

E-rate still helps with connections

The E-rate program, which is entering its 20th cycle and is worth \$4 billion, is still giving. It can still help districts connect their school buildings to the internet, says John Harrington, CEO of Funds for Learning consulting firm.

Almost all of the physical infrastructure necessary to wire a school building for internet access qualifies for E-rate funding. Eligible expenses include wireless access points, data cabling, network switches and other related items such as conduits and connectors. Administrators can also seek E-rate funds to install high-speed data connections between buildings. Most districts choose to connect their buildings via a wide area network, and lease one central connection to the internet, Harrington says.

Such connectivity arrangements are cost-effective because they allow all schools to share a single internet connection. They also enhance network security because a centralized firewall and other security measures monitor the internet traffic flowing throughout the district. And such arrangements keep all internal communication within the district. For example, an e-mail between a few teachers never leaves the district's network.

"For many years, the E-rate program helped only a small number of schools—about 1 in 20 schools could receive those funds," Harrington says. "When the program was reformed [in late 2014], all school sites could qualify for some funding for internal connections. But a lot of district administrators I've talked to recently haven't really gotten that memo. They don't think it can help them with their hardware needs, and that's not true."

So far, only one in four schools have used hardware funding under E-rate.

Funding for leasing connections

Also, in the past, districts had to lease data connections between buildings, typically from a local phone or cable company, even if those buildings were across the street from each other, Harrington says. The connections are in the form of physical cables (either copper or fiber optics) that run between physical addresses within the community.

Now districts can use E-rate funding to lease such connections or install a high-speed fiber optic cable themselves. In most cases, wires are hung on telephone poles around the community (which is the least expensive route), or the cables are buried under or alongside city roads, Harrington says.

Need for speed

Reform in the E-rate program in 2014 raised the annual spending cap by more than 60 percent and shifted the program's focus from legacy voice technologies to broadband and Wi-Fi. Districts will have access to more than \$4 billion in 2017 for connectivity upgrades. Meanwhile, the number of E-rate requests for high-speed internet has doubled since last year, according to Funds for Learning's "2016 E-Rate Trends Report." Other points of the report:

- 74 percent of districts surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they had faster internet connections because of the E-rate program.
- 62 percent of districts surveyed agreed or strongly agreed the E-rate competitive bidding process lowers the prices that vendors quote for services.
- 87 percent of districts agreed or strongly agreed that E-rate funding is vital to their internet connectivity goals.

See DAmag.me/f7 for the full report.

— Angela Pascopella

'Empowerment Zone' offers hope to failing schools

By Lauren Barack

Six Springfield, Massachusetts, middle schools, flagged as close to failing by the state two years ago, seized an unusual opportunity to run themselves.

Now they form the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, an entity that's still part of the Springfield Public Schools but which functions with more autonomy than the district's other schools. The program was developed by the district, the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the Springfield Education Association teachers' union.

Not a charter, not a typical school

The Empowerment Zone is neither a typical district school nor a charter school. It provides a third approach by keeping elements of the district structure, such as neighborhood school assignments, unionized faculty and a board with a local voice. And while charter schools generally require students to apply, middle school students who live in the Empowerment Zone can just enroll. But like charters, individualized school teams have more flexibility to run their own schools.

Each of the nine Empowerment Zone schools (the original six middle schools were turned into nine) has a principal and a teacher leadership team, each elected by their school peers. Each also sets its own curriculum, manages staff and runs its budget, which can range from \$2 million to \$6.5 million for the middle schools, and more than \$10 million for a high school joining the zone next fall.

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