To appropriately equip students with the information and resources necessary to develop skills for success in college and careers, schools and libraries must have equitable access to Internet infrastructure. The FCC Universal Service Program for Schools and Libraries (also known as the E-Rate program), the federal government's largest education technology program,[1] offers an opportunity to meet this goal.

The program, which was established pursuant to the Telecommunications Act of 1996,[2] subsidizes two categories of services using a competitive application process: 1) telecommunications and Internet connections for schools and libraries and 2) internal connections and related maintenance within schools and libraries receiving Internet and telecommunications services. The amount of support awarded is determined by the level of poverty and geographic location of the schools and libraries.[3]

The FCC began modernizing the E-Rate program in July 2014 by issuing an E-Rate Modernization Order to expand Wi-Fi connections in schools and libraries while continuing broadband support services.[4] The FCC issued a second order in December 2014 that, among other things, increased E-Rate program funding for the first time since 1997.[5]

The E-Rate program is critical to millions of Latinos* and low-income communities that depend on schools and public libraries to access the Internet. Nearly half of Latino children live in households without home Internet.[6] The E-Rate program is an important measure in the federal government's ongoing effort to level the playing field and bridge the digital gap that persists in Hispanic, Black, and low-income communities.

THE FCC E-RATE PROGRAM

Universal service, a cornerstone of the Communications Act of 1934, which sought to ensure that all Americans had access to telephone communications,[7] was expanded by the Communications Act of 1996 to include[8] schools and libraries through E-Rate. The E-Rate program:

- Helps eligible schools and libraries obtain affordable Internet connections
- Supports telecommunications and access, as well as internal connections and maintenance services, for schools and libraries that provide Internet access
- Provides a 20–90% discount on eligible services
- Bases subsidies on poverty levels and whether the schools and libraries are located in rural or urban locations
- Is funded through an assessment of telephone carriers' revenues, which is passed on to business and residential consumers[9]

THE NEED TO MODERNIZE THE E-RATE PROGRAM

Innovative digital education technologies, as well as the Internet's growing role in connecting teachers, students, and communities to jobs, information, and ongoing learning opportunities, has led to greater demand for high-speed Internet and Wi-Fi connections at schools and libraries. Since announcing its modernization efforts, the FCC received public comments that included the following:

- A 2014 survey[10] found that affordability and adequate funding were the largest barriers to Internet connectivity.
- 80% of school districts indicated that E-Rate funding was inadequate, and only 9% of school districts had adequate bandwidth to fully meet demand.[11]
- Black, Latino, low-income, and rural students are twice as likely to be in schools with low Internet access compared to their peers and less likely to be in schools with high-speed Internet.[12]

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* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

- 60% of public schools (40 million students) did not have the wired broadband capacity needed to facilitate digital learning.[13]

- 68% of all school districts reported not having one school in their district able to meet long-term high-speed connectivity targets.[14]

- 45% of school districts lacked sufficient Wi-Fi capacity to achieve modern digital learning objectives.[15]

- 50% of public libraries reported inadequate connections with speeds far below targets for libraries.[16]

FCC E-RATE MODERNIZATION ORDERS

In July 2014, the FCC issued an order to expand Wi-Fi connections in schools and libraries while continuing broadband support services. This order:[17]

- Sets funding at $1 billion in support for fiscal years 2015 and 2016, with a target to connect 10 million students to Wi-Fi in 2015 alone

- Funds Wi-Fi expansion through savings gained by ending or phasing out funding for legacy services (e.g., paging and phone services)

- Provides schools and libraries in rural areas with equitable access to funding for Wi-Fi

- Strengthens schools' ability to negotiate with service providers by requiring transparency through online posting of prices and terms for E-Rate subsidized services

On December 11, 2014, the FCC issued its second order expanding modernization of the E-Rate program. Broadly, the FCC order:[18]

- Expands funding for Wi-Fi connections until 2019

- Raises the annual funding cap, established in 1997, from $2.4 billion to $3.9 billion, indexed for inflation

- Establishes a performance management system to improve program performance and give schools and libraries flexibility for purchasing broadband services

NCLR'S COMMENTS ON E-RATE MODERNIZATION

NCLR supports federal policies and programs that assist Latino students and families in gaining access to telecommunications and Internet services. NCLR applauds the FCC's E-Rate modernization measures and funding increases. These efforts are critically important to accommodating the ever-increasing demand for faster Internet connections in schools and libraries and providing students and communities with greater access to updated technology.

NCLR has long maintained that expanding E-Rate to cover community-based organizations would be a more comprehensive approach to reaching Latinos. Language barriers can keep Latinos and other immigrant communities from seeking services outside of their established community networks. NCLR remains concerned about current Internet inequities in predominantly Hispanic and low-income schools. The E-Rate modernization order makes great strides toward improving student and community access to updated technology, but the administration's goal to connect 99% of students to high-speed Internet cannot be realized without addressing the significant disparities that currently exist in schools with large minority and low-income student populations. It is therefore imperative that the FCC, in implementing the provisions of its E-Rate modernization order, ensure sufficient funding to eliminate school technology inequities.

ENDNOTES

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