

WiFi Connectivity For Buses Using The Federal Emergency Connectivity Fund

The Technology Division and Transportation Departments are working to implement WiFi on 213 Denton ISD buses using the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) at an initial cost of \$0 and potential ongoing costs in future fiscal years at the discretion of the District, based on the success of the initiative.

The American Rescue Plan was voted into law on March 11, 2021. Section 7402 of that law established the \$7.171 billion Emergency Connectivity Fund for the purchase of remote learning telecommunications equipment, reimbursable at 100%. The program is being administered by the Universal Service Administrative Co. (USAC), who also manages the E-rate program.

DISD's Technology Division began preparing for ECF funding in June 2021 and applied for funding during the August 2021 ECF application window. DISD's ECF request was approved and funded in ECF Wave 2 on October 15, 2021.

E-rate is normally funded at a percentage discount based on free and reduced-lunch-eligible students, therefore DISD normally receives a 60% discount on E-rate eligible equipment. While USAC is administering ECF in a pseudo-E-rate manner, there are a number of significant differences. The most significant is that ECF is funded at a 100% discount rather than the normal, partial E-rate discount. Additionally, there are two methods of purchasing through E-rate-type programs, Service Provider Invoice (SPI) and Billed Entity Applicant Reimbursement (BEAR). SPI involves discounted invoices from the vendor, while BEAR involves full invoicing from the vendor and subsequent reimbursement from the federal government. While DISD's preference is to use BEAR to keep vendors from bearing the weight of million-dollar purchases, the hardware for this initiative is SPI. The significant issue is that this takes the District completely out of the paper trail. So, in order to put the District back in that documentation process, the Technology Division is proposing that the District send a \$0 (\$491,678.55 cost minus \$491,678.55 in discounts) purchase order to the vendor for the equipment and the installation services.

Another significant issue is the cellular service portion of this initiative. The Verizon service will be invoiced as BEAR at a temporary cost of \$21,300.00 through June 30, 2022. This will be refunded at 100% at that time. Verizon pricing is heavily discounted already for the COVID pandemic. The cost for the monthly services is likely to go up significantly at that time. Technology will work with the Transportation Department to determine the effectiveness of the initiative and to determine the proper course of action for next fiscal year. The District is not obligated to continue the cellular service and the equipment are all permanent DISD assets with no yearly maintenance costs.