

Sound Basic Education for All

An Action Plan for North Carolina



In collaboration with Learning Policy Institute and
The William & Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation

Leandro Recommendations Comparison: The WestEd Sound Basic Education for All Action Plan for North Carolina and the Governor's Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education

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Introduction

This document compares the recommendations of the *Sound Basic Education for All Action Plan for North Carolina* by WestEd (“Action Plan”) with the Report of the Governor’s Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education (“Commission Report”), using the recommendations approved by the Commission on January 23, 2020. It is organized by the five major categories of recommendations that are included in both the Action Plan and the Commission Report:

1. A qualified and well-prepared teacher in every classroom
2. A qualified and well-prepared principal in every school
3. Early childhood education
4. Student assessment and school accountability system
5. Finance and resource allocation

In each section, the Action Plan includes research-based findings that provide the rationale for its recommendations. The Commission arranged for presentations of relevant research to its members, and information from those presentations is available on the Commission website (<https://governor.nc.gov/issues/education/commission-access-sound-basic-education>), however the Commission Report does not include summaries of the research that informed their recommendations.

The Action Plan also includes major sections on (1) high-poverty schools, (2) regional and statewide supports for school improvement, and (3) monitoring the state’s compliance. Recommendations from these sections are also included in this comparison; some are aligned with recommendations included in other categories in the Commission Report. In addition, the Action Plan provides detailed financial analyses and recommended sequenced investments for the state that are beyond the scope of work of the Commission.

A Qualified and Well-Prepared Teacher in Every Classroom

The Action Plan and Commission Report both provide recommendations that address teacher recruitment, induction, mentoring, retention, professional learning, career paths, compensation, and placement. That is, both address the full set of requirements for the state to ensure a qualified and well-prepared teacher in every classroom. In addition, both reports highlight the need for an adequate number of positions for teachers, teaching assistants, and instructional support personnel to provide students with instruction and supports adapted to their individual needs. Both reports also emphasize the importance of North Carolina taking steps to diversify its educator workforce to better match the demographics of its students and to ensure that high-need schools are able to attract and retain qualified and well-prepared teachers. The two sets of recommendations are broadly aligned in each of the 10 areas described below but differ in their specific action recommendations in a number of these areas, as noted in the following sections.

1. Increase the pipeline of well-prepared teachers who meet the needs of the state's public schools, while increasing the racial-ethnic diversity of the teacher workforce.

Both the Action Plan and Commission Report recommend that the state strengthen the capacity of North Carolina teacher preparation programs, in both its public and private universities, and increase the number of teacher graduates from these programs, which have been shown to produce teachers who are both more effective and are retained in the teaching profession longer than lateral-entry/residency program or out-of-state teachers. The Commission Report specifies a goal of increasing the percentage of the teacher workforce prepared by public and private North Carolina Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) to 70% within 6–8 years. The Action Plan specifies a goal of 5,000 newly prepared teachers annually from the UNC and independent colleges and universities to return the state to its former level of teacher preparation. These two goals converge if it is estimated that the state needs about 7,000 new teachers per year, which is a reasonable estimate based upon the data since 2010. Both the Action Plan and the Commission Report call for the significant investments that will be required to provide well-prepared teachers for every classroom.

The Commission Report recommends that the state provide multi-year planning and implementation grants to enable IHEs to improve their teacher preparation programs, with the process managed by the Teaching Fellows Commission. It recommends providing multi-year innovation grants to IHEs or IHE-school district partnerships to experiment with ways to attract students majoring in high-need academic areas to

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obtain their teaching certification. It also recommends a program that provides post-BA residencies in high-poverty schools or districts, in which teachers receive a stipend, additional mentoring, and an opportunity to complete their master's degree in exchange for 3 additional years of service in a high poverty district or school.

Both the Action Plan and the Commission Report emphasize the importance of North Carolina diversifying its teacher workforce to better match the diversity of its student population in light of the positive effect that teachers of color have on the achievement of students of color. This general goal is reflected in a number of recommendations summarized below.

The Action Plan provides the following more specific recommendations for state actions to address strengthening the teacher pipeline:

- a. Provide targeted funding to increase capacity and enrollment of teacher preparation programs at minority-serving institutions to help diversify the teaching workforce.
- b. Support high-quality teacher residency (previously called lateral-entry) programs in high-need rural and urban districts. These programs provide teacher preparation candidates with a full year of postgraduate clinical training in a university and school district partnership program that provides financial support tied to earning a credential at the end of the year and a commitment to continue teaching in the district for 3–5 years. These residency programs have been successful in recruiting diverse candidates who then have high rates of retention in high-poverty schools. North Carolina already has some successful partnership programs that can provide models for others, such as the North Carolina A&T Teacher Residency partnership with Randolph County Schools and Stokes County Schools. The Action Plan recommends that these programs be supported through a state-matching grant program that leverages Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Title II funding.
- c. Use licensing and accreditation rules plus program improvement grants so that teacher preparation programs leverage strong clinical training and prepare their future teachers for standards-based, culturally responsive, trauma-informed teaching that attends to students' social, emotional, and academic development.
- d. Review state teacher testing requirements to ensure that any testing barriers to entry that are unrelated to capacity to teach effectively are removed and that there are multiple ways to demonstrate competency.

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- e. Disaggregate and make public the statewide data for participants in teacher preparation programs, program completers, retention rates, and the racial-ethnic diversity of teacher education faculty, mentor teachers, and other professionals involved in teacher preparation.
- f. Provide local education agencies (LEAs) with guidance and support on successful practices to ensure a diverse workforce.
- g. Require greater levels of mentor support and training for teachers of record who are not yet fully licensed, ensuring that they get access to the professional development and induction support they need and, ideally, begin to transition into programs that offer high-quality clinical training with wraparound coursework for a coherent, well-supported form of preparation.

Both the Action Plan and the Commission Report include additional specific recommendations to strengthen and further diversify the educator pipeline, which are described in the following sections.

