



**This Bill Analysis
reflects the contents
of the bill as it was
presented in
committee.**

SENATE BILL 579: Transforming the High School Experience.

2025-2026 General Assembly

Committee: Senate Education/Higher Education
Introduced by: Sens. Lee, Sawyer, Settle
Analysis of: PCS to First Edition
S579-CSRQ-12

Date: April 30, 2025
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OVERVIEW: *Senate Bill 579 would create the following: (i) North Carolina High School Redesign Commission; (ii) Competency-Based High School and Healthcare and High-Tech Pathways Program; (iii) Lighthouse Math Project; (iv) Community College Seamless Skills Initiative; and (v) Competency-Based Education and High School Redesign Strategic Network. The Proposed Committee Substitute (PCS) makes technical changes to align with the provisions as they were in Senate Bill 257, the 2025 Appropriations Act.*

BILL ANALYSIS:

PART I. NORTH CAROLINA HIGH SCHOOL REDESIGN COMMISSION

Section 1 would establish the North Carolina High School Redesign Commission (Commission) which would be located administratively in the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) but would be independent of DPI. The purpose of the Commission would be to explore and recommend changes to policies and systems governing high school and higher education to better prepare North Carolina students for success as they transition to higher education or the workforce.

Commission Membership and Duties – The Commission would consist of 15 members and would consider the following, at a minimum, to inform its recommendations:

- Flexible requirements for high school diplomas that are relevant to the knowledge, skills, and abilities students will need for success in the future workforce.
- Access to apprenticeships, internships, clinical experiences, and other high-quality, work-based learning experiences while in high school.
- Opportunities for students to earn industry recognized credentials while in high school.
- Partnerships between public school units and North Carolina Community Colleges, The University of North Carolina, and North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities.
- Personalized pathways for students to satisfy core graduation requirements.
- Modular credit bearing alternatives to semester or yearlong courses.
- Competency-based alternatives to time-bound courses.
- Strategies for extending learning beyond school walls at scale via community connected experiences, including incorporating incentives for local businesses to partner with schools.
- Uses of artificial intelligence to expand student opportunities to engage in career exploration and work-based learning experiences.
- Alternative funding models to enable the development of a statewide learning ecosystem that encourages these new flexibilities and learning opportunities.
- Career exploration opportunities for students in middle school and the first two years of high school that prepare students to engage successfully in a redesigned high school experience.
- Evaluation of the programs, projects, and initiatives established by this act, and any other competency-based education (CBE) programs or high school redesign efforts taking place in the State.

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The Commission must partner with the Office of Learning Research at the North Carolina Collaboratory to conduct these evaluations.

Report – The Commission would be required to submit a report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee by April 30, 2026, and annually thereafter. The reports must include all recommendations approved by a majority of Commission members and a summary of any evaluations of the efficacy of CBE programs and high school redesign efforts implemented during that school year.

Termination – The Commission would terminate on June 30, 2030, or upon filing of its final annual report, whichever occurs first.

PART II. COMPETENCY-BASED HIGH SCHOOL AND HEALTHCARE AND HIGH-TECH PATHWAYS PROGRAM

Section 2 would establish the Competency-Based High School and Healthcare and High-Tech Pathways Program (Program) to create pathways for a student to utilize competency-based education (CBE) to obtain either an associate degree or an industry recognized credential/certification/licensure based on the student's goal of employment or enrollment. Students would decide their college or career track at the end of their junior year with an initial emphasis on healthcare preparation. Mooresville Graded School District (MGSD) would partner with Mitchell Community College (MCC) to implement the Program.

Program Design and Flexibility – MGSD, in collaboration with MCC, would be directed to contract with an organization with demonstrated expertise in designing and implementing learner-centered, modular, and competency-based high school programs that align with emerging and high-tech career pathways. The organization must have experience in co-designing stackable credentials with public school units and higher education partners and a documented track record of developing digital infrastructure that supports student-paced progression, interdisciplinary learning, and real-world skill acquisition. This organization would have to assist in developing a framework for the Program, including course design, sequencing, credentialing structure, and other elements necessary for personalized student progression. Students would have the opportunity to participate in a pathway provided by the Program by the 2027-2028 school year at the latest.

Notwithstanding any provision of law to the contrary, the following flexibilities would be available to Program participants:

- MGSD would be able to offer Credit by Demonstrated Mastery assessments and CTE Proof of Learning assessments outside of existing State testing windows.
- MCC would be able to enroll MGSD students in community college courses prior to their 11th grade year without the student meeting the requirements for 9th and 10th grade students pursuant to subdivision (4) of G.S. 115D-20.
- Students participating in the Program would have access to all community college courses at MCC, regardless of pathway selection.
- MGSD would be able to replace any high school graduation credit requirement with either community college courses offered by MCC or locally developed CBE courses that are consistent with the student's pathway. However, MGSD would not be able replace any graduation credit requirements in the following subject areas:
 - English.
 - Mathematics.
 - Science.
 - Social Studies.
- MSGD would be able to operate any high school in the local school administrative unit consistent with the flexibilities of a school operating under a restart model pursuant to G.S. 115C-105.37B(a)(2) which provides the same flexibility given to charter schools.

