

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

Session Law 2017-57, Section 11B.2.(b)



Report to the

Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services

and

Legislative Education Oversight Committee

By

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services

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Introduction

Under Session Law 2016-94, Section 12B.5.(a) and (b), titled **State Agency Collaboration on Early Childhood Education/Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten**, the North Carolina General Assembly charged 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 the State to:

- Collaborate on an ongoing basis in the development and implementation of a statewide vision for early childhood education;
- 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.

The 2016 law required a report that was submitted in January 2017 to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services and the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee. That report described how the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Public Instruction had initiated a process to define a shared vision of a birth through third grade system and action steps that would lead to: 1) maximizing gains young children made in high-quality early childhood programs; 2) helping close the achievement gap in third grade and beyond; and 3) reducing retention and school dropout rates. The January 2017 report recommended continued planning for shared governance for the State's birth through third grade early education systems.

Subsequently, under Session Law 2017-57, Section 11B.2.(a) and (b), titled **State Agency Continued Collaboration on Early Childhood Education/Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten**, the North Carolina General Assembly required the continuation of the collaborative efforts to develop and implement a statewide vision of early childhood education and a comprehensive approach that is birth through third grade.

The 2017 law also requires a report to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services and the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee by January 1, 2018. This report is submitted in response to that requirement.

Rationale and Definition for a Comprehensive Early Childhood Approach

Child development is a dynamic, interactive process that is not predetermined. During children's early years, brain architecture is forming through children's experiences and environments. The first eight years of life represent a distinct and critical developmental period, during which the foundation of cognitive, social, and emotional skills on which the entirety of their future learning is formed. There is broad consensus that end of third grade reading proficiency is linked to later academic achievement and successful school completion. To build a strong foundation, children need health and development on track beginning at birth, supportive and supported families, and high quality early care and education through third grade.

For the purpose of this report and ongoing collaboration, a comprehensive approach to early childhood education means ensuring that state and local policies and practices are aligned and coordinated throughout the birth through age eight developmental continuum and rooted in child development research. Further, a comprehensive approach to early childhood education recognizes that domains of development are interrelated: good physical and social-emotional health, for example, are necessary for healthy cognitive development and learning. This requires working together across sectors in a "whole child" approach. In other words, community services (including health, mental health, early learning, etc.), schools, and families together help children achieve well-being and reach their full potential.

These core understandings shaped the vision and recommendations for governance, accountability, and measures of success described in the subsequent sections of this report.

Cross-Agency Planning and Collaboration for a Comprehensive Early Childhood Approach

Since the first report was submitted in January 2017, a cross-agency planning team has been used to further develop recommendations for a statewide vision and comprehensive approach to early childhood. Participants in the Cross-Agency Planning Team included representatives from the NC Department of Public Instruction, the North Carolina Partnership for Children, and several divisions of the NC Department of Health and Human Services (the Division of Public Health, the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Abuse Services, the Division of Social Services, and the Division of Child Development and Early Education).

The planning process contributed to the development of this report and strengthened cross-agency communication. It is also important to note that there are many ongoing cross-agency, public-private efforts to support a high-quality, accountable birth through third grade approach. For example, the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading, spearheaded by the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, is a partnership among the state's early learning and development public agencies, policymakers, and philanthropic and business leaders to define a common vision, shared measures of success and coordinated strategies that support children's optimal development beginning at birth and lead to reading proficiency in third grade.

Vision and Shared Measures of Success

The Cross-Agency Planning Team that developed this report recognized the opportunity to synthesize and affirm the similar visions of multiple cross-agency early childhood efforts. These efforts share the vision for each North Carolina child to have a strong foundation for lifelong health, education and well-being, supported by a high-quality birth through third grade system that delivers positive outcomes for young children, families, and communities.

North Carolina should continue the work initiated and led over the past two years by the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading (<http://buildthefoundation.org/pathways/>) to define and implement shared measures of success. NC Pathways is focused on third grade reading proficiency as the goal because it is an early indicator of academic and career success. To meet the goal, NC Pathways has developed measures that address whole-child, birth through age eight development in these four areas:

- Health and Development on Track Beginning at Birth
- Supported and Supportive Families and Communities
- High Quality Birth-through-Age-Eight Learning Environments
- Regular Attendance at Early Learning Programs and School

The NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Measures of Success Framework shown below provides a snapshot of the shared measures of success:



While there is still more work to be done, NC Pathways has been successful in engaging state and local, government, business, philanthropy and research stakeholders to create a unified framework for North Carolina to improve early literacy outcomes for young children.

