

Sound Basic Education for All

An Action Plan for North Carolina



In collaboration with Learning Policy Institute and
The William & Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation

Executive Summary

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Background

The Supreme Court of North Carolina’s (the Court’s) decision in *Leandro v. the State of North Carolina* (1997) unanimously affirmed that the state has a constitutional responsibility to provide every student with an equal opportunity for a sound basic education and that the state was failing to meet that responsibility. Since then, the Court has repeatedly found that “the court record is replete with evidence that the *Leandro* right continues to be denied to hundreds of thousands of North Carolina children [and that the actions the state has taken so far are] wholly inadequate to demonstrate substantial compliance with the constitutional mandate of *Leandro*” as Judge W. David Lee ruled in March 2018.


The challenges of meeting this responsibility have increased since the original decision, and the state needs to significantly increase its commitment and efforts to provide for the education of every student. To do so, the state will need to strategically improve and transform multiple components of the education system, including ensuring an adequate supply of qualified teachers and principals; improving curriculum, instruction, and assessment; funding education adequately; and more effectively addressing the needs of at-risk students and the persistent gaps in achievement among groups of students. A commitment to strengthening the education system in the state is vital to building and maintaining the required capacity at the school, district, regional, and state levels.

About This Action Plan

This Action Plan provides recommendations for actions that will advance the state’s efforts to achieve compliance with the *Leandro* decision. It identifies the most critical actions that the state needs to take immediately and carry out over the next six years and beyond to transform the education system and provide the necessary education opportunities for all students.

The development of the plan was in response to the February 1, 2018, order by Judge Lee for the appointment of an independent consultant to develop detailed, comprehensive, written recommendations for specific actions necessary to achieve sustained compliance with the constitutional mandates articulated in the *Leandro* decision. The Defendant State of North Carolina, the Plaintiffs Hoke County Board of Education et al., and the Penn Plaintiff-Intervenors jointly nominated WestEd to serve as the independent consultant, and Judge Lee issued a consent order appointing WestEd to this role on March 7, 2018.

WestEd arranged for two other independent organizations, the Learning Policy Institute and the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University, to also contribute to developing the Action Plan. The three organizations collaborated to conduct multiple studies to better understand key issues and challenges related to North Carolina’s education system and to inform the recommendations. These studies involved extensive analyses of relevant data about student achievement, the education workforce, school effectiveness, state funding for education, and other areas related to the state’s education system; site visits to North Carolina schools and districts; interviews and focus groups with policymakers, school and district administrators, teachers, parents, community members, and students; a statewide survey of school principals; reviews of relevant research and best practices employed in other states; reviews of prior studies of efforts to improve outcomes in the state; a cost



function analysis to estimate the minimum cost necessary to achieve education outcomes; and professional judgment panels to collect data on educators' perceptions. Site visits, interviews, and focus groups were designed to maximize engagement with education stakeholders representing the diversity of the state in terms of geography, school level, and school type as well as the characteristics of the student and educator populations. The findings and recommendations are informed by educators and community members in every region of the state, as shown in Exhibit 1. A series of 12 separate background reports submitted with the Action Plan provide the details and findings of the multiple studies conducted.

Exhibit 1. North Carolina educational stakeholders engaged in the study



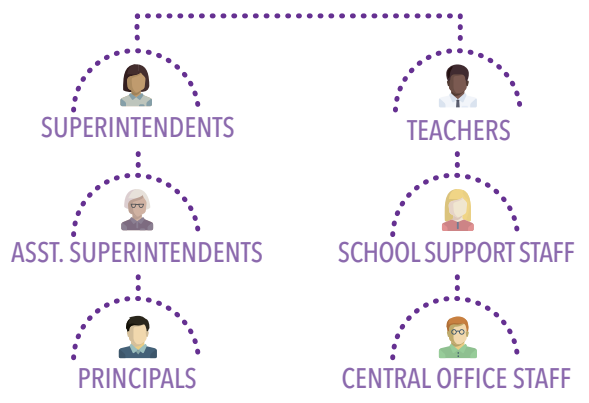
44
Counties
Represented

ALL 8
Regions
Visited

1,270 Educators
Engaged

- Alamance County
- Alleghany County
- Buncombe County
- Burke County
- Chatham County
- Chowan County
- Clay County
- Craven County
- Cumberland County
- Davidson County
- Davie County
- Durham County
- Edgecombe County
- Forsyth County
- Franklin County
- Gaston County
- Granville County
- Greene County
- Guilford County
- Halifax County
- Haywood County
- Henderson County

- Hoke County
- Hyde County
- Johnston County
- Lincoln County
- Mecklenburg County
- Northampton County
- Onslow County
- Orange County
- Pasquotank County
- Pitt County
- Polk County
- Randolph County
- Robeson County
- Rowan County
- Rutherford County
- Scotland County
- Surry County
- Swain County
- Union County
- Vance County
- Wake County
- Washington County



60+ Other Education
Stakeholders Engaged

community leaders; elected officials; Department of Public Instruction staff; members of local education associations; parents; state commission members; philanthropists; representatives of higher education; State Board of Education members; and others

