



# Report to the North Carolina General Assembly

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DPI Study/Improve Outcomes for Students  
with Disabilities

*SL 2015-241 (HB 97)*

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This report is submitted to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee to comply with the requirement that NCDPI shall report on the progress of developing and implementing policy changes on (i) IEP reforms, (ii) transition planning policies, (iii) increased access to Future-Ready Core Course of Study for students with disabilities, and (iv) model programs for use by local school administrative units to improve graduation rates and school performance of students with disabilities.

**Part I: Review and Revisions to the North Carolina Policies Governing Services for Children with Disabilities and related procedural changes.**

**1. Specific Learning Disability Policy Change**

In February 2016, the State Board of Education amended the *Policies Governing Services for Students with Disabilities* (NC 1500 – 2.5 (b) (11) – 1503 – 3.5 (b)). In its 2006 regulations, the US Department of Education indicated that states must develop criteria for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability. Further, it indicates that a state:

- Must not require the use of a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability.
- Must permit the use of a process based on the child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention; and
- May permit the use of other alternative research-based procedures for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability.

Based on this guidance and the extant evidence-base of valid approaches to the identification of students with Specific Learning Disability (SLD), the 2016 amendment restricted the use of a severe discrepancy for determining eligibility and developed criteria for a process based on a child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention. Beginning in February 2016, the Exceptional Children Division (ECD) and Integrated and Academic and Behavior Systems (IABS) have provided comprehensive training surrounding the systemic changes that support the implementation of the policy. Over time, the ECD has heard from stakeholders about specific language in the policy that could be better articulated to support practice. Most notably, this included language concerning the threshold for ‘research-based’ intervention, the state’s definition of a specific learning disability, and concerns about performance comparisons among culturally and linguistically similar peers.

Consequently, the 2016 policy was amended during the 2019-20 school year after a review including a facilitated meeting with representative stakeholders including practitioners, parents, state and local advocacy and professional organizations, university faculty, and parents. As a result of additional stakeholder feedback through public comments and face to face stakeholder meetings, edits and language changes were made to the policy passed in February 2016 addressing the issues described above. These changes were then taken to NC DPI’s internal Rules Committee and to the State Board of Education for consideration.

At the April 2020 State Board of Education meeting, the initial redline edits to the policy were shared. All public comments received over the course of the 30-day public comment period were reviewed, responded to in writing, and shared with the State Board of Education. At the June 2020 State Board of Education meeting, the policy amendment passed with Board approval and the revised policy went into effect July 1, 2020.

Following State Board approval, the policy has been updated in ECD documents, including the public facing website and guidance has been provided to LEAs to support the policy’s implementation. An online Canvas course, *Implementing an Instructional Model in the Evaluation and Identification of Specific Learning Disabilities* was developed to also support the policy’s implementation and is available to all certified NC Public School educators, administrators, and support staff within the NCEdCloud dashboard. Currently, there are 958 enrolled/registered participants and 387 who have completed.

The policy is currently being implemented in the 2020-2021 school year with a variety of supportive professional learning opportunities and assurances that IDEA regulations are being met across the state. This includes a PSU

submitted checklist indicating that PSUs are appropriately notifying parents when academic or behavioral concerns arise among students, that students are regularly monitored in terms of response to instruction/intervention, and that regular conversation occurs among school staff and parents/caregivers concerning Child Find and suspicion of a disability.

## 2. **Session Law 2017-127 House Bill 149**

The requirements of H.B. 149 continue to be supported through comprehensive professional learning opportunities, resources and information sessions. Information is made available electronically through the Exceptional Children Division website to provide information and resources specific to dyslexia and dyscalculia. This website houses the *NCDPI Dyslexia Topic Brief*, originally published November 2015 and substantially updated in 2019. In addition, the website contains information geared to parents, webinars, training materials for school staff, and summaries of the work that has been completed to date to support H.B. 149.

