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NC's SOUTHEAST JOINS EFFORT TO BOOST ONLINE LEARNING ACCESS *Partnership with Truist Foundation and Atlantic Telephone Membership Co-op Provides Wifi Hotspots*

March 22, 2021 (Elizabethtown, N.C.) North Carolina's Southeast (NCSE) has forged a unique partnership with Truist Foundation and the Atlantic Telephone Membership Corporation (ATMC) to provide students and others in rural Southeastern communities with ready access to Internet hot spots. The Southeastern Partnership II, NCSE's tax-exempt sister organization, obtained a \$25,000 award from the Truist Foundation to enable ATMC to install drive-up hot spots at public schools in Columbus Counties.

"The pandemic has required everyone to pitch in with ideas and initiatives to keep the region moving forward," said Jeff Etheridge, chairman of the board of directors at NC's Southeast. "We were eager to do our part in deploying our organizational assets to help our young people connect to online learning resources necessary in their education."

Headquartered in Shallotte, ATMC is a non-profit telephone cooperative that provides telephone, cable TV and Internet service to rural residents who are not served by national telecommunications carriers. The \$25,000 award enabled ATMC to purchase, engineer and install all equipment needed to create the hotspots, which have been available to students free of charge between 8:00 am and 8 pm daily. "ATMC is grateful for our partnership with North Carolina's Southeast and for the opportunity to obtain the \$25,000 grant from the Truist Foundation," said Keith Holden, chief executive officer at ATMC. "Because of the grant, ATMC was able to provide hotspots to five Columbus County schools at the start of the pandemic. The grant allowed us to provide critical connectivity so that students could access learning materials and safely connect with their teachers."

Truist Foundation pursues charitable giving and community engagement programs on behalf of Truist Financial Corporation (NYSE: TFC), which was formed by the 2019 merger of BB&T and SunTrust. Headquartered in Charlotte, Truist is the nation's sixth-largest commercial bank. "Truist Foundation is proud to be part of the solution to boosting access to e-learning for students in rural communities in Southeastern North Carolina," said Ben Ivey, Senior Vice President, Middle Market Banking at Truist Bank, speaking on behalf of Truist Foundation. "This project helps ensure the pandemic doesn't limit the academic or vocational preparation of our young people, who are the future of our region's workforce. We commend North Carolina's Southeast and ATMC for their partnership in making this vision a reality."

The project has impacted an estimated 2,000 students in grades K-12 and college in Columbus County. The hotspots are also available to members of the public filing for unemployment benefits, setting up online banking arrangements to receive stimulus payments, searching for employment opportunities, and engaging in online interviews with potential employers. "Given the historic job losses occurring in the wake of the pandemic, access to reliable Internet has been critical to educating our students and identifying opportunities for our workforce," said NC's Southeast President Steve Yost. "This project showcases the region's spirit of collaboration and the role our organization plays in bringing together public, private and non-profit partners to pursue common objectives on behalf of our communities."

A public-private partnership headquartered in Elizabethtown, N.C., **North Carolina's Southeast** links business leaders with county governments in seeking to "provide strong economic development leadership in southeastern North Carolina through innovative marketing and collaborative regional initiatives that will support the creation of new jobs, generate capital investment and secure new business locations." Member counties include Anson, Bladen, Brunswick, Columbus, Craven, Cumberland, Duplin, Hoke, Lenoir, Montgomery, New Hanover, Moore, Onslow, Pender, Robeson, Sampson, Scotland and Wayne. For additional information, visit www.ncse.org

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