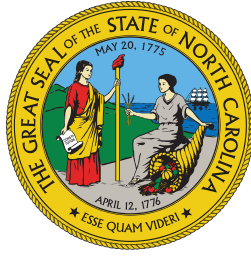


NORTH CAROLINA EARLY CHILDHOOD ACTION PLAN

# Executive Summary

FEBRUARY 2019

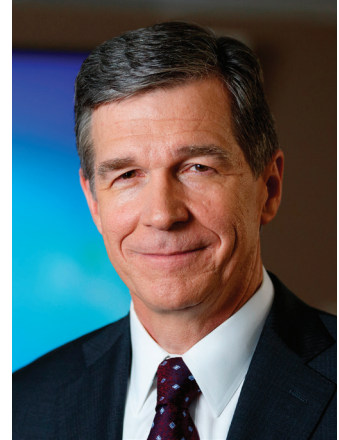




North Carolina's future depends on our children today. We know that the foundation for future learning, health and well-being is built during early childhood. When we commit to giving every child a strong foundation in their first years of life, we create healthy and vibrant communities for all of us.

Our state has been a national leader in advancing opportunities for young children, including founding Smart Start, the first statewide early childhood public-private partnership in the country, and implementing one of the highest quality pre-k programs in the country. We are, and should continue to be, proud of these accomplishments.

But our work is far from done. Too many of our young children face barriers that can hold them back from achieving everything they can. Too many experience hunger on a daily basis, or abuse and neglect at home. Too many are already behind on their reading levels by third grade. Too many babies die before their first birthday. We have a shared responsibility to take on racial and other disparities that impact young children's well-being. We must do more to provide families and communities across our state with better supports, tools and choices so that every child in North Carolina has the opportunity to succeed.



When I issued Executive Order 49 in the summer of 2018, I challenged our state's Department of Health and Human Services and the Early Childhood Advisory Council to spearhead the development of a statewide plan for achieving better outcomes for young children's health, safety, well-being, and learning success.

With the input of over a thousand North Carolinians, the Early Childhood Action Plan lays out a bold vision and roadmap for how we can create change for our young children by 2025.

I know we can reach these goals, but we can only get there if we do it together. Right now, today - whether you are a parent or grandparent, a small business owner, an educator, a pediatrician, a law enforcement officer, an elected official, or just someone who wants to make a difference for young children - I am asking you to take action for our young children.

My goals as Governor are to help all North Carolinians be better educated, healthier, and have more money in their pockets so that they can live more abundant, purposeful lives. There is no better place to start than at the beginning, by committing to our young children.

Thank you for all you do and will do for our children and our great state. Together, we will reach our goals.

Governor Roy Cooper

# Our Vision for NC's Children

**Vision Statement: All North Carolina children will get a healthy start and develop to their full potential in safe and nurturing families, schools and communities.**

By 2025, all North Carolina young children from birth to age eight will be:

1. **Healthy:** Children are healthy at birth and thrive in environments that support their optimal health and well-being.
2. **Safe and Nurtured:** Children grow confident, resilient, and independent in safe, stable, and nurturing families, schools, and communities.
3. **Learning and Ready to Succeed:** Children experience the conditions they need to build strong brain architecture and skills that support their success in school and life.



# Guiding Principles

Our fundamental beliefs to be used throughout the development and implementation of the Early Childhood Action Plan.

## 1. Children and families are at the center of our work.

North Carolina's early childhood systems serve children in the contexts of families and communities. Child development is a dynamic, interactive process that is not predetermined; it occurs in the context of relationships and communities. We know it is possible, and essential, to build resilience and healthy development by creating positive and protective factors in young children's lives, including strong relationships between children and caring adults.

## 2. Brain and developmental science are fundamental.

Brains are built through children's earliest experiences and through the environments around them. During a child's first eight years of life, brain architecture is forming a foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health. While positive experiences and environments can set up a child on a stronger life-long path, traumatic experiences or environments during those formative years can have long-lasting, detrimental impact.

