



Taking Equal Opportunity Rhetoric Seriously: Envisioning and Costing-Out a P–12 Public School System in North Carolina Where Every Child Thrives

A Working Document

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Executive Summary

What would it take to truly close the vast opportunity gaps in pre-K–12 public education in the United States—far beyond the weak standard in common use of “adequacy” based on test scores? This report presents findings from the North Carolina part of a national costing-out study called the “Price of Opportunity,” which seeks to identify and estimate the cost of the resources and programs required to achieve this ambitious goal. The study also considers the balance between educational, social, and economic policy systems needed to eliminate educational opportunity gaps. The approach, findings, and cost estimates presented in this report inform a key part of the national Price of Opportunity study.

The “Every Child Thrives” Standard

This report provides estimates for a pre-K through 12 (P–12) public school system in North Carolina where every child can flourish, drawing on the groundwork laid by the North Carolina Justice Center and numerous other supporters of public education in North Carolina. We define an “Every Child Thrives” standard as one that ensures that every public school has the resources and programs needed to overcome the challenges facing students inside and outside of school. The system that meets this standard provides students from all backgrounds and circumstances with educational opportunities that prepare them to succeed economically and socially in college, careers, and life. We hope this report extends the ways that policymakers, scholars, and state and community stakeholders discuss and conceptualize the educational resources needed to close opportunity gaps.

Developing Recommendations and Estimating Costs in North Carolina

To identify needs and estimate costs of an Every Child Thrives public school system in North Carolina, we employ a modified professional judgment panel (PJP) approach. While PJPs are a common method for estimating the cost of educational systems, policy change, and programs, our modified approach, referred to as a Price of Opportunity Panel (POP), departs from the traditional PJP approach in five significant ways:

- The POP approach increases collaboration as part of entering a state’s P–12 policy and political environment.
- POPs raise and broaden the expectations P–12 public schools are asked to meet.
- POPs identify variation in educational needs across geography, demography, and stakeholder roles.
- POPs expand the term “expert” to include youth, families, and community members.
- POPs widen the domain of educational resources and programs under consideration

This report presents 12 categories of educational recommendations that emerged from the POPs and that are aligned with those of the *Leandro v. North Carolina* litigation, a seminal case in North Carolina school finance. We estimate that the total cost of implementing an Every Child Thrives educational system in the state would be between \$36.6 billion and \$43.4 billion, or roughly \$23,600 to \$28,000 per pupil. This estimated cost of an Every Child Thrives school system represents an increase of \$18.4 to 25.2 billion over current expenditures on P–12 public education in North Carolina (a 201 to 238% percent increase).

We conclude this report with a discussion of what these estimates signify for North Carolina and public education in the United States.

Introduction

Resources for education and the money needed to buy those resources significantly shape the academic and life outcomes of children, especially historically marginalized and minoritized children in the United States (Carter & Welner, 2013; Jackson, 2020; Jackson & Mackevicius, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Determining the level of funding needed for P–12 public schools to be successful is a central financial challenge for federal, state, and local policymakers. This challenge includes defining indicators of success and allocating resources in ways that support successful outcomes (Baker & Green, 2012; Levin et al., 2019; Picus et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2005). Stakeholders who study or are engaged in determining educational costs, or the levels of spending needed to meet a given educational outcome, have grappled with these questions for decades (Baker & Green, 2012).

“Adequate” Is Not Enough to Equalize Opportunity

Scholars who specialize in estimating necessary, or “adequate,” educational costs typically generate their recommendations by relying on quantifiable measures, such as standardized test scores, and on policy-informed thresholds of success, such as a state-determined levels of proficiency on educational content and performance standards (Taylor et al., 2005). This approach is aligned with the prevailing policy paradigm of standards-based reform. But it minimizes or overlooks the resources and programs needed for closing gaps in enriching learning opportunities and addressing social issues like poverty and racism (Carter & Welner, 2013). If we were content to reduce the purpose of schools to meeting basic proficiency on student test scores, these approaches might suffice.

However, U.S. P–12 public schools are expected to fulfill a broader role. Politicians and policymakers have regularly and increasingly referred to P–12 schools as America’s Great Equalizers (Kantor & Lowe, 2013; Shelton, 2023; Welner, 2021), a term put forth in the work of Horace Mann (1848). In the rhetoric of modern politicians, the idea of schools as the Great Equalizer is deployed to convey that schools are the most effective means of combating poverty. Yet, when used in this manner, Great Equalizer rhetoric is often accompanied by few substantive educational changes and few, if any, additional resources. This perpetuates the misconception that schools alone, as we currently conceive of them, can equalize educational and life opportunities for children from any background. It also justifies the regression of social policy, exacerbating widespread childhood poverty and discriminatory social norms.

What Resources and Programs Are Needed to Meet In-School and Out-of-School Challenges?

Our national Price of Opportunity project asserts that for schools to truly become Great Equalizers in this sociopolitical environment, they must be equipped with the resources and programs necessary

to address both in-school and out-of-school challenges facing their students. Those challenges arise from inequities due to American pathologies such as racialized poverty and concentrated poverty. The national study seeks to identify and estimate the cost of the resources and programs required to close opportunity gaps for children in the United States, either through enhanced P–12 public schooling or through addressing those larger societal pathologies.

This report presents findings from one state, North Carolina, to show one approach to estimating the cost of the schooling-focused half of the national Price of Opportunity study (future publications will address reforms needed outside of schools to address the larger societal pathologies). The report provides estimates for a P–12 public school system in North Carolina where every child can flourish, drawing on the groundwork laid by the North Carolina Justice Center and numerous other supporters of P–12 public education in North Carolina. We define an “Every Child Thrives” standard as one that ensures every public school has the resources and programs needed to overcome the challenges facing students inside and outside of school. The system that meets this standard provides students from all backgrounds and circumstances with educational opportunities that prepare them to succeed economically and socially in college, careers, and life. We hope this report extends the ways that policymakers, scholars, and state and community stakeholders discuss and conceptualize the educational resources needed to close P–12 opportunity gaps.

Developing Recommendations and Estimating Costs

To identify needs and estimate costs of an Every Child Thrives public school system in North Carolina, we use a modified professional judgment panel (PJP) approach. While PJPs are a common method for estimating the cost of educational systems, policy change, and programs, our modified approach, which we call a Price of Opportunity Panel (POP), departs from the traditional PJP approach in five significant ways:

- The POP approach increases collaboration as part of entering a state’s P–12 policy and political environment.
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- POPs expand the term “expert” to include youth, families, and community members.
- POPs widen the domain of educational resources and programs under consideration.

This report presents reforms in 12 educational categories that are based on the recommendations of the POPs and aligned with those of the *Leandro v. North Carolina* litigation, a seminal case in North Carolina school finance. Our methods are described in detail in Part 2 of this report. We estimate that the total cost of implementing an Every Child Thrives P–12 educational system would be between \$36.6 billion

and \$43.4 billion, or roughly \$23,600 to \$28,000 per pupil. This estimated cost of the Every Child Thrives school system represents an increase of \$18.4 to 25.2 billion over current expenditures in P–12 public education in North Carolina (a 201 to 238% percent increase).

Reimagining Educational Institutions within Our Present Sociopolitical Environment

This range of costs is the outcome of a thoroughly reimagined educational framework that extends well beyond conventional school practices. This is because the Every Child Thrives standard that is necessary to meet Great Equalizer goals exceeds the notions of adequacy used to determine P–12 educational funding today. Our standard requires schools not only to serve as educational resources but also to dismantle barriers that undermine students’ opportunities to learn. The increased costs reflect an approximation of the expenses of addressing systemic issues such as racism and cyclical poverty within educational institutions. Our estimates thus operate under the unfortunately realistic assumption (though certainly not the suggestion) that lawmakers will do nothing to address the nation’s broader societal systems, and that those systems will continue to create large opportunity gaps.

We asked our panelists to limit recommendations to resources that could realistically be provided within schools, meaning that the resulting recommendations could only indirectly address opportunity gaps arising from inequitable access to, for instance, healthcare, childcare, nutrition, and housing. This points to a foundational problem of looking to the nation’s public schools to play the Great Equalizer role that is often assigned to them. But our estimates aim to offer a preliminary assessment of the costs linked to those responsibilities that are already placed on schools in our present sociopolitical environment, which is to furnish every child with roughly equal opportunities to learn and thrive in life.

The Conceptual Nature of Our Estimates

This report’s range of costs derived from the POP approach is intended to serve as a rough estimate of what the Every Child Thrives bottom line might be. We aim to be as transparent as possible about our assumptions as we explore concepts and present conceptual policy ideas. We recognize that precision is not achievable given our methods, but we prioritize accuracy and reasonableness as much as possible. We encourage others to undertake similar exercises while challenging and developing our assumptions.

In Parts 1–5, we delve into the details of our costing-out process, and in Part 6 we present four costing-case studies that make up a significant percentage of the total estimated costs. We conclude this report with a discussion of what these estimates signify for North Carolina and P–12 public education in the United States.

Part 1. The Challenge: Opportunity Gaps and the Myth of the “Great Equalizer”

Educational opportunity gaps continue to limit the lives of millions of children in the United States (Carter & Welner, 2013). Eleven million U.S. children live in poverty, and a disproportionate number of them are Black, Brown, Indigenous, and/or reside in rural areas (Haider, 2021). Despite our status as the wealthiest country in the world, childhood poverty and racialized poverty persist at devastating rates.

