

# EdNC: Breaking Down Barriers in North Carolina, Mile by Country Mile



By Colin McMahon and Hanin Najjar for Blue Engine Collaborative

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## *our students, our state, our future*

EducationNC (EdNC) works to expand educational opportunities for all students in North Carolina, increase their academic attainment, and improve the performance of the state's public schools. We provide residents and policymakers with nonpartisan data, research, news, information, and analysis about the major trends, issues, and challenges bearing on education. We gather and disseminate information employing the most effective means of communication, primarily through the Internet. In addition to the content distributed, we encourage an active and connected community of those interested in education policy and practice throughout the state. Our work encourages informed participation and strong leadership on behalf of the students of North Carolina.

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## *Blue Engine Collaborative*

Blue Engine Collaborative is a team of experienced consultants, coaches and advisors with wide-ranging expertise in the field of media and nonprofit sustainability, including organizational strategy, executive leadership, audience reach and community engagement, revenue growth and diversification, and digital product development.

Blue Engine Collaborative conducted interviews for this case study in spring 2024.



## It was 2012,

and in conversations over country breakfasts at the iconic Big Ed's restaurant in Raleigh, two of EdNC's founders – Gerry Hancock and Ferrel Guillory – focused not on what their organization should look like or how much money they would need. They focused on the problem they wanted to solve:

North Carolina lacks a source of truth for all things public schools.

Simple, clear, and begging for a solution.

In the 10 years since those conversations led to the creation of EdNC, the startup news organization's leadership has done a lot of other things right.

- + They built a team whose talent was matched only by their commitment, then grew the organization to more than a dozen people, journalists and non-journalists alike.
- + They became subject matter experts in all things education. Then, importantly, earned a reputation as trustworthy authorities on the topic.
- + They put in the miles, traveling to all 100 counties of North Carolina and forming personal connections with thousands of stakeholders.
- + They innovated on ways to build investment, build audiences, and build trust.
- + They grew their annual budget to more than \$2.5 million in 2023 and 2024.
- + They adjusted the approach when required but never lost sight of their mission: To produce trustworthy news and information about education in North Carolina, to provide those engaged on the topic with a way to participate in the process, and to expand educational opportunities and improve academic outcomes for all students.



“Unique” is a word that gets thrown around too often, but EdNC’s approach to executing on its mission stands out in the journalism world. Few other news organizations are as rooted in “boots on the ground” efforts – in relationship building, reporting, and community-building. That started even before launch as the founders made the rounds to listen to people’s needs. The EdNC team toured 100 counties in the first 18 months. They developed a tech platform that allows for deep and wide surveys of tens of thousands of North Carolinians. Getting out and talking to people – not sitting behind a desk – is embedded in the DNA of EdNC.

And because EdNC does this, because team members show up in all corners of the state, so does their success. Educators, policymakers, and parents don’t just read EdNC stories; they share them, call the org with tips or while in crisis, and cite its reporting in their own work.

“No organization cares about our work more than EdNC, and having them work alongside us has been absolutely critical,” said Laura Leatherwood, president of Blue Ridge Community College. “They educate the state of North Carolina about the challenges and opportunities for public education. They lift up our work, our students, and our community colleges. I am not sure where we would be without them.”

The numbers back up the praise: Since full audience tracking began in 2017, EdNC has grown from an average of 20,000 unique users a month to more than 90,000, and total site users have surpassed 1 million a year for each of the last four years. Almost half of readers come from outside North Carolina. And a meaningful portion of the audience is loyal to the brand: Returning visitors make up about 17% of the audience in an average month.

So how did this all happen? And what can news leaders, journalism funders, community organizers, and startups of all stripes learn from how EdNC did it?

At the outset, EdNC faced the same challenges any topic-based nonprofit news site faces: Starting with zero followers and no name recognition, launching with uncertain long-term funding, and all the while hoping to capture an audience that was increasingly treating journalism with indifference – or disdain.

EdNC entered this fray not with fists clenched but with ears open.

Founders Guillory and Hancock – one a longtime journalist and the other a veteran of state government – talked with experts, policymakers, and philanthropists. They knew the problem they wanted to solve, but they did not claim to have all the answers.

They found encouragement and financial support, most significantly from Leslie Winner, the executive director of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, and Brad Wilson, then CEO of Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina.

Then they found Nation Hahn and Mebane Rash.

Hahn came first, joining the effort when Guillory and Hancock hired New Kind to do the design work on the organizational concept. Part of the founding team, Hahn eventually left New Kind to join EdNC, first as a senior adviser and later becoming Chief of Growth. Rash was hired as EdNC’s first CEO and Editor-in-Chief, posts she retains today.

In 10 short years, they and their team have built EdNC from that initial concept hatched over coffee into an influential player in the state.

*Then they found  
Nation Hahn and  
Mebane Rash.*





## *Here are some of the approaches that worked for EdNC and the reasons they have been so successful.*

### *Connect with and listen to the audience*

Rash was not an obvious choice to head up a new organization dedicated to covering education news. She wasn't even a journalist. She was a lawyer working in public policy. But EdNC's founders saw in Rash an incredibly creative leader who had the ability to attract people with talent, passion, and purpose. And the last thing they wanted to do was follow a mold.

As one of EdNC's early supporters put it: "There wasn't a cookie cutter that existed for EdNC that had the right design to it."

What Rash lacked in journalistic experience she more than made up for in a lifetime love of telling stories. And she knew from growing up in a politically active family in a politically active Charlotte neighborhood that the best ideas came from real people, from all walks, talking and working together.

The challenge, in a vast and divided state of 100 counties, 78 of which count as rural, was this: How could EdNC find out what those real people had to say? How could they get them to work together?

"The people in those counties didn't know who to trust with the decline in rural journalism. They didn't have a voice in the conversation in Raleigh," Rash said. "North Carolina is a big place, and no one was going to come and tell their stories of the good things that were happening in public schools."

So Rash devised a new path to confront the challenge. Hundreds and hundreds of paths, actually.

"The first person I hired was Alisa Herr, web developer, and then I went out on the road and did 150 interviews over 4 months. I just met with all kinds of people – parents, teachers, superintendents, CFOs, news reporters – and had them show me their phones. And I asked them, 'Where do you get your information? What do you do with it? How do you decide if you're going to trust it?'"

Armed with this first-hand data on consumer behavior and media consumption patterns, Rash would

report back every night to Herr, the developer who was building the site.

"We built the platform based on what the people wanted and based on how they use information," Rash said. "Who wants data? Who wants maps? Who reads content that looks traditional, and who needs video? What kind of video? Long, short, documentary, all those things."

"Often it's the content and what the reporter wants the content to look like that's driving the decision. And we just kind of spun that around back to the audience," Rash said.

Because Rash and Herr were the only ones involved in building out the site, they could faithfully translate the wants of the interview subjects into the final product.

