

# K-64 (Catawba County)

## PROGRAM PROFILE

**“Educational attainment goals need to focus on skills, not just degrees.”**

— K-64 partner

**“We have turned things around. We now get the brightest and the best as interns. There is not an inch of free space at the Manufacturing Solutions Center.”**

— K-64 partner



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## What Is the K-64 Initiative?

K-64 is a five-year education and economic development initiative in Catawba County that prepares students from pre-kindergarten (K) through retirement (64) to compete in the global economy and supports local companies by creating a highly-qualified talent pipeline. The initiative responds to the reality that Catawba County needs to attract, grow, and retain talent to meet future workforce needs. The initiative focuses on connecting students to opportunities that prepare them for work. From learning in technology-rich environments to experiencing local and global employment possibilities, K-64 actively readies students of all ages for viable and sustainable careers.



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## Who Are the Partners and What Are Their Roles?

- **Catawba Valley Community College:** Played a critical role in K-64's ideation and serves as the administrative home for it and many of the county's postsecondary programs. The college's president is an active leader of the initiative.
- **Catawba County:** Provided the seed funding for the effort and remains an active leader in the initiative; requires a funding match from local companies.
- **Catawba County Chamber of Commerce:** Provides connectivity to the county's business community.
- **Catawba County Economic Development Corporation:** Promotes K-64 when recruiting companies to the area.
- **Catawba County Schools, Hickory Public Schools, and Newton-Conover City Schools:** Share best practices and agree to implement evidence-based programs. Also work with postsecondary institutions to further align the respective curricula.
- **Lenoir Rhyne University:** Offers a 50 percent tuition reduction to residents of Catawba who maintain specified grade point averages.
- **Local Companies:** Generously provide work-based learning opportunities to students and work closely with the community college to offer postsecondary learning opportunities for the existing workforce. Local companies are also investing in K-64. Continued Catawba County funding is tied to a private sector match from local companies and grants from funders.



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P-12



POSTSECONDARY



WORKFORCE

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## How Does the Initiative Work?

K-64 supports students, schools, and employers to ensure that Catawba County is an attractive place for a working-age population. Its leaders drive delivery of resources that allow schools and students to distinguish themselves by their marked understanding of workforce needs, developed pathways from school to work (and back to school), and emphasis on adaptable technology skills. In turn, employers find access to the talent pipeline they need.

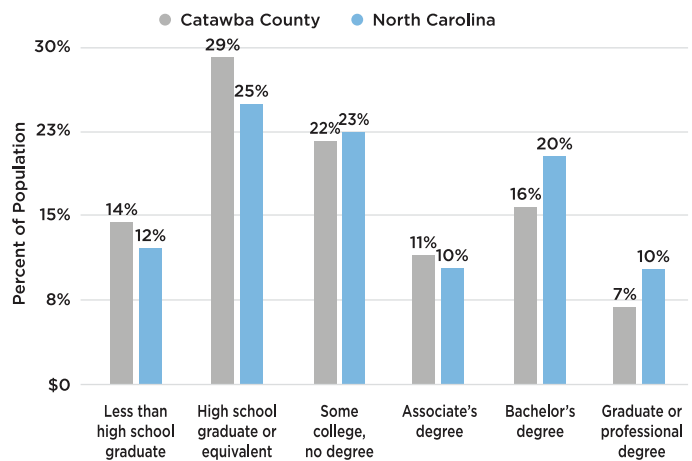
The initiative has six focus areas:

- 1 **One-to-World Technology:** Connecting every student with the technology devices needed to accelerate learning inside and outside the classroom.
- 2 **Character and Soft Skills Development:** Teaching critical soft skills, such as goal setting, interpersonal communication, and team building, to ensure that students are well prepared to engage in work and in life.
- 3 **Tech-Savvy Educators:** Equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to incorporate leading-edge technologies into lesson plans and classroom environments.
- 4 **Work-Based Learning:** Facilitating job shadowing, internships, co-ops, work-study programs, and apprenticeships to connect students with global career opportunities and local employers.
- 5 **Employer Engagement:** Cultivating collaborative partnerships with businesses to invest in the development of a well-prepared and highly engaged workforce of tomorrow.
- 6 **Career Adaptability:** Ensuring access to relevant educational services and training opportunities to help adults develop nimble skill sets and assure career longevity.

