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Manchin: Broadband access as important as sewer, water

Student learning time extends from schools to homes

By Erin Uy

Financial and technological constraints have limited the ability of many schools to obtain sufficient broadband access so they can provide students with richer curricula and workforce skills. But industry and some government leaders are setting their sights on a new playing field — home base.

One Economy Corp., a coalition of industry leaders, government officials and nonprofit groups, is leading a campaign to close the digital divide by providing high-quality broadband access to low-income and rural homes.

Because service is unevenly distributed across the nation, students don't have equitable access to cutting-edge educational tools. To bridge that gap, the campaign builds on a growing movement to extend students' learning time from the school to the home.

In West Virginia, for example, Gov. Joe Manchin has committed to having broadband services available to every part of the state by 2010.

"If we expect rural communities in West Virginia and other states to prosper in the global economy, broadband access is as important as water and sewer infrastructure," Manchin said.

Ray Ramsey, One Economy CEO, called for greater collaboration among the private and public sectors in bridging the digital divide.

"When you bring those sectors together, you can build that bridge for every single person," he said.

The group's Bring IT Home America campaign, launched Tuesday, is intended to put broadband services in 500,000 homes by 2010. Other goals include employing 5,000 students to provide technology training in their neighborhoods and creating a public Internet resource.

West Virginia leads the way with its 21st century learning initiative. In the 1990s, Manchin said, the state started providing a computer to every classroom. Today, however, technological access and training requires more than just equipment, he said, such as teacher training, quality resources and home access.

Manchin said broadband access will continue to be a state priority. In March, he signed into law a bill that will create a council with the power to enter into private sector partnerships to provide broadband to areas without service.

Further, to ensure Internet service is of sufficiently high quality, the law defined broadband capacity as a data rate of at least 200 kilobits a second. Education leaders have noted that lower-grade broadband service tends to limit students' access to quality content and the number of students able to use the Internet at school.