2. Expand the North Carolina Teaching Fellows Program.

The Action Plan and Commission Report both recommend a significant expansion of this valuable and proven-effective program. Both recommend the following specific actions:

- a. Increase the overall funding to support more Teaching Fellows and set a goal of increasing the number of candidates per year from the current 200 to at least 1,000. The Commission recommends the goal of 1,000 in the next 4 years while keeping the program prestigious; the Action Plan recommends the goals of 1,000 within 3 years and 1,500 within 5 years.
- b. Increase the number of eligible teacher preparation programs from the current 5 to include programs that serve the different regions of the state and to include minority-serving universities to help increase the diversity of the teaching workforce.

The Action Plan contains the following additional recommendations for the expanded Teaching Fellows program that are not found in the Commission Report:

- a. Reinstate the additional leadership training the participants in the Teaching Fellows program previously received and include training in topics such as culturally responsive teaching, teaching students with disabilities, and trauma-informed teaching.

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- b. Provide the shorter payback period (contingent on a 4-year teaching commitment overall) for those who teach in any high-poverty school, not just schools that are low performing, to incentivize Teacher Fellows to teach in those schools.
- c. Develop recruitment strategies that attract candidates of color to apply to be Teaching Fellows.

The Commission Report contains four specific recommendations for the expanded Teaching Fellows program that are not included in the Action Plan:

- a. Expand the program beyond the current focus on science, mathematics, and special education to include all areas of certification. If there are more applicants than available slots, priority should be given to students who agree to teach in content areas with the most severe shortages and students who agree to teach in low-wealth school districts or high-poverty schools for the payback period.
- b. Ensure that no Teaching Fellow has a payback period of more than 1 year for each year he/she receives the scholarship.
- c. Provide multi-year state planning and implementation grants to enable IHEs to improve their preparation programs.
- d. Provide resources for a statewide network to provide supplemental programming for Teaching Fellows at all participating IHEs.

3. Provide funding to support "Grow-Your-Own" and "2+2" community college/university programs to help recruit teachers for high-poverty communities.

Grow Your Own teacher preparation programs recruit and train local community members, career changers, paraprofessionals, after-school program staff, and others currently working in schools. Drawing on the "pull of home," local graduates and community members offer a sustainable solution to teacher shortages while also often increasing the diversity of the teacher workforce. A 2+2 program enables candidates to begin in a local community college, with a well-articulated and streamlined path to completion of a teaching credential in a university teacher preparation program with a clinical practicum in their local schools. Often these two approaches are combined, enabling Grow-Your-Own teacher candidates to complete a significant part of their preparation in a local community college.

Both the Action Plan and the Commission Report recommend a state grant program to incentivize and support additional Grow-Your-Own and 2+2 programs to make teacher

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preparation more affordable and accessible to students, diversify the teaching workforce, prepare teachers to work successfully with at-risk students, and enable candidates to do their clinical practicums in their local schools. This would build upon existing programs, such as the one operated by a partnership of Halifax County Public Schools, Halifax Community College, and Elizabeth City State University. The Commission Report specifically recommends that the grants fund partnerships for 5 years and include formative and summative evaluations by external evaluators. The Action Plan also recommends increased efforts to attract students to these programs, such as expansion of high school-based career academies that encourage students to consider the teaching profession and enable them to take college courses in education and areas relevant to their teaching interests, with their tuition paid through the Career and College Promise legislation. The Action Plan also recommends programs to support teaching assistants in becoming licensed teachers, such as the one that has been successful in Northampton County.

4. Increase teacher compensation.

The Action Plan and Commission Report both recommend increasing teacher salaries to make them competitive with teacher salaries in other states in the region and with other career options that require similar levels of preparation, certification, and levels of experience. The Commission recommends a North Carolina-specific wage comparability study to determine the appropriate salary levels to match those of other college graduates. The Commission Report specifically recommends increasing the compensation for teachers who obtain advanced credentials that are correlated with more effective teaching, such as National Board Certification and master's degrees in the content area taught.

5. Enable low-wealth districts and high-poverty schools to offer salaries, benefits, and incentives that will make them competitive with more advantaged districts.

The Action Plan and the Commission Report both recommend increasing the funding allotments to low-wealth districts to enable them to offer teacher salary supplements that are competitive with those from other districts in order to better attract and retain teachers in high-need communities. The Action Plan adds that compensation should be considered broadly and that benefits such as subsidized housing, loan repayment, childcare, professional learning supports, and recruitment and retention bonuses can help low-wealth districts and high-poverty schools attract and retain qualified teachers. The Commission Report also includes specific recommendations for the amounts of

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bonuses and for a sliding scale dependent upon the county wealth level to determine the percentage of the required funding to be provided by the state.

6. Expand the New Teacher Support Program.

The Action Plan and Commission Report both recommend expanding the New Teacher Support Program, which has demonstrated success in improving both the effectiveness and retention of novice teachers (those with 3 or fewer years of experience) but currently reaches only 1,100 of them each year; however, they differ in the scope and priorities for the recommended expansion. The Commission Report recommends expanding the program to all novice teachers in low-wealth school districts and high-poverty schools, with state funding provided on a sliding scale, from 50% to 100% of the cost, depending upon the resources of the school district. The Action Plan recommends first an expansion to all first-year teachers (approximately 5,000) and then, within 5 years, expansion to include all novice teachers (approximately 15,500). The Action Plan provides additional recommendations in regard to ensuring that the mentors are well trained, knowledgeable in the same field as the mentees, and are provided with adequate time to both coach the novice teachers and support their planning. It specifically recommends that North Carolina's many National Board-certified teachers be provided with opportunities, time, and incentives to serve as mentors to beginning teachers and as instructional leaders in their schools. It also recommends that the novice teachers be provided with reduced teaching loads and collaboration time with other teachers in their department or grade level.

7. Ensure that all teachers have opportunities for continued professional learning.

The Action Plan and the Commission Report both reflect the requirement that teachers have high-quality, ongoing professional learning opportunities in order for the state to achieve the goal of a well-prepared, qualified, and effective teacher in every classroom.

