



Straight A's

Public Education Policy And Progress



E-RATE UPDATE: Federal Communications Commission to Double Federal Funding for High-Speed Internet in Schools; FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler to Offer Details During Alliance's Digital Learning Day Event

On February 3, the Federal Communications Commission announced that it will invest \$2 billion over the next two years to support broadband networks in the nation's and libraries. The investment, which will double the funding for adding high-speed internet connections in schools, is expected to provide 20 million students in at least 15,000 schools with high-speed internet access.



The FCC said the additional funding will come from “reprioritizing existing E-rate funds to focus on high-capacity internet connectivity, increasing efficiency, and modernizing management of the E-rate program.” **FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler** will elaborate on the plan to restructure E-rate at the Alliance for Excellent Education's Digital Learning Day event on Wednesday, February 5 ([Register for access to the live webstream](#)). Chairman Wheeler's remarks will come on the heels of President Obama's State of the Union Address (see article below) in which the president reiterated his goal to connect 99 percent of students to high-speed broadband over the next five years.

“As we consider long-term improvements to the [E-rate] program, we will take immediate steps to make existing funds go farther, significantly increasing our investment in high-speed internet to help connect millions of students to the digital age,” [Wheeler said](#). “We will take a business-like approach to the management of the program, identifying opportunities to improve the ways funds are deployed and streamlining the process for schools and libraries.”

“When it comes to accessing the internet, many of the nation's teachers and students are stuck on a two-lane road in a superhighway world,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Just as the construction of the interstate highway system closed a distance divide in the United States by connecting individuals and making travel faster, high-speed broadband can bring today's schools into the twenty-first century to do the same for the digital divide.”

Since its inception, the E-rate program has played a vital role in connecting the nation's schools and libraries. When the U.S. Congress passed the Telecommunications Act of 1996, only 14 percent of classrooms had internet connection and most schools with internet access used dial-up internet access. Thanks to the E-rate program, virtually every school in America today is connected to the internet, but more work remains. For example, slow download speeds and

intermittent connections prevent teachers and students from accessing engaging content and rigorous course material.

“The needs of our schools have dramatically changed since E-rate began in 1996,” Wheeler wrote in a [January 24 blog post](#) at FCC.gov. “To be prepared for college and the twenty-first-century workforce, students today need to have access to state-of-the-art, interactive, educational content; and tools for student collaboration, student-teacher communication, and lesson planning. None of this will be possible if our students aren’t connected to networks capable of delivering that content and offering those tools.”

Spearheaded by the Alliance for Excellent Education, Digital Learning Day recognizes schools and school districts that use effective applications of education technology to support teachers, improve learning, and help students achieve at their highest potential.

As part of Digital Learning Day on February 5, the Alliance will host a national showcase that will be streamed live from the Library of Congress in Washington, DC and moderated by **Judy Woodruff, coanchor and managing editor of the PBS NewsHour**, and in addition to FCC Chairman Wheeler, it will feature **Acting U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education James H. Shelton III, U.S. Representative George Miller, FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel, Cecilia Muñoz, Assistant to the President and Director of the Domestic Policy Council at the White House, Wyoming Department of Education Director Rich Crandall, and Maryland State Superintendent of Schools Lillian Lowery.**

The national showcase will also feature educators and students from schools and school districts that are using technology to make a positive difference in student learning, including those in Talladega, Alabama; Beaverton, Oregon; Henry County, Georgia; Hillsborough, Florida; Albemarle County, Virginia; and West Windsor Township, New Jersey.

A new component of the national event this year will be a free virtual conference built onto INXPO’s next-generation webcasting platform. Through this system, educators, parents, students, and others across the United States and internationally can tune into the live webcast, participate in live chats with digital learning experts, and access on-demand instructional videos and toolkits. Individuals can sign up for the virtual conference at <https://vts.inxpo.com/scripts/Server.nxp?LASCmd=AI:4;F:QS!10100&ShowKey=17940>.

