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NEWS RELEASE

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Chattanooga recognized as national leader for closing Digital Divide

Chattanooga, TN (June 18, 2021) - Less than a year since its launch, HCS EdConnect powered by EPB has installed internet at no charge in the homes of more than a third of all Hamilton County Schools students, marking an