The Commission Report makes one multifaceted recommendation to address this goal, focusing on the role of school districts in providing professional learning for teachers: Provide adequate funds to school districts for relevant, integrated teacher professional development and enough paid teacher workdays in the calendar for school districts to provide collaborative teacher professional development without removing teachers from the classroom during instructional time.

The Action Plan differs in focusing its recommendations on creating a statewide system to ensure that all North Carolina teachers have the needed opportunities for continued

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professional learning to improve and update their knowledge and practices. This approach recognizes that school districts vary greatly in their capacities to provide effective professional development to meet teachers' individualized professional learning needs. The Action Plan then provides the following specific recommendations:

- a. Expand the role of the Professional Educator Preparation and Standards Commission to include developing recommendations for how North Carolina can ensure that all educators have access to high-quality professional learning opportunities relevant to their needs.
- b. Implement Learning Forward's *Standards for Professional Learning* to serve as guidance for the design and assessment of professional learning opportunities and to inform continuous improvement and future funding decisions. Although these standards have been adopted by the North Carolina State Board of Education, the state has not yet framed an action plan for implementing them.
- c. Invest in building the capacity and infrastructure needed to support more personalized and job-embedded professional learning opportunities for teachers. Coordinate with the various entities across the state that provide professional learning to LEAs, such as colleges and universities and regional entities, to ensure teachers have access to a coherent system of high-quality professional learning.
- d. Provide teachers with contractually obligated time and support to engage in high-quality professional learning opportunities that align with the needs of individual teachers, teacher teams, and schools. This recommendation is aligned with that of the Commission Report.
- e. Fund college and university partnerships with school districts to support content-focused, standards-based professional learning that is aligned with preservice efforts and available virtually as well as on-site.
- f. Create a professional learning block grant for low-wealth districts and district collaboratives for the purpose of developing teachers. To receive grants, LEAs would submit plans identifying high-leverage, evidence-based strategies, as well as outcomes tied to these strategies. Target these grants to high-need districts and schools with the amounts weighted by the numbers of at-risk students.

8. Invest in addressing working conditions that impact teacher retention and effectiveness.

Both sets of recommendations point to teacher working conditions being critical to teacher recruitment, retention, and effectiveness. To ensure appropriate working conditions, the Action Plan and Commission Report include the following recommendations: address principal preparation to create positive school environments; provide an adequate number of teaching, teacher assistant, and instructional support personnel to allow for differentiated instructional, assessment, and remediation to meet the needs of students; provide professional development, collaboration, and leadership opportunities for teachers; implement assessment systems that contribute to teaching and learning; and provide social, emotional, and health supports for students that enable teachers to better focus on instruction.

9. Implement differentiated staffing models and career pathways that include advanced teaching roles and additional compensation to retain and extend the reach of high-performing teachers.

The Action Plan and Commission Report both recommend that the state support schools and districts to implement effective approaches to differentiated staffing models that include advanced teaching roles. Both recommend state grants to support districts to develop, implement, and scale these models. Both also recommend ongoing evaluation and improvement efforts to better understand the outcomes from differentiated staffing approaches in terms of student achievement and teacher retention and to disseminate and guide effective practices across the state.

The Action Plan provides the following additional specific recommendations:

- a. Expand the Teacher Compensation Models and Advanced Teaching Roles pilot program to allow all districts to apply for one-time startup funds. In addition to dedicated state funding, encourage LEAs to use existing funds (e.g., Title I and Title II funds) to help launch and sustain the use of models of advanced teaching roles.
- b. Leverage the expertise of National Board–certified teachers by providing a multiyear stipend for those who teach in high-poverty schools for 5 years while also serving as mentors and instructional leaders.

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The Commission Report provides other specific recommendations:

- a. Provide class size waivers and other flexibility as necessary for school districts to implement career pathways experiments or plans.
- b. Provide ongoing funding to low-wealth school districts for salary supplements and the support personnel necessary to sustain implementation of successful career pathways plans.
- c. Provide the resources for school districts that are experimenting with career pathways to collaborate with each other.
- d. Provide grant funding for LEAs that have successfully implemented career pathways programs to partner with smaller LEAs that do not have the resources to develop these programs.
- e. Provide funding for teacher and principal leadership development to increase the pool of teachers and principals who can successfully implement leadership roles in career pathways plans.

10. Create an organizational structure to guide the work to recruit, prepare, retain, and support teachers to strengthen the teaching workforce.

While both the Action Plan and the Commission Report include the general recommendation for an organizational structure to guide and coordinate statewide efforts to strengthen the teaching workforce, they take very different approaches.

The Action Plan recommends that the state expand the role of the Professional Educator Preparation and Standards Commission, which was established by the North Carolina legislature in 2017 to involve stakeholders in establishing high standards for North Carolina educators and to make recommendations regarding all aspects of preparation, licensure, continuing education, and standards of conduct of public-school educators.

The Commission Report recommends that the state fund a separate statewide entity to coordinate and enhance efforts to strengthen and diversify the teaching workforce. The Commission Report notes that this entity can be housed within an existing organization or be a newly created organization, selected through a proposal process. The major tasks of this entity could include: develop and implement a plan to recruit capable college students and graduates into effective, high-quality, accredited teacher certification programs; develop and place more teachers of color, teachers committed to rural areas of the state, and teachers committed to teaching in low-wealth, low-performing, and high-poverty schools; implement evidence-based, credit-awarding

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programs that encourage high school students to prepare for careers in teaching; and operate, maintain, and expand the TeachNC website developed by NCDPI, BEST NC, and TEACH.

A Qualified and Well-Prepared Principal in Every School

The Action Plan and Commission Report are very consistent in this category, with aligned recommendations for the state in the areas described below. When there are differences, they are noted in the relevant section; however, the differences reflect decisions made by the two groups on what to emphasize or prioritize, not disagreements about what needs to be done.

1. Align principal preparation standards to the national standards.

The Action Plan and the Commission Report both recommend that the state align its school administrator preparation standards with the National Education Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards from the National Policy Board for Educational Administration.