The Exceptional Children Division has continued to develop dyslexia delegates across the state that provide ongoing training with school staff titled *A Deep Dive into Dyslexia*. This course provides an overview of the science of reading, causes and characteristics of dyslexia, components of word level reading disabilities, and evidence informed instructional and assessment practices. A map of Public Schools Units and those with a delegate is included on the SLD webpage. To date, there are seventy-nine dyslexia delegates across the state. The Exceptional Children Division covered registration costs for any dyslexia delegate who wanted to attend the Spotlight on Dyslexia Virtual Conference in June 2021. Over fifty dyslexia delegates chose to participate in this virtual conference.

The course, *Demystifying Dyslexia*, is available as either a professional learning opportunity through a dyslexia delegate or an online Canvas course. As an online Canvas course, *Demystifying Dyslexia* is available to all certified NC Public School educators, administrators, and support staff within the NCEdCloud dashboard at any point throughout the school year. This two-hour course is an introduction to dyslexia and provides educators accurate information regarding the evaluation, identification, and education of students with dyslexia within North Carolina public schools. To date, over 1704 educators have enrolled in the online course and 1172 have successfully completed the online course.

A course has been developed for mathematics, titled *Understanding Specific Learning Disabilities in Mathematics* which is in the initial phase of building and developing instructors across the state to provide content related to dyscalculia. Currently, there are 33 Foundation of Math instructors that share background and characteristics of dyscalculia, instructional approaches, interventions, and assessment practices in the training provided. A map of Public School Units indicating which have an instructor is included on the SLD webpage, which can be found at this [link](#).

Additionally, the North Carolina State Improvement Project (NC SIP) works closely with 72 Local Education Agencies and seven Institutes of Higher Education to provide two five-day intensive professional learning courses titled *Reading Research to Classroom Practice* (RRtCP) and *Foundations of Math*. These courses equip teachers to work effectively with students with persistent difficulties in reading and math, including those with dyslexia and/or dyscalculia. To date, over 40,473 individuals have completed one of these courses and over 400 individuals have completed the rigorous process of becoming a certified instructor. These instructors continue to be supported in growing their knowledge base through on-going webinars and coaching as they provide professional learning and coaching in the field. In 2021, *Reading Research to Classroom Practice*, in conjunction with the above-mentioned courses on dyslexia, received accreditation by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA). This was validation that these courses are equipped to provide teachers, administrators and other education professionals with the tools to appropriately determine strategies and support for students with significant reading disabilities. North Carolina is the only state to date who has received accreditation from IDA for courses developed and delivered from the state education agency.

Additionally, the longstanding efforts to provide a universal data platform (Every Child Accountability and Tracking System- ECATS) will support HB 149 by providing a statewide documentation system for the required Individual Reading Plans (IRPs). This will ultimately reduce administrative burden on teachers by integrating the requirements of HB 149 into group and individual intervention planning that is occurring through the implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Support. This will allow teachers to develop literacy goals for students not demonstrating proficiency, allow for documentation of the specific interventions being implemented, and documenting student response based on validated tools and methodology for determining adequate progress.

### **3. Documentation/Paperwork Reduction: New Data Management System**

Every Child Accountability Tracking System (ECATS) officially rolled out on July 17, 2019, with statewide implementation of the Special Education and Services Documentation Modules. The new data system is provided to all public schools without cost and is the state-required data system for special education. By implementing a statewide system, transition of students from one school system to another within the state is much more seamless and eliminates delays in securing student information for the implementation of individualized education programs (IEP). The data collected through ECATS provides superintendents, district leadership, building administrators and instructional staff with information regarding the unique needs of serving students with disabilities. These data assist in the budgeting of resources, development of professional learning for all instructional staff and increases compliance with federal regulations and state policies. Efficient use of standard and advanced reporting features in ECATS have been provided through in-person and recorded technical assistance and professional learning opportunities.

The third module, Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) was launched in the fall of 2020 for beta sites, to ensure adequate and appropriate functionality. Statewide MTSS module access was provided to all districts beginning in fall of 2020-2021. This module provides a platform for data collection and analysis, as well as intervention plan documentation.

The EC Division also developed and provided access statewide to ten CANVAS courses illustrating the implementation of federal regulations and state policies when documenting services provided to students with disabilities in ECATS. Further, access to the ECATS training site has been provided to Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) for demonstrating the development of IEPs for the training of pre-service teachers.

