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EDUCATE North Carolina

Early Learning to Postsecondary Completion

Issue Briefs



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for EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP *and* POLICY

Working at the intersection of policy and politics

TABLE of Contents

SESSION I:

Effective Teaching | Accurate Measures and Strong Supports2

SESSION II:

Teacher Compensation | What's it Worth?5

SESSION III:

About Face | Turning Around Low-Performing Schools.....7

SESSION IV:

Point A to Point B | Improving Postsecondary Transition10

SESSION V:

Ready to Learn | Literacy in the Early Years.....13

SESSION VI:

Adolescent Literacy | Reading for Readiness.....17

Research indicates that teachers are the most important school-based factor for student growth and achievement.¹ It is also clear that the quality of teachers can vary both across school districts and within schools themselves. Low-income students are disproportionately more likely to have less effective teachers, placing these students at a significant disadvantage. A single year with an ineffective teacher can cost a student up to one and a half years' worth of achievement.² On the other hand, five consecutive years with an effective teacher could nearly close the achievement gap.³

Until recently, the requirements of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, known as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), have led states to focus mainly on ensuring that there are “highly qualified teachers” in every classroom. NCLB defines “highly qualified” in terms of inputs — teachers must hold a bachelor’s degree, be licensed by the state, and demonstrate subject matter competency. Today, many states are considering teacher quality in terms of the outputs they produce — namely, the achievement of their students. From 2007 to 2010, the number of states requiring evidence of student learning to be the most significant criterion in teacher evaluations rose from four to ten.⁴

Although it is clear that strong teachers are essential for student achievement, less is known about what elements of a teacher’s practice make a difference for students. Regular evaluations are one tool that can identify a teacher’s strengths and hone in on areas for improvement. Ideally, this process provides teachers with feedback on their performance and gives administrators the information they need to develop teacher supports and make personnel decisions. This information is critical to improving the effectiveness of teachers; research demonstrates that without useful feedback, most teachers’ performance plateaus by their third or fourth year on the job.⁵

Unfortunately, teacher evaluation systems often use a binary “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory” rating that doesn’t provide detailed information about a teacher’s strengths and weaknesses. These systems can also send a signal that there is little room for improvement. According to The New Teacher Project’s report, *The Widget Effect*, more than 99 percent of teachers receive a satisfactory rating under this type of binary evaluation system.⁶

A more comprehensive approach is needed to promote effective teaching in every classroom. Based on research and the experience of districts and states across the country, the strongest teacher evaluation systems:

- Define and identify effective teachers;
- Provide a mechanism to reward and retain effective teachers;
- Prompt the removal of ineffective teachers;
- Provide feedback to teacher training programs; and
- Guide professional development.

In and of itself, a teacher evaluation system will not improve instruction. It is the ongoing professional development and support that teachers receive that will help them to improve the effectiveness of their work in the classroom. In California, the **Long Beach Unified School District** uses a data-driven approach to analyze teacher practices, student achievement scores, and teacher professional development scores to target training where it is needed most. The district also works to build the capacity teachers need to increase student achievement through in-depth training institutes and a two-year professional development program for new teachers.

MEASURES USED TO EVALUATE TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS

In recent years, states have begun searching for measures of teacher effectiveness that better reflect the professional practices of teachers and the achievement of their students. These measures include the following:

■ Value-added measures

Learning is a complex process that can be affected by a range of variables including a student's previous teachers, instruction delivered in other subjects, the school environment, and a student's home life. Some states are developing "value-added" measures to factor in these elements and analyze whether student achievement and growth is on track. Value-added measures compare the growth in a student's standardized test scores to an expected student growth trajectory. The Education Value-Added Assessment System, or EVAAS model, used in North Carolina uses prior test scores to predict future scores; other systems do the same but also control for student characteristics. These models typically require multiple years of data for both teachers and students to allow for accurate measurement. For instance, **Tennessee** requires a minimum of three years of available data before value-added measures are used to evaluate teachers.⁷

Researchers and policymakers who favor value-added measures argue that they produce consistent enough results year to year to warrant incorporation into teacher evaluation systems.⁸ Others suggest that value-added measures are not a sufficiently stable measure of teacher effectiveness and fail to account for factors like classroom dynamics.⁹ Yet even proponents of value-added measures acknowledge that the method **should only be used in combination with other measures of teacher effectiveness.**¹⁰

■ Classroom observations of instructional practice

Observation and feedback from a trained observer can provide rich information about the effectiveness of instruction in the classroom. To ensure that observation measures are valid and reliable, principals and other evaluators need training and support so that they are fully prepared to conduct meaningful observations. It is also important to have well-established rubrics so that the evaluator captures the most critical aspects of instruction.

■ Student perceptions of the classroom environment

Early research through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation-funded *Measures of Effective Teaching* (MET) study has found that student perceptions of the classroom environment are fairly consistent with student outcomes. Further guidance on the potential use of student surveys in evaluations is expected later this year when the MET study is completed.

