Frequently Asked Questions

Digital Connections Partnership Schools Grant

General Questions

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General Questions

Do you have a link to the enabling legislation for this grant?
Yes, the legislation is posted at https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2014/Chapter257.

Will there be a balance of geographic location around the state?
In order to create balance, we divided the funding into three pots: urban, suburban, and rural.

Will all types of districts be considered equally for funding or is this more targeted at high needs districts?
The grant is not targeted specifically to high needs districts. However, as the score card shows, if there is a tie, we will consider the level of need for the upgrade, based on the infrastructure the school currently has.

Can you please explain the criteria for placement in rural vs. suburban?
The classifications were based on categories developed by the Department's school finance office in the 1980s. The suburban category is comprised of "economically developed suburbs" and "residential suburbs" and the rural category is comprised of "rural economic centers," "small rural communities," and "resort/retirement/artistic communities.” The urban category is the same.

Can a district apply for a grant that would include all school buildings in the district as well as town buildings?
Yes, but the state match should be calculated based on the portion of the project funding that is only for school property and school buildings.

How many years does the grant span?
It spans two fiscal years.
Is there a scoring rubric for the grant?
Yes, please see the scorecard, which is posted at http://www.doe.mass.edu/odl/grants/DigitalConnections.html.

What does “finalist” mean?
A finalist is a chosen grant recipient. We use the term “finalist” because receiving the funding depends on the grant recipient being able to meet the grant requirements, such as having local match funding and obtaining bids from vendors. If a finalist found that it was unable to make the match or other key grant requirements, it would be disqualified and another finalist would be chosen from among the runners-up.

What professional development standards are you looking for us to demonstrate in this grant?
The Massachusetts Standards for Professional Development are posted on the ESE website at http://www.doe.mass.edu/pd/standards.html.

Since the Department is awarding points for the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) certification, is the Department setting up opportunities to take the certification test in state before the grants are due?
No, applicants must obtain CoSN certification using standard testing dates and resources. Applicants do not have to obtain the CoSN certification prior to November 17; they just need to commit to obtaining it within the next two years.

How will the procurement and reimbursement process work?
If you are chosen as a grant finalist, you will be expected to contact at least three vendors, request vendor site visits, and obtain bids from each of them, choosing the lowest bidder unless there is a legitimate reason to choose another. MassIT will be available to assist you with coordinating the site visits. MassIT will then work with you to determine the exact costs and help manage the building phase of the project. As far as purchasing devices, you are encouraged to purchase devices through a state contract unless there is a reason for your district to do otherwise.

Can districts partner with other districts?
Yes.

How does a district “prove” that it has the local match?
The district, as part of its application, assures that Department that it has the funds. If the district becomes a finalist and does not have the funds, it can withdraw from the grant. If the district moves forward and with the infrastructure upgrade and then does not have the money to pay its portion, the Department has the option of withholding funds from the district to reimburse the state for the district’s portion.
Do you have any examples of schools that are part of a larger plan to connect to the community?
If some or all of the buildings are part of initiatives run by the Massachusetts Broadband Institute, you can indicate that you are part of a larger plan to connect community anchor institutions.

How will the impact/reach of a proposal be scored by reviewers?
The number of students served by the infrastructure upgrade (not the number of devices to be purchased or use as a result of the upgrade) will serve as a "tiebreaker" for this program and is an important metric for assessing value to the taxpayer. This means that the Department reserves the right to use the number of students served to select a finalist from among two or more proposals with similar scores.

Funding Eligibility

What is the range of funding that you are anticipating offering to districts?
There are three pots of funding: Urban - $2 million, Suburban - $2 million, Rural - $1 million. An applicant can apply for the maximum amount of funding in its category, provided that it is able to fund the required local match.

How/when do we find out what the percentage match is for our district?
Your district should be listed in the Attachment B list of communities and match requirements. You need to locate the tab for the type of community and then find the city or town where your school is physically located. The file is located at http://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2015/DCPSG/AttachB-Communities.xlsx

Who determines a community’s match?
Within each category (urban, suburban, rural), communities are sorted based on their local contribution to the Chapter 70 program. Communities with higher contributions have a higher local match; communities with lower contributions have a lower local match. The sliding scale (local contribution amount) is in increments of 10 percent from 30-70 percent.

Can I obtain funding for a project that is already completed or is partially underway?
No, initiatives that are completed or are currently in progress are not eligible for funding under this grant. Grant funds cannot be used in place of any funds that were already expended prior to the grant opportunity or for expenditures for which a purchase order has already been executed.

