

2026

NORTH CAROLINA'S STATE OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Developing North Carolina's Workforce

FEBRUARY 12, 2026



*my***FUTURE NC**
2 million by 2030

Report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee of
the North Carolina General Assembly pursuant to Session Law
2019-55 House Bill 664 Section 1.(c) as provided by G.S. 120-29.5



Economic Prosperity for All North Carolinians

To ensure North Carolina remains economically competitive now and into the future, in 2019, with bipartisan support in the General Assembly and a signature from the Governor, the state of North Carolina adopted one of the most ambitious goals in the nation—to have 2 million North Carolinians aged 25-44 to hold an industry-valued credential or postsecondary degree by 2030.

By increasing educational attainment opportunities for all, North Carolina creates upward mobility and enhanced economic prosperity for our citizens and communities while also meeting the current and future workforce needs of business and industry. Additionally, higher levels of education enhance entrepreneurship which can help boost local economies, especially in rural areas of the state.

Our Vision

North Carolina employers have the necessary skilled workforce to meet business demands, and every individual in the labor market earns a family-sustaining wage in a personally fulfilling career. This positions our state to remain economically competitive now and into the future.

Our Mission

- myFutureNC promotes work of all sectors and helps find and fill gaps to drive educational access and attainment outcomes that align with and fulfill employer needs.
- myFutureNC promotes a shared vision for an education-to-workforce continuum across North Carolina—from early childhood through adulthood—and aligns and supports local, regional, and state actions that will dramatically increase attainment of industry-valued credentials and postsecondary degrees.



Connecting Learning to Work

Measuring Progress

In addition to the 2 million by 2030 goal, myFutureNC monitors progress on **18 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** that are leading benchmarks for educational attainment, aligned around four key transition points:

[Academic Readiness](#)

[College & Career Access](#)

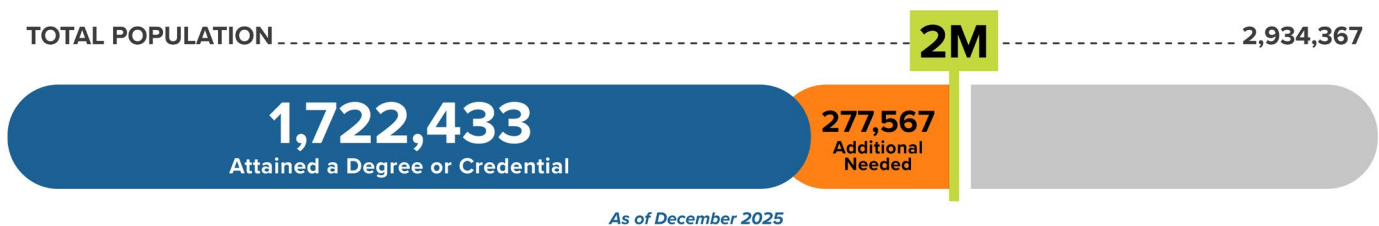
[Postsecondary Completion](#)

[Workforce Alignment](#)



Where We Stand on the 2M Goal

North Carolina residents ages 25-44



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, [American Community Survey 2024 1-Year](#) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS), released December 4, 2025.

Growing Our Own

North Carolina is making measurable progress toward its 2030 attainment goal. Since 2019, 1.72 million adults ages 25–44 now hold a postsecondary degree or industry-valued credential — an increase of 272,000. Over that same period, **attainment in this age group grew 19%, more than double the 8% population growth**, with 85 of 100 counties posting gains. This is clear evidence that North Carolina is strengthening its talent pipeline from within.

Opening Doors, Aligning Pathways, Securing North Carolina's Future

North Carolina is at a turning point. Over the past six years, myFutureNC has worked alongside communities, educators, employers, policymakers, philanthropists, and local leaders to listen, learn, and build. Together, we have created real momentum toward a stronger, more connected education-to-workforce system.

This progress is not ours alone—it reflects the dedication and vision of partners across the state who are laying the foundation for change. Now, with alignment and energy like never before, North Carolina is ready to take the next bold step forward—together.

Opening Doors - Access

Access is the first step to opportunity, and North Carolina has taken bold action to widen those doors. From the earliest years—through NC Pre-K and our statewide focus on the Science of Reading—students are setting the strong foundation they need to succeed. And as they move into high school, opportunities expand through dual enrollment and early college programs like [NC's Career and College Promise Program](#), along with [Advanced Placement](#), [International Baccalaureate](#) and [Cambridge International](#) offerings. Coupled with the [Next NC Scholarship](#) & [NC Need-Based Scholarship](#), these efforts are lowering the cost for students and creating clear, affordable entry ramps to degrees, industry-valued credentials, and ultimately a stronger workforce for North Carolina.

These aren't just programs on paper—they are real pathways helping more students, including first-generation college-goers and those from rural communities, move with confidence from early learning through high school and beyond. The lesson is simple: when education is accessible and affordable, more talent enters the pipeline for high-demand jobs, and when more of our people succeed, our entire economy grows stronger.

And when challenges arise, North Carolina helps students stay the course. Programs like [Finish Line Grants](#) and Completion Assistance Grants provide emergency funding for unexpected expenses, preventing small setbacks from becoming roadblocks. By removing barriers—whether tuition, fees, or life emergencies—we ensure that students don't just start, but finish.

Last school year, nearly 40,000 public high school graduates participated in [NC Career & College Promise](#) programs. In fall 2025, more than 62,000 North Carolina public high school seniors were offered direct admission to all 58 NC community colleges, 11 UNC schools, and 29 NC Independent Colleges and Universities through the [NC College Connect](#) program.

Connecting Learning to Work — Alignment

Access alone is not enough. Students must be able to move seamlessly from classrooms into careers. Across North Carolina, we see clear proof that alignment works. [Apprenticeships](#), [employer-college partnerships](#), and the upcoming [Workforce Pell Grants](#)—set to begin in 2026—are creating strong bridges from learning to work. These models cut red tape, reduce time and cost, provide students access to social capital that leads to higher economic mobility, and ultimately businesses gain more loyal and skilled workers they urgently need.

The challenge is scale. These models are strong, but scattered. To meet the needs of both students and employers, we must take these proven successes statewide. Every student—whether in a large urban center or a small rural county—deserves a clear, affordable path from education into a [good job](#). And every business deserves access to the talent pipeline it needs to grow. Alignment delivers a double win: students succeed faster, and businesses get talent when and where they need it.

Last year, North Carolina saw a 45% jump in registered apprenticeships and a 50% increase in pre-apprenticeships. As of March 2025, [NC Community College System \(NCCCS\) ApprenticeshipNC](#) is supporting **over 10,600 active apprentices and pre-apprentices**, with another 2,200 enrolled in nationally registered programs through NC employers.



Future-Proofing Success — Attainment

Today, nearly 42% or 1,185,764 North Carolinians ages 25–44 still lack a postsecondary degree or credential. The good news: we've made real headway in expanding access, aligning education with workforce needs, and opening doors for learners across the state. But to hit the grand slam, we've got to scale it up. That means ensuring more students not only start, but finish, and with a degree or credential of industry value. It means helping more working adults see the value of upskilling and connect with opportunities to advance. And it means making sure industries across North Carolina can tap into the talent they need to thrive in a rapidly changing economy.

With innovative solutions like [Propel NC](#), early career exploration through [Career Development Plans](#) and [NCCareers](#), expanded lifelong learning opportunities, and a stronger educator pipeline, North Carolina is positioned not just to close gaps, but to lead the nation in preparing its people—and its economy—for long-term success. To achieve this, educators must be professionally supported and revered by all as the profession deserves. **Without an effective educator in EVERY classroom, North Carolina will never have a sufficiently skilled workforce.**

North Carolina is currently **55,000 workers short** of its 2030 attainment goal—closing this gap is essential for the state's long-term competitiveness.

The Path Forward

The time for diagnosing problems has passed. We know what works! We have tested, refined, and embraced these strategies in communities across the state. What we need now is scale, alignment and synchronization.

