

Shrinking School Budget ?

Thursday, May 7, 2009

Stimulus aims to help close digital divide

Wed, May 06, 2009

[Send](#) [Print](#) [Reprints](#) [RSS](#)

Stimulus aims to help close digital divide

More than \$7 billion available to bring broadband access to underserved areas

By Maya T. Prabhu, Assistant Editor

Primary Topic Channel: [Legislation](#) , [Federal Policy](#) , [Broadband](#)

With more than \$7 billion of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act set aside for increasing broadband access in the United States, the stimulus presents a huge opportunity for schools and communities to help close the digital divide.

The stimulus package authorizes the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to implement the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP), which is a \$4.7 billion, one-time competitive matching grants program. The funds are intended to expand broadband services to underserved areas, improve broadband access for public safety agencies, stimulate the economy, and create jobs. Besides the funding in BTOP, an additional \$2.3 billion has been set aside for broadband in a variety of other stimulus programs.

Of this \$4.7 billion, \$4.35 billion will pay for competitive grants to acquire and deploy equipment, technology, and infrastructure that promotes access and educational or employment opportunities among low-income, unemployed, and otherwise vulnerable populations and improves public safety broadband communications services.

Of this amount, \$250 million is slated for innovative programs that encourage sustainable adoption of broadband services; at least \$200 million will go toward upgrading technology and capacity at public computing centers, including those at community colleges and public libraries; and \$10 million will be transferred to the office of inspector general for program audits and oversight. Another \$350 million will be set aside for developing and maintaining statewide broadband inventory maps to provide an accurate representation of broadband availability across the United States.

The two-year, competitive BTOP grants will be available to states, nonprofit organizations (including schools and colleges that bring broadband services to their larger communities), and internet service providers, and they require a 20-percent matching investment from nonfederal funding sources.

"There is a growing use of online learning in both brick-and-mortar and distance education. Anything that can provide increased broadband access to more students can only be a benefit," said Cheryl Vedoe, chief executive officer of Apex Learning, a company that provides online curriculum to high schools as well as institutions of higher education.

Alan Wohlstetter, chair of Fox Rothschild's infrastructure practice group, worked with Wirefree Wilkes-Barre in Pennsylvania to create a municipal wireless system in that community. By providing wireless broadband access throughout the city, he said, the program has enabled the students in the city's colleges and universities to have more access to broadband.

"What we've seen in Wilkes-Barre is that broadband makes it easier for students to do their work and involve technology in education," Wohlstetter said.

But just providing access might not be enough to close the digital divide, said M. René Islas, vice president at B&D Consulting. He said schools need to ensure that educators are receiving the necessary training as well.

"We need to ensure that with the expansion of broadband, we also overcome the novelty of having technology in the classroom," said Islas. "Part of the access issue is that even though students don't have access to the technology, they also don't have access to experienced teachers."

Increasing broadband availability can also boost campus security, Wohlstetter said. Creating a wireless system in Wilkes-Barre will enable the city to connect 150 video surveillance cameras via an IP network.

"This enhances the safety of students at educational institutions," he said, adding that increasing the availability of broadband in underserved areas "can help ... with public safety and economic development" in addition to education.

In the stimulus package, Congress requires the Federal Communications Commission to create a national broadband plan. To fulfill that requirement, the FCC is soliciting input from all stakeholders to provide a roadmap toward ensuring that all Americans reap the benefits of broadband.

In reference to education, the FCC is asking the community for input on topics such as what role broadband can play in boosting school quality, what role libraries can play in marshalling broadband access to advance education, and what are the barriers to bringing broadband into the classroom.

"It is technology that intersects with just about every great challenge confronting our nation--whether it's jobs, education, energy, climate change and the environment, international competitiveness, health care, overcoming disabilities, equal opportunity--the list goes on," said Acting FCC Chairman Michael J. Copps in a statement. "Enabling our people and our enterprises through value-laden broadband can spell the difference between just muddling through if we're lucky and opening the way to many more years of U.S. prosperity and world leadership."

The stimulus law requires the FCC to assemble its national broadband plan and present it to Congress by next February. Comments are due June 8, with reply comments due July 7. For details, see the FCC web site (look for GN Docket No. 09-51).

Links:

[Broadband Technology Opportunities Program](#)

[Federal Communications Commission](#)

eSchoolNews

7920 Norfolk Ave, Suite 900, Bethesda Maryland, 20814

Tel. (866) 394-0115, Fax. (301) 913-0119

Web: <http://www.eschoolnews.com>, Email: WebAdmin@eschoolnews.com