

Arkansas's Broadband Challenge

Senate Subcommittee Hearing

Connecting Urban and Rural America: The State of Communications on the Ground

August 19th at 9:00a Arkansas Electric Co-op

Little Rock, Arkansas

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Good morning. Thank you Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Fast Access for Students Teachers and Economic Results (FASTER) Arkansas committee, which is focused on broadband expansion.

For the last several years, I have been working with Governor Mike Beebe's Workforce Cabinet on STEM Works, an initiative to strengthen Science, Technology, Engineering and Math education in Arkansas. STEM Works subsidizes project- and problem-based learning programs for high school and college students. Today, we have almost 15 percent of high schools signed up for a STEM Works program and three universities implementing the UTeach teacher preparation model, which is wonderful. But we found that schools that wanted to participate in STEM Works sometimes couldn't because they lacked adequate broadband infrastructure.

So we started looking at broadband capacity across the entire State. How did we fare in the global bandwidth arms race? The short answer was not well.

- Last year, the 2012 "Digital Learning Now" report from the Foundation for Education Excellence in Education gave Arkansas an "F" for digital learning opportunities.
- TechNet's 2012 Broadband Index listed Arkansas as 50th among all states for broadband access.
- The Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators (AAEA) surveyed its members in 2011 and found that 80 percent of district administrators experienced problems with bandwidth in the previous year, 78 percent wanted to implement technology initiatives but couldn't due to bandwidth limitations, and 84.5 percent had to restrict access to educationally-relevant or useful sites due to bandwidth concerns.

Now, it hasn't always been this way. Arkansas was among the first states to recognize the importance of broadband, providing all schools connections to the Arkansas Public School Computer Network in 1992.

Multiple public boards, commissions, and task forces have been created at the state level to research, strategize, advocate and propose broadband solutions, but they have achieved limited results. Differing business models, numerous provider territories, divergent constituency interests, inadequate funding, market realities, and the absence of strong, visionary leadership were obstacles to moving forward.

Arkansas has not ignored broadband expansion but progress has been slow and unsteady.

Challenges for Rural States

Preparing students to be competitive in the 21st Century global economy is an imperative in any state. In states with many poor and rural students, 21st century schools not only prepare the workforce, but help reduce the burden of poverty and isolation. Meeting this imperative is a special challenge in places where people are relatively poor and distances between them are relatively large.

Arkansas faces the same challenges as other rural states working to increase broadband access to schools:

- Service providers see expanding to low population density areas as cost-prohibitive;
- Construction and monthly service costs are too high for small communities to absorb;
- Local network infrastructure may be outdated; and
- The lack of sufficient technical expertise at the local level.

Arkansas Is Moving Forward

However, none of that is stopping the state from moving forward.

Everyone involved recognizes the potential benefits of effective digital learning:

1. Students can learn anytime, anywhere, including online, blended or hybrid classrooms, or through digital content.
2. Teachers can use real-time data and adaptive software to individualize instruction for each student and help them reach their full potential.
3. Teachers can use digital learning and technology to participate in professional development and enhance their skills.
4. Students will gain access to courses and expertise that is not available at their local school.

The possibilities are endless.

The General Assembly passed Act 1280 of 2013 that requires high schools to offer one or more digital learning courses beginning with the 2014-2015 school year. The legislation also directs the state to study the broadband necessary to deliver quality digital learning to each school district. The report to legislative leadership is expected in December 2013.

FASTER Arkansas was formed at the request of Governor Beebe and includes representatives from cable, telephone and fixed-wireless companies, secondary and post-secondary education, each of Arkansas' United States Senators, and maybe most importantly, industry and business leaders who recognize that the development of strong broadband public policy is vital not only for the educational advancement of our students but is also vital for the economic growth and advancement of our state. By working together, we believe that FASTER can put forth, in a unified voice, public policy proposals to be considered by both the legislative and executive branches of our government.

How the Federal Government Can Help

Arkansas is moving forward and making progress but will need help. Arkansas needs:

1. Access to funding for middle and last mile build/out.

In some locations, the cost of middle mile and last mile build/out of broadband infrastructure is cost prohibitive. A retooled E-Rate program could better subsidize and prioritize this work.

2. Access to funds to build or upgrade local area networks and provide local technical support.

Aging schools may not have the necessary local network infrastructure or technical talent to take advantage of high speed broadband, even if it's available.

3. A simplified, revenue-stable E-Rate program that prioritizes applications from regional educational consortiums, including Arkansas Educational Cooperatives.

This would encourage the development of more comprehensive, regional solutions and greater economies of scale for purchasing and construction.

4. Ongoing support for digital learning.

Having federal officials talk about the importance of digital learning and broadband expansion helps drive home the importance of this issue.

Mr. Chairman, Arkansas is a rural state. Many of our school districts are losing residents and when this happens, students either miss out on opportunities to take high-level courses, or districts are forced to consolidate. This endangers the rural way of life and limits economic opportunities for our state. Broadband expansion offers way to stem the tide and FASTER Arkansas is committed to being part of the solution.

Thank you for your interest in this important issue.