

Google is turning some NC school buses into rolling study halls

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Thanks to an initiative from Google, some North Carolina students are receiving homework help from an unlikely source ☺ their school buses.

The program called Rolling Study Halls powers regular school buses with Wi-Fi to help students maximize their learning time, which is especially helpful for those living in [rural areas](#) with sparse internet access. The initiative began with school buses in Caldwell County and is now expanding to 16 [school districts](#) across the country.

"I don't think any child should be left behind just because the family cannot afford the resources," said Lilyn Hester, Google's head of external affairs in the southeast U.S. region, who founded the program. "I'm excited I work for a company that embraces that as well and is working to pilot something with that in mind."

Hester, who lives in Durham and went to school at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, said she got the idea for the program initially from talking with education leaders in Caldwell County about the long bus rides that get many students home late in the day. She thought that "long" meant 20 minutes, so she was surprised to hear that some kids are on the bus for more than an hour one way.

"Then the wheels started turning, how could we turn that into educational time?" Hester said. "What if we turn that bus ride into a classroom of sorts? And what if we put teachers on those buses to help kids with their

homework on that commute?"

With that idea, she helped establish the partnership between Google and education leaders in Caldwell County, about 200 miles west of Raleigh and close to Google's Lenoir Data Center. Google installed Wi-Fi on 11 school buses for the pilot program. They also worked with the Education Foundation of Caldwell County which paid teachers to ride the buses with students, helping them with their homework.

Along with coordinating the installation of the Wi-Fi technology, Google provided a grant to the foundation to pay for the Wi-Fi and data usage

Pat Triplett, executive director of Education Foundation, noted the success of the program in Caldwell and how it helped raise test scores. Although there were some initial problems with the Wi-Fi speed, she said the benefits outweighed the challenges overall and that the program is still in operation. This fall, they are hoping to service four middle schools in total.

As an added benefit, Hester said, some of these instructors reported that fighting on the school bus went down drastically after the buses became equipped with Wi-Fi. In Caldwell County, students are issued laptops by the school that they can take home with them, which restrict access to certain inappropriate sites.

Now, Google is expanding to additional states, many of which are in the southeast like Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina. The company is partnering with school networking nonprofit CoSN and wireless provider Kajeet on the recent rollout which began last week with the Deer Trail School District in Colorado. CoSN works to identify school districts that could benefit most from the technology. The goal is to reclaim more than 1.5 million hours for students by the end of the school year.

Susan Bearden, a representative of CoSN, said Google is looking for school districts that have at least 50 percent of students eligible for free and reduced meals, as well as bus commutes of at least 45 minutes each way. These are usually communities in rural areas.

"The program is not a technology initiative, this is really a learning initiative," Bearden said. "The goal of the program is to try to recapture dead time that kids are using spending traveling to and from school and trying to turn that into learning time."

Another goal of the program is to bridge the digital divide between those with internet access and those without. Studies from the Pew Research Center have shown that low-income homes are up to four times more likely to be without broadband access than middle or upper-income homes.

Hester said she has heard stories about families who live in rural areas driving to parking lots outside of cafes or shopping centers, so their kids can use the internet to do their homework.

"We thought it would be great if we could provide these students with the means so that they too can be competitive," she said.

To do that Google is looking to use the buses outside of [school](#) hours by partnering with communities to bring them to locations like community centers or fellowship halls.

Moving forward, the leaders of Rolling Study Halls hope to expand the [program](#) even further. Triplett of Caldwell County said that her dream is to equip athletic buses with Wi-Fi so athletes can do homework during their travels to away games.

After this pilot phase ends in 2019, Google is going to evaluate the

success of the initiative and determine if they can duplicate the results more widely, Bearden said.

Hester said she's enjoyed working with the community partners on the project, who were willing to take a leap of faith with technology they weren't quite familiar with to give kids access to the internet and teach them technology skills.

"For a young person to get them excited about computer science, it excites me as well," she said. "These kids could create the next big thing, the next Google."

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