



# INFORMATION CAPSULE

## Research Services

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### SCHOOL DISTRICTS CHARGE TECHNOLOGY FEES TO HELP REDUCE BUDGET SHORTFALLS

#### At a Glance

School districts around the country are requiring families to pay a technology fee to help support one-to-one computer initiatives and Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) programs. Fees range from \$5 to \$100 per student, with most districts charging from \$15 to \$50 per year. This Information Capsule reviews some of the similarities among school districts' assessment of technology fees, including charging higher fees at the secondary level, imposing fees only when computing devices leave school property, waiving or reducing fees for low-income families, and placing a cap on technology fees for families with multiple children. Finally, concerns about whether imposing additional fees creates unequal educational experiences for students are discussed.

Public schools across the country are struggling with cuts in state and federal funding, rising personnel costs, and lower tax revenues. The imposition of academic, technology, and extracurricular fees has become a common way for school districts to raise money without raising taxes. Districts have long charged families for extras such as field trips and driver's education, but because of budget shortfalls, most now charge fees for textbooks, advanced placement classes, sports, art programs, extracurricular activities, and even bus rides. With the introduction of one-to-one technology initiatives and Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) programs, many districts are asking parents to pay an additional technology fee (Crain, 2014a; Forsythe, 2013; Torres, 2013; Bailey et al., 2012; Jacobs, 2011; Simon, 2011).

An online review of school district policies found that many districts are charging fees to maintain technology services and programs. Districts in states such as Colorado, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Wisconsin impose technology fees. Fees range from \$5 to \$100 per student per year, with most districts charging from \$15 to \$50.

Several districts offer students choices regarding technology fees. For example:

- Chestnut Ridge School District (2013) in Pennsylvania provides students with two alternatives if they do not pay a \$20 technology fee:
  - Students are "Day Users," signing a computing device out first thing each morning and returning it prior to the conclusion of each school day; or
  - Students provide their own technology (BYOD) and bring their device to school with them every day.

- Miscoe Hill Middle School in Massachusetts' Mendon Upton Regional School District (2013) provides parents with two options:
  - Parents pay an annual \$192 Personal Technology Take Home Fee that includes the exclusive use of a district-owned iPad; or
  - Parents purchase an iPad for their child and pay the school an annual \$40 App and Management Fee.

It should be noted that Douglas County School District, the third largest district in Colorado, eliminated its \$25 technology fee for the 2013-2014 school year, saving parents an estimated \$1.2 million overall. The district was able to eliminate the technology fee because the state approved an increase in per pupil funding for the 2013-2014 school year (Douglas County School District, 2013).

### **Some Districts Charge Higher Fees at the Secondary Level**

Some districts charge higher technology fees at the secondary level than at the elementary level. Examples include:

- Community Unit School District in Wheaton, Illinois charges a technology fee of \$15 for elementary students and \$40 for secondary students (Simon, 2011).
- Haysville Unified School District 261 in Kansas assesses a \$45 technology fee for kindergarten students, a \$75 fee for students in grades 1-5, and an \$85 fee for students in grades 6-12 (Elpers, 2013).
- Indian Prairie School District 204 (2013) in Illinois charges half-day kindergarten students a \$15 technology fee. Full-day kindergarten students and students in grades 1-5 are charged a \$30 fee. Students enrolled in grades 6-8 are charged \$45 and those in grades 9-12 are charged \$50.
- Jefferson County Public Schools (2013) in Kentucky charges a technology fee of \$10 for elementary students and \$20 for middle and senior high school students.
- Lena-Winslow School District #202 (2013) in Illinois charges elementary students a \$5 technology fee and secondary students a \$15 fee.
- Lyons Unified School District 405 (2013) in Kansas charges a technology fee of \$20 for students in grades 3-5, \$35 for students in grades 6-8, and \$50 for students in grades 9-12.
- Maize Unified School District 266 in Kansas charges \$75 for students in kindergarten through grade 8 and \$85 for high school students (Elpers, 2013).
- Southland School District (2014) in Minnesota does not charge a technology fee for pre-kindergarten and elementary students, but charges a \$40 fee for middle and senior high school students.