Given funding availability, is there a recommended cap on a funding request?
There is no recommended cap, except that the state match cannot exceed the total state funds allocated to a particular community type.
Can a district apply for a grant that would include all school buildings in the district as well as town buildings?
Yes, but the state match should be calculated based on the portion of the project funding that is only for school property and school buildings. Such a project is an example of a larger plan to connect to the community (see “Do you have any examples of schools that are part of a larger plan to connect to the community?”).

Why aren't vocational schools listed in the matching funds document?
Vocational schools are eligible. The local match for a vocational school is based on the community where the building is located. This principle also applies to regional school districts in which school buildings are located in different communities.

In a regional vocational school district, how do you determine whether you are applying for the urban or rural portion of the grant?
You would identify the community where the building is located and find the community in the Attachment B list of communities and match requirements. Example: Easton is located in the suburban tab, the local contribution is 40%, and the state contribution is 60%.

How many grants will you be making in each of the three types of communities?
We will be looking for quality, not quantity. We will identify the districts with the strongest proposals, and we will fund the top applicants in each category ($2 million for urban, $2 million for suburban, and $1 million for rural schools). One grantee could potentially apply for and obtain the full grant for their community type. The district would, of course, need to have the required matching funds available.

Where should funding for professional development come from?
All funds for professional development must be part of the local match, and only professional development planned for the first of the two fiscal years under this grant (FY2016) is eligible to be included in the local match.

Can you clarify your statement at the beginning of the webinar regarding being able to use funds to jumpstart introducing a new budget line item to support project sustainability?
We are saying that the grant offers an opportunity for districts to have a conversation about digital learning and to discuss their goals and commitment to it.

Will there be another round of grants with the remaining grant funds from the $38 million that the Legislature approved?
Governor Patrick released $5 million for the current round of grants, which functions as a pilot. Governor Baker will determine when and how to release the rest of the funding.

Would participation in this pilot grant preclude participation in future grants?
No, participation in this grant would not preclude possible future grant participation opportunities.
If we purchased devices already this fiscal year, could we count that towards the match? No, any prior or current purchases being made will not qualify under this grant.

For what year does the district need to have the infrastructure line item?
The line item would need to be in place for FY16 and beyond.

Since the grant is for two fiscal years, could the match then come from two fiscal years?
Yes, but only if the project is scheduled to take place across two fiscal years. Local matching funds must be available to fund any products or services purchased in that fiscal year. For example, if a community is awarded a project that will take place in FY16, all of the funds must be FY16 funds. If a community is awarded a multi-stage project (i.e., one school building would be upgraded in FY16 and one would be upgraded in FY17, funding for the latter phase of the project may come from FY17 since the work is being done in FY17. The district would need to pay its share of the costs by June 30 of each year.

If a proposal costs more than the Department is able to fund, might the Department ask the district to reduce that size of the proposal or simply reject the proposal because it's too costly?
If a proposal is beyond the $1M or $2M in matching funds in its category and it is a high quality proposal, it is conceivable that the Department might conditionally approve the district but request that they reduce the scale of their proposal to bring it within the allocated funding.

Completing the Application

Can a district submit multiple proposals, one for each school?
It is a school-based grant, and districts can apply for more than one school. For Part III, applicants should submit one Excel workbook and create multiple sheets for each school being applied for. For Part IV, applicants should include a paragraph about each school for answers that vary from school to school.

Is Part III asking for details on the school’s current infrastructure or the proposed infrastructure?
Part III is asking for details on the school’s current infrastructure. MassIT will provide an estimate for what it takes to bring the school up to standard.

Shouldn’t there be a budget form to complete?
No. Just identify the school(s) that you want to upgrade, enter the information for those schools into separate spreadsheets (Part III), and then MassIT will determine what the school(s) need in order to get up to the recommended standard, and then create an estimate. If selected as a finalist, the district will need to seek bids and then create a budget.
How does a district determine what it can ask for?
MassIT will determine what is needed to bring the school up to the recommended standards, and will then estimate the cost to do so. (Note that the grant application asks applicants to describe their current infrastructure.) For the purpose of writing the proposal, applicants will need to estimate any non-infrastructure costs.

Must all forms be emailed to the Department?
As indicated in the RFP, the two forms that require signatures must be sent by postal mail. The other forms must be send via email to odl@doe.mass.edu. Note that Part III must be submitted as an Excel spreadsheet.

