



# THIS WEEK'S SPEAKER

April 13, 2021

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## Jennifer Nichols, Executive Director, The Aspire Carolinas Foundation

By Rick Handford

Dale Halton introduced Jennifer Nichols, the Founder and Executive Director of the Aspire Carolinas Foundation, which seeks to provide support for schools educating children with autism/Asperger's and other learning differences in the greater Charlotte region. She holds a BS in Education from Malone University in Canton, Ohio and taught for nine years in Michigan before moving to North Carolina and changing careers. After several years in sales and management, she entered the non-profit field, working with organizations such as First in Families, InReach, The Arc of Mecklenburg, The American Red Cross, and Discovery Place.

Jennifer moved on to work at The John Crosland School as Director of Institutional Advancement for eight years, where she was responsible for all philanthropic efforts, program development, marketing, and public relations.

On October 23, 2017, Jennifer and Dale Halton along with a few other passionate individuals started the Aspire Carolinas Foundation. Jennifer is passionate about opening the first industry-specific Charter Trade High School in North Carolina providing all students the opportunity to get hands-on experience and training in the trades. When not working Jennifer loves to read, sing, participate in ministry, garden, and hang out with her family and friends.

Jennifer began her talk by noting that while every child deserves a place to learn, not all children fit into a normal learning environment. The Aspire Foundation seeks to provide learning opportunities by providing suitable environments for students that do not do well in standard school settings.

Jennifer introduced the staff with a slide, and recognized Jim Secunda, President, and Lauren Nicholson, Treasurer, both of whom were in attendance at the meeting, as was Dale Halton, Vice President, and Heidi Daum, the Head of School of the Halton School. Their architect, Rob Johnson, attended via Zoom.

The Halton School, the first of three schools at the Huntersville Education Village, is designed to provide a safe and welcoming environment for children in grades 3 through 8 with Asperger's syndrome. The Halton school is located in a newly renovated historic house at the center of the 25-acre campus. The 6,000 square foot facility opened in 2019 with seven students, currently has 15 enrolled, and has 21 applicants for the next school year. The school has a maximum enrollment of 64, and a maximum class size of eight students. It will have its first student graduate into high school this year.

The next school on the Campus will be the charter Trade School. While starting small, it is planned to grow to 60,000 square feet of airy and bright modern space conducive to technical learning. Operating under a North Carolina charter school license, it will be the first trade school in the Charlotte metro area for grades 9-12. Upon graduation the students will be fully qualified to begin a career in their chosen trade with a local business or company. Students will have varied curriculum choices in advanced manufacturing, construction trades, and other vocational offerings. Courses will offer hands-on training rather than purely theoretical teaching. The students will be prepared to begin work in their chosen trade upon graduation. At full enrollment, this school will serve 400-plus students within the region.

The third and largest school on the Huntersville Education Campus will be a K-12 School for Students with Learning Differences (LD) and a School Within a School. The planned 70,000 square-foot building will serve families who have children with learning differences and will include a dedicated school wing for up to 75 Asperger's and autism spectrum students (the school within a school). This synergetic arrangement allows the LD and Asperger's/autism spectrum schools to share resources. The building plans include classrooms for lower-, middle-, and upper-school students, and features shared spaces including a dining hall, gymnasium, music room, art room, counselor offices, a central receptionist desk, and school administrative offices.

Jennifer went on to relate some of the notable successes achieved by Heidi and her team in helping students who had been unsuccessful in conventional schools to reach a higher level of achievement, including one notable student whose mother drove him back and forth from Winston-Salem every day because she was so excited with the results being achieved at the Halton School. I would recommend that you watch the video of the presentation, as Jennifer and her slides bring these stories to life in a way that I cannot.

She closed with outlining the organization's needs in pursuing their mission and referencing ways to help. [Aspire Carolinas Foundation](#) and <https://thehaltonschool.org> are two links that may be helpful to you.

\*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/536921741>

Jennifer's introduction begins at the 7:10 minute mark.