SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT & INVESTIGATIONS
OF THE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE,
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Hearing entitled "Problems with the E-Rate Program: Waste, Fraud, and Abuse Concerns in the Wiring of Our Nation's Schools to Internet" - September 22, 2004, 10:00 a.m.

STATEMENT OF SHARON FOSTER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF TECHNOLOGY INFORMATION SYSTEMS OF YSLETA INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, EL PASO, TEXAS

Background

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this morning. My name is Sharon Foster. I am currently the Executive Director of Technology Information Systems of the Ysleta Independent School District ("YISD") in El Paso, Texas. I have been asked to provide this statement for this hearing of the House Energy and Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations entitled "Problems with the E-Rate Program: Waste, Fraud, and Abuse Concerns in the Wiring of Our Nation's Schools to Internet". A copy of my curriculum vitae is attached to this statement.

During my career as an educator, I have had experience in virtually every aspect of classroom and administrative work. I have been a classroom teacher, campus administrator, technology trainer, Director of Instructional Technology and acting Executive Director for Technology Information Systems. I am currently the Executive Director of Technology Information Systems for YISD in El Paso, Texas, a position that requires me to oversee instructional technology, administrative information systems, and telecommunication networks.

All of my experience is with large urban districts with student populations over 45,000. I worked in El Paso Independent School District ("EPISD"), a neighboring district of YISD, for 15 years, the last eight of which were as head of the Instructional Technology Department. Part of my responsibility in that position was that of E-Rate Coordinator. I served as E-Rate Coordinator for years 1 through 3 of the E-Rate Program. As E-rate Coordinator, I met with other technology and telecommunication staff to identify projects for which EPISD would seek E-Rate funding. In addition to determining the appropriateness and scope of the E-Rate projects, I would make sure that all application requirements were met in a timely manner and addressed any requests for additional information from the Schools and Libraries Division of the Federal Communications Commission (the "SLD").

In August of 2000, I left EPISD in order to join YISD an as employee. My departure was not related to the E-Rate program at EPISD. I left EPISD prior to the bidding process for year 4 of the E-Rate Program. At YISD, I assumed the position of Director of Instructional Technology. As Director, I worked with YISD's E-Rate coordinator, Richard Duncan, and other staff members to determine future E-Rate projects for the District (years 4, 5, 6, and 7). In other words, I was involved in YISD's participation in the E-Rate program, but am not principally responsible for such participation.

I recently was named Executive Director for Technology and Information Systems at Ysleta and now, am once in again responsible for over-seeing E-Rate projects.

What E-Rate has Done for Districts

The most significant improvement that E-Rate has enabled to be achieved in my experience has been the improvement to school district infrastructure, with both EPISD and YISD. As done by most school districts across the nation, EPISD and YISD used the initial E-Rate projects to improve the speed and reliability of voice and data networks. E-Rate projects provided the basics for each district's network, which supports virtually any type of technology-based instruction, including high-speed internet access to all classrooms, distance learning systems, video to classrooms, integrated phone networks [such as phone service to every classroom], and other improved network functions. Very early on in the E-Rate program, dial-up or other non-broadband Internet access was identified as inadequate for technology-based instruction in the classroom. E-Rate funding has allowed for acquisitions by school districts of network electronics that ensured high-speed access, and for the cabling that distributed network access to every instructional area.

Most school districts would never have been able to afford the cabling and network initiatives that E-Rate funded. Moreover, without the E-Rate funds and the flexibility in their use, most school districts would never have been able to develop the in-house expertise for such extensive cabling projects. YISD explored the feasibility of training and using district-employees as cablers for the network cabling, and its turnover costs in employees alone would have been prohibitive. Skilled network technicians were able to seek employment in virtually locale, and YISD would have lost employees as to whom it had spent a great deal of money to train. E-Rate funding allowed poor school districts to cable schools on an aggressive schedule, using vendors specializing in that work, and thereby allowing them to try to catch up to more affluent districts in terms of computer networking.

An example of the way that the E-Rate program allowed fully functioning networks was in the implementation of the YISD telephone network. While YISD could not use E-Rate funds for some of the network costs [for example, the purchase of the individual phone sets], E-Rate funds did allow YISD to purchase the PBX and switching equipment, and funded the cabling to the classroom. YISD could never have afforded the integrated phone system it now has without the use of E-Rate funds. That telephone system has benefited teachers and students at the district.

