



Public Schools of North Carolina
State Board of Education
Department of Public Instruction



*Health and
Human Services*

Report to the North Carolina General Assembly

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

Session Law 2016-94

Section 12B.5.(a) – 12B.5.(f)

Jointly Prepared By:

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Division of
Mental Health/Developmental Disabilities/Substance Abuse Services

and

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Office of Early
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STATE AGENCY COLLABORATION ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION/TRANSITION FROM PRESCHOOL TO KINDERGARTEN

SECTION 12B.5.(a) 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 this State, and within resources currently available, shall collaborate on an ongoing basis to develop and implement a statewide vision for early childhood education. In collaborating in this effort, the agencies shall 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.

SECTION 12B.5.(b) The Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Public Instruction, and any other agencies or organizations that administer, support, or study early education programs in this State shall report their findings and recommendations, including any legislative proposals, resulting from the initiative to develop and implement a statewide vision for early childhood education pursuant to subsection (a) of this section. The agencies shall make an initial report to Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services and the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee on or before January 1, 2017, submit a follow up report to those same committees on or before January 1, 2018, and may make any subsequent reports, annually, on or before January 1, as needed to those same committees.

SECTION 12B.5.(c) The Department of Health and Human Services, in consultation with the Department of Public Instruction, shall promote the successful transition of children who receive assistance from NC Pre-K program and the Child Care Subsidy Assistance program for four- and five-star rated facility classrooms to kindergarten. In its promotion of a successful transition from preschool to kindergarten, the Department of Health and Human Services shall recommend that both NC Pre-K teachers and preschool teachers prepare a preschool to kindergarten transition plan for each child transitioning to kindergarten that documents the child's strengths and needs based on the five Goals and Developmental Indicator domains for children's developmental and learning progress that are based on the NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development. The preparation of the transition plan shall only apply to children who receive assistance through the NC Pre-K program or the Child Care Subsidy Assistance program. It is the intent of the General Assembly that the Departments utilize this transition plan until such time as the standardized program to transition children from preschool to kindergarten, required pursuant to subsection (e) of this section, is developed and implemented.

SECTION 12B.5.(d) The Department of Health and Human Services shall report on the implementation of the transition plan required pursuant to subsection (c) of this section, including any findings and recommendations and any legislative proposals, to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services and the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee on or before December 15, 2016.

SECTION 12B.5.(e) The Department of Health and Human Services, in consultation with the Department of Public Instruction, shall develop and implement a standardized program to transition children from preschool to kindergarten. In developing this standardized transition program, the Department of Health and Human Services shall identify, at a minimum:

- (1) Methods to standardize student transition information such that it is quantifiable.
- (2) Recommendations for sharing data contained in a student's transition plan between preschool teachers and either kindergarten teachers or the schools that receive the incoming kindergarten students.
- (3) Recommendations for sharing data contained in a student's transition plan between preschool teachers and the parents or guardians of the child who is transitioning to kindergarten.
- (4) Recommendations for preschool teacher training and continuing education to support their role in completing transition plans for preschool children.

- (5) Recommendations for baseline information that should be compiled in transition plans for students transitioning to kindergarten.
- (6) Procedures for the management of transition plan documents, including recommendations for the length of records retention, provisions for confidentiality, and proper disposal.
- (7) Any other components the Department deems appropriate in the provision of information between preschools, students' families, and kindergartens.

SECTION 12B.5.(f) The Department of Health and Human Services shall report on the development of the standardized transition program required pursuant to subsection (e) of this section, including any findings and recommendations and any legislative proposals, to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services and the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee on or before January 1, 2018.

Early Childhood Education: A Statewide Vision

The charge of the North Carolina General Assembly to “develop and implement a statewide vision for early education” mandates that North Carolina recognize and address the distinctive challenges and opportunities presented by early education from birth through grade three (B-8). Early experiences shape brain development and early learning provides a foundation for later learning. These are the considerable opportunities for early education. The challenge is to ensure that opportunity is fully realized in the face of a growing diversity of young children, and the current variation in the quality of early learning experiences.

