

## Provide safe and equitable learning environments for our students and teachers

Public schools take all children and give them an opportunity to succeed academically, regardless of their race, their family income, or where they live. Further, public schools are obligated to provide safe and equitable learning environments that foster every child's potential.

Effective public schools offer an excellent educational environment where parents and teachers work together to prepare each child for college or career. Effective public schools promote policies of equity and inclusion that create a respectful, safe, and healthy learning environment. Effective public schools offer a rich classroom experience with a well-rounded curriculum that is innovative and inclusive. In addition, they offer school-based services that address a child's social, emotional, and physical health needs and are available to all students. For our students to succeed in school and in life, they need a broad education that includes significant study of literature, mathematics, the arts, history, civics, science, foreign languages, and physical education. This requires access to high-quality textbooks, high-speed, reliable internet and devices, and other classroom instructional supplies.

Finally, our public schools should provide a healthy, safe school climate with discipline practices that promote fair and respectful treatment of all students. School cultures that promote equity, respect, and a sense of belonging among their students are more effective in keeping their schools safe. In addition, schools that implement prevention, early intervention, and other proactive strategies are more successful in keeping students in school and on track for graduation.

Disparities in student achievement suggest that funding for resources needed for students to succeed is not always equitable. Poverty and racial segregation are two real problems faced by our public education system. School districts cannot be solely responsible for eliminating poverty in our country. However, we as citizens can advocate for policies and programs that help all children reach their full potential.

**Public Schools First NC** strongly affirms that every child, every teacher, every member of a school's staff is entitled to a safe environment at school. **Strategies that promote safe and equitable schools include:**

### **Adopting the recommendations found in the Leandro Case**

In 1994, in *Leandro v. State* cases, parents, students and school districts in low-wealth, rural counties filed a lawsuit alleging that students in these counties were denied their right to a sound basic education under the N.C. constitution. The case affirmed that inequitable and inadequate school funding bars access to a sound and basic public education, particularly for students of color and students from families with low incomes. The WestEd work plan and key findings, released in 2019, detailed critical needs and recommendations for the state in meeting the constitutional mandate to provide all children with a sound basic education. This report concluded that North Carolina needs to spend several billion dollars over the next several years to ensure all students are provided an opportunity to receive a "sound basic education."

- Revising the state funding model to provide adequate, efficient, and equitable resources
- Providing a qualified, well-prepared, and diverse teaching staff in every school
- Providing a qualified and well-prepared principal in every school
- Providing all at-risk students with the opportunity to attend high-quality early childhood programs

- Directing resources, opportunities, and initiatives to economically disadvantaged students
- Revising the student assessment system and school accountability system
- Building an effective regional and statewide system of support for the improvement of low-performing and high-poverty schools
- Convening an expert panel to assist the Court in monitoring state policies, plans, programs, and progress

## All public schools should be racially and economically integrated

Studies demonstrate that all students perform better in a diverse environment. Further, disparities in student achievement suggest that funding for resources needed for students to succeed is not always handled equitably. Historian of education Diane Ravitch identifies poverty and racial segregation as the two “real problems” faced by our public education system. School districts cannot be solely responsible for eliminating poverty in our state. North Carolina must continue to work to **reduce disparities in resources between rural and urban districts** across the state, and between low-poverty and high-poverty schools within the same district. It is not acceptable that children attending school in higher-poverty districts have substantially less access to state and local revenue than children attending school in lower-poverty districts.

## All public schools should have a diverse, well-prepared, well-supported staff

The opportunity gap between students of color and their white peers is vast and in many schools the gap is growing. The population of black and brown students in public schools continue to grow, meanwhile the teachers who serve them are likely to be white. With concerning discrepancies in discipline, and a growing opportunity gap, many advocates are calling for a more diverse workforce as a means of bridging the divide. [Studies show](#) that students who have demographically similar teachers exhibit better academic outcomes. [Teachers of color hold](#) higher expectations for minority students, are more likely to recommend them for advanced classwork, more likely to serve as role models and help students value education, and be more culturally sensitive and less likely to subscribe to biased stereotypes about their students. Because teachers of color, like their students, experience racism and other stressors in the classroom, it is vital they are well-supported by an administration and staff that are well-trained in anti-racism and reducing implicit bias.