Birth through Third Grade Governance

A comprehensive early childhood system in North Carolina for the whole child, birth through third grade, with shared measures of success requires sustained leadership and collaborative action across sectors. As previously described, children's educational attainment is maximized with not only aligned educational policies, and practices, but also with integrated, whole child services that address children's health, mental health, and family engagement. No single agency or funding stream will provide all the elements necessary to ensure young children's success. Further, there is no research or evidence that any particular model of state or local governance leads to better results for young children; rather, it is the intentional and shared ownership of data, accountability, and strategies that appear to make a meaningful difference in young children's outcomes.

North Carolina has a long history of successful leadership in early childhood systems development and many existing formal and informal cross-agency collaborative efforts to improve outcomes for young children. Future governance approaches should build upon these strengths and capitalize on new opportunities. For example, since the cross-agency team was assembled to create the vision and recommendations for this report, three new governance structures are already underway:

- **Birth through 3rd Grade Interagency Council:** Per Session Law 2017-57, Section 7.231.(a), this Council was established by the NC General Assembly to be led jointly by the NC Department of Health and Human Services and the NC Department of Public Instruction, with a charge to establish a vision and accountability for a birth through third grade system of early education that addresses: 1) standards and assessments; 2) data-driven improvement and outcomes, including shared accountability measures such as the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading; 3) teacher and administrator preparation and effectiveness; 4) instruction and environment; 5) transitions and continuity; 6) family engagement; and 7) governance and funding.

- **Child Well-Being Transformation Council:** Per Session Law 2017-41, Section 5.1. and 5.2., this Council was established by the NC General Assembly to serve as a means for coordination, collaboration, and communication among agencies and organizations providing public services to children. The Council will direct its initial focus on the following initiatives: 1) mapping the network of child-serving agencies and organizations in the State; 2) cataloging examples of failures in coordination, collaboration, and communication in the context of child welfare; and 3) reviewing the work of bodies similar to the Council operating in other states to identify promising practices and focus areas for the Council's work.

Beginning March 1, 2020, the Council will direct its focus to: 1) monitor changes in the social services and child welfare system associated with reform and regional supervision; 2) identify gaps in coordination, collaboration, and communication related to all publicly funded child serving programs; and 3) recommend changes in law, policy, or practice necessary to remedy gaps or problems impacting coordination, collaboration, and communication among publicly funded child-serving agencies.

- **NC Early Childhood Advisory Council:** The Early Childhood Advisory Council is designated by the Governor as required by federal law (including Head Start, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, and the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Grant). The Early Childhood Advisory Council is charged with providing leadership in the development of a comprehensive, high-quality state early childhood development system through the creation of a shared early childhood action plan with defined measures of success.

The interconnectedness across these three Councils and the staff supporting them will be critical to make meaningful progress toward better governance for a comprehensive early childhood approach. To that end, the Cross-Agency Planning Team makes the following recommendations:

- The three Councils should develop and implement a shared action plan for children birth through third grade.
- The three Councils should ensure cross-representation for effective coordination and leadership should prioritize coordinated planning and decision making.

- The three Councils should use a core group of staff shared across the Councils that work together to plan agendas, share information, coordinate, and keep the work moving forward.

Summary

The fact that North Carolina has three new or renewing Councils demonstrates the continued support for investments in early childhood development and the effective use of coordinated data, resources, policies, and strategies to ensure positive child outcomes for North Carolina's young children. The Councils provide governance structures for the collaborative work required to develop recommendations and actionable steps. This work will require expert facilitation, with leadership and staffing that ensures coordination across the Councils so that efforts are not duplicated or inconsistent, but rather complement each other and share strategies for improving child outcomes birth through third grade.

The NC Department of Health and Human Services and the NC Department of Public Instruction are committed to continued cross-agency collaboration and transparency to maximize existing resources, and to working closely with all our public and private partners and the NC General Assembly to deliver child and family-centered, high-quality, accountable services that produce better educational, health and life outcomes for North Carolina's children.