

Building a Bridge Over the Equity Gap



Schools nationwide implement creative and cost-saving solutions to increase internet access for students

The typical evening in America has changed in one generation from a family huddled around a single television screen to one dominated by individual handheld and laptop devices, connected to the world through the miracle of the internet.

Many students who use tablets and computers at school continue to use them in their studies and leisure activities at home. But across this digital divide are 60 million Americans who lack home internet access. Often, these students are members of minority groups or lower-income families.

According to the annual Speak Up survey, thirty-five percent of students surveyed said they go to school early or stay late in order to access the internet, while nearly a quarter go to public libraries and 19 percent visit fast-food restaurants and cafes to get online. Crossing this chasm is the biggest challenge for educators tasked with producing successful students in the new millennium.

E-Rate Programs can Equalize

Schools across the country are using the federal E-Rate program to develop creative solutions that overcome the hurdles posed by the equity gap. In addition to connected-classroom initiatives, some districts are implementing programs such as providing loaner laptops that students can use at home.

In Coachella Valley, Calif., administrators took an even more proactive approach, equipping 100 school buses with Wi-Fi routers and solar panels so students could access the internet during long commutes to class, and then parking them overnight in neighborhoods to give students access at home.

The U.S. Federal Communications Commission implemented the E-Rate program to provide discounted telecommunications and internet access to eligible schools and libraries. In 2014, the FCC announced additions to the

program that address the growing gap in digital learning opportunities with discounted benefits to schools and libraries that range from 20 to 90 percent.

Like many federal programs, however, figuring out exactly what is eligible for discounts under E-Rate, as well as implementing the program, can be intimidating. The Middlesex Regional Educational Services Commission (MRESC), a state-chartered organization that provides cooperative, cost-efficient education, transportation and business services to 800 K-12 New Jersey Schools and numerous government agencies, worked with Comcast and Dellicker Strategies to navigate the process.

To help member districts acquire scalable, high-capacity connectivity, MRESC sought to broker a deal with local Ethernet service providers so that member districts could leverage federal E-Rate funds. With the help of Dellicker Strategies, a consulting firm that specializes in the areas of blended learning and the telecommunications purchasing process, the MRESC embarked on an expansive project to upgrade and future-proof the network infrastructure for more than 100 K-12 schools across New Jersey.

“In the past, our member schools had to seek funding for Internet services through E-Rate directly, and that is a very cumbersome process. With the consortium, MRESC submitted a single request on behalf of all K-12 schools in New Jersey. When individual schools were ready to select and apply for funding, it was much less time consuming,” said Patrick Moran, business administrator and board secretary for the MRESC.

Comcast provides the expertise and technology to help bridge the equity gap in the classroom, in public libraries, and at home. Visit Comcast at business.comcast.com.

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