

SUPPORTING NORTH CAROLINA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS: FROM COVID RELIEF TO COVID RECOVERY



EDUCATION INSIGHTS
PUBLIC SCHOOL FORUM OF NC
MARCH 2021


PUBLIC SCHOOL
FORUM of north carolina
NCFORUM.ORG



Thanks to quick actions on the part of federal, state and local leaders, North Carolina's public schools have been able to develop incredible innovations to meet the needs of children and families during COVID-19. As we begin to transition from COVID relief to COVID recovery, the Public School Forum of NC recommends several actions that will continue to provide local schools sustained support, stability, and flexibility to meet the local needs of our communities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Stabilize school budgets to preserve new innovations

Supplement — do not supplant — schools' COVID recovery needs with federal and state funds targeted toward COVID relief

Continue sustained investments that expand broadband to households across North Carolina

Invest in school facility repair and rebuilding efforts to support safe teaching & learning environments

Provide local school districts with multiple kinds of flexibility to transition into COVID recovery

SUPPORTING NORTH CAROLINA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS: FROM COVID RELIEF TO COVID RECOVERY

THE LANDSCAPE

For the past year, North Carolina's public schools have innovated in ways big and small to ensure students continued to learn and grow in the face of unprecedented changes brought on by a global pandemic known as COVID-19. Quickly pivoting to remote and hybrid learning environments across our state beginning last March, public school leaders and educators adapted their instructional delivery models to virtual learning and also took steps to address inherent inequities in our educational system by implementing new ways to ensure students could access nutrition and digital connections while families and children engaged in schooling from home to mitigate the spread of the virus.

This past year, North Carolina's public schools were able to accomplish so many amazing innovations in such a short period of time because local, state and federal leaders took quick actions to enable public schools to continue the necessary work of educating children during a global pandemic. Our state



leaders in the General Assembly enacted a hold harmless provision to ensure temporary public school enrollment declines did not result in funding decreases that impacted local capacity to respond to student needs. State leaders also directed the provision of millions of federal, state and philanthropic dollars for supports and resources to ensure as many students as possible had high-speed access to the internet, and federal and state funds were also funneled to districts to support the purchase of protective equipment and sanitation supplies that helped to keep staff and students safe while engaging in in-person and remote learning.



THE LANDSCAPE

While we look forward to the continued deployment of vaccines that will work to ensure COVID-19's impacts become much less very soon, the pandemic is not over yet – and for the 2021-22 school year, we must provide supports to our public schools in specific ways so that they can continue to provide innovative academic solutions to students across our great state. While undoubtedly many students have experienced learning losses during this challenging time, some students have experienced learning gains by way of developing and honing 21st century skills. Instead of going back to the old way of doing business, let's invest in sustained supports that preserve the great innovations that have been borne out of COVID-19.

Fortunately, North Carolina is in a strong position to invest in these supports. According to a budget presentation by the Fiscal Research Division of the NC General Assembly, our state's budget outlook is positive. Looking toward the end of this fiscal year, the state's revenue growth is now projected to be \$3.6 billion, instead of a decline as previously projected. Fifteen percent of that revenue must be transferred to the state's rainy day fund, which is projected to be a total of \$1.67 billion at the end of this fiscal year, with that infusion of funds. In addition, we will have approximately \$4 billion in nonrecurring, unappropriated dollars on the table due to the impasse surrounding HB 966 and the unanticipated growth in FY 2020-21 revenue. All of this puts North Carolina in a favorable position to ensure our public schools and educators are well-equipped to meet the needs of our children going into the school year this fall.



\$3.6 BILLION

REVENUE GROWTH



\$1.67 BILLION

RAINY DAY FUND



\$4 BILLION

UNAPPROPRIATED

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

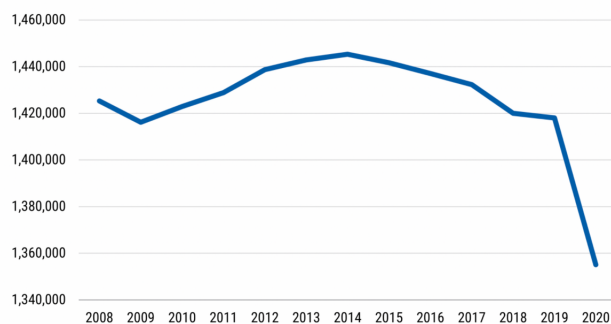


Stabilize school budgets to preserve new innovations

Looking back to the months prior to the start of the 2020-21 school year, K-12 public school leaders across North Carolina were concerned that actual student enrollment numbers would be lower than projections. Indeed, those concerns were confirmed: ultimately, schools across the state saw a total enrollment decline of 63,000 students (-4.4%) in the second month of the 2020-21 school year.¹

