



COVID-19 Learning Impact Program 2022

Addressing the Impact of COVID-19 on Student Learning in North Carolina

Request for Proposals

Application deadline: 5:00pm, August 31, 2022

The North Carolina Collaboratory, headquartered at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-Chapel Hill), is partnering with the Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) to request research and evaluation proposals addressing the impact of COVID-19 on student learning across North Carolina, and the effectiveness of State and local policies and programs implemented during the pandemic.

Opportunity Overview

- **Eligible applicants:** Any institution of higher learning in North Carolina.
- **Total funding available for program:** \$6,000,000
- **Number of anticipated awards:** Dependent on the size of application budgets received.
- **Award budgets:** Applicants may request \$150,000 to \$500,000 per project within specific [funding tiers](#).
- **Award project period:** Projects may last for up to 24 months.
- **State and federal requirements:** All funds distributed via this program must be used in accordance with:
 - Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards, 2 CFR Part 200.
 - State regulations found in Title 09, Subchapter 03M of the North Carolina Administrative Code.
- **Additional requirements:** All awardees are subject to specific [reporting and auditing requirements](#).
- **Spending restrictions:** No indirect (F&A) costs are permitted, as per Article 31A of North Carolina General Statute (NCGS) Chapter 116-255 Subsection (c)(2) and Section 8.12(a) of Session Law 2021-180.
- **Matching funds requirement:** None.

All applicants should read these instructions thoroughly before preparing an application. Questions regarding this Request for Proposals (RFP) are welcome and may be sent to collaboratory@unc.edu.



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Important Dates

- **Application deadline:** August 31, 2022
- **Award announcements:** on or before October 1, 2022
- **Earliest project start date:** October 1, 2022
- **Latest project end date:** October 31, 2024

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Background and Scope

Established in the summer of 2016 by the North Carolina General Assembly (NCGA), the North Carolina Collaboratory facilitates the dissemination of expertise within the University of North Carolina (UNC) System and other institutions of higher learning for practical use by State and local governments. In November 2021, the NCGA appropriated funds to the Collaboratory for research and other activities that monitor, assess, and address the public health and economic impacts of COVID-19 across the State.

The goal of this Request for Proposals (RFP) is to help academic researchers assist the State government in mitigating the immediate and long-term impacts of the pandemic on students across North Carolina, which have critical implications for the State's future workforce and economy. This not only includes investigating widespread impacts on student learning at all education levels, but also evaluating State policies and programs implemented in response to the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief ([ESSER III](#)) Fund, which provided \$3.6 billion to North Carolina to help safely reopen and sustain the safe operation of schools, support the education workforce, and address students' academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs.

To accomplish this goal, the Collaboratory is partnering with the [Office of Learning Recovery and Acceleration \(OLR\)](#) at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) to define research and evaluation priorities that align with the State's pandemic-related education needs. Created by Superintendent Catherine Truitt, the OLR provides districts and schools with resources and support to promote resilient recovery from the pandemic across the State. The OLR also seeks to address instructional time lost during the pandemic by developing, implementing, and evaluating State and district-run interventions.



Priority Areas

The goal of this RFP is to generate information that will guide evidence-based decisions for combating the impact of lost instructional time and accelerating learning for all students affected by COVID-19.

Applications are sought in the following priority areas:

- A. Research: The longitudinal impact of COVID-19 on student learning in North Carolina.
- B. Evaluation: The effectiveness of ESSER III Fund policies/programs during the pandemic.

More information about each priority area is provided in the tables below.

Table 1: RESEARCH

Priority Area A: The longitudinal impact of COVID-19 on student learning in North Carolina.

Applications for this priority area must investigate at least one of the following:

- Impact of the pandemic on the educator workforce ([Appendix I, section 1](#)).
- Impact of the pandemic on the postsecondary choices of high school juniors and seniors ([Appendix I, section 2](#)).
- Identifying effective practices in virtual learning by grade band ([Appendix I, section 3](#)).
- Understanding students and families who left and returned to the public school system during the pandemic ([Appendix I, section 4](#)).
- Impact of the pandemic on persistently low-performing schools ([Appendix I, section 5](#)).
- Interventions/mitigation strategies targeting academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of students during the pandemic ([Appendix I, section 6](#)).

