



Achieving Educational Excellence The Vision, Direction, and Plan for NC Public Schools

Overview

I have aimed to be a champion for public education throughout my professional career. Through my work in North Carolina as a school district superintendent, school board attorney, leader of educational non-profits, and chief executive of a foundation that awards grants in support of public education and as a parent of children who attended NC's public schools, I know first-hand that NC's public schools have the unique ability to transform the lives of each and every student as well as our state as a whole. As someone who believes deeply in our public schools, it would be a privilege to serve as the next Superintendent of Public Instruction for North Carolina and oversee its more than 2500 schools and 1.4 million public school students, and lead the administration of more than \$11 billion annually.

North Carolina's public school system desperately needs a bold vision, direction, and, ultimately, a plan that can galvanize all North Carolinians. *Achieving Educational Excellence*--the successful combination of high academic achievement, strong character development and striving for excellence, and being the best public school system in the country--is my vision for North Carolina's public schools. Once inspired by those aspirational goals, I believe all North Carolinians and I can work together to develop and implement a strategic plan that will, over time, deliver on that vision. The pillars, which are core elements to having a strong public educational system, and the action items outlined below will guide the plan development.

Background

My Mother inspired my passion for education. After my Father died tragically when I was just ten years old, she used education to turn that tragedy into triumph. She fulfilled her lifelong dream of becoming a teacher, and she instilled in me the value of a strong public education. She was a special education teacher, and she always celebrated the achievements of her students, big and small. In Georgia, there was even an educational center - the Gwen Green Learning Center - named in her honor. I learned so much watching my mother's passion and impact on her students. It solidified my belief that public schools are essential because they accept every one of us in the community; our system of public education has the transformative power to educate every child. She also instilled in me the ethos that we should not settle for being mediocre when being excellent is an option.

It is because of values instilled in me by my Mother that I offer a vision for North Carolina public schools that is, admittedly, ambitious. While I know our public schools are currently woefully underfunded when compared to the rest of the nation, our educators are often disrespected and

underpaid, and student achievement needs improvement, it is important that we set a vision that is aspirational. Our children deserve nothing less than our very best. When we make a commitment to excellence for all of our children, I am confident that we can achieve it.

This vision is similar to one I used when I was Superintendent of Guilford County Schools, the third largest district in North Carolina. We also focused on academic achievement, character development and being excellent. Because students, educators, parents, and community members embraced that vision and the related strategic plans, the district experienced notable gains in graduation rates and academic achievement. In addition to our district's success within the state, we also received national recognitions for academic performance, graduation rates, and character development/service learning during and after my tenure as its Superintendent. While there is always need for improvement, Guilford County Schools currently has some of the best schools in the state and the country.

Strategic Plan Development

My process for developing strategic plans requires collaboration with many stakeholders through careful listening, learning and deliberation, along with a sense of urgency. The listening and learning has, over the years, been branded as "Mo Wants to Know." Thus, if elected, I plan to listen to North Carolinians, including students, parents, community members and leaders, elected and appointed officials, faith leaders, business leaders and others about how we will turn the vision of *Achieving Education Excellence* into a reality. I also recognize that the plan will need to honor the complex relationships that exist within the North Carolina public school system. There are local school districts and public charter schools that understand their particular circumstances and needs and how they should be addressed; there are entities such as the State Board of Education and General Assembly who have tremendous influence over the system. Thus, it will be important for the plan to be embraced by many stakeholders for it to truly be impactful. In addition, I recognize that there are effective initiatives. The plan must be careful to embrace those efforts, even while seeking to develop or refine other initiatives.

I have already listened and learned a lot as I have traversed the state of North Carolina as part of my campaign. I have read the recommendations and thoughts that people have submitted through the Mo Wants to Know section of my campaign website. The listening will continue through the rest of the campaign and, if elected, through the first few months of my term. Thereafter, my process will include drafting a comprehensive plan that will be replete with goals, strategies, initiatives, launch dates and accountability measures, sharing that plan broadly and then engaging various teams to implement it. My experience tells me that this process, if done with fidelity and humility, can be powerful for an entire community because all can be a part of it.

Strategic Direction

Outlined below are six pillars and related action items that will guide the development of the plan for North Carolina's public schools. I look forward to these pillars and action items being enhanced as the strategic plan is developed.

Pillar 1

Prepare Each Student for their Next Phase in Life

Public education unlocks the doors to the world and allows our democracy to flourish. Children who have learned the skill of lifelong learning are prepared to chart their own path. Schools should be places where students learn to think. Being prepared for life means that a student can understand a controversial idea, think about that idea, and articulate the reasons that the student agrees or disagrees with it. Preparing our students for the next phase of their lives means giving them two things at once: first, the tool set that all people need to function in the 21st century, and second, the opportunities and the access to those opportunities to develop themselves so that they can choose as well as are prepared for wherever they want to go after they graduate from high school.

Action Items

- Support and enhance ongoing efforts to set rigorous minimum standards for all schools that encompass the basics that all students should learn: reading, writing, mathematics, science, history, civics, critical thinking, and character.
- Partner with others to enhance the system of early education that provides access to high-quality prekindergarten to ensure that all students enter kindergarten ready to learn.
- Enhance the focus on early literacy interventions from kindergarten to 3rd grade to ensure a solid foundation for reading ability. The early literacy efforts currently underway will continue, enhanced by additional efforts to provide engaging materials for students and by expanding those literacy efforts to struggling readers at the middle school level.
- Develop strategies to individualize instruction to meet each student where they are. There must be professional development and support for educators to continually grow in their ability to provide differentiated instruction. Technology must be seen as a tool, but not the only or even the best way, to enable educators to individualize their practice with students even further. We must also be mindful that students do not need to be bombarded with excessive social media while at school. We should also support tutoring programs and other individualized efforts in schools. Teacher assistants and adequately staffed schools with appropriate roles will also assist with individualized instruction with effective staff to student ratios.
- Be sure that students are given ample opportunities to find inspiration and growth through world languages, arts, career and technical education courses, physical education, health, financial literacy, college-level courses, co-curricular and extracurricular activities and other curriculum.
- Develop strategies that allow students to develop positive behavioral traits and to learn how they can be of service to their communities.
- Work with the community college system, the university system, business leaders, and more to align high school curricula and opportunities to work and post-secondary opportunities that are right for each individual child.

