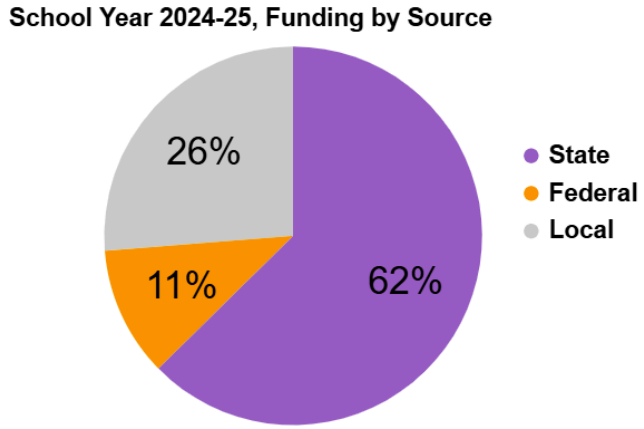
The Facts on NC Elections and Education

Public education is governed at the federal, state, and local levels. You can find the candidates for each office here. These elected officials all have some role in determining policy and funding for our public schools. They are essential in promoting and supporting healthy, well-resourced public schools.

U.S. Congress

In 2026, North Carolina will choose all 14 of N C's U.S. House of Representative members and one U.S. Senate seat. Our other senate seat will be up on the ballot in 2028. Because these are federal positions, members' role in NC's educational system may seem remote, but U.S. Congressional leaders play a very important role in promoting high-quality, equitable educational opportunities throughout the nation primarily through the U.S. Department of Education.



In 2024-25, 11% of funds for NC education came from the federal government, while 62% came from the state, and 26% from local government.

Although the US Constitution doesn't mention education explicitly, writings by the founding fathers, federal land grant legislation, and regulations guiding establishment and financial support of public schools firmly establish an important role for the federal government in public education.

In addition, the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution allows for federal involvement in education. It requires all states to provide "any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." **The 14th Amendment gives the federal government the power to intervene when people are not being provided equal protection under the law.**

For example, after the Supreme Court's ***Brown v. Board of Education*** decision in 1954 when many states did not provide equal access to educational opportunities, the federal government stepped in with The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. This influential piece of legislation was designed to aid low-income students and combat racial segregation in schools. However, ESEA does not contain mandates or requirements for schools. Instead, it offers funding on a conditional basis to schools that meet the requirements outlined in the relevant sections (called titles). Funding is often provided through grants or incentive programs.

Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act is the most widely known section. It provides funds to districts that serve large numbers of low-income students.
Other titles identify key funding priorities.

- Title III: provides aid for programs to support English language acquisition for English learners.

- Title IV funds programs to support a well-rounded education, safe and healthy students, and technology; after-school instruction and care; charter schools; magnet schools and family engagement in education.
- Title V focuses on programs to support rural education.
- Title VI provides aid for disabled children.

Every five years, Congress must reauthorize ESEA, which provides an opportunity to make changes. This is where the voice of our representatives and senators is essential.

Title IX of the 1965 Civil Rights Act, as amended in 1972, bans sexual discrimination in federally funded education programs. The 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, known today as the Individuals with Disabilities Act, or IDEA, granted the right to a free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities.

The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, funded through the Department of Agriculture strengthened nutrition standards for the National School Lunch, Breakfast, and Smart Snacks Programs. The work of public school employees such as occupational and physical therapists are funded through Medicaid, which also provides dental, vision, hearing, and mental health services. When the federal government cuts Medicaid, students living in poverty lose health services.

These examples are just a few of the many ways federal lawmakers affect the lives of students.

NC Senate, House of Representatives, and Courts

In the U.S., individual state governments have the primary responsibility for education, and each state determines the extent to which control is delegated to local governments. In NC, the Department of Public Instruction provides statewide leadership in education, implements legislation related to education, and develops policies and guidance to support local education agencies (school districts) as they conduct the day-to-day work of educating students.

The NC General Assembly (NCGA) is heavily involved in setting a wide range of education policies and develops the state budget that typically provides **about 60-67% of K-12 education funding**.

The NCGA is made up of the NC Senate and House of Representatives. Members are elected every two years (even years) and make the laws that govern education in NC. The legislature can regulate (or delegate) public preschool, primary and secondary education; license private preschools, primary, and secondary schools; and license or otherwise regulate parents providing home schooling. They also influence curricula, standards, and procedures.

The NC State Constitution clearly establishes the General Assembly's essential role in funding public education. Article IX Section 2 of the NC. Constitution states that "The General Assembly shall provide by

taxation and otherwise for ***a general and uniform system of free public schools, which shall be maintained at least nine months in every year, and wherein equal opportunities shall be provided for all students***."

Because communities across the state vary widely in their ability to supplement the state and federal dollars the ***state provides the critical baseline funding for equity and quality***. In each budget, our state legislators make decisions about whether to fully fund the numerous programs that affect public education.

The NCGA also establishes policies and regulations such as high school graduation requirements and teacher certification standards that directly impact all public schools. They make policies tied to funding decisions and operations of local school districts such as the school calendar and the number of required instructional days of instruction. A few examples highlight the range of state legislation:

- Set educator salaries and policies around raises, bonuses, and promotions.
- Established the A-F School Performance Grades (read our fact sheet).
- Eliminated the NC Teaching Fellows Program (2015); established a smaller version in 2017.
- Funded school safety programs, workforce development programs, and early college programs.
- Authorized (2013) and greatly expanded voucher programs (read our fact sheet).
- Established numerous policies in areas such as school discipline, safety, and curriculum.