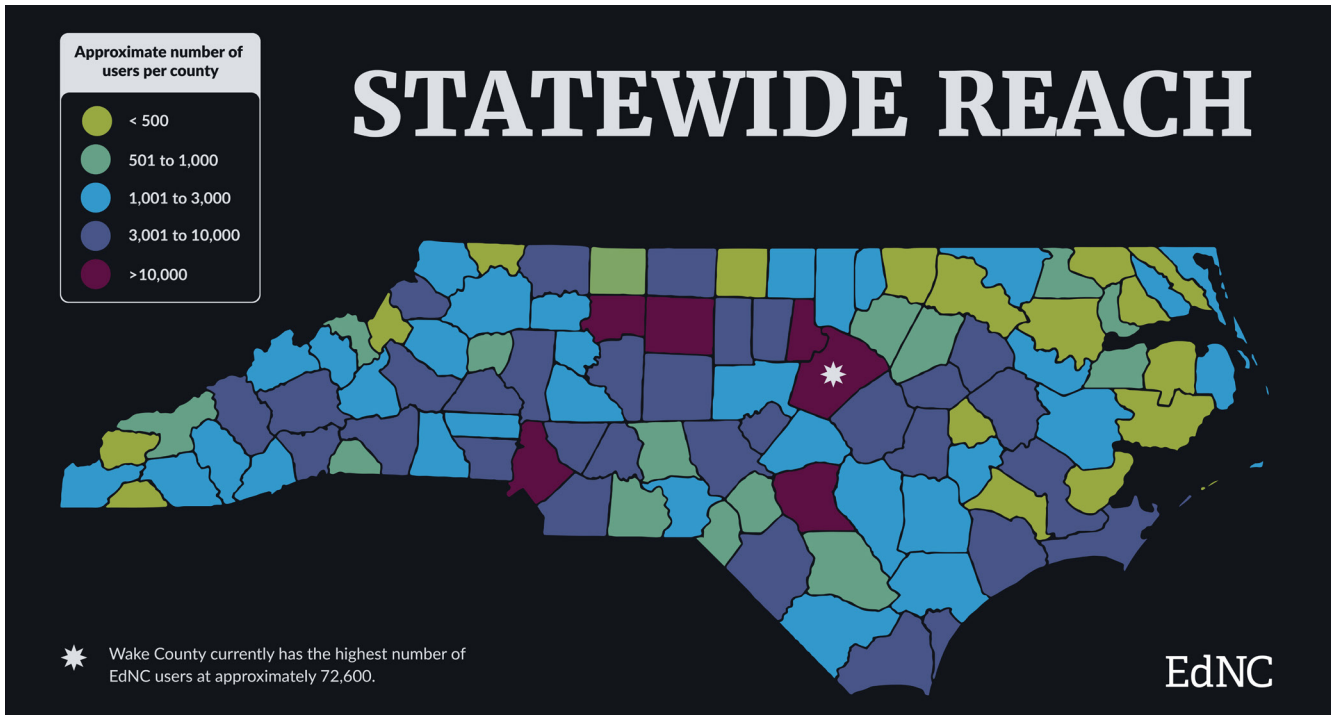
"We didn't have our own preconceptions about what we wanted to build. We didn't have a funder or anybody else driving what we built. It was just very audience informed. And that's been huge."

Since launching its site in January 2015 based on that research and those principles, EdNC has followed an audience-centric approach in everything it does.

"That foundational platform, that kind of design thinking process has served us at every stage," Rash said. "And we iterate every year. So we start in March ahead of our fiscal year and do that same process that we did at the beginning. Okay. How much money do we have? Who's on our team? What's our scope of work? What does our audience need this year? How are we going to meet their needs?"

"And between March 1 and June 30, we iterate our plan for the next year. Nothing is static," Rash said.

EdNC also assiduously surveys their audiences. The team conducts snap surveys after events as part of



their efforts to measure the impact of their work. And an annual survey provides valuable insights into audience needs and wants.

Some results from the 2023 survey, which drew 2,440 responses, offer a glimpse at the information provided:

- + 52% of respondents were K-12 teachers, 20% were community college faculty, 9% work in child care.
- + 27% of respondents were nonwhite, including 14% Black.
- + 68% of respondents reported sharing items they read on EdNC with colleagues, and 35% reported sharing on social media.
- + 36% said they had directly applied knowledge gained from EdNC in their professional lives.

That last figure provides concrete validation to the astonishing impact EdNC enjoys in the state.

Rash is not the only road warrior at EdNC. The whole team has the mindset of getting out to see the people they cover and connect with them in place, in person.

“We don’t have offices. We’ve always said our offices are the districts and community colleges out there in the world,” Rash said. “Our team stayed on the road during the pandemic. They slept in their cars. I slept in my Jeep. We met people in parking lots.

“I visited 92 schools myself during that first year of the pandemic. We’ve done 3 rounds of visiting all 100 counties.”

Karen Roseboro, superintendent of schools in Tyrrell County, remembers being surprised when EdNC showed up along with the state superintendent of schools for an achievement ceremony.

Roseboro’s Tyrrell County, located between the north-east North Carolina mainland and the Outer Banks, is the least populous county in the entire state. Tyrrell County has only three schools and a total of 447 students. Yet EdNC showed up.

“They came to recognize our blue party day, which we held to celebrate being removed from the list of low-performing districts,” Roseboro said. “And that recognition was huge for our community, because you could tell they had never been exposed to that level of attention.”

EdNC’s coverage of the Tyrrell County success story was published across the state through its distribution partners and even picked up by some national press, Roseboro said.

“That’s important, that validation,” Roseboro said. “We really need to make sure that this success story gets told, that as a result of hard work and perseverance in the face of limited resources, that by investing in the students that we do have, that by focusing not on what we’ve lost but focusing on what we have gained, that we can do incredible work here and succeed.

“That’s the role EdNC plays. They tell that story.”

Roseboro said EdNC also helped connect her district with donors, resources, and foundations. They even found people to help Roseboro’s team write grant requests.

“It’s so much more than just a publication,” Roseboro said with a laugh. “I learned that.”

One of the fruits of all that travel – beyond the invaluable connection made with sources and the communities they cover – was EdNC’s ability to compile a 100-county analysis to study how information moves county by county, and who has influence over how it moves. That helped EdNC better figure out how to distribute their content and what were the best ways to reach their audiences where they were.

The extent of this face-to-face approach was uncommon in journalism at the time EdNC was founded. Relatively few reporters developed such personal relationships with the communities they covered, as many studies show, and once travel budgets got cut and newsrooms shrunk even further, that on-the-ground reporting dropped even more.

Hahn tells the story of editor friends from legacy newspapers having to get corporate approval to send a reporter on a two-hour reporting road trip. “We never had to ask,” Hahn said. “We just got in the car and left.”

To this day, reporters do not have to get permission to travel.

“This industry has struggled for a variety of reasons, some of them outside our control. But I would argue that part of the reason we have struggled is we as journalists have not been in the community where people can see us and feel us and touch us,” Hahn said.

“In our first budget, we had set money aside for travel, for convening people, for taking people out to

lunch or gathering 10 or 15 or 20 people at a brewery or a lunch spot or a church.”

In 2024–25, EdNC has budgeted \$200,000 for travel, relationship building, and professional development of the team, which includes first and foremost, being on the road.

“That dedicated travel is super important,” he said. “It allowed us to build trust from the start. Because people could see us.”

Hahn acknowledges how hard that work can be, how difficult it is for an organization to commit to the practice. It takes time and money. It’s hard to scale.

