



RURAL EDUCATION COLLABORATIVES: A CLOSER LOOK

Eastern Shore of Maryland Educational Consortium

EASTERN SHORE OF MARYLAND EDUCATIONAL CONSORTIUM



Battelle for Kids (BFK) has thought deeply about, researched, and invested in rural education collaboratives (RECs). In 2015, BFK partnered with Education Northwest (EdNW) to study 17 of the most promising RECs across the country to learn how they are advancing equity, economic growth, and educational change for rural students and communities. Our research and lessons learned are detailed in the paper, *Generating Opportunity and Prosperity: The Promise of Rural Education Collaboratives*.

In addition, we developed in-depth case studies of four of the collaboratives—using in-person and phone interviews, direct observations of collaborative activities, and other research—including:

- [Eastern Shore of Maryland Educational Consortium](#)
- [Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement Network](#)
- [Ohio Appalachian Collaborative](#)
- [Vermont Rural Partnership](#)

Each collaborative offers a unique characteristic that, when taken together, provides real insight into what it takes to advance rural educational opportunity—being well-grounded, well-designed, well-positioned, and well-timed.

There is great promise in rural collaboratives to help elevate the voice of rural districts; uplift and empower isolated educators, administrators, and students; and use limited resources to tackle big issues. Join us as we continue to lead, serve, innovate, and connect collaborative action that advances rural educational opportunity and economic prosperity.

The recent passage of the federal [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#) signals a new era for innovative forms of state and local relationships in the relentless pursuit of educational excellence and equity. Innovation through collaboration is essential. BFK is committed to working with people and places across the country that want to make ESSA work for rural students, families, and communities. Our research on the value and impact of rural education collaboratives can help this effort.

ABOUT BATTELLE FOR KIDS

Battelle for Kids is a national, not-for-profit organization dedicated to moving education forward for students by supporting the educators who work with them every day. Our mission-driven team of education, communications, technology, and business professionals provides innovative services, solutions, and products that empower teachers, develop leaders, and improve school systems to advance learner-centered education and ensure the growth and success of all. Learn how we move rural education forward at bfk.org/rural.

OVERVIEW

Almost 30 years ago, nine rural county school systems along the Eastern Shore of Maryland saw a pressing need to come together. County Boards of Education began looking for ways to do more with less. Led by one of their own, the superintendents lobbied state officials and agencies to better address rural needs. This advocacy led to the 1986 legislation under which the [Eastern Shore of Maryland Educational Consortium \(ESMEC\)](#) was established. Composed of the nine county school systems and led by superintendent representatives, ESMEC exists to advise member schools on the unique needs of its rural education community. Specifically, ESMEC was created to advise “member school systems about projects, programs, or services that would enable all Eastern Shore students to develop socially, culturally, economically, and, most importantly, educationally.”

Today, the Consortium serves 130 schools and over 64,000 students along the Eastern Shore. While projects may change based on priorities that are identified each year, the majority of ESMEC activities center around operational efficiency and effectiveness; professional development; and collective advocacy. The strength of this collaborative lies in its simplicity. A regionally focused, bottom-up approach has kept the Consortium relevant to its members and well positioned to ensure decision makers do not overlook their needs. Together, superintendents, an executive director, support staff, principals, teachers, and students form a community of support and collaborative innovation. Leaders of this rural education collaborative shared several lessons learned from this group with proven staying power: “Collaborate, communicate, cooperate—it’s critical.”

“The Shore takes care of the Shore—it’s a Shore thing!”
—ESMEC’s Founding Members

FOUNDING

Known for its sparkling Atlantic Ocean waterways and lush green fields, Maryland’s Eastern Shore has a unique culture embedded in rural life. Community members living along the Shore have a history of working together locally to make up for limited resources. Eastern Shore county superintendents often communicate the importance of education in rural communities.

“Helping people understand the needs of the rural community in the larger picture and how our needs might be very different is critical. It is a different mindset. We prioritize educating our government on the changes in the rural community. Back in the day, when watermen were working on the water and farming was thriving, it was a great business. A lot of that has changed because of rules and regulations, and all of a sudden, we are having a change in the dynamic of the culture ... When they’re saying, ‘You’ve got to get kids ready for the manufacturing field!’ Well, we don’t have any manufacturing jobs. You’ve got to get students to see the opportunities beyond rural, but also within rural.”

—Eastern Shore County Public School Superintendent

As one of the major employers in the area, schools have a strong relationship with the surrounding communities. They serve rural students with a diverse set of needs. The Eastern Shore population has a wide distribution of income with a small middle class. Many students and families throughout the region live under the poverty line, and schools are often where these dynamics play out. Educators must convey the value of education and equal opportunities for all students to both high- and low-income families. These realities make collaboration necessary to survive, and bring to bear multi-talented teams of educators and school staff.

