

*Public Schools First NC supports one unified, equitable, inclusive, fair, innovative and accountable public education system that nurtures and prepares each child for success in school and life. We believe legislators should fulfill their constitutional obligation as stated in the Leandro decision and work to provide **every child with a sound, basic education**. With this constitutional mandate in mind, we are advocating for adequate, equitable education funding that, at a minimum, reflects the national average by 2023. In the hope that adjustments can be made to public school funding during the legislative short session, we present our legislative agenda for 2022.*

Background

While the 2021 legislative session ended with the good news of the first state budget since 2018, public education did not see the benefits that it should have been provided in the new two-year state budget. Going into 2021, the state had a [surplus of \\$4 billion](#). As of Oct. 2021, that number had grown to more than [\\$9 billion](#) in unreserved funds. Yet even with this surplus, the legislature failed to fund sufficient teacher, administrator, and support staff salary increases to make up for the stagnation of the previous years. Nor did the legislature come close to fully funding the remedies outlined in the 2021 [Comprehensive Remedial Plan](#) developed by the parties involved in the Leandro case to address the chronic neglect of low-wealth school districts. Although both the State of North Carolina and the State Board of Education agreed to the plan's provisions, of the \$1.7 billion requested for the first two years, the legislature allocated approximately 53% of the first year's request and 43% of the second year's request. The failure of the legislature to act to increase funding when it has the ability to do so signals a clear intent to deliberately underfund our public schools and ignore the court's ruling in funding Leandro.

Over the past decade, North Carolina has continued to fall behind in its commitment to educate all students. The recent report by the Education Law Center, [Making the Grade: How Fair is School Funding in Your State?](#) gave North Carolina an F for both funding and funding effort. North Carolina ranks 47th out of 51 (DC included) for overall per pupil expenditure, just below Mississippi (46th) and far below our neighbor, South Carolina (25th). Even more troubling is North Carolina's rank of 49th (above only Arizona) for funding effort, a metric that takes into account a state's financial ability to fund education in addition to total funding.

North Carolina continues to struggle with some of the highest rates of child and student poverty in the nation. Child poverty increases the challenges faced by our public schools, requiring an even stronger commitment to providing needed resources. According to the recent report by the NC Poverty Research Fund, [The Persistent and Pervasive Challenge of Child Poverty and Hunger in North Carolina](#), North Carolina has the tenth highest state rate for child poverty in the nation with nearly 1 in 5 children living below the federal poverty threshold and almost 10% living in extreme poverty. Before the new 2021-2023 budget, the most recent state budget passed was the 2018 budget which made little to no investments to expand school resources, provide at-risk student services, restore teaching assistants, or fund classroom supplies and technology. Our public schools have been operating over the last three years with funding below the 2008-2009 spending levels when adjusted for inflation. The new budget does not make up the deficits over the last thirteen years. Adequate, equitable funding ensures the optimal classroom environment and learning resources needed for student success.

1. Fully Funding the Leandro Comprehensive Remedial Plan

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](#) that informed the [2021 Comprehensive Remedial Plan](#) included eight recommendations. These were distilled to the seven essential components in the Comprehensive Remedial Plan for how NC can comply with the directive to provide a sound, basic education to all children.

These components are:

- A system of teacher development and recruitment that ensures each classroom is staffed with a high-quality teacher who is supported with early and ongoing professional learning and provided competitive pay;
- A system of principal development and recruitment that ensures each school is led by a high quality principal who is supported with early and ongoing professional learning and provided competitive pay;
- A finance system that provides adequate, equitable, and predictable funding to school districts and, importantly, adequate resources to address the needs of all North Carolina schools and students, especially at-risk students as defined by the Leandro decisions;
- An assessment and accountability system that reliably assesses multiple measures of student performance against the Leandro standard and provides accountability consistent with the Leandro standard;
- An assistance and turnaround function that provides necessary support to low-performing schools and districts;
- A system of early education that provides access to high-quality prekindergarten and other early childhood learning opportunities to ensure that all students at-risk of educational failure, regardless of where they live in the State, enter kindergarten on track for school success; and
- An alignment of high school to postsecondary and career expectations, as well as the provision of early postsecondary and workforce learning opportunities, to ensure student readiness to all students in the State.

In light of the legislature’s failure to fully fund the provisions of the Comprehensive Remedial Plan, Public Schools First will continue to advocate for legislation that implements all of the seven required components to “address critical needs in public education and to ensure that the State is providing the opportunity for a sound, basic education to each North Carolina child, and further hold itself accountable for doing so.”

2. Using public tax dollars exclusively for public schooling with consistent accountability and polices

Public Schools First NC supports keeping taxpayers’ education dollars in public schools that are properly accountable and transparent institutions. Public funds should not be used to fund schools run by private or for-profit organizations that are not part of the NC accountability system to help monitor and assure high quality educational outcomes for all children. All taxpayer-supported K-12 schools should have the same accountability, transparency, policy flexibilities, curriculum and rules applied.