“But if we’re thinking about what is a (key performance indicator) or measure of success for newsrooms moving forward? I would argue it’s less about (reaching lots of audiences) ... and more about, ‘Do people know you, trust you, believe you? Are they in a relationship with you? Are you giving them a reason to be?’”

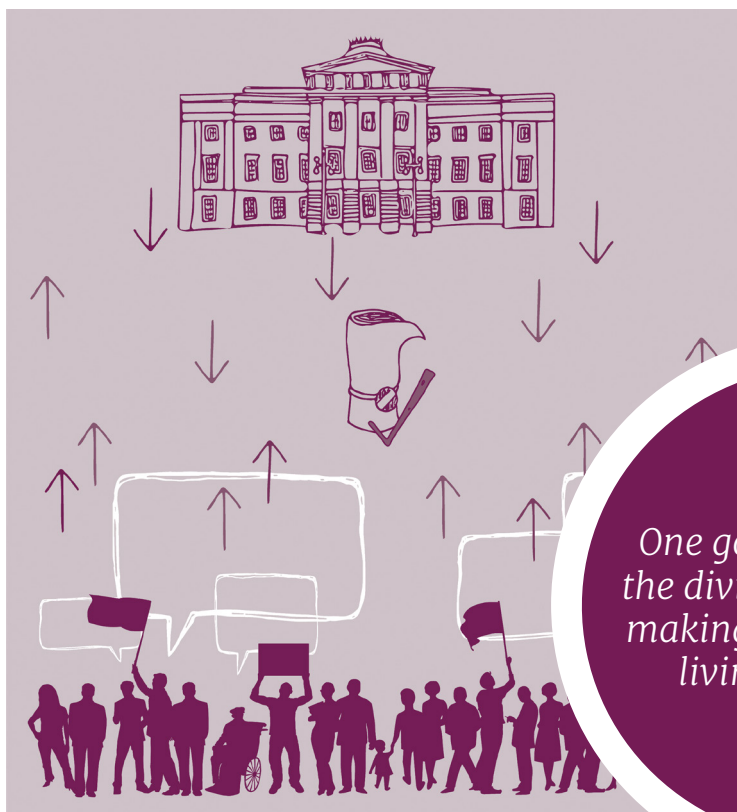
On top of the in-person connection, EdNC as an organization was introducing its digital audience to the team in a way that was also uncommon at the time. They were putting faces to the names of their reporters and sharing with their audiences the stories of the reporters as people. This at a time when many newsrooms frowned on personalizing any journalists beyond a columnist or two.

“We did some research that showed that our audience knew who we were. They saw our team as experts and wanted to hear directly from us,” Hahn said.

For example, impressions and engagement on social media posts that included photos with team members, showing them in the community, were significantly higher.

## *Strategy takeaway No. 1*

Treat your audiences like real humans. Meet them. Talk to them. Listen to them. Let their wants and needs shape your work and your approach. Treat your team members like real humans, too. Show your subjects and audiences that you are flesh and blood. Talk about who you are, what drives you, why you want to tell their stories. Develop the expertise you need and become an authority on the topics in the minds of your audiences.



*One goal was to bridge the divide between those making policy and those living the policies.*

## *Develop an ‘architecture of participation’*

Using a phrase borrowed from the world of software development, Rash and Hahn set out to build an architecture of participation. They wanted stakeholders in the world of education – students, parents, teachers, administrators, politicians, and policy-makers – to engage with EdNC beyond passively reading articles.

They had seen traditional news media nosedive (in part because of the well-documented financial pressures already underway at the time). They had watched civil forums disappear, robbing people of places to share and discuss credible news and information. They wanted to engage people where they were while building EdNC into a gathering place of sorts.

“For us, the ‘architecture of participation’ meant: We know we want people to participate. We know we want people to engage in a dialogue about the state of education in North Carolina. And that by engaging in that dialogue, they will have a seat at the table to analyze ideas and to propose their own,” Hahn said.

Hahn had started working with founders Guillory and Hancock in 2013 through New Kind, a design thinking and brand development agency where

Hahn helped clients expand their reach and engagement through social media and other digital platforms.

Guillory, Hancock, and EdNC entered Hahn’s life at a tragic, life-altering time. Earlier that year, a family friend had attacked Hahn and his wife, Jamie Kirk Hahn, at their Raleigh home. Jamie was stabbed to death. The murderer was eventually convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

“The first meeting I had after coming back to work after a long break was with EdNC,” Hahn said. “So it’s hard for me not to intertwine my work on this project with my life changing.”

“Part of all this is that I realized that I did not have a whole lot of interest in selling more software companies to the world, and I did have a whole lot of interest in doing things that make a difference. I figured that with the time that was left for me on Earth – whether that was a day, or a year, or a decade, or a lifetime – that I wanted to try to make a difference.”

Like his other co-founders, Hahn was frustrated by the disappearance of smart, trustworthy reporting on public policy. A news junkie himself, Hahn had been kicking around his own ideas about a digital news



startup. As EdNC started to take shape over multiple meetings and iterations, Hahn saw the potential to build an organization that could provide a platform for people to exchange ideas and deliver context and transparency.

In his previous work, Hahn had seen how companies could increase sales and increase brand loyalty if people felt they were involved in the company's work. He wanted to translate that to the nonprofit journalism model and create far deeper engagement with the communities being covered.

"One goal was to bridge the divide between those making policy and those living the policies. So, for us, this meant giving people the architecture to participate," Hahn said.

In practice, that required getting a lot of little things right: Meeting people where they were – on social media, for example – and engaging with them there. Making sure they had baseline contact functionality, such as emails in newsletters that were monitored and staffed for responses.

EdNC encouraged people to contribute to the site, an aspect that eventually grew into an initiative called Reach NC Voices. It also led to audience surveys and events, which EdNC uses consistently to engage with its audience first-hand.

"In a lot of ways, the architecture was our strategic framework for how we would engender this participation, but it also became our external-facing term for what we were doing," Hahn said.

Not only does EdNC offer outside contributors an opportunity to share their ideas and experiences with a wide audience, but those contributed articles and essays make up an essential part of EdNC's content offering: EdNC published nearly 200 such articles under its perspectives section in 2023, and the site is on track to surpass that number this year. At least 20% of EdNC's perspectives are written by people of color each year, and the organization shoots for 40%.

The Reach initiative, meanwhile, has grown into a tool, product, and platform of its own. It rose up in response to the 2016 elections, which laid bare the deep and wide ideological differences that divide North Carolinians. EdNC's funders asked whether the team could help to scale up listening across the state and expand their architecture of participation to make more room for people to discuss issues of the day.

Hahn and others found inspiration in projects in other places, from Utah to Australia, that were aimed at engaging parents of schoolchildren or bringing citizen voices into the legislative process. They consulted with Groundsource and Hearken, which were innovating ways for newsrooms to engage with their audiences and communities. And they teamed up with a tech partner, Public Input, to prototype a listening platform.

With funding from an initial investment from Wilson at Blue Cross NC, and after a year of testing, learning, and listening to their audiences through on-the-ground town halls, EdNC launched the platform in 2017. After a year in which they reached more than 50,000 North Carolinians through the initiative, EdNC received another boost: Wilson through Blue Cross NC contributed \$1 million upon his retirement.

