

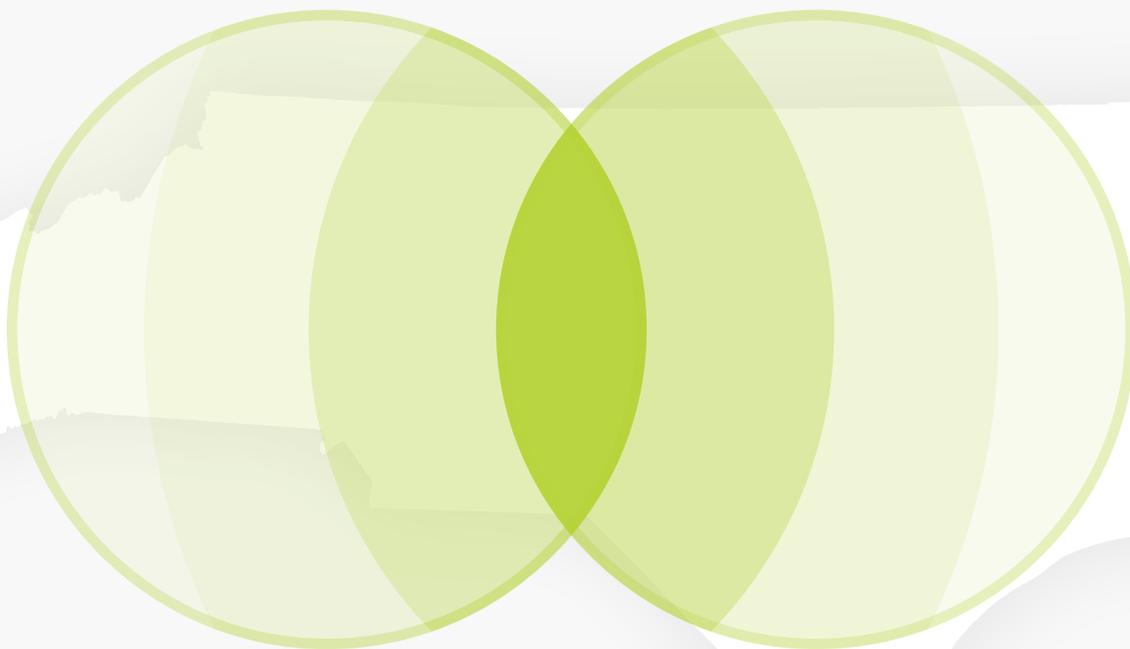


A CALL TO **ACTION** FOR OUR STATE



North Carolina is growing—not just in size, but also in diversity and in economic activity. Our growth creates a host of opportunities for our state, but also a number of challenges.

In particular, it impacts our ongoing efforts to strengthen the alignment between our education systems and our economy, as well as our ability to project changes in the labor market that should inform that alignment. In response to these challenges, the *myFutureNC Commission* was formed to create a vision for education across North Carolina—from early childhood through postsecondary—that includes a state-level attainment goal, key benchmarks for measuring progress toward reaching that goal, and priority areas to guide the state as it works collaboratively to turn the vision into reality. The result of the Commission’s work is this stakeholder-generated, multi-sector Call to Action.



TWO NORTH CAROLINAS, ONE SHARED FUTURE

At the turn of the present century, in a time of general prosperity, our state’s leadership warned against becoming complacent and allowing our state to fracture into, as one leader put it, “two North Carolinas—a poor one and a thriving one.”²

The concern then was that overall positive outcomes might prevent us from seeing underlying disparities that ultimately could undermine the foundation of those outcomes and eventually overturn our progress. The economic events of a few years later helped to underscore the importance of maintaining constant vigilance in order to ensure the ongoing success of the entire state.

We are reminded continually that outcomes for all of us depend at least in part on outcomes for each of us, and that the economic and social results of large geographic, demographic, and economic disparities can touch all of us, regardless of our personal prospects (Rowlingson, 2011). North Carolina continues to be home to many such disparities, and they manifest in different ways across our diverse state.

2. Lieutenant Governor Beverly E. Perdue, in remarks to the North Carolina Senate, January 24, 2001 (<http://bit.ly/senate-journal>)



EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Increasing access to educational opportunities long has been a focal point in our state, with roots extending deep into the preceding century. And in many ways, North Carolinians continue to experience steady growth in the educational opportunities available to them. For example, 2016 marked the first time that our state had more adults with an Associate's degree or higher (about 42%) than adults with a high school diploma or less. However, the majority of those degree-holders (60%) are not home-grown talent. Furthermore, they are not evenly distributed across the state, instead concentrating in only a few urban counties (Tippett, 2017). This imbalance is impacted not only by economics but also by geography: Far fewer North Carolina students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds complete degrees in six years or less than do students with greater economic stability (33% versus 58%; Tippett & Kahn, 2018c), and a North Carolina community's challenges in providing a diverse and high-quality educational experience often are tightly coupled with that community's rurality (Antoszyk et al., 2018e).