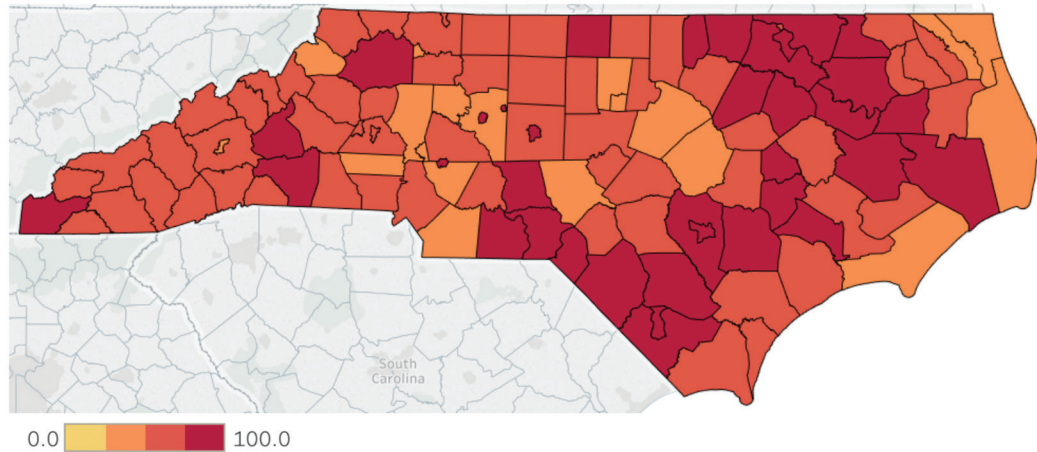
The North Carolina Context

Although North Carolina has had a deep and long-standing commitment to public education, the state has struggled with fulfilling this commitment for all of its children. The failure to provide an adequate education to many children led to the *Leandro v. North Carolina* case and the 1997 landmark decision. Judge Howard E. Manning Jr. of the North Carolina Superior Court was assigned to monitor the state's compliance with the *Leandro* decision. For nearly two decades, until his retirement in 2015, he was a strong advocate for every child in North Carolina receiving a sound basic education. His actions included requiring the state to set a high bar for the achievement level that would demonstrate a student had obtained a sound basic education; ordering the state to provide preschool programs for at-risk 4-year-old children; ordering the state to intervene directly in the chronically low-performing Halifax County Schools; and requiring the state to provide guidance and support for the turnaround of low-performing schools.

In recent years, the challenges to providing every North Carolina student with an opportunity for a sound basic education have increased, driven by the major ongoing technological, social, and economic changes in our society. The Court foresaw that the world for which students must be prepared would continue to change, as the *Leandro* decision's definition of a sound basic education included that it would "enable the student to function in a complex and rapidly changing society ... and compete on an equal basis with others in further formal education or gainful employment in contemporary society." In response to these changes, North Carolina has significantly revised its core curriculum standards and assessments several times, making the requirements of a sound basic education more rigorous. Social and economic changes are also impacting the education workforce, leading both to fewer young people choosing teaching as a profession and to fewer of those who do enter teaching remaining in the profession past the first few years.

The state has also seen an 88% increase in the number of economically disadvantaged students served by its public schools, resulting from the combination of the overall growth in student population and an increase in the proportion of students who are economically disadvantaged, from 39% in 2000–01 to 57% in 2015–16. Exhibit 2 shows the proportion of economically disadvantaged students by school district for 2018–19. In addition, the number of students who are English learners more than doubled over 15 years. State funding for education has not kept pace with these increased challenges, and the growth in academic achievement shown by the state's students from 1993 through 2005 has not continued. Although the state has seen continued increases in high school graduation rates, these have not led to increased success rates in postsecondary education. Most important, large gaps in all achievement measures continue among racial, ethnic, and economic subgroups of students.

Exhibit 2. Proportion of economically disadvantaged students, by local education agency, 2018–19



Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2019)

Eight Critical Need Areas

The overall goal of the *Leandro* Action Plan is to guide North Carolina in implementing systemic approaches to increasing the capacity of its Pre-K–12 public education system to ensure every child receives a sound basic education. The research conducted to inform the development of the Action Plan identified eight critical need areas for action. The Action Plan provides detailed findings and the recommended actions in each of the eight critical need areas shown in Exhibit 3. These eight areas of critical need are briefly summarized in the following sections of this Executive Summary.

Exhibit 3. Eight critical need areas



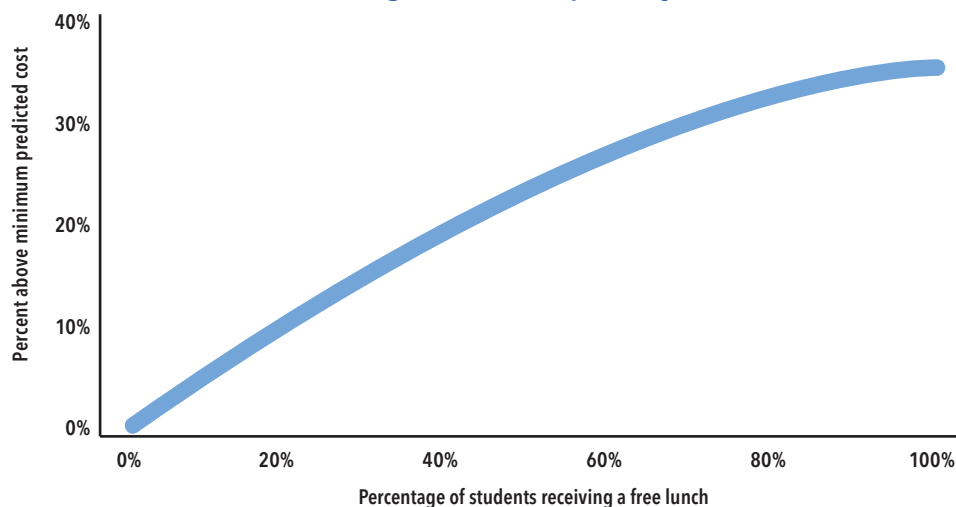
Adequate, Equitable, and Aligned Finance and Resource Allocation