■ Teacher perceptions of working conditions and instructional support at their schools

Researchers have noted that teaching practices are influenced by two factors: teacher characteristics and the situational forces that teachers face.¹¹ A comprehensive evaluation system will also include measures that attempt to capture information about the environment in which a teacher works. In North Carolina, the bi-annual *NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey* asks teachers from across the state for their perceptions of their classroom and school experiences.

TEACHER EVALUATION IN NORTH CAROLINA

The set of standards that are currently used to evaluate teachers in North Carolina were adopted by the State Board of Education (SBE) in June 2007. The teacher evaluation instrument is based on five standards and includes a teacher self-assessment, a pre-observation meeting between the teacher and principal, and classroom observations by the principal. Before the end of each school year, the principal rates the teacher as developing, proficient, accomplished, or distinguished based on the teaching standards. All teachers in the state are evaluated on these standards as of the 2010-2011 school year.

As part of its *Race to the Top* plan, in July 2011, **the SBE adopted an additional sixth standard that directly addresses a teacher's impact on student achievement.** The teacher evaluation instrument will continue to be used in its current form in 2011-2012 while the measures for the sixth standard are developed. The principal evaluation instrument is aligned the teacher evaluation tool, and has been updated to include **a new standard that evaluates how principals contribute to the academic growth of their students.**

This year, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) will develop parameters for how student achievement will be measured as part of the sixth standard. NC DPI will also perform pilot studies to consider whether student surveys and team value-added data may be used to evaluate teachers' impact on student achievement. In addition, 60 teacher work groups will convene to develop test item specifications that will measure student learning in non-tested grades and subjects; a vendor will develop the actual items, and teacher teams will vet these items for inclusion in the final measures.

A Teacher Effectiveness Work Group, part of the commission convened by Governor Bev Perdue to oversee *Race to the Top*, will consider how to add the student growth component to the teacher and principal evaluation tools. This group will be advised by an outside vendor on the selection of a student growth model, **which will go into effect in the 2012-2013 school year. No teacher will be evaluated on the sixth standard until he or she has three years of student achievement data to ensure reliability.**¹²

In November 2011, North Carolina — along with Colorado, Nevada, and Guam — was selected to participate in the *State Strategies to Evaluate Teacher Effectiveness Policy Academy* led by the National Governors Association (NGA) and sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Through the academy, North Carolina will be able to receive technical assistance from NGA and its partners as it continues to develop teacher effectiveness policies.

The traditional teacher pay system uses a series of “steps and lanes” to reward teachers for every year in the classroom and typically offers pay increases as teachers earn advanced degrees and certifications. Proponents of alternative compensation plans for teachers suggest that other models may be more effective in recruiting and retaining good teacher candidates and can reward educators for the strides they make in improving student performance. Alternative compensation models can include one or more of the following ways to differentiate teacher pay:

- **Pay for skills and knowledge:** Teachers receive extra compensation as they earn advanced degrees and specialized certifications, such as National Board Certification.
- **Pay for hard-to-staff subjects or schools:** Often used as a recruitment or retention tool to attract teachers in high-demand fields or to struggling schools where strong teachers are needed.
- **Pay for additional roles and responsibilities:** Teachers may receive extra pay for taking on greater workloads while serving in advanced or “master” teaching roles.
- **Pay-for-performance:** Additional pay is rewarded based on the output of student performance.¹³

ALTERNATIVE COMPENSATION PLANS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES

Given the current spotlight on identifying effective teaching practices, a number of states and districts have explored alternative compensation models that reward teachers based on the performance of their students. The budget signed into law by **Ohio** Governor John Kasich in July 2011 requires that schools receiving *Race to the Top* funds pay teachers based on performance. This year, **Georgia** is bringing in a team of experts to develop a new statewide system to evaluate teachers and school administrators based on student performance. Select districts will pilot a pay-for-performance plan based on the evaluation system in the 2013-2014 school year.¹⁴ The state of **Tennessee** has secured more than \$194 million in public and private support for district alternative compensation plans. Districts that apply for these funds must develop compensation plans that are not only based on student performance, but also include additional teacher training and mentoring.¹⁵

In 2006, the **Houston Independent School District (HISD)** launched the largest district-level performance pay program in the United States. The program was implemented as part of a broader education reform initiative called *ASPIRE* (Accelerating Student Progress, Increasing Results & Expectations).¹⁶ *ASPIRE* uses value-added analysis to examine a student’s academic growth over time. All school campus-based employees are eligible for rewards; two of the three award categories are based on value-added scores. In 2011, the bonuses awarded to staff and teachers ranged from \$100 to \$15,530.