Multiple nonprofits in North Carolina now leverage the Reach platform, free of charge. Like EdNC, they use the tools to reach people via text messaging, online surveys, article and website embeds, and live events.

"We use it in partnership with philanthropies and other public interest groups to kind of get a pulse on what's happening in their communities," Hahn said. "We did a project that focused on 3,000 parents in western North Carolina and their thoughts on public schools and public education. We are using Reach with our election work this year. We often use it for audience research, including all our impact surveys. And then from the journalism point of view, we use it for things like (finding subjects for stories)."

## *Strategy takeaway No. 2:*

Devise ways to bring these real humans who are your audiences into the conversation. Open the newsgathering process to them, and even your publishing platforms. Talk to your audiences as a daily part of doing business, not just once for a story or at an event, but in follow-up communication, audience surveys, and regular check-ins.



“Fundraising is telling a story, right?”

## Engage deeply with funders

All this travel and connection provides another benefit: EdNC can connect its funders to the very people and communities they serve. It is no longer enough for EdNC to show up in those communities. EdNC also connects others – philanthropists, policymakers, and others in positions of influence – to those communities and helps shrink the distance between those on the ground and those in power.

Though EdNC does receive individual contributions, the vast majority of its funding comes from larger grants. In 2022 and 2023 combined, it raised more than \$6.4 million, and to date has raised more than \$18 million.

Most of EdNC’s funders are based in North Carolina. Few, if any, had funded journalism before committing to EdNC. Rash leads fundraising, supported by a fundraising expert, Kelley O’Brien.

“Fundraising is telling a story, right?” Rash said.

“But the thing that we have done differently is that

we really wanted them not to just read the words in a grant application. We wanted them to come and see these things, see what we do, see how we do it. We wanted them to see these communities, see these issues, see these challenges.

“So they go with us.”

This “go and see” approach will vary depending on the groups and purpose. Many will involve EdNC taking groups of cross-sector stakeholders to visit communities in what they call “24 hours in.” The goals are many:

- + Establish trust
- + Share relationships
- + Learn from one another and alongside one another
- + Check assumptions
- + Inform grantmaking and policymaking
- + Build momentum for collective action

EdNC’s strong editorial standards inform these visits. EdNC pays for any hosting costs, for example. “We impose on people’s time but not on their pocketbooks,” Hahn said. They work hard to represent the demographics of the community with their invitation lists. They try to represent different viewpoints and avoid any “ideological purity test.”

The visits build on the trust EdNC has earned with the communities they cover. Most significantly, the practice has helped change the relationship among the three groups in play: EdNC, the philanthropists, and the people at the heart of the matter.

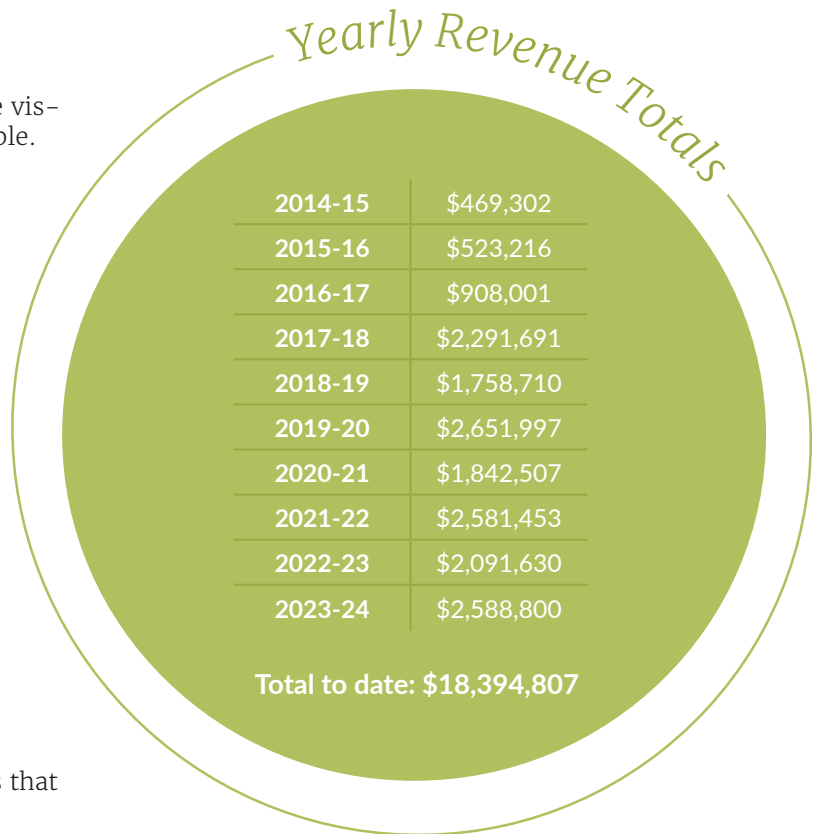
Recently, the leadership of Blue Cross NC and their foundation visited all 100 counties in the state alongside EdNC, Rash said.

“It informed their philanthropy because they saw the nexus of education and health care through the relationships we built. Where does that happen?”

“But that’s how we raise money. We let them see it themselves.”

Rash recognizes how rare this practice is in the philanthropy world. She understands how nonprofits can feel vulnerable having their funders on hand to watch them work. But EdNC sees this practice as a way to democratize relationships, just as the practice of journalism democratizes access to information.

On these “go and sees” and other in-state trips, EdNC team members logged 50,000 road miles alone in 2023. Rash keeps a sleeping bag in the latest version of her Jeep (“only 150,000 miles so far.”) And spending just a night or two a month at her home in the small community of Deep Gap is not uncommon.



One example of the value of this on-the-ground experience: Rash recalled working with researchers looking into the issue of chronic absenteeism. They had in hand news reports on the issue and a raft of studies. But they did not have eyes on the reality of the people portrayed in those reports.

“I said, well, if you go to the schools, it’s a whole different thing. They need washers and dryers in the high schools, because they don’t have a way to wash their clothes,” Rash said. “They don’t have shoes, which is why there are these shoe nonprofits in North Carolina. It’s completely different when you see it.”

### Strategy takeaway No. 3:

Don’t be afraid to show your funders the work you do. Part of your mission is to bridge the gap between the people and communities you cover and the people and institutions making decisions that affect those communities. Find ways to connect those groups – connect those people – and the impact will spread beyond your journalism.

## Fail forward, fail fast

Not every idea is brilliant. Not every initiative is going to work. Rash and EdNC's founders not only knew that going in, but they made it one of their principles. When Hancock approached Rash about building EdNC from the ground up, he had a directive:

"For me," Rash recalled, "the beautiful thing was they said, 'Fail forward. Fail fast.'"

