Budgeting for the 2014 E-Rate Release

Preparing Your District's Budget For The Future of Technology

School administration and technology procurement departments face new technology pressures every year, both in planning for the needs of their schools and students, and financing them. And the need for extensive planning and financing is obvious: every education model in the country is based on having Internet access within schools, state mandates include integrated technology in their core learning goals, and teachers and students rely on Internet access for daily function within the classroom. Despite this need, most classrooms have a 5.3:1 student to computer ratio [1]and only 40 percent [2]have wireless Internet access for the whole school.

The Schools and Libraries Universal Service Support Mechanism administered by the Universal Service Administrative Company[3] (USAC) under the Federal Communication Commission[4] (FCC), or E-Rate, was created to financially support this need for technology and currently provides support for 95 percent[5] of our nation's students.

School districts across the country are eligible to receive 20-90 percent[6] of their technology-related financial support from the E-rate program to fund Internet access and interconnectivity within their schools. However, when a critical piece of infrastructure relies on funding from outside the district budget that may change or not be approved, more than a budget plan is at risk. Schools don't know when or if they'll be able to move forward with proposed plans. And if schools rely on funds and do not receive them, students and teachers will be left without access and may not meet internal, state, and federal technology goals.

Funding school infrastructure is critical to meet external curriculum demands and internal function demands. But the solution is not to rely on the E-rate program more. The solution is right in front of us: plan, plan, plan.

Possible Call-Out Box
Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC)
Federal Communication Commission (FCC)
Bring Your Own Device (BYOD)
Request for proposals (RFP)
Funding Commitment Decision Letter (FCDL)

Long-term technology planning with or without the 2014 E-rate program

By necessity, educational leadership often develops plans and contingencies without sight of the whole picture. After all, schools function with unknown quantities of students, school days, tests, and facilities.

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[1] http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010040.pdf

[2] http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010034.pdf

[3] http://www.usac.org/

[4] http://www.fcc.gov/

[5] http://www.fundsforlearning.com/docs/2013/07/FY2013 P1 School Demand Analysis 2013-07-03.pdf

[6] http://www.fcc.gov/encyclopedia/e-rate-schools-libraries-usf-program

Positioning your district to benefit from E-rate while meeting your technology goals is just an extension of that planning within the unknown.

According to Sarah Heaton, Special Assistant to the CIO of Baltimore City Schools[7], school districts should aim to develop a technology vision without taking E-Rate into account.

"Because E-rate has long been an obscure federal program, we don't necessarily think about how E-rate affects our budget or how we could leverage the dollars to put into place things we weren't otherwise able to afford," says Ms. Heaton. "We focus on how we could make smart decisions about paying for technology and installing tools that will benefit our school district in the long run."

Ms. Heaton emphasizes that in order to create a long-term technology vision for your district, you need to have a clear grasp of your current and future technology needs. This includes the physical capacity of your schools to absorb such technology and the adoption of such technology within the classroom.

The future growth of your district and the future growth of technology also play a part in the decision-making process. Keith Krueger, the CEO of the Consortium for School Networking[8] (CoSN), weighs in that this is an opportunity to plan for growth over the years[9], not just short-term needs.

"You aren't going to build a network and be done with it," he says. "Given the evolving nature of technology and the ever increasing needs of bandwidth you can expect that whatever you have you're going to need more of it. It will get cheaper, faster, smaller, and more powerful, but you'll still need to spend your budget on a more and more robust network."

"Too often, we think 'When are you done building a tech network?' But IT requires us to think smart, design networks in a scalable way, and keep the future in mind," Mr. Krueger says. "How we design our technology infrastructures needs to be viewed as an investment, not a shopping list."

Here are three to guidelines to help you develop a successful technology vision for your district, apply for E-rate support, and cope with its unknown effects on your budget:

Consider the long-term and little-known costs of your vision
Once you have a clear vision of your school's technology needs, your work begins. It can still take years to fully deploy the technology assets you need, from fiber and wireless Internet connections within schools to the need for electrical wiring and air conditioning for equipment.

