

# 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 days<sup>1</sup>

#### Form 471

- Submits funding request
- Requires signed contract before filing

#### ⚠ Common Denial Risk:

- No signed contract in place at time of 471 submission = automatic denial<sup>1</sup>
- 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

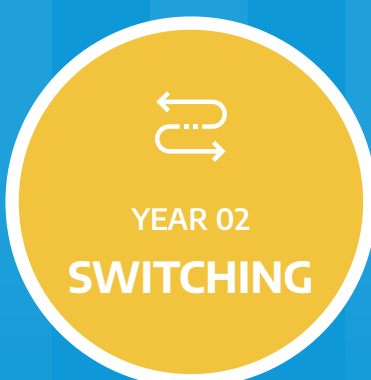
- 2 School Bus Wi-Fi Ineligible**
  - Wi-Fi on buses no longer qualifies<sup>2</sup>
  - E-Rate remains strictly “educational purpose” based

- 3 Category 2 Budget Increase**
  - Increased from \$2.2B to \$2.7B<sup>3</sup>
  - 20.7% funding expansion

Designed to address infrastructure and inflation



YEAR 01  
POWER



YEAR 02  
SWITCHING



YEAR 03  
WIRELESS

MORE FLEXIBILITY = MORE STRATEGIC PLANNING REQUIRED.



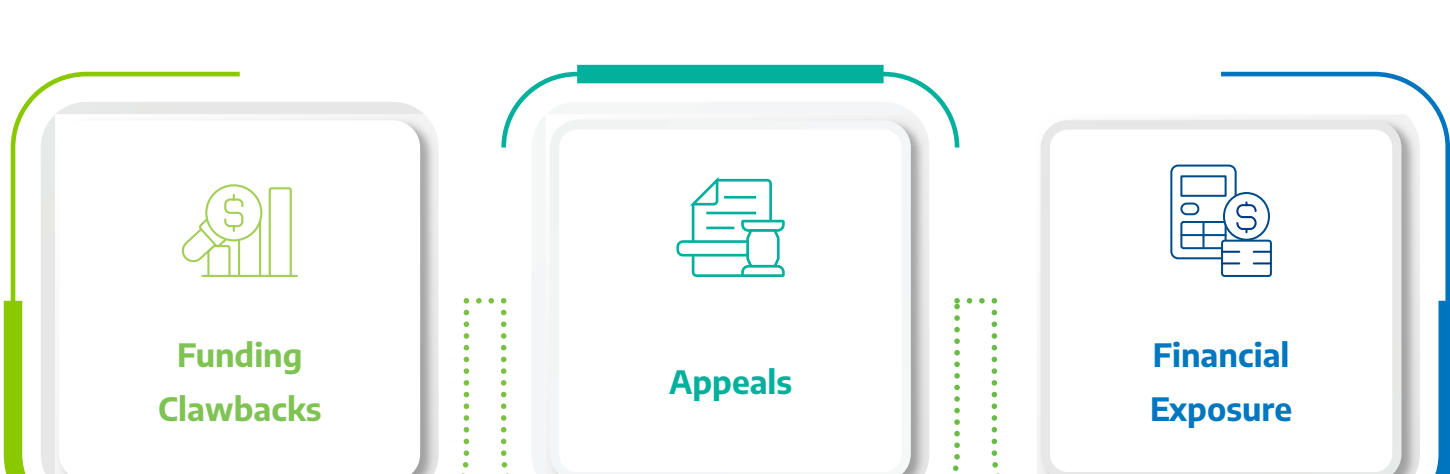
### Eligibility Complexity: Know Before You File

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

#### 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

<sup>1</sup>USAC, 2026, E-Rate Applicant Process Overview

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

<sup>3</sup>USAC, 2026, Category Two Budget (FY2026–2030)

<sup>4</sup>USAC, 2026, Eligible Services List (ESL)