ESMEC AT A GLANCE

State(s)
Maryland

Year Established
1986

Students Served
64,400

Grade Level
Pre-K–12

Focus Area(s)
Cost Savings, Rural Advocacy

Annual Operating Budget
\$124,000

“We wear so many hats that you have to be able to multitask and juggle things. When I go to state meetings, they might talk about equity and have an entire department. Our equity staff member is also the career and technology advisor, so when they [the state] ask for reports and evaluations to be done, for us, it’s only one-fifth of a person’s job. You don’t just become an expert in one thing.”

—Eastern Shore County Public School Superintendent

With limited, unpredictable year-to-year resources, and legislative support to facilitate and administer joint programs between county boards, the nine superintendents began to practice collective purchasing and other cost-savings methods.

FOCUS

Initially, the focus of the ESMEC was around advising “member school systems about projects, programs, or services that would enable all Eastern Shore students to develop socially, culturally, economically, and, most importantly, educationally.” The nine county school systems now select projects yearly based on the needs of their staff and students, ranging from educating decision makers and administrative professional development, to leveraging vendor group rates for amplified cost savings. Dr. Jon Andes, ESMEC’s executive director, sums up the flexible approach and why it has worked for more than 25 years: “The ESMEC is homegrown and authentic to what schools need.” Along with this level of flexibility, when an opportunity comes along, counties only participate if it makes sense. As a result, every initiative becomes personalized to participating county needs. For example, when six superintendents identified climbing healthcare costs as a shared barrier in 1998, the subgroup came together as the ESMEC Healthcare Alliance to receive better rates.

“Our foci change depending on the time. This past year, we really focused on the whole Common Core State Standards shift. When it came, we tried to make sure we were updated legislative-wise. A couple years ago, we had the BEACON study done on the economic impact of education ... We always want to look for more ways to be efficient and effective and stay abreast of what is happening at the national and state level.”

—ESMEC Superintendent

THE ESMEC VALUE PROPOSITION

“Most folks come for therapy, answers, or both.”

—Jon Andes, ESMEC Executive Director

Rural collaboratives often come together out of necessity, and the county schools along the Eastern Shore are no different. Because the spirit of working together runs so deeply, as one superintendent stated, “You get to a place of collaboration where you can think about others as much as yourself.” Instead of simply identifying opportunities for an individual county, there was a shift to thinking and operating on a larger scale (i.e., how an opportunity might benefit the Consortium as a whole). Such collaborative thinking does not stop at the superintendent level either—district office staff, school building administrators, support staff, and teachers all model a similar level of collaboration. “The collaborative was built from the bottom up,” Andes remarked, “but the collaborative spirit of the ESMEC resonates from the top down.”

Adopting a spirit of collaboration creates much value for ESMEC members. The Consortium provides a trusting, reliable network of support for its members. In a region where school administrators and teachers wear many different hats, the ESMEC creates a safe environment to discuss common challenges and find solutions. “It’s cathartic,” one superintendent reflected. “I can’t call Baltimore City to discuss some of these things ... the ESMEC gives me a place to talk to someone who understands.” In-person meetings also play a significant role in trust and relationship building. One superintendent considers it a “mutually educational” experience and described the ESMEC’s collaborative efforts:

"[The ESMEC] provides a forum for us to brainstorm. It's kind of like a think tank where we can problem solve or brainstorm. We do a lot of networking for our employees and professional development opportunities. For example, we decided that we wanted all our math folks to develop a strategy to implement Common Core math, forming the Eastern Shore Nine. We developed and facilitated that effort, then sort of backed off and let them take hold. It's important for our schools to see us collaborate."

EVOLUTION AND MILESTONES

From the beginning, participating members of the ESMEC have paid annual membership dues. The cost can vary from one year to the next, but the ESMEC typically operates on an approximately \$124,000 annual budget. County school boards cover membership fees with state or local funding. In addition to membership fees, the Consortium also receives revenue from local sponsorship partners, community foundations, and the occasional grant.

Several initiatives have branched off ESMEC work over the years and now operate as separate units. The Energy Trust (see Innovation in Cost Savings), Special Education Alliance, and Healthcare Alliance groups, described in a later section, were products of early ESMEC work and continue to benefit the Consortium.

OPERATIONS AND GOVERNANCE

The ESMEC is governed by superintendents representing the nine county boards on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. They meet on a monthly basis to share information, discuss challenges, and identify solutions. Six sub-committees focus on various administrative areas: transportation, food service, personnel, pupil services, school facilities, and finance/purchasing. The Consortium's executive director convenes and facilitates the district administrators to, as he describes, "promote management efficiency and effectiveness through collaboration and cooperation." In addition to coordinating/facilitating meetings, the executive director is also responsible for communicating with Consortium members, producing a quarterly newsletter, and serving as the ESMEC liaison to state agencies and officials.