“In the two years since the Alliance’s inaugural Digital Learning Day, the many uses of technology to improve student learning outcomes in the nation’s schools have skyrocketed,” said Wise. “Still, there are schools and classrooms where students are asked to check their devices at the door. Digital Learning Day was created to provide all educators—from those who are technology averse to the technology rock stars—with the support and guidance they need to feel comfortable using different types of technology to improve learning in their classrooms.”

In addition to the national showcase, tens of thousands of teachers and millions of students from all fifty states and the District of Columbia will participate in thousands of state and local events, including the more than [1,500 local events](#) that educators have added to the Digital Learning Day website. In conducting their events, educators will be tapping the [interactive lesson plans](#) and

[teaching toolkits](#) available in several different subject areas, including English language arts, math, science, social studies, and more.

Visit DigitalLearningDay.org for additional information, including local events, teacher toolkits, and more.



YEAR OF ACTION?: In State of the Union Address, Obama Pushes High School Redesign and High-Speed Internet in Schools, Says He Will Move Agenda Forward With or Without Congress

“Today in America, a teacher spent extra time with a student who needed it, and did her part to lift America’s graduation rate to its highest level in more than three decades.” Although President Obama opened his January 28 State of the Union address with that reference to education, he did not put forth any new education proposals. Instead, he continued his push on previously announced initiatives focused on high school reform, high-speed internet connections for 99 percent of the nation’s students, early education, and increased access to higher education. The president also signaled that he would not wait on congressional action to move his agenda forward, declaring 2014 a “year of action.”

“What I offer tonight is a set of concrete, practical proposals to speed up growth, strengthen the middle class, and build new ladders of opportunity into the middle class,” Obama said. “Some require congressional action, and I’m eager to work with all of you. But America does not stand still—and neither will I. So wherever and whenever I can take steps without legislation to expand opportunity for more American families, that’s what I’m going to do.”



In recent weeks, Obama has already showed a willingness to sidestep Congress. In November, he announced a new \$100 million collaboration between the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Education to redesign high schools to provide high school students with education and training that combines rigorous academic and career-focused curriculum with work-based learning opportunities. Because the program, called Youth CareerConnect, is funded from revenues from the H-1B visa program, it does not need congressional approval.

Obama has also made progress toward his goal of connecting 99 percent of America’s students to high-speed broadband by 2018. During his State of the Union address, he announced that companies such as Apple, Microsoft, Sprint, and Verizon, with support from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), plan to connect “more than 15,000 schools and twenty million students over the next two years, without adding a dime to the deficit.” And at the Alliance for Excellent Education’s Digital Learning Day event on February 5, FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler is expected to explain the FCC’s next steps on reforming the E-rate program to make it easier for applicants (see article above).



LEADING IN AND BEYOND THE LIBRARY: School Libraries, Librarians Critical for Transition to Digital Learning, Says New Alliance Report

A new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education explains the key role that school librarians and libraries should play in state- and districtwide efforts to transition to digital learning, or the effective use of technology to improve teaching and learning. The report, *Leading In and Beyond the Library*, calls for district and school leaders, policymakers, and boards of education to support, encourage, and fund the evolving role of librarians and libraries as facilitators of content creation, personalized learning, and professional development.

As the common area for digital resources and new technology, libraries are often the first place in the school to transition to twenty-first-century learning environments with high-speed internet connections, digital subscriptions, video capabilities, and even e-books, the report notes. Librarians are content specialists by training and are often the first educators in the school to master new technologies, creating opportunities for in-school professional development for teachers, team teaching, and opportunities to collaborate on lesson plans. Schools utilizing libraries this way become great equalizers for learning opportunities, offering students with limited or no internet access a place to research, learn at their own pace, collaborate, and create content, often outside of school hours.

