Postsecondary Foundations

POLICY BRIEF 5

Build Strong Digital and Data-Driven Foundations for Success

Foundation 1: **Expand Broadband Access, Affordability, and Adoption across North Carolina**

By connecting students and adult learners to the preparation and training they need to participate in North Carolina's rapidly-changing economy, broadband access equalizes opportunities for postsecondary readiness, access, completion, and alignment, regardless of ZIP code. And yet, many communities in North Carolina—most of them rural—have only limited access to broadband[1], and for those that do have access, affordability and adoption rates vary. This gap has become an even greater obstacle to increasing the number of adults with high-quality credentials or degrees as a result of the coronavirus-related school and campus closures that have moved many of our state's learning and training opportunities online.

Foundation 2: **Consistently Collect and Analyze Cross-Sector Attainment Data**

The North Star for North Carolina's attainment efforts—the initial 2M by 2030 goal for the number of adults with high-quality credentials or degrees—is only as meaningful as the data available to help us track our progress toward reaching that goal. Groups who need access to that data include not only policymakers and Sector leaders but also the thousands of North Carolinians who are working to increase attainment— their own as well as the attainment of others—across our state.
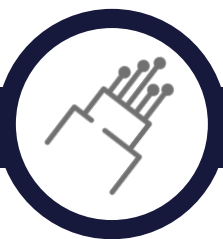
While by many counts our state is a leader in data collection, none of our Sectors' data systems were designed to work together, nor were they tailored to answer questions about attainment progress. For North Carolina to successfully track, analyze, and act on attainment data, the state must invest in the people, data, and systems needed to help guide our way.[11]

Recommended Legislative Actions 2021

- **Expand Broadband Access**
- **Modernize Sector Data Systems**
- **Capture a Broader Array of Attainment-Relevant Data**

myFutureNC Commitments for 2021

- Partner with Stakeholders to Develop Plans for Greater Broadband Affordability and Adoption
- Convene Partners to Establish Cross-Sector Data Standards

Foundation 1: Expand Broadband Access, Affordability, and Adoption across North Carolina

Recommendations:

To ensure that poor connectivity is not a barrier to postsecondary advancement, during the 2021-22 Session, the North Carolina General Assembly should:

Expand Broadband Access

Action: Accelerate Support for Longer-Term Infrastructure Solutions.

Many of the state's current quick solutions to connectivity (such as mobile hotspots) are only temporary workarounds; the long-term solution is to create a robust, sustainable, statewide broadband infrastructure.

For 2021: The Office of the Governor proposes using federal American Recovery Plan (ARP) Act funding to: modify and expand the Growing Rural Economies with Access to Technology (GREAT) program[2] (which already is transforming access in 26 Tier I counties,[3] with expansion to Tier 2 and rural segments of Tier 3 counties in the coming months); support local governments seeking to leverage additional federal funding; and invest in build-outs in areas not prioritized by GREAT.

Action: Continue to Provide Short-Term, Bridging Connectivity Efforts.

The state's move toward a robust, longer-term fixed broadband network will take time to complete. In the meantime, schools and communities un- or under-served by broadband service providers will continue to need short-term solutions that reduce the connectivity gap[4] and provide adequate access to online learning opportunities.

For 2021: The Office of the Governor proposes using federal ARP Act funding to bring temporary coverage to households that are likely to remain underserved for three or more years via small-area WiFi towers, fixed wireless, and other stop-gap solutions, to ensure immediate internet access ahead of wider broadband availability.[5]

Action: Support Efforts to Address Localized Online Learning Needs.

Adequate access to online learning opportunities is a statewide challenge,[6] but solutions often are location-specific. Our community college and university campuses—many of which already are working to meet these challenges—are best-positioned to develop effective, location-sensitive approaches.

For 2021: The Office of the Governor recommends using federal ARP funding to support targeted higher education sector efforts to address site-specific education technology infrastructure needs (e.g., broadband access and service[7], software, technology to support easier access to financial aid information, and other related improvements).[8]

Foundation 1: Expand Broadband Access, Affordability, and Adoption across North Carolina

myFutureNC's Commitments for 2021

Partner with Stakeholders on the Development of Plans for Greater Broadband Affordability and Adoption

Access is only the first part of the challenge; the second part is ensuring that all North Carolinians can take advantage of that access. In about one-third of the state's counties, less than half of all households have a broadband subscription—even in counties with extensive access options.[9] In 2021, myFutureNC will:

- **Work with Sector and Stakeholder Partners to Explore Long-Term Solutions for Improving Service, Affordability, and Adoption for Lower-Income Households.** These solutions may consider options such as providing subsidies for households that otherwise cannot afford service,[10] or offering tax credits or other incentives to providers that actively seek ways to defray costs for those households.

Looking Ahead: Actions to Consider for 2022-23

The actions above will move the state forward rapidly, but on their own they may not be enough. Going forward, the state should consider additional actions such as:

- **Encouraging Public-Private Partnership Solutions.** Clarifying ways in which local governments can support bringing broadband to their unserved and under-served communities, such as by working alongside providers to build out service to these communities, may be an additional important step in the state's efforts to expand broadband access to the last mile.

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[1] According to the North Carolina Department of Information Technology's Broadband Infrastructure Office, fewer than 60% of residents in 11 counties have **access** to baseline high-speed connectivity options, with the lowest availability in Hyde (21%) and Greene (33%).

[2] **NC GREAT Program**; related 2021 legislation: **H947**

[3] A county's Tier designation indicates its economic well-being relative to other counties (Tier 1=most economically distressed; Tier 3=least economically distressed).

[4] As a **recent EdTech report** suggests, technology usage gaps between more- and less-affluent school districts—already wide before coronavirus closures—increased during the switch to online learning in Spring and Fall 2020.