## 3. Alleviate inequity to ensure that all of North Carolina's children can reach their fullest potential.

North Carolina is committed to equity of opportunity for all children by confronting disparities through strategic commitments across the state. Child outcomes that vary disproportionately across race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, physical and developmental ability, and geography must be recognized in order to identify and implement strategic interventions.

## 4. Build upon existing strengths and partnerships in early childhood systems.

North Carolina has a rich history of innovation in early childhood. The Early Childhood Action Plan builds upon existing efforts and promotes diverse participation, cross-sector collaboration, and partnerships with families and organizations that have worked to improve child and family outcomes.

## 5. Set bold priorities and achievable goals for North Carolina's young children.

We must commit to a prioritized set of areas to tackle for our state's children, knowing that the process of prioritizing makes accomplishing outcomes more feasible. Not only must we prioritize, but we must hold ourselves accountable with measurable and achievable goals for each priority, because without accountability, we may not see the changes our children deserve.

## 6. Track progress toward all goals, ensuring transparency, accountability, and good stewardship of resources.

We will report on the outcomes of our work and use data to continuously improve our efforts to ensure cost-effective strategies that result in the highest impact for children. Effective early childhood interventions can yield significant positive returns on investment to communities through better outcomes in education, health, social behaviors, and employment.

# 2025 Goals At-A-Glance



## Goal 1: Healthy Babies

Babies across North Carolina from all backgrounds will have a healthy start in their first year of life.



## Goal 2: Preventive Health Services

Babies, toddlers, young children, and their families will have regular, ongoing access to high-quality health services.



## Goal 3: Food Security

Babies, toddlers, young children and their families across North Carolina will have access to enough healthy food every day.



## Goal 4: Safe and Secure Housing

Babies, toddlers, young children and their families across North Carolina will have access to safe, secure and affordable housing.



## Goal 5: Safe and Nurturing Relationships

Babies, toddlers and young children across North Carolina will grow up with safe and nurturing family and caregiver relationships.



## Goal 6: Permanent Families for Children in Foster Care

Babies, toddlers and young children in foster care will grow up in stable, consistent and nurturing families, whether that is with the child's birth family or through an adoptive family.



## Goal 7: Social-Emotional Health and Resilience

Babies, toddlers and young children across North Carolina will express, recognize and manage their emotions in a healthy way, especially under stress.



## Goal 8: High-Quality Early Learning

Babies, toddlers and young children across North Carolina will have access to high-quality opportunities to engage in early learning.



## Goal 9: On Track for School Success

Young children across North Carolina will enter kindergarten on track for reaching their developmental goals.



## Goal 10: Reading at Grade Level

Young children across North Carolina will read on grade-level in elementary school, with a particular focus on African American, American Indian and Hispanic children who face the greatest systemic barriers to reading success.



## GOAL 1: HEALTHY BABIES

**Babies across North Carolina from all backgrounds will have a healthy start in their first year of life.**

Every North Carolina baby deserves to have a healthy start. Unfortunately, too many babies in our state face great challenges at birth, such as preterm birth and low birth weight.

Infant mortality can be used as a measure of child, family and community health. It is a rate of infant death, but is also used more broadly to indicate societal health, poverty levels, racial disparities, and the availability and quality of health services in a community.<sup>1</sup>

In North Carolina, stark disparities in infant mortality exist. For example, African American infant deaths persistently occur at over double the rate of white infant deaths.<sup>2</sup> The North Carolina Early Childhood Action plan focuses specifically on reducing this disparity, recognizing that overall birth outcomes for children will then also improve.

### OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Decrease disparities in infant mortality, thereby improving overall birth outcomes for all children.

### BY THE NUMBERS

- NC has the 11th highest infant mortality rate in the country.<sup>3</sup>
- The African American infant mortality rate in NC is over twice as high as the white infant mortality rate.<sup>2</sup>



## GOAL 2: PREVENTIVE HEALTH SERVICES

**Babies, toddlers, young children, and their families will have regular, ongoing access to high-quality health services.**

Timely health check-ups are essential to support the optimal health and well-being of babies, toddlers and young children across North Carolina. During well-child visits, healthcare professionals provide preventive care, such as immunizations, lead screenings, and developmental and social-emotional screenings, to identify possible health concerns as early as possible. Parents also have a chance to talk about their concerns, get information, guidance and advice about their child's health and development, and get connected to the right services for their child.