"You aren't going to build a network and be done with it," says Mr. Krueger. "A lot of school districts are heading to BYOD environment, which can lower immediate costs. But it overnight increases the amount of network expense. You're going from a 1:4 student to device ratio to a 1:1 or 1:3 ratio, increasing your network functionality, security, and electricity needs."

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[7] http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/site/default.aspx
[8] http://www.cosn.org/
[9] http://www.cosn.org/focus-areas/it-management/send-smart-education-networks-design

Seemingly non-financial decisions such as bring your own device (BYOD) environments can add up to big costs in professional development training, security, bandwidth, and electricity. And internally, schools need to plan for tangential technology needs such as teacher connectivity, SmartBoard and tablet connectivity, and digital curriculum integration. Money spent on new technology will also require funds to train staff members on that new technology.

Possible Call-Out Box
What's the difference between Integrated Technology and Applied Technology?
Within the classroom, integrated technology refers to technology that enhances or deeps a learning experience, such as learning to use digital research tools to complete an assignment. Applied technology refers to using technology as a tool to more efficiently deliver information, such as using a PowerPoint presentation to deliver a lesson.

"You can have beautifully configured school buildings and a 21st century environment," says Ms. Heaton, "But that doesn't mean the teachers will be able to capitalize on that environment." Effective professional development and training will allow teachers and students to truly integrate technology in the classroom, not just apply it.

Prepare a detailed technology plan
With a clear view of your district's long-term vision, you can turn to E-Rate with a detailed technology plan to support it. The first step is to apply for E-rate discounts under the Internal Connections or Basic Maintenance of Internal Connections categories. Craft a successful technology plan with an emphasis on the following core concepts:

Time management
Time management is an important aspect of applying for E-Rate. Your team needs to keep track of important deadlines, which change every year, and account for administrative or technical delays.

Set aside time for gathering the required information and request for proposals (RFP). Take into account school board meetings, administrative holidays, and other calendar conflicts that can affect your planning. If you think you have set aside enough time, pad it by a few weeks to account for any delays.

USAC compliance
Improve your chances of receiving the maximum discount by carefully meeting the following four criteria from the USAC[10]:
- Provide clear goals and a realistic strategy for using telecommunications and information technology.

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[10] http://www.usac.org/_res/documents/sl/pdf/handouts/E-rate-Overview.pdf

- Plan a professional development strategy to ensure that staff members know how to use these new technologies.
- Lay out an assessment of the telecommunication services, hardware, software, and other services needed.
- Establish an evaluation process that enables the school or library to monitor progress toward the specified goals.

Embrace these criteria not as a way to check off the E-rate to-do list or to have a plan on file, but as a way to develop genuine and meaningful planning tool for your school district's technology vision.

Service provider interaction
While it might be appealing to receive input and advice from service providers, doing so could disqualify you immediately[11]. Don't let service providers help write your technology plan or fill out your application and don't accept gifts from anyone throughout the process. Make sure your administrators, teachers, and staff members are aware of the policy, as well.

Strategize with contingency budget plans
Creating a comprehensive technology plan is a huge accomplishment, but your planning efforts can't stop there. Your Funding Commitment Decision Letter (FCDL) will determine whether your school receives 100 percent of the funds it needs or a lesser amount. So while you don't have any guaranteed funding, you do have the overall budget and cost information you need to make contingency plans according to how much funding you are awarded.

Before you receive your FCDL, invest time and planning resources into contingency plans for each of these scenarios. How will you approach your long-term technology goal in each of these situations? Talk about your options -- and possible delays in accomplishing those technology goals -- in each situation. Even if you receive 100 percent of the funding you need, you may not know your status until after the procurement cycle starts. In each of these scenarios, you will need to have backup plans for financing and procurement.

Don't let the E-rate program's unknown qualities derail your district's long-term vision for school connectivity. Focus your efforts on planning an accurate and meaningful vision for connectivity and technology within your district, and then find out how the E-rate program can support your efforts.

For more information about the E-Rate program, please visit the Funds for Learning website. [12]

Interview Sources

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[11] http://www.edtechmagazine.com/k12/sites/edtechmagazine.com.k12/files/88100-wp-g-e-rate-df.pdf
[12] https://www.fundsforlearning.com/

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