



Child Poverty Policy in Delaware: A Focus on Education



ABOUT THE BRIEF

*This policy brief by the Institute for Public Administration was prepared for the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission (the Commission) to serve as an overview of the changing conditions of child poverty¹ and the resulting educational outcomes for students. This brief is an update to the 2017 publication, *Child Poverty Policy in Delaware: A focus on Health and Education*. The analysis includes a review of recent state legislation and policy decisions that impact child poverty and education.*

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a dominant force limiting educational success for an increasing number of Delaware children. To overcome the challenges to educational success for all students, policy makers must recognize and respond to the realities and impacts of child poverty and the limitations of current state policies in addressing child poverty.

In 2009, the Delaware Child Poverty Task Force offered proposals for policies that would reduce childhood poverty by 50 percent over the next decade. Since then, over 200 pieces of legislation have been enacted addressing needs of Delaware families and children (Policy Inventory, 2016). Since 2017, additional changes in policy and practice were made to meet the needs of Delaware's early learners, K–12 students, and parents and guardians who live in poverty. Even so, child poverty in Delaware is more extensive now than it was a decade ago. Despite all of

¹ This brief uses the federal measure of poverty. As noted by KIDS COUNT in Delaware, “the poverty measure was established in 1964 based on research indicating that families spent about one-third of their incomes on food. A family is officially classified as poor if its cash income (wages, pensions, social security benefits, and all other forms of cash income) falls below the poverty threshold” (2018).

the legislative and executive efforts, Delaware remains without a comprehensive and integrated plan, backed by substantial and sustainable funding, that addresses the overall challenges of poverty for Delaware children and families. As a result, current policies and practices are fragmented and less effective than they should be.

The fragmentation of efforts is also reflected in the delivery of public and nonprofit sector programs. As the Commission has demonstrated, over 500 public and nonprofit organizations provide services to low-income families in Wilmington alone (Wilmington Community Asset and Resource Mapping, 2018). Yet, the work of these organizations is typically uncoordinated and the combined impact of these programs has been far less than desired.

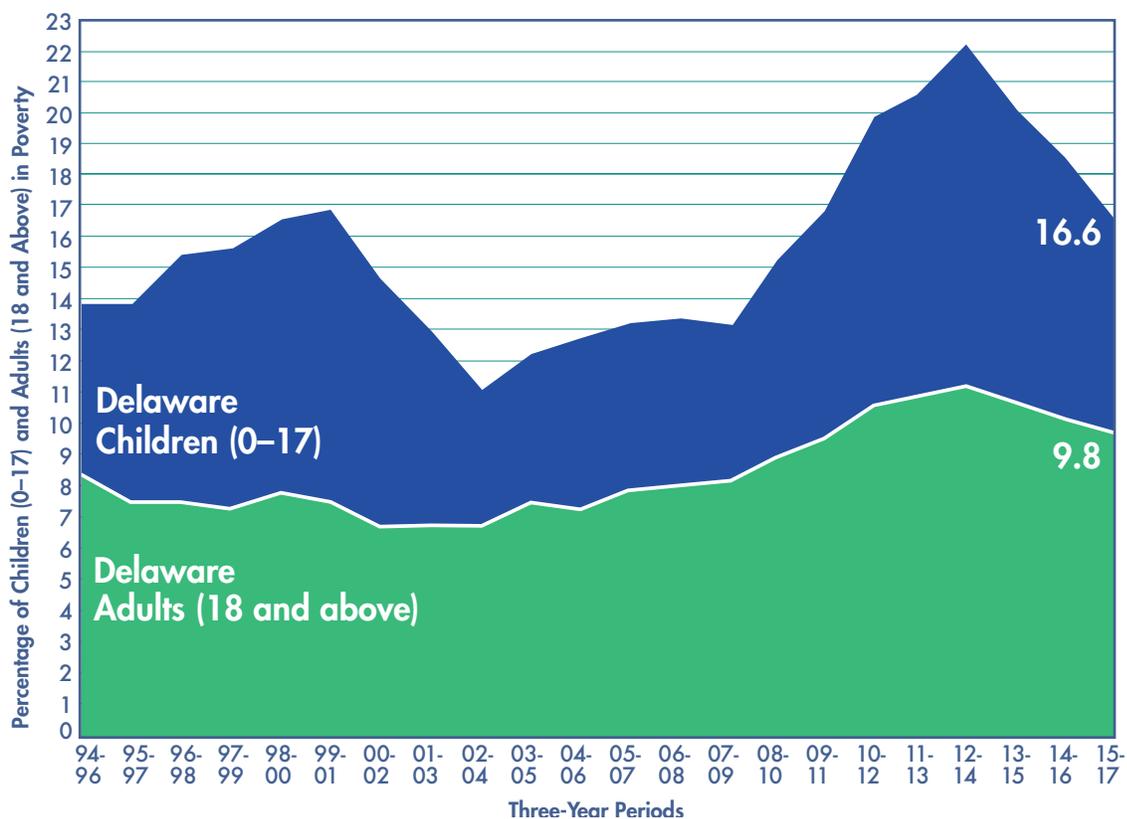
Delaware needs to better align existing programs and create a sustainable plan to reduce child poverty. That plan will be effective only with input from the community members, students, and families who are affected by poverty every day. Further, as