These outcomes are a choice. They are the result of political decisions that have, among many other things, curtailed social welfare programs, inadequately funded schools, and perpetuated exclusion and discrimination against marginalized groups (Adamson, et al., 2020; Baker, 2018; Kantor & Lowe, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Nevertheless, American politicians repeat the expectation that the nation’s 90,000 public schools, especially those serving the most economically disadvantaged students, will provide their students with such high-quality educational opportunities that they will serve as society’s Great Equalizers—even without adequate financial resources.

Horace Mann’s 1848 use of the “Great Equalizer” terminology was never meant to imply true equality. Mann’s thinking was simply that public schooling could sufficiently mitigate poverty to stave off misery or revolution (Welner, 2021). Politicians today continue to flippantly offer up this rhetoric to shift the burden of societal progress and equity onto schools (Kantor & Lowe, 2013; Welner, 2021). Moreover, perpetuating the American myth of schools as the Great Equalizer and, implicitly, as the solution to racism and economic inequality, has hindered prospects that policymakers might genuinely address children’s needs. This is despite evidence indicating that average differences in measured school quality explain only a fifth to a third of the variance in student outcomes, leaving out-of-school and unmeasured factors to explain up to 80% of the variance in those outcomes (Welner & LaCour, 2019).

When policymakers rhetorically position schools as the cure for poverty, they reduce the role of social policy and leave discriminatory policies against marginalized and minoritized groups untouched (Kantor & Lowe, 2013). Unfortunately, in this reality, schools not only fail to serve as Great Equalizers, they also tend to diminish democratic, educational, and economic opportunities for economically disadvantaged and racially minoritized students—through harmful policies like high-stakes accountability and racialized school discipline.

As illustrated in Figure 1, in the existing system, schools in affluent areas generally offer more enriching learning opportunities to students who are less impacted by poverty and racial discrimination. Conversely, schools in economically disadvantaged areas, serving students who disproportionately experience poverty and racial discrimination, generally lack the financial resources to provide enriched learning opportunities.

The current policy environment has yielded diminished standards, aiming for a version of “adequacy” that provides resources that may allow most students to achieve, for instance, sufficiently on state exams—but leaves them far short of having equal or equitable opportunities for academic and life success. With this existing mindset, it will be near impossible to achieve the goal of schools rising to the level of a Great Equalizer.

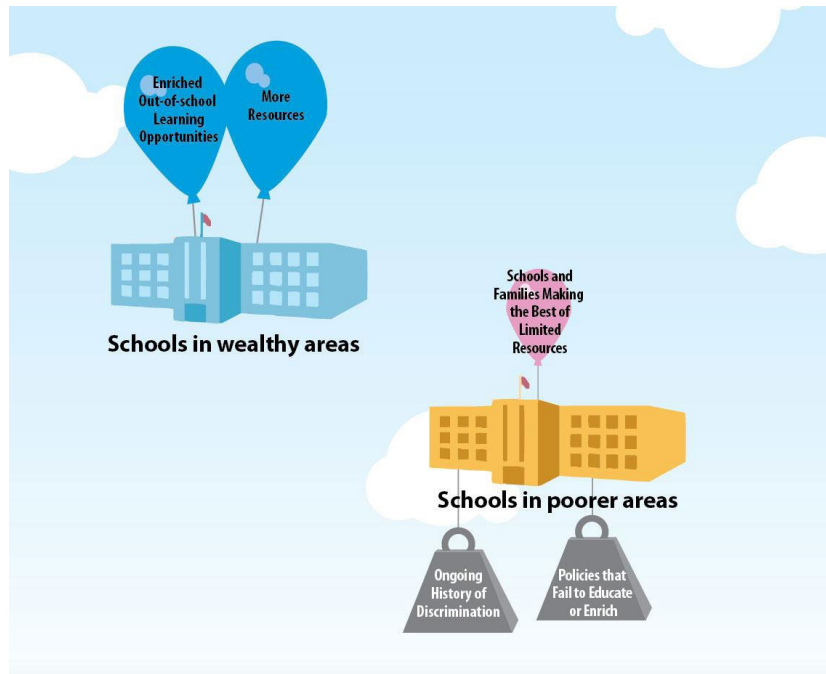


Figure 1 | Inequalities in School Funding

Taking the Rhetoric Seriously

We contend, then, that the success of public schools requires addressing one of two situations. One option is for social policies to seriously confront the systemic conditions of poverty and racial discrimination outside of schools, thereby placing only realistic expectations on the schools themselves. The second option is to provide schools with markedly greater financial resources and programs sufficient to tackle both in-school and out-of-school obstacles. In other words, either the economic and social conditions outside of schools must improve, or schools must be equipped with resources to counteract societal inequities. While the former would resolve the root causes of educational inequities, policymakers have typically favored the latter, at least rhetorically. The Price of Opportunity project asks what that rhetoric, if pursued in a serious way, would look like in practice.

These two policy alternatives are illustrated in Figures 2 and 3. Figure 2 depicts a school capable of overcoming societal challenges such as poverty, racial discrimination, and policies hindering enriched learning. The balloons in this figure symbolize the school-centric policies necessary to achieve this goal. Figure 3 presents a policy approach that directly addresses societal challenges through social policy, enabling schools to focus on delivering high-quality teaching and learning.

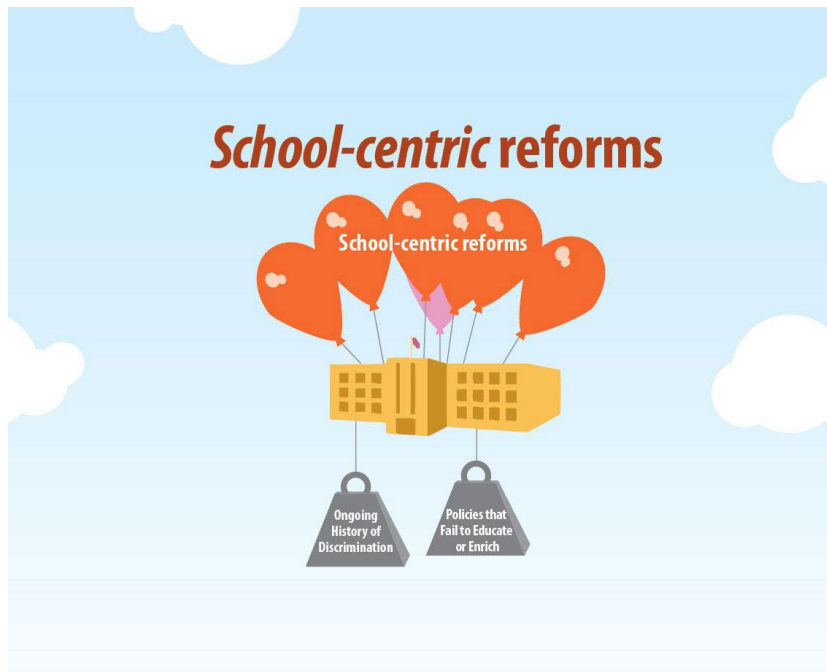


Figure 2 | School-centric reforms

The broader Price of Opportunity Project addresses both policy alternatives. But in this report, we focus on the policy scenario envisioned in Figure 2, a school system with the necessary educational resources, programs, personnel, and practices to provide all children with approximately equal opportunities to flourish in their life, career, and education. In this report, we call this the Every Child Thrives standard for public education. (In our broader research project, we envision and conceptualize this as the Great Equalizer standard.)



Figure 3 | Systemic reforms

Beyond *Leandro*: The Price of Opportunity in North Carolina

Because this report was developed in partnership with stakeholders in North Carolina who have fought diligently for public education and increases in financial resources for P–12 public schools, we frame the findings within ongoing school finance discussions in North Carolina. The report details the responsibility the state of North Carolina has to its P–12 students, as outlined in *Leandro v. North Carolina*.

The *Leandro* case holds significant importance in shaping North Carolina’s approach to education funding and delivery. The case, named for the lead plaintiffs, Kathleen *Leandro* and her son Robert, a student from Hoke County, symbolizes the push for fair educational opportunities for all North Carolina students. Legal proceedings began in 1994 when five low-wealth school districts filed a lawsuit alleging that the state was not meeting its constitutional duty to provide a “uniform system of free public schools.” The argument was that funding and resource disparities among districts led to unequal educational opportunities, violating students’ constitutional rights. Ongoing hearings, reviews, and decisions related to the *Leandro* case have transpired at various points over the last 30 years, with courts appointing consultants and experts to evaluate the state’s progress in meeting its constitutional obligation. These assessments have typically centered on funding adequacy, teacher quality, school infrastructure, and educational outcomes.

We hope that North Carolina’s leaders fully address their constitutional obligations under *Leandro*; doing so will undoubtedly benefit the state’s children. Yet our goal in entering the policy and sociopolitical landscape in North Carolina with the Price of Opportunity project has been to understand what resources and programs school systems need in order to provide students with more than these minimally constitutionally required educational opportunities. We want to estimate, instead, what is needed to provide equal opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds and circumstances to succeed economically and socially in college, careers, and life. In contrast to the current limited scope of school systems, the transformed Every Child Thrives system outlined in this report would be resourced to address the systemic challenges facing students inside and outside of schools, including poverty and racism.

