

Invest in Early Childhood: Recommendations from Leandro v. State of NC

Introduction

More than 25 years ago, five low-wealth North Carolina school districts – Hoke, Halifax, Cumberland, Robeson, and Vance – claimed that their tax revenues were not sufficient enough to provide an equal education to its students, leading them to sue the state of North Carolina and the state Board of Education. In 1997, the Supreme Court of North Carolina’s landmark decision in *Leandro v. State of North Carolina* affirmed every child’s state constitutional right to a sound, basic education beginning in early childhood.

Judge Howard E. Manning, Jr. presided over the case for several years at the trial court level following that decision and ruled that the state was required to act, including the provision of early childhood education for students at risk. Although some progress was made in the next decade to expand funding for K-12 education and early childhood programs, there never was a comprehensive plan for all children to have a sound basic education, and at-risk-children continued to fall further behind. In 2017, Governor Roy Cooper joined with the Leandro plaintiffs to work together on a plan for meeting the state’s constitutional obligation and established the Commission on Access to a Sound Basic Education, which issued recommendations. In 2018, Judge W. David Lee took over the case and appointed WestEd as an independent education consultant to bring forward the most recent research and recommendations to meet the state’s constitutional obligation.

“North Carolina’s PreK-12 public education system leaves too many students behind, especially students of color and economically disadvantaged students. As a result, thousands of students are not being prepared for full participation in the global, interconnected economy and the society in which they will live, work, and engage as citizens.” – Judge W. David Lee, 2020

WestEd submitted its final report to the court in December 2019, with recommendations for specific actions necessary to achieve sustained compliance with the constitutional mandates of the Leandro decision. WestEd recognized that the current investment in public education funding is insufficient and recommended that, to strengthen the preschool to K-12 education system, the state should increase the base budget for K-12 education by \$3.7 billion and the base budget for early childhood by \$1.18 billion for a total increase of \$4.88 billion in recurring funding by 2028-29. ¹

Not for the first time, the Leandro case recognizes that a child’s education begins in early childhood, and that high-quality early childhood education is a critical foundation for later success in school. The Leandro case and the WestEd report reaffirm that a strong, supportive early childhood education system is essential to a child’s healthy development, early learning, and future academic success. It makes clear that there is an urgent need to expand funding for North Carolina’s early education system to ensure that all children, especially children from underserved and marginalized communities, have access to a sound, basic education beginning in early childhood.

2019 WestEd Recommendations for Early Childhood Education

1. Increase the volume and quality of the early childhood educator pipeline
2. Scale up Smart Start to increase quality, access, and support for at-risk children and families
3. Expand NC Pre-K to serve all at-risk 4-year-old children
4. Align and improve early-grade K-12 settings to support successful transitions to K-3 and promote early-grade success

It is time for the state to take action to address the education needs of all children. Barriers to our students' success continue to mount during the COVID-19 pandemic, and their constitutional rights must not be contingent upon the economic conditions facing North Carolina.

Why Is This Important to Do Now?

Early education is the foundation for future educational success.

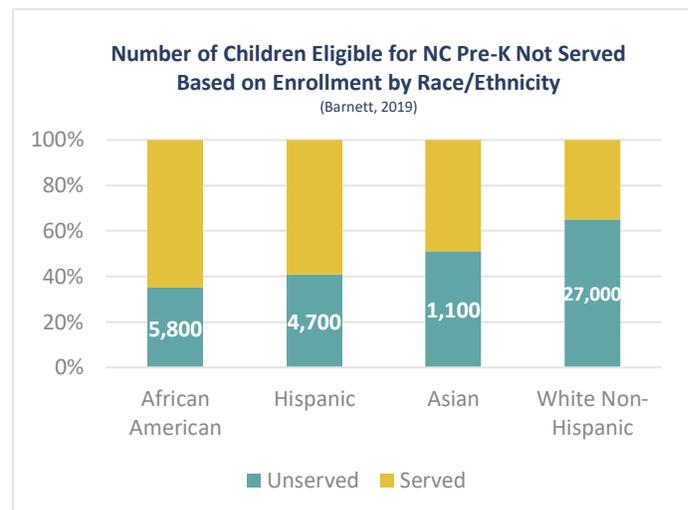
High-quality early learning programs provide children with a substantial amount of benefits, including: higher levels of literacy and numeracy understanding, stronger academic skills, and a higher possibility for their skills to persist throughout their academic careers.² In addition, such early education advantages are felt within a child's physical health by promoting healthy eating habits and exercise through active play.³ Studies have found that aside from its physical and mental health benefits, early childhood education can reduce grade retention and special education placement, which produces cost savings for schools and access to greater resources for children.⁴

Current early childhood programs like Smart Start and NC Pre-K are effective.