The North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan focuses on timely well-child check-ups, and also includes other important indicators of children's health. For example, access to health insurance for children and families is critical to ensure that children receive the healthcare they need. Other services, including oral healthcare, lead screenings and immunizations, are important ways of protecting children from potential harmful environmental exposures and disease.

### OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Increase the percentage of young children who get timely check-ups.

### BY THE NUMBERS

- Nearly one third of children ages 3-6-years-old enrolled in NC Medicaid or Health Choice do not receive on time well-child visits.<sup>4</sup>
- Almost 20% of NC heads of household with young children do not have health insurance.<sup>5</sup>



## GOAL 3: FOOD SECURITY

**Babies, toddlers, young children and their families across North Carolina will have access to enough healthy food every day.**

Today, too many North Carolina children do not know if there will be enough food for them every day, or do not get enough quality, nutritious food. Food insecurity puts young children at risk for negative health, developmental, behavioral and academic outcomes.<sup>6-9</sup> Food insecurity also puts young children’s parents and other caregivers at risk for poor physical and mental health, and can lead to family conflict.<sup>10, 11</sup>

The North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan focuses on decreasing child food insecurity, but also includes measures that address overall healthy nutrition, like child obesity and the percent of young children who receive supplemental food and nutrition services.

### OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Decrease rates of food insecurity among young children.

### BY THE NUMBERS

- Over 1 in 5 children across North Carolina face hunger.<sup>12</sup>



# 2025 TARGETS AT-A-GLANCE: HEALTHY

## Goal 1: Healthy Babies

**2025 TARGET:** By 2025, decrease the statewide infant mortality disparity ratio from 2.5 to 1.92, according to data provided by the State Center for Health Statistics.



## Goal 2: Preventive Healthcare

**2025 TARGET:** By 2025, increase the percentage of North Carolina's young children enrolled in Medicaid and Health Choice who receive regular well-child visits as part of a healthcare delivery process that provides comprehensive, patient-centered, accessible, quality care as recommended for certain age groups, according to data provided through NC Medicaid and HEDIS measures.

- For children ages 0-15 months, increase from 63.9% to 68.7%.
- For children ages 3-6 years, increase from 69.8% to 78.5%.



## Goal 3: Food Security

**2025 TARGET:** By 2025, decrease the percentage of children living across North Carolina in food insecure homes from 20.9% to 17.5% according to data provided by Feeding America.





## GOAL 4: SAFE AND SECURE HOUSING

**Babies, toddlers, young children and their families across North Carolina will have access to safe, secure and affordable housing.**

Too many children across North Carolina do not have a safe and stable place to sleep at night. Some families may be living in shelters, in their cars, or temporarily living with friends or relatives. Unstable housing is stressful, especially for families with young children.<sup>13</sup> This puts these children at a higher risk for poor physical health, and mental health and behavioral problems.<sup>14-16</sup> They are also at risk for delayed language and literacy skills, attention difficulties, and poor self-regulation.<sup>15, 17, 18</sup> They may also struggle in school with relationships with their classmates and their teachers.<sup>19</sup>

Children living in unsafe or unstable conditions also often face greater challenges at home and in their communities, such as family and neighborhood violence, maltreatment, food insecurity, chronic illness, and lack of proper healthcare.<sup>20-22</sup> They may face unhealthy home environments that expose them to things such as lead, pests, poor ventilation, or mold, that could lead to health problems such as asthma, or physical dangers that could lead to injury. Further, caregivers of young children who experience homelessness often report poor health, signs of maternal depression or other mental illness, putting them at risk for low confidence in parenting and using harsh parenting practices.<sup>23</sup>

The North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan focuses on decreasing rates of homelessness for all young children across the state, and particularly among those children participating in high-quality early learning programs. There are also other measures in the plan that focus on safe living environments, such as reducing emergency care for asthma and tracking elevated blood lead levels, both of which may be caused by harmful environmental exposure.

### OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Decrease the number of young children experiencing homelessness.

### BY THE NUMBERS

- Over 26,000 NC children under age 6 are homeless, or roughly 1 in 28.<sup>24</sup>



## GOAL 5: SAFE AND NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS

**Babies, toddlers and young children across North Carolina will grow up with safe and nurturing family and caregiver relationships.**

Strong, positive relationships between children and their caregivers is a key ingredient for healthy brain development. When young children face severe adversity, such as abuse, neglect or witnessing violence, the structure and function of their brain and bodies can change. For some children, the level of stress produced by severe adversity causes their bodies to respond by staying set on high-alert, which can result in long-term health consequences.<sup>25</sup> Caregivers play an active role in shielding children from feeling overwhelming amounts of stress.

Child maltreatment is defined as abuse and neglect of a child under the age of 18 by a parent, guardian or caregiver. While child maltreatment occurs within families from all economic backgrounds, it is more common among children in low-income families.<sup>26</sup> Factors that can contribute to child maltreatment include the presence of adults who face substance use disorders, mental illness (notably maternal depression) and intimate partner violence.<sup>27</sup>

The North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan focuses on reducing rates of child maltreatment as the primary measure of safe and nurturing relationships. When focusing on this measure, it is critical to note the limitations of child maltreatment data, including that minority populations are disproportionately reported, investigated and substantiated for cases of maltreatment.

### OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Reduce the number of children who experience abuse or neglect.

### BY THE NUMBERS

- Children under age 4 make up over half of substantiated child maltreatment cases.<sup>28</sup>



**GOAL 6: PERMANENT FAMILIES FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE**

**Babies, toddlers and young children in foster care will grow up in stable, consistent and nurturing families, whether that is with the child’s birth family or through an adoptive family.**

Young children need safe, permanent homes with nurturing and secure relationships with adults for healthy growth and development.<sup>29</sup> For children who must be placed in foster care, being removed from their home and placed in a foster home may be stressful.

North Carolina is committed to ensuring that all children in foster care across the state grow up in a home environment with safe and nurturing family relationships, whether that is with the child’s birth family or through an adoptive family. Right now, too many of North Carolina’s children in foster care spend hundreds of days in the foster care system before being placed in a permanent home.

In order to reach North Carolina’s commitment to stronger, lasting relationships for children in the foster care system, the Early Childhood Action Plan focuses on decreasing the number of days it takes for a child in the foster care system to be reunified with his or her family, if appropriate, or decreasing the number of days it takes for a child in the foster care system to be adopted, if reunification is not appropriate.

**OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY**

Decrease the number of days young children spend in foster care.

**BY THE NUMBERS**

- More than half of 4- and 5-year-olds in NC’s foster care system spent over 1,000 days in foster care before being adopted.<sup>30</sup>



## GOAL 7: SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND RESILIENCE

**Babies, toddlers and young children across North Carolina will express, recognize and manage their emotions in a healthy way, especially under stress.**

Social-emotional skills, such as the ability to recognize and manage one's emotions and the ability to understand the emotions of others, provide a foundation for building trusting relationships that are important at home, school and the work place. For example, skills like cooperation and helpfulness have been linked to positive outcomes later in life such as having a job, being physically and mentally well, and being less criminally involved.<sup>31, 32</sup>

The importance of social-emotional health and resilience for young children is becoming increasingly recognized nationwide. Currently, we do not have a strong statewide data source on young children's social-emotional health and resilience. North Carolina has an opportunity to be a national leader in developing the ability to track social emotional well-being for young children at a state level. The state has already begun work to identify appropriate data sources that would allow for this to be tracked.

### OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Become a national leader in developing a statewide measure of social-emotional health and resilience, and make steady progress on improving children's social-emotional health and resilience.

### BY THE NUMBERS

- Data not yet available. Promising data sources include the Survey of Well-being of Young Children (SWYC), and select indicators on the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH).