Table 2: EVALUATION

Priority Area B: The effectiveness of ESSER III Fund policies/programs during the pandemic.

Applications for this priority area must evaluate one or more of the following ESSER III policies or programs. More information about ESSER III can be found in [Appendix II, section 1](#).

State Reserve:

- State and local teacher bonuses during the pandemic ([Appendix II, section 2](#)).
- Statewide rollout of LETRS training for North Carolina elementary school teachers and administrators ([Appendix II, section 3](#)).
- Supporting educators in North Carolina's recurring low-performing schools and districts ([Appendix II, section 4](#)).
- Use of software to mitigate cyberbullying, monitor student internet activity and classroom educational devices, assist with suicide prevention services ([Appendix II, section 5](#)).
- School Psychologists Grant Program ([Appendix II, section 6](#)).

Local Allotments Reserve:

- Funding deployment and efficacy of local ESSER funded programs ([Appendix II, section 7](#)).

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Funding Guidelines

The total amount available for grants in this program is \$6,000,000. Eligible investigators from institutions of higher education in North Carolina may request a minimum of \$150,000 and a maximum of \$500,000 using tiers listed in the table below. In addition to their eligibility, applicants' chosen funding tiers and budgets will be assessed for their reflection of the actual needs of the proposed project and scope of work.

Priority Area	Tier	Maximum Request	Parameters
A (Research)	1	\$150,000	Standard research grant: A proposal for original academic research targeting a topic listed in Table 1 .
	2	\$250,000	Partnership research grant: A proposal for original academic research targeting a topic listed in Table 1 and involving at least one public stakeholder partner (see Eligibility).
	3	\$500,000	Research and mitigation grant: A proposal for original academic research <u>and</u> activities to mitigate pandemic impacts on educator practice and/or student learning, involving at least one public stakeholder partner (see Eligibility) and targeting a topic listed in Table 1 .
B (Evaluation)	1	\$500,000	Evaluation of one or more ESSER III policies or programs listed in Table 2 .

Funding Restrictions and Requirements

Indirect (F&A) costs are *not* permitted by this funding program, as set forth in North Carolina General Statute (NCGS) 116-255(c)(2) and Section 8.12.(a) of Session Law 2021-180.

Additionally, all funds distributed via this program constitute federal financial assistance via the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 to the State of North Carolina and have been appropriated to the Collaboratory by the NCGA as part of the Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (CSLFRF) Program. Consequently, all funds must be used in accordance with the following:

- Federal Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards, 2 C.F.R. Part 200.
- State regulations found in Title 09, Subchapter 03M of the North Carolina Administrative Code.
- Any additional guidance, requirements, and/or restrictions from the federal and State government that go into effect after the public release of this RFP.

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Eligibility

Applicants

Applications will only be accepted from institutions of higher education in North Carolina. Preference may be given to applicants from constituent institutions of the UNC System, as per NCGS 116-255(c)(1).



Furthermore, NCGS 116-255(b)(3) states that the Collaboratory shall support research programs at historically minority-serving institutions in North Carolina, namely Elizabeth City State University, Fayetteville State University, North Carolina Agricultural & Technical University, North Carolina Central University, UNC-Pembroke, and Winston-Salem State University. Accordingly, the Collaboratory encourages applications led by or involving partnerships with these campuses.

Partnerships

For **funding tiers A2 and A3** (see [Table 1](#) and [Funding Guidelines](#)), applicants are required to partner with a relevant stakeholder that will benefit from the project's activities or findings, such as but not limited to school districts, individual schools (public or private), state agency offices and education policymakers. The identity, role and activities of each partner should be clearly described in the proposal, and their participation in the project should have clear benefits for project success and impact.

Funding may be allocated to partners within the applicant's budget **only if** the lead applicant declares their ability to ensure all spending and project activities are conducted in compliance with the State and federal requirements listed in [Funding Restrictions and Requirements](#).

Principal Investigators

Any individual with the resource, skills, and knowledge required to carry out the proposed activities may serve as principal investigator (PI) in accordance with their institutional policies and procedures. Individuals from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups and individuals with disabilities are encouraged to apply for this funding opportunity.

Mitigation Activities

For **funding tier A3** (see [Table 1](#) and [Funding Guidelines](#)), applications may incorporate activities designed to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on student learning, such as but not limited to the implementation of after-school tutoring sessions, school lunch programs or mental health clinics.

