

Light Paper

Education is a Foundational Element to Family Success



April
2025

Story

Through the Institute for Family's Shine on NC Initiative, [Claudia Perry and Lance Olivierre](#), former spouses, were granted the opportunity to reflect on raising their two now adult children and the tough decisions they had to make to give their children better opportunities. One of their decisions involved uprooting their family to move to a more well-resourced area of town in pursuit of better educational opportunities. Claudia Perry discusses the move by saying:

"We decided to move from West Charlotte to South Charlotte where it was a different situation and a different environment school-wise. What I remember about that is, we enjoyed living in our little house in West Charlotte, our kids had awesome friends, we were right near my mother, which was great."

Lance Olivierre expands on this sentiment:

"You had just been to a school regional function where they were going over the statistics about the schools that were in Charlotte in general and they were reviewing performance standards in the schools, and you had highlighted schools where our kids were supposed

to be going to and said, 'Hey we might need to refocus and look at something different.'

Claudia continues by speaking to the socioeconomic situation in West Charlotte at the time, highlighting how there were no bookstores in West Charlotte at the time and most of the resources needed to supplement a child's education were in South Charlotte.

"Our kids had been getting great grades in their schools, and they were in town development. But when we moved to South Charlotte, we discovered that the education we thought they were getting was awesome was really a little bit substandard. I felt very let down as a native Charlottean that a person's academic life would be so impacted by their zip code. I am glad we were able to make that move, but it doesn't feel fair that I had to move for my children to get an education. What about people who didn't have the opportunity to move?"

Lance adds,

"Looking back, I think that is one of the most important decisions we made for our children's education. And I think that was a pivotal decision that has helped make them into the productive people they are now."

Claudia and Lance's family story highlights what Healthy People has been researching and finding evidence to support for years: education access and quality have significant implications on a family's future success and overall well-being. Their experience underscores the profound impact that educational resources and opportunities can have on children's academic and personal development. As Claudia acknowledges, while she and Lance were fortunate to have the capital to move, not every family can do so, leading to inconsistencies in academic experiences and outcomes in North Carolina.

Summary

Healthy People defines education access and quality as the ability for individuals to engage in high-quality education programs and institutions, which is determined by learning outcomes, academic standards, and access to opportunities. Education is fundamental to family well-being as it enhances opportunities for secure employment in the future, fosters critical thinking skills, and contributes to overall development. In this Light Paper, we will be exploring why education quality and access are important, the effects that has on individuals and families, the state of education in the U.S. and North Carolina, and the current education priorities in North Carolina. Following the Paper, there is a glossary section containing some important education-related terminology that can help professionals successfully serve families.

Education Access and Quality

[Healthy People](#) defines education access and quality as the ability for individuals to participate in quality education programs and institutions, determined by learning outcomes, academic stands, and access to opportunities. Education access and quality are measured in many ways, including high school graduation rate, educational attainment, literacy and numeracy skills, and school quality. According to the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), education is a cornerstone of family well-being because it increases families' opportunities for secure jobs in the future, develops critical thinking skills, boosts creativity, and enhances time management skills. The [North Carolina Health Disparities Analysis Report](#) explains how those with more education typically engage in healthier behaviors and make more informed decisions about their lives, leading to happier individuals, families, and communities. Psychologists have also traced education to increasing subjective life satisfaction.

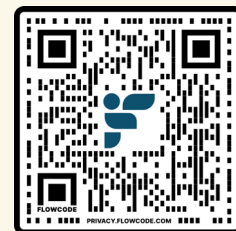
The [Journal of Public Health Management & Practice](#) captures evidence explaining how educational attainment is closely related to job security and economic well-being; a high school diploma is a standard requirement for most jobs. Earning a high school diploma decreases the risk of premature death and increases employment opportunities.¹ Those with a high school degree are also more likely to vote, to volunteer, and to donate to charity,² contributing more to overall societal advancement and community well-being. Graduating from high school in four years has been identified as a Leading Health Indicator for the U.S. by Healthy People. Additionally, the family's education level has a significant effect on a student's academic success and aptitude.³

From 2021-2022, for high school students enrolled in a public institution, the adjusted cohort graduation rate was 87 percent, which has increased by 7 percent from the decade before.⁴ Furthermore, a study by [Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton](#) highlighted how the life expectancy of those with a college degree versus those without a college degree is substantially higher. Men



Explore free on-demand training content.

