Policy • Implementation • Results

HOLSHOUSER
LEGISLATORS
RETREAT

A Report from the *December 2015 Holshouser Legislators Retreat*

THE hunt institute

HOLSHOUSER LEGISLATORS RETREAT

For the 13th consecutive year, The Hunt Institute convened North Carolina Legislators to engage in a purposeful dialogue with state and national experts and practicing educators about the future of education in our state. The *2015 Holshouser Legislators Retreat* focused on both sound policy as well as successful implementation in North Carolina schools – with the goal of ensuring that every child has the opportunity afforded by an excellent education. This report documents the discussion and policy takeaways from this year's convening.

Front cover photo of Governor Jim Holshouser, courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

The content of this report is taken from the *Retreat's* presentations and discussions with the following resource experts:

Bruce Atchison | Executive Director of Policy and Operations and Director of Early Learning, Education Commission of the States

Cindy Bullard | Department Chair, The NC Leadership Academy Charter School

Dr. Gregory Cizek | Professor of Educational Measurement and Evaluation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education

Andrew Cole | Consultant, Educational Leadership, The Wallace Foundation

Trey Ferguson | Math Instructor, Wake County Public Schools

Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli | Director, Northeast Leadership Academy, North Carolina State University

Jose Garcia | STEM Director, Greene County Schools

Dr. Brian Gong | Senior Associate, Center for Assessment

Steve Hill | Executive Director, STEM East

Dr. Terry Holliday | Former Commissioner, Kentucky Department of Education

Representative D. Craig Horn | NC General Assembly, Chair, House Education Appropriations and House Education K-12

Dr. Tony Jackson | Superintendent, Vance County Schools

Dr. Jacqueline Jones | President & CEO, Foundation for Child Development

Dr. Glenn Kleiman | Executive Director, The Friday Institute for Educational Innovation

Dr. Arthur Levine | President, Woodrow Wilson Foundation

Dr. Melinda Maddox | Deputy State Superintendent, Alabama Department of Education

Dr. Amanda Martyn | Instructor of Biology, NC School of Science and Mathematics

Dr. Janet Mason | Superintendent, Rutherford County Schools

Dr. Patrick Miller | Superintendent, Greene County Schools

André Peek | Chair-Emeritus, NC Business Committee for Education

Susan Perry-Manning | Executive Director, Delaware Office of Early Learning

Dr. Amber Northern | Senior Vice President for Research, Thomas B. Fordham Institute

Dr. Michael Priddy | Board Chair, NC Public School Forum

Dr. Shirley Prince | Executive Director, NC Principals and Assistant Principals Association

Dan Swartz | Project L.I.F.T, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Dr. Jason Van Heukelum | Deputy Superintendent, Cabarrus County Schools

Cindy Watkins | President, Smart Start

Michael West | Technology Facilitator, Wake County Public Schools

Kevin Wheat | Principal, Allen Jay Preparatory Academy, Guilford County Schools

Dr. Freddie Williamson | Superintendent, Hoke County Schools

Dr. Mary Ann Wolf | Director of Digital Learning Programs, The Friday Institute for Educational Innovation

> **"Strong leadership, strong goals, strong strategy, and regularly publish results — works every single time. The challenge is staying the course."**
>
> **~Dr. Terry Holliday**

Takeaways and Implications

Communication. Teacher involvement and listening to the voice of practioners were vital to implementation success.

Coordination. The governor, general assembly, and the business community led Kentucky reforms together, and higher education was involved in determining expectations for K-12 education.

Vision and Goals. Kentucky established a clear vision with big goals, changed processes toward achieving those goals, and then trained educators so they were equipped to pursue those goals with their students.

Policy, Implementation and Results

Education is vital to the future of our state and our country. Great results from the North Carolina education system – making certain that students graduate truly prepared for the rigors of further education, a rapidly changing workforce, and citizenship – **can help secure our state's economic future**.