the Commission’s action agenda describes, state public education resources need to be redirected and focused to better support the developmental needs of all students, from birth through adulthood (Strengthening Wilmington Education, 2015).

CHILD POVERTY IN DELAWARE

As depicted in Figure 1, the child poverty rate in Delaware, based on a three-year average from 2015–2017, is 16.6 percent (KIDS COUNT in Delaware, 2018). This percent is a decrease when compared to the 2014–2016 average, 18.5 percent, but still higher than it was a decade ago (KIDS COUNT in Delaware, 2017). Among counties, New Castle County (NCC) has the state’s lowest rate of child poverty and Sussex County has the state’s highest rate among the three counties at 20.3 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013–2017). However, the city of Wilmington, located in NCC, has the highest child poverty rate in the state, 38.5 percent (KIDS COUNT in Delaware, 2018).

FIGURE 1: CHILDREN AND ADULTS IN POVERTY, DELAWARE



Source: Center for Applied Demography and Survey Research, University of Delaware

Source KIDS COUNT in Delaware, Fact Book 2018

As depicted in Figure 3, there are neighborhoods in Wilmington that have 63–70 percent of children living in poverty. While child poverty is particularly acute in Wilmington, it is clearly a statewide issue.

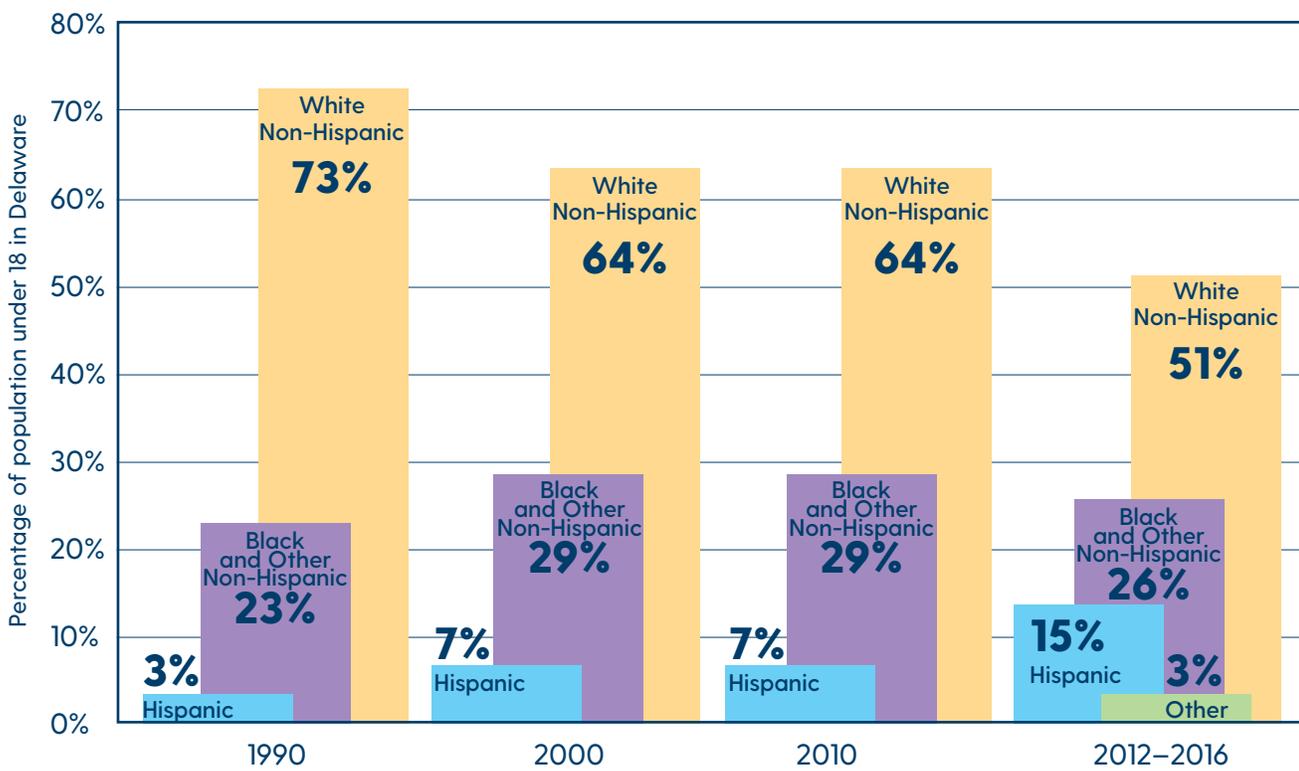
CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS AND CHALLENGES

