

Nebraska Schools and Libraries—Breaking the Ice and Igniting Internet Relationships Abstract

The Nebraska Library Commission, in collaboration with the State Office of the Chief Information Officer, plans to use the SPARKS Grant of \$25,000 to partner with, and incentivize five rural public school districts and five rural public libraries to create a mini-consortium E-rate application model that will dramatically increase the frequency of applications and funding to rural public libraries in Nebraska, as well as across the United States, and to work together to increase the internet speeds at the public library.

The **time frame** for this project will be from **May 1, 2018-April 30, 2019**, with a preliminary, pre-grant activity of competitive applications submitted and evaluated between January and March, 2018.

The **project will address the need** of the rural public library to become a key Community Anchor Institution within the community by becoming the fastest (and often the only) source of free Wi-Fi internet in rural communities with a legal service area of under 25,000. This project will also provide homework hotspots for students who lack internet at home, estimated to be 17% of all Nebraska households, or over 50,000 students statewide, and to emphasize continuing education for patrons of all ages by sharing virtual field trips.

The **intended audience** of these grant activities are the local school district and local public libraries, their students, staff, and patrons. If this E-rate application and infrastructure sharing model proves successful, it will be replicated statewide and communicated nationally to the top 15 states that have over 2/3 of their public libraries labeled as “Rural” (IMLS locale codes 41, 42, 43) and “Small” (service populations <25,000).

The **specific project activities** will include: A competitive application process to determine community project sites; competitive procurement, purchase, and installation of fixed wireless equipment to interconnect the public school and public library buildings; purchase and installation of a new 802.11ac internal network within each public library; 6-month test of augmented internet model within the library; training and guidance to support each school district/public library mini-consortium as they make their first-ever joint E-rate application in 2019-2020; evaluation of IMLS performance measures; composing the final project report; and construction of a descriptive project model and promotion via Nebraska and national media outlets.

The specific performance goals, project outcomes and results include:

- Delivering training and assistance in establishing credentials within the USAC E-rate Productivity Center (EPC) so that E-rate applications and funding can be maximized to improve external and internal networks;
- Augmenting rural public library internet speeds to the FCC minimum of 25Mbps down/3Mbps up or more;
- Upgrading internal public library networks to 802.11ac and Cat 6 and/or 6a wiring;
- Creating at least one supervised homework hotspot in each public library so that K-12 students can access public school networks and resources while in a public library setting;
- Improving the equity of access and digital inclusion of rural community citizens by increasing the speed of public Wi-Fi locations, and enable selected partners’ staff to travel and share their experiences;
- Exploring cloud-based videoconferencing to bring museum virtual field trip programs to rural communities;
- Constructing an exportable model to replicate project success across Nebraska and within similarly situated states across the U.S.

The **Nebraska Schools and Libraries—Breaking the Ice and Igniting Internet Relationships** project intends to address: Rural library directors’ inability to apply for Category 1/Category 2 E-rate funding by using a personalized training and a mini-consortium application model; the lack of infrastructure sharing among public school districts and public libraries in rural communities by providing free equipment to incentive their collaboration and participation; the dismissive attitudes of rural residents who say that “nothing much ever goes on in the library and their Wi-Fi is too slow” by demonstrating the fastest internet they’ve ever experienced; the criticism by rural taxpayers that their taxes are too high by showing an increase in efficiency of having two major political subdivisions work together to achieve better service at lower costs; and to convince the school technology coordinator that public libraries are not the administrative burden that they think they are.