*my*FUTURE**NC**

LISTENING TOUR

A Statewide Perspective
on Education, Attainment
& Opportunity

**FOUNDATIONAL CHALLENGES & BARRIERS TO STUDENT
ATTAINMENT & RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS**

Introduction

In the fall of 2017, the President of the University of North Carolina System, the Acting President of the North Carolina Community College System, and the North Carolina State Superintendent of Public Instruction partnered with representatives from the education, business, policy, philanthropy, faith-based, and nonprofit communities to establish myFutureNC, a statewide commission focused on educational attainment. For over a year, the Commission worked on developing a comprehensive Call to Action that included an attainment goal for the state, benchmarks to measure progress toward that goal, and Focus Areas and Priorities to guide the state's work as it continues to reach for the goal.

During the spring of 2018, the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University organized a Listening Tour to gather feedback from stakeholders across the state about the Commission's emerging Call to Action and its components. In each of the state's eight prosperity zones, Tour staff convened stakeholders at a central location and conducted focus groups and panels all related to the theme of attainment. At many of the stops, staff also led focus groups at local schools or colleges, as well as at local businesses, in order to collect information from teachers, students, employees, and others who otherwise would not have been able to participate in the events. Over the course of the tour, nearly 400 event participants and over 170 on-site student, teacher, and employee participants provided input in the following locations: **Asheboro, Cherokee, Elizabeth City, Greensboro, Jacksonville, Kannapolis, Lenoir, Pinehurst,** and **eastern Wake County**. In addition to the daytime events, EducationNC hosted evening gatherings in surrounding communities, allowing for even greater participation from community members who were unable to attend the daytime meetings. Concurrent with the Listening Tour and evening gatherings, EducationNC and Gallup administered two surveys to different constituencies. To include the voices of more North Carolinians and those who were not able to participate in face-to-face convenings, this report includes responses to relevant corresponding survey items.

Data collected on the myFutureNC Listening Tour and from other myFutureNC-related meetings (including Commission meetings) coalesced into two broad categories of findings—*Challenges and Barriers* to meeting personal and statewide attainment targets, and *Recommendations* for moving forward. We have grouped the challenges and barriers into six thematic areas: *Foundational, Structural, Social, Place-Based,* and *Fiscal Challenges and Barriers,* along with *Challenges and Barriers to Engaging Students and Families.*

Organization of the Briefs

Six documents summarize the *Challenges and Barriers* identified during the Listening Tour (one for each of the different themes), as well as the related *Recommendations* provided by Listening Tour participants. Where appropriate, we have supplemented participant comments with relevant data from the statewide EducationNC and Gallup surveys.

Challenges and Barriers

What are the problems we need to solve in order to improve attainment? What are the structural elements that get in the way? Challenges and barriers can be either within- and cross-sector or out-of-sector. "Sector" refers to the major education provision levels (pre-Kindergarten, K-12, community colleges, and four-year colleges and graduate schools); "out-of-sector" refers to other variables outside of formal schooling that influence attainment.* This brief details challenges and barriers that we have categorized as **Foundational Challenges and Barriers**. Foundational Challenges and Barriers include challenges stemming from conflicting goals and values, both within and across education sectors. These conflicts often emerge between a) the things that the state measures; b) the things that the state values; and c) the things that each sector knows need to be the focus of its work.

Recommendations

For many focus group participants, recommendations are based on existing or past local-level actions or programs. In some cases, recommendations are speculative and are not grounded in current projects or initiatives. Recommendations for addressing identified challenges and barriers are included at the end of each section.

Source Codes

At the end of each section, abbreviations indicate the Listening Tour sessions during which the topic of that section was discussed.

Disclaimer

The themes shared in these six summary documents are not presented here as statements of fact or as indications of the Commission's preferred recommendations. The information is simply a reflection of the conversations held across the state—a record of how North Carolinians who participated in the Listening Tour sessions think about the issue of attainment and of the work necessary to improve attainment outcomes for people in their communities.

* This brief also refers to the "continuum," which is used to describe education sectors from P-12 to postsecondary in addition to the business and industry sector that follows.

Foundational Challenges & Barriers to Student Attainment & Related Recommendations

Siloed Sectors

On paper, sectors connect to form an education continuum that starts with preschool and ends in a career, but in reality, each sector tends to operate independently of the others.

Listening Tour participants statewide expressed concerns that the state's education sectors do not appear to have a clear understanding of each other's work. More specifically, they noted that actors along the continuum lack a shared mission, impeding cross-sector coordination and communication. In the current system, educators struggle to prepare students to achieve long-term academic success because their performance is measured using within-sector tools like standardized tests, which tend to stress performance on discrete tasks rather than holistic preparedness. As a result, instruction often overlooks the development of broader skills unrelated to testing, which creates gaps in student learning that carry over at each sector transition. Participants concluded that redefining attainment goals so that schools prepare students for long-term success may require system-wide restructuring and collaboration.

Recommendations from Participants

- Invite higher education representatives to take a more formal role in designing and structuring the K-12 experience.
- Seek greater involvement from business and industry in development of attainment goals.
- Develop a communications plan that ensures that everyone involved (teachers, students, parents, businesses) understands why and how sectors can and should work together

(A, C, EC, P, W)

Mis-Alignment between State Policies & Desired Outcomes

Education stakeholders must unite to make progress towards commonly agreed-upon goals.

Participants also raised concerns about critical disconnects between educators, students, and the policymaking process that governs education. Schools are accountable for ensuring that students meet goals and standards set by policies that often are developed without their input. As a result, policies that appear to make good sense in the abstract can end up impacting educators and students negatively when those policies fail to account for on-the-ground realities.