The Action Plan finance and resource allocation analysis focused on three major components of an effective education resource allocation system: *equitable distribution of funding*, *alignment of funding for efficient use*, and *adequacy of funding*. Perhaps most important, in considering the level of funding necessary to achieve the standard of a “sound basic education” as described in the *Leandro* rulings, it is important to consider the findings of this analysis in tandem with the findings from other sections of the report, particularly those that may support districts in more effectively using their existing resources. For example, if the state only invests additional dollars in the K–12 education system without also changing the mechanisms for distributing funding to districts and without providing support and monitoring tools for districts to consider the most effective use of resources, then it is less likely that the desired student outcomes will be achieved.

With findings from three complementary research components — a needs assessment, professional judgment panels, and a cost function analysis — the Action Plan surfaces several key findings. First, the state needs to direct additional resources to underserved student populations, including economically disadvantaged students, English learners, and exceptional children. The current school funding formula does have a designation for these underserved student populations. However, students from low-income backgrounds need higher levels of funding. This resource need continues to grow as the concentration of these students rises, as shown in Exhibit 4.

Exhibit 4. Costs of educating students in poverty



The second key finding addresses the alignment of funding for efficient use. The analysis finds that funding needs are impacted by regional variations in costs and by the scale of district operations. In North Carolina’s current resource allocation model, local funding and the Classroom Teacher allotments create additional funding

inequities; restrictions on these allotments also reduce flexibility and funding levels. In addition, constraints on local flexibility hinder districts’ ability to align resources with student needs. Finally, frequent changes in funding regulations hamper budget planning, and the state budget timeline and adjustments create instability.


A third key finding is that the current level of state spending is inadequate based on the resources required for students to achieve average annual academic growth and for accelerating underperforming students to proficiency. In order for the state to meet the requirements of *Leandro*, it needs to increase funding in two ways: (1) make short-term investments over the next eight years to reduce the gap between lower-performing students and their higher-performing peers, and (2) in tandem, provide additional ongoing funding (i.e., make permanent increases in the amount of state funding for education beyond short-term investments) to ensure that once students reach desired performance targets, this growth will be maintained. Accordingly, after the short-term investment period — assuming all students are performing at grade level — the state focus would be on maintaining only the ongoing funding. The analysis generated several different scenarios for both short-term investment and increased ongoing funding and presented all of these in the Action Plan. When determining which scenarios most accurately meet the standard of the *Leandro* ruling — reducing gaps for the state’s lower-performing students and maintaining such growth so that students achieve at grade level each year — the actions funded by the short-term-investment scenarios referred to as Ongoing A and Short-term C most closely meet the standard. Exhibit 5 shows the estimated total costs and annual costs for these two scenarios over an eight-year period.

Exhibit 5. Additional funding beyond current state spending: Ongoing A and Short-term C implemented over eight-year period

	Sum total (\$ in billions)	Sum total per pupil (\$)	Total per year (\$ in billions)	Average per pupil per year (\$)
Current State Spending	\$8.29	\$5,690		
Ongoing A Scenario	\$3.70	\$2,540	\$0.46	\$318
Short-term C Scenario	\$3.16	\$2,170	\$0.39	\$271
Ongoing A + Short-term C	\$6.86	\$4,710	\$0.86	\$589

Note: Includes efficiency adjustment to account for the average 6.3% of funds identified as not contributing directly to the outcomes incorporated into the model. Dollar values adjusted for inflation to 2019 dollars using the Bureau of Labor Statistics cost price index (CPI) calculations over the period July 2017 to July 2019. These figures would need to be further adjusted for inflation over the next eight years.

However, research and experience indicate that increased spending alone will not produce improved student outcomes without attention to how the resources are distributed and used. It is important to pursue the findings and recommendations related to finance and resource allocation in tandem with the other recommendations for improving education included in the Action Plan as a means to ensure resources are used effectively to meet the standard of student outcomes identified in the *Leandro* ruling.



Though this study cannot know how policymakers and practitioners will choose to use these resources, the study's findings and recommendations provide guidance on how to effectively distribute, use, and monitor K–12 funding. Further, complementary sections provide guidance on the use of current and additional resources by articulating a suggested investment sequence that would enable the state to identify, invest, and monitor such existing and additional resources, ensuring dollars are being used wisely.