A study analyzing HISD student data over a three-year period found a dramatic increase in the rate of improvement. Since implementing the *ASPIRE* Award Program, HISD has seen positive growth in student-level achievement gains and overall achievement.¹⁷

RESEARCH FINDINGS ON PAY-FOR-PERFORMANCE

It should be noted that current research is limited on whether performance pay leads to higher student achievement. A 2010 study of a pay-for-performance system in the Nashville Public Schools found that teacher bonus pay alone, absent other supports, does not raise student achievement.¹⁸ Others have expressed concern that pay-for-performance plans can have negative consequences for teacher morale and collaboration and may also lead teachers to focus on a narrow set of objectives.^{19,20}

States and districts looking to implement pay-for-performance plans also confront the challenge of measuring teacher contributions to student achievement in non-tested grades and subjects, as well as teachers of students with disabilities. Research estimates that as many as 69 percent of teachers would not be able to be accurately assessed with test-score based models.²¹ Some districts have preferred to use school-level incentives rather than incentives for individual teachers, given the difficulty of measuring the contribution of a single teacher.²²

LESSONS LEARNED FROM PERFORMANCE PAY PROGRAMS

The Center for Educator Compensation Reform (CECR) is a research organization funded by the U.S. Department of Education that raises awareness of effective strategies for teacher pay reform. It has provided technical assistance to a number of districts — including Houston and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools — that received federal grants to implement performance pay programs. CECR has identified four major lessons learned from the work of these programs:²³

- 1. Communications:** Designers of pay-for-performance programs need a strategic communications plan that builds buy-in from the community and clearly communicates the structure and intent of the program. The objectives of the performance-pay program should be clearly defined so that the public understands the reasons why this plan is being implemented.
- 2. Buy-In:** It is important to obtain the buy-in of stakeholder groups including parents, union leaders, local school boards, and local business leaders when implementing a new pay system. In particular, teachers should ideally be involved throughout process of developing the pay-for-performance plan. The success of the program will depend on whether teachers believe that pay-for-performance programs are fair and can have a positive impact on student achievement.
- 3. Fairness:** Many districts and states that have attempted to implement pay-for-performance plans have realized too late that they lacked adequate funding to successfully implement a comprehensive performance-pay program. States must consider how these programs will be sustained both financially and politically over time.
- 4. Comprehensiveness:** Experts agree that tests alone cannot offer a valid and reliable measure of teacher effectiveness. It is critically important to use multiple forms of assessment to obtain a full picture of teacher performance (including test scores, evaluations, and other items like student surveys). Using only a single measure may ignore other important aspects of a teacher's practice and also prevents full buy-in from teachers and principals.

According to recent estimates, by 2018, approximately 60 percent of all jobs will require some education beyond high school; nearly 59 percent of jobs in North Carolina will require some postsecondary education.²⁴ Unfortunately, the country is falling short of preparing students for this reality. Twenty years ago, the United States had the highest postsecondary attainment rate in the world for adults ages 25-34. Today, it ranks fifteenth.

The United States will not be able to develop a globally competitive workforce without taking urgent steps to address the significant achievement gaps that exist between students and to turn around the country's lowest-performing schools. Recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) do demonstrate that the achievement gap has closed since 2009 between low-income students in both fourth and eighth grades for both reading and mathematics. That said, fewer than one in four African American, Latino, and low-income children scored at the proficient level on the fourth-grade NAEP tests in math and reading.²⁵ This achievement gap is costly to the country. A 2009 report from McKinsey & Company estimated that the achievement gap between low- and high-income kids costs the United States between \$400 and \$670 billion each year.²⁶

At a time when postsecondary education is critical for students' future success, **fresh ideas and proven strategies can help students in the most struggling schools achieve a high level of performance and graduate fully ready for careers or postsecondary education.** Innovative programs and school districts across the country are attaining notable outcomes and are demonstrating that high academic achievement is possible for even the most disadvantaged students. In fact, some innovative high-poverty schools are able to outperform their peers thanks to an intensive focus on strong instruction, integrated supports for students, and flexibility from traditional operating conditions.²⁷

For example, the **Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP)** network of college-preparatory charter schools has attained remarkable outcomes for K-12 students across the country. By the end of eighth grade, 66 percent of KIPP students outperform national peers in math, and 54 percent outperform their peers in reading.²⁸ In California, the **Green Dot Public Schools**, a series of 17 charter high schools, is demonstrating success in preparing traditionally disadvantaged students for postsecondary education. More than 90 percent of Green Dot Public Schools complete California's rigorous college-preparatory curriculum compared with less than 30 percent of students in the Los Angeles Unified School District.²⁹

BARRIERS TO INNOVATION

Budgets are tight across the country, and investing in innovation has been a financial challenge for public schools. The United States spends more than \$500 billion in public funds and \$4 billion in philanthropic dollars on public K-12 education, yet less than one-quarter of one percent of the entire education budget in the country is spent on research and development. In the private sector, fields like medicine and engineering invest as much as 15 to 20 percent in research and development.³⁰

In addition to financial challenges, those working to bring new ideas to scale face a number of structural barriers and lack of coordination among groups. Professors David Cohn and Deborah Lowenberg Ball of the University of Michigan suggest in order to “scale up” a new idea in public education, leaders also need to “scale in” and develop the internal infrastructure needed to support effective use of the new idea. These researchers have identified four key explanations for why innovations fail in public education:

1. **Poor design:** Innovations may fail to take hold in schools and systems because they are not designed well enough to be usable for teachers. These new ideas can also fail because teachers don’t have sufficient opportunities to learn how to use them.
2. **Lack of incentives to change:** New ideas fail because schools and school systems are resistant to change because there are insufficient incentives in place for them to change what they are doing.
3. **Insufficient focus on teachers:** Innovations may fail because they do not focus enough on the actual practices of teachers in the classroom.
4. **Fragmentation:** The complexity and fragmentation of the education system can make it difficult to ensure consistency in the adoption and implementation of new practices and ideas.³¹

LEARNING FROM EFFORTS TO TRANSFORM STRUGGLING SCHOOLS

The current economic crisis presents an opportunity to think critically about new strategies and learn from those who have made strides to raise student achievement. Trailblazing leaders like Chris Barbic, founder of the YES Prep Public Schools, and Jerry Weast, former superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools, have demonstrated records of success in implementing innovative programs with strong outcomes.

