



NORTH CAROLINA EARLY CHILDHOOD ACTION PLAN: DATA CONSIDERATIONS IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PROGRAM AND POLICY CHANGES

GOAL 8: HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING

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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 be 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 8: High-Quality Early Learning

ECAP Commitment: Babies, toddlers, and young children across North Carolina will have access to high-quality opportunities to engage in early learning.

COVID-19 and Possible Impacts on Goal 8 Indicators:

- The number of children who meet eligibility requirements for NC Pre-K and child care subsidies based on income may increase due to COVID-19 related job losses.
- The percent of income eligible children enrolled in NC Pre-K may skew lower than usual if the number of children who meet eligibility requirements (denominator) grows and/or if classroom capacity decreases due to distancing requirements and the number of NC Pre-K classrooms remains the same.
- The percent of family income spent on child care may be skewed lower than usual if families are keeping children home or not paying to maintain enrollment during COVID-19 closures.

Indicator	Data Quality Considerations	Vulnerability
<p>Percent of Income-Eligible Children Enrolled in NC Pre-K</p> <p><i>Current Data Sources: Division of Child Development and Early Education, NC DHHS</i></p>	<p>Moderate – Administrative records may reflect enrollment at the beginning of March. Data are currently reported as the percent of children served annually. If data are disaggregated by month, enrollment numbers may not be accurate.</p>	<p>High – There may be more children who become income-eligible for NC Pre-K due to economic losses and fewer classrooms spots available if enrollment numbers are limited to allow for distancing in schools. Children who are income-eligible for NC Pre-K stand to gain the most benefits from early education. Pre-K education is associated with better primary school education outcomes. We do not know if Pre-K classrooms will open in the Fall for in-person learning. Additional efforts are needed to meet children’s early learning needs at home.</p>
<p>Percent of Family Income Spent on Child Care</p> <p><i>Current Data Sources: Child Care Aware America</i></p>	<p>Moderate – Data may not accurately reflect changes in spending or changes in family income beginning in March 2020.</p>	<p>High – Child care needs may increase if children do not return to school. Families may also be spending a higher percentage of their income of child care if family income decreased due to employment losses.</p>
<p>Percent of Eligible Children Whose Families Receive Child Care Subsidy and Are Enrolled in 4- or 5-Star Centers or Homes</p> <p><i>Current Data Sources: Division of Child Development and Early Education, NC DHHS</i></p>	<p>Moderate – Administrative records may reflect enrollment at the beginning of March. Data are currently reported as the percent of children served annually. If data are disaggregated by month, enrollment numbers may not be accurate.</p>	<p>High – The number of families who are income eligible for child care subsidies may increase while the number of spaces available in high-quality child care centers or homes may decrease if enrollment is limited to allow for more distancing. Additional efforts may be needed to improve the ratings of child care centers and homes to meet this target.</p>
<p>Percent of Eligible Children Enrolled in Head Start</p> <p><i>Current Data Sources: North Carolina Head Start State Collaboration Office</i></p>	<p>Moderate – Administrative records may reflect enrollment at the beginning of March. Data are currently reported as the percent of children served annually. If data are disaggregated by month, enrollment numbers may not be accurate.</p>	<p>High – There may be more children who become income-eligible for Head Start due to economic losses and fewer classrooms spots available if enrollment numbers are limited to allow for distancing in schools. Children who are income-eligible for Head Start stand to gain the most benefits from early education. Head Start education is associated with better primary school education outcomes. We do not know if Head Start classrooms will open in the Fall for in-person learning.</p>

Indicator	Data Quality Considerations	Vulnerability
		Additional efforts are needed to meet children’s early learning needs at home.
<p>Percent of Early Childhood Teachers with Post-Secondary Early Childhood Education</p> <p><i>Current Data Sources: Child Care Services Association Early Childhood Workforce Studies, Division of Child Development and Early Education, NC DHHS</i></p>	<p>High – Data are drawn from the Child Care Services Association Early Childhood Workforce Studies. We do not anticipate that data quality will change in response to COVID-19.</p>	<p>Low - We do not anticipate existing efforts will need to be amplified due to COVID-19.</p>
<p>Percent of Full-Time Early Care and Education Teachers in North Carolina Who Left Their Centers During the Previous 12 Months</p> <p><i>Current Data Sources: Division of Child Development and Early Education, NC DHHS</i></p>	<p>High – Data are drawn from administrative records. We do not anticipate that data quality will change in response to COVID-19.</p>	<p>Moderate – In April, less than 1% of NC Pre-K sites reported that teachers had been laid off during the COVID-19 emergency. More teachers and early child care providers may have left centers in response to the uncertainty of re-opening plans and concerns about safety.</p>



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