How the North Carolina Study Fits into the Price of Opportunity Project

The broader Price of Opportunity project asks two overarching questions:

- What would it cost to invest in within-school resources and programs that would make public schools in the United States a true Great Equalizer, ensuring that students can overcome the out-of-school obstacles posed by poverty and discrimination? (Policy alternative depicted in Figure 2)

- What would it cost to sustain a robust and comprehensive set of social policies outside of schools—addressing needs in areas such as healthcare, housing, food security, employment, and racism—that directly attend to the out-of-school obstacles students and their families face? (Policy alternative depicted in Figure 3)

To answer the first question, we used the Price of Opportunity Panel (POP) approach (described in Parts 2 and 3) to conduct deep dives into a sampling of U.S. states. Colorado was the pilot state, followed by North Carolina. (Michigan is the third state, and we are currently deciding on the states to follow.)

The process described in this report was designed to seek the vision of those public-school advocates with the most in-depth, on-the-ground knowledge of the needs of North Carolina’s students and their schools. The visions that these participants offered are necessarily unique to them; a different set of participants would offer somewhat different visions. That said, the participants in the first three states in this study have described an Every Child Thrives system of schools with exceedingly similar elements.

The second question will be addressed in future reports emerging from the broader Price of Opportunity project.

A “Working Document”

We ask, then, that readers keep several things in mind as they consider this report. First, the Every Child Thrives system described here for North Carolina is a high-fidelity summary of the picture painted by our participants. That part of this study should be considered final, although we may offer more details in later publications.

Second, the costing-out of specific recommendations should be considered interim, since that part of the study will later be standardized across all the researched states. For instance, based on our North Carolina POP panelists’ recommendations, we estimated a need to assign one restorative justice (RJ) coordinator to any school with over 200 students, while smaller schools with fewer than 200 students would be allocated a 0.5 RJ coordinator. If other states’ recommendations include RJ coordinators and consistently come it at higher or lower numbers, we will raise or lower the North Carolina bottom-line numbers accordingly as part of our national calculations, explaining those adjustments in related publications.

This report is provided at a relatively early stage of our research process, as a “working” document—one that is subject to modification as we learn more from other states and as we refine our approaches. We hope this report finds a helpful middle ground between over-providing details at an early stage and a lack of needed transparency. We recognize that school finance scholars may reasonably critique the level of detail we have decided to include in this report. To illustrate our methods and estimates, in Part 6 we offer several costing cases in Part 6 that begin to provide the details we know matter.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, this study is exploratory and conceptual in nature. We have attempted to provide concrete numbers in as accurate and reasonable a way as possible. But they are intended only as a rough estimate of what an Every Child Thrives bottom line might be, based on the specific context we've explored in North Carolina. We aim to be as transparent as possible about our assumptions and our process, and we encourage others to replicate our process without expecting to necessarily replicate our numbers.

Part 2. What Resources Do Schools Need?

Building a New Approach

Historically, researchers have relied on two types of costing-out approaches: “top-down” and “bottom-up” methods (Taylor et al., 2005). Both approaches use standardized test scores as a proxy for school quality.

Top-Down Approaches

Top-down approaches leverage quantitative measures of student outcomes and data on per pupil expenditures to predict the cost of raising student outcomes to a desired level. This approach is useful when estimating the total cost of a desired outcome across a large set of schools, such as all U.S. P–12 public schools. For example, recent work by Baker and colleagues (2020) used a top-down approach (the cost-function approach) to estimate the costs associated with raising performance on standardized tests to the national average for all school districts in the United States. They estimated that school funding would need to increase nationally by \$150 billion to achieve this goal.

Such top-down approaches are enormously useful but suffer from a “black box” limitation because they rely on expenditure data as a proxy for cost and they employ statistical methods to estimate total cost, providing no indication of the inputs required to improve student performance.

Bottom-Up Approaches

The alternative, bottom-up approaches have their own drawbacks. They require a great deal of time, money, and experts in identifying and designing the resources and programs necessary to achieve a desired educational outcome. These recommendations are then costed out using data on the individual cost of each item. Levin and colleagues (2018), for example, used the PJP approach to estimate the cost of “adequacy” in California’s K–12 schools. They conducted PJPs in northern and southern California, estimating that the state would need to raise educational expenditures by \$25.6 billion to meet minimal adequacy.

The PJP approach, as originally developed, relies on educational expert practitioners to deliberate on the educational resources and programs necessary to meet a given standard of education. Typically, this standard is determined by a state’s constitutional duty to K–12 education, as interpreted by the state’s courts. The PJP approach has been used for many K–12 “adequacy” studies (Augenblick et al., 2001; Levin et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2005).

The *Leandro* Plan: Combining Both Approaches

WestEd’s (2019) Sound Basic Education for All report for North Carolina used aspects of both approaches. The research team focused first on understanding the inequities in the distribution of funding, then assessed the flexibility and stability in existing systems, and finally conducted an adequacy study. They used PJPs and focus groups to inform all aspects of the study, but a cost function (or top-down) approach was the primary way they addressed adequacy. This impressive WestEd study is the basis for the Comprehensive Remedial Plan, colloquially referred to as simply the *Leandro* plan, as well as the regularly contested state-submitted timeline and planned action steps for meeting a “sound basic education” (i.e., adequacy) (*Leandro*, 1997; McColl, 2024).

The Price of Opportunity Panel Approach

Embarking on our work, we considered existing approaches and concluded that we needed to build on the PJP bottom-up approach because it facilitates the identification, design, and estimation of the costs of programs and resources needed to meet an educational goal within a specific policy environment, such as a state. Moreover, the PJP approach is easily modified to employ a variety of different standards. Because the Price of Opportunity project explores an ambitious vision for schools, and because the PJP bottom-up approach creates a space for discussion about the conceptualization of educational standards and the resources needed to meet an ambitious standard, we developed a Great Equalizer standard:

A “Great Equalizer” public school has the resources and programs needed to overcome the challenges facing students inside and outside of school. This system provides students from all backgrounds and circumstances with educational opportunities that prepare them to succeed economically and socially in college, careers, and life.

To identify the programs and resources required to meet this standard, we created and introduced the Price of Opportunity Panel (POP) approach. This costing-out method is designed to identify and estimate the cost of the resources and programs needed to close P–12 educational opportunity gaps, building on and significantly modifying the PJP approach. Embedded in the POP approach are five sets of assumptions, each of which is discussed in the following sections:

- the researchers’ license for conducting the costing-out study
- the educational standard that should be met
- the geographic and demographic variance in educational needs
- the experts most qualified to speak to these issues
- the type of resources and programs that should be taken into consideration

Consulting Before Entering a State’s P–12 Policy and Political Environment

The traditional PJP method is typically initiated following an invitation from a state legislature or counsel as part of school finance litigation. The aim is generally for the results to inform a revision of the state’s school finance formula (the WestEd study was court-ordered to identify the resources necessary within North Carolina’s current finance formula).

We conceived the Price of Opportunity Panels to achieve similar ends, but their origin was markedly different. As part of our broader project, these panels were undertaken as a collaborative effort with a group of stakeholders, including but not limited to community organizations and education advocacy groups, university researchers, and policymakers. Thus, before entering the P–12 political and policy environment in North Carolina, we ensured that our project was of value to stakeholders and aligned with current state efforts.

During this process, our consultations were targeted to people and groups that shared our broad goal of understanding whatever enhancements to resources would be needed in a school system to meet the Every Child Thrives standard. Accordingly, we did not consult with individuals or groups dedicated to constraining school resources (e.g., anti-tax organizations). We did not actively seek out individuals or groups committed to a specific school reform design (such as those related to testing or school choice). Nor did we seek out expertise on human resources issues such as hiring, dismissal, terms of employment, and due process, that could have an indirect impact on costs, but also could take deliberations down less productive rabbit holes.

Raising and Broadening the Expectations P–12 Public Schools Are Asked to Meet

The standard typically used by PJP panelists in P–12 education is determined by a state’s constitutional duty. We departed from this convention by adopting a standard that would close educational gaps for all P–12 students, which we termed the Great Equalizer standard. With this standard, we envision a public school system that counterbalances societal inequities, providing students from all backgrounds with educational opportunities that equip them to succeed economically and socially in college, careers, citizenship, and life. Within this report, we refer to this more ambitious educational standard as the Every Child Thrives standard.

Given that our standard shifted away from measurable outcomes of educational achievement such as standardized tests, toward access to educational resources and programs, it requires a bold approach to costing-out an uncharted school system. The approach must describe a system that not only does not yet exist but is challenging even to imagine within the current U.S. sociopolitical context.

Scholars drawing on concepts like “radical dreaming” and “freedom dreams” directly address this challenge. For instance, Bleiker and Butler (2016) explain that Indigenous people, subject to genocide resulting from colonization, have often had to imagine or radically dream of a world that “merged past, present, and future through a visualization of alternative narratives to the ones that dominant political discourses promulgate” (p. 72). Robin Kelley (2002), in the preface to his book, describes freedom dreams:

Trying to envision “somewhere in advance of nowhere”... is an extremely difficult task, yet it is a matter of great urgency. Without new visions, we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us. [Internal cites omitted.]

Following a similar path, our study seeks to inspire a dreaming approach to participant deliberations.

