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FCC Seeks To Be Educated About Educational Uses of Broadband

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As part of its ongoing efforts to get a handle on All Things Broadband before the FCC's homework (*i.e.*, the National Broadband Plan, a/k/a the NBP) is due in February, the Commission has released yet another Public Notice, this time seeking comments on issues relating to the educational use of broadband.

To ensure that the information is thoughtfully prepared and presented in a manner that will maximally assist the Commission to draft the NBP in the next three months, the FCC generously gave parties 17 days to prepare their submissions. Initial comments were due to be filed by November 20, enabling folks to get that project off their desks before Thanksgiving. No such luck with reply comments: they're due by December 11. (Given the abbreviated timeframe afforded on this, the Commission will presumably be amenable to late-filed *ex parte* comments which cast light on the issues.)

The latest Public Notice invites comments on virtually every aspect of the educational use of broadband technology. By "educational", it means everything from pre-K to grad school, including both institutions and students. The kind of input it's looking for? Pretty much anything and everything, including "implementation strategies, budgets/expenses, financing strategies, programmatic goals, measured outcomes, and other detailed operational and strategic information about the programs using broadband for educational purposes." Again, this information was to be collected, organized and presented to the Commission by November 20, a brief 17 days after the invitation for comments went out.

As far as nitty-gritty factual information goes, the Commission is interested in the current availability and implementation of broadband services within schools and school districts. Where broadband services have been implemented, how are they being used for online learning systems, backroom data reporting systems and the like? Have various communications systems (instant messaging, online video conferencing and such) assisted in the introduction of new learning opportunities that were not otherwise available?

On a more conceptual level, the Commission is asking about the role of government in

supporting the introduction and development of broadband use in schools and school districts, and what specific steps the Commission could or should be taking along those lines (including the setting of technology standards and the support of technology literacy programs).

The E-Rate program is yet another focus of the FCC's interest: what modifications to that program might "stimulate the adoption of broadband throughout communities"? How do current participants use the program, and should the program be expanded (through Congressional action, of course) to include additional educational programs such as Head Start? Also, how about maybe modifying the distribution of E-Rate funds – would that assist broadband deployment? And might changes to the E-Rate program affect the expansion of broadband deployment, and what might the impact of such expansion be on the level of E-Rate Funding? (The Commission is particularly concerned that the current limit on funding – \$2.25 billion – may prevent further expansion of broadband deployment. But if that limit were to be upped, what types of services could be provided?)

It's not exactly clear how such a vast amount of information covering such a vast number of subjects might be compiled and usefully presented in a mere 17 days – let alone thoughtfully digested and analyzed by the Commission in the next three months. Why the FCC waited as long as it did to initiate a soup-to-nuts review of the use of "broadband for educational purposes" is unclear, but it reminds us of a frantic midnight call to a fellow student for their notes to prepare for the big calculus test the next day. While the goals of the Commission are obviously worthwhile and could lead to the development of important policies, the rushed nature of the agency's efforts does nothing to dampen skepticism as to whether a tsunami of information submitted on incredibly short notice can or will be put to good use. Only time will tell.