



Department of
Education

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for

Connecting Schools & Classrooms

Version 0.1



Overview

The Information Technology Division is committed to working with all areas of the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) to address what has come to be known as the *Homework Gap*. Achieving universal access to high-capacity broadband and sufficiently powerful instructional devices are key contributors to this gap. We are committed to ensuring equitable education opportunities for all students and that includes closing these gaps, especially among our most vulnerable student populations.

Now is the time to act. Federal pandemic emergency resources, non-emergency connectivity programs, and growing public demand for connectivity offer the opportunity to address local communities’ needs. Use this FAQ to discover how to use the available resources to connect schools and classrooms throughout a local school district.

After using these questions and answers to learn about the available funds, programs, loans, and grants, scan the sections for helpful tips on how to prepare for the application process, as well as some related links and suggestions for additional reading.



Note: This tool is one of three FAQs designed to help address and close the *Homework Gap*. To learn more, please refer to the following two FAQs: 1) Equipping Students & Educators with Devices and 2) Connecting Households and other Places Students Live. Please reach out to the District Technology helpdesk (dt.support@tn.gov) for assistance with acquiring these additional FAQs.

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1 Introduction



Technology offers many benefits for students, educators, and families—including the following: 1) enabling remote access to learning; 2) offering new and effective collaboration opportunities; and 3) expanding access to powerful supplemental learning tools, resources, and informative data.

The hurdles preventing ubiquitous access to high-capacity broadband and related devices often vary across communities, but the most significant obstacles include telecommunications infrastructure gaps (especially in the most remote rural areas); persistent poverty; and lack of household awareness regarding the benefits of online connectivity. Overcoming these hurdles require close collaboration among local, state, and federal leaders, as well as with the telecommunications and technology providers responsible for delivering the innovative technology and tools that digital education demands.

Use this FAQ to understand and evaluate key federal funds, programs, loans, and grants as potential tools for meeting your district's connectivity needs. These include both emergency and non-emergency programs and resources. Some programs highlighted in this FAQ provide connectivity funding to schools and other education entities, while others direct funding to qualified households, telecommunications providers, or other community institutions, such as libraries.

Note: Sections 1.1 and 1.2 list the available connectivity resources by emergency and non-emergency. Please be aware that these are the programs best suited for connecting schools and classrooms. Additional resources exist if the goal is to equip students and educators with devices OR to connect households and other places students live. Please refer to those FAQs for that information and reach out to the District Technology helpdesk (dt.support@tn.gov) for assistance with acquiring these additional FAQs.

1.1 Federal Emergency Connectivity Programs

The following emergency federal connectivity programs are available when connecting schools and classrooms:

- The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund
- The Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEERF)

1.2 Federal Non-Emergency Connectivity Programs

The following non-emergency federal connectivity programs are available when connecting schools and classrooms:

- The Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund (CCPF)
- The E-rate program, also known as the Schools and Libraries Universal Service Program
- The ReConnect Loan and Grant Program

2 Prerequisite Tips

Yes! Please use the guidance and direction in this FAQ to understand the various available federal funds, programs, loans, and grants. But do not stop with the initial application process. Many *to-do* items need to be completed on the front end...*now!* This section lists some of these prerequisites.

2.1 A System Award Management (SAM) Number: New Number

Applicants and service providers seeking funds and/or reimbursements MUST be registered with SAM. Essentially, any entity seeing to do any business with the U.S. Government must be registered. Many of these programs are Congressional appropriations, requiring a SAM number. It can take up to twenty (20) days to acquire a SAM number, so check now. If you are unsure if your organization is registered or if you cannot locate the number, contact your business office.

2.2 A System Award Management (SAM) Number: Number Renewal

Knowing that you have a SAM number is not the only question that needs answering. SAM registrations expire. A registration is good for one year. Contact your local business office to verify how long your SAM number will remain valid and usable. It may be time to renew.

Note: To register for a new SAM number or renew a current number, visit the SAM Web site at: <https://sam.gov/content/home>

2.3 FCC Competitive Bidding Rules

For some programs, like the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) Program, the FCC has waived their competitive bidding rules. But, every district must be in compliance with state and local rules. Review Board purchasing policies to determine if formal competitive bidding is required or if Board authorization is required for purchases using state master and piggyback contracts. In short, review your local policies, regardless of the FCC's guidance on this matter.

2.4 Review All Current Contracts

Check all of your contracts and the vehicles that the district will use to purchase services starting on July 1, 2021. Verify everything is up to date.