All mitigation activities should be clearly associated with the proposed research and have the potential to generate useful information for specific decision-makers such as government officials or education leaders, ultimately leading to evidence-based policies and approaches to improving student learning in North Carolina.

Research Subjects and Materials

All project activities must be conducted in accordance with established federal guidelines and policies for research involving human subjects. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is not required at the time of submission, but the application should a) briefly describe any human subject activities and b) confirm that the proposed project has been disclosed to appropriate compliance office(s) and IRB (see [Proposal Content](#)). As applicable, successful applicants will be required to submit IRB protocol numbers and expiration dates to the Collaboratory before award funds are released.

Submission of an application to this RFP indicates an acceptance of all the above requirements for the proposed project. Applicant institutions are responsible for a) ensuring all proposals submitted to the Collaboratory have been reviewed and approved by appropriate institutional personnel and b) overseeing compliance for all awarded projects.

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Application Instructions

All activities described in the application should accurately reflect the amount of funds requested for the project and be feasible within the proposed timeframe.

Due to the breadth of topics covered by this RFP, applicants should assume reviewers are scientifically and technically literate but not subject matter experts.

Proposal Format

Proposals must adhere to the following formatting requirements:

- Use margins of 0.5 inches or larger (top, bottom, left and right) for all pages.
- Use fonts of standard type (e.g. Times New Roman, Arial or Calibri) at 11 points or larger. Smaller text in legends is acceptable if the text remains legible when the page is viewed at 100%.
- Follow the page limits for each section of the application, as outlined below.
- Concise writing and frequent use of white space and headings is strongly recommended.

Applications that include documents that are illegible and/or do not conform to instructions within this RFP will be withdrawn from consideration and will not undergo review.

Proposal Content

Proposals must not exceed the page limits included in each section. Once completed, the following components should be **assembled in the order listed below and combined in a single PDF** for submission to the Collaboratory (see [Submission Process](#)).

