

**Qualla Education Collaborative
Summary Report
October 2016 – May 2017**

**Cherokee Central Schools & Eastern Band of Cherokee
Indians Education & Training Division
Cherokee, North Carolina**

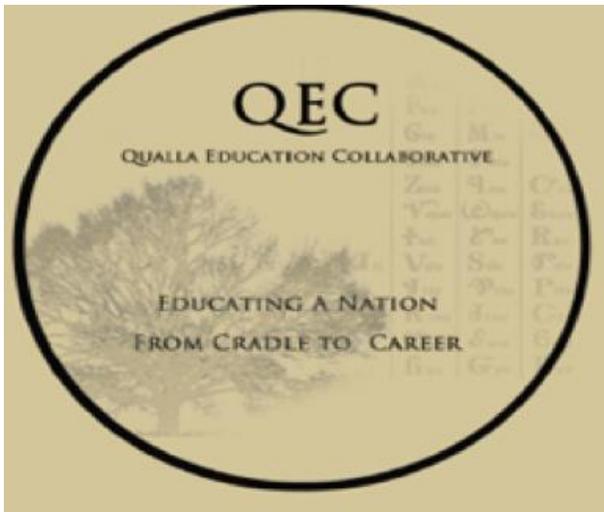
**Phase 2 Planning Grant funded by the
Cherokee Preservation Foundation**

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INTRODUCTION

In October 2015, the Cherokee Preservation Foundation awarded an initial planning grant to the Cherokee Central Schools, in partnership with the tribe's Education and Training Division, to explore ways to increase collaboration between schools and districts, existing tribal and community-based programs and partnerships within the region serving tribal youth. The community of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) had in place the necessary components to form a dynamic cradle to career continuum of education and training to prepare its youth for the future; however, most efforts operated within silos and lacked alignment and coordination. With this in mind, the concept for the Qualla Education Collaborative (QEC) was formed as a collective venue to support better collaboration. Collaboration, in a structured way, enables cross-disciplinary and systemic level problem solving as well as a mechanism for ensuring alignment of education efforts, the elimination of duplication and improved efficiencies. It also provides a forum for strategic education planning and intentional action towards strengthening school and community engagement aimed at supporting students' readiness for career, college and life.



The Foundation awarded a second grant in October 2016 to support capacity-building for the QEC and the development of operational processes for sustainability. Additional discretionary funding was granted to support community outreach and stakeholder input activities for the QEC's first school and community collaborative project; the implementation a blended learning model at the Cherokee Central Schools. The specific outcomes for the second grant included the following: 1) training

to support and sustain strategic planning, collaboration and management of education projects; 2) development of a project charter for blended learning model implementation; and, 3) site visits to model schools to better understand the attributes of a successful blended learning model implementation.

imaginED Partners LLC served as the process facilitator and technical assistance provider for the QEC. imaginED Partners is an American Indian, woman-owned K-12 professional services practice specializing in leadership development, collaborative engagement, system design, and new school development. This K-12 Practice and its Talent Circle™ of distinctive education experts across the nation is a catalyst for place-centered innovation and a trusted partner serving alongside educators and community

leaders and organizations to build meaningful, culturally responsive learning models where all students thrive, and organizations achieve their missions effectively and successfully.

This report presents a detailed summary of the Qualla Education Collaborative (QEC) activities and accomplishments during its second phase of funding.

WHAT IS THE QEC?

The QEC is a school and community collaborative made up of educators, tribal community leaders and other partners who each have a stake in improving the educational outcomes of EBCI students from cradle to career and meeting the present and future workforce needs of the tribe. The mission of the QEC is to create innovative, culturally-relevant solutions and authentic learning experiences that effectively advance our students' well-being and enhance their future-readiness for college, career and life. The QEC established four priority goals for all sponsored projects and/or education initiatives.

All projects must show evidence that the initiative addresses one or all of the following priority goals: 1) *Advance instruction*; 2) *Enhance people*; 3) *Integrate technology*; and 4) *Create effective systems and operations*.



The governance structure reflects how the QEC does its work. As shown in this diagram, core indicators will drive the work and decisions made by the QEC.¹ The Cherokee Central Schools serves as the host organization. Roles such as the process facilitator and project manager(s) are critical to sustaining the Collaborative and its important work.