### **Some Districts Only Impose Fees When Devices Leave School Property**

Some districts impose technology fees only if students want to take school-issued computing devices off campus. For example:

- Parents at the Baldwin Unified School District in Kansas pay a \$50 fee if they want their children to take a school-issued iPad home at night. Parents can avoid the \$50 fee if students return the iPad every evening before leaving school (Jones, 2013).
- At Fort Gibson Public Schools (2013) in Oklahoma, a technology fee must be paid before school-issued laptops can be checked out for home use. The technology fee is \$25 for students in grades 3-5 and \$50 for students in grades 6-12. No technology fee is assessed for pre-kindergarten through grade 2 students.
- At Girard Unified School District 248 (2013) in Kansas, students are permitted to take a school-issued iPad home each evening if their parents pay an annual technology fee of \$50. If parents do not want the iPad to go home with their children, then the \$50 technology fee is not assessed.
- If parents at Ridley School District (2013) in Pennsylvania opt out of the \$30 technology fee, their children are not permitted to take their iPads off district property. District officials stress that these students will have the same opportunities to use the technology during the school day as all other students.
- Schuyler Community School District (2013) in Nebraska charges parents a \$40 non-refundable technology fee to take mobile computing devices off campus. If the technology fee is not paid, students may use the device during the school day, but may not take the device home with them.

### **Some Districts Charge a Combined Academic, Non-Instructional and Technology Fee**

In some Illinois districts, technology fees are included with other academic and non-instructional fees. For example:

- Community Consolidated School District 15 (2013) charges a book rental/materials/technology fee of \$120 per student in grades 1-6 and \$130 per student at the secondary level.
- Darien Public Schools District #61 (2013) charges a combined fee for books, technology, art, and activities/assemblies. The fee ranges from \$140 for students in kindergarten through grade 2 through \$272 for students in grade 8.
- Lincolnshire-Prairie View School District 103 (2013) assesses a combined fee for registration, technology, classroom projects, assignment notebooks, and take-home folders. At grades 5 and up, bus fees are also included. The fees range from \$87 to \$190, depending on the student's grade level.
- Mascoutah District 19 charges families of high school students an instructional fee of \$110 that covers textbooks, curriculum materials, planners, workbooks, and technology supplies (Forsythe, 2013).

### **Technology Fees are Reduced or Waived for Low-Income Families**

Many school districts reduce or waive the technology fee for parents who cannot afford it. Examples include:

- Buffalo Lake – Hector – Stewart Public Schools (2013) in Minnesota has a \$40 technology fee, but charges \$20 to families on the reduced price lunch program and \$10 to families on the free lunch program.
- Jefferson County Public Schools in Kentucky (2013) waives technology fees for students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch.
- At the Lincolnshire-Prairie View School District 103 (2013), parents may receive a waiver if they are unable to afford the technology fee.
- In the Mascoutah School District 19 in Illinois, families qualifying for free or reduced price lunch may also qualify for student fee waivers (Forsythe, 2013).
- Mooresville Graded School District (2013) in North Carolina waives the technology fee for parents who cannot afford to pay (approximately 18% of the district's families).
- At Willmar Senior High School (2013) in Minnesota, students who are unable to pay the technology fee may apply for a scholarship to subsidize the fee.

Some schools allow parents to pay technology fees in installments:

- At the Lyons Unified School District 405 (2013) in Kansas, parents of middle and high schools students may pay the technology fee in two payments. There is an additional \$5 charge added to each payment to cover the record keeping and time needed to track the two payments for each parent.
- The Miscoe Hill Middle School in Massachusetts charges a \$192 Personal Technology Fee to families who are issued a school-owned device. The fee may be paid in two installments of \$96 each, at no additional processing charge (Mendon Upton Regional School District, 2013).
- Mooresville Graded School District in North Carolina charges a \$50 technology fee that can be paid in installments by families that need payment assistance (Bailey et al., 2012).

### **Districts Place a Cap on Technology Fees for Families with Multiple Children**

Most school districts place a cap on the technology fees that families with multiple children enrolled in the school system are required to pay. For example:

- Buffalo Lake – Hector – Stewart Public Schools (2013) in Minnesota has a \$40 technology fee, but the maximum cost is \$100 for families with multiple students enrolled in the district's schools.
- Fort Gibson Public Schools (2013) in Oklahoma charges secondary students a \$50 annual technology fee, but the fee is \$25 for each additional student in the household.
- As part of the Maine Technology Learning Initiative, Maine School Administrative District 70 (2012) charges a technology fee of \$30 for one student and \$50 for each family.
- Pennsylvania's Ridley School District (2013) assesses a \$30 technology fee, but families pay a maximum of \$90 for multiple students.

- Sargent School District in Colorado (2012) sets the technology fee at one-half of the annual established fee for every child after the oldest enrolled.
- Schuyler Community School District (2013) in Nebraska has a \$40 technology fee, but caps the cost at \$120 per family.