This legislative emphasis on children’s earliest years and recognition of the essential role they play in building the foundation for children’s learning offers a unique opportunity to rethink our current system of early learning. The task is to build upon the latest science, leverage North Carolina’s strengths, and move toward an aligned system of early care and education that is capable of producing the best outcomes for children.

Why B-8?

Evidence of how the brain develops as young children learn, the effects of negative events on later life outcomes and the synergistic dynamic by which children acquire cognitive and emotional skills highlight the importance of a closely coordinated, developmentally-appropriate, high quality and stable early learning experience for children across the B-8 years.

A developmentally-appropriate approach is one that, “matches content with children’s developmental levels and emergent abilities.” It is this attention to a child’s development that sets the B-8 continuum apart. It is this perspective that can lead to more effective teaching and learning within this continuum. This approach ensures effective alignment and integration of high quality B-8 standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment, support for children’s emotional and social development, and enhanced family engagement in their children’s education.

A developmentally-appropriate B-8 continuum can answer three major policy challenges by capitalizing on learning gains from early childhood programs, narrowing the achievement gap at grade three and beyond, and improving school promotion, graduation and college attendance rates.

1. Maximize the gains from early childhood programs

The significant benefits of high quality early learning opportunities, especially for children from low-income households are well established. These include sizable positive effects on children’s cognitive development, school progress, and social-emotional development (including self-regulation and impulse control). To the extent that K-3 schooling fails to provide appropriate transitions, developmentally-sensitive instruction and learning environments, the benefits of strong programs prior to school entry, while still impressive, are diminished. Research tells us we can optimize the education and social gains children make in high-quality early learning programs by strengthening the learning continuum through grade three. Quality early learning interventions, “are best sustained when they are followed by high quality learning experiences.”

2. Close the achievement gap in third grade and beyond

Evidence shows that children from low-income households arrive at school with language deficits compared to children from middle-class households. This persists through third grade where the literacy gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children in North Carolina is manifest in the difference in mean standardized test scores. These third grade gaps continue to persist and are evident in standardized and end-of grade test results later in elementary, middle, and high school grades.

North Carolina has a sound foundation from which to tackle the achievement gap. Studies of the positive, collective impact of Smart Start and state-funded pre-kindergarten on reduced early grade retention rates and special education identification are profound. And, rigorous evaluations of state-funded pre-kindergarten conclude that participation significantly accelerates learning, numeracy, and literacy, and that the gains are greatest for children who enter with the lowest levels of proficiency in most skill areas, including literacy, math, and general knowledge and self-regulation and behavior.

A well-coordinated, strengthened, developmentally-appropriate B-8 system will boost literacy and numeracy of all students, but be of special benefit to those from disadvantaged backgrounds or who face exceptional learning challenges. As such, it will work to close the third grade achievement gap.

3. Reduce retention and school dropout rates

A major challenge is to end retention in the early grades. A developmentally-appropriate B-8 approach is cognizant of the differences between children in their development but alert to developmental delays and other potential causes for retention. It therefore has the potential to dramatically cut retention rates.

Early retention has been demonstrated to have significant negative effects including dropping out of school and reduced post-secondary education participation. A synthesis of research shows that retention in the early grades is harmful, especially when it occurs before second grade. Children who are retained are far more likely to drop-out before high school graduation. In 2013-14, nearly 12,000 children in Kindergarten through 2nd Grade were retained in North Carolina, costing an unexpected \$115 million for these children to repeat a grade.

North Carolina's approach to improving the Birth through Third Grade continuum

The mandate of the General Assembly to strengthen coordination of early childhood education programs represents an unprecedented opportunity to address the complexity that is North Carolina's system of early care and education. In an attempt to "develop and implement a statewide vision for early learning," it is recommended that the following systemic priority be addressed:

Governance

In its 2015 report, *Building a Strong Foundation: State Policy for Early Childhood Education*, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) describes the fragmented nature of early learning systems in states. Citing the disconnect of funding streams and services, SREB concludes “too often, silos among the agencies that administer programs result in duplicated services, service gaps, confusion for families and funding inefficiencies.”