## All school districts should advocate to close the digital divide

Many educational resources have moved online, including textbooks and reference materials. This poses a particular challenge for students without reliable high-speed internet access at home and is sometimes referred to as the homework gap. Lack of a reliable internet connection makes it difficult for students to access information and complete assignments. A recent study by Dr. Cosmos George, President of the Warren County NAACP, shows a correlation between ACT scores and access to broadband. Students with better access to broadband tend to perform better on college admissions tests. An estimated 10 to 20 percent of our K-12 students do not have broadband internet access at home, according to the NC Broadband Infrastructure Office. The FCC reports that 6.29 percent of NC households do not have access to high speed broadband, and [95 percent of those households are in rural areas](#). The recent COVID-19 pandemic lays bare these preexisting inequities. Even though many students have been out of school since mid-March, they are still without internet access or devices to participate in remote learning activities including interacting with

their teachers and classmates online. These students risk being further behind than their classmates when school resumes.

The NC Rural Center suggests the following steps to help close the digital divide:

- 1) Raise the speed standard for federal investments in rural broadband.
- 2) Leverage federal investments to expand rural high-speed broadband.
- 3) Continue to prioritize the connection of anchor institutions to high-speed broadband, particularly our public libraries.

Students in urban areas may also lack access due to financial concerns and these needs should be met as well. Equity and inclusion for all students must be at the heart of our response to the digital divide dilemma.

## **All North Carolina young children deserve access to high-quality Pre-K education**

**Providing Pre-K education is essential** to ensuring that each child comes to school “kindergarten ready.” Early childhood education helps level the academic playing field, setting the stage for future success—in the classroom and beyond. North Carolina continues to have a waiting list. [We support universal Pre-K](#) that is available for all students.

## **All schools should deal fairly with all students**

North Carolina schools consistently and disproportionately suspend students of color more often than white students. Too often, the classroom is where the “pipeline” or pathway to prison begins. Students who are suspended miss a lot of instructional time and are more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system. Moreover, there is no evidence that suspensions or expulsions make schools safer.

## **All schools need programs and funding to ensure safe schools**

Key to this goal is strong **violence prevention and threat-reporting programs at all schools**. Administrators, teachers, and other staff need to know how to teach students peaceful conflict resolution and positive interpersonal relationship skills. There are many excellent programs but this requires allocating resources and staff training time. Further, schools need staff trained in conducting threat assessment and risk-assessment procedures that can help prevent tragedies from occurring.

## **All schools must have trauma-informed policies and programs**

We have a critical need for more helping professionals in our public schools to help children cope with [adverse childhood experiences](#) (ACEs) including bullying and racism. Children come to school with varying levels of adverse experiences and need emotional and physical support. They need educators and other helping professionals who are trauma-informed and trained to be responsive and compassionate to help remove barriers that are impacting social, mental, and physical well-being and consequently impede academic success.

## **Helping professionals are needed in every school**

Every school needs school social workers, school counselors, school psychologists, and school nurses to help create a trauma-informed climate to help identify and guide students to the support services they need

to be successful at school. These helping professionals are needed to train all educators on how they can create school cultures that teach resilience. In turn, every educator in the school building can help children build resilience so they can moderate the impacts of ACEs in order to be able to come to school and graduate with a chance at a healthy and productive future. (See more information [here](#).) Research shows that students are more likely to get needed mental health services at school than through any other place. For many children, school is the only safe and stable place in their lives.

## Adequate helping professionals

All schools should have counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and school nurses in schools based on national standards.

### Here is what experts recommend schools have:

**1 school counselor for every 250 kids.** NC pays for 1 for every 413 students. NC on average, has one for every 353 students.

