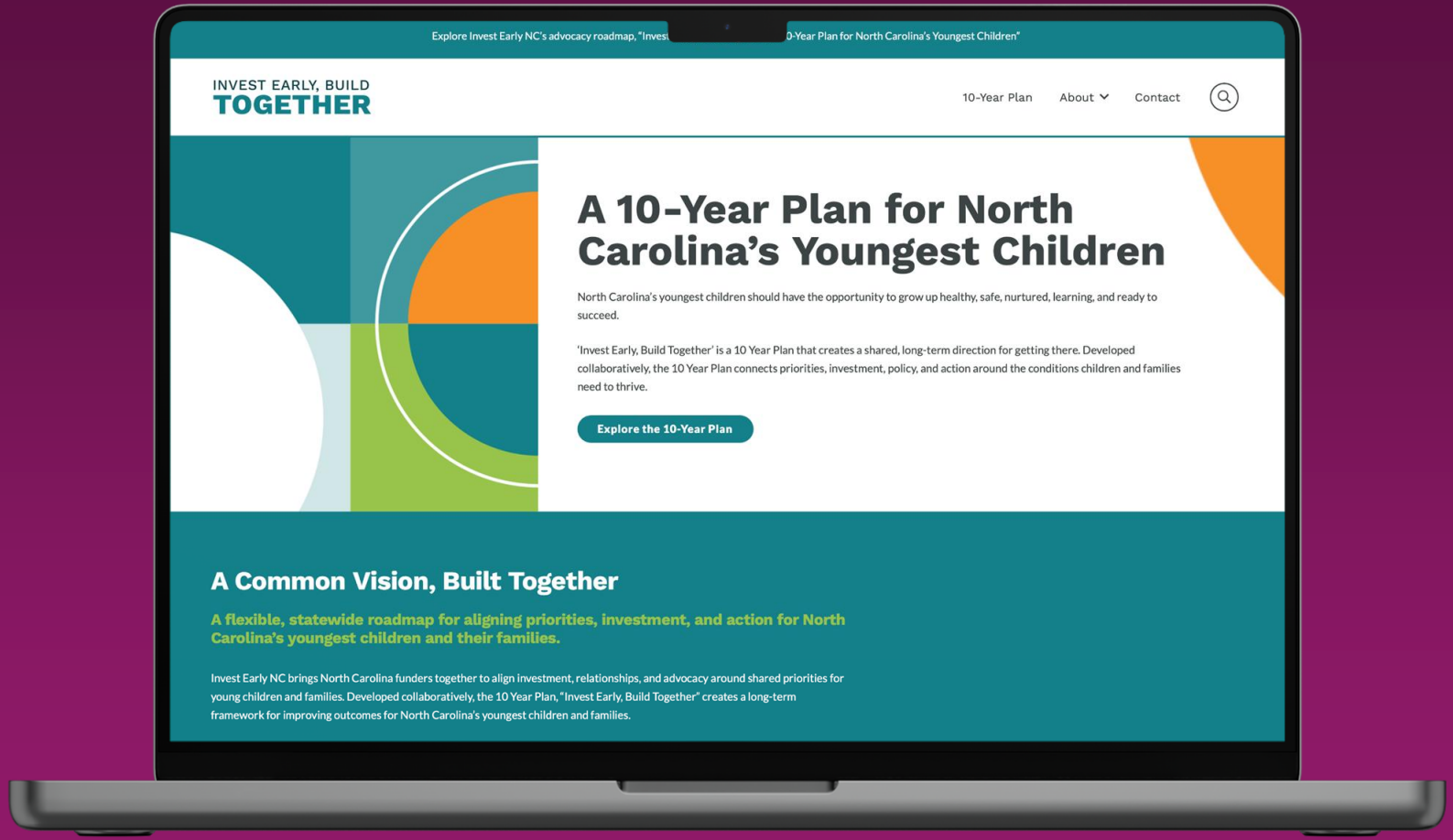
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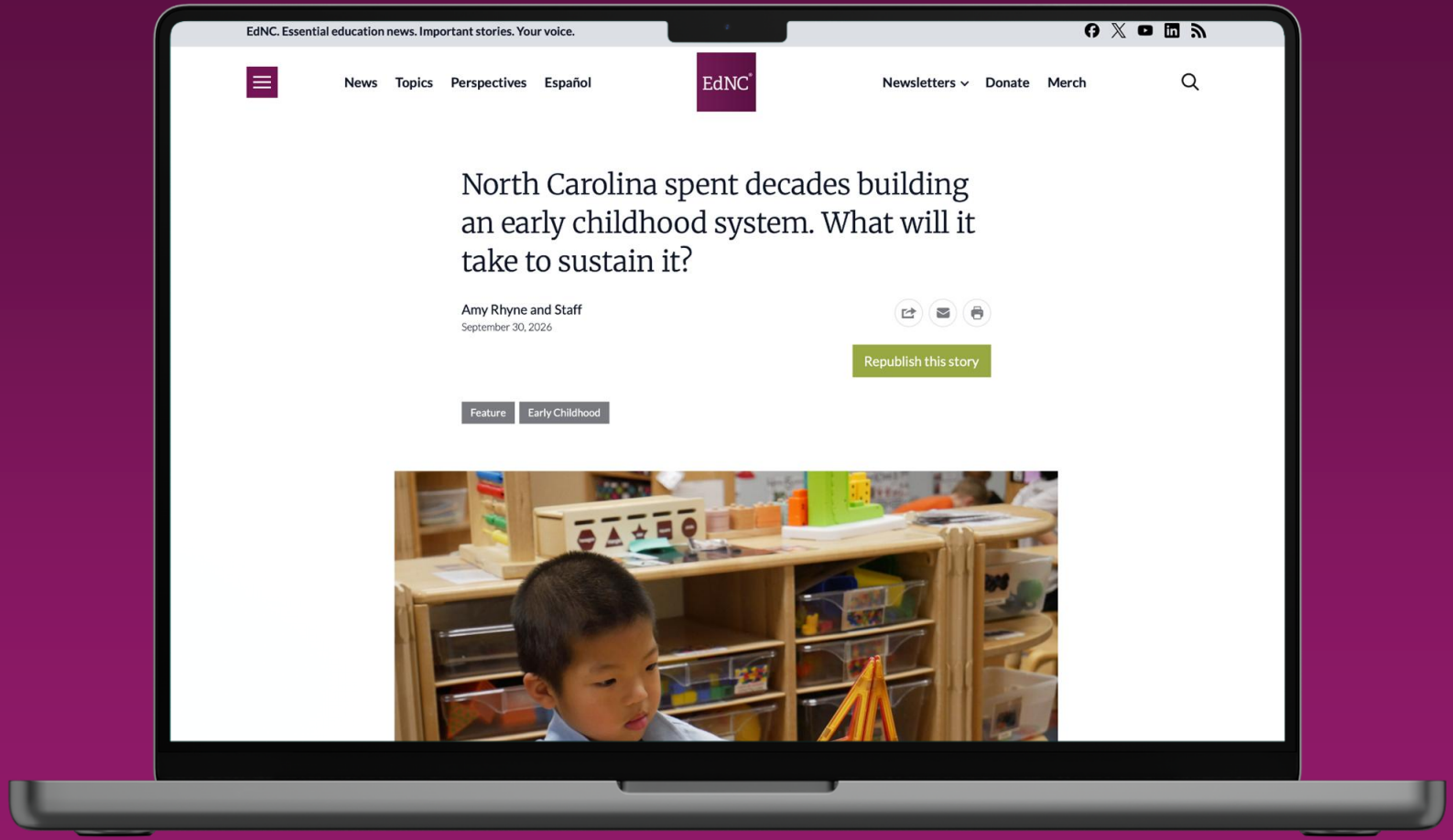
Understanding North Carolina's people, places, and forces shaping the early childhood landscape

