

1. Introductory Overview

*Please provide a general overview of your organization's project, what the project is designed to do (goals) and how it changes and improves people's lives (methods), situating the benefit within a specific business or institutional context.
(In 600 words or less)*

Delivering educational equity to the students in southwest Michigan's Berrien and Cass counties is a difficult task due to the rural, economic, and diverse nature of the two-county area. Berrien and Cass counties include a significant number of poor, rural communities. In Berrien County nearly 40 percent of children younger than 17 live below the poverty level, and in Cass County, the rate is approaching 35 percent. In both counties, the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunches continues to increase. The region overall has seen its population decrease, wages decline and manufacturing jobs disappear.

One of the challenges for children living in poor, rural communities is limited access to cultural institutions and experiences. Due to a lack of resources, many of the students in Berrien and Cass counties have never traveled more than 20 miles away from home. These students' understanding of the world is limited to the narrow experiences available to them in their local, rural communities. In addition, schools have cut field trip budgets to reduce or eliminate travel outside of the county. These circumstances create a need for educational opportunities and experiences connecting students to a global community.

In addition to lacking vital cultural exposure, the schools these children attend are not meeting government test performance requirements, and the students are underperforming in subject areas across the board.

To address these significant challenges, the Berrien Regional Education Service Agency (Berrien RESA) began deploying interactive, IP-based video conferencing technology in schools in 1999. The goals of the Berrien RESA Video Conference Program were: reduce the impact of rural geography and poverty on educational outcomes; improve student achievement; enhance students' global communication skills; and provide professional development opportunities for school faculty.

The program has significantly impacted the lives of both students and teachers in Berrien and Cass counties. Chief among the benefits realized by students is increased exposure. Since these students cannot travel to participate in cultural experiences, video conferencing brings the experiences to the students. Berrien and Cass county classes have virtually travelled as far as Australia and India, they've connected live with classrooms in adjacent counties, and they regularly participate in global collaborative dialogues. None of this would be even remotely possible without video conferencing technology.

Video conferencing is also providing these students with expanded educational experiences to prepare them to work in a global economy. With jobs migrating from Michigan and the United States overseas, more than ever students need to be competitive, creative, global learners.

Administrators and faculty are enjoying the benefits of the video conference network as well. By holding meetings over video, everyone travels less and is therefore more efficient and productive. In fact, school district has seen travel cost saving totaling more than \$12,000 per year.

2. The Importance of Technology

How did the technology you used contribute to this project and why was it important? (In 600 words or less)

Video conferencing is central to the Berrien RESA educational technology program. It is the delivery mechanism that allows Berrien and Cass County children to connect to new people and new experiences and broaden their world views.

Berrien RESA has a network of 70 Polycom video conferencing endpoints in elementary, middle and high schools throughout the two-county region. Almost all of the Polycom video systems are installed on mobile carts. It was very important to the architects of the video network that the equipment could be brought into the classroom instead of the students being distracted by going into a new environment to participate in a collaboration, class session or cultural exchange. The organization also attributes much of the success of the program to the fact that the technology fades into the background and doesn't take away from the focus on learning. For example, the Polycom microphone can be placed almost anywhere in the room during a conference, making it very unobtrusive and limiting the distraction. The final key to the program from a technology standpoint is simplicity. Each of the 70 schools outfitted with video equipment have a coordinator to oversee the program. However, the skill levels of the coordinators vary significantly, from media specialists to teachers or administrative assistants. The organization has found the Polycom equipment so simple to use that none of the coordinators have been intimidated or unable to operate the systems.

The ultimate goal for the Berrien RESA Video Conference Program is for every school to have access to a video conferencing unit on its own campus. There are still 30 campuses that do not have access in the school building, but the students can travel to another school within the district to participate in a video conference.

3. Benefits

Has your project helped those it was designed to help? (Yes/No)

YES

Has your project fundamentally changed how tasks are performed? (Yes/No)

YES

What new advantage or opportunity does your project provide to people? (In 600 words or less)

For the children in Berrien and Cass counties, exposure to the arts, to people different from them, to different cultures and traditions, and to different ways of thinking has been expanded exponentially through the Berrien RESA Video Conference Program. The program allows the counties' educationally underserved students to communicate with peers around the world to solve problems, discuss global issues, and complete collaborative projects, just as they will in the workplace after they graduate from high school.

Rural students have little experience with people outside of their own communities, but through this program, they're able to connect directly over video with peers in states throughout the country, greatly increasing their exposure to new and different ideas and lifestyles.

And just a small sampling of the international conferences facilitated by the Berrien RESA Video Conference Program demonstrates its reach and breadth:

- Conferences with Pakistan to compare cultures for high school students
- Geography games with Nicaragua for middle school students
- Collaborations with India comparing Halloween and Diwali for second graders
- Presentations from a diver swimming with sharks at an aquarium in Australia for middle school students
- Connections with a language arts/journalism class in Taiwan for high school students

More than 18,000 students were impacted by the program in the 2007-2008 school year.