The impact of this shift in educational standard on the types of resources, programs, and associated costs is depicted in Figure 4. If we consider funding recommendations from costing-out studies as a staircase, the floor and first four steps of that staircase represent the current funding approaches—which generally use standardized test scores as a proxy for school quality. Each step represents a higher expectation in academic performance on standardized tests—proficiency versus national averages, for example. Conversely, if costing-out studies focus on the cost of closing P–12 gaps in

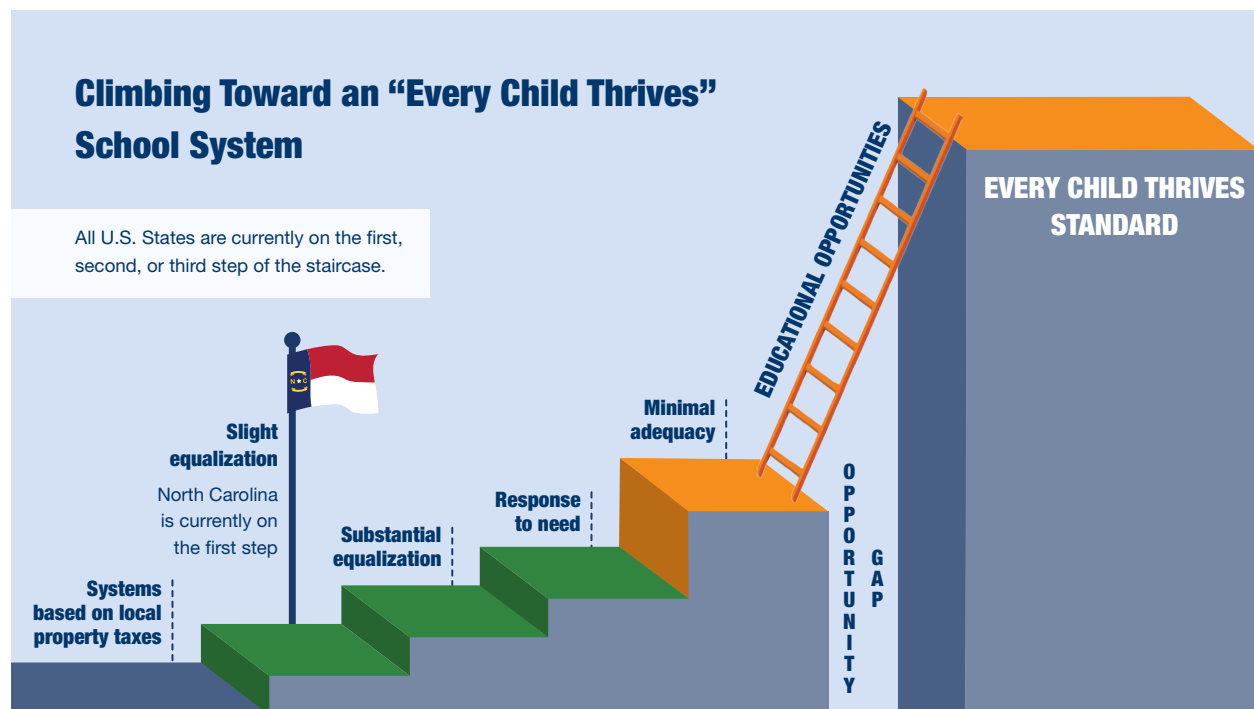


Figure 4 | Climbing toward an “Every Child Thrives” School System

opportunities to learn, as we propose, the resource needs are likely to be greater, and the costs are likely to be significantly higher. This is represented by climbing the ladder to the last step on the staircase, illustrating the substantial leap between current expenditures and the expenditures needed to close opportunity gaps.

Identifying Variance across Geography, Demographics, and Stakeholder Role

The PJP approach is crafted to highlight variations in geographic and demographic contexts. Researchers can and do enhance PJP studies by incorporating multiple district-level and regional panels, enabling an exploration of how resource needs and costs might differ across these diverse contexts. For instance, Levin and colleagues (2018) conducted two statewide panels to capture the nuances in the educational needs of schools in both northern and southern California; WestEd (2019) conducted three PJPs, pulling experts from across geographies, demographics, and roles in North Carolina.

In our exploration of variance, we deviated from the traditional PJP methodology in two key aspects: site and stakeholder. Regional and community meetings served as platforms to initially conceptualize what constitutes the ideal school, drawing insights from community, school-site, and educational stakeholder groups. This involved engaging teachers, administrators, families, students, and other community members in community conversations, particularly those from historically marginalized communities.

The process also actively sought the community voices most capable of articulating children's needs in those communities. Our intent was to align our work with existing and ongoing community dialogues and deliberations concerning educational resources. Moreover, we aimed for our deliberations to capture community beliefs, values, and reflections on how public schools could and should optimally serve students, reflecting communities' collective wisdom developed over time.

Expanding the Term “Expert” to Include Youth, Families, and Community Members

The POP process emphasizes the key knowledge of participants who understand students' out-of-school obstacles. To address this, we drew on an expanded pool of expertise. Typically, PJPs have relied on educational practitioners with experience in providing public education, such as teachers, principals, district-level support staff, and administrators. We built on that experience considerably, adding parents, community activists, and youth, alongside educational practitioners, in both the preliminary convenings and the statewide POP convening.

In our second and third PJP modifications, we elevated expectations for schools and conducted a more thorough examination of variance in educational needs, based on an assumption about the type of

participants with the most expertise to effectively address these issues. Knowledge about what children and youth need to address opportunity gaps within schools is dispersed among various stakeholders: the students themselves, their parents, community members, teachers, school administrators, and other school community members such as counselors and social workers (Yosso, 2005; Barajas-Lopez & Ishimaru, 2016). Teachers and high-school students from rural communities may highlight different needs than those in suburban or urban areas. Community members might offer different insights than mental health workers, and parents of emerging-bilingual students may see different needs than other parents.

Given the formidable, multifaceted challenge presented by the Every Child Thrives standard, all the needs identified by these diverse stakeholders should be considered. Therefore, the process of designing an Every Child Thrives school system must involve this broader group of experts, incorporating their varied knowledge and expertise. Diversity within these groups is also crucial.

Widening the Domain of Resources and Programs under Consideration

The ambitious Every Child Thrives standard called for participants to envision far beyond the resources and program designs that would merely yield satisfactory outcomes on standardized test scores or acceptable graduation rates—the typical PJP standard. The resources needed to approximately equalize a students' opportunities in life are substantially higher and include resources and programs not typically classified as educational, such as those that address learning obstacles related to children's healthcare, food or housing insecurity, and other barriers often tied to racism.

We actively encouraged panelists to “dream” about the necessary resources for schools under the higher standard, in ways that are not limited by political constraints. The panelists expanded their focus to include issues such as citizenship, economic opportunity, and addressing opportunity gaps, rather than being confined to a narrow concept of academic preparation. Panelists were specifically prompted to exercise their judgment in crafting programs and identifying resources. This included contemplating resources that might not currently exist or have never been traditionally considered viable in schools, but that could conceivably be provided in schools. (Recommendations that were truly unachievable within schools would be excluded in later stages of analysis.)

Part 3. Data Collection and Analysis

Between 2021 and 2023, our collaboration with the North Carolina Justice Center (NCJC) unfolded across five phases. Phases 1 to 3 focused on data collection from a diverse group of participants, building toward identifying programs and recommendations for an Every Child Thrives system. Phase 4 delved into data analysis and costing-out, and the current Phase 5 involves disseminating our research through this report and research-based tools for NCJC partner organizations and the broader public.

Phase 1

In Phase 1, we laid the groundwork for our research by establishing relationships and gaining an understanding of the North Carolina context. An extensive literature review and nine one-on-one interviews with parents, a school board member, an attorney, and educators provided foundational knowledge for our team of school finance and P–12 public education in North Carolina, setting the stage for informed discussions in subsequent project phases. At the end of Phase 1, the NEPC researchers compiled a list of approximately 23 individuals and/or organizations to reach out to, in order to complete and support subsequent phases.

Phase 2

Phase 2 involved regional community meetings, engaging individuals in five focus groups across the state. The first community meeting, hosted by the Education Justice Alliance in Raleigh, drew 12 participants. A second meeting in Durham with six participants was hosted by Immersion for Spanish Language Acquisition (ISLA) and was conducted in Spanish. Our third meeting was hosted by the Down East Partnership for Children in Rocky Mount and drew roughly 30 participants. Our fourth community meeting was hosted in Wilmington by Community Conversations and had 70 participants. The final meeting was hosted in Hoke by the NAACP, drawing 30 participants. These sessions were facilitated with the support of NCJC partners soliciting responses to key questions. Data collected in Phase 2 were used to complement information gathered in Phase 1 and prepare for Phase 3, our statewide convening

Phase 3

Phase 3 is where we undertook our statewide Price of Opportunity Panel (POP), where panelists with a range of experiences and expertise collaborated to design the necessary programs and resources for establishing an Every Child Thrives P–12 public school system in North Carolina. Building on information collected in Phases 1 and 2, POP panelists were tasked with determining what educational programs would be required for realizing the Every Child Thrives vision. Held via Zoom in January 2022, the POP discussions ran approximately eight hours, with a separate 90-minute orientation meeting held several days prior, to introduce the Every Child Thrives standard and set discussion norms. Panelists were broken into three small groups, each with two facilitators from the research team. Facilitators provided simple starting topics for their groups based on issues raised by participants in Phases 1 and 2 (e.g.,

“family engagement” or “early childhood”), though panelists were welcome to interpret each topic broadly or to suggest additional topics. Facilitators asked probing questions to encourage specificity in recommendations as well as to tease out the reasoning for recommendations, which would help us justify decisions in Phase 4. The POP was audio and video recorded, then transcribed.