Concurrent with the growth in child poverty, the demographic make-up of Delaware’s children has changed dramatically over the last three decades. As depicted in Figure 2, between 2012 and 2016, 51 percent of Delaware children were white, down from 73 percent in 1990 (KIDS COUNT in Delaware, p. 17, 2018). Students of color experience poverty far more than white students. Nineteen percent of all Black Delawareans and 25 percent of Hispanics lived in poverty over the period of 2011–2015 compared to 9.3 percent for White Delawareans (An Overview of Poverty in Delaware, 2018).

There has also been an increase in the number of Delaware students who are English learners (ELs). There was a 36 percent increase in the enrollment of EL students in public schools in the decade of 2007–2017 (Delaware Public Education at a Glance, 2018). There has also been an 18 percent increase in the public school enrollment of students with disabilities. In sum, today’s Delaware students are more diverse, likely to live in poverty, and likely to deal with distinctive challenges (KIDS COUNT in Delaware, 2018). These changes pose growing demands on Delaware’s public education system, and those demands translate to greater resource needs. While the cost of Delaware’s public education system continues to increase, the State provides no direct, recurrent allocation of funds to schools for low-income or EL students.

Governor John Carney has proposed action for the 2019 legislative session that would, for the first time, provide statewide targeted funds to schools to help meet the needs of low-income and EL students.

FIGURE 2: CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS OF DELAWARE’S CHILDREN



Note: Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race.
Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau and American Community Survey, in KIDS COUNT in Delaware Fact Book 2018

POVERTY AND EDUCATION

The changing demographics in Delaware put increased demands on public schools to meet the needs of students—especially students who live in poverty. Therefore, we must examine the relationship between poverty and education and how education can impact life trajectory. In Delaware, across the nation and across the world, poverty impacts every aspect of a child’s life and has a substantial impact on their educational experience. Poverty impacts a child’s social interactions, emotional well-being, educational trajectory, and economic stability. Ninety percent of brain development occurs in the first three years of life and gaps in learning and academic achievement linked to socioeconomic background begin during the preschool years, persist throughout childhood, and limit opportunities for higher education, workforce positions, and life experience (Bivens, 2016). As of 2018, 20 percent of Delaware children, birth to age 5 live in poverty, which puts them at greater risk of falling behind (Delaware Public Education at a Glance, 2018). As these children grow older, they perform below their peers academically, read less, have lower attendance rates, are more likely to have serious developmental delays and untreated health problems, have higher rates of student behavior problems, and experience a lack of family involvement (Strengthening Wilmington Education, 2015).

The discrepancy in academic achievement among low-income and non-low-income students is also visible in the disparate high school graduation rates and proficiency rates. Graduation rates for all Delaware students in the 2016–17 school year was 85.75 percent as compared to 78 percent for low-income students (Delaware Report Card, 2019). In the same school year, the graduation rate for non-Wilmington students was 87 percent compared to 72 percent for Wilmington students (Status of Public Education, 2018).

