

Pursuing an “Every Child Thrives” Public School System in North Carolina

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School of Education
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **BOULDER**

2025

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Presentation Overview



**Project
Background**



**Estimated cost of
“Every Child Thrives”
Schools in North Carolina**



**Designing an “Every Child
Thrives” School System
in North Carolina:
12 Recommendations**

Today's Speakers | Feb. 8, 2024



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Section I

Project Background



About the National Education Policy Center (NEPC)

Mission & Vision

Our mission is to provide high-quality information that supports democratic deliberation about education policy.

NEPC is a research center housed at the CU Boulder School of Education. We believe that the democratic governance of public education is strengthened when policies are based on sound evidence and support a multiracial society that is inclusive, kind, and just.



About the Price of Opportunity Project

Project Team

The Price of Opportunity is a national collaborative project between several researchers from multiple educational institutions.

As such, all members of our team have made substantial contributions to the research design, data collection and data analysis.



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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



About the Price of Opportunity Project Team Members

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NEPC's Price of Opportunity Project

PROJECT GOALS



Challenge

lawmakers and others to confront what's actually needed to provide equal and high-quality learning opportunities for all students.



Aim

to shift the discourse and logic that dominate deliberations about school resources and about broader social and economic policies.

NEPC's Price of Opportunity Project: Strategies

Every Child Thrives

What resources do schools need to counterbalance larger societal inequities?



Social & Economic Policies

What broader changes and resources are needed to address the societal inequalities that impact schools?



NEPC's Price of Opportunity Project: Strategic Approaches

Great Equalizer or Every Child Thrives

Approach #1

Cost-out Interventions from Price of Opportunity Panel.

Approach #2

Cost-out Interventions from Researcher Judgement Panel.

Social & Economic Policies

Approach #3

Estimate cost of crucial additional US policy interventions.

Approach #4

Estimate % of GDP that OECD countries spend on social & economic policies.

The School Funding Study in North Carolina

As part of this project, we studied school funding in North Carolina, in partnership with the North Carolina Justice Center. The study builds on the state's long-running *Leandro* advocacy work.



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About North Carolina Justice Center (NCJC)

Mission & Vision

Our mission is to eliminate poverty in North Carolina by ensuring that every household in the state has access to the resources, services, and fair treatment it needs to achieve economic security.

North Carolina Justice Center is a leading progressive research facility and advocacy organization.



Section II

Estimated Cost of an “Every Child Thrives” School System in North Carolina



What does an “Every Child Thrives” School System Look Like?

Students from all backgrounds and circumstances have educational opportunities that prepare them to thrive economically and socially in college, career, and life.

The system has the resources and programs to help students overcome the challenges they face inside and outside of schools.



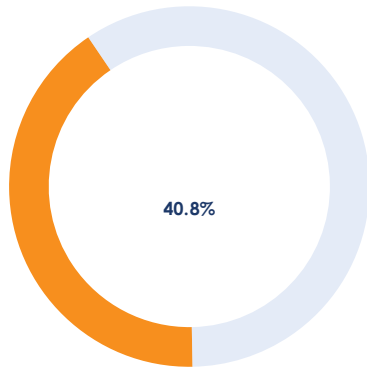
How Schools in North Carolina are Financed

State law places “full responsibility for operating expenses on the state.” Because of this, North Carolina schools receive a larger proportion of state funding compared to other states.

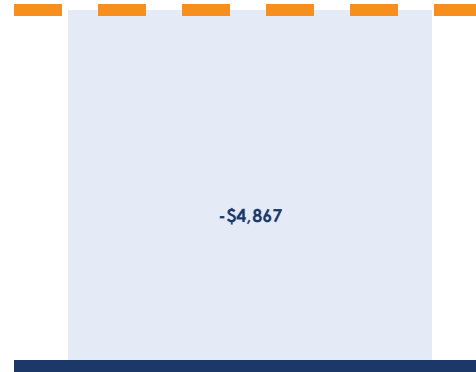
Every district adds to the state’s contribution with its own local funds. Differences in local funding can create inequities between districts.
(Nordstrom, 2018)



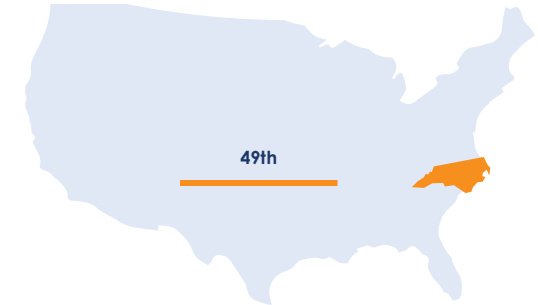
N.C. Education Funding in 2021-2022



**40.8% of
North Carolina's
General Fund**



**North Carolina's funding
level is \$4,867 below
the national average**



**North Carolina's
funding effort ranks
49th at \$11,263**

Education Law Center (2023); National Center for Educational Statistics (2023)

Leandro v. North Carolina | 1997, 2004

Importance

In 1994, families from five rural, low-wealth school districts filed the lawsuit, asserting that the state was not meeting its constitutional duty to provide a "uniform system of free public schools."

The case is named after the lead plaintiffs, Kathleen Leandro and her son Robert, a student from Hoke County.

The battle for better school funding is still being fought today.



Leandro v. North Carolina | 1997, 2004

Guiding Principles

Leandro calls for rectifying educational disparities by highlighting resource imbalances among districts, particularly those affecting minoritized and marginalized students.

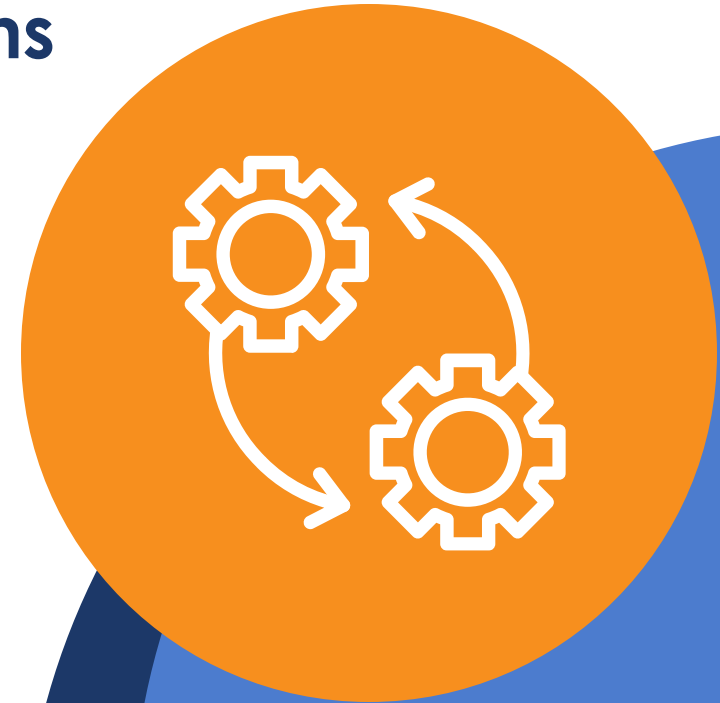
Leandro establishes legal precedents that clarify the state's duty and the legal foundations that define educational equity.



How We Built on *Leandro*:

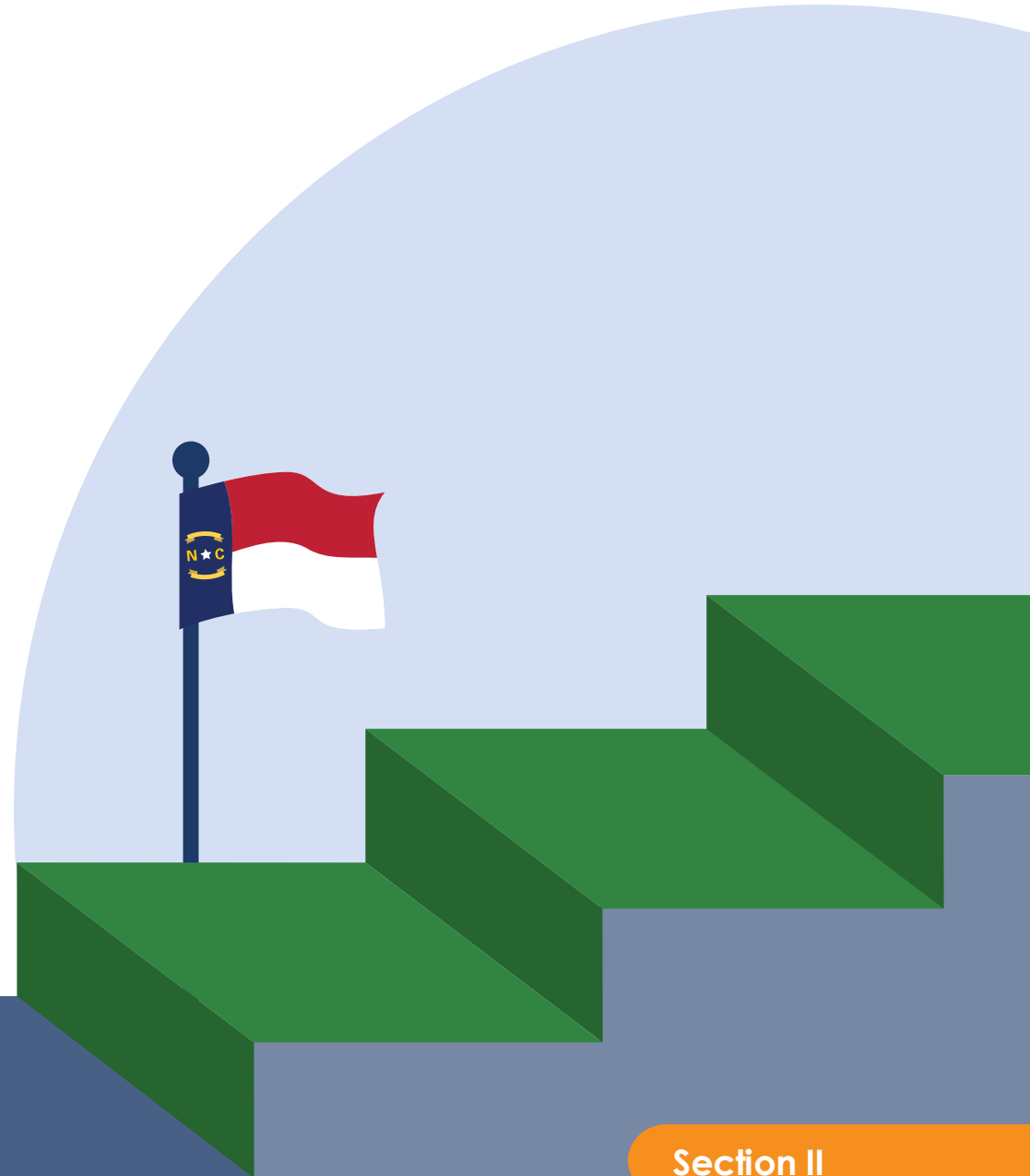
“Every Child Thrives” Recommendations

- The goal: to work toward a system that equitably serves every child in North Carolina.
- Estimated the costs for meeting the state’s immediate fiscal imperatives and the broader aspirations of *Leandro*, including measures that go beyond *Leandro*.
- The 12 recommendations are organized by their alignment with the *Leandro* remedial plan.



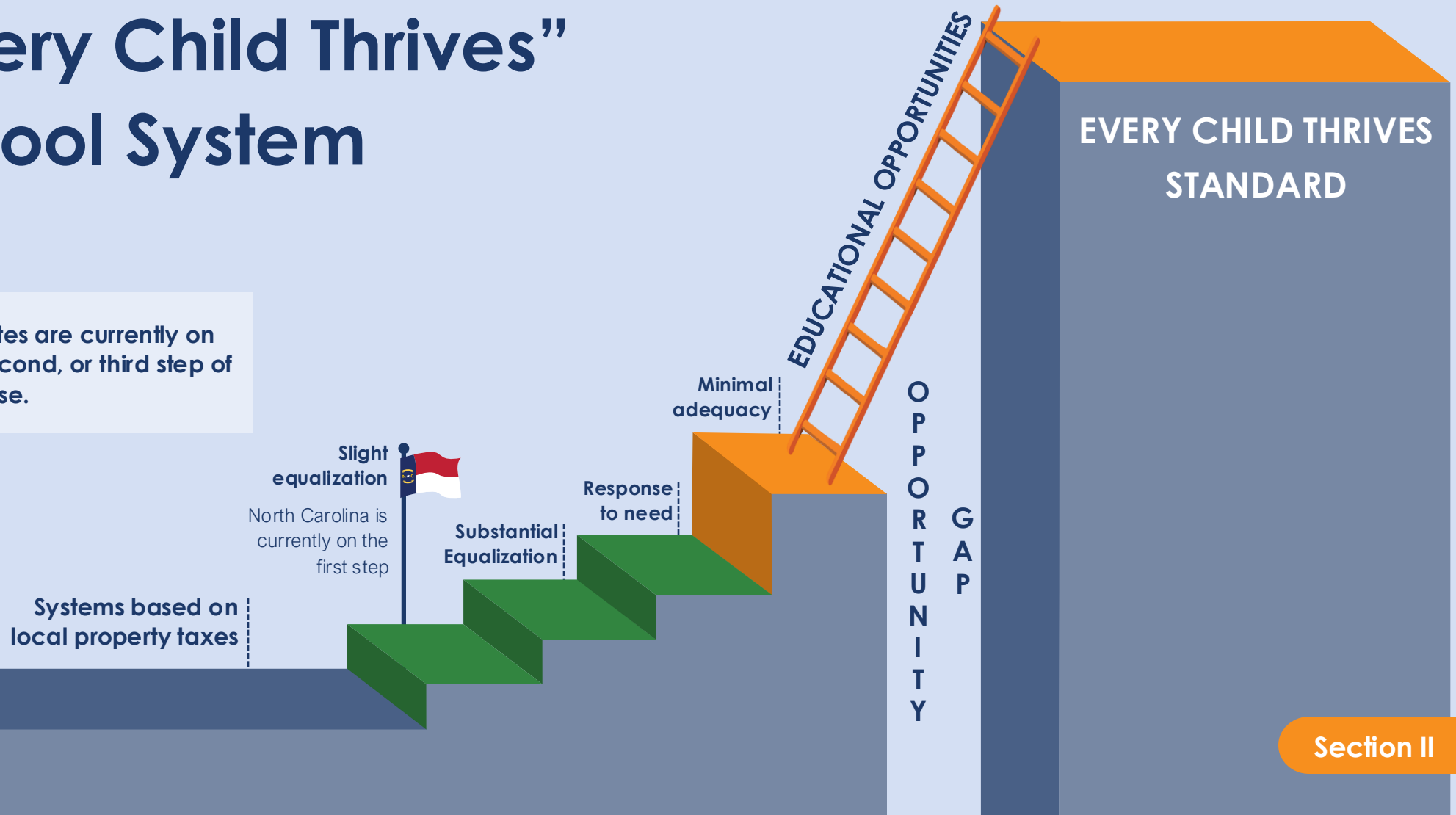
Envisioning an “Every Child Thrives” School System

What would it take to move North Carolina from its current “slight equalization” model of public schools to the “Every Child Thrives” quality children deserve?



Climbing Toward an “Every Child Thrives” School System

All U.S. States are currently on the first, second, or third step of the staircase.



What's in the Opportunity Gap?



Social Inequality

Inequalities in areas such as transportation, nutrition, healthcare, pollution, racism, poverty, and discrimination.



Differences in School Quality

Differences in areas such as school funding, facilities, curriculum, access to qualified teachers, and learning materials.

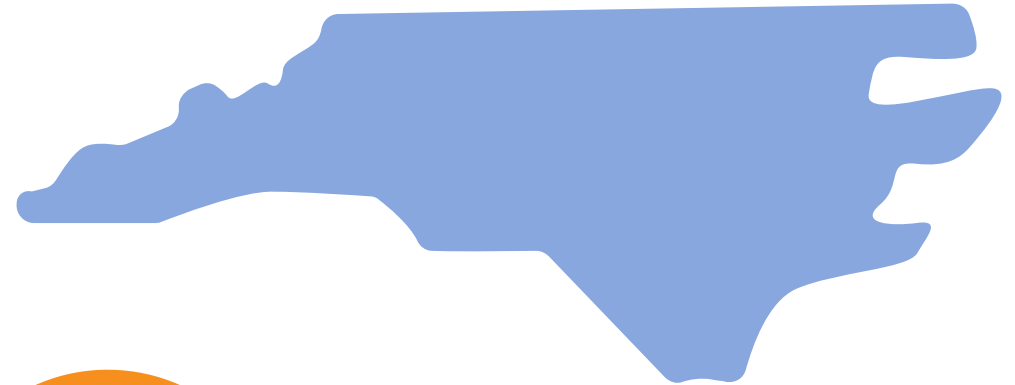
Addressing School Funding Inequities in North Carolina

NEPC and NCJC engaged in a multi-step public engagement process to identify and cost out 12 recommendations.

