



News Release

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Region One ORION Offers High Speed Network to Support Classroom Initiatives

One Step Closer to Closing the Digital Divide

The Region One Education Service Center is one step closer to closing the “digital divide” for students in the region with the approval of a 10-year \$6.7 million funding application by the Universal Service Administration Company (USAC) for its ORION project. ORION is a regional fiber optic network which provides a fast connection to the internet and a connection to other regional school districts to support classroom initiatives. ORION, *One Regional Interconnected Optical Network*, will allow participating members more bandwidth and greater internet access that is essential for digital learning and rich technology services at a significant cost savings. School districts, charter schools, and libraries were invited to join the ORION consortium to take advantage of the initiative and the cost-saving opportunities it presents. Currently, the consortium boasts 28 members made up of school districts, charter schools, and libraries across an eight-county area.

“Our role as an education service center is to assist school districts to operate efficiently and effectively. Our obligation to the students in our region is to provide opportunities for learning that are equal to their counterparts across the state. ORION allows us to do that by ensuring that all students have access to tools that will enhance and support their learning,” says Dr. Cornelio Gonzalez, Region One ESC Executive Director.

In a presentation to the Texas Education Agency, Ali Kolahdouz, Region One Chief Technology Officer shared that according to the Education Superhighway Compare and Connect K-12 (2018) online tool, many schools continue to work on infrastructure improvements to meet the FCC’s recommended bandwidth of 1Mb per student. As the use of online instructional resources, distance learning and e-learning courses is on the rise, the need for bandwidth, the measure for how much data can be transferred over an internet connection, increases and demand is higher. The vision for ORION is to provide students access to cutting-edge educational tools using next-gen technology, says Kolahdouz, “ORION will not only allow members to provide students with “just adequate” connectivity services, ORION enables members to offer “next level” connectivity which opens up a world of possibilities for our students.” With increased bandwidth students will be able to view virtual and immersive worlds, interact with other students across the globe, and learn in an environment built on 21st century infrastructure.

Region One Education Service Center (www.esc1.net) serves over 437,000 students and educators in eight counties in South Texas including Brooks, Cameron, Hidalgo, Jim Hogg, Starr, Webb, Willacy and Zapata counties. Region One works to assist school districts in improving student performance, assist districts to operate more efficiently and economically, and implement initiatives assigned by the legislature or the Commissioner of Education.

In addition to providing increased connectivity, ORION consortium members will recognize a significant cost savings for the ORION internet. Thinking ahead to the possibilities beyond the network and internet, Kolaoudou explains that ORION enables members to share classroom resources over a private, high-speed network, demand aggressive pricing from vendors for services and products that they are already purchasing, and allows members to pool their efforts and resources to build regional services.

With the approval of its USAC application, Region One will begin the next phase of the project which includes meeting with the awarded provider, SmartCom Telephone, to begin building a deployment schedule and gather hardware specifications related to the implementation, explains Kolaoudou. Once the consortium has identified the solutions it would like to implement on the new high-speed infrastructure, the ORION steering committee will draft and submit Requests for Proposal (RFPs) with the goal of securing cost-effective, region-wide services for consortium members. The target date for the ORION network to be installed at member districts is July 2020.

Any district, charter school system, or library (e.g., E-Rate eligible entity) can join ORION by requesting to be added to the next USAC filing. New members that submit required documentation and meet timelines will be eligible to join the consortium and have ORION service at their site in early 2021. Please contact Ali Kolaoudou at (956) 457-7531 or akolaoudou@esc1.net if you would like more information about joining ORION.

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