To select Phase 3 participants, we carefully considered expertise and diversity of race, culture, gender, and geography, as well as capacity to engage in thoughtful and considerate discussions. We also looked at how power dynamics might interfere with discussions. For example, the presence of a state legislator might prompt others to defer, as might a superintendent or a union leader (and the latter two may not feel as though they could speak freely in front of each other).

We worked with community partners to identify potential participants and did multiple rounds of outreach. The goal was to assemble a statewide panel of 20 to 25 participants, with a balanced representation of in-school and out-of-school perspectives. Unfortunately, only 15 participants attended, a limitation of this study. While diverse in race, gender, and expertise, all participants were from the central and eastern part of the state (i.e., Wake County, Hoke County, New Hanover County) and most came from urban or suburban settings. Ten participants worked in schools—four teachers, two support personnel, and four administrators—along with one current student and two recent graduates. Our five out-of-school experts included parents and community activists advocating for racial equity, better access to early childhood education, and broad support for public schools. Many of our participants fit into multiple categories (i.e., a member of a community activist group also provides support services for a school district). Despite the small panel size, discussions were rich.

Phase 4

In Phase 4, we first analyzed all of the collected data from Phases 1, 2, and 3 to derive a rich definition of the key components of the Every Child Thrives standard in North Carolina. Data preparation began with the coding of transcripts from statewide panel discussions. The list of codes had been generated prior to this stage in North Carolina through a mixture of deductive and inductive processes. An initial list was generated from prior research and understanding of key education finance issues, then those codes were tested during practice coding of the transcripts from both the Colorado pilot work and transcripts from a POP held with education researchers. At that stage, some codes were eliminated, and new codes were added as data from North Carolina were encountered that did not fit within the existing list. Excerpts were retroactively coded as these new codes emerged. This coding resulted in 1,018 total excerpts coded into 19 separate categories across all transcripts.

Following the initial coding, we gave all excerpts in each of the categories a second read. Members of the research team reviewed the coded transcript excerpts and wrote memos that captured overlapping themes, with an emphasis on the descriptions of programs and solutions to systemic problems noted by the panelists. These memos were compiled to construct definitions of an Every Child Thrives school system for each of the 19 categories, drawing features directly from panelist descriptions. We then reviewed the *Leandro* “Comprehensive Remedial Plan” to determine where that plan overlapped with our code categories and where it did not. In those cases where *Leandro* was clearly aligned with our

panelist definitions, we combined our definitions and category descriptions with the *Leandro* categories. We created separate standalone definitions for the categories that fell outside of the Comprehensive Remedial Plan.

We reviewed all POP transcripts and considered contributions in the Zoom chat to identify recommendations that could be costed out. Some recommendations were explicit (e.g., panelists provided a specific case load ratio for school social workers) and some evolved over the course the discussion. We developed a list of recommendations for estimating quantitative costs for each small group, listening to recordings as necessary to accurately code consensus or attend to dissenting tones. Once we generated a list for each group, we revised and reconciled overlapping suggestions, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the panels' vision for an Every Child Thrives system of P–12 public education in North Carolina.

Following reconciliation, we created a database of over 100 recommendations. We assigned categories to recommendations based on our knowledge of school finance, considering factors such as the type of change (e.g., personnel-related or pre-service), responsible parties, locus of change (e.g., classroom level or policy), and anticipated cost (e.g., most recommendations increasing personnel would be high cost, while most policy changes would be low cost). We sought to ensure each recommendation was self-contained, in that it incorporated all the participant guidance needed to cost it; however, we also indicated where a recommendation may be related to others. For example, incorporating more community and school partnerships or internships is connected to some curricular changes and to the new community liaison position recommended by participants. We grounded all recommendations in participants' explanations.

Part 4. Recommendations

In this section, we outline 12 program recommendations that emerged from the North Carolina POP. Recommendations 1 through 7 are aligned with the program recommendations that emerged from the most recent *Leandro* decision. Recommendations 8 through 12 reflect recommendations made by North Carolina POP participants that go beyond *Leandro*. For each recommendation, we list bullet points that flesh it out.

1. A well prepared, high quality, and supported teacher in every classroom.
2. A well prepared, high quality, and supported principal in every school.
3. A finance system that provides adequate, equitable, and efficient resources.
4. A reliable and reasonable assessment and accountability system.
5. Full support to low-performing schools and districts.
6. Equitable and high-quality pre-kindergarten and early childhood learning systems.
7. Alignment of high school to postsecondary and career expectations for all students.
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.

Recommendation 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.
- Address counterproductive mindsets about student achievement, ability, and behavior, particularly related to race.
- Increase teacher diversity and provide ample career pathways.
- Elevate equity-focused teacher performance goals.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.
- Bilingual staff trained and available for essential student support services.
- Provide enough “seats” and staffing to eliminate waitlists.
- Increase wages and benefits for early childhood educators.

Recommendation 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, hands-on, and interest-driven.
- Align school schedules to complement academic and extracurricular participation.
- Develop robust and evidence-based tutoring programs.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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.
- Reinforce the rights of linguistically diverse students and families.

Recommendation 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.

Recommendation 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 linguistic diverse.

Recommendation 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.

Part 5. Moving from Panelist Recommendations to Estimated Costs

The goal of our work is to recognize that current conceptions of “adequacy”—tied to test scores and traditional understandings of schooling, teaching, and learning—are themselves inadequate, given the broken social and economic policy system around schools. For schools to close achievement gaps, they must close opportunity gaps, and it should not come as a surprise that to close opportunity gaps arising from poverty and racism will be costly. Bringing additional supports into schools, through both programs and personnel, raises a host of questions that the field will need to explore for decades to come.

The Price of Opportunity project was designed to identify what is needed to close opportunity gaps, propose policies and programs to address those needs, and estimate the associated costs. Our goal in the North Carolina study, as we moved from panelist recommendations to costs, was to honor the expertise of panelists—some of whom were themselves students experiencing the state’s inadequate system of policies and practices, or expert practitioners who support students every day. Our estimation process did not, of course, require attention to small differences—which can be thought of as rounding errors. Moreover, given the complexity of a proposed Every Child Thrives system, which has millions of moving parts, the data collected were not enough to determine all operational costs.

Accordingly, we set out to collect key program recommendations and associated costs that would allow readers and stakeholders to judge for themselves whether to reconsider current conceptions of adequacy and approaches to estimating adequacy. We aim to be as transparent and clear as possible about how we made decisions about each of our steps in moving from qualitative recommendations to costs. We expect readers will have questions, critiques, and critical feedback about our methods; we invite this conversation among those who share the goal of understanding what it costs to close opportunity gaps and offer all children a fair opportunity to succeed.

In this section we detail how we approached our cost estimates. We aimed to ensure that those estimates best reflected panelists’ recommendations, while remaining reasonable within the context of P–12 school finance and educational policy.

What We Mean by “Estimate”

In our work, the term “estimate” refers to our approximation of the cost of a complex reimagined school system, acknowledging the inherent imprecision in this process. We took several steps to reduce this imprecision.

First, we were systematic in deciding what to calculate versus what to extrapolate. For example, across all school districts, approximately 80% of expenditures were allocated to personnel and related to salary and benefits. For this reason, we prioritized recommendations that impacted personnel numbers and compensation, focusing first on teachers and then moving to other positions, based on the expected impact of participant recommendations in light of current spending patterns. Because expenditure data reported through object and function codes, the accounting codes that capture how and on what school districts spend money, were often not detailed enough to allow us to consider personnel positions individually, we estimated costs for groupings of personnel, such as “instructional support personnel.” We reviewed annual reports or board reports from districts to compile additional information about key positions.

Second, we qualitatively coded panelists’ recommendations to highlight potential synergies or dependencies that might arise across recommendations. We coded and categorized recommendations by:

- locus of change (e.g., classroom, district level, or preservice)
- type of change (e.g., personnel, policy, or supplies)
- who the recommendation served (e.g., teachers or emerging bilingual students)
- the needs met by the recommendation (e.g., mental health, safety, or basic needs like housing or nutrition)
- entanglement with other institutions (e.g., higher education, medical providers, or urban planning)

For example, if participants recommended that all schools should have at least one librarian, the cost of this individual recommendation may be small relative to the total cost of the Every Child Thrives system, but it can be grouped and considered together with recommendations to increase nurses, counselors, and social workers in the “instructional support personnel” category. This grouping supports an efficient costing-out process and a consideration of personnel-to-student ratios as a collective as opposed to within each individual personnel category.

Our “Best” Estimate

While our discussion of the estimation approach of the Every Child Thrives system reflects our steps to grapple with imprecision, “best” signifies adherence to the specific recommendations of our panelists, grounded in relevant and recent data. We elicited these recommendations through probing questions during panel discussions, aiming to arrive at enough detail or guidance to support calculations. In cases of gaps, we relied on existing research and consulted subject-matter experts, guided by participant suggestions. For instance, participants might assert that all special education students must receive necessary services. Leveraging child count data, which identifies students in different special education

categories, and referring to the work of Chambers et al. (2003) for estimates of necessary spending per student, we were able to address this recommendation, even though the participants themselves never fleshed out “necessary.” If we could not directly justify an estimate of costs with a panel recommendation, we refrained from costing it.

When panelists disagreed about details, we analyzed all panel conversations and noted specific exchanges to understand the participants’ intentions. An example is the determination of teacher compensation levels. Panelists agreed on the need to increase wages, but the suggested salaries within a single panel varied widely. In one instance, a participant humorously recommended paying teachers like professional athletes, but without additional justification, we did not seriously consider this as a costing proposal. The ensuing discussion, which drew on the comments of multiple panelists, settled on an average salary range of \$75,000 to \$150,000. We pursued a similar approach throughout our costing-out process.