From an administrative standpoint, faculty are more productive because they travel less, particularly during the winter when the weather makes driving dangerous and even more time consuming.

If possible, include an example of how the project has benefited a specific individual, enterprise or organization. Please include personal quotes from individuals who have directly benefited from your work. (In 600 words or less)

Letter from a Texas teacher whose students participated in an ASK program, which connects students with authors over video:

Dear Ms. Smothers,

I cannot tell you how much our videoconference meant to all of us. Paris, Texas, is a small town, and many of our students have never been outside the city limits. Opportunities for low-income and minority students are limited.

In one stroke, this videoconference enlarged these students' world. They loved the snowball! (It rarely snows here, and it was about 60 degrees that day.) Although we had already located Grand Rapids on the map, the moderator's comments really made distances understandable to my students. But the most wonderful event for my class was seeing an African-American woman as a successful author.

I am sending letters that my students have written to you. One of the African-American girls in my class states in her letter that she was surprised to see that you are “chocolate brown and not buttermilk.” (She paid attention!) It shocked me that after all of our class discussions on the book, that she imagined its author to be white. She simply couldn’t imagine it.

This videoconference opened my eyes as well. It brought home to me the importance of putting before my students images of successful adults who look like them. Thank you for sharing your wonderful stories, your home-made toys, and your time with us. Please continue to visit students through the technology of videoconferencing!

Sincerely,
Nancy Bratteli
Third Grade Teacher
Aikin Elementary
Paris, Texas

Letter from a student who participated in the ASK program mentioned above:

Dear Mrs. Smothers,

You inspire me in many different ways. You are an African American and fulfilled your dream. You have courage, and you stick to what you say. You care about children. You are my role model, just like my teacher. You are an encouragement!

Your friend, Alyssa

Note from Alyssa’s teacher: Alyssa struggles with severe dyslexia. She also just lost her “best friend,” her grandmother who lived with their family. Your book, and our visit with you, came at a wonderful time for her.

Feedback from a teacher who participated in Eco-Conversations, a video conferencing program that connects schools to discuss environmental issues and carbon emissions:

I personally feel that every school should use VC. The benefits to my special education and Title 1 students were absolutely amazing! They played a big part in drawing the backgrounds...and felt very successful! These students were on equal ground with the “A Students” and did a better job!! It had an educational impact on EVERY student that I teach!

Karen Ennesser
Dowagiac Middle School

My students absolutely LOVED IT. You know they really liked it when they are telling other teachers and students about it!!! Talking to another country is by far the best VC out there!! When you have students like those here in Dowagiac who have maybe been as far away as Detroit or Chicago (many not that far) they are fascinated with the accents, language usage.....very cool, I would talk to another country any time it was available!

Karen Ennesser
Dowagiac Middle School

4. Originality

Is it the first, the only, the best or the most effective application of its kind? (None of the Above/First/Only/Most Effective/All of the Above)

MOST EFFECTIVE

What are the exceptional aspects of your project? (In 600 words or less)

In many school systems around the country, video conferencing is still a novelty. That's not the case in Berrien and Cass Counties where video conferencing is built into the program with a comprehensive support structure. One of the county's school buildings held 74 conferences in a one-year period with only 17 teachers. And some schools in the region even have separate budgets for video conferencing.

Very few school systems are using video conferencing to the extent and the amount that it is being used by Berrien RESA. That is attributable at least in part to the "curriculum video conferencing" model being employed. Another program differentiator, curriculum video conferencing is based on research that led to the development of video conference programs for K-8 students that enhance and meet the Michigan Curriculum Frameworks.

Finally, Janine Lim, instructional technology consultant, with Berrien RESA spearheaded the development of the largest and most accurate video program database in the country with nearly 2,000 listings. The Video Conference Program Database (<http://www.VCcontentproviders.org>), sponsored by Polycom, contains more than 1,900 programs from content providers such as zoos and museums that offer ISDN or IP-based video conferencing. The database is a global resource and receives more than 20,000 hits a month. Search functions include program description, program title, content provider, standards/subject area, grade level, program fee, technology restrictions, or country.

5. Difficulty

What were the most important obstacles that had to be overcome in order for your work to be successful? Technical problems? Resources? Expertise? Organizational problems? (In 600 words or less)

Often the most innovative projects encounter the greatest resistance when they were originally proposed. If you encountered an obstacle like fighting for approval or funding, please provide a summary of the objections you faced and how you overcame them. (In 300 words or less)

The greatest obstacle the Berrien RESA Video Conference Program had to overcome was funding, and it remains an ongoing issue. All of the program's activities are grant funded which means the dollar amounts available for equipment and content can vary significantly over time. The organization has dealt with its funding challenges by taking advantage of no-cost content, some of which is offered through Video Conference Program Database, and also by facilitating collaborations among classes around the world which are also free of charge.