### **4. General Response Concerning COVID-19 / Remote Learning.**

In response to school building closures and the requirement to make remote learning opportunities available, LEAs were required to continue the offer of a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities. However, as a result of this shift, every IEP in the state required a review in the event a revision was necessary to ensure that services were not interrupted as a result of the national pandemic. In anticipation of the burden of paperwork and number of IEP meetings that would be required to maintain compliance with this federal mandate, the EC Division developed the Contingency Plan (CP). The CP serves as an addendum to the IEP and is intended to describe how a student's IEP would be implemented between all transitions of the school reopening plans established by the Governor (Plan A, Plan B and Plan C). This streamlined the required EC processes, and ensured compliance with regulations, while creating a mechanism for strong communication with families and the maintenance of appropriate access to special education and related services required by IEPs.

The use of Contingency Plans was supported through a number of technical assistance activities, including recorded and live help sessions; open virtual office hours available to local EC leaders; written examples; and ongoing individualized support provided by Division consultants. Additionally, parent-friendly communication was provided statewide to support local efforts and explain the CP process and purpose.

The Exceptional Children Division has also engaged in rigorous ongoing support to Public School Units in response to COVID-19. These supports include:

- Ongoing monthly webinars for directors providing up to date policy and practice guidance

- Ongoing communication (daily, bi-weekly and currently monthly) with the Directors' Advisory Council (DAC), which is an elected group of EC directors and charter coordinators representative of each education region of the state, to provide recommendations and concerns.
- Meetings with a diverse stakeholder group to develop EC and Social Emotional Learning guidance related to school re-entry. This guidance was and is provided in *Lighting Our Way Forward*: <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/news/covid-19-response-resources/lighting-our-way-forward>
- Weekly meetings with superintendents and charter school administrators during regularly schedule meetings with agency staff
- Ongoing (weekly, then bi-weekly) office hours for EC directors and Coordinators in order to respond to questions and provide guidance.
- Daily, then weekly communication summarizing salient guidance and information concerning the response to COVID-19 for students with disabilities.
- Development of google sites and ongoing professional learning related to remote learning for students with disabilities and social emotional learning:
  - <https://sites.google.com/view/covidspedconsiderations/home-supplemental-optional>
  - <https://sites.google.com/dpi.nc.gov/ncdpiselremotelearning/home>

**5. Session Law 2020-7 Senate Bill 476**

Through a longstanding effort of the School Mental Health Initiative and data gathered from the NC AWARE grant funded through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency, the Exceptional Children Division spearheaded an effort to develop State Board of Education policy to satisfy the requirements for SL 2020-7. With a diverse team of stakeholders, the team drafted a policy to meet the components required of the statute. This includes components of a local mental health policy, a suicide risk referral protocol, liability limitations, training elements supported by NCDPI, and monitoring and reporting practices.

The [State Mental Health Policy](#) was approved by the State Board of Education in November of 2020:

Subsequently, a robust [set of resources](#) was developed among Project AWARE sites, NC Healthy Schools, and the Exceptional Children Division to support implementation of the policy. This includes model training plans, suicide risk referral protocols, sample Memorandums of Agreement with local mental health providers and Managed Care Organizations, and sample PSU-level plans:

**6. COVID-19 Relief ACT Funding for Exceptional Children**

The Exceptional Children Division has worked collaboratively with the State Board of Education and divisions at NCDPI to develop applications, determine funding formulas, and implement monitoring and reporting processes for COVID-19 Relief Act Funds supporting students with disabilities. This has included:

- 15 million dollars allotted through PRC 132 to support the extraordinary costs associated with educating students with disabilities as a result of COVID-19
- 10 million dollars or ESSER 1 funds allotted through PRC 167 to provide future services and instruction support to learning targets
- 81 million dollars of American Rescue Plan funds sent as subrecipient grants to PSUs to supplement IDEA 611 monies (using the same formulas as the 611 grant)
- 6.1 million dollars of American Rescue Plan funds sent as subrecipient grants to PSUS to supplement IDEA 619 monies (using the same funding formulas as the 619 grant)
- Ongoing Technical Assistance and Support has been provided to LEAs, including the website located [here](#).

