

# STEP

## (Edgecombe & Nash Counties)

### PROGRAM PROFILE

“Seeing people who look like them in these positions is the only way students will believe these paths are open to them, too.” — STEP executive director

“I want to be an anesthesiologist, and this program helps me to understand what the job is and how I can become one.” — High school student

## What Is the STEP Partnership?

The Strategic Twin Counties Education Partnership — STEP for short — is a unique initiative between several stakeholder groups in Edgecombe and Nash counties. This cradle-to-career effort seeks to build a talent pipeline by ensuring that young people in both counties are exposed to, and fully prepared for, the 21st-century jobs their region has to offer. There is a palpable sense of urgency reinforcing STEP. Edgecombe and Nash counties find themselves in the enviable position of having recently announced economic development projects that will create at least 1,700 new jobs over the next 24 months. The STEP partnership is ramping up efforts to increase awareness about, and skills needed for, these hard-to-fill jobs, which pay higher-than-average wages for the region. Most of these jobs will require some form of postsecondary education.

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

- **Edgecombe County and Nash-Rocky Mount Public School Systems:** Prioritize work-based learning opportunities.
- **Edgecombe and Nash Community Colleges:** Emphasize curriculum that aligns with regional employer needs.
- **Employers:** Deploy employees to program activities such as school visits, facility tours, internships, and other work-based learning opportunities.
- **Rocky Mount Edgecombe Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC):** Promote career pathways.
- **Turning Point Workforce Development Board:** Provide data and other insights on career pathways.
- **Early Childhood Learning Organizations:** Represent the interests of critical early learning stakeholders.



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## How Does the Partnership Work?

STEP is a partnership among local industries, two county school systems, and two community colleges. The program focuses on creating career exploration and preparation opportunities for students in Edgecombe and Nash counties in three cluster areas: advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and transportation logistics. As reflected in **Figures 1 and 2**, these industries are growing in both counties after periods of decline.

STEP is a direct response to the misperception by many Edgecombe and Nash county residents that “there are no good jobs here,” as well as an attempt by program partners to leverage resources collaboratively. The local employer responsible for catalyzing STEP recognized that, too often, high school students believed that they had to leave home to find “good” jobs, while local employers couldn’t find enough people to fill their “good” jobs.

**Figures 3 and 4** present median earnings at various levels of educational attainment in Edgecombe and Nash counties as compared to earnings in the state of North Carolina as a whole.

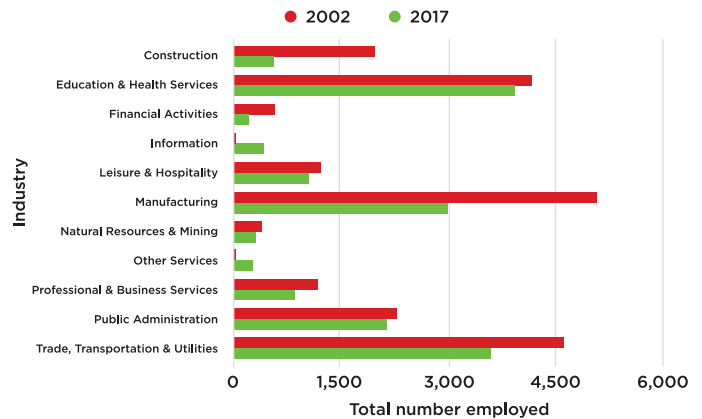
The STEP partnership seeks to enhance students’ understanding of the local labor market through career awareness programs (described in more detail below), as well as to respond to employer needs by developing a local pipeline of talent with the technical and employable skills that are in demand.

STEP has launched a #WorkHERE media campaign across the two counties. The hashtag is visible in printed materials and on social media. It has been so successful as a rallying device for all partners that STEP is in the process of launching a new campaign: #TheWorkStartsHere.

Career awareness programs include in-school activities such as the popular Lunch with Engineers program, where engineers from local companies join high school students in small groups for informal pizza lunches. Students are exposed to companies and careers that are often hidden in plain sight. Organizers emphasize the value of helping students to envision themselves in certain occupations. This is often accomplished by using diverse, homegrown talent as industry spokespersons. Program participants find that students are more inspired when they hear from professionals who grew up in their communities, went to their high schools, and played on their streets.