Document	Page Limit	Instructions
(1) Cover Page	-	Complete the template provided in the application package.
(2) Project Team	-	Complete the template provided in the application package.
(3) Performance Site	-	Complete the template provided in the application package.
(4) Public Information Summary	30 lines of text or less	Provide a succinct and accurate summary of the proposed work for <u>public release</u> that is informative and understandable to a <u>lay reader</u> . Do not include any confidential information.
(5a) Project Description	6	<p>Using the headings provided below, address the following points using language suitable for a <u>scientifically/technically literate lay reader</u>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Heading 1: Issue or ESSER III program. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Describe the issue/ESSER III program or policy you plan to investigate. ○ Identify the educator and/or student population(s) affected by this issue, policy or program. ▪ Heading 2: Prior work. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Outline prior work and evidence to support your proposed approach. ○ Demonstrate that the project is feasible, and the project team has the capabilities and expertise to successfully complete the project within the proposed timeframe. If applicable, mention funding already received for this work. ▪ Heading 3: Approach and deliverables. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Define your research or evaluation question(s). ○ Outline the project objectives, methods, and activities.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Describe the expected milestones and deliverables, and how project success will be defined. ○ <i>For A2 and A3 funding tier applications only:</i> Identify the stakeholder partner (see Eligibility) and describe how you will work together throughout the project to achieve success. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Heading 4: Anticipated challenges. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Describe any anticipated project and/or scientific challenges. ○ Describe how potential pitfalls and risks will be managed and mitigated to increase the likelihood of project success. ▪ Heading 5: Outcomes and Impact. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Describe your expected outcomes, and how they will help local and/or State entities address the impact of COVID-19 on student learning in North Carolina. This should include explanations for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What information/data you expect to generate during this project. ▪ Who will be able to access, utilize and benefit from this information/data. ▪ How this information/data will be delivered to the intended end users (e.g. education policymakers, school district leaders).
(6) Project timeline	2	<p>Using a table or diagram, provide a project timeline with the following information clearly marked and described:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Proposed activities, milestones, and deliverables. ▪ <i>For A2 and A3 funding tier applications only:</i> The respective roles of the academic research group and the stakeholder partner(s) (see Eligibility).
(7) Scope of work	2	<p>Describe the aims, activities, milestones and deliverables of the proposed project, and how project success will be defined and assessed. <i>For A2 and A3 funding tier applications only,</i> include descriptions of how the partners will work together throughout the project.</p>
(8) Bibliography	-	<p>Using your preferred reference style, provide full references for all information/literature cited in the application.</p>
(9) Budget	-	<p>Complete the template provided in the application package.</p> <p>Budget guidelines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Applicant budgets must be within the limit of a specific funding tier. ▪ Budgets should cover no more than 2 years (24 months). ▪ No matching costs are required. ▪ All funds must be managed in accordance with State and federal laws. ▪ Budgets must align with the proposed activities, scope of work and project timeline. <p>Allowable budget requests:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Salary and fringe/benefit costs for personnel who are directly contributing to project activities, including (but not limited to) PIs, other key personnel, project managers, research staff, and students. ▪ Travel expenses. ▪ Equipment specific to the project. ▪ Materials and supplies. ▪ Contracted services. ▪ Publication fees. ▪ Student tuition.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IRB costs, as applicable. <p>Budget restrictions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutional overhead/indirect costs (F&A) are <u>not</u> permitted.
(10) Budget justification	-	<p>Explain in detail each expense listed in your budget. Salary/fringe requests should be accompanied by the name, title, responsibilities, and effort (% or calendar months) of individuals in the proposed project. If any equipment or contracted services are included, please provide quotes from the vendor(s).</p> <p><i>For A2 and A3 funding tiers only</i>, justify any funds allocated to the stakeholder partner(s) (see Eligibility), and explain how they will be overseen for compliance with State and federal laws.</p>
(11) Biographical sketches	2 each	Complete the biographical sketch template for the PI and other key personnel (as defined by NIH guidelines) participating in the project.
(12) Letters of support (optional)	-	<p>Letters of support are optional and may be provided from individuals such as (but not limited to):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A decision-maker who will benefit from or utilize information/data generated during the project. A stakeholder partner participating in the project. A project manager who will participate in the project and oversee the production of proposed deliverables.
(13) Human subjects (if applicable)	-	As applicable, describe the involvement and characteristics of human subjects, as well as study procedures, materials used in the research, potential risks to subjects, the process for recruitment and informed consent, and protection against risks. Provide a statement that demonstrates the applicant institution(s) have the appropriate compliance infrastructure and policies in place for all proposed human subjects work, and assurance that the project will be reviewed and approved by an IRB and comply with HIPAA for either or both partner institutions.

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Submission Process

The deadline for submissions is 5:00pm on August 31, 2022. Applications received after this deadline will not be reviewed or considered for funding.

All application materials should be combined into a single PDF and submitted via email to collaboratory@unc.edu. Submission emails should be sent by the individual serving as the project PI and contain the following:

- Subject line:** "Application for COVID-19 Learning Impact Program 2022".
- Body:** Include the name, institutional affiliation and contact details for the PI.
- Attachments:** A single PDF containing all application materials listed in the section above.

Following submission, a reply from the Collaboratory will be sent to the email address used for application submission to confirm receipt. If an email reply is not received within two weeks, please contact collaboratory@unc.edu.



This RFP is solely a request for expressions of interest and statements of qualification. It is not an offer to contract or an invitation capable of acceptance to create a contract. The Collaboratory may cancel or modify this RFP at any time without liability for any loss, cost, or expense as a result of that cancellation or modification. For more information about the Collaboratory and previously funded projects, please see <https://collaboratory.unc.edu/>.

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Review Process

All proposals will be evaluated by a review panel comprised of five/six individuals. **Due to the breadth of topics covered by this RFP, applicants should assume reviewers are scientifically and technically literate but *not* subject matter experts.**

As part of the review process, the Collaboratory will share the contents of grant applications with both internal and/or external experts to assess the merits of each application and their adherence to requirements described in this RFP. If applicable, the applicant is responsible for specifically identifying all confidential information within the application that should not be shared outside the Collaboratory and review panel.

If deemed necessary by the review panel, applicants may be asked to submit additional information or documentation, and/or present their proposal and other relevant information to reviewers before a funding decision is made.

Review Criteria

The Collaboratory seeks to ensure the highest principles of academic research rigor and scientific inquiry are followed in all projects. Accordingly, reviewers will assess proposals for compliance with the following principles:

1. The development of significant questions that can be investigated empirically.
2. Linkage of research to relevant theory.
3. The use of methods that directly address the question of interest.
4. A coherent and explicit chain of reasoning.
5. A standard of generalizability with existing research and research contexts.
6. Publication of research to encourage professional critique.