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Vendor Partnership – MGSD would be directed to select a third-party vendor (Vendor) that is an educational support provider with a nationally recognized, research-based instructional and leadership framework, including a High Reliability School model, a taxonomy of educational objectives aligned to classroom strategies, and a system for implementing personalized competency-based education. The Vendor must have published extensively in peer-reviewed and practitioner literature, have an established track record of working directly with K-12 schools and public school units across multiple states, and offer professional development services, implementation support, and instructional resources developed and led by a founding education researcher with over four decades of influence in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. MGSD would have to partner with the Vendor to develop standards-aligned proficiency scales for all content areas in grades 9 through 12 to ensure educators in the participating schools have the tools necessary to successfully transition to CBE approaches. The Vendor must provide professional development and coaching to the schools in MGSD to ensure educators can engage in learning about CBE approaches, including implementation of the proficiency scales developed by MGSD.

Funding – The PCS states that it is the intention of the General Assembly to appropriate from the General Fund to DPI the sum of up to \$2,000,000 in nonrecurring funds for each year of the 2025-2027 fiscal biennium. These funds would not revert but remain available until the end of the 2026-2027 fiscal year. These funds would be allocated to MGSD for the following purposes:

- To contract with experts in CBE and designing stackable credentials.
- To hire one additional staff member at MGSD to oversee implementation of the Program.
- To partner with a Vendor.

PART III. LIGHTHOUSE MATH PROJECT

Section 3 would establish the Lighthouse Math Project (Project) to increase the percentage of high school students who are (i) eligible to complete college level math upon graduation from high school and (ii) able to complete college level math either through dual enrollment while in high school or within the first year of college enrollment.

Project Participants and Design – Wake Technical Community College (Wake Tech) would be directed to partner with Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) for high school students at East Wake High School and Knightdale High School to be eligible to participate in the Project at the Wake Tech East campus of Wake Tech. Wake Tech and WCPSS must partner with SparkNC to align the Project participants' efforts at the Wake Tech East campus with the design and implementation of the Project.

Furthermore, WCPSS, in collaboration with Wake Tech, would be directed to contract with Khan Academy, Inc. (Khan), for use of the artificial intelligence student tutoring program, Khanmigo. Students enrolling at participating high schools would have access to Khanmigo from the time of enrollment in the high school which would continue through their attendance at Wake Tech if the students choose to enroll at Wake Tech East. Wake Tech must collaborate with Khan to do the following:

- Develop and deliver at least one Khanmigo-centered gateway college math course to be offered to high school students at participating high schools to be completed as a college level math course. This course shall also be available to students who graduate from participating high schools and enroll in the courses at Wake Tech East.
- Develop a Khanmigo-centered developmental math course sequence that would be provided by Wake Tech faculty to students from participating high schools in one of the following formats:
 - As part of a Career and College Promise Career Ready Pathway.
 - As supplement to a Career and College Promise Pathway.
 - As a summer bridge program available to students prior to or subsequent to their junior and senior years of high school.
 - As a community college course during the first semester of enrollment at Wake Tech.

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As part of the Project, Khan, in consultation with Wake Tech and WCPSS, would be directed to develop a self-paced, competency-based modular math course with appropriate student diagnostics and student assessments based on the college readiness math competencies provided as part of the Project. The intent would be that students successfully demonstrating college readiness math competencies would be eligible to enroll in college level math courses.

Funding – The PCS states that it is the intention of the General Assembly to appropriate from the General Fund to DPI up to \$500,000 in nonrecurring funds for the 2025-2026 fiscal year to contract with Khan for licenses for the Khanmigo application and to create the Khanmigo-centered gateway college math course. The PCS further states that it is the intention of the General Assembly that funds appropriated for the purposes laid out in this Section would not revert but remain available until the end of the 2026-2027 fiscal year.

Finally, the PCS states that it is the intention of the General Assembly to appropriate from the General Fund to the North Carolina Community Colleges System Office up to \$1,000,000 in nonrecurring funds for the 2025-2026 fiscal year to be used to establish time-limited positions at Wake Tech. Two positions would be assigned to work in each participating high school to assist in the implementation of the courses offered by the Project. It would be the intent of the General Assembly that funds appropriated would not revert but remain available until the end of the 2028-2029 fiscal year.