ACTIVITIES AND IMPACT

Students, teachers, principals, and administrative staff receive a number of services that greatly impact their day-to-day educational experience. Activities directly correspond to the needs of the Consortium members, including efficiency and effectiveness, professional development, and collective advocacy.

EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS

Several initiatives streamline and maximize school operations to enable cost savings so that "buses, beans, and balls" do not constrict decision making. "We have to be very creative in using resources," one superintendent stated.

MILESTONES

1986

- State of Maryland passes legislation enabling collective purchasing and other cost-savings methods among county boards.
- ESMEC established.

1994

- Four county systems established Special Education Alliance.

1995

- Board retreat started as conference to help build superintendents' and board members' capacity to address school needs.

1998

- Five county systems established Health Insurance Alliance.

2001

- Energy Trust established.

2006

- Aspiring Leaders program created for regional staff development.

2012

- Business Economic and Community Outreach Network (BEACON) project determined economic impact of Eastern Shore public education.

2014

- Curriculum Repository Around the Bay (CRAB) cloud-based platform launched in all counties.

- **Health Insurance Alliance**—Described as a “huge success,” the Alliance began in the 1990s and allows its six county school members to offer valuable healthcare to staff at a relatively low cost.
- **Special Education Trust**—Similar to the Health Insurance Alliance, four school systems share services like occupational and speech therapy across counties. This makes a big difference when one or two students per county are in need of these services.
- **Energy Trust**—Created by ESMEC in 2001, the Energy Trust has taken shape as an independent electricity procurement cooperative.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- **Aspiring Leadership Institute and Annual Fall Leadership Conference**—Face-to-face gatherings that provide county school staff with high-quality development opportunities. Incoming ESMEC leaders consider the opportunity to build relationships with new peers invaluable (see Legacy of Leadership).
- **Curriculum Repository Around the Bay (CRAB)**—A cloud-based, collaboratively developed platform to house teacher-created curriculum.
- **Teacher Recruitment Fair and “Teacher of the Year”**—Initiatives to recruit, incentivize, and reward more minority teacher candidates.
- **Superintendent Summer Conference on Education**—Boards of Education, superintendents, and executive staff gather at this meeting to learn from one another, set priorities, and receive professional development from outside speakers.

COLLECTIVE ADVOCACY

Each year, the ESMEC identifies its legislative priorities in areas such as funding, capital projects, technology, and local control. The Consortium uses the agenda to help inform and educate federal, state, and local officials, as well as business leaders on rural issues. For example, rural superintendents on the Shore meet to align on issues before convening with the larger Public School Superintendent Association of Maryland. They also expressed to the Association that frequent travel to Baltimore for meetings was difficult for some ESMEC superintendents, and as a result, the meetings were moved to a more accessible location.

To convey its economic impact on the surrounding community, the ESMEC commissioned a study on the return on investment (ROI) of public education. In 2012, the Business Economic and Community Outreach Network (BEACON) published a report called the “Economic Impact of Publicly Funded K–12 Education on the Eastern

LEGACY OF LEADERSHIP

Talbot County rests on the western edge of the Eastern Shore peninsula. As one of the smaller Eastern Shore school systems, the district serves 4,570 students across its nine school buildings. St. Michael’s middle/high school principal and assistant principal share something in common with their superintendent: They have all gone through an iteration of the Aspiring Leadership Institute. St. Michael’s principal found the Institute’s opportunity to collaborate critical.

“I attended the Aspiring Leader’s Institute as an incoming assistant principal. Sharing experiences with similar professionals and bringing that back to school was so beneficial. We had a mix of principals and teacher leaders involved in our cohort. There were three cohorts of 15. I have good working relationships with some of them to this day, and I know that I can pick up the phone and call them any time.”

Talbot County’s superintendent had similar positive experiences as a new principal in what would later become the Institute.

“When I first came, the Shore [ESMEC] had an assessment center ... It was a three-day training for people from the Shore who wanted to become principals. We did a lot of activities and simulations ... it was outstanding. It really helped me become a better administrator, not only by putting myself in that experience, but having conversations with folks that are in similar situations.”

St. Michael’s school leaders continue to pass the benefits of ESMEC professional development to their teachers and students.

Shore of Maryland.” The findings demonstrated that the ROI of ESMEC school systems was approximately 92 percent, with a total yearly impact of \$1.8 billion, supporting almost 20,000 jobs, including factors such as increased income of more high-achieving graduates, increased dollars in the public and private sectors, and the economic impact of the ability to attract/retain net wealth creators. BEACON also developed an [interactive economic impact dashboard](#), which graphically depicts these findings.