In addition, the schools in Berrien and Cass counties see the value of interactive video conference programming for their students, so they work on their own to find sources of funding.

Access was another significant challenge early on for the Berrien RESA Video Conference Program. In 1999, only the high schools had video systems on site. That meant the elementary and middle school classes had to take a bus to the high school campuses to participate in video conferences. The organization solved the problem by applying for a US Department of Agriculture Rural Utilities Service Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grant that funded additional equipment in an expanded number of schools. Not only was access improved, schools moved from occasional use of video conferencing to an integrated program that is now part of the regular school routine.

The Berrien RESA struggled initially with adoption and had to fine tune over time the structures it established within the schools so that the video conferencing systems would be used, the content taken advantage of and the technology integrated into the curriculum. Time is also often a barrier to adoption given that teachers are held to stringent testing requirements and must spend much of their class time focused on those subject areas. Some classes are taking advantage of the video conferencing network, but not to the fullest extent. For example, classes only participating in content provider programs, not leveraging the essentially free collaborations with peers in other classrooms. The organization works to overcome these obstacles by offering training to teachers through its Planning Interactive Curriculum Connections online course. The class focuses on technology use, finding content, and actually making video connections, giving teachers practice without a classroom full of students.

6. Success

Has your project achieved or exceeded its goals? (No/Achieved/Exceeded)

EXCEEDED

Is it fully operational? (Yes/No)

YES

How do you see your project's success affecting other applications, organizations, or global communities? (In 300 words or less)

The Berrien RESA is a model for schools throughout the United States, a best practices example of how to create the optimum structure and curriculum integration for video conferencing in education.

Examples of schools throughout the nation following the lead of the Berrien Regional Education Service Agency are plentiful. Its Mystery Quest program (<http://www.remcl1.k12.mi.us/dl/MysteryQuest/>) has been adapted by multiple schools in Wisconsin and Texas. The extremely popular Read Around the Planet (<http://www.twice.cc/read/>) was started in Berrien County. It has grown from two classes in the county connecting over video to more than 1,700 classes and 50,000 students around the world participating. The Read Around the Planet format was also used to develop a Black History Month Exchange in Dallas, and several states are running their own Read Across the state programs, including New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Dakota, and Arizona. In addition, several regional education service agencies across the country have built their video conference programs using the Berrien RESA model.

The organization's Video conference Program Database (<http://www.VCcontentproviders.org>) has become a global resource, receiving more than 20,000 hits a month, that guides educators all over the world to appropriate and effective video content for use in their classrooms.

The organization's online training course, Planning Interactive Curriculum Connections (www.remcl1.k12.mi.us/dl/picc; <http://collaborativevcs.pbwiki.com/>) is now in its 11th session and includes participants from eight countries. In total, more than 200 participants from across the country and internationally have taken the course. Many participants are regional- or state-level coordinators who have implemented collaborative projects in their regions due to taking the class. At the end of the course, participants write their own online projects and have contributed to the largest online collection of teacher-designed collaborative projects available for video conferencing.

The Berrien RESA has also published an online booklet, accessible to any educator, that offers video conferencing training.

How quickly has your targeted audience of users embraced your innovation? Or, how rapidly do you predict they will?

(In 300 words or less)

In the 2007-2008 school year alone, more than 18,000 students were impacted by the program. All 70 participating schools hold video conferences each year, with a growth from 150 video conferences a year in the early 2000s to more than 900 video conferences in 2007-2008. Schools are also growing to the point where they can make their own video conferences happen without the assistance of Berrien RESA. This independence on the part of some schools makes it easier to sustain this level of growth in the future.

7. Demographics

(Please note, contact and demographic information will remain confidential to the program and will not be provided to the Judges.)

What is your Business/Industry?

Non-Tech: Advertising/Marketing/PR/Media (Publishing, Broadcast, Online)

Non-Tech: Agriculture/Forestry/Fisheries

Non-Tech: Education

Non-Tech: Finance/Banking/Accounting

Non-Tech: Government (including Military, Federal, State, & Local)

Non-Tech: Healthcare/Medical/Pharmaceutical/Bio-Tech

Non-Tech: Insurance/Real Estate/Legal

Non-Tech: Manufacturing & Process Industries

Non-Tech: Mining/Oil/Gas

Non-Tech: Retailer/Wholesaler/Distributor

Non-Tech: Transportation/Utilities (Energy, Water, etc.)

