



# K-12 Bridge to Broadband

## Working Together to Help Close the Home Connectivity Gap with the 'K-12 Bridge to Broadband' Initiative

This spring, the coronavirus pandemic forced nearly 125,000 schools to close their doors – tasking 55 million teachers and students with quickly adapting to distance learning in the final weeks of the school year. Schools, teachers, and parents faced many hurdles in adapting to learn-from-home models of instruction. Many schools across the nation transitioned their curriculums online, but others were less successful, hampered by numerous significant challenges in shifting from in-person to remote modes of teaching.

One of these many challenges is ensuring that every student household has the tools it needs to access and participate in online instruction. For many years, cable broadband providers have worked to tackle this problem, offering a variety of private programs and working with community partners to connect low income families to the Internet with broadband connectivity, discounted computers, and training to build and enhance digital skills. While these programs have successfully connected millions of individuals to the Internet, we know that there are still too many households eligible for such programs that have yet to sign up for service.

To make further progress, NCTA and EducationSuperHighway believe that schools and service providers can develop new partnerships to meaningfully accelerate the pace of connecting students and closing the home connectivity gap. In particular, we see merit in the development of standard processes that can assist school districts in identifying which students lack Internet access and in procuring low cost broadband connectivity offerings for their families.

We have identified five key elements that are relevant to the development of a successful school-based Internet adoption program through the process of bulk procurement of home Internet access for students and their families:

- 1. Companies will create a “sponsored” service offering.** Schools across the country are increasingly partnering with broadband providers to procure home access for unconnected families in their district. The lead in procuring services can be a school district, an intermediary unit (collection of school districts at a regional/county level) or a state. In a sponsored service model, broadband service providers can help school districts set up programs to get students the tools they need to create a successful learning environment, and school districts can provide funding directly to the service provider(s) that can support the provision of broadband service to individual student households. To promote adoption, NCTA member companies will create sponsored service options for schools interested in helping students and the families get online.

**2. Companies will work together with school districts to identify which students need service.**

School districts of all sizes are facing the same challenge: they don't know which of their students need an Internet connection (or which students in need can be served by an existing provider). Providers can assist schools to better assess their needs by developing standard processes to facilitate the confidential exchange of information that identifies serviceable student households that do not currently have broadband service, in compliance with applicable privacy laws. Such systems must be built to protect the privacy of student addresses and the confidentiality of provider records and should be built to facilitate the timely identification of households without broadband service. For example, such a process could support school districts by reviewing a list of addresses provided by the school district and responding in a timely manner with a list of addresses that do not have broadband service from a provider or group of providers, but are serviceable in the normal course of business.

In some cases, school districts and providers have successfully used the following process to answer these questions in 10 days or less:

- The school district and provider sign a mutual NDA. The NDA prohibits the school district from disclosing the provider's customer information and also limits the provider's use of the school district's address information solely to answer the specified questions.
- The school district provides the service provider with a list of all its student addresses (no names are included).
- The provider reviews the data and sends back information identifying which addresses are unserved and could be provided with broadband service within a reasonable period of time.
- The school district merges the answers from all providers to determine which students are unserved.

Many of NCTA's broadband service providers are already working to assist schools in this way, but as part of this initiative, each provider will seek to develop a standard process for assisting schools with such data analysis with controls that protect student privacy and the confidentiality of records.

**3. Companies will agree to a baseline set of eligibility standards. In order for a school district to rapidly assess which of their students can be connected under a sponsored service agreement, they need to be able to quickly determine who is eligible.**

To this end, providers should develop baseline eligibility standards to assist districts in evaluating which students qualify for coverage under sponsored service agreements. At a minimum, offers from NCTA member companies should consider coverage of households containing students on the federal Free and Reduced Lunch program.

**4. To maximize adoption, companies will minimize the amount of information necessary to sign up families.**

In a sponsored service program, providers should limit the data they require from families only to that required for providing service (i.e. confirming the service address) and reducing fraud (i.e. proof of identity). As part of this initiative, NCTA member companies will review information practices to facilitate enrollments, and in particular, provide flexible options for identity verification where possible.

**5. Companies offering sponsored service arrangements to schools should avoid using school-supplied information for targeted marketing of collateral services to families covered by the program.**

School districts are highly sensitive about not being perceived by their families as a marketing partner for private companies and should be advised of tools available to opt out of promotional campaigns. Providers should agree not to use any information supplied by schools to

target marketing offers to families participating in the sponsored service program for other provider services unrelated to the sponsored service.

As with any industry initiative, we understand that schools and service partners may seek to tailor broadband partnerships to fill local needs. But NCTA and EducationSuperHighway agree that the emergence of standard processes to help schools better identify student households in need and to provision home broadband service through bulk-billing arrangements could meaningfully shrink home connectivity gaps, which will assist schools, teachers, and parents in meeting our obligation to educate students, even in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

*EducationSuperHighway is a national non-profit that is taking action through its Digital Bridge K-12 initiative to support the efforts of states and school districts to keep students learning during COVID-19. EducationSuperHighway has worked alongside state and school district leaders, policymakers, and advocates to help 40 million students access high-speed Internet.*

*NCTA – The Internet & Television Association, is a trade association representing the nation’s leading providers of broadband Internet access. NCTA’s member companies reach 80% of US homes with high-speed broadband services and operate a number of successful programs that have connected millions of individuals to the Internet.*

