

Arkansas Launches \$13 Million School Broadband Upgrade

Colin Wood | April 29, 2015



Arkansas started investing in technology for its K-12 system in the early 1990s through the development of the Arkansas Public School Computer Network. The network linked schools together, but in 2015, broadband Internet connectivity is lacking. Recently elected Gov. Asa Hutchinson recognized a need for its students to get connected and the state is now launching an upgrade – totaling about \$13 million annually – to its fiber infrastructure that will bolster education efforts and provide a stepping stone for further broadband development in the state.



“The governor as part of his campaign made a big push to do computer science education in the schools within four years,” Arkansas Chief Technology Officer Mark Myers (pictured at left) said. “In order to do that at any real level, you have to have broadband capability in the 21st century.”

On April 15, the state finished awarding contracts to bidding vendors, selecting 22 lowest-bidding vendors in all. The vendors include small one-town telephone companies to large corporations like AT&T and CenturyLink. Starting in July, the vendors will work to connect all but two of the state’s 276 school districts, charter schools and educational cooperatives to the state’s network. Project completion is expected by July 2017, while most facilities should be connected within 12 months. Today, the state’s schools Internet connectivity varies greatly – some schools have gigabit connections while others are well beneath FCC benchmark broadband speeds of 25 Mbps for downloads and 3 Mbps for uploads.

“Arkansas is a very rural state,” Myers said. “If rural parts of Arkansas have broadband up to 10 gigs, then all of a sudden it’s available to businesses, it’s available to homes, it’s really going to expand the citizens’ ability in this state to be at the head of the class. If AT&T’s already built a connection to West Memphis, Arkansas, they already have all the stuff in the ground to do it, now they just have to pay for connecting that individual house to that same call center. We’re helping them invest in putting fiber in the ground.”

The project aims to bring a minimum of 100 Kbps of bandwidth per student, which means that larger school districts will get faster connections – up to 10 Gbps – while smaller school districts will get smaller pipes, but the result will be sufficient connectivity for nearly every student in the state to receive quality Internet access. Some schools are deploying Chromebooks and iPads to make use of the increased connectivity, and the goal is for every student to have a personal device, Myers’ office reported.

The state’s broadband upgrade is funded through the existing budget of the Arkansas Department of Education.

<http://www.govtech.com/network/Arkansas-Launches-13-Million-School-Broadband-Upgrade.html>