“In today’s digital world, the school library has evolved from a place to merely check out books to one that offers opportunities for collaboration, project-based learning, and online access,” said **Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia**. “Similarly, librarians, formerly left to work independently in their own corners of schools, are now playing central roles in school leadership and working on a daily basis with students, teachers, and administrators. With skilled librarians leading the charge, school libraries can evolve from quiet reading zones to active hubs for student innovation and promotion of digital literacy.”

Libraries and librarians are also in a unique position to aid schools in implementing college- and career-ready standards, including the Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted by forty-six states and the District of Columbia. For example, students struggling to master deeper learning competencies included in the higher standards can receive one-on-one instruction in libraries with the help of digital technology and trained and skilled librarians.

The report highlights three districts where libraries and librarians play a key role in the transition to digital learning environments: Forsyth County Schools in Georgia; Mooresville Graded School District in North Carolina; and Avon Community School Corporation in Indiana. All three districts emphasize the role of librarians as school leaders and include them in strategic planning around implementing and purchasing new technology. Each of the districts also participates in the Alliance’s Project 24 initiative, which encourages districts to plan for the digital transition and embrace digital learning.

Leading In and Beyond the Library includes recommendations for how district and school leaders, policymakers, and school librarians can ensure that the knowledge and skills of school librarians and the opportunities available in the library are maximized during the digital learning

transition. Among the recommendations are how district and school leaders can transform the role of the school librarian to incorporate professional development and coaching on new technologies for teachers; how policymakers and boards of education can consider how funding librarians also enhances teacher, student, and administrative development; and how librarians should take initiative in reimagining the school library as a hub of digital learning for students and teachers alike.

“To prepare students for the demands of college and to compete in the modern economy, schools and districts would be wise to tap into the critical knowledge that librarians have about emerging technology and trends,” said Wise.

Read the full report online at

<http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/BeyondTheLibrary.pdf>.



STATE OF THE STATE ADDRESSES: Governors Propose Additional Funding for Education, Focus on Connecting Graduates with Jobs in Latest Round of Speeches

In the latest round of state of the state addresses, the nation’s governors continue to boost funding for education and restore funding that was cut during the Great Recession. At the same time, governors are looking forward and proposing new ways to bring technology into the classroom while also ensuring that recent high school graduates are prepared to succeed in college or work.

Rhode Island: Chafee Pledges Additional \$38 Million for K–12

Rhode Island Governor Lincoln Chafee (D) pledged an additional \$38 million in general support for K–12 public education in his [January 15 state of the state address](#) and stressed the need for aiding struggling and low-income students.

“If you accept the funding levels I have proposed, we will have dedicated an additional \$189.8 million to public education in Rhode Island over my four budgets,” Chafee said. “There is no better or smarter investment we can make. It will pay dividends and help close an equality gap that threatens our future.”

Chafee also focused attention on closing the skills gap in the state. There are jobs to be had in Rhode Island, he noted, but students are entering the workforce without the skills necessary for them. To address this mismatch, he proposed a targeted investment in workforce training that will serve two purposes: helping the unemployed find jobs and meeting the needs of employers.

“Education has always been the great equalizer,” Chafee said. “No matter where you start, if you get access to a good education and work hard, you can succeed.”

Alaska: Parnell Emphasizes Digital Learning, Technical Education

Alaska Governor Sean Parnell (R) unveiled a host of education initiatives in his [January 22 state of the state address](#). He focused his reforms on increasing technology in the classroom,

eliminating unnecessary standardized tests, and improving technical education. He dubbed 2014 the “education season.”

In December, Parnell announced a \$5 million digital teaching initiative that he expanded on in his address. The Alaska Digital Teaching Initiative, he promised, will give students access to high-quality teachers and instruction. The funding will provide for technology that makes it possible for teachers to video conference with remote schools and teach in real time.

“We must recognize our students need twenty-first-century classrooms to compete in a twenty-first-century economy,” Parnell said.