We drew on the resource and program recommendations of North Carolina educational and community experts to develop the recommendations and to estimate a total cost to implement them of **\$42.3B to \$49.2B**.



\$42.3B to \$49.2B

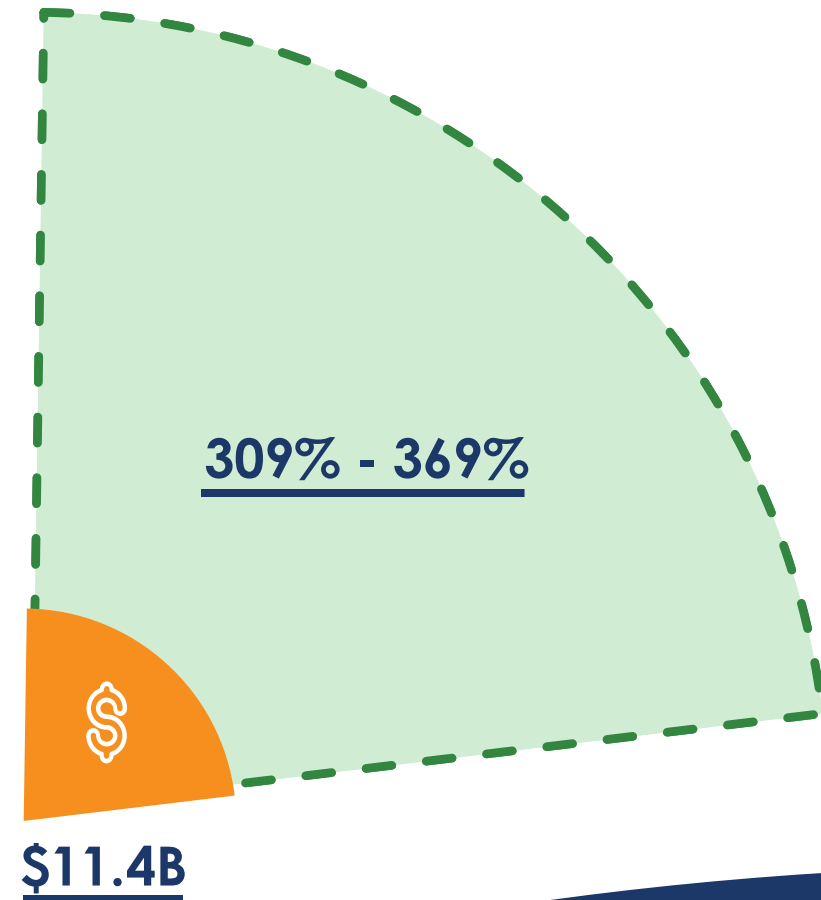


How much does the state education budget allocation increase?

309% - 369% Increase

It would increase the state's education budget allocation from the current figure of approximately \$11.4B (McClellan, 2023; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2023).

Note: figures do not include capital expenses other than maintenance paid through operating budgets or ESSER (COVID-relief) spending.

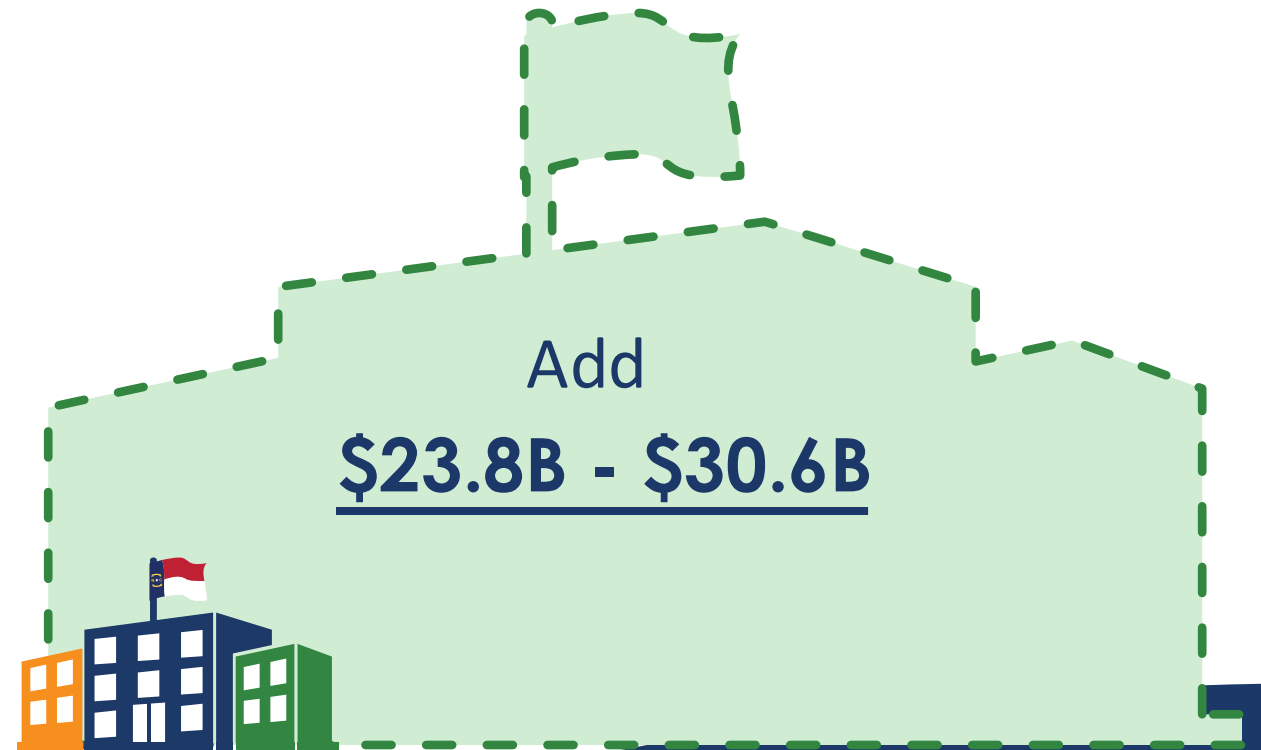


How much does this increase K-12 spending, including state, federal, and local?

227% - 265% Increase

It would increase overall K-12 spending, including federal and local contributions, by approximately \$23.8B to \$30.6B (Moore & Fratrik, 2023, and National Center for Educational Statistics, 2023).

Note: figures do not include capital expenses other than maintenance paid through operating budgets or ESSER (COVID-relief) spending.



How much does this increase to education spending increase the overall state budget?

170% - 191% Increase

It would add \$23.8B - \$30.6B to North Carolina's overall state spending of approximately \$33.8B. The new amount would be \$57.6B to \$64.4B. (National Association of State Budget Officers, 2023; North Carolina General Assembly, 2023)

Note: figures do not include capital expenses other than maintenance paid through operating budgets or ESSER (COVID-relief) spending.



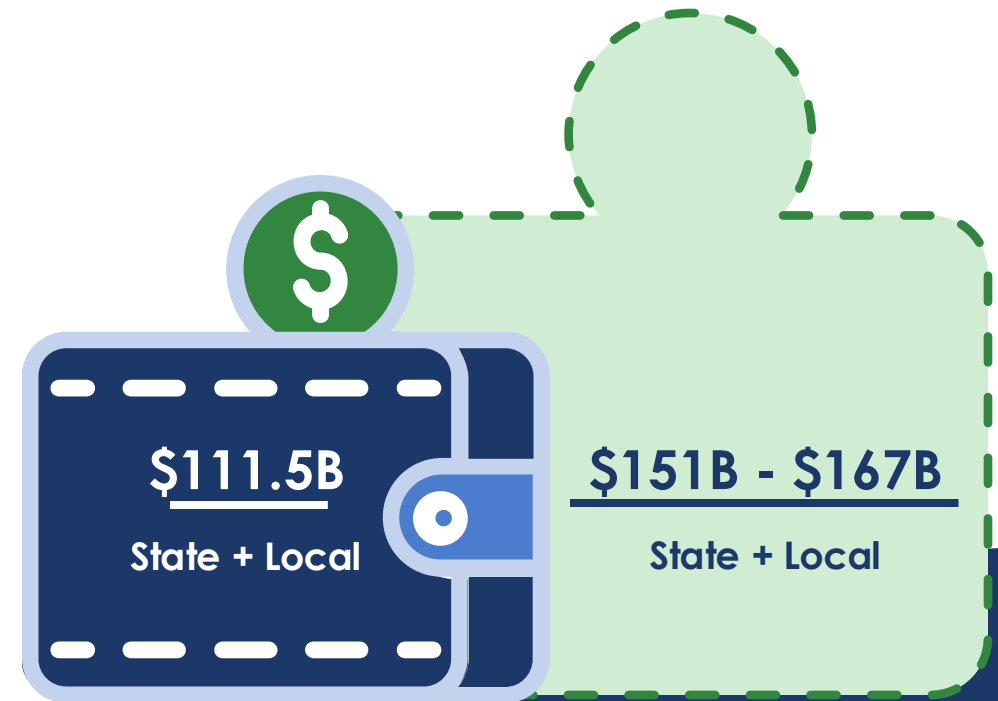
How much does this increase to education spending increase overall state and local spending?