What amount should be entered on the “Standard Contract Form” under “amount requested”? 
Put the estimated cost of the entire project and add the word “approximately.”

How can a district make its proposal more competitive?
Applications will be judged on quality of applicants’ responses in Part IV, including the applicants’ vision and plans for successfully implementing digital learning. For more information, please see the scorecard, which is posted at http://www.doe.mass.edu/odl/grants/DigitalConnections.html.

In Part III, do we need to enter the number of devices we have, even if we do not plan to purchase additional devices?
Yes.

If we have device carts, how should we count them in Part III?
Include the devices as part of the total number of devices in the school in Part III. We also recommend that you include a note in the comments section about the number of carts/devices you have. Do not include device carts (mobile labs) in the computer lab section.

Infrastructure

Do you have a list of equipment/items that are eligible for the project?
No, because needs will be different for each building and district. It depends on what infrastructure is in place right now and what will be needed to bring the school(s) up to the recommended standards.

Are servers are considered infrastructure and matched by state?
MassIT will determine whether a server is needed to provide high-speed broadband. Note that the grant application asks applicants to describe their current infrastructure; MassIT will determine what is needed to bring the school up to the recommended standards.

Internal wiring of wireless hot spots is infrastructure, right?
Yes, internal wiring of hot spots is considered infrastructure.
Do firewalls count as infrastructure?
No, firewalls are not considered infrastructure.

Do VoIP phone systems count as infrastructure?
No, infrastructure costs must be related to the cost to provide high-speed Internet access to students and teachers.

Will switching will be an allowable expense?
Yes, but only if it is part of enabling a wireless network.

In order to accommodate some new wireless access points, we need to upgrade to POE switches. Would the purchase of POE switches be covered?
Yes, POE switches would be covered.

What is this grant’s definition for "high speed broadband"? Please refer to The Broadband Imperative, available online at http://www.setda.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Broadband_Trifold.pdf.

Can you give examples of how far into infrastructure we can go? How about switches, modems, wireless PTP between buildings, cabling, access points, and fiber between buildings?
These items would be eligible for funding. Eligible items would be similar to those that are eligible for E-Rate Category Two.

Devices

Is the grant only for 1 to 1 initiatives?
Yes. Applicants must make a commitment to a 1:1 program for either the entire school, one full grade in the school, or one subject area in the school.

Why does this grant not fund devices directly?
The grant funds come from the recently passed IT bond bill. Since a bond is a long-term obligation, devices are not an appropriate use of this funding, since devices become outdated after a few years. However, the funds you allocate for your district match and any E-rate reimbursement funds you receive can be used towards the purchase of devices. Your plan for incorporating and replenishing devices also must be included in the grant application.

Does the device purchase need to be connected with infrastructure in same building?
Yes; this is a school-based grant, so the devices would need to be used in the same building that received the infrastructure upgrade.
If we purchased devices already in this fiscal year, could we count that towards the match?
No, any prior or current purchases being made will not qualify under this grant.

Can a 1:1 initiative under a current leasing process be considered?
No, if it is already established, you cannot use grant funds (or your local match) to pay for it.

Would a parent-funded 1:1 count as a private match?
If it is a new 1:1, then it would fall under private funding and could count towards the local match. Keep in mind, though, that devices are considered to be instructional materials within the meaning of Chapter 71, Section 48 of the Mass. General Laws. We advise schools to be prepared to provide such devices free of charge to students whose families do not choose to buy them or cannot afford to do so. If students need such devices to complete out-of-school assignments, schools must provide that access.

Does a school need to allow students to take the computers home in order to be considered 1:1?
No. However, if the 1:1 initiative is for a whole school or for one or more grades within a school, those students would need to have access to the devices throughout the school day. If the initiative is for a single subject area, the students would need daily access to the devices on a daily basis for that subject.

Would devices such as projectors and televisions be eligible for funding?
No. Eligible devices include computers, tablets, and assistive technologies needed to use such devices. These devices are eligible as part of the district’s match; they are not eligible for state funding. The devices must meet PARCC specifications, even if the district has decided not to opt into PARCC online testing. Devices for teachers, such as small, handheld tablets, do not have to meet PARCC specifications.

Could a district use its local match to place school computers in the town hall for students to use to complete their schoolwork?
No; the local match can be for infrastructure and/or devices within district-owned school buildings.

Does replacement of teacher devices count towards the local match?
Yes, devices for teachers can count towards the local match. One of the criteria by which we will be scoring applications is whether the district has a plan for sustaining devices over time.