**Part II: Transition Planning Policies**

**1. Continuum of Transitions**

Over the last several years, a team of stakeholders has been engaged with the development and implementation of practices to support a continuum of transitions (from pre-k through high school). To date, the team has developed and provided professional learning support for a transition tool kit to be used for middle and high school transitions, developed a tool to assist schools in the documentation of transition activities and selection of evidence-based transition practices across all grade levels, and developed training and resources for promising practice activities associated with the development of self-determination.

The most recent Continuum of Transitions (CoT) work has been informed by two sessions seeking stakeholder input. During these meetings, stakeholders identified needs related to a general dearth of resources related to supporting transitions within elementary grades, collecting and documenting data across grade spans, and intervening to positively impact self-determination. Based on this feedback, the CoT workgroup (a workgroup of the SSIP stakeholder team) created an initial professional development session that included the following components:

- A review of the research around post school outcomes for SWD, which included postsecondary education and employment outcomes (WHY)
- An implementation plan (beginning with usability testing) for a promising practice of self-determination “Bell Ringer” activities, which included identifying a diverse group of LEAs across the state as participants (WHO)
- The specific steps of administering the AIR Self-Determination Assessment (which served as pre- and post-measures) and implementing the “Bell Ringer” self-determination activities (HOW)

In addition to these training components, materials were shared that included “Bell Ringer” PowerPoints, with reviewed, scripted self-reflection questions. For the usability testing of the activities, four initial sites were identified that represented geographic and demographic diversity, as well as a willingness to use the measures across grades. Prior to delivering the “Bell Ringer” lessons, teachers involved in the pilot completed the AIR Self-Determination Assessment for each of the students participating in the activities to gather pre-intervention data. Pilot teachers then implemented the Bell Ringer activities (teachers were asked to complete the activities on a consistent basis, no less than two sessions per week for a full nine weeks). During the activities, students engaged in a discussion around a statement related to self-awareness, disability awareness, and / or self-directed IEPs. Students were asked to consider the statement and respond with their thoughts about how the statements applied to them individually (Did they understand that skill? Did they demonstrate that skill? Did they need to develop that skill?). After nine weeks of providing “Bell Ringers”, teachers again completed the AIR Self-Determination Assessments to gather post-intervention data. The usability testing revealed several findings that will guide implementation of this promising practice next year. Primarily, the effect of the intervention appeared to be larger for elementary students than middle and high school students. Additionally, while there were standardized approaches to delivering the intervention activities (e.g., a minimum of 2 sessions per week for 9 weeks), there was a wide range of sessions (i.e., dosage) that were delivered across the classrooms ( $M = 21.31$ ,  $SD = 10.24$ ). The following resources were created for LEAs to use for transition planning (1) a CoT Tool for documenting student transition activity through their school experience, (2) a CoT LiveBinder, (3) a recommended CoT Plan, (4) links to a multitude of transition activities for all grade levels, and (5) a Guiding Questions Tool that is aligned with the state SSIP goals.

Finally, in partnership with the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT) the team has started conversations concerning the alignment of evidence-based transition practices to the LEASA. This alignment tool is intended to help schools and teachers identify the practices that are most closely aligned to their root causes and improvement plans.

The 2019-2020 CoT cohort consisted of three LEAs who met the following readiness criteria by demonstrating:

1. a recognition of the benefits of and desire to begin transition activities prior to the required age 16
2. current implementation of a strategy that supports beginning transition activities prior to age 16
3. a desire to have support in the development of additional strategies and data collection

Participants of this cohort included two traditional and one charter LEAs of varying sizes. The traditional LEAs identified their target grade bands and received training in the administration of the pre- and post-assessment, AIR Self-Determination Assessment, the implementation of the Bell Ringer activities, and in the submission process for the pre- and post-assessment data.

Two traditional LEAs have expressed a desire to continue in 2020-2021 with Person-Centered Thinking training with a plan of focus to improve student participation in student-led IEPs. The charter school was unable to complete the Bell Ringer activities. In addition, one LEA and participant in both the first cohort and in Person-Centered Thinking training has developed a plan to expand grade levels within their LEA and increase student-led IEP participation over a period of several years. Other LEAs invited to participate in the 2020-21 cohort declined to participate due to virtual instruction.