2. Provide internships and mentoring to new school administrators.

The Action Plan and the Commission Report both recommend that the state require that programs that prepare educators for school administrator certification provide every student with a paid, full-time, year-long internship that includes mentoring from experienced principals and authentic opportunities to engage in leadership work and connect theory to practice.

3. Require essential areas of expertise be included in principals' preparation programs.

The Action Plan and the Commission Report both recommend that the state ensure that a number of essential topics are included in the preparation of new school administrators and the professional development provided to acting school administrators. These topics include the following:

- a. Continuous school improvement through collaborative leadership and decision-making
- b. Teacher retention and support
- c. Role of specialized instructional support personnel in addressing student health and wellness
- d. Instructional leadership and the use of well-designed curriculum aligned with state standards
- e. Creating a welcoming, safe, and supportive environment for all students

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- f. Social-emotional needs of students
- g. Community engagement

There are some differences between the Action Plan and the Commission Report in the specific topics listed, but these differences likely reflect which topics were chosen to highlight, not areas of disagreement. The Commission Report specifies the need for principals to be knowledgeable about *early brain development and appropriate practices for early childhood learning*. While not being as specific about early childhood development and learning, the Action Plan includes the importance of principals *having capacity to support students' development transitions across grade levels, from Pre-K through high school*. In addition, the Action Plan includes more specifics about instructional leadership requiring expertise in *personalized, culturally responsive, technology-enhanced, data-informed and competency-based learning approaches*.

4. Expand TP3 and Principal Fellows preparation programs.

The Action Plan and the Commission Report both recommend that the state expand the Transforming Principal Preparation Program (TP3) (including the Principal Fellows program) to ensure a sufficient number of qualified and well-prepared new principals, which is estimated to be about 300 new principals each year. The Action Plan and Commission Report both highlight the need to recruit a diverse group of future school administrators that are representative of the students they are serving. Both also recommend that every school district have a partnership with at least one high-quality principal preparation program that meets all of the NELP standards and provides full-time, year-long internships.

The Action Plan is more specific about the need to prepare principals who are able to serve as transformation leaders in low-performing, high-poverty schools in both rural and urban communities.

5. Expand professional learning opportunities for current school and district administrators.

The Action Plan and Commission Report both recommend that the state expand professional development opportunities for superintendents, district administrators, and school administrators by providing additional funding for existing professional development opportunities, such as those offered by the North Carolina Principals and Assistant Principals' Association (NCPAPA). Both also recommend additional funding

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to support the development of new professional development opportunities, and creating a formal statewide mentorship program for beginning assistant principals and principals, noting that this program would provide opportunities for veteran and retired principals to coach beginning school administrators.

The Action Plan provides more specific recommendations to apply at least some of the optional 3% set-aside allowed under ESSA Title II to provide professional development to school and district leaders, as is being done in other states.

6. Revise salary schedules, incentives, and working conditions.

The Action Plan and Commission Report both recommend that the state revise the school administrator salary structure to make these positions more attractive to qualified educators, especially those in high-need schools. Both also recommend that principals be afforded greater autonomy to make resource decisions to address the needs of their schools.

The Commission Report includes a recommendation that the state revise the allotment formula for assistant principals to both increase the number of state-funded assistant principals and provide flexibility in the use of funds to build more school leadership capacity.

The Action Plan also addresses school administrators' working conditions and provides more specifics than the Commission Report for implementing this recommendation. These include:

- a. Ensure the salaries for assistant principals and principals are, in all cases, higher than the same individual would receive as a teacher.
- b. Provide incentives for school leaders to work in high-need schools, including:
 - A meaningful supplement for principals who take a position to turn around a persistently failing school
 - Protection against principals having a salary reduction if they go to work in low-performing, hard-to-staff schools in order to enable multiyear efforts to improve these schools
- c. Reward school leaders for their school's progress on broader indicators beyond student achievement on standardized assessments, including indicators related to teacher recruitment and retention, school working conditions, opportunities to learn, and student achievement growth.

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- d. Improve working conditions for school leaders by providing them with more decision-making autonomy, supporting the use of distributed leadership models, and helping district leaders build strong professional cultures and positive working conditions for principals.
- e. Provide funding for additional nurses, counselors, social workers, and psychologists so that the principal has access to professionals trained to address students' physical and mental health needs and out-of-school issues that impede students' learning.

Early Childhood Education

The Action Plan and the Commission Report are aligned in recommending the expansion of existing state programs to serve all at-risk students from birth to age five and their families. To do so, both provide recommendations to strengthen the early childhood educator pipeline through improving the compensation, preparation, professional development, and retention of qualified early childhood educators. Both also include recommendations to better support children's transition to the K–12 system and also emphasize the need for improved data systems to improve programs and to track the success of the programs in providing the needed services to prepare young children to be successful in school.

The Commission Report includes additional recommendations for early childhood education not found in the Action Plan, as described further below. In part, these differences stem from the Commission Report combining recommendations for Pre-K and the early (K–3) elementary grades, while the Action Plan's Early Childhood Education section focuses on findings and recommendations for Pre-K and the transition to kindergarten only.

The Action Plan and Commission Report are aligned in the four following major recommendations:

1. Strengthen the early childhood educator pipeline.

The Action Plan and the Commission Report both emphasize the need to increase the number of qualified and well-prepared early childhood educators, and to provide incentives and working conditions to increase their retention rates, in order to provide quality Pre-K programs for all eligible children. Both sets of recommendations include the following:

- a. Implement a salary and benefits scale for early childhood educators in programs that receive public funding that is comparable to that for public school teachers.
- b. Expand early childhood educator preparation programs to meet projected workforce targets for high-quality early childhood education services for all eligible children.
- c. Provide induction programs and mentoring to support new early childhood educators.
- d. Provide high-quality professional development to support Pre-K teachers and teacher assistants in meeting the standards of National Association for the

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Education of Young Children (NAEYC)-endorsed programs¹; in developing their expertise in early learning standards, child development, culturally responsive teaching, trauma-informed care, social-emotional development, and early literacy; and, overall, to work successfully with the full range of at-risk children and their families.