2.5 Review All Current Documentation

Look at any documentation that you have on file to help you determine unmet needs, to see what you've collected during the pandemic, and to help you get started with any new application process.

2.6 Inventory Physical Equipment and Assets

Do an inventory. Document what devices your district owns and where these assets are located. The district may want to use a federal program to finance a new WIFI hotspot to service these devices. And some devices will not meet the federal minimum broadband standards and need to be replaced because they are now obsolete.

2.7 Register for Application Training Sessions

Training on how to apply for the ECF Program will soon be available. Use the following link to stay informed on that fund and sign up for training:

- <https://survey.alchemer.com/s3/6296809/Emergency-Connectivity-Fund>

2.8 Create a Document-As-You-Go Game Plan

Regardless of the fund, program, loan, or grant a district applies for, on-going documentation will be required for several years. The types of broadband service documentation can include: (a) type of service; (b) upload/download speeds and monthly data cap; (c) person receiving service; and for fixed broadband service; (d) the service address, (e) date(s) service received. Equipment documentation can include: (a) device type; (b) make/model; (c) serial number; (d) person receiving device; and (e) the dates the device was loaned out and returned to the school or library.

While the FCC requires districts to create and maintain documentation records, how that is done and what the record look like is up to each individual district. The lesson here is to create a documentation system that works and follow it. If asked to produce these records, be able to do with so minimum delay.

3 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund

3.1 What is the ESSER?

ARP provided \$122.8 billion in additional funding for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund, which Congress established and funded first through the CARES Act (\$13 billion in March 2020) and later through the CRRSA (\$54 billion in December 2020).

3.2 Are there restrictions on ESSER funds?

SEAs and LEAs have significant discretion regarding how to best use ESSER funds, including for broadband connections, hardware, and software. Each state receives a portion of ESSER resources based on its proportional share of ESEA Title I-A funding. SEAs may set aside up to 9.5% of their total allocation for statewide emergency relief activities, including to support digital learning.

3.3 How may ESSER funds be used?

These flexible funds also may be used by states and school districts to acquire devices for students and teachers for both remote learning and for classroom-based learning. States and school districts also may use the funds to build school-based network capacity and purchase or upgrade other technology required to support students during the pandemic, including enhanced connectivity for remote learning.

3.4 May an organization use ESSER funds to purchase devices?

Yes! School districts may use ESSER funding for a range of activities, including broadband connectivity, devices & software. In addition, other programs listed in the FAQ do, as well. Please review all of this document's FAQs for additional information.

Note: It will be key for chiefs to develop strategies for using ESSER funds and the more targeted ECF funds in a complementary way to close their communities' connectivity gaps

3.5 How is the ESSER funding different than the ECF funding?

ESSER funding, unlike ECF funding, may be used for on-campus device needs, i.e.: for devices to support learning recovery or for school-based equipment to support remote learning. Districts can be strategic about which emergency funds to use for which specific needs. In addition, ESSER funding could be used to cover any unmet needs for remote learning devices if a district's ECF funds are not sufficient.

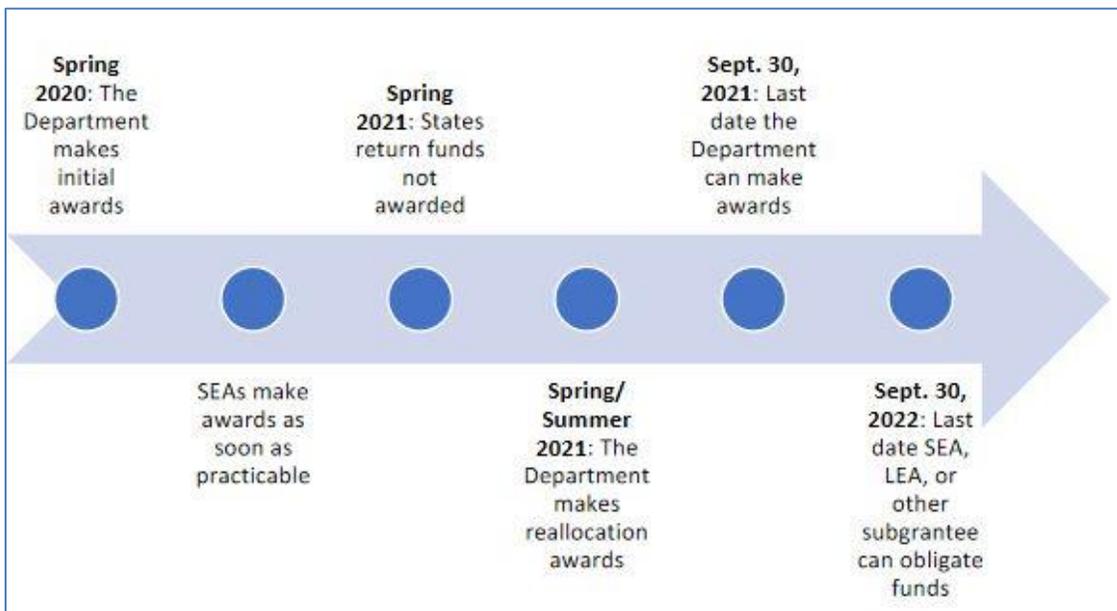
3.6 Who applies to the Department for ESSER formula funds?

