

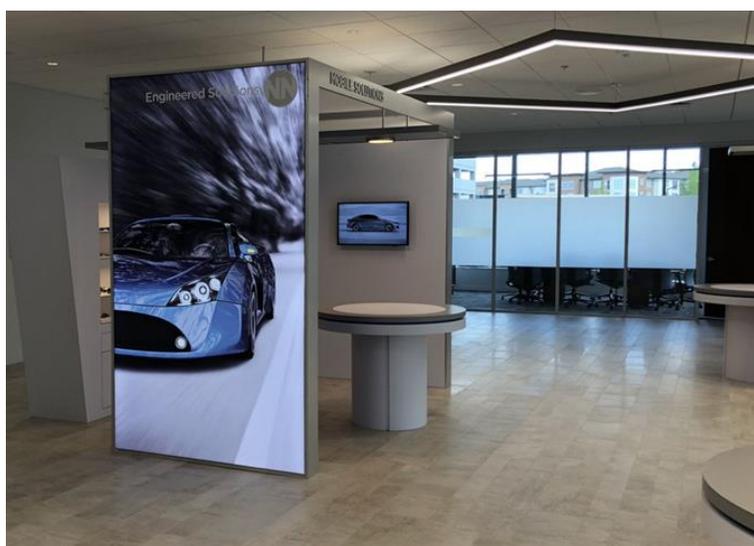


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## Featured Media



Contributed photo This workspace is a conceptual image of a student collaboration area at Apprentice Academy High School of North Carolina, which will open in Monroe in the summer of 2019.

## Apprenticeship Academy: An alternative to college prep

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *Following is the third in a three-part series on charter schools.*

Long-time area residents will remember when Monroe had the Union County Career Center, a high school of about 800 students that specialized in teaching vocational careers rather than focusing on college prep.

Students took vocational and technical courses in cosmetology, carpentry, childcare, plumbing, welding, electrical studies, and auto mechanics -- making them more marketable when they graduated. Students could earn certifications in many of these fields.

That vocational school was replaced in the fall of 2006 with Central Academy of Technology and Arts, a college preparatory environment that, according to its website, has a “focused curriculum in the fields of information systems, medical science, performing arts, pre-engineering and transportation systems ... seeking to prepare students for higher-education and rewarding careers.”

Next summer, Union County will again offer a vocational high school, but unlike the Career Center, this school will not be part of the Union County Public Schools’ district. It will be a charter school.

Apprentice Academy High School of North Carolina (AAHSNC), which is slated to open in Monroe in the summer of 2019, will have a new state-of-the-art facility located on NC 84, between Clark Road and Martin Luther King Blvd.

Academy founder and principal, Barry Ross, said he and the board named the charter high school based on what they were trying to accomplish. “We’re trying to enable kids to go to work, the way they used to get good jobs, through apprenticeships,” he said.



School officials expect to break ground as early as November.

“The building will be like nothing parents have ever seen,” Ross said. “It’s going to be a 21st Century facility. We want to build a school that students will find similar to their work environments.”

AAHSNC will specialize in apprenticeships, offering workforce-ready skills that school officials promise will make their high school graduates more marketable for in-demand, high-paying careers.

“I haven’t met one person yet that the mission of this school doesn’t resonate with, especially if you’re of an age when you remember when ‘work’ wasn’t a bad thing,” he said. “You could say, ‘I went to a vocational high school’ and that wasn’t a bad thing, either.”

### **College isn’t for everyone**

“My background is in education, but I’m smart enough to know that college isn’t for everyone, and it’s not a guarantee for anything,” Ross said.

“People forget two tiny little words: ‘a’ and ‘the.’ If you start thinking that you have ‘the way’ to success for everyone, that’s when you’re in trouble. You have to think that this is ‘a way’ to success. That’s why society is where it is, because everybody has ‘the answer.’ They are not willing to accept that they have one answer and others have another answer.”

Ross is passionate about opening a vocational school that will give all students an employable trade after high school. As a former high school principal in the public school system, he said he’s seen too many students graduate with no discernable job skills, including his own son.