The education-to-workforce efforts in North Carolina have never been better aligned and active. With major initiatives like the [Governor's Council on Workforce and Apprenticeships, NC Workforce Credentials Initiative, NC Commerce's Economic Development Plan, NC College Connect, NCCCS Boost, NCCCS Statewide Articulation Agreements, UNC Admission Redirect](#) and NC having been selected by the Lumina Foundation as one of just twelve [FutureReady States](#) - all moving in the same direction - we have a rare opportunity. Stakeholders across sectors are aligning. Bipartisan support exists. Jobs continue to grow. And we are [America's Top State for Business](#) AGAIN! The groundwork is laid, and momentum is on North Carolina's side.

Together, North Carolina has opened doors through access. Communities across the state have seen alignment deliver results. And we all recognize that attainment is the key to securing our talent future. North Carolina can—and must—bring these elements together under one bold, statewide strategy that ensures **every** learner, **every** worker, and **every** community is part of our shared prosperity, and **every** employer has access to a skilled workforce.

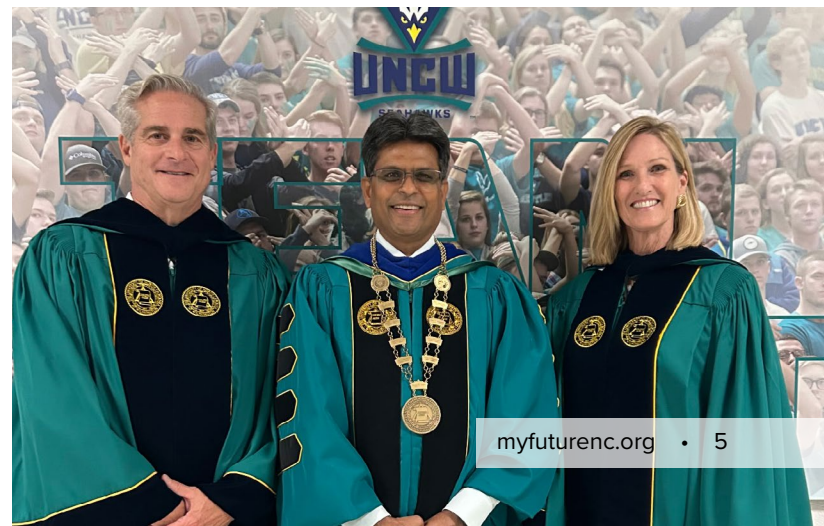
Together, we can make North Carolina the national leader in connecting learning to work and achieving the 2 million by 2030 goal AND beyond. The path is clear, the partners are ready, and the time to act is now.



Cecilia K. Holden
President/CEO, myFutureNC



John A. Fraley
Board Chair, myFutureNC



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President, NC Independent Colleges and Universities

Cross-Sector Collaboration Ensures More Opportunities for NC

Our cross-sector Board of Directors oversees the myFutureNC 501c3 nonpartisan non-profit. With individuals from each of our eight [economic prosperity zones](#), the board represents business, education, policymaking, and philanthropy and encapsulates a wide range of perspectives, expertise, and experiences. This bipartisan group of influential leaders in our State is laser-focused on providing opportunities for all North Carolinians and a skilled workforce for all employers through informed decision-making and innovative solutions that lead to better outcomes. The myFutureNC Board is positioned for continued success and positive impacts within every local community and our State at large.

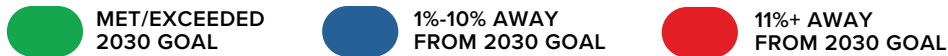
2025 Advisory Board of Commissioners

Our commissioners are ambassadors for North Carolina's 2 million by 2030 goal, vision, and initiatives. In this role, they provide insights and feedback about on-the-ground efforts to increase postsecondary attainment, share ideas, input, and critical feedback needed to enhance the more prominent, ongoing postsecondary attainment agenda in North Carolina, and help build capacity for myFutureNC to execute its mission and make progress towards North Carolina's educational attainment goal.

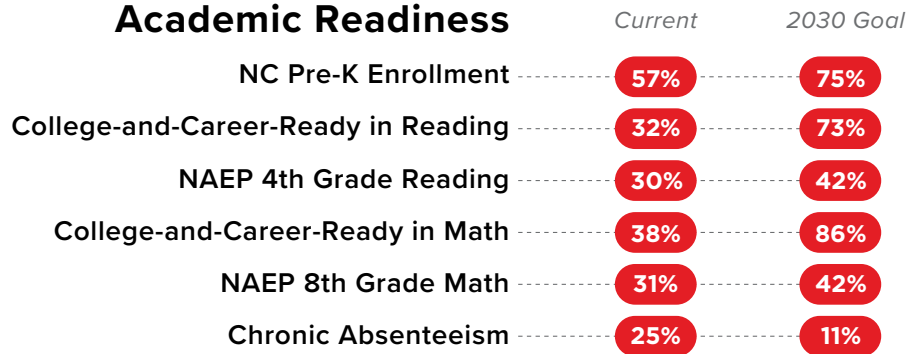
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- **Emma Battle**, *President & CEO, Higher Ed Works*
- **Brenda Berg**, *President & CEO, BEST NC*
- **Dr. Valerie Bridges**, *Educational Consultant at Enhanced Solutions Group, LLC*
- **Anita Brown-Graham**, *Professor, ncIMPACT Initiative at the UNC School of Government*
- **Bryant Buck**, *Executive Director, Mid-East Commission Council of Governments*
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- **Tare Davis**, *County Commissioner, Warren County*
- **Dr. Kandi Deitemeyer**, *President, Central Piedmont Community College*
- **Dr. John D. Denning**, *Senior Advisor, John M. Belk Endowment*
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- **Susan L. Gates**, *Special Advisor on Education, SAS*
- **Dan Gerlach**, *Owner, Dan Gerlach LLC*
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- **Dr. Rob Jackson**, *Superintendent, Buncombe County Schools*
- **Dr. Tony Jackson**, *Superintendent, Chatham County Schools*
- **A.J. Jaeger**, *Executive Director, Belk Center of Community College Leadership and Research*
- **Mark Jerrell**, *Chair, Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners*
- **Barbi Jones**, *Executive Director, Cabarrus Regional Chamber of Commerce*
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- **Dr. Amanda Lee**, *President, Bladen Community College*
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- **Jenni Owen**, *Professor of the Practice, Duke Sanford School of Public Policy*
- **Dr. Mark Poarch**, *President, Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute*
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- **Jeff Toner**, *President, James Tool Machine & Engineering Inc.*
- **Margaret Turlington**, *Director, Simple Gifts Fund/Anonymous Trust*
- **Elaine Townsend Utin**, *Former Co-Founder and Executive Director of LatinxEd*
- **Wendy Walker-Fox**, *Workforce and Economic Development Director, Piedmont Triad Regional Council*
- **Dr. Brent Williams**, *Superintendent, Lenoir County Public Schools*
- **Dr. Stelfanie Williams**, *VP for Community Affairs, Duke University*
- **J. Bradley Wilson**, *CEO Emeritus, Blue Cross Blue Shield*
- **Tracy Zimmerman**, *VP, Policy and Strategy, Neimand Collaborative*

One State, One Goal

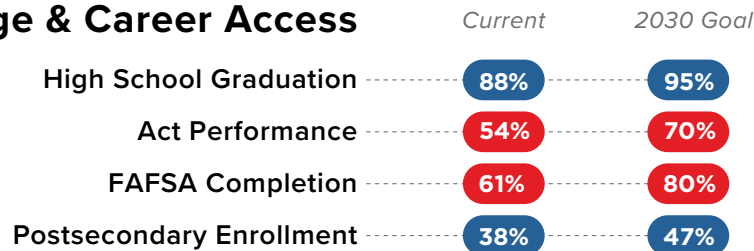
Building seamless pathways from education to employment to ensure prosperity for every community.



