

Lab schools were created by North Carolina lawmakers through a provision in the 2016 budget. The stated purpose 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 existing in high-needs school settings. A laboratory school shall provide an opportunity for research, demonstration, student support, and expansion of the teaching experience and evaluation regarding management, teaching, and learning."

A lab school operates much like a charter, but is managed by a collaborating university. They are intended to support high needs, low-performing schools and improve student outcomes. Lab schools, like charter schools, can employ experimental teaching methods and are afforded more flexibility in designing and implementing their curriculum, their choice of calendar and staffing models. Different from charter schools, funding for child nutrition and transportation is provided by local school districts.

Lab schools were originally required to serve districts where at least 25% of the public schools were classified as low-performing, according to 2015-2016 student achievement data. A waiver was granted in 2017 to offer flexibility to that provision after concerns were raised about schools' proximity to their partner institutions and potential staff travel times. Funding is based on the average per-pupil allotment for average daily membership. Schools must serve three consecutive grade levels from K-8th grade. Teachers and administrative staff are hired by the participating institutions chancellor and are considered university employees. Initial legislation stipulated that eight lab schools be created and that legislation was later modified to nine. Read the full text of the original publication [here](#).

The universities selected to run lab schools include Appalachian State, East Carolina, N.C. Central University, UNC Charlotte, UNC Greensboro, UNC Pembroke, UNC Wilmington and Western Carolina University. The selected institutions offer training programs for teachers, and could theoretically utilize a lab school to test innovative education techniques. Only 50% of teachers at a lab school are required to be licensed. This provision allows student teachers to participate in lab schools. Student teachers and administrators in training would have opportunity to practice new methods in real world situations before moving on to other schools.

In 2017, East Carolina University and Western Carolina University opened lab schools in partnership with their local school districts. UNCG, Appalachian State University and UNC-Wilmington plan to open lab schools in the fall of 2018. Four others are set to open in fall 2019. Two models used thus far are school within a school model, where only certain grades are part of the lab school, and whole school model.

Two lab schools opened for the 2017-2018 school year. [ECU partnered with South Greenville Elementary](#), a title one school serving a neighborhood with a 100% poverty rate. The lab school currently serves grades 2-4, but will eventually serve grades Prek-5. According to ECU's website, "Students will receive access to state of the art resources in literacy, science, math, and technology. Opportunities for additional learning time will occur through planned extended day and year activities".

[Catamount School in Jackson County](#) also opened this year, operated by Western Carolina University. This lab school serves students in sixth through eighth grades and is located on the campus of Smoky Mountain High School. Educators there focus on the "whole school, whole community, whole child" model.

In the fall of 2018, two additional lab school will open, [UNCG will adopt Moss Street Elementary](#), serving 420 students in grades K-5. It will mark the opening of the largest lab school to date. The five-year goal is to increase the school's grade from a D currently, to a B. A B grade means 80 percent of students at a given school pass state tests.

[Appalachian State University will partner with Middle Fork Elementary School](#) in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School district. The K-5 elementary school has a projected enrollment of 315 students. The stated goal, according to ASU is "to become a model, demonstration school, and resource for children, families, professionals, and partners".

[D.C. Virgo Preparatory Academy School](#) will open July 18, 2018. A year-round school serving grades K-8, this lab school will operate under the guidance of UNC Wilmington. STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) will remain a part of the academic core with a focus on inquiry-based instruction.

The remaining lab school partnerships will be UNC Pembroke, working with Robeson County Schools, UNC Charlotte, working with Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and N.C. Central University, still in the process of identifying a partner.

Lab schools are a new endeavor, and no data yet exists to discern their effectiveness. The concept is a good one, but education experts wonder if universities were appropriated enough time, money and resources to effectively manage a K-8 school. Working simultaneously at the University and the newly created lab schools will be a challenge. Critics also wonder if the timeline is too short for universities to make necessary preparations to hire staff, purchase furniture and resolve logistics of operating a K-8 institution while raising student achievement scores in a relatively short amount of time.

Teachers and students will have to re-apply for positions and seats at the new schools. Current students are not guaranteed a spot, only given priority registration. Teachers could lose tenure as they would technically be leaving the school system to become university employees. Not only might this foster ill will, it could also result in teachers choosing not to continue at the selected school. It would be difficult to measure success of any initiative using different populations.

Finally, a project of this magnitude requires a commensurate amount of funding. At this time, it does not appear that adequate resources have been allocated to ensure success. Creating a lab school does not erase the challenges that were present in the traditional public school. Indeed, new challenges may arise from management by Universities, not accustomed to running K-8 schools.

### **Resources**

<https://uncw.edu/virgo/>

<http://www.news.appstate.edu/2017/06/30/laboratory-school-2/>

<https://soe.uncg.edu/announcing-the-uncg-partnership-school/>

<https://www.wcu.edu/learn/departments-schools-colleges/ceap/catamount-school/>

<http://blog.ecu.edu/sites/coeblog/2016/11/ecu-laboratory-school/ecu-to-create-laboratory-school-with-pitt-county-schools/>

[https://www.ncleg.net/Applications/SummariesPublication/Home/Summary/2016/9/H1030-SMTC-123\(sl\)-v-3/](https://www.ncleg.net/Applications/SummariesPublication/Home/Summary/2016/9/H1030-SMTC-123(sl)-v-3/)

<http://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/education/article111928007.html>

<https://newsandfeatures.uncg.edu/rockingham-county-schools-lab-school-reidsville/>