K-12 enrollments down in North Carolina public schools 63,000 in Fall 2020

Month 2 ADM, 2008-09 to 2020-21



Source: NC Department of Public Instruction

CAROLINA
DEMOGRAPHY

In anticipation of these enrollment declines and in order to stabilize school funding, lawmakers took action. North Carolina's schools are funded by the state based on the number of students attending schools, and significant declines can destabilize school budgets. To ensure schools were well-positioned to offer families and students the educational settings that best fit

their needs as well as address public health concerns – and able to stay on track to return to pre-COVID operations once the pandemic ends – the NC General Assembly enacted a hold harmless provision for schools that experienced enrollment declines. This action ensured that local school budgets would not be financially penalized for what was regarded as temporary reductions in student enrollment.

Looking ahead to the 2021-22 school year, school leaders across North Carolina caution that while we are fortunate to be experiencing a decline in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations, the pandemic is not yet over. The NC Department of Public Instruction projects another year of overall enrollment declines, although of a smaller scale. But it's just that – a projection – and school districts need to continue to keep strong innovations in place with stabilized budgets that are not penalized once again by what is the equivalent of a slow moving hurricane – COVID-19. To that end, we encourage lawmakers to consider another measure to ensure temporary enrollment declines across public school districts do not impact schools' abilities to meet the local needs of their communities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



Supplement – do not supplant – schools' COVID recovery needs with federal and state funds targeted toward COVID relief

Billions of dollars in one-time federal funds have been – or will soon be – directly appropriated to LEAs to support COVID relief efforts or directed to the General Assembly and Governor for distribution to K-12 public schools. However, North Carolina's public schools need permanent, recurring investments to support long-term student success as our schools transition from COVID relief to COVID recovery. In 2018, our state ranked 48th in the nation on cost-adjusted per pupil funding level by state relative to the national average, according to the Education Law Center.² That report also found that North Carolina ranks 49th in the nation on "funding effort," which is measured by the percentage of the state's economic activity or gross domestic product (GDP) allocated to support the PK-12 school system.³



48th Per Pupil Funding
49th Funding Effort

COVID relief funds have supported to date the purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE), sanitation supplies, technology purchases and mental health support personnel and resources, and supporting interventions to mitigate learning loss, to name a few areas for which funds could be used.

However, in order to support recovery efforts, which will extend well beyond the time that the COVID-19 virus is effectively contained with widespread vaccination efforts, North Carolina's leaders must make recurring, sustainable investments in our public schools. As mentioned above, our state is in a good financial position to make these investments at a time when we want to preserve key innovations in our public schools, such as virtual academies that have been implemented in many districts across our state that provide families with greater choices when it comes to their children's schooling. In addition, it is especially important to secure these investments for communities that have endured significant disruptions to their educational programs and overall ability to access necessary physical and mental health and housing supports due to Hurricane Matthew (2016) and Hurricane Florence (2018).

SUPPORTING NORTH CAROLINA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS: FROM COVID RELIEF TO COVID RECOVERY

Long Term Support for SISP Critically Needed

A portion of COVID relief funds have been directed to increase the number of School Instructional Support Personnel that work with students in order to meet the academic, physical, and mental health needs of students and to ensure that schools are safe and supportive learning environments. However, many of these new hires are being made with non-recurring funds, and some are hired on a contractual basis or for a limited time period. School leaders report concern that once one-time federal COVID relief funds dry up, they will be faced with a funding cliff that will require them to eliminate many of these positions, as they will not have the funding streams available to hire them on a long-term basis. This scenario, say school leaders, is reminiscent of the years following the time when federal Race to the Top funds were awarded to NC in the wake of the Great Recession.

North Carolina should take steps to ensure additional recurring funds are appropriated for increased numbers of school counselors, nurses, social workers, and psychologists to begin to meet national guidelines, initially prioritizing high-poverty schools. North Carolina should also provide school districts appropriate flexibility in position allotments for these personnel so that they may strategically hire staff to best meet the needs of their students. The state should also consider a re-evaluation of the pay scale for these roles to ensure they are able to attract qualified individuals to fill vacant positions.

Recommended vs. Actual Ratios of SISP to Students in North Carolina's Public Schools

Social Workers



1:250

RECOMMENDED

1:1289

ACTUAL

School Psychologists



1:500

RECOMMENDED

1:1800

ACTUAL

School Counselors



1:250

RECOMMENDED

1:353

ACTUAL

School Nurses



1:750

RECOMMENDED

1:1013

ACTUAL

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Meeting the requirements laid out in the [Leandro Comprehensive Remedial Plan](#) are essential steps toward ensuring North Carolina's students will have the resources they need to achieve academic success both during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. In particular, **recurring state investments** should be made without delay in additional school support personnel such as school counselors, nurses, social workers, and psychologists; expansion of the NC Pre-K program; teacher salary increases, and other critical areas.



