Broadband USA Applications Database

Applicant Name: COACHELLA VALLEY UNIFIED SCH.DIST

Project Title: The Digital Advantage Program - Coachella Valley Unified School District Student Laptop Program

Project Type: Sustainable Broadband Adoption

_______________________ Executive Summary_______________________

a) There is a Digital Divide between lower income members of the population who cannot afford Internet connectivity and those who regularly have an entrée to information resources online because their income affords them access. Many families cannot afford a computer let alone a monthly Internet service. As students get older, they fall further and further behind their peers who do have access to the digital learning landscape of the Internet. This problem is prevalent in low-income, minority communities. Children living in poverty are especially impacted because online educational opportunities are out of reach, yet available to middle and upper income peers. This contributes, in part, to a growing gap in educational performance between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Studies show that students who are equipped with digital technologies have higher academic achievement, attendance, and graduation rates. Access to computers and high speed Internet among Latinos is a critical problem in the Coachella Valley making up rural areas of Riverside and Imperial County, CA. Learning opportunities are stunted for Latino students because many residents cannot afford computers or broadband service plans or there is simply a lack of broadband infrastructure in their areas. As a result, Latinos and other ethnic groups face a disparity and are 'disproportionately represented' among the population of people held back by limited access to technology. This lack of access to information technology combined with language barriers, already high drop out rates and historically substandard academic performance within the Latino community further exacerbates an existing recipe for disaster. According to the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, a non-partisan think tank dedicated to Latino public policy issues, classroom computer use creates a form of interest, increases student motivation and improves the overall learning outcome. The potential payoffs of information technology in teaching and learning applications are several: (1) there is great potential for technology to enhance learning, educational attainment and achievement; (2) the acquisition of information technology skills in an educational context can launch students on information technology career paths. But due to high drop out rates within the Latino community, even with in-class technology, instruction falls on deaf ears if students are not in the classroom in the first place. It is simply not enough to provide information technology opportunities on the school campus. Information Technology must also incentivise students to attend, participate and learn. Where little motivation is provided in the home or among peer groups, innovative incentives are needed to entice low-income students to attend school and do the work. Many believe that access to information technology, especially during off campus time, is one hook to keep students interested in learning. Information technology related incentives are important because they can not only accomplish behavioral change, but also actually improve student performance. The
The goal is academic growth, stable attendance and increased graduation rates through frequent and consistent access to information technology. b) The Digital Advantage Program is an incentive based program designed to award personal laptop computers to high school freshman who meet district benchmarks in the areas of academic performance, attendance, extra-curricular participation and behavioral standards. The program works to decrease dropout rates, improve academic performance and increase the district's graduation rates. Research in graduation and dropout studies suggest that the freshman year of high school is critical, as it is the year many students decide to remain in school or leave due to various challenges such as academic achievement, discipline, and attendance. The Sunnyside Unified School District (SUSD) in Tucson, Arizona began a 'Digital Advantage Initiative' in 2008 by focusing its efforts on freshman students. SUSD aimed to improve students' ability to achieve by providing them with laptop computers that could be taken to and from the campus. In order to earn a laptop, students had to demonstrate the four A's at the end of their first semester of high school: Attendance; Achievement; Activity and Attitude. The results after the first year of implementation were outstanding showing an overwhelming success rate in student attendance and achievement. Dropout rates after laptops were issued has significantly decreased as well, in some cases nearly 50% at the end of the third quarter. Students, equipped with information technology, take greater pride in their academic performance and now have access to media and exciting online learning opportunities. Getting laptops to kids is the first step in bridging the digital divide. The second step involves providing access to the Internet through broadband technologies. One such technology involves the erection of WiMAX towers at school sites. WiMAX, meaning Worldwide Interoperability for Microwave Access, is a telecommunications technology that provides wireless transmission of data using a variety of transmission modes, from point-to-multipoint links to portable and fully mobile internet access. Towers, depending on height, have a range of approximately 30 miles. Though this would not reach all of the rural households served by the district, it provides for many that would otherwise never be able to access the Internet. With this technology, students who are Digital Advantage participants, could connect from their home, with their awarded laptop, and provide not only educational exposure to the student, but Internet access and all that it brings, to the entire family. Thus, the entire community benefits from this more comprehensive approach while contributing to the long-term sustainability of the Digital Advantage program by building technological infrastructure that will fuel long-term educational opportunities online. An even more immediate solution could impact larger success of the Digital Advantage Program. One such solution that shows promise is a partnership with local mobile phone providers for laptop data cards using mobile phone technology to provide access to the Internet. These cards are generally free with the purchase of a monthly retail service plan. c) The Coachella Valley Unified School District serves one of the fastest growing populations in California. The district is comprised of 96.7% Latinos, many of whom speak English as a second language. Nearly 2,500 students belong to the families of seasonal migrant laborers and over 86.5% of the students qualify for the Free or Reduced Price Meal Program. Not surprisingly the district has a very high dropout rate and struggles to meet academic testing standards. But an innovative pilot program offers hope. The district serves low-income students in predominantly rural, agricultural areas located in Eastern Riverside County and Imperial County, California. These areas are experiencing some of the highest unemployment rates in the Nation, currently as high as 24% unemployment. They have also experience some of the highest foreclosure rates in the Nation and rank toward the very top of the AP Economic Stress Index, a measure
of the economic distress of various areas of the United States. d) The Coachella Valley Unified School District (CVUSD) currently manages millions of dollars of federal and state grant money in the day-to-day operations of their school district. As a larger government organization with hundreds of trained professionals, they are accustomed to the rigors of managing government dollars and have numerous accountability measures in place to ensure money is managed correctly. Added to that, they have a robust information technology staff and an assistant superintendent assigned to manage technology initiatives (the equivalent of a private sector CIO). With a new superintendent and a renewed commitment to making academic gains, CVUSD is seeking new kinds of incentives, innovative approaches and programs to keep students in school and on track to graduate. The Obama Administration's Race to the Top program has encouraged districts like CVUSD to think like entrepreneurs and try new and creative ways to reach student subgroups who have a track record of struggling. A new focus on integrating technology into the learning process is gaining significant momentum. CVUSD is rising to that challenge and rethinking many aspects of educational delivery. e) We will generate over a four year period of time the following: 4 Direct Man/Year jobs, 27 Indirect Man/Year Jobs and 15 Induced Man/Year Jobs. f) To provide laptops to students for the next four years, the program needs $968,210. This is program down by year as follows: Year 1: $208,621 Year 2: $229,483 Year 3: $252,432 Year 4: $277,674