



# PROGRAM EVALUATION DIVISION

## NORTH CAROLINA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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# North Carolina Should Focus on Early Childhood Learning in Order to Raise Achievement in Predominantly Disadvantaged School Districts

## Summary

**A student's economic background is a strong predictor of his or her academic performance.** This study sought to identify characteristics of school districts that are predominantly economically disadvantaged and perform well academically. Using a national dataset of average test scores for school districts from 2009–2015, the Program Evaluation Division (PED) identified characteristics of predominantly disadvantaged districts that demonstrate average or better performance on standardized state tests; PED subsequently completed case studies of 12 such districts.

**The gap in achievement between predominantly disadvantaged districts and more advantaged districts is already present by third grade.** PED found that the small group of high-performing predominantly disadvantaged districts are already achieving these average or better test results in third grade. Thereafter, these districts maintain similar rates of student growth compared to other disadvantaged districts. Thus, the main pathway to higher performance for predominantly disadvantaged districts is by securing high student achievement in the early education years instead of focusing primarily on achieving above average academic growth after third grade.

**PED found that high achieving predominantly disadvantaged districts share several characteristics including**

- focusing on early education,
- increasing or maximizing student learning time,
- attracting, developing, and retaining high-quality teachers,
- using data and coaching to improve instruction,
- seeking additional outside resources, and
- promoting a local school board focus on policy and academic achievement.

In order to direct more attention to improving achievement in the early education years, the General Assembly should require districts that the State Board of Education identifies as low-performing to create an early childhood learning improvement plan as a component of their required plans for improvement. The General Assembly should also require an assessment of early childhood learning as part of the Department of Public Instruction's comprehensive needs assessment process for certain low-performing districts.