After 10 years, Rash can supply a list of times that principle was put into practice:

- + The team tried on having EdNC be a cohort of organizations and initiatives. EdNC would report the news; the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research would conduct research on the issues surfaced by the news report; Reach NC Voices would be the community engagement platform; and First Vote NC would be the online voting experience for public high school students. But the structure proved to be unworkable. Eventually, all those teams and responsibilities were brought under the EdNC roof.
- + Reach NC Voices has proven instrumental in surveying communities and helping EdNC assess the impact of its work. But the team has struggled to fully integrate the texting, surveying, and engagement aspects of the platform into their journalistic toolbox.
- + The slow adoption, despite leadership's view that Reach NC is the most stable and effective engagement tool designed for journalism, shows that it's impossible to force people to use a tool that does not feel right in their hands. EdNC is now looking for a slow and steady adoption of the tool rather than an en masse embrace.
- + A newsletter and column around high school sports never got enough audience to justify the staffing that would be needed to pull it off, especially considering the night and weekend work required. EdNC, making the difficult decision that the juice was not worth the squeeze, shelved the project in 2018.
- + The EdAmbassadors program was spun up to integrate the voice of the teacher in EdNC. After one cohort of teachers was established, EdNC realized they could accomplish the same result by committing more resources to publishing more perspectives and more diverse perspectives as part of the normal EdNC content offering.
- + Chartbeat was used to help the team track website traffic county by county. The team found it easier and faster to bring the project in-house and hard-coded their own dashboard.
- + Don't call it a pivot to video, but EdNC hired a first-rate videographer to try to broaden its content offerings and its audience. But when some of that video struggled to gain an audience, the team assessed its labor and expense and decided to recalibrate. Now, with no call for a full-time videographer, the team produces short videos for social media and commits to long-form documentaries only for events. EdNC is not the first news organization to shake up its approach to video, nor will it be the last.

### *Strategy takeaway No. 4:*

The title of this section says it all: Fail forward, fail fast. It's impossible to know exactly when to pull the plug on a project that is not performing as expected. Sometimes small fixes can lead to big success. But having a fail fast mindset frees you to try things and move on when they don't pan out, increasing your chances of producing more winners along the way.





## *Treat your people well... and play nice with others*

As much as EdNC takes pride in its work, the leadership team takes similar pride in how they treat people on the team.

They talk constantly about employee wellness. They received a grant that provides paid wellness breaks for staff members, such as a yoga retreat or a beach vacation.

Each year, as part of the annual self-examination that EdNC conducts, every employee is asked to talk about how they want to grow professionally and personally over the next year and what they need to be supported in that. Consider it a mix of career development and retention interview.

“They get to talk to us first versus us talking at them first,” Rash said. “How are they doing? Everybody’s workload is divided into grunt work, stuff that they have to do, and then ... gold! What feeds their souls?”

The team discusses what they like about their work, what they want to do more of, what they want to do less of, and anything else that might be on their mind. Then the leadership matches up those insights with the funding for the year, the priorities, and the scope of work.

“And then we circle back to them and say, we want you on the bus, and here’s how much you get paid. And here’s what the scope of work looks like for next year, and here’s what we can do to support you personally and professionally,” Rash said.

By the end of June, the budget and plan for the fiscal year starting July 1 will be ready and employee expectations will be set. These conversations also help with long-range planning as team members feel free to open up about what they want to do with their lives and careers beyond the next 12 months.

For Director of Content and Communications Anna Pogarcic, the annual review allowed her to discuss with Rash her growth and career trajectory. It also revealed that many of the items in EdNC's audience playbook were piling up on her plate.

"I mean, we're doing a lot of stuff," Pogarcic said, proudly. "And I kind of found when I was reflecting this year that I had a lot more of what we like to call grunt work. So, Mebane and I talked about things we could incorporate that would ease that, or spread those tasks across multiple people.

"It's about making sure that we are balancing the things that need to happen for EdNC to continue to thrive, but also that the individual people have things they work on that they're proud of and not always just doing grunt work."

Pogarcic, who joined EdNC in 2021 after having interned there while in college, said team members feel connected despite all of them working remotely. They meet about once a month as a group and have yearly retreats. Talk is often about the mission.

"The ethos of EdNC is that we don't need an office because we're out in the community doing the work," Pogarcic said. "We're all very independent. The way Mebane describes it is that we're all professionals in charge of structuring our day."

The full team and smaller teams meet Mondays to touch base about content, priorities, travel, etc. The rest of the week is then meeting free, allowing the team to concentrate on getting out and talking with people and doing their work.

"It's not like you feel chained to your desk and people are breathing down your neck all the time," Pogarcic said. "And I think it's really important to the work we do that we're actually out in schools, meeting people, building connections, learning what the people across the state that we're trying to serve want."

"One of the themes of our coverage of community colleges is that life happens, and that can be what takes community college students off track in terms of attainment," Rash said. "Well, the fact of the matter is that life happens to all of us, at all stages. Our wellness policy is based on that, on what's happening in real people's lives."

Most of the EdNC team, which currently stands at 14, have been with the organization for several years. But EdNC is also becoming a proving ground for young journalists and education advocates. Former EdNC team members now hold positions of influence in state government, and others are pursuing advanced academic degrees while still working part time with EdNC.

EdNC does not follow the "always be growing" mantra. Their growth has been careful and deliberate, and Rash believes that, for now, they are best suited at about 15 team members.

That care in growth – from three people to 15 over a decade – is motivated in part by a desire to be fair to the employees themselves.

“We use a strategy where we don’t add people until we could see a year and a half or two years for their salary,” Rash said. “So we’ve been really intentional about growing our team, which has been helpful so that they have security and so do we. And our teams have been super stable.”

Pogarcic put it this way: “I’ve heard from people who joined EdNC from other workplaces. They’re always like: ‘You know. You’re lucky to work here with the way that we approach things.’”

EdNC makes its team members available to help other organizations, particularly non-profit news outfits. Rash and Hahn have consulted with other organizations. Other team members have been loaned out to help other outfits. And EdNC liberally shares its learnings and tools.


The Reach audience engagement platform, for example, is used by multiple newsrooms across the country. EdNC also made its audience playbook available to any organization that wanted to learn from or borrow its approaches.

Just as EdNC sees itself as a force multiplier in the world of North Carolina education, it wants to play a similar role in the news industry.

“In North Carolina we connect the dots on issues, people, events, and policies in a way that amplifies others doing good work. We give tools to others to join the debate. We publish first-person perspectives to build leadership,” Hahn said. “We’ve tried to play this role as an organization who is fortunate to have the right resources and who’s willing to do the work that needs to be done to help others—and that includes nonprofit journalism in general.”

### *Strategy takeaway No. 5:*

We’re all in this together. Whether that’s the employees and leadership at a news organization or all of us, collectively, in the news industry as a whole. A team that is cared for, respected and bought in will outperform one that is overworked, overstressed, and kept on a need-to-know basis. A team that helps its fellow news organizations lifts itself by lifting the industry as a whole.



*EdNC set out to measure those ripple effects.*

## *Share your script, and stick to it*

Another positive way EdNC stands out in the journalism world is that it tells its own story well. The organization doesn't shy away from explaining its mission. It lists its institutional accomplishments, appropriately, with pride. It's built a vocabulary around the work and shares it assiduously.

The EdNC team has a script, and they stick to it.

This happens internally as well as externally. EdNC is consistent in sharing audience data reports across the team and relating the results to its mission. Team members are expected to compile weekly or monthly reports to track impact. The team goes on annual retreats to reflect on its work. Team members know what the mission is, know how EdNC goes about its business, and know the terminology to explain it: "Architecture of participation." "Blitz." "Go and see." "24 hours in."

More broadly, the team knows the meaning and purpose of two other key phrases.