Whether you're a professional, family service expert, or advocate, our learner-driven courses offer flexibility and deep insights. Delve into family narratives, engage in stimulating discussions, and access invaluable resources. Reflect and transform your perspectives on family dynamics. Visit our website to get started.



Learn more about our free courses at instituteforfamily.org

with a bachelor's degree earn approximately \$900,000 more in median lifetime earnings than high school graduates, while women earn \$630,000 more.⁵

While education is a fundamental right and has significant impacts on family well-being, the quality of education varies significantly across the country, by state, and even by town. Statistics from the American Enterprise Institute show how, despite a 150% increase in per-student spending since 1970, there has been no improvement in K-12 outcomes.⁶ The quality of education in the United States has decreased in many states due to a high student-to-teacher ratio due to a shortage of K-12 teachers, with also the number of under-qualified teaching hires increasing 69% from 2022-2023.⁷ A poll done by [Gallup](#) showed that 36% of people are satisfied with the quality of education in the US K-12, which matches the record low in 2000. Conversely, 76% of parents are at least “somewhat satisfied” with the quality of education their oldest child is receiving.⁸

State of Education in North Carolina

The state of education in North Carolina presents a mixed picture, with notable achievements and significant challenges. According to a [WalletHub study](#), North Carolina ranks 33rd overall among the states, with an overall quality ranking of 38th overall. The quality ranking was determined by 15 measurements that included: high school graduation rates among low-income students, median SAT scores, dropout rates, math test scores, and reading test scores. A report from the [National Assessment of Education Progress \(NAEP\)](#) showed the post-pandemic effects on education, revealing that 4th and 8th-grade reading and math scores have decreased across the board, widening inequality gaps across various measures such as gender, race, and economic status. In North Carolina, 4th and 8th grade reading scores have substantially decreased, reaching the lowest they have since 1992 and 1998.

However, there were also moments of achievement. There have been moments of success and celebration. For example, a report from the State Board of Education provided evidence that the 2023-2024 state test results show North Carolina students are seeing gains in most grades and subjects, with an increase in college and career readiness and grade-level proficiency.⁹ Additionally, graduation rates increased slightly from 86.5% to 86.9% from 2022 to 2023 and 72.5% of schools met or exceeded growth in 2023-2024. With this, the number of low-performing schools in the state decreased from 804 to 736, and low-performing districts decreased from 25 to 23. Furthermore, according to data released by the [NC Department of Public Instruction \(DPI\)](#), more than one in four schools received an A or B rating during the 2023-2024 school year and nearly three-fourths of schools met or



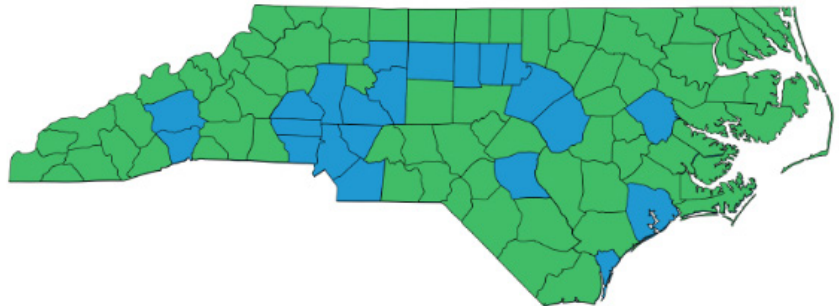
The Shortage of Special Education Teachers in North Carolina is Growing

The shortage of special education teachers in North Carolina is a pressing issue that affects both educators and students; it is leading to increased stress on current teachers and compromising the quality of education for students with disabilities. To create an educational environment that allows all students to thrive in North Carolina, we need to attract and retain qualified teachers. It is not just about filling an empty job position; it's about creating an environment where both teachers and students can come together and thrive.

In this [Lightbulb Moment](#), learn more about the shortage of special education teachers, the shortage's effects on students, and what we can do to help educators.

exceeded growth measures (If you are interested in seeing this broke down by county and school districts, you can check out the [North Carolina School Report Cards](#)). At the time, former Superintendent Catherine Truitt said, "The data in the accountability report provides us with a clear picture of what's going well in our schools and what areas need additional support. This year's data shows us that we're headed in the right direction in most areas, but that we must remain committed to advocating for additional support for our teachers."