# 2025 TARGETS AT-A-GLANCE: SAFE AND NURTURED

## Goal 4: Safe and Secure Housing

### 2025 TARGET:

Part 1) By 2025, decrease the percentage of children across North Carolina under age six experiencing homelessness by 10% from 26,198 to 23,578, according to data from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF).

Part 2) By 2025, decrease the number of children in kindergarten through third grade enrolled in NC public schools who are experiencing homelessness by 10%, from 9,970 to 8,973, according to data provided by the NC Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI).



## Goal 5: Safe and Nurturing Relationships

**2025 TARGET:** By 2025, decrease by 10% the rate of children in North Carolina who are substantiated victims of maltreatment\*\*

- For children ages 0-3 years, reduce from 20.1 to 18.1 per 1,000 children
- For children ages 4-5 years, reduce from 14.5 to 13.1 per 1,000 children
- For children ages 6-8 years, reduce from 13.4 to 12.1 per 1,000 children

All data for this target is provided by the Division of Social Services Central Registry and NC FAST.

## Goal 6: Permanent Families for Children in Foster Care

### 2025 TARGET:

Part 1) Reunification: By 2025, decrease the number of days it takes for a child in the foster care system to be reunified with his or her family, if appropriate.

- For children aged 0-3 years, decrease the median number of days from 371 to 334

- For children aged 4-5 years, decrease the median number of days from 390 days to 351 days
- For children aged 6-8 years, decrease the median number of days from 371 to 334

Part 2) Adoption: By 2025, decrease the number of days it takes for a child in the foster care system to be adopted, if reunification is not appropriate.

- For children aged 0-3 years, decrease the median number of days from 822 to 730
- For children aged 4-5 years, decrease the median number of days from 1,006 to 730
- For children aged 6-8 years, decrease the median number of days from 988 to 730

All data for this target is provided by the Division of Social Services, Child Placement and Payment System (CPPS) and NC FAST.

## Goal 7: Social-Emotional Health and Resilience

**2025 TARGET:** By 2025, North Carolina will have a reliable, statewide measure of young children’s social-emotional health and resilience at the population level.

\* In setting this target, we acknowledge that current counts are likely to be an underestimation of homelessness among young children and that rates could increase as identification methods improve.

\*\* In setting this target, it is critical to note the limitations of these data, including that minority populations are disproportionately reported, investigated, and substantiated for cases of maltreatment.



## GOAL 8: HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING

**Babies, toddlers and young children across North Carolina will have access to high-quality opportunities to engage in early learning.**

High-quality early care and education programs help prepare children physically, academically, socially and emotionally. While children from all backgrounds can benefit from attending high-quality and affordable child care and education programs, children facing challenges related to poverty, disabilities or limited English proficiency often benefit the most from these programs.<sup>33</sup> A growing amount of evidence shows that high-quality child care programs help better prepare children become more on-track for school success, which supports them in becoming healthy, successful adults.<sup>34, 35</sup> Research also shows that employers benefit when employees' children are in quality child care arrangements.<sup>36</sup> When parents know their children are provided quality care that fosters healthy development, they are more productive and focused on work.

There is broad demand for high-quality early learning programs across the state. The North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan focuses on two measures of families' access to child care programs: rates of eligible families enrolled in NC Pre-K and affordability of child care programs. Affordability is defined based on the percent of a family's income spent on child care. The plan also highlights other important measures centering around access to high-quality early learning, such as enrollment in Head Start, receiving child care subsidy and enrollment in high-quality programs, and higher education among early learning teachers.

### OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

**Increase the percentage of eligible children enrolled in NC Pre-K and child care subsidy, and decrease the percentage of income families spend on high-quality child care and early learning programs.**

### BY THE NUMBERS

- Less than half of eligible children, approximately 30,000, are enrolled in NC Pre-K.<sup>37</sup>
- Nearly 12% of an NC family's income is devoted to infant care.<sup>37, 38</sup>
- Roughly one in five eligible children under age five, approximately 46,000, receive child care subsidy in NC.<sup>37</sup>



## GOAL 9: ON TRACK FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS

**Young children across North Carolina will enter kindergarten on track for reaching their developmental goals.**

A child’s developmental progress at kindergarten entry has been linked to success in school and into adulthood.<sup>31, 39, 40</sup> Assessments of children’s ongoing development, before they get to kindergarten, facilitates referrals and services to address identified needs. The North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan focuses on increasing the percent of children across North Carolina who enter kindergarten at a level typical for their age group. In addition to the Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA), other forms of developmental screening, and appropriate supports for identified needs, are also important. Measures addressing these areas are included as secondary areas of focus.

### OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Increase the percentage of North Carolina’s children who enter kindergarten on-track for reaching their developmental goals.

### BY THE NUMBERS

- Over 70% of children ages 0-3-years-old enrolled in NC Medicaid receive a developmental screening.<sup>41</sup>
- Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) data is not yet available.\*

\* The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) administers the KEA and is working to provide state-level reporting.





## GOAL 10: READING AT GRADE LEVEL

**Young children across North Carolina will read on grade-level in elementary school, with a particular focus on African American, American Indian and Hispanic children who face the greatest systemic barriers to reading success.**

Reading at grade-level in third grade is linked to children’s early success in school, graduating ready for college or a career after high school, and becoming productive adults.<sup>42</sup> Beyond third grade, time in the classroom is less and less devoted to the fundamentals of learning to read, so learning to read well early is important for young children.<sup>43</sup> It is often said that a child learns to read until third grade and then reads to learn after third grade. Across North Carolina and the country, there are significant differences in reading achievement by race and ethnicity because of systemic factors that hold students back from being able to reach their full potential.<sup>44</sup>

The North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan uses two data sources to measure reading proficiency. The first is North Carolina’s end of grade tests (EOGs), which are administered to all public school students in third grade and above. The second is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The NAEP measures reading proficiency based on a sample of 4th grade students in each state so we can compare North Carolina’s scores to others across the country.

### OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Increase the percentage of children reading at or above proficiency in third grade.

### BY THE NUMBERS

- Less than half, 45%, of North Carolina third graders read above proficiency on state EOGs.<sup>45</sup>
- Less than 40% of North Carolina fourth graders read proficiently on the NAEP.<sup>46</sup>

# 2025 TARGETS AT-A-GLANCE: LEARNING AND READY TO SUCCEED

## Goal 8: High-Quality Early Learning

### 2025 TARGET:

Part 1) By 2025, increase the percentage of income-eligible children enrolled in NC Pre-K statewide from 47% to 75%.

Part 2) By 2025, decrease the percent of family income spent on child care, according to data provided by Child Care Aware America:

- Infant Care: Decrease from 11.6% to 7.0%
- Toddler Care: Decrease from 10.5% to 7.0%
- Four-Year-Olds: Decrease from 10.0% to 7.0%



## Goal 9: On Track for School Success

**2025 TARGET:** By 2025, increase the percentage of children across North Carolina who enter kindergarten at a level typical for their age group, according to the five domains of the NCDPI Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA).\*



## Goal 10: Reading at Grade Level

**2025 TARGET:** By 2025, increase the percentage of children across the state achieving high levels of reading proficiency according to the following measures:

Part 1) Increase the percentage of students reading above proficiency from 45.8% to 61.8% for third through eighth grade students on statewide end of grade tests (EOGs), consistent with the state’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Plan 2025 reading proficiency benchmark.

Part 2) Increase reading proficiency from 39% to 43% according to the fourth grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).



\* The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) administers the KEA and is working to provide state-level reporting.

## COMMITTING TO ACTION: Strategies for All of Us

As North Carolinians, we all have a role in improving the health, safety and well-being of young children from birth through age eight. Whether you are a parent, a health care provider, a policymaker, a business leader, a teacher or anyone else who is committed to our state's future, right now each of us can commit to actions that will create a better future for young children, their families and all of us.