Similarly, the E-Rate program has allowed school districts to upgrade network electronics on reasonable schedules. Indeed, for districts like YISD, they have been able to manage the upgrades and use the network routers, servers and other electronics in very effective ways. Cabling upgrades, for example from 10-Base T cabling to cabling with more capability and reliability, have been possible via E-Rate funding. These upgrades have provided benefits to faculty and students, and aided the instructional process.

Concerns and Problems With E-Rate Program

The E-Rate program has been the mechanism that many large, under-funded school districts have used to improve telecommunication infrastructure. School districts have discovered that virtually all instructional initiatives require one essential element: namely, a high-speed, reliable telecommunications network. One of the great successes of the E-Rate program is that it has been able to help school districts enormously in developing those networks.

There are several issues in the administration of the program that have created obstacles to districts in planning projects, providing continuity, and managing the projects from year to year.

Technology projects are linear, and in the case of most school districts, are planned in phased implementations. Planning for those projects can be done with estimated E-Rate funding from one year to the next, but so far the experience of most districts has been that funding is nearly always delayed. For example, currently, YISD is managing proposed projects for years 5, 6, and 7 of the E-Rate program. Some of those funds have been awarded, some have not, and in some cases the decisions on initial and/or continued funding have not always been clear. In planning a multi-year project, it is extremely difficult to provide assurances to campuses when it is unclear how fast implementation can proceed, based on unknown levels of funding and/or indefinite schedules for release of funds. The delays have proven frustrating to districts.

In the case of YISD, we have tried and for the largest part succeeded in applying for funds based on correct interpretation of E-Rate funding guidelines. There have been instances when we have had to provide additional information and explanation to the SLD for guidance, and in virtually every case our position has been determined to be correct. In the very few instances when our interpretation of funding or use guidelines have not been upheld, our interpretation of E-Rate guidelines were made in good faith, reasonably-based, and in line with how other school districts have interpreted the guidelines.

It has been difficult, and has taken a tremendous staff effort, to maintain our understanding of funding guidelines. In particular, knowledge of eligible products, eligible locations, and how to determine in what instances campuses are not eligible for E-Rate funding have been, at best, less than straightforward. We understand the need for E-Rate's guidelines to evolve, and for guidelines to change in some instances, but that makes the district's efforts, especially in multi-year project planning or long-term network development, extremely difficult. School districts are generally also faced with equity issues; in other words, ensuring that all campuses, including those that are not E-Rate eligible, receive fair and equitable treatment by the district in terms of technology acquisition and funding.

One increasing-common issue with the E-Rate program amongst school districts is the best use of funds to provide for the appropriate network design and development that both supports instructional needs of the particular district and that allows the district to take advantage of and support the network in the future. The E-Rate funds have been used overwhelmingly for the upgrade of networks, and though the funds cannot be used for specific instructional purposes, the distinction between hardware and software that is exclusively instructional is difficult to maintain. Districts are using networks to support web-based projects, administrative information management systems, submission of state-mandated reports, and e-mail systems that are important to both administrative and instructional functions, and difficult if not impossible to segregate.

In my view, what districts and E-Rate administrators have found most difficult about the use of E-Rate funds is managing multi-year projects, implementing large projects without adequate support resources, ensuring that teacher skill-sets match the upgrades in network capabilities and instructional potential, and dealing with the changes in regulations and application of rules. I have found, with both EPISD and YISD, that one of the essential elements in the use of E-Rate funds is ensuring that the projects supported by such funding are successful. However, without a support mechanism for the teachers who will be using the technology, including training and staff development, and campus-based technology support services, it is virtually impossible for districts to implement technology projects that will be successful and use to full potential the networks that E-Rate funds have enabled. That will be the task of all school districts, including YISD, that use E-Rate funds.

In many instances, districts have been criticized for failing to capitalize fully on the improvements afforded through E-Rate. In my experience, some of that lost capacity has been almost predictable. In the first years of the E-Rate program, districts for the most part, applied for only what they could implement. It is my personal opinion that, in the following years of E-Rate program, when vendors began to have more of a role in the application process and when further ambiguities arose regarding the scope and extent of the E-Rate program, many school districts across the country may have asked for too much too quickly, and were not in the best position to fully support the technology projects for which funding was awarded. Such districts likely had the needs for that technology, and justifiably requested E-Rate funding for those projects, but in hindsight perhaps should have been less ambitious in order to better assure fully effective implementation.

