

A large, rusted metal water tower stands against a clear blue sky. The tower is made of weathered steel with visible rivets and a circular walkway around its upper section. The lighting suggests a bright, sunny day.

ONE GASTON WORKS

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Community and economic development strategies vary widely in scope and scale, but at their core they share a common goal: raising standards of living and improving quality of life for residents. Usually this means having access to jobs that pay living wages and offer opportunities for career advancement. While many jobs require some type of post-secondary training credential or two-year degree, earning a four-year degree is no longer a requirement for well-paying employment.

APPROXIMATELY

22%

OF GASTON COUNTY
RESIDENTS AGED 25+
HAVE OBTAINED AT LEAST
A BACHELOR'S DEGREE

Educational attainment rates in Gaston County are relatively low. Approximately 22% of Gaston County residents aged 25 and over have obtained at least a bachelor's degree; in North Carolina and the U.S., this figure is roughly 32%. On a positive note, Gaston County's educational attainment levels have improved in recent years, a testament to the work of key local partners like Gaston County Schools (GCS), private and charter schools, Gaston College, and Belmont Abbey College.

The Gaston Business Association recently launched a program seeking to improve talent development and job placement outcomes by providing educators and trainers with actionable data on workforce skills and credentials demanded by local employers. GBA's new Talent Pipeline Management (TPM) Program has been endorsed by Gaston County Schools, Belmont Abbey College, Gaston College, and the Gaston Workforce Development Board as an essential element of the county's workforce system moving forward.



ONE GASTON WORKS OBJECTIVE 1: STRENGTHEN CHILDCARE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

In order for parents to participate in the workforce, they need access to affordable childcare. The years from birth to kindergarten are critical for a child's social, emotional, and educational development. Research has shown children enrolled in pre-kindergarten (PK) and similar early childhood education programs are more likely to succeed in school and experience positive outcomes later in life. Availability of childcare also has an impact on the strength of a community's workforce. In communities across the country, this challenge has been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on parents and childcare providers.

Gaston County Schools Pre-Kindergarten program places approximately 900 four year olds each year in public schools and private childcare sites. Services for qualifying low-income children are offered through Gaston Community Action's Head Start Program. Seven Head Start centers in Gaston and Lincoln Counties provide 431 low-income children with education programs, family case management, disability services and support, mental health services, meal plans, and health screenings.

The following strategies and potential actions reflect the strong desire of Gaston County stakeholders to expand quality childcare and PK opportunities to additional eligible youth in multiple age groups.





GASTON WORKS Strategy 1.1: Provide affordable, available, quality childcare enabling adults to secure and retain jobs.

Further assessment can help the community understand existing capacity and barriers to the creation of new licensed childcare facilities, and the idea of providing grants or incentives for expanding childcare capacity can be explored. In Boise, Idaho, a Childcare Task Force has recommended actions by local government, community organizations, and the business community, all aimed at creating and sustaining quality childcare. Some employers may be able to expand on-site care and/or childcare benefits for employees.

GASTON WORKS Strategy 1.2: Ensure pre-kindergarten programs are available for all.

North Carolina's Pre-Kindergarten Program (NCPK) provides statewide funding. Beyond this, there may be opportunities to seek competitive grants and other monies to support PK expansion and/or supportive services such as before- and after-school care programs. Some communities have implemented local option taxes to fund pre-kindergarten expansion.

ONE GASTON WORKS OBJECTIVE 2: READY STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE AND CAREERS

A strong talent pipeline is critical to a community's economic competitiveness and the prosperity and wellbeing of its residents. The county already features many existing career focused efforts, including Gaston County Schools Career and Technical Education program that offers courses in a wide range of occupational categories, including Business and Marketing, Family and Consumer Sciences, Health Sciences, and Trades and Industrial. The district's Business Advisory Council meets twice a year to discuss existing and potential career focused programming.

Gaston County is home to several innovative educational programs. The Gaston Early College High School program, a magnet school partnership with Gaston College, enables Gaston Public Schools students to receive a high school diploma, complete college courses, and earn an associate in arts, associate in science, and/or associate in engineering degree. At GCS' Highland School of Technology, Gaston County's first magnet high school, students complete courses in one of three academies: Health Sciences; Business, Legal, and Information Sciences; or Manufacturing/Engineering Technology and Graphics.

Gaston County's career focused training was further advanced when Belmont Abbey College recently leased land for CaroMont Health's new \$300 million hospital, part of the college's long-term plan to train medical professionals through a new Bachelor of Nursing and a Master of Health Administration degrees. Healthcare training is also provided through the Gaston Early College of Medical Sciences (GECMS), a healthcare focused high school designed for students interested in careers in the medical/healthcare industry. The new school is a collaborative effort between Gaston County Schools, Gaston College, Belmont Abbey College, and CaroMont Health.