Academic Readiness



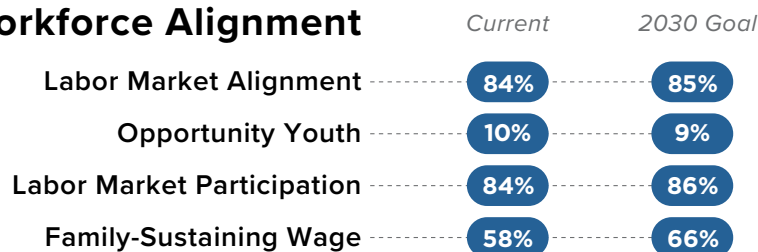
College & Career Access



Postsecondary Completion



Workforce Alignment



Current data are as of February 12, 2026. Data will continue to be updated throughout the year. For the latest information, including KPI definitions, data sources, and trend data, please visit the myFutureNC KPI Dashboard: <https://dashboard.myfuturenc.org/all-indicators/>

myFutureNC 2026 County Attainment Profiles

Released on February 12, the [2026 myFutureNC Attainment Profiles](#) provide detailed insights into educational attainment across North Carolina. Each of the state's 100 counties has a two-page profile featuring **100 data indicators** spanning four key transition points in the education-to-workforce continuum: **academic readiness, college and career access, postsecondary completion, and labor market alignment.**

These profiles serve as vital tools for local leaders and communities—offering a clear picture of progress and opportunity across the state. In addition to county profiles, **regional profiles** were also released, organized by **Prosperity Zones, Workforce Development Board regions, Councils of Government regions, and Regional Charter School regions.** These broader views help partners identify shared challenges, align strategies, and strengthen cross-county collaboration.

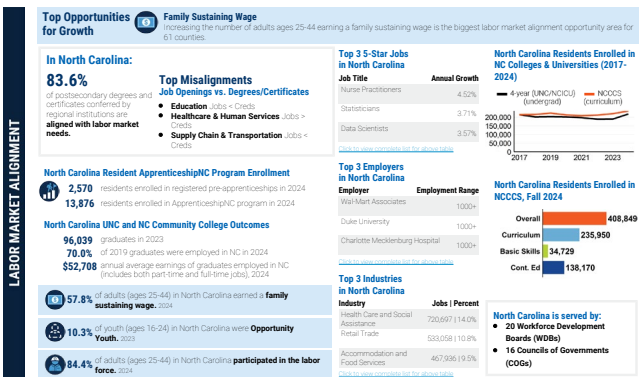
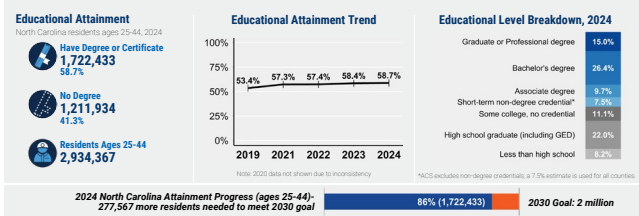
Developed in partnership with [Carolina Demography](#), the profiles include **locally recommended attainment goals** for every county. Many cross-sector partnerships across the state have [adopted these local goals](#)—or developed their own—to align with North Carolina's overarching 2 Million by 2030 statewide attainment goal.

To support local leaders and data users, myFutureNC offers a suite of complementary resources—including a **Data Sources One-Pager, Attainment Trends Workbook, and detailed data spreadsheet**—that provide context, guidance, and deeper insight into the indicators and trends highlighted in the county and regional profiles. All resources are available on the [myFutureNC Attainment Profiles webpage](#).

North Carolina

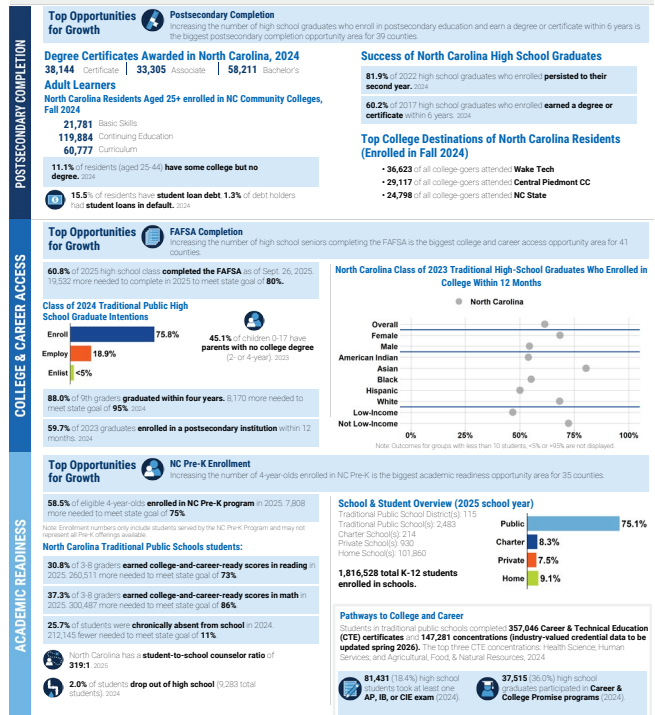
myFutureNC 2026 Attainment Profiles

This profile reflects the state as a whole, not any single institution.



North Carolina 2026 Attainment Profile (all data pertaining to K-12 represents traditional public school students)

Updated: Feb 10, 2025



For more information about each indicator, including data sources and methodology, visit:
dashboard.myfuturenc.org/county-data-and-resources/

2026 Champions for Attainment

Across North Carolina, leaders are stepping up to help our state reach an ambitious goal: **2 million North Carolinians with an industry-valued credential or degree by 2030**. The 2026 Champions for Attainment Awards shine a light on those turning that vision into reality—educators, employers, philanthropies, and organizations who are opening doors for adult learners, military families, veterans, and justice-involved individuals.

These champions are redefining what access and completion look like, building **innovative pathways through workforce training, community partnerships, and work-based learning**. Their efforts embody myFutureNC’s evidence-based strategies, proving that when North Carolinians have the tools and support to learn, they transform not only their own futures—but the future of our entire state.



NCCCS Career Coaches

The [NC Career Coach Program](#) places community college–based career coaches in high schools to help students identify career goals and map clear education pathways early. Coaches provide one-on-one guidance aligned to local workforce demand and support access to dual-enrollment opportunities. In 2024–25, the program served more than 31,000 students statewide, helping reduce postsecondary attrition and increase credential attainment.



NC Health Talent Alliance

The [NC Health Talent Alliance](#) is a statewide public-private partnership led by the [NC Chamber Foundation](#), NC AHEC, and the NC Center on the Workforce for Health to address North Carolina’s critical healthcare workforce shortages. Using employer-led, data-driven strategies, the Health Talent Alliance aligns education and training programs with real-time workforce demand across regions. This coordinated approach strengthens healthcare talent pipelines and expands access to industry-valued credentials statewide.



NC Reconnect

[NC Reconnect](#) is a statewide initiative focused on reengaging adults ages 25–44 who started at a community college but did not complete a credential. Through five cohorts and collaboration with colleges statewide, the initiative has reached more than 47,000 former students and successfully reengaged over 3,000 adult learners. Notably, approximately 25% of those contacted responded, and 23% of respondents re-enrolled, far exceeding the national re-enrollment average of just 3%.



The Forward Fund

The Forward Fund is North Carolina's first pay-it-forward fund, providing zero-interest, outcomes-based loans to remove financial barriers to short-term, high-demand workforce credentials. Since launching in 2025, the fund has supported close to 200 learners, significantly increasing post-training earnings while meeting regional workforce needs. Its sustainable model reinvests repayments to expand access for future learners and strengthen the state's workforce pipeline.



Surry-Yadkin Works

Surry-Yadkin Works is a regional apprenticeship program connecting both high school students and adults to paid, real-world work experiences while earning high school (when applicable) and college credit. Through strong partnerships among public schools, Surry Community College, employers, and community organizations, the program bridges classroom learning and workforce needs. Participants gain early career exposure, industry credentials, and momentum toward long-term career and postsecondary success.



Bertie Attainment Coalition

The Bertie Attainment Coalition is a community-driven partnership aligning K–12 education, Martin and Roanoke-Chowan Community Colleges, workforce agencies, local government, and nonprofits to expand postsecondary attainment across Bertie County. Guided by clear, measurable goals, the coalition strengthens pathways for youth, opportunity youth, and adult learners through career guidance, work-based learning, and reengagement strategies. Its coordinated, data-informed approach reduces barriers to completion and connects residents to credentials aligned with high-demand jobs.





North Carolina's Pathway to Progress: Measurable Gains, Shared Success

Momentum is not on the horizon — it's here. Over the past several years, North Carolina has been listening to communities, sharing and gathering data, and building powerful partnerships. This work has moved from planning to measurable progress — fueling real change across the state.

