

## **Expanded Broadband Access A Boon To NC Education, Economic Development Initiatives**

**By Mike Coltrane, chairman and CEO of CT Communications**

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Dating back to the Kitty Hawk and the Wright brothers, North Carolina has been a state known for innovation. It's a passion that makes me proud to be a North Carolinian.

Our elected leaders recognize that the state's innovative development strategy cannot be accomplished without investments in education. Governor Easley has said that our economic and educational advancements must reflect a common spirit of purpose as we build our future.

North Carolina leads the nation in education progress. The state must welcome and encourage private sector investment in advanced communications technologies, such as broadband networks, if that progress is to continue. An environment that emphasizes education and is receptive to increasing broadband access is attractive to businesses that will help North Carolina garner and retain investment dollars and high-quality jobs and industry.

In addition to the state's initiatives to reduce class sizes in grades K through 3 and the More at Four statewide program focusing on the needs of at-risk four-year-olds, North Carolina's innovative education reforms include the Learn and Earn high school program.

In the state's 33 Learn and Earn schools, students can graduate in four to five years not only with a high school diploma, but also with an associate's degree or two years of college credit, giving them a significant jump on their futures. These schools are catching the eye of the Nation. The Stanly Learn and Earn Early College High School in Albemarle recently received the Magna Award from the National School Boards Association. The Stanly School was recognized for its strong partnerships with the school district, community college and local business leaders; and for providing students who might not otherwise attend college a chance for higher education.

Our state leaders recognize that technology can take a good program and make it even better. We can increase the effectiveness of programs like Learn and Earn Online by expanding high-speed, broadband Internet access available to students both at home and at school. Lawmakers can do their part in this campaign by continuing policies that keep the Internet free of undue regulation.

This year alone, the U.S. communications industry plans to invest \$70 billion in upgrading and expanding the nation's broadband infrastructure. As chairman and CEO of a communications company in Concord, I am aware of the infinite possibilities broadband advances offer to enhance education, our economy and our lives. A policy climate in North Carolina that welcomes and encourages broadband investment from the private sector and spurs broadband deployment will help the state realize its hand-in-glove strategy of improving education to advance economic development.

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