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North Carolina's Choice

Why our public schools matter

Edited by Eric Frederick, Molly Urquhart,
Alessandra Quattrocchi, and Mebane Rash

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Preface

This book is informed by EdNC's travel to our 115 school districts, our 58 community colleges, and our 100 counties.

It is for all of our students and educators.

It is for all of our public schools.

We hope it serves as a reminder that policy changes to public education bear on the role our public schools will play in economic development statewide, economic impact locally, as anchor institutions in communities, in building the diverse workforce the future requires, the provision of early childhood education, postsecondary access and opportunity, and the perception of this state we all call home.

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Chapter One

The history of public education in North Carolina, and its role in economic growth

Hannah Vinueza McClellan

In North Carolina, our 2,700 public schools serve more than 1.5 million students.[1]

There are 115 public school districts, more than 200 charter schools, nine lab schools, three residential schools for students with hearing and visual impairments, and one regional school.[2] In addition to charter schools and lab schools, our public schools offer an abundance of other choices: year-round, magnet, language immersion, single-sex, early college, career academies, virtual academies, alternative schools, and more.[3]

While some parents choose homeschools or private schools, public schools are the school of choice for most North Carolina families.[4]

But access to public education has not always been a given in our state. The first North Carolina public school was founded in 1705 in Elizabeth City at a time "when for the majority of North Carolina children, educational opportunities were almost non-existent," according to a 1993 report from the N.C. Department of Public Instruction (DPI) on the history of education in North Carolina.[5] "This was particularly true in the more rural areas, where sparse population, bad roads, poverty, and prevailing illiteracy often combined to create a self-perpetuating cycle of illiteracy and economic depression that was to haunt the people of North Carolina during the early days of statehood," said the report.

So when did our state's public education system begin? It depends on your definition of system. The state's three constitutions – adopted in

1776, 1868, and 1971 – have increasingly provided for public education across North Carolina.[6]

North Carolina adopted its first constitution in December 1776 during the American Revolution. Though that constitution included a provision for education, it did not include funding.[7] The Education Act of 1839 led to the expansion of North Carolina public schools, and the new State Constitution of 1868 officially established free education for children and training institutes for teachers.

"Strong leaders over the years have taken political risks for our children – from 1839 when the first common school law was enacted, providing the basis for combining state and local funds for school support, to the Great Depression when North Carolina took over the funding of public schools," former State Superintendent of Public Instruction Bob Etheridge wrote in the DPI report.

Since 1900, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights Movement, educational reform, and politics have each shaped our public education system in profound ways. What follows is a brief overview of the historical moments for public education in our state.

[*Editors' note*: *Contemporary issues in public education pick up on p. 11 if you wish to skip ahead.*]

Access to public education

During the colonial period, ahead of U.S. independence, the "provincial government accepted no responsibility for education."[8] Any educational opportunities were led by private tutors, literate parents, and religious leaders from the Anglican, Presbyterian, Quaker, and Moravian churches. A few affluent children attended schools in England.

Public schools, like the Elizabeth City school founded in 1705, "were the exceptions rather than the rule," according to the 1993 DPI report.[9]

"The farmers were not much interested in books and book learning," Dr. Hugh Lefler, a North Carolina historian and author, said in the re-

port. "Few of them had any education, and most of the children never learned to read or write. The only education that the farmers had was gained from meeting people and from dealing with the problems of their daily work."

In 1776, the State Constitution included a provision that said, "A School or Schools shall be established by the Legislature for the convenient Instruction of Youth."[10] However, legislators at the time probably intended education to function privately, as this provision did not allocate any public funding for schools.

By 1800, about 40 academies had been established, the report says, primarily for white men. There were two well-known academies for white women: Mordecai Female Seminary in Warrenton and Salem Female Academy in what is now Winston-Salem. There was no school for Black people, most of whom were enslaved.

"These academies were certainly useful in preparing a relatively small number of individuals for civic leadership, but the absence of State funding meant that education in the academies was available only to the affluent," the DPI report said. "For the less well-to-do, 'subscription schools' were sometimes available when several families joined together to subscribe funds to hire a teacher (probably itinerant) for a period of two or three months to teach the children of the subscribing families. Even this alternative was not available to the large number of families too poor to participate and without the education to teach their own children."[11]

During this time, North Carolina had one of the lowest literacy rates in the Union. A few North Carolina residents started calling attention to the problem.

In 1817, a young state senator introduced a plan for state funding of public schools. Archibald D. Murphey, the "father of public education" in the state, spearheaded the General Assembly's creation of the 1825 Literary Fund, meant to subsidize public schools.[12]

The expansion of public education until the Civil War

In 1838, the president and directors of the Literary Fund made recommendations to the General Assembly regarding public education legislation. In 1839, the first public school law was passed, containing many of those recommendations.

This Education Act introduced a county referendum on school taxes, among other things, and appointed five to 10 "superintendents" in each county to oversee the schools. The law did not establish teacher qualifications, curricula, or a central administrative office at the state level.

"Despite these weaknesses, however, the Act ushered in a period of expansion and progress for North Carolina public schools," according to the DPI report.

Academies were privately funded and owned at that time, while the common schools received public funding.

> *"In 1840 there were 632 common schools with 14,937 pupils, an average of less than 24 pupils per school. At the same time there were 140 academies with 4,398 pupils, an average of just over 31 pupils per academy. By the outbreak of war in 1861, there were approximately 4,000 common schools with 160,000 pupils, an average of 40 pupils per school, and 350 academies with approximately 15,000 pupils, an average of almost 43 pupils per academy."*[13]

At the time, formal education for Black people remained non-existent in North Carolina, where slavery was still legal. Slaveholders in colonial North Carolina associated literacy with the potential for uprisings among enslaved people, and in response, they prohibited them from reading, according to a 2019 report from the Center for Racial Equity in Education (CREED).[14] Despite the risk, the report suggests that many enslaved people secretly taught themselves and others to read.

The rare opportunities for free Black people to receive an education in North Carolina largely existed in the apprentice system.

"Had it not been for the apprentice system, it is safe to say that the educational achievement of the free Negroes would have been far below

the level that was attained," said historian John Hope Franklin in the CREED report.

According to the 1850 U.S. Census, there were 553,028 white people in North Carolina, 27,463 free people of color, and 288,538 enslaved people. The same U.S. Census found there were 100,591 white people and 217 free Black people attending school in North Carolina at the time.

In 1852, nine years before the Civil War, the legislature created the Office of Superintendent of Common Schools – appointing Calvin H. Wiley to fill the inaugural position. Wiley was another key figure in the expansion of North Carolina public schools, also earning the moniker "the father of public education" among some historians.[15] Wiley was also a lawyer, Presbyterian minister, newspaper editor, author, and state legislator. He served as the state's first superintendent until 1865, visiting schools across the state and establishing educational standards.[16]

Wiley's leadership was marked by significant progress in the state's public education system, recognized as one of the best in the South by the time the Civil War began in 1861.

The war brought a reversal for the state's public schools, "and by the end of the War, only a handful of schools remained open."[17] In 1866, the Office of Superintendent of Common Schools ceased to exist.

From abolition to segregation to desegregation

After slavery was abolished, one of the first things freed Black people did was build schools – organizing to pay for school buildings, supplies, and teachers.[18] In 1866, delegates at the Freedmen's Convention in Raleigh created a constitution for the Freedmen's Educational Association of North Carolina to help improve African American education in the state.

As Black people fought for education, the 2019 CREED report says, some white people lashed out. In 1866, white people burned down four schoolhouses, and two more the following year. Two Black men in Duplin County were forced to close their school in 1866 after white

people threatened to burn it to the ground.[19]

Despite a lack of state support during the Reconstruction era, the number of schools for Black students increased from 100 in December 1865 to 156 by March 1867. During the same time, the number of teachers increased from 132 to 173, while the number of Black students rose from about 8,500 to 13,039.[20]

The new State Constitution of 1868 included strong provisions for public education, officially creating a new universal public school system for Black and white schools to operate at least four months out of the year. The constitution required the General Assembly to "provide by taxation and otherwise for a general and uniform system of public schools, wherein tuition shall be free of charge to all of the children of the State between the ages of six and twenty-one years."

Among other things, that constitution also established:

- A Superintendent of Public Instruction to be elected by the people for a four-year term;
- A school term of at least four months each year;
- An "irreducible educational fund" with specified revenue sources; and
- A State Board of Education consisting solely of ex-officio members, automatically part of the board by virtue of holding another, typically elected, office.

Despite such progress, Black students faced continued threats from white people who were angry about vague language regarding school integration in the new constitution. According to the CREED report, a resolution for segregated schools passed but then failed to make it into the final draft, and racial violence targeting Black education grew.

"In this violent context, the state lost 49 schools, 511 teachers, and 1,683 students from the peak of the 1868–69 school term to the peak of the following year," the CREED report says.[21]

In 1870, the legislature adopted an amendment that mandated segregated schools and enacted legislation that transferred public school

funding from a state tax to a county tax.

"Many members of American Indian communities were concerned for the quality of their children's education in this segregated school system. They successfully petitioned the state legislature to create public schools that would train and employ American Indian educators. The first was Croatan Normal School, which opened in 1887," wrote Mary Beth Fitts, assistant state archaeologist, in an article on "Mapping North Carolina's American Indian Schools" published in 2020. "North Carolina's American Indian Schools were supported by the communities they served and remain a matter of local pride," she said.

In the early to mid-1880s, the CREED report says, "the education system in North Carolina remained ineffective for both African Americans and poor whites."[22]

The state established teacher training institutions around North Carolina, including eight for white people and five for Black people. In 1897, the General Assembly established a State Board of Examiners "to define and grant first grade life certificates, to furnish annual examinations to supervisors and to recommend a course of reading and professional study for teachers."[23]

During the early 20th century, Democratic Governor Charles B. Aycock led a statewide movement for "universal education."[24] Under Aycock's leadership, the number of local tax districts increased, and the General Assembly made its first direct appropriation of tax funds for public schools.

Aycock's push for universal education, however, was directly connected to efforts to disenfranchise Black voters, according to the CREED report. After the constitutional amendment establishing literacy tests to vote in 1900, Aycock advocated for education to ease the fears of illiterate whites. His administration changed the tax code concerning education funding, placing a higher tax burden on African Americans while disproportionately allocating funds toward white schools.[25]

"The gap between Black and white public education in North Carolina increased dramatically," the CREED report says. "From 1904 to 1920, annual spending per white school averaged $3,442 but only averaged

$500 for Black schools."

In 1913, the first Compulsory Attendance Act was passed, requiring all children ages 8 to 12 to attend school for at least four months per year. In 1919, that term was increased to six months.

Funding discrepancies still created many obstacles for Black students. The Rosenwald fund, officially formed in 1917, supported the construction of hundreds of Black schools – with more than 800 Rosenwald schools created by the time the fund was depleted in 1932.[26] Many of the female Black teachers who taught in Rosenwald buildings were trained and paid by another northern philanthropic society, the Anna T. Jeanes Fund.

