

A NOTE TO READERS: THIS ANALYSIS WAS GENERATED WITH AI

This article was produced using an AI assistant directed to analyze publicly available education, workforce, economic, and budget data from multiple sources and synthesize the patterns no single source reveals alone. All statistics were verified against original sources before publication. Readers can replicate this approach with their own regional or program data. That is the point of this series: AI as a tool for extending capacity, not replacing expertise.

AI as a tool for efficiency — not a substitute for the human judgment that makes this work matter.

Where the Money Goes

A Budget Story Behind Every NC Diploma

A synthesis of NC DPI graduation data, BLS wage outcomes, Education Law Center school funding rankings, the 2026 Leandro ruling, the rise of school choice, and the July 2026 state budget — and what they mean together for North Carolina's students and families

Every spring, nearly 90,000 North Carolina high school seniors walk across a graduation stage. Superintendents celebrate. Parents photograph. The state reports record graduation rates. In 2024–25, North Carolina's four-year cohort graduation rate reached 87.7 percent — the highest level in a decade. By graduation-rate measures alone, the system appears to be moving in the right direction.

But a diploma is a beginning, not a destination. The question that gets asked far less often — and far less loudly — is what happens next. Not for every student. For the students in the schools where funding is thinnest, poverty is deepest, and resources are fewest. For those students, where does the diploma actually lead?

This article synthesizes five storylines that all converge on one underlying question: where is North Carolina's education money actually going, relative to where the documented need is highest? The answer has shifted meaningfully in the last several months — with the passage of the first full state budget in more than two years — but the structural picture is more complex than any single headline can hold.

THE GRADUATION RATE AND THE GAP BENEATH IT

A Record and What It Conceals

North Carolina's four-year graduation rate rose to **87.7 percent in 2024-25** — the highest in a decade. A record 54 percent of the Class of 2025 completed at least one college-level course — including Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and dual enrollment programs — an all-time high. In 2024-25, according to the NC Department of Public Instruction, **86,998 public high school students were enrolled in at least one Career and College Promise dual enrollment course**, a 10 percent increase from the prior year. These are genuine gains and deserve to be named as such.

But readiness has not necessarily kept pace with graduation. Bryce Fiedler, director of the Carolinas Academic Leadership Network, cautions against treating graduation rates alone as evidence of college and career readiness. Fiedler has argued that recent changes in AP score-setting practices may have contributed to higher passing rates nationally, making it important to interpret year-to-year gains in advanced-course outcomes alongside other measures of student preparedness. The data bears this out.

Economically disadvantaged students graduated at lower rates than their more affluent peers, and DPI accountability data indicate that completion gaps remain substantial. And in 2025, only **19 percent of economically disadvantaged students earned college-and-career-ready reading scores, compared to 44 percent of their non-disadvantaged peers** — economically disadvantaged students are less than half as likely to read at a level that predicts future success.

87.7%

**4-Year Graduation Rate — NC
2024-25**

Highest in 10 years | NC DPI

19% vs 44%

**Reading Readiness —
Disadvantaged vs. Peers**

*2025 | NC DPI — a 25-point equity
gap*

8 pts

**Graduation Gap —
Economically Disadvantaged**

*Gap widened 4 pts in one year | NC
DPI*

Sources: NC Department of Public Instruction 2025-26 Accountability Reports; NC DPI CCP Report April 2026; Carolinas Academic Leadership Network, April 2026

THE LEANDRO RULING: A CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT WITHOUT AN ENFORCEMENT MECHANISM

What Changed in April 2026

On April 2, 2026, the NC Supreme Court voted 4-3 to dismiss the Leandro case with prejudice — ending 32 years of litigation on jurisdictional grounds. The court did not overturn the constitutional finding that every NC child has a right to a sound basic education, or that the state

has failed to provide it. What it eliminated was the court's authority to compel the legislature to fund a remedy. According to estimates produced by Every Child NC, a coalition of advocacy organizations that advocated for implementation of the Leandro remedial plan, Wake County could have received approximately \$290.7 million in additional annual state funding under the funding levels contemplated by the court-backed plan — roughly \$1,802 per student. These figures represent advocacy-group projections based on the remedial plan and are not official state allocations or amounts specified by the Supreme Court. The April 2026 ruling did not identify district-level funding amounts.