Even with these talent pipeline strengths, input participants identified areas for improvement. Many businesses have found it difficult to tap into local talent pools and education networks. At the same time, some students and families are unaware of career opportunities in Gaston County's target sectors. Input participants also said there is a need to address communication and data gaps between education and industry, and to ensure that PK-12 schools are sufficiently resourced.

The strategies proposed in this One Gaston Works objective leverage existing efforts and propose new capacity to prepare students for success by connecting them to college and career opportunities matching their interests, goals, and skill sets.

GASTON WORKS Strategy 2.1: Optimize the approach presented by the Gaston Business Association Talent Pipeline Management program.

To address these concerns, GBA's Talent Pipeline Management framework is oriented around six sequenced strategies that build off one another to support employers in developing a data-and-performance-driven approach to improving education and workforce partnerships.

The initiative can also include developing projections for job openings to quantify employers' talent and skills needs, creating a shared language to better communicate competency, credentialing, and other hiring requirements.

GASTON WORKS Strategy 2.2: Ensure local schools can successfully advance all students to college or careers.

Gaston County can claim their focus on career preparation as an area of strength. Gaston County Schools, private and charter schools, Gaston College, and Belmont Abbey all have innovative programs that increase student opportunity. These programs need to continue to aim for community awareness, and to coordinate opportunities for competitive grant funding and other philanthropic resources.



GASTON WORKS Strategy 2.3: Expose students early and often to local career paths and workplaces.

Gaston County offers many opportunities for students to be exposed to career opportunities and to begin their path toward entry into the workforce. Continuation and enhancement of these efforts is important. These include but are not limited to:

- Gaston County Schools' A.S.P.I.R.E. afterschool community learning center program, where PK to 5 students to connect with local businesses through in-class visits and field trips
- GCS's Career and Technical Education program, Early College High School, Early College of Medical Sciences, and Highland School of Technology to expose students to local career opportunities and training tracks
- Gaston College's Certificate and Associate of Applied Science programs in Textiles Technology and "2+2" degree articulation agreement with NC State's Wilson College of Textiles

Enabling and encouraging educators and guidance counselors to get an in-person look at manufacturing facilities and other career opportunities prepares them to support student decision-making.

A centralized online clearinghouse for any internships and apprenticeships offered by Gaston County businesses could help match candidates with local opportunities.



Gaston Works Strategy 2.4: Effectively communicate with parents.

Even if career building opportunities exist and students have been exposed to them, that may not be enough. Parents need to know what's available as well, in order to help their children make connections between their interests and these opportunities. Parents also need to be involved early.

Gaston County Schools already hosts an online Parent Academy, and outreach can help ensure parents are aware of it. There might be an opportunity to expand it into a comprehensive Parent University model, like the Parent University in Mesa, Arizona.

ONE GASTON WORKS OBJECTIVE 3: STRENGTHEN TARGETED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Stakeholders in Gaston County expressed a strong desire to see their community grow a diverse range of high-quality job opportunities for its residents. Numerous factors influence a community's competitiveness for job growth, many of which are addressed in other One Gaston 2040 Focus Areas and objectives. Traditional economic development activities such as business recruitment and business retention and expansion (BRE) remain essential components of a balanced and holistic community and economic development initiative.

The Gaston County Business Retention and Expansion program, staffed by the Gaston County Economic Development Commission (GCEDC), includes on-site visits where staff seek to understand the business's core products or services, industry capabilities, and growth issues, then provide customized growth assistance. This could include location services, land and building availability and costs, and meeting facilitation with property brokers or agents.

The Gaston Business Association, the result of a merger between the Gaston Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Gaston Development Corporation, delivers a strong, unified voice for local businesses. The GBA provides traditional member support services as well as a broader strategic approach to economic development. In addition to the workforce services profiled earlier in this Goal Area, GBA is the county's principal advocate at the state, local, and federal level for policies and programs supportive of Gaston County's economic competitiveness and growth.



GASTON WORKS Strategy 3.1: Maintain excellent relationships with local businesses, relocation prospects, and site consultants.

Effective coordination between the EDC, GBA, and economic development professionals in the cities and towns is vital to business retention and expansion, site identification and development, and industry recruitment.



GASTON WORKS Strategy 3.2: Communicate economic development programs, growth opportunities, and successes to internal and external audiences.

Gaston County has a robust set of economic development tools at its disposal and has a record of success in retention and recruitment. Regular communication and collaboration between economic development practitioners, elected officials, and other key partners will maximize the effectiveness of these tools. For example, Gaston College's Small Business Center (SBC) provides entrepreneurs with information they need to start or expand a small business, including free seminars, resource centers, and one-on-one counseling.

The Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina (EDPNC) and the Charlotte Regional Business Alliance are valuable external partners who can provide marketing opportunities outside of the community (e.g., trade missions and conferences).