As school districts have more skillfully used E-Rate funds, and have developed support staff for the technology infrastructure made possible by the E-Rate program, I believe it is more critical for districts to ensure that technology infrastructure and capability is driven by instructional need, that teacher technology skill-sets are established through staff development and training, and that campus-based technology support is provided. In my opinion, technology projects fail when there is no identified instructional need for the technology, when teachers are asked to use technology that does that support their teaching outcomes, when teachers are asked to use technology without sufficient training, or when campuses are required to support technology without adequate resources.

Although the E-Rate program has enabled vastly improved networks for school districts, the use of those networks has been limited by the lack of funding for the training and campus-based support that would help better ensure full success. In some instances, school districts have had to abandon technology projects, or have implemented projects that did not provide the results that were hoped for, due to training, staff development, and support issues. One specific example was the initial success in EPISD technology projects when when Campus Technology Coordinators (CTC) were part of all technology planning and implementations. When funding for CTC's was no longer available, several projects decreased in usefulness because of the difficulty individual campuses had in making sure teachers were adequately supported and that equipment was always working and available for use. In short, staff development for technology use must meet instructional needs, and funding for staff development, like the funding for network and technology projects, must be on a consistent, realistic, multi-year basis.

For school districts like EPISD and YISD, the E-Rate program has been a successful program. It does, however, require some adjustments, on the part of both school districts in general and the E-Rate program. However, without the funding from provided by the E-Rate program, there is no question that many of the instructional initiatives and some of the instructional progress in these schools districts would not have been possible. Such funding has significantly benefited the instructional process at such districts.

Closing Remarks

YISD is not a wealthy district; its "free and reduced lunch" average is 86%. In general, YISD has a low economic profile. The 2000 Profile of Selected Economic Characteristics, issued by the United States Census Bureau, estimates the per capita income for 1999 in the El Paso, Texas at $14,388 per year. It should be noted that YISD's boundaries do not include the areas generally recognized as being the most affluent of El Paso, so the figures for census tracts within YISD's boundaries would probably be lower. For comparison, according to the same survey, the annual per capita income for 1999 in the United States was $21,587, for the State of Texas was $19,617, and for the Washington D.C. was $28,659. As one can readily see, YISD students are in poor financial circumstances, and in great need of the benefits from the projects that can be completed using E-Rate funding.

The primary impact to YISD if E-Rate funding is no longer available is that instructional advantages available through a typical telecommunications network would, in all likelihood, no longer be available. It would be virtually impossible for YISD to fund the maintenance of the network, and within several years we would have a much smaller access to Internet resources, limited student e-mail availability, and virtually no services for teachers in the way of voice or data network capability. In such a case, our goal would be to continue to offer the best services we could to teachers and students, but, realistically, that level of network service would be very small in comparison to the current levels. Ultimately, the instructional variety and opportunity would be decreased for the students of YISD. I think that would be true for other poor districts throughout the country.

Thank you again for providing me with this opportunity to present testimony.

Sharon Foster

Sharon Foster
Executive Director of
Technology Information Systems
Ysleta Independent School District
El Paso, Texas 79935

September 16, 2004

Sharon Foster

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PROFILE

Professional, stable, and reliable. Excellent communication, organizational, and management skills. Self-directed; comfortable with significant responsibility.

EXPERIENCE

February 2004 - to present Ysleta ISD
El Paso, TX
Executive Director, Technology Information Systems
Oversee all network operations for the District, including student systems, AS400, and district e-mail system. Responsibilities also include all Telecommunication services, computer repair and maintenance, E-Rate submissions, and implementation of the District Technology Master Plan. Supervise Director for Instructional Technology

March- 2002 - February 04 Ysleta ISD
El Paso, TX
Director, Instructional Technology
Responsible for the overall operation of the Instructional Technology Department, including Library Media Services at all campuses. Develop and administer the budget for Instructional Technology, and ensure that the District is compliant with all state mandated programs and policies with regards to Instructional technology. Coordinate district-wide technology staff development in accordance with SBEC minimum teacher standards for technology.