The Action Plan provides additional specific strategies for increasing the early childhood educator pipeline, such as service scholarships, student loan forgiveness programs, residency programs, Grow-Your-Own programs for paraprofessionals, and career academies for high school students.

2. Scale up the Smart Start program.

The Action Plan and the Commission Report both recommend that the state scale up the Smart Start program to provide a continuum of services for at-risk children from birth to age five and their families. This recommendation is based on evidence that Smart Start provides high-quality programs that have a strong positive impact on participating children's future success in school, but is currently unable to serve all eligible children due to funding limitations and the shortage of early childhood educators.

The two sets of recommendations are consistent in addressing the following:

- a. Increase the overall investment in Smart Start to meet the defined needs of at-risk children and families eligible for this program.
- b. Adjust funding sources that support Smart Start to ensure the most effective use of dollars to better enable communities to meet the local support needs of children and families.
- c. Augment current funding and infrastructure for programs to expand evidence-based family/parent engagement, home visiting, and other family support programs, identifying the most at-risk children and prioritizing services for them as young as possible where impact is greatest.

¹ <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/10-naeyc-program-standards#6>

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The Commission Report contains two specific recommendations for Smart Start that are not included in the Action Plan:

- a. Expand access to developmental screenings, including social-emotional screening, to ensure screening for all children birth to age five.
- b. Provide community-level flexibility to target Smart Start funding to the greatest community needs by removing the 70/30 mandate and the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) match requirement.

3. Expand the NC Pre-K program.

The Action Plan and the Commission Report are aligned in recommending that the NC Pre-K program be expanded to provide high-quality, full-day, full-year services to all at-risk 4-year-old children to meet family and community needs and prevent summer learning loss. As for Smart Start, this recommendation is based on evidence that NC Pre-K provides high-quality programs that have a strong positive impact on participating children's future success in school, but is currently unable to serve all eligible children due to funding limitations and the shortage of early childhood educators.

In the specific recommendations for expanding the NC Pre-K program, the Action Plan and the Commission Report have some overlapping recommendations, but each provides some specifics not found in the other. The differences appear to reflect what each group chose to prioritize or highlight, not fundamental differences in their recommended approaches.

Both the Action Plan and the Commission Report recommend the following:

- a. Increase the state per-child payment rates and local administrative rates to support the true cost of providing high-quality services.
- b. Increase the reimbursement rate to account for expanded full-day, full-year programming.
- c. Provide additional funds and capacity for transportation for families to get to NC Pre-K sites in both public and private settings.
- d. Continue to maximize the public-private mixed delivery system responses to community needs. The Action Plan elaborates that the state should provide financial incentives for four- and five-star private centers that are already providing Pre-K for 4-year-olds in high-poverty communities so they can meet

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- the higher-quality standards to become NC Pre-K sites, thereby allowing them to receive state funding.
- e. Establish a data-collection process to identify children and families in need of early childhood education services in order to accurately inform the state's planning efforts.
 - f. Build and upgrade facilities to ensure enough high-quality spaces for NC Pre-K sites, either in public schools or venues of community-based programs.

The Commission Report contains the following recommendations that are not included in the Action Plan:

- a. In addition to teacher compensation, state funding should fully cover transportation, capacity building, program quality improvements, and the costs of identifying eligible students and providing their families with information.
- b. Change the use of the TANF federal funds.
- c. Implement strategies to ensure equity of access in communities of color and in communities whose first language is not English.
- d. Provide families of children enrolled in NC Pre-K with a child care subsidy to support afterschool and summer care and learning through age 12.

4. Improve supports for children's successful transition to Kindergarten.

Both the Action Plan and the Commission Report recommend strengthening the connection between early childhood education environments and elementary schools to ensure students effectively transition to kindergarten and the early grades. Within this agreed-upon overall goal, the Action Plan and the Commission Report provide some specific recommendations in common, and then the Commission Report has a number of additional, specific recommendations not found in the Action Plan. As before, the differences appear to reflect what each group chose to prioritize or highlight, not fundamental differences in their recommended approaches, and some of the additions in the Action Plan relate to those in the other reports endorsed by the Commission.

Both the Action Plan and the Commission Report recommend the following:

- a. Ensure that preschool providers effectively work with families to support transitions from one setting to another and that early-grade K–12 settings have the appropriate knowledge and tools to intake and serve such children and families.

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- b. Expand effective professional development in early childhood education for school principals.
- c. Fully fund instructional assistants in the early grades (K–3) to ensure adequate student-to-staff ratios for fostering responsive relationships and effective instruction. The Commission notes, in addition, that instructional assistants should be included in professional learning activities about children’s literacy.
- d. Improve student access, in both Pre-K and elementary school, to specialized instructional support personnel (nurses, social workers, counselors, and psychologists) in alignment with nationally recommended ratios and offer competitive salaries to fill positions. In addition, provide school systems with staffing models that support utilizing these specialized staff to meet the social-emotional, behavioral, physical health, mental health, and safety needs of young children as they transition into K–3 schooling.
- e. Implement developmentally appropriate formative assessments across systems to guide aligned instructional practices for early childhood education.

The Commission Report provides a number of additional recommendations about supporting the transition to kindergarten and the early grades that are not included in the Action Plan:

- a. Provide strategies and invest in the recruitment, training, and retention of high-quality elementary principals, increasing the number of elementary principals of color, incentivizing principals to stay in or move to high-need elementary schools, and providing professional development for effective leadership for early learning. (This recommendation aligns with Action Plan general recommendations about principals, with an emphasis on the specific needs in elementary schools.)
- b. Review and revise accountability measures in the early grades to ensure a culture of continuous quality improvement. Ensure that the way effectiveness is measured is culturally relevant and meaningful to educators, families, students, and other stakeholders.
- c. Ensure districts and schools have the resources and capacity to implement a multi-tiered system of supports that uses data-informed practices to provide access to evidence-based instruction, as well as supports for social and emotional development and to promote continuous school improvement.
- d. Support aligned, evidence-based, developmentally appropriate early learning curricula, including structured literacy curriculum and assessments that are culturally relevant and address the learning needs of English language learners.