PART IV. COMMUNITY COLLEGE SEAMLESS SKILLS INITIATIVE

Section 4 would establish the Community College Seamless Skills Initiative (Initiative) to create a CBE model that seamlessly connects high school and community college. By aligning learning experiences from high school with college-level competencies, the Initiative would enable students to explore career pathways, earn dual credit, and fulfill computer science requirements while gaining credentials of value in high-demand technology employment sectors through college credit.

Participants and Design – Fayetteville Technical Community College (FTCC) and Wilkes Community College (WCC) would be directed to partner to implement the Initiative and commit to accomplishing each of the following:

- Establish high-tech pathways that would integrate high school and community college curricula for hands-on, project-based learning.
- Develop competency-based pathways that would create cross-curricular maps for dual credit, fostering seamless transitions between secondary and postsecondary education.
- Scale and replicate to be able to build a scalable framework for rapid implementation across North Carolina.
- Empower student ownership by enabling students to set long-term learning goals and to manage and own their credentials with a digital wallet.
- Facilitate student work experiences to accelerate learning and transition students into work through "learn & earn" work-based learning in partnership with public agencies and private employers.
- Address workforce needs by developing and sustaining a comprehensive talent pipeline of skilled workers for high-demand technology fields in occupations that depend upon informational technology and operational technology for operational success.
- Develop statewide resources, including a guidebook to facilitate model replication and a new talent development model to accelerate learning using CBE.

Digital Wallet – The participants in the Initiative would be directed to contract with a third-party entity to create a secure, interoperable digital wallet platform capable of issuing, storing, verifying, and sharing learner credentials, including microcredentials, certifications, transcripts, and verified skill records. The platform must allow for credential portability across educational institutions and employers, support open standards for interoperability, and ensure privacy and security in compliance with applicable laws. The platform must enable learners to manage a comprehensive, lifelong record of achievement that is accessible, verifiable, and shareable

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with third parties through digital means. All credential and learner data would be owned and controlled by the student and would not be stored in centralized cloud infrastructure.

Technical Support – The North Carolina Community Colleges System Office would be directed to provide ongoing technical support to community colleges participating in the Initiative. FTCC would be directed enter into a memorandum of understanding with WCC to jointly co-design the Initiative and they must engage an organization with demonstrated expertise in designing and implementing learner-centered, modular, and competency-based high school programs aligned with emerging and high-tech career pathways. The selected organization must have a history of co-designing stackable credentials with public school units and postsecondary institutions and a proven track record of building digital infrastructure that supports student-paced progression, interdisciplinary instruction, and authentic skill development. The organization must assist in the development of a comprehensive framework for the Initiative, including course design, sequencing, credentialing structure, and related elements necessary to support personalized student progression during the 2025-2026 school year.

Funding – The PCS states that it is the intention of the General Assembly to appropriate from the General Fund to the North Carolina Community Colleges System Office up to \$3,750,000 in nonrecurring funds for the 2025-2026 fiscal year to be allocated to FTCC and WCC for the Initiative. To the extent funds are appropriated for this purpose, the sum of up to \$2,750,000 must be allocated to FTCC and the sum of up to \$1,000,000 must be allocated to WCC. Funds allocated would not revert but remain available until the end of the 2028-2029 fiscal year.

PART V. COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION AND HIGH SCHOOL REDESIGN STRATEGIC NETWORK

Section 5 would direct Mooresville Graded School District, Mitchell Community College, Wake Technical Community College, Wake County Public School System, Fayetteville Technical Community College, Wilkes Community College, and SparkNC to collaborate to create a Competency-Based Education and High School Redesign Strategic Network (Network). The president of SparkNC, or the president's designee, would serve as the chair of the Network and coordinate and support the operations of the Network. The Network would be directed provide a means for each entity to share what it has learned and developed regarding CBE and high school redesign to advance the goals of developing a CBE approach to education across the State.

PART VI. OFFICE OF LEARNING RESEARCH EVALUATION

Section 6 would direct The Office of Learning Research at the North Carolina Collaboratory to study and evaluate the programs and initiatives established in the PCS and report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee by March 15, 2027, and annually thereafter, with a final report on March 15, 2030. Reports must include at least the following:

- The total number of students engaging with these programs and initiatives.
- The total amount of funds used to implement, design, and operate the programs and initiatives.
- Effects on student achievement and learning outcomes.

Study and Evaluation Funding – The PCS states that it is the intention of the General Assembly to appropriate from the General Fund to the Board of Governors of The University of North Carolina the sum of up to \$450,000 in nonrecurring funds for the 2025-2026 fiscal year to be allocated to the North Carolina Collaboratory for the Office of Learning Research to conduct this study and evaluation.

EFFECTIVE DATE

The act would become effective when the Current Operations Appropriations Act of 2025 becomes law and if that bill appropriates funds for the purposes detailed in each Section of this act.