Truitt was right to address the need for additional support for teachers in North Carolina. Teacher turnover, also known as attrition, is increasing in North Carolina. According to the [Department of Public Instruction](#), during the 2022-2023 school year, 11.5% of teachers left their role, compared to the 7.8% of teachers who left teaching the year before. The number of vacant teacher positions, which includes



All rural counties of North Carolina are highlighted in green.

classroom teachers who are not fully licensed, has also risen to 6.4%. An article from [WRAL News](#) addressed how more than 10,000 North Carolina teachers left the state's classrooms in 2023, the highest 12-month total reported in at least the past two decades. [The State of the Teaching Profession report](#) released by NC DPI also highlighted that around 6,000 teaching positions were not filled by a qualified teacher at the beginning of the school year. The impact of the lack of qualified teachers on student's success is detrimental, leading to instability and lower-

quality education. [Millicent Rogers](#), the chairwoman of the Durham Public Schools Board of Education, explains the impact of the teacher shortage on student outcomes, commenting on how as teachers leave, children, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, are left to navigate a system in crisis.

Disparities in access to education remain a significant issue in North Carolina. North Carolina's education quality varies considerably from county to county, with a significant portion of the state being considered rural. The map below is from the [NC Rural Center](#). Counties in green are considered rural.

As you can see, a majority of counties in NC are classified as rural areas. [Public Schools First NC](#) speaks to how students in rural NC are more likely to live in a household with an income below the federal poverty line and are less likely to graduate high school than their non-rural peers. Rural counties struggle with lower tax bases, which limits their ability to fund education at the same level as wealthier urban counties. Public School Forum Policy and Research Manager, [Elizabeth Paul](#), stated, "North Carolinians living in lower-wealth districts continue to face an impossible financial burden to support public education."

In lower-resourced districts, it is also more difficult to offer competitive salaries for teachers, contributing to the hiring and teacher retention issues in North Carolina. The [Public School Forum of North Carolina](#) speaks to how Wake County Schools were able to offer its teachers an average locally funded salary supplement of \$9,465. However, Greene County, a lower-wealth, rural district taxed itself at a higher rate than Wake County to adequately fund its schools and offered a supplement of only \$1,000 in the same year. These gaps in spending and resources consistently inhibit North Carolina's rural counties from closing education gaps that put students behind their non-rural counterparts. [Ron Dixon](#), DPI's assistant superintendent of the Office of School Improvement stated, "Regardless of where our schools and districts are, we want them to continue improving."

The state of education in North Carolina is characterized by significant achievements and ample room for growth. While improvements have been made in graduation rates and student and school performance in certain areas, disparities persist that continue to leave students, particularly in rural, low-income areas of North Carolina, behind. Addressing these disparities and supporting teachers are essential for the continued progress and academic success of future generations.

Priorities Around Education in North Carolina

Fortunately, advancing education continues to be a top priority in North Carolina. Superintendent Maurice “Mo” Green shared the [North Carolina Department of Public Instruction’s legislative priorities and budgetary asks](#) for NC’s public schools at the February State Board of Education meeting. Green remarked:

“It is well known that education is the greatest equalizer of lifelong success, and it is imperative that we sufficiently fund education for the betterment of not only our citizens, but also our state’s future. As North Carolina’s public education authority, it is our duty to ensure that our schools are cultivating excellence, and I believe these legislative priorities and budgetary asks support our mission at NCDPI and keep students at the center of our work.”

The priorities laid out in the 2025-2026 fiscal year fit into six guiding pillars for **Achieving Educational Excellence**:

- 1. Prepare each student for their next phase of life.**
- 2. Invest in public schools by fully funding public education.**
- 3. Revere public school educators.**
- 4. Enhance parent and community support.**
- 5. Ensure safe, secure learning environments.**
- 6. Celebrate the good in public education.**

As a part of building a strategic plan for North Carolina schools, Superintendent Green also launched the initiative, [“Mo Wants to Know,”](#) where he is hosting listening and learning sessions with community stakeholders statewide, including parents, students, educators, school, and district staff.



Lightbulb Moments in the Light Lab

Demystify family well-being

The Light Lab offers Evidence-based insights, resources, and strategies to strengthen family well-being, community, and connectedness throughout North Carolina.

Access **research-based resources** to make informed decisions and foster stronger, more connected communities through our Light Lab.

In the Light Lab, we amplify family voices, present comprehensive data, and highlight innovative strategies to build protective factors and enhance family well-being across North Carolina.

