



BRIEF: Achieving K-12 Broadband Goals Using a State RFI

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INTRODUCTION

The new FCC Emergency Broadband Benefit program creates an opportunity for states to equitably provide either broadband connectivity or devices, or both to all, eligible low-income households that qualify for discounted digital connectivity options.

As a result of the announcement regarding the program, states are now looking for ways to **identify and aggregate all of the covered telecom services** within a given service area. It is clear that states will need a process to more **efficiently and effectively visualize the broadband marketplace** - inclusive of the various telecom providers, service offerings, packages, discounts and options available to each customer and customer subgroup (rural, tribal, low-income households, and so on).

Some states are tackling the challenge of organizing all of this information by generating a state-issued **Request for Information (RFI) process**, which can more easily capture the telecom and broadband plan offerings, by internet service plan and/or device, in a transparent manner.

For the education community in particular, crafting an RFI process for K-12 telecom services may be a **valuable, cost-effective and timely policy** for states to utilize in an effort to streamline the at-home connectivity and device offerings for all students, and prioritize students who lack access or face affordability barriers. Given the clear homework gap that exists, states may find that an RFI can support local education agencies (LEAs), school-aged children and their families in qualifying for the most value-priced at-home connectivity and digital device offerings.

This policy comes at a time when many states are grappling with an influx of what could be millions of dollars in broadband and EdTech funding, making it the right step for states to take to best approach the “supply” side of the broadband equation. A statewide RFI creates an opportunity to display the inventory districts and schools have for education technology purposes to close the digital divide. States may also find the **voluntary** nature of participation by telecom providers in an RFI to be less binding than a mandate *requiring* these stakeholders to play a role.

TWO STEPS TO STREAMLINING THE PROCESS WITH AN RFI

An RFI can streamline the process for districts **to identify and leverage pre-qualified telecom services** and connectivity options to ensure transparency about the various options in the community’s service area.

States can take either **one** or **both** of the following actions:

1. Define and aggregate a list of the telecommunications and internet service providers and broadband services. Explicitly define the specifications regarding telecom providers’ offerings with regard to pricing, speed and quality, which are fundamental aspects of the delivery process. The list will be inclusive of, but not limited to, fixed broadband, wireless broadband, satellite-based broadband, and/or mobile broadband (4G, 5G, etc.) options.
2. Adopt and support a state master agreement and pre-approval process to streamline the purchase of broadband and telecom service offerings for school districts. For example, EducationSuperHighway provides expertise in aligning and engaging telecom providers with LEAs to support procurement of connectivity and devices, through its [K-12 Bridge to Broadband Initiative](#).



The state's role in the preapproval process may optimize and simplify negotiations with telecom providers to facilitate the decision-making process on behalf of LEAs. It also allows LEAs greater transparency and clarity on the pricing for various broadband service offerings.

The state will want to consider how to effectively maximize the use of federal and state funds (e.g. FCC e-rate funding and flexibility) to support improved broadband infrastructure, through 5G, satellite, or fixed wired broadband architecture, for schools and their respective students, educators and families.¹

BEST PRACTICES: OHIO

In 2020, the state of Ohio and the Lt. Governor's Office worked on an exciting initiative to further the goal of providing Internet access to more underserved households in Ohio.

BroadbandOhio, working in conjunction with the Department of Education, built an opportunity to identify existing telecom education services, pricing, and supports for schools and their respective students. The result was that Ohio was not only successful in receiving numerous responses in its first round of the RFI, but it re-opened the RFI to a second round in January 2021. This optimal timing will help Ohio leverage forthcoming FCC Emergency Broadband Benefit funds effectively.

“We’ve had great response to the RFI with 49 service provider submissions, helping us build a public, transparent price list to help school districts and Information Technology Centers across Ohio purchase equipment and services for remote learning. The information provided includes solutions ranging from access to hotspots, public WiFi, and take-home internet devices. The program is helping school districts compare prices and make decisions on the best technology to enhance learning for their students.”

- Peter Voderberg, Chief, Office of BroadbandOhio

The K-12 specific RFI is a part of a broader plan by Governor Mike DeWine and Lt. Governor John Husted's Office, which released an RFI for all fiber-optic and telecom rights-of-way controlled by the state to broadband providers to increase broadband access for residents. The state has planned to leverage seven assets to achieve wired or wireless access for all residents, including the ODOT Intelligent Transportation System, the U.S. 33 Smart Corridor and ODOT right of way, among others.

[And, in a further nod to the importance of broadband access and affordability, Governor DeWine's FY 2022-23 biennial budget proposal includes \\$250 million to support activities to bridge the digital divide.](#)

[View Ohio's RFI.](#)

Timing is everything. States should be mobilizing action steps on how to leverage what could be millions of dollars in broadband and edtech funding coming from the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. States can use a K-12 RFI (like the case of Ohio) as an efficient, data-rich approach to quantifying the “supply” side of the broadband equation.

¹ [K-12 and Postsecondary Virtual Learning Environments](#). National Governors Association.



COMMON ELEMENTS IN A K-12 RFI

A K-12 Request for Information (RFI) should include numerous elements: 1) background, 2) purpose, 3) timeline for participation, 4) caveats and disclaimers, 5) minimum requirements, and 6) expected content for vendors to include in the RFI response. The RFI should also include a brief statement explaining the invitation to participate and submission date, as well as the name of participating state agencies or departments.

By providing these elements, states can benefit from a valuable, information-gathering exercise to support their LEAs.

More Information & Sources

- ExcelinEd - [RFI Template](#)
- GovTech - [Ohio RFI Leverages Assets to Achieve Broadband Access Goals](#)
- Innovate Ohio - [Husted Announces Broadband Connectivity Pilot Project at Rural School District, Expanding Broadband to Several Ohio Communities in NW Ohio](#)
- Community Networks - [Ohio Broadband Co-op Releases Feasibility Study](#) RFP