YES Prep and the Tennessee Achievement School District

The YES Prep Public Schools, a series of charter schools founded by Chris Barbic, were established to increase the number of Houston (TX) students who graduate from a four-year college. Since its creation in 1995, YES Prep has grown from a single district charter school program to a charter school system serving 4,200 students on 8 campuses. These schools serve a diverse group of students, most of whom are low-income and are first-generation college bound. The central components of these schools include a rigorous college preparation curriculum, enrichment opportunities, service learning, and personalized career and college counseling.

YES Prep has received recognition for its record of success. Ninety percent of the students in the class of 2010 graduated from high school, compared with a 70 percent graduation rate for the Houston Independent School District. Approximately 80 percent of YES Prep alumni are currently enrolled in college or have completed their degrees. This is particularly noteworthy, given that only 25 percent of low-income students nationally enroll in college.

Today, Barbic leads the **Tennessee Achievement School District (ASD)**, a statewide school district focused on turning around the state’s lowest-performing schools. These schools may be converted into charter schools, taken over by the state, or managed by a combination of local and state control. The state has set aside \$49 million of *Race to the Top* funds to support the district and operate it for five years. Five schools are currently being co-managed by the ASD, and as many as 85 of the lowest-performing schools in the state may become part of the district if Tennessee’s waiver for *No Child Left Behind* is accepted by the U.S. Department of Education.

Montgomery County Public Schools

A strong emphasis on postsecondary and career readiness was crucial to the turnaround of the **Montgomery County Public Schools** (MCPS) in Maryland. Dr. Jerry Weast led MCPS for 12 years, and under his leadership the district attained the highest graduation rate among the nation's 50 largest school systems for 3 consecutive years. A key component of the school turnaround strategy was a focus on ensuring that every student graduated ready to succeed in college. On its own, the district worked to define college-ready target scores on the SAT and ACT. It then worked backwards to establish a series of straightforward academic targets – the *Seven Keys to College Readiness* – students would need to attain through their years of schooling to graduate fully college ready. Leaders also established a “red zone” within the district, an area with a high concentration of low-performing, high-poverty schools. Schools in this zone received extra resources and programs, like smaller class sizes and supplemental training for teachers.

The district has seen dramatic results from its turnaround work. As of January 2010, 78 percent of students took Honors or Advanced Placement tests. In addition, the percentage of African-American and Hispanic students scoring three or higher on AP tests is higher than the national average for all students. MCPS has narrowed the achievement gaps between African-American and Hispanic students and white students in elementary and middle school reading and math. From 2006 to 2009, the district closed the gap between African-American and white students in middle school reading by 12 percentage points.³²

As North Carolina works to implement higher standards and improve teacher effectiveness, it is likely that students' readiness for postsecondary education will improve, and the need for remedial education will be reduced in the not-so-distant future. However, in the interim, policymakers must find ways to ensure that students get the assistance they need to succeed in postsecondary education both while they are still in high school, as well as once they arrive on a community college or university campus.

Most students believe that when they graduate from high school, they should be prepared for postsecondary work in community colleges or universities. Nevertheless, too many students soon discover that their high school diplomas do not guarantee that they will be successful in college. A recent study by ACT found that **only one-third of North Carolina students who took the ACT were college-ready.**³³ Students who are underprepared often must take one or more remedial or developmental courses in English, reading, or math. According to the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS), in the fall of 2009, nearly two-thirds (61 percent) of first-time, credential-seeking NCCCS students were enrolled in at least one developmental course in English, reading, or math, and 33 percent were enrolled in two or more developmental courses.³⁴ Based on system-wide data from The University of North Carolina, nine percent of first-year students who began at a UNC institution in the fall of 2008 took at least one remedial course in their first semester; this rate likely varies by campus.³⁵

Remedial or developmental courses are often the first barrier students face on their path to completing a postsecondary degree or credential. The courses are costly to students, postsecondary institutions, and the state; are focused on knowledge and skills students should have learned in high school; and often do not provide credit towards a student's credential or degree. **In addition, research shows that students pursuing a certificate, associate's, or bachelor's degree who took remedial or developmental courses were significantly less likely to complete their credential or degree than students who did not need remedial courses:**

- Nationally, less than 25 percent of students who begin in remedial education at two-year institutions ultimately complete a degree or certificate program, compared to 40 percent who do not need remediation.³⁶
- Only 17 percent of students in four-year institutions who take a remedial reading course and 27 percent who take a remedial math course eventually graduate.³⁷

PROMISING PRACTICES

As policymakers in North Carolina and around the nation work to ensure that more students successfully complete a postsecondary degree or credential, policy solutions generally fall into two categories: interventions to help students avoid remediation and programs that accelerate students' paths through remedial courses and into credit-bearing courses.