Specific to this RFP, the review panel will also evaluate all proposals according to the following criteria:

- What is the potential for the proposed project to effectively address Priority Area A or B?
- Is there a clear description of how information generated during this project will benefit and be utilized by specific end-users (e.g. decision-makers, education leaders, policymakers)?
- Is there potential for the project outcomes to provide evidence-based support for State/local efforts to address the impact of COVID-19 on student learning in North Carolina?
- Is there a clear description of the project's target milestones and deliverables?
- Is there a clear description of the project's definition of success?
- Is the budget reasonable for the proposed project activities and timeline?
- Is the plan for performing the proposed activities well-reasoned, well-organized, and based on sound rationale?



- How well qualified is the project team to address their research/evaluation questions and conduct the proposed activities?
- *For A2 and A3 funding tiers only:* Does the proposed project clearly demonstrate a mutually beneficial collaboration between an academic research group and a stakeholder partner?
- *For A2 and A3 funding tiers only:* Has the application explained how the project partners will work together effectively to achieve success?

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Award Process

The Collaboratory anticipates notifying applicants of award decisions no later than October 1, 2022. ***Projects may last for up to 2 years (24 months), starting no earlier than October 1, 2022, and ending no later than October 31, 2024.***

Before funds are released, authorized representatives of award recipient institutions will be required to review and sign a Funding Agreement (shared after the notification of award) and provide the following information:

- IRB approval dates and protocol numbers (as applicable).
- Payment information, such as a W-9 form, remittance address and ACH banking details.

Funding for selected projects must be managed in accordance with the following:

- Federal Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards, 2 C.F.R. Part 200.
- State regulations found in Title 09, Subchapter 03M of the North Carolina Administrative Code.
- Any State and federal regulations that may arise and/or change during the project performance period, as and when the Collaboratory receives updated guidance from relevant entities such as, but not limited to, the US Treasury, NCGA, NC Pandemic Recovery Office (NCPRO), NC Office of State Budget and Management (OSBM), UNC System, and UNC-Chapel Hill.

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Reporting and Auditing Requirements

Successful applicants will receive reporting schedules, instructions, and templates from the Collaboratory. In total, four types of reports must be submitted to the Collaboratory, subject to change following updated guidance received from State, federal and university entities:

1. Monthly expenditure reports.
2. Quarterly progress reports.
3. Final expenditure reports.
4. Final performance reports.

Any changes in reporting requirements in response to updated regulations will be provided by the Collaboratory. Failure to submit reports by the deadlines provided by the Collaboratory may result in a hold on or retraction of remaining funds from the award.

Successful applicants are expected to ***keep complete records of the receipt and disbursement of all funds under this project*** for a minimum of five years after the completion of their project, or until all audit



exceptions have been resolved, whichever is longer, as required by OSBM and subject to updated guidance from State, federal, and university entities.

Successful applicants will also be subject to audit requirements stipulated in the North Carolina State Administrative Code as well as Federal Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards, 2 C.F.R. Part 200. This includes:

- Obtaining and monitoring Single Audits under 2 CFR 200.501 if the funding recipient receives \$750,000 or more in federal awards.
- Obtaining and monitoring Single Audits under 09 NCAC 03M .0205(a)(3) and (b)(4) if the funding recipient receives \$500,000 or more in State financial assistance using federal funds.

A funding recipient receiving less than these thresholds must retain and provide records for review or audit as requested by federal or State entities or the Government Accountability Office. As per State requirements, non-state entities may also be required to provide an audit by internal and/or external auditors to meet the requirements of the North Carolina Administrative Code and other applicable federal and/or State guidance, regulations, and/or policies.

During and after the project, successful applicants may be expected to respond to requests from the Collaboratory and participate in seminars, conferences, and deliver presentations to the legislature and [Collaboratory Advisory Board](#).

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Contact

Questions regarding this funding opportunity and the application process are welcome and should be sent to the Collaboratory team via email to collaboratory@unc.edu.

