

*my*FUTURENC

LISTENING TOUR

A Statewide Perspective
on Education, Attainment
& Opportunity

5

OF 7

**PLACE-BASED 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 **Place-Based Challenges and Barriers**. Place-Based Challenges and Barriers are *geographic or regional obstacles* to ongoing engagement and attainment. As evidenced through visits to all eight education regions in North Carolina, different regions of the state have very different needs. As such, it is of the utmost importance to balance local flexibility with equity of opportunity statewide.

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.

Place-Based Challenges & Barriers to Student Attainment & Related Recommendations

Codes at the end of each topic entry indicate the Listening Tour location(s) at which the topic was discussed:

Source Key

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

Inequitable Early Childhood Opportunities

The quality and availability of early childhood education options varies by community.

As noted in the Regional Differences section above, participants highlighted a need for equal opportunities across the state. Many focused on early childhood specifically, as they felt that the quality and availability of programs was not consistent across rural and urban communities. Participants called for affordable options that staff highly-trained individuals.

Relevant Survey Findings

- More than a third (39%) of Gallup survey respondents were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the availability of preschools in their area. Similarly, 42% of EducationNC survey respondents rated their options for preschool as “excellent” or “good.”
- Almost a quarter (23%) of Gallup survey respondents were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the affordability of preschools in their area. Similarly, 27% of EducationNC survey respondents rated preschool affordability as “excellent” or “good.”

Recommendations from Participants

- Expand or provide universally-available state pre-Kindergarten programs
- Recruit and place the best teachers in pre-Kindergarten

(EC, J, L, P, W)

Inadequate Coordinated Public Sector Infrastructure Resources

Community-maintained infrastructure differs greatly by geographic area.

Not all communities are equally equipped to provide housing, amenities, childcare, reliable transportation, and social services for all residents. In some communities, the challenge is more about universal affordability than availability. If students and families are unable to access all of the critical resources in their communities, it puts them at a disadvantage and renders them unable to participate fully in education and workforce preparation opportunities.

As an example, Listening Tour participants discussed the challenge of accessing broadband Internet in some communities due to geography (it is cost-prohibitive to wire some communities for access based on remoteness and/or topography) and affordability. This issue becomes dire as schools continue to transition to digital learning and lack of Internet access at home limits some students from taking advantage of online educational tools and resources.

Recommendations from Participants

- Invest in mixed-income housing so people at all economic levels can afford to live and work in the same community and have equal access to community amenities

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



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Urban-Rural Opportunity Divide

Rural communities face unique challenges related to their locations.

Listening Tour participants across the state spoke of the challenges rural communities often face related to student educational attainment and employment opportunities. Many small rural communities do not have the population or infrastructure to support a large number of businesses, which can force young people looking for work to leave rural areas when they are ready to start their careers. In addition, local businesses in rural areas often are unable to offer salaries and opportunities that compete with those in urban settings. The lack of businesses in rural areas further impacts schools, as small businesses may be unable to sponsor programs such as work-based learning opportunities, and the perception of lack of employment opportunities may make it difficult to attract high-quality teachers and their families.

Recommendations from Participants

- Continue to rely on technology to bridge geographic barriers and provide all students with equitable access to educational opportunities
- Develop regionally-tailored professional development specifically for rural teachers
- Allocate funding to rural areas to attract teachers and provide experiential learning opportunities for students

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

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