- + One is how EdNC thinks about its work: "theory of change"
- + One is how EdNC thinks about measuring the impact of its work: "Ripple Effect Mapping"

EdNC first published its theory of change in 2017 and has iterated on it ever since.

"We wanted to help folks understand how we approach our work," Hahn said. "We think about news, plus research, plus Reach, plus innovation equals impact and leads to change. We're still digging in on the drivers."

Those drivers are:

1. *Be on the ground in your communities*
2. *Journalism as the fourth estate in a democracy*
3. *In-depth research*
4. *Building and engaging our audience*
5. *Leading innovation in the new media and nonprofit world*
6. *Tracking the impact of our work and moving the needle on policy change*
7. *Increasing leadership capacity statewide*
8. *DEI + belonging across the intrapersonal, organizational, community, and systems dimensions*
9. *The broad base of financial support*



Ripple effect mapping is not unique to EdNC, but the way the EdNC team conducts theirs is wholly their own. Unlike traditional media, they don't measure success by newspapers sold or profit margin or whether their investigation got a politician indicted. Like all mission-driven news organizations that make an impact on society, their impact cannot be measured solely by the digital audience either.

The team's day does not end when they post an article to the website. EdNC reporters and researchers are live, valuable resources for so many players in the North Carolina education environment. They answer calls from people needing information, context, or connections. They introduce people with needs to people with abilities to address those needs. They bridge the gap between policymakers and people living with the effects of those policies. Many of those actions fail to result in site visits or pageviews.

"We realized there were these force multipliers to our work, or ripple effects. And it went beyond news coverage," Hahn said. "We're out there democratizing access to relationships. We're taking people on the road. We're practicing live journalism and holding live events. There are so many ripples that come from that that go well beyond a 750-word inverted pyramid story.

"Then we started thinking about it, and Chuck Kaylor, a funder, started thinking about it like, 'Wow, these guys and gals are force multiplying well beyond their coverage,' " he said.

With those conversations in mind, EdNC set out to measure those ripple effects.

They started tracking not just the live events and "go and sees" but also times when an EdNC reporter appeared on a panel or an EdNC article motivated a state legislator to visit a community college and put a legislative fix into motion. They use the Reach initiative to perform impact surveys with participants and communities after an EdNC team or "go and see" visit.

And this year, EdNC will use the Reach platform for its widest survey yet, an attempt to measure its impact by reaching out to tens of thousands of North Carolinians EdNC has touched. One of the questions: "From the impact of our articles and perspectives to our presence in your classroom or community, do you have a story you can share with us about the ripple effects of our work (for example, who read our work that we might not know about; how do you see our articles shared; did you meet or build relationships with new people; did you get a grant; etc.)."

## *Strategy takeaway No. 6:*

As important as audience metrics are in today's digital media environment, they do not tell the whole story. Finding ways to recognize and catalog the good that you do with your journalism pays dividends. It encourages your team. It helps prove your value to your funders, subscribers, or other supporters. It binds together your narrative, linking delivering on mission to developing your audience.



## *Identify and measure audience*

While EdNC was dedicated to their audiences in the early days, they were not ready to measure those audiences in any systematic way.

“I’m a lawyer. I’m not a journalist,” Rash said, laughing. “I didn’t know anything about analytics. We had one reporter. So for a while analytics were not so important to us.

“What we were tracking early on was, are we growing our audience on Facebook? Are we growing our audience on Twitter? Are we growing newsletter subscriptions? Things we could see easily.”

What EdNC did track in that first year was something far more important to them and their mission than their SEO ranking. They wanted to make sure they were delivering on their promise to communities across the state. They made sure they got to all 100 counties. They made sure they created content about all those communities they visited, “as a give-back for being welcomed in those communities,” Rash said.

Sophisticated audience measurement would wait until EdNC started working with industry experts like Tim Griggs of Blue Engine Collaborative and the Lenfest Institute. Those collaborations provided quick returns for EdNC, as website traffic began to increase quickly, particularly from organic search.

“From the beginning we knew we wanted to have

three drivers of traffic: Google, newsletters, and social media. And, so, from the beginning we have spent at least \$24,000 a year, and up to \$36,000 most recently, on paid boosting. We’ve tried to grow those three drivers equally, which I do think was important, and continues to be important,” Rash said.

Rash looks back to the earliest days with a sense of both accomplishment and astonishment.

“The day we launched we had no people in our audience. None. No one knew who we were,” she said.

“Now we shoot for 2 million pageviews a year, 1.2 million users a year. We send out 300,000 emails a week. We have about 50,000 paid impressions on social media a day.

“And, remember, no one knew who we were. So it is kind of crazy.”

She continued: “I didn’t have numbers in mind when I was doing this, but I didn’t think people would be hungry for education news like they’re hungry for education news. That is what people come to us for. It’s our education news that drives the pageviews. People want to know what’s going on.”

Hahn said they’ve achieved their goal of being read in all corners of the state, though like most news outlets their deepest and widest audiences are in the most populated communities. What sticks out to Hahn is

that EdNC readers remain loyal even if the team has not visited a community or written about a community in several months.

“People come to us because they give a damn about education,” he said.

On that note, one approach that proved a breakthrough for EdNC in terms of audience growth was focusing on higher-quality, audience-directed content designed to meet the needs of the people who care most about education in the state – rather than the “general store approach” of trying to be all things to all people. Previous efforts to increase content production had failed to increase traffic.

By doing less, the team found it was achieving more.

Audience dramatically increased thanks to this content strategy and the ways in which it was fueled by a significantly more sophisticated approach to search engine optimization (SEO).

Hahn considers that refinement a turning point in EdNC’s audience journey.

Steve Johnston, a Charlotte journalist who has known founder Ferrel Guillory since the 1970s, said EdNC stands as a potential model for other news organizations. He only hopes that funding for the group will continue and worries about philanthropic dollars being spread too thinly across nonprofit media groups.

“The combining of a narrow focus within the education sphere with constant presence within that focus area is what is EdNC’s strength,” Johnston said. “Staff energies and therefore news content seem driven by what staff learn in the field, a healthy inversion of how so much other media content is identified.

“My hope is that the model EdNC has willed into life may inspire devotees of other statewide public policy issues as they noodle over how to promote change via awareness, attention to detail, and celebration of humanity.”

Technical improvements provided another audience boost. EdNC sped up the site and made other SEO and user engagement fixes. The editorial team got more SEO training and worked to improve headlines and other aspects of their editorial product.

The commitment to relevant content that resulted from this approach ultimately had a ripple effect, driving numbers at the top of the audience funnel from the deeper engagement at the middle.

“We started producing more of the content the audience needed,” Hahn said. “As our content became more focused on the questions they had, more focused on their daily lives, we became more relevant to them.”

When the pandemic happened, EdNC doubled down on answering audience questions, branding the content, “Ask & Answer” for the first time.

“Some of it was just brand building, right? It takes a long time to get your name out there and to become a trusted source. Eventually you have people saying, ‘Oh, yeah, these EdNC folks were at our college two years ago, and last year, and this year, right? Oh, these folks are at every state board meeting.’ We also became more frequently cited, more frequently republished. That takes time too.

“I think our audience growth was a little bit of all those things.”