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Appendix I: Additional information for Priority Area A

The following section provides additional information to inform Priority Area A applications. Questions are welcome and should be sent to the Collaboratory team via email to collaboratory@unc.edu

1. Impact of the pandemic on the educator workforce

According to a March 2022 report presented to the State Board of Education, approximately 8.2% of North Carolina teachers left employment in the State's public schools during the 2020-21 school year. This represents an increase of only two-thirds of one percentage point from the prior school year, which State education leaders describe as a remarkably stable rate considering the disruption caused by COVID-19.

However, the North Carolina education community has cited a variety of issues – such as the current school climate, compensation, opportunities for advancement, family engagement, decrease in autonomy – that could lead to school staffing shortages at the end of this school year. Accordingly, NCDPI seeks to better understand the impact of the pandemic on the educator workforce and identify district, school, and State level strategies for effectively retaining and recruiting staff. Applicants are encouraged to address questions such as:

- How did the pandemic affect staffing at public schools?
- How did the pandemic affect school climate?
- What were the reasons cited by educators for staying in the profession?
- How do these patterns vary by educator characteristics and contextual factors ([Appendix III](#))?
- What are the most promising strategies and policies at the district, school, and State level to recruit and retain staff and fill vacancies?
- How has pandemic funding created new positions, and has that affected the vacancy rate?

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2. Longitudinal impact on the postsecondary choices of high school juniors and seniors.

NCDPI's interest in this topic stems from a need to understand the impact of the pandemic on the college choices of junior and senior students (classes of 2020 and 2021), and whether these choices differed from comparable student populations that graduated before the pandemic. To this end, NCDPI is interested in answering questions such as:

- Did the pandemic affect whether and where students applied to UNC System institutions?
- Did the pandemic affect whether and where students enrolled within the UNC System?
- Did the pandemic affect whether students submitted the FAFSA to UNC System institutions?
- Are there differences by demographic variables or contextual factors ([Appendix III](#))?

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3. Identifying effective practices in virtual learning by grade band

On March 14, 2020, per Executive Order 117, North Carolina closed its public schools to in-person instruction. In the spring and fall of 2020, Public School Units (PSUs) throughout North Carolina pivoted

to emergency remote instruction. Since then, North Carolina PSUs have utilized virtual instruction for an extended amount of time, and pandemic-related legislation has allowed widespread use of remote instruction.

While an emergency transition to remote instruction was problematic for many students, high-quality, purposeful virtual learning in North Carolina has provided many students with rich opportunities for more than 20 years (see [NC Digital Learning Plan](#)). As schools now start to reexamine their instructional programs post-pandemic, many districts are looking at integrating purposeful, high-quality virtual and hybrid instruction for students and staff to meet the needs of all families. Consequently, and following a recommendation from the Working Group for Virtual Academies (established under Part III C, Section 3C of Session Law 2021-130), NCDPI would like to better understand:

- How have North Carolina students performed in virtual learning since returning to school during the 2021-22 school year, and are there differences by demographic variables or contextual factors ([Appendix III](#))?
- What are present-day best practices for integrating virtual learning opportunities into standard instructional practice, and are there differences by grade band?

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4. Understanding students who left and returned to the public school system during the pandemic

During the pandemic, public school enrollment dropped by more than 4% in North Carolina. This decrease was concentrated in the early grades and has been largely attributed to COVID-19-related disruptions. To investigate further, NCDPI is interested in studies that aim to understand students and families that left and then returned to the public school system between March 2020 and the current school year. This includes answering questions such as:

- How many families chose to leave the public school system during this time period?
 - What were the reasons for leaving?
 - Where did they enroll their student when they left?
 - Are there differences by demographic variables or contextual factors ([Appendix III](#))?
- How many families chose to re-enroll in the public school system during this time period?
 - What were the reasons for returning?
 - Are there differences by demographic variables or contextual factors ([Appendix III](#))?
- How can the public school system better meet the needs of all North Carolina families as the State continues to recover from the pandemic?

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5. Impact of the pandemic on recurring low-performing schools

In 2016, the North Carolina State Board of Education (SBE) adopted a policy for recurring low-performing schools ([DSTR-040](#); see Section A1 for definition of “recurring low-performing school”). The policy – titled *Reform for Recurring Low-Performing Schools* – provides structure for the Statutory Reference G.S. 115C-

105.37B and serves as a comprehensive effort to strengthen recurring low-performing public schools that have demonstrated difficulties in continuous student achievement outcomes. The policy gives autonomy and flexibility to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to raise academic standards, promote accountability, and provide greater competition and choice within the public schools.

