

POSITION PAPER: **FIRN Funding Concerns for School Districts & Post-Secondary Institutions**

ISSUE: There are discussions and proposals to **terminate statewide FIRN services for school districts, and to roll the pro-rated district expenditure into the base student allocation**. FIRN provides essential Internet & communication services at a discounted cost and at service levels via contracts that are not available to most districts. The proposed change is likely to be significantly more costly, and not as consistently feasible, for schools and educational programs, K-20, statewide. By way of background, current FIRN-provided services include:

- Internet bandwidth (at substantially lower costs than individual districts can negotiate; including higher federal Erate discount levels than are available to the majority of school districts);
- Internet filtering for students/schools (fully CIPA compliant; with 24x7 technical support) – including resolution of filtering issues and challenges;
- Networking & communications services and technical support – ranging from caching, network security and intrusion detection, virus protection, network monitoring, VPN services...);
- Emergency and disaster communications support;
- Connectivity for student & teacher access to: FCAT Explorer, FASTER transcripts, FACTS on-line, distance and virtual learning, bright futures, new state online assessments, online instructional content correlated to state standards, etc...
- Mandated state and federal data reporting transmissions, including data encryption;
- Email & web site hosting option for districts – essential to many smaller districts and consortia.

In short, FIRN provides essential, mandated, centralized, shared commodity and technical services at a cost level that is far less than what individual districts can match. More important, many of these are specialized, highly technical support services that would be substantially more expensive – if even available – at the level of consistently high quality to many school districts or educational agencies. Our understanding is that FIRN funds might be reallocated to FEFP, AS PART OF THE BASE FTE ALLOCATION. Initial study indicates that the proposed cuts would provide school districts funding at approximately \$1.50 per FTE next year. Based upon four example school districts, **comparable services will cost 20-40% more per school district than the proposed reallocation of funds. For a medium-sized school district this translates to approximately \$40,000 – \$150,000 in additional funding impact annually; for a large-sized school district, as much as approximately \$400,000 annually** in costs beyond the proposed reallocation of funds.

The new requirements for K-8 virtual schooling further increase the need for cost-effective and reliable online access and greater bandwidth for districts. Having these services centralized through FIRN keeps costs lower for schools.

We encourage legislative members to recognize the cost savings afforded by FIRN as a service option for all schools, and to continue to support FIRN funding. We also strongly encourage that legislative staff, school district Superintendents, as well as K-20 Chief Technology Officers or Chief Information Officers make contacts and communicate the importance of continuing the FIRN2 network as it exists at present, leveraging the Erate federal funding for the entire state – which provides a higher level of discounting (72%) than the discount level available to many districts. At the least, the following options for support are particularly critical:

- Ensure that there is a statewide (FIRN or DMS) agreement available to educational entities with specifications and pricing that are e-rateable for connectivity, email, filtering, caching, and advanced network support services. These contract options would serve as a vehicle that education could purchase from regardless of the funding source.
- Ensure that critical state reporting connectivity and services are provided for purposes of mandated state reporting and transcript functions. These are the backbone of critical state and federal data reporting and student matriculation processes
- Encourage funding options for school and college connections

In this time of major budget reductions, the loss of the state level FIRN2 network will result in a lower, and less reliable, level of access to online resources for Florida's students and teachers.

On behalf of: **FAMIS – Florida Association of Management Information Systems** (contacts: David Smith – Bay; Bill Piotrowski – Leon - <http://www.famisonline.org/Home/tabid/36/Default.aspx>) and **FAEDS – Florida Association of Educational Data Systems** (contact Bill Campman – TCC; David Jasa – St. Lucie <http://www.faeds.org/>)