RISE Caldwell-Watauga

Board Report | Workforce Development Update

Reporting Period: October 2025 – March 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The RISE Caldwell-Watauga initiative continues to demonstrate strong early momentum in building a regional, employer-driven workforce pipeline across Caldwell and Watauga counties.

Since October 2025, the program has engaged **152 total student applicants** across Spring 2026, Summer 2026, and projected Fall 2026 cohorts. Early participation outcomes significantly exceed Year 1 targets, reflecting strong alignment between education partners, employers, and regional workforce demand.

In **Academic Year 2025–2026**, Caldwell County is on track to achieve **228% of its participation target**, while Watauga County is planned to be at **155% of its target**, resulting in a combined regional achievement of **196% of goal performance**.

Employer engagement remains strong and diversified across healthcare, education, manufacturing, skilled trades, public safety, aviation, and business sectors. Healthcare & Life Sciences represents the largest industry cluster at **43.2% of total placements**, reinforcing regional labor demand alignment.

To date, Spring and Summer 2026 programming is producing **88 student experiences**, including registered apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, internships, and paid placements. The employer pipeline continues to expand, with additional partners currently in discussion or committed for future placement cycles.

Overall, RISE demonstrates a scalable and sustainable workforce development model that is effectively connecting students to real-world career pathways while meeting employer talent needs across the region.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Total Applicants (Since Oct 2025): 152
Employer Partners: 36
Spring 2026 Participants: 32
Summer 2026 Participants: 56
Total Spring + Summer Engagements: 88

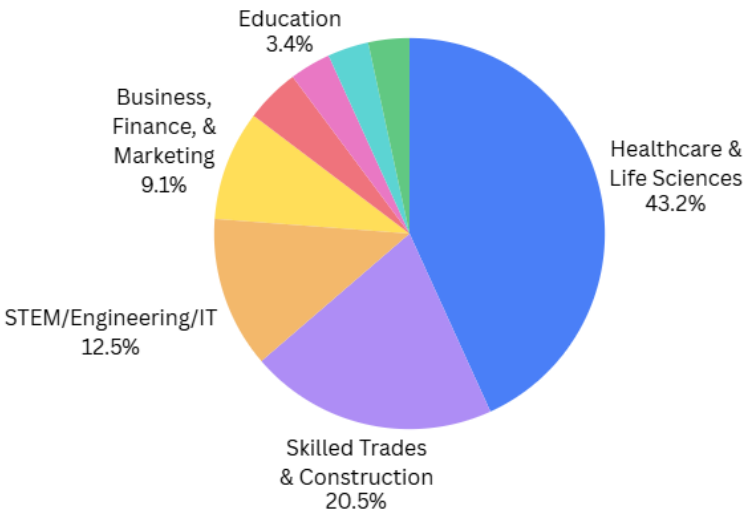
Participation Targets: Year 1 - Year 3

	Caldwell Targets (GOAL)	Caldwell (Actual)		Watauga Targets (Goal)	Watauga (Actual)		Total Participant Targets	Total (Actual)	
AY 25/26	25	57	228%	20	31	155%	45	88	196%
AY 26/27	50		0%	40		0%	90		0%
AT 27/28	75		0%	60		0%	135		0%

INDUSTRY CLUSTER BREAKDOWN

The RISE participant pipeline spans multiple high-demand industries aligned with regional labor market needs.

- Healthcare & Life Sciences: **38**
- Skilled Trades & Construction: **18**
- STEM / Engineering / IT: **11**
- Business, Finance & Marketing: **8**
- Arts, A/V Technology & Design: **4**
- Education & Training: **3**
- Law, Public Safety & Government: **3**
- Hospitality & Culinary: **3**



Key Insight: Healthcare and Skilled Trades together account for nearly **64% of all placements**, highlighting strong alignment with regional workforce demand and employer needs.

SEMESTER PARTICIPATION SUMMARY

Spring 2026 (Total: 32)

- 1 Registered Apprenticeship (Hospitality – graduating pathway)
- 12 pre-apprenticeships (35%)
- 19 Internships
- 13 Paid placements (40%)

Summer 2026 (Total: 56)

- 1 Registered Apprenticeship (Welding – first PA conversion)
- 12 returning participants from Spring
- 43 actively seeking placement (internship or pre-apprenticeship)
- Additional placements pending employer confirmation