NC Pre-K is the state's pre-kindergarten program that serves 4-year-old children, primarily from low-income families. Given its consistently high standards and previous evidence of effectiveness, studies have found that children within the NC Pre-K system have exceeded developmental expectations in literacy, math, and general knowledge in addition to achieving overall higher test scores within these subjects.⁵ The other major early childhood program in the state, Smart Start, was created in 1993 as a public-private partnership with the intent of connecting families with resources in their community to provide children with a comprehensive local system of early education and family support services. Since its formation, research shows that children participating in Smart Start programs enter elementary school with better math and language skills.

Present-day investments in early education are not sufficient.

Despite initiatives to improve education opportunities beginning in early childhood, current investments are not satisfactory and restrict the expansion of high-quality early education. In 2011, the state legislature imposed a 20% budget cut on Smart Start, which decreased the state funding levels to the lowest they have been since the 1998 fiscal year.⁶ Similarly, NC Pre-K has never been fully funded, only serving approximately half of all eligible children in the state. In addition, at the beginning of 2020 there were nearly 50,000 children on waiting lists for child care subsidies, which assist parents in affording early childhood education while they work or attend school.⁷ Insufficient investments have also resulted in an early education workforce that receives low salaries and no benefits, with a high rate of turnover.⁸



A greater focus on key early childhood priorities is necessary and needed.

The WestEd Report highlights several investments that the state must pursue in order to ensure every child has access to a sound, basic education beginning in early childhood. This includes at least a \$571 million expansion of the NC Pre-K program and a \$532 million investment in Smart Start to support all early childhood education students, especially at-risk children and their families.⁹ Further, there must be an increase in the volume and quality of the early childhood educator pipeline, which requires higher wages, additional benefits from supplemental programs, and a statewide system of professional development.¹⁰ Better alignment is also needed between early childhood programs and elementary schools, including effective transition practices, more teaching assistants in the early grades, and more access for students to school nurses, counselors, and psychologists to promote future academic success for our state's youngest students.¹¹

What comes next?

The state's initial action plan response.

On early education, the Initial Consent Order requires “A system of early education that provides access to high-quality pre-kindergarten and other early childhood learning opportunities to ensure that all students at risk of education failure, regardless of where they live in the State, enter kindergarten on track for school success.” In January 2020, with the benefits of the findings, research, and recommendations of WestEd and the Commission, Judge W. David Lee signed this Consent Order negotiated by the NC State Board of Education, the Office of the Governor and NC Department of Justice, and the original Plaintiff school districts. The Consent Order required the Leandro parties to submit short- and long-term plans.

In June 2020, a report was submitted to the Court, as required, that identified short-term actions. For FY 2020-21, the state's initial action plan proposed \$35.6 million to combat the current early education inefficiencies, calling for the expansion of the NC Pre-K and Smart Start programs as well as increased funding for the early educator pipeline and the NC Infant Toddler program that provides early intervention services. Two other activities are also underway with grant funding: to develop a new early learning program for infants and toddlers modeled on the NC Pre-K program, and to create quality transition for young children from early childhood to K-3 classrooms.



A plan for North Carolina's youngest children.

There are several provisions of the state's initial response that would benefit infants and toddlers. The long-term plan is not yet released, but is expected to expand on the short-term action plan released in June 2020. Components of the Leandro plan that benefit infants and toddlers include:



- Expanding the Child Care WAGE\$ and Infant-Toddler Educator AWARD\$ programs providing educational attainment-based salary supplements for the early childhood educator workforce.
- Strengthening and expanding the NC Infant Toddler program that provides early intervention services and supports for families with children birth through two-years-old with developmental delays and special needs.
- Enhancing the child care subsidy system to provide greater access for eligible families to high-quality child care.
- Developing a high-quality early learning program for children birth through age three modeled on the NC Pre-K program that is targeted to high-need areas.
- Increasing investment in Smart Start, which will allow local partnerships statewide to reach more families with infants and toddlers with high-quality child care, home visiting, parenting education, developmental screenings, and other targeted support to address community needs.

A long-term plan.

Currently a second report is under development that incorporates additional action steps and lays out an eight-year plan. However, when and how these actions will be taken remains to be seen. The opportunity and obligation rests with the NC General Assembly to allocate state funding to fund these action steps and satisfy the Court Order requirements, so that all children in North Carolina have access to a sound basic education, starting in early childhood.



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- ¹ WestEd, Learning Policy Institute, & Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University (2019). *Sound Basic Education for All: An Action Plan for North Carolina*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd
- ² Ansari, Arya, et al. "Starting Early: The Benefits of Attending Early Childhood Education Programs at Age 3." *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 56, no. 4, Jan. 2019, pp. 1495-523. SAGE Journals Online.
- ³ WestEd, Learning Policy Institute, & Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University (2019). *Sound Basic Education for All: An Action Plan for North Carolina*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd
- ⁴ Heckman, J., Pinto, R., and Savelyev, P. (2013). Understanding the mechanisms through which an influential early childhood program boosted adult outcomes. *American Economic Review*, 103(6), 2052-2086
- ⁵ Wechsler, M., Kirp, D., Ali, T.T., Gardner, M., Maier, A., Melnick, H., & Shields, P.M. (2016). *The road to high-quality early learning: Lessons from the states*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.