

**State Agency Collaboration on Early Childhood Education
/ Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten**

SL 2016-94, Section 12B.5.(b)



Report to the

**Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and
Human Services**

and

Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee

By

**North Carolina Department of Health and Human
Services**

January 1, 2017

STATE AGENCY COLLABORATION ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION/TRANSITION FROM PRESCHOOL TO KINDERGARTEN

SECTION 12B.5.(a) The Department of Health and Human Services, in consultation with the Department of Public Instruction and any other agencies or organizations that administer, support, or study early education in this State, and within resources currently available, shall collaborate on an ongoing basis to develop and implement a statewide vision for early childhood education. In collaborating in this effort, the agencies shall develop a comprehensive approach to early childhood education, birth through third grade, including creating cross agency accountability with a comprehensive set of data indicators, including consideration of the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading, to monitor and measure success of the early childhood education systems.

SECTION 12B.5.(b) The Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Public Instruction, and any other agencies or organizations that administer, support, or study early education programs in this State shall report their findings and recommendations, including any legislative proposals, resulting from the initiative to develop and implement a statewide vision for early childhood education pursuant to subsection (a) of this section. The agencies shall make an initial report to Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services and the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee on or before January 1, 2017, submit a follow up report to those same committees on or before January 1, 2018, and may make any subsequent reports, annually, on or before January 1, as needed to those same committees.

SECTION 12B.5.(c) The Department of Health and Human Services, in consultation with the Department of Public Instruction, shall promote the successful transition of children who receive assistance from NC Pre-K program and the Child Care Subsidy Assistance program for four- and five-star rated facility classrooms to kindergarten. In its promotion of a successful transition from preschool to kindergarten, the Department of Health and Human Services shall recommend that both NC Pre-K teachers and preschool teachers prepare a preschool to kindergarten transition plan for each child transitioning to kindergarten that documents the child's strengths and needs based on the five Goals and Developmental Indicator domains for children's developmental and learning progress that are based on the NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development. The preparation of the transition plan shall only apply to children who receive assistance through the NC Pre-K program or the Child Care Subsidy Assistance program. It is the intent of the General Assembly that the Departments utilize this transition plan until such time as the standardized program to transition children from preschool to kindergarten, required pursuant to subsection (e) of this section, is developed and implemented.

SECTION 12B.5.(d) The Department of Health and Human Services shall report on the implementation of the transition plan required pursuant to subsection (c) of this section, including any findings and recommendations and any legislative proposals, to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services and the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee on or before December 15, 2016.

SECTION 12B.5.(e) The Department of Health and Human Services, in consultation with the Department of Public Instruction, shall develop and implement a standardized program to transition children from preschool to kindergarten. In developing this standardized transition program, the Department of Health and Human Services shall identify, at a minimum:

- (1) Methods to standardize student transition information such that it is quantifiable.
- (2) Recommendations for sharing data contained in a student's transition plan between kindergarten students.

- (3) Recommendations for sharing data contained in a student's transition plan between preschool teachers and the parents or guardians of the child who is transitioning to kindergarten.
- (4) Recommendations for preschool teacher training and continuing education to support their role in completing transition plans for preschool children.
- (5) Recommendations for baseline information that should be compiled in transition plans for students transitioning to kindergarten.
- (6) Procedures for the management of transition plan documents, including recommendations for the length of records retention, provisions for confidentiality, and proper disposal.
- (7) Any other components the Department deems appropriate in the provision of information between preschools, students' families, and kindergartens.

SECTION 12B.5.(f) The Department of Health and Human Services shall report on the development of the standardized transition program required pursuant to subsection (e) of this section, including any findings and recommendations and any legislative proposals, to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services and the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee on or before January 1, 2018.

Early Childhood Education: A Statewide Vision

The charge of the North Carolina General Assembly to the Department of Health and Human Services, in consultation with the Department of Public Instruction and any other agencies or organizations that administer, support, or study early education in this State to “develop and implement a statewide vision for early education” directs that North Carolina recognize and address the challenges and opportunities presented by early education from birth through grade three (B-8). Early experiences shape brain development and early learning provides a foundation for later learning. There are considerable opportunities for early education to optimize children’s overall well-being, and for benefitting the state as a whole. The challenge is to ensure that these opportunities are realized in the face of a growing diversity of young children, and the current variation in the quality of available early learning experiences.

