*my*FUTURE**NC**

# LISTENING TOUR

A Statewide Perspective on Education, Attainment & Opportunity

**3**

**ENGAGEMENT 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 **Challenges and Barriers to Engaging Students and Families**. Challenges and Barriers to Engaging Students and Families are those related to helping students and their families *progress along the continuum* and barriers that can cause students and families to drop out of the continuum.

## 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.*

# Engagement Challenges & Barriers to Student Attainment & Related Recommendations

## Insufficient Guidance for Navigating Sector Admissions and Transitions

**Parents lack guidance for how to help their students during major academic transitions, particularly those for which classroom structure and curriculum change significantly.**

A large contingent of Listening Tour participants and survey respondents felt that schools mostly focused on academic preparation and spent little time preparing students socially and emotionally for transitions. While some transitions are difficult for students, others are more difficult for parents, many of whom found information surrounding transitions to be inconsistent, ineffective, and incomplete. Though any transition from one grade level to the next or one sector to another can be difficult, participants commonly highlighted the following transitions as the most difficult:

- **Preschool to Kindergarten:** Parents found researching preschool options challenging. Most stakeholders agreed that students who do not attend preschool have a more difficult time adjusting socially, emotionally, and academically to Kindergarten.

- **Grade 2 to grade 3:** This transition is difficult for students and parents due to the move into a testing culture. Grade 3 is the first high-stakes testing year.

- **Grade 8 to grade 9 (middle to high school):** Stakeholders viewed the transition from middle to high school as difficult because of perceptions that students receive less support than in previous transitions. Educators detailed the struggle of wanting to guide students fully in this transition while also helping them develop their independent decision-making skills.

- **High school to postsecondary:** Student participants said they struggled most with the high school to postsecondary transition. In high school, college applications require students to develop an understanding of admissions requirements and course transfer. Once enrolled, students outlined the difficulties associated with navigating a new system and classroom structure, choosing a course of study, and obtaining financial aid—sometimes with little to no guidance. They further highlighted communication challenges, saying that it was difficult to know who to turn to for support and how to ask for assistance.

  While parents can help students navigate higher education to some extent, many need more resources and information to help them counsel students before they enter postsecondary or career tracks. Parents of first-generation college students especially need support and guidance for navigating postsecondary options. One focus group participant framed the issue by saying that every student and family needed at least one go-to personal connection who could serve as both a support and an advocate for the student and parent throughout the continuum ("someone who knows more about the student than a test score").

It is worth noting that, while these transitions generally are difficult for all students, there are some student groups who participants indicated tend to struggle more with the transitions than do others. These cohorts include students who are:

1. From lower-income backgrounds;

2. "In the middle" academically (participants perceived that schools tend to focus on high-flyers and struggling students);

3. Non-traditional (for example, homeschooled students);

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4. Special needs; and

5. First-generation college attendees, because there is a lack of "family institutional memory" related to the college preparation process and experience.

## Relevant Survey Findings

- Almost a quarter (23%) of EducationNC survey respondents rated "[access to] better guidance about successfully moving between education levels" as the most helpful way to increase educational attainment among students in their community. This response came in second behind "more financial aid opportunities" and tied with "[access to] better information about degrees/credentials that are most relevant for the available jobs in my community."

- Half of Gallup survey respondents were of the opinion that preschool attendance greatly impacts students' long-term success.

- Just over half (54%) of EducationNC survey respondents identified the transition from high school to community college or technical training as the transition in which students and families need the most guidance. Almost the same percentage (52%) identified the transition from high school to four-year college as the area of second-greatest need.

- Forty-two percent of Gallup survey respondents were of the opinion that K-12 schools in their area were only "sometimes" a good places for students from low-income families; 8% said that they were "never" a good place.

