COVID-19 and Broadband Access in SREB States: Resources and Strategies for Extended School Closures

Many students and educators across the nation have been forced to shift from a face-to-face educational format to online and digital education delivery. As such, access to sufficient broadband speeds to support digital learning has become one of the most pressing issues of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the recently published *2020 Broadband Deployment Report* from the FCC indicates that the digital divide is rapidly closing, the need for home access broadband has increased, and the gaps — those who do not have access to reliable, stable broadband — have been significantly highlighted. Many SREB states have achieved the minimum standards for connectivity to schools, but the rural areas beyond the school buildings require innovative actions to provide equitable access for both K-12 and postsecondary students.

Federal Communications Commission

Keep Americans Connected Pledge

FCC has asked that companies make sure that Americans stay connected by ensuring that these organizations will:

1. not terminate service to any residential or small business customers because of their inability to pay their bills due to the disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic;

2. waive any late fees that any residential or small business customers incur because of their economic circumstances related to the coronavirus pandemic; and

3. open its Wi-Fi hotspots to any American who needs them.

Over 700 companies, both large and small, have signed the pledge so far.

E-Rate Program Extension

1) Extends the service delivery deadline for nonrecurring services for funding year 2019 by one year, from September 30, 2020 to September 30, 2021

2) Grants schools and libraries an automatic 60-day extension to file requests for review or waiver of decisions by the E-Rate program administrator, the Universal Service Administrative Company

3) Provides applicants and service providers an automatic 120-day extension of the invoice filing deadline

4) Gives all program participants an additional 30-day extension to respond to certain information requests from USAC

Additionally, there are several pieces of legislation that would expand the E-rate funding program to allow schools and districts to use the funding to purchase wireless hotspots, internet-connected devices and internet service for its students.

The CARES Act – Education Stabilization Fund

[Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund](#) — $16B made available for "purchasing educational technology (including hardware, software, and connectivity) for students who are served by the local educational agency that aids in regular and substantive educational interaction between students and their classroom instructors, including low-income students and students with disabilities, which may include assistive technology or adaptive equipment."

The Department of Education specifically requests information regarding "the extent to which the SEA intends to use any portion of its SEA reserve (up to 10% of its ESSER Fund award) to support:

- technological capacity and access — including hardware and software, connectivity, and instructional expertise — to support remote learning
- remote learning by developing new informational and academic resources and expanding awareness of, and access to, best practices and innovations in remote learning and support for students, families, and educators

[Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund](#) — $3B made available for states to "establish, develop, improve, or expand the availability, accessibility, capacity, and use of remote learning techniques and technologies which includes distance education."

TV Whitespace for Last Mile Connectivity

TV Whitespace refers to the unused, low-frequency UHF and VHF spectrum that can be used for [innovative wifi distribution](#) to rural and difficult terrains through specialized radios and new or existing towers. Traditional wifi is limited to about 100 meters but TV whitespace has a range of 10 kilometers, and it can be transmitted through buildings and environmental barriers. The [FCC](#) makes this spectrum available for public use, and at least two states ([North Carolina](#) and [West Virginia](#)) in the SREB region are implementing this technology to reach very rural or mountainous areas with no broadband access and limited cellular service. In providing equitable access to rural, low-income students, TV whitespace is a promising option for bridging the digital divide for these students.

Additional K-20 Strategies for Expanding Broadband Access

Keeping Students and Faculty Connected

- https://www.govtech.com/network/Cities-Deploy-Rapid-Digital-Inclusion-Efforts-Amid-Crisis.html
- http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2020/04/internet_access_stimulus_urged.html

WiFi Maps

- https://georgia-dca.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=5fed233c11c9417b940d93d80b68498
- https://ed.sc.gov/newsroom/covid-19-coronavirus-and-south-carolina-schools/

Mobile WiFi Hotspots

- https://www.govtech.com/network/Washington-County-Turns-Buses-into-Mobile-Hotspots.html
- https://www.govtech.com/network/Illinois-City-Purchases-Wi-Fi-Hotspots-for-Students.html
- https://www.govtech.com/education/k-12/Virginia-School-System-Turns-Buses-into-Wi-Fi-Hot-Spots.html

Technology for All

- https://www.govtech.com/budget-finance/Federal-Grant-Money-to-Buy-Tech-for-Atlanta-Students-at-Home.html
- https://www.govtech.com/network/Baltimore-Taps-Youth-Fund-to-Get-Students-Connected.html

Partnering for Broadband

- https://www.govtech.com/network/Massachusetts-Program-Hooks-Students-up-to-Internet.html

Federal Legislation in Consideration

- https://www.digitalequityact.org/ LIFT Act

Broadband in Hard to Reach Areas

- https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/apr/30/house-democrats-roll-out-86-billion-plan-broadband/
- https://wbhm.org/feature/2020/rural-alabama-pandemic-highlights-need-broadband-access/

TV Whitespace

- https://www.finalmilecommunications.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/TVWS-FMC-Website-MM-200510.pdf
- https://www.fcc.gov/general/white-space
- https://www.engadget.com/2012-01-30-north-carolina-launches-fcc-approved-tv-white-space-network-in-w.html
- http://wvutoday-archive.wvu.edu/n/2013/07/09/nation-s-first-campus-super-wi-fi-network-launches-at-west-virginia-university.html