¹ TRIP: Tri-County Region Improvement Process-The Practice of Community Collaboration

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The StriveTogether Framework for Building and Sustaining a Cradle to Career Civic Infrastructure² was utilized to guide the development of the Qualla Education Collaborative. This theory of action consists of four principles that are proven in helping partnerships progress from the initial formation to collectively impacting student outcomes. These principles include: 1) *engage the community* by giving members a voice, mobilizing strategic improvement and collective problem-solving; 2) *focus on eliminating locally defined disparities* by using data to inform decisions and strategy; 3) *developing a culture of continuous improvement* by implementing a disciplined process, with fidelity, to guide the work; and 4) *leverage existing assets* by aligning resources, treasures and talents to maximize impact. The Framework provided a systematic approach for building a sustainable Qualla Education Collaborative.

Facilitated through a culturally responsive lens, educators and EBCI leaders were encouraged to think about students becoming college and career ready while recalibrating the students' cultural identity, sense of place, sense of belonging and cultural practices as a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Members of the QEC leveraged the framework to establish the following principles to guide its work:

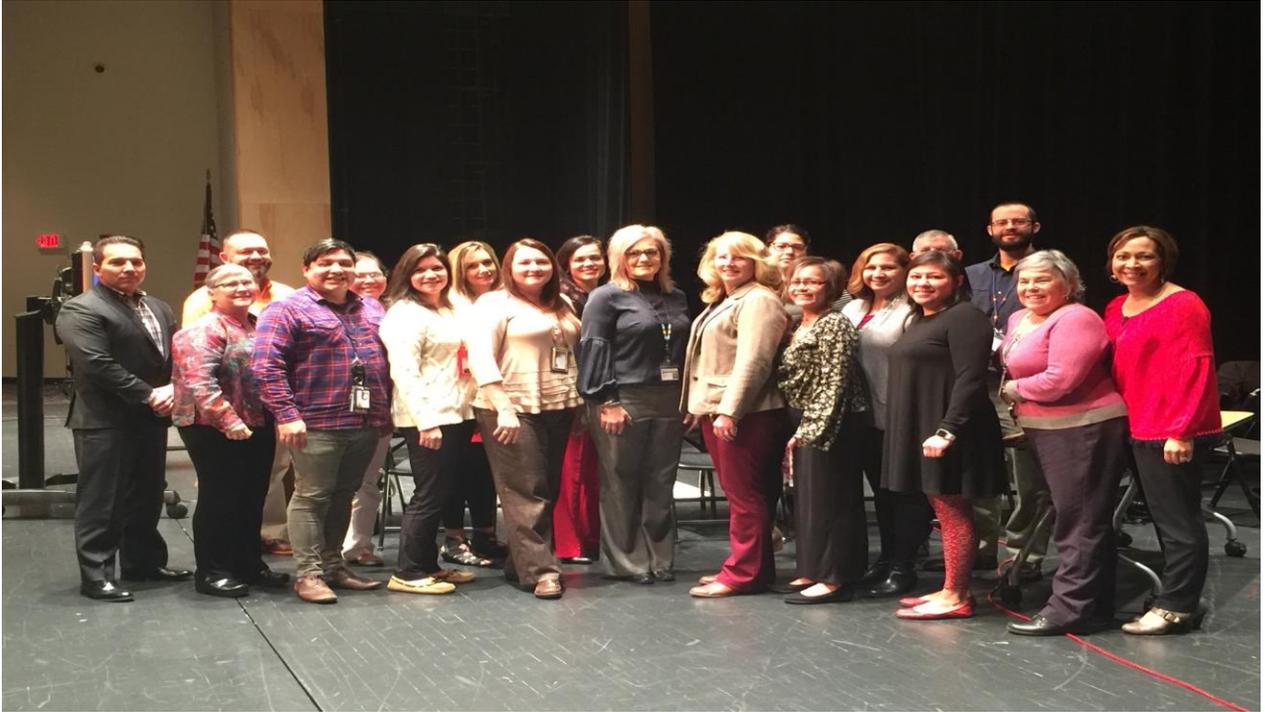
1. Engage the Tribal Community: The QEC engages the EBCI community in creating a cohesive system of education that enhances the well-being and educational outcomes of EBCI students.
2. Focus on Advancing Student Outcomes and Eliminating Disparities: The QEC meets monthly to share information, discuss issues, identify solutions and act to improve programs.
3. Establish a Culture of Continuous Improvement: The QEC practices the use of data, cultural knowledge and research to tackle issues and guide improvements in a constant, continuous and disciplined manner.
4. Leverage the Communities' Time, Talents and Treasures: The QEC focuses on the core values of the Tribe and leverages the time, talent and treasures within the community to maximize positive impact.