## Recommendations from Participants

*General*

- Allow counselors to work across sector divides to address transition challenges for students and families and expand counseling programs

  - For instance, provide college and career counselors who work for postsecondary institutions but are placed in K-12 to help students learn about offerings and enroll in programs

- Allow some teachers to bridge transitional years so students have at least one point of consistency (for instance, between grades 5 and 6)

- Raise parent/guardian and student awareness of available support options at transition points

- Recruit volunteers to help parents navigate school systems and advocate for their children

- Provide between-year transition support at all stages in the form of summer camps, return-to-school orientation events, curriculum navigation sessions, and more

*Sector-specific*

- Design and implement a "Rising Kindergarten" summer camp to prepare students for school, especially those who did not attend preschool

- Register students earlier than usual for middle school so that they have ample time to consider options

- Institute transition planning for high school students

- From an early age, expose every student to college campuses and expectations

- Support college transitions with in-depth pre- and post-enrollment peer mentoring

- Ensure counselors are well-versed in available financial aid and scholarship opportunities, as well as admissions requirements at nearby schools

- Appoint cross-sector ambassadors at all levels and across all sectors

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

# Little Knowledge of Career Opportunities

**Families and students need broader, deeper, and more accurate information about career options.**

Students, parents, teachers, and school administrators voiced concerns about the lack of connections between course work, testing, real-world applications of what is learned, and knowledge about career pathways. Most were aware of the pathways to four-year degrees, but many were not aware of certificate programs, two-year options, and opportunities for work-based learning. Students even had difficulty identifying career options once enrolled in postsecondary education. When stakeholders discussed this topic in focus groups, the majority agreed that student exposure to potential fields of study and careers should begin early. All agreed that the conversations should begin in middle school, if not before, and continue through postsecondary.

The logical person to guide students and their families would be a career counselor. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of this role in multiple conversations across multiple topics. Unfortunately, in schools with a dedicated guidance counselor, need often forces those counselors to focus most of their attention on academic planning and emotional and social issues, leaving them little time to develop relationships with employers or to steer students toward fulfilling careers.

Focus group participants also cited employer involvement as crucial. Employer engagement with students, families, and schools through career fairs, job shadowing and site visits, mentorships, and work-based learning opportunities like internships and apprenticeships helps to educate the public about the pathways to employment. Furthermore, through these interactions, employers can help manage student expectations about life beyond the classroom. Some schools employ career counselors who develop relationships with area employers to increase student exposure to careers, and in other schools, teachers make connections, but generally, these relationship-builders are not widespread.

## Relevant Survey Findings

- About a quarter (26%) of EducationNC survey respondents were of the opinion that educational opportunities in their community were very well aligned with available jobs, and 25% of respondents expressed that educational opportunities provide avenues to gain needed work skills for available jobs.

- The majority (91%) of of EducationNC survey respondents indicated that their educational experiences were "very useful" or "somewhat useful" in helping them get a job. However, only 62% found that their level of education "very useful" or "somewhat useful" in increasing their pay.

- Roughly a quarter (23%) of EducationNC survey respondents rated "better information about degrees/credentials that are the most relevant for the jobs available in my community" as the second most helpful way to increase educational attainment among students in their communities.

## Recommendations from Participants

- Communicate early, often, and clearly to students, parents, teachers about career options and the postsecondary pathways connected to them

  - Provide information about how coursework is applied in the real world

  - Develop an information center from which students and families can get accurate and consistent information about college and career pathways

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- Increase the number and availability of career counselors and coaches
  - Promote use of interest assessments early and at regular intervals to identify student interests and skills and help them explore related careers
  - Provide career-readiness counseling and institute career and college readiness activities throughout middle and high school
  - Provide professional development to increase counselors' awareness of available careers, skills needed, and pathways to attainment
- Encourage, support, and formalize partnerships between schools and businesses; Partnerships should include meaningful experiences for students of all ages
- Expose students to different careers at different time points along the continuum, starting in the early grades, via formal structures such as:
  - Apprenticeships
  - Career-focused academies offered by business and industry
  - Career-focused clubs in schools
  - Hands-on career fairs
  - Internships and mentorships
  - Job shadowing
  - Lunches with employers and community members
  - School-business partnerships with a purpose (for example, partnerships built around projects that are mutually beneficial to student learning and business objectives)
  - High school senior projects focused on careers
  - Site visits and tours
  - Virtual reality or job simulation opportunities

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

## Insufficient Information about Financial Aid

**Increased financial aid guidance not only will help students and families determine how to pay for postsecondary education but also may help make that education seem more accessible.**

While any frustration-inducing barrier can derail student academic resilience, two of the most critical—and seemingly solvable—barriers are the processes for establishing in-state residency and applying for financial aid. Focus groups with parents and students highlighted a need for counseling regarding both processes. Many were not aware of the criteria, deadlines, loan types, and required steps. In addition, some students and families lack awareness of the difference between scholarships and grants.

