



eSN presents...

Our 2008 eRate Survival Guide

A new eRate application season is upon us, and educators charged with getting telecommunications discounts for their schools are bracing anew for the process. Here's our annual eRate Survival Guide to help you get through it all with minimal pain—and a maximum return on your time invested.

New eRate focus: 'Back to basics'

Schools will have from Nov. 7 to Feb. 7 to apply for 2008 funding

Laura Devaney
Associate Editor

As the 2008-09 eRate filing window opens, eRate coordinators from schools and libraries across the country are attending training sessions designed to give them vital information about what's new with the \$2.25 billion-a-year federal program.

This year's answer (to the relief of many): Not much.

The filing window for the 2008-09 eRate funding cycle opens at noon on Nov. 7, 2007, and will close at 11:59 p.m. EST on Feb. 7, 2008.

Although in past years, eRate administrators have promoted a variety of new forms and rule changes, this year's training sessions are focusing on a "back to the basics" approach.

"The whole thrust this year is to try to get people to [understand that] when you do the basics right, your application generally goes right," said Mel Blackwell, vice president of the Universal Service Administrative Company's Schools and Libraries Division (SLD), the agency that administers the eRate.

"This year, we've kept it kind of static so we can focus on the basics. We've found over the years that some of the same basic mistakes keep cropping up—we're focusing on that," Blackwell said.

Despite this back-to-the-basics approach, there are a few new changes to the program, which provides telecommunications discounts of up to 90 percent for eligible schools and libraries.

One such change is more time for applicants to respond to requests for additional information from SLD. The amount of time has increased from seven to 15 days.

Another new change, Blackwell said, is that SLD will identify all items on eRate applications that are causes for denial.

In the past, the agency would stop at the first mistake it came to that would cause an applicant not to receive funding. If an applicant appealed SLD's decision and was successful, however, there might have been another denial waiting around the corner as the application proceeded.

Now, SLD will go through the entire application and will provide information on every mistake or cause for denial. This way, applicants will know about all the things that prevented them from receiving funding and will be able to apply that knowledge to the next year's application.

In the past, SLD was limited to 175 characters when describing what went awry with a school's application. Now, that limit has been increased to 2,000 characters.

SLD also announced that there will be "slight modifications" to the certifications found on Forms 470 and 471, but it has not announced when the new versions of the forms will be available.

violating the program's competitive-bidding rules, and violating the 28-day posting period for your Form 470.

(Applicants must wait 28 days after filing a Form 470, which describes the services requested, before they can sign a contract and file a Form 471. This gives companies a chance to bid for their ser-

Training sessions touch on what documents to keep, how to write a solid technology plan, how to run an effective competitive-bidding process, and how to navigate a Program Integrity Assurance (PIA) review, or audit, which ensures that eRate support is committed only for eligible products and services, as well as for eligible uses by eligible entities.

SLD recommends that eRate applicants keep documents for five years from the last day that services are delivered for a particular fiscal year. Both applicants and service providers should keep all records related to the application, receipt, and delivery of discounted services.

Blackwell said the top five kinds of documentation that are most frequently missing are discount verifications, adequately maintained asset listings, signed and dated contracts, consultant agreements, and bid evaluation or award schedules.

Applicants are advised to make copies of all forms and create an eRate folder to help keep information organized and accessible.

The sessions also include a demonstration of the online Form 486, which confirms receipt of services; how to determine which products and services are eligible for eRate support, how to appeal successfully, and how to invoice SLD.

Training materials, as well as sample documents and checklists, can be found on SLD's web site.

"We're going to really work with people on getting back to the basics," Blackwell reiterated. "If you do the fundamentals right, then you get [funding]."

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Tip sheets and checklists are available to make the filing process easier. Educators can use checklists and suggested job aids for better chances at success when filing an appeal.

Funding Year 2008, the program's eleventh year, runs from July 1, 2008 to June 30, 2009.