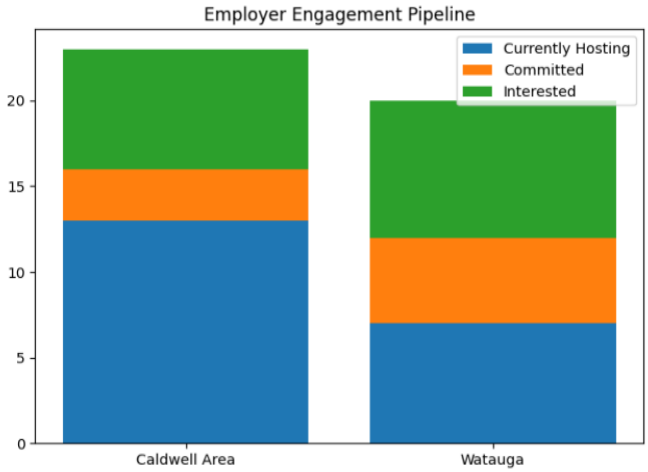
EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

Caldwell County Region

- 13 currently hosting students
- 3 committed (placement in progress)
- 7 expressing interest
- **Total pipeline: 23**

Watauga County Region

- 7 currently hosting students
- 5 committed (placement in in progress)
- 8 expressing interest
- **Total pipeline: 20**



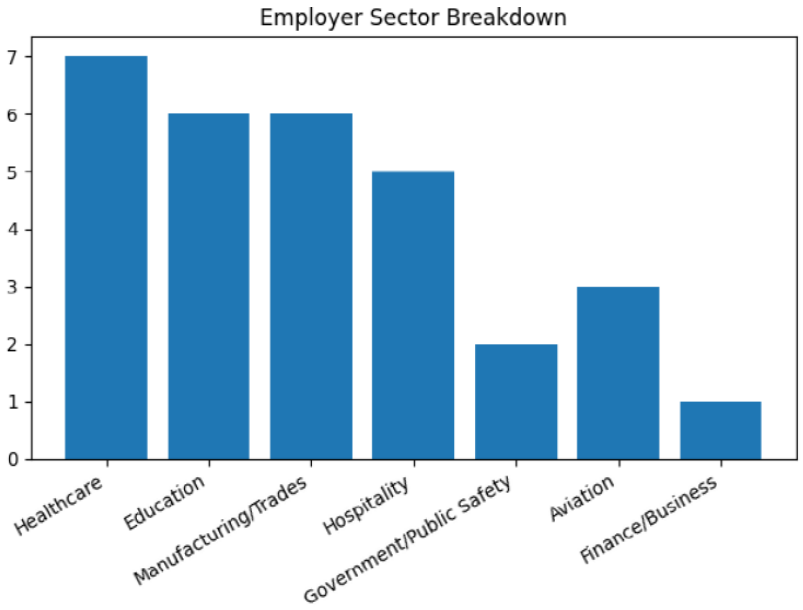
Total Regional Pipeline: 43 Employers

Our regional employer network continues to grow across both counties, supporting a strong placement pipeline.

EMPLOYER SECTOR BREAKDOWN

Employer partners span multiple sectors:

- Healthcare & Life Sciences
- Education & Training
- Manufacturing & Skilled Trades
- Hospitality & Tourism
- Government & Public Safety
- Aviation & Transportation
- Finance & Business Services



Key Insight: Healthcare, Education, and Skilled Trades represent the strongest employer engagement sectors, forming the backbone of the current placement ecosystem.

REGIONAL EMPLOYERS



Watauga County (12)