To address these findings, the Action Plan provides the following recommendations:

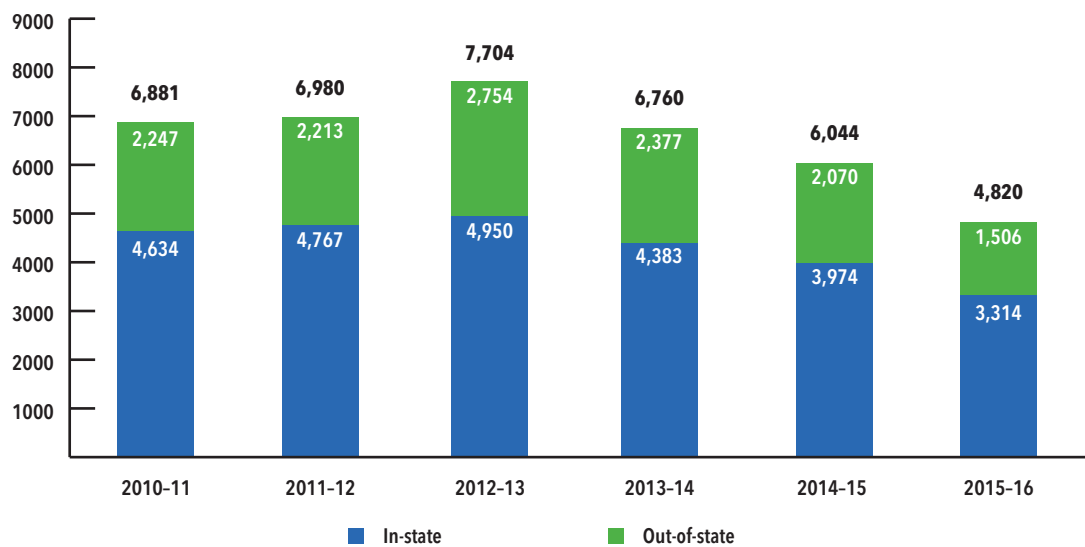
1. Increase the cost effectiveness of the North Carolina funding system so that public education investment prioritizes higher-need students and provides appropriate flexibility to address local needs.
2. Modify the school finance system to ensure future stability in funding for public education, including predictable, anticipated funding levels that acknowledge external cost factors.
3. Increase the overall investment in North Carolina's public schools first by identifying and effectively investing in a small number of foundational, high-impact strategies. Continued investment in these foundational areas are most critical to setting up the system for success in the future.

A Qualified and Well-Prepared Teacher in Every Classroom



The *Leandro* decision affirmed the critical need for the state to provide a qualified and well-prepared teacher in every classroom. The Action Plan documents that the state has failed to meet this constitutional obligation. The state has significant shortages of qualified teachers and high teacher attrition rates, especially in high-poverty schools that largely serve disadvantaged students. In addition, the supply of qualified and well-prepared teachers has been shrinking (see Exhibit 6). Salaries and working conditions negatively impact teacher recruitment and retention, which in turn impact school effectiveness.

Exhibit 6. Teachers credentialed from in-state and out-of-state programs, 2010–11 through 2015–16



Source: U.S. Department of Education (2017)

Further efforts are required to increase the number of well-prepared teachers of color, who have been shown to have a positive impact on students of color. For current teachers, statewide efforts to support teacher professional growth and development are inadequate and inequitable. Although North Carolina has existing programs that have been shown to be effective, including the Teaching Fellows Program, the New Teacher Support Program, and the Advanced Teaching Roles Program, these types of programs need to be strengthened and expanded to meet the state's needs.

To address these findings, the Action Plan provides the following recommendations:

1. Increase the pipeline of diverse, well-prepared teachers who enter through high-retention pathways and meet the needs of the state's public schools.

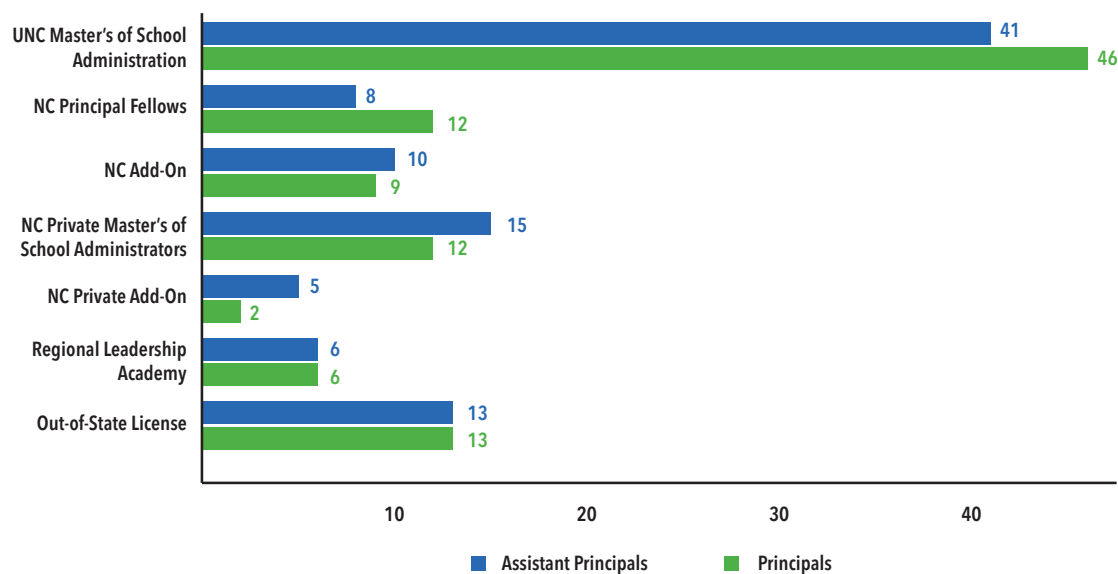
2. Expand the North Carolina Teaching Fellows program.
3. Support high-quality teacher residency programs in high-need rural and urban districts through a state-matching grant program that leverages ESSA Title II funding.
4. Provide funding for Grow Your Own and 2+2 programs that help recruit teachers in high-poverty communities.
5. Significantly increase the racial-ethnic diversity of the North Carolina teacher workforce and ensure all teachers employ culturally responsive practices.
6. Provide high-quality comprehensive mentoring and induction support for novice teachers in their first three years of teaching to increase both their effectiveness and their retention.
7. Implement differentiated staffing models that include advanced teaching roles and additional compensation to retain and extend the reach of high-performing teachers.
8. Develop a system to ensure that all North Carolina teachers have the opportunities they need for continued professional learning to improve and update their knowledge and practices.
9. Increase teacher compensation and enable low-wealth districts to offer salaries and other compensation to make them competitive with more advantaged districts.