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- e. Require low-performing school districts to include an early childhood improvement plan as a component of their required plans for improvement.
- f. The Department of Public Instruction should include an assessment of early childhood learning as part of its comprehensive needs assessment process for districts.
- g. Require districts to incorporate early learning strategies into their district-level plans for state and federal funding (i.e., ESSA) and collaborate with other early learning leaders in the district, including Smart Start and Head Start, in developing and implementing these strategies, including effective transitions for children from early learning settings into public schools. Require districts to obtain Smart Start sign-off on the early learning components of their ESSA plans to support a collaborative community approach to early learning for children birth through grade 3.

Additional Recommendations in the Commission Report

The Commission endorses the *Early Childhood Action Plan*² from the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, which provides goals and target metrics in the areas of (1) health, (2) safety and nurturing relationships, and (3) learning and ready to succeed. The three major learning goals are high-quality early learning, on track for school success (focused on kindergarten readiness), and reading at grade level. It also endorses the *Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Action* framework³ from the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, which addresses the importance of health and on-track development beginning at birth, supported and supportive families and communities, and high-quality birth-through-age-eight learning environments with regular attendance. The school-related recommendations in these two documents are broadly consistent with those of the Action Plan, but these endorsed reports are generally broader in scope than the K–12 system and more specific in target metrics and recommended actions than the Action Plan.

The Commission Report also includes a set of recommendations to improve cross-sector early childhood data quality, collection, analysis, and use across the state, as well as recommendations to build a culture of continuous quality improvement (CQI) to

² <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/about/department-initiatives/early-childhood/early-childhood-action-plan>

³ https://files.buildthefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FINAL_NCECF_report-pathways-actionframework_digital-spreads-020519.pdf

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support data-based decision-making that are more specific than those in the Action Plan.

Finally, the Commission Report includes the following recommendations about early intervention not found in the Action Plan:

- a. Include at-risk children in North Carolina's definition of eligibility for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C Early Intervention Program (Infant-Toddler Program), which provides supports and services for families and their children, birth to age three, who have special needs. Expanding eligibility would serve a broader population of infants and toddlers not meeting current criteria in order to prevent further developmental delays. Expanding eligibility would require significantly more capacity and resources for the state's early intervention system.
- b. Expansion of infant/early childhood mental health services in the community for young children not served by the Early Intervention Program would also help meet the needs of those most at risk, ensuring interventions as young as possible where impact is greatest.

Student Assessment and School Accountability Systems

The Action Plan and Commission Report contain aligned top-level statements that the state's student assessment and school accountability system needs significant revision to meet the goals as described by the Action Plan:

The systems should provide the information needed by educators, parents, policymakers and others about the educational effectiveness of each school and about the learning and progress of individual children and of subgroups of children. The system should also produce data to inform the evaluation and continuous improvement of educational programs and to enable the Court to track progress, identify areas of concern, and monitor compliance with the *Leandro* requirements (Action Plan, p. 107)

The two analyses then differ greatly in the specificity of the recommended actions, with the Action Plan providing a far more in-depth analysis and set of recommendations.

Commission Report Assessment and Accountability⁴ Recommendations:

1. Take advantage of the flexibility granted under ESSA to include multiple measures of school performance in the state's accountability system to help provide a more balanced, data-informed, and student-focused look at how schools are performing. These measures could be focused on the following examples:
 - a. Chronic absenteeism
 - b. School climate
 - c. Student discipline (i.e., suspensions and other discipline actions, disaggregated by various demographics and offenses, not as a punitive measure but as a way to identify successes and areas for improvement)
 - d. Extended-year graduation rates (i.e., 6- and 7-year graduation rates)
 - e. College- and career-readiness
2. Create a plan for a more balanced statewide assessment system that can provide standards-aligned assessments to inform classroom learning and assist teachers in differentiating instruction, like NC Check-Ins and/or other formative assessments, as

⁴ The Commission Report provides two other recommendations from the assessment and accountability working group—one on resources for school turnaround supports, and one on the role of School Resource Officers—that are addressed elsewhere in this comparison document, since they do not directly address either student assessment or school accountability.

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well as summative assessments for accountability. Assessments should be data-informed and student-focused.

3. Discontinue the School Performance Grades and create a new set of school and district accountability metrics that provide understandable and publicly available information on student performance and that include information separately on the percent of students proficient and student growth on state assessments.
4. Endorse the state's focus on improving 3rd grade reading proficiency and the NC Early Childhood Foundation's *Pathways to Grade-Level Reading* measures of success and action plan for ensuring that all 3rd graders are proficient in reading. To achieve those goals, the state must ensure that the state-supported K–2 literacy assessments currently being used in districts across the state remain formative assessments and are not used for accountability purposes.

The Commission priorities are completely consistent with the more specific ones in the Action Plan, which also provides additional recommendations not included in the Commission Report. Many of the Action Plan recommendations are directly relevant to providing data needed to monitor the state's progress toward meeting the *Leandro* requirements. The top-level recommendations in the Action Plan for student assessment and school accountability are provided below, with the Action Plan providing specific findings and recommended actions for each one:

Action Plan Student Assessment System Recommendations:

1. Establish a more balanced and student-centered assessment system. This is aligned with the Commission Report recommendation #2 above.
2. Clarify alignment between the assessment system and the state's theory of action from the state's ESSA plan. The focus under this recommendation is revising the assessment system so that it aligns with the state goal of supporting personalized learning. This is aligned with Commission Report recommendation #2 above.
3. Include additional item types that provide a broader understanding of students' knowledge, skills, and abilities.
4. Improve coherence among curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
5. Revise achievement levels to align with the Court's standard of a sound basic education.

