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Investing in education for a new economy: Gaston County expands school choices



Serious investments in education are being made across Gaston County. Pictured: Belmont Middle School groundbreaking ceremony earlier this year.

GASTON OUTSIDE

By Patrick Mumford – Executive Director, Greater Gaston Development Corporation
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Personalized. Career-ready. In recent years, Gaston County has adapted its educational programs to the needs of its students and the trends of today's - and tomorrow's - economy.

Parents and employers alike have expressed a need for educational programs that recognize the unique talents and ambitions of each student, as well as a rapidly-changing employment landscape.

In response, Gaston County partners in education have been working to ensure highly-personalized, well-funded educational programs prepare students to excel in the present and future economy appropriately. Those efforts have received national and regional accolades, with schools regularly earning [Blue Ribbon designations](#) or ranking high in [U.S. News & World Reports' Best Colleges](#).

This effort has been community-wide. Residents, businesses, and government leaders have joined together to ensure that students in Gaston County receive a quality education, whether they're elementary schoolers or adult learners, or attending public or private schools. These schools have a close collaboration with local businesses, enabling students to receive real-world experience and networking contacts prior to graduation.

"We are extremely proud of what is happening in Gaston County schools and the role that our public schools play in providing quality options so students are prepared for college and the workforce," said Superintendent of Schools W. Jeffrey Booker, Ed.D. "Our exciting school choice and magnet school programs, as well as our highly-successful Career and Technical Education program, are equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and hands-on experiences they need to achieve success.

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"Along with our new school construction and numerous school renovation projects, we are doing everything we can to guarantee the best educational environment for students and offer them outstanding academic, athletic, fine arts and extracurricular opportunities."

Investing in education with new schools and facilities

Enhancements to education cannot happen without funding, and Gaston County residents have shown enthusiastic support for investing in their schools. Voters overwhelmingly approved \$250 million in bonds for Gaston County Schools – and an accompanying sales tax increase to fund the bonds – last year to support the construction and renovation of public schools. The county's largest bond package of its kind, these investments are already underway.

Excellent progress is being made on construction of the new Belmont Middle School campus. The modern, two-story school complete with athletic fields and plenty of space for parking will open in 2021, and it is designed to accommodate future growth in a thriving area of the county.

The Belmont Middle School project is the third new public school for Gaston County in the past three years. The new Pleasant Ridge Elementary in Gastonia opened in 2017, and the new Stanley Middle School opened in 2018.

In addition to the new schools, renovation and repair projects are taking place now at 12 schools across the county. The projects include parking lot and driveway paving, new gymnasium floors, camera, intercom and life safety upgrades, roof replacements, new fencing, and other improvements, including library updates.

Also this year, two new charter schools, Ridgeview Charter School and Community Public Charter School, have opened, bringing the county's charter school total to four with Piedmont Community Charter School (PCCS) and Mountain Island Charter School (MICS). PCCS and MISC are making serious capital investments as well.

Many private schools in the county, such as Gaston Day School, Gaston Christian School and Belmont Abbey College, are investing millions of dollars in capital improvements aimed at improving campuses, labs, and classrooms. Gaston College as well joins these many schools in making similar important capital investments.

Personalized choices: Specialized education tracks roll out with school choice offerings

The best education caters to a student's unique talents and aspirations, giving them the knowledge, skills, and confidence to succeed within and beyond the classroom. Students in Gaston County have many educational options beyond the traditional classroom setting.

This year, Gaston County Schools triples its school choice options with the launch of six new Academy programs. These programs allow parents to find the academy best suited for their child's talents, with options in career, leadership, public service, technology and industrial engineering, health sciences, and collegiate prep. The academy programs add to an already-diverse array of school choice options in Gaston County schools.

In addition, six magnet schools – two each of elementary, middle, and high schools – cater to students' interests in technology and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math), give gifted and talented students a program for accelerated learning, and provide an online option for home-schooled students. An analysis by the Charlotte Business Journal ranked two of these schools - Highland School of Technology and Gaston Early College High School - the two best high schools in the region for career and college readiness.

An extended classroom: Creating a workforce that businesses trust

With the support and collaboration of our businesses, Gaston students enjoy an expanded classroom that gives them educational experiences beyond their school walls.

Key employers in the region have given Gaston's educational programs a vote of confidence, too.

Last spring, CaroMont Health announced plans to invest \$325 million in capital projects and facility improvements in Gaston County. An exciting part of those plans is the construction of a new hospital in Belmont. This hospital will not only be adjacent to the campus of Belmont Abbey College, but it will partner with the college as well as Gaston County Schools to help train and retain a home-grown workforce in the healthcare fields.

CaroMont will support these plans to create health sciences programs such as the Health Sciences Academy at East Gaston High School to offer real-world education for Gaston County students.

"We are in a region that has a tremendous network of organizations acting as engines for economic development and institutions offering nationally-recognized educational programs," said Chris Peek, president and CEO of CaroMont Health. "Our relationships with Gaston County Schools, Gaston College and Belmont Abbey College are a critical part of our strategy to cultivate, educate and train the healthcare professionals of tomorrow. We have great confidence the workforce in our community will continue to grow and thrive through these kinds of collaborative efforts. We have the potential to change this county and transform lives."

Gaston County Schools' Career and Technical Education (CTE) students earned the greatest technical attainment scores among North Carolina's largest school districts, as well as the highest credential rate in the region. These accolades would not be possible without the support and cooperation of local businesses, who have become active supporters of the CTE program, attending hiring fairs, offering training, and hosting site visits. When students graduate with these skills and credentials, they not only find jobs more quickly, but they find better-paying jobs.

Gaston College is receiving attention for the success of its customized training program for area employers. The college is currently the second-largest provider of customized training projects within the state of North Carolina's 58-college system and is first in the system's Southwest region. Additionally, they have recently rolled out a new evening part-time business-focused associate of arts pathway that will enable students the flexibility to enjoy an affordable brick-and-mortar classroom experience, and are constructing a state-of-the-art veterinary medical technology building for their tech program.

TechWorks Gaston, a nonprofit tech hub committed to job creation and economic growth for Gaston County and the region, celebrated its grand opening in April in Belmont. In a restored mill building, TechWorks features gigabit fiber and state of the art audio/visual capabilities in a 14,000-square-foot digitally connected learning center of office and co-working space, conference and training rooms, and a large convening-event space.

TechWorks provides a place for leaders, entrepreneurs, and students to collaborate, writing Gaston's next chapter together as it leads the region forward in creating an entrepreneurial tech hub.

The recently launched TechWorks Technology Academy will offer innovative education approaches, enablement of in-demand tech skills, provide needed certification testing services, and expand digital engagement at home and at work for all Gaston residents. TechWorks Gaston will offer leading certification programs as both a Certiport and Pearson VUE Authorized Testing Center, the first testing center in Gaston County, and play an instrumental role in developing a new generation of diverse tech leaders.

To learn more about educational and economic activity in Gaston County, visit [Doing Business Here](#).

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