

NC EARLY CHILDHOOD ACTION PLAN

OVERVIEW

MARCH 2019

What Is the North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan?

The North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan provides a framework for galvanizing public and private action to achieve a bold vision and measurably improve outcomes for our state's young children by 2025.

The plan prioritizes 10 goals for children from birth through age eight that, when achieved, will provide all North Carolina's children a fair opportunity to grow up healthy in safe and nurturing families, schools and communities so that they are learning and ready to succeed.

How Was the Early Childhood Action Plan Created?

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) was charged by Governor Roy Cooper through Executive Order No. 49 to spearhead the development of a statewide early childhood strategic plan in coordination with the Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC), other departments, and public and private stakeholders from across the state.

NCDHHS partnered with a diverse group of more than 350 individuals throughout 2018 to create a draft of the guiding principles, vision and goals. This partnership included regular convenings of three content workgroups for each of the three sections of the plan: Healthy, Safe and Nurtured, and Learning and Ready to Succeed. The groups included representatives from state agencies, thought leaders in relevant early childhood fields, practitioners, and leaders of the key informing work to the Early Childhood Action Plan, such as:

- NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative led by the NC Early Childhood Foundation
- NC Perinatal Health Strategic Plan
- North Carolina Institute of Medicine Statewide Taskforce on Essentials for Childhood
- North Carolina Think Babies
- And many others.

These working groups provided critical input in the drafting stages of the plan — on everything from layout to guiding principles to detailed input on data sources and phrasing — and provided feedback on the final draft of the plan.

On Nov. 1, 2018, the first full draft of the Early Childhood Action Plan was shared with the public to provide input. Over the next two months, NCDHHS held weekly webinars and more than 30 in-person sessions with commissions, advocacy organizations, nonprofits, parent groups, and others. By the end of the public comment period, NCDHHS received over 500 individual comments via email on aspects of the plan.

In total, nearly 1,500 people provided input, representing a diversity of perspectives including parents, families, healthcare providers, child care providers, educators, school administrators, child advocacy groups, and researchers. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive but also resulted in substantive changes to the original draft plan to make it even stronger.

NCDHHS will continue to work with the ECAC to ensure progress on the plan and partner with local communities across the state to ensure the Early Childhood Action Plan truly belongs to every North Carolinian, galvanizing action across the state.



How is the Plan Structured?

CATEGORIES

There are three main content categories of the NC Early Childhood Action Plan: Healthy, Safe and Nurtured, and Learning and Ready to Succeed. Each of these categories is separated out in the plan. However, each category is linked with the other. A child's health, for example, has an impact on that child's safety and wellbeing and his or her learning. The design of the wheel graphic central to the plan includes a blending of colors around the edge of the circle to signify this overlap between categories (see figure above). The 10 goals of the plan fall within each of those three categories, with three or four goals falling under each.

GOALS

There are 10 prioritized, measurable goals in the Early Childhood Action Plan. Every goal features a 2025 data target, as well as related sub-targets that help drive toward improved outcomes for children. For example: the Healthy Babies goal features a 2025 target to reduce the disparity ratio between African American and white rates of infant mortality, and sub-targets measure related indicators such as the rate of infants born at a low birth weight.

While many priorities were considered as goals for the Early Childhood Action Plan, the 10 goals selected represent areas where focused effort and attention to measurement could move the needle on improving child outcomes in the state.

STRATEGIES

The plan features guiding strategies at the end of every category (Healthy, Safe and Nurtured, and Learning and Ready to Succeed) to provide suggestions for ways anyone in North Carolina can take action for young children. The strategies are intended to provide high-level ideas that could result in specific, timebound actions when implemented by a state agency, a local business, a healthcare provider or anyone else who is committed to changing outcomes for North Carolina children and families.

How Does Data Inform the Plan?

Data plays a pivotal role in the Early Childhood Action Plan. Not only has the state set a vision for changing outcomes for young children, but the state has also set quantitative benchmarks to hold North Carolina accountable to achieving those outcomes.

HOW WERE DATA TARGETS AND SUB-TARGETS DETERMINED?

Several approaches were utilized when creating the 2025 targets and sub-targets.

- **Benchmarking:** Reference values, such as goals from national plans, were used as comparisons to set targets for North Carolina's plan. When this method was used, benchmark values were considered with the comprehensive picture of historical data trends seen on a state level. Benchmark reference values were also weighed against the achievability of targets given state-specific factors and context within North Carolina.
- **Expert knowledge:** The development of the Early Childhood Action Plan depended greatly on the valuable feedback and input of subject matter experts. In many cases, their guidance was used to set targets based on field experience and knowledge that could be applied to set 2025 targets.
- **Validation:** Data were validated as being accurate and methodologically sound. Calculations used to compute values and limitations of data were well understood: All data accessed publicly or through a data request process were screened for quality to ensure that data were accurate and collected in a methodologically-sound manner. This step was also used to understand calculations used to compute values and to understand data limitations, particularly as they related to looking at data across multiple years of time.
- **Disaggregation:** Given the focus of the action plan on early childhood years from 0-8 and the ability to narrow in on subpopulations by demographic, data that was disaggregated by age, race, ethnicity, county and other factors was sought as much as possible.
- **Setting baselines:** The most recent data available were used as the baseline starting position to set targets. For each target set, the most recent data available were used as baseline values from which to set targets for 2025.
- **Extrapolating from historical trends:** Where available, historical trends were taken into consideration to better refine 2025 targets and understand their importance and achievability.
- **State and national comparisons:** State data were compared to national data, where possible. The national picture of data was considered where appropriate to understand where North Carolina stands in comparison to other states and contexts.

- **Alignment:** Other state and national initiatives were taken into consideration in order to align to those initiatives, where possible. Other state and national initiatives were examined to amplify and align data priorities in the Early Childhood Action Plan with other initiatives and to set reasonable targets based on the experience of other initiatives.
- **Future data collection:** A general plan was mapped out for accessing and analyzing data for future years and for monitoring and analysis purposes leading to 2025.

How Will This Plan Change Over Time?

The North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan is designed to hold fast to its commitment to achieving measurable 2025 goals, while at the same time evolving to include new evidence, best practices, lessons learned, and improved analytics.

On an ongoing, annual basis, goals, data sources and targets will be reevaluated through stakeholder input in order to gauge progress, and readjust or bring in new data, as appropriate.

HOW IS DATA SHARED?

All data collected as a part of the Early Childhood Action Plan is available through an online, interactive data dashboard. Every goal has its own interactive page, with data disaggregated by applicable demographics, whenever possible, whether that is by race, geography or other factors.

Future aspects of the data dashboard will be updated in the months following the plan's release, including county-specific reports.

How Does the Plan Focus on Inequity?

One of the guiding principles driving the creation and implementation of the Early Childhood Action Plan is to "Alleviate inequity to ensure that all of North Carolina's children can reach their fullest potential." The plan commits to taking action for children all over the state, with a particular focus and emphasis on counteracting systemic bias, particularly stemming from race and ethnicity.

This commitment to alleviating inequity stands out in the first goal of the plan: Healthy Babies. Through the input of stakeholders, the 2025 target of the plan focuses around reducing the African American infant mortality rate in the state as opposed to seeking to reduce the overall average rate of infant mortality in North Carolina. A focus on a reduction of the overall average would have masked the driving factor behind the statewide rate: that the African American infant mortality in the state is more than double the rate of white infant mortality. Stakeholders agreed that reducing disparities was a stronger goal for the Early Childhood Action Plan, and this spoke to the overarching guiding principle of alleviating inequity.