“When he graduated this past June, he didn’t have a skill to his name; To graduate high school and you can’t do anything, what was the purpose?” Ross said. “I will not allow that to happen; our board will not allow that to happen to any student enrolled at Apprentice Academy High School. We’re going to do our part to make sure those kids have skills. You will graduate from high school with a skill that will allow you to do something where you can make money.”



Some of the trades that will be taught at the charter high school academy are HVAC, electrical, welding, carpentry, plumbing, automotive repair, culinary arts, cosmetology, health sciences, computer programming and cyber security.



### **600 students**

The school will open with about 600 students in grades 9 through 11, and will add a 12th grade after the completion of its first year.

Ross said at his school, the first two years students will be involved in career exploration because most 13- and 14-year-olds do not have a specific career focus. Students will explore various career fields by getting a close-up view of various jobs. This will include ride-alongs and internships at area businesses that will give students high school credits.

In the 11th and 12th grades, students will have paid internships or paid apprenticeships. “When they’re on the job site, that’s a part of their school day,” Ross said. “They’re earning money while they’re there, and they’re getting their high school credits through work-based learning.”

The school will offer a lot of flexibility, which will make it easier for personalized education. In personalized learning, the lessons are individually tailored to the student's needs.

"It's a lot easier to personalize learning for 600 kids than it is for 1,900," Ross said. "That's the benefit of a charter school. We can be smaller and we can offer these things."

Ross said the attention each student will receive has been well received. "There has to be a way for teachers to deliver instruction at a pace where a student can work on his own," he said. "Super smart kids can blow through a course in 60 days, but another student might need 90, 100 or 120 days. In a personalized learning environment, you can do that."

If a student needs to work to help support his family, Ross said classes will be arranged to fit his or her schedule: "Our philosophy is, the school fits the needs of the child; the child doesn't fit the needs of the school."

### **Rebirth of vocational education**

Ross said the timing of his school matches the apparent push from the State Board of Education for a rebirth of vocational education. "You can't pick up a newspaper or see TV news and not realize what's going on in this country," he said. "There is no such thing as a job shortage. The problem is there's a skills gap, because there are not enough people who have the skills that employers need."

This need is evidenced by the number of local businesses that have stepped up to support the high school charter academy. The school's business champion is Lea Burt, owner of Mechanical Contractors Inc., (MCI), the largest HVAC company in North Carolina.

MCI held a luncheon recently for area business and industry executives to come learn about the charter high school. This enabled Ross to introduce the concept of his academy in an attempt to build support.

It worked.

Some of those who stepped forward include: Howard Brothers Electric, Edifice Construction, Steel Fabricators, Shelco Construction Company, Nexcom – Telecommunication Company and Ingersoll Rand Corporation.

“This should tell you what industry thinks of our school and how much they think it’s needed,” Ross said.

AAHSNC board member Robert Dussinger, a retired Navy Lt. Commander and a Vietnam veteran, is the retired vice president of a large insurance company. He said he is excited to serve on the academy’s board of advisors.

“The thing that really interests me about this school is, it’s so student centered,” Dussinger said. “In our school, students won’t be required to take this course or that course, whether he wants to or not. And then when he gets home, he won’t have four or five hours of homework. That’s almost mind-boggling.”

Robert’s wife, Pat, also serves on the academy’s board. They represent two of the seven board members.

### **Breaking cycle of poverty**

“This kind of education can and will break the cycle of poverty,” Pat Dussinger said. “If a family is poor or struggling financially, their child can learn one of these trades and then he can financially help his family. His future will not be poverty-ridden. Then their kids will see what their parents are doing and the cycle will be broken. If they apply themselves in our school, their future opens.”

She added that all members of the charter high school’s board are passionate about vocational education. “Each of us has a reason why we are so passionate about this kind of education. Either we saw individuals whose lives opened because they had a trained skill to offer the work world, or we knew someone whose lack of training meant they didn’t reach what they could have been in their life.”

For students who want to attend AAHSNC, the lottery registration for rising 9th, 10th and 11th graders (for the 2019-2020 school year) begins in January of 2019.

For more information, call 980-339-3086 or go to the school’s website at: <https://aahsnc.weebly.com/programs.html>



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