

Obama hooks up new school broadband plan

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US President Barack Obama (C) visits a classroom at Buck Lodge Middle School in Adelphi, Maryland, on February 4, 2014

President Barack Obama on Tuesday unveiled a new government partnership with the private sector worth nearly three billion dollars to hook up an extra 20 million school kids to high speed Internet.

"In a country where we expect free Wifi with our coffee we should definitely demand it in our schools," Obama said, unveiling the latest prong of his "opportunity agenda" in a Washington suburb.

The program, a link up with US firms including Verizon, Sprint and Apple, fits into Obama's consistent push to improve education and to equip young Americans with the technological skills needed to compete in an increasingly competitive global market.

But it is also Obama's latest attempt to show that with a "pen and a phone" he can wield presidential power to significant economic effect even though Republicans in Congress are squelching much of his second term agenda.

The program will see the Federal Communications Commission put down \$2 billion to connect 20 million more students to wireless broadband in their schools.

The Department of Agriculture will come in with \$10 million in grants to benefit rural schools.

The administration has also secured hundreds of millions of dollars in investment from top communications and Internet companies.



A student shows US President Barack Obama how he is working to create an ebook with an iPad in a classroom at Buck Lodge Middle School in Adelphi, Maryland, on February 4, 2014

Apple has pledged \$100 million to buy iPads and MacBook computers for disadvantaged schools.

AT&T will pay more than \$100 million to offer Internet connectivity to selected middle school students.

Microsoft has pledged to offer steep discounts on the cost of its Windows operating system.

Sprint will come up with another \$100 million to offer free wireless to 50,000 low-income high school students for four years.

Verizon will meanwhile put up \$100 million in cash to support the Obama program, known as ConnectED, which was launched last year.

"Today the average school has about the same Internet bandwidth as the average American home," Obama said.

"But it serves 200 times as many people."

The White House says the new effort will bring America close to giving 99 percent of schoolchildren Internet access within five years.

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