Our “Reasonable” Estimate

The term “reasonable” reflects several aspects of our costing-out process. First, a reasonable estimate is built on sufficient and reliable data. For instance, imagine that participants recommended shortening bus routes by increasing the number of school buses. While we could identify transportation-related expenditures and estimate the number of buses a district might need based solely on student enrollment, transportation decisions are inherently location-specific. Attempting to make assumptions from our desks, far removed from the potential routes and locally relevant variables would result in overly vague and hard-to-justify assumptions. Without better district-level data, we could not have made a reasonable estimate for transportation.

For this report, we also took “reasonable” to imply that any assumptions made to complete a calculation reflected panelist intentions and erred conservatively. This point overlaps with our desire to tie our costing-out process and estimates closely to participant recommendations. To do that, we again drew on all panelists and drew a modified consensus about recommendations through our coding process. A modified consensus means that while all POP panelists may not have agreed with all of the details of a recommendation (unanimity), panelists came together to agree around the spirit of recommendations.

Questions also arose throughout our costing-out work about how the distribution of resources should change for different schools or school districts. For example, if a panelist recommended a maximum nurse-to-student ratio of 1:500, we had to make decisions about how to allocate nurses across schools. Conventionally, researchers have held multiple panels throughout states to assess how resource needs might vary in different contexts. Because of our own resource constraints, we were only able to hold one statewide panel where program design and personnel needs were discussed. For this reason, to answer these questions and develop a reasonable estimate, we looked at broader discussions within and across our panels about potential variation in needs that could or would arise across schools and districts of different characteristics.

Finally, in pursuit of “reasonable” estimates, we sought to limit our estimates of programs and personnel recommendations to those things that could realistically be accomplished in a school and/or school district. For example, in the case of teacher preparation programs, a P–12 system as currently structured could implement a “Grow Your Own” program or provide some form of loan reimbursement or tuition assistance. However, the system cannot make college tuition free for education majors, as the higher education system operates independently. Similarly, schools cannot significantly alter local housing markets, make an area more affordable, create an economy supporting a teacher’s spouse, or eliminate high-stakes standardized testing. The locus of change for any recommendation must be reasonably connected to an entity within the P–12 system.

Limitations of our Best and Reasonable Estimates

In designing and implementing a “dreaming” approach, we asked our participants to not self-censor—to not lower their standards for the system because a given element would be costly. But we did not use a “blank checkbook” metaphor; we asked them to keep efficiency concerns in mind. We recognize that this creates a tension regarding the imagination and costing-out of the system as an ambitious Every Child Thrives P–12 public school system. We also understand a common critique of costing-out is the potential for researchers and practitioners to over-recommend—i.e., to go above what is needed to realistically accomplish set goals. This critique is often levied by individuals claiming panelists are not considering how resources can be used most efficiently (Hanushek, 2006).

Our responses to this critique:

- We do not claim that our North Carolina panelists definitively described the best Every Child Thrives P–12 public school system for the state. We hope others will engage in a similar exercise—so long as they do not water down the standard.
- The panelists’ recommendations served as an intermediary step—as a source of data to outline program and personnel recommendations. Those recommendations were then systemically coded and estimated to reflect a school system that took synergies into account, further addressing efficiency concerns. Our conversations about what students need to succeed were kept separate from the conversation about costs.
- We firmly believe that the students, parents, practitioners, and school leaders who spend their lives in schools know best what students need to succeed. We are not willing to discard or diminish their voices out of a misguided concern that they will be inefficient in their recommendations.

A second limitation, in contrast, is the possibility that our panelists did not dream enough. Critics of costing-out approaches often decry what they consider to be highly manipulable approaches to estimating educational costs, but there is less outcry about program and resource recommendations

that underestimate what students need—often out of political concerns about presenting a price tag that would result in sticker shock. The primary claim of this study is that schools are expected by society to educate children in ways that offer them opportunities to succeed in school and life—but with inadequate funding. If our panelists are to imagine what that success would actually look like, they must be able to dream beyond the current policy structures and fiscal constraints. Yet, we noticed quite often that facilitators in our panels had to remind panelists that the goal of our work was not to ask what schools need to meet proficiency on standardized test scores.

We were also limited by what could be realistically accomplished in schools. It is therefore likely that the estimates presented in this report remain insufficient to overcome the impact of poverty and racism on the lives of students—that they fall short of the Every Child Thrives threshold.

For these reasons, among others, we offer this report as a starting point to a larger conversation about P–12 educational resources in the United States, recognizing that our work is just that—a starting point. We also set conversations about a school funding formula aside for a future conversation, recognizing that our data and approach would not support claims about how funds should be distributed to different school districts.

Part 6. Estimating Major P-12 Educational Costs

To give readers a sense for how we estimated the cost of the Every Child Thrives system, we offer details about four aspects of the recommendations that contributed significantly to our overall program and personnel costs. Note that these four examples of how we calculated costs do not align one-to-one to the 12 program recommendations set forth in Part 4, since some of the recommendations include elements that do not have a clear fiscal cost, and some of the costing-cases include elements from more than one recommendation.

- Supporting Teacher Working Conditions (primarily addresses Recommendations 1, with elements of 7, 8, and 9)
- Ensuring a Robust School Leadership Team at Every School (primarily addresses Recommendation 2, with elements of 1, 10, and 11)
- Ensuring All Students Have Access to High-Quality Support Personnel and Services (primarily addresses Recommendation 10, with elements of 11 and 12)
- Providing High-Quality Special Education (primarily addresses Recommendation 8)

For each of these examples, which we refer to as “costing-cases,” we offer details about panelists’ specific recommendations and the data and method used to estimate the cost of panelists’ recommendations. We decided to present these costing-cases because of the significant percentage of total educational costs explained by the costs associated with paying and supporting teachers, school leaders, and personnel that support students. As the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports, “80% of total expenditures were spent on salaries and benefits,” and “two-thirds of expenditures for salaries and benefits were considered instructional spending” (NCES, n.d.). Further, special education costs make up a significant and growing part of total district expenditures (Parrish, 2001). Our goal in presenting these cases is not to be exhaustive, but to offer a glimpse into our process, recognizing that our process and estimates will continue to develop over time.

Costing-Case 1: Supporting Teacher Working Conditions

The panelists’ discussions of teacher working conditions included several factors with no clear fiscal cost. They recommended, for example, that teachers have greater opportunities to lead in schools and districts. And they recommended addressing the state’s over-commitment to standardized test scores. The budgetary elements of the panelists’ recommendations should be understood within that context; changes in resource allocation can support teachers and the teaching profession in North Carolina, but it is unlikely that this investment alone, without additional changes to district culture and state/federal

accountability policies, would transform the work of teachers in schools. But the panelists did stress the need to address staffing, prep time, salary, and benefits. The recommended changes may, in fact, be sufficient to address many of the challenges teachers face today, which go beyond personal financial well-being and include the structure and culture of schools.

According to three consecutive reports from North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction (e.g., NC DPI, 2021–2023; see Data Sources), teacher salaries are the single largest line item in expenditures on K–12 public education, accounting for over 40% of all education expenditures in the state. We therefore prioritized fleshing out any recommendations related to a change in the salary for teachers or a change in the number of teachers.

The POP participants made several such recommendations. These were factored into our estimates of the cost associated with supporting and improving the teacher workforce, including recommendations for:

- Manageable teacher/student ratios, particularly for students in poverty, students with disabilities, and emerging bilingual students
- Competitive compensation
- Greater time to prepare for classes

For alignment, we situate this costing-case into the guidance provided in Recommendation 1 (A Well-Prepared, High-Quality, and Supported Teacher in Every Classroom) and aspects of Recommendations 7, 8, and 9, which aim to enhance the working conditions of teachers to better prepare students for postsecondary experiences and to better support and empower linguistically diverse or special education students.

Participants recommended class sizes of under 20 students and suggested adding a second teacher to classrooms with over 10 to 12 students, especially in classes with exceptional student needs. Our estimation included a modest increase in teacher preparation time and smaller class sizes to reduce the need for teachers to bring regularly work home. We also made adjustments to increase total teacher compensation, to address concerns about attracting a more diverse workforce, helping with loan repayment and college costs, and encouraging teachers to remain in the profession. Presently, the average salary for teachers in North Carolina stands at \$57,805, including local supplements and extra pay for longevity, mentoring, and other achievements (e.g., National Board Certification). Retirement and healthcare benefits constitute an average of \$17,454 per teacher, accounting for 23.2% of their total compensation, which then adds up to \$75,259.

Our participants initially recommended a variety of salary boosts. As we pushed participants to be specific and justify their numbers, concerns repeatedly arose about paying for tuition, repaying loans, ability to start families, and simply not being expected to fiscally sacrifice. The youth of color on our panels argued persuasively that their experiences in school turned them off from considering teaching as

a profession, even though their presence on the panel and prior experiences in tutoring or after-school programs suggested they cared deeply about their communities and the youth who would be following behind them. When asked to say more about the issue, they noted that they would consider teaching if a six-figure salary would be realistic to achieve. Issues of attracting and retaining teachers of color and building better connections between schools and communities were, in fact, emphasized throughout the panels.