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 the NC accountability tests or nationally-normed tests 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.
- **Supports instructional integrity** based on following the NC Standard Course of Study in all schools receiving taxpayer dollars.

3. Increasing teacher salaries to the national average and pay improvement for all school personnel

We support raising teacher pay to at least the national average and offering veteran teachers an increase to recognize their skills and experience. According to the [NEA’s 2020-21 Rankings and Estimates Report](#), the projected national average teacher salary for 2020-2021 is \$65,090. The projected average salary for NC teachers is estimated at \$54,392. Even with the modest salary increases in the 2021 budget (about 2.5% per year for the next two years, including longevity step increases), NC’s average is expected to be even lower over the next five years as large numbers of educators are eligible to retire.

We support legislation that:

- **Reinstates supplements** for teachers who earn advanced degrees.
- **Increases supplements and/or pay for high-vacancy positions** including school psychologists, school social workers, and special education teachers.
- **Pays livable wages and full benefits** to all school support personnel.
- **Restores full-time teacher assistants** for each K-3 classroom.
- **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 classroom space to accommodate the additional classrooms.
- **Restores class size caps** for grades 4-5.
- **Increases per pupil funding to national average**, including adequate funding for textbooks and technology.

4. Strengthening and diversifying North Carolina’s teacher pipeline

NC must restore its teacher pipeline and increase diversity in the profession by adding more teachers of color. Increasing the teacher pipeline is entirely possible with adequate funding and programs focused on this goal.

We support legislation that:

- **Expands the Teaching Fellows Program** to include more HBCUs and increase the number of fellowships for rural schools and other high-needs schools/areas.
- **Recruits more teachers of color.**
- **Evaluates teachers fairly** using a variety of tools, not just student test scores.
- **Eliminates the A-F grading system** or improves it to fairly consider student growth.
- **Invests in teacher and principal training programs.**
- **Provides incentives for college students** to select education as a major.
- **Increases mentoring support** and professional development, especially for new teachers.
- **Respects curriculum integrity** and teachers' professionalism and decision-making authority.

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.

5. Increasing numbers of helping professionals in schools and adopting universal 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 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 affect students emotionally, physically and biologically as well as hinder their academic success. Schools can play an important role in addressing the effects of ACEs 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.

6. Providing 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 all 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 of attending Pre-K last throughout elementary school, holding steady or growing at each grade level, for both high and low-income students. Research on the NC Pre-K Program has shown clear benefits, but many children are unable to enroll due to insufficient funding. In 2020, only 53% of eligible four-year old children in NC enrolled in the program, with fewer than 20% in some counties. 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.

7. Increasing funding for special education students

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% (increased to 13% in the 2021-23 budget). 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.

We support legislation that:

- **Removes the cap on special education funding to allow coverage of all eligible children.**
- **Increases spending levels at federal and state level to fully fund special education service costs.**

There are over 190,000 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.

8. Improving integration and the equitable distribution of resources

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. School segregation limits educational opportunities and resources for black and brown students, isolates groups of students and limits interactions across groups.

We support legislation that:

- **Works to provide equitable and adequate distribution** of highly qualified teachers who can provide quality instruction, equitable access to educational resources, and advanced courses 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 stops the diversion of public funding for privatization.
- **Ensures resources** go to students who need them the most.

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.

9. Creating safe and supportive learning environments for all students and teachers

Every child and every school staff member is entitled to a healthy, safe, and supportive school environment. No student or staff person should feel that they are in danger when at school.

We support legislation that:

- **Supports policies that ensure safe, secure, inviting, and respectful schools** for all of our diverse students and educators.
- **Moves away from traditional punitive discipline** that contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline and hinders students' participation in much-needed classroom and educational opportunities.
- **Implements positive approaches to discipline** such as [restorative justice programs](#) that have been shown to promote healthier and safer school climates.
- **Keeps guns off school grounds** and out of classrooms including not arming teachers in our schools.
- **Implements required** violence prevention and threat-reporting programs at all schools.

10. Eliminating the Digital Divide

The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted an already pressing issue in North Carolina – the huge digital divide that pervades our state defined as: “The economic, educational, and social inequalities between those who have computers and online access and those who do not.” Households that are often most affected by this divide include rural households, low-income households, and Black and Hispanic households.

We support legislation and funding that:

- **Supports access for K-12 students and educators to high-speed broadband internet** and devices for at-home use.
- **Creates high-quality professional development** opportunities for integrating tech in instruction.
- **Improves infrastructure for broadband** in rural and low-income communities.
- **Provides free hot-spots for WIFI** for homeless school-age children/families.

Public Schools First NC will monitor the NC General Assembly's 2022 Legislative 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 legislative updates called [Week in Review](#).

We will 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.

We invite you to join us in this advocacy work for our children. By large margins, North Carolinians support fully and fairly funding our public schools and making sure that students have the classrooms resources and well-qualified teachers they need to develop critical thinking skills and be prepared to fulfill their role as productive and contributing members of our society.