Learn more at:

instituteforfamily.org



The [North Carolina Association of Educators](#) commented on 2025-2026 education priorities, highlighting several key areas of attention needed to strengthen public schools for the next generation and generations to come that closely mirror Superintendent Green’s pillars:

- **Investing in student’s future through professional educator pay.**
- **Improving student well-being supports.**
- **Investing in school infrastructure.**
- **Incorporating public school educator’s voice into strategic plans.**
- **Ensuring accountability and communication as to where tax dollars are going.**

[Kevin Bastian](#), director of the Education Policy Initiative at Carolina (EPIC), adds to this need by explaining, “Students need more now, so teachers are taking on more than ever. States, districts, and schools have a responsibility to make sure teachers and leaders have the resources they need to feel supported. There should be mentoring, professional development, and adequate compensation and benefits available.”

Overall, the commitment and desire to advance education in North Carolina is clear, but it is going to require a collective effort and support to achieve these ambitious but reachable goals. As Superintendent Green and the North Carolina Association of Educators have outlined, investing in our schools, supporting our teachers, and engaging communities are all essential steps to improving the educational landscape in North Carolina.

Conclusion

Education is a fundamental principle for thriving individuals, families, and communities. As stakeholders in family success, it is crucial to understand the educational state of North Carolina and continuously collaborate to advocate for the necessary support and resources to improve conditions in our state. When we work together, we can ensure that every student has access to high-quality education, granting them the opportunity for future success. Elevating education quality and access in North Carolina will make our state a better place to establish generational success for families, fostering academic achievement and continued well-being.

Glossary of Education Terms

This is by no means an exhaustive list of terms that relate to education. However, these are some that are essential to having a broad understanding of how education works and what is in place to protect students.

Department of Education – The Department of Education is an entity that works towards fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access to educational opportunities. [USA Facts](#) describes how The Department’s mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for all students to succeed in the future. The Department of Education is led by the Secretary of Education, who is nominated by the standing president, confirmed by the Senate, and then sworn into office. In Fiscal Year 2024, the Office of Federal Student Aid accounted for most of the Department’s spending; this office funds higher education aid programs, funds Title I, special education programs, and school improvement programs. The Department of Education oversees the upholding of laws, policies, and acts such as the Civil Rights Act as it pertains to education, the American with Disabilities Act, and Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act.

Department of Public Instruction (DPI) – The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction oversees implementing the state’s public-school laws for pre-kindergarten through 12th grade through the State Board of Education and the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Through the Standard Course of Study, the DPI outlines what students who are enrolled in NC public schools should know and be able to do and the metrics used to assess student success. The DPI also actively works with parents and guardians to actively engage them with their children’s education, recognizing they are crucial partners and support systems.

Board of Education (BOE) – The [National Association of State Boards of Education](#) speaks to how a BOE functions as the citizen’s voice, serving as an unbiased panel of people who make public education decisions. A BOE is made up of elected or appointed representatives from the community. [U.S. News](#) explains the three major responsibilities of a BOE: develop the annual budget to run the school system, set school policies, and hire and evaluate the superintendent. Like other positions, the pay for BOE members varies significantly depending on what school district they serve in. In some cases, BOE members are an unpaid, volunteer position.

Curriculum – In North Carolina, the [NC Department of Public Instruction \(DPI\)](#) explains that the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS) defines curriculum standards for NC public school students. The NCSCOS defines appropriate content standards for each grade or proficiency level, defining what students are expected to know and be able to do by the end of a school year and/or course. Per NC State Board of Education policy, these standards have to be reviewed every 5-7 years to ensure they are relevant.

Standardized Testing/Assessment – [ProctorEdu](#) defines standardized testing as, “assessments that are administered under uniform and controlled conditions, following specific procedures and guidelines to ensure consistency and comparability of results across test takers.” Standardized testing is a form of assessment that is used across the country to assess curriculum, hold schools and teachers accountable for students’ academic performance, to use as data improvement, and understand college and career readiness. Some examples of standardized tests are the SAT, ACT, and state-mandated assessments (like EOGs, EOCs, and NCEXTEND1). While standardized testing has served a purpose over the years, [EducationWeek](#) highlights some of the common criticisms including the idea that educators are trained to teach to the test, how tests exacerbate educational inequalities, and the tests have a narrow focus, not capturing the multifaceted nature of intelligence.

