



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Collaborative Governance: The Case of WNC EdNET

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Connecting Our Schools, Community Colleges and Universities

To effectively address today's public problems there is an

increasing need to work through partnerships across multiple boundaries (organizational, jurisdictional, sectoral). “Collaborative governance” has come to be the term of art for this idea of *working together across boundaries* to solve public problems. There are many fascinating examples in North Carolina of collaborative governance creating significant public value. Here we'll look at a particularly noteworthy example, the Western North Carolina Education Network (WNC EdNET). Through multiple levels of partnerships, schools in the westernmost part of the state are gaining access to the latest broadband technologies, enabling area students to compete globally in ways not previously “available or imagined.”

WNC EdNET is a partnership made up of the six westernmost counties in North Carolina, the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians (EBCI), two community colleges, a four-year college, two regional agencies, and several grant-making organizations, to bring broadband access to the 70 schools in the region. The story begins in 2003 with the formation of BalsamWest FiberNET, LLC, a public-private partnership formed by Drake Enterprises Ltd. and the EBCI to develop a fiber optic backbone connecting the six westernmost counties of the state. Drake and EBCI initially invested \$14 million in BalsamWest with the idea of leveraging those funds with additional private and public investments in the future. But the costs of connecting specific locales to a backbone can be a major barrier, particularly in rural areas—the so-called ‘middle mile’ problem—and even more so in mountainous regions such as western North Carolina.

Early in 2005, Bill Gibson of the Southwestern Commission (Regional Council of Governments) and Roger Metcalf of the Western Region Education Service Alliance (WRESA) got together to explore opportunities as a result of a program of the Golden LEAF Foundation to support technology in schools and the recent BalsamWest initiative. These two individuals and their organizations (both, notably, are boundary organizations) provided the spark for the rapid development of this major regional collaboration. The school superintendents, technology coordinators, and representatives from the three area colleges were brought in early on. By October of 2005 the first grant was awarded by the Golden LEAF foundation, \$2 million to get WNC EdNET started. The majority of the funds went toward fiber infrastructure and equipment to start connecting schools. The initial Golden LEAF grant was then leveraged to obtain several additional grants.

But the project has been about much more than simply getting the fiber infrastructure to the schools. It has been about building a network “for the purpose of collaboratively enhancing the development and use of technology as a tool for improving learning opportunities” and facilitating “capacity building and use of broadband technology for the enhancement of teaching and learning.” WNC EdNET recently incorporated as a 501c3 (nonprofit) organization and is realizing the



potential to become a “major collaborative, coordinating body” in the region.

Much more can be said about this innovative public-private partnership (more information can be found on the WNC EdNET website). The point here is to give an example of what collaborative governance looks like and the difference collaborative approaches can make. The project’s brochure states: “The WNC EdNET approach is collaborative and as such provides for a focus of resources in a rural, sparsely populated section of Southern Appalachia. A myriad of different players are working together rather than competing with each other in procurement and use of critical resources.” Because the partners are working together, these rural schools will have broadband access on par with anywhere else in the world. And because the partners continue to work together on the implementation side, schools are building the capacity to utilize that technology to their greatest advantage. These kinds of outcomes would be impossible if the different entities had gone it alone.

Collaborative governance is not easy. Nor is it appropriate in all circumstances. But as the world shrinks, public problems ignore traditional boundaries. Thus solutions to these problems requires working across boundaries. Communities and regions that learn to do that well are more likely to succeed than those that go it alone.