When the Great Depression hit in 1929, both Black and white schools suffered. Because most school funding was still a local matter, the impact on public schools varied widely.

In 1931, legislators passed the School Machinery Act, providing a free and uniform education to all the children of North Carolina. That law "included almost all of the basic elements contained in the public school laws in effect today, Chapter 115C of the General Statutes of North Carolina."[27]

This legislation also raised the compulsory attendance age from 14 to 16, added the 12th grade, extended the school term to nine months, and created the school lunch program.

"It is difficult today to understand fully the tremendous courage and vision that this group of legislators must have had to take such bold action to save public schools from possible extinction," the DPI report said.

The Civil Rights Movement would lead to further change within the state's public schools during the latter half of the 20th century. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine and declared segregated schools unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*. During the 1962-63 school year, the Chapel Hill–Carrboro school system was the first in the state to implement a voluntary and districtwide desegregation plan.

The next year, the 1964 National Civil Rights Act prohibited discrimination in public education and gave federal and local governments the ability to enforce desegregation – despite long-standing resistance and threats of violence from many white people and leaders. Desegregation efforts were strengthened with the 1971 U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools* that school districts could use busing to implement desegregation in public schools.

As federal and local governments gained the authority to implement desegregation, however, not all impacts were positive for Black people.

"Black communities repeatedly had to sacrifice their leadership traditions, school cultures, and educational heritage for the other benefits of desegregation," historian David Cecelski said.[28]

In response to desegregation, white families began moving to suburban school districts or enrolling their children in private schools. By 1970, more than 230 new private academies had opened in North Carolina, and by 1971, more than 35,000 white students enrolled in private, all-white schools.[29]

Leading to the schools of today and the advent of educational reform

The Constitution of 1971 entrusted the State Board of Education "to supervise and administer" the public school system and laid out new guidelines for the fiscal management of public schools.[30] Public education in the state continued to expand during the 1970s and 1980s, including additional support for school facilities and additional pay and benefits for school employees. Desegregation started to slow by the late 1970s in many parts of the state.

The first state-funded kindergarten programs were piloted in 1973, and they were available to all children by the 1977-78 school year. This period also saw the introduction of statewide testing programs and the state mandate for public schools to serve students with disabilities.

The state's commitment to public education continued under Democratic Governor James B. Hunt, known as the education gover-

nor.[31] The longest-serving governor in North Carolina history, Hunt served in the role from 1977 through 1985, and again from 1993 through 2001. His leadership helped usher in the passage of two omnibus education reform packages, provisions of reading programs and resources, and "ways for the general public to be involved in the policy process."[32]

In 1984, Hunt established the North Carolina Commission on Education for Economic Growth, which was tasked with proposing a plan for "ensuring the future prosperity and well-being of our children and the continuing soundness of our state's economy."[33] In the years that followed, the state introduced a new teacher pay schedule and more school accountability measures. During his second term, Hunt also worked to introduce early childhood programs.

"Educators and state leaders expect that even higher levels of achievement and excellence will be expected in coming years as reform efforts begin to bear more fruit," the 1993 DPI report says. "And as the needs of the 21st century economy and world become more clearly understood." Many of the reforms addressed accountability, access, and equity.

Still, some of the education reforms during the 1980s and 1990s were seen as ineffective due to their sporadic nature. A January 1997 report by Education Week went as far as to describe North Carolina's education policies as "Random Acts of Reform."[34] A 2000 article from the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research said, "North Carolina has experimented with many new reform ideas since the early 1980s, but the stop-and-start nature of these reform efforts often has left little opportunity to evaluate or even yield results."[35]

In 1994, five low-wealth school systems sued the State of North Carolina. Known as *Leandro*, the case reflected the increasing push for better public education for students across the state.[36] "Thanks to the intersection of race and poverty in North Carolina, many underfunded districts had high African American enrollment," the CREED report says.[37]

The 1997 ruling in the case interpreted the state constitution to require access to a sound, basic education.

What that means is still being litigated today.[38]

[*Editors' note: For more on* Leandro*, see p. 63.]*

The introduction of public school choice

Magnet schools were North Carolina's "first step toward school choice."[39] Magnet schools typically offer a specialized curriculum or program for students who enroll at the school free of charge. Magnet schools were introduced in Wake County Public School System during the 1977-78 school year and in Durham Public Schools in 1995.[40] Today, hundreds of magnet programs can be found in schools and districts across the state.[41]

In 1996, the General Assembly passed the Charter School Act, authorizing "a system of charter schools to provide opportunities for teachers, parents, pupils, and community members to establish and maintain schools that operate independently of existing schools."[42] When it was first passed, the law limited the number of charter schools to 100. In 2011, an act to remove that cap was ratified and passed into law.[43]

During the 2023-24 school year, North Carolina had 211 charter schools enrolling about 145,000 students, making up 10% of the state's public school enrollment, according to DPI data.[44]

State law previously gave the State Board of Education sole authority for charter school oversight in the state, including the approval and renewal of charters, based on the recommendation of the now-defunct Charter School Advisory Board. The State Board approved 26.26% of charter school applications on average between 1997 and 2022.[45]

In August 2023, the Republican-led General Assembly changed that system by creating a new Charter School Review Board (CSRB), which now has sole authority to approve or deny charter applications.[46] Under the new law, the decisions by the CSRB can be appealed to the State Board of Education.

"This has indeed been a golden era of charter-related legislation for our General Assembly, and charter advocates have much to celebrate,"

said Rhonda Dillingham, the executive director of the North Carolina Association for Public Charter Schools.

A critical moment for public education

In 2010, Republicans won a majority in both the N.C. House and Senate, controlling both chambers for the first time since 1898,[47] and education policy changes since then have reflected the priorities of those in power, for example the Excellent Public Schools Act of 2021, which was instrumental in rapidly getting the Science of Reading into classrooms across the state to improve literacy.

School choice has been another priority. "North Carolina passed two separate voucher laws – known as the 'Opportunity Scholarships Program' – in 2013, one for students with disabilities and one for students from low-income families," writes Boomer Kennedy, a North Carolina educator who has studied school choice in the state.[48]

In 2023, Republicans gained a supermajority after an elected Democrat and former educator, Representative Tricia Cotham, switched parties. This gave the Republican party the power to override Democratic Governor Roy Cooper's veto.[49]

Gov. Cooper in May 2023 declared a state of emergency for public education in North Carolina in response to legislation that President Pro Tem Senator Phil Berger, R-Rockingham, called the "largest expansion of school choice" since the state started the Opportunity Scholarship program 10 years ago.[50] The program provides private school vouchers to students through public funds, with the stated purpose of increasing the accessibility of private schools for more families.

In 2023, the state budget added $250 million to the Opportunity Scholarship Grant Reserve over the biennium, putting the revised appropriation for the reserve at $618 million over the next two years. The budget also removed all income eligibility requirements for recipients, starting with the 2024-25 school year.

By the 2032-33 fiscal year, the budget will allocate $520.5 million to the Opportunity Scholarship Grant Reserve, to be allocated every year

after. In comparison, the budget allocated $480.4 million to implementing a new teacher salary over the biennium.[51]

The expansion came a year before federal funding for COVID-19 relief was set to expire.

The budget did not include any stabilization funds for districts, but starting in the 2025-26 school year, the General Assembly will "reinvest in the public schools any savings realized by the State each year" when a student accepts an opportunity scholarship "that is less than 100% of the average State per pupil allocation for average daily membership for a student in a public school unit."[52] It is unclear how much money this will practically mean for public schools.

A bipartisan group of education stakeholders raised concerns over the voucher expansion, including 40 school districts both urban and rural in counties that lean Republican and Democratic. Primary concerns include the lack of testing accountability at private schools, the impact of the expansion on funding and enrollment at public schools, and the lack of requirements that private schools serve all students.

Why does all of this matter?

The history – and future – of public education in North Carolina is deeply related to economic growth in the state in both rural and urban counties.[53]

In 2022, CNBC named North Carolina No. 1 for business in the country, "for putting partisanship aside."[54] In 2023, North Carolina received the ranking for a second time for its "world class workforce."[55] But this ranking is a lagging indicator, and CNBC noted, "the political harmony that has helped [make] the state so competitive is fading."

The population of North Carolina is increasingly diverse with growth now largely led by migration. According to a 2022 report from Carolina Demography, domestic and international migration accounted for 95% of the state's population growth in 2022.[56]

Given the importance of the state's workforce, the state has adopted a

goal of 2 million North Carolinians between the ages of 25 and 44 attaining a high-quality credential or degree by 2030. Sustaining such a diverse, world-class workforce depends on the state's ability to educate its residents – from pre-K, through K-12, to postsecondary education.

In February 2024, myFutureNC said the state is behind where it needs to be to meet its attainment goal by 2030.[57]

If North Carolina wants to continue to be ranked best for businesses, it cannot take for granted the historical progress and expansion of our public school system as well as the role school districts play in local economic prosperity. Our state must continue to work toward serving all students well and move away from the historical inclination for favoring those of privilege.

"The events in Raleigh this year have made it clear that there's now no middle ground in public education in North Carolina – either you're for our students or you're not," State Board of Education Chair Eric Davis said at the board's August 2023 meeting. "And if you're for our students, we must be all in for all of our students, and their teachers, and their principals, and their schools."[58]

Gov. Cooper went on to declare 2024 "The Year of Public Schools."[59]

In headlines and political campaigns, 2024 is the year North Carolina's longstanding commitment to public education is itself being tested.

Only state revenue and political will stand in the way of expanding school choice and at the same time investing in public schools.

At the 2024 Rural Summit, Dr. Jeff Cox, a former superintendent and community college president and now the president of the N.C. Community College System, reminded the state, "Poverty is stubborn."

And Cecilia Holden, the president of myFutureNC, concluded: *"There's one word that describes economic development. What is that? Education. Education and economic development are one and the same."*[60]

CHAPTER TWO

Seeing school districts as big business and superintendents as CEOs

Mebane Rash

In North Carolina, annual state funding for public schools totaled $11.6 billion in 2023-24. Federal funding, not including COVID-19 relief funding, provided another $1.10 billion.[1] Local appropriations and supplemental taxes brought in $3.58 billion.[2]

That should count as big business.

The K-12 education industry includes our state's Department of Public Instruction and our 115 school districts with 2,700 public schools (including charter schools) serving more than 1.5 million students and employing 188,273 full-time personnel.[3]

In 54 of our 100 counties, the school district is the largest employer.[4] Close to a decade ago, districts were the largest employer in 66 counties.

They are the largest employer in urban counties like Guilford and Wake; in suburban counties like Cabarrus, Lincoln, and Union around Charlotte, and Chatham and Johnston around Raleigh; and in many rural counties from way out west in Cherokee to the outer banks in Dare.

In 52 of our 100 counties, school districts employ more than 1,000 workers.