A Qualified and Well-Prepared Principal in Every School



The *Leandro* decision also affirmed the critical need for the state to provide a qualified and well-prepared principal in every school. The Action Plan documents that the state has made significant progress in doing so, but is still far from fully meeting this constitutional obligation. North Carolina has innovative and effective principal preparation programs that incorporate evidence-based best practices and meet the National Education Leadership Preparation standards, but not all of its preparation programs meet these standards (Exhibit 7 shows the percentage of North Carolina school leaders prepared through each of seven pathways).


Exhibit 7. Percentage of principals and assistant principals prepared through the seven pathways



Source: Bastian & Goff (2017)

Note: At the time of the survey, three leadership academies funded by *Race to the Top* had been operating for several years. Only one continued after the grant funding, so the percentage for the Regional Leadership Academy pathway would be expected to decrease in the following years.

The Principal Fellows scholarship program attracts strong master's of school administration (MSA) candidates who then have higher graduation rates, are more likely to assume and remain in school leadership positions, and have more positive impacts on their schools, as compared with others who enter MSA programs. For acting school leaders, North Carolina has some high-quality professional development programs, but these are not sufficient to meet the statewide needs. Most important, the current compensation system and working conditions (e.g., workload, job complexity, lack of support and resources) create disincentives for principals to remain in the principalship and to work in low-performing schools.



To address these findings, the Action Plan provides the following recommendations:

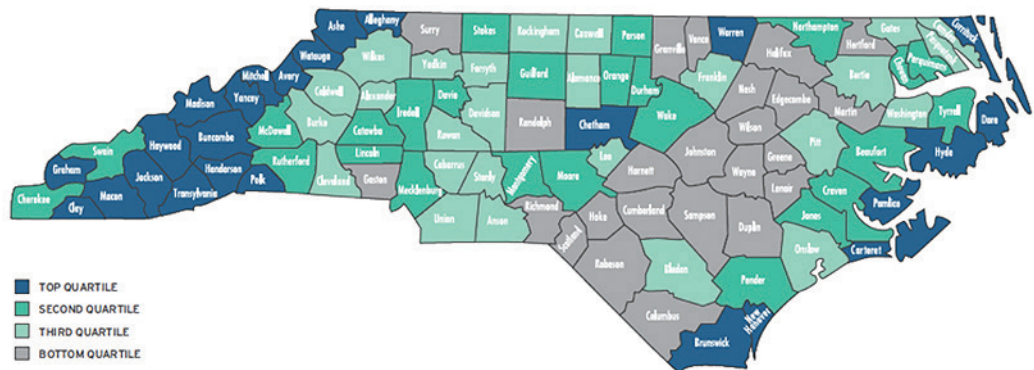
1. Update the state’s principal preparation and principal licensure requirements.
2. Continue to expand access to high-quality principal preparation programs.
3. Expand the professional learning opportunities for current principals and assistant principals.
4. Revise the principal and assistant principal salary structures and improve working conditions to make these positions, especially in high-need schools, more attractive to qualified educators.

High-Quality Early Childhood Education



The critical importance of addressing the needs of Pre-K children who are prospective enrollees in North Carolina’s public education system was established by the *Leandro* case and was upheld by the Court in 2004. Research indicates a high-quality early foundation for learning that develops children’s personal, social, cognitive, and language skills is critical for later success in school and can significantly improve life outcomes for children from low-income families. However, access to early childhood education remains out of reach for many low-income families in North Carolina. Although high-quality early childhood education is available in the state, primarily through the NC Pre-K and Smart Start programs, many communities lack an adequate supply of early childhood programs, especially those in low-wealth counties, as shown in Exhibit 8. Costs to families, a shortage of qualified early childhood teachers, and other factors create barriers that limit access to early childhood education for low-income families. The transition from early childhood education to the K–12 system also poses challenges for children and families.