With a focus on achieving great results for North Carolina students, this year's *Holshouser Legislators Retreat* gathered some of the best policy minds and most innovative educators to **discuss what we can do to achieve those results**. Programming addressed policies set at the state level as well as the implementation of those policies in districts, schools and classrooms – under the assumption borne out of experience that *both* thoughtfully crafted policy *and* dedicated implementation by educators are required to achieve great results. Legislators and resource experts spent the *Retreat* discussing policy and implementation issues relevant to early education, school leadership, digital learning and assessment.

Kentucky Story

Dr. Terry Holliday, former commissioner of education in the Commonwealth of Kentucky and veteran educational champion, started the *Retreat* off with a keynote address on policy and practice.

Holliday's remarks focused on the last seven years of his work, implementing Kentucky's ambitious policy agenda as intended in *Kentucky Senate Bill 1* (2009). The bill called for the state to raise standards and realign assessment and accountability systems. Holliday emphasized a number of important components for a successful change management effort, including measureable goals, regular communication with educators, and persistence when faced with inevitable challenges.

The measurement of results was a central theme of Kentucky's story and was later discussed during the *Retreat's* assessment panel (see page 10). Holliday emphasized that getting a policy passed is often only the first step. As he put it, "[Once a bill passes,] then comes the hard part. How do you take a policy and turn it into implementation? To me, the first thing you need is a clear goal." Kentucky's implementation has proven promising: between 2010 and 2015, Kentucky more than doubled the number of students deemed college and career ready.

For more on Kentucky's story, visit www.hunt-institute.org and read *The Role of Strategic Communications in the Transition to New Academic Standards and Assessments: Case Studies of Tennessee and Kentucky*.

Early Education

The Value of the Early Childhood Environment

The early education resource experts at the *Retreat* agreed on this fact: **children's early life experiences have a profound effect on later life outcomes**. In thinking about how state policy can lead to improved results, state leaders must focus on the earliest years and ensure students are in nurturing, stable environments that help them grow. Susan Perry-Manning, executive director of the Delaware Office of Early Learning, highlighted just how critical the first years are: "What happens during the first 2,000 days of life is setting the foundation for all future learning." She went on to connect early learning with future workforce development, noting that business leaders see positive early childhood learning as necessary to build academic and social/emotional skills that are vital to adult life and employment. Many economists have made a similar argument that early childhood education provides significant cost savings to society by reducing incarceration rates and avoiding costly (and often ineffective) retraining programs.

The evidence base that connects a positive early learning environment with improved outcomes for young children has built bipartisan support for early childhood education. Facilitator Bruce Atchison, who directs early childhood programming at the Education Commission of the States, drove this point home: "At the end of last year's legislative session (2015), of the 44 states that were funding pre-K programs, 25 had Republican governors and 19 had Democratic governors. It is truly a bipartisan issue."

Quality Programs and Workforce

Despite the compelling research on the importance of nurturing experiences between birth and age 8, ensuring high-quality programs continues to challenge policymakers. Dr. Jacqueline Jones, president and CEO of the Foundation for Child Development, referenced a 2015 report published by the National Academies of Science titled *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8*. This report lays out a blueprint for ensuring adults who interact with young children have the knowledge and competencies they need to help students thrive. "If the adults standing in front of the children don't have the skills to do the job, then you are not going to achieve good student outcomes. We are looking at a moment when early childhood organizations from around the country can come together to define the necessary competencies."

The discussion with policymakers also highlighted the challenge of multiple funding sources for early education programs. Funding comes from federal, state and local channels and is included in both education budgets and health and human services budgets. The panelists cited work in a dozen states that have consolidated early childhood services, in terms of funding and operations. The state of Colorado created the Office of Early Childhood, which brought 27 separate programs in six different state departments under one office.

"Birth to 3 is the period in which infants are absorbing everything around them and whether it is positive or negative has huge impact on their developmental trajectories."
~Dr. Jaqueline Jones

Takeaways and Implications

Future outcomes. Children are learning and developing from birth, and a stable, nurturing early learning environment will improve later life outcomes. This includes environments that develop and support children's social/emotional, behavioral and academic skills.