Noting that the multidimensional nature of children’s growth and development in the early years involves a comprehensive array of services and resources across health, mental health, family support, social services, and education, coordination through governance is necessary to build an effective and efficient system of early care and education.

North Carolina’s current focus on the birth through third grade continuum presents a unique opportunity with respect to governance. That being, the development of the first in the nation governance model specific to programs and services for children from birth through age eight.

This proposed, aligned system of B-8 early care and education offers the following features/advantages:

- One authority for early learning standards, instructional practices and assessments, creating opportunity for strengthened alignment and support for children B-8.
- Coordinated and stream-line budgeting and operational decision-making that is driven by common goals and outcomes for children’s success in school.
- Ensured teacher/program quality through process of standards, oversight, and support.
- Increased accountability, both programmatic and fiscal.

Conclusion

Without a well-defined governance structure, the system of early education in any state, by definition is not truly a system. It can be more accurately described as a collective of disparate parts. To ensure greater school success and outcomes for the children in our state, it is imperative that we move collaboratively to strengthen, coordinate, and build an efficient and accountable system of early care and education.

State leaders in early childhood stand prepared to lead such a governance conversation for North Carolina and make recommendations for a system that is coherent in supporting the sustained growth and development of all young children in our state. Only then will we leverage the gains children make in high-quality early learning programs and ensure that we meet the goal of all of North Carolina’s children being prepared for success in school and in life. That is not only our charge but our opportunity.

Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten

Absent a comprehensive governance model as described in the previous section of this report and in response to the 2016 Appropriations Act, SECTION 12B.5.(c) STATE AGENCY COLLABORATION ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION/TRANSITION FROM PRESCHOOL TO KINDERGARTEN, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) acknowledge the importance of ensuring that children have smooth transitions between Pre-K and kindergarten programs. We also recognize the necessity to promote and support collaboration between state and local agencies that serve young children to prioritize and improve birth-through-third-grade alignment. This special provision applies to NC Pre-K classrooms, 4 and 5 Star Rated 4-year-old childcare programs receiving childcare subsidy, and public school kindergarten programs.

To address the provisions of the law, DHHS, in consultation with DPI, will develop a standardized method for Pre-K teachers to collect evidences of learning and document children's learning statuses in the 5 domains of learning and development. This method will leverage a subset of the widely held expectations from North Carolina's Foundations for Early Learning and Development, which align vertically with the construct progressions measured by North Carolina's Kindergarten Entry Assessment. Features of this process include but are not limited to:

- Pre-K teachers will gather evidences of learning and indicate a learning status for each child at the end of the Pre-K year.
- This transition information will then be transferred from Pre-k to receiving public school kindergarten programs within a county.
- Families will have the ability to opt-out of having their children's information shared between programs.

The DHHS, in consultation with the DPI, will identify key transition plan components and provide a planning template and guidance for developing a local transition plan. Local NC Pre-K committees will be responsible for developing and implementing local transition plans for their communities. Local NC Pre-K committees consist of stakeholders representing key organizations that serve young children in the community, including LEAs, which provides an opportunity for local cross-agency collaboration.

The implementation process will:

- Begin in fall of 2017 with a usability pilot consisting of a select group of counties and a subset of Pre-K and kindergarten teachers from each county. A readiness measure will be developed and used to identify cohorts of counties for scaling-up the transition from Pre-K to kindergarten program, which will begin in fall of 2018 with a small cohort of counties. Scale-up will continue over the next three years with a cohort of counties added each year until all one hundred counties are including and fully implementing the defined transition practices.

Per legislation, full reporting on the development of the standardized transition program, including any findings and recommendations and any legislative proposals, to the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Health and Human Services and the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee will occur on or before January 1, 2018.