Using the same benefits percentage (23.2%) as is presently applied in North Carolina, an average wage of \$100,000 would mean an average total compensation of \$123,000. Further, we estimate approximately 120,000 teachers (an increase from the current 99,000 teachers) would be needed in the existing North Carolina K–12 public school system to ensure the recommended student teacher ratios could be met. (This does not include the pre-K teachers recommended for the Every Child Thrives system—these are calculated separately, as part of Recommendation #6. Nor does this calculation include additional special education instructors or instructional support staff, which are also calculated separately, as part of other recommendations.) This represented roughly 21,000 more teachers (full-time equivalents, or FTEs) than currently employed in K–12 North Carolina public schools. Including changes to compensation for existing teachers, the estimated additional cost of supporting teachers and improving the teacher profession is approximately \$2.6 billion, yielding an estimated total of \$14.8 billion.

Costing-Case 2: Robust School Leadership

According to the same series of reports from North Carolina’s Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI, 2021–2023; see Data Sources), salaries for school leaders account for approximately 4% of all education expenditures in the state. This is a far smaller percentage than teachers and is also lower than certified instructional support. But the panelists recommended increasing the number of Assistant Principals (APs) significantly, in order to better support principals. They explained the importance of making principals’ workload more manageable and reducing churn in administrative positions.

We followed the participants’ recommendations for adding AP positions and increasing their pay in building the Every Child Thrives system. This costing case directly addressed Recommendation 2: Ensuring a Well-Prepared, High-Quality, and Supported Principal in Every School, while also touching on supporting teachers (Recommendation 1), supporting staff in wrap-around services positions (Recommendation 10), and fostering family relationships (Recommendation 11).

The estimate drew on participant guidance to enable APs to concentrate on specific tasks (such as facilities, transportation, scheduling, or particular departments or grade levels), allowing principals to delegate some non-instructional leadership and staff supervision responsibilities. Panelists also explained that narrowing the focus of AP roles could align their compensation more closely with that of teachers, offering an alternative career path for experienced teachers with specialized expertise who wish to transition out of the classroom without pursuing a principalship.

Even with this additional support, principals should also receive increased compensation, according to our participants. They emphasized the need for principals to manage sustainable workloads and be compensated at a higher rate than teachers. They also highlighted the importance of principals possessing classroom experience and maintaining involvement in the local community. Participants stressed the importance of flexible decision-making and the prolonged tenure of respected principals for fostering informed and community-sensitive leadership within schools.

Our resulting estimate ensured at least one AP per school, surpassing the current allocation. It also included one additional AP for every 300 students to assist with growing responsibilities as schools expand. We maintained the current salary difference (in absolute terms, not percentage) between teachers and APs, with an average compensation per AP of \$129,000. Similarly, we increased principal wages while maintaining the current average difference of approximately 30%, resulting in a new principal compensation of \$160,000. To meet the recommendations, we estimated the need for an additional 4,000 APs, totaling approximately \$780 million in new spending or a new total expenditure on school leaders of \$1.36 billion.

Limitations of our estimation include its reliance on teacher wages and the allocation of APs based on student membership, which may not fully account for the work of school leaders. Additional data would be needed to fully reflect the cost of supporting high-quality school leadership in every school, including data that speaks to what professional development and training school leaders need to be successful. Further, much of the work of supporting principals, including creating opportunities to enter the principal pipeline or establishing educational expectations for schools and districts, may be outside the realm of schools and districts, creating a gap between the operational costs that we estimate here and the real costs associated with further reimagining the ways schools operate.

Costing-Case 3: Personnel Supporting Student Well-Being

Compensation for instructional support personnel, the majority of whom are paid on the same salary schedule as teachers, constitutes approximately 4% of the total state expenditures on schools. Given that POP participants introduced new positions and significantly reduced service ratios for existing services, positions in this category have the potential to substantially impact the bottom line for the Every Child Thrives system. This costing-case primarily addressed Recommendation 10 (Wrap-Around Supports and Community Partnerships), while also touching upon Recommendations 11 and 12 regarding family support and a positive school climate.

Discussions among panelists emphasized the proactive management of student, family, and community needs, aiming to move away from reactive responses to crises. Panelists advocated for a comprehensive support network of adults in schools, including nurses, social workers, psychologists, mental health counselors, college and career counselors, restorative justice coordinators, and translators. They argued that such personnel would enrich students' education, address challenges hindering learning opportunities, and help relieve burdens otherwise placed on classroom teachers. The Every Child Thrives schools that the panelists described would surround students with caring, professional adults.

Panelists' recommendations also emphasized strengthening school-community relationships, addressing diverse needs such as housing and food insecurity, and ensuring language accessibility. They highlighted the roles of nurses in monitoring physical health, social workers in providing student support, and counselors in guiding students' post-P-12 paths. Instead of punitive discipline, the participants recommended restorative practices with the resources to make those practices effective. In all these recommendations, they attended to minimizing disruptions to regular duties, particularly regarding testing and assessment.

Our estimates for a robust support personnel network includes estimates for increasing the number of librarians, nurses, social workers, psychologists, mental health counselors, college and career counselors, restorative justice coordinators, community coordinators, family and community liaisons, and testing coordinators. Our estimates used the following numbers:

- For increasing the number of librarians, we estimated the cost of ensuring at least 0.5 librarians per school, with exceptions for larger schools, resulting in an estimated total of approximately 2,594 librarian positions needed. Librarians are currently paid on the same salary schedule as teachers, so we again used an average compensation of \$123,000, and we estimated a total cost of \$319.6 million to employ sufficient librarians statewide.
- For nurses, recommended changes included providing one nurse for each school, with a maximum student-to-nurse ratio of 750:1. Our calculation involved assigning one nurse per school for up to 750 students, with an additional 0.25 nurse for every group of 1 to 187 students beyond that threshold. For instance, schools with 751 to 937 students would have 1.25 nurse FTEs, while those with 1,313 to 1,499 students would have 1.75 FTE nurse positions. To implement this recommendation, approximately 3,215 FTE nurses would be needed, with an estimated cost of around \$396 million based on a nurse salary similar to that of teachers at \$123,000. (Note that implementing all of these recommended ratios requires smaller schools to exceed the staffing recommendations. As a result, the overall averages for the state have more favorable smaller ratios than those recommended. This phenomenon is exacerbated with larger ratios, such as 750:1. This system we calculated would result in a statewide average student-to-nurse ratio of approximately 479 students per nurse.)
- The panelists recommended assigning at least one full-time social worker per school, with a maximum student-to-social worker ratio of 250:1. They proposed rounding up to the nearest 0.25 FTE over 250 students to provide a conservative maximum ratio, allowing for stable worker assignments despite fluctuations in average daily membership. This approach aimed to enhance worker stability and ensure benefits for full-time employees while accommodating part-time workers to maintain stability and benefit eligibility. Implementing this recommendation requires an estimated 6,745 FTE social workers, with an average compensation of \$123,000 per social worker. We project the total cost for social workers to be approximately \$830 million, resulting in an average student-to-social worker ratio of approximately 228 students per social worker.

- Panelists recommended limiting the caseload of school psychologists to a 250:1 student-to-psychologist ratio, to ensure that more students could access meetings with psychologists for a wide range of mental health and educational needs, from testing and diagnosis to providing crucial support. The calculations here mirror those for social workers: approximately 6,745 more FTE psychologists at an estimated cost of \$123,000 per school psychologist, with the total cost of meeting these recommendations in North Carolina totaling approximately \$830 million. (Note that while this is considerably more than school psychologists are currently paid in North Carolina, it does not maintain the slight separation from teachers; the salary tables for school psychologists with an MA currently pay them slightly more than classroom teachers with an MA.)
- In addition to these additional psychologists, panelists recommended a student-to-mental health counselor ratio of 125:1. (This is half the *Leandro* recommended ratio.) While psychologists offer more technical aspects of care (e.g., disorder-specific therapy or the administration of psychological tests), mental health counselors provide general therapy and assist students in day-to-day life (The Family Institute, 2024). They explained that mental health counselors play a crucial role in supporting students' emotional and psychological well-being. They underscored, in particular, the importance of building relationships and providing personalized care. Implementing this recommendation of a 125:1 ratio requires approximately 12,813 FTE mental health counselors, with an estimated cost of around \$1.58 billion based on a compensation of \$123,000 per counselor.
- Panelists recommended the same 125:1 ratio for high school students to college and career counselors. They explained that while mental health counselors addressed the emotional and psychological needs of students, college and career counselors played a distinct role in guiding students towards their post-graduation educational and professional pathways. These counselors' responsibilities include monitoring, coordinating, and administering tests, arranging internships, identifying academic support needs, and assisting with college applications. Implementing the panelists' 125:1 ratio recommendation requires approximately 4,131 FTE college and career counselors for grades 9 to 12, with an estimated compensation of \$123,000 per guidance counselor and with a total estimated cost of \$509 million.
- Panelists recommended increasing the number of restorative justice (RJ) coordinators, due to their belief that schools should move away from punitive discipline policies and adopt restorative practices. The proposed changes included assigning one RJ coordinator to any school with over 200 students, while smaller schools with fewer than 200 students would be allocated a 0.5 restorative justice coordinator. We estimated that approximately 2,595 RJ coordinators would be needed across North Carolina, at an estimated cost of \$123,000 per coordinator, to meet the panelists' recommendations. Therefore, the total cost of providing high-quality RJ coordinators to schools throughout North Carolina was estimated to be roughly \$328 million.