Essential education news. Important stories. Your voice.


Explore Invest Early NC's advocacy roadmap, "Invest
0-Year Plan for North Carolina's Youngest Children"
INVEST EARLY, BUILD
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A 10-Year Plan for North Carolina's Youngest Children
North Carolina's youngest children should have the opportunity to grow up healthy, safe, nurtured, learning, and ready to succeed.
'Invest Early, Build Together' is a 10 Year Plan that creates a shared, long-term direction for getting there. Developed collaboratively, the 10 Year Plan connects priorities, investment, policy, and action around the conditions children and families need to thrive.
Explore the 10-Year Plan
A Common Vision, Built Together
A flexible, statewide roadmap for aligning priorities, investment, and action for North Carolina's youngest children and their families.
Invest Early NC brings North Carolina funders together to align investment, relationships, and advocacy around shared priorities for young children and families. Developed collaboratively, the 10 Year Plan, "Invest Early, Build Together" creates a long-term framework for improving outcomes for North Carolina's youngest children and families.

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North Carolina spent decades building an early childhood system. What will it take to sustain it?
Amy Rhyne and Staff
September 30, 2026
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Early Childhood

North Carolina: A legacy of early childhood leadership

- The story: 35+ years of building a statewide early childhood system
- What is the system? Childcare, pre-K, educator supports, quality standards, and family partnerships
- A national leader in early childhood policy and practice
- Expanding focus: access, quality, workforce, school readiness, and economic development
- Defining question: How do we sustain what North Carolina has built?

The 1990s: Building a national model

- 1990: T.E.A.C.H. helps early educators pursue education and credentials
- 1993: Smart Start funds locally led early childhood and family supports
- 1993: Division of Child Development established
- 1997 - 1999: Quality ratings and WAGE$ salary supplements support improvement
- Public-private partnerships and local decision-making become defining features

2000–2008: Childcare becomes early education

- 2001: More at Four (predecessor of NC Pre-K) establishes state-funded pre-K for at-risk 4 year olds
- 2004: More at Four reaches all 100 counties
- 2005: NC Foundations establishes preschool learning standards
- 2007: Infant-Toddler Foundations expands guidance to birth - age 3
- Childcare increasingly recognized as an educational environment

2009–2019: Alignment amid financial constraints

- 2011: More at Four becomes NC Pre-K under DHHS
- 2013: NC Foundations establishes a birth-to-five continuum
- 2015: Pathways to Grade-Level Reading connects early learning to third grade
- 2019: Early Childhood Action Plan sets 10 goals for children birth - age 8
- Funding challenge: State early childhood funding fell approximately 53% from FY 2007-08 to 2019

2020–2024: Crisis reveals importance of childcare

- COVID-19 exposed financial vulnerability of childcare providers
- 2021: Approximately $1.3 billion in federal ARPA childcare funding flowed to NC
- Stabilization grants supported operating costs, wages, and retention
- 2023: Tri-Share pilot introduced shared childcare costs among employers, families, and government
- 2024: Hurricane Helene exposed vulnerability of childcare infrastructure

2025-2026: From stabilization to system redesign

- 2025: Federal pandemic stabilization funding ends
- 2025: Gov. Stein establishes bipartisan Child Care and Early Education Task Force
- 2025: HB 412 advances regulatory and quality rating changes
- 2026: Approximately $160 million in recurring federal funds directed toward higher subsidy reimbursement rates
- Statewide subsidy reimbursement floor established
- More collaboration among government, business, philanthropy, and providers

The challenges that remain

- Families: Struggle to afford care, limited access aligned to work hours
- Providers: Struggle to cover costs
- Educators: Struggle with low wages
- Workforce compensation, recruitment, and retention
- Uneven access across rural and urban communities
- Quality expectations versus available resources
- Reliance on federal funding and short-term solutions
- Need for sustainable, coordinated financing