Continue sustained investments that expand broadband to households across North Carolina

High-speed internet, or “broadband,” is critical for work, school, and life in North Carolina – especially as families and educators continue to engage in remote learning during the pandemic. Over 30 percent of households across our state do not adopt broadband due to affordability, a lack of infrastructure, and/or a gap in digital literacy skills. During COVID-19, many stakeholders have implemented short-term solutions to expand broadband access for students, including WiFi hotspots, “park and learn” internet sites, deployment of devices, and digital literacy training. But even after the pandemic wanes, affordability will be a primary concern, notably the difficulty in paying for internet service plans that these devices require. Looking ahead, a multi-stakeholder effort must be made to fortify short-term broadband access solutions to address affordability concerns and develop and deploy long-term access solutions for students and households.

~40% of households across North Carolina have access to a wired broadband internet connection that costs less than or equal to \$60/month.



Source: Coble, C. (2020). Perspective| The Reality of Broadband in North Carolina. EdNC.
<https://www.ednc.org/perspective-the-realityof-broadband-in-north-carolina/>

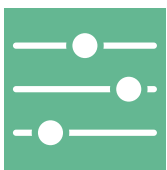
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



Invest in school facility repair and rebuilding efforts to support safe teaching & learning environments

Years ago, North Carolina's school facility repair and construction needs exceeded \$8 billion statewide⁴, and the pandemic has made the need to invest in our school buildings even more urgent, as students and educators return to in-person learning. Well-ventilated and physically safe classrooms are high priorities in order to ensure the health and safety of our schools' staff and students. These needs are even more urgent in economically distressed districts that cannot rely on a robust local tax base to fund capital construction, as well as districts that have experienced significant impacts from Hurricanes Florence and Matthew.

The last statewide K-12 school bond of \$1.8 billion was passed 25 years ago, in 1996.⁵ Interest rates are currently very low, and the time is now for the General Assembly to approve a multi-billion dollar school bond referendum to be placed on the ballot in November 2021.



Provide local school districts with multiple kinds of flexibility to transition into COVID recovery

Without pause, local school leaders around the state are emphasizing that in order to transition from COVID relief to COVID recovery, they need flexibility – and not just in terms of funding decisions, but also calendar flexibility and assessment flexibility.

When directed, the NC General Assembly distributes federal COVID relief funding to districts. In the past, these funds have at times been distributed to LEAs in specific buckets, which makes meeting the local needs of students and communities more challenging to do for local school leaders. Whenever possible, lawmakers and the State Board of Education should endeavor to make these funds as flexible as possible.

In addition, school leaders say that in order to serve students' needs during COVID recovery, flexibility is critical in two additional areas: **school calendar and student assessment and accountability**. With greater calendar flexibility, schools are more nimble to re-align content standards in ways that give students more time to close learning gaps. More autonomy in determining school calendars will enable districts to mitigate learning losses that have taken place during COVID-19 – and also maximize learning gains that have transpired, as well. Flexibility in assessing students' learning gains and losses will enable district leaders to implement mechanisms that more accurately measure where students are at academically – and how they need to move forward.

CONCLUSION

In education and beyond, COVID-19 illuminated and exacerbated the inequities that exist in our society, and the pandemic's impact will undoubtedly be felt for many years to come. But despite the incredible challenges that our public school communities have faced as a result of the pandemic, this past year has also shone a bright light on the strength and resilience of North Carolina's students, families, educators, and administrators. Looking ahead to the 2021-22 school year, we look forward to strong and stable investments in our state's public schools that position North Carolina to recover from this global pandemic in ways that make us stronger than ever before.

RESOURCES

1. Tippet, R. (2021). Understanding declines in NC public school enrollment. Carolina Demography. Retrieved at: <https://www.ncdemography.org/2021/02/15/understanding-declines-in-nc-public-school-enrollment/>
2. Farrie, D. & Sciarra, D. (2020) Making the Grade 2020: How Fair is School Funding in Your State? Education Law Center. Retrieved at: <https://edlawcenter.org/assets/MTG%202020/Making%20the%20Grade%202020.pdf>
3. Ibid.
4. Recent Results from 2015-16 Public School Facility Needs Survey. (2016). North Carolina Association of County Commissioners. <https://www.ncacc.org/Blog.aspx?IID=207>
5. Bostic, R. & Reese, J. (2017). Public School Facility Needs. Presentation to the House Appropriations Committee on Capital.