

## Tech CEOs Request Billions For School Wi-Fi

By: Blake Neff  
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A group of tech leaders is urging the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to spend billions expanding access to wireless Internet in the nation's schools and libraries.

The group of 41 leaders, which includes Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, Netflix CEO Reed Hastings and Star Wars director George Lucas sent a letter to the FCC on Monday encouraging them to ratify a proposed plan by FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler that would allocate \$5 billion to expand the government's E-Rate program to put Wi-Fi in as many schools as possible.

"The Chairman's proposal is a significant, fiscally responsible step forward in modernizing the E-rate program and connecting our schools," the letter reads. "The message from America is clear, if our schools do not have the broadband they need, our students will not be able to compete in the global economy."

The letter urges "swift, bipartisan action" by the FCC's commissioners to verify the proposal.

Wheeler's proposal, which will be voted on Thursday, would add the additional \$5 billion on top of E-Rate's \$2.4 billion annual budget, which exists to help schools buy a variety of technological goods at reduced prices. If approved, the FCC estimates that by 2015, 10 million additional students would have access to Wi-Fi.

The tech leaders aren't the first to show approval for Wheeler's plan. Several education groups have praised it, or have offered criticism solely on the basis that it does not go far enough. The Consortium for School Networking, a group promoting educational technology, has complained that billions more are needed to achieve President Obama's stated goal of 99 percent of American students having wireless Internet access at school.

The American Library Association, meanwhile, said in a statement that getting every school and library access to high-speed, high-capacity broadband Internet was more important than increased Wi-Fi access.

Some groups say the entire endeavor is misguided, however.

“Expanding the E-Rate Program, spending more money on technology, will almost certainly have very little if any effect on educational outcomes,” Neal McCluskey, an education analyst with the Cato Institute, told The Daily Caller News Foundation.

McCluskey said that most evidence indicates that things like increased Internet access show little to no connection with test scores or other measures of academic success, while in the workplace, employers are worried far more about the lack of basic skills than they are about lack of familiarity with technology.

“Kids are actually a lot more adept than teachers at incorporating technology,” he said, pointing to the incident in Los Angeles last fall where students were given free iPads and rapidly circumvented the school district’s security protocols in order to freely surf the Internet.

McCluskey also warned that E-Rate has struggled with fraud and waste over the years, saying that there have been instances of schools spending thousands of dollars on equipment that they cannot actually use.

It’s also possible, he said, that tech CEOs could see a business benefit to their appeal.

“It’s possible they just think [expanded Wi-Fi] is genuinely good,” he said. “But they’re probably not unaware that they also benefit, though.”