Tips from Learningtech.org
Pandemic Funding for Distance Learning
Part 1: Overview, Title I, and Hotspots Via CTF (4/24/2020)

As the COVID-19 pandemic has forced extended school closures and resultant distance learning, many school leaders have been seeking advice on how to serve the needs of students who lack adequate Internet access and/or computing devices at home. The need to complete *regular* schoolwork remotely exacerbates the existing "homework gap," placing underserved students at an even greater disadvantage. Unfortunately, except for one early pilot study, the E-Rate program has never considered home Internet access or devices for students eligible for discounts. There are active petitions to the FCC urging that these rules be relaxed, at least during the current crisis; and no doubt discussions are underway with lawmakers. However, kids can't wait, and neither parents nor schools can rely on prompt action at this time.

Meanwhile, other funding opportunities have been emerging to help alleviate these needs:

- U.S. Department of Education Emergency Funding (based on Title I)
- SBA CARES PPP (Payroll Protection Program) Funding (and Related SBA Programs)
- California Teleconnect Fund Hotspot Discounts
- California Public Utilities Commission [CPUC] Organized Vendor Donations/Discounts
- FEMA grants for state agencies (including charter schools)

New options are appearing on an almost-daily basis, although details about eligibility, amounts available, application processes, and more have been in flux. Rather than waiting until the range and details of these options are stable (and, by then, some have run out of money), Learningtech.org will be issuing a *series* of *Tips from Learningtech.org* to help schools plan for a possibly extended – and possibly repeated – distance learning need; this is just our first *Tip* in that series. Future tips will provide more detailed information about each resource. Where appropriate, we will offer additional services to assist clients in pursuing these opportunities.

On April 23, 2020, the U.S. Department of Education announced that emergency funding would be provided to schools that applied for and are receiving Title I funding for the 2019-2020 school year. So far, it *appears* that no new application process will be required. Although details are still emerging, estimates are that an additional amount, up to 80% of their 2019-2020 Title 1 allocations, will be provided. Unlike standard Title I funding, however, there is no restriction on how the funds are spent; it appears that hot spot service and student devices would qualify. We will monitor this carefully and report further as additional specifics, including per-state breakdowns, become available.

Schools that operate as 501(c)(3) nonprofits, including Charter School Management Organizations, have been able to receive funding under the SBA's Cares PPP program and/or other SBA loans and grants. In the case of PPP, loans are partially forgivable, but must be spent mainly on employee compensation. However, forgiven portions could help balance the overall school budget, possibly allowing other funding sources to be applied to distance learning needs. Although the PPP funding had recently been depleted, additional funding has just been approved.

Today's most important action item, for our California clients, is to apply for the newly announced California Teleconnect Fund [CTF] program, which provides for a 50% discount on hotspot service for student usage at home. Hopefully, all of our E-Rate clients are also already receiving "stacked" CTF discounts for Category 1 services also eligible for E-Rate. However, existing E-Rate and CTF programs do *not* permit home-use hotspot devices or monthly recurring services. **A *new* application *is* required.** The $25-30M funding pool currently available is not expected to be sufficient for all schools, and covers service only through 9/30/2020. Priority is being given to rural, small, and medium-sized districts. The application process seems straightforward (though we do not know what hurdles may lie ahead in the application process). AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, Verizon, and other carriers are enrolled to participate in this key program. As a convenience for our existing clients, we would be happy to take your information by phone call or email, and submit this additional CTF application on your behalf, for a flat fee of $100. Whether you apply on your own or request our assistance, we strongly encourage prompt action, since the funds are expected to run out.

Programs that focus on defraying costs for computing devices used by students at home, including generous grants from technology companies, will be discussed in our next *Tip*. We will also examine issues relating to Internet safety and compliance with the Child Internet Protection Act [CIPA]. Please watch for Part 2 in this series!

We have established a special email address, pandemic@learningtech.org, for inquiries specifically related to the challenges of ensuring equity in distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are eager to help answer your questions, share information, and help you ascertain which program(s) might be most appropriate for your school. Finally, if you learn about related programs we may have overlooked, please let us know!