K-64 prides itself on not offering only new initiatives and programs. The leaders note that the K-64 focus areas are already evident, to some degree, in individual schools. Leaders say the value of K-64 lies in the ways the initiative identifies high-impact programs and works as a public-private partnership to expand those programs system-wide. If new initiatives are identified as potentially high impact and are not in place due to a lack of funding or resources, K-64 seeks the funding and resources to make these things happen. The underlying theory is that the combination and integration in every school of all six focus areas will differentiate Catawba County's education system from any competition in North Carolina or in the greater southeastern U.S. region. As reflected in **Figure 1**, the county has significant numbers of residents with lower levels of educational attainment than state averages.

One strategy for scaling is reflected in the successful work-based learning efforts in the county. Catawba boasts that it has placed 1,000 K-12 students in work-based learning opportunities with 350 companies. The Manufacturing Solutions Center alone has provided training programming for more than 2,000 students and offers tours to more than 10,000 students—many, but not all, of whom reside in Catawba County. Also, while K-64 operates only within Catawba County, it is particularly proud of the regional

FIG. 1: **CATAWBA COUNTY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT** (Ages 25–64)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012–2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.



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Apprenticeship Catawba program, which is a community collaboration of companies, the Catawba Valley Community College, the North Carolina Department of Labor, and high schools to offer four-year apprenticeships.

In another scaling strategy, K-64 has hired three college and career advocates to assist existing high school guidance counselors and to apprise them of the college and career programs available in the county. Counselors are seen as integral to the heavy emphasis on marketing education as a lifelong activity. In addition, they are able to spread the word on the many ways local educational institutions are building ever-increasing numbers of career pathways with multiple on- and off-ramps. Two very popular programs are the manufacturing and furniture academies at Catawba Valley Community College. The Mechatronics and Engineering community college curriculum begins with junior and senior high school students through the Apprenticeship Catawba program.

All of this work requires resources. In January 2017, the Catawba County Board of Commissioners committed \$2.6 million over two years in seed funding to help launch K-64. In turn, the K-64 board of directors is using this public funding to leverage private contributions and grant funds. One private match comes from a financing plan for \$430,000 from Peoples Bank to fund a one-to-world technology pilot program, providing a Chromebook for every seventh grader in Catawba County. The pilot program was devised based on input from all three school systems, local businesses, and community leaders.

K-64 understands that hardware will not solve digital literacy gaps. In addition to the notebooks, there is training for teachers. Catawba County Schools deploys 17 instructional technology experts throughout the system to help teachers use the technology to facilitate learning. The business community has also been helpful in ensuring that the technology is put to good use. Companies have assigned real projects to students for classroom project-based learning.

Leaders of K-64 insist that their individual efforts have been strengthened through their collaborative participation in the initiative. While the initiative focuses on students, some partners are focused on connecting with people who are currently disconnected from work and school. The local workforce development board is key to reaching out through community and faith-based organizations to share information about learning and work opportunities generated by K-64.

## What Is the Governance Model?

K-64 is governed by a 12-person board of directors consisting of four members appointed by the Catawba County Board of Commissioners and eight ex-officio members representing the managing organizations. It is managed by Catawba Valley Community College in collaboration with local businesses leaders, community partners, Catawba County Schools, Hickory Public Schools, Newton-Conover City Schools, Lenoir-Rhyne University, Catawba County Government, Catawba Economic Development Corporation, and the Catawba County Chamber of Commerce.