How would a (bring-your-own-device) BYOD fit into local match?
If it is a new BYOD initiative, then it would fall under private funding and could count towards the local match. Keep in mind, though, that devices are considered to be instructional materials within the meaning of Chapter 71, Section 48 of the Mass. General Laws. We advise schools to be prepared to provide such devices free of charge to
students whose families do not choose to buy them or cannot afford to do so. If students need such devices to complete out-of-school assignments, schools must provide that access.

Can you tell me more about the Learning Technology Initiative (LTI) contract?  
As part of its statewide 1:1 initiative, Maine developed an RFP and selected vendors that offer devices and end-to-end support on a three-year lease basis. Massachusetts is currently making arrangements to use the Maine contract, which has the potential to reduce district costs by 30-40%. Although the Maine contract included Apple and HP devices (1-1), the Massachusetts contract will be expanded to include the Android platform. To achieve the savings, districts will need to make their purchases through MassIT. All districts will be eligible to use the LTI contract, regardless of whether they are finalists for the grant. Details about the LTI contract will be available in December 2014.

E-Rate

Are we required to apply for E-rate for projects we apply to Digital Connections for or can we apply to Digital Connections for some projects and E-rate for other projects?  
If you are chosen as a Digital Connections Partnership grant finalist, you are required to apply for E-rate funding. Grant finalists have the option of having MassIT apply to E-rate on their behalf; then if E-rate reimbursement is awarded (which depends on the demand E-rate has for its funds), that reimbursement will then be passed back through to your district or school. You can then use that money towards your local match or for other expenditures of your choosing.

Can E-rate reimbursement be applied as the match?  
Because an E-rate reimbursement is not guaranteed (due to funding limitations), it cannot be considered as part of the local match at this point in time. Applicants must allocate matching funds; if an E-rate reimbursement later becomes available, that money can be used as part of the local match. Subsequent use of the E-rate reimbursement will not be required to be connected to this grant.

How will MassIT help grant recipients with their E-rate applications?  
Grant recipients have the option of requesting that MassIT submit an E-rate application for any schools selected through this grant, streamlining the process and removing the paperwork burden from applicants. If the district chooses to have MassIT submit the application, it would need to sign a letter of agency allowing MassIT to do so. MassIT would then complete the application, beginning with the Form 471, since a vendor would have already been identified.

If a grant recipient asks MassIT to complete its E-rate application, would the district’s E-rate discount rate change?  
No.
Vendor and Project Timeline

Will applicants need to get three bids from vendors under state contracts?
Bids are not required for this phase of the grant application process. The grant application includes technical questions regarding your current infrastructure. Your answers to the technical questions will then be used to determine what is needed to bring your school building(s) up to the recommend standards, as well as to estimate the costs. If your application is chosen for further review, you would then need to either obtain three bids from vendors under state contracts or do an RFR.

Are the vendors required to be from the state contract vendors?
Unless a district is going through a separate procurement process, vendors on state contracts should be used.

Would the funded district/school make the final vendor decision, or does MassIT control that decision?
Lowest cost should generally be the deciding factor, but this does not have to be a MassIT decision alone. If there is a value with to the other vendor, the school district can make that decision.

Will any current year projects be able to be funded, or do all projects have to begin July 1, 2015?
All projects can begin no earlier than July 1, 2015. The Department is required to submit a report to the Legislature prior to making the funds available in March but is anticipated to be submitted earlier. Once this grant report is received, approved, and acknowledged, projects could begin as soon as July 1, 2015.

Can the local match be used to fund projects retroactively?
No, this grant cannot retroactively reimburse districts for prior projects. It can only be used for FY16 and FY17 expenditures that are specified in the district’s grant application. The funds (state and local match) cannot be used for expenditures for which a purchase order has already been executed.

Could we spend our matching funds earlier, once we hear that our proposal is accepted, or does that have to wait?
See above; all projects can begin no earlier than July 1, 2015, and only then once the grant report required under the enabling legislation has been submitted to the legislature.

For the matching funds portion from schools, when is this deadline for districts to determine this amount?
Finalists will be expected to get bids from vendors in January and February. Once a vendor is selected, the district match will be calculated. The district will need to include its match in its FY16 budget and make a commitment by June 30, 2015 to pay its share of the project. The district would be expected to pay its match by June 30, 2016 at the latest.
If there is a FY17 component of the project, the district would be expected to pay its match by June 30, 2017.