The Education-to-Workforce space is already more active and aligned than ever. With the leadership of the [Governor's Council on Workforce and Apprenticeships](#), North Carolina is advancing with clarity and confidence. Together, we are synchronizing strategies, aligning resources, and moving in one direction.

The results speak for themselves: today, 1.72 million North Carolinians ages 25 to 44 hold a postsecondary degree or credential. That's 272,000 more credentialed residents since 2019, when myFutureNC was established. Across the state, 85 of 100 counties have increased the share of residents with a degree or credential in just the last five years. That means more North Carolinians are equipped with the knowledge and skills for meaningful careers — and more employers have access to the talent needed to power local economies. These gains prove that our state not only knows what to do — we are doing it, and doing it at scale.

Expanding Access Across Every Stage of Learning in North Carolina

Early Foundations

High-quality early childhood education is one of North Carolina's smartest investments in access and affordability—not just for young children, but also for their families and communities. Expanding [NC Pre-K](#) and other affordable early learning options reduces long-term remediation costs, strengthens family stability, and boosts workforce participation. Children who start strong are more likely to read on grade level by third grade, graduate from high school, and complete postsecondary education.

Equally important, access to affordable, high-quality child care is essential for working adults and parents pursuing their own education and training. Reliable child care enables parents to enroll in college or workforce programs, persist in their studies, and increase their earning potential. For adults going back to school to skill up or reskill, childcare can mean the difference between completing a credential and dropping out. Investments in early education not only prepare the next generation of learners—they create stability and opportunity for entire families.

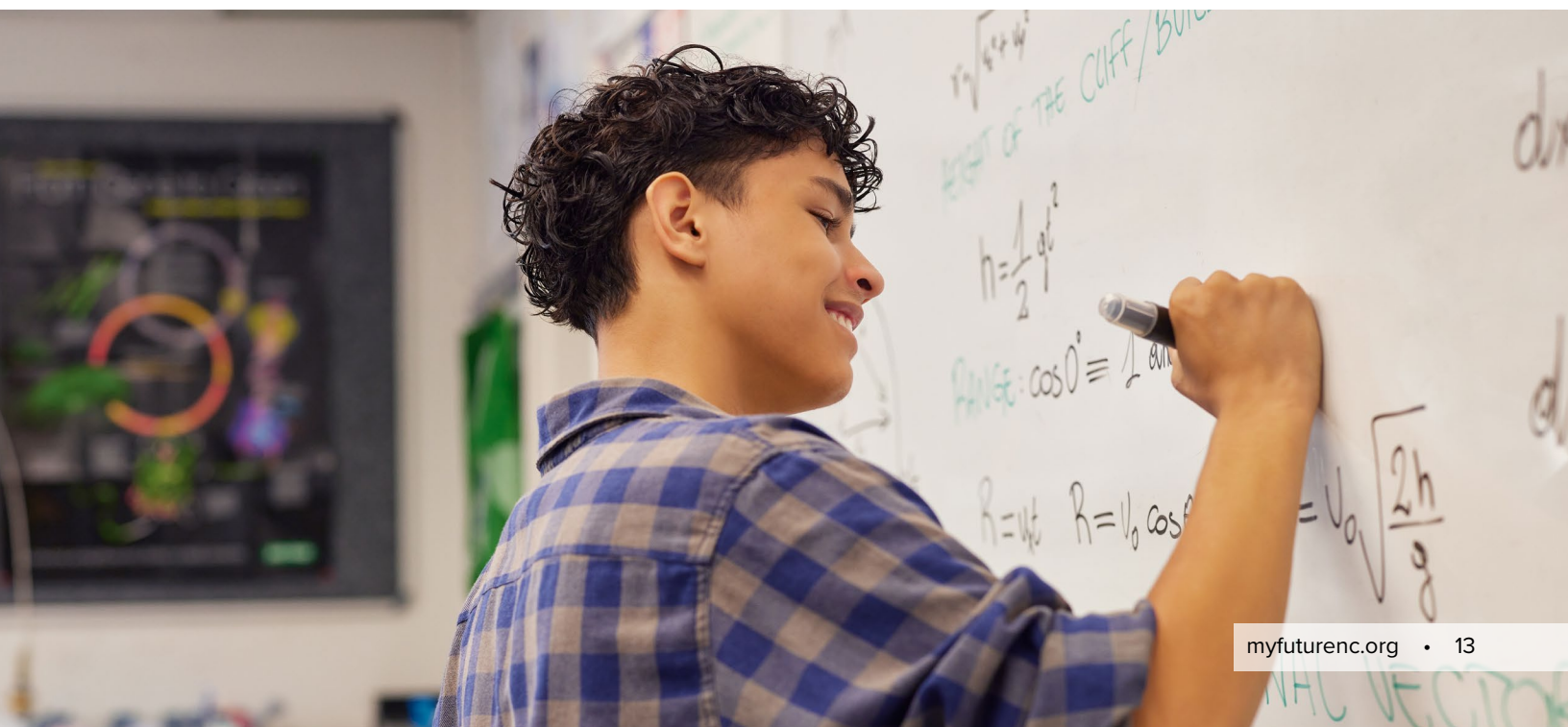
Building on this foundation, North Carolina extends access through middle and high school programs that prepare students for college success. [GEAR UP NC](#) provides critical support to first-generation and low-income students as they progress through middle and high school to sustain this momentum. Through academic assistance, career exploration, FAFSA workshops, and retention support, [GEAR UP NC](#) ensures students and families have the tools to access and complete higher education.

High School Access to College-Level Learning

As students enter high school, access to advanced coursework provides a bridge to college readiness. Programs such as [Advanced Placement \(AP\)](#), [International Baccalaureate \(IB\)](#), and [Cambridge International](#) expand rigorous opportunities statewide. Students gain critical skills, save on tuition by earning college credit early, and ensure equitable access across rural and urban schools.

Through the [Career & College Promise \(CCP\) Program](#), juniors and seniors can jump-start their future by taking tuition-free college courses in transfer, career, or early college pathways. CCP works like dual enrollment—helping students save money, finish degrees faster, and gain the confidence that comes from real college experience.

These early college opportunities seamlessly connect to North Carolina's financial aid and affordability initiatives, ensuring that cost is never a barrier to continuing education.



Affordability & Financial Aid

Affordability is one of the strongest determinants of whether students can access and complete postsecondary education. North Carolina has built a coordinated financial aid system that helps ensure cost is not a barrier.

At the center of this system is [College for North Carolina](#) (CFNC.org), the state's free, comprehensive resource to help students and families plan, apply, and pay for college. CFNC serves learners of all ages—including K–12 students, adult learners, and military-affiliated students—and partners with all 110 public and private colleges in North Carolina. It functions as the statewide application portal and the official provider of high school transcripts, processing more than 700,000 applications and transcripts annually. Since its inception in 2000, CFNC has registered more than 7 million users, making it one of the premier college access platforms in the nation.

CFNC is a collaborative effort between the [NC Department of Public Instruction](#), [NC Community College System](#), [NC Independent Colleges and Universities](#), [The UNC System](#), the [North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority \(NCSEAA\)](#), and [College Foundation, Inc. \(CFI\)](#).

The NC State Education Assistance Authority (NCSEAA) administers the state's financial aid programs, with College Foundation, Inc. (CFI) supporting program delivery. Core programs include the [Next NC Scholarship](#) and the [NC Need-Based Scholarship for Private College Students](#), which together make higher education more affordable for thousands of North Carolinians every year. In 2024-2025, over 151K students received need-based scholarships from the State totaling more than \$281M.

Financial aid also extends beyond tuition to meet real-life needs. [Finish Line Grants](#) provide up to \$1,000 per semester to community college students facing financial emergencies, ensuring unexpected expenses like car repairs, childcare, or medical bills don't derail their education. Additionally, wraparound supports—childcare, transportation, food assistance, and healthcare access—help students manage the nonacademic costs of college attendance, stabilizing their lives so they can focus on coursework and completion.

Taken together, North Carolina's financial aid system ensures affordability is addressed both in the classroom and beyond it—making higher education a reality for learners of every age and background.



