February 2009 — News

Good News for Ed Tech in the Economic Stimulus Bills

The House has passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, also known as the economic stimulus plan, and a bill has been introduced into the Senate. Congress intends to pass the bill by the middle of February, and Speaker Pelosi has said the House members will not have their Presidents' Day recess until they pass a bill.

While we should not celebrate until President Obama signs a final bill, there is good reason to believe that we in ed tech may have the opportunity to use some of the federal dollars to improve student achievement with technology. In the current version of the bills, there are a number of opportunities for technology. It is possible that the legislative process will change certain aspects of the bill, but the sections on education in both the House and Senate versions are very similar, so significant change is unlikely.

First and most pertinent, Title II D of NCLB, Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT), is slated to receive $1 billion new dollars in addition to the existing $267 million in the program. Congress would use the current version of NCLB to distribute this and other education dollars. As a result, the basic structure of EETT will be used for the new money. While it is possible that the new Department of Education staff may tweak some things, a couple of basics are:

- 50 percent of the money will be flowed directly to Title I schools in accordance with a state's Title I formula, and 50 percent will be awarded through competitive grants;
- 25 percent of the money a school district receives must be used for professional development.

The timing of distribution of the new money probably will be on the same track as the current EETT funds: $500 million will flow to states in July 2009 and need to be encumbered by September 2010. The other $500 million will go to states in July 2010 and need to be encumbered by September 2011. Some states are getting their RFP process in gear now and may release RFPs this spring so they can be ready to award grants when the money comes available in July. This fast track is in tune with the charge from both President Obama and Congress to get the money out there as soon as possible.

EETT is the most obvious positive aspect of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, but it is not the only place where technology comes into play.

Broadband

In the House version, there is $6 billion for broadband and wireless services in underserved areas to strengthen the economy and provide business and job opportunities in every section of America with benefits to e-commerce, education, and healthcare. In the Senate version there is $9 billion for the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's Broadband Technology Opportunities
Program to improve access to broadband. This very likely will help school districts, especially in rural areas.

**School Facilities Modernization, Renovation and Repair**

Both bills have a lot of money—$14 billion in the House and $16 billion in the Senate—for modernizing schools. The emphasis in this portion of both bills is on making schools more energy efficient, but technology upgrades also are allowable uses of funds. In the Senate version of School Modernization under "allowable use of funds," schools can use some of that money for "upgrading or installing educational technology infrastructure." In the House version of School Modernization the language under allowable use of funding relating to technology is "upgrading or installing educational technology infrastructure to ensure that students have access to up-to-date educational technology; technology activities that are carried out in connection with school repair and renovation, including wiring, acquiring hardware and software, acquiring connectivity linkages and resources, and acquiring microwave, fiber optics, cable, and satellite transmission equipment ... other modernization, renovation, or repair of public school facilities to improve teachers' ability to teach and students' ability to learn...."

Also in the K-12 education section of both bills there is:

- $13 billion for IDEA special education;
- $13 billion for Title I;
- $66 million to $70 million for homeless children and youth; and
- $100 million for "competitive grants to states to address teacher shortages and modernize the teaching workforce."

Some of this money can be used for technology, as long as it pertains to serving those kids or programs in that section.

There are a few discrepancies between the two bills related to education, the most notable of which is $250 million for a grant program for statewide data systems that is included in the House version, but not the Senate.

The Senate takes up debate on its version this week. Once bills have passed both houses of Congress, a conference committee will be appointed to reconcile the differences and create a final bill. That in turn has to be voted on by both houses. Leaders of Congress have pledged to have a final version on President Obama's desk by the middle of February.