myFUTURENC

LISTENING TOUR

A Statewide Perspective
on Education, Attainment
& Opportunity

4

OF 7

**SOCIAL/CULTURAL 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 **Social and Cultural Challenges and Barriers**. Social and Cultural Challenges and Barriers arise when social and cultural pressures outside of the continuum make attainment difficult for students.

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.

Social/Cultural Challenges & Barriers to Student Attainment & Related Recommendations

Inconsistent Wraparound Services

School officials recognize the need to provide wraparound services to students in order to meet their primary goal of educating students, but they struggle to do so without additional support.

During the Listening Tour, many stakeholders talked about the importance of meeting the basic needs of students. Though it is not their primary responsibility, schools find it necessary to provide support services like meals, counseling, and medical care to students in order to achieve their education goals. For students raised in lower-income households or households in crisis, schools may be their only lifeline to needed social, physical, or sometimes even emotional supports.

Wraparound services can help to foster a sense of community and increase attendance, but schools need additional support from community and government organizations to provide these services. In addition, while stakeholders consider schools to be excellent, central places to house needed services, they recognize the challenges associated with using schools as the primary service center. Chief among these challenges are the lack of trained personnel and the lack of funding to address the breadth and depth of issues that students bring with them to school at every step along the continuum.

Relevant Survey Findings

- Half of Gallup survey respondents were of the opinion that K-12 schools were only "sometimes a good place" or "never a good place" for students of low-income families.

Recommendations from Participants

- Expand the use of schools as conduits for connecting third-party support services to students and families (such as access to pre-natal care, transportation, and mental health services)

- Maximize volunteer resources to supplement learning outside of school for students who do not have resources at home

- Develop an advisory system that addresses the whole student, focusing on students' academic, social, and emotional health

- Provide wraparound services for students in higher education, such as:

    - High-quality, affordable childcare

    - Emergency funds to help with non-educational challenges (for example, emergency car repair) that put some students in danger of dropping out

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

Failure to Address Student Social and Emotional Needs

Students deal with a myriad of social and emotional challenges related to incidents within and outside of the classroom. They need support networks to help them deal with these issues.

The need for services to address students' social and emotional challenges permeated focus groups in almost every region. As we have noted in other briefs in this series, students need

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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supports to deal with academic challenges and transitions, but also with challenges like mental health issues, deployment of a family member, death, abuse, and more.[1] A specific issue highlighted at more than one Listening Tour site was the need for support services for students of undocumented parents. For these students, the threat of deportation and the accompanying feeling of instability can leave them feeling stressed and isolated.

In addition, Listening Tour participants were concerned about the lack of available staff trained to help students navigate all of those issues. Because it is the primary mission of schools to educate students, counselors often focus on academics and not the needs of the whole student, though many recognize that the key to student academic resilience is the development of strong coping skills. Similarly, teachers often must choose between serving the needs of the majority or the needs of one or two students who are coping with severe social and emotional issues.

Relevant Survey Findings

- About a third (32%) of Gallup survey respondents were of the opinion that the lack of guidance counselors is one of the biggest challenges facing K-12 schools.

Recommendations from Participants

- Prioritize the hiring of guidance counselors, social workers, parent counselors, and dedicated mental health support personnel for all schools

- Create a model to define and track traumatic incidents experienced by students outside of school to develop a holistic approach to providing student services

- Train faculty and staff in trauma-informed practices so that they can guide their students through resilience training

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

Differences in Student and Family Backgrounds and Experiences

Successful navigation of schooling depends as much on whole-family familiarity with and comfort operating within education settings as it does with student academic readiness.

Listening Tour participants highlighted the importance of a family's deep-rooted educational experiences and social and cultural backgrounds as often-overlooked but necessary ingredients for student success. Families who are disengaged from the education system for a variety of reasons (for example, because of past experiences in schools, cultural or language barriers, or even unfamiliarity with the community) may struggle to make the connections that will improve educational opportunities for their students. Participants felt that schools often miss opportunities to connect families to key resources, networks, and information. For example:

- **Resources:** School officials and advocates talked about the importance of providing resources to English language learners and their families, particularly undocumented students. While some recommended hiring more qualified teachers to support English Language Learner programs, others highlighted the need for resources to help families gain familiarity with the school culture and to address legal challenges.

- **Networks:** In areas with a high population of military families, representatives discussed the challenge these families often face as they try to plug into a social network after a move. One focus group participant shared a scenario in which a parent needed to take one of her

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

children to the doctor during her spouse's deployment. Because she was new to the area and lacked the social connections that could help her with her other children, the parent had to take all of her children to the doctor with her, resulting in school absences for all of them.

- **Information:** Participants noted that it is particularly difficult for first-generation college students to navigate higher education. These students are not able to rely on family or community experiences to guide them in choosing the opportunities best suited for them. In some cases, not attending or dropping out of college may be exclusively related to an information gap, as students do not always have the "college knowledge" to know how to, for example, approach professors or apply for financial aid.

Relevant Survey Findings

- Over half (55%) of Gallup survey respondents were of the opinion that K-12 schools in their area were only "sometimes a good place" or "never a good place" for students for whom English is a second language.

Recommendations from Participants

- Identify peers / non-academic persons who can serve as ambassadors to help disconnected families access programs and pathways in each education sector

- Engage with families and disseminate information outside of school, in community spaces where they are more comfortable (for instance, churches and community centers)

- Offer support programs for potential first-generation college students in 9th and 10th grade, and include parents of first-generation students on college tours

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

Poor Development of Soft Skills

Student development of soft skills is crucial to success in the workforce.

Site visits to businesses in each region elevated the need for soft skills in the workplace and the lack of student preparation in this area. At each site, business owners and employees mentioned the need for industry-specific technical skills, but largely focused on transferable non-technical skills that fell into one of two main categories: basic work ethic behaviors and communications skills.

In terms of work ethic, employers said they were looking for candidates who:

- Are reliable (arrive on time and show up every day);

- Dress appropriately;

- Show respect for authority;

- Follow directions;

- Stay on task; and

- Want to progress and excel, make their family proud, take initiative and pride in quality work, and support their family.

In terms of communication skills, employers said they hope to hire candidates who:

- Are able to work in a team;

- Have strong interpersonal skills (including written and verbal communication skills) and make eye contact;

- Have strong listening comprehension skills; and

- Interview well.

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All Listening Tour participants expressed the need to reinforce soft skills at home, at school, and in the workplace.

Recommendations from Participants

- Provide direct instruction in soft skills from an early age
- Track soft skills acquisition/mastery as part of a student's permanent record
- Address critical soft skills deficits via curricula and internship/mentorship experiences
- Include businesses in cross-sector development of a shared list of soft skills needs

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

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

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