Accordingly, NCDPI is interested in understanding the impact of the pandemic on recurring and persistently low-performing schools by finding answers to the following questions:

- What were the most common and promising recovery practices implemented in low performing schools?
 - Were there important changes to educators' instructional and administrative practices?
 - How did learning environments change?
- What were the most significant impacts on educators and/or students?
 - Are there differences by demographic variables or contextual factors ([Appendix III](#))?
- To what extent did the pandemic disproportionately impact educators and students in recurring low performing schools?

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6. Interventions/mitigation strategies targeting academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of students during the pandemic

According to [US Department of Education's American Rescue Plan Act](#), at least [20% of local ESSER funds](#) must be used to address learning loss through evidence-based interventions that respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Since school districts and schools had a great deal of flexibility in identifying and implementing those interventions and programs, NCDPI is interested in rigorous, small-scale studies that can provide insight into the cost-effectiveness of different projects and measurable impacts on student learning.

Applications for this area may involve one of two approaches:

1. Investigating an intervention/mitigation/recovery strategy that has *already been implemented*, in partnership with a local school district or school (see [funding tier A2](#)).
2. Implementing and assessing a *new evidence-based intervention* in partnership with a local school district or school (see [funding tier A3](#)).

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Appendix II: Additional information for Priority Area B

The following section provides additional information to inform Priority Area B applications. Questions are welcome and should be sent to the Collaboratory team via email to collaboratory@unc.edu

1. About the ESSER III Fund.

A description of the American Rescue Plan Act Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER Fund) can be accessed via the [NCDPI website](#).

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2. Studying the NC Supplemental Salary Fund

Catalyzed in part by the pandemic's negative effects on educators, North Carolina made a significant investment in strategic compensation initiatives through Senate Bill 105, which included (a) \$1,800 bonuses for principals; (b) \$2,800 bonuses for most teachers; and (c) \$100 million to help low-wealth counties compete with bigger, wealthier counties when recruiting and retaining teachers. NCDPI's interest in this topic is to comprehensively examine the implementation and impact of these investments on educator and student outcomes during and after the pandemic. This includes finding answers to questions such as:

- How are Public School Units using their strategic compensation funds?
- What are the effects of these strategic compensation reforms on educator turnover, mobility, and quality?
- To what extent do the strategic compensation reforms affect student outcomes, such as achievement on standardized tests?

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3. Evaluating statewide rollout of LETRS training for North Carolina elementary school teachers and administrators

NCDPI's Early Literacy Program focuses on providing a training program for educators and administrators working with children in Pre-K-5th grade, with the goal of ensuring instruction is grounded in the Science of Reading, and outcomes promote reading achievement in students. The program also seeks to ensure the delivery of professional development to educators and administrators is evidently capable of establishing deep knowledge of literacy instruction. To this end, ESSER III funds were allocated to support participation in the LETRS training programs for all North Carolina educators working with children in the public and private Pre-K program and students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Through monitoring and evaluation activities, NCDPI is interested in understanding the impact of this training on:

- a) Teacher knowledge and changes to instructional practices to support literacy.
- b) Administrator knowledge and changes to leadership practices to support literacy.

This may involve addressing evaluation questions such as:

- What processes (instructional, sustainability, communication) are provided to teachers and administrators to support local implementation of LETRS strategies?
- How satisfied are participants with LETRS coursework?
- How does educator/leader knowledge change specific to the content presented in LETRS?
- What shifts in instruction and leadership practices are based on LETRS?

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4. Supporting educators in North Carolina's recurring low-performing schools and districts

In 2020, North Carolina started utilizing ESSER funds to continue support for recurring low-performing schools and districts, including hiring district and school leadership coaches and providing professional development for teachers. NCDPI seeks to examine the implementation and impact of these efforts to help the State's lawmakers and education policymakers better understand the types of support that most effectively meet educators' needs in low-performing districts and schools. Ideally, applications targeting this area should seek to answer questions such as:

- How are the coaching and professional development supports being implemented in North Carolina's recurring low-performing schools and districts?
- How do these coaching and professional development efforts affect teachers' and principals' turnover decisions and perceptions of their school's working environment?
- To what extent do these coaching and professional development efforts affect student outcomes, such as test scores, attendance, probability of graduation, and post-secondary matriculation and degree attainment?

