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## Slow Connection

*TUSD administrators look to boost the schools' lagging technology infrastructure*

By **DAVE DEVINE** ✉

Barack Obama's inauguration was historic, but some students in the Tucson Unified School District missed it: The bandwidth capacity of their schools is so limited that they only got to see a choppy streaming video image from Washington, D.C.

"We have a limited capacity of infrastructure," confirms Brian MacMaster, the district's chief technology officer since April 2008. This infrastructure delivers technology to schools through either landline or wireless networks. "Our schools have limited capacity to use Web-based applications (for education). There are many new educational offerings based on technology, but without the infrastructure, TUSD has to limit its curriculum offerings."

Former Superintendent Roger Pfeuffer was hoping to address the problem in 2006. He wanted to eventually supply every district school with one gigabit of capacity. Currently, almost all TUSD elementary and middle schools have less than 1 percent of that figure, while district high schools range from below 1 percent to 10 percent.

To bring the district's technology into the 21st century, TUSD in 2006 submitted a five-year, \$35 million application for federal E-Rate funds. Much of this money was to be combined with \$7.6 million in voter-approved bonds to improve the district's technology, primarily by using a wireless system.

But those funds never came, because the process ran into legal issues about how the application was assembled. (See "Communications Breakdown," June 8, 2006.) That led to the Arizona Attorney General's Office filing civil charges against some of those involved.

After the 2006 fiasco, the district scaled back its ambitious technology plans. In the last two years, TUSD has applied for \$4.8 million and \$5.6 million, respectively, in E-Rate funds, much of it for technology improvements.

Even though the federal government has already awarded a high percentage of available E-Rate funds for the last two years, TUSD has not received any notification about its applications. MacMaster hopes that situation is about to change.

"Now that the attorney general has released his findings," he says, "I feel confident (the federal government) will move forward with our applications."

Assuming they do, the district's chances of receiving large amounts of money don't appear promising. While many other school districts in Tucson have annually been awarded funds, TUSD's last successful E-Rate application was in 2002.



Jason Swift

Former Superintendent Roger Pfeuffer hoped to boost TUSD bandwidth capacity in schools in 2006, but the needed funds never came.



On top of that, most E-Rate awards are for relatively small dollar amounts, with some exceptions. Between 2006 and 2008, the largest award to a Tucson-area school district was less than \$500,000; in Arizona, the largest was \$5.8 million in 2006, and \$2.9 million in 2007.

Even if TUSD gets some E-Rate funds, the technology target has been significantly reduced since Pfeuffer set his goals. The current plan is to make \$485,000 worth of improvements over a three-year period to increase capacity at elementary schools to one-tenth of his 1 gigabit goal; to 30 percent for middle schools; and to half for high schools.

"It's a pay-as-you-go plan," MacMaster says of this landline proposal from Qwest. "As our demand grows, the infrastructure can also grow."

MacMaster says he thinks these improvements would provide district schools with enough technology capacity for today, but "in five years, we may have to re-evaluate the situation."

The annual service charge for this proposed upgrade, MacMaster adds, is \$2.6 million. That compares to a current cost of \$1.2 million.

MacMaster is also presently preparing a request for proposals for consulting services to assist the district with its future E-Rate process. The results could be presented to the TUSD governing board within a few months.

Following the ill-fated 2006 application, the California-based Miller Institute for Learning With Technology became the district's E-Rate consultant. To date, the Miller Institute has been paid \$220,000.

"Miller hasn't gotten us one penny of E-Rate money," points out TUSD Governing Board President Judy Burns, a longtime critic of hiring consultants to assist with E-Rate paperwork. "If district staff could (successfully) do E-Rate applications in the past, why not now?"

Burns also isn't completely comfortable with the district's current technology-improvement plan. "I have the same question now that I put to Roger Pfeuffer in early 2005," Burns says. "Give me a plan which takes us from where we are now to where we need to be, along with its cost."

"We need to spend money wisely," Burns says, adding that she has several unanswered questions about the financial impacts of the Qwest proposal.

Even if the 2007 and 2008 TUSD E-Rate applications aren't fully funded, the district still has \$3.3 million in bond money available for technology upgrades. Plus, there is always the chance that the governing board may once again seek voter approval for a budget override in November; an override question narrowly failed last November.

Once a proponent of placing the override on the ballot again, Burns is more cautious now. Given the economic downturn, combined with the state Legislature's cuts in funding for education, she is uncertain on how to proceed.

"If property taxes go down," Burns says about what could happen because of falling real-estate values, "maybe people would support an override. But if they don't, the override just may be folly."

For his part, MacMaster takes another approach.

"We don't need luck," he says about improving TUSD's technology capacity. "We need millions."

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