



NORTH CAROLINA
State Board of Education
Department of Public Instruction

Report to the North Carolina General Assembly

Pilot Program to Raise the High School
Dropout Age

SL 2016-94, sec. 8.21 (g)

(H1030)

Date Due: January 15, 2026

DPI Chronological Schedule, 2024-2025

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION VISION

Every public school student in North Carolina will be empowered to accept academic challenges, prepared to pursue their chosen path after graduating high school, and encouraged to become lifelong learners with the capacity to engage in a globally collaborative society.

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION MISSION

The mission of the North Carolina State Board of Education and the North Carolina Superintendent of Public Instruction is to use their constitutional authority to guard and maintain the right to a public education for every student in North Carolina and to support public school units in providing every student an excellent education that prepares them for success in their next phase of life.

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LEGISLATIVE DIRECTIVE

N.C. Session Law 2016-94, Section 8.21(g) states: “The local school administrative units, in collaboration with the State Board of Education, shall report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee, the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Education, and the Senate Appropriations Committee on Education/Higher Education by January 15, 2018, and by January 15 of each even-numbered year thereafter until the end of the operation of the pilot programs.

“The report shall include at least all of the following information:

- (1) An analysis of the graduation rate in each local school administrative unit and the impact of the pilot program on the graduation rate
- (2) The teen crime statistics for Catawba County and for Rutherford County.
- (3) The number of reported cases of violations of compulsory attendance laws in Catawba County and Rutherford County and the disposition of those cases.
- (4) Implementation of enforcement mechanisms for violations of the compulsory attendance requirements of the pilot program, including the imposition of criminal penalties.
- (5) The number of at-risk students served in any night program established as part of the pilot program and student graduation and performance outcomes for those students.
- (6) All relevant data to assist in determining the effectiveness of the program and specific legislative recommendations, including the continuation, modification, or expansion of the program statewide.”

This report will serve as the required reporting by the local school administrative units, in collaboration with the State Board of Education, to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee, the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Education and the Senate Appropriations Committee on Education/Higher Education as indicated in N.C. Session Law 2016-94, Section 8.21(g).

BACKGROUND

To reduce the number of dropouts, some leaders in education have called for states to raise the upper limit of their age of compulsory school attendance — hereafter referred to as the “dropout age” — to 18.

As of this report, 24 states and the District of Columbia do not allow students to drop out before turning 18. Texas has the highest dropout age of all states at 19. The rest of the states are split between dropout ages of 16 (14 states) and 17 (11 states).

In North Carolina, students may legally leave school at 16. When this pilot began, the State Board of Education supported the vision of raising the dropout age.

In recent years, North Carolina has placed increased emphasis on a comprehensive approach to education that supports the needs of the whole child through expanded wraparound services. Also, alternative strategies to traditional education are being implemented, with virtual/online options, after-hours programming, Career and Technical Education pathways and Multi-tiered Systems of Support. All these factors support the concept that a continuum of strategies that engage students, support at-risk students and allow for flexible educational opportunities must be employed to improve results.

The “Pilot Program to Raise the High School Dropout Age from Sixteen to Eighteen” was initiated with Session Law 2013-360 (Senate Bill 402, sec. 8.49). The legislation instituted the pilot counties as Hickory Public Schools and Newton-Conover City Schools.

The first year of the pilot program — the 2014-15 school year — was used primarily for planning. The first full year of implementation was the 2015-16 school year.

Rutherford County Schools entered the pilot during the 2017-18 school year. In 2017, McDowell County Schools was added to the pilot program (House Bill 40, sec. 8.21(a)).

STATE OF THE PILOT IN 2025

The Raise the Age pilot has now been in existence for 12 years. Two of the four original districts are still participating and maintaining a drop-out age of 18. One district, McDowell County, did not realize they were still in the pilot due to staff turnover in the district. They expressed an interest in being involved in the pilot moving forward. Hickory City is no longer participating in the pilot. Districts from the original pilot were invited to a meeting to discuss the status of the pilot in the respective districts. Common themes emerged among the districts. While most did not have specific dedicated programs specific to the pilot, all were using a variety of interventions and initiatives to address the needs of all at risk students. Examples of these interventions include:

- Multi-tiered systems of support universal support for all students
- Pathways programs focusing on most at risk students
- Credit recovery programs
- Regular transcript audits to keep students on track
- Mentoring
- Alternative learning programs
- Graduate coaches
- Supports from school counselors, social workers, and psychologists to provide needed services to students in a timely manner

