

*my*FUTURENC

LISTENING TOUR

A Statewide Perspective
on Education, Attainment
& Opportunity

7

OF 7

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
MOVING THE WORK FORWARD

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.

The contents of this seventh brief are a little different; rather than reflecting participant thoughts about a specific challenge or barrier, this brief instead summarizes more general suggestions proposed by participants for guiding the overall work of myFutureNC—that is, **Recommendations for Moving the Work Forward**.

Definitions

The terms “Sector,” “within-sector,” and “cross-sector” refer 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 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.

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.

Recommendations for Moving the Work Forward

All of the recommendations included in the first six briefs in this series relate to specific challenges and barriers identified by Listening Tour participants. Other recommendations shared during the Listening Tour did not apply to a single challenge area, instead addressing in broader terms ideas for structuring an overall plan to achieve the goals set by the Commission. This brief presents these general recommendations in three sections: **Guiding Principles**, **Laying the Groundwork (Early Actions)**, and **Measuring Progress**.

Guiding Principles

Listening Tour participants across the state embraced myFutureNC's mission of raising attainment across North Carolina, but they cautioned against implementing new policies, practices, and other changes too quickly. They advocated instead for a slower, more deliberate implementation, to better ensure that any changes do not inadvertently have a negative impact on components of the continuum that are functioning well now.

In addition, Listening Tour participants proposed two main principles for guiding the work moving forward:

- **Align Goals across Sectors:** As discussed in many of the Challenges and Barriers briefs, student success hinges on alignment along the continuum, from each level of education through a student's entry or re-entry into the workforce. As a result, each sector's goals should not exist in isolation but instead should build upon those of the other sectors.
- **Provide State-Level Structure and Support, but Encourage Localization:** The standardization of common state-level goals is important, and adopting universal definitions related to these goals will help stakeholders enact policies with fidelity. Equally as important, however, is affording local and regional actors the ability to develop plans for meeting goals that best fit their needs. While there was widespread support for a state-approved framework for improving student attainment, participants also expressed a strong desire for flexibility when translating that framework into a local context. Flexibility will allow for more innovation and the creation of unique programs tailored to address local challenges.

Laying the Groundwork (Early Actions)

Listening Tour participants outlined a number of recommendations for working towards the goals set forth by the myFutureNC Commission, but two in particular are important for early stages of the work.

- **Describe the Current State of the Continuum:** A formal, unified description of the entire education continuum will help contribute to the creation of common goals. It also will enable implementers to identify points along the continuum at which students and families disengage, so that they can figure out how to align efforts across sectors to combat that disengagement more effectively.
- **Develop a Plan-of-Action Playbook:** A Plan-of-Action Playbook will give implementers a common roadmap to follow as they work to increase attainment in North Carolina. To get a picture of the current state of each region and school district in the state, it will be advantageous to start the process by conducting an asset inventory in communities statewide, with the grain size for analysis to be determined by the implementers. Listening Tour stakeholders also identified early childhood and business and industry as two areas on either



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end of the continuum that should receive special attention during the development of the Playbook. These and other ideas are described here in greater detail:

- *Conduct an Asset Inventory:* Many stakeholders recommended creating an asset inventory, which will involve conducting deep dives in each region and school district in North Carolina to identify existing assets and best practices. Part of this work also should include identification of best practices in other states. An asset inventory will help implementers dedicate resources to scaling successful programs while new initiatives take root and mature.
- *Focus on Early Childhood:* Stakeholders from every region agreed unanimously that preparation for Kindergarten should be a focus when considering ways to improve overall attainment in North Carolina. They framed Kindergarten as the gateway to all future attainment, noting that greater return in higher education often can be traced back to more investment in the earliest learning periods, when learning patterns and habits are first established. Several participants added that attention should be given to both within- and out-of-sector components of early childhood support.
- *Identify Education and Workforce Needs at a Regional Level:* Listening Tour participants called for stronger collaboration between education and business and industry, with an initial goal of helping students and families gain a deeper understanding of how each step along the continuum contributes to longer-term goals. In order to create dynamic pathway maps for students that detail the steps from early education through to career, or even from the workforce back into education, it is crucial for business and industry to complete and regularly update regional workforce needs assessments. Proper communication of workforce needs with each education sector will help educators tailor programming to meet those needs and to anticipate and plan for the resources necessary to maximize progress along each pathway.

Measuring Progress

In addition to Commission-defined measures of student attainment, Listening Tour attendees identified other measures that they felt would provide a more comprehensive reflection of student attainment. Alongside benchmarks like standardized tests, enrollment numbers, graduation rates, and measures of career readiness and involvement in the workforce, participants also suggested tracking more outcomes for students from birth to pre-Kindergarten, soft skills attainment for K-12 students, and, at the higher education level, more post-graduation outcomes. Outside of the continuum, Listening Tour attendees suggested collecting data to better examine the efficacy of supports provided to families. Overall, it was important to participants that myFutureNC establish goals for all sectors along the continuum that reach beyond the more traditional measures of attainment.

In addition to identifying traditional and non-traditional measures to add to the assessment of student attainment, there was interest in providing better linkages across existing data systems. Participants favored the idea of completing efforts to create a P-20 data system that can track student progress from pre-Kindergarten through high school graduation and into postsecondary education or the workforce. The success of such a system would depend not only on collaboration across sectors and access to data that already exists but also generation of new data points. In addition, several acknowledged that a successful system may depend on greater access to data that are currently cost-prohibitive to collect or access. A fully-realized P-20 data system would support both short- and longer-term planning not only at the individual student level, but also at the within-sector and cross-sector levels.

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