

Public Schools First NC supports an equitable, inclusive, fair, innovative and accountable public education system that nurtures and prepares each child for success in school and life. With this constitutional mandate in mind, we present our legislative agenda for 2021.

Background

Over the past decade, per-pupil spending has declined by 6 % in NC, leaving our state ranked the 6th lowest in the nation on this measure ([WestEd report](#)). The most recent data (2019-20) reports the estimated national average for per-pupil spending is \$13,384 as compared to NC's estimated per-pupil spending of \$10,632.

Over the past few years, NC public schools have added more than 90,000 students, including more English language learners and students living in poverty. According to the latest figures, almost half of NC's children live in poor or low-income households and 22 % live in poverty ([ncchild.org](#)). As of December 2020, no comprehensive budget has passed. The most recent state budget, passed in 2018, made little to no investment to expand school resources, provide at-risk student services, restore teaching assistants, or fund classroom supplies and technology. These critical resources and more remain below 2008-2009 spending levels when adjusted for inflation. This is unacceptable. Adequate, equitable funding ensures the optimal classroom environment and learning resources needed for student success.

Leandro Case Sets the Legislative Focus

The [Leandro](#) case remains one of the biggest education policy issues in NC. The NC Supreme Court ruled on this case in 1997 and in 2004, that NC has a constitutional obligation to ensure all children have access to a sound, basic education. This includes equitable access to resources and opportunities, well-trained teachers and principals, and adequate per-pupil funding. The State continues to fall short of this legal and constitutional mandate. The [WestEd report](#) includes eight recommendations for how NC can comply with the directive to provide a sound, basic education to all children. We will advocate for legislation that implements the **eight critical needs** identified in the WestEd Report:

1. Revise the state funding model to provide adequate, efficient, and equitable resources. These resources should be aligned to student needs in every school and district.
2. Provide a qualified, well-prepared, and diverse teaching staff in every school.
3. Provide a qualified and well-prepared principal in every school.
4. Provide all at-risk students with the opportunity to attend high-quality early childhood programs.
5. Direct resources, opportunities, and initiatives to economically disadvantaged students.
6. Revise the student assessment system and school accountability system.
7. Build an effective regional and statewide system of support for the improvement of low-performing and high-poverty schools.
8. Convene an expert panel to assist the Court in monitoring state policies, plans, programs, and progress. Monitoring should ensure the state's ongoing compliance with the Leandro requirements.

Public Schools First NC is committed to the passage of child-centric legislation based on these identified critical needs. We believe legislators should fulfil their constitutional obligation as stated in the Leandro decision and work to provide *every child* with a sound, basic education.

To respond to these identified needs, we are advocating for adequate, equitable education funding that **reflects the national average by 2022**. Our specific legislative priorities are listed below.

***Universal access to high-quality Pre-K**

NC children need universal access to high-quality pre-school to prepare them for kindergarten. Universal Pre-K provides lifelong, positive results for children, their communities, and our state. We support legislation that:

- **Implements universal Pre-K for all eligible children**
- **Improves and invests in the early childhood educator pipeline**

High-quality pre-kindergarten programs are critical in preparing the highest-risk children for success in grades K-12. The advantages from attending Pre-K last throughout elementary school, holding steady or growing at each grade level, for *both high and low-income students*. Research has shown clear benefits from the program, but many children are unable to enroll due to insufficient funding. Only 23 % of four-year old children in NC have access to Pre-K. This percentage is below the national average. There are nearly 33,000 children who are eligible but not enrolled due to lack of access. Experts suggest that many more eligible children do not even apply due to the long waiting list. Several lower-income counties are forced to refuse state funding because they do not have the funds to cover the difference between what the state pays and what the programs cost.

***Increasing the number of helping professionals in schools and communities and supporting trauma-informed curricula/programs that focus on social and emotional learning.**

We support legislation that:

- **Increases funding to hire more helping** professionals (school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, and school nurses) to meet nationally recommended ratios. Schools need these staff to meet the social, emotional and mental health needs of students which have significantly increased during COVID.
- **Provides better healthcare and mental health services and access** for children and families not just in our schools but throughout our communities.
- **Provides trauma-informed training** for all school staff with an emphasis on social and emotional learning (SEL) to help them implement trauma-informed district-wide policies and programs.

Children across NC suffer Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in various ways including: emotional or physical neglect, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, effects of severe poverty, systemic racism and homophobia, a parent's addiction to alcohol or other substances. The trauma of ACEs can cause children to develop toxic stress, affecting them emotionally, physically and biologically as well as hindering their academic success. Schools can play an important role in addressing the effects of traumatic stress on students by providing prevention, early intervention, and intensive treatment for children exposed to trauma; however, this requires having helping professionals in schools to help identify needs, implement trauma-informed programs, and link children and their families to mental health services.

***Increase funding for special education students**

We support legislation that:

- **Removes the cap on special education funding to allow coverage of all eligible children**
- **Increases spending levels to fully fund special education service costs**

Funding for special education comes from both Federal and State budgets. Federal funding comes primarily from two sources: the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). ESSA provides categorical funding to support student achievement in low-income areas.