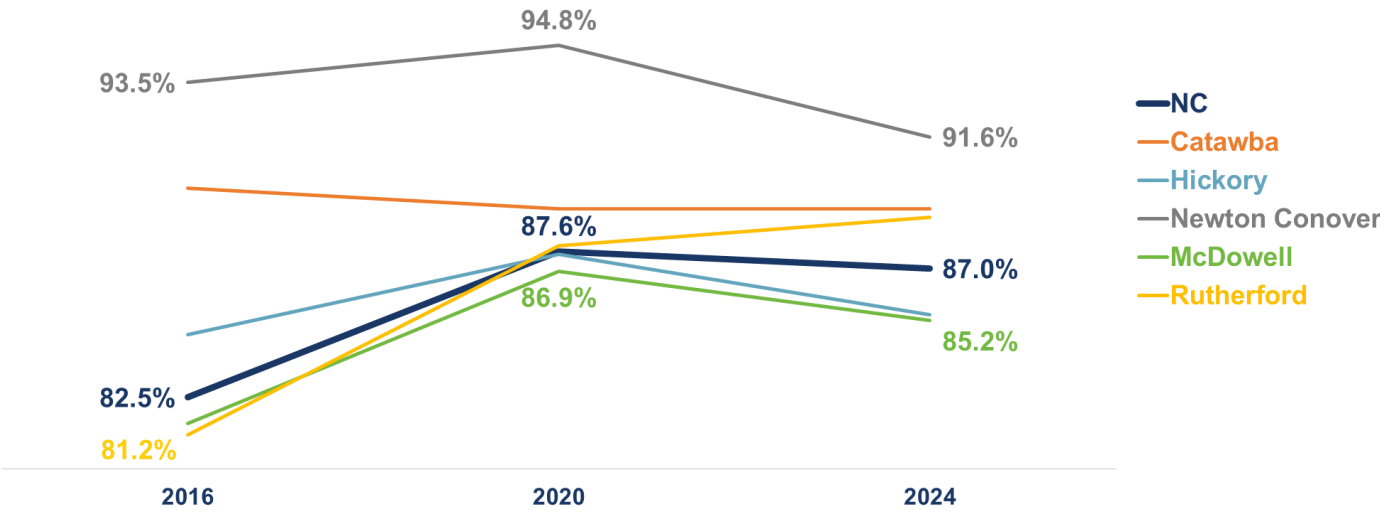
All participating LEAS said that the drop out age of 18 was now the standard in their respective districts and parents and students were aware and supportive.

EXPRESSED NEEDS

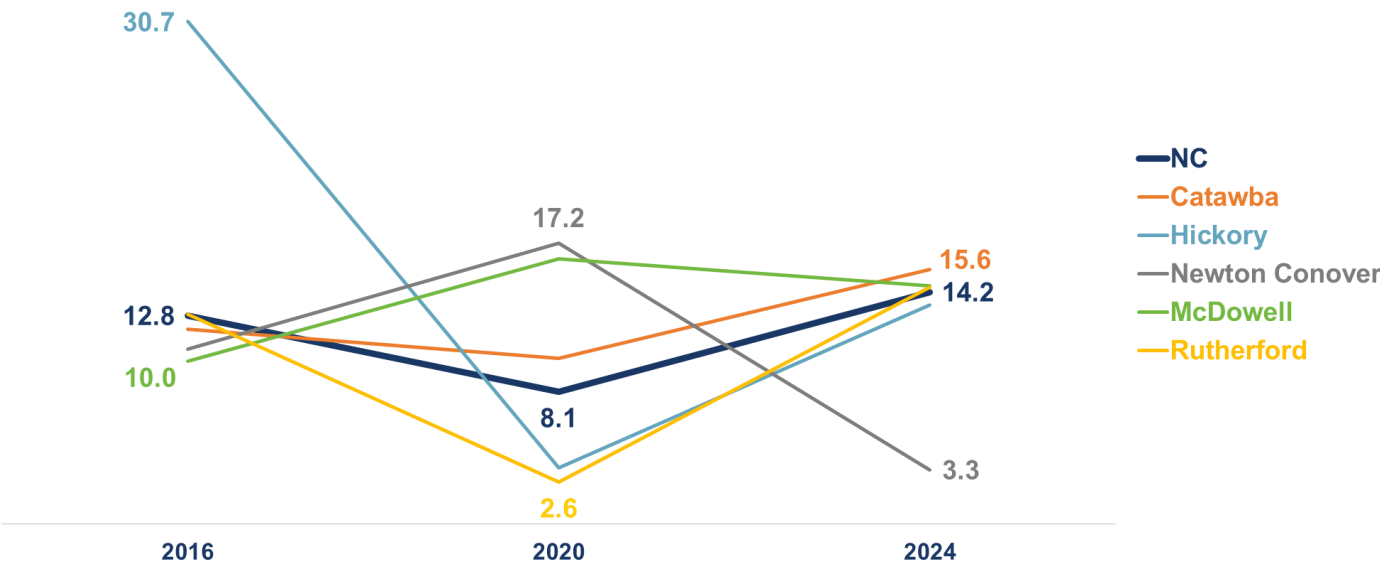
While all participating LEAs expressed the importance of the pilot and supported the continuation of the raised drop out age, they did express challenges, most notably the need for additional mental health services for students. The need for additional funding for mental health at all levels was a recurring theme among the districts. Also mentioned was the need for additional funding for alternative learning programs. Districts expressed the need not only to keep students in school until 18 but also expressed the strong desire for every student to succeed.

DATA

Graduation Rates



Total # of Criminal Acts per 1,000 Students in Grades 9-13



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Violations of compulsory attendance laws are unable to be determined. These offences are often categorized under multiple categories and dispositions difficult to obtain.
- At-risk students served in any night programs established as part of the pilot program and student graduation and performance outcomes for those students: Pilot districts do not currently offer any night programs specifically for the pilot. Interventions are provided for all students.

LEAs have continued participation in the pilot, and all expressed the desire to continue maintaining a dropout age of 18 for their students. They all continue to provide universal supports and targeted interventions to keep students in attendance until the age of 18