

Electronic School



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Federal shifts

E-rate and net neutrality could bring changes to technology programs

AS DISTRICTS BECOME MORE invested and reliant on high-speed networks and Wi-Fi access to educate students, school board members need to be aware of how shifts at the federal level could affect the funding and long-term effectiveness of their technology programs.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which completed an overhaul of the \$3.9 billion E-rate program in 2014, now is considering some significant changes to how fees are collected and funds are distributed. These changes, prompted by the appointment of Ajit Pai to FCC chairman, could result in sticker shock for rural and remote school districts that

have come to rely on E-rate to provide students with access to the internet.

E-rate is one of four federal universal service programs funded by fees collected from telecommunications providers. While the program has been criticized over the past two decades because of a cumbersome paperwork process and fees that have escalated faster than some would like, observers say the FCC's 2014 revamp has led to improvements for districts.

Jon Bernstein, a consultant to the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), says he has worried about the future of E-rate "from day one of this administration." On

one hand, Bernstein says, Pai has publicly supported the program and says its future is secure. On the other, the FCC chairman's desired tweaks could have a huge impact on schools.

"One thing that has made E-rate a bipartisan program is that it is about getting what you need to pay for the cost of services. You get what you get," he says. "Bandwidth costs what it costs, and especially in rural areas where access is expensive, changing the formula would be a huge problem. There are losers there."

Pai's proposal to change how E-rate funds are distributed is and should be the largest concern for districts. The FCC chairman has supported a "student-centered" program based on enrollment, which would hurt small, rural school districts that have struggled to upgrade broadband connections.

In the 2014 overhaul, the FCC allowed rural schools to use E-rate funds to build new fiber-optic networks, a huge advantage for states such as Alaska, which receives more federal dollars for E-rate than it does for Title I programs or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

"I don't think it will go away, but given what's been said, I think they are going to tinker with E-rate, and this is not the right time to do that," Bernstein says. "Three years in, there's no need to confuse applicants and make them less willing to take part in the program by making more changes. There is no need for more changes, because it is working better."

NET NEUTRALITY

Another proposed FCC change that has some ed-tech supporters concerned surrounds "net neutrality," the rule that prevents telecommunications companies like AT&T, Comcast,

and Verizon from charging extra fees for faster speeds while throttling, blocking, or slowing the delivery of other content.

Pai is opposed to changes made by the FCC in 2015 that prevent internet providers from creating these “fast lanes.” But ed-tech advocates say weakening the net neutrality rules would be, at best, a hassle for school districts. At worst, it could result in internet service providers becoming more involved in curriculum and content decisions to benefit their commercial interests.

If net neutrality is rolled back, districts will be dealing with another intermediary — the internet service provider — that “comes between them and the online services they want to use,” says Doug Levin, former executive director of the State Educational Technology Directors Association.

“Now, if you decide to use an online service, whether it’s Discovery Education videos, a Pearson product, or the Khan Academy, if you’ve purchased the bandwidth and the devices, then kids can go out and access it without additional costs,” says Levin, who now runs EdTech Strategies, a Washington, D.C., based consulting firm. “Without net neutrality, the carriers can get in the middle of the relationship and make it more expensive to get certain content.”

What happens to students in low-income and rural areas whose families now can barely afford internet access if the net neutrality provisions are removed? Many internet providers have started offering low-cost access to families whose income is below a certain point. Would that continue in a free and open market?

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who can afford to pay for it, and that would be a setback,” Levin says. “It used to be that schools did not assign homework that required students to use the internet because they weren’t sure they had access at home. That’s really turned around in the last five to eight years, but I can see districts doing that again if these provisions are rolled back.”

THE GOLDEN GOOSE

Although Levin is concerned about net neutrality, he agrees that how E-rate is administered in the future “is ultimately the bigger issue.” He and Bernstein say school boards need to pay attention to the FCC debate because E-rate funding is critical to bringing school buildings and libraries up to date.

Levin and Bernstein both say they are concerned about how universal service funds will be collected in the future. One proposal is to move the funds from interest-bearing commercial bank accounts into the Department of the Treasury, which raises questions about whether they will be subject to the federal appropriation process and potentially used to offset other government deficits.

“This is a money issue for school boards,” Bernstein says. “If E-rate, which is the golden goose, is having its life supply cut off, then you’ve got problems. If this money that you’re

expecting and counting on is not going to be there, then it has to come from somewhere else. And where is it going to come from?”

Levin fears that major changes to E-rate “could have a real effect on districts and their ability to meet mandates for online testing,” which is now the norm in most states.

“E-rate is definitely not out of the woods as things continue to shift,” he says. “Depending on what happens, it could have a multimillion dollar impact on district budgets that feels like it’s coming from nowhere.”

Bernstein says his hope is that E-rate can continue to remain a bipartisan issue at a time in which Congress seems hopelessly divided.

“At the end of the day, what hamstringing the chairman is that E-rate is not a partisan issue. It’s a bipartisan issue,” Bernstein says. “And he will have a hard time steamrolling through major changes without a lot of scrutiny.”



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