The path to closing the funding gap is now entirely a matter of legislative will. There is no judicial backstop. That reality makes the passage of the July 2026 state budget — the first full budget in more than two years — the most directly relevant policy event for this article's core argument.

32 yrs

**Leandro Litigation — Filed
1994, Dismissed April 2026**
*Dismissed with prejudice — cannot be
refiled*

4-3

NC Supreme Court Vote
*Jurisdictional grounds — constitutional
finding stands*

~\$290M

**Estimated Wake County Annual
Funding Impact**
*Per Every Child NC advocacy
estimates — not a court order*

Sources: NC Supreme Court ruling, April 2, 2026; WRAL; NC Newsline; Every Child NC Leandro Impact Analysis

THE SCHOOL CHOICE EXPANSION

Where the Money Is Also Going

Since 2023, when the income cap on North Carolina's Opportunity Scholarship was eliminated, voucher enrollment has grown rapidly: from 32,549 recipients in June 2024 to **106,789 students receiving vouchers as of April 2026**, at a cost of \$585 million for 2025-26. State data released in 2025 found that a substantial share of new recipients had previously attended private school before receiving the voucher — a pattern that suggests the program is, for many recipients, a subsidy for existing private school tuition rather than a new pathway out of public school. Reports have also documented that some private schools increased their tuition after the voucher expansion.

Charter schools tell a parallel story of scale. Public Schools First NC and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools report that North Carolina allocated **substantial state and local funds to charter schools in 2024-25**; precise figures vary by whether state-only or combined state and local funds are counted, and readers should consult DPI's annual budget reports for the most current breakdown. What is clear from multiple sources: charter enrollment grew 26.4 percent between 2019-20 and 2024-25 — the 4th-fastest growth rate in the nation — with **more than 74,000 students remaining on charter school waitlists**.

The July 2026 budget fulfilled one concrete commitment: the \$35.75 million in voucher savings that state law required to be reinvested in public schools was directed to school nutrition and custodial staff bonuses, middle school literacy professional development, and a K-8 math curriculum. A promise made in 2023 was kept in 2026.

106,789**NC Students Receiving
Vouchers, April 2026***Tripled from 32,549 in June 2024 |
\$585M program***26.4%****Charter School Enrollment
Growth 2019-2025***4th-fastest nationally | 74,000+ on
waitlists***\$35.75M****Voucher Savings Reinvested in
Public Schools***July 2026 budget — fulfilled 2023
commitment*

Sources: NCSEEA; Public Schools First NC; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools; DPI fiscal impact report May 2026; EdNC

THE JULY 2026 BUDGET: REAL PROGRESS AND REAL CAVEATS

The Largest Teacher Pay Raise in Nearly 50 Years — and What It Doesn't Yet Fix

On July 10, 2026, Governor Josh Stein signed North Carolina's first full state budget in more than two years — a moment that has direct implications for every finding in this article. The budget includes the largest starting teacher pay raise in nearly 50 years and the largest overall teacher pay raise in 15 years. Understanding both what it delivers and what it leaves unresolved is essential for practitioners following this space.

WHAT THE BUDGET DELIVERS — GENUINE PROGRESS

- Beginning teacher base pay rises from \$41,000 to \$48,000 for the 2026-27 school year — a 17% increase for early-career teachers
- Average 8% teacher pay raise across the workforce — the largest in 15 years, per Governor Stein
- The \$48,000 starting salary brings NC in line with surrounding states — a dramatic improvement from being the lowest in the Southeast — and comparable to South Carolina's recent starting salary
- School nutrition and custodial staff receive \$1,750 one-time bonuses; teachers receive \$500–\$1,000 bonuses
- Principals and assistant principals receive average 6.3% raises; non-certified staff receive 3%
- \$13.8 million for middle school literacy professional development; \$10 million for K-8 math curriculum
- \$5 million annually for AI classroom tools (Khanmigo and MagicSchool)
- The \$35.75 million voucher savings reinvestment promise, made in 2023, is fulfilled