Quality Matters. Ensuring high-quality programs by defining standards for early environments with a focus on the skills of early education professionals is vital to improving outcomes.

Coordination Across Providers. Given the diverse set of public and private early childcare and education providers, strategic coordination is necessary to ensure quality and coherence of children's experience.

School Leadership

As any teacher will attest, principals are vital to a school's success. The current consensus that a school leader must, first and foremost, provide instructional leadership to the school has made the job more demanding. The North Carolina School Executive Standards make this explicit in Standard 2: Instructional Leadership, which requires principals to, among other things

- Initiate and guide conversations about instruction and student learning that are oriented towards high expectations.
- Create an environment of practiced, distributive leadership and teacher empowerment.
- Ensure that there is an appropriate and logical alignment between the curriculum of the school and the state's accountability program.

This shift has brought the need for inspiring skilled leaders into focus. Research has indicated the measurable difference school leaders can make in student outcomes – a difference that is even greater in schools with the greatest need. At the *Retreat*, legislators heard from three panelists who are leading efforts to invest in recruiting, training and preparing great principals.

Arthur Levine, President of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation

Key Ideas:

- Schools should be run on the same principles as a business.
- Training programs for school leaders have not fully risen to the challenge of preparing tomorrow's school leaders.
- Improving principals takes time and a long-term investment.
- Recruitment, preservice and development are all important as well as measuring the outcomes achieved by leaders from preparation programs.

Read more about the Woodrow Wilson Foundation's MBA Fellowship in Education Leadership.

Bonnie Fusarelli, Director of The Northeast Leadership Academy

Key Ideas:

- Ensuring excellent principals is not a problem of scale – there are not so many principal positions that we shouldn't be able to ensure every school has an effective leader.
- Great school leadership takes bravery and the ability to have tough conversations that help teachers move forward in their practice. Great leaders empower teachers.
- Executive coaching is a powerful tool to help principals grow.

Read more about the Northeast Leadership Academy.

Andrew Cole, Educational Leadership Consultant, the Wallace Foundation

Key Ideas:

- Research indicates leaders make a significant difference in student outcomes, particularly in the most challenging school environments.
- The Wallace Foundation's work has distilled what great leaders do, including setting direction, developing people and redesigning the organization.
- Context matters, and training and preparation should account for differences in policy, organizations and student populations.

Read more about the Wallace Foundation's work.

Technology in Education

North Carolina aspires to be a leader in technology-enabled learning. Every day, educators work to apply technology in new and inventive ways in schools. The State Board of Education has provided leadership on instructional technology for years, and recently the General Assembly has taken substantive steps to enable digital learning, both through policy making and allocating resources. Our state is well-positioned to lead the country, but procuring devices and delivering connectivity to classrooms continues to present practical challenges.

More importantly, teachers have to be able to use technology effectively. Survey data suggest many of them do not have the skills they need. On the 2014 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, more than half of responding teachers indicated they need training on integrating technology into instruction to teach students more effectively. North Carolina must ensure educators have the skills and abilities to teach using technology. With this in mind, a panel led by Andre Peek, chair-emeritus of the NC Business Committee for Education, focused on the significant opportunities and the hard questions yet to be answered about technology in education.

Teaching and Learning

Dr. Glenn Kleiman, executive director of the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation, emphasized the need to stay focused on the goal of technology: "It really is about teaching and learning." This was echoed in the thoughts of Michael West, technology facilitator at Wendell Middle School in Wake County: "We can't just drop technology into classrooms and expect great things to happen. We have to provide support to teachers." Additionally, West warned against technology for technology's sake, asserting, "A worksheet on an iPad is an evolutionary step sideways." Panelists agreed that technology has the possibility to be transformatively powerful, but not all uses are meaningful, nor do all promote deep learning and engagement.

Still, the hope in technology as an enabler of learning is great. Kleiman described the educational shift outlined in the North Carolina Digital Learning Plan as moving from a standardized model where "we pretty much taught all kids in the same way, and students were expected to adapt," to a more personalized, competency-based model where we are less concerned with seat time and "more concerned with what students know and are able to do."