LESSONS LEARNED

Since 1986, the Eastern Shore of Maryland Educational Consortium has managed to thrive as a rural collaborative and “be the economic engine of the region” by graduating college and career ready students. With challenges of geographic location, travel time, and resource management, the ESMEC’s members offered the following lessons learned.

COLLABORATIVE NORMS ARE ESSENTIAL

ESMEC members emphasized the importance of building a culture of collaboration by developing norms that create the right space and time for working together. The leadership team offered several tips that help establish positive collaborative norms around communication, starting with member needs, and focusing on positive, creative solutions.

- *Be innovative and creative. Look within and across districts for expertise.*
- *Manage and respect district priorities. It is critical to understand variances across districts. See others as allies, not competitors.*
- *Share out the good that is happening, instead of focusing on the bad.*
- *Work toward thinking about others as much as yourself. Do not get hung up on ownership, identify ways to make it work.*
- *Start from the bottom up. Listen to your collective needs and let the collaborative evolve based on those.*
- *Personality matters, stay positive.*

Meet Members Where They Are

Like many rural regions, the distance between schools can be a barrier to collaboration. When asked what sort of challenges ESMEC members face, leadership agreed that time is a factor. Some district representatives have to drive at least two hours to attend meetings. With schools scattered across the Shore, sometimes across bodies of water, it also becomes difficult to plan activities. As one superintendent shared, “A challenge for us is providing consistent programs across schools, especially when some students have an hour and 45-minute bus ride ahead of them.”

Ewell Elementary School, located on Smith Island, is only accessible off the mainland by boat, and has 11 students enrolled. One of the three teachers is also the school principal. To get to Ewell from the Somerset County Public Schools’ office, it takes about 15 minutes to drive to the dock, and 45 minutes on the water to reach the shore.

Although remote geography and limited time are common challenges, the leadership team works around them. They incorporate more call-in options to meetings, use technology, and take advantage of existing meetings that already require the group to travel. For example, when the Public School Superintendents Association of Maryland meets, ESMEC superintendents coordinate to host the meeting in a central location or conduct the meeting immediately before.

In addition to being creative with scheduling, the ESMEC quickly learned to be creative with its existing resources. An example of this innovative approach to resource efficiency is the development of the ESMEC Energy Trust (see Innovation in Cost Savings), established in 2001 to “save public funds through cooperative energy procurement.”

Community of Support

Early on, the Eastern Shore leadership team rallied around a key asset to its development: a strong sense of belonging to life on the Shore. The ESMEC made relationship development a priority and connected the dots between counties of different sizes and levels of funding. Leadership leveraged existing relationships—or created new ones—with local agencies, community foundations, and Eastern Shore businesses to advocate for, collaborate with, and financially support the work of the Consortium. The community of support has been one of the ESMEC’s most valuable assets. “We have a great relationship with the county government,” noted one ESMEC superintendent. “Everyone is so giving, and that’s the beauty of being on the Shore.”

These lessons provide a set of guiding principles that leadership can return to repeatedly. Although time, funding, and resource capacity are continuous challenges, the path forward for the ESMEC is as strong as the region’s inherent collaborative spirit. Members of the Consortium have found the “right size” that creates the highest return on investment. Leaders also continuously look for opportunities that will benefit the entire region, not just a single county. This inclusive strategy and willingness to act collectively has carried the collaborative through many challenges and will be an asset as they continue to innovate.

CONCLUSION

Moving forward, the ESMEC will continue to respond to the needs of their districts to determine their focus as a consortium. Increasing professional development opportunities for central office staff is one possible initiative, as well as identifying the right structure and capacity to support CRAB. ESMEC members will continue building community relationships to help address these issues. Whichever projects the Consortium takes on, it is clear that the endeavor will be taken together.

INNOVATION IN COST SAVINGS

The ESMEC Energy Trust was founded in 2001 in response to Maryland’s electricity deregulation. In the midst of unpredictable energy costs, the county school systems created their own cooperative.

The Energy Trust identifies cost savings by organizing and analyzing participant load and usage data, coordinating the marketing of participant energy demands, and advising participants regarding supply contract terms and conditions.

In 2015 alone, ESMEC county school systems avoided \$3.5 million in costs. Since its inception, the Energy Trust has saved ESMEC public schools an estimated \$13.5 million dollars in electricity costs with this innovative approach to reducing price volatility. In turn, more Energy Trust members are able to apply these savings to needed programs and services.

Participation has grown over the years as the region recognizes the value of the Energy Trust. Currently, 10 school systems, three community colleges, eight county governments, and seven towns are involved—with most located on the Eastern Shore.