### Relevant Survey Findings

- EducationNC survey respondents rated "more financial aid opportunities" as the most helpful way to increase educational attainment among students in their community.
- About half (48%) of Gallup survey respondents were satisfied with the affordability of 2-year community colleges. This percentage was 26% in relation to public colleges and universities and 14% in relation to private colleges and universities.

**Source Key**
- **A:** Asheboro
- **C:** Cherokee
- **EC:** Elizabeth City
- **G:** Greensboro
- **J:** Jacksonville
- **K:** Kannapolis
- **L:** Lenoir
- **P:** Pinehurst
- **W:** Wake County
- **O:** Other

- Of EducationNC survey respondents who had not reached their desired level of education, 35% said that they stopped attending school was too expensive, and 15% said that they did not reach their desired level of education because they did not feel that the benefits were worth the cost.

**Recommendations from Participants**

- Devote high school class periods to financial aid advising

- Hold financial aid sessions well in advance of deadlines, and also hold them for younger students and their families, starting as early as middle school

- Use behavioral nudges like automatic texting to encourage the completion of financial aid applications and to connect students with resources

- Partner colleges with high schools to jointly inform students about aid and resources

- Promote online financial aid resources for parents provided by The College Foundation of North Carolina *(www.cfnc.org)*

**(A, C, EC, G, K, L)**

## Limited Guidance for Lifelong Learning

**Developing a mentality of lifelong learning is important, as it increases employee resiliency in ever-changing markets. The education system needs to support those re-entering academia after time in the field.**

Educational institutions need to develop lifelong learners and re-engage adults who want to return to school for more training. To stay competitive, many of the rapidly changing industries in our state will need employees who can upskill quickly. In our current education system, many institutions lack methods for providing information and supports to people who are considering a return to academia. Listening Tour visits to businesses across the state uncovered many examples of employees who were interested in changing careers or upskilling but who did not know how to plan a return to school or were unable to do so due to scheduling or financial constraints. Furthermore, federal regulations create barriers to providing financial aid to students, as financial aid is only available to certain students pursuing degrees in certain types of programs. Students pursuing short-term credentials and continuing education courses are ineligible for financial aid. Once enrolled, these students need special supports, as re-entry into academia after time away can be difficult.

**Relevant Survey Findings**

- More than a third (39%) of EducationNC survey respondents had not reached their desired level of educational attainment.

**Recommendations from Participants**

- Develop and promote multiple pathways for student and adult learners that include multiple on- and off-ramps along an individual's education continuum to accommodate shifts in education and career pathway needs over time

- Provide adult learners with more flexibility (that is, flexible work schedules and course scheduling and course length options)

- Provide additional scholarships for adult working students who do not otherwise qualify for financial aid

- Identify and share the stories of local businesses that provide flexible work hours for employees who take classes

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- Expand "Part-Way Home" programs designed to help non-completers return and finish

**(A, C, G, J, W)**

## Disaffected and Disconnected Families

### Family disengagement from the education system weakens student outcomes.

At almost all Listening Tour stops statewide, focus group participants discussed a perceived lack of student and family engagement in the education system, and the time points at which students and parents withdraw. While high school and postsecondary were the most commonly cited points of student disengagement, some felt that students disconnected from school earlier, despite mandatory attendance requirements. As for parent involvement, stakeholders perceived decreases as students aged.

For some parents and families, intimidation leads to disconnection. For example, some parents feel uncomfortable spending time at their child's school because they lack a certain level of education or credentials. Others may struggle with engagement if they are not native English speakers or are unfamiliar with the culture in North Carolina schools.

**Relevant Survey Findings**

- Almost half (40%) of Gallup survey respondents identified poor communication with parents and families as one of the biggest challenges facing K-12 in their communities.

**Recommendations from Participants**

- Identify strategies for engendering shared aspirations and expectations statewide
- Provide opportunities for students and their parents to visit colleges where they can see older students who look like them
- Bring families into schools more often to familiarize them with the culture
- Offer parents educational opportunities that will enable them to better help their children with coursework
- Partner with churches and community groups to address the needs of families who otherwise may be reticent to attend meetings on school campus

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

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