**1 social worker for every 250 children.** NC pays for 1 per 1,922 students. NC, on average, has one for every 1,289 students.

**1 school psychologist for every 700 kids.** NC pays for 1 per 2,483 students. NC, on average, has one school psychologist for every 1,800 students.

**1 school nurse for every 750 kids or at least one per school.** NC, on average, has one per 1,013 students; many schools aren't served by a full-time, permanent nurse. (\*Note: Some school districts use local funds to supplement state dollars.)

## All schools should have policies that protect LGBTQ+ Youth

Policies must be in place to protect LGBTQ+ students from bias, discrimination and institutional barriers that impact their access to educational resources and opportunities. One of the most important things schools must do for LGBTQ+ youth is create a safe, welcoming, affirming, inclusive and supportive environment. Parents, educators and other adults who serve children have a responsibility to create safe spaces so that all students, including LGBTQ+ youth can thrive and reach their full academic potential. Some strategies for creating safe school environments include establishing clear and inclusive policies to support LGBTQ+ youth and school staff, developing a LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum, being a visible advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusion and equality, providing nationally recommended levels of mental health staff and providing LGBTQ+ inclusive training for all staff. (See [here](#) and [here](#) for additional resources.)

## All guns must be kept off school grounds and out of K-12 classrooms

Guns have no place at school unless being carried by trained and licensed school resource officers. Further, gun safety experts and advocates strongly oppose armed civilians/volunteers. They cite how armed civilians are not knowledgeable about the school, do not have familiarity with the students, and often lack understanding of effective school or law enforcement policies and practices. Volunteers can increase chaos and create more risk than protection for our students.

## **All schools must not allow arming teachers**

There is no evidence that arming teachers will keep children safe at school. In fact, the research shows that arming teachers will actually make our students less safe. Using common sense, one can understand why this should not be the role or duty of our educators. Arming teachers actually increases the risks posed to our students. Both national teacher professional associations and gun safety experts agree on this point.

**All schools must have adequate funding to keep schools safe ensuring** school security can be funded as determined by local school districts. All schools must have ways to limit access to school buildings, monitor visitors, and prepare children and staff for physical safety threats, etc. This is an investment we must provide every school and provide the training needed to enforce strategies adopted by each school to keep children and staff safe.

## **Resources**

**Brookings Institute, The benefits of Hispanic student-teacher matching for AP courses, October 2019**  
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2019/10/11/the-benefits-of-hispanic-student-teacher-matching-for-ap-courses/>

**Brookings Institute, The many ways teacher diversity may benefit students, August 2016**  
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2016/08/19/the-many-ways-teacher-diversity-may-benefit-students/>

**NEA, Three Keys to School Safety, April 2020, <http://www.nea.org/home/54092.htm>**  
**Public Schools First NC, Aces and Resilience, What Can We Do, March 2020,**  
<https://www.publicschoolsfirstnc.org/resources/fact-sheets/aces-and-resilience-what-can-we-do/>

**Public Schools First NC, Education Justice, March 2020, <https://www.publicschoolsfirstnc.org/know-the-issues/education-justice/>**

**Public Schools First NC, The Facts on Leandro, March 2020,**  
<https://www.publicschoolsfirstnc.org/know-the-issues/sound-basic-education-leandro/>

**Public Schools First NC, The Facts on PreK, March 2020,**  
<https://www.publicschoolsfirstnc.org/resources/fact-sheets/the-facts-on-pre-k/>

**Public Schools First NC, The Facts on Rural Schools, March 2020,**  
<https://www.publicschoolsfirstnc.org/resources/fact-sheets/the-facts-on-rural-schools/>

**Public Schools First NC, LGBTQ Youth and Schools, March 2020,**  
<https://www.publicschoolsfirstnc.org/resources/fact-sheets/lgbtq-youth-and-schools/>

**Public Schools First NC, The WestEd Report, <https://www.publicschoolsfirstnc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Sound-Basic-Education-for-All.pdf>**

**Last updated: May 22, 2020**