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Action Plan Accountability System Recommendations:

1. Amend the current accountability system, including the information provided by the North Carolina Dashboard, to include measures of progress toward providing all students with access to a sound basic education, a number of which North Carolina currently uses. The recommended actions call for both measures of student opportunities to learn and measure of student outcomes, which include the metrics in Commission Report recommendation #1 above.
2. Include in the North Carolina Dashboard state, district, and school performance and growth (both overall and by student subgroup) on a comprehensive set of measures that would indicate progress toward meeting the *Leandro* tenets and is inclusive of the reporting requirements under ESSA.
3. To measure progress toward meeting the requirements of *Leandro*, North Carolina's accountability system should be structured to reward growth in school performance on an indicator, in addition to status on select indicators. This recommendation is aligned with Commission Report recommendation #3 above.
4. Use a process for identifying schools for support and improvement that includes a set of decision rules to meet the requirements under ESSA and *Leandro*.
5. Use data from the accountability system at the state, district, and school levels to guide planning and budget decisions and to assess school progress and improvement efforts.
6. Use the data provided in the North Carolina Dashboard to identify the appropriate evidence-based interventions and supports.

Finance and Resource Allocation

The Action Plan and Commission Report contain aligned top-level statements that the state needs to determine and provide an adequate level of funding in order to provide a sound basic education to every student, accounting for individual student needs, the concentration of high-need students in many schools and districts, and the importance of a high-quality early childhood education for at-risk children. This includes, of course, the funding necessary to meet the *Leandro* tenets of a qualified, well-prepared principal in every school; a qualified, well-prepared teacher in every classroom; and the resources needed to provide every child with the opportunity for a sound basic education. Both the Action Plan and Commission Report also recommend that the state provide adequate funding for low-wealth districts that considers the capability of the county to provide local funding and the higher costs involved in educating at-risk students, especially when a school or district serves a large proportion of economically disadvantaged students.

As is the case for assessment and accountability, the Commission Report contains a set of general priorities while the Action Plan provides a more detailed analysis and more specific action recommendations. In addition, recommendations provided in other sections of the Action Plan on High-Poverty Schools and on Regional and State Supports for School Improvement are relevant to finance and resource allocation and are included in this section. The Commission did not have separate working groups on those two topics, but some of the recommendations provided by other Commission working groups align with the Action Plan recommendations in these sections.

The Action Plan begins with the overall goal to revise the state funding model to provide adequate, efficient, and equitable resources aligned to student needs in every school and district, with a focus on the funding required to meet the *Leandro* requirements. After reporting a series of findings documenting that current funding is inadequate and that the funding system is inefficient and inequitable, the Action Plan provides three broad recommendations, with specific actions to achieve each one, followed by detailed analyses and specific guidance to inform the state's future financial planning for the costs of meeting the *Leandro* requirements. The recommendations and a summary of the action steps for each are as follows:

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1. Increase cost effectiveness of the North Carolina funding system so that public education investment prioritizes higher-need students and provides appropriate flexibility to address local needs.
 - a. Allow more flexibility for districts in their use of teacher allotments and other allotments.
 - b. Provide additional funding to support the education of students with the greatest needs.
 - c. Provide additional funding to offset inequities in the feasible local contributions to school districts.

2. Modify the school finance system to ensure future stability in funding for public education, including predictable, anticipated funding levels that acknowledge external cost factors.
 - a. Establish a policy that accounts for annual increases in cost within the state's school funding formula.
 - b. Create guardrails on the level and timing of funding distributed to school districts in the future to ensure more predictability for school systems.
 - c. Incorporate factors into the school finance formula that account for regional differences in cost and that include adjustments for necessary small schools/districts and for low-wealth communities.
 - d. Revise the funding mechanism for charter schools so that funds are distributed directly from the state rather than funneled through public school districts.
 - e. Phase in a student-weighted funding formula, collapsing all remaining allotments aside from the position allotments.

3. Increase the overall investment in North Carolina's public schools first by identifying a small number of foundational, high-impact investments. Continued investment in these foundational areas are most critical to setting the system up for success in the future.
 - a. Once a small number of investments have been identified and made, establish a routine that creates an opportunity for North Carolina to revisit these investments, their impact, and future actions to further the state's stride toward meeting the tenets of *Leandro*. Some examples of these investments include:
 - i. Early childhood staff compensation and time

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- ii. Reframing of teacher supply pipeline and compensation
- iii. Principal preparation
- iv. Whole-child support, such as counselors and social workers
- b. Establish a mechanism for continually updating state funding amounts to account for annual rising costs.
- c. Provide funds for the necessary resources, including additional staff positions, professional development, funding for technology and other materials, and additional supports for higher-need students.

Additional Action Plan Finance and Resource-Related Recommendations

The Action Plan contains a section on High-Poverty Schools, emphasizing the need for the state to direct resources to address the greater challenges to providing a sound basic education in schools that serve a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. The major recommendations in this section are provided below (see the Action Plan for the more specific action steps for each one). These recommendations have implications for the funding and resources required at the district and school levels.

1. Attract, prepare, and retain a highly qualified, diverse, and stable K–12 teacher and leader workforce in high-poverty schools.
2. Provide additional time, resources, and access to the programs and supports that meet the educational needs of all students in high-poverty schools, including at-risk students.
3. Revise the school accountability system so that it credits successful efforts in high-poverty schools and supports further success.
4. Provide comprehensive whole-child supports, including professional staff such as nurses, counselors, psychologists, and social workers.
5. Provide resources, opportunities, and supports to address out-of-school barriers to learning that constrain a school’s ability to meet the educational needs of all students in high-poverty schools.

The Action Plan also contains a section on Regional and Statewide Supports for School Improvement, which describes the requirements for state supports to assist low-performing and high-poverty schools in meeting the *Leandro* requirements, as well as meeting the goals in the state’s ESSA plan. The major recommendations in this section are provided below, each of which has implications for the funding and resources required at the state level to provide the necessary support systems.

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1. Rebuild the state’s capacity to fully support the improvement of its lowest-performing schools.
2. Provide resources, opportunities, and supports for low-performing and high-poverty schools to address out-of-school barriers to learning, using a community-schools or other evidence-based approach.
3. Provide statewide and/or regional support to help schools and districts select high-quality, standards-aligned, culturally responsive core curriculum resources and to prepare teachers to use those resources effectively.

