carolina was also the first in the nation to make full-day kindergarten universally available in 1984; pioneer a comprehensive early childhood initiative to improve the quality of child care; and provide access to health screenings and offer support to families through the innovative Smart Start Network [1].

As a result, North Carolina increased the amount of children from birth to age five enrolled in four- and five- star child care centers from 33% in 2001 to 73% in 2020 [2]. Our state's prekindergarten program is among the best in the country [3], and we have the highest rate of developmental screenings in the nation [4].

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

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

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

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

All North Carolina children, regardless of race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status, are reading on grade-level by the end of third grade, and all children with disabilities achieve expressive and receptive communication skills commensurate with their developmental ages, so that they have the greatest opportunity for life success.

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

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

As a result, this diverse group has determined research-based, whole-child, birth-through-eight measures—the Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Measures of Success—to help North Carolina determine if our state's young children are on the path to early literacy. Further, Pathways partners have created and are endorsing the Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Action Framework, which proposes actions in the areas stakeholders identified as priorities, including children's social-emotional health, high-quality early care and education, and regular school attendance [5].

The impact of this work is widespread, creating a ripple effect. By creating a shared agreement around a set of measures and actions to drive early childhood outcomes, NCECF, its partners, and the Pathways stakeholders have helped ensure that early childhood is in the spotlight in North Carolina, and the work continues to drive the focus for other early childhood initiatives and planning processes across the state. The full impact of the initiative will be measured

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over time, and the Pathways ripple is already visible at the legislative, community, and stakeholder levels.

Why Birth Through Eight?

The first eight years of a child’s life are a critical time that build the foundation for all future learning. In fact, by the time a child is in third grade, their reading proficiency can predict future academic achievement and career success. Research is clear that achieving grade-level reading and overall well-being is possible if we ensure that children have health and development on track from birth, supportive and supported families and communities, and high-quality birth-through-age-eight learning environments with regular attendance (Table 1).

In North Carolina, only 38% of fourth graders and 25% of those from economically disadvantaged families scored at or above reading proficiency on the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) [6]. Significant gaps existed by race, ethnicity, and income. Though North Carolina’s numbers did not differ significantly from national numbers at the time—the state’s score was higher than 23 other states or jurisdictions, lower than only four, and in the same performance category as 24—consensus was building among political, business, and community leaders that it was time to take action. While North Carolina had several support systems in place for children and their families, the efforts were siloed—operating on their own, even though the desired outcomes were the same. Pathways invited stakeholders to step outside their silos and work together to meet a common goal. The updated 2019 NAEP data showed 36% of North Carolina’s fourth graders scoring at or above proficiency in reading [7]. The updated NAEP data also revealed some concerning trends. North Carolina’s average score declined by 5 points between 2015 and 2019, a worse drop than in 36 other states [7]. We are particularly failing some groups of students—especially Black boys. Declines over the last

four years for boys overall and for Black students in particular were statistically significant [7].

Disaggregated data also showed that a greater percentage of young students in 2019 fell below the lowest achievement level [7]. Our young students and families who are facing the highest barriers to opportunity are not being well served by the status quo.

Legislative and Administrative Impact

State Impact

State leaders identified shared birth-to-eight, whole-child measures of success to put children on a pathway to grade-level reading. The North Carolina General Assembly highlighted Pathways in the 2016 and 2017 budgets and updated provisions calling for greater birth-to-eight coordination across agencies and organizations, including consideration of the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading.

Pathways serves as a foundation for prominent state-level early childhood initiatives like the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services’ (NCDHHS) Early Childhood Action Plan (ECAP), which outlines NCDHHS’ vision for early childhood in North Carolina [8], and the Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education. The Commission was created by Governor Roy Cooper to take a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach to tackling three areas identified by the 1996 Supreme Court Leandro ruling requiring the state to identify specific resources to ensure that all children, including those from at-risk or rural and underserved communities, have access to a sound basic education.

Other initiatives include the myFutureNC Commission, a statewide, cross-sector organization focused on educational attainment, and the B-3rd Interagency Council, a joint council between NCDHHS and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction tasked with creating a vision and accountability for a birth-through-grade-three system of early education.

TABLE 1. Why Birth Through Eight?
Health and development on track from birth, including such outcomes as:
o All babies are born at a healthy gestational age and birth weight.
o All children are on track developmentally.
o All children have access to early intervention as needed.
o All parents have access to needed health, substance use disorder, and domestic violence services.
Supportive and supported families and communities, including such outcomes as:
o All children have safe, stable, nurturing relationships with families/parents/caregivers and other adults.
o All families have access to home visiting, family support, and parenting education programs.
o All families have access to paid sick, maternity, and paternity leave.
o All families have access to stable, safe, affordable housing and transportation.
High quality birth-through-age-eight learning environments with regular attendance, including such outcomes as:
o All children are prepared to succeed in school.
o All children have access to affordable, high-quality early education, beginning at birth.
o All children attend school regularly.
Source. Build the Foundation. Shared Measures of Success to Put North Carolina’s Children on a Pathway to Grade-Level Reading. 2018. (See reference 9.)

Community Impact

Local communities across the state are using the Pathways Measures of Success framework for collaborative community planning, identifying which of the Pathways shared measures to focus on locally and developing strategies for action to improve child and family outcomes [9, 10].

Communities beyond North Carolina are also using Pathways as a model. One example is the Gila River Indian Community outside Phoenix, Arizona, where community leaders are using the Pathways Measures of Success framework and associated research to build a case for focusing on early literacy in their community and to organize for action.

Stakeholder Impact

In a Pathways stakeholder survey, 95% of respondents said they “felt confident that if the state made progress on these measures, we would improve third grade reading outcomes” (unpublished data, North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, November 2019).

Collaborative partner organizations have incorporated the Pathways measures into their own data tracking and reporting. Cyndi Soter-O’Neill of the ChildTrust Foundation said in a personal communication: “[Pathways] has given focus to a lot of important, but often disparate and disconnected, work across the state. I think it also revealed just how much is already happening in the state and where the critical gaps are, in addition to elevating local and family voices in a state-level conversation.” Henrietta Zalkind, executive director of the Down East Partnership for Children, said: “Pathways has also become the go-to data resource to help drive early childhood work forward at both the local and state level.”

This will create change for children and families throughout North Carolina and, increasingly, across the country as the Pathways measures of success are shared and used by communities in other states focused on improving outcomes for young children. We encourage stakeholders in North Carolina and across the country to continue to adopt the Pathways model to support collaborative planning in the service of improving early childhood outcomes.

The adoption of the Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative is a testament to our Pathways partners, who have attended the meetings, done the homework, supported the vision, and remain committed to improving outcomes for North Carolina’s young children.

Pathways Impact: Bringing Focus to the Work

It is encouraging that the Framework is resonating with different communities and NCECF is eager for it to be used broadly. Through Pathways, we see potential to improve outcomes for even more children. Our hope is to use what we’ve learned through this process to build a solid foundation for children, not only in North Carolina, but nationwide.

Many Pathways process resources, including reports

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

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