## **2. Secondary Transition**

The EC Division continues to use the Transition Toolkit LiveBinder to support traditional and charter LEAs on tools for completing secondary transition plans. Transition Leads who attended training continue to redeliver information using materials contained in the Transition Toolkit LiveBinder. Transition Leads new to their LEA are provided training during Summer Institutes or through participation in a session offered in a combined regional format. The Secondary Transition topic webinars that were provided live February 2017 through May 2017 on the topics of: Vocational Rehabilitation, Community Colleges, Career Technical Education, Significant Cognitive Disabilities, Visual Impairments, Specific Learning Disabilities, Deaf/Hard of Hearing, Emotional Disabilities, Autism, and Deaf-Blindness have been uploaded in the Transition Toolkit and are located on the Exceptional Children Division website to serve as a resource for LEAs.

An additional webinar has been provided on the topic of Age of Majority. The PowerPoint and notes for that session have been added to the resources in the Transition Toolkit. In addition, the LEAs have access to the ECATS Secondary Transition module as another training resource. A new initiative is in the development and will consist of a Secondary Transition training session offered to LEAs the year prior to their Program Compliance Review (PCR).

Three LEAs provided feedback on the pilot PCR Secondary Transition Overview session during the 2019-2020 school year. Two of those LEAs will utilize the pilot draft during their Professional Learning Community sessions during the 2020-2021 school year. Feedback from their use will be used to inform additional training resources needed to support improving the Secondary Transition process at the local level.

In addition, twenty-six LEA teams have participated in collaborative training (Career and Technical Education, Exceptional Children, and Vocational Rehabilitation) to promote the identification and sharing of resources to provide pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities as a means to improve post-school outcomes.

## **Part III: Increased Access to Future-Ready Core Course of Study for Students with Disabilities (SWD)**

### **1. Specially Designed Instruction within an MTSS**

This professional learning series was created in response to an identified area of need through the feedback from local special education directors and includes three Canvas courses: Specially Designed Instruction: Leadership Drivers, Foundations of Specially Designed Instruction within a Multi-Tiered System of Support, and Specially Designed Instruction: Design, Delivery, and Decision-Making. The creation of the courses has been a collaboration between the Exceptional Children, Integrated Academic and Behavior Systems and the K-12 Standards, Curriculum and Instruction Divisions. The overall intent of this series is to improve outcomes for students with disabilities through building on current intervention systems and problem-solving at the individual student level.

In Spring of 2018, a pilot of this professional learning series was made available to seven LEAs to participate in the Canvas courses with ongoing support and feedback from NCDPI consultants. This has continued in 2019 with five additional LEAs with the intent of finalizing the course based on feedback and making it available to field in the fall of 2020. This course is now available to all LEAs through Canvas.

The course is unique in that Local Education Agencies can elect to provide the course locally in a virtual, blended, or face-to-face format based on the available resources and preferences. Following successful completion of each course, these LEA teams will then redeliver within their districts. The EC division has expanded the availability of the courses by providing an Implementation Guide for professional learning series to all EC Directors/Coordinators or Professional Learning Teams and opening the registration for Foundations of Specially Designed Instruction within an Multi-Tiered system of Support and Specially Designed Instruction: Design, Delivery, and Decision-Making to all NC Educators through NCEES on the NCEdCloud Dashboard.

#### **Part IV: Model Programs for Use by Local Administrative Units to Improve Graduation Rates and School Performance of Students with Disabilities**

Multiple initiatives and projects will work collectively to support these two focus areas. They have been combined rather than repeat each item.

##### **1. Special Projects Funding.**

LEAs complete applications for Special Project funds and budgets funds so students with more significant needs can attend school and better access educational services which in turn improves school performance and graduation rates. This year, the applications are provided through a new online system that offers high security while facilitating both reporting and monitoring processes. All EC grants, including sub-recipient IDEA and special grants can now be accessed through one agency-wide online system (CCIP).

##### **2. NC State Improvement Project.**

In 2016, the US Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) awarded North Carolina State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) funding for another five-year grant cycle in the total amount of \$7.2 million. This Grant from OSEP continues to support the work of the three previously awarded five-year grants through which Reading Research to Classroom Practice (RRtCP) and Foundations of Mathematics (FoM) courses were developed. These courses improve teachers' instructional skills in the delivery of reading and math.