Simplified College Entry Points

North Carolina has simplified college entry to reduce barriers and expand opportunity. [NC College Connect](#) offers eligible high school seniors direct admission to participating colleges and universities—including North Carolina community colleges, [UNC institutions](#), and [North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities \(NCICU\)](#)—streamlining the application process.

[Choose NC](#) provides a streamlined way for students not offered admission to certain UNC System institutions to automatically apply to other institutions within the System. Together, these initiatives make it easier for students to explore a broader range of institutions with less paperwork and more opportunity.

[NC Boost](#), fueled by a historic \$35.6 million gift from [Arnold Ventures](#)—the largest private investment ever in the [NC Community College System](#)—removes financial barriers by providing tuition and fee waivers, stipends, textbook funding, and dedicated advising to help students stay on track. Scholars are required to enroll in degree or credential programs aligned with high-demand workforce pathways under [Propel NC](#), ensuring that access translates into employability and economic mobility. The program launched at eight community colleges in 2025 and will expand to fifteen by 2026, combining aid with advising to scale opportunity across the state.

Strong Institutions, Broader Access

North Carolina's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are essential engines of opportunity, serving populations that have historically faced the greatest barriers to higher education.

HBCUs: With 10 campuses enrolling more than 45,000 students, North Carolina has the largest HBCU presence of any state. These institutions provide supportive learning environments, strong mentoring networks, and a legacy of academic excellence. They are particularly effective at enrolling and graduating first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students while producing graduates in high-demand fields such as STEM, healthcare, and education. HBCUs are not only vital to North Carolina's attainment goals—they are drivers of cultural and economic growth statewide.

HSIs: North Carolina also has a growing network of Hispanic-Serving Institutions, primarily within its community college system. Community college–anchored HSIs serve as gateways of possibility for Hispanic and Latinx learners. They not only expand access to higher education but also surround students with the support systems—academic, social, and financial—that make persistence and completion attainable. In doing so, they nurture talent, uplift families, and strengthen entire communities. Given that nearly 20% of NC's K–12 students identify as Hispanic or Latinx, HSIs are critical to expanding postsecondary attainment for one of the state's fastest-growing populations.

For many North Carolinians, returning to higher education as adults is the next step toward career advancement and economic mobility.



Adult Learner Reengagement: Continuing Education and Credentials

Adult learners make up a third of North Carolina's community college enrollment. One promising model for boosting reenrollment and completion is [NC Reconnect](#). The John M. Belk Endowment, in partnership with myFutureNC, the Belk Center for Community College Leadership, the North Carolina Community College System, and other state and local partners, have joined forces to reconnect adults with higher education.

Through five cohorts, NC Reconnect has worked with community colleges to reengage adults who started but did not finish a degree. Collectively, the effort has reached more than 47,000 former students and successfully reengaged over 3,000. Notably, about 25% of those contacted responded, and 23% of that group re-enrolled—a rate far above the national average of just 3%.

A key insight from NC Reconnect is that many adult learners are choosing continuing education and short-term workforce training rather than degree programs.

Popular pathways include commercial driver's license (CDL) training, healthcare certifications, and IT credentials—programs that are fast, flexible, and tied directly to jobs with family-sustaining wages.

To support this demand, North Carolina offers programs like [Short-Term Workforce Development Grants](#), which provide up to \$750 per course for noncredit training in high-demand fields. [Workforce Pell Grants](#), launching in 2026, will be transformative—allowing students to use federal aid for short-term, career-focused programs for the first time. This expansion will make continuing education even more affordable and accessible for working adults who may not need or want a degree but do need credentials that lead directly to employment.



Degree Completion for Adult Learners

With a community college within 30 minutes of nearly every resident, the [North Carolina Community College System \(NCCCS\)](#) offers affordable, flexible pathways for adults looking to finish a degree, gain new skills, or change careers. More than 200 certificate and diploma programs, workforce training opportunities, and foundational education options help adults balance education with work and family while advancing toward their goals.

More than 1 million North Carolinians have attended college but left before earning a degree or credential. To help bring them back, the [UNC System](#) is expanding its partnership with [ReUp Education](#), which specializes in reengaging former students and supporting their path to graduation. Since 2023, ReUp has helped over 4,200 North Carolinians reenroll in UNC institutions, with more than 600 already earning degrees. Ten campuses will now participate in this expanded effort, which includes personalized coaching to help returning students stay on track.

In addition, [Project Kitty Hawk](#)—a nonprofit affiliate of the UNC System—creates workforce-aligned online degree pathways for adults who started college but never finished. Its “Flight Path” programs offer accelerated degrees, streamlined services, and dedicated success coaches for working adults.

Adult learners will also find flexible options at [North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities \(NCICU\)](#) that meet their needs, including online and in-person classes, weekend and evening programs, and shortened terms or mini-mesters. Many NCICU campuses offer reduced tuition for adult students, along with accelerated bachelor’s and master’s pathways, prior learning credit, and specialized support for military-affiliated and transfer students. Some institutions also offer a bachelor’s degree completion program or associate’s degree transfer program with a set maximum cost per student.

Together, NCCCS, UNC, and NCICU institutions are ensuring that adult learners across North Carolina have multiple, affordable, and flexible on-ramps to complete or advance their degrees.

Building Pathways from Service to Career

[Military families and veterans](#) are a vital part of North Carolina’s workforce pipeline. Tailored support services—including credit for prior learning, specialized advising, and targeted outreach—help service members transition into civilian careers or advance within them. Community colleges and universities partner with military bases and veteran organizations to ensure that these learners can access flexible, affordable programs that honor their service and accelerate their educational goals.

Data: 100,000 active-duty service members, 600,000+ veterans, and hundreds of thousands of military spouses and children

Correctional Education and Reentry

Access must extend to every learner, including those who are incarcerated. The [NC Department of Adult Correction’s Education Services](#) provides a continuum of opportunities ranging from basic literacy and high school equivalency to vocational training, postsecondary courses, and industry-recognized credentials. Through partnerships with more than 40 community colleges and several universities, incarcerated students can earn credit-bearing courses that transfer into degree programs after release.

Under the [Reentry 2030 Strategic Plan](#), North Carolina has committed to scaling these offerings, strengthening transitions back into higher education, and ensuring continuity of opportunities once people leave incarceration. By embedding education and credentialing within correctional settings, [NC’s Department of Adult Corrections](#) contributes to broader access by ensuring individuals in—and returning from—incarceration have real, sustainable pathways to postsecondary attainment. These programs reduce recidivism, improve employability, and expand the pool of skilled workers ready to contribute to North Carolina’s economy—transforming education into a powerful driver of second chances.

Closing the Loop: Workforce Readiness

North Carolina's access strategies form a continuum that begins with early childhood education and extends through adulthood and lifelong upskilling. At every stage, the state has invested in opening doors—through early learning, dual enrollment, simplified admissions, financial aid, adult reengagement, and inclusive institutions like HBCUs and HSIs. Together, these efforts create a seamless, statewide framework of opportunity.

What makes this continuum powerful is its connection to the workforce. Programs like Boost, Short-Term Workforce Development Grants, and Workforce Pell ensure that education leads directly to high-demand jobs with family-sustaining wages. By aligning pathways to labor market needs, North Carolina ensures that access translates into economic mobility for learners and skilled talent for employers.

The state's vision is clear: every North Carolinian—whether a preschooler beginning their learning journey, a high school student earning college credit, an adult reengaging after years away, or an individual returning from incarceration—must have a meaningful on-ramp to education and training that prepares them for work. This learner-centered, workforce-driven approach underpins the goal of **2 million North Carolinians with a postsecondary credential or degree by 2030**, securing opportunity for all while strengthening the state's economy and competitiveness for decades to come.





Connecting Learning to Work: Seamless Pathways

In North Carolina, learning leads to earning—at every stage of life. Students, educators, employers, and communities work together from early childhood through adulthood to create clear, seamless pathways to meaningful careers.

This work recognizes that education is most powerful when it connects to real opportunity. Learners gain early exposure to industries, build practical skills, and see how what they learn today opens doors for tomorrow - all while also building access to social capital, specifically economic connectedness, which [research](#) identifies as one of the strongest predictors of upward mobility for individuals from low-income backgrounds. Employers play a key role by helping shape learning programs, validating credentials, and expanding hands-on experiences that prepare people for success in a fast-changing economy.

