



NASCIO 2021 State IT Recognition Awards Nomination

State of Delaware

Department of Education

Delaware School Districts and Charter Schools

Department of Technology and Information

Better Than School Parking Lot WiFi:

Connect Delaware Broadband Service Expansion

Category: Cross-Boundary Collaboration & Partnerships

Project Initiated: August, 2020

Project Completed: December, 2020

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Executive Summary

[Connect Delaware](#) was developed jointly by Delaware's Department of Technology and Information (DTI) and Department of Education (DOE), as well as Local Education Agencies (LEAs: school districts and charter schools) to use a \$20 million in CARES Act funding to support the buildout of new broadband infrastructure and to acquire broadband equipment and services for low-income students in Delaware. The program engaged key stakeholders to build a greater understanding of needs and gaps in broadband availability and adoption in Delaware.



Idea

Connect Delaware is comprised of two discreet subprograms. Its infrastructure program supports the buildout of new broadband infrastructure by the private sector in Delaware. Its subsidy program provides fixed and hotspot broadband connections to qualifying low-income students in the State. For both programs, all funds were required to be spent, and all services required to be completed, by December 30, 2020 due to the federal requirements of the CARES Act.

Delaware's Department of Technology and Information (DTI) worked with the state Department of Education (DOE) to develop a subsidy program that would provide broadband services free of charge to low-income students through the 2021 calendar year. DOE and Delaware's Local Education Agencies (LEAs)—19 school districts and 23 charter schools—were key stakeholders in the implementation of this program.

DTI issued a scope of work in early October to solicit proposals from internet service providers to provide broadband service to eligible students through December 31, 2021.

Eligible broadband services met the following technical requirements:

- Provide 25/3 Mbps capacity, or a connection capable of operating at least two simultaneous Zoom or Google Classroom sessions
- Provide latency < 150 ms
- No data restrictions based on the time of day; unlimited data with at least 25 GB per month at full speed
- Provide a Wi-Fi connection capable of supporting at least five simultaneously connected devices
- Include necessary equipment to enable service, including Wi-Fi distribution throughout the home
- Include all necessary installation at the home, or capability to work out-of-the box with written instructions
- Availability of customer service from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., seven days a week



Implementation

AT&T, Comcast, Mediacom, and Verizon executed contracts with the State to provide services through the program. The four providers and their corresponding products were added to a catalog of eligible services, which was distributed to school districts and charter schools. AT&T and Verizon offered hotspots, and Comcast and Mediacom offered fixed home connections.

School districts and charter schools assessed the broadband needs of their eligible students, and selected the products that would best meet student needs. Orders were then submitted by districts and charters to DTI, which placed orders directly with participating service providers. Service providers delivered products directly to school districts and charter schools, which distributed products to families, and invoiced the State directly for the services. Hotspots were shipped directly to school districts and charters, and individual voucher codes that could be redeemed for fixed service were sent electronically.

Student eligibility for the subsidy program was based on LEA knowledge of student/family enrollment in a variety of federal subsidy programs:

- Medicaid
- Public Housing
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP)
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- National School Lunch Program (NSLP)/Head Start
- Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)
- The Women, Infants, and Children program (WIC)

While some free and low-cost internet programs determine eligibility and allocate services on a household basis, Connect Delaware did both at the individual student level. Through the program, households with more than one eligible student were able to receive services for each student. For example, a family with two students could both receive a fixed home broadband connection and a mobile hotspot. This eligibility structure removed the penalty that would have been otherwise faced by multi-student families attempting to engage in simultaneous distance learning with a single connection, in some cases the same one other family members need for remote work.





Impact

All of the State's 19 school districts and 23 charter schools requested a total of 25,789 products through the program. The distribution of requested products among participating internet service providers is reflected in Table 1.

<i>Provider</i>	<i>Number Requested</i>
AT&T	4,186
Comcast/Xfinity	2,120
Mediacom	230
Verizon	19,253
TOTAL	25,789

As of December 2020, school districts and charters were distributing products to eligible students.

The Connect Delaware subsidy program is unique in the manner in which it distributed responsibility across several key players. Responsibility was lifted almost entirely from students and their families, and instead assumed jointly by DOE, DTI, participating service providers, and school districts and charters. This program structure minimized enrollment burdens for families and administrative burdens for school districts and charters, ultimately resulting in high participation and a significant amount of connections for students.

The program also allowed school districts and charters to determine student eligibility based on their knowledge regarding student/family enrollment criteria above, as opposed to requiring a cumbersome proof-of-enrollment process that could serve as a barrier to participation for many families and place additional burden on LEAs. In total, school districts and charters requested broadband services for 25,789 students.

The role of identifying both student needs and the appropriate broadband service to meet those needs was delegated to LEAs. This approach capitalized on the LEAs' firsthand knowledge of students' level of need, both in terms of income and connectivity. Granting LEAs the ability to determine needs based on their own judgement was critical to ensuring that the program could move forward on a short timeline, and minimized the administrative burden. This process also shifted the burden of enrollment off of families. If it had been the responsibility of families to determine their eligibility and collect and submit the necessary materials to enroll, it is almost certain that families in need would have missed out on the benefit of the program due to the burden of enrollment or lack of awareness. Finally, this structure streamlined the process of disseminating program information, as the majority of information was distributed to LEAs, allowing each to use their preferred and customary channels to communicate with their students and families. Communication coming from a usual and trusted source, the LEA, made it much more likely to reach families, as opposed to DTI or DOE (state-level agencies) sending communications directly to individual families.

Additionally, DTI took several actions to streamline how the LEAs were asked to participate, including DTI's handling of all communications with participating internet service providers. For example, DTI issued the program scope of work and engaged with interested providers to execute contracts with the State, which resulted in the creation of a catalog of eligible broadband services that was provided to the LEAs. Those LEAs were then able to receive bulk quantities of products and services for students without executing contracts themselves.

DTI also provided supporting materials and served as a resource to LEAs throughout the program. For example, DTI provided informational materials, such as answers to frequently asked questions and access to a program-specific email address to direct additional questions, and provided materials designed for students' families, including program information sheets in multiple languages and technical support contact information for families having technical difficulties.

DTI's longstanding partnership with DOE was instrumental in the implementation of Connect Delaware and in enabling the program structure. DOE acted as a trusted communication channel and distributed much of the program information to LEA leadership. DOE's relationship with school districts and charter schools made smooth communication with key stakeholders possible.

"The student hotspot program helped our household a lot! We live in Sussex County—already "bandwidth challenged" so the hotspots relieved a lot of connectivity issues. With two parents working remotely, and a middle and high schooler both in hybrid learning, our single cable Internet sometimes couldn't handle all four of us needing to connect to video conferencing at the same time."

- Terry Harris, parent