136% - 150% Increase

It would add \$40B – \$56.2B to North Carolina’s combined state and local spending of approximately \$111.5 billion. The new amount would be in the \$151.4B - \$167.7B range.

(United States Census Bureau, 2024)

Note: figures do not include capital expenses other than maintenance paid through operating budgets or ESSER (COVID-relief) spending.



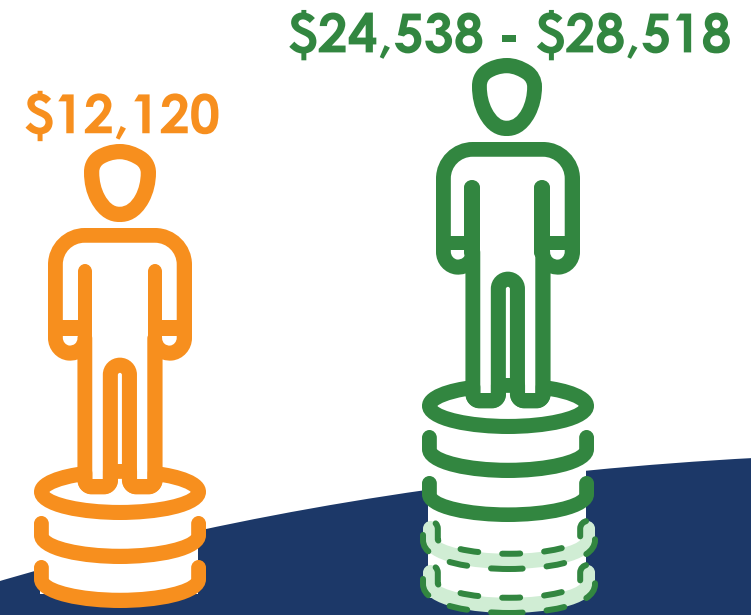
How much does this increase to overall education spending increase total per-pupil spending?

202% - 235% Increase

Per pupil spending in NC is \$12,120. The recommended spending amounts would increase per pupil spending to the range of \$24,538 - \$28,518.

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2023)

Note: figures do not include capital expenses other than maintenance paid through operating budgets or ESSER (COVID-relief) spending.

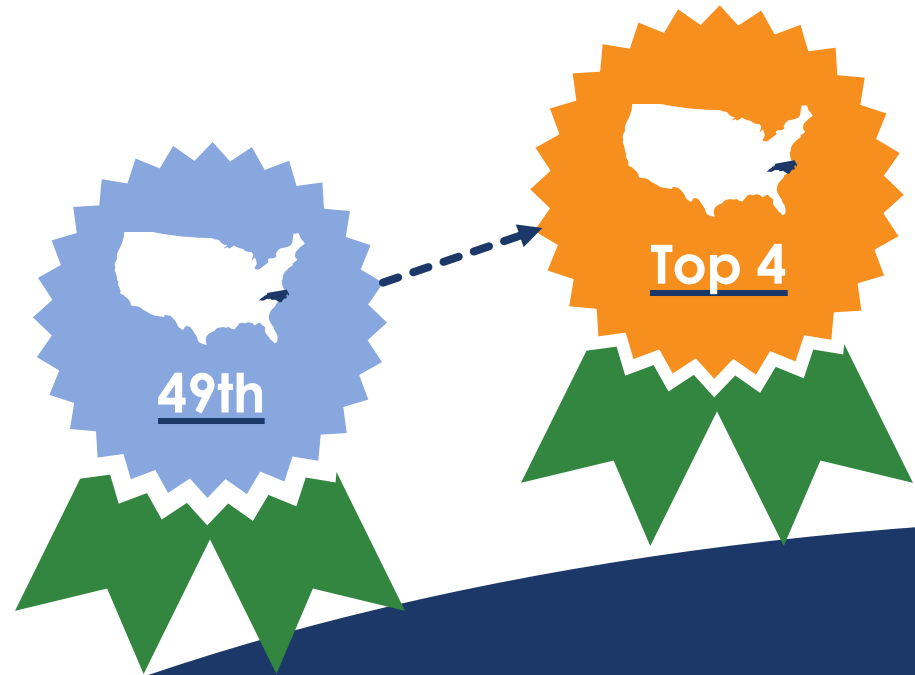


How would this increase to overall education spending raise North Carolina's ranking?

Top Three

In 2021, NC was 49th in per student education spending. If the per pupil spending was in the \$24,538 - \$28,518 range, it would be among the top four.

Note: figures do not include capital expenses other than maintenance paid through operating budgets or ESSER (COVID-relief) spending.



How We Calculated This Number

\$42.4B to \$49.2B

We grounded cost assumptions in data from experts, state reports, and databases and relied on four methodological principles:

- The best, most reasonable estimates
- *Leandro* as a guide
- Synergies in programmatic costs
- A justifiable range for cost estimates

More about methodology:

<https://nepc.colorado.edu/initiative/price-opportunity>



Section III

12 Recommendations for Designing an “Every Child Thrives” School System in North Carolina

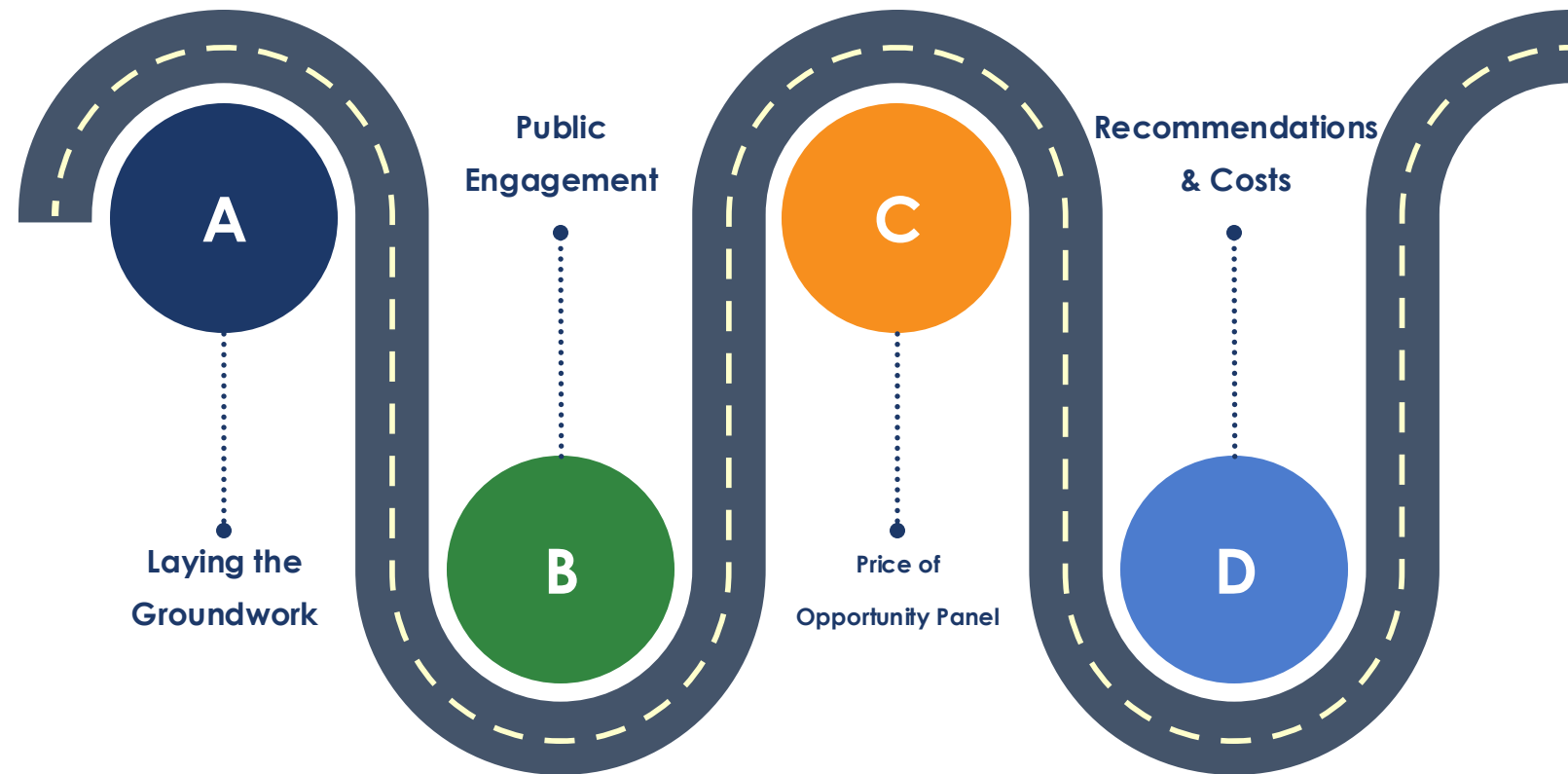


Getting to 12 Recommendations

Phases A-D

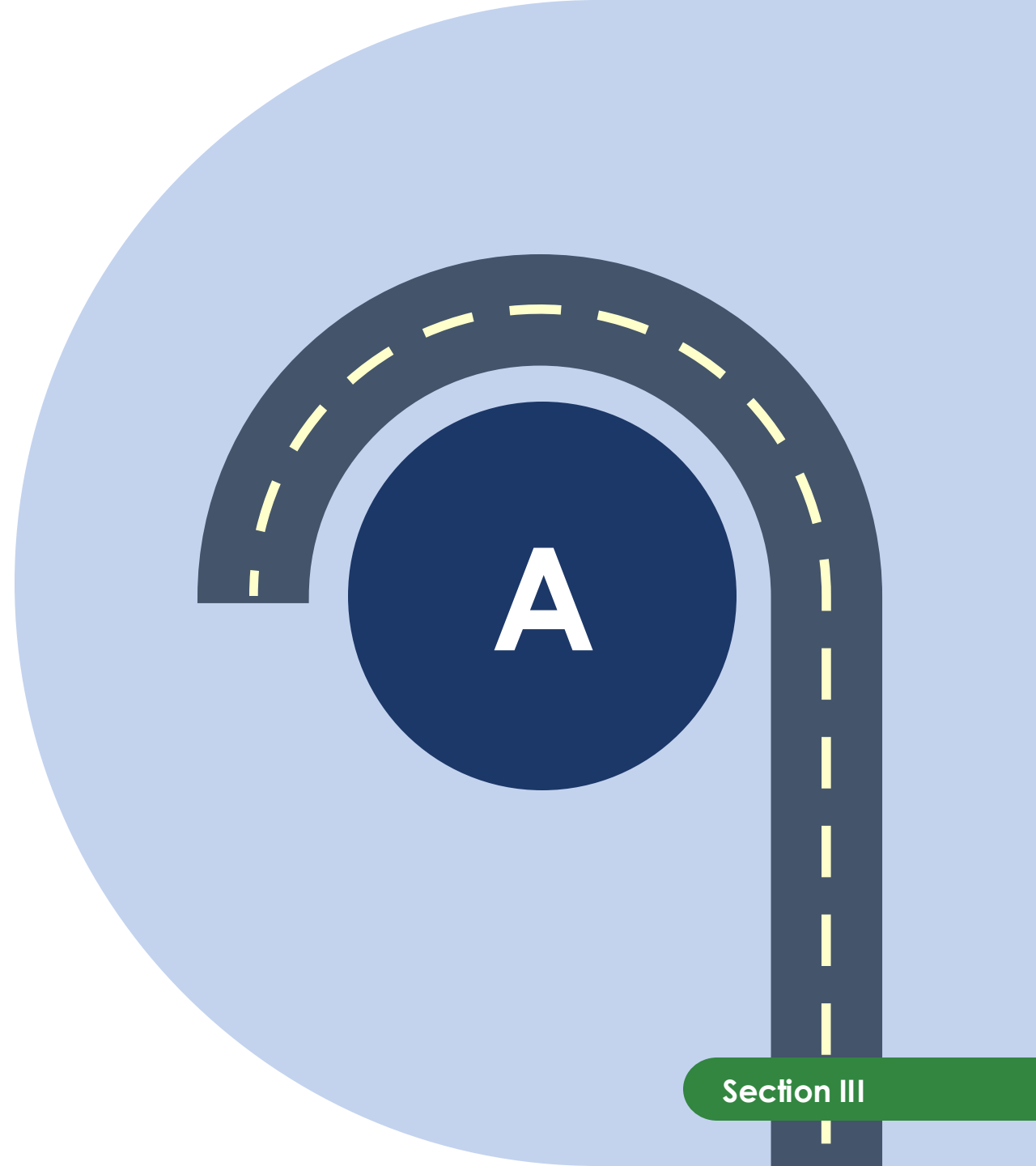
Between 2021 and 2023, the collaboration between the NEPC and the NCJC unfolded in four stages to develop and test a costing strategy tailored to the state of North Carolina.

Phases A-C were data collection, and Phase D was data analysis and costing-out.



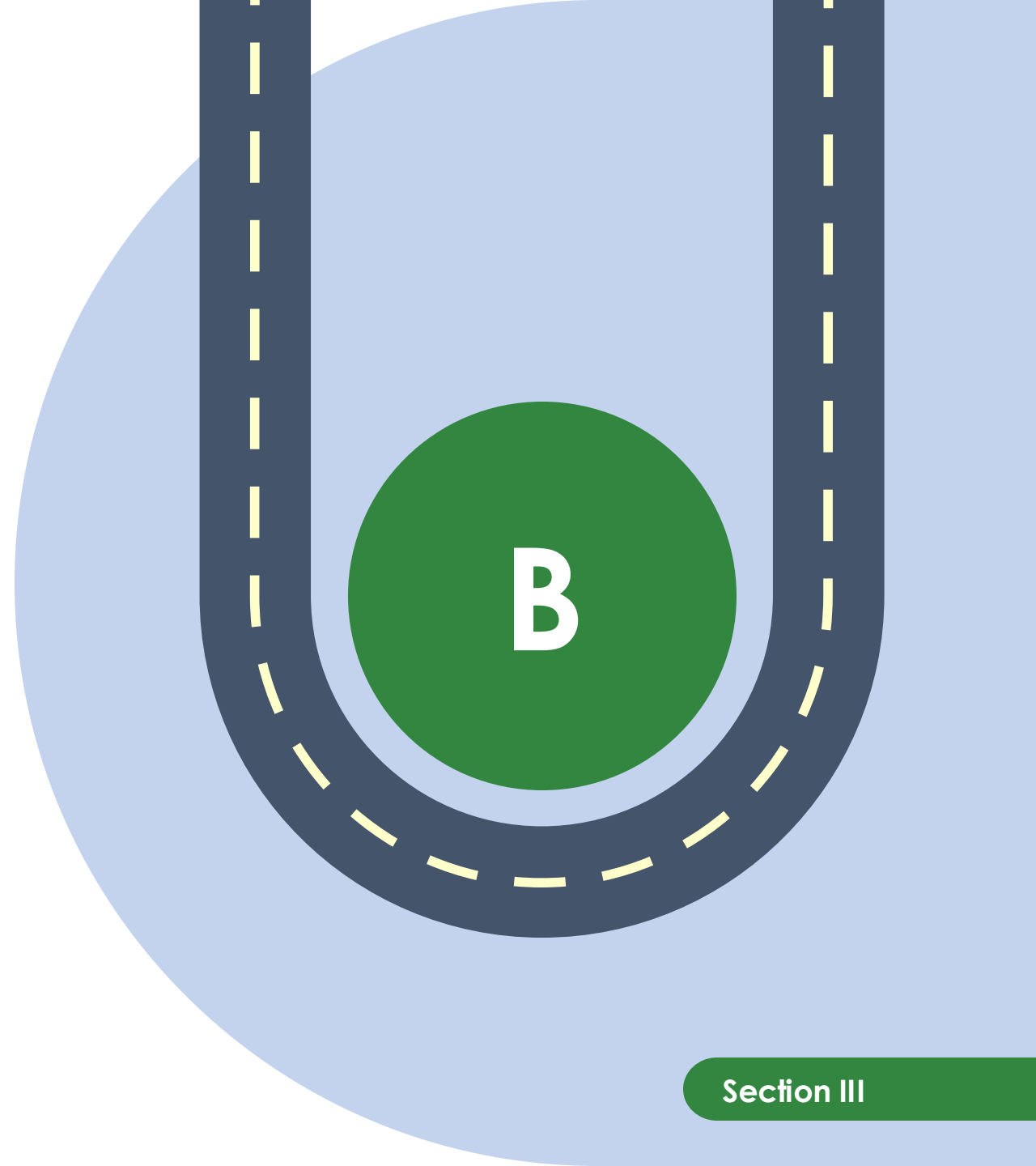
Phase A: Laying the Groundwork

First, NEPC and NCJC took time to build a strong relationship. Then, through an extensive literature review and one-on-one interviews, we gained foundational knowledge of school finance in North Carolina, setting the stage for informed discussions.