In Charlotte, the school district employs more workers than Bank of America; in Wake, more workers than SAS; and in Cabarrus, more

workers than Amazon, FedEx, or Corning.

In a small, rural county like Jones, the school district is the largest employer with under 200 employees. The county government is the second largest employer. There are two employers with between 50-99 employees, and all of the rest of the county's top 25 employers employ fewer than 50 people.

Our school districts are a source of jobs – lots of jobs. And they are good jobs, in terms of stability, benefits, and career progression.

"People don't think about the school system as a business," says Scott Elliott, the former superintendent of Watauga County Schools. "But the financial impact of a school system ripples throughout the local economy because of all of the types of workers we employ."

School districts employ educators – from teaching assistants to teachers to principals to central office leaders – but they also employ janitors and mechanics, bus drivers and nutritionists, speech pathologists and school nurses, electricians and plumbers, accountants and technicians, and more.

It's an educated workforce. It's a workforce with a diverse skill set. Both attract other businesses to the community.

Elliott points also to the purchasing power of districts.

Statewide, in 2021-22, purchased services totaled $295,805,673 and supplies and materials cost $285,354,792.[5]

Elliott says his school district was a "$60 million a year business, 97% of which is spent on operations, including salaries, goods, and services necessary to operate the schools. Much of that money is held in accounts with local banks."

"We buy a lot of power," says Elliot, "but we also buy a lot of light bulbs."

"There are businesses in this community whose livelihood is to supply all the different items we need to operate our schools," he continues.

"We invest our resources in our community's small businesses," he adds "but it is good for us, too." He says districts get better customer service and a higher quality product when they are ordering from a business with which they have a relationship.

"Often," he says, "the local business owner will have a child in our schools or they may have attended our schools or they employ our high school students or they employ a teacher's spouse. We are all connected."

Elliott would know. In addition to serving as superintendent, he also served as the chair of the board of directors of the local chamber of commerce.

"Education is an industry," says Elliott, noting the combined power in some counties of a university and a community college and a district. "We are a force – an influential force."

When economists calculate the economic impact of public schools, they look at the number of people directly employed by the state department of education and the school districts. They look at the purchasing of goods and services by the state department of education and the school districts as well as the personal spending of those employed. Both lead to the creation of additional jobs. Then they look at the income generated for those workers, and they look at the taxes – income, sales, and property taxes, for example – that are paid by those employed in the industry.

Additionally, the spillover effects of investing in public schools are well documented, from less unemployment and reduced dependence on public assistance to reduced crime and increased health outcomes to greater political and civic engagement.[6]

Within districts, superintendents serve as the CEOs of the education industry.

"The school superintendent is the symbolic representation of the school system," says Elliott. "That person's ability to work within the political constructs and understand culture, human resources, and systems within the community really shapes how the public views the schools."

It is a job with long hours and broad responsibility requiring a large toolkit of skills.

Superintendents serve six constituencies: students, parents, educators, their school boards who hire and fire them, their county commissions who fund them locally, and the public who entrusts taxpayer dollars to the public education enterprise.

With annual operations that can be in the billions, they have to know how to manage assets and cash flow, building up fund balances which operate like savings accounts and raising money for foundations.

They have to understand strategic staffing.

They have to know how to build schools. Between 2023-29, the Wake County Public School System anticipates renovating 10 schools and building 11 new schools, costing $2.63 billion.[7] A new school can cost more than $100 million.[8]

Superintendents have to understand how all kids learn so they can ensure instructional practices employed in classrooms and schools serving very different populations of students are deployed with fidelity.

They have to be able to lead on the good days but also on the worst of days, when there is a student suicide or school shooting.

They serve for salaries that don't come close to the salaries of CEOs in private companies of similar size.

And increasingly, it is a job that comes with little respite, as email, text messaging, and social media have changed our norms around communication, and access is now expected 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Couple that with the pandemic and the polarized, politicized world we live in, and it is no surprise that North Carolina started the 2023-24 school year with 30 superintendents in transition.

Superintendents worry about the expansion of school choice, the impact on our communities, and the role of public education in our democracy.

"Our public schools in this nation and certainly in North Carolina are the bedrock of a democracy, of a vision for our citizens – all of our citizens – and that is a position to be respected and supported," says Catty Moore, the former superintendent of the Wake County Public School System.

They also worry about the partisan nature of school board elections, how culture wars are finding their way into our classrooms, equity and how to serve all students better, the influence of social media on the public's perception of our public schools, inadequate school funding, and the educator pipeline.

Elliott sees the role of superintendent as "the connective tissue" in communities, bridging the district, elected, business, and faith leaders.

At a convocation ahead of the 2022-23 school year, Elliott stood in front of his teachers, asking them to focus on teaching in the classroom, promising that he would take on the outside world.

First he reminded them that these polarized, politicized times are not new.

> *"All the noise that seems to be all around us about what happens in our schools - what should be taught about our history, whose perspectives get to be shared, and even the fundamental purpose of education - none of that is new. And, it's not going away. Why? Because what we do is really, really important. Schools have always been at the crossroads of cultural and political change. Reconstruction, desegregation, the inclusion of children with disabilities, the space race, A Nation at Risk. We've been here before."*

And then he offered his promise.

> *"We will not let other people with other agendas attack you, we will not let them disrespect you, and we will not let anyone threaten you or tell you that you are not worthy of this profession.*
>
> *You matter. You are seen. You are loved."*

A.J. Crabill is an expert in school board governance and consultant to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

In a brief released by Chiefs for Change, a bipartisan network of state and district education chiefs, Crabill said,

> *"What matters most is that superintendents be deeply invested in creating school systems that have their strength of alignment in improving student outcomes, rather than their strength of alignment with attending to adult inputs.*
>
> *Superintendents must be obsessed with improving the quality of instruction that students are experiencing every day. It's not an either/or. You have to do both. The question is: which is leading, and which is following? It has to be that student outcomes are leading and adult inputs are following."*[9]

When Elliott came to Watauga County, it wasn't under ideal circumstances. The previous superintendent didn't last a year, and the community was in a fight over book bans that fractured the community. He wondered whether the district could heal and come back together.

Elliott learned superintendents can connect the communities they serve.

In the High Country, he says, there is a collective appreciation for the outdoors. He also discovered a quieter, but deeper value in being a closely connected community built around family and tradition.

"I have been able to use those metaphors and that framework to talk about how the community is like an ecosystem, and how the school system holds our community together, and that it has to remain healthy and well balanced," Elliott says.

Echoing Crabill, Elliott continues, "But we have to deliver. We have to really provide them with a quality school system."

In this era of school choice, in this time when it is easy for people to move wherever they want, Elliott stresses:

"We need to be the best place a child can get an education in North Carolina."

CHAPTER THREE

Schools as anchor institutions

Caroline Parker

North Canton Elementary in Haywood County only runs one morning bus route, and at the wheel is Carol Harkins. She has been a bus driver for 25 years.

"I like building those relationships with these kids, and just seeing how they get so comfortable with you, that sometimes they call you mama, and just being able to give them time to talk," she says. "These are my kids."

In 2021, Tropical Depression Fred dumped 14 inches of rain in 12 hours, triggering flash floods and landslides in Haywood communities, and Harkins was behind the wheel of a school bus. She recalls crossing a bridge to drop off some students, and not five minutes later, turning around and seeing that the bridge was starting to go.

She called in for support, and she, along with the rest of the students, were lifted via a bucket truck across the water. Asked if any of her students were scared, she said no, "We played games. We made it fun."

This flooding was just one of the many challenges Haywood County and its school district have had to overcome. In the last decade, the district 30 minutes west of Asheville has persevered through a cyber attack, multiple flooding events, a pandemic, and most recently, the closing of the county's largest employer.

The Canton paper mill provided well-paying jobs for more than a century to local residents. The loss shook the foundation of Canton, as well

as the county in which the town sits.

And while the community wrestles with the idea of what will come next for their economy, the public school system remains a constant – inherently connected to the community, offering refuge during challenging times, and creating fertile grounds for growth.

Our public school systems fall in the special category of anchor institutions. Anchor institutions are rooted by definition, moored to the communities they serve. In North Carolina's rural regions, they offer stability and support when the environment inevitably changes.

Anchor institutions are the first line of defense in times of crisis. When a 100-year flood hits, or a town's largest employer shuts its doors, or life comes to a halt during a pandemic, communities head to the anchor institutions to assess, organize, mobilize, and cope – to share their burdens.

"The anchor institution concept idealizes the belief in the power of place-based institutions to support social and economic growth," says Michael Harris and Karri Holley, who study the impact colleges have on the economic and social development of cities.[1] School districts often have an even bigger impact on towns, cities, and counties.

As spiritual as a Sunday service can be, so too can a Friday night under the lights at a high school football field. Generations of families who have sat in the same pew at church will sit on the same bleacher during the Pisgah vs. Tuscola football game in Haywood County. The rivalry between the two high schools began in 1922 and is locally known as The Mill vs. The Hill.

Pisgah High School is within eyesight of the Canton paper mill, which shut down in 2023 after over a century of business. Tuscola High School, as you can imagine, rests on top of a hill about eight miles west in Waynesville.

Jill Mann is the principal of North Canton Elementary. In the wake of the Canton mill closure, she said, "I don't know that there's another school system that has had so many things happen to them that we have. And it just seems like everybody comes together, and we get

through it every single time."

Dr. Trevor Putnam took the Haywood County superintendent job in November 2022. Five months later, and still on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic, he was at the helm when the paper mill announced its closure. Relying on the community's history of resilience, Putnam chose to be hopeful.

"It's looking at the glass half full or half empty," he says. "And I choose to look at it half full, and an opportunity to fill it. Whatever the end result may be, we're going to be OK, and we're going to be Haywood Strong."

School districts are the safety nets for our state and our society.

Social prosperity takes center stage

What is social prosperity and how can it be measured? According to researchers Katharina Lima de Miranda and Dennis K. Snower, social prosperity is determined by solidarity, agency, and empowerment.[2] When we talk about it in schools, it can look like belonging and being given a safe space to grow.

Each of these things – solidarity, agency, and empowerment – starts with taking risks. It happens when students begin making friends at school. It continues during all-district band competitions or try outs for the junior varsity basketball team. Building blocks for social prosperity are found in so many places at school.

With solidarity comes comfort with oneself and within a group and the experience of belonging. Feeling connected, students are more likely to cheer on their peers.

An easy place to see and sense this type of belonging is through the arts.

Angela Martin has been teaching theater for 18 years in the Clinton City and Sampson County school systems. Sampson County is the state's largest producer of turkeys and sweet potatoes, and 49% of the

county acreage is taken up by farms.[3]

Martin grew up performing at the Sampson Community Theater and brings her lifelong love of the stage to the region's students with seasonal all-county productions. The theater teacher prioritizes representation for these plays, getting a substitute for herself and traveling to all the high schools to hold auditions. She has an open call and makes sure the home school community is involved. The spring 2023 all-county performance of "Grease" included 40 students from eight high schools as well as homeschool students. Every performance sold out.

