

Solving the Home Connectivity Gap

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. Many schools across the nation transitioned their curriculums online, but students in every state were left behind.

Service providers are a key stakeholder in helping to solve the home connectivity gap. We believe that creating a standard process whereby school districts can identify which students lack Internet access and procure low cost connectivity offerings for their families can dramatically accelerate the pace of connecting all of America's K-12 students to remote learning. NTCA and its member companies have an opportunity to lead the nation in solving this issue by collectively offering a unified solution to school districts across the country.

We have identified several key elements that should be considered as we standardize the process of bulk procurement of home Internet access:

1. **Broadband providers should create a “sponsored” service offering.** It is critical to eliminate the home Internet access purchasing burden for families. Schools across the country are increasingly taking on the responsibility of procuring home access for the unconnected families in their district. The home access procurement lead 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, school districts, not families, would receive the invoices from the service provider(s).
2. **Providers should help school districts 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. Providers have the information to rapidly figure this out and should support school districts by reviewing the school district's student addresses and answering three questions: 1) Do you currently serve this address? 2) If yes, is the plan a low-cost offering? 3) If not, are you able to serve this address within 14 days?

The following process has been used to answer these questions in 10 days or less:

1. The school district and provider sign a mutual Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA). The NDA prohibits the school district from disclosing the provider's customer information and limits the provider's use of the school district's address information to answering the specified questions.
2. The school district provides the provider with a list of all its student addresses (no names are included).
3. The provider reviews the data and sends back answers to the three questions for each address.
4. The school district merges the answers from all providers to determine which students are unserved.

3. ***Providers should 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. Providers and schools should collaborate to establish a common set of baseline eligibility standards that districts have the information to easily evaluate their students against. A starting point, for example, could be to agree that any student on the Free and Reduced Lunch program whose family does not currently buy a full priced service from the provider at the time the eligibility list is first generated is eligible.
4. ***Providers should not market to families in the sponsored service program.*** School districts are highly sensitive about not being perceived by their families as a marketing partner for private companies. In a sponsored service agreement, they are acquiring home access on behalf of families in need and need the ability to opt out of promotional campaigns. Preferably, providers would agree not to market to, or up-sell, families in the sponsored service program.
5. ***Providers should minimize the amount of information families must provide at sign-up in order to maximize adoption.*** The most significant barrier to adoption after affordability is the process of signing up for service. In a sponsored service program, providers should limit the data they require from families to that needed for providing service (i.e. confirming the service address) and reducing fraud (i.e. proof of identity). In particular, social security numbers should not be required.
6. ***Providers and schools should provide for a transition upon termination of the sponsored service program.*** At such point as the school district ceases bulk procurement of sponsored services, the service provider may thereafter alter in its sole discretion the terms of service for each customer within that program. Changes may include but not be limited to:
 - Ceasing to provide service to the customer if the customer has a previously outstanding past due balance to the provider (i.e., pre-dating the sponsored service program) that the customer does not pay within a period established by the provider.
 - Asking for additional information (including but not limited to a social security number) to the extent necessary to conduct credit checks or complete other standard customer onboarding processes.
 - Modifying the sponsored service plan in any way, including changes to service rates or performance.

As with any industry initiative, we understand that some light customization is needed for each provider to be able to effectively serve their customer base. If we can agree to these basic principles, we'll be well on our way to a standardized home access procurement model that can be replicated in every market in which an NTCA member serves.