### **Districts Explain to Stakeholders How Proceeds from the Technology Fee are Used**

Most districts explain to stakeholders how the proceeds from the technology fee will be used. Technology fees tend to be used for the following four purposes:

- Subsidizing the purchase of school-issued mobile computing devices and chargers;
- Offsetting expenditures associated with the repair and replacement of mobile computing devices;
- Contributing to the payment of insurance premiums for school-issued devices; and
- Financing general technology improvements, such as increased bandwidth, Internet access, and support printing (Zawislak, 2014; Elpers, 2013).

Some schools and districts have even taken to promoting the benefits included with their technology fees. Examples include:

- Miscoe Hill Middle School in Massachusetts explained to parents that in spite of technology fees, the district's one-to-one and BYOD programs could actually save them money. District officials pointed out that the introduction of mobile computing devices in the classroom has led to a reduction in needed school supplies. It is no longer necessary to purchase a graphing calculator and other miscellaneous supplies, such as binders, notebooks, and index cards. The district estimated a minimum annual savings of approximately \$100 per student, while fees for students enrolled in the BYOD program are only \$40. In addition, the \$40 BYOD fee includes up to \$50 of apps per year (Mendon Upton Regional School District, 2013).
- Northern Lebanon School District (2013) in Pennsylvania charges students an annual \$35 technology fee to participate in the district's BYOD program. The district highlighted the benefits included with the technology fee to stakeholders, such as:
  - Access to the school network for up to two devices;
  - Microsoft Windows 7 Professional Upgrade – a single annual license that allows students to upgrade their personally owned computer;
  - Microsoft Office 2013 Professional – a single annual license that allows students to install software on their personally owned computer, such as Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, Microsoft PowerPoint, Microsoft Outlook, and Microsoft Publisher;
  - Ability to print at a central location; and
  - Ability to upgrade software at no cost when it is released.
- Rose Hill Unified School District 394 in Kansas (2014) explained to parents that the \$60 technology fee covers the insurance premium on the laptops issued by the district. Payment of the insurance fee could potentially save parents significant amounts of

money because it covers the repair or replacement of devices related to theft, accidental damage, power surge, fire, vandalism, and natural disaster.

### **Technology Fees and Educational Equity**

School districts charging technology fees clearly stipulate that students will not be denied access to computing devices, even if their parents cannot afford to pay the technology fee. Parents will either receive a fee waiver from the district or special student arrangements will be made. Accommodations include student use of mobile computing devices only during the school day, access to devices in school computer labs, and device sharing among students (Denmark School District, 2013; Lincolnshire-Prairie View School District 103, 2013).

However, critics of extra fees claim that they create a two-tiered educational system by requiring families to pay for opportunities for their children to learn. An analysis by Crain (2014a) found that Alabama's 134 school districts collected \$37.7 million from middle and senior high school students for required dues and fees during the 2012-2013 school year. Crain concluded that her "analysis reveals the inequality of the haves and have-nots, and how much additional money the haves are investing in their children's education."

Michael Griffith, Senior School Finance Analyst at the Education Commission of the States, said that the introduction of added school fees may lead to greater concerns over equity and access. He noted, "The kids who are most hurt by this are those kids who aren't low-enough income to qualify for free or reduced [price] lunch but are still low-income kids" (cited in Torres, 2013).

In 2012, California passed a law banning schools from charging fees for classroom items and activities in response to a lawsuit that the state settled with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The ACLU said the fees violated state law that guaranteed children a free public education (Torres, 2013). The California Department of Education's April 2013 memorandum to superintendents providing guidance on the law stated, "School districts and schools shall not establish a two-tier educational system by requiring a minimal educational standard and also offering a second, higher educational standard that pupils may only obtain through payment of a fee or purchase of additional supplies that the school district or school does not provide" (Crain, 2014b).

### **Summary**

Public schools across the country are struggling with cuts in state and federal funding, rising personnel costs, and lower tax revenues. Many districts are asking parents to pay an additional technology fee to help support one-to-one technology initiatives and Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) programs. Fees range from \$5 to \$100 per student, with most districts charging from \$15 to \$50 per year.

This Information Capsule reviewed similarities among school districts' assessment of technology fees, including charging higher fees at the secondary level, imposing fees only when computing devices leave school property, waiving or reducing fees for low-income families, and placing a cap on technology fees for families with multiple children.

Although school districts clearly stipulate that children will not be denied access to technology if their parents cannot afford to pay the technology fee, critics of additional fees claim they create a two-tiered educational system by asking families to pay for opportunities for their children to

learn. Districts must carefully consider issues of equity and access before any decisions regarding the introduction of technology fees are made.

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