

E-Rate Status in Southern States



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"As traditional teaching and learning become things of the past, the excitement and benefits of electronic learning through telecommunications networks hinge on the ongoing funding brought about by E-Rate opportunities."

West Virginia

"Without this program, as many as 40 percent of the schools in our state would either have no Internet access or ... inadequate connections. This program has allowed even the poorest rural districts to enjoy equal access to the Internet."

Oklahoma

Have E-Rate discounts to schools made a difference?

Yes! Schools have increased access to the Internet and other resources and far more rapidly than they could have without the E-Rate. The E-Rate has jump-started schools' use of technology. As the director of one state's department of education said, "I can think of no other federal program in the past 20 years that has had such an impact on the public schools."

Are all school districts applying for and using E-Rate discounts?

All school districts are eligible to apply for E-Rate discounts, but priority for funding goes to schools with high percentages of students who receive free and reduced-price lunches. Schools that request funds for networking and related equipment receive funding before schools that request Internet or other technology services.

In 1996 Congress passed milestone legislation that changed how the telephone and communications industry conducted business. The Universal Services Provisions of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 directed the Federal Communications Commission to provide schools and libraries with improved telecommunications services at discounted rates. This program has become known as the E-Rate program.

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Because participation in the E-Rate program is not required, not all school districts in the southern region have applied for E-Rate discounts. In some states, 100 percent of the districts participate, and every southern state has a participation rate of at least 80 percent. School districts' reasons for not participating vary from state to state, but common reasons include a lack of understanding of the technology's potential for teaching and learning; a lack of local personnel to manage new technology; and a lack of knowledge about the requirements for applying for E-Rate discounts.

State departments of education in southern states have provided local school districts with extensive support and guidance in applying for E-Rate discounts. This assistance has included workshops and training sessions as well as Web sites with extensive information about submitting applications. Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia each submitted a statewide application on behalf of all school districts.

How much have Southern states received in E-Rate funding?

The following table shows total E-Rate funding to each southern state for the first two years of the program.

State	Number of students (in thousands)	Total funding for two years (in millions)
Alabama	779	\$ 73
Arkansas	486	23.9
Delaware	128	2.4
Florida	2,520	119.5
Georgia	1,430	167.9
Kentucky	704	106.7
Louisiana	877	77.3
Maryland	922	37
Mississippi	551	55
North Carolina	1,355	64.4
Oklahoma	652	66.6
South Carolina	702	58.5
Tennessee	963	113.2
Texas	3,969	262.9
Virginia	1,192	51.1
West Virginia	308	18.7

Sources: Schools and Libraries Division of the Universal Services Administrative Company, 2000; National Center for Education Statistics, 2000

How have school districts used E-Rate funding?

“The E-Rate funding allowed us to obtain the necessary technical infrastructure and focus on developing teachers’ skills in integrating the Internet into the curriculum.”

Tennessee

E-Rate funding is available for networking and other equipment to connect classrooms and schools and for Internet services. During the first year of the program, schools used most of their funding for wiring and related equipment.

Every southern state reports improved student-to-computer ratios. Some states, such as Louisiana, have made dramatic gains; Louisiana’s student-to-computer ratio improved from 88-to-1 in 1997 to 8-to-1 in spring 2000. Every southern state has made substantial progress in increasing students’ and teachers’ access to computers and the Internet. These improvements have come about through improved planning for and coordinated use of E-Rate discounts, state legislative funding for technology and federal funding for technology. As technology planning by school districts and states improves, so does the use of technology funds to support states’ educational goals.

The following chart shows E-Rate funding that schools received for wiring and Internet service in each of the first two years of the program.

State	Funding for Internet connections (in millions), 1998	Funding for Internet connections (in millions), 1999
Alabama	\$ 35.5	\$ 16.5
Arkansas	5.2	3.4
Delaware	0.1	0.3
Florida	19.1	37.7
Georgia	52.8	66.8
Kentucky	33.9	42.2
Louisiana	26.9	22.7
Maryland	2.8	10.5
Mississippi	11.8	16.2
North Carolina	10.6	19.2
Oklahoma	20.6	20.4
South Carolina	13.1	20.2
Tennessee	11.6	31.3
Texas	79.6	88.7
Virginia	6.9	10.1
West Virginia	3.7	4.5

Source: School and Library Corporation, April 2000

What other benefits have schools received?

“Our local funding is insufficient to purchase the newest technologies. Without the E-Rate we would still be planning for a [local area network] instead of using one to communicate and conduct research.”

Arkansas

Planning to use technology in schools has improved in the last three years. State departments of education report that the goals, content and organization of school districts' plans have improved significantly. As the E-Rate funds brought a new focus to technology issues, state policies and regulations related to technology also improved.