## *Strategy takeaway No. 7:*

If there were a silver bullet to build audience, everyone would be firing it. Sometimes audience development can be counterintuitive: When EdNC turned away from efforts to scale or ramp up editorial production and instead focused on high-quality, audience-directed content, they prospered at broadening their digital reach as well. Knowing who you are and then being rigorous and sophisticated in tracking the audience you seek can be a powerful one-two punch.



## Be ideologically, religiously non-partisan

North Carolina’s size and remarkable diversity of incomes, industries, and politics complicates EdNC’s efforts to gain trust in all corners of the state. Yet they have managed to win accolades, support, or at least grudging respect across the political spectrum and among the rich, poor, and in-between.

Their stance as honest brokers is one pillar that contributes to this. Their openness to giving voice to a variety of perspectives is another. They avoid casting judgment or suggesting they have the only solution to a problem.

And, of course, they get out to the communities they cover.

“People can see us as just sort of folks from the community—their neighbors and their friends and their family, right? Their fellow parishioners at the church or fellow diners or fellow beer drinkers, right? When they see us, they know us. And they know that we will be there for them,” Hahn said.

“So, even if we write a story that might be critical of something, they don’t inherently say, oh, that’s just fake news. Because they know our hearts and they know our minds, they know who we are. So they might disagree with what we publish, but they’re not necessarily running from it.”

In its most recent audience survey, EdNC asked whether people thought they provided a neutral view of what’s happening in education. Only 7% of respondents said EdNC was not neutral.

“In North Carolina?” Rash said, laughing. “I’ll take that as a win.”

North Carolina is among the purplest of states, with roughly even distribution of Republican, Democrat, and Unaffiliated voters – making it a critically important swing state.

Supt. Roseboro in tiny Tyrrell County says EdNC’s secret sauce is sticking to the facts.

“I see it as just them being factual,” Roseboro said. “It is what it is. The story is the story. I don’t think any of us sitting in these seats across the state have argued that EdNC got something wrong. They do a really good job of educating us for us to make our own informed opinions, regardless of what side of the fence we’re on.”

Of course, no one escapes completely unscathed these days, Rash acknowledged. But she finds consolation in the political balance of the criticism that EdNC does receive.

“The right complains, and the left would like us to be more liberal. So I think we’re in a sweet spot, but it’s a sweet spot relative to being really intense on both extremes. Those in power on both sides read our stuff. They think of us as the people to go to to tether what’s happening in classrooms and schools to policy.

“People definitely know who we are now,” Rash said, “and we have staked out that position of trust.”



Nowhere is that trust more evident than in the EdNC's work on community colleges. The coverage vertical kicked off in 2018 on the strength of blitz visits to all 58 North Carolina community colleges and at least one story about each of those schools. Since then, the coverage vertical has won trust, awards, and growing audiences.

Supported by a grant from the John M. Belk Endowment, EdNC took on the community college challenge even though postsecondary education was not part of the plan when EdNC was launched a few years earlier.

The foray made sense. Few reporters covered community colleges at the time. Growing numbers of business leaders and experts saw community colleges as key to unlocking social mobility and greater opportunities for the state's young people. And the Belk Endowment had a keen interest in bringing reporting and rigorous discussion to the sector.

"We realized pretty quickly that if we're going to do it, we wanted to do it right," Hahn said. "So we started by listening, by going around to the community colleges, producing prototypes of our coverage, getting to know folks, and asking them what kind of information resources they needed and what kind of things would be good to do."

With a sense of what problems the schools were looking to have solved, EdNC launched Blitz 2.0 in 2022, visiting all 58 community colleges again. Research during those visits led the leadership team to identify five indicators that contribute to the financial health of the colleges and impact how well colleges are able to serve their communities:

1. *individual state budget appropriations*
2. *county support*
3. *the rate of dual enrollment*
4. *foundations and philanthropic support*
5. *receipts from student tuition and other fees*

"Our community colleges never had any entity that promoted our work across the state and across the country," said Leatherwood, the Blue Ridge Community College president. "EdNC helps inform, educate, and influence policy in support of community colleges. They also bring resources to the table that we might not have otherwise had access to, including intellectual talent, financial resources, and thought partners. I don't think they realize the generational impact they will have on the citizens of North Carolina."

## *Strategy takeaway No. 8:*

Unless your business model is to preach to the converted, you will likely gain the largest audience and have the greatest impact if people see you as an honest broker. This does not mean burying the truth or shading the facts. Marshaling the facts and reporting them without bias deepen your credibility and enable you to bring about needed change.

## What's next for EdNC?

Rash and the team at EdNC are looking to expand their audience now, going into national and state elections in November 2024. “There are just so many eyeballs on North Carolina and education this year, we knew we needed to hit that,” Rash said. Having served their core audience’s needs for the last several years, EdNC will try to grow their audience reach in 2024 before considering a return to a more focused approach next year.

“There are other stories to be told and other issues to explain and other questions to answer and other practical services,” Hahn said.

Pogarcic is the youngest person to ever be admitted to the Media Transformation Challenge and under her leadership, EdNC is using this moment of opportunity to grow their audience.

As the industry as a whole continues to face instability when it comes to search and social traffic, EdNC is prioritizing finding new ways to reach their audience through channels they can control. Among other things, they have brought texting back into their work to send weekly alerts and are experimenting with targeted emails to specific segments of their audience.

The team is also refocusing on local distribution throughout all of the state’s 100 counties to broaden and deepen their reach. But one of the most important aspects is making sure their stories continue to serve their audiences—the team has doubled down on audience-first content through Ask & Answers and other service stories.

Those service stories could be about providing guidance for people to better understand the FAFSA federal student aid process. Or providing information for parents trying to decide between private and public education. Or helping parents discover more options, more choice, within the public schools system. Or explaining to kids about to graduate from high school what are the paths available to them to continue their education.

EdNC sees those topics and that type of content driving new audiences while absolutely delivering on mission.

One of EdNC’s most read pieces of late, for example, was a profile Rash wrote about an unknown Republican candidate for superintendent of public instruction.

“It was an incredible piece of explainer journalism that was a huge (reach) play because nobody knew who this was,” Hahn said.



As director of content, Pogarcic sees the expansion of private school vouchers as a major opportunity to expand EdNC's audience. Parents who previously may not have tuned into EdNC will need answers as the voucher program leads to expected changes in enrollment and funding, at the very least.

"Our big question is, 'What is our changing role in this?'" Pogarcic said. "And I think a big realization for us is that we really need to focus on building new relationships with people who might not already be EdNC readers. ... Our unique approach to journalism is really valuable to them, but I don't think they're getting it right now and could benefit from it."

At a higher level, EdNC will use this 10th year in business to dig even deeper into self-assessment, like the previously mentioned, wide-scale ripple effect survey using the Reach platform. They plan to work on how their theory of change aligns with their mission and their key performance indicators. They are reconceiving what it means to be loyal, focusing on service on their board and strategic council, publication of perspectives, individual donors, and brand ambassadors, in addition to loyal readers. And they will ride the wave of an election year in a super-partisan environment where education is a political football.

Asked what she thinks will come next following such an impressive first decade, Rash gave a warm, good-hearted laugh.