## Is the Program Data Driven?

K-64's board of directors is charged with implementing concrete plans that include tangible and timely goals and outcomes. That work is in the very early stages. The initiative has set and is tracking the number of students involved in its technology, training,



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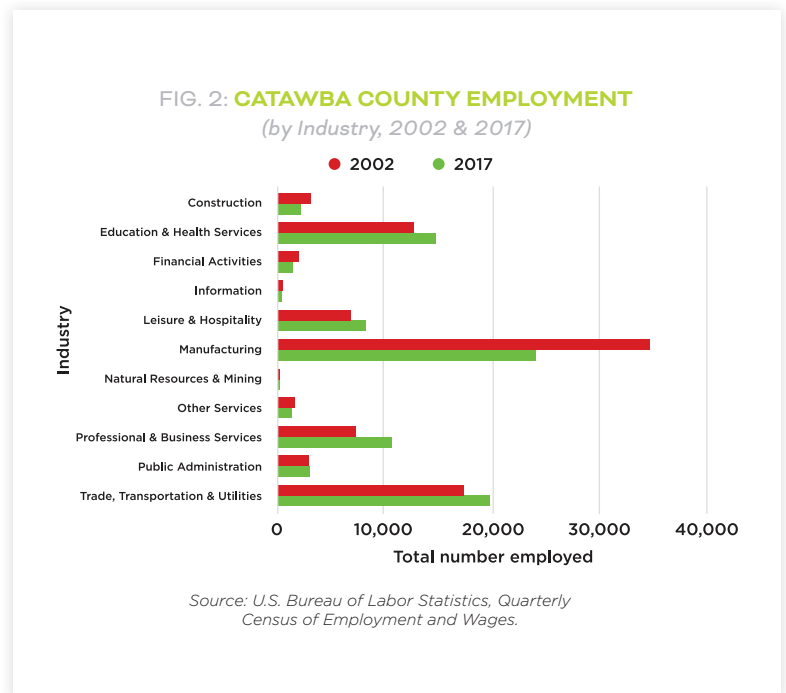
and work-based learning activities. It is also tracking reductions in absenteeism and tardiness in the three public K-12 systems. To date, the program has not set measurable outcome goals. That work is on the board's agenda for this year.

## What Are the Early Indicators of Success?

K-64 has declared war on low educational attainment in the region, and there are signs the initiative is winning early battles. The Catawba County Board of Commissioners has pledged that it will not offer economic incentives to companies that hire people who do not have a high school diploma. Existing local companies are funding postsecondary learning for employees. They also offer flexibility to attend classes. Some of these companies, which at times hire community college students before they have completed their certificate or degree, are working with Catawba Valley Community College to create schedules that allow students to more easily and quickly finish their degrees.

As one example of the potential effect of this work on the region's future postsecondary attainment levels, Lenoir-Rhyne University has announced a new program to provide a minimum of 50 percent off tuition for (1) any first-year undergraduate student who is a Catawba County resident with at least a 3.5 high school GPA or (2) any transfer undergraduate student from Catawba County with more than 30 completed hours from an accredited college and at least a 3.5 GPA. Called the Catawba County Promise, the program will reward local high school and transfer students who have a B+ average with a guaranteed — and significant — minimum level of financial aid.

Finally, the K-64 leaders believe that their collaborative efforts to increase educational attainment will help to diversify the local economy. They point to recent recruitment of out-of-state and international firms as proof that the strategy is working. As noted in **Figure 2**, the county's mix of employment by industry has changed significantly between 2002 and 2017.



## What Is the Promise of the Strategy for Increasing Educational Attainment in North Carolina?

K-64 is a testament to the ability of the public and higher education sectors to catalyze innovations in developing the local talent pipeline. Leaders identified successful existing programs that were working, working to remedy each of their six talent concerns. Those concerns, and the lack of coordination among existing programs to address them, underscored the need for a systemic approach to link students' interests and abilities with employers' needs. The K-64 initiative enjoys great support for building on the success of proven practices to identify, inventory, and expand programs that are effective in at least one of three areas: (1) working in partnership with local employers to design educational curricula that correspond with workforce demands,



(2) giving students early exposure to career options and associated education and training requirements, or (3) supporting ongoing skills development for adults.

Widespread community support for K-64 is one thing, but the willingness of Catawba's best and brightest to use K-64's pathways is another. In the past, a highly talented high school graduate would leave town and usually not return. Today, that student is likely to seek an internship or fellowship in one of Catawba's many companies.

It's not just that K-64 is causing Catawba to retain its talent. It is also recruiting talent. Entrepreneur Jordan Schindler moved to Hickory from Seattle to create items of clothing at the Manufacturing Solutions Center that will improve the wearer's wellness. The current focus is on delivering wound-healing medications or improved muscle performance through wearable medical garments.



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