As a result of this legislation and an interest in strengthening cooperation, the DHHS Division of Child Development and Early Education and the DPI Office of Early Learning have embarked upon a focused collaboration, with efforts to create and enhance a seamless transition between preschool – birth to five – and education in elementary school kindergarten and beyond, encompassing the birth through grade three timeframe. This legislation additionally requires development of a formal statewide process of transitioning children from four-year-old classroom graduation to their entrance into kindergarten. This transition plan work, and similar efforts have brought together representation from DHHS, DPI, Smart Start, Head Start and local and regional early education groups across the state.

A legislative emphasis on children’s earliest years and recognition of the essential role those years play in building the foundation for children’s learning offers a unique opportunity to continue and enhance this collaboration within our current system of early learning. The objective is to build upon the latest science, leverage North Carolina’s existing strengths, and move toward a more aligned system of early care and education that is capable of producing the best outcomes for children.

Why B-8?

Evidence of how the brain develops as young children learn, the effects of negative events on later life outcomes, and the synergistic dynamic by which children acquire cognitive and emotional skills highlights the importance of a closely coordinated, developmentally-appropriate, high quality and stable early learning experience for children across the B-8 years.

A developmentally-appropriate practice (DAP) is one that matches its content with children’s developmental levels and emergent abilities. Developmentally-appropriate practices involve teachers meeting young children at their stage of development both as individuals and as part of a group, and helping each child meet challenging and achievable learning goals. This perspective leads to more effective teaching and learning within the continuum of education whenever there is effective alignment and integration of high quality B-8 standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment, support for children’s emotional and social development, and enhanced family engagement in children’s education.

A developmentally-appropriate B-8 continuum can address three major policy challenges by capitalizing on learning gains from early childhood programs, narrowing the achievement gap at grade three and beyond, and improving school promotion, graduation and college attendance rates.

1. Maximize gains from early childhood programs

The significant benefits of high quality early learning opportunities, especially for children from low-income households, are well established. These include sizable positive effects on children's cognitive development, school progress, and social-emotional development, including self-regulation and impulse control. If traditional K-3 education fails to provide appropriate transitions, developmentally-sensitive instruction, and learning environments, the benefits of strong programs prior to school entry are diminished. Research tells us we can optimize the education and social gains children make in high-quality early learning programs by strengthening the standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment, and support for children's emotional and social development through grade three. Quality early learning interventions, "are best sustained when they are followed by high quality learning experiences¹."

2. Close the achievement gap in third grade and beyond

Evidence shows that more children from low-income households arrive in kindergarten with language and other academic deficits, as compared to children from middle-class households. These deficits can persist through third grade, where the literacy gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children in North Carolina becomes apparent in the difference in mean standardized test scores. From third grade, gaps continue to persist and are also evident in standardized and end-of grade test results later in elementary, middle, and high school grades.

North Carolina has a sound birth-8 foundation from which to tackle achievement gaps, beginning with the child care rated license and Subsidized Child Care Assistance programs that provide high-quality enriching experiences beginning at birth, though the preschool years through NC Pre-Kindergarten, with Smart Start supports and possible involvement with Head Start and other supporting federal, state and local organizations. Studies of the positive, collective impact of North Carolina's state-funded early childhood programs on reduced early grade retention rates and special education identification are profound. Rigorous evaluations of state-funded pre-kindergarten conclude that participation in these programs significantly accelerates learning, numeracy, and literacy, and that the gains are greatest for children who enter with the lowest levels of proficiency in most skill areas, including literacy, math, and general knowledge and self-regulation and behavior.

In a report released in November 2016, Duke Center for Child and Family Policy Director, Dr. Kenneth A. Dodge, found that North Carolina's investment in early childhood programs had long-lasting benefits for children, resulting in learning gains through the end of elementary school. "What we're learning is we really need a birth to age 8, or birth to adulthood, approach to education."² North Carolina's investment in early child care and education programs resulted in higher test scores, less grade retention and fewer special education placements through fifth grade and beyond.