"The filing window is set to close about two weeks earlier than it did last year, which I think is a sign that the processes [SLD] has in place are even better than they were last year," said Scott Weston, executive director of information services for the eRate consulting firm Funds for Learning.

"It's a sign that hopefully the application review process will move even faster this year, and that applicants will receive funding commitment decision letters sooner."

This year's training sessions highlight some of the mistakes that applicants commonly make on their eRate forms.

Blackwell said the most frequent mistakes are failing to provide adequate documentation, requesting ineligible services, incorrectly calculating your discount rate,

vices. The 28-day posting rule means that schools and libraries must file their Forms 470 by Dec. 27 this year if they want enough time to file their Forms 471.)

Tip sheets and checklists are available to make the filing process easier. Educators can use checklists and suggested job aids for better chances at success when filing an appeal.

"We're really trying to put a big focus on showing people as much as we can, telling them as much, helping them as much, and also making sure they know what the basics are," Blackwell said. "[We think we'll] see more people being successful and filing fewer appeals, and when you get to that point, the process goes more quickly."

He added: "Year after year, we've had a lot of big changes, new forms, new ways to apply, and we're taking a breather. [We] think things will look a bit more familiar to people for two years in a row."

Editor's note: For more eRate news and information, see our Educator's Resource Center on "Accelerating Technology with eRate Support": <http://www.eschoolnews.com/resources/reports/eratefunding>.

Visit: eSchool News.com

See these related links:
 Schools and Libraries Division
<http://www.universalservice.org/sl>

SLD's eRate Training Materials
<http://www.usac.org/sl/about/training-presentations/training-2007/fall/2007-fall-training-presentation.aspx>

For more on "Grants & Funding," visit our **FREE** archives of over 3,500 articles. Go to www.eschoolnews.com/news/browse.cfm

Achieving eRate success through teamwork

By Peter Kaplan and Scott Weston

The eRate program is complex and continually changing. Most people involved with the eRate have many other job responsibilities in addition to managing the process. Even the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recognizes this fact:

“...we note that the primary jobs of most of the people filling out these forms include school administrators, technology coordinators, and teachers, as opposed to positions dedicated to pursuing federal grants, especially in small school districts...” (Bishop Perry Middle School ruling, May 2, 2006)

With competing priorities, it can be difficult for an eRate applicant to keep track of the ever-changing rules, guidance, forms, and deadlines that are a part of the program. When seeking assistance with the process, some eRate applicants express confusion over when it is appropriate to receive help from a service provider. In this primer, we will outline the major steps of an applicant's eRate process and detail when it is—and is not—appropriate for a service provider to be involved.

Technology planning

For applicants, the eRate process begins with technology planning, not procurement. Any request for eRate funding, other than basic telephone service, must be rooted in the applicant's technology plan. This technology plan must be drafted before any application paperwork is submitted, but it does not need to be approved until services start at the beginning of the eRate funding year.

During the technology-planning process, applicants may seek the advice of existing or potential service providers to learn more about how they can use technology to meet their educational objectives. Service providers are welcome to offer their expertise and guidance to give applicants the latest information on services and products they can use in their schools and classrooms. To better understand how to integrate technology into their learning environments, applicants are encouraged to invite technology companies throughout the year to talk with them about these issues and talk about the challenges they face.

Even with this assistance from service providers, applicants remain responsible for developing their own technology plans. Service providers cannot draft or develop a technology plan for an applicant. Many resources are available to schools, districts, and libraries to help them develop technology plans.

eRate procurement and contracting

Once the technology plan is drafted, applicants can decide what telecommunications services and products they need to procure to meet the goals and objectives outlined in their plan. The centerpiece of the eRate procurement process is the FCC Form 470.

On this Form 470, applicants describe the goods and services they wish to purchase with eRate discounts. This form gives the service-provider community valuable information about these services and any RFP or other procurement guidelines that must be followed. When a Form 470 is posted to the Schools and Libraries Division's web site, a 28-day posting period begins. It is during this time that potential service providers respond to the Form 470 or RFP with bids and proposals. Service providers cannot be involved in any aspect of managing the applicant's competitive-bidding process and cannot be listed as a “technical contact” on the Form 470.