One way that states and districts are working to improve postsecondary completion rates is to help students get the assistance they need before they enroll in a community college or university program. These types of initiatives generally fall into three categories:

- **Early Assessment:** These programs evaluate high school students' postsecondary readiness early enough so that they can improve their skills before high school graduation. Providing targeted remedial courses to high school students allows them to improve their skills in basic content areas before they must pay out of pocket to cover the same material in their postsecondary programs. One exemplary example of this type of intervention is the *California Early Assessment Program* (see box below).
- **Dual Enrollment Programs:** Though most often thought of as enrichment for high-achieving students, dual enrollment programs — where students take college courses and earn college credits while still enrolled in high school — are now also being used to create opportunities for at-risk students in some states. These types of programs provide college access to high school students who might have never previously considered postsecondary education. The **Early College High School (ECHS)** model is one example of a dual enrollment program geared towards academically disadvantaged students. Recent national analyses found that 75 percent of 2007 ECHS graduates earned some college credit, and an additional 10 percent earned enough credits for an associate's degree.³⁸ In North Carolina, a recent experimental study found that North Carolina ECHS students were better prepared for college than students in the control group, especially in math.³⁹

THE CALIFORNIA EARLY ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

The *California Early Assessment Program (EAP)* assesses the readiness of California public high school students for college-level English and mathematics courses and provides intensive remedial high school coursework to those students who need additional preparation. Established by legislation in 2001, the program came about as administrators of the 23-campus California State University (CSU) noted that more than 60 percent of first-time students needed remedial assistance in English or mathematics. CSU worked together with administrators from the California Department of Education and the California State Board of Education to create an aligned system of assessments and remediation. In 2008, state legislation expanded the EAP to include the California Community Colleges.⁴⁰ There are three components to the program:

- **Early testing:** Fifteen early assessment test items and an essay are integrated into the state's eleventh-grade English and math assessments. Students who score at a high enough level to be deemed college-ready based on their results are exempt from taking remedial coursework at CSU or the community colleges. Test items were jointly developed by CSU and K-12 faculty and cover both California high school standards and CSU placement standards.
 - **Twelfth-grade coursework:** Students who do not score at a college-ready level on the EAP test items are able to take several pathways during their senior year to avoid remediation. These pathways include taking additional courses aimed to improve their reading, writing, and/or math skills during their senior year or enrolling in an online math program developed by CSU.
 - **Professional development:** The EAP includes in-depth professional development for high school English and mathematics teachers. The math professional development was developed by a team of university professors, educators from CSU, and high school math teachers.
- The EAP has remarkably high participation rates; in spring 2009, approximately 82 percent of eligible eleventh graders participated in the English EAP, while 77 percent of eligible eleventh graders took the math EAP.⁴¹ Analyses of the EAP show that the program has demonstrated results in improving student preparation for college. One study found that from 2004 to 2009, the number of students who needed remedial assistance in English dropped by six percentage points; there was also a four percentage point drop in the number of students who needed remediation in math.⁴²

- **Summer Bridge Programs:** These programs are generally designed for students who have just graduated from high school and are entering a postsecondary program in the fall. These programs typically involve three-to-five week courses that are aimed at helping students to improve on placement exams so that they will no longer need remedial education. Some programs also include “college-skills” seminars.

One of the biggest concerns with remedial education is the amount of time it takes for many students to complete the recommended courses – time that is not being spent in credit-bearing courses. In most remedial education programs, courses are taught for the duration of a full semester. For the lowest-performing students who must complete a sequence of remedial courses, it can take several semesters before they are able to begin their actual program coursework. It is not surprising that many students do not ever make it past this first barrier. A study by the *Achieving the Dream* initiative found that less than **30 percent of students who place into the lowest levels of developmental math and reading ever finish their remedial sequences.**⁴³

Innovative institutions around the country are currently looking at new ways to offer students the assistance they need in a more cost- and time-efficient manner. One method that is gaining support is **modularized remediation**, where students take shorter modules to brush up on the skills they need, rather than taking a semester-long course that may also cover material they’ve mastered. The increased ease of use and accessibility of online learning will likely lend itself well to this model. Similarly, **fast-track courses** compress semester-long courses into a shorter time frame, such as several weeks during the summer or half a semester during the school year, allowing students to progress into credit-bearing courses more quickly.

Other institutions are looking into **mainstreaming** remedial students, where students enter into their entry-level, credit-bearing courses, but then receive additional supports and tutoring to ensure that they are able to succeed. In one variation of this model, remedial students might take a lengthened course (e.g. spread over two semesters instead of one) so that they can receive the additional help they need, while still earning college credit. While potentially more costly than traditional remedial models, this type of structure looks promising in terms of increasing student persistence towards a degree or credential.

EFFORTS IN NORTH CAROLINA

Efforts are underway in North Carolina to use the ACT to assess the college readiness of students. During its 2011 session, the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation to support the administration of the ACT to all students in the eleventh grade. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction is currently planning to use \$5.5 million in reversions to **administer the PLAN college readiness assessment to all tenth graders and the ACT to all eleventh graders free of charge in the 2011-2012 school year.** The state is also in the process of developing a new accountability model that could eventually use ACT results as a measure of students’ postsecondary readiness.