WHAT THE BUDGET DOES NOT YET FIX — THE CAVEATS PRACTITIONERS NEED

- Teachers went without a comprehensive state budget and corresponding salary increases during the preceding budget impasse; the 2026 budget provides bonuses and forward-looking pay increases for 2026-27 but does not include retroactive salary adjustments
- The 8% average is heavily weighted toward beginning teachers; veterans with 15+ years receive approximately 5.5% — roughly \$3,200 over two years — far below the 25% increase NCAE requested for all experience levels
- Veteran teacher pay remains flat from years 15 to 24 on the salary schedule, with pay of \$59,000 only reached at 25 years of experience
- NC's national ranking for overall average teacher pay was 43rd as of 2024-25 (NEA data), projected to fall to 46th in 2025-26 before the budget passed — post-budget national ranking data is not yet available
- NC's ranking in school funding effort — last among all 50 states and the District of Columbia per the ELC — reflects investment relative to fiscal capacity; that structural ranking has not been reassessed since the budget passed
- Teacher attrition was running at 11.5% per year before the budget — whether this raise is sufficient to reverse that trend is not yet known

Teacher Licensure: Opening the Pipeline, Raising New Questions

The budget also includes significant changes to teacher licensure, carried over from Senate Bill 840 after that legislation stalled. The core changes: **the first-year licensure exam requirement is eliminated**, the third-year assessment is retained, and teachers on limited licenses who demonstrate strong student performance for two of their three most recent years can earn a continuing professional license through a performance pathway rather than examination. The budget also streamlines credential transfer for out-of-state and international teachers.

The intent is clearly to expand the pipeline — and there is meaningful evidence this approach can work. When the Praxis Core entry requirement was waived during the pandemic, NC saw a 35 percent increase in educator preparation program admissions. With more than 6,700 teaching positions unfilled by a certified teacher based on 2025-26 staffing data, removing unnecessary barriers addresses a real and documented staffing crisis.

The tradeoff is worth naming as analysis, not established fact: this approach means some teachers will enter and remain in classrooms through a pathway that does not include the traditional first-year licensure examination. Whether that changes classroom quality is a question that will be answered by evidence over the coming years. Bryce Fiedler of the Carolinas Academic Leadership Network described the licensure changes as preferable to relying on long-term substitutes — the real-world alternative in many high-poverty schools.

8%

Average Teacher Pay Raise —
July 2026 Budget

Largest in 15 years | Beginning pay:
\$48,000

17%

Pay Increase for Beginning
Teachers

\$41K → \$48K | Largest starting raise
in nearly 50 years

6,700+

NC Teaching Positions Unfilled
by Certified Teacher

2025-26 staffing data — context for
licensure changes

Sources: EdNC, July 2026; Public Schools First NC; Public Ed Works, July 2026; WFAE, July 2026; Governor Stein press release July 10, 2026; NC Public School Forum

WHAT THE FUNDING GAP STILL MEANS

From School Dollars to Life Outcomes — A Structural Picture That Is Improving but Not Yet Changed

The July 2026 budget is the most significant investment in NC teacher compensation in a generation. It matters. And the structural funding picture documented by the Education Law Center's Making the Grade report has not yet been reassessed following the budget's passage. As of the Education Law Center's most recent *Making the Grade* report, North Carolina ranked 51st among the 50 states and the District of Columbia on the organization's school-funding-effort measure, which evaluates state and local investment in public education relative to economic capacity. The budget adds roughly \$553 million to K-12 spending — meaningful investment, against a backdrop of enrollment declining by nearly 19,000 students.

In Wake County — North Carolina's largest and comparatively well-resourced district — substantial proficiency gaps persist across student groups. District accountability data consistently show white and Asian students outperforming Black and Hispanic students on state assessments by wide margins. The exact magnitude of those gaps is documented in WCPSS's annual accountability reports. Even in a well-resourced district like Wake County, those gaps are large. In districts with fewer resources — Robeson, Scotland, Warren, Washington — the structural disadvantage is measurably greater.

The Opportunity Atlas, a Harvard research project tracking actual economic outcomes, finds that in some high-poverty NC counties and census tracts — particularly those with high concentrations of children in poverty — children born into the bottom income quintile have **less than a 10 percent chance of reaching middle-income status as adults**. This varies by county, census tract, and racial group. The point is not a uniform statewide condition, but a documented pattern of place-based economic disadvantage shaped by multiple factors, including local labor markets, family income, housing stability, health outcomes, and educational opportunity. School funding levels are one of several variables researchers and policymakers examine when seeking to understand differences in economic mobility across communities.