"It's been a lot of fun, and I think all of us hold it as sort of the greatest privilege of our lives," she said. "As for what comes next, well, I think we'll see. I mean, doing this work in North Carolina, it's definitely spicy."

### *Strategy takeaway No. 9:*

Be serious about the mission, but try not to take yourself too seriously. And by all means enjoy the ride, even if it's long, uncertain, and on the bumpiest of roads.

## *The Editors' Notes from Molly and Mebane*

EdNC – the work we do, the communities we serve – has been and continues to be a great privilege for us and the EdNC team.

We strive every day to be welcome in all 100 counties, and in large measure that happens because we commit every day to do no harm.

Ahead of this case study, the Blue Engine Collaborative conducted an in-depth review of our approach to news and content.

The report found EdNC does four things well:

1. **Strong mission:** EdNC demonstrates a clear commitment to its mission by strategically aligning KPIs with educational goals for North Carolina.
2. **Data collection:** EdNC does a good job of collecting a blend of quantitative and qualitative data across multiple products and channels.
3. **Data sharing:** EdNC promotes a culture of open information sharing, ensuring that data insights reach all levels of the organization.
4. **Transparency:** Exemplary in openly communicating outcomes, impact, and financials, fostering trust and engagement with their audience and stakeholders.

Rolfe Neill, the long-time publisher of The Charlotte Observer, taught us not to be afraid “to be caught loving our community.” He taught us when and how to use the social and political capital of news publishers to address public problems.

The hardest aspects of this work in the last 10 years have also been when we learned the most about how to do this work well -- in Edgecombe County, where we learned from leaders how students could redesign their experience of learning and education; during the pandemic, when our team collectively chose to show up in person even before vaccines were available; in Haywood County, where we learned from leaders how public schools and community colleges serve as anchor institutions in times of economic crisis; and after Hurricane Helene, in the counties where we learned from leaders the day-to-day challenges of change management in the face of unprecedented, wide-scale destruction.

Our capacity to do this work only happens because of our team of peer experts, who day in and day out publish our news and perspectives with unmatched professionalism. From the blitz to our book, thank you for wanting to do the best work we can imagine together.

A special thank you to Tara Kenchen and Kelley O'Brien who provide strategic support to us as leaders and as an organization that shapes how we show up in the world.

Public schools matter. Attainment matters. We look forward to the next 10 years.

# *Thank you to our funders who breathe life into our work.*

## *Team*

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Mebane Rash	Eric Frederick	Derick Lee
Liz Bell	Emily Thomas	Lauren Castillo
Molly Urquhart	Anna Pogarcic	Chantal Brown
Caroline Parker	Katie Dukes	Andy Marino
Alli Lindenberg	Hannah Vinueza McClellan	Ben Humphries

## *Board*

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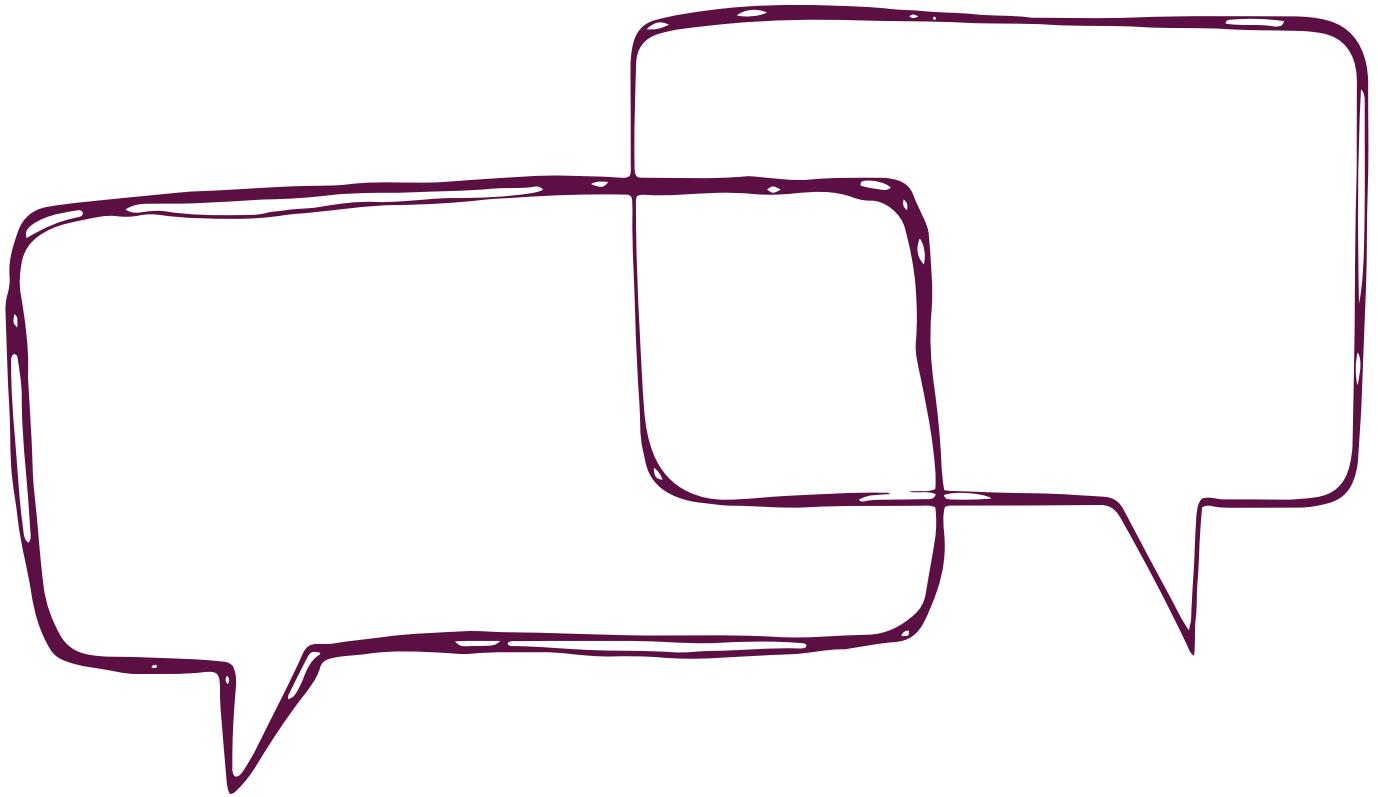
Dr. Donnell Cannon	Dr. Anthony Jackson	Mebane Rash
Newell Clark	Kayla Romero Morais	Dr. Pamela G. Senegal
Ferrel Guillory	Dr. Monique Perry-Graves	Yona Wade

## *Strategic Council*

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Dr. Margaret H. Annunziata	Kezia "Kate" Goodwin	José Oliva
Russ Campbell	Patrick Greene	Cyndi Soter O'Neil
Leah Carper	Victoria Griffin	Erica Beshears Perel
Laurie Clowers	Gerry Hancock	John L. S. Simpkins
Debra L. Derr	D. Craig Horn	Melissa Singler
Dr. Scott Elliott	Lashaun T. Jenkins	Rob Thompson
Astrid Emily Francis	Amy L. Kovac-Ashley	Dr. Deanna Townsend-Smith
Dr. Jeremy Gibbs	Dr. Laura Leatherwood	Elaine Townsend Utin
	Freebird McKinney	





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