Additionally, under the newly announced *NC Career and College Promise* (NCCCP) program, high school students will have the opportunity to begin on a college-transfer or technical dual enrollment pathway that will allow them to earn community college credits tuition-free while still in high school. Developed as part of the NCCCP, the *Core 44* is an agreed-upon 44 credit-hour sequence that will transfer seamlessly to participating public colleges and universities in the state.

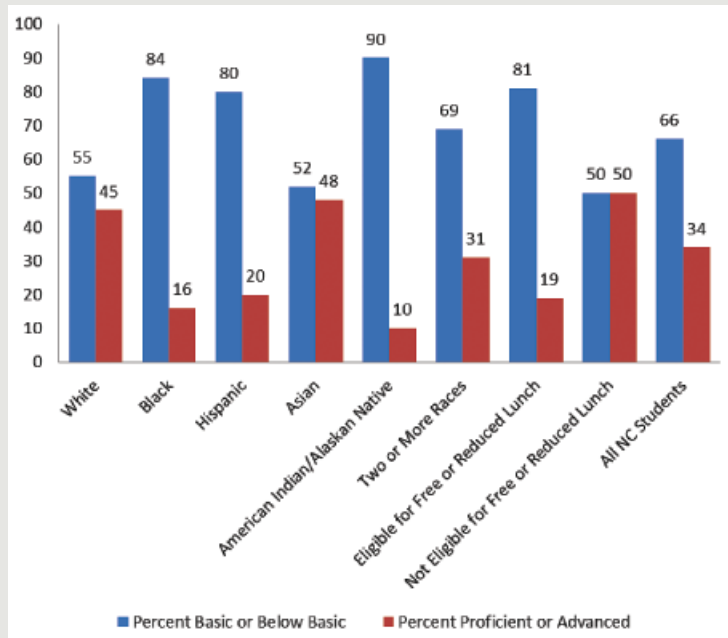
Strong literacy and language skills are the foundation of success in school and in life. Educators know that literacy development starts very early in life; in fact, research shows that the skills and abilities that children develop from birth through age five predict later reading outcomes.⁴⁴ A longitudinal study on language acquisition found that three-year-old children from high socioeconomic backgrounds had vocabularies that were nearly 50 percent greater than children from middle and low socioeconomic backgrounds and twice as large as those of children whose families received welfare.⁴⁵ Another study found that low-income children began school more than a year behind middle-income children.⁴⁶

For students who start out behind, the struggle to catch up compounds each year. This struggle reaches a critical turning point in the fourth grade, where teachers generally move away from direct reading instruction and students are expected to apply their reading skills to their broader coursework. This shift from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” creates a further disadvantage for students who are not reading at grade-level and affects their progress across the content areas.

Research confirms these observations: A recent study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that students who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to not graduate from high school than proficient readers. These students account for three-fifths of those who fail to graduate on time or eventually drop out.⁴⁷ This information is alarming, but it is important to recognize that the so-called “third-grade reading problem” is not a *third-grade* problem. Improving the reading skills of all students will require a comprehensive agenda that spans birth through K-12.

FOURTH GRADE READING PROFICIENCY IN NORTH CAROLINA⁴⁸

Researchers often use the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 4th Grade Reading test as a measure of literacy proficiency. On the 2011 NAEP, 66 percent of North Carolina fourth graders were not proficient in reading. For low-income students and children of color, the numbers were even more alarming.



A COMPREHENSIVE EARLY LITERACY STRATEGY

In order to ensure that more students are reading proficiently by the end of the third grade, states should consider developing comprehensive early literacy strategies that span birth through elementary school. Research shows that high-quality early education is a cost-effective investment for improving both early and later academic success, especially for students from low-income families and children of color.⁴⁹ Expanding access to quality early education programs is vital to improving the likelihood of reading success for all students (see box below to learn about North Carolina's winning *Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge* proposal).

According to a brief published by the National Institute for Early Education Research, quality literacy education in the early childhood years should include:

- Evidence-based curricula and teaching practices;
- Early literacy standards that are aligned with K-12 standards;
- Instructional standards for early childhood professionals; and
- Parental involvement programs with a strong early literacy component.⁵⁰

Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant Competition

In December 2011, North Carolina was one of nine states to win a *Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge* grant; 37 states had applied under the program. The proposal that North Carolina submitted in October builds on Governor Bev Perdue's *Career and College: Ready, Set, Go* initiative and aims to ensure that North Carolina's early childhood system prepares every child for success in school and life. North Carolina's *Early Learning Challenge Plan* has three overarching strategies:

- 1) Strengthen standards, assessments, and the capacity to collect data to drive program quality and continuous improvement;
- 2) Invest in people and relationships to increase teacher and system effectiveness and sustain change; and
- 3) Target high-intensity supports and community infrastructure-building efforts to turn around poor outcomes for young children in the state's highest-need counties.

