Q&A with Evan Marwell, Founder and CEO, EducationSuperHighway

EducationSuperHighway Prepares to Sunset

With school connectivity goals accomplished, the program prepares to end, leaving new programs in place to make sure the classroom gap stays closed.

In 2013, EducationSuperHighway, a nonprofit dedicated to helping schools close the digital divide under the leadership of Evan Marwell, took on a daunting task: to make sure all U.S. schools have the broadband and Wi-Fi necessary to meet current and future educational needs.

In November 2017, **Broadband Communities** reported on the nonprofit's significant progress in building fiber to schools – it was then on the homestretch. Today, 99 percent of schools have fiber connections, and 42.3 million students have been connected since the organization's inception. Marwell, declaring that the classroom connectivity gap has effectively closed, is preparing to sunset EducationSuperHighway in August 2020.

What did it take over the last two years to connect extremely remote school districts? And looking forward, with broadband needs ever increasing, what measures have been taken to guarantee the classroom gap will remain closed?

BROADBAND COMMUNITIES: *In the two years since **Broadband Communities** reported on EducationSuperHighway, did you simply follow through on the work that was already in progress, or did you have to make a more concerted effort to close the classroom gap?*

EVAN MARWELL: There were some significant examples of people and groups stepping

Evan Marwell, EducationSuperHighway

up effort over the last two years. More governors participated in getting their schools updated. Critically, more states put up matching funds. School districts that could afford to get fiber built to their school buildings did. We certainly stepped up our investment in working with school districts and service providers. We went

from working with 500 school districts per year to 1,000 school districts per year. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) stepped up its game, accelerating the process of reviewing and approving new applications.

BBC: *You must have a large staff to reach so far and wide. What does the staff look like now?*

EM: At our peak we had a staff of 70. Now we're down to about 48 people, and that will be reduced again in a couple of waves starting in 2020.

BBC: *Will EducationSuperHighway shut down entirely?*

EM: Yes. We'll see what happens with the formal nonprofit structure, but my expectation is that by August 31, EducationSuperHighway will have no game to play.

BBC: *Bandwidth is going to have to be upgraded forever, isn't it?*

EM: I think that's probably right. We believe that the next real challenge school districts will face relates to bandwidth bottlenecks – we want teachers to be able to do what they want without getting in the way of one another's use. That will probably require 1 Mbps per student. That's the next standard we're working to enable.

As we sunset the organization, we're focused on three things.

1   Getting consensus in the E-Rate program around the goal of 1 Mbps per student.
2   Making sure school districts will have the tools they need to drive progress toward that goal. Specifically, districts need the kind of data we've been providing for the last five years so they can track progress and find better deals.
3   Building a new software platform that will keep that data available. We will hand it off to new partners to carry the work forward.

BBC: *When the presidential administration and FCC chairman changed after the 2016 election, was your progress affected?*

EM: We certainly were concerned about that, but we've been pleasantly surprised. In our 2019 State of the States report (https://stateofthestates.educationsuperhighway. org/#national) we discussed how the Trump administration, through the U.S. Department of Education primarily, and the FCC, through Chairman Ajit Pai's leadership, continue to view E-Rate as a critical program for U.S. schools and continue to view achieving the goal of building fiber to schools as a critical responsibility. The FCC made a concerted effort to speed up its approval process for fiber conception projects, which has made a big difference. The schools continued to meet critical goals.

BBC: *Some schools were not making the change because of a lack of money or expertise. Did you make a final effort to connect with those school districts?*

EM: That was a huge part of our program. For the last couple of years, we worked with more than 1,000 school districts to provide that kind of technical support. We made a huge effort to connect with those schools to provide expertise. One big challenge school districts face is knowing who to call when they need broadband. A lot of what we did was create a breakdown in the marketplace by doing two things:

1   We helped school districts write good requests for quotes (RFQs) for what they needed. We also helped school districts during the procurement process.
2   We reached out to all service providers with infrastructure in the area to make sure they knew about the RFQs and were aware of E-Rate.

BBC: *Aren't there still a tiny number of school districts that need to get connected at the right speed?*

EM: One reason we're sticking around for one more year is to help as many school districts as we can to get online. We've been pretty successful with a good chunk of those. Some just don't want to do it, and a small number are in places so remote that, even with help from the FCC and the state government, the cost of getting bandwidth is still prohibitive. They just can't make it happen.

Those very remote school districts – think the far reaches of Montana and Alaska – are probably going to wait until the next generation of satellite internet to come along, and maybe they'll get on then.

BBC: *Do you have anything else to say at the conclusion of this experience?*

EM: Yes! Three big takeaways came out of what we've done over the last six years.

First, as Americans we have the ability to solve our problems. We must break a problem down to an achievable goal, define the goal properly, and then make it a multisector effort – an effort of the public sector, the nonprofit sector and the private sector. When those three sectors come together, we can solve our problems.

Second, I can't overemphasize how important the role of government and government leadership has been in this, and it hasn't just been about providing the funding, although that's critical. It's really about government playing a role in setting goals and being the distribution channel for us to get to school districts.

Third, we use data differently. Most nonprofits use data to measure their impact. We use data to drive transparency in the marketplace and to connect buyers and sellers in new ways. Data can be used effectively in government and throughout the public sector. It's something the country needs to spend more time and money on.

BBC: *What are you going to do when this is over?*

EM: I don't know. The only thing I know is that I want to continue to make significant contributions to significant things. EducationSuperHighway has unquestionably been the best experience of my career. I enjoyed everything I did before, but it's different when you wake up every day and can make a difference in the lives of people. ❖

– Interview conducted by Marianne Cotter