"Just like in the original movie, the girls are very close and they love each other as family, and we're kind of like that," one student said.

Simon Ussery is a homeschool student and snagged the lead role of Danny Zuko. On stage with all his new friends, Ussery said Martin "encourages and pushes us to be better." His supporting cast, both on and off the stage, nodded their heads and cheered in agreement.

"Theater education can help young people develop a strong sense of self and identity, build empathy and learning among peers, and broaden the ways they make meaning of the world around them," say Gwynne Middleton and Mary Dell'Erba of the Education Commission of the States.[4]

During a production, students take agency in their jobs – whether it be starring as the lead role or creating a new world through set design. They are individually empowered while working in unison with their crew. And as the whole cast takes center stage at the end of a show, is there a bigger sign of solidarity than a final bow, hand-in-hand? In theater, each student has a supporting role working toward a common goal. An unanticipated benefit is increased social prosperity.

The weaving of a community safety net

In 1946, President Harry Truman signed into law the National School Lunch Act, with hopes to "safeguard the health and well-being of the nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other foods."[5] Of the many pro-

grams birthed from this Act, the one we are most familiar with today is the National School Lunch Program, more colloquially known as free or reduced price lunch.

From August 2022 to February 2023, not even a full school year, over 2.1 billion free or reduced price lunches were served in our nation's school systems.[6] In our rural communities where food is often grown, food insecurity remains high. Access to food is influenced by population density and geography. Fewer people to serve means less grocery stores, and the distance to these food hubs means more money for gas and potential transportation barriers.

While schools are not grocery stores, they are spaces where students come with provided transportation five days a week. The communal meeting space lends itself to learning and feeding kids. More than lunch, schools can offer an array of food initiatives, such as the School Breakfast Program, Summer Food Service Program, and the Child and Adult Food Care Program.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated one in every five children in North Carolina struggled with hunger, and almost 60% of students enrolled in North Carolina's public schools qualified for free or reduced price school meals.[7] And in March 2020, federal pandemic regulatory waivers allowed schools to offer free meals to all. This expansion of the program highlighted the importance of schools in our society, again making the case that they serve as anchor institutions.

Kim Cullipher is the school nutrition director at Perquimans County Schools. Perquimans is considered 100% rural by the North Carolina Department of Commerce. Cullipher says, "Universal feeding allowed me to know that no child that attended school went hungry that day. That's our purpose. That is why we show up every single day, fighting daily uphill battles that get harder each day; our purpose, our why, is to ensure that no child goes hungry."

Feeding students remains top of mind for many school districts as they wade through the choppy waters of a post-pandemic world. No Kid Hungry says, "Longitudinal data suggest that children's learning outcomes suffer when they regularly experience hunger and that nearly every aspect of physical and mental function is hurt as well. Food insecu-

rity affects concentration, memory, mood, and motor skills, all of which a child needs to be able to be successful in school."[8]

Rural school buildings are especially positioned to be intermediaries within the health and wellness space. In addition to nutrition, school counselors, social workers, and nurses provide comprehensive student support services to support the whole child. These services are provided to all students, including those served across 18 exceptional children programs: intellectual disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment, traumatic brain injury, serious emotional disabilities, developmental delays, learning disabilities, orthopedic impairment, speech/language impairment, autism, other health impairments, and multiple disabilities.

In some school districts, this includes dental care.

According to the Health Resources and Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as of September 2019, an estimated 2.4 million North Carolinians struggled to get adequate dental care. Only 25% of dentists in North Carolina practice in rural areas.[9]

Montgomery County is one of our 78 rural counties and is one of the regions designated as a Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) by the North Carolina Office of Rural Health. In an effort to mitigate that shortage, the county school district started working with a local health care provider to deliver dental care on school campuses.

In 2017, two school-based dental centers opened at East Middle School and West Middle School with the help of FirstHealth of the Carolinas, a nonprofit health care network headquartered in Pinehurst.

FirstHealth received grant funding for the construction, planning, and implementation of the two clinics. When school is in session, the clinics often are open two to three times a week, serving students from all grades. During the summer, dental services continue with parent-scheduled appointments.

Dr. Paul Hood of FirstHealth Dental says having the clinics in schools eliminates any transportation issue for parents. The caretaker doesn't

have to leave a job to transport the student, so there isn't a missed day of work.

Another barrier to entry for many health care providers is trust. If the family doesn't have a history of going to the dentist for preventive care, appointments can be scary. The school environment is familiar, taking the element of the unknown out of the equation.

Hood says, "There's not that much availability of places for our parents to take their kids for dental care, and I think they feel good about it being at a school. That gives us (and them) a little sense of validation. And I think they feel safe about bringing them up there at the school."

Adding to the school district dental services, in October 2022, FirstHealth started a portable clinic program, which visits all six Montgomery County elementary schools and the high school.

"I think the portable program again helps tremendously with eliminating the transportation barrier," Hood said. "Kids actually can miss less school time by seeing us in school. They don't have to come to school late or leave early. Oftentimes, we find that the day they have a dental appointment, they simply don't go to school at all, whereas if we're with the portable program, we're taking them out of class for maybe 30 or 45 minutes."

During the 2022-23 school year, the portable clinic had 244 elementary student visits, 1,271 middle school student visits, and 159 high school student visits. School-age children are getting regular teeth cleanings, learning preventive care, and creating the healthy habit of seeing a dentist. None of this could happen without the support and excitement of the school district, Hood says.

Partnerships among community organizations like these are win-wins. Using the strength and expertise of the dental clinic along with the space and school's ability to organize (and always pivot) makes for a healthier student body.

The people of anchor institutions

In our rural areas, anchor institutions are there for the highs and lows, but mostly for everything in between. They both ground communities when the earth below them feels unsteady, and in times of smooth sailing, they stand just as firm. There doesn't have to be a crisis for an anchor institution to play a role.

Schools and the people in them are anchor institutions in the small but gigantic act of showing up every day – in the math teacher refusing to let a student give up, in the bus driver greeting their riders the same way each day, in the support of teammates when the game winning shot is missed, or in the euphoria of watching the scoreboard hit zero when the home team is victorious.

The day-in and day-out of choosing to try and having staff create the opportunity for students to fail and learn and grow is the daily work of our public school system.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw the immediate need for schools and the tireless work of leadership trying to make it safe for students to return in-person. The U.S. Department of Education collected data before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and determined "that in-person learning, on the whole, leads to better academic outcomes, greater levels of student engagement, higher rates of attendance, and better social and emotional well-being, and ensures access to critical school services and extracurricular activities when compared to remote learning."[10]

All public schools are anchor institutions for their communities, but in rural areas it hits harder. Generations of families drive the same roads, attend the same church, and play on the same football fields – the roots in rural regions run deep. Anchor institutions in these areas thrive in spite of constant challenges because of the people who inhabit them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Employers need diversity across place, race, ethnicity, and learning differences – and so do public schools

Rupen Fofaria with Alli Lindenberg

When Apple chose to move a headquarters to the Research Triangle Park area, it specifically cited the region's demographics, the diversity of its public schools, and the number of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).[1]

Why do employers value diversity?

Research suggests diversity is the one constant that might help us navigate the transformational times ahead.

So much is unknown about jobs of the future. How many will require a physical presence? How will artificial intelligence affect certain tasks, including customer service?

When a trio of researchers set out to measure what makes the workplace more productive and profitable, they chose a setting that embodies much of that unpredictability – the bank, a brick-and-mortar stalwart that, nowadays, exists almost entirely on our phones.

The researchers, who published their findings in the journal Organizational Studies and later in the Harvard Business Review, evaluated creativity, persistence, and what helps create successful conditions in the workplace.[2]

What was the answer? Diversity. But not just any kind of diversity. Focusing on 500 bank branches throughout the northeastern U.S., they found that diversity on paper doesn't necessarily lead to profitability, but diversity in practice does.

The retail bank branch is as good an example of working in America during times of change and technological advancement as any. It's an environment that depends on employees working together toward goals, working with customers, and navigating the evolving nature of work in times of greater technological interdependence.

The reason diversity improves productivity and profit, according to the study, was simple. When co-workers valued one another's backgrounds and became vulnerable enough to learn from them, that stoked greater creativity and problem-solving and made the company welcoming to a more diverse customer base.

For example, a white branch manager described how his Chinese co-worker's explanations of norms in the Chinese community helped him better serve that segment of customers. But many of the branch's tasks were technical and unrelated to people's cultural backgrounds. In those cases, the benefit from diversity seemed to stem mainly from the process of learning – a process that involves taking risks and being unafraid to say "I don't know," "I made a mistake," or "I need help."

"Showing such vulnerability across divisive lines of difference, such as race, and being met with acceptance rather than judgment or rejection, strengthens relationships," the researchers' report says. "Stronger relationships in turn increase resilience in the face of conflict and other stressors. In short, for culturally diverse teams, the experience of learning across racial differences can, in and of itself, improve performance."

But the key is diversity in practice, or learning from diversity, as the researchers put it.

The first place workers practice learning from diversity is in the schools they attend.

North Carolina is ethnically and racially diverse. Of our 10,835,491 people, about 61% are white, 22% are Black, 10% are Latino, 3% are

Asian, 2% are American Indian, and 2% are two or more races.[3] North Carolina's public schools are even more diverse. In 2022-23, students were 43.7% white, 24.5% Black, 21% Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 5% multiracial.[4]

Our state is diverse across many other lines of difference as well, including sexual orientation, rich and poor, old and young, urban and rural, conservative and liberal, those born and raised in North Carolina and those from other states and nations. In schools and workplaces, educators and employers also recognize the neurodiversity of students and workers, which acknowledges that our brains work differently.

Why diversity matters in public schools

The importance of diversity in schools, in communities, and in the workplaces of today and in the future is recognized and centered in public schools across our state.

Donna Bledsoe, the principal of Cedar Ridge Elementary in Surry County Schools, writes:

> *"North Carolina has a long and storied history of valuing public education as a cornerstone of our society. From the establishment of the first public school to the present day, our state has consistently strived for excellence in education.*
>
> *Public education has always been a driving force in North Carolina's progress, and it continues to be a beacon of hope and opportunity for countless students.*
>
> *But our schools are not just schools. They are diverse families of dedicated educators, resilient students, and engaged community members. And the work of public schools extends far beyond academic excellence.*
>
> *Our commitment to nurturing not just academic achievers but future leaders who will shape our world is unwavering. We instill in our students the values of leadership, integrity, and service, ensuring they are prepared to make a positive impact on society by leading self, leading others, and changing the world.*

We believe that education is the great equalizer, and we are committed to equity practices that ensure every student has the opportunity to excel. We embrace diversity as a strength, and we've worked tirelessly to create an inclusive environment where every child feels valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential.

