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Contact:  
Joe Ableidinger  
Executive Director, SparkNC  
[launch@sparknc.org](mailto:launch@sparknc.org)

## **The Innovation Project Launches SparkNC, Creating New Pathways to Expand Access to High-Tech Careers for North Carolina Students**

***Initiative will transform education in NC by guiding students through a purposeful learning continuum, empowering innovative districts to pilot new learning models, and building a necessary talent pipeline to meet modern workforce demands in high-tech industries.***

RALEIGH, NC (June 29, 2022) – The Innovation Project (TIP), a nonprofit collaborative working group of innovative North Carolina school district superintendents and their teams, today announces the launch of SparkNC. This transformative initiative will meet student needs for reengagement, connection, purpose, choice and customized learning, and accelerate student progress along new pathways to careers in high-tech fields like artificial intelligence and machine learning, software development, computer systems engineering, and cybersecurity.

“North Carolina students are full of amazing potential, but many are disengaged, and they’ve missed so much over the past few years,” reflected Joe Ableidinger, SparkNC’s Executive Director. “We’re designing learning experiences to reengage them in different ways, creating new pathways to fields that hold massive economic promise for their futures.” Funded by a 2021 appropriation from the North Carolina General Assembly, as part of North Carolina’s American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) State Plan, SparkNC will benefit students disproportionately harmed by learning loss and disengagement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Senators Michael Lee and Deanna Ballard and Representative Donny Lambeth championed this initiative in the budget process with support from other members of the General Assembly. Senator Lee is a co-chair of the Hunt-Lee Commission, a bipartisan group created to study and synthesize innovative practices to inform education policy. “I support this transformative work because I want North Carolina’s education system to be future ready.” Lee says this includes developing strong ties to the modern economy and creating a continuum of learning that serves students from their early years through their entry to the workforce and beyond. “SparkNC will do both, and it will empower innovative educators to act in service of these goals

and to learn from each other and collaboratively redesign policies and practices to meet the needs of all learners.”

SparkNC will focus heavily on innovative interdistrict partnerships and deep collaborations among businesses, higher education, and K-12 schools, including providing students with opportunities to engage with real industry partners to tackle real-world problems with the support of expert coaches. In this way, SparkNC will be a proof of concept for a new way to do school—one that is more learner-centered, industry-relevant, and competency-based.

Through its emphasis on development of students’ durable skills and engagement with real-world challenges, SparkNC will address key goals of State Superintendent Catherine Truitt’s Operation Polaris and the State Board of Education’s 2025 Statewide Strategic Plan. “The pandemic has shown us many things,” says Superintendent Truitt, “including how quickly the workforce is changing and how different talent needs are today than 5 or 10 years ago. I’ve remained committed to aligning K-12 public education to our state’s workforce needs, and SparkNC is one new and innovative way that we can help equip today’s students to meet the evolving needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce.”

To ensure North Carolina remains economically competitive, the state set an ambitious educational attainment goal: by 2030, 2 million North Carolinians ages 25-44 will have a postsecondary degree or credential. myFutureNC, a statewide nonprofit organization, was created to move the goal into action, and one of their strategic responsibilities centers around making sure education aligns with labor market needs. Senator Ballard is a member of the myFutureNC Board of Directors. She says, “Bottom line: SparkNC will pique today’s students’ interest in industries and opportunities they may not have considered before—opening doors and pathways for student success while also propelling North Carolina forward in preparing a top-notch workforce and ensuring we meet our myFutureNC attainment goal. I am proud to join my colleagues across the education sector in supporting this transformative work.”

TIP will incubate SparkNC for several years before the initiative expands outside of TIP to serve students in all North Carolina public schools. Dr. Kim Morrison, the Superintendent of Mt. Airy City Schools and TIP’s Board Chair, captured the excitement of this opportunity for innovative district leaders. “SparkNC fits perfectly with TIP’s themes of rethinking, reimagining, and redesigning education. Our district members are thrilled to have this opportunity to help our students prepare for their futures. We are equally excited to work as a community of education innovators to adapt how our districts work to better meet the needs of all students.”

This summer, SparkNC will launch its full website and introduce its growing team and several exciting partnerships with industry, higher education, and other leading education innovation organizations. To connect with SparkNC and sign up for future updates, visit [www.sparknc.org](http://www.sparknc.org) and [@wearesparknc](https://twitter.com/wearesparknc) on Twitter.

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## **About The Innovation Project**

[The Innovation Project](#) (TIP) brings together forward-thinking North Carolina school district leaders to find and implement innovative and transformative practices in public education so that students and their communities can thrive. We build networks across our member school districts and communities that accelerate and sustain innovation. TIP seeks district leaders who want to be a part of a close, dynamic community to rethink, reimagine, and redesign public education with equity and access as foundational goals. We engage in work that enables educators, leaders, and students alike to develop entrepreneurial mindsets and to prepare for the challenges of learning and leading in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.