Pillar 2

Invest Fully in Public Education

Funding for North Carolina's public schools has not kept pace with the growing costs of a growing state. According to the Education Law Center's Making the Grade Report 2023, North

Carolina's per-pupil expenditure of slightly more than \$11,000 annually ranked 48th out of 50 states and the District of Columbia, an amount that is about \$5,000 less per pupil than the national average. South Carolina, by comparison, ranked 27th in the country with a per pupil expenditure of more than \$15,000 and Virginia ranked 35th with more than \$14,000 per pupil. In short, the amount available for local school districts to spend on public education in North Carolina is significantly less than the amount available to districts in neighboring states. This puts us at a regional and national disadvantage. Data shows that investing more resources in public education, particularly in targeted strategic ways such as early interventions, educator compensation, and support services for disadvantaged students, makes a major difference in how well students learn.

Action Items

- After evaluating the current budget and effectively utilizing existing resources, advocate for more funding from all sources and, in particular, advocate for more compensation for educators.
- Direct funds to be spent strategically on educators and programs that have proven to have the greatest long-term benefits for students.
- Streamline financial systems so that funding is both predictable and equitable, and in so doing, provide support necessary for local districts to plan appropriately for the future.

Pillar 3

Revere Public School Educators

Every person who learned from, and was inspired by, a good teacher understands intrinsically what it means to have that privilege. We know that teachers have the most influence on student learning. North Carolina is not paying its educators enough and in turn, not respecting educators in the ways that they should be respected. Educators need to be paid appropriately and their working conditions need to reflect the respect that they deserve.

Action Items

- Advocate for increased compensation for all educators, which includes teachers, principals, and all staff from custodians to bus drivers to social workers and counselors.
- Work with higher education leaders and business leaders to develop strong recruiting and training grounds for teachers.
- Develop support programs for educators to encourage them to stay in the profession and to stay in our state, including housing support programs, professional development opportunities, access to technology, and flexibility.
- Support local school districts that are implementing coaching programs in their schools for new educators.
- Advocate for and work on strategies that can improve working conditions for teachers, such as lowering class sizes and hiring assistants to relieve them of certain duties.

Pillar 4

Enhance Parent and Community Support

Schools are only one part of a child’s life. Families are the most important people in a child’s life and they are the most important partners for schools. Important, too, are community organizations, churches, synagogues, non-profits, healthcare providers, mental health providers, social service providers, volunteers, and community organizations that impact children. Study after study shows that students who have strong parent and/or community support do far better than students who do not. Parents and community also make a major difference in the life of the school itself, creating the type of environment where students learn and grow.

Action Items

- Establish more ways for parents’ voices to be heard at the Department of Public Instruction, through listening sessions and collaborations with parent-teacher organizations.
- Allocate resources and support to “community schools” models or other evidence-based models that school districts can adopt to address out-of-school barriers to learning.
- Increase support systems for the educators who serve as a bridge to the local community, such as counselors, social workers, student advocates, and parent liaisons.

Pillar 5

Ensure Safe, Secure Learning Environments

In 2024, we have so many reminders of the ways in which our world can threaten the physical and emotional well-being of our students. We cannot make our schools completely safe from everything, and we do have to teach our children how to live in a world with a great deal of danger in it. But we also have learned so much about the ways to protect our schools from threats both internal and external. We need to be sharing what we do know across the state and putting the features in place that will have the best chance of keeping everyone safe.

Action Items

- Gather and communicate best practice information for making schools safe environments, including information about facility upgrades, effective technology tools and behavioral practices; advocate for resources to implement those best practices; and provide technical support to local school systems and schools so that they can implement best practices.
- Increase access to mental health services across the state through advocacy efforts with the General Assembly, seek funds from various other sources for these services and work with schools on ways to make it easier for students and staff to access mental health services.
- Work with law enforcement and school personnel to develop effective, positive relationships that enhance the safety of schools while also developing positive behaviors of students.
- Develop and refine policies that make schools welcoming and safe environments for all students, develop positive student behaviors and address inappropriate behavior.

Pillar 6

Celebrate the Good in Public Education

Families all across North Carolina send their children to the local public school - in fact, the vast majority of them do choose public education. They entrust their children to the educators whose bright faces greet them each morning. They build community around high school football games on Friday nights and middle school band performances. Each year, thousands of students walk across stages to cheers and tears as they are, in fact, prepared to go out and lead the life they choose. Our schools did not become bright beacons of hope all on their own. Generations of North Carolinians have made the choice to invest in them and make them strong, which is noteworthy.

But angry rhetoric sells more than joy and positive stories. There are things in public schools that must be reformed and improved – but we spend more time pointing them out and suggesting that the answer is not to have a public education system at all, instead of fixing problems and preserving and celebrating the aspects of public education that do work well. Denigrating our public schools is not the answer to providing a great education for all North Carolinians.

Action Items

- Work with local school leaders to find and elevate the schools, the communities, the parents, the students and the educators who are doing things well.
- Acknowledge challenges and speak honestly about how they are being addressed and celebrate the progress that is made on them.
- Assist economic development efforts across the state by reminding potential employers of the great feats of our public education system and encourage all to participate in it.