QEC MEMBERSHIP

The superintendent for the Cherokee Central Schools and the Secretary for the EBCI Education and Training Program Division serve as co-chairs for the QEC. The QEC membership, as the QEC school and community partners, are representative of educators,

² KnowledgeWorks, StriveTogether Framework for Building and Sustaining a Cradle to Career Civic Infrastructure, 2016

ECBI tribal division leaders and program managers affiliated with programs that provide educational services and programs serving EBCI youth, ranging from early childhood to the post-secondary level. The Western Region Educational Services Alliance (WRESA) is the only regional partner at the present time.



Each member of the QEC signed partnership agreements committing:

- To maintain a focus on improving student achievement and the holistic well-being for all Native students attending schools on and off the Boundary;
- To promote the effective use of data to drive continuous improvement;
- To support and participate in the work and projects of the QEC, when called upon, to accomplish its goals;
- To contribute to a constructive dialogue of education improvements as a tribal community responsibility;
- To coordinate our individual and collective actions, advocacy and seek funding to support our shared goals, where possible;
- To be accountable for outcomes associated with the QEC mission; and
- To persist in sustaining the Collaborative and the level of active engagement necessary to make a positive impact.

The QEC Partner Agreement is a statement of intent only, is not legally binding upon the parties, and implies no financial commitment on the part of any partner member.

SCOPE OF WORK AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In its second planning phase, the Qualla Education Collaborative project outlined three outcomes and specific activities. The first outcome was professional training for the QEC membership to help build capacity to support and sustain strategic planning, collaboration and management of education projects. The second outcome was to develop a project charter for a blended learning model implementation at the Cherokee Central Schools (CCS), which was the first collaborative project for the QEC project portfolio. Finally, the third outcome consisted of QEC members and CCS educators visiting schools that were nationally recognized for their blended learning models, and to observe and gain a better understanding for what it would take for Cherokee Central Schools to implement a blended model successfully. Cherokee Central Schools obtained additional discretionary funding from Cherokee Preservation Foundation in December 2016 to support community outreach and stakeholder input activities related to this initial QEC project. The next section describes the scope of work (activities) completed for each outcome and the results.

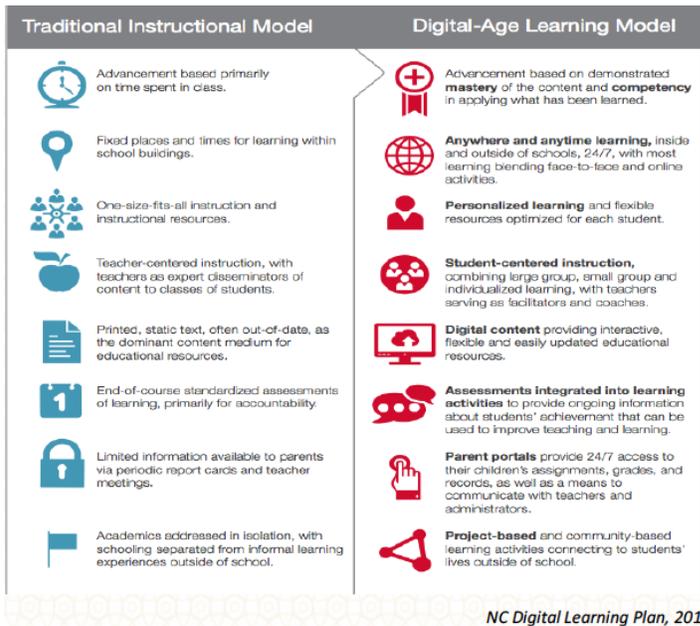
Outcome A: Stronger processes in place to support and sustain the strategic collaboration, coordination and future education project implementations of the Qualla Education Collaborative.