Last

NC School Funding Effort National Rank

51st of 51 jurisdictions (50 states +
DC) | ELC 2025

Large

Proficiency Gap — Wake Co. by Race

White/Asian students outperform
Black/Hispanic peers on state
assessments | WCPSS accountability
data

<10%

Income Mobility in Some High- Poverty NC Counties

Bottom quintile reaching middle
income | Opportunity Atlas

Sources: Education Law Center Making the Grade 2025; WCPSS annual accountability reports; Harvard Opportunity Insights Opportunity Atlas

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE DIPLOMA

The Jobs That Don't Require a Four-Year Degree — and What They Pay

For practitioners working with young adults in high-poverty communities, this remains the daily reality: most students in their caseloads are not heading to four-year universities. Skilled trades and technical fields — including HVAC technology, electrical work, precision machining, and licensed practical nursing — typically offer starting and early-career wages ranging from roughly \$42,000 to \$65,000 annually, depending on occupation, region, and experience level, with many credentials obtainable in one to two years through North Carolina's community college system. The July 2026 budget invested \$3.85 million in community college workforce expansion and created a new Digital Credential Program — targeted investments in exactly these pathways.

By contrast, the most common direct-entry jobs for NC graduates — retail, food service, warehouse work — pay **\$27,000 to \$34,000 annually** — below the ALICE Threshold for a single adult in virtually every NC county. A diploma opens a door to these jobs. It does not, by itself, open a door to financial stability. The budget investments in community college pathways and CTE are steps in the right direction; they have not yet changed the labor market reality graduates encounter when they arrive.

"For kids who have less options, less capital... they're the ones who are finding less opportunity." — Jennifer De Forest, YouthTruth

SYNTHESIS: A BUDGET THAT HELPS AND A STRUCTURE THAT PERSISTS

What Five Storylines Say Together

The picture that emerges from reading all five storylines together is not simple — and it would be a disservice to practitioners to pretend it is. North Carolina has, in the span of a few months, ended the judicial mechanism that had been pushing it to close its school funding gap, rapidly expanded two school choice programs that increase the share of public education funding supporting private-school attendance and charter-school enrollment, and passed the most significant teacher pay investment in a generation.

Those three things are simultaneously true. The pay raises matter. The licensure changes respond to a documented staffing crisis. The educator pipeline is receiving more attention than it has in years. At the same time, the broader questions that animated Leandro — whether educational opportunity remains too dependent on a student's zip code, family income, or local tax base — remain unresolved. A 17 percent raise for beginning teachers is historic and insufficient at the same time.

For practitioners, the honest framing is this: **the budget is the beginning of a response to a structural problem that has been building for decades. It is not the conclusion of that problem.** Whether the teacher pay increases are enough to rebuild the pipeline, whether the licensure changes expand quality access or reduce standards, and whether the community college investments translate into actual upward mobility for the students who need it most — these are questions the data will answer over the next several years. What practitioners can do now is know this context, use it in advocacy, and bring it to the families and young people their work is designed to serve.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE — UPDATED FOR JULY 2026

1

Name what the budget did — and what it didn't — when talking to families.

The largest starting teacher pay raise in nearly 50 years is a real policy win worth naming. It also did not eliminate longstanding funding inequities, resolve workforce shortages, or restore the judicial enforcement mechanism that ended with the Leandro dismissal. Families deserve an accurate picture of both progress and remaining challenges. Practitioners who can communicate both realities help families understand that improvement and unmet need can exist at the same time.

2**Help families understand who is in the classroom**

Changes to teacher licensure are likely to affect who enters classrooms and how quickly vacancies are filled. In communities that have struggled with long-term substitutes or persistent vacancies, these changes may increase access to qualified educators. Practitioners can help families understand what these changes mean, answer questions about teacher preparation pathways, and pay attention to whether staffing stability and instructional quality improve over time.