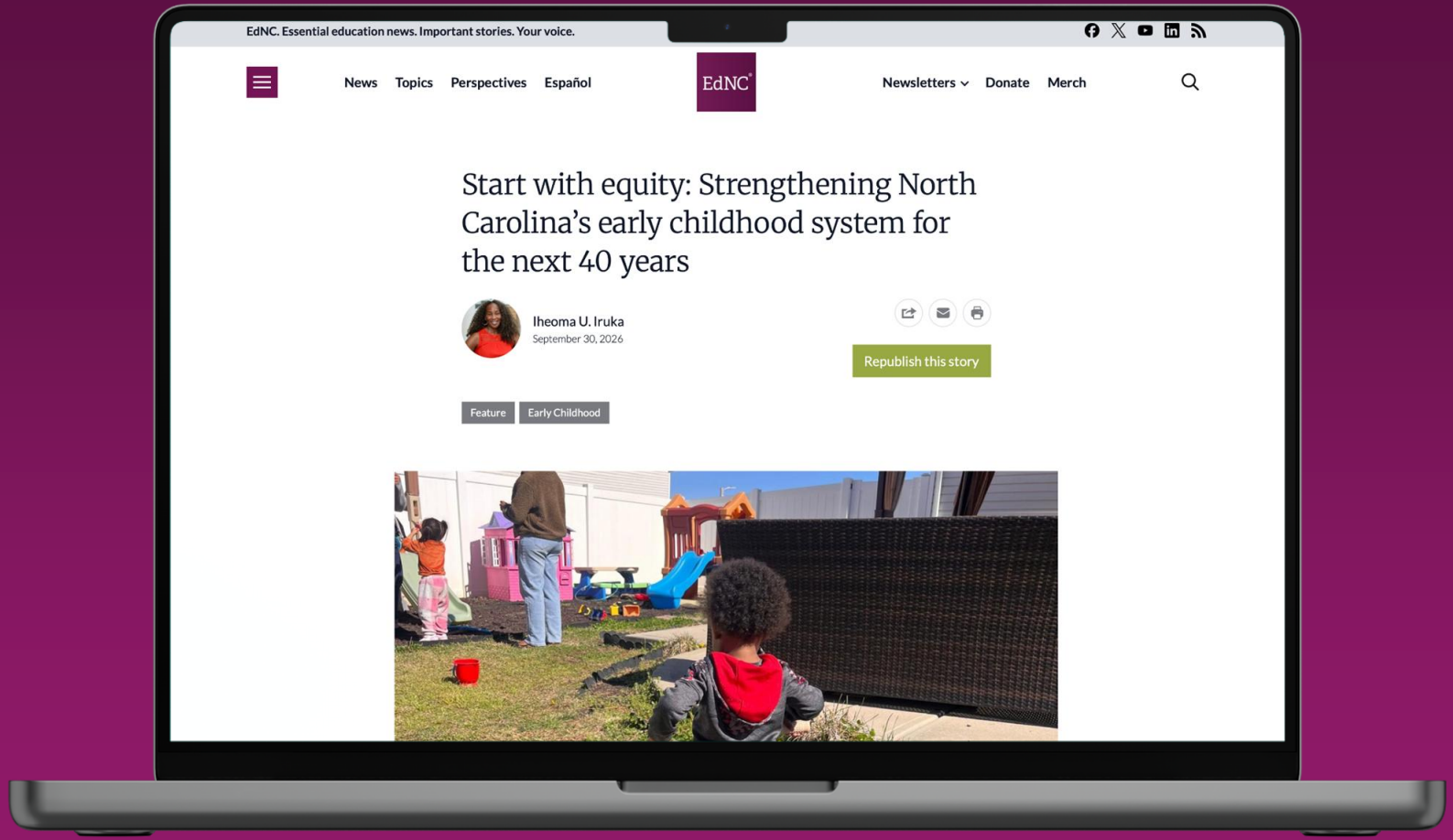
Looking forward: What 35 years can teach us

- Build on established infrastructure and partnerships
- Invest in educators as the foundation of quality
- Align affordability, access, quality, and compensation
- Recognize childcare as both education and economic infrastructure
- Develop durable, equitable funding strategies

Looking forward

North Carolina has shown we can build an innovative system.

- Are we willing to make the sustained investments necessary to preserve and strengthen it for future generations?
- What role do you play in helping us address these challenges and move forward together?


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Iheoma U. Iruka
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