Exhibit 8. North Carolina counties, by quartile of wealth per average daily membership



Source: *Public School Forum of North Carolina (2018)*

To address these findings, the Action Plan provides the following recommendations:

1. Increase the volume and quality of the early childhood educator pipeline.
2. Scale up the Smart Start program to increase quality, access, and support for at-risk children and families.
3. Expand the NC Pre-K program to provide high-quality full-day, full-year services to all at-risk 4-year-old children.
4. Align and improve early-grade K–12 settings to support successful transitions to K–3 and promote early-grade success.

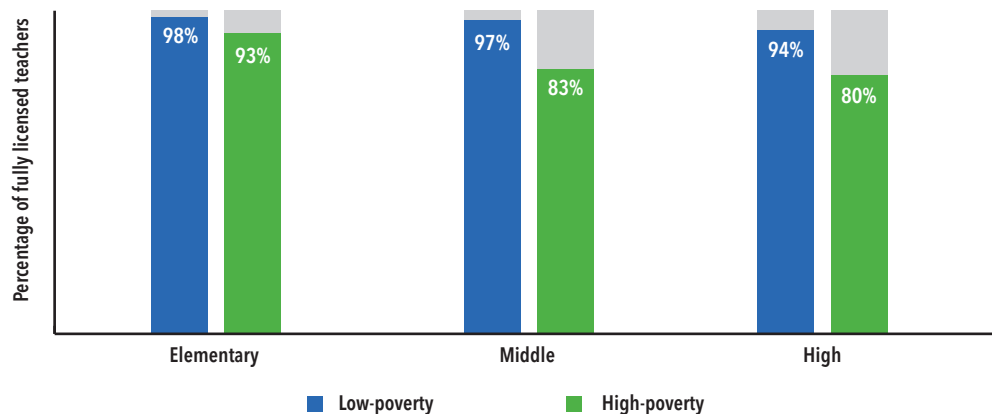
Support for High-Poverty Schools



The *Leandro* case focused from the start on the state’s responsibility to educate its children from low-income families and communities. Currently, more than 400,000 students attend the 843 high-poverty schools in the state, defined by having at least 75% of students eligible for federally subsidized meals due to their families’ low-income. More than 25% of the state’s K–12 students attend high-poverty schools, and more than 30% of the state’s schools meet the high-poverty criteria.

These high-poverty schools serve disproportionate numbers of students with other risks identified by the *Leandro* case, including students who have limited proficiency in English, are members of a racial or an ethnic minority group, have a single parent, and/or live in a household in which the adults have low education levels. Students attending high-poverty schools are far less likely than their peers in other schools to receive a sound basic education, in large part due to having less access to qualified teachers (see Exhibit 9), qualified principals, and sufficient educational resources. Students’ equal opportunities in these schools are further limited by a lack of supports and services to help mitigate barriers to learning associated with adverse out-of-school conditions in communities of concentrated poverty.


Exhibit 9. Fewer fully licensed teachers in high-poverty schools, 2017



Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of NCDPI data

To address these findings, the Action Plan provides the following recommendations:

1. Attract, prepare, and retain a highly qualified, diverse, and stable K–12 teacher and leader workforce in high-poverty schools.
2. Provide additional time, resources, and access to the programs and supports that meet the education needs of all students in high-poverty schools, including at-risk students.

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3. Revise the school accountability system so that it credits successful efforts in high-poverty schools and supports further success.
 4. Provide comprehensive whole-child supports, including professional staff such as nurses, counselors, psychologists, and social workers.
 5. Provide resources, opportunities, and supports to address out-of-school barriers to learning that constrain schools' ability to meet the education needs of all students in high-poverty schools.

State Assessment System and School Accountability System



State Assessment System

A high-quality assessment system that provides useful and timely data on student growth and proficiency is an integral component for ensuring a sound basic education for all students. The state's achievement levels do not clearly indicate whether students are ready for college and careers or what is necessary for a sound basic education. North Carolina's summative assessments meet federal requirements and are aligned to the state's academic standards, but lack some elements of rigor and depth that are articulated in the academic standards. In addition, there is a lack of alignment between the state assessment system and the state's theory of action as articulated in its ESSA plan. However, there are opportunities to increase coherence between curriculum, instruction, and assessment in North Carolina. Supporting assessment for learning, including interim assessments, can enable a more balanced and student-centered assessment system.

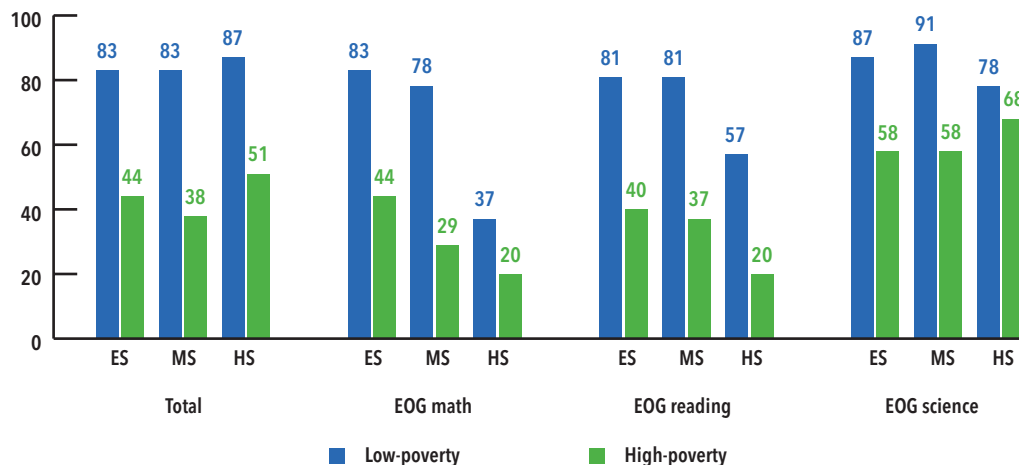
To address these findings, the Action Plan provides the following assessment recommendations:

1. Establish a more balanced and student-centered assessment system.
2. Clarify alignment between the assessment system and the state's theory of action.
3. Include additional item types that provide a broader understanding of students' knowledge, skills, and abilities.
4. Improve coherence among curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
5. Revise achievement levels to align with the Court's standard of a sound basic education.

School Accountability System

North Carolina's accountability system is primarily based on measures of student performance on summative assessments and does not include, or uses only in limited ways, a number of opportunity-to-learn indicators that can provide information to help ensure that all students have the opportunity for a sound basic education. The accountability system emphasizes students' proficiency status over growth, which results in a strong bias against schools that largely serve economically disadvantaged students and fails to credit these schools with successful efforts that are foundational to their students' receiving a sound basic education (see Exhibit 10). The accountability system does not consider critical factors when determining which schools are identified as being among the lowest-performing schools in need of state-provided interventions and supports.

Exhibit 10. Math, reading, and science proficiency in North Carolina in high-poverty vs. low-poverty schools



Note: "ES" stands for "elementary school"; "MS" stands for "middle school"; "HS" stands for "high school."

To address these findings, the Action Plan provides the following accountability recommendations:

6. Amend the current accountability system, including the information provided by the North Carolina Dashboard, to include measures of progress — a number of which North Carolina currently uses — toward providing all students with access to a sound basic education.
 - Include in the North Carolina Dashboard state, district, and school performance and growth data (both overall and by student subgroup) that are based on a comprehensive set of measures that would indicate progress toward meeting the *Leandro* tenets and are inclusive of the reporting requirements under ESSA.
 - To measure progress toward meeting the requirements of *Leandro*, structure North Carolina’s accountability system to reward growth in school performance on an indicator, in addition to status on select indicators.
 - Use a process for identifying schools for support and improvement that includes a set of decision rules to meet the requirements under ESSA and *Leandro*.
7. Use data from the accountability system at the state, district, and school levels to guide planning and budget decisions and to assess school progress and improvement efforts.
8. Use the data provided in the North Carolina Dashboard to identify the appropriate evidence-based interventions and supports.

Regional and Statewide Supports for School Improvement

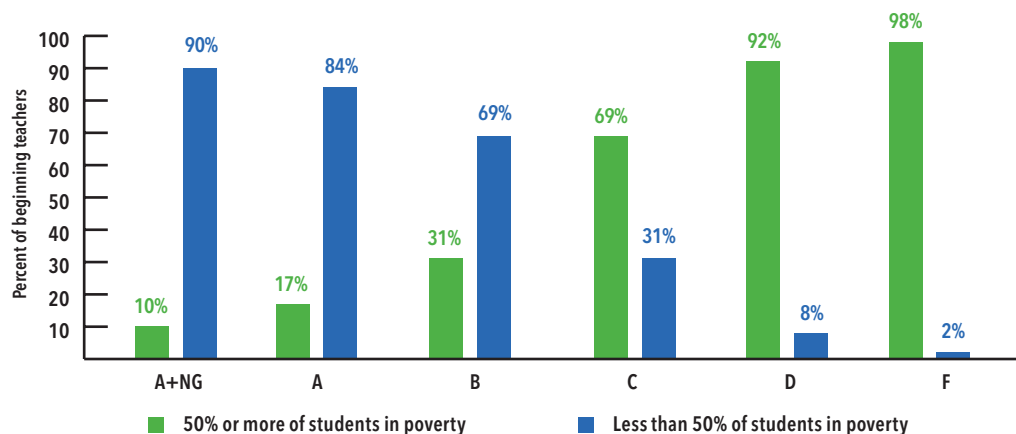


In prior decisions, the Court emphasized the critical need for the state to provide an effective system of supports to help low-performing schools recruit and retain effective staff; provide high-quality professional development; use evidence-based instructional practices and curricula; create effective school cultures; provide student supports; use data for continuous improvement; engage families; and foster collaborations. Though there are areas of strength in supporting school improvement efforts, North Carolina needs a more systematic, comprehensive statewide and regional system for school improvement.

Some North Carolina schools have fostered strong achievement growth for at-risk students through the work of teams of talented and dedicated educators. However, small, low-wealth districts have limited capacity to support school improvement, and the state’s system of support for improving low-performing schools is insufficient. Exhibit 11 highlights that the schools in need of support — those that receive a grade of D or F — are those that serve large numbers of economically disadvantaged students.

Some evidence-based practices are already in place across the state and valued by North Carolina educators, specifically the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) for school improvement, which is already used in every district; the Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Intervention System (SW-PBIS) for providing students with social, emotional, and behavior supports, which is being implemented in some schools; and the NC Check-In formative assessments aligned to curriculum standards, which are quickly gaining widespread use. These provide a foundation for the comprehensive statewide and regional system that is needed.