3**Use the Leandro story to explain why opportunity still looks different across communities**

The Leandro case documented longstanding differences in educational opportunity across North Carolina communities. Although the litigation has ended, many of the conditions it identified remain relevant to families today. Practitioners can help families connect individual experiences—staffing shortages, limited course offerings, transportation challenges, or access to specialized services—to broader policy and funding decisions that shape local opportunities.

4**Treat postsecondary planning as a mobility conversation, not just a college conversation**

Most young people will not immediately enroll in a four-year university. Families benefit when practitioners can clearly explain the full range of pathways available after high school, including apprenticeships, industry credentials, community colleges, military service, and workforce training programs. The strongest family-centered practice helps young people connect their interests, strengths, and goals with realistic pathways to economic stability and long-term opportunity.

5**Keep readiness, not just graduation, at the center of family conversations**

An 87.7 percent graduation rate represents meaningful progress. At the same time, substantial gaps remain in reading readiness and other indicators linked to future success. Families often hear whether a student is passing; they hear less often whether a student is prepared for what comes next. Practitioners can help families understand both. The most useful question is not simply, "Will this student graduate?" but also, "Will this student have meaningful options after graduation?"

A Final Thought from the Institute Team

The July 2026 budget, the Leandro dismissal, teacher licensure changes, voucher expansion, and new workforce investments are not isolated events. Together, they represent a significant shift in North Carolina's education landscape. What these changes ultimately mean for students, families, educators, and communities will not be known for several years.

The most important indicators, teacher retention, staffing stability, student readiness, workforce credential attainment, postsecondary enrollment, and long-term economic mobility, will take time to emerge. Many of the central questions raised in this article remain open questions. Will higher teacher pay improve recruitment and retention? Will the new licensure pathways strengthen the educator pipeline without compromising quality? Will workforce and community college investments lead to greater economic mobility for young adults? The answers will come from evidence, not predictions.

For practitioners across education, health care, social services, workforce development, faith communities, and family-serving organizations, staying informed is increasingly part of the work. Not because every professional needs to become a policy expert, but because families deserve clear, accurate explanations of the systems affecting their lives.

One of the most valuable forms of support a practitioner can provide is the ability to translate complex policy developments into plain language and meaningful conversation. Families should not have to interpret court rulings, budget documents, accountability reports, or legislative changes on their own. They need trusted partners who can help answer practical questions: *What does this mean for my child? What opportunities are available? What has changed—and what hasn't?*

In a time of rapid change, helping families understand their options, navigate systems, and make informed decisions may be just as important as any individual program or policy. The story is still unfolding. Staying informed and helping families make sense of what comes next is part of the work and the Institute stands ready to help.

DATA SOURCES

1. NC Department of Public Instruction, Cohort Graduation Rate Data 2024-25 and Career and College Promise Annual Report 2024-25 (April 2026). dpi.nc.gov
2. Education Law Center, Making the Grade 2025 — NC ranked last among all 50 states and DC in school funding effort. edlawcenter.org
3. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, NC 2023/2024. bls.gov/oes
4. Harvard Opportunity Insights, The Opportunity Atlas — income mobility by NC county and census tract (patterns vary by location and race). opportunityatlas.org
5. NC Supreme Court, ruling in Hoke County Board of Education v. State of North Carolina, April 2, 2026. WRAL; NC Newsline
6. Every Child NC, Leandro Impact Analysis Tool — estimated per-district funding impacts of the Leandro Comprehensive Remedial Plan. everychildnc.org
7. NC General Assembly, Senate Bill 257 (State Budget, 2026-27), signed July 10, 2026. EdNC; Public Schools First NC; Public Ed Works; WFAE
8. National Education Association, 2026 Educator Pay in America — NC ranked 43rd in average teacher pay in 2024-25, projected 46th in 2025-26 (before July 2026 budget). naea.org; ednc.org
9. NC State Education Assistance Authority (NCSEAA) — Opportunity Scholarship voucher enrollment and funding data. ncseaa.edu

10. Public Schools First NC — charter school enrollment and funding analysis; budget impacts. publicschoolsfirstnc.org
 11. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools — NC charter growth rate and enrollment data.
 12. Carolina Journal, 'Education bills that stalled in committee reappear in new budget,' July 2026. carolinajournal.com
 13. Southern Regional Education Board, North Carolina 2024 State Progress Report. sreb.org
 14. Wake County Public Schools (WCPSS) — annual accountability reports document proficiency gaps by student group. wcpss.net
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AI-Assisted Research: Source, Method & Citation

A transparency document for readers, partners, and policymakers

THE AI SOURCE

Claude by Anthropic

All research synthesis, article drafting, session guide development, and document production in this series was generated with Claude — a large language model developed by Anthropic, PBC — accessed via claude.ai. Claude synthesized publicly available data sources into practitioner-ready documents at the direction of the human researcher.

