FCC to expand use of Internet subsidies in schools

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(AP) -- The Federal Communications Commission wants to get more bang from the federal dollars that subsidize Internet access in schools and libraries by lifting some of the restrictions that come with the funds.

The FCC plans to let schools open their doors to the public after hours so that people can use subsidized Internet connections after students go home. It also plans to launch a pilot program that would let schools use the money to pay for wireless connections for electronic reading devices that can download textbooks.

The FCC will vote on the proposals for the E-Rate program on Thursday.

The agency also plans to allow schools and libraries to tap E-Rate funding to lease unused optical fiber or pay for access over existing local and regional fiber networks for faster Internet connections. Roughly half of all schools and libraries in the E-rate program have Internet speeds of just 1.5 megabits per second, according to the commission.

E-Rate is one of four programs that make up the Universal Service Fund, the $8-billion-a-year government fund that subsidizes Internet access in poor and rural communities through a surcharge on phone bills.

FCC chairman Julius Genachowski said broadband can improve the quality of education by giving students in far-flung locations access to top teachers and tutors and other valuable learning resources. Schools

also need to be able to equip their students with the "digital literacy" skills that are so critical in today's economy, Genachowski said.

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