NORTH CAROLINA EARLY CHILDHOOD ACTION PLAN:

DATA CONSIDERATIONS IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PROGRAM AND POLICY CHANGES

GOAL 10: READING AT GRADE LEVEL

Caroline Chandler, MPH; PhD Candidate, UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, Department of Maternal and Child Health; Research and Engagement Team, Jordan Institute for Families

Paul Lanier, PhD; Kuralt Distinguished Associate Professor, UNC School of Social Work; Associate Director for Child and Family Well-Being, Jordan Institute for Families

Executive Summary

The North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan (ECAP) was released in February 2019 and established goals and targets based on the current state of child health and well-being to improve early childhood outcomes by 2025. When this plan was released, we could not have known that the COVID-19 pandemic would disrupt lives across the state and nation. COVID-19 necessitated a sudden shift in how programs function and families are served. The pandemic has and will continue to have major public health implications. Further, children and families will experience ripple effects from school closures, the economic recession, extended time away from peers, and strain to the social safety net. Black and Brown families in particular have suffered greatly from COVID-19 due to structural racism and systemic oppression.

The goal of this document is to record changes to NC programs and policies that serve North Carolina families in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, identify data limitations resulting from those changes, and make recommendations about how to use ECAP data moving forward. This project aims to address the unforeseen challenges that have developed due to the COVID-19 pandemic by identifying programs are being implemented differently and changes to data that are being collected as a result of new implementation approaches.

Background

The North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan (ECAP), which was released in 2019, establishes ten goals aimed at addressing children's ability to live healthy lives, have safe and nurturing relationships, and learn and be ready to succeed. Each of the ten goals includes targets and sub-targets that serve as indicators of improvement as the State works towards those goals. Goals, targets, sub-targets, and measures reflect the data that were available and the expected function of early childhood service systems prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has disrupted nearly all aspects of those service systems. Therefore, it is important to consider how service systems and data collection changed beginning in March 2020 so we can measure changes in each target and sub-target and make recommendations about how goals may need to shift or be re-prioritized in light of the pandemic.

Current Considerations

We reviewed each indicator in the ECAP and identified concerns about data quality based on our knowledge in July 2020 about how programs and policies have changed thus far. The summary table is color coded to indicate levels of concern over data reliability and validity due to changes in data collection, reporting, or practice in response to COVID-19. Reliability means that data are consistent across time. Validity means that the data are actually measuring the factor(s) they are intended to.

- Low data quality (red) indicates a measure that relies on data we anticipate will be unreliable and potentially invalid due to data collection and reporting changes or due to unknown procedural implications from COVID-19.
- Moderate data quality (yellow) indicates a measure that relies on data we anticipate is reliable but may be affected by currently unknown sources of bias. Data may have uncertain validity.
- High data quality (green) indicates a measure that relies on data we anticipate is reliable and valid and do not have reason to believe that there will be changes in data quality due to COVID-19 related barriers.

We do not recommend eliminating any data sources at this time despite some questions regarding data reliability and validity. It is reasonable to expect to see changes in trends for nearly all indicators beginning in March 2020 due to widespread policy and practice changes. By maintaining all original data sources and indicating where data may be unreliable or invalid, we can better identify whether there were actual changes in key indicators or whether some variance during the COVID-19 period may be due to data quality. We also recommend adding new data sources to some targets in cases where we believe the current data source may not be designed to capture nuanced variation.

We also rate the priority of each target for achieving ECAP goals in 2025 based on current predictions of the level of vulnerability and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the existing ECAP measures.

- High priority (red) means that efforts to meet a target need to increase substantially to overcome deficits that may by imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic or that efforts to meet a target are prioritized because they will have secondary effects on other targets.
- Moderate priority (yellow) means that efforts to meet a target may need to increase but that we do not anticipate downstream impacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Low priority (green) means that the indicator is still important but that we do not anticipate needing to increase existing efforts to meet targets once programs re-open.

Goal 10: Reading at Grade Level

ECAP Commitment: Young children across North Carolina will read on grade level in elementary school, with a particular focus on African American, American Indian, and Hispanic children who face the greatest systemic barriers to reading success.

COVID-19 and Possible Impacts on Goal 10 Indicators:

- EOG, NAEP and mCLASS data will be missing across the state as students did not take EOG or NAEP exams or complete mCLASS assessments in Spring 2020.

- 2021 EOG, NAEP and mCLASS scores may be skewed lower than usual due to the loss of educational time in the previous year and currently unknown changes to the 2020-2021 school year.

Indicator	Data Quality Considerations	Vulnerability
Students Scoring College and Career Proficiency on 3rd - 8th Grade End of Grade Assessments for Reading *Current Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction*	**Low** – Students did not take End of Grade Exams at the end of the 2019/2020 school year. Data will be missing across the state.	**High** – Students lost three months of in-person education. Disparities in access or ability to effectively engage in remote learning may increase disparities in reading proficiency.
Percent of Students Scoring at or Above Proficiency on 4th Grade NAEP Reading Assessment *Current Data Sources: National Center for Education Statistics, Nation's Report Card*	**Low** – Data will likely be missing across the state.	**High** – Students lost three months of in-person education in Spring 2020. Many school districts are starting the 2020/2021 school year remotely with more structures in place to promote student learning than in Spring 2020. Disparities in access or ability to effectively engage in remote learning may increase disparities in reading proficiency.
Percent of Students Demonstrating Reading Comprehension at or Above Grade Level on mCLASS Reading TRC Assessment in Kindergarten, 1st Grade, and 2nd Grade *Current Data Sources: NC Department of Public Instruction*	**Low** – Data will likely be missing across the state.	**High** – Students lost three months of in-person education in Spring 2020. Many school districts are starting the 2020/2021 school year remotely with more structures in place to promote student learning than in Spring 2020. Disparities in access or ability to effectively engage in remote learning may increase disparities in reading proficiency.
Percent of Families with Children Aged 0-8 Living at or Below 200% Federal Poverty Level *Current Data Sources: American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau*	**High** – Data are drawn from the American Community Survey and U.S. Census Bureau. We do not anticipate that data quality will change in response to COVID-19.	**High** – We anticipate that economic impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic will increase the percent of families with young children living at or below the FPL. Poverty is an upstream indicator that increases risk for many other ECAP targets.

UNC | SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
Jordan Institute for Families