We believe that every child, regardless of their background, deserves the opportunity to thrive, and we are dedicated to making that belief a reality, bringing joy each day as we design dreams and grow leaders.

This is the story of pride and success shared by diverse public schools across our diverse great state from Murphy to Manteo."

Learning from diversity starts with our students in public schools across our state. The diversity that public schools offer reflects the diversity of the world in which students will need to navigate – and find prosperity. And it requires education leaders to be intentional about inclusion – all types of inclusion.

Inclusion at Evergreen Community Charter School[5]

Evergreen Community Charter School has served more than 9,000 students since its founding in 1999. Located in Asheville, the public charter school is home to many bright students and has earned a reputation of praise for their inclusive model of education for students with learning differences.

The school serves students K-8 and has a maximum enrollment of 444 students. There is one self-contained classroom for students that need the highest level of support at Evergreen. Apart from that group, all other students with learning differences are in the general classroom setting with their peers. The students in the general classroom typically receive a combination of in-classroom support and additional pull-out support for direct skills instruction. The pull-out support is also available for students who aren't meeting grade-level standards and need more direct instruction.

"We really try to make sure that kids are learning about how their own brain works and what they need, so they know how to be advocates

for themselves and how they can take control of their learning and that makes a huge difference," says Jen Watkins, executive director of Evergreen.

Teaching about neurodiversity can be complex, but Evergreen strives to make it accessible and empowering. They want their students to learn to celebrate the brain that they have and embody a growth mindset.

"It's actually really easy for kids to understand that everyone's brain works differently. Helping kids identify things they are really good at and things that they really struggle with, and just kind of demystifying and destigmatizing 'either you're smart or you're not,'" says Watkins.

Students at Evergreen have the opportunity to apply a growth mindset to not only their academic curriculum but also their character development. The school has academic standards and character standards called "Habits of Scholars." Students are graded on both types of standards every trimester.

"A lot of our work is character based, learning social skills, how to interact and how to communicate. We still focus heavily on academics, but it's not just drilling academics. We have our academic standards and we also have habits of scholars, which are basically…the skills you need to learn to become a good scholar, but also carry over into life," says Watkins.

The "Habits of Scholars" fit into the school's philosophy of education. Evergreen grounds its teaching in EL Education's beliefs: Learning is active, learning is challenging, learning is meaningful, learning is public, and learning is collaborative. They also use what they call "Learning Expeditions" to organize their curriculum. Teachers plan these expeditions using themes and guiding questions. The idea is to give students a better understanding of the "so what" of topics of study.

Evergreen hopes to prepare all of its students to thrive in any given environment.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities nominated Evergreen to be part of the national Canopy Project, which highlights schools around the country for education innovation.[6]

At Evergreen, like at the bank branches, students get to work with other students across diversity that includes neurological, socioeconomic, as well as racial and ethnic lines of difference – learning from that diversity.

"That's central to our mission and helping students become lifelong learners," Watkins continues. "Students learn more when they can learn from each other, and we see it as adults in the workplace how we can all achieve more when we work together and learn from one another. It's fundamental to the inclusion piece, that we're a community and every person here is part of the community and matters and is valued and has things to contribute."

"Our goal is to create people who can make change in the world," she says.

CHAPTER FIVE

The role of public schools in early childhood education

Katie Dukes

Learning doesn't start at age five, and it doesn't start in school.

Imagine the parent you might see shopping at your nearest big-box store, pushing a toddler in their cart, narrating their actions.

That toddler is taking in everything, associating new words with new objects through a combination of looking, listening, and asking an endless stream of questions.

The parent and child are learning together.

And this type of learning – the learning that happens before the age of five – is critical for brain development.

The vast majority of human brain development occurs in the first three years of life. During this time more than 1 million neural connections are formed each second.[1] Strengthening these connections during the 2,000 days between birth and kindergarten leads to improved outcomes in education, health, employment, and economic stability.[2]

While learning doesn't begin at age five, formal public education typically does.

But in North Carolina, public schools provide essential services to children and families well before they enter a kindergarten classroom.

The goals of public kindergarten and preschool

The idea for kindergarten came from a 19th century theory that young children were not just miniature adults who simply hadn't had the experiences necessary to function as full-sized adults, but that their brains were in a stage of development that would benefit from a nurturing environment that encouraged curiosity and play.

The first kindergarten was established in Germany in 1837. By the mid-1800s, German immigrants brought kindergartens to the United States, and a century later they were commonplace in public school systems across the nation.[3]

The path to public kindergarten in North Carolina is described in a 1974 DPI report.[4] In the report, the researchers outline the history of formalized early childhood education.

As early as the 1830s, private interests had been operating what were then called "Infant Schools." According to the DPI report, "Some advertised themselves as being places to prepare children for later schooling; others simply promised to keep children out of mischief."

Some of the state's earliest kindergartens were established by mill owners for the children of millworkers: "When both father and mother were employed by a mill, this presented the only alternative to leaving their young children unattended." Kindergartens were also established by educational institutions that were training future teachers.

In the first decade of the 20th century, free public kindergartens were introduced in Buncombe County and Washington County, though both programs were short-lived. In the following two decades, parents and teachers joined forces to push for access to public kindergarten statewide. Their efforts brought continued attention to the need to educate young children.

By the mid-20th century, private kindergartens were popping up around the state in churches and homes. They fell under the supervision of DPI thanks to a 1945 law affirming the department's authority to do so. Parental demand for their children to attend these private kindergartens was high, which drove up the price but not the supply.

Parents and teachers continued their push for free public kindergarten, and bills to provide it were introduced in the General Assembly in 1963, 1965, and 1967 before one finally passed in 1969.

Districts were invited to apply for the opportunity to offer free public kindergarten during the pilot phase of implementation. The stated objectives of the kindergarten pilot were:

1. To provide many opportunities for social development and adjustment to group living;
2. To promote development of good health habits;
3. To instill habits, appreciations, and attitudes which serve as standards of conduct at work and play and as guides to worthwhile use of time and materials in and out of school;
4. To provide opportunity for self-expression through language, music, art, and self-experience;
5. To provide situations in which children can succeed and through success, build confidence in their own ability and work;
6. To develop an atmosphere in which creativity is stimulated;
7. To develop a feeling of adequacy through emphasis on independence and good work habits; and
8. To lay foundations for subject-matter learning and intellectual growth.

North Carolina fully implemented public kindergarten statewide by the 1977-78 school year.[5]

As experts learned more and more about how brains develop throughout the 20th century – and came to understand the crucial development that occurs in the 2,000 days leading up to kindergarten – there was increased interest in extending the benefits of public education to younger children.

It took 140 years for kindergarten to move from being an idea to being a regular part of our state's public education system. In the 45 years

since, public preschool has followed its own path.

During those decades, demand for early childhood care and education had not been met by the private market – a market that economists generally define as "failed."

As a result, North Carolina has developed a variety of public investments to support families seeking to enroll young children in preschool, including Smart Start and a first-in-the-nation quality rating and improvement system. Dozens of states followed our lead, and by the end of the 20th century, North Carolina's reputation as an innovator in early childhood education was well-earned.

In 2001, North Carolina started More at Four, a statewide (though not universal) public preschool program. Here's how it was described in a 2005 program evaluation conducted by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute:

> *"The North Carolina More at Four Pre-kindergarten Program is a state-funded initiative for at-risk 4-year-olds, designed to help them be more successful when they enter elementary school. More at Four is based on the premise that all children can learn if given the opportunity, but at-risk children have not been given the same level of opportunity."*[6]

In 2011, More at Four was renamed the "North Carolina Prekindergarten Program," typically referred to as NC Pre-K.

And NC Pre-K is working. Numerous studies over the past two decades have found positive, lasting impacts for children enrolled in our state's public preschool and for their families.

In 2017, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) reported that 90% of NC Pre-K participants were from low-income backgrounds, despite the requirement being 80%. DHHS also reported the program had positive effects on children's language development and communication skills, cognitive development, and emotional and social development. This impact wasn't limited to enrolled children and their families:

> *"... Studies have consistently shown lasting positive impacts for the children involved, the classrooms and communities they are a part of, and then as a result, for the school systems these children attend and their families and the State of N.C. as a whole."*

The authors of the report noted that one reason for these spillover benefits is that NC Pre-K funds are commonly blended with other funding sources, creating classrooms where students who aren't enrolled in NC Pre-K still benefit from the program.[7]

Additionally, a 2018 report on potential expansion of NC Pre-K stated, "Extensive research has confirmed that children who participate in the program experience significant positive outcomes that extend well into their elementary school years."[8]

The role of public schools in preschool

Today, NC Pre-K is a statewide preschool program designed to support low-income 4-year-olds at risk of negative education outcomes. It is housed under the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) at the DHHS.

NC Pre-K is managed locally by 91 contractors, most representing one or two counties. Contractors can be one of the state's school districts, regional Smart Start agencies,[9] or Child Care Resource & Referral Councils.[10]

Regardless of the type of contractor, classrooms can have a maximum enrollment of 18 students and must provide breakfast or a morning snack, plus lunch that meets U.S. Department of Agriculture requirements. Each classroom must have a lead teacher who has or is working toward a K-12 teaching license, plus an assistant teacher who has or is working toward an associate degree in early childhood education, or a child development credential.[11]

A 2018 report from the National Institute for Early Education Research explains the NC Pre-K management structure this way:

> *"Contractors incur the administrative costs of the program, including monitoring, recruitment, assignment and payment. The contractors then*

> *subcontract with 'providers' at individual sites, including for-profit and nonprofit private centers, public schools, and Head Start agencies. These NC Pre-K providers incur the costs of day-to-day operations of the program."*[12]

Because NC Pre-K is designed to be classroom-based, public schools are a natural fit as providers. Sometimes, even when Head Start or private centers are providers, they will still operate from public school classrooms or campuses. That's partially because state funds provided for NC Pre-K can only be used in very specific ways:

> *"State funds are to be used for 'operating' the NC Pre-K classrooms, which may include salary and/or benefits for teaching staff, equipment, supplies, curriculum and related materials, developmental screening tools and assessments efforts, and staff training. Funding can also be used to cover expenses associated with meeting the program's quality standards. However, state funding is not available to cover certain costs – primarily the costs of real property, buses, or motor vehicles."*[13]

Public school districts already have the "real property" needed to provide NC Pre-K, namely classrooms. And many also allow NC Pre-K students to ride school buses.

Due in part to these specific requirements, DCDEE's most recent data reveal that more than half of NC Pre-K classrooms are operated by public schools.[14] According to self-reported data provided by DPI's Office of Early Learning and DCDEE in July 2023:

- At least 622 public schools are home to at least 1,102 NC Pre-K classrooms.
- Approximately 2,032 preschool classrooms are operated by public schools, regardless of funding source.
- Approximately 73 of 115 school districts offer services for children under age 5, independent of NC Pre-K.
- School districts provide itinerant exceptional children services to over 5,400 preschool children statewide.[15]

One major advantage of an NC Pre-K classroom located in a school

building is its proximity to the services that school districts provide, particularly for children with learning differences. The earlier that schools learn about the special needs of incoming students, the better prepared they can be to support their education. That's part of why schools play such a crucial role in helping families identify learning differences in the first 2,000 days.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, "The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children."

