Big potential for broadband

by Gov. Mike Beebe
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LITTLE ROCK — Arkansas has made great strides in national measurements for health care, excellence in education, and continued economic stability.

We will keep building on that progress by embracing the tools, skills and resources necessary for us to remain competitive. One of those vital resources is a stronger broadband Internet infrastructure in our state, especially in our schools.

While in the past, cost has hindered the expansion of broadband, new opportunities may remove that barrier for Arkansas.

A nonprofit group, called EducationSuperHighway, studies the need for digital learning in American schools. It has chosen to collaborate with us on an in-depth pilot project that could expand broadband access and lower its costs for our public schools.

In fact, the group believes Arkansas can become the first state in the country to meet the national goal of linking every student to high-speed broadband and in-school WiFi. And, above all, we can do it without needing to raise taxes or cut other programs.

Currently, Arkansas spends $15 million annually on broadband in K-12 schools. Using federal matching funds, we want to use that money in the coming years to invest in cheaper, faster fiber-optic cables, instead of simply maintaining our current copper-wire infrastructure.

EducationSuperHighway has pledged to work with state agencies, legislators, school districts and service providers to find our clearest path to realizing that goal.

Fifty-one percent of our school districts do have sufficient broadband access to meet the current federal standard. This surpasses the national average of 37 percent.

However, only one Arkansas school district has the fiber-optic network to meet the national goal for Internet capacity by 2018. We are beginning our work now to help our schools keep up and advance nationally in our capacity for this vital educational resource.

By partnering with EducationSuperHighway, the Arkansas Department of Education has taken an important step toward providing our students with the best tools they need for success in 21st-century classrooms. We have the opportunity to equip every Arkansas public school with fiber Internet systems at affordable prices.

Not only that, but we also have the right set of circumstances to do it ahead of other states.
As technology continues to rapidly advance, broadband in our schools becomes a greater factor in preparing our students for life after graduation. Because of the inextricable link between education and economic development, the dividends of this partnership with EducationSuperHighway can reach far beyond Arkansas’s school walls and into our communities and local economies.

Every day, technology makes our economy more global, and therefore more competitive. The Internet is becoming the platform to conduct most business around the world. A strong broadband infrastructure is not a luxury; it is a necessity. States that cannot build one will fall behind.

Fortunately, through this new partnership, Arkansas has the chance to push far ahead of the curve.

Together, we can give our children the resources they need to compete and succeed, to let their minds explore their full potential without being held back by outdated resources. It’s our latest step toward greater excellence in education.

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