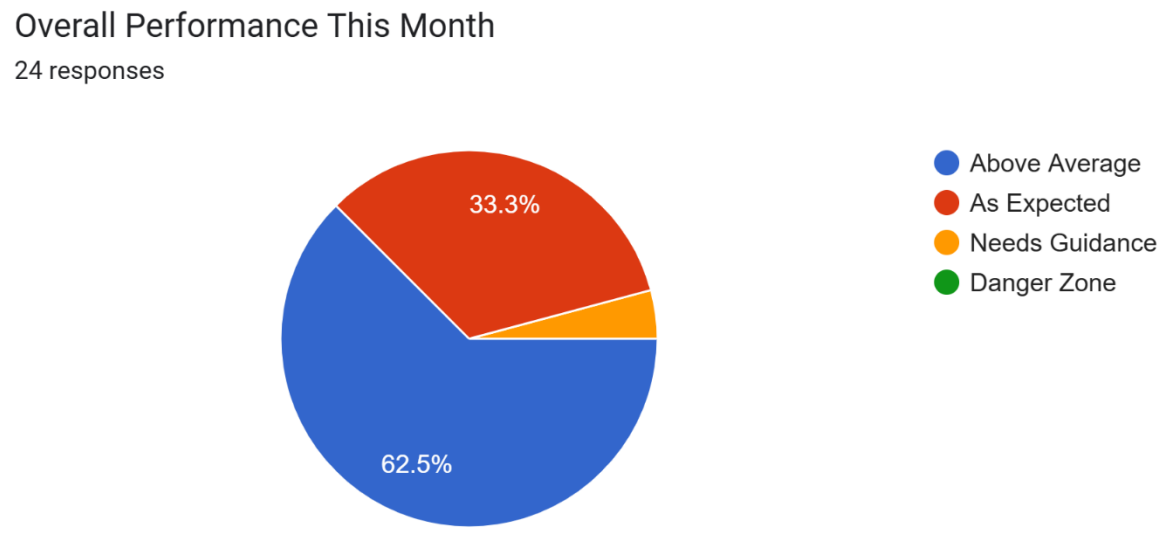
- Watauga County Schools – Cove Creek School
- Deerfield Assisted Living and Memory Care
- UNC Health Appalachian
- Hampton Inn & Suites by Hilton Boone NC
- Boone Civil Air Patrol / AVL Train
- The Animal Hospital of Boone
- RISE Caldwell-Watauga / CCC&TI
- ASU - Appalachian Institute for Health and Wellness
- *Booneshine *In Progress Future Partner*
- *The Cardinal *In Progress Future Partner*
- *Mast General Store *In Progress Future Partner*
- *VPC Builders *In Progress Future Partner*

▨ Caldwell County (16)

- Caldwell County Schools – Lower Creek Elementary
- Caldwell County Finance
- Caldwell County Sheriff's Department
- UNC Health Caldwell
- Dr Holland Family Dentistry
- JEBCC Catering Group
- CCC&TI – Marketing
- Paragon Group
- Exela Pharma Sciences
- Cloninger Ford Motor Company - Morganton (Burke)
- Foothills Regional Airport
- Trailer Sales & Services (Catawba)
- Foothills Aviation Club / Lower Creek Airport
- *Bernhardt Furniture *In Progress Future Partner*
- *Catawba Valley Medical Center *In Progress Future Partner*
- *Cloninger Fore Motor Company - Hickory *In Progress Future Partner (Catawba)*

Early Employer Feedback (Spring 2026)

Early employer evaluations reflect **strong overall performance and high satisfaction** with student participants across industries. The majority of students are meeting or exceeding expectations, with consistent themes emerging around professionalism, attitude, and workplace readiness. In all 3 feedback cycles we have 0% Danger Zone Feedback reported for students in place for more than 30 days.



Key Strengths Identified by Employers

- **Positive Attitude & Work Ethic:** Employers overwhelmingly cite attitude as the most important factor. Students are described as enthusiastic, respectful, and eager to contribute.
- **Willingness to Learn:** A strong desire to learn, accept feedback, and grow is consistently noted across nearly all placements.
- **Professionalism:** Students are demonstrating appropriate workplace behavior, communication, and appearance, often exceeding expectations for their age.
- **Reliability & Accountability:** Many students are punctual, dependable, and complete assigned tasks with minimal supervision.
- **Teamwork & Communication:** Employers highlight students' ability collaborate, communicate clearly, and build positive workplace relationships.



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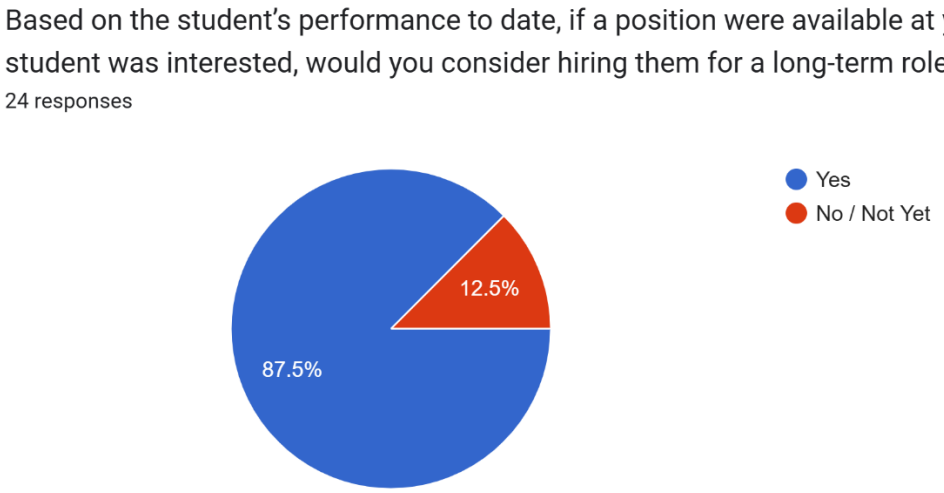
Areas for Growth

While feedback is largely positive, employers identified a few common opportunities for continued development:

- **Confidence & Initiative:** Some students would benefit from taking more initiative and leading tasks independently.
- **Communication Depth:** Expanding on ideas, providing more detail, and strengthening professional communication in presentations.
- **Workplace Readiness Skills:** Time management, balancing responsibilities, and punctuality (in a few cases).
- **Technical/Contextual Skills:** Role-specific growth areas (e.g., industry terminology, operational exposure, or certifications).
- **Transportation & Logistics:** In isolated cases, access to transportation continues to impact student growth opportunities.