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5. Use of software to monitor student internet activity and classroom educational devices to mitigate cyberbullying and assist with suicide prevention services

The North Carolina General Assembly has utilized ESSER III State reserve funds to help districts and charter schools monitor student internet activity and help identify and protect young children from related threats such as violence, self-harm, and suicide; child pornography, online predators, and sexual content; cyberbullying or other forms of online abuse; and drug or alcohol abuse. NCDPI seeks to understand the effectiveness and impact of these applications, with the goal of making policy recommendations for future State investments. Applications for this area may address questions such as:

- Which monitoring software applications were implemented in North Carolina districts and charter schools?
- How did the districts and charter schools implement the software applications? What worked well and what did not?
- What was the impact of implementation of the software applications, and to what extent were North Carolina districts and charters able to protect students from threats and harm?
- What are the monitoring needs for North Carolina districts and charter schools going forward?
- What are the policy recommendations at the State and local levels?

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6. School Psychologists Grant Program

North Carolina has one school psychologist for every 1,900 students. Statewide, approximately 13% of students are in special education, who need school psychologists to help oversee their individualized education plans. Consequently, the State provides only one school psychologist for approximately 250 special education students.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the North Carolina General Assembly invested ESSER III funds to establish the School Psychologists Grant Program, with the goal of improving the safety, mental health, and well-being of students. These funds were distributed as grants to Public School Units (PSUs) for recruiting school psychologists based on current and ongoing needs. Accordingly, NCDPI is interested in questions such as:

- What are the current and on-going school psychologist needs for North Carolina districts and charter schools?
- Which school psychologist recruitment strategies were implemented in North Carolina districts and charter schools? What worked well, and what did not?
- What are the short and longer-term policy recommendations at the State and local levels?

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7. Funding deployment and efficacy of local ESSER funded programs.

Between 2020 and 2021, Congress targeted more than \$5.6 billion in supplementary Coronavirus Relief Funds toward K-12 schools in North Carolina via three rounds of ESSER (I, II and III) legislation. Because the pandemic presented various challenges for schools, Congress granted State and local education agencies broad discretion to use these funds in response to local needs. NCDPI's interest in this area stems from the need to understand the ESSER spending plans and expenditures of Public School Units (PSUs). This includes answering questions such as:

- How do North Carolina PSUs differ in their plans for ESSER funds?
- How did ESSER spending plans change across funding rounds (ESSER I, ESSER II, ESSER III)?
- To what degree do ESSER expenditures for North Carolina PSUs align with their spending plans?
- How did ESSER spending plans relate to local priorities and goals during the pandemic period?

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Appendix III: Demographics and contextual factors

The following table provides demographic and contextual factor information for consideration of questions described in [Appendix I](#) and [Appendix II](#).

Demographic Characteristics	Contextual Factors
<p>Students</p> <p>Race/Ethnicity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ White ▪ American Indian/Alaskan Native ▪ Asian ▪ Black ▪ Hispanic/Latino ▪ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander ▪ Two or More Races <p>Sex:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Female ▪ Male <p>Grade:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ K-13 <p>Other:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prior Achievement ▪ Academically or Intellectually Gifted ▪ Chronically Absent ▪ English Learners ▪ Students with Disabilities ▪ Economically Disadvantaged ▪ Justice-Involved Students ▪ Military-Connected Students ▪ Students Experiencing Homelessness ▪ Students in Foster Care ▪ Migrant <p>Educators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Demographics (i.e., Race, Sex, Grade, as listed above) ▪ Years of Experience ▪ National Board Certification ▪ Licensure Area 	<p>PSU-Level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ADM ▪ SBE Region ▪ Low Wealth Designation ▪ Locale (i.e., Rural, Town, Suburban, Urban) ▪ ARP Funding Level ▪ Low Performing <p>School-Level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ADM ▪ School Grade (A-F) ▪ School Type (ES, MS, HS) ▪ Low-Performing ▪ Title 1/non-Title 1 ▪ TSI/CSI (ESSA-Designation) ▪ Rural/Urban ▪ Home Internet Connectivity ▪ Instructional Mode (In-person; Blended; Virtual)

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