- Panelists also suggested creating and staffing three new positions in the state's schools. The first of these is Community Coordinators, who panelists explained would enhance school-community relationships, particularly focusing on communication and public relations. The proposed changes included employing one FTE community coordinator for most P–12 public schools. We estimate North Carolina would require approximately 2,394 community coordinators, equating to one coordinator per school with an average daily membership of 340 or more, which constitutes 75% of all schools in North Carolina. Schools with fewer than 340 students were allocated a 0.5 FTE position. Using a compensation estimate of \$83,000 from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the increased cost for North Carolina was estimated to be approximately \$199 million.
- The second new position, in alignment with the concept of community schools, would be year-round Family Liaison/Coordinators with flexible schedules to address family needs, provide advocacy support during events like Individualized Education Program meetings, and facilitate connections to vital resources. The panelists proposed allocating one liaison per school, with the possibility of additional support in particularly high-needs schools. However, due to a lack of specific guidance from the panelists on the extent of additional support needed, we conservatively estimated only a single coordinator per school. Specifically, we estimated that 2,774 full-time equivalent family liaison/coordinators would be needed statewide, with a total cost of approximately \$351 million based on an assumed compensation of \$123,000 per coordinator.
- The third new position would be a dedicated Testing Coordinator to address the challenges faced during test administration, which often detracted from educators' primary roles. This position was envisioned to also encompass elements of formative and interim assessment administration. Panelists recommended assigning one certified teacher as a testing coordinator to each school, regardless of its size, meaning that our calculations mirrored those for the Family Liaison/Coordinators above: 2,774 Testing Coordinators with an average compensation of \$123,000, totaling roughly \$351 million.

The state currently spends less than a billion on support personnel to assist with the mental health, well-being, and academic success of students. To meet these panelist recommendations, we estimate that the state would spend \$6.5 billion on such personnel. These estimates and staffing allocations were challenging because of the tension in making them both sufficient and efficient, given the total rise in personnel in schools under the panelist recommendations. We attempted in our estimates to reflect how schools' respective needs might factor into the allocation of support personnel, but we expect that estimates would benefit from further refinement to reflect shifting needs of schools. For example, schools with the highest percentage of marginalized and minoritized students are likely to need greater supports than students attending schools in the wealthiest parts of the state.

Costing-Case 4: Special Education

Participants highlighted the need for increased resources to support students with disabilities. Even while they advocated for more personnel and specialized practitioners overall, they stressed the increased needs of students with disabilities and (even more so) for those with severe disabilities. Collaborative partnerships during IEP meetings were also emphasized, with the panelists criticizing the way that these meetings became adversarial. Panelists called for greater parental involvement and engagement, even without the threat or presumption of adversarial legal actions. They also set forth a broader goal of promoting disability justice and inclusion across all spheres of society, including support services such as occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech pathologists, and behavioral interventionists. And they suggested the creation of a communication director position specializing in special education, to improve communication tailored to the needs of students with disabilities. Overall, the recommendations emphasized a multifaceted approach to support students with disabilities, from collaborative decision-making in educational settings to broader systemic reforms and resource allocations.

However, to estimate the additional costs associated with improving special education services in North Carolina, we did not attempt to price out each suggested component and addition. Instead, we relied in part on data obtained from the North Carolina Department of Education that provided valuable insights into the total number of students identified with disabilities across the state's 13 recognized disability categories. We also incorporated data from Annie E. Casey's Kids Count project to ensure comprehensive coverage, specifically addressing the potential special education needs of 3- and 4-year-old students. Then, to address the varying resource needs associated with different disability categories, we implemented cost weights derived from a study by Chambers and his colleagues (2003) of the additional costs associated with several disability categories. The authors, based on actual student-level special education and general education expenditures, assigned specific spending ratios to each disability category, allowing for a series of weights to be used to estimate the cost of special education across other contexts and settings.

An integral component of this methodology involved first estimating the base cost of education in an Every Child Thrives system for students not in special education. This estimation was derived from our previously calculated cost of each of the categories listed earlier, serving as a proxy for total general instructional expenditures. The final cost estimate for special education expenditures was then determined by multiplying the estimated per-pupil base cost for students in general education by the total number of students within each disability category. This multiplication factored in the corresponding cost weight assigned to each category, ensuring a nuanced reflection of the diverse needs within the special education spectrum.

Our approach recognizes the significance of special education costs in North Carolina, in alignment with the ongoing calls for an equitable school finance system in *Leandro*. This is particularly crucial, as special education costs tend to surpass the per-pupil expenditures observed in general education

settings. This reality is reflected in our estimate of the Every Child Thrives system in North Carolina. Special education costs emerge as a substantial contributor to the overall expenditure, and are essential for creating and maintaining a robust, high-quality educational system that caters to the diverse needs of every student. Through our estimates for students in general education, we arrived at approximately \$17,800 for the state's per pupil base cost (i.e., without special education or other additions such as nutrition). Using the weights presented by Chambers et al. (2003), we estimate total spending on special education in an Every Child Thrives system would be approximately \$7.1 billion, or about twice current spending on special education in North Carolina.

Please note again the limitation in our approach. We would ideally like to specifically identify what students with disabilities need to thrive and how much each personnel and program change would cost. However, because there are an unlimited number of combinations of student needs reflected in special education, our approach was designed to draw on empirically informed multipliers for each disability. Notwithstanding this limitation, our estimate of special education highlights the reality that spending on special education needs to increase significantly from current levels.

Part 7. Developing a Range of Total Estimated Costs

The final phase of our costing-out approach involved addressing potential variations in our ultimate cost estimate. Recall that the estimated cost of implementing an Every Child Thrives P–12 educational system is between \$36.6 billion and \$43.4 billion, or roughly \$23,600 to \$28,000 per pupil. A pivotal factor influencing our cost projections is personnel-related expenses, which constitute a substantial portion of our overall anticipated costs. On a national scale, personnel-related expenses comprise approximately 80% of total school district operating costs (as separate from capital costs), highlighting their significant impact.

Due to the considerable influence of personnel costs on our estimates, our calculations are sensitive to determinations concerning the necessary personnel in districts and schools. This includes assumptions related to salary and benefits and additional costs linked to personnel-related activities like onboarding, professional development, and other work resources. Variation may specifically arise from either overestimating or underestimating the required number of personnel, miscalculating compensation figures, and inaccurately estimating the additional costs associated with increased personnel.

To address this variability (e.g., to account for the reality that a different team would make somewhat different assumptions and determinations) and to account for inherent uncertainty, we established a range of costs. Our approach to estimating this range is to allow for variation in the factors contributing most to cost estimates, which, in our case, is number of personnel, personnel compensation, and onboarding costs. Therefore, we vary each of these factors in our estimates, allowing for the possibility that final estimated total costs associated with personnel can vary by roughly 15% in either direction.

Part 8. Beyond “Adequate”: A Moral Obligation

The purpose of this report is to fundamentally shift how public-education supporters talk and think about P–12 school funding. Today, most supporters call for “adequate” funding, where adequate refers to a state’s constitutional duty to allocate to school districts a level of funding that is, for instance, sufficient for nearly all students to meet state educational performance and content standards. Typically, these standards revolve around scoring proficiently on standardized tests. If the “nearly all” part were taken seriously, if the standardized tests captured the wide range of goals we place upon schools, and if “proficiency” were ambitiously set, this idea of adequacy could approximate a great deal of what the Every Child Thrives standard seeks to achieve.

But the shift to an Every Child Thrives (or Great Equalizer) standard highlights the ways that the adequacy standard has become impoverished. If lawmakers were to address outside-school opportunity gaps, such that the nation’s public schools were no longer tasked with counter-balancing those inequities, perhaps the current framing of adequacy would suffice. As things stand, it falls far short of sufficient. Ensuring equitable opportunities to learn for all students, especially those challenged by racism and poverty, requires substantially greater resources, personnel, and programs than are currently provided to schools.

In this report we explain and illustrate a vision of what would suffice. We outline our theoretical assumptions and methodological approach to answering these questions in North Carolina. Our bottom-line estimate for the total cost of implementing an Every Child Thrives P–12 educational system is between \$36.6 billion and \$43.4 billion, or roughly \$23,600 to \$28,000 per pupil. This estimated cost of the Every Child Thrives school system represents an increase of \$18.4 to 25.2 billion over current expenditures in pre-K through 12 public education in North Carolina (a 201–238% percent increase).

In providing these estimates, we hope it helps to place estimates of the cost of an “adequate” education in North Carolina in the context of overall needs and of “Great Equalizer” myth-making. What is “adequacy” adequate for? As a society, we must continue to ask ourselves - is how we currently conceptualize and think about P–12 public school funding sufficient for public schools to provide every student with the education that is politically promised to them and societally expected of the schools themselves? What further support would schools need due to the inadequacy of policy structures and systems that surround those schools, such as inadequate healthcare, nutrition, employment, and housing policies?

Supporting children is a moral obligation. Children should be protected and educated in a way that offers each child an opportunity to flourish and thrive. Children should have access to a life that offers them the opportunity to feel fulfilled and joyful. Children should not be robbed of opportunities to flourish because some deem the price tag too high. It is a fool’s errand to attempt to meet this moral obligation

without the needed investments of resources. We are, however, not naïve; we recognize that additional investments—and additional taxes—imply political choices and battles. It is precisely because of this political debate that the full cost of supporting children should be explored and estimated. Supporters of public schools should not limit themselves to call for minimal adequacy—instead, they should push for funding that creates an equitable system of public education where every child can thrive.

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