Giving students a stronger foundation for reading through quality early childhood education will go a long way toward improving literacy among elementary school students, but the work continues once they enter the K-12 system. Students must be assessed as they progress throughout grades K-3 and given intervention and support as needed when they show signs of falling behind. This early intervention will help to reduce the number of students who reach the third grade without reading proficiently. Additionally, states need to look carefully at the literacy requirements they set for teacher preparation and licensing for all teachers, regardless of what grade or subject they teach. It is vital that all teacher candidates receive sufficient and high-quality training in literacy instruction. In **Massachusetts**, the state that led the nation on the 2011 NAEP for fourth- and eighth-grade reading, teacher candidates for PK-6 are required to pass a *Foundations of Reading* test in order to obtain licensure.

Policies to increase school readiness and intervene early when students show signs of falling behind should greatly reduce the need for retention. But, if we fail to ensure that a student is reading proficiently at the end of the third grade, they may need to be retained for an additional year of instruction and support. This is an element of a comprehensive literacy strategy, but it must be where the plan ends, not where it starts. Too often policy discussions of early literacy focus only on ending social promotion. This makes sense intuitively—if a student isn’t meeting grade-level standards in third grade, how can they be expected to meet the fourth-grade standards? However, the problem is more nuanced. While research does not support social promotion as an effective practice, neither does it find that retention has lasting effects on student achievement.⁵¹ Studies have found little to no effect on student achievement for retained students overall, and while some students who are retained show sharp improvement relative to promoted peers in meeting grade level standards during the repeat year, this improvement often disappears two-to-three years subsequent to retention.⁵² In cases where students do need to be retained for an additional year, they should be offered additional supports as well as instructional models to ensure that they are not just repeating the same curriculum and lessons.

RECENT STATE LEGISLATION AROUND READING PROFICIENCY⁵³

Many states are recognizing that retention and social promotion policies alone will not fix the literacy problem. Early identification, diagnostic assessment, effective interventions, and teachers who are knowledgeable and skilled in teaching reading are also important aspects of a comprehensive literacy strategy. In **New Mexico**, legislators are drawing from other states, like **Massachusetts**, and are working to ensure that all teachers are knowledgeable and skilled at literacy instruction.

State	Bill	Description	Includes retention policy
Utah	HB302	Requires a system of diagnostic reading tests at the beginning, middle, and end of each school year for grades K-3 and provides interventions based on test results.	No
Arizona	HB2732	Requires screening of the reading levels of all children entering grades K-3 and the retention of third-grade students who score “far below the third-grade level.”	Yes
Oklahoma	SB346	Requires schools to screen K-3 pupils for reading difficulties and provide help if they aren’t on track; students who do not improve up to the appropriate level by the end of the third grade will be retained and provided with intensive intervention during the repeated year.	Yes
New Mexico	HB74	Requires elementary school teachers to demonstrate a knowledge of the “science of teaching reading” in order to obtain licensure.	No

Literacy instruction traditionally focuses on the early grades, but too many middle and high school students do not have the reading and writing skills necessary for success. Students who are not reading at grade-level in middle and high school are at a disadvantage across the content areas as they are often expected to learn material through reading texts and articles. Even when secondary teachers recognize that students are struggling, they often lack the training and expertise to provide ongoing literacy instruction, as direct literacy instruction traditionally disappears by the end of elementary school.

The data confirm that many middle and high school students are struggling. According to the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), two-thirds of all eighth and twelfth graders score below the “proficient” level in reading. Roughly one quarter of eighth graders and twelfth graders score below the “basic” level, meaning they have only a partial mastery of grade-level knowledge and skills.⁵⁴ **In 2011, 69 percent of eighth graders in North Carolina scored below the proficient level in reading on the NAEP. This percentage has remained relatively constant since 1998.**⁵⁵

Low-income and minority students, in particular, are falling behind their peers in mastering reading and writing. According to a recent Harvard study, about 40 percent of the nation’s white students were identified as proficient in reading, whereas only 13 percent of African-American students and 5 percent of Hispanic students achieved the same level of proficiency.⁵⁶ In North Carolina, African-American students scored 24 points lower than white students on the 2011 NAEP. Hispanic students scored 16 points lower than white students. Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch averaged 22 points lower than their peers.⁵⁷ The achievement gap remains substantial, and action is needed to ensure that every student masters the essential skills of reading and writing.

