

MISSISSIPPI EDUCATION UNDER FIRE

A Valuable Mississippi Education Resource in Serious Jeopardy

The purpose of this paper is to explain a current threat to education in the state of Mississippi. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has initiated a process at the request of the President that could seize the Instructional Television Fixed Service (ITFS) spectrum away from its current educational users and sell it to commercial telecommunications companies for their third generation (3G) cellular telephone service. FCC Chairman William E. Kennard said recently “ We must ensure that the tools of the Information Age reach all Americans from the business districts to the barrios; from those with every advantage to those with disabilities; from the young to the old; and from suburban homes to our rural heartland. Only then can we make sure that every American has the opportunity to realize the full potential and prosperity of the New Economy and enjoy the full promise of American life.”¹ Yet if the FCC takes spectrum away from EDNET and its private sector partner Worldcom, it will virtually eliminate rural Mississippians access to high-speed broadband Internet services for the foreseeable future. The FCC would in effect be pulling the plug on Mississippi EDNET, Worldcom, and many millions of dollars they both have invested. It will reduce educational opportunities in rural Mississippi and put a lid on Mississippi’s attempts to rise above its fiftieth place in the digital divide.

What is EDNET

EDNET is the only ITFS network in the United States that covers an entire state and utilizes all the available educational spectrum. The creation of EDNET was authorized in 1990 by the State Legislature of Mississippi for the purpose of promoting, encouraging, and assisting all levels of education, research, and economic development within the Mississippi. Subsequently the Mississippi Department of Education, the State Board for Community Colleges, the Institutions of Higher Learning, Mississippi Educational Television, the Office of the Governor and the Office of the Attorney General combined their individual ITFS licenses to create EDNET. EDNET exists to support the instructional programs of its member agencies and assist state agencies with their missions whenever possible. In partnership with Wireless One, a division of WorldCom, EDNET has been putting the finishing touches on construction of a statewide broadcasting system using the ITFS spectrum.

EDNET provides educational television programming for Mississippi’s pre K-12 and adult education community, twenty-four hours each day. EDNET can provide up to five channels to schools, colleges, extension centers, head start centers, workplaces and other places of learning. EDNET programming also

¹ Federal Communications Commission web site – “Chairman Kennard’s Greeting”–
<http://www.fcc.gov>

includes public affairs, professional and worker training (such as teachers, fire fighters and public safety officers); and transmission of teleconferences for educational, training and administrative purposes.²

Currently ITFS channels can only be licensed to educational entities. The agency partners have an agreement to pool their collective 20 ITFS channels for management by EDNET. The 20 channels are currently leased to Wireless One, a division of WorldCom. Wireless One then combines EDNET's twenty channels with its own eleven channels to deliver wireless cable service similar to traditional cable television to customers across Mississippi.

The current financial investment in the EDNET system statewide is approximately \$40,500,000. This figure includes a \$500,000 start-up appropriation made by the State Legislature in 1993.

What is EDNET's Potential

In September 1998 the FCC ruled that wireless channels, like those currently used by EDNET and WorldCom for television, can now be used to deliver high-speed broadband Internet services. This has significantly increased the market value of EDNET's spectrum licenses and provides an additional way to deliver educational content. WorldCom has announced its intention to convert its MMDS spectrum from television to high speed Internet service. EDNET would like to continue to partner with a company like Worldcom to provide valuable education services. This new service has the potential to help bridge the digital divide by bringing high-speed broadband Internet service to many rural and impoverished areas of Mississippi.

This unique public/private partnership between EDNET and WorldCom allows the state education agencies to better meet their educational missions. It provides resources to help find new, exciting ways to address issues of isolated and underserved students just as WorldCom seeks to meet the needs of isolated and underserved markets for high speed Internet access.

The Threat

On October 13, 2000, the President executed a memorandum that articulated the need to select radio frequency spectrum to satisfy the United States' future needs for 3G mobile voice, high-speed data, and Internet-accessible wireless capability.

² Additional information concerning EDNET is available at <http://www.msednet.com>

The FCC and the NTIA plans to issue a notice of proposed rulemaking on December 31, 2000 on spectrum allocation for third generation wireless. Final reports will be issued by the two agencies in March 2001. Identification of spectrum by the FCC in coordination with NTIA will be made by July 2001.³

Reallocation of EDNET's spectrum by the FCC would have the following serious negative effects:

- Loss of **broadband Internet service** needed to help bridge the digital divide in rural and impoverished areas of Mississippi.
- Loss of over 5 channels of 24 x 7 **educational programming** delivered directly to schools, colleges, extensions centers and head-start centers around Mississippi.
- Loss of **remedial education programs** for adult education including the GED on TV series which assists students who have dropped out of school and want to obtain their GED
- The loss of EDNET's **distance learning** capability will place Mississippi students at a learning disadvantage compared with other states.
- The loss of the EDNET's ITFS spectrum will completely eliminate a source of badly needed **private sector funding** for education in the State of Mississippi.
- Because Mississippi has the most aggressive implementation of an ITFS network, it will be disproportionately penalized if the spectrum is seized by the FCC.

Alternate option

³ United States Department of Commerce web site - press release "Commerce Dept. Releases Interim Report on Third Generation Wireless Deployment" – November 15, 2000 – <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/>

There are alternate areas of the spectrum that can be used for 3G cellular telephone service other than ITFS. For example, on November 15, 2000 the Commerce Department released a preliminary study on the availability of spectrum currently controlled by the military for third generation wireless systems. According to Gregory L. Rohde, assistant secretary of commerce for communications and information and NTIA administrator, "This interim report indicates that segmentation and sharing possibilities in the 1755-1850 MHz band. The industry and the federal agencies need to begin exploring these possibilities as well as possible re-allocation options." The report went on to state that sharing of allocated spectrum to accommodate third generation wireless systems with existing federal government users might be feasible, under certain conditions. Assessing the potential of re-allocation within the 1755-1850 MHz band for 3G services was not a subject of the interim report and will be determined in the final report due in March 2001.⁴

Call for Action

We believe that adequate spectrum for 3G mobile can be identified and allocated, but that we must not handicap ITFS licensees, the educational community, or our fixed wireless operator partners in the 2.5 GHz band. After years of hard work by EDNET, WorldCom and the FCC, we finally have the right rules, the right spectrum and the right partners to enable us to serve students where and when they are they are ready to learn, to deliver critical broadband service to consumers in underserved rural places and to provide competitive options to consumers elsewhere. These services are critical to education and to our economic life in Mississippi.

Please let the FCC know the devastating impact on Mississippi's education and economic development infrastructure any decision to take away our ITFS spectrum will have. We strongly recommend that the FCC leave the ITFS spectrum intact and instead use 1755-1850 MHz spectrum for new 3G cellular services. You can contact FCC Chairman William E. Kennard several ways: via phone (202) 418-1000, fax (202) 418-2801, his mailing address is FCC 445 12th St. Southwest, Washington, D.C. 20554, or through the FCC website at <http://www.fcc.gov/>.

⁴ United States Department of Commerce web site - press release "Commerce Dept. Releases Interim Report on Third Generation Wireless Deployment" – November 15, 2000 – <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/>