For the purposes of early childhood education, there are two relevant parts of IDEA to know about:

- Part C relates to services and support for children from birth to age three, providing for the creation and execution of individualized family service plans (IFSPs). In North Carolina, this part is administered by DHHS.
- Part B relates to services and support for students ages three to 21, providing for the creation and execution of individualized education plans (IEPs). In North Carolina, this part is administered by DPI.

This means that school districts are responsible for providing special education to students as young as three. But for families with children who have IFSPs, school districts actually start the process of evaluating what their IEP needs will be at age two. For families without IFSPs who suspect their children might have special needs at age three or four, schools do those evaluations for free to develop IEPs as needed.

In the 2022-23 school year, public school districts served 16,344 children ages three to five before they reached kindergarten.[16] That's 9% of the total number of students they served through IDEA.

Losing public preschools: 'It would be devastating'

To learn more about the role of public schools in educating our state's

youngest learners, EdNC reached out to every NC Pre-K contractor, interviewing more than half of them during the summer of 2023 by phone or email.[17]

We learned that in Brunswick, Camden, and Stanly counties, there are no longer any NC Pre-K classrooms on public school campuses. While these counties are in very different parts of the state, their explanations for why public schools quit hosting NC Pre-K were the same.

"Our schools were just busting at the seams, and they needed to use those classrooms or that space," said Jake Griffiths, the Brunswick County NC Pre-K contact.

Chudney Hill-Gregory, the contact for Camden County, described the population increase in Camden County putting pressure on public school classrooms, saying schools still want to host sites but simply don't have the space.

"We did have the problem of space a few years ago… and our county lost several classrooms at that time," wrote Terri Scott, the contact for Stanly County's NC Pre-K contractor.

This points to the need for greater investment in both North Carolina's public schools and our public preschool program as the state's population continues to grow. But what's truly telling is what happened to early childhood education in these counties when public schools were no longer able to share their space.

"I know that we served a lot more children when it was in public schools," Griffiths said. "So we pretty much cut that in half or even a third."

"It has given one less option for families to receive services at that location/area of the county," Scott wrote of Stanly County. "It creates a hardship if families need transportation within that school's district to the school where their other children attend in a K-5 setting."

In counties where public schools don't host NC Pre-K classrooms, families have fewer choices about where to send their children for preschool. Their freedom to live and work in a location of their choosing is

limited by the lack of access to early childhood education.

While population increases caused classroom closures in these three counties, decreases in student population can have the same outcome. If students leave public schools, schools could close or consolidate. That would similarly reduce the number of classrooms available for NC Pre-K.

When asked to imagine what would happen in their communities without NC Pre-K in public schools, here's what contractors had to say:

"Well, it would be catastrophic. It'd be catastrophic."
- Stacey Bailey, Buncombe County

"Our community would be devastated, and that is not an exaggeration."
- Rebecca Snurr, Transylvania County

"If the public schools were to stop serving NC Pre-K students, it would be detrimental to our county."
- Sharon Lyons, Alleghany County

Almost a quarter of respondents used the words "catastrophic," "devastating," or "detrimental." And in cases when they didn't rely on those specific words, they still described potentially devastating impacts: children becoming food insecure or losing access to health screenings, parents quitting work or stopping out from postsecondary education.

"I think we would have a severely underserved population," said Heather St. Clair of Nash and Edgecombe counties.

For many four-year-olds, NC Pre-K is their first experience with learning in a group setting. Children who don't have experience in classroom settings simply know less about how to function in one. According to many contractors, kindergarten teachers report stark differences between a student who has experienced some formal child care setting – whether that's in a home alongside other children, in a child care center, or in a public school – and a student who hasn't.

"If we didn't have pre-k, if we couldn't get them in these programs, kindergarten wouldn't be kindergarten," said Bobbi Holly, the contact person for the Bertie County NC Pre-K contractor. "You would be spending so much of your time just teaching them the basics."

This is specifically due to the importance of social and emotional development during the first 2,000 days of life. Children who have already had some practice interacting with new people, forming connections with caring adults outside of their home, being separated from their parents or guardians, and regulating their emotions in new environments are much more successful in transitioning to kindergarten and beyond.

The main reason contractors were so distraught when imagining a future for NC Pre-K without having classrooms in public schools is that the early childhood education system at large simply does not have the capacity to fill the gaps that would be left.

And in at least six counties, school districts are the sole provider of NC Pre-K.

To qualify for hosting NC Pre-K, providers must have a four- or five-star license. Many parts of the state do not have enough of these licensed providers.

"All of the child care in Polk County is only with Polk County preschools," Amy Scott said. "There is none. No private, no nothing."

Simply stated, the existing early childhood education landscape in North Carolina cannot afford to lose the classrooms hosted by our public schools.

Extending the benefits of public education

Public education can serve as a great equalizer, a way to disrupt the cycle of intergenerational poverty for at-risk children, families, and communities.

But the period of time in a student's life when education is most likely

to have an equalizing effect is the first 2,000 days.

Thanks to the work of parents, teachers, and other experts in the field of child development during the 20th century, North Carolina extended the benefits of public education to young children by providing universal access to kindergarten.

In the 21st century, we've begun the process of extending those benefits even closer to that moment when a baby enters the world.

Our public schools play an absolutely crucial role in supporting our youngest learners, and losing their participation would have devastating consequences for us all.

CHAPTER SIX

The role of public schools in postsecondary attainment

Nation Hahn

The history of early colleges in North Carolina began with an investment from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to evaluate and launch "small schools" in North Carolina – and a serendipitous meeting between then-Governor Mike Easley and a flooring company.

The state was already working on the "small schools agenda," thanks to an investment from the Gates Foundation. This body of work called for the state to evaluate splitting larger high schools into smaller schools focused on different disciplines.

While this grant was in motion, Easley met with the leadership of a small but growing company. The company was focused mostly on flooring and was launching in the foothills region of North Carolina with ambitious plans.

Easley asked company leaders about the skills they would need for employees. They said they were targeting folks with an associate degree or above.

JB Buxton, president of Durham Technical Community College and former education adviser to Easley, recalls that Easley had expected them to say they needed a high school degree – and the governor was surprised when the company said that if they wanted employees with a high school diploma, they would have been located elsewhere. They needed people with associate degrees because of the high competen-

cies and skills required for the precise, advanced manufacturing in their production process.

Easley left the meeting struck by the fact that manufacturing was changing quicker than he had considered, Buxton said, and he felt strongly that the nexus of community colleges and high schools would play a larger role moving forward than some had predicted.

Easley had already been deeply concerned about inheriting one of the worst graduation rates in the country. These strands of thought came together to convince Easley that an emphasis on being able to graduate from high school with an associate degree would convince more high schoolers that graduating could actually lead to a well-paying job.

The Gates Foundation had given North Carolina a $20 million investment to build out a small schools agenda.

"The 20 million bucks was really about schools within a school," Buxton says. "The idea was to break apart large high schools into four schools – and the schools would focus on specific industries and skill sets."

With these wheels in motion, early colleges became a priority for the governor – and the Gates Foundation gave the state additional money to produce research into early colleges.

Launching 'Learn and Earn'

Early colleges are defined as schools that allow students to work on both their high school diploma and an associate degree or credential at no cost. These programs are designed as partnerships between a school district and an institution of higher education.

"Easley always liked the idea of an early college," Buxton says. But industry interest in rapidly expanding the pool of candidates with an associate degree or high-quality credential convinced Easley and his team that the state should have a sense of urgency to launch what the administration would eventually call its "Learn and Earn" initiative.

In fact, the marching orders for Buxton and the education team were to stand up the first five early colleges in the state in short order. The launch of these five early colleges coincided with Easley's relatively easy re-election in 2004.

That victory gave Easley the opportunity to build out an agenda that included the rapid expansion of early colleges across North Carolina. The scope of this ambition became clear when Easley told Buxton his goal was to have an early college within reach of every high school student across North Carolina – much like North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) founder Dallas Herring's desire to have a college within a 30-minute drive of every North Carolinian when the system launched in the mid-20th century.

The target market for early college in Easley's mind included aspiring first-generation college students from lower-income families. The administration worked with Walter Dalton, Linda Garrou, and Howard Lee to introduce and run the legislation – and they built the framework for early colleges within a broader piece of legislation allowing for several cooperative, innovative models in North Carolina.

The state partnered with Jobs for the Future to build the framework and early plan. Easley set what Buxton deemed an "ambitious goal" of 75 early colleges, and the assumption for Easley's team was that growth would be gradual. Instead, Buxton recalled, the initiative "grew like wildfire" because of the administration's focus, school districts' desire to provide opportunities for their students, and the buy-in of community colleges across the state.

The rollout won national acclaim, receiving the Innovations in American Government Award from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

In presenting the award, Harvard noted that in "2006-07, rates of grade promotion and graduation for Learn and Earn participants were higher than the statewide average, with nearly half the Learn and Earn high schools seeing 100 percent promotion rates."

Harvard also observed that these numbers have not "been skewed by 'creaming.' The program purposely targets kids at risk, those for whom

English is a second language, and those who would be first-generation college students."

Today's dual enrollment system

Nearly two decades later, North Carolina's dual enrollment system offers three pathways for high school students to take college classes for free under the heading of Career and College Promise (CCP). CCP – which was first passed when Beverly Perdue was governor – has gone on to be recognized by the Education Commission of the States as a model for dual enrollment programming and policy. That distinction is attributed to CCP's pathways design, statewide policy, funding, and collaboration across education systems.[1]

Career and College Promise allows qualified high school students in our state the opportunity to pursue college courses tuition-free while they are in school. CCP is administered by the North Carolina Community College System and the NC Department of Public Instruction.

Today three pathways exist under the umbrella of CCP:

- College Transfer Pathways (CTP): Providing tuition-free course credits toward a number of college transfer degrees, including Associate in Arts and Associate in Science – generally the more popular degree-seeking options among students.
- Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways: Providing tuition-free course credits toward a certificate or diploma. Students may also pursue a Workforce Continuing Education Pathway (WCEP) that leads to a state- or industry-recognized credential.
- Cooperative Innovative High Schools (CIHS): Providing opportunities for students to complete an associate degree or earn up to two years of college credit within five years through schools located on college campuses.

Eligibility requirements vary among the pathways but typically con-

sider a student's grade level, unweighted GPA, or college readiness through an assessment. CIHS program eligibility is established jointly by local boards of trustees, with special emphasis placed on first-generation college students.

A 2024 report to the General Assembly showed more than 78,000 high school students participated in Career and College Promise during the 2022-23 academic year. That number includes public, charter, private, and homeschool students across the state.