In this phase, members of the QEC finalized its governance structure, roles and responsibilities and operational framework for collaboration. This included finalizing the shared vision, mission and goals for the QEC and defining what a successful, workforce ready EBCI graduate would look like. Next, the QEC deliberated on how success would be measured in terms of the QEC and its effectiveness and the overall college and career readiness of students. From these discussions core indicators were defined for each strategic priority and a “data dashboard” in the format of a Balanced Scorecard was produced. Members defined the criteria and protocols for evaluating project proposals for alignment with its strategic priorities and prioritization of its work. Decisions made by the QEC are by “consensus”.

For capacity-building, members participated in professional learning and interactive training activities to enhance their skills in strategic project management and performance management. The training focused on the processes of “Continuous Improvement Project Oversight (CIPO)” and offered tools and process facilitation resources to support and sustain effective planning, collaborative problem-solving, solutioning and the management of the QEC portfolio of education projects. Topics addressed included: Scope Management, Issues Management, Cost Management, Quality Management, Communications Management, Risk Management, and Change Control Management.

Outcome B: Initial planning for a school and community-based blended learning implementation (project charter) launched.

In the first QEC phase of planning, the implementation of a blended learning model targeting the middle and high school levels, which connects to the Cherokee Youth Center program was determined top priority for prototyping. The QEC later expanded this to include the elementary level. As the schools across North Carolina transition from more traditional instructional models to digital-age learning models as a way to better engage students, it was determined to be vital for the Cherokee Central Schools to begin taking steps to make the same transition, as reflected in the diagram of the NC Digital Learning Plan below.



Building on the work during phase one of QEC planning, such as the roadmap for planning a blended learning implementation, the QEC approved a project charter presented by CCS as its first collaborative project. The roadmap outlined six elements: leadership, professional development, teaching, operations, content and technology. The project charter presented to the QEC addressed the scope of work for the year one blended learning implementation intended to transition the instructional model at CCS to a digital-age learning

model.

Outcome C: Awareness and understanding of the characteristics of a successful blended learning model; and challenges in implementation.

For the final outcome, in the Spring of 2017 members of the QEC, educators and school leaders visited two school districts who are recognized nationally for their innovative practices in teaching and learning. The first school district was Horry County Schools (HCS) in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Horry began its blended-learning initiative, called the Personalized Digital Learning program, in the 2013–14 school year. The district had previously developed a strong culture of data usage and an emphasis on differentiation in classrooms using online content, which district leaders realized made for a natural transition to blended learning. Like the Cherokee Central Schools, HCS uses the Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) and state assessments to track student progress. It began a 1:1 implementation

with middle school students in early 2014, which it expanded to include elementary and high school students later that year. Elementary and middle school student growth scores in math and reading have improved since the district began implementing blended learning. These increases have been greatest in middle school, which has had the most comprehensive blended-learning implementation. As a result, one middle school in the school district gained the national recognition of a “Breakthrough Model School”.

The second school district the QEC team visited and observed was Mooresville Graded School District (MGSD). Since 2007, the Mooresville Graded School District (MGSD) has been implementing what it calls the Digital Conversion Initiative to employ technology in ways that improve teaching and learning through increased student engagement, including the use of blended learning. Critical components of the conversion include a 1:1 computer initiative, extensive professional development, a variety of online curriculum and EdTech products, the use of state resources for bandwidth, and creative budget flexibility to pay for online curriculum and devices with district funding. The district is often lauded as a leading example of successful instruction and technology integration achieving results in terms of measurable student outcomes. Student scores on end-of-grade and end-of-course exams have steadily increased since 2007, and MGSD was rated number one in North Carolina for meeting the state’s targets for proficiency and other measures in the 2013–14 school year, which it has continued to maintain.

Classroom observations and the lessons learned shared by staff at Horry County and Mooresville Graded school districts offered valuable insights to members of the QEC and the CCS educators and informed the development of the first QEC project charter.

Community outreach and stakeholder input activities: In the Spring of 2017, the QEC and the Cherokee Central Schools conducted focus groups with students, teachers and parent/community groups to collect stakeholders’ input and assess community buy-in for the proposed transition of teaching and learning practices to a blended learning model at the Cherokee Central Schools. Given the emphasis on career and college readiness, E-STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math, with the addition of Entrepreneurship and Arts) was the curriculum focus.

