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Is President Obama's Wi-Fi Goal Realistic?

Cost estimates show that the Wi-Fi goal will take a major increase in E-Rate dollars.

For the Federal Communications Commission to bring high-speed wireless access to 99 percent of students in four years, it will need some political courage — and \$3.2 billion.

In a ConnectED initiative announced last year, President Barack Obama called on the commission to not only increase high-speed broadband, but also high-speed wireless through its E-Rate program, which funds telecommunications, Internet, internal connections and connection maintenance in schools and libraries.

The problem is that everyone ignores the Wi-Fi and local area network aspect of connectivity, said Keith Krueger, CEO of the Consortium for School Networking. And no one really knew what wireless network upgrades schools needed and how much they would cost. That's where the Consortium for School Networking and the non-profit EducationSuperHighway come in.

1. Add a minimum of \$800 million in new E-Rate funding each year for local area network, Wi-Fi and core wide area network upgrades. This funding should be distributed to schools and libraries based on what each campus needs to bring the network up to snuff.

Total: \$3.2 billion over the next four years

2. Set aside part of this new funding to cover any schools that overestimated their network readiness.

If the commission follows these recommendations, it could make the Wi-Fi portion of Obama's ConnectED vision a reality by 2018. The commission has expressed interest in modernizing and potentially increasing E-Rate funding if the Consortium for School Networking could demonstrate a need for it in schools and provide an estimate of how much it would cost to meet those needs.

"For the first time, we have real data about what the gap is in where we are today and what it will cost to get to the president's vision for this aspect," Krueger said.

To get the numbers behind these recommendations, the two organizations consulted with more than 50 chief technology officers - in addition to equipment vendors and networking experts - to figure out a list of equipment that schools would need for robust wired and wireless networks. Then they researched the amount of equipment needed and estimated the cost of the equipment through price lists, vendor discussions and district purchasing experiences.

For example, each classroom needs about 1.2 wireless access points at a cost of \$520, while one internal core switcher/router costs \$12,500 for a medium-sized district of six to 15 schools. The cost estimates include potential labor costs for big jobs like installing wiring, but do not include network design, configuration or operational costs because they vary so much.

In addition to equipment numbers, the organizations needed to get a sense for where schools stand

in their network readiness. With data in hand from the consortium's E-Rate and Broadband Survey of more than 460 people last fall, they suggested that the commission should focus first on upgrading the 57 percent of schools that don't have robust wired and wireless networks. They estimated that 40 percent require network switch upgrades and 26 percent require fiber backbone upgrades, for example.

If the Federal Communications Commission can come up with the funding of at least \$800 million over the next four years, Obama's goal is realistic. But to maintain good connectivity moving forward, EducationSuperHighway and the Consortium for School Networking suggest that this funding level should continue beyond 2018.

"It's very realistic if we have the political will to do it," Krueger said.

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