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE

One of the primary data-gathering tools the Commission used to better understand the diversity of the state's educational and economic strengths and needs was a statewide Listening Tour, conducted between February and July 2018 in each of the state's eight Prosperity Zones. As we learned on the Tour, 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, and even in those that can provide these services, they are not accessible by all residents. When students and families are unable to access all of the critical resources in their communities, they are unable to participate fully in education and workforce preparation opportunities. A good example of these disparities is access to broadband Internet: Many communities in North Carolina have access to this increasingly-standard amenity, but for some communities, access is blocked either by geography or by affordability, and sometimes by both. More than just a modern convenience, access to broadband Internet quickly is becoming a deciding factor in an individual's access to educational opportunities as well (Antoszyk et al., 2018e).

GAPS BETWEEN OUR IDEAL AND OUR REALITY

These persistent disparities not only prevent the state from reaching its economic potential but also run counter to the rights and core beliefs that undergird our identity and our civic fabric. The North Carolina Constitution highlights the right of all North Carolinians “to the privilege of education,” and further states that “equal [educational] opportunities shall be provided for all students.”³

And yet, North Carolinians do not have confidence that we are providing these opportunities. In one poll conducted in summer 2018 for this Commission by Gallup, more than half of those polled (53%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that all students receive the same quality of education regardless of their background. In addition, half or more felt that North Carolina’s primary and secondary schools are never or only sometimes good places for students with learning disabilities (56%), for students who speak English as a second language (55%), or for low-income students (50%); more than 40% expressed similar concerns for racial or ethnic minorities. In another summer 2018 poll conducted by EducationNC and the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation on behalf of the Commission, 61% of those surveyed indicated that schools are an area in need of improvement in their community.

We must ensure that our Constitutional commitment reaches every resident, regardless of her or his race, ethnicity, background, age, location, or experience—a challenge made even greater by our ever-diversifying population (Johnson, 2017). For decades, we have persisted in our efforts to secure and maintain those rights, but our rate of return for each new effort is shrinking. North Carolina has reached a crossroads beyond which the state will need more than replication, expansion, or tweaking of current approaches in order to fully align our education systems, address social disparities, and improve our state’s economic competitiveness.



ALL NORTH CAROLINIANS HAVE THE RIGHT **“TO THE PRIVILEGE OF EDUCATION”** & “EQUAL [EDUCATIONAL] OPPORTUNITIES SHALL BE PROVIDED FOR ALL STUDENTS.”

— NORTH CAROLINA CONSTITUTION

3. Article I, Section 15; Article IX, Section 2



FROM GOOD TO GREAT

To move from the looming prospect of two distinct North Carolinas to One North Carolina characterized by shared prosperity and opportunity, we must begin by aligning postsecondary education attainment and credentialing goals not only with our state's current and emerging market needs but also with the goals and aspirations of our residents.

A STRONG HISTORY

Many states claim leadership in education, but few can match the decades of forward-looking innovations that have made North Carolina a reliable source for national inspiration. Each education sector has maintained a significant commitment to improving education, and each has developed initiatives that have served as national models. For example:

- North Carolina's **Smart Start** and **More at Four** pre-Kindergarten programs were ahead of their time when first introduced, and under their new name—the NC Pre-K Program—they continue to set the standard for state-funded early instruction.
- The state created several **nationally-renowned models for statewide support of students with exceptional talents**: the nation's first statewide high school dedicated to exemplary instruction in mathematics and science; a school of the arts that bridges secondary and postsecondary education; and a residential summer enrichment program with multiple campuses.
- Many states have emulated North Carolina's **Career and College Promise** and **Early College** models, which merge high school and postsecondary curricula and provide clear pathways to meaningful degrees.
- The North Carolina **Comprehensive Articulation Agreement** provides statewide guidance for credit transfer between community colleges and public universities, as well as a transfer assured admissions policy.
- **NC Promise** continues the UNC System's longstanding commitment to affordability by reducing tuition costs at key campuses to a nominal \$500 per semester; the state also provides generous tuition support for residents who attend the state's independent colleges and universities.

Even with the support of these and many other innovations and initiatives, we are not yet where we want to be; there is much more work to be done.



Thousands of our youngest students enter Kindergarten each year already well behind their peers. Scores on national reading and mathematics tests indicate that fewer than half of all North Carolina middle school students can demonstrate proficiency (Dyke & True, 2018), and improvements in achievement as measured by state tests have stalled (Lauen & Tomberlin, 2018).

High school dropout rates continue to fall, and graduation rates continue to rise, but each year thousands of students still leave the education continuum before they finish their high school years. Of those who do graduate from high school, fewer than one in five meets or exceeds all college readiness benchmarks as measured by ACT scores, and nearly half meet none of those benchmarks (Tippett & Kahn, 2018a). And, perhaps most tellingly, in the midst of the most dramatic transformation of the employment landscape in decades, fewer than half of all working North Carolinians hold postsecondary degrees or credentials (Dyke & True, 2018).

