

# School district proposes free citywide Wi-Fi

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The Rochester School District wants to ensure its students have Internet access at home, and the rest of the city's residents may be beneficiaries.

The district has hired a consulting firm to study the possibility of creating a free city-wide wireless network. It would build on existing resources, including libraries, schools and other public buildings, then look to fill in gaps.

There are still plenty of details to hash out, including how much usage to allow for free and how to differentiate

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between students doing homework and everyone else.

"We're not going to be able to fund streaming movies," Ann Marie Lehner, the district's top information technology officer, said. "We're expecting there will be several tiers and there might be a cost as you go up."

The primary funding will come from the state Smart Schools Bond Act, which provides money for certain technology spending in schools. The district will receive \$47 million through that program and will set a small portion aside.

Another larger broadband Internet access grant opportunity from the state will become available later this year. The state has indicated that it looks favorably on the project and encouraged the district to pursue funding, Lehner said.

To go along with the Internet access, the district plans to provide each student with a laptop, much as some suburban districts do. It hasn't done that yet, Lehner said, because it wouldn't be equitable when not all students have Internet access.

"Think about extending the school day 24/7, just like suburban students have access to technology and resources all the time," she said. If the grant funding comes through as hoped, implementation might begin in later 2016, Lehner said. It would likely be piloted in some neighborhoods first before spreading throughout the city.

The district is spending \$38,500 on the project and expects a report from the consultant, New Jersey- based Millennium Strategies, by the end of the year. It will show what resources currently exist, overlaid on a map with socioeconomic data on poverty and where students live. It will also consider other funding sources for the project. According to the 2013 American Communities Survey from the U.S. Census Bureau, about 21 percent of Rochester residents do not have Internet access. That is about the same as Buffalo and Syracuse as well as the national average.

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