



Arkansas Rural Ed Association

1309 Texas Street

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February 24, 2014

Joint Budget Chairs Senator Larry Teague and Representative Duncan Bird:

I am urging you to support SB 146, the Arkansas Broadband Facilities Matching Grant Program. As you know, our state has many rural and historically underserved communities that stand to reap the greatest benefits from this \$10 million. The school districts I represent need this money to promote quality experiences and opportunities and enable their students to compete in a diverse global community.

Many of our rural schools face geographic and financial barriers that make technology upgrades challenging. Building-to-building fiber connections must cover more ground and district consolidations require maintaining duplicate systems and equipment. This money will help level the playing field and allow small, rural, cash-strapped districts to give their students the same digital learning opportunities that larger districts have. This money will fund connections to classrooms, administration buildings and bus barns through 2015—improving access and increasing capacity in localities that need it most.

Arkansas schools have the opportunity to benefit, right now, from approximately \$40 million in funding from the federal E-rate program if we act quickly. We can't pass up this opportunity.

Governor Beebe has clearly said that this \$10 million is not for the Arkansas Research and Education Optical Network (AREON). It will not fund middle mile connectivity. However it will directly help rural and geographically isolated schools with the high costs they face. School districts in your community will control these funds and use them to improve connections between classrooms, administration buildings and bus barns through 2015. This money will not negatively impact any existing state or local contracts, and it will not hurt private providers.

For years, the Arkansas Rural Education Association has been dedicated to improving instruction and promoting quality education for all students in rural schools throughout the state—and doing that requires investment in our state's education technology infrastructure. That's why I'm asking for your support of SB 146.

Sincerely,

Bill Abernathy

Bill Abernathy, Executive Director

Cc: Governor Mike Beebe, Dr. Tom Kimbrell, Arkansas Rural Superintendents