[5] Examples of current work in this area include **NC Student Connect**, which in September 2020 started leveraging about $40M in federal CARES Act funding to distribute wireless high-speed hot spots to students, establish accessible public wireless sites, and remote learning professional development.
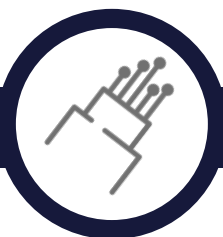
[6] As a **recent EdTech report** suggests, technology usage gaps between more- and less-affluent districts—already wide before coronavirus closures—increased during the switch to online learning in Spring and Fall 2020.

[7] This category includes last-mile connectivity for buildings on community college campuses that currently do not have high-speed connections

[8] Per the Governor's proposal, higher education sectors also would be able to use these funds for non-Broadband-related but still attainment-focused activities such as apprenticeship and retraining infrastructure to support preparation for high-demand workforce areas.

[9] North Carolina Department of Information Technology **Broadband Adoption Index**

[10] For immediate, short-term affordability relief, the Office of the Governor has proposed investing federal ARP funds to leverage additional private and federal cost-share funds for lower-income household subscription subsidies for FY22 through FY25.

Foundation 2: Consistently Collect and Analyze Cross-Sector Attainment Data

Recommendations:

To improve the state's ability to determine progress toward the 2M by 2030 goal, during the 2021-22 Session, the North Carolina General Assembly should:

Modernize Sector Data Systems

Each system the Sectors use to collect and store data differs in its capacity, its procedures, and its security, which impacts not only how accurately we can monitor North Carolina's progress toward its attainment goal but also how well we can analyze ways to improve progress.[12]

Action: Support Rapid Upgrades of Public Sector Data Systems.

The state should move quickly to act on Sector recommendations for modernizing their Enterprise Resource Platforms by migrating to more secure systems. Doing so will significantly enhance the state's ability to store, access, and protect the data needed to understand and respond to attainment trends via effective and efficient policy and resource allocation.

For 2021: Both NC Department of Public Instruction and NC Community College System[13] are seeking support for these upgrades.

Capture a Broader Array of Attainment-Relevant Data

Because many Sector data systems were not designed initially with a specific set of cross-sector attainment benchmarks in mind, the attainment-relevant data they do collect are not always complete.

Action: Increase the Availability of Cross-Sector Attainment- Relevant Data.

Unlike data used to measure most within-sector outcomes, some of the cross-sector data our state needs in order to better track and act on attainment progress are not readily available from existing state sources.

For 2021: In FY 2021-22, the State should consider using existing available federal funds to procure cross-sector longitudinal data available from the National Student Clearinghouse.[14] myFutureNC recommends recurring legislative support for data procurement starting in FY 2022. Doing so will enhance the state's longer-term ability to measure key intermediate and longer-term attainment-relevant outcomes.

Foundation 2: Consistently Collect and Analyze Cross-Sector Attainment Data

myFutureNC's Commitments for 2021

Convene Partners to Establish Cross-Sector Data Standards

As an organization explicitly established for the purpose of better aligning attainment-relevant work across sectors, myFutureNC will work with sector partners to:

• Identify the data needed from each sector partner to better monitor North Carolina's attainment progress; and

• Develop procedures for consistently collecting attainment-relevant data across sectors.

Looking Ahead: Actions to Consider for 2022-23

The next critical step for the state will be developing and maintaining the human capacity necessary to capitalize on the improvements to attainment-relevant data collection outlined above. As soon as possible, the state should consider proactive steps to formalize and strengthen cross-sector analyses such as:

• **Supporting State Efforts to Fully Modernize an Interoperable NC Longitudinal Data System (NCLDS).** Just as attainment is not the result of the work of one Sector alone but of all Sectors working in collaboration, analysis of attainment progress also is a cross-Sector endeavor. The state already has agreements in place for maintaining a "system of systems" (the NCLDS) that can connect workforce, higher education, K12, and early childhood outcomes to help strengthen attainment-relevant decision-making. The next step is to turn these agreements into an active entity.[15] The eight key actions for doing so recommended in the NCLDS study commissioned by the Governor's Education Cabinet include: Establishment of formal governance and organizational structures; development of a system architecture to meet NCLDS functional and technical requirements; and development of an external research agenda to prioritize data requests and the formation of research-practice partnerships.[16]

• **Increasing Capacity across Sectors to Collect and Analyze Attainment-Relevant Data.** For example, the state should identify ways to build analytic capacity both at NCLDS and at other partner agencies to support North Carolina's cross-Sector, attainment-related evaluation and research priorities.

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[11] The Education Commission of the States (**2018**) has identified four key targets for this investment: data use, coordination and collaboration, leadership, and outcomes alignment

[12] Data security in particular continues to be a major concern with outdated K12 and postsecondary systems, as demonstrated by recent security breaches in Rockingham County Schools (2018) and Central Piedmont Community College (2021), among others.

[13] Note: NCCCS also is seeking related support for **cybersecurity staffing and services upgrades**.

[14] The **National Student Clearinghouse** provides longitudinal, cross-Sector data on nearly every postsecondary student currently enrolled in a public or private institution.

[15] In the recent past, the North Carolina General Assembly has demonstrated support for the NCLDS; though eventually vetoed, H398 (**2019**) included two years of non-recurring start-up funding ($750K per year).

[16] The Information Decision-Making Collaborative already initiated this process in 2020; Collaborative membership includes representatives from NCDIT (GDAC), the Office of the Governor, the Hunt Institute, NCDHHS, NCDPI, NCSBE, NCCCS, the UNC System Office, NCICU, NCDOC, and myFutureNC.