Cooperative Innovative High Schools accounted for 28% of CCP's total population. According to CTE and CTP data from the 2022-23 academic year, students enrolled in 194,650 credit-level college courses. Those same students completed 85% of their credit-level courses, compared to 73% of the general student population.

The average GPA was 3.17 for students enrolled in either CTP or CTE during fall 2022. At the end of the 2022-23 academic year, students in CTP and CTE pathways earned 3,315 credentials across the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS).[2]

Data from NCCCS shows CCP students are primarily female (60%) and white (58%). CTE pathways accounted for the highest male population (54%), and CIHS had the highest percentage of non-white students (53%).[3]

Connecting our most rural students to higher education

Enrollment in rural community colleges in North Carolina has increasingly been driven by dually enrolled students.

Central Carolina Community College (CCCC) serves Chatham, Harnett, and Lee counties. CCCC president Lisa Chapman describes dual enrollment as a "central strategic priority" for the college as it considers how best to serve its region. More than just an academic or business model priority, she describes their dual enrollment approach as a "critical piece of our strategy to re-enforce and grow the talent pipeline" across the three rural counties they serve.

One successful element of early colleges, Chapman says, is the "power of the place." She notes that the first-generation college students targeted for early colleges tend to benefit the most from the experience of being on a college campus.

CCCC leaders took both their focus on talent development and the "power of place" when they also placed career coaches in each of the high schools in their region, because they knew high school counselors are often stressed and stretched. This approach has allowed them to help focus students on either getting on a pathway to enter the workforce with a credential right after high school graduation or to accelerate their entry into higher education for a degree.

At Beaufort County Community College (BCCC) – which serves Beaufort, Hyde, Tyrrell, and Washington Counties – early college high school is essential to maintaining the very cultural heritage of the region, according to BCCC president Dave Loope.

Loope equates the work of BCCC's four early college high schools to "a keystone in a regional archway of counties that have existed for over 300 years but now find themselves crumbling under the weight of a postmodern world."

"It's our job to interpret the contemporary world and enable the college students in our counties to understand their places in that world," comments Loope. "At the same time, because we understand that for many students their identities are tied to a unique place-rural eastern North Carolina-our interpretation of the content in our courses must include ways of coping with immense and rapid change in the world at-large. That might mean preparation for university, but it just as often means preparation for the changing workforce landscape in our region and globally that will allow them to have a job right here."

Early college high schools capitalize on this culture by integrating it with college-level coursework to develop pathways for community wellbeing.

"Just because our students live in remote areas outside the main population centers in North Carolina doesn't mean that they matter less," says Loope. "In fact, I would argue that the success of our early col-

lege high school students is critical to developing leaders for tomorrow across our region and beyond. Early college high school helps develop and discipline the minds of these young people, helps them understand the wider world, and helps them bring positive change to that world."

Loope also focused on the key role early colleges play in solving some of the most pressing labor shortage issues in our rural areas:

> *"How else would you bring 25 new college graduates to Hyde, Tyrrell, and Washington Counties each year? As rural eastern North Carolina continues to suffer from outmigration, our early college high schools create concrete pathways for young people either to take jobs in their home region upon graduation or shorten the time to the baccalaureate degree in fields such as teacher education and nursing. For the latter, we have to work harder with partners such as the UNC system and the North Carolina Rural Center to convince our early college graduates that they have a future in their home counties or at least nearby. We are in desperate need of teachers and nurses, and it just makes sense that our early college students should fill those vacancies."*

Evolving role of dual enrollment in North Carolina's future

Dual enrollment strategies have proven to be successful in North Carolina – exceeding even the wildest ambitions of those involved in designing the programs. And yet the programs will need to evolve.

One caution raised by Buxton was the threat of changing the funding model.

"One (risk factor) is if we change our financing approach in the state," he warns. "If you do a dollars-follow-the-student kind of approach, you are quickly creating disincentives for this kind of collaboration."

He expressed hope that the state would remain committed to a funding model that supports the continuation of dual enrollment programs – and even its expansion. After all, he says, the state ultimately saves resources in terms of taxpayer investment in individual students if those students gain their credential or degree through dual enrollment.

Both Buxton and Chapman pointed out that the ultimate ambition of the program must continue to focus on expanding the college-going population and the talent pool for the state as a whole. Both stressed the hope that we will continue to treat early colleges specifically and dual enrollment broadly as an intervention that moves the needle toward college-going, attaining degrees and credentials, and expanding our workforce.

For Durham Tech, the expansion of opportunity for students looks like a new partnership with Durham Public Schools to ensure that 25% of Durham Public Schools students will complete an industry-recognized credential or an associate degree by the end of their high school career. Implementation will include Durham Tech instructors being co-located in 11th-grade classrooms in Durham high schools beginning in the 2023-24 school year.

Chapman says CCCC and other colleges must begin to reach students earlier in their academic careers to encourage the continued growth of dual enrollment programs. "We need to engage students earlier than high school who, for some reason, have not seen themselves as members of Central Carolina – and figure out why they don't see us as their college," Chapman says. "I think that is a critical piece."

Buxton's and Chapman's push for tighter partnerships between K-12 and community colleges matches with the ambition of NCCCS president Dr. Jeff Cox, who assumed the helm of the system in June 2023. Cox has previously served as a coach and teacher, a principal, a K-12 superintendent, and a college president.

Cox's agenda as system president is focused on expanding customized training and apprenticeship programs, student outcomes data, and K-12 partnerships and articulation agreements. Much like Chapman, Cox wants community colleges to reach more students, starting in middle school.

"I think I'd be wasting an opportunity if I didn't use some of my background and experience to try to streamline things further along the education continuum," Cox says.

Gov. Easley is proud to see all of the progress on the dual enrollment front, according to Buxton. He went on to say that if Easley "had his way today every high school in the state should be a 'learn and earn' early college."

Through dual enrollment, North Carolina's public schools are connecting students to opportunity and setting them up to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in an ever-changing world.

CHAPTER SEVEN

From a great consensus to a great debate

Ferrel Guillory

"The times they are a-changin'."

- Bob Dylan, 1964

"The more you do to improve education, the more you discover what is yet to be done. Each breakthrough opens a window on another unexplored frontier."

- Governor Terry Sanford, 1961-65

Indeed, the times have changed, and so has North Carolina changed dramatically over the past half century. Still, Terry Sanford's words and the need continuously to improve public education resonate in a conflicted state where a great education debate reached a critical crossroads in 2023.

Competing agendas, sharply diverging along the divide between Democrats and Republicans, define the consequential clash over the scope of and commitment to public education in North Carolina. As the 2024 statewide elections approach, fundamental issues confront the state's leaders, candidates, and voters.

With the clout of a veto-proof majority, Republican lawmakers have executed a sweeping turn in education policy. They enacted a major expansion of state subsidies for students in private schools, increased leverage for parents in dealing with public schools, and gave the legislature more power through appointments to steer schools, community colleges, and universities.

North Carolina's public life has long revolved around competition between its traditionalists and modernizers.

Even as its cultural and ideological differences played out in elections and legislation, economic expansion, population growth, and diversity transformed North Carolina.

The scale of the state's growth and change flowed out of the combination of private-sector investments and government initiatives. As the essays in this collection illustrate, public education has served as essential institutional infrastructure in the making of modern North Carolina – and it continues to do so in communities across the state.

Making of a mega state

From 1970 to 2020, the population of North Carolina doubled – increasing from 5.1 million to 10.5 million. To sense its scale, consider that North Carolina's 50-year growth equals the entire current population of South Carolina.

That robust growth, fueled by an expanding economy and an in-migration of talent, vaulted North Carolina to 9th in population among the 50 states – and thus into the ranks of American mega states. The state has the second highest number of rural residents after Texas, while the U.S. Census projects persistent population growth to 2050, especially robust in the metropolitan areas of Charlotte and the Research Triangle.

North Carolina is a complex state of natural beauty, of economic divides, and of political paradox. It is a sprawling geographical place, of outer banks, coastal plain, sandhills, narrow rivers, and blue ridges. It is a political entity in which both traditionalism and modernization have long exerted influences on public attitudes that form its civic culture.

When Sanford, a Democrat, was governor, North Carolina was more rural than urban. Thousands of its citizens assembled furniture, sewed garments, ran machines that spun thread or rolled cigarettes, and cropped tobacco under a blazing sun. Half a century later, it has become increasingly a state of white-collar workers in electronics, bank-

ing, biotechnology, and pharmaceuticals.

North Carolina recently attracted such companies as Apple, Wolfspeed, Toyota, VinFast, and Boom Supersonic. Officialdom – Democrats and Republicans alike – celebrated North Carolina's rating as the No. 1 state for business for two consecutive years, 2022 and 2023.[1]

In fact, North Carolina had ranked among the top states for business throughout the early years of the 21st century. Its gross domestic product had steadily risen from 2000 to 2020, with brief downturns during the Great Recession of 2008-09 and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-21.

"Not Your Grandfather's Manufacturing: How North Carolina industry has changed since the 1990s," says the headline of an illuminating essay by the Labor and Economic Analysis Division (LEAD) of the state Department of Commerce. Relying on automation and computerization, manufacturers look for employees with skills, credentials, and degrees from community colleges and universities.

> *"The industries with the highest productivity levels and strongest productivity growth in North Carolina are the same ones installing the most industrial robots globally," says the LEAD analysis in 2023. "Like the global trade disruptions of the 1990s and 2000s, businesses, state program directors, and policy makers have little ability to halt or pause current and future changes coming to the manufacturing industry."*
>
> *"However, with the right policies, education, and workforce training, North Carolina can position our current and future employers and their employees to receive more of the economic benefits of the 4th industrial revolution."*[2]

The 4th industrial revolution, according to McKinsey & Company, is being "driven by disruptive trends including the rise of data and connectivity, analytics, human-machine interaction, and improvements in robotics."[3]

Forging a great consensus

As North Carolina shifted from an agrarian to an industrial economy, and as high-tech began to replace low-skill manufacturing as a driving force, a great consensus emerged with education as a core component. It was not an official writ but a powerful attitudinal framework that guided public and private sector influencers.

The "great consensus" and "great education debate" are terms that I have used for years in writing columns and essays, in speeches and discussions, in an ongoing effort to explain North Carolina's dynamics.

The consensus, in my view, had three components:

- The consensus held, first, that North Carolina must have better education – early childcare; reforms to elementary, middle, and high schools; widely accessible community colleges linked to workforce needs; and a consolidated university system with both educational and research prowess. Officialdom could debate ways and means over teacher pay and student testing, for example, but it had become an article of faith that North Carolina must educate more of its young people much better.
- The consensus also held that North Carolina must have better roads, bridges, and highways. Again, it was acceptable to debate whether to build this loop or that by-pass, but it was held as a constant that North Carolina should invest more in roads.
- The consensus had as its driving argument that North Carolina must have economic growth producing more jobs and better jobs. Indeed, better schools and better roads were both in service to economic development.