The EC Division received a new SPDG grant in May of 2021. This five-year grant spans 2021-2026, and continues to focus on professional development in literacy, math, and coaching. However, this new grant is also targeting low performing districts who may not have professional knowledge or capacity to provide evidence-based instruction in these academic areas. This newly awarded grant will also continue to support the integration of these courses with our Institutes of Higher Education (IHEs), further preparing pre-service teachers to begin their professional career with additional tools and knowledge to support student needs.

##### **3. State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) and LEA Self-Assessment.**

The EC Division completed phase III, year five of the State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP). The purpose of the SSIP work in North Carolina is to improve graduation rates for students with disabilities at a rate that closes the gap with non-disabled peers. To this end, the work continues to focus on supporting Local Education Agencies in conducting root cause analysis, infrastructure alignment, and continuing implementation & evaluation of improvement plans. To date, the major activities of the SSIP process to date include:

- The LEA Self-Assessment (LEASA) was developed to support traditional and charter LEAs in their identification of root causes associated with graduation gaps between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers. Subsequently, the tool supports the development and implementation of evidence-informed interventions aligned with identified root causes. For the EC Division, the annual aggregated data served as a tool to inform regional infrastructure alignment and the development of a comprehensive professional learning plan.
- The provision of comprehensive professional learning to support needs identified through the LEASA process. During quarterly regional meetings, the State provided ongoing coaching on the rationale for using the LEASA, presented strategies for analyzing data and selecting priorities, and modeled completion of the LEASA. SEA staff met monthly in Regional data team meetings to review and analyze data from the LEASA to provide LEA staff technical assistance and support as they developed and/or updated local implementation plans.
- The analysis of LEASA data. The EC Division staff reviewed updated LEASAs using a validated rubric to determine an appropriately aligned tiered system of providing technical assistance and professional learning. Using the data from the rubrics, the EC Division grouped identified needs to provide targeted support around particular topics or processes.
- The update of a statewide professional learning calendar. The SSIP Team analyzed the quantitative and qualitative data for updating the previously developed universal professional learning calendar. The calendar was designed by identifying commonly occurring needs reflected in the critical components of the LEASA and recommendations for support made during the EC Division staff reviews. Thus, supports offered by the EC Division during the 2020-21 school year is a direct result of self-identified root causes at the local level.

The evaluation of the SSIP has thus far yielded indicators of successful implementation. It should be noted, the 2020/2021 five-year cohort graduation rate of students with disabilities was 74.5 percent, indicating substantial improvement since the 2014 baseline data of 67.82 percent.

During the 2020-2021 school year, the EC division has worked collaboratively with a wide variety of stakeholders (e.g., National TA centers, parents and families, parent centers and advocates, internal and external educational experts) to set targets for the 2021-2022 State Performance Plan / Annual Performance Report. This in-depth analysis of data across 17 key federally reported indicators of procedural compliance and student outcomes has resulted in better understanding of strengths and weaknesses across a number of areas. Most notably, the EC division will be prioritizing support for early literacy outcomes of students with disabilities by leveraging HB 149 and evidence-based professional learning (e.g., Reading Research to Classroom Practice, LETRS, bug-in-ear coaching) while supporting implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Support as described within the legislation.

#### **4. Implementing Model Programs for use by LEAs**

- A. EC Process modules have been developed and provided to LEAs. These modules provide virtual training materials to LEAs for use in resolving compliance violations, onboarding new EC staff and providing refreshers to existing staff. The modules highlight regulatory requirements and effective practices for developing and implementing the individualized education program. The courses align with the required use of ECATS Special Education module as well.
- B. A Homebound Stakeholder group was initiated in partnership with the Disability Rights North Carolina to explore placement decisions for students with disabilities. As a result, the *Guidance for Homebound and Modified Day Placements* document was created and shared with local education agencies. This document provides a set of essential questions and resources for IEP teams to consider when determining placements for children with medical or significant behavioral issues. Following the implementation, this document was reviewed for any additional recommendations or clarifications in 2020-21.
- C. Additional Division Activities:
  - Participation in the Results-Based Accountability Collaborative (nationally)

