

BROADBAND, CONNECTIVITY, CYBERSECURITY, AND E-RATE COSSBA Requests



Executive Requests

- Efficiency and equity in the operation of the E-Rate program.
- Enhanced and expanded capacity of the E-Rate program.
- Flexibility in E-Rate program requirements and eligibility, as communities continue to utilize virtual instruction at an unprecedented level.
- Sustained quality and speed of connectivity in schools.
- Focus on closing the education technology gap and “The Homework Gap” for students in rural and low-income communities.
- Additionally, COSSBA opposes the FCC’s proposal to place a budget cap on the Universal Service Fund and the E-Rate program.

Congressional Requests

- Enactment of legislation that codifies and funds federal support for implementing effective cybersecurity measures for K-12 schools.
- Distribution of emergency funding for students who lack access to devices and/or connectivity.
- Implementation of a permanent exemption or solution to the Anti-Deficiency Act.
- Reinstatement of net neutrality to ensure that schools are not paying additional costs.
- Continue to support robust funding for rural broadband deployment in the upcoming Farm Bill reauthorization.

Issue History

Broadband and Connectivity

A vast majority of schools across the country have the capacity to connect students to the internet every day, but, according to Education Superhighway, only 38% of school districts meet the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recommended level of one megabit per second.¹

As of recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 94% of U.S. households with children aged 3 to 18 have internet access, but only 88% have access through a computer. This statistic reflects the increasing importance of internet connectivity for educational purposes and the efforts to close the digital divide. Further, while a high percentage of households have internet access, a smaller proportion have reliable access through a computer, which is often necessary for more effective educational activities compared to access through mobile devices.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted in-school instruction, programs supporting at-home learning reduced the number of students without broadband access by 20-40% and reduced the number of students without a device by 40-60%. Analysis finds that over 75% of these programs’ efforts will expire in the next one to three years.³ These expirations could reverse some of the progress made in closing the digital divide unless permanent solutions are implemented.

Cybersecurity

Public schools rely on information technology for many operations. But cybersecurity incidents, like ransomware attacks, significantly affect everything from educational instruction to school operations. K-12 schools have reported significant educational impact due to cybersecurity incidents. Cyberattacks can also cause monetary losses for targeted schools due to the downtime and resources needed to recover from incidents. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), officials from state and local entities report that the loss of learning following a cyberattack can range from 3 days to 3 weeks, and recovery time ranges from 2 to 9 months.⁴

The number of cyberattacks on K-12 public schools has significantly increased in recent years. The K-12 Cybersecurity Resource Center reported that in 2020, there were over 400 publicly disclosed cybersecurity incidents, which was an 18% increase from the previous year. The most common types of cyberattacks include ransomware, phishing, and data breaches. Ransomware attacks, where hackers encrypt a school's data and demand payment for its release, have been particularly prevalent. These attacks can have severe consequences, including disruptions to learning, financial losses, and the exposure of sensitive student and staff information. Some schools have had to shut down operations temporarily to address cybersecurity breaches. Further, the financial impact of cyberattacks on schools can be substantial. Costs can include ransom payments, recovery efforts, legal fees, and investments in improved cybersecurity measures. The average cost of a data breach for educational institutions was reported to be around \$3.9 million. Literally impacting millions of students across the nation, this problem is growing at an alarming rate as are the costs to adequately address it.

E-Rate Program

The federal E-Rate program helps eligible schools and libraries access affordable telecommunications, internet access, and internal connections by providing discounts from 20-90%. E-Rate is administered by the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC), which was created in 1997 under the FCC.⁵

Funding for the E-Rate program is based on demand and is currently capped at \$4.276 billion. To be eligible for funding, a school must meet the statutory definition of an elementary or secondary school.⁶ An eligible school may submit a request to the USAC for identified goods and services, followed by the school selecting the most cost-effective goods and services from competitive bids. Next, the school must apply to the USAC for approval of the purchases, and the USAC will issue funding commitments dependent on eligibility.⁷ Discounts for goods and services depend on poverty level and location of the school.⁸ The E-Rate program is a vital component of the national effort to ensure that all students have access to the digital resources necessary for modern education.

During the pandemic, the importance of the E-Rate program was further highlighted as schools transitioned to remote learning. While E-Rate funding itself cannot be used to cover off-campus internet access, the FCC introduced additional initiatives, such as the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF), to help address connectivity needs for remote learning. The ECF program, which has since sunsetted, invested \$7.17 billion to provide support to approximately 18 million students, 11,500 schools, 1,070 libraries, and 130 consortia, and provided nearly 13.5 million connected devices and over 8 million broadband connections. Subsequent FCC action on wi-fi hotspots and other services has allowed a significant part of ECF's homework gap support to continue through the E-Rate.