

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The General Assembly should require low-performing school districts to include an early childhood improvement plan as a component of their required plans for improvement.

Under N.C. Gen. Stat. §115C-105.39A, Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in which the majority of schools receive an overall school performance grade and growth score of “low-performing” are designated as low-performing districts. After receiving this designation, a district must create a plan to address how it will improve school growth and performance scores in each low-performing school. In addition, the plan must address how the superintendent and other administrators will work with each low-performing school and how district policy should be changed to improve student achievement throughout the district.

The majority of the gap between higher- and lower-achieving school districts exists by third grade. Education is a cumulative process and because poor performance in early years can have a negative cascading effect, low-performing districts should develop specific strategies aimed at boosting achievement from Pre-K to third grade. If low-performing districts hope to raise achievement, the data suggests that the greatest opportunity to do so is during the early years of student learning.

Early learning strategies can include

- expanding Pre-K program participation among disadvantaged students;
- improving Pre-K quality;
- ensuring alignment of Pre-K curricula with elementary school curricula;
- developing programs to help students transitioning to kindergarten;
- providing professional development focused on early learning; and
- providing instructional coaching focused on Pre-K through third grade.

Improving early education would not only help students struggling in early grades but would also reorient the system to help ensure future students develop a stronger educational base and become less likely to struggle academically in later grade levels.

Under current state law, the superintendent of a low-performing district that receives this designation has 30 days to submit a plan for improvement to the local board of education. The local board must then vote to approve, modify, or reject the plan within the next 30 days. The local board must submit a final plan to the State Board of Education within five days of the local board's approval of the plan. The State Board then reviews the plan and, if appropriate, offers recommendations to modify it. Local boards must provide access to the final plan on their websites.

Colorado has recently made a push to ensure struggling schools incorporate early learning into their turnaround strategies. Colorado established a law in 2017 that updated requirements for school

improvement and turnaround plans to require an early childhood learning needs assessment in addition to the general needs assessment.⁹ Similar to Colorado, the North Carolina General Assembly should require low-performing LEAs to develop early childhood improvement plans as part of efforts to improve performance.

Recommendation 2. The General Assembly should require an assessment of early childhood learning as part of the Department of Public Instruction’s comprehensive needs assessment process for districts.

As discussed in Finding 4, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) can select certain districts needing more intensive support for a comprehensive needs assessment. These assessments provide analysis of districts on key indicators and can help guide district improvement plans. The General Assembly should require that comprehensive needs assessments for LEAs that have one or more low-performing schools serving any of the grades K-3 should include an assessment of early childhood learning. At a minimum, assessments should contain an analysis of

- early education staffing and training levels,
- curricula alignment throughout early education years,
- kindergarten transition supports and collaboration with early childhood education providers, and
- kindergarten preparedness.

DPI should begin including early childhood learning assessments as part of its comprehensive needs assessment program no later than July 1, 2020. At that time, DPI should report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee on the status of its efforts.

Appendix

Appendix: Characteristics of the 12 Case Study Districts

Agency Response

The Program Evaluation Division submitted a draft of this report to the Department of Public Instruction and State Board of Education for review. The State Superintendent’s response is provided following the Appendix.

Program Evaluation Division Contact and Acknowledgments

For more information on this report, please contact the lead evaluator, Jeff Grimes, at jeff.grimes@ncleg.net.

Emily McCartha made key contributions to this report. John W. Turcotte is the director of the Program Evaluation Division.

⁹ Colorado Senate Bill 17-103. <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb17-103>.