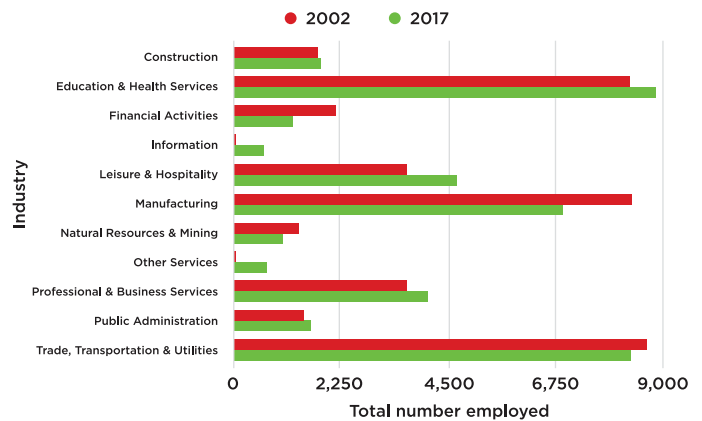
STEP also offers career-cluster showcases at the community colleges for students, teachers, and families, each one focusing on a particular industrial sector, and career connections programming for small groups of students who have expressed an interest in a specific career path. For out-of-school activities, STEP offers job shadowing opportunities and industry tours to students. STEP targets high school teachers and

FIG. 1: **EDGECOMBE COUNTY EMPLOYMENT**  
(by Industry, 2002 & 2017)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages.

FIG. 2: **NASH COUNTY EMPLOYMENT**  
(by Industry, 2002 & 2017)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages.



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guidance counselors by providing summer learning sessions at the community colleges, training on staff development days, presentations at departmental meetings, hosted industry tours, and special seminars to expose career technical education teachers to best practices in their respective fields.

For skills development, STEP seeks to make the most of the resources at the two school systems and the community colleges. Professionals at these institutions are now working closely together, leading STEP to focus on maximizing local use of Career & College Promise (CCP), North Carolina's dual-enrollment program for high school students. CCP allows eligible North Carolina high school students to enroll, through their high schools, in college classes at state community colleges and universities. Students who successfully complete college courses earn college credits that they can take with them after graduation. In many cases, students can also earn dual credits — meeting high school graduation requirements with college courses.

CCP offers students the option to choose from the following pathways:

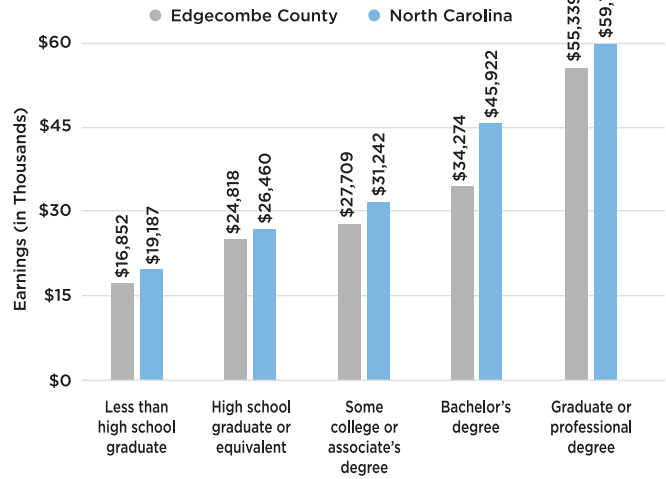
- **College Transfer:** Designed for students planning to continue their educational careers beyond high school to eventually achieve associate's or bachelor's degrees at community colleges or universities.
- **Career and Technical Education:** Allows students to begin certification or diploma programs in particular technical fields or career areas.
- **Cooperative Innovative High Schools:** At these small public high schools, usually located on the campuses of universities or community colleges, students simultaneously work toward completion of both a high school diploma and an associate's degree, transferrable credit, or a certificate.

While STEP encourages students to explore all options, its goal is to have every student graduate from a public high school with two industry-recognized certificates through career and technical education.

The partnership is successful due in large part to strong support from employers. STEP hosts an annual business leadership summit that enables the various partners to showcase what they have accomplished in the past year. STEP is so proud of this summit, that its leaders applied for and received a national award recognizing the collaboration.