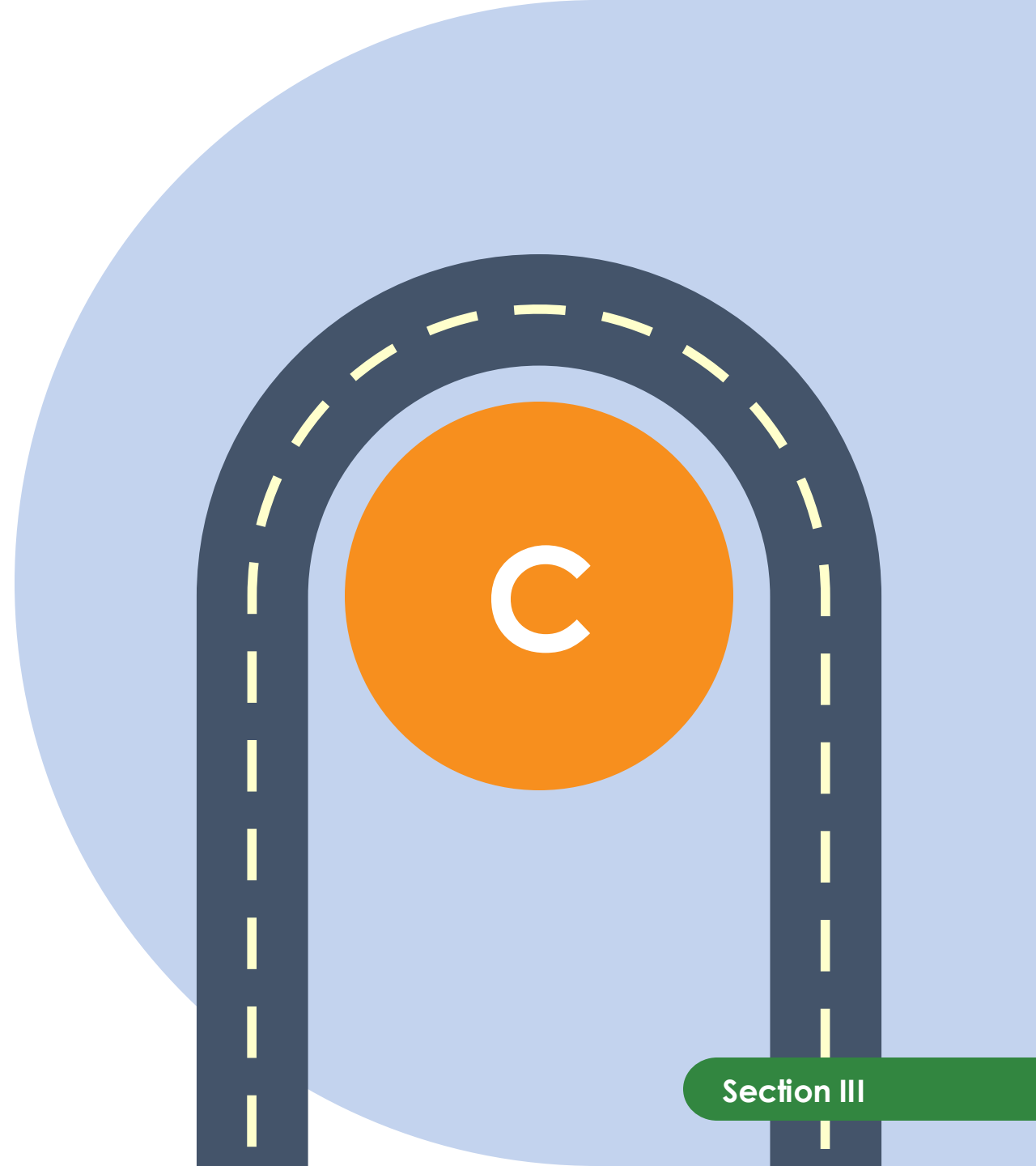
Phase B: Public Engagement

- We held five regional community focus groups across the state, facilitated with the support of NCJC partners.
- The sessions posed key questions based on insights gathered in Phase A.
- The outcomes informed discussions at the statewide convening.



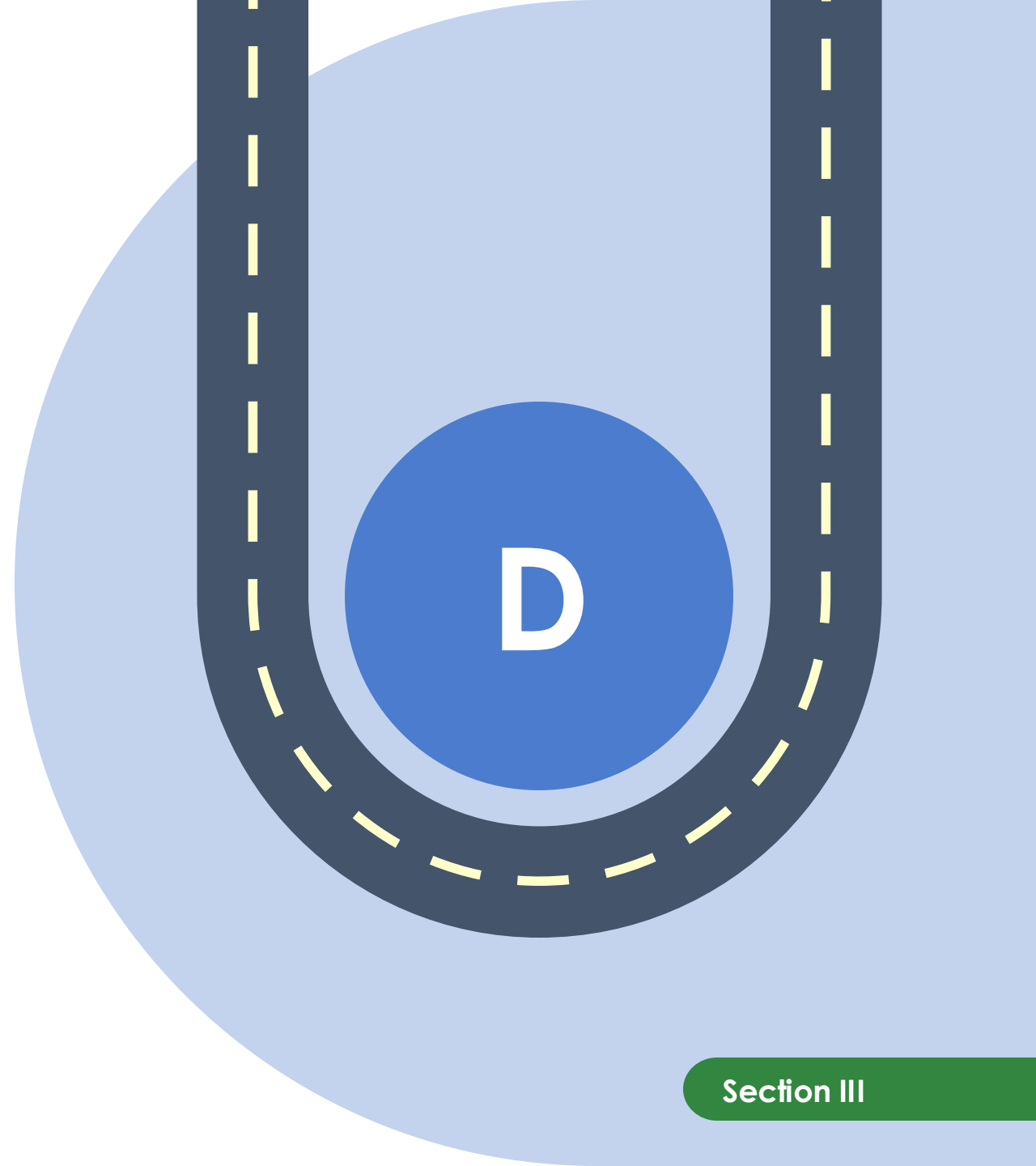
Phase C: Price of Opportunity Panel

A statewide Price of Opportunity Panel drew on the expertise of stakeholders including teachers, school leaders, parents, students, and community advocates to suggest the specific resources and programs necessary for an “Every Child Thrives” school system in North Carolina. These conversations were recorded and transcribed, marking the completion of data collection.