¹ Quality Early Education and Child Care From Birth to Kindergarten, American Academy of Pediatrics, [Pediatrics](#), January 2005, VOLUME 115 / ISSUE 1

² "Impact of North Carolina's Early Childhood Programs and Policies on Educational Outcomes In Elementary School," Kenneth A. Dodge, Yu Bai, Helen F. Ladd, Clara G. Muschkin. *Child Development*, November 2016., <https://today.duke.edu/2016/11/early-childhood-spending-benefits-dont-fade-away-nc-study-finds>

A well-coordinated, strengthened, developmentally-appropriate B-8 system will boost literacy and numeracy of all students, but be of special benefit to those from disadvantaged backgrounds or who face exceptional learning challenges. Working together, North Carolina's existing programs can help close the third grade achievement gap and eliminate or reduce the gap in future years.

3. Reduce retention and school dropout rates

A major challenge is to end the need for student retention and grade repetition in early grades. A developmentally-appropriate B-8 approach is cognizant of the differences between children in their development, but alert to developmental delays and other potential causes for retention that can and should be addressed formally. It therefore has the potential to dramatically reduce retention rates and create positive outcomes in their place.

Early retention has been demonstrated to have significant negative effects, including increased high school drop-out rates and reduced post-secondary education participation. A synthesis of research shows that retention in the early grades is harmful, especially when it occurs before second grade. Children who are retained are far more likely to drop-out before high school graduation. In 2013-14, nearly 12,000 children in Kindergarten through 2nd Grade were retained in North Carolina, costing the public school system an unexpected \$115 million for these children to repeat one or more grades and creating additional negative impacts on their future education and success.

North Carolina's approach to improving the Birth through Third Grade continuum

The request of the General Assembly to strengthen coordination of early childhood education programs represents an unique opportunity to address the complexity that is North Carolina's system of early care and education. In an attempt to "develop and implement a statewide vision for early learning," it is recommended that the following systemic priority be addressed:

Governance

In its 2015 report, *Building a Strong Foundation: State Policy for Early Childhood Education*, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) describes the sometimes fragmented nature of early learning systems in states. Citing the disconnect of funding streams and services, SREB concludes "too often, silos among the agencies that administer programs result in duplicated services, service gaps, confusion for families and funding inefficiencies."³ Noting that the multidimensional nature of children's growth and development in the early years involves a comprehensive array of services and resources across physical and mental health, family support, social services, and education, coordination through governance is necessary to build an effective and efficient system of early care and education. North Carolina's targeted focus on the birth through third grade continuum presents a unique opportunity with respect to governance,

³ *Report of the SREB (Southern Regional Education Board) Early Childhood Commission — Building a Strong Foundation*, November 2015 (15E08), http://publications.sreb.org/2015/ECC_report.pdf

potentially allowing for the development of a nationally recognized model encompassing a spectrum of programs and services for children from birth through age eight.

An aligned system of B-8 early care and education could offer the following features/advantages:

- A united authority for early learning standards and instructional practices and assessments, creating opportunity for strengthened alignment and support for children B-8.
- Coordinated budgeting and operational decision-making that is driven by common goals and outcomes for children's success in school.
- Consistent teacher/program quality through coordinated standards, oversight, and support.
- Increased accountability, both programmatic and fiscal.

Currently, the North Carolina Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC) which is required by DCDEE's primary source of Federal funds (the Child Care and Development Fund), provides a forum for representatives from early childhood programs and agencies to make recommendations for goals and policies across the early childhood system. Consideration of a B-8 shared governance can be further explored through a sub-committee of this existing entity.

The opportunity also exists for greater accountability in shared governance through analysis of educational outcomes in NC's Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS). Through ECIDS, children receiving services overseen by DCDEE/DHHS and the DPI can be linked to DPI longitudinal outcome data, which will assist in program evaluation and policy planning, including establishing a shared and comprehensive set of data indicators.

Conclusion

With a well-defined governance structure, the system of early education in North Carolina can ensure greater school success and outcomes for the children. It is imperative that State leaders move collaboratively to strengthen, coordinate, and build an efficient and accountable system of early care and education that will benefit all aspects of the state's population and economy, current and future.

State leaders in early childhood stand prepared to engage in a governance conversation for North Carolina and to make recommendations for a system that is coherent in supporting sustained growth and development for all of North Carolina's children. Only then will we truly leverage the gains that children can achieve in high-quality early learning programs and ensure that we meet the goal of all of North Carolina's children being prepared for success in school and in life.