For example, many participants noted that the state's K-12 school accountability and reward system does not align with the outcomes it intends to support. School performance grades provide one example of an accountability measure that many stakeholders feel is detrimental to schools. While one intent of the policy is to help policymakers assess schools in need of resources or intervention, and another is to help parents and guardians assess school quality, the policy may incentivize schools to focus on overall school performance at the expense of focusing on growth for all students, regardless of their individual performance levels.

On a local level, many stakeholders believe that some of these disconnects contribute to a decline in support for public schools. They sense a shift from a time when whole communities supported public education to an individual, "it's-all-about-my-child" mindset. They cited the diversification of education options as a contributor, because working toward common goals is more challenging when there are multiple competing education providers. For example, some participants suggested that growth in the number of charter schools and other school choice options splinters stakeholders. Overall, there was a desire for a restoration of unified community support for every child's education.

AUTHOR
Emily Antoszyk
Research Associate

(Please direct all inquiries about this document to eaantosz@ncsu.edu)

AUTHOR
Erin Huggins
Research Associate

AUTHOR
Laura Rosof
Research Assistant

AUTHOR
Trip Stallings
Director of Policy Research

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Recommendations from Participants

- Elevate the roles of local-level decision-makers: Pull together local and regional stakeholders to work with education and business and industry sectors on localized plans for restoring cooperation on and support for public education

(EC, K, P)

Disconnects between Schooling and Community Needs

Education all along the continuum does not accurately reflect real-world needs.

A major foundational challenge identified at nearly every Tour stop was the gap between the experiences schooling provides and the experiences that would best prepare students for life after school. The most common examples were differences between the K-12 environment and the post-graduation world. K-12 culture tends to be test-to-test and linear; in addition to overemphasizing discrete skills at the expense of critical thinking skills, this kind of culture plays to the strengths of only a small segment of the student population. This focus on testing and accountability means schools often overlook important "soft" skills, too, such as interpersonal communication. While student success in rigorous academic environments may contribute to success in the workforce, academic achievement is only part of the total package an employee needs to bring to a job.

Furthermore, current measures of success in elementary, middle, and high school are too limited to reflect all of a community's needs. Many participants feared that over-reliance on quantitative metrics like GPAs, test results, and graduation rates may steer students and educators down less meaningful and less fulfilling paths. For example, an emphasis on GPA may deter students from taking courses without honors credits that might expose them to meaningful careers needed to fill gaps in the workforce. For teachers, an emphasis on improving graduation rates creates incentives to promote students before they are ready. In general, quantitative measures only tell part of the story, and stakeholders called for more holistic assessments all along the continuum.

For postsecondary, there was a concern that an overemphasis on traditional four-year college degrees may deter students from entering important fields not supported by those degrees. In addition, there was concern that many majors and programs at four-year colleges do not align with workforce needs. Finally, all along the continuum, but especially in higher education, it can be challenging for schools to respond to the needs of their communities and the business and industry sector when funding, equipment, supplies, and space are not earmarked for those needs. Whether actual budgets reflect it or not, there was a pervasive sentiment that the gap between community needs and the support necessary to address those needs leads many colleges to prioritize research funding, which likely contributes to the perception that higher education values research dollars over service to the community.

Recommendations from Participants

- Prioritize hands-on learning over testing

- Shift from instruction focused on end-of-grade tests to instruction focused on individual growth. Student growth in areas such as task performance, perseverance, meeting personal goals, and demonstration of skills should be the primary measures to evaluate student achievement.

- Incentivize companies to invest more (both financially and educationally) in the students they want to attract to the workforce (for example, help pay for the cost of programs that train their future employees).

(A, EC, G, J, K, L, P, W)

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Devalued Education Pathways and Professions

As a state, we need to overcome the different values we assign to each higher education option.

A traditional four-year college pathway is not the only postsecondary option, but many students, families, and communities continue to believe it is the only option for ensuring high-paying, fulfilling work. Some argued that there is inherent value in the four-year degree, which acts as a filter, identifying students who persisted through postsecondary. This, however, devalues experience in favor of credentials.

This persistent belief creates a barrier particularly for lower-income students, who may think that a four-year college is inaccessible because of the cost, but who also may not consider alternative options because of their misperceptions about the market value of any other kind of degree or certificate. In addition, many students think non-four-year pathways are only for certain types of students (for example, certain genders, races, or classes), which further limits the pool of candidates who follow these critical pathways. The four-year college bias also influences the decisions of working adults who could re-train or up-skill in a non-four-year program. The challenge does not just affect college recruitment; businesses that rely on students from community colleges or training programs also feel the sting of unfair negative perceptions of the careers they offer. Even an ever-increasing number of positive reports of job placement and job satisfaction from students who earn two-year degrees or industry certification has not been enough to change this perception.

Relevant Survey Findings

- The majority of Gallup survey respondents (46%) said that completing a four-year degree was the best path to a good job for students graduating from high school. This response was followed by completing a two-year degree (24%), completing a professional certification (23%), and going directly to work (7%).

Recommendations from Participants

- Conduct a public awareness campaign about workforce opportunities for people with non-four-year degrees and certifications. Begin by broadening the definition of attainment to include a wider range of pathways and outcomes (such as apprenticeships and career and technical education at two-year colleges)

- Institute career and college signing days at schools to publicly recognize students who choose *any* pathway (career, four-year, two-year, technical, etc.)

- Re-brand Career and Technical Education track programs by emphasizing their benefits (for example, increased wages, shorter time to completion, etc.)

- Provide equitable counseling on traditional and alternative pathways

(A, C, EC, G, J, K, L, P, W)

Please direct all inquiries about this document to eaantosz@ncsu.edu.

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