

E-Rate 2026: What CIOs Need to Know Now

E-Rate enters its thirtieth year with important updates that impact funding strategy, compliance, and long-term infrastructure planning.

With filing windows published and regulatory changes underway, districts must approach 2026 strategically to avoid denials, maximize Category 2 budgets, and navigate evolving eligibility rules.

PREPARATION, NOT REACTION, DETERMINES SUCCESS.

The Foundation: Competitive Bidding Still Rules

E-Rate remains a compliance-driven program built on structured process.



Form 470

- Initiates competitive bidding
- Must remain posted for 28 days¹

Form 471

- Submits funding request
- Requires signed contract before filing

⚠️ Common Denial Risk:

- No signed contract in place at time of 471 submission = automatic denial¹
- Price must remain the highest weighted bid evaluation factor

Key Changes for 2026

- ### 1 Cybersecurity Pilot Expansion

 - Language around managed services is evolving
 - Increased need for eligibility verification
 - Recommendation: Confirm interpretations with USAC before filing
- ### 2 School Bus Wi-Fi Ineligible

 - Wi-Fi on buses no longer qualifies²
 - E-Rate remains strictly “educational purpose” based
- ### 3 Category 2 Budget Increase

 - Increased from \$2.2B to \$2.7B³
 - 20.7% funding expansion

Designed to address infrastructure and inflation



MORE FLEXIBILITY = MORE STRATEGIC PLANNING REQUIRED.



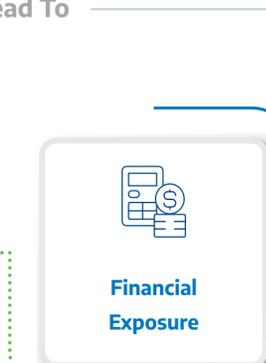
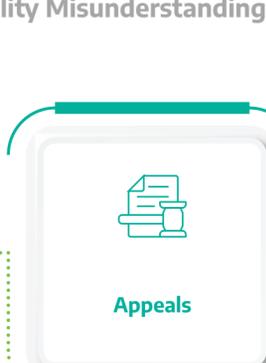
Eligibility Complexity: Know Before You File

E-Rate eligibility is governed by the annual Eligible Services List (ES), and not all products qualify at 100%.⁴

Examples

- LTE devices are often only partially eligible
- Manufacturer certification determines percentage
- Managed services interpretations are evolving

Eligibility Misunderstandings Lead To



WHEN IN DOUBT: CONFIRM TWICE WITH THE USAC HELP DESK.

HOW CONNECTION HELPS

From switching and wireless to cybersecurity and modernization, we help you maximize funding while minimizing risk.

- Navigate E-Rate strategy and compliance
- Align infrastructure upgrades with funding cycles
- Validate eligibility before submission
- Structure staged Category 2 investments
- Coordinate vendor documentation and contracts

Explore Our Solutions and Services



Modern
Infrastructure



Cybersecurity



K-12
Technology Solutions

SOURCES

¹USAC, 2026, E-Rate Applicant Process Overview

²FCC, 2025, Order Ending E-Rate Support for School Bus Wi-Fi and Hotspot Lending Programs

³USAC, 2026, Category Two Budget (FY2026–2030)

⁴USAC, 2026, Eligible Services List (ESL)