



## Early Learning Issue Brief

### **Background**

Early learning is the foundation for student success. A quality pre-k program, K-3 literacy supports, and teacher assistants (TAs) are just a few ways that North Carolina can ensure student readiness as they progress to higher grades.

### **Pre-K**

The NC Pre-K program is the State's pre-kindergarten program designed to deliver high-quality educational opportunities for at-risk four-year-olds and other eligible children. Additional pre-k options include the federally funded Head Start program and the State's special education program, which are offered to eligible three and four-year olds.<sup>1</sup>

Data shows that students who participate in NC Pre-K are more proficient in reading and math, less likely to repeat elementary school grades, and less likely to be placed in special education classes. Because NC Pre-K only enrolled 47.4% of the State's eligible four-year-olds in 2019, one of the State's goals is to increase the percentage of eligible enrollment to 75% by 2025.<sup>2</sup> NC Pre-K state and federal funding has consistently increased over the past five years to the current \$182 million funding level for the 2020-2021 fiscal year, but this increase has proven not to be nearly enough to meet the needs of the State's at-risk pre-k population.<sup>3</sup>

### **K-3 Literacy**

In 2012, the General Assembly established the Read to Achieve (RtA) program, which began in North Carolina in the 2013-2014 school year, to focus more resources on improving early grade reading proficiency. RtA requires students to demonstrate grade level reading proficiency before moving up to fourth grade.

Annual K-3 literacy reports show that RtA has not improved student reading outcomes. In the 2013-2014 school year, 60.4% of students demonstrated reading proficiency on the Beginning-of-Grade 3 (BOG3) reading test, the End-of-Grade (EOG) reading test, or the EOG reading retest.<sup>4</sup> That percentage continued to decrease during the following years, with a slight increase to 57.3% for the 2018-2019 school year.<sup>5</sup> A 2018 study done by North Carolina State University identified potential factors that contribute to these continued negative student outcomes, including a lack of support for pre-third grade intervention, assumptions about availability of qualified teachers, and differences in local capacities to carry out RtA.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The State of Preschool 2019, National Institute for Early Education Research

<sup>2</sup> NC Department of Health and Human Services Early Childhood Action Plan Goal 8: High-Quality Early Learning

<sup>3</sup> NC General Assembly Fiscal Research Division: Division of Child Development and Early Education presentation to the Joint House and Senate Appropriations Committees on Health and Human Services, March 5, 2019

<sup>4</sup> Report to the NC General Assembly: Improve K-3 Literacy Accountability Measures, October 2014

<sup>5</sup> Report to the NC General Assembly: Read to Achieve Data – State Level Summary, December 2019

<sup>6</sup> Is Read to Achieve Making the Grade?: An Assessment of North Carolina's Elementary Reading Proficiency Initiative, October 2018, North Carolina State College of Education

## **Teacher Assistants**

School districts receive State funding to support TAs in K-3 classrooms. Previously, school districts received a set dollar amount for TA salaries for each K-3 student. Starting in the 2015-2016 fiscal year, funding was revised to be based on new K-3 TA to student ratios. The State's lack of commitment to TAs can be seen through the significant 25% decrease in funding levels since 2013.

With an increased focus on reading at grade-level by the end of third grade, qualified TAs have become an essential component of student learning. The role of a TA has transformed over the years from a clerical support role to classroom instructional support. In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act improved the quality of TAs through higher standards and increased educational requirements.<sup>7</sup>

Roles and benefits of TAs in the classroom include:

- Ensuring a more personalized experience by allowing one-on-one time for students
- Working with small groups of students to practice and reinforce skills introduced by the primary classroom teacher
- Delivering additional instructional time to students with learning or physical disabilities, limited English proficiency, behavioral issues, and struggling readers.
- Conducting one-on-one assessments while the primary teacher leads classroom lessons, or vice versa

## **NCSBA Position**

NCSBA believes that additional investments must be put into a quality pre-k program to allow more eligible children to enroll. Pre-k programs are crucial for future student success, especially in grade level reading by the end of third grade. Additionally, the State should invest in proven K-3 literacy programs and supports.

TAs are a vital component to early learning success. More state-funded TAs are needed in K-3 classes to work with students and support the teachers who are required to simultaneously juggle multiple responsibilities. The proposed ratios will provide an essential benefit to young children during their formative years.

### Current K-3 TA Ratios

K: 2 TAs per every 3 classes

1-2: 1 TA per every 2 classes

3: 1 TA per every 3 classes

### Proposed K-3 TA Ratios

K-1: 1 TA per every class

2-3: 1 TA per every 2 classes

NCSBA encourages the General Assembly to consider making the proposed TA to student ratios even lower by providing one TA for every K-3 classroom on a temporary basis, as schools address the negative impacts of COVID-19 on students. In addition to student learning loss, students have been experiencing a host of social, emotional, and mental health issues. Local school boards believe that having an extra adult in the classroom is much more beneficial than having one or two fewer students in the classroom, especially as students, families, and communities recover from the pandemic. Additional TAs go a long way in ensuring that each student is given the opportunity to a sound basic education during these formative years.

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<sup>7</sup> 20 USC 6319