In 2017, 74 percent of City of Wilmington students failed to meet state standards in English Language Arts (ELA) and 83 percent of students failed to meet state standards in Mathematics (Status of Public Education, 2018). When comparing Smarter Balanced Assessment scores, a standardized test administered in Delaware for grades 3 through 8 and



grade 11, the ELA and math proficiency rates for low-income Wilmington students was lower than the rate of all district students in Brandywine, Red Clay Consolidated, Christina, and Colonial, and all low-income students across the board in the 2016–17 school year (Status of Public Education, 2018). To begin to address these issues, in February 2018 there was a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) established between the Governor’s Office, Delaware Department of Education, and the Christina Board of Education that proposed changes to five Wilmington schools. The MOU includes ideas to improve student achievement for Wilmington schools through school consolidation and the creation of an early learning and dual generation center (Wilmington Schools Partnership, 2019).

The Commission believes that the trends illustrated above, for the most part, are not the result of the performance of any school or school district, but a result of the overall public education system’s inability to effectively address the educational needs of the students living in severe poverty experienced by most Wilmington students.

DELAWARE LEGISLATION AND POLICY DECISIONS

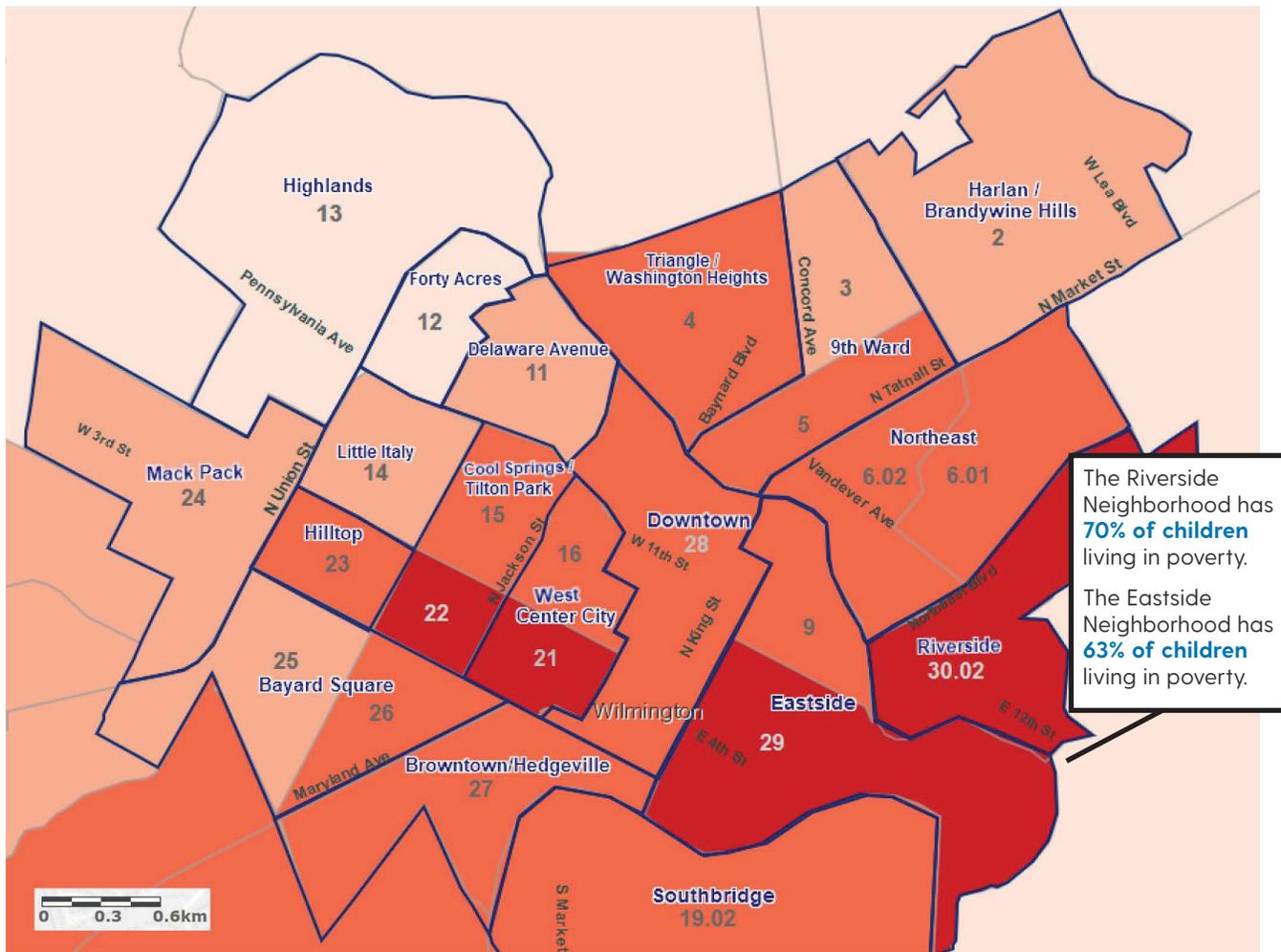
The changing composition and diverse needs of Delaware’s students has increased the demands on Delaware’s public education system. Delaware needs policies, curricula, teachers, and administrators that can meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population. These changing demands translate into