Over subsequent decades, the great consensus played out through the terms of Democratic Governors Jim Hunt, Mike Easley, and Beverly Perdue and Republican Governors Jim Holshouser and Jim Martin, as well as an increasingly two-party legislature.

Through the second half of the 20th century, the consensus crossed lines of class, race, and geography. Businesses wanted development. So

did rural residents. Working class Blacks and whites wanted better jobs. Latinos and Asians moved in for employment and education opportunities. North Carolina competed with states in using tax incentives and set up a network of governmental and non-governmental structures to lure new and expanding businesses.

In its report commissioned by a state judge, the national education consulting firm WestEd reported that in the 1990s North Carolina had been the "most successful" state in narrowing the achievement gap between white and students of color.

Legacy inequities linger

And yet, as the flow of federal and state data regularly show, education reforms from the great consensus did not erase inequalities stemming from the Old South economy and racial segregation. Even with the in-migration of Black citizens and the expansion of the Black middle class, the South – North Carolina not an exception – remains a region with race as a fault line.

While many more North Carolinians enjoyed the fruits of economic diversification, wide income, wealth, and housing gaps persisted. Three out of 10 North Carolinians live with modest incomes below 200% of the official poverty line.

North Carolina has more than 800 high-poverty schools, including both traditional public schools and publicly funded charter schools. Nearly six out of 10 school students living in low-income households qualify for free or reduced price lunch. In general, schools with high enrollment of poor or near-poor students perform at lower academic levels than schools filled with students of middle-class and affluent families.

The U.S. Census reports that North Carolina ranks 47th in per-pupil spending relative to overall personal income, a measurement of a state's effort in funding public schools.[4] And yet, surely the nation's ninth most populous state has the capacity to afford a stronger effort to invest in public education.

Politics, polarization, and pandemic

By the end of the 20th century, the great three-prong consensus had begun to recede as such issues as health care, environment, gun violence, and crime competed for priority. Highway-building and industry-hunting remained rooted in policy, while a great education debate arose out of political, cultural, and demographic trends in the nation and North Carolina.

Also, the 2008-09 recession and the 2020-22 pandemic had unanticipated ripple effects on education budgeting and policymaking. The political division on education reflects the character of contemporary American party coalitions.

The nonpartisan Pew Research Center offers extensive analysis of the sharp differences in the composition of the two major parties. To summarize, based on 2022 results: Democratic voters were on average, younger, more racially and ethnically diverse, and more likely to possess college degrees than Republican voters. More than eight in 10 Republican voters were white. Democrats had more strength in cities, Republicans in rural communities, with a rough balance in suburbs.[5]

This analysis ignores the rise of unaffiliated votes in North Carolina. More voters are register unaffiliated now than are registered in either party: as of March 2024, there were 2,238,554 registered Republicans; 2,409,932 registered Democrats; and 2,746,876 voters registered as unaffiliated.

From 2010-23, North Carolina politics featured closely competitive statewide elections – narrow vote margins elected candidates of widely diverging agendas. Former Republican President Donald Trump won the state's electoral votes in 2016 and 2020 with slightly less than 50% in both elections. Democrat Roy Cooper won two terms as governor with 49% in 2016, 51% in 2020.

In the General Assembly, Republicans gained majorities in the House and Senate in the 2010 election, held during the steep recession that shocked the nation and ravaged the state budget. Subsequently, they solidified control through aggressive redistricting. After six years of checks and balances with a Democratic governor wielding veto power,

Republicans reached veto-proof majorities in the House and Senate in the 2023 legislative session.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the great education debate. Beginning in March 2020, Gov. Cooper ordered schools closed to in-person instruction. For a year or so, many public schools conducted classes online, while the fleet of yellow buses delivered food and internet hot spots.

The federal government poured in a torrent of relief funding, as teachers, principals, and district administrators strived valiantly to sustain learning. The pandemic experience reinforced the importance of students' access to wireless internet and of schools' attention to their mental health.

And yet, some frustrated parents protested prolonged public school closures. Soon a "parents' rights" movement re-emerged. The protests, which Republican officeholders amplified, extended to vaccinations and masking, the teaching of American racial history, book bans, LGBTQ+ students, and school-based mental health services. Local school boards became forums for heated debates.

A sharp right turn

Shortly before the COVID-19 outbreak, *Leandro v. State of North Carolina*, a court case that had run for more than two decades, came to a critical juncture. In the mid-1990s, several low-wealth school districts, along with students and parents, had filed a suit, leading eventually to a landmark state Supreme Court ruling establishing a right to a sound, basic education. Such an education, said the high court, requires a well-trained teacher in every classroom, a competent principal with leadership skills, and "the resources necessary" to meet the "educational needs of all children, including at-risk children."

Before he died of cancer in 2022, Superior Court Judge David Lee had sought to implement an eight-year plan to bridge gaps and narrow inequities in accord with the state Supreme Court's ruling. He drew from an extensive study conducted by WestEd, a California-based national education consulting firm.

"State funding has not kept pace with the growth and needs of the pre-K-12 student body," Judge Lee wrote. "The state does not currently provide adequate resources to ensure that all students have the opportunity to obtain a sound basic education, as well as to meet higher standards and become college-and-career ready. There is inadequate funding to meet student needs, especially among economically-disadvantaged students and students in high-poverty schools."

Gov. Cooper incorporated elements of the "comprehensive remedial plan" in his budget proposals submitted to the legislature. The governor's package called for higher pay for educators to retain and recruit well-trained teachers and for a range of efforts to strengthen low-performing schools in rural communities and metro areas.

The Republican majority in the General Assembly adopted a budget that provided roughly half of the education spending in the court order for two years. Lawmakers argued not against the educational substance of the plan but rather that the legislative branch of government, not the governor or the courts, has ultimate power to appropriate funds. Subsequently, the state Supreme Court, with a newly elected Republican majority, agreed to block Lee's order and rehear the case.

Meanwhile, the Republican legislative majority moved ahead with an agenda they had initiated a decade ago.

The 2023 session of the General Assembly was a milestone in Republicans' drive to put their stamp on state policy in education, taxation, and more. The legislature enacted, by overriding the governor's vetoes, laws to facilitate the expansion of charter schools as well as to require public school educators to inform parents when their child changes a name or pronoun. Through the power of appointment, they sought increased legislative influence on the course of study in K-12 classrooms and over the governance of community colleges. They expanded private school subsidies by making all students eligible regardless of family income along with new yet relatively modest testing provisions to measure private schools' educational quality.

Republican lawmakers also continued their decade-long, step-by-step diminishment of individual and corporate income taxes. Income tax reductions are projected to cost the state as much as $6 billion in what

would have been available annual revenue by the end of this decade – in effect restraining the state's ability to fund public education systems to meet the challenges of the times.

North Carolina, now what?

From a newly built school on Ocracoke Island to Swain County High School in the Great Smoky Mountains, public schools with more than 188,000 full-time employees including educators reflect and define rural communities, suburban subdivisions, and city neighborhoods in the sprawling multi-dimensional state that is North Carolina. Even with a slight decline in the school-age population and a post-pandemic uptick in private and homeschool enrollment, more than 1.5 million young children and adolescents – around eight out of 10 – attend schools funded by the state, county, and federal governments.

"Today's kids are different," Bill Daggett, an education futurist, said at a conference held by the NC Chamber. Thus, he said, they are not served well by schools designed for the economy of the previous century, schools familiar to adult teachers and parents. Daggett focused especially on the implications of the current generation of students who connect to each other and the world outside through hand-held devices.

But North Carolina's "kids are different" in other ways as well. They are more diverse than ever – the state having shifted from a largely biracial to a multi-ethnic Black-white-Asian-Hispanic-American Indian society. They are also part of a "lockdown generation" of students living through an era of school shootings. And, many of them are still recovering from the disruptions to learning as well as to sports and extracurricular activities caused by COVID-19.

Students still need reading, writing, and math, as Daggett said.

But they also need the development of ethical sensibility, interpersonal skills, and public engagement encouragement.

Schools educate people to cope with their times. Schools equip people with know-how to thrive in a career. What's more, schools educate

leaders to bring about change in their own times and places.

Just as schools responded to industrialization and the space race in the 20th century, so now they are challenged to prepare young people for the accelerating changes of the 21st century.

But at this moment in time when the state should be focused on transforming education for the 4th industrial revolution, the politics of education is fueling investment in a mixed-delivery system where it will be even harder for the state to assure access to a sound, basic education.

No doubt the state's great education debate will proceed with intensity through elections for governor, state superintendent, other statewide offices, and legislative seats in 2024 – and through elections and legislative sessions for the remainder of this decade and beyond.

The times keep on a-changin' and as the song says, "come senators, congressmen, please heed the call," because the need for educational improvement – for quality public schools, colleges, and universities to meet the demands of the future – continues while this great education debate unfolds.

As Terry Sanford taught, another educational frontier is just waiting to be explored.

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Chapter 1. The history of public education in North Carolina, and its role in economic growth

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Chapter 7. From a great consensus to a great debate

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About EdNC

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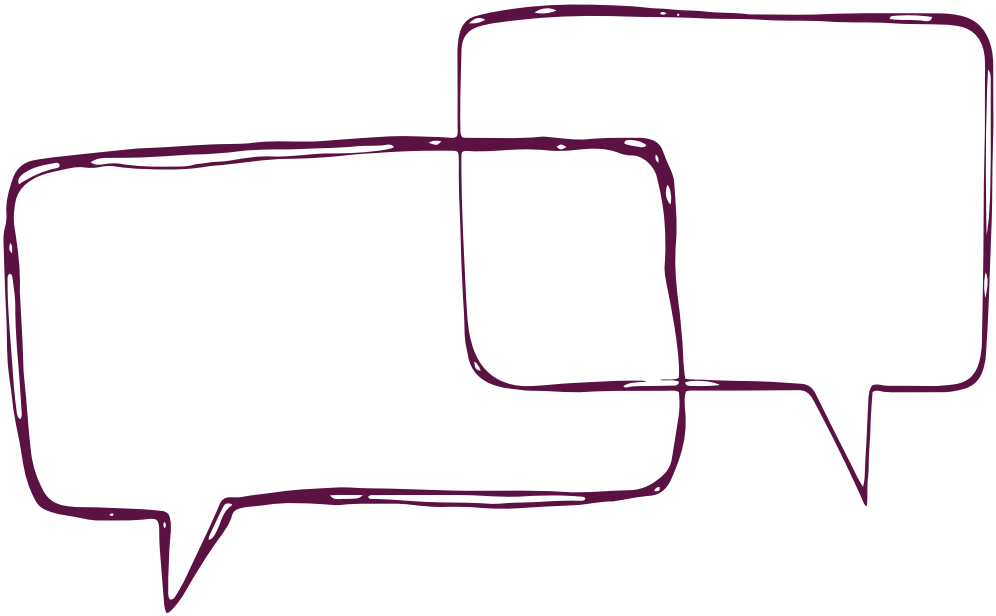

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