At the K–12 level, intentional career planning is a cornerstone of this vision. **Career Development Plans (CDPs)** guide students in linking their academic experiences to real-world aspirations, ensuring every graduate leaves high school with clear, personalized postsecondary and career goals. All public schools are required to implement CDPs, and since 2023, over half of the state's school districts have turned to [NCCareers.org](https://www.nccareers.org) to help students connect their interests and coursework with meaningful career pathways—a number that continues to rise.

By integrating career awareness, work-based learning, and structured planning throughout every stage of learning, the state is redefining how students and adult learners move from classroom to career. The goal is simple but transformative: to build a talent pipeline that helps North Carolinians find fulfilling work, supports families and communities, and keeps the state's economy strong.

These priorities come to life through a growing network of work-based learning and apprenticeship programs that connect people directly to high-demand careers—creating lasting opportunities across the state.

Work-Based Learning and Apprenticeships

North Carolina's commitment to career-connected learning is realized through a statewide network of earn-and-learn opportunities. From high school through adulthood, work-based learning (WBL) and apprenticeship programs bridge classroom instruction with real-world experience—so learners gain skills, credentials, and confidence. At the same time, employers build a reliable, skilled workforce.

Through [ApprenticeshipNC](#), [Career Launch NC](#), and regional partnerships, paid career-connected experiences are expanding across industries. In 2024, ApprenticeshipNC supported [16,446 registered apprentices](#), representing a 9% increase from the previous year, and partnered with **3,224 employers** statewide. Individuals who complete Registered Apprenticeship Programs earn about \$10,000 more per year—adding up to a lifetime wage boost of roughly \$400,000. Employers benefit with returns averaging 47% to more than 100%, while retaining up to 90% of completers after five years. For the public, apprenticeships generate the highest return on investment of any workforce or education strategy.

Work-based learning is rapidly expanding across North Carolina's talent system, engaging students through internships, clinical placements, and youth apprenticeships. Embedding these opportunities across secondary and postsecondary programs ensures education stays aligned with employer demand and every graduate is career-ready.

Innovative industry sector-specific models are strengthening critical workforce pipelines:

- **Teacher Apprenticeships (BEST NC)** – North Carolina is advancing a statewide teacher apprenticeship model, TeachReadyNC, designed to create a paid, mentored pathway into the classroom while earning credentials. The policy is included in both the proposed Senate and House budgets, positioning it for statewide expansion. TeachReadyNC aims to prepare up to 3,000 new teacher candidates per year over the next decade, offering a high-quality alternative to emergency or permit-to-teach licenses that often result in higher turnover and lower student outcomes.
- **Nursing Apprenticeships (NCBCE • Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation • myFutureNC)** – A statewide advisory council is working to expand Registered Nurse (RN) apprenticeship programs across six regions, advance policy and practice changes, and develop a replicable playbook to guide future growth and help address nursing shortages in rural and underserved communities.

Together, these efforts are redefining how North Carolinians learn, earn, and advance—strengthening families, communities, and the state's economy for the long term.



Private-Sector Partnerships for Alignment

Private-sector leadership is a cornerstone of North Carolina's workforce strategy. Through collaboration with employers, industry associations, and chambers of commerce, the state grounds its workforce initiatives in real-time labor market needs. Employers are not merely consumers of talent—they are co-designers of the talent system. They contribute data, expertise, work-based learning opportunities, and insight to inform policy, validate credentials, and shape programs that provide learners with tangible opportunities and measurable results for businesses.

NC Chamber & NC Chamber Foundation

The NC Chamber and NC Chamber Foundation, through the Institute for Workforce Competitiveness and the Talent Pipeline Management (TPM) framework, position employers as co-architects of workforce pathways. More than **400 companies** have participated in Chamber-led initiatives that apply supply-chain principles to map talent flows, identify gaps, and co-develop solutions. Industry sector-based collaborations—such as the [NC Health Talent Alliance](#)—connect employers, colleges, and regional organizations to address urgent workforce needs in healthcare, advanced manufacturing, and other high-demand fields, giving learners clear, accelerated pathways to rewarding careers.

Governor's Council on Workforce and Apprenticeships

The [Governor's Council on Workforce and Apprenticeships](#) provides bipartisan leadership and serves as the backbone for statewide coordination—linking education, industry, and policy through shared goals and metrics. As an advisory body within the [NCWorks Commission](#), the Council unites the [Department of Public Instruction \(DPI\)](#), the [NC Community College System \(NCCCS\)](#), the [UNC System](#), the [NC Independent Colleges & Universities](#), [Local Area Workforce Development Boards](#), workforce agencies, employers and myFutureNC to create a unified approach to charting progress on North Carolina's workforce development goals.

Guided by **eleven measurable statewide goals**, the Council strives to expand work-based learning and doubling apprenticeships, as well as strengthening transfer and credential pathways, and aligning data across agencies. This structure reduces duplication, promotes accountability, and ensures that regional efforts contribute directly to statewide workforce goals.

The Council also anchors employer engagement at the policy level—ensuring that private-sector insight shapes program design, credential validation, policy, and resource allocation. Together, these efforts turn alignment into action, creating the infrastructure that supports every earn-and-learn pathway across the state.





Regional Engines & Cross-Sector Convenings

Regional partnerships turn North Carolina's workforce strategy into measurable outcomes. Through shared leadership, data-driven planning, and targeted convenings, these collaborations align statewide priorities with local economies—ensuring every region can adapt, innovate, and grow.

[AdvanceNC](#) unites 11 community colleges, three universities, 7 workforce development boards, and numerous K–12 districts and employers in the Piedmont. Together, they have supported over **65,000 learners** and **1,000 employers** through shared training programs, credential pathways, and work-based learning—bridging rural and urban communities.

Across eastern North Carolina, the [NC East Alliance](#) bridges the gap between educators, employers, and community leaders across **29 counties**, fostering pathways to high-demand careers. Through the [STEM East Network and Industry in Schools](#) initiative, educators and students gain practical exposure to local industries. These experiences ignite interest in regional career opportunities and align academic learning with the requirements of regional industries.

The **Hunt Institute's** [ElevateNC initiative](#) has prepared more than **250 cross-sector leaders** to advance workforce-aligned policies. Its regional convenings bring together practitioners, students, elected officials, and policy experts, equipping participants with practical strategies to implement solutions in their home communities and ensuring local insights continue to inform statewide investment and strategy.

Building on this momentum, **myFutureNC** hosted a series of convenings in **2025**, focused on **justice-involved learners, military families and veterans, and employer-led attainment strategies**. These sessions united educators, employers, and policymakers to identify barriers, share best practices, and co-design solutions that expand access and success.

In **Western North Carolina**, partners are driving recovery and workforce renewal following Hurricane Helene. Despite widespread damage and worker displacement, community colleges have reconnected learners to jobs, training, and new opportunities. With continued state support, communities are rebuilding stronger than before. Collaborative recovery efforts are restoring livelihoods, strengthening local infrastructure, and showcasing the enduring resilience, determination, and ingenuity that define the people of Western North Carolina.

Together, these partnerships are the engines of North Carolina's workforce ecosystem—scaling innovation, sustaining communities, and linking education to high-demand careers across the state.

Access and Regional Impact

Expanding opportunity for every North Carolinian is central to the state's vision. Regional workforce boards, community colleges, and local partners are closing opportunity gaps and delivering training where needed most—from broadband expansion that enables online learning and remote employment in remote communities to mobile career centers that bring credential programs directly to learners and employers. Through initiatives like **Propel NC**, **Career Launch NC**, and **ApprenticeshipNC**, residents across rural and urban areas can prepare for high-demand careers without leaving their communities.

Access also means ensuring that learners can persist and succeed. Transportation assistance, childcare coordination, career coaching, and stipends help individuals stay on track while pursuing training and employment. Programs led by workforce boards, and community colleges are showing measurable impact—boosting completion and job placement while supporting the whole learner. As these efforts expand, special initiatives strengthen pathways for **military families, veterans, and justice-involved learners**, whose skills and experiences are vital to North Carolina's long-term success.

