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TEA seeks funds to boost school internet connectivity

[December 15](#) — The Texas Education Agency (TEA) is asking the Legislature to spend \$25 million in fiscal 2018 to help school districts qualify for a federal program that discounts optical fiber construction projects. The agency said the \$25 million state investment ultimately could leverage an estimated \$250 million in federal funds for projects to improve internet connectivity and speed in Texas classrooms.

TEA included the one-year funding as a desired “exceptional item” above its proposed baseline budget in its fiscal 2018-19 [legislative appropriations request](#). The 85th Legislature will begin considering state agency budget requests soon after it convenes in January 2017.

The commissioner of education testified at a Legislative Budget Board [joint budget hearing](#) that the funding would be targeted to help rural districts and those serving large numbers of economically disadvantaged students build their broadband infrastructure. A legislatively mandated [study](#) released by TEA in January 2016 found that 74 percent of school campuses were below target internet connectivity requirements contained in the bill.

The commissioner said a federal funding opportunity that matches state funds with federal funds to provide discounted school optical fiber construction projects could expire in 2019. Authorized in 2014 by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), it is part of the federal [E-rate program](#), which was

established to make telecommunications and information services more affordable for schools and libraries. The E-rate program also helps schools pay for ongoing internet access costs. It is funded by the Universal Service Fund through required contributions from telecommunications service providers based on a percentage of their revenue.

According to TEA, the requested \$25 million in state funding would be matched by \$25 million in federal E-rate funding for a combined \$50 million “local funding share.” Once districts paid their local funding share, they would be eligible for an estimated \$200 million in E-rate program discounts. The per-district discounts range from 20 to 90 percent, with higher discounts available for higher poverty and more rural schools.

The House Committee on Public Education and the Senate Committee on Education both have held hearings this year on interim charges related to improving broadband access in schools. The House committee was directed to research federal and state funding opportunities to support increased access to broadband and the Senate committee was charged with studying the availability of affordable broadband access to school districts across Texas. During committee hearings in May and September, education technology advocates said the \$250 million likely would be sufficient to help the 16 percent of Texas school districts still lacking optical fiber build out their networks.

— Janet Elliott