When asked a question about the barriers to success with technology, the panelists were universally convinced that great leadership in the district office, schools and classrooms is required to make the shift to digital-age learning. Additionally, the mindset of educators toward new technology and school cultures that value innovation and risk-taking are vital. The panel concluded that truly leveraging technology will require nothing short of inspiring and training the entire education workforce – about 100,000 adults in North Carolina – to make a major shift in the way teachers teach and students learn.

"The role of the school will change, and learning will not be confined to the four walls."

~Michael West

Takeaways and Implications

Training. Leveraging technology requires adults with the knowledge and skills to use the tools and a big culture shift within some schools.

Sustainability. All too often, schools get time-limited grants to implement new technology, but lack the ability to sustain promising programs in the long-term.

Equity. Across our state, there are still significant disparities in access to connectivity and devices in and out of school.

Dig Deeper: Digital Learning Progress Rubric

The Friday Institute recently released the second version of its Digital Learning Progress Rubric, which lays out a detailed roadmap to digital learning in 5 areas:

- Leadership
- Technology and Infrastructure
- Content and Instruction
- Professional Learning
- Data and Assessment

Assessment: Quality and Use

Testing is on the minds of students, parents, educators and policymakers. Most stakeholders will readily concede that assessments are necessary and important; at the same time, they express concern about the quality of assessments and the use of the resulting data. This is particularly true of teachers, all of whom use assessments in their classroom practice and some of whom do not have faith in state and district tests or their uses.

Federal and state policies in the last 15 years have increased the use of assessments for transparency, school accountability and, more recently, evaluating educators. The use of assessment results in North Carolina has proven controversial, whether in determining teacher effectiveness through value-added modeling, triggering intervention in low-performing schools, or assigning school performance grades.

Within this context, the *Retreat* gathered national experts to discuss assessments. The result of their dialogue with policymakers highlighted several important considerations.

High-Quality Assessments

Dr. Amber Northern, senior vice president for research at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, set the context by citing national data: Approximately one-third of freshman at two- and four-year colleges require remedial coursework, and approximately 40 percent of employers rate new hires as deficient in their overall preparation for entry-level jobs. In the recent history of accountability assessment, states (North Carolina included) often identified a great number of proficient students who, in truth, were not. Northern asserted, "[Students] think they are prepared, but then it is a huge reality check for kids to apply to college or to apply for a job and be told, 'You don't have what it takes.'"

In February, the Fordham Institute released the results of a two-year study of assessments. The report, *Evaluating the Content and Quality of Next Generation Assessments*, was precipitated by the fact that, in the past, state tests were often largely multiple choice, off-the-shelf (meaning not necessarily or carefully aligned to state standards) and cheap. Higher standards that require deeper understanding and critical thinking also require a next generation of assessments. The report identified strengths and areas for improvement for the PARCC, Smarter Balanced, and ACT assessments (the tests being used by the largest number of states). Ultimately, the report concluded that the new assessments have largely delivered on their promise: "They are, in fact, the kind of tests that many teachers have asked state officials to build for years."

Purpose. Purpose. Purpose.

Dr. Brian Gong, senior associate at the Center for Assessment, disclosed one of the most important misunderstandings when it comes to testing: the persistence of the idea that you can use a single assessment for many purposes. Gong asserted that assessments are put to many different uses, from a "policymaker at the state trying to get a broad overview about achievement" to an "individual teacher trying to get information about individual students at a very small point in time." Across the multiple uses of assessment, "no one has figured out how to design one assessment that will do all things." Gong connected this to the need for a *system of assessment* where stakeholders have access to a range of assessments that are designed for specific uses. Dr. Greg Cizek, professor of educational measurement and evaluation at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, agreed and put it simply: "Purpose. Purpose. Purpose," elaborating that tests are tools and that with state tests, we have often been using a hammer to drive in a screw. For example, policymakers often want state standardized tests to produce high-level measures of school achievement without taking up too much class time, while also providing nuanced feedback on individual student performance. State tests are not the right tool for the latter task.