Military Families & Veterans

Home to one of the nation's largest military and veteran populations, North Carolina is building seamless pathways from service to civilian success. Through initiatives such as **SkillBridge**, **NC4ME (North Carolina for Military Employment)**, and the **NCWorks Veterans Portal**, the state connects service members and their families to high-quality careers across every region.

Veterans who participate in **credit-for-prior-learning** initiatives have the opportunity to receive college credit for military experience, allowing them to complete degrees or credentials **30% faster** than non-participants—underscoring the importance of recognizing military-acquired skills and experience. Employer partners, led by **NC4ME** and the **NC Chamber Foundation**, are translating military training into customized, on-the-job pathways that leverage leadership and technical expertise.

myFutureNC's statewide convenings for military families and veterans are helping to align efforts and strengthen coordination among education, workforce, and community partners. These collaborations aim to build a more connected system of support that could ease transitions, accelerate attainment, and enhance North Carolina's leadership in military workforce integration. [LEARN MORE](#)

Alignment for Justice-Involved Learners

Through the **Reentry 2030 Plan**, North Carolina is expanding opportunities for justice-involved individuals by aligning education, credentialing, and workforce reintegration. In 2024–2025, 12,565 incarcerated learners participated in adult education programs across state facilities, earning more than 1,500 industry-recognized credentials since 2022 in fields such as welding, construction, manufacturing, and culinary arts.

Twenty-three local reentry councils now serve 32 counties, connecting over 12,000 returning citizens to jobs, housing, and training. These coordinated efforts—driven by community colleges, employers, and nonprofit partners—are reducing recidivism and rebuilding lives. Employers statewide are increasingly adopting second-chance hiring, recognizing the value of a broader, more resilient workforce. Together, these efforts strengthen families, expand opportunity, and advance North Carolina's vision of economic mobility for every resident.



Credit Mobility, Prior Learning, and Digital Infrastructure

North Carolina is modernizing how learning is recognized, transferred, and tracked to build a seamless education-to-work system. Statewide credit-for-prior-learning (CPL) policies now award college credit for military training, professional certifications, and on-the-job experience, saving learners time and tuition while eliminating redundant coursework. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's [Some College, No Credential](#) report, more than 1.16 million North Carolinians have college experience but no credential. Expanding CPL can help many of these adults complete programs faster and at lower cost while balancing education, work, and family responsibilities.

The [Comprehensive Articulation Agreement \(CAA\)](#) ensures smooth transfer from community colleges to four-year universities. In fall 2025, 10,840 students transferred from community colleges into the UNC System—part of more than 18,700 total transfer students across the state's public universities, an 8.2% increase over the previous year. Building on that foundation, [Uniform Articulation Agreements](#) in high-demand fields such as nursing, business, and engineering allow students to continue specialized study without losing credit or momentum.

The North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities (NCICU) further expands transfer opportunities through its [Independent Comprehensive Articulation Agreement \(ICAA\)](#) which includes 30 NCICU campuses that have formal agreements with the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) and Louisburg College. NCICU also maintains [discipline-specific agreements](#) in Early Childhood Education, Fine Arts, Music, Psychology and Sociology, RN to BSN, Theatre, and Teacher Education.

To further streamline these processes, North Carolina is developing a [unified digital transcript system](#) connecting North Carolina public school units, community colleges, and UNC constituent institutions statewide. Legislation directed the State Education Assistance Authority to contract with the College Foundation, Inc. (CFI) for system development, supported by \$6 million in state funding. Once launched, the platform will provide students free, secure access to official transcripts and integrate with [CFNC.org](#), serving as the single point for requesting and transferring transcripts across public higher education institutions.

Private colleges and universities are also advancing transfer solutions. Supported by a [\\$1.3 million collective grant](#) and [Lumina Foundation](#) funding for faculty engagement, NCICU and NCCCS are expanding course-sharing and transfer pathways. In parallel, Ellucian is piloting seamless transfer and reverse-transfer technologies within the UNC System. In the coming years, these tools are expected to connect all 58 community colleges, Louisburg College, and both public and private universities through the state's new digital transcript infrastructure.

Together, these innovations form the digital backbone of a connected, data-informed talent system—removing barriers, empowering learners, and accelerating affordable pathways to meaningful careers.





Funding Models, Credentials, and Sector Playbooks

North Carolina is aligning funding and credential frameworks to strengthen the connection between education, workforce demand, and economic growth. By investing in high-value programs and using data to guide resource allocation, the state ensures every public dollar supports outcomes for learners, employers, and communities.

Propel NC is the North Carolina Community College System's new funding model designed to better align state investments with workforce needs rather than student enrollment alone. Beginning in FY 2025-26, funding will be organized around key workforce sectors—such as healthcare, advanced manufacturing, and information technology—so that colleges are rewarded for preparing learners for high-demand, high-wage jobs. This modern approach strengthens connections between education and industry, ensuring community colleges remain central to North Carolina's talent pipeline.

This results-based model is complemented by the [NC Workforce Credentials Advisory Council](#), where employers, educators, and agencies have endorsed more than [150 high-value, industry-recognized credentials](#) aligned with **256,000 annual projected job openings**. Learners who complete these credentials earn an annual median wage of \$58,000 - clear evidence of the return on coordinated credential alignment.

The [North Carolina Business Committee for Education \(NCBCE\)](#) connects employers and educators to strengthen North Carolina's workforce through work-based learning. It helps students gain real-world experience, equips teachers with innovative professional development, and engages businesses in building strong local talent pipelines. Public-private partnerships led by NCBCE and corporate funders continue to expand apprenticeships and education-to-career pathways statewide.

The [NC State Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research](#) partners with educators, researchers, and policymakers to produce timely, relevant resources—from in-depth reports to practical toolkits and leadership playbooks—that help community college leaders navigate complex challenges and advance institutional and student success goals. By bringing together key partners, the Center transforms evidence into action, turning insights into strategies that strengthen leadership and drive systemwide improvement.

2024-2025 PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE:

- [Leading Rural Innovation and Change Series: Adapting to the Future of Work](#)
- [Leading Rural Innovation and Change Series: Becoming an Innovator](#)
- [Redesigning the New Student Onboarding Experience](#)
- [Responding to Rural Community College Student Needs through “Be Great in 8”](#)
- [Rural Advanced Manufacturing Partnerships Toolkit](#)
- [Rural Healthcare Partnerships Toolkit](#)

