



Virtual Charter Schools Issue Brief

Background

North Carolina first ratified charter school legislation in 1996, with the goal of improving student learning and increasing student opportunities.¹ In 2014 the General Assembly passed a budget bill (SB 744) including a four-year virtual charter school pilot program. For a school to participate in the pilot program it must abide by the following requirements:

- maximum enrollment of 2,592 in the fourth year of the pilot program,
- required ratio of teachers to students for K-8 grades is 1:50 and 1:150 for 9-12 grades,
- certified teachers for each instructional course,
- student withdrawal rate less than 25%,² and
- at least 80% of teachers who are residents of North Carolina.³

NC General Statute 115C-218.95 states the State Board of Education's (SBE) authority over regular charter schools allows the SBE to terminate a charter based on failure to meet student performance requirements, failure to meet standards of fiscal management, violation of law, violation of any standards or procedures set in the charter, or for other good cause.⁴ Section 8.35.(f) of the 2014 budget bill states that if a virtual charter school does not abide by the previously stated requirements, it is subject to termination of enrollment expansion or termination of a pilot. The language of the bill does not clearly state if this authority is granted to the SBE.⁵

In 2015, North Carolina Connections Academy and North Carolina Virtual Academy opened as the two virtual charter schools under North Carolina's pilot program. These schools aim to promote individualized learning, as well as introducing a wide range of instructional opportunities. The General Assembly and the SBE require that virtual charter schools in the pilot program provide frequent updates and recommendations regarding curriculums, student engagement, monitoring of technology, and other factors that affect student outcomes.⁶

A provision in the 2018 budget bill extended the virtual charter school pilot program for an additional four years, making it an eight-year program concluding at the end of the 2022-23 school year. The 266-page bill was presented as a conference report that could not be debated or

¹ NCGS 115C-218(a)

² S.L. 2014-100, sec. 8.35

³ S.L. 2016-94, sec. 8.13

⁴ NCGS 115C-218.95

⁵ S.L. 2014-100, sec. 8.35

⁶ NCSBE and NCDPI. *Virtual Public Charter School Pilot Program*. 2017, Report to the North Carolina General Assembly.

amended, thus meaningful debate never occurred.⁷

School Performance

NC Connections Academy

Year	Grade	Performance Grade Score	Growth Status ⁸	Withdrawal Rate ⁹
2015-16	D	51	Not Met	31.3% (32.2% including finite enrollees)
2016-17	D	54	Not Met	NA

NC Virtual Academy

Year	Grade	Performance Grade Score	Growth Status ¹⁰	Withdrawal Rate ¹¹
2015-16	D	46	Not Met	25.0% (31.3% including finite enrollees)
2016-17	D	44	Not Met	NA

Because of poor school performance it is unclear why the General Assembly has extended the pilot program for another four years. Virtual charter schools have been a controversial issue in North Carolina as far back as 2001 when the first virtual charter school applications were submitted in the state. When the State Board of Education received an application for a virtual charter school in 2002, former Chairman Phil Kirk stated his concerns about this style of education. He believed that virtual charter schools would be viewed as subsidized homeschooling. Kirk also discussed the fact that students would not receive daily interaction with qualified and competent teachers and classmates, nor is it likely that they would be prepared as a graduate to enter a business or industry workforce that favors effective verbal and written communication and compatibility between coworkers.¹²

NCSBA Position

According to NC General Statute 115C-218.95, the State Board of Education may terminate a charter based on failure to meet student performance requirements, failure to meet standards of fiscal management, violation of law, violation of any standards or procedures set in the charter, or for other good cause.¹³ NCSBA believes that the authority given to the State Board of Education over charter schools should be expanded to include schools participating in the virtual charter school pilot program.

⁷ S.L. 2018-5, SB 99, sec. 7.13

⁸ North Carolina School Report Cards, *NC Connections Academy*, <https://ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com/src/school?school=00A000&year=2017&lang=english>

⁹ *Virtual Public Charter School Pilot Program*. 2017.

¹⁰ North Carolina School Report Cards, *NC Virtual Academy*, <https://ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com/src/school?school=00B000&year=2017&lang=english>

¹¹ *Virtual Public Charter School Pilot Program*. 2017.

¹² Phil Kirk, Chairman of North Carolina State Board of Education, Statement on the New Academy Connections Charter School Application, 2002.

¹³ NCGS 115C-218.95