

UNIVERSAL ACCESS, A PLAN TO IMPLEMENT THE E-RATE

By Gerry Cherry
Staff Writer

■(GIT) The Telecommunications Act of 1996 sailed through Congress, because both houses saw the need. Implementing the provisions of the broad plan will take years.

Briefly, the Act calls for access to the Internet for all schools, libraries and rural health care providers at a rate consistent with urban access, or lower, with the goal of being "hooked up" nationwide by the year 2000.

The E-rate, a free "education rate" will "advance our nation's long-standing goal of affordable access to telecommunications service for all Americans including schools, libraries and rural health care clinics," Secretary of Education Richard Riley said in a letter to Reed Hundt, chairman of the FCC.

"Technological literacy is a critical skill for America's students to succeed in the 21st century," Riley's letter said.

"Simply put, today's work force rewards those workers who possess computer literacy skills, and tomorrow's work force will demand computer literacy skills. In order to prepare our children to meet the challenges of the 21st Century, universal access to the Information Superhighway will be critical. The Internet, in many ways, is the blackboard of the future. It is our strong belief that by

advancing free basic access, we will increase the pace of classroom learning and continuing efforts to improve education."

The main drawback to users is the cost of access to telecommunications services. These costs prevent many of our teachers and children from using the educational resources of the Internet. The second drawback is the on-going monthly charges for access. "By way of illustration," Secretary Riley wrote, "we know that some [school] districts are paying about \$200 a month in access charges while others pay \$2,000 for the same technology and services.

Across the U.S. today, only nine percent of the nation's classrooms are connected. "For these reasons, we support a guarantee of universal access to advanced telecommunications and information services for every public, private, and parochial K-12 school and library in America," to ensure that no school or library will be denied the opportunity to participate in the Information Age because of an inability to pay, Riley wrote.

Schools and libraries are investing million of dollars on computers, software, and teacher training, a waste of money if schools and libraries cannot afford to pay the monthly access charges.

Last week, the Federal-State Joint Board reached another decision furthering universal access. "Almost 70 percent of all schools will get at least a 50 percent discount on a wide range of telecommunications services," Riley said. "By providing the deepest discounts to schools with the largest number of poor children — discounts of up to 90 percent — the Federal-State Joint Board begins to give these schools a real start to being part of the ongoing telecommunications revolution.

"This is long overdue. This recommendation coupled with other Administration efforts now underway with the private sector tells me that we are on track to meet the objective that all of our nation's schools and libraries are connected to the Internet by the year 2000," Riley added.

Recommendations from the FCC Telecommunications and Health Care Advisory Committee for implementing the plan include a flat-based pricing system for urban and rural users to eliminate the long-distance access charges so onerous to rural users today. The act specifically mandates telecommunications providers to sell access to rural health care providers at rates comparable to rates in urban areas. Companies providing access would be subsidized for profits lost in the transaction, at the same time gaining access to a much broader range of potential customers for service. If a student uses the Internet at school, the student will probably want access to the Internet at home.

Oklahoma's First Steps

Josh O'Brien, Director of Media Relations for the Oklahoma Department of Education said the state has been waiting to see what "Washington, D.C. would do.

"We're interested in improving technology at this agency and all the school districts," O'Brien said. Oklahoma has 549 school districts, some with more than one school. At this time, no static count of how many school districts are using the Internet can be made.

On Dec. 5 "Web Day" sponsored by the Oklahoma Department of Education, will be held in 18 different locations simultaneously to familiarize school district officials with the state's web page and encourage individual school use of the Internet, O'Brien said.

SATELLITE TOWN MEETING SET

From U.S. Dept. of Education

■(WASHINGTON) Truancy is often the first sign a young person is in trouble. It can also be a gateway to crime. According to the Los Angeles County Office of Education, truancy is the most powerful predictor of juvenile delinquent behavior.

How big is the problem? While no national data exist, according to the "Manual to Combat Truancy" (available at <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/truancy/>), in some cities, unexcused absences number in the thousands each day. Pittsburgh and Milwaukee, for example, count 2,450 and 4,000 (respectively) absent without an excuse.

"When young people start skipping school," the report says, "they are telling their parents, school officials and the community at large they are in trouble and need our help if they are to keep moving forward in life."

"What can schools and communities do to keep students in school, challenged and learning?"

That question is the focus of this month's Satellite Town Meeting, at 7 p.m., Tuesday,

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was an important stopover for thousands of migrating waterfowl and shorebirds. Once the area is restored, it is expected to be used by more than 200,000 waterfowl and shorebirds, including the endangered whooping cranes.

"The opportunity to partner with Oklahoma for such a worthwhile project is exciting, and we look forward to doing what we can to make this effort a success," said Keith Bailey, Williams chairman, president and chief executive officer. "The Williams Companies is committed to protecting and enhancing the quality of the environment which is so important to us all."

The donated pipe will be collected from Williams' five natural gas pipe companies: Transcontinental Gas Pipe Line Corporation, Northwest Pipeline Corporations, Kern River Gas Transmission Company, Texas Gas Transmission Corporation, and Williams Natural Gas Company. It is planned that the pipe will be gathered and delivered to the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation by the end of 1997.