Schools have used redirected technology dollars to increase professional development opportunities for teachers and have equipped classrooms with computers. Nearly every school district now provides its teachers with some form of technology training. Many schools are working to increase the number of computers in classrooms. The Fund for Learning, a private consulting company, estimated that schools nationwide bought nearly 4.5 million computers in 1999.

What difficulties have school districts and states experienced?

While the E-Rate has had a positive impact on schools, problems remain.

1. In spite of efforts by the School and Library Corporation to improve and simplify the E-Rate application process, federal regulations related to developing and managing the E-Rate application continue to require a tremendous amount of work. Districts and states have had to assign staff to work exclusively on E-Rate issues.

Some schools that have limited staffing and expertise have relied on consultants and private companies to assist them with E-Rate applications. These arrangements often have been successful, but a situation in Oklahoma illustrates the danger of relying on others to submit applications. In that case, a private company listed its employee as the contact person for the application. The competitive bidding process did not permit this, and the Federal Communications Commission withdrew nearly \$20 million in subsidies for Internet service to nearly 120 small schools.

2. As schools' computer use increases, schools and districts need additional — and more qualified — technical support. Because most businesses nationwide face shortages of skilled and knowledgeable technical personnel, schools have difficulty competing for and retaining competent technical staff. This problem is particularly acute for rural schools. Schools must have sufficient technical staff before they can use technology to its greatest potential in teaching and learning.

3. While teacher training in the use of technology in the classroom has improved, many teachers still are limited users of technology. The southern region has more than a million teachers, making it a daunting task to train all of them to use new and different tools to improve teaching and learning. Through the U.S. Department of Education's Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers grants and increased requirements in many states, teacher education programs in the nation's colleges and universities are devoting more time to ensuring that graduates will be competent in the use of technology. This is a positive step, but more needs to be done to ensure that teachers already in classrooms can use technology effectively.
4. The increased use of technology in school districts and states requires policies regarding student safety, security and appropriate use. States also need to adopt and use procedures for purchasing equipment and services. Such policies and procedures often are new to school districts and states and require careful attention prior to adoption.
5. Companies have recognized the potential market created by schools' increased use of the Internet. Eduventure.com reported that the "total investment of companies providing online education products and services grew from \$99 million in 1997 to \$981 million in 1999." "Educational technology" companies now are marketing a wide range of electronic products to schools, but there is no guarantee of the products' and services' effectiveness or quality. Schools need to consider these purchases carefully and to make sure the products and services meet the instructional goals for their students and teachers.

What resources are available to schools through the Internet?

The Internet and the resources it represents provide many students and teachers with materials and information never before available. This information is "free" to schools, but it is not well-organized and its quality and accuracy often are questionable. For this reason, schools and states increasingly are providing students and teachers with information about "best sources." Electronic gateways for teachers — such as Georgia Learning Connections and Louisiana's Making Connections — are good examples of southern states' efforts to link lesson plans and other instructional resources to their academic standards for students.

Companies are developing and making available "electronic gateways" that they say will provide teachers and other educators with instructional materials, lesson plans and connections to many other resources. Some companies also say that they link their resources to individual states' academic standards for students. These companies are

spending substantial amounts with the expectation of “capturing the market” through contracts with schools and districts. There has been insufficient research into the quality and pricing of these products and services, whether they are kept up-to-date, or whether they accurately meet state standards.

Conclusion

“We are recognizing the impact of E-Rate funding through increased access to technologies that would not have been realized for years to come; but, even more importantly, we have seen school boards and districts recognize the importance of technology-rich education. The coordination of funding efforts in our state has allowed even the most financially strapped districts to make headway. In the last few years, our schools have moved forward by leaps and bounds.”

Louisiana

Yes, the E-Rate provides access to information that otherwise would be unavailable to schools — especially low-income schools in rural and inner-city areas — and their students and teachers. Without the E-Rate it would have taken years for many of these schools to achieve this level of technology use.

Have the region’s schools made good use of E-Rate discounts? For the most part, yes. Almost all schools have benefited directly by installing networks and connecting to the Internet. With the technology funds that states have been able to redirect because of the E-Rate discounts, professional-development opportunities for teachers and the number of computers and software available have increased significantly. Data suggest that schools have great need for and interest in the E-Rate program. The School and Library Corporation, the division of the Federal Communications Commission that manages the program, reports that schools’ requests this year will exceed \$4.72 billion — more than twice the program’s spending cap of \$2.25 billion.

“The E-Rate, now in its third year, provides discounts on telecommunications services, Internet access and internal connections to libraries and schools. In the first two years, \$3.66 billion in discounts has brought the Internet and new information technologies to tens of thousands of schools and libraries.”

Education and Library Networks Coalition, 1999

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