Extend the supports already available to schools to help them further implement the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) and the School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS)

4. PBIS, and NC Check-In approaches.

These recommendations for Regional and Statewide Supports for School Improvement align with a priority in the Assessment and Accountability section of the Commission Report: Ensure that the Department of Public Instruction has sufficient staff and resources to provide multi-year, data-driven supports for turning around low-performing schools and districts that include:

- A comprehensive needs assessment
- School improvement planning with focus on continuous improvement
- School leader and teacher professional development
- School leader and teacher in-school coaching
- Engagement of the school community, including families

Action Plan Investment Scenarios and Funding Requirements

In its Finance and Resource Allocation Findings section, the Action Plan also provides detailed investment scenarios that estimate the cost for the state to achieve different thresholds for student performance, and recommends the priorities and sequence of the state’s future investments in K–12 public schools and district operations, in early childhood programs, and in state-level supports. In doing so, the Action Plan provides the state with a great deal of specific guidance to inform planning the funding system required to provide every student with the opportunity for a sound basic education.

Commission Report Finance and Resources Recommendations

The Commission Report contains 10 priorities in its Finance and Resources section, each of which is aligned with recommendations in one or more sections of the Action Plan, as noted below.

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1. Determine an adequate level of funding in order to provide a sound basic education to every student. This aligns with the Finance and Resource Allocation section of the Action Plan and with the more detailed funding scenarios and investment recommendations that provide analyses to support the state in meeting this requirement.
2. The state has the obligation to provide sufficient resources to districts to allow them to attract and retain principals, teachers, and staff who are able to deliver a sound basic education to the students in the district. This requires a determination of the appropriate balance between state and local funding, and a consideration of the capability of the county, particularly low-wealth counties, to provide local funding. This aligns with recommendations in the Teachers, Principals, and High-Poverty Schools sections of the Action Plan, as well as the first recommendation in the Finance and Resource Allocation section.
3. Adjust the allotment system with the goals of providing more funding to support high-needs students and of consolidating allotments to provide appropriate flexibility to LEAs so that they can effectively meet the needs of students. This aligns with the Action Plan's section on Finance and Resource Allocation, recommendation #1.
4. To meet the academic, physical, and mental health needs of students and to ensure that our schools are safe and supportive learning environments, the state should provide sufficient funding to ensure that schools are staffed with specialized instructional support personnel at the nationally recommended ratios. This aligns with the Action Plan's sections on High-Poverty Schools, recommendation #4, and Finance and Resource Allocation, recommendation #3.
5. The state should ensure that adequate funding and effective delivery systems are available to provide access to free breakfast and lunch programs for all students with needs. This aligns with the Action Plan's section on High-Poverty Schools, recommendation #5.
6. The state must fully fund the operational expenses of public schools, as required by statute, while local governments have the responsibility to provide for capital and infrastructure needs to the extent they are capable. The decline in state funding has resulted in local governments having to cover more operational expenses, which has led to a strain on their ability to cover capital and infrastructure needs. Since some local governments are not fully capable of providing for capital and infrastructure needs, the state should develop robust and dedicated sources of funding for recurring statewide support for capital, infrastructure, and technology needs, especially in low-wealth school districts. This partially aligns with findings and recommendations in the Action Plan's

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section on Finance and Resource Allocation and the related investment scenarios. The Action Plan analysis did not investigate capital spending, but if its recommendations are enacted, it will create relief on the capital spending side for local school districts.

7. Implement statewide salary schedules for teachers, school administrators, and instructional support personnel to ensure that they are adequately compensated and given the necessary incentives and professional development opportunities to grow professionally, to remain in the profession, and to work in high-needs schools and districts. This aligns with Action Plan recommendations in the sections on Finance and Resource Allocation (recommendation #3), Teachers (recommendations #7 and #9), and Principals (recommendation #4).
8. Ensure that districts have sufficient funding, staff capacity, and access to professional development and technical assistance for district and school administrators to make evidence-based, informed decisions and to ensure they have the operational capacity to effectively utilize all available local, state, and federal sources of funding. This aligns with many recommendations throughout the Action Plan.
9. Ensure that the Department of Public Instruction has sufficient funding and staff capacity to enable the agency to support school districts in providing a sound basic education to all students. This aligns with the Action Plan recommendations for Regional and Statewide Supports for School Improvement.
10. The state should conduct a study on the best and most appropriate ways to fund charter schools without placing financial and planning burdens on schools and districts in order to maintain the opportunity for every student to have access to a sound basic education. This aligns partially with Action Plan Finance and Resource Allocation recommendation #2, which recommends that the state revise the funding mechanism for charter schools.

Additional Recommendations

The Commission Report, in its section on Assessment and Accountability, includes a recommendation that the State Board of Education define the roles and responsibilities of School Resource Officers (SROs), based on national and state models for effectively incorporating SROs in schools. It also recommends a statewide training program to support SROs in carrying out those roles and responsibilities. The Action Plan does not specifically include SROs in any of its recommendations.

The Action Plan includes final recommendations about Monitoring the State's Compliance, recommending that the Court require annual reports from the State Board of Education and Department of Public Instruction with plans for meeting the *Leandro* requirements, including metrics that can be used to monitor progress, and that the Court appoint a panel of education experts to help the Court monitor the state's plans, initiatives, and progress in meeting the *Leandro* requirements. The Commission Report does not provide any recommendations to the Court in this regard.

Conclusion

The WestEd Action Plan and the Commission Report each provide substantial guidance to inform North Carolina's leaders about the challenges in addressing the constitutional requirement to provide equitable access to a sound basic education for all students. Most importantly, both provide specific recommendations for addressing those challenges. The two reports are aligned in their overall goals and in many of their recommended actions, while differing in the amount of emphasis placed on different areas and in a number of the specific recommendations. Together these report, along with the background papers prepared to inform the WestEd Action Plan, provide the state with comprehensive, systemic, research-based guidance for its efforts to provide all students with the high-quality education that is critical to the future economic and social success of the individuals, their families and communities, and the state as a whole.