State funding is disbursed through the "Children with Disabilities" allotment which includes a cap, currently set at 12.75 %. Established in 1993, this cap is set based on estimated number of special needs students as compared to the general student population. Often, the actual number of children with disabilities is greater than the cap allows. As a result, school districts are forced to take money from other allotments to fill the gap or not provide services.

There are over 203,000 children in NC identified as children with disabilities. COVID-19 and the resulting move to virtual learning has had significant and negative impacts on these students. Some children with disabilities simply cannot learn in an online environment. Many have lost access to helping professionals, therapists and assistive technology when their schools closed. As these most vulnerable students return to school buildings, they will require additional support due to lost instructional time and to help reset their emotional and social functioning needs.

***Improve integration and the equitable distribution of resources**

We support legislation that:

- **Moves away from traditional punitive discipline** that contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline along with removing students from much needed classroom and educational opportunities.
- **Works to provide equitable and adequate distribution** of highly qualified teachers who can provide quality instruction, equitable access to educational resources, advanced courses, and a focus on [restorative justice](#) to ensure that all students graduate high school ready for career or college.
- **Produces integrated, equitable schools** by investing in traditional public schools that serve all children and stopping the diversion of public funding for privatization.
- **Establishes a more balanced and student-centered** assessment system.
- **Ensures resources** go to students who need them the most.

A focus on school integration and equitable distribution of education resources is especially important now, when [schools across the country are re-segregating](#) at an alarming rate. Levels of segregation in our nation's schools are now at levels not seen since the 1960s. School segregation limits educational opportunities and resources for black and brown students, isolates groups of students and limits interactions across groups.

Schools with lower-income, high-minority student populations tend to have fewer resources and employ teachers who have less training. Integration has benefits for all students, including improved test scores, a decrease in drop-out rates, an increase in capacity for working with others, decreased levels of prejudice and much more.

***Restore NC's teacher pipeline and recruit and retain more teachers of color**

NC must restore its teacher pipeline and increase diversity in the profession.

We support legislation that:

- **Expands the Teaching Fellows Program** to include more HBCUs and increase the number of fellowships; targeting some fellowships for rural schools and other high-needs schools/areas.
- **Recruits teachers of color:** Research shows students of color perform better on academic benchmarks when they have at least one teacher of color.
- **Evaluates teachers fairly** using a variety of tools, not just student test scores.
- **Eliminates the A-F grading system** or improve it to fairly consider student growth.
- **Invests in teacher and principal training programs** to address shortages and improve retention.
- **Provides incentives for college students** to select education as a major.
- **Increases mentoring support** and professional development, especially for new teachers.

NC's long reputation as an educational leader and the quality of our public schools has made it attractive to new families and businesses. A successful public school education depends on quality public school teachers. Enrollment in the UNC system's teacher prep programs has dropped 30 % since 2010.

***Provide safe learning environments for our students and teachers**

Every child, every school personnel member is entitled to a safe environment at school. No one should live with the fear that sending their children to school may be placing them in harm's way. No school staff should feel their lives are in jeopardy for simply showing up at work.

We support legislation that works toward creating safe, secure schools for all our students and educators including:

- **Keeping guns off school grounds** and out of classrooms including not arming teachers in our schools.
- **Implementing required** violence prevention and threat-reporting programs at all schools.
- **Strengthening** background checks governing gun ownerships and registration.
- **Educating children** and their parents on gun safety/safe storage.

***Exclusive use of public tax dollars for public education with effective accountabilities**

Public Schools First NC believes taxpayers' education dollars belong in properly accountable and transparent public institutions, not delivered by disparate mechanisms to private and for-profit entities that do not guarantee adequate educational outcomes for children.

We support legislation that:

- **Places a moratorium on funding school vouchers** that give taxpayer money to private schools without ensuring student safety and educational achievement with no documentation on how tax dollars are used or how students are performing.
- **Requires private schools** receiving vouchers to use a nationally-normed test for students receiving vouchers to demonstrate student performance, similar to public school accountability.
- **Increases accountability and transparency** in all charter schools.
- **Restores a cap** on the number of charter schools allowed.
- **Allows local school boards the same flexibility** as charter schools including calendar flexibility.

***Increase teacher pay for all teachers**

We support raising teacher pay to at least the national average; especially offering veteran teachers an increase to recognize their skills and experience. According to the NEA's 2020 Rankings and Estimates, the projected national average teacher salary for 2019-2020 is \$63,645. The projected average salary for NC teachers is estimated at \$54,682. NC's average is expected to be even lower over the next five years as large numbers of educators are eligible begin to retire.

We support legislation that:

- **Closes the gap** between high and lower wealth counties by making funding models more equitable.
- **Fully funds the class size mandates for grades K-3** including additional personnel and capital funding.
- **Restores class size caps** for grades 4-5.
- **Reinstates supplements** for teachers who earn advanced degrees.
- **Increases per pupil funding to national average**, including adequate funding for textbooks and technology.
- **Increases school construction funding** via a statewide school construction bond.
- **Restores full-time teacher assistants** for each K-3 classroom.

We will monitor the NC General Assembly's 2021 Legislative Long Session for legislative actions that impact public education. To ensure that you receive up-to-date information about legislative actions, sign up for our newsletter via our web site where we post our [weekly Legislative Update](#). We also alert our public as important legislative actions happen on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Follow us on social media to make sure you know when critical public education issues are impacted by legislative actions.