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Introduction

Education is supposedly the nation’s great equalizer, empowering every kind of student with tools and knowledge to pave the way for their futures. And yet, K-12 schools remain chronically underfunded, with their teachers and administrators often underpaid and overworked. Many schools across the country struggle to meet even basic needs, such as maintaining their classrooms, paying their teachers, and providing their students with school supplies. And as financial need within schools prevails, simultaneously, technology has expanded to the point where it is omnipresent in every day life, and therefore critical for students to grasp. But technology is expensive, more so than typical classroom necessities, meaning that this gap—between what schools need and what they can afford—is expanding, and growing more concerning.

How important is technology in education? Though there’s nothing wrong with traditional teaching—without gadgets or technological assistance—technology does have the ability to make teacher’s lives easier while also improving student retention. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, 92% of teachers said that the Internet has a major impact on their teaching, aiding their ability to find helpful resources and materials for their students. Additionally, by having access to different learning tools such as videos, images, and games, teachers can help students with a wide range of learning styles.



But the most important reason to integrate technology into K-12 education is arguably because of the digitizing workforce. Many jobs now require basic technological skills. In fact, according to a report called “Digitizing and the American Workforce” most jobs—beyond obvious tech jobs, and including lawyers, nurses and receptionists, among others—are now classified as “moderately digital”. Meanwhile, “highly digital” jobs have tripled since 2002, and “low-digital jobs” have dropped from 55.7% to 29.5%--and this number continues to decrease.

This means that the more schools can educate students in technology and incorporate it into their curriculums, the more students will be prepared for their futures. But the problem still remains—how can schools struggling with funding manage to provide technological experience for their students? What are the steps that they need to take?

The value of eRate

eRate is a program that was founded in 1996 under the Universal Service Fund to address this issue. Its aim was to help fund technology and networks for K-12 schools and libraries so that they could connect to the Internet and educate students. Though eRate doesn't cover everything, like laptops or desktop computers, it covers many aspects of networking, like cabling, access points, and switches. Schools can apply annually and receive 40%-90% funding, depending on how many of their students qualify for free or reduced lunch.



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eRate could be a good option for you if:

1. Your school has very little technology.

97% of K-12 schools report having one or more computers in their classrooms, but for many schools, this is still not enough. This is especially true for schools in low-income and rural areas. According to the Pew Research Center, 56% of the teachers of the lowest income students say that they struggle to teach technological skills because they don't have enough tech resources in their classrooms. This is in comparison to 21% of teachers of the highest income students.

2. Your school has *enough* technology, but the technology itself is slow or outdated.

This is a very common issue for schools. Even if a school can figure out a way to afford technology, most schools don't know what infrastructure they actually need. Often, volunteers at the school step in to research what technological tools the school should invest in, but given how busy and underpaid teachers and administrators are, there are usually large gaps in this research. Often times, the infrastructure that schools finally purchase runs poorly, and ends up causing more stress for the teachers. Rather than helping their students, this technology eats into their valuable class time.

3. Your school can afford to invest in technology, but can't afford the "last mile".

The "last mile" refers to the cost of the final leg of technological connection, getting the Internet from the provider to the school itself. Even if schools can afford Internet infrastructure, this is an additional cost that is especially expensive for schools in rural areas. In rural areas, it can be very difficult for Internet providers to offer reliable, high-speed Wifi without charging extra for more cabling and maintenance.



If any of these problems sound familiar, then eRate is a great option for subsidizing the cost of reliable, efficient technology that can transform your school and your students. But in order to take full advantage of a program like eRate, you need to know where to begin.

How do you even know what technology to apply for?
How can you figure out what infrastructure would best elevate learning at your school?

[Get Started](#)

Considering your options

1. Do it Yourself Approach

If you're thinking that you don't want to invest in a professional solution, then teachers or administrators at your school could order a pallet of technological product from a provider and configure, install, and document it yourself.

The **pro** of this approach is that it would be cheaper in the beginning to use volunteers rather than a professional service. But this is also a **con**, because it's relying on people who are not tech experts to make difficult decisions about equipment. And given low school budgets, most teachers tasked with this job would likely choose cheaper tech options—at a place like Best Buy, for example—that only work for a small number of devices. Though these devices are cheaper initially, they nearly always cost more eventually, and waste the time and energy of the teachers.

Lastly, when schools try to assess their technological needs themselves in order to save money, it usually ends up backfiring. A program like eRate is around for the sole purpose of funding technology for schools. But if a school doesn't know what it needs, and just tries to get the cheapest, simplest technology, they can't properly fill out the eRate paperwork with their requests. Schools often can't take full advantage of the program, which would save them money, because they're trying to save money—an irony that's easily avoidable.

2. Professional Solution

The professional solution would have clear steps in place to identify the best path forward for your specific school.

These steps would include:

1. The professional IT service will come to your school and identify what your goals are and what you need.
2. They will make a purpose-built proposal of the vital networking equipment needed and all of its information.
3. They will make thorough and specific suggestions on how your school should fill out the eRate application—USAC 470—in order to do it properly and receive the most funding possible.
4. They will do a thorough examination of the school in order to map out existing technology and document the installations so that schools understand their own infrastructure. This way schools can make future decisions about technology in an informed way.

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A professional IT service will ensure that your school isn't choosing cheaper tech options only to pay for it later. With extensive tech experience and education, professionals will choose the option that—though it may seem expensive at first—will be the best for your school in the long run. For example, the average school volunteer would likely apply for many different access points to assist with the school's Wifi because these are cheaper and supposedly they work. But an IT professional would know that having various access points on different wireless networks would compete with one another, their transmissions interfering. What schools really need are access points that can handle many devices—up to 150 devices—so that there are fewer access points that would only necessitate one wireless network that roams. This one network would mean zero interfering across access points. The Wifi would be much faster and smoother, assisting classroom learning rather than distracting from it.

Having one network would also allow students to bring in their own devices. This would mean that students could take advantage of any technology that they already have, lessening the burden of the school. Though bringing in your own devices may make it harder to monitor and control what students are doing online—something that is a big concern to many teachers—there are options available, especially with eRate. Network Access Control (NAC), for example, is a service that enables restrictions over the Internet, preventing pornography, hate speech, and more. This is something that eRate can fund, and they can also fund other means of monitoring student computers on the network at all times. Through these different strategies—fewer access points, one wireless network, e-ratable restrictions—a professional IT service can ensure that your school is set up for technological success.



Conclusion



Schools have so much on their plates already. It seems impossible that along with educating the future generations they could also have the time to research technology, figure out their own needs, and worry about the costs while already struggling with funding. But technology doesn't need to be stressful; it's supposed to make life, and learning, easier.

That's why we, at **CNS Partners**, are here to help. Though eRate is an amazing program, it has its challenges, and by utilizing a professional IT service, your school won't have to worry. We are here to go through every step of the process with you, from helping you fill out the eRate application that can get you everything you need, to maintaining your installed technology. At CNS Partners, we have 20 years of experience in IT solutions and we understand how technology can help the future of education. We can tailor our services to your specific educational needs, and help improve your school.