Following each focus group, a survey was administered to each respective stakeholder group. For example, student surveys solicited input to help educators create interesting and engaging learning experiences for students at Cherokee Central. This anonymous survey collected information about the current use of technology and the teaching and learning practices in CCS classrooms. It also asked what students thought about CCS offering more learning experiences and what this should look like. Teacher surveys asked for teachers’ input in the design and implementation of an E-STEAM and blended learning model to help them personalize learning for all students. This anonymous survey collected information about the current use of technology in CCS classrooms and the efficacy and attitudes towards E-STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math, with the addition of Entrepreneurship and Arts). Surveys for the parent/community input gathered information on what they considered important for

students to learn as well as their thoughts on the proposed transition of teaching and learning practices at CCS.

All information gathered from stakeholder groups was used to provide baseline data for designing and implementing the model and measuring progress. Due to the volume of data collected, results and findings from the community outreach and stakeholder input activities was reported to the QEC in a separate document.

As part of the work supporting a focus on STEM-education, the QEC accepted into its project portfolio in May 2017 the [SPRK-ing Interest in STEM and Computer Science-AISES]. This project, funded by the Cherokee Preservation Foundation, launched in the Fall of 2017.

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

There was amazing consistency among all stakeholders regarding the strengths of the schools and the tribal community as well as the potential to realize its vision of a future-ready EBCI graduate. The following are a few notable building blocks for success:

1. There is a strong sense of community spirit among the faculty and staff of the school and community stakeholders.
2. The school leadership and teachers at CCS and EBCI program managers are dedicated to improving the performance of students and is open to change and willing to try new ideas in the pursuit of higher student achievement and greater readiness for college and career.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Based on interviews, observations, survey results including participants' discussions during the grant cycle, the following are opportunities for growth and development to assist in shaping future goals for the QEC:

1. The QEC will need to continue building its capacity to facilitate the CIPO process, meetings and project management protocols to ensure that the Collaborative is running smoothly and efficiently – most importantly, having an impact. This is especially critical as the QEC membership expands to engage more stakeholders. New members will require orientation as part of an onboarding process.

2. Members of the QEC need to further refine its cradle to career core indicators to benchmark progress. In the process, a more thorough review of the existing data assets and needs across the school and community programs will be instrumental in ensuring the QEC can build a data-driven culture of continuous improvement.
3. The QEC should continue refining the communication plan and a strategy for increasing the community buy-in and understanding of the rigorous standards required for students to be career and college ready.
4. To conduct a data management and data system analysis to assess the functionality and data architecture of the current education data system and EBCI Education and Training Division databases against current and evolving reporting and research needs in order to identify next steps for improvement. This assessment can provide recommendations for how the existing system(s) could be improved to more efficiently and effectively produce annual performance reports, address gaps in data as well as serve as a longitudinal dataset for various research projects. The work of the QEC is highly dependent upon the use of data to inform decisions and strategy; therefore, this recommendation is critical to the success of the Collaborative. This process should be completed by a vendor knowledgeable of the federal education data and North Carolina education and student information data systems.
5. To seek funding to sustain the operations and work of the QEC beyond the grant cycle, including other opportunities to support collaborative projects such as demonstration grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education to support innovative learning models and improved student achievement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Cherokee Central Schools is most appreciative of the continual support our school receives from the Cherokee Preservation Foundation, the primary funder of the Qualla Education Collaborative initiative. Without the Foundation's leadership and understanding that a solid education and productive collaboration are critical to preparing a highly skilled workforce, the QEC would not be possible.

The imaginED Partners team gratefully acknowledges the important contributions, expertise and guidance provided by teachers and school leaders at the Cherokee Central Schools, community leaders and program managers, and leaders of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Tribal Offices. You all are the core ingredient that has made the Qualla Education Collaborative a reality. We express our appreciation to every individual for sharing their stories and pearls of wisdom, and for the commitment in making the Collaborative a model for others to replicate. We are also immensely grateful and

honored to be partners with such passionate, esteemed professionals with a strong desire to create better opportunities for Native students and communities.