North Carolina's Assessment Pilot

The North Carolina State Board of Education is piloting a system of assessments.
For more, re-visit the **2015 HLR Issue Brief** (pages 21-24).

Annual Testing and the Every Student Succeeds Act

On the same day legislators in North Carolina participated in the *Retreat*, the ink was drying on new legislation representing a sea of change in federal education policy. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) was signed into law by President Obama on December 10, 2015. ESSA is the latest reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA).

With ESSA, states have more authority over education decisions. The law shifts authority and responsibility back to the states on issues like school accountability, intervention in low-performing schools, and evaluating teachers. Notably, however, many of the requirements for assessments remain in place. Students will continue to be tested in mathematics and English language arts in grades 3-8 and once in high school, as well as once each in elementary, middle and high school science.

Moderator Lucille Davy, senior advisor at The Hunt Institute and member of the National Assessment Governing Board, asked panelists about the grade-level testing that was one of the policy backbones of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and is preserved in ESSA. Mindful of the shortcomings of the policy landscape before NCLB's mandate for state assessments, Cizek saw three important advantages to grade-level testing:

1. Ensuring that special needs students are included in school assessment
2. Disaggregating student data by subgroup to ensure that all populations are served
3. Monitoring the progress of state reforms and spending

Additionally, grade-level testing allows states to measure growth (in North Carolina, growth is measured through the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS)).

The pressure to achieve measurable results on state tests has led districts and schools to add interim and benchmark tests. This, when coupled with new mandates to measure student growth using standardized test for teacher evaluation, has led to a fairly widespread sense that testing has an outsized influence on schooling. Gong had some insight into this, citing the data in North Carolina that indicate approximately two percent of student time is spent on either state or district tests. But this relatively small amount of time might not square with educator experience, where logistics, test-preparation and make-up tests result in schools that *feel* much more driven – and disrupted – by tests than the data might indicate.

Assessment panelists emphasized the need for alignment – particularly between curriculum and instruction – and what is tested. All too often, districts focus on practice and interim tests because they lack confidence that their curriculum and instruction will help them achieve better results on the test. Because tests influence instruction, panelists advised the use of high-quality tests that measure the most important knowledge and skills that students need to learn to be prepared for the future. Bad tests will incent bad teaching. The

"What you'd like to have is a strong curriculum and good instruction – and the test reflects that."

~Dr. Brian Gong

Takeaways and Implications

Quality. Assessments must test the most important knowledge and skills. Challenging, high-quality tests often cost more.

Systems of Assessment. All too often, we expect one test to do everything. High-level state tests cannot be used to yield fine-grain data for instruction, just like teacher-made tests can't be used by parents for comparing the performance of their child's school to those across the state. A coherent system of assessments is the only way to ensure the right assessment tool is used for the appropriate purposes.

The Value of Curriculum. A rich curriculum aligned to the most important skills that will be tested ensures that schools focus on teaching and learning more than test preparation and testing.

importance of quality and alignment is equally true for district tests (often purchased from vendors), as it for state tests. Recent studies have found much of the time spent testing comes from locally mandated interim and benchmark assessments.

Superintendent Panel: Policy and Implementation

The final panel of the *Retreat* featured superintendents from across the state reflecting on the previous discussions. District leaders are uniquely positioned to reflect on how policy is implemented and what conditions are necessary to ensure that policy can lead to its intended results.

"The road from policy to practice is not a straight line."

~Dr. Tony Jackson

Takeaways and Implications

Lead with Intent. Policies need to have a clear, student-based purpose that educators can connect to and believe in.

Time to Change. Implementing policy requires time for districts to understand the intent of the law, to think through the implications at a local level, and to lead their staffs.

Educator Input. There is a wealth of expertise in schools and classrooms around the country. Policymakers should involve educators who will implement the policy in all stages of development, in order to surface challenges that can be expected and mitigated as well as to build trust in the policy direction.

Balancing Flexibility and Accountability. Panelists agreed that more can be expected of school districts and educators if they are given flexibility.

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