

Laboratory Schools in North Carolina¹

In 2016, the North Carolina General Assembly (NCGA) passed legislation requiring the University of North Carolina System to establish laboratory schools. Since then, laboratory schools have opened in partnership with six UNC System institutions: the ECU Community School (operated by East Carolina University), The Catamount School (operated by Western Carolina University), the Appalachian State University Academy at Middle Fork, the Moss Street Partnership School (operated by The University of North Carolina at Greensboro), the D. C. Virgo Preparatory Academy (operated by the University of North Carolina Wilmington), and Niner University Elementary (University of North Carolina Charlotte). Three new schools are slated to open in fall 2022. Coordinated through colleges of education (COE) at UNC System institutions, laboratory schools are operating as public schools of choice.

While the structure and foci of UNC System laboratory schools vary somewhat across campuses, the schools are united by a common mission and set of commitments. The mission of UNC System laboratory schools is to improve student performance in local school administrative units with low-performing schools by providing an enhanced education program for students residing in those units and to provide exposure and training for teachers and principals to successfully address challenges that exist in high-need school settings. Laboratory schools serve every part of the University mission—teaching, research, and public service—and represent an innovative extension of the UNC System’s presence in K-12 education.

According to the enabling legislation, UNC System laboratory schools must serve students in at least three contiguous grades in the K-8 grade range. The UNC System was originally required to establish laboratory schools in local school administrative units in which at least 25 percent of the schools were low-performing, but an amendment in 2017 allows the UNC System to exercise three waivers to establish laboratory schools in districts that do not meet this requirement. Students are eligible to attend a laboratory school if they reside in the local school administrative unit in which the laboratory school is located and either previously attended a low-performing school or failed to meet expected growth in the previous academic year. In 2020, additional eligibility criteria were added to include siblings of a child who is eligible, and children of lab school employees. In addition, if enrollment targets are not met by March 1, the lab school may enroll students within the local administrative unit who do not meet the eligibility criteria provided these students do not exceed 20% of the total school population.

East Carolina University (ECU) and Western Carolina University (WCU) opened their laboratory schools in the 2017-18 academic year, while Appalachian State University, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), and the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) opened their laboratory schools in the 2018-19 academic year. The University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC) opened its school in the 2020-2021 academic year.

¹ From the University of North Carolina Laboratory Schools Handbook, 2021-22