Only SEAs in the 50 States, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia apply directly to the Department for ESSER Funds. An SEA is the agency primarily responsible for the state supervision of public elementary schools and secondary schools. The Bureau of Indian Education and the Outlying Areas are not eligible to receive ESSER formula funds. Congress provided a separate set aside in the Education Stabilization Fund to provide funds to those entities.

3.7 How do school districts or other entities access Esser formula funds?

School districts (LEAs) must apply to the relevant SEA. Every SEA must use at least 90 percent of its ESSER Fund grant to make subgrants to LEAs by formula based on FY 2019 Title I, Part A allocations.

3.8 What is the overall timeline for using Esser funds?



3.9 When and how does a district apply for Esser funds?

Districts that plan to apply for this grant opportunity should complete this intent to apply form by June 7, 2021, by using the ESSER [Intent to Apply](#) online form.

4 Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEERF)

4.1 What is the GEERF?

Both the CRRSA and the CARES Act provided governors, through the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEERF), with flexible emergency resources to help the education entities in their states that are most impacted by the pandemic. Governors may award funds to any school district, higher education institution, or other education-related entity that the governor deems essential to carrying out emergency educational services—including the delivery of remote learning.

4.2 May an organization use the GEERF to purchase devices?

Yes! GEERF provides a source of supplemental funding for both broadband connectivity and devices for students and educators. In addition, other programs listed in the FAQ do, as well. Please review all of this document’s FAQs for additional information.

4.3 What about the ARP and GEERF funding in 2021?

Congress did not provide additional funding for the GEERF through ARP in March 2021, so any remaining 2020 GEERF funds may now be obligated for other purposes. State chiefs are encouraged to consult their governor’s office to determine whether any unspent GEERF funding is available for connectivity purposes in 2021.

4.4 Did the CRRSA provide additional GEERF in 2021?

The Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021 (CRRSA) was signed into law on December 27, 2020 and provides an additional \$4,053,060,000 for the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEERF). The CRRSA Act provides that \$1,303,060,000 of those funds be used to supplement the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER II Fund) awarded to each state with an approved GEER application under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act enacted on March 27, 2020.

4.5 How does a governor apply for a state’s share of the GEERF?

To apply for a state’s allocation from the GEERF, a governor must submit to the Department an executed Certification and Agreement that the secretary sent to the governor on April 14, 2020. The Certification and Agreement includes specific programmatic, fiscal, and accountability assurances, including those related to “Maintenance of Effort” (MOE), equitable services for students and teachers in nonpublic schools, and continued payments to employees and contractors. A governor must also provide information on the extent that the funds will be used for remote learning.

4.6 How long should a governor anticipate receiving funds?

The Department expects to award funds within three business days of receiving a governor's completed Certification and Agreement.

4.7 Which entities can receive emergency grants from governors?

Governors may provide subgrants to Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) and Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) within their jurisdiction that have been "most significantly impacted by coronavirus" to support their ability to continue providing educational services to their students and to support the "on-going functionality" of these entities. In addition, a governor may use these funds to provide support through a subgrant or a contract to other LEAs, IHEs, and education-related entities that the governor "deems essential" for carrying out emergency educational services, providing childcare and early childhood education, providing social and emotional support, and protecting education-related jobs.

4.8 Is a governor required to award the funds to each category of eligible entities?

No. A governor has wide discretion in determining the entities in the state that will receive GEERF funds. A governor can choose to fund only LEAs, only IHEs, only education-related entities, or any combination of eligible entities.

4.9 How may an IHE use GEERF funds?

Subject to any restrictions that a governor places on an IHE's use of GEERF funds, an IHE may use the funds, awarded under section 18002(c)(2) of the CARES act, to support a broad array of activities. For example, an IHE might use GEERF funds to provide:

- Staff, infrastructure, and technology to support distance education, or remote learning;
- Academic support for libraries, laboratories, and other academic facilities;
- Institutional support for activities related to personnel, payroll, security, environmental health and safety, and administrative offices;
- Student services that promote a student's emotional and physical well-being outside the context of the formal instructional program; and
- Student financial aid, such as IHE-sponsored grants and scholarships.