A BOLD NEW APPROACH

Our state has come so far and accomplished so much in education, especially over the past 30 years, but the time has come for bold new plans and even bolder actions that will take our state even further. Perhaps the most critical action needed is a collective willingness to abandon our traditional sector-by-sector approach to addressing isolated issues in favor of a cross-sector, coordinated approach that tackles systemic challenges and barriers across the education continuum, from earliest childhood through postsecondary and beyond.

- **Creating Personal Opportunities.** First, our education sectors and systems need to follow through on the promises of past reforms and the possibilities of the digital age to truly become more completely *student-centered*. As part of that work, we must embrace a much broader definition of “student”—one that understands that adult learners are as much a part of the student landscape as are our youth. A greater focus on student-centered learning will provide the support necessary for every resident not just to fit personal strengths to existing economic opportunities but also to create new opportunities.
- **Expanding Talent Development.** Next, we must commit to comprehensive and sustainable *talent development*. As with student-centered learning, talent development is about more than just training workers who can meet the demands of economic development or marketplace competitiveness; it is also about continuing to support the

growth of our residents' aspirations, their sense of civic purpose, and their personal drive. These characteristics long have been hallmarks of North Carolinians, and none should be neglected in deference to economic needs alone; indeed, fostering those characteristics as part of our overall talent development commitment will enhance our state's economic competitiveness.

- **Cultivating an Attainment-Driven Mindset.**

Perhaps more critical than any of these, however, is our responsibility to continue to cultivate a mindset and culture statewide that embraces the importance of postsecondary attainment. As indicated by survey results (Gallup, 2018) and by increases in the number of first-generation college-going students, that transition is well under way. Another step involves changing the narrative about distinctions between four-year degrees, two-year degrees, and other forms of postsecondary credentials. Currently, four-year degree-holders outnumber two-year degree-holders three-to-one (Dyke & True, 2018), and survey responses suggest that many North Carolinians continue to identify a four-year degree as the best path to a good job (Gallup, 2018). Many students and parents remain unaware of the variety and depth of certificate programs, two-year options, and opportunities for work-based learning now available (Antoszyk et al., 2018c). As we learned during our Listening Tour, this information gap can create a barrier, particularly for lower-income students and for working adults interested in re-training or upskilling—both of whom may believe that a marketable degree is less accessible for them due to cost and time. The challenge does not just affect college recruitment; businesses that rely on students from community colleges or training programs also struggle as a result of fewer graduates with the training those businesses need. Even increasing numbers of positive reports of job placement and job satisfaction from students who earn two-year degrees or industry certification have not yet changed these trends (Antoszyk et al., 2018a).



[F]OUR-YEAR DEGREES
AREN'T FOR EVERYONE;
EVERY JOB IN THIS WORLD
DOES NOT REQUIRE A
FOUR-YEAR DEGREE. **BUT**
[MOST JOBS] REQUIRE
POSTSECONDARY
EDUCATION FOR SURE.

— LISTENING TOUR PARTICIPANT



- **Integration and Coordination across Sectors.** We must acknowledge and tear down the barriers that prevent us from better integrating the shared work of all of our education sectors, and we must coordinate their collective work with the work of our economic sector. Our residents know these gulfs exist, and they know that they hinder our ability to meet our potential as a state. During the Listening Tour, participants conceded that sectors may connect on paper to form an education continuum that starts with early childhood education and ends in a career, but they contended that, in reality, each sector tends to operate independently of the others. They expressed concerns that actors along the continuum lack a shared mission, impeding cross-sector coordination and communication (Antoszyk et al., 2018a).

A WAY FORWARD

If we can find ways to work together to tackle these challenges and push our systems into a new era, we can increase the strength and diversity of North Carolina’s “home-grown” talent, which in turn will improve economic opportunities for all North Carolina residents, including underserved populations.

To develop a plan for achieving this vision for North Carolina, the myFutureNC Commission proposes the framework described in this document—a cross-sector, long-term, coordinated, and stakeholder-generated *Call to Action* for our state.⁴ Unlike so many efforts before it, however, we envision a state-led and state-supported plan that is locally owned and locally actualized. Our history has shown that top-down, state-level mandates can go only so far; our state is large and diverse, and our communities need plans tailored to their specific strengths and challenges. As one Listening Tour participant put it, “[O]nce you’ve seen one [North Carolina] community, you’ve seen one [North Carolina] community.” A successful *Plan of Action*, developed by a collaborative team of representative stakeholders from across the state in response to this Call to Action, should provide a general framework for local plans and for the state support that will be necessary to develop those plans, but in the end the most successful plans will be those that respond directly to local contexts.

Once developed, these community-centered plans of action will define the future that each community wants for itself, collaboratively envision a path for attaining that future, and identify ways to coordinate its efforts and resources with other communities across North Carolina. As we learned during our Listening Tour, this work already is under way in many communities across our state, but often in isolation. We believe that through the collective actions of myFutureNC, we can strengthen existing local efforts, inspire new ones, and pave the way for realizing our vision for the future of our state.



4. See Appendix A for details about how the Commission developed this Call to Action.