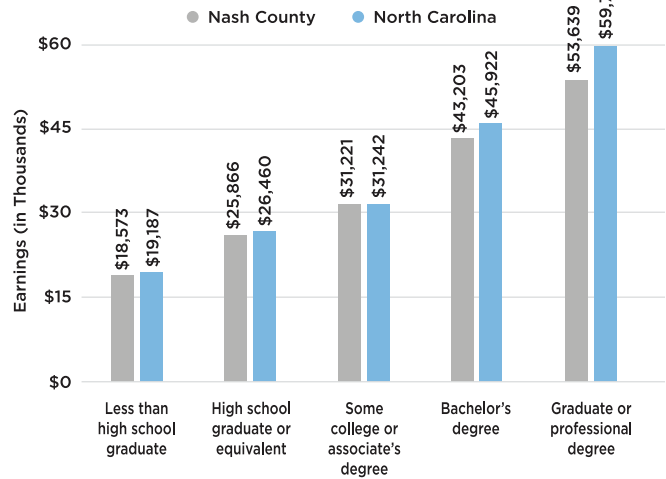
STEP is ramping up. In its board's three-year work plan, the organization is focused on increasing the number of employers engaged in the partnership; getting more students

FIG. 3: **MEDIAN EARNINGS BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT** (Workers Age 25+)



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

FIG. 4: **MEDIAN EARNINGS BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT** (Workers Age 25+)



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



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involved in work-based learning experiences; and tracking the interest in, and impact of, its messaging campaigns. It is important to note that each partner organization has its own priorities and goals. For example, Edgecombe County Schools has developed a complementary goal of ensuring that all students graduate from high school prepared for college, whether or not they choose to matriculate. Its ambitious “College for All” initiative extends the relationship that young people have with the school district from birth through age 25. Young residents can expect communication and support from the school district’s director of innovation during that entire cradle-to-career continuum. Nash-Rocky Mount Schools, for its part, is committed to the Future Focused initiative and has pledged to expose all students to all types of careers during their time in K-12. STEP partners not only praised the program for its support of the formal collective goals, but also for its support of the complementary goals of individual partner organizations.

## What Is the Governance Model?

STEP has a 16-member board of directors composed of (1) the Edgecombe and Nash-Rocky Mount school district superintendents and (2) the Edgecombe and Nash Community College presidents, among others.

## Is the Program Data Driven?

STEP has set a goal of having all students graduate from high school with two industry-recognized credentials. The program emphasizes “Drive in the Fast Lane” opportunities — high-quality credentials that can be achieved in a year. To operationalize these goals, STEP has spent the past year focused on understanding the baseline. The program is assessing, for example, how many CCP courses are being taken in high schools and community colleges in the region, and it bases its career awareness activities on local workforce data.

According to a three-year plan approved by the STEP board in January 2018, in 2018-19 STEP will begin to track metrics on the number of CCP participants and industry-recognized credentials that are earned by students in high school and community college in the three cluster areas mentioned above. Metrics will be presented on a public report card, which should ensure that STEP and its partners remain responsive.

## What Are the Early Indicators of Success?

Today, STEP can point to ever-increasing numbers of students and families participating in programs and reaching out for information. In addition, more industry partners have joined the program, including smaller businesses.

Recently, both Edgecombe and Nash counties expressed strong interest in becoming ACT Work Ready-certified. The ACT Work Ready Communities framework uses its assessment and certification expertise to help community leaders develop sustainable mechanisms for closing skills gaps and collecting workforce skills data. Powered by the ACT WorkKeys system, the program gives residents verifiable proof to show employers that they are ready to succeed. The willingness and ability of these two counties to work together on ACT certification are welcome indicators of their willingness and ability to work together on postsecondary attainment.



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

Edgecombe and Nash counties mirror other rural communities hoping to stem the “brain drain” that occurs as high-achieving youth leave home seeking better options for work and as those who remain see no benefit to postsecondary attainment.

By introducing students and parents to opportunities for high-paying jobs for the students in their home counties before they graduate from high school, STEP provides the information and motivation needed for students to employ their higher learning certificates or degrees in their home counties.



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