5 The E-rate Program

5.1 What is the E-rate program?

The Schools and Libraries Universal Service Program, or E-rate program, provides schools and libraries with affordable broadband access. The program subsidizes broadband connections to school buildings as well as the connections within the buildings.

5.2 Does the E-rate program provide any discounts?

Yes. E-rate provides discounts for telecommunications, Internet access, and internal connections to eligible schools and libraries. It discounts eligible telecommunications services by anywhere from 20% to 90%, depending on the participating school district's poverty level and urban/rural status.

Note: E-rate discounts do not apply to the cost of computers, software, professional development, electrical capacity, and other tools required to use broadband connections. E-rate funds also may not be used to subsidize household broadband connectivity for students or teachers.

5.3 How does the E-rate program work?

An eligible school or library identifies goods or services it needs and submits a request for competitive bids to the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC). USAC posts these requests on its website for vendors to bid on. After reviewing the vendors' bids, the school or library selects the most cost-effective eligible products and services using price as the primary factor. It then applies to USAC for approval for the desired purchases.

Next, USAC issues funding commitments to eligible applicants. When a vendor provides the selected services, either the vendor or the applicant submits requests to USAC for reimbursement of the approved discounts.

The bid request and competitive bidding processes must comply with FCC rules and also state and local procurement requirements.

5.4 How are requests prioritized?

If demand for E-rate money is greater than the available funds, funding is allocated first to the highest poverty schools and libraries, then the next-highest poverty applicants, and so on.

5.5 Does the E-rate program duplicate state and local efforts?

The FCC's plan complements the efforts of states and localities to bring advanced telecommunications and information services to schools and libraries. When the E-rate program was established in 1996, only 14 percent of the nation's K-12 classrooms had access to the Internet.

5.6 In what other ways can the E-rate program help students?

Although E-rate-supported services may not be used to provide broadband service to students or educators at home, E-rate-funded networks can be used on campus after school hours.

Note: These on-campus networks can be extended to provide Wi-Fi access in school parking lots and other locations on campus.

6 Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund (CCPF)

6.1 What is the Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund (CCPF)?

The Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund (CCPF) addresses many challenges laid bare by the pandemic, especially in rural America and low- and moderate-income communities, helping to ensure that all communities have access to the high-quality, modern infrastructure needed to thrive, including internet access.

6.2 How much funding will each state receive?

The American Rescue Plan (ARP) established \$10 billion overall. Each state will receive a least \$100 million, and the remaining funds will be distributed based upon the state's total population (50%), the amount of state residents living in rural areas (25%), and the number of households that are below 150% of the poverty line (25%).

6.3 When will the funding become available?

The Treasury Department has not yet published regulations or guidance on the program's implementation, but CCSSO expects the funding to become available later in 2021. Now is the time for district leaders to consult with governors and other state officials about how to use all or a portion of the funding for high-priority educational broadband projects in rural or other high-cost areas.

6.4 When using these funds, are there megabit considerations?

CCPF broadband investments should aim to deliver home broadband connections that provide at least 25 megabits per second for downloads and 125 megabits per second for uploads per student, consistent with the recently published Consortium for School Networking recommendations for home learning.

Note: Most schools have access to high-capacity broadband, but buildings that do not have such access – for example schools in rural isolated places – could be connected to fiber using the CCPF.

7 ReConnect Loan & Grant Program

7.1 What is the ReConnect Loan & Grant Program?

The USDA's Rural Utilities Service's (RUS) ReConnect Program is a broadband pilot program focused on rural communities. It provides loans, grants, and combinations of loans and grants to expand and improve broadband services in rural areas that lack sufficient access. The program's goal is to attract private investment for deploying broadband infrastructure to eligible rural areas, including homes, schools, libraries and more.

7.2 Who is eligible to apply for the program?

Eligible entities include states, local governments, other political subdivisions, territories, tribes, non-profit entities, for-profit corporations, LLCs, and cooperative or mutual organizations.

7.3 Are there any broadband speed requirements associated with this program?

Proposals must aim to deliver broadband speeds of at least 25/3 megabits per second, or faster, per household. The USDA notes that proposals should aim to serve as many rural customers as possible. Consistent with the Consortium for School Networking remote learning recommendations, we recommend projects that deliver at least 25 megabits per second for downloads and 12 megabits per second for uploads per student.

