

## OPINION

# Creating a strong future for Guilford County

These are uncertain times in our world, our country and Guilford County. We are all learning new routines and dealing with new challenges in our daily lives, even as we continue to plan for the future.

Our community had planned numerous local activities to mark the national "Week of the Young Child" (April 13-17) and celebrate the 37,000 children age 5 and under in Guilford County. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of events weren't possible. Now, there is an even greater need to raise awareness of the important role children play in creating a strong future for Guilford County and the responsibility every member of our community has in their development.

In the 2018-19 academic year, only 40% of children

entering kindergarten were proficient or above proficient in language and literacy development as measured

by reading and comprehension assessments. Research shows that when children enter school on track, their chances of succeeding not just in school but in life increase dramatically. They're more likely to read on grade level by the end of third grade, graduate from high school, have higher-paying jobs and contribute more in taxes, as well as live longer, healthier lives.

Fortunately, a comprehensive effort is already well underway in Guilford County to tackle the fundamental issues limiting



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the potential of our children and our community. More than a hundred local organizations and nonprofits began working together in 2014 under the banner Ready for School, Ready for Life. Together, partners are creating an innovative system of care that connects families and the youngest children in our community with a wide range of support services.

Ready for School, Ready for Life is working on multiple fronts to achieve better outcomes, such as implementing a county-

wide early literacy plan, improving transitions from pre-school to kindergarten and making high-quality, affordable child care available to all families.

We're in this for the long term, and we're measuring our effectiveness in key areas such as planned and well-timed pregnancies; healthy births; on-track development for infants; toddlers and preschoolers; school readiness at kindergarten; and the ability of every child to read on grade level in the third grade.

Enhanced services are becoming more and more available to our youngest children and their parents through their obstetricians and pediatricians, and by Nurse Family Partnership, Guilford Family Connects and HealthySteps. Our work has already generated national attention and

support, including meaningful, multi-year commitments of time, resources and funding by The Duke Endowment and Blue Meridian Partners. We anticipate more than \$100 million will be invested

over 10 years to plan, design and implement a system that will seamlessly connect families with the services they want and need to support healthy development of their newborns, infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

In addition to these processes and advocacy initiatives, we have also embraced a national movement called The Basics. Launched in Boston by a team of researchers, The Basics promote five fun, free and easy ways to spur development during a child's first three years, when 80% of brain growth takes place. These are

things that all adults can do as they interact with children in their everyday lives.

We have seen tremendous response to The Basics over the past year, including support from the business community, faith leaders, health care professionals and a wide range of local government agencies.

To learn more, please visit [getreadyguilford.org](http://getreadyguilford.org) and [guilfordbasics.org](http://guilfordbasics.org). These websites provide detailed information, short videos and tips on how to make a meaningful difference in the lives of all children in our community. Our goal is to ensure success in life, and we all have a role to play.

Ed Kitchen and Susan Shore Schwartz are co-chairs and Charrise Hart is chief executive officer of Ready for School, Ready for Life.