LITERACY AND POSTSECONDARY READINESS

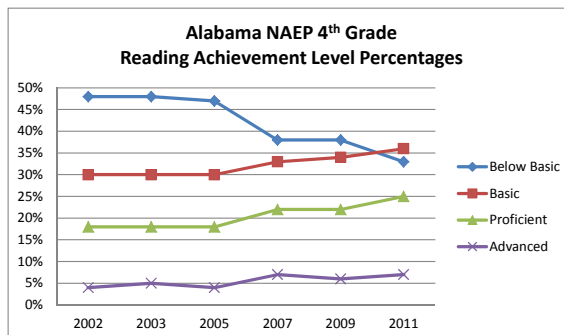
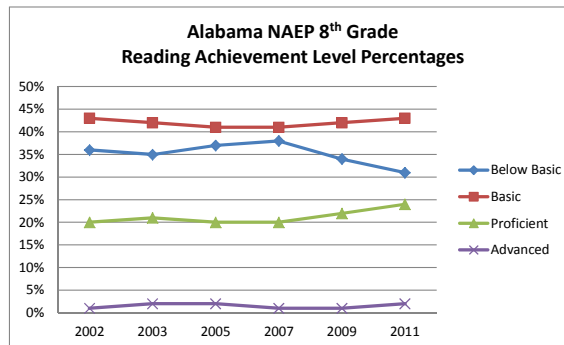
There is a disconnect between the skills and knowledge that students are expected to learn in high school and those that they need to be successful in college or the workplace. According to data from the ACT, one-third of the nation’s high school graduates are not prepared for an introductory-level college writing course and require remediation.⁵⁸ This challenge is true in the workplace and the military as well. A recent survey of more than 400 employers across the nation found that over one-half of high school graduates entering the workplace are inadequately prepared in important literacy skills, including oral and written communications, reading comprehension, and critical thinking and problem solving.⁵⁹

Young people entering college or the workplace are expected to read and comprehend complex texts, like highly technical manuals and detailed textbooks, and make arguments based on the information gleaned from the texts. With the abundance of information available to them through online sources, students must also use analytical reading skills to determine which pieces are evidence-based and pertinent to their work. But studies have shown that the texts students are asked to read in grades K-12 have decreased in difficulty over the last five decades.⁶⁰ What is more, middle and high school courses do not emphasize the information-rich texts young people will encounter in college or the workplace, such as textbooks, manuals, and articles. They also do not emphasize the essential critical reading skills students need to decipher factual materials.⁶¹ Students need to be exposed to increasingly complex texts while in high school so that they are prepared to master reading material in college and the workplace. In addition, teachers of all subject areas need training and professional development in literacy so that they can incorporate appropriate materials in their classrooms and provide necessary support to struggling readers.

North Carolina's new *Essential Standards for English Language Arts* are aligned with 48 other states and address this need by introducing students to texts of increasing difficulty through the grades as well as a variety of texts that better reflect college and career expectations. Students are taught to use more challenging texts as they develop their reading, writing, and analytical skills over time.⁶²

STATEWIDE EFFORTS

A number of states are currently involved in comprehensive efforts to improve adolescent literacy in their local schools and districts. Perhaps the best known of these initiatives is the **Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI)**. The statewide professional development program is designed to improve reading instruction and, ultimately, achieve 100 percent literacy among public school students. Established as a pilot program in 1998, the program provides a number of supports, including professional development, onsite support, and school coaches. It focuses on three aspects of reading instruction: **preventing reading difficulties; identifying struggling readers** and helping them to become proficient; and **improving the reading skills of all students**. The state points to improvements on the NAEP as evidence of the program's success. Over the last eight years, **Alabama has shown the largest statewide increase in fourth grade reading skills and ranks sixth in reading score improvements by eighth graders over the same period.**



Source:
National Center for Education Statistics. (2011) *Alabama State Snapshot Report Grade 4 and 8 Reading*.

Another leading effort is **Just Read, Florida!**, a comprehensive reading initiative created in 2001. The program trains reading coaches, principals, and teachers; gives parents strategies to help their children with reading; and works with teacher preparation programs and districts to integrate research-based reading instructional strategies. After 10 years of operation, **16 percent more middle-grade students and 12 percent more high school students were reading on grade level or higher.** The program has also had success among minority populations with **23 percent more Hispanic students and 19 percent more African-American students reading on grade level or higher since 2001.**

An early adopter of the commonly developed state standards, **Kentucky** is now implementing the new Kentucky Core Academic Standards. To implement them well, the state has made significant investments in professional development for literacy instruction. **The 2009 passage of bipartisan education reform legislation known as Senate Bill 1 created professional development networks to improve literacy instruction.** Each district sends “teacher-leaders” to network meetings to learn literacy instruction techniques. These teacher-leaders then train other teachers in their districts to use the new skills. The professional development work builds upon previous state efforts to improve adolescent literacy, including the creation of the *Collaborative Center for Literacy Development* (CCLD), a partnership between state higher education institutions and the Kentucky Department of Education to develop literacy projects across the state.

Kentucky is also part of the *State Adolescent Literacy Network*, formed in 2007 by the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE). The Network, which also includes **Connecticut, New Hampshire, Utah, and West Virginia**, receives financial support and technical assistance for literacy reform initiatives already underway. As part of the Network, Kentucky received a grant to develop and implement a plan to integrate literacy instruction into core content courses such as science and social studies. As a result, Kentucky established the Adolescent Literacy Task Force, which created a comprehensive state literacy plan. The plan included a focus on adolescent literacy with ongoing programs such as:

- *The Striving Readers Program* which provides professional development to content area teachers for literacy instruction and to literacy coaches for intensive intervention models for struggling readers.
- *The Adolescent Literacy Coaching Project* which provides training to teachers in grades 4-12 to serve as school literacy coaches. Districts, schools, and universities provide monthly sessions on content-area literacy coaching and mentoring; and
- A range of professional development opportunities offered through the Kentucky Department of Education to bolster content area literacy and interventions with struggling readers.

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