7.4 May an organization use this program to purchase devices?

Unfortunately, ReConnect does not support the purchase of devices. The good news is that other programs listed in the FAQ do. Please review all of this document's FAQs for additional information.

7.5 Who can I contact for more information about USDA loan programs?

Submit your ReConnect program questions by using the Contact Us Form located at <https://www.usda.gov/reconnect/contact-us>. USDA also encourages districts to reach out to their General Field Representative (GFR) or state office for more guidance related to a specific community. A list of GFRs, their service areas, and their contact information can be found here: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/telecom-gfr/all>; State office contact information can be found here: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/about-rd/state-offices>.

7.6 Will USDA offer training or other resources to help with ReConnect applications?

USDA will conduct a series of webinars addressing specific ReConnect topics once a FOA has been published. Register to receive updates about the program, including upcoming workshops and webinars, on the ReConnect website by clicking the "Stay up to date" link toward the bottom of the home page at reconnect.usda.gov

8 Amendment History

Version #	Modified Date	Modified By	Section, Page(s) and Text Revised
0.1	06/09/2021	Roy Burkhead	Original

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TN Department of Education
 Information Systems Division
 Andrew Johnson Tower, 10th Floor
 710 James Robertson Parkway, Nashville, TN., 37243

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Appendix A: Acronyms List

Term	Definition
ARP	American Rescue Plan Act of 2021
CARES Act	Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act
CCPF	Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund
CIPA	Children’s Internet Protection Act
CCSSO	Council of Chief State School Officers
CoSN	Consortium for School Networking
CRRSAA	Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021
E-rate	Schools and Libraries Universal Service Program
ESSER	Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund
FAQs	Frequently Asked Questions
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
GEERF	Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund
GFR	General Field Representative
IHE	Institutions of Higher Education
LEA	Local Educational Agencies
MOE	Maintenance of Effort
RUS	Rural Utilities Service
SAM	System Award Management
SSAE	Student Support & Academic Enrichment Program
USAC	Universal Service Administrative Company
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USF	Universal Service Fund

Appendix B: Related Links and Additional Reading

Use the Internet and file links in this appendix to access information related to the funds, programs, loans, and grants referenced throughout this FAQ.

Note: If you cannot access a link or unsure whether or not to open a destination file, always consult your local IT administrator first.

General Web Sites of Interest

- <https://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty-guidelines> HHS Poverty Guidelines for 2021
- <https://eplan.tn.gov/default.aspx> ePlan is Tennessee's online platform that allows schools and districts the ability to access district and school plans, funding applications, and monitoring tools. ePlan has a dedicated TDOE Resource page, which has multiple resources available to help districts ensure that Tennessee succeeds when it comes to educating our students.
- <https://sam.gov/content/home> Applicants and service providers seeking reimbursements must be registered with System Award Management (SAM).

The Elementary & Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER)

- [Additional ESSER Grant Reading](#)
- [Intent to Apply](#) online application link.
- <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/05/ESSER-Fund-Frequently-Asked-Questions.pdf> Additional Q&A material.

The Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEERF)

- [Office of Elementary & Secondary Education's official GEERF Page.](#) Additional GEERF information, including a sample template letter for any state governor.
- <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/10/FAQs-GEER-Fund.pdf> Additional Q&A material.

The Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund (CCPF)

- The U.S. Department of the Treasury [Capital Projects Fund Web site.](#)
- [The Consortium for School Networking.](#)
- The Benton Institute for Broadband & Society's [Capital Projects Fund Web site.](#)

The E-rate program, aka: The Schools and Libraries Universal Service Program

- The U.S. Department of Education's [E-rate Web page](#).
- The FCC's [E-rate Web page](#).
- <https://www.usac.org/e-rate/> The Universal Service Administrative Co's E-rate Web page.

The ReConnect Program

- <https://www.usda.gov/reconnect/program-overview> The ReConnect Program's homepage on the USDA site.
- <https://www.usda.gov/reconnect/contact-us> Submit program questions by using the Contact Us Form located at this Web site.
- <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/telecom-gfr/all> Use this Web address for a list of GFRs, their service areas, and their contact information.
- <https://www.rd.usda.gov/about-rd/agencies/rural-utilities-service> The Rural Utilities Service's (RUS) homepage on the USDA site. The RUS administers the ReConnect Program.
- The RUS also administers the [Telecommunications Infrastructure Loans and Loan Guarantees](#) program, an addition program for rural broadband connectivity.
- The RUS administers [Community Connect Grants](#), which state education leadership may align to help with their state's rural broadband needs.