the need for more targeted resources to provide all students a robust and high-quality education, regardless of their income-status or special needs.

The Commission has recommended changes to the Delaware funding system to better meet the increasingly complex needs of students in poverty and

students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. In addition to changes in the allocation of education funds, the Commission urges Delaware officials to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to support low-income students, EL students, students with disabilities, and our early learners.

FIGURE 3: PERCENT OF CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY, WILMINGTON, DELAWARE



The Riverside Neighborhood has **70% of children** living in poverty.
The Eastside Neighborhood has **63% of children** living in poverty.

Wilmington Neighborhood Outline

West Center City Neighborhood Name

14 Census Tract Number

Percent of Children Living in Poverty



February 21, 2018

Map prepared using Online ArcGIS.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census; 2009-13 results are from a rolling American Community Survey.

Note: This map is provided by the University of Delaware, Institute for Public Administration (IPA) solely for display and reference purposes and is subject to change without notice. No claims, either real or assumed, as to the absolute accuracy or precision of any data contained herein are made by IPA, nor will IPA be held responsible for any use of this document for purposes other than which it was intended.

Source: Wilmington Community Asset Mapping, 2018

LEGISLATION AND POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

The General Assembly and Governor took some important actions in the 2017 and 2018 legislative sessions, with more proposed for the 2019 legislative session. These actions include legislation and executive orders that address the needs of students with disabilities, early learners, students from low-income families, and EL students—some key actions are highlighted below.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Some progress has been made to address the needs of special education students, and importantly—the K–3 basic special education student population. Highlighted below are a few key pieces of legislation that were passed in 2018.

- In 2018, funding was allocated in epilogue for K–3 basic special education students. The Student Success Block Grant will provide \$2.8 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 to fund approximately 33 additional units statewide to support students identified as Basic Special Education in grades K–3 (DSEA Legislative Matters, 2018).
- Senate Substitute 1 for Senate Bill 85, passed in 2018, in response to recognition that although students with disabilities make up 13 percent of students, they account for 24 percent of out-of-school suspensions (Senate Substitute 1 for Senate Bill 85). This bill seeks to reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions, increase transparency, improve overall school climate and, ultimately, improve student outcomes (Delaware General Assembly).

EARLY LEARNERS

Over the past several years, there have been numerous strides made by groups focused on early learners. There are also some substantial funds allocated for early childhood education in the FY 2020 budget; the budget items are outlined below.

- In the FY 2020 proposed budget, Governor Carney has allocated \$3.2 million for Delaware Stars for Early Success (Delaware Stars) for tiered reimbursement. Delaware Stars is a five-level Quality Rating and Improvement System used to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early care and education and school-age settings (Office of Governor, 2019).
- In the FY 2020 proposed budget, there is also a recommended \$3.8 million designated for Purchase of Care (Office of Governor, 2019). The Purchase of Care Program (POC) in Delaware is a subsidy that provides support to caregivers of children, birth to age 12. POC helps low-income families pay for their child care so that parents and/or guardians can hold a job or attend a training program. Providers typically get reimbursed at the 2011 market rate, this money would be used to reimburse at the 2015 market rate (Office of Governor, 2019).

