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HEADLINE: FCC to Mull E-Rate Modification at Upcoming Meeting

BODY:

An order circulated for a vote at the Feb. 11 FCC meeting proposes changes to the E-rate program to allow participating schools to open their networks to the general public after school hours without reducing the school's level of Universal Service Fund support. Currently, schools are permitted to allow the public to access their computers, but they have to cost validate and reduce the amount of USF they receive.

The order and rulemaking notice, circulated by FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski on Jan. 21, are part of the commission's ongoing effort to finalize the National Broadband Plan. In a notice released Nov. 3, the commission sought comments on amending the E-rate program to determine whether it can be "a vehicle to stimulate the adoption of broadband throughout communities." The commission requested examples of how "expanding permissible use of E-rate supported services" could maximize broadband utilization.

Schools and public libraries are "fully aligned in making sure that all types of library users have access to broadband and telecom services that the E-rate discount supports," said Lynne Bradley, American Library Association director of government relations. But E-rate doesn't cover the cost of keeping buildings open after school, she said in an interview. Schools will need a "trained information specialist to help the public use these online and digital resources," she said. "People will have questions about getting onto electronic sites and some will need translation services." The schools will "have to figure out how they will handle such a demand if this is handed off to them," she said.

Without additional E-rate funds, school districts can find ways to pay for additional staffing after hours, like create a partnership with the city government, said Pamela Jacobs, E-rate coordinator for the Iowa Department of Education: "I don't think this creates anything new that they (the schools) haven't already faced before." Approving the modification would be "a common sense ruling on the part of the FCC." Cost-allocating is inconvenient, she said.

"Most of our districts have been cautious about trying to do this. If the FCC takes action, it'll make it easier for schools to be able to allow Internet access for their community."

E-rate applicants in Alaska petitioned the commission in 2001 to allow the public to use school connections, in an effort to provide the public with Internet access, and the FCC granted the petition. The item before the commission will not allow any changes to be made to E-rate applications that are due Feb. 11, the commission said in a release. -- Kamala Lane