Public and private partners across the state have come together to create an initial list of strategies that will help North Carolina move the needle on that vision and the 10 Early Childhood Action Plan goals by 2025.

### Healthy: Children are healthy at birth and thrive in environments that support their optimal health and well-being.



North Carolinians can support young children's healthy growth and development by:

- Closing the insurance coverage gap to ensure more families have regular access to physical, mental and oral health services.
- Increasing access to healthcare providers, including pediatricians, OB/GYNs, oral health providers and pediatric specialists, particularly in rural areas.
- Making it easier for young women to visit a primary care provider more regularly, which can help support healthy future pregnancies.
- Promoting referrals to and participation in early intervention services for infants and young children with developmental delays and disabilities, and their families.
- Making it easier for eligible families to enroll in supplemental food and nutrition benefits programs, especially during times of disaster and recovery.

- Promoting opportunities for young children to access breakfast and after-school meals during the traditional school year, as well as opportunities to receive meals on weekends and school breaks.
- Promoting exercise and healthy eating habits for young children in early care and learning programs, kindergarten through third grade classrooms, and at home with their families.



North Carolinians can create healthy environments for young children by:

- Encouraging breastfeeding-friendly policies and services in local communities.
- Increasing children's access to safe, clean drinking water and indoor and outdoor air.
- Reducing exposure to toxic substances, such as lead.
- Making more safe and affordable housing and transportation available for low-income families with young children.

**Safe and Nurtured: Children grow confident, resilient and independent in safe, stable and nurturing families, schools and communities.**



North Carolinians can support safe, stable and nurturing families by:

- Promoting evidence-based home visiting and parent education programs.
- Providing better care for mothers facing depression.
- Providing increased access to research-based mental health services to children and adults who need them.
- Improving the process for getting children who are in the foster care system into permanent families.
- Investing in family-centered systems like the Smart Start network.



North Carolinians can support safe, stable and nurturing schools and communities by:

- Hiring more staff in supportive roles such as school counselors, social workers and school nurses.
- Training professionals who work with young children on best practices in mental health and resilience, including doctors, teachers, law enforcement and others.
- Eliminating or minimizing the use of suspension and expulsion in birth through third grade classrooms.
- Promoting family-friendly work places, such as paid sick leave, paid parental leave and reliable work schedules.
- Increasing wages and promoting tax policies for working families that support a high quality of life.
- Promoting access to higher education to improve young parents' ability to increase his or her income.

**Learning and Ready to Succeed: Children experience the conditions they need to build strong brain architecture and skills that support their success in school and life.**



North Carolinians can support making high-quality early learning available to more families by:

- Increasing access to NC Pre-K, 4- and 5-star early learning programs, and other high-quality early childhood programs.
- Increasing funding for child care subsidy for eligible families.
- Increasing access to high-quality education programs and improving wages to attract, recruit and retain highly-qualified birth through third grade teachers.

- Making transitions between preschool and kindergarten easier for children, families and teachers.
- Increasing access to high-quality early childhood programs for children who are homeless, in foster care, and from immigrant families.
- Providing greater access to high-quality early learning programs and ongoing classroom supports for young children with disabilities and other special healthcare needs.

**Building Racial and Cultural Equity: Barriers along lines of race, ethnicity and other factors can limit a young child's access to opportunities.**



North Carolinians can help build racial and cultural equity by:

- Giving families and youth of color a seat at the table in program and policy design and implementation.
- Promoting learning environments for young children that are free from systemic racism and implicit bias.
- Training leaders who support young children and families in racial equity and cultural competence, including training on implicit bias, cultural variations in communication and interaction, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), building resiliency, and child development.
- Using diagnostic and assessment tools in education and healthcare that are free of linguistic, racial and cultural bias.
- Hiring a diverse workforce of child- and family-facing providers across sectors, e.g. healthcare, education, law enforcement, ensuring more racial, ethnic, and geographic representation.



***What other strategies can we add? Where can you take action now?*** Visit [www.ncdhhs.gov/early-childhood](http://www.ncdhhs.gov/early-childhood) to commit to take action today!

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