Judges. The Leandro case highlights the importance of our courts in ensuring a quality system of free public education for all students. Other issues over the past decade decided by the NC Supreme Court include allowing school vouchers and the extent to which charter schools must follow state guidelines. For example, charter schools are not legally bound to provide accurate enrollment numbers to the state and private voucher schools are not required to have certified teachers. These and other issues are decided by the judges elected by NC voters.

North Carolina Board of Commissioners

Each of the 100 counties in our state have a locally-elected Board of County Commissioners. The commissioners make up the governing body of each county and typically include five or seven commissioners, though some counties may have as many as nine or as few as three. County Commissioners are elected in even-numbered years in partisan seats in conjunction with other federal or state elections to 2-year or 4-year terms, depending on the county.

North Carolina counties carry out the many services mandated by state and federal governments. County Commissioners have financial responsibility for their county, which includes adopting the budget each year and setting property tax rates. The county has responsibility over a range of areas:

- Public Safety (e.g. sheriff's office, county courthouses, emergency medical services, fire districts)
- Health & Human Services (e.g. social services, mental health, public health, COVID response)

- Housing Affordability (e.g. subsidized housing, veterans housing services
- Elections (e.g. staffing polling locations, maintaining voting machines)
- Education funding (e.g. K-12, community colleges, early childhood and pre-K programs). County funds provide nearly a fourth of the K-12 funding, on average, in each county.

County Commissioners have an important role in public education. The state requires counties to build, equip, and maintain all school facilities. In counties with growing student populations, the need for new schools can be a substantial drain on county budgets. The state pays the bulk of educator salaries, but to attract and maintain staff many counties add local salary supplements and extra benefits. Counties may also fund additional classroom personnel such as teacher assistants, and many provide equipment, books, and other supplies to supplement state funding.

The annual budget for the local school district is submitted to the Board of Commissioners by the district school board. Each year, the county commissioners decide how much of their school district's requests they will fund. When the state and federal funds are insufficient to meet the needs of a county, county commissioners must decide whether (and how) to raise the funds to make up the deficit. Of the few available options to raise money, the most commonly used are property taxes and other locally assessed fees. To build or renovate schools, countries often use general obligation bonds, which are funded by property taxes.

Tax rates by county vary widely in North Carolina, from a low of 22.0 cents in Carteret County to 92.0 cents per $100 in assessed property value in Hyde County. Wake and Mecklenburg Counties, with the two largest school districts in NC, have property tax rates of 53.7 cents and 49.2 cents per $100 assessed property value respectively. Often, counties with fewer property resources must tax themselves at higher rates to pay for services that wealthier counties can afford through higher levels of revenue. This local wealth difference is the source of many school inequities across the state. Persistent underfunding from the NC General Assembly puts even more pressure on local communities to fill the gaps. With approximately 26% of school funding coming from the county, **these wealth differences can result in substantial educational inequities**.

County commissioners make key decisions that affect the quality of life in your local community, especially when it comes to funding public schools. It is important to ask candidates about their support for keeping school buildings upgraded for health and safety purposes, how they view paying teacher supplements, their support for additional helping professionals or pre-K slots, and more.

Where the Rubber Hits the Road: Local School Board Members

No elections get closer to our children's schools than the local public school board elections. Each of the 115 NC school districts has an elected school board. School board members who have respect for educators and exhibit sound, calm leadership in the service of a quality public education system that serves all children are more important than ever.

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Public school board members are elected and must live in the community served by the school district. Ideally, having community members serve on the school board helps to keep members invested in the health of the public schools since schools have such a large influence on the overall health of a community. Note that charter school boards are not elected and are only required to have 50% of their members reside in NC. Private schools have no state residency requirements at all.

According to NC General Statues, local school boards have broad authority to determine policies regarding how schools are run as long as they focus on the education of students.

> *"It shall be the duty of local boards of education to provide students with the opportunity to receive a sound basic education and to* ***make all policy decisions with that objective in mind, including employment decisions, budget development, and other administrative actions****, within their respective local school administrative units, as directed by law."* § 115C-47 (4)

There are several primary responsibilities of school boards:

- Provide leadership and direction by developing goals/objectives to meet stated established standards for student success
- Employ the superintendent and make decisions about the superintendent's personnel recommendations
- Determine operating and capital budgets, present the budget to county commissioners and advocate for appropriate funding
- Oversee the management of the school district's major systems including budget and finance, curriculum and instruction, personnel and other services
- Approve student assignment boundaries

A detailed description of the powers and duties of the local boards of education is included in state statute. The long list highlights the tremendous influence school board members have on all aspects of school district functioning.

By law, school boards must hold monthly meetings that are open to the public and provide opportunities for public comment. Neither charter schools nor private schools have the same requirements for parental and community involvement or public engagement in board meetings. Make sure to research your local school board members to understand whether they will be true advocates for our students and promote healthy, fully funded public school systems that respect educators and treat them as the professionals they are.

Before you vote, make sure you research your candidates to make sure they will support public education!

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