AI System: Claude (Sonnet series)

Developer: Anthropic, PBC

Access: claude.ai

Period: 2024–2026

Claude did not independently access the internet or retrieve data. All data sources were identified and provided by the human researcher. Claude's role was synthesis and drafting. Verification was the researcher's responsibility at every stage.

THE HUMAN RESEARCHER

Claudia Perry

AI does not conduct research independently. Every article, session guide, and document in this series was initiated, directed, reviewed, and approved by the human researcher. The AI was a synthesis and drafting tool. All research questions, source selection, analytical framing, and final publication decisions were human decisions throughout.

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Every AI output was read in full, fact-checked against original sources, and approved before publication. Claude generated drafts. The Institute for Family published them.

HOW THE AI WAS DIRECTED — THE PROMPT METHOD

Every article and document began with a structured research directive — a prompt — written by the human researcher. Prompts were not simple questions. They specified which data sources to synthesize, the practitioner audience to write for, the analytical frame to apply, the structural elements required, and the professional voice to use. Representative examples:

PROMPT TYPE	REPRESENTATIVE EXAMPLE
Data synthesis	"Synthesize three major data sources on NC family economic conditions into a single article for cross-sector practitioners. Identify key statistics from each, explain how these data streams reinforce each other structurally, and conclude with five concrete practice implications. Note that the article was AI-generated."
Data update	"New 2024 ACS data has been released. Revise Article 1 to include these new findings: Gini coefficient rose to 0.478, Black NC household income fell 3%, uninsured rate fell to 8.6%, 515,000 now at risk from federal cuts. Mark new data with ★."

PRIMARY DATA SOURCES

Claude synthesized these sources. The human researcher identified and provided all of them. Cite individual statistics from original sources, not from this series.

2024 ACS (U.S. Census Bureau, Sept. 2025)

LIMITATIONS

No independent data access Claude did not retrieve data. All statistics were provided by the researcher in prompts.

Synthesis, not verification Claude identified patterns across sources.

Poverty, income, inequality, housing cost burden, health coverage
data.census.gov

United For ALICE / United Way NC (2025)

ALICE Threshold, household survival budgets, rural-urban wage gap
unitedforalice.org

NC Budget & Tax Center

County poverty snapshots, racial income gaps, policy impact
ncbudget.org

Education Law Center — Making the Grade 2025

NC 51st-place school funding ranking, per-pupil gap, teacher pipeline
edlawcenter.org

NC Housing Coalition — 2025 County Profiles

Eviction filings, cost-burden rates, housing wage data
nchousing.org

RWJF County Health Rankings 2025

All 100 NC counties — health outcomes and social factors
countyhealthrankings.org

NC Health Professions Data System / Sheps Center

Provider shortages by county, rural workforce data
nchealthworkforce.unc.edu

NC Commerce / LEAD Division (2025)

Hurricane Helene labor market and economic recovery data
commerce.nc.gov

Blue Zones LLC / Buettner (PMC 2018)

Power 9 framework; NC community applications
bluezones.com

Child Care Services Association / Early Years NC

Childcare worker wages, ECE household vulnerability
childcareservices.org

Verification against original sources was the researcher's responsibility.

Framing reflects prompt framing The structural, equity-centered, practitioner-focused frame is a deliberate human choice embedded in the prompts — not an AI default.

Not peer-reviewed These are practitioner resources, not academic publications. Individual statistics should always be verified against primary sources before use in formal policy contexts.

Hallucination risk AI can generate plausible but inaccurate content. The human oversight and fact-verification process was specifically designed to catch and correct errors before publication.

HOW TO CITE

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For individual statistics:

Always cite the original data source — not the AI-generated article. The articles in this series are synthesis documents. The authoritative citation for any statistic is the primary source from which it was drawn.