Hiring Outlook

- **Strong Hiring Potential:** The vast majority of employers indicated they would consider hiring their student for a long-term role if a position were available.
- **Barriers to Immediate Hire:** When "not yet," reasons were typically **external** (age requirements, required credentials, or certifications)—not performance-related.



What Employers Value Most

Across responses, employers consistently emphasized that the strongest candidates demonstrate:

- Positive attitude and strong work ethic
- Reliability and punctuality
- Willingness to learn and accept feedback
- Communication and interpersonal skills
- Initiative and self-motivation

Summary

Early data indicates the program is successfully preparing students with **critical employability skills**. Employers view participants as valuable contributors with strong long-term potential, reinforcing the effectiveness of work-based learning as a talent pipeline strategy.



First 3 months - Spring 2026 Student Impact Summary

Student Investment & Support

In our first three months this semester, RISE has made a direct financial investment in student success, reducing barriers to participation while incentivizing performance and growth:



- $24,549.95 in total stipend checks issued,
- $11,700 in transportation support, ensuring access to job sites across the region
- $12,849.95 distributed as performance-based bonuses, earned through:
  - Positive employer feedback
  - Completion of RISE assignments
  - Achievement of benchmark credentials

This model reinforces accountability, skill development, and equitable access, while rewarding students for meaningful progress.

Cohort Outcomes & Continuation



The Spring 2026 cohort reflects strong momentum in both student engagement and workforce alignment outcomes. Of the 32 students served this semester:

- 13 students (41%) have requested to continue into Summer or Fall programming
- 4 students are exploring new career pathways, demonstrating confidence to refine their goals
- 3 students have been offered permanent employment as a direct result of their placement
- 1 student has secured a long-term welding apprenticeship and is graduating into the workforce

These outcomes signal not only successful placement, but meaningful career clarity, retention, and transition into employment pipelines.



Program Reach & Access

RISE continues to scale access across the region, now partnered with all 8 major schools in the service area, including:

CCC&TI, Caldwell Online Academy, Caldwell Academy for Applied Sciences, South Caldwell High School, West Caldwell High School, Hibriten High School,

Student grade-level distribution reflects strong upperclassman engagement:

- 1 Sophomore
- 12 Juniors
- 17 Seniors



Work-Based Learning Model Strength

- **40%** of students are in paid placements, reinforcing equitable access and real workforce participation
- **35%** are in pre-apprenticeship pathways, building early pipelines into high demand fields

This balance highlights a dual-impact model: immediate earning opportunities paired with long-term credential pathways.

Student Experience & Perception Shift



Student feedback this semester shows a consistent and measurable shift from uncertainty to confidence, belonging, and career commitment.

Key Themes Emerging:

- Increased confidence and sense of belonging in professional environments
- Greater understanding of career pathways and workplace expectations
- Stronger alignment between student interest and career choice

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Student Voice Highlights

"I was nervous at first… now it's what I look forward to every day."

"They treat you like part of the team — not just a student."

"I realized there are so many career paths that can actually make a difference."



"It doesn't even feel like work anymore — I'm having so much fun learning."

"Everyone is willing to help you and teach you — you're never on your own."

"This confirmed that this is exactly what I want to do in my future."

"I didn't realize how much teamwork and communication really matters."

SUMMARY

- Retention is strong: Over 40% of students are requesting to continue in summer and fall, signaling high program value
- Workforce outcomes are real and immediate: Job offers and apprenticeships are already being secured
- Career clarity is increasing: Students are either confirming pathways or confidently pivoting
- Employer environments are exceeding expectations, particularly in mentorship and culture
- The model is working: Paid placements + pre-apprenticeships are creating both short- and long-term impact



The RISE Caldwell-Watauga initiative is demonstrating early success as a regional workforce development model. The program is exceeding participation targets, strengthening employer engagement, and creating meaningful, structured pathways from education to employment.

Continued growth in employer partnerships and student placements positions the initiative for long-term scalability and sustained regional workforce impact