Non-Tech: Travel/Hospitality/Entertainment/Recreation

Non-Tech: Other

Tech: Communication Carriers (ISP, Telecom, Data Comm Cable)

Tech: Manufacturing - Hardware/Software

Tech: Service Provider (MSP, BSP, ASP, ESP, Web Hosting)

Tech: Other

What is your Job Title/Function:

IT Management: CIO, CTO, CSO

IT Management: Director

IT Management: Manager

IT Management: Technical Consultant

IT Management: VP

Business Management: CEO, COO, Chairman, President

Business Management: Other Corporate, Business Manager

Other: Non-Manager

What best describes your involvement in the IT purchase process?

Authorize/approve purchase
Evaluate/recommend products, brands, vendors
Specify features/technical requirements
Set budget for expenditures
Determine need to purchase
Create IT strategy
All of the above
None of the above

Number of employees in your entire company:

Over 20,000
10,000 - 19,999
5,000 - 9,999
1,000 - 4,999
500 - 999
100 - 499
50 - 99
Less than 50

What is your company's annual IT/IS budget for all IT/IS products?

\$1 billion +
\$500 to \$999.9 million
\$100 to \$499.9 million
\$50 to \$99.9 million
\$10 to \$49.9 million
\$1 to \$9.9 million
\$500,000 to \$999,999
\$250,000 to \$499,999
\$100,000 to \$249,999
None

What is the estimated annual revenue of your entire company?

\$10 Billion +
\$1 Billion - \$9.9 Billion

\$500 Million - \$999 Million

\$100 Million - \$499 Million

Less than \$100 Million

Would you like to receive a complimentary subscription to Computerworld?

Yes

No

If you answered 'Yes' to the previous question, what is the last digit of the year of your birthdate?

0

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

What is your organization's MOST mission critical development/implementation project this year?

Business Intelligence/BPM/Customer Analytics

Data Management

Mobile & Wireless

Enterprise Infrastructure/Data Center Buildout/Consolidation

Network Infrastructure/Storage

Security

Application Development and Integration (Web services/EAI)

Compliance

What is your organization's SECOND-MOST mission critical development/implementation project this year?

Business Intelligence/BPM/Customer Analytics

Data Management

Mobile & Wireless

Enterprise Infrastructure/Data Center Buildout/Consolidation

Network Infrastructure/Storage

Security

Application Development and Integration (Web services/EAI)

Compliance

8. Additional Questions

How do you think Information Technology will be different in 2020? (In 300 words or less)

Videoconferencing in particular needs to grow to the point where it is as easy as a phone call and works cross-vendor without dialing challenges. I hope that this technology will be that easy in 10 years.

What does being a part of the 2009 Computerworld Honors Program mean to you? (In 300 words or less)

It's an incredible honor to be nominated, and to have the opportunity to network with other nominees and award winners.

9. Program Release Question

Since 1988, materials submitted to the Computerworld Honors Program have become part of the Program's Global Archives and is available online at www.cwhonors.org. Your submission materials will become a valuable component of the Program's Global Archives and will be included in the permanent research collections of more than 350 distinguished national archives, museums and institutions of higher learning. Your materials may be provided to media outlets interested in reporting on Computerworld Honors. In addition, Computerworld may also nominate your project to other Best Practices Awards Programs as applicable.

Please check YES below to allow public access to the materials you submit to the Computerworld Honors Program.

Alternatively, your organization has the choice to restrict public access to your submission materials, so the general public cannot view your Case Study and any additional materials provided to the Program. If you wish for your materials to be embargoed, the Program will publish the Introductory Overview section only. Please note that the Program's 21st Century Achievement Award Judges will need to review all of the materials your organization provides, including the Case Study in its full state, in order for your organization to become a Finalist or 21st Century Achievement Award Recipient.

Please check NO if you don't want to make your Case Study available to the public.

YES, I am allowing public access to materials that my organization submits to the Computerworld Honors Program

NO, I do not want my Case Study or any materials that are submitted to the Computerworld Honors Program available to the public. I wish to embargo these materials.

Digital/Visual Materials

The Program welcomes nominees to submit digital and visual images with their Case Study. We are currently only accepting .gif, .jpg and .xls files that are 1MB or smaller. The submission of these materials is not required; however, please note that a maximum of three files will be accepted per nominee. These files will be added to the end of your Case Study and will be labeled as "Appendix 1",

"Appendix 2" or "Appendix 3." Finally, feel free to reference these images in the text of your Case Study by specifically referring to them as "Appendix 1", "Appendix 2" or "Appendix 3."

Note: send all materials to Debbie Ryan, they are uploaded via the online form.

Video Materials

Please send videos that represent your project or organization in Mini DV, DVD, or BETA SP format.

Select images from your materials may be shown at the Gala Awards Evening on June 1, 2009. Please note, materials are requested but not required. In addition, materials will not be used in the judging process and are for program use only. Send these to Ann Spurling, Executive Producer, Computerworld Honors Program, c/o Electronic Field Productions, 3495 Winton Place, Building D, Rochester NY 14623.