- Collaboration with the Council for Exceptional Children to support early career teachers through mentoring
- Strategic Plan was developed and launched in March of 2021 with rational decision-making procedures (TREGO ED) to align with the State Board of Education Strategic Plan
- Interagency Collaboration with the Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH) for Due Process Petitions and Appeals
- Interagency Collaboration: Reviewed and revised Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the Department of Health and Human Services to ensure educational services are being provided in Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities (PRTFs)
- Capacity Building/Initiatives: Migrating professional development/training to online platform for fidelity of implementation and to expedite training required as a result of teacher/administrator turn-over
- Initiative: Continued work on previously developed Educational Sign Language Interpreter and Cued Language Transliterator Coaching Cohort to increase the knowledge, skills, and competencies of these professionals improve outcomes for students who require an interpreted or transliterated education.
- Initiative: Partnered with the National Center for Systemic Improvement to review and revise General Supervision System with an emphasis on combining program and fiscal monitoring activities
- The EC Division was invited to join with the CEEDAR (Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform) Center to investigate and develop strategies to support teacher recruitment and retention for special education teachers and related service providers. The state level team includes interagency divisions representation and IHEs. A stakeholder group, to be developed, will include local EC directors, and other appropriate stakeholders.
- The Policy, Monitoring and Audit section of the ECD began a compliance cohort for central office EC Department staff, to further strengthen the knowledge and application of IDEA within LEAs.

## 5. Project AWARE

North Carolina's Project AWARE is a collaboration between the NC Department of Public Instruction and the NC Department of Health and Human Services to develop a comprehensive plan of activities, services, and strategies for connecting youth and families to mental health services in three pilot school districts.

Project AWARE promotes innovative service delivery based on the recommendations of the NC School Mental Health Initiative for equitable access to high quality and well-coordinated mental health and substance abuse services including 1) continuum of supports and services, 2) strategies to foster sustainability, and 3) engagement of all stakeholders.

Project AWARE addresses the three tiers of mental health (promotion, prevention, and intervention) through a continuum of education, universal screening, and appropriate services and supports for all students in response to varying levels of need. Recognizing the interrelatedness of academic outcomes and mental health/well-being of students Project AWARE seeks to provide an embedded approach within an existing system (schools) versus fragmented and reactive approaches.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) awarded grants to 24 US states/territories and the District of Columbia for a 5-year funding cohort for FY's 2018-2023. The Project AWARE grant serves to build state and local education agencies' capacity to develop a comprehensive, coordinated and integrated program to advance wellness and resilience in educational settings for school-aged youth.

The 21st Century Care Act established the Interdepartmental Serious Mental Illness Coordinating Committee

(ISMICC). In December 2017, the ISMICC issued a Report to Congress that outlined five major areas of focus and recommendations intended to support a mental health system that successfully addresses the needs of all individuals with serious mental illness or serious emotional disturbance and their families and caregivers. Project AWARE addresses the Healthy People 2020 Mental Health and Mental Disorders Topic

Area and aligns with the following ISMICC recommendations:

- 2.6 Prioritize early identification and intervention for children.
- 2.7 Use telehealth and other technologies to increase access to care.
- 2.9 Support family members and caregivers.
- 3.2 Make screening and early intervention among children and youth a national expectation.
- 3.5 Implement effective systems of care for children and youth throughout the nation.

In June of 2021, NCDPI was notified of a second concurrent Project AWARE grant for 8.9 million dollars. This concurrent grant maintains the goals and objectives of the first grant, while scaling the project to three new PSUs across the state. At the current time, six of the eight State Board of Education geographic districts are now included within the project. Notably, the project requires universal support for mental wellness (particularly focused on developing resiliency), supplemental supports for students experiencing mild mental health issues, and strong collaboration with local providers and Managed Care Organizations to ensure seamless support for students with more significant mental health needs. This work strongly supports Senate Bill 476 and the State Board of Education mental health policy.

### **Conclusion**

Since the establishment of this report, the topics and requested information have either been completed through project finalization, addressed through policy changes and implementation, or improved through statewide technical assistance by the EC Division. As a result, this report has become duplicative to other individual reports. The EC Division requests that this report be considered for elimination moving forward.