Title I School – A Title I School is a school that receives federal funds from the United States Department of Education to help children from low-income families. The U.S Census Bureau estimates poverty rates in school districts each year and identifies who qualifies for funding. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), the purpose of Title I funding is to provide all children with the opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act – The [National Center for Homeless Education](#) defines this act as a piece of legislation enacted in 1987 to provide federal funding for homeless shelter programs and protect the right to education for youth experiencing homelessness. This legislation ensures that youth experiencing homelessness have equal access to the same free, appropriate public education as other children. It requires schools and local educational agencies to provide a few key services to support these vulnerable youth: immediate enrollment, school stability, and transportation. These funds are allocated through the United States Department of Education.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) – University of Washington defines an IEP as a plan or program that is developed to ensure that a child with a disability identified under the law

is attending a school that has the required services to cater to the child's needs. In North Carolina, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction ensures students receive the appropriate IEP through the Exceptional Children Division. The [Office of Exceptional Children](#) works to provide students with disabilities develop intellectually, physically, emotionally, and vocationally.

504 Plan – The California State Council on Developmental Disabilities defines a 504 Plan as a blueprint or plan for how a child will have access to learning at school that is given to a child that has a disability that interferes with their ability to learn in a general education classroom. In North Carolina, 504 plans are managed by the NC Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI). In this plan, it specifies the services and changes that need to be made to the learning environment to meet the needs of a child with a disability. The plan is created by a team of people who are familiar with the child's abilities, which may include a child's parent and general and special education teachers.

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) – This describes the legal right that every student with a disability has to receive a free public education. FAPE ensures that students with disabilities receive special education and related services at no additional cost to their families. The [U.S. Department of Education](#) explains how the “appropriate” component of FAPE means that the education provided must be designed to meet the individuals' educational needs that were determined through evaluation and placement procedures.

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) – FERPA serves to protect the privacy of student education records and applies to all schools that receive funds from the U.S. Department of Education. The [U.S. Department of Education](#) says it affords parents the right to have access to their children's education records, the right to seek to have the records amended, and the right to have some control over disclosure of personally identifiable information. When a student turns 18, the right transfers from parent/guardian to student.

Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) – The [Institute of Education Sciences](#) defines an FBA as an individualized problem-solving process for addressing student problem behavior. The process involves collecting information about the environmental conditions that precede the problem behavior and the subsequent rewards that reinforce the behavior. The collected information is used to create a personalized behavior intervention plan (BIP).

Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) – A BIP is a written improvement plan created for a child having difficulty with behavior, based on the functional behavioral assessment (FBA). A BIP includes a definition of the behavior that is happening, why it is happening, and how to

Footnotes

1 Levin, H. M., Belfield, C., Muennig, P. A., & Rouse, C. (2007). The costs and benefits of an excellent education for all of America's children. Teachers College, Columbia University.

2 Sargrad, Scott, Khalilah M. Harris , and Lisette Parteloq. 2019. "A Quality Education for Every Child." Center for American Progress. July 2, 2019. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/quality-education-every-child/>.

3 Ozcan, Mehmet. 2021. "Factors Affecting Students' Academic Achievement according to the Teachers' Opinion." Education Reform Journal 6 (1): 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.22596/erj2021.06.01.1.18>.

4 National Center for Education Statistics. 2010. "The NCES Fast Facts Tool Provides Quick Answers to Many Education Questions (National Center for Education Statistics)." Ed.gov. National Center for Education Statistics. 2010. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=805>.

5 Social Security Administration. 2015. "Education and Lifetime Earnings." Ssa.gov. November 2015. <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/research-summaries/education-earnings.html>.

6 Stand Together . n.d. "7 Ways to Improve the Quality of Education in the U.S." Standtogether.org. <https://standtogether.org/stories/education/ways-to-improve-the-quality-of-education-in-the-us>.

7 "A Look at American Education Issues Today." 2024. Elevate K12. June 24, 2024. <https://www.elevatek12.com/blog/elevate-in-action/american-education-issues/>.

8 Inc, Gallup. 2023. "K-12 Education Satisfaction in U.S. Ties Record Low." Gallup.com. August 31, 2023. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/510401/education-satisfaction-ties-record-low.aspx>.

9 North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. 2023. "2023-24 Accountability Report Shows Continued Academic Growth for North Carolina Students." Nc.gov. 2023. <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2024/09/04/2023-24-accountability-report-shows-continued-academic-growth-north-carolina-students>.