Exhibit 11. School performance grades, by percentage of students in poverty



Source: Oakes et al. (2019)

Note: Schools that earn an A designation and do not have significant achievement and/or graduation gaps are designated as an A+NG school.

To address these findings, the Action Plan provides the following recommendations:

1. Rebuild the state’s capacity to fully support the improvement of its lowest-performing schools.
2. Provide resources, opportunities, and supports for low-performing and high-poverty schools to address out-of-school barriers to learning, using a community-schools or other evidence-based approach.
3. Provide statewide and/or regional support to help schools and districts select high-quality, standards-aligned, culturally responsive core curriculum resources and to prepare teachers to use those resources effectively.
4. Extend the supports already available to schools to help them further implement the MTSS, SW-PBIS, and NC Check-In approaches.

Monitoring the State's Compliance



This Action Plan and the research reports that informed it describe many findings documenting that North Carolina is far from meeting its constitutional obligation to provide every child in the state with an opportunity to receive a sound basic education. In fact, the challenges of meeting this obligation have increased since the original *Leandro* ruling in 1997, and the challenges of providing every student with a sound basic education are likely to continue to increase in the coming years.

Bringing the state's education system into compliance with the *Leandro* requirements needs to be an ongoing effort. It will require a deep commitment from the state and all stakeholders, with wise and productive investments; well-planned immediate, near-term, and long-term responses; and ongoing work and continuous improvement over many years. To ensure the state is effective in its efforts to comply with the *Leandro* requirements, the Court will need to continue to monitor the state's proposed actions, its implementation of those actions, and the results.

The Action Plan provides the following recommendations for monitoring the state's compliance:

1. The Court should appoint a panel of education experts to help the Court monitor the state's plans, initiatives, and progress in meeting the *Leandro* requirements.
2. The Court should require annual reports of plans and progress on meeting the *Leandro* requirements from the North Carolina State Board of Education and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Investment Overview and Sequenced Action Plan

The recommended actions in the *Leandro* Action Plan are comprehensive and wide-ranging, touching on most of the major components and elements of North Carolina's Pre-K through 12th grade education system, as well as on the components of the higher education system that prepare the education workforce. The report proposes a sequence for implementing the major recommended actions in each critical need area. The actions have been sequenced based on North Carolina's current capacity, with a focus on strengthening the state's ability to sustain over time the improvements most critical to its education system. The report suggests sequencing that prioritizes investments in the communities with the greatest needs first, including high-poverty schools.

In the Investment Overview section of the report, the research team provides a cost estimate for meeting the state-determined goals for student proficiency included in the state's plan for meeting the requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (i.e., by 2027, 74.1% proficiency in grades 3–8 Math, 73.3% in High School Math, 65.8% in grades 3–8 Reading, and 71.3% in High School Reading for English Language Arts). Separate cost estimates are provided for reaching a 90% student proficiency rate, which is the target articulated by the Court in a Memorandum of Decision, *Hoke County Board. of Education v. State* (Wake Co. Super. Ct., Oct. 12, 2000).

The sequenced Action Plan assumes continued increases in investment by the state over the next four budget cycles. The study's analysis of needed resource investment over the next eight years suggests the following:

- » **K–12 education operating expenditures (short-term):** Invest approximately \$395 million per year over the next eight years that would provide intervention support to ensure students achieve at grade level. These investments would be withdrawn from the system after such student achievement levels are reached.
- » **K–12 education operating expenditures (ongoing):** Invest approximately \$463 million per year on an ongoing basis that would enable students to maintain grade-level growth.
- » **Early childhood education:** Invest approximately \$148 million per year in programs such as NC Pre-K and Smart Start.
- » **State-level infrastructure:** Invest approximately \$2 million per year in programs such as teacher and principal development and the state's system of support.

In the Sequenced Action Plan section of the report, the recommended actions across the eight critical needs areas are organized into a roadmap laying out three phases of implementation.

The criteria used for determining the phase in which each action should begin are as follows:

- » **Phase I:** Highest-priority actions that require immediate attention, are fundamental to the success of other actions, build critical capacity to sustain improvement, and provide a significant return on investment. These actions should be initiated by 2020.

- » **Phase II:** Prioritized actions that build on or are dependent upon Phase I actions, as well as new actions recommended for initiation.
- » **Phase III:** Actions that continue to build on Phase I and II actions, new actions recommended for initiation, and actions to sustain the investments and capacity put in place since 2020 to ensure a sound basic education for all children. These actions should be initiated by 2026.

In summary, the requirements of the *Leandro* decision are as relevant and essential today as they were when they were originally framed more than 20 years ago. Although there have been many efforts on the part of the state and districts to improve students' achievement, the challenges of providing every student with a sound basic education have increased, along with the number of at-risk students. Large achievement gaps between subgroups of students continue unabated, with, on average, the achievement of Black, Hispanic, and Native American students lagging far behind that of White and Asian students and the achievement of economically disadvantaged students lagging far behind that of their more advantaged peers. The Action Plan provides a roadmap for the state that, if combined with a deep and ongoing commitment to ensuring that all of North Carolina's children receive a sound basic education, will enable the state to meet its constitutional obligation.