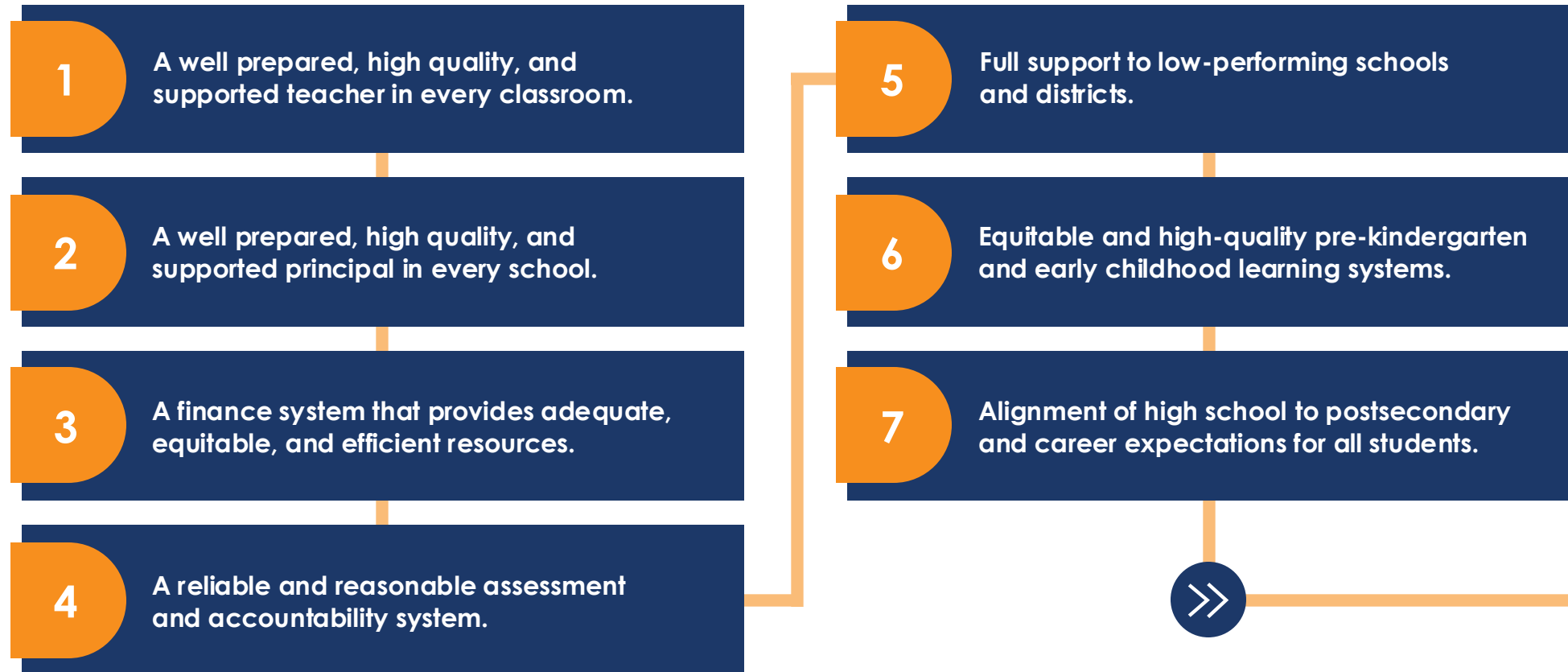


Phase D: Recommendations and Costs

- Research analysts reviewed audio transcripts from the statewide panel and identified key programs and practices for the “Every Child Thrives” school system.
- We estimated costs for implementing the envisioned school system and developed a set of 12 recommendations that, together, would meet or exceed current *Leandro* provisions.



“Every Child Thrives”: Recommendations 1-7



“Every Child Thrives”: Recommendations 8-12

8

A strong system of supports for special education.

9

An empowering system of supports for linguistically diverse learners.

10

A strong system of wrap-around supports and community partnerships.

11

A robust and multifaceted family engagement system.

12

A positive school climate and system of behavior supports in every school.



1

A Well Prepared, High-Quality, and Supported Teacher in Every Classroom

- Improve teacher working conditions including class size, staffing, planning time, and compensation.
- Provide teachers with ample support and mentoring.
- Provide teachers robust professional development.
- Funding for anti-racist professional development.
- Increase teacher diversity and provide ample career pathways.
- Elevate equity-focused teacher performance goals.



Rec. 1 | What Participants Shared



There is a need to change educators' deficit beliefs, mindsets, and expectations for children of color and to challenge the expectations extended from white supremacy culture."



Teachers should not have to work two and three jobs to be able to live in their communities, which just leads to burnout. We need to pay teachers reflecting the hours of planning and grading that they do."



[I would like] enough time to grade and plan and collaborate with my peers during the day. [To] have protected lunchtime, have protected time to work. At my school, we're greatly understaffed. And most of us are covering during our planning periods."

2

A Well Prepared, High-Quality, and Supported Principal in Every School

- Align trainings for aspiring and current administrators with district needs.
- Create administrative internships or fellowship programs.
- Differentiate administrator roles and workloads.
- Protect administrators' time to allow for instructional leadership and teacher-support.
- Elevate equity-focused administrator performance goals.



Rec. 2 | What Participants Shared



Administrative prep programs need to be more tightly aligned with the school system. It needs to be a true partnership that both sides really listen.”



There is also a big need for administrators’ direct support of teachers... especially, teachers early in their career with support, with instructional strategies. Having that would make a big difference in terms of retention.”

3

A Finance System that Provides Adequate, Equitable, and Efficient Resources

- Rectify resource inequities between schools/districts by race and income.
- Fund high-quality and accessible facilities, transportation, and technology for all schools.
- Increase transparency of decision-making about finances and budgets.
- Educate parents and students about their rights for equitably funded education under state and federal law.



Rec. 3 | What Participants Shared



We basically tell kids that how they spend their day isn't important enough to provide them with adequate facilities."



We have not considered the real level of funding necessary for public education."

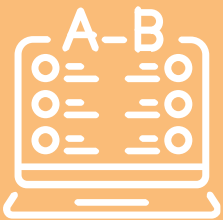


Regardless of your background, you're denying students their constitutional right, and that's what it goes back to. It goes all the way back to 1868."

4

A Reliable and Reasonable Assessment and Accountability System

- Reliably Assesses Multiple Measures of Student Performance
- Reduce the number of tests and assessments.
- Realign assessment to support growth in teaching and learning.
- Remove high-stakes consequences based on single assessments.
- Ensure conditions to properly administer tests.



Rec. 4 | What Participants Shared



North Carolina values performance more than growth. So, we're already measuring and emphasizing the wrong pieces."



The testing is just so, so, overabundant. They have more data than they need."

5

Full Support to Low-Performing Schools and Districts

Turnaround assistance was not specifically mentioned by participants and is not specifically included in the analysis of costs. However, the kinds of supports often provided to turnaround schools – high-quality educators, administrators, staff, resources, materials, supports, and services – are an integral part of the other recommendations.

No participant feedback for this recommendation is applicable.



6

Equitable and High-Quality Pre-Kindergarten and Early Childhood Learning Systems

- Provide a universal pre-K program to every child who needs it.
- Ensure that childcare opportunities exist from birth.
- Provide enough “seats” and staffing to eliminate waitlists.
- Increase wages and benefits for early childhood educators.



Rec. 6 | What Participants Shared



If there's one thing that I know about early childhood, it's that it really sets the foundation for everything else that follows.”