Parnell also proposed repealing and replacing the state’s high school graduation exam. He called the assessment a measurement of outdated standards and called for it to be replaced with the SAT or ACT.

“Today’s qualifying exam does not measure readiness to graduate or college- and career-training preparedness,” Parnell said. “In its place, I propose high school students take either the SAT, ACT, or WorkKeys test within two years of their expected graduation date. The first test they take would be at the state’s expense. Rather than a high-stakes test of limited value, we will have better information from these tests, and they will open the door to a young person’s postsecondary education and job training.”

Finally, Parnell advocated for a stronger emphasis on career and technical education (CTE) in high schools. He called these programs “strong pathways to success,” saying that “students excel when they find a subject that inspires them.” He proposed improving CTE programs by expanding dual-credit options, which allow students to receive simultaneous credits toward high school graduation and a certification in a career field.

Missouri: Nixon “Will Not Support Anything” that Takes Money out of Schools

“We must work to help every child start school ready to learn. We must demand that every school is getting the job done. And, we must make sure that every student can afford to get a college degree,” said **Missouri Governor Jay Nixon (D)** in his [January 21 state of the state address](#), which focused extensively on improving education in the state.

In his Fiscal Year 2015 budget, Nixon plans to nearly triple funding for the Missouri Preschool Program and pledges an additional \$278 million for K–12 education. Among his goals for the additional funding are recruiting the “best and brightest” teachers and increasing technology access in classrooms.

“In today’s global economy, whether you root for the DeSoto Dragons, the Sikeston Bulldogs, or the Mound City Panthers, our K–12 schools must also be rigorous, high-tech institutions of innovation,” Nixon said. “More technology. Smaller class sizes. Well-prepared teachers. The tools our kids need to succeed.”

Nixon passionately defended his commitment to education reform. Referencing economic data that ties high school dropout rates to increased unemployment and lower incomes, he called for increased accountability in schools.

From preschool to graduate school, Nixon’s budget includes a total of an additional \$493 million for education. “I will not support anything that takes money out of our classrooms,” Nixon said.

In exchange for the increased funding, Nixon said the state would “demand accountability and measurable results,” including tougher classes, higher test scores, and higher graduation rates.

New Mexico: Martinez Wants to See Return on State’s Education Investment

New Mexico Governor Susana Martinez (R) wants to see a tangible return on the state’s education investment. In her [January 21 state of the state address](#), Martinez pledged an additional \$100 million for education, and she wants to see it makes a difference.

“We should expect a return on our education dollars, and that return should be student achievement—our kids reading at a higher level, our students graduating at a higher rate,” Martinez said.

Martinez also focused on the need to match individuals with jobs and proposed expanding the state’s early college high schools to create a workforce for local small businesses. “By their nature, these schools are designed to produce employable workers—high school students, who intern with local businesses, graduate with a diploma, job-ready certificates, and an associate’s degree,” she said.

With the additional funding in her budget, education spending in New Mexico now exceeds pre-recession levels, Martinez proudly noted. She called for the additional funds to be directed toward struggling students, low-performing schools, rewarding effective teachers, and increasing parental involvement. She particularly championed teachers by encouraging an increase in professional development and pledging \$8.5 million to improve teacher training. To increase parental involvement, Martinez proposed an expansion of “parent portals,” which are websites where parents can easily monitor their student’s progress—and attendance—in school.

Straight A’s: Public Education Policy and Progress is a free biweekly newsletter that focuses on education news and events in Washington, DC and around the country. The format makes information on federal education policy accessible to everyone from elected officials and policymakers to parents and community leaders. Contributors include Jason Amos, editor; Cyndi Waite; and Kate Bradley.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a Washington, DC–based national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. For more information, visit www.all4ed.org. Follow the Alliance on Twitter (www.twitter.com/all4ed), Facebook (www.facebook.com/all4ed), and the Alliance’s “High School Soup” blog (www.all4ed.org/blog).