LOW-INCOME STUDENTS AND ENGLISH LEARNERS

Several pieces of legislation passed in 2017 and 2018 provide support for low-income students and EL students. Although these efforts are largely piecemeal, they will better serve the needs of Delaware's vulnerable students.

DIVERSE STUDENTS NEED RESOURCES

Delaware needs policies, curricula, teachers, and administrators that can meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population. Delaware's education system needs more targeted resources to provide all students a robust and high-quality education, regardless of their income-status or special need.

- In 2017, Governor John Carney launched Delaware’s English Learner Strategic Plan 2022. The strategic plan intends to engage EL students in high-quality instruction and assessment, foster highly effective educators for EL students, mobilize and engage the community in support of EL students, and continue to refine EL education (Delaware’s English Learner Strategic Plan, 2018).
- In 2018, House Concurrent Resolution 97 was passed, which aimed to increase the number of minority teachers in the classroom and emphasized the value of teacher diversity in Delaware (Delaware General Assembly).
- In 2018, Governor Carney signed Executive Order #24 making Delaware a trauma-informed state. This Order points to the Family Services Cabinet Council to help mitigate the impact of adverse childhood experiences and build resilience in children, adults, and communities (Executive Order, 2018).

OPPORTUNITY FUNDING

In 2017 and 2018, Governor Carney created the opportunity grant program, which was funded initially at \$1 million and increased to \$6 million. The initial awards went to nine schools and aimed to “help districts and charter schools improve supports for low-income students, students chronically exposed to stress and trauma, and English language learners” (Opportunity Grants, 2017).

The Commission has argued that while the opportunity grants are desirable, they are one-time funding allotments. While Delaware spends a great deal to support public education, the current Delaware funding system does not include any recurrent targeted funding for low-income students or EL students. This issue became the focus of a court case when, in January 2018, the ACLU and others brought suit against the State of Delaware claiming that the current funding system does not equitably serve students in poverty, EL students, and students with disabilities (Court of Chancery, 2018). In November 2018, the State of Delaware requested dismissal of the suit. Vice Chancellor Laster of Delaware’s Chancery Court



turned down this request and stated the claims should be decided at trial. The issue of delayed property reassessment in Delaware was also included in the ACLU lawsuit, Laster decided to prepare a separate case on property reassessment, distinct from the issue of funding.

In January 2019, Governor Carney took action. He proposed a three-year, \$60 million opportunity funding initiative to target resources toward low-income students and English learners. The money would be distributed in installments of \$20 million, annually, over the three-year period. This funding initiative is an expansion of the opportunity grant program, but also makes extra funding allotments for low-income and EL students. If this plan is passed by the legislature and signed into law, it will send \$500 for each EL student and \$300 for each low-income student directly to school districts and charter schools (Albright, 2019). District schools and charter schools must submit spending plans subject to approval by the Department of Education. Spending authorized under the initiative must directly benefit low-income and EL students (Governor Carney, 2019).

If the Delaware General Assembly approves the Governor’s proposal, it will be the first direct State allocation to target resources toward low-income and EL students. We are hopeful that this support will continue beyond the initial three-year period pending demonstration of continued need and documented benefits to schools and students. The Commission has indicated that the opportunity funding initiative is an important step toward a student need-based public education funding system that can better address the diverse challenges of all Delaware’s students.

CONCLUSIONS

Poverty remains a dominant force limiting the educational achievement of Delaware students—in particular our low-income students, EL students, and students with disabilities. While the state has enacted several policies and launched some programmatic initiatives over the past two years, Delaware still has no comprehensive and integrated plan to address the overall challenges of poverty and education for Delaware children and families in a sustained and cost-effective manner. The Commission reaffirms the action agenda needed to meet the needs of all Delaware students.

- Meet the developmental needs of all Delaware children from birth through school and entry into the workforce.
- Streamline the governance of public education in order to better align policies to meet the challenges of child poverty.
- Provide long-term, sustainable funding and support for low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities.

REFERENCES

For a full list of references, visit www.bidenschool.udel.edu/ipa/resources/publications

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PREPARED FOR THE WILMINGTON EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT COMMISSION

The Wilmington Education Improvement Commission is mandated by law to advise the Governor and General Assembly on how to improve the quality and availability of education for children P–12 within the City of Wilmington and recommend actions to address the needs of all schools statewide that have high concentrations of students in poverty, English learners, and other students at risk.

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