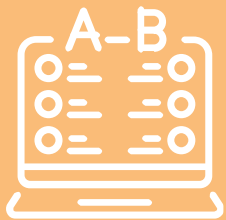


We call it the ‘workforce behind the workforce.’ We don't fund childcare as a public good, which is really what we would like to eventually see.”

7

Alignment of High School to Postsecondary and Career Expectations for All Students

- Ensure that curriculum reflects and responds to students' cultures and identities.
- Ensure that curriculum prepares students for college, career, and civic engagement.
- Ensure that curriculum is inquiry-based and hands-on and interest-driven.
- Align school schedules to complement academic and extracurricular participation.
- Develop robust and evidence-based tutoring programs



Rec. 7 | What Participants Shared



It would be great if students had an opportunity for paid apprenticeships, maybe as a course, or community partnerships where students got high school credit.”



Part of culturally relevant pedagogy is giving students space in school to see the bigger picture and relevance of what they're learning in terms of improving outcomes for themselves, for their communities, for society as a whole.”

8

A Strong System of Supports for Special Education

- Ensure that class sizes and classroom resources accommodate individualized education plans (IEPs).
- Provide all teachers with trainings specific to children with disabilities.
- Funding for professional development to address ableism and racism.
- Educate all school staff and parents on the rights of students with disabilities
- Create support groups for families and parents with children with disabilities.



Rec. 8 | What Participants Shared



My child has a disability and was basically suspended every Thursday. I didn't know what to do. We got moved to a different placement in a different school. That was a disaster too. One of the tactics schools use is putting kids in separate settings, and this was an emotional behavioral setting, and it was a disaster.”



We kind of know what the price tag is in special ed, those children who have highly specialized needs are more expensive, but it starts with that individualized education plan and then unfortunately we fight over whether or not we have to actually do it and how much it's going to cost and if there's money for it.”

9

An Empowering System of Supports for Linguistically Diverse Learners

- Affirm the linguistic diversity of students, staff, and families.
- Increase learning supports for linguistically diverse students.
- Increase services for linguistically diverse translation and educator communication.
- Bilingual staff trained and available for essential student support services.
- Reinforce the rights of linguistically diverse students and families.



Rec. 9 | What Participants Shared



We have seen so many cases in which Spanish is being prohibited.”



I would really love to see ESL teachers or translators. That was severely lacking for all the elementary school kids where I went to elementary.”

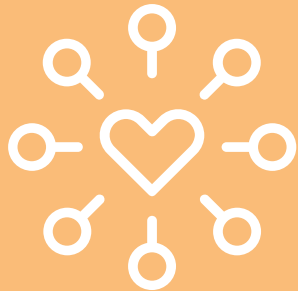


I think teachers should have an opportunity to learn to communicate in the parents’ languages.”

10

A Strong System of Wrap-Around Supports and Community Partnerships

- Increase the number of providers to meet or exceed professional association recommendations.
- Ensure culturally competent and linguistically diverse providers.
- Provide competitive compensation and benefits for all providers.
- Ensure adequate staffing to manage partnerships and provide access to services.
- Offer community workshops or trainings/conferences that parents can attend.



Rec. 10 | What Participants Shared



Our school has a student body of 2000 with one social worker. If we had the Leandro money, or more, we could hire more social workers. And for our community of students, I'm telling you it would not be a waste.”



What we need is an engaged school community team to support overall wellness.”



We need more conversations about mental health and cultural competence in schools.”

11

A Robust and Multifaceted Family Engagement System

- Ensure two-way communication between schools and parents.
- Support school leaders in building/rebuilding trust.
- Empower parents to participate meaningfully in decision-making.
- Ensure that parent engagement is culturally relevant and linguistically diverse.



Rec. 11 | What Participants Shared



The schools here are like a court, where anything you say can be used against you. The schools are so attached to protocols and don't care what I have to say."



In Durham, there is a lot of issues with schools and ICE checkpoints. They started putting them near the schools, so how and why would parents go anywhere? And the first thing they ask when you go to school are the background check. There are so many barriers."



We need school leaders who can repair and build trust with communities."

12

A Positive School Climate and System of Behavior Supports in Every School

- Use engaging and relevant curriculum and instruction.
- Address and change criminalizing adult mindsets about BIPOC students.
- Increase social and emotional awareness and skills for all school members.
- Ensure that all schools have conflict prevention and resolution programs.
- Reduce or eliminate suspensions.



Rec. 12 | What Participants Said



You're not going to force kids to come to school. If kids want to be there, they will participate and play, so why don't we focus on creating the types of environments where teachers and kids want to be?"

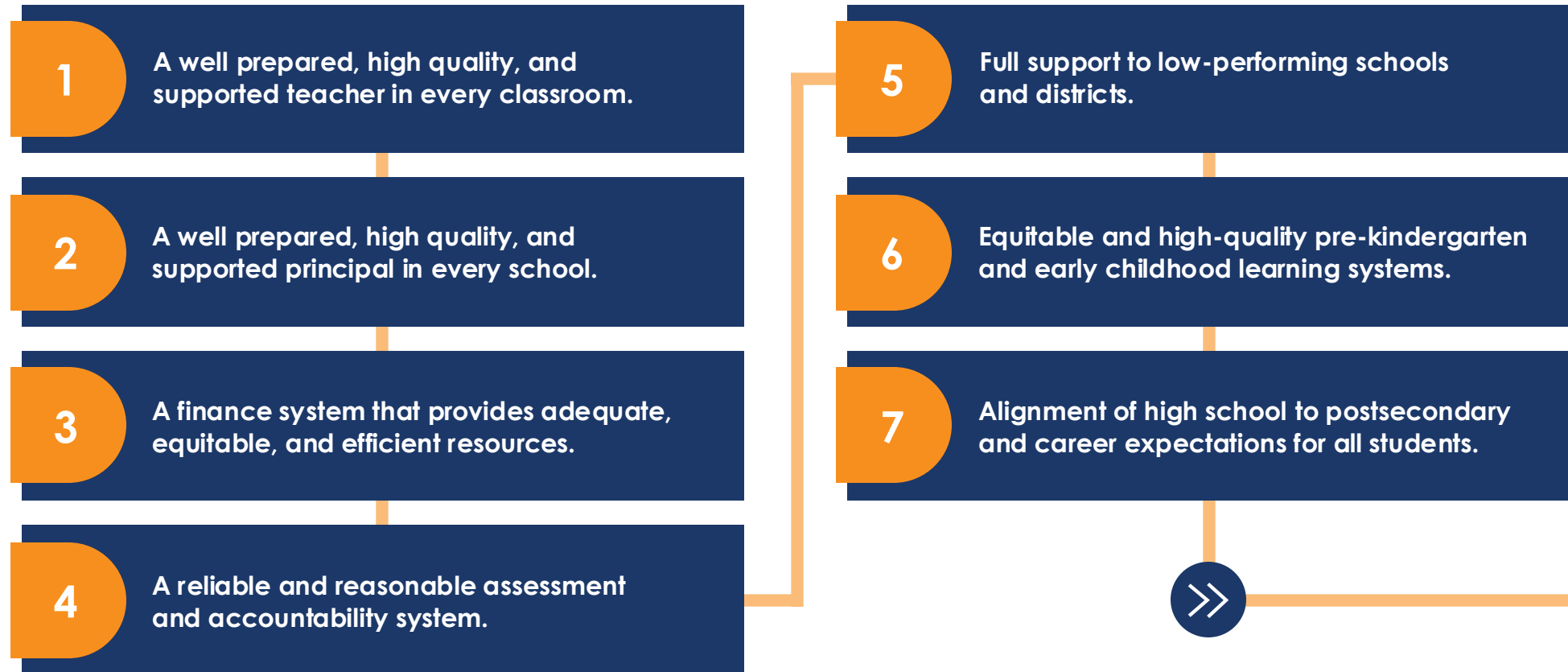


A lot of people are going to say, well, 'we need to suspend kids more' [but] we really just need more adults around."



When you cut down on the suspensions, you cut down on the dropout. And when you provide mentorship on campus, it gives students an opportunity to have that person on campus that they can go to, that they can talk to, that can help them meet their needs when they're spiraling."

“Every Child Thrives”: Recommendations 1-7



“Every Child Thrives”: Recommendations 8-12

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Thank you!

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the web**

Learn more about the NEPC

If you'd like to learn more about the National Education Policy Center, please feel free to explore our website!

<https://nepc.colorado.edu/>

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Place-Based Partnerships

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Reference

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