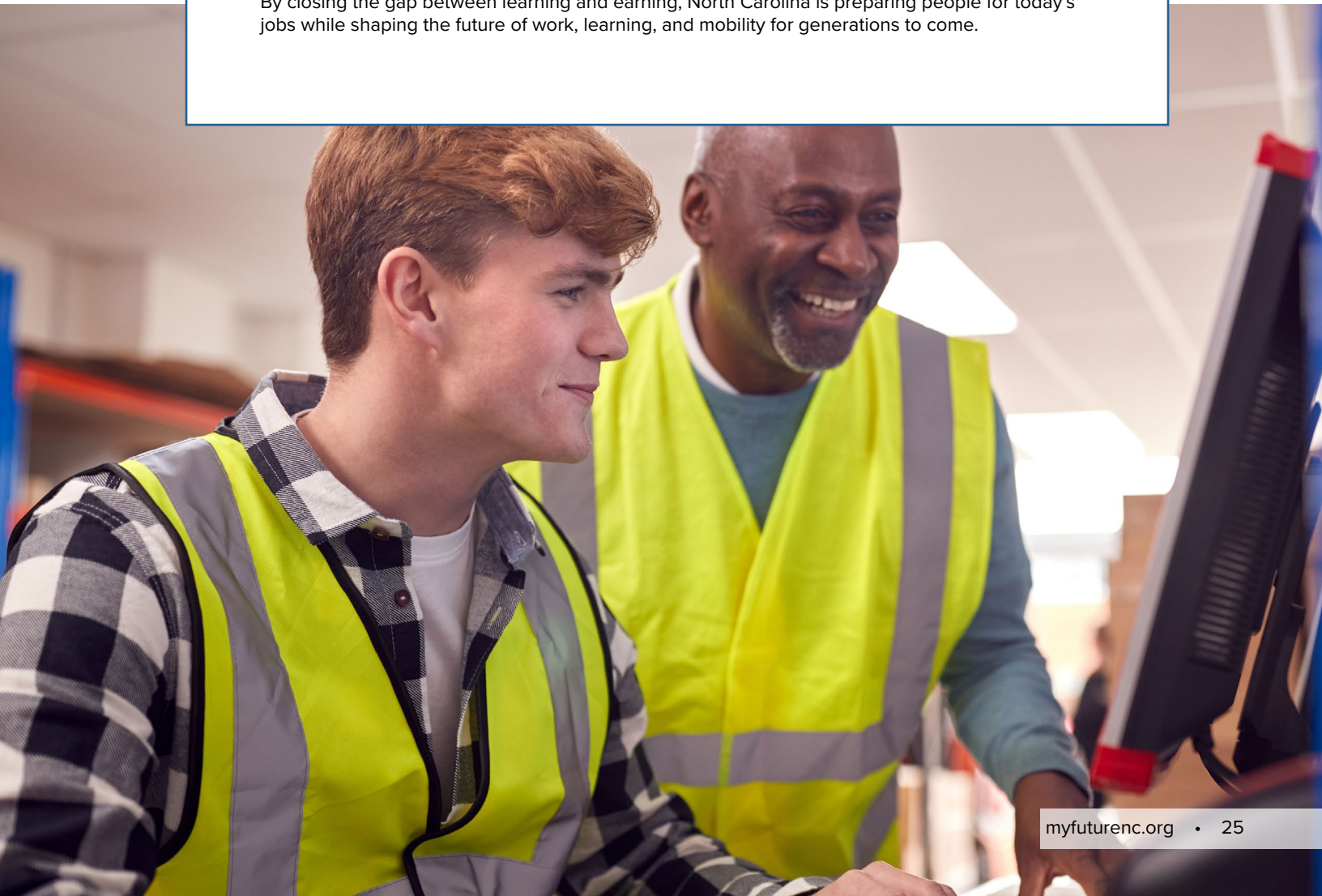
Closing the Gap Between Learning and Earning

North Carolina's partners are united around a single goal: ensuring that learning leads directly to earning for every resident, in every region and a skilled workforce for employers. Through sustained collaboration among schools, colleges, employers, and community organizations, the state is transforming isolated initiatives into a coordinated, career-connected system that delivers results for learners, families, and businesses alike.

From **Career Development Plans** that guide early exploration to **apprenticeships and work-based learning** that builds real-world experience, North Carolina is shortening the distance between education and employment. **Credit mobility, recognition of prior learning, digital infrastructure,** and **outcome-driven funding** will help to ensure that every credential counts and every pathway leads to opportunity.

Together, these strategies expand access to high-value learning, strengthen employer partnerships, and modernize systems that make progress visible and portable. The result is a workforce network greater than the sum of its parts—a connected system that powers opportunity, innovation, and resilience across every region.

By closing the gap between learning and earning, North Carolina is preparing people for today's jobs while shaping the future of work, learning, and mobility for generations to come.



The Workforce Act of 2026: A Coordinated Agenda for Talent and Opportunity

The Workforce Act of 2026 outlines four policy priorities to modernize education-to-workforce pathways across North Carolina. By reducing friction in credit transfer, strengthening advising, and supporting employer-recognized, workforce-aligned credentials, the Act advances a system built for speed, clarity, and completion.

myFutureNC's advocacy also reaffirms continued support for key statewide initiatives, including Propel NC, Boost, NC College Connect, NC Works, and need-based scholarships. These complementary investments work alongside the Act's priorities to expand access, accelerate completion, and meet the state's evolving workforce needs.

How We Move the Number

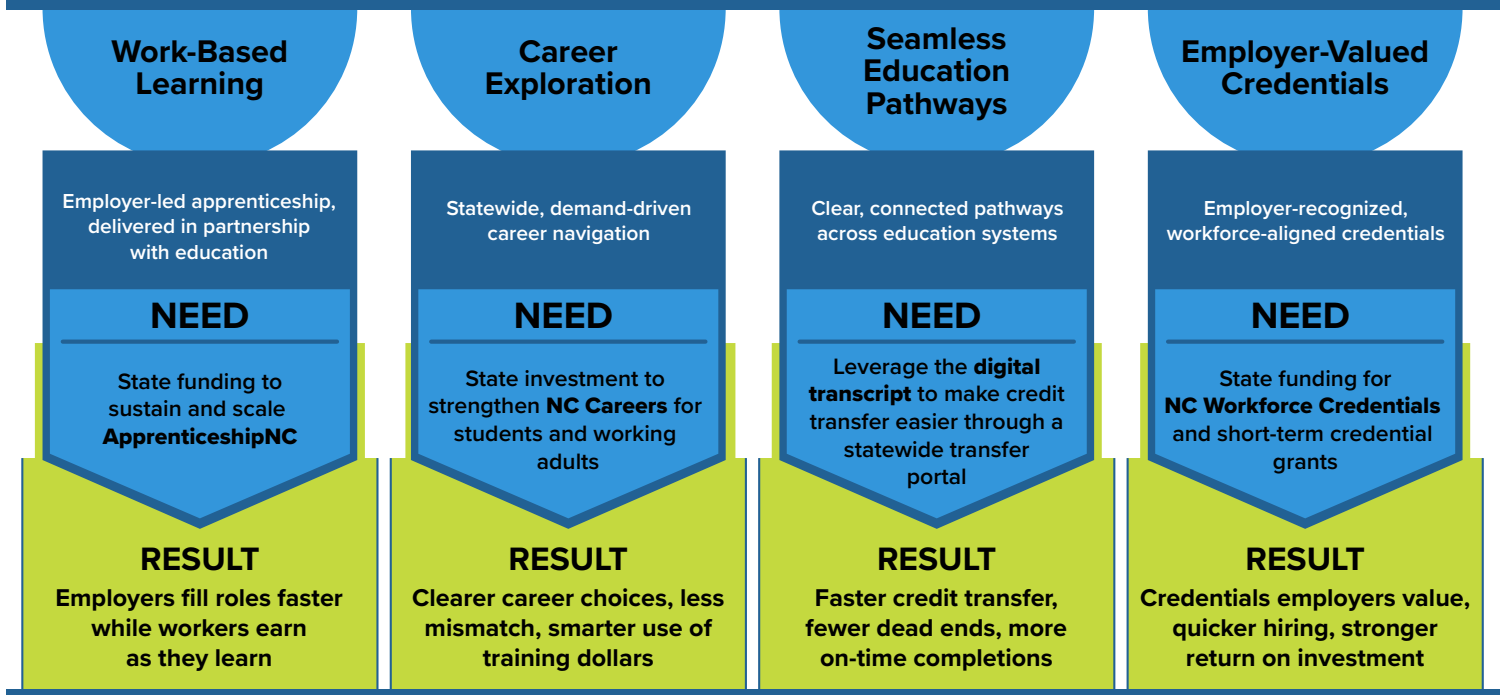
Make it easier to start, help people finish, and the numbers go up statewide.



The Workforce Act of 2026 focuses on one simple goal: **move people faster from learning to good jobs**. It does that by scaling what already works—four proven strategies that employers use, students understand, and NC can deliver.

2026 Advocacy Agenda

Four Cross-Sector Partnerships That Deliver Results



Complementary Investments myFutureNC Supports

Also Supports Existing Statewide Initiatives: NC College Connect • Propel NC • Next NC • NC Need-Based Scholarships • Boost / Completion Assistance Grants • NC Works

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Miriam and Robert Hayes Charitable Trust
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New America/New Venture Fund
NC Business Committee for Education, Inc.
NC Business Leaders for Education (BestNC)

NC Education Lottery
North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation
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The Goodnight Educational Foundation
The Joint Coalition
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Foundations, individuals, and corporate partners play a critical role in helping myFutureNC advance its mission to close North Carolina's educational attainment gap. To respect donor privacy, we do not publicly list individual contributions. If you or your organization would like to learn more about supporting this work financially, please contact us at office@myfuturenc.org or visit our [website](#).

Citations

For a list of all citations, please go to www.myfuturenc.org to access the online version of the North Carolina State of Educational Attainment Report which includes all citation hyperlinks.

*my***FUTURENC**
2 million by 2030