Aug -2000 – March 02 Ysleta ISD
El Paso, TX
Coordinator for Instructional Technology Initiatives
Responsibilities include supporting the implementation of the Technology Applications districtwide. Write and administer state and federal technology grants. Facilitate the development of a Scope and Sequence for the Technology Applications K-8. Coordinate technology training for campus based staff. Assist in the alignment of the Technology Applications with the curriculum. Coordinate all Distance Learning initiatives. Participate in state and local technology boards and organizations. Recommend computer hardware and software for instructional use.

Oct 95 - Aug 2000 El Paso ISD El Paso, TX

Administrator, Training & Instructional Technology

Was responsible for coordinating technology training for all district employees. Provided direct supervision to the El Paso ISD Broadcast Studio. Write and administer state and federal technology grants including E-Rate. Facilitate the integration of technology into the District curriculum. Purchase hardware, software, and services in support of the El Paso ISD Long Range Plan for Technology. Served as project manager for the initial cabling for voice, video, and data for every classroom in the district which included identifying main and intermediate distribution closets at each campus and overseeing the installation of the network electronics.

Mar 94 - Oct 95 El Paso ISD El Paso, TX

Program Assistant

Provided support for the Writing to Read (WTR), Voy a Leer Escribiendo (VALE), Writing to Write (WTW) Programs. Included budget preparation, initiating purchase orders, distribution of materials, and contracting of professional services. Served as project coordinator for the installation of 36 classrooms for WTW.

Nov 93 - Feb 94 IBM El Paso, TX

Educational Instructional Specialist

Provided computer related assistance at all El Paso ISD campuses implementing WTR/VALE/WTW Programs. Responsibilities included observations of teacher implementation of programs, coordinated administrator program training; assisted in writing the training module for WTR/VALE/WTW.

EDUCATION

B.S. Physical Education, Minor in Elementary Education, 1980
University of Texas at El Paso El Paso, TX

Master's in Educational Administration, 1994
Sul Ross State University Alpine, TX

CERTIFICATES

Mid-Management Certification
Certified Professional Technology Coordinator
Certified Professional Distance Learning Coordinator

Elementary General
Elementary Physical Education
Kindergarten

OTHER EXPERIENCE

Serve as chair for the Educational Cable Access Collaborative
Member of the Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund (TIF) Working Group
Serve on TEA committee developing on-line course curriculum standards
Member of state Technology Special Interest Groups (TechSig)
Co-Chair for Congressman Reyes' Education Citizen's Advisory Panel
Leadership El Paso, Class 23
Member of the Border Technology Steering Committee, 1995-1999

SUMMARY OF MAJOR POINTS
(Statement of Sharon Foster)

1. The E-Rate program has been very beneficial to poor school districts and their teachers and students.

2. Perhaps the primary benefit from the program in the instructional area has been in the acquisition and development of effective computer networks, upon which many instructional activities can be leveraged.

3. The delays in award of E-Rate funding, and uncertainty involving some of the rules of the program, have generated many problems for school districts.

4. School districts should be more realistic in what sort or number of projects they can expect to fully and effectively implement in a particular year or series of years, especially considering teacher training and support issues.

5. Despite the problems, the E-Rate program is a good program and should be maintained in effect, with some modifications.

House Committee on Energy and Commerce

Witness Disclosure Requirement – "Truth in Testimony" Required by House Rule XI, Clause 2(g)

Your Name: Sharon Foster

1. Are you testifying on behalf of a Federal, State, or Local Government entity? Yes No

2. Are you testifying on behalf of an entity other than a Government entity? Yes No

3. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) which you have received since October 1, 1999:

None

4. Other than yourself, please list what entity or entities you are representing:

Ysleta Independent School District

5. If your answer to question number 2 is yes, please list any offices or elected positions held or briefly describe your representational capacity with the entities disclosed in question number 4:

Executive Director of Technology Information Systems

6. If your answer to question number 2 is yes, do any of the entities disclosed in question number 4 have parent organizations, subsidiaries, or partnerships to the entities for whom you are not representing? Yes No

7. If the answer to question number 2 is yes, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) which were received by the entities listed under question 4 since October 1, 1999, which exceed 10% of the entities revenue in the year received, including the source and amount of each grant or contract to be listed:

Although the District has received federal grants, contracts or subcontracts, during the time period in question, none of them appear to reach the 10% amount.

Signature: Sharon Foster Date: 9/16/04