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LEGISLATIVE EDUCATION STUDY COMMITTEE
BILL ANALYSIS
55th Legislature, 1st Session, 2021

Bill Number HM19 **Sponsor** Castellano
Tracking Number .220161.1 **Committee Referrals** HEC
Short Title Internet Access for Teachers
Analyst Bedeaux **Original Date** 3/4/21
Last Updated _____

BILL SUMMARY

Synopsis of Bill

House Memorial 19 (HM19) requests the Public Education Department (PED) to assist school districts in providing Internet access to teachers statewide. The memorial asks PED to use federal Covid-19 relief funding to pay for teachers' Internet access and reimburse teachers in need of assistance who paid out-of-pocket for Internet service during the pandemic.

FISCAL IMPACT

Memorials do not contain appropriations.

Internet stipends outlined in this memorial likely represent an eligible use for PED's federal Covid-19 relief funds, including federal governor's emergency education relief funds. However, memorials do not carry the binding force of law and cannot compel PED to use federal funds for any purpose.

SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, educators, administrators, and other stakeholders statewide have worked to close the digital divide by funding Wi-Fi hotspots, personal devices, and even subsidized Internet connections. Currently, it is unclear how many teachers lack home Internet access, or how many teachers in need of assistance are paying out-of-pocket for Internet access.

Many state and federal initiatives have provided funding and resources to expand Internet access, raising questions about how much additional funding is necessary. The New Mexico Homework Gap Team, a collaborative task force of PED, the Department of Information Technology (DoIT), the Public School Facilities Authority, and several other state agencies and regional and tribal actors, have created a Broadband for Students initiative to connect approximately 20 thousand disconnected students, although it is unclear to what extent the initiative is assisting teachers. Additionally, the Public School Capital Outlay Council authorized \$200 thousand to contract with

a broadband consulting firm to assist school districts and charter schools in identifying solutions to student and teacher connectivity issues. Also of note, DoIT was awarded a \$1.5 million grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration to provide technical assistance for broadband development in partnership with local, tribal, and other government entities, but it is unclear whether school districts and charter schools qualify for these funds.

The federal Covid-19 relief package enacted in December 2020 includes a \$3.2 billion appropriation to fund a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) program for broadband access for low-income families. The program will provide \$50 per month to subsidize low-income households and \$75 per month to subsidize homes on tribal land. Additionally, the program will fund \$100 per household to purchase an Internet capable device. Funding will be distributed directly to internet service providers (ISPs) to connect homes, meaning the responsibility lies with school districts and charter schools to reach out to low-income families and find solutions. The bill also included a \$1 billion appropriation to the federal tribal broadband fund to be distributed at the discretion of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), as well as a \$300 million appropriation for a grant program administered by NTIA to fund broadband in rural areas of the country. The program will issue grants fund partnerships between ISPs and state and local governments and gives priority to projects in rural areas of the country that reach a large number of unserved families.

OTHER SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

The memorial asks PED to assist teachers at school districts, omitting state-chartered charter schools.

RELATED BILLS

Related to HB86, Native American Library, Internet, and Education, which makes several appropriations to New Mexico tribes, pueblos, and nations for Internet connectivity equipment.

Related to HB141, Ed Infrastructure Technology Definition, which also amends the definition of “education technology infrastructure” in the Public School Capital Outlay Act to include physical hardware and services for remote learning.

Related to HB233, Internet Access for Teachers, which enacts a temporary provision of law requiring PED to provide financial support to teachers to offset the cost of Internet access.

Related to *SB144, Remote Education Technology Infrastructure, which amends the definition of “education technology infrastructure” in the Public School Capital Outlay Act to include the physical hardware and educational resources necessary to establish broadband connectivity among students and teachers at schools and during remote learning.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- LESC Files
- Department of Internet Technology (DoIT)

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