Once the 28-day posting period ends, applicants can evaluate all of the responses and choose their ser-



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vice providers. Remember that the price of a proposal must be given the highest weight when considering all of the factors that go into the decision-making process. Also, do not give preferential treatment to the vendors that gave you advice or guidance about technology.

An important key to success during the competitive-bidding and service provider selection process is to track all interactions with service providers, keep all bids and proposals you receive, and document how you choose all service providers. All of this information is required for eRate compliance, and it also can be used to demonstrate that service providers were not inappropriately involved in this part of the process.

During procurement and contracting, a service provider can help applicants by highlighting important rules—such as waiting until the end of the 28-day posting period to choose a service provider and sign a contract. While the eRate is celebrating its 10th anniversary, many applicants' eRate staff may be relatively new to the program, so there always will be opportunities for service providers to share their knowledge about eRate rules and regulations.

Form 471 application process

Once the competitive-bidding process is complete, there are many ways that applicants should partner with their service providers to ensure a smooth eRate experience. Requests for eRate discounts are made by completing and submitting an FCC Form 471. These forms must be filed during the “filing window,” which will open on Nov. 7 and close on Feb. 7 for the 2008-09 funding year. If a form is filed outside this window, it will not be considered for funding.

On the Form 471, applicants should request discounts only for products and services that are eligible

for eRate support. If they apply for funding toward services that are ineligible, their funding will be reduced or possibly denied. In 2005 and 2006, more than \$50 million in requests were denied because the applicant sought discounts for ineligible services or products. Applicants and service providers should work together to identify the eligible portion of a service or product to avoid a delay or denial in funding.

Applicants also can partner with their service providers to create the “Item 21 Description of Service Attachment.” This attachment details the services and products for which the applicant is seeking discounts. To give the SLD sufficient information to evaluate their funding request, applicants may need to submit invoices or contracts along with a description of the solution. Even if your service provider doesn't help you draft this Item 21 attachment, giving your service provider a copy of what you submitted can facilitate the invoicing phase of the eRate process.

Once an application is submitted, it is reviewed by the SLD's Program Integrity Assurance (PIA) staff. PIA staff will ask many questions to ensure that requests apply only to eligible services, at eligible locations, and that applicants followed all eRate procurement rules. When applicants start getting questions about the eligibility of a project, they can enlist the help of service providers to make sure they answer these questions fully and accurately. Millions of dollars are denied each year because the schools do not understand how to respond to PIA staff's eligibility questions.


Post-commitment process

Once eRate funding is committed and services or products are delivered, applicants must submit a Form 486 to the SLD. This form notifies the SLD that the project or service has begun. It also signifies to the SLD that the applicant's technology plan is finalized and that the applicant is following the provisions of the Children's Internet Protection Act, if applicable.

If this form is not submitted on time, funding may be reduced. The form is due within 120 days of either the issuance of a Funding Commitment Decision Letter or the date on which services begin, whichever comes later. Service providers should be proactive in reminding applicants of this important form's deadline, as the SLD must process this form before it disburses any funds.

Additionally, the SLD will not reimburse applicants until the service provider files its annual certifications on the FCC Form 473. It is appropriate for applicants to remind their service providers about this form if they see that it has not been completed.

There are also service delivery and installation deadlines, as well as deadlines for the submission of payment paperwork. These deadlines can differ from one funding commitment to the next, based on when the funding commitment was made, when the project begins, and if additional time is requested to complete a project. Applicants and service providers should communicate often about these matters so that all deadlines are met.

As the FCC has acknowledged, staff members involved with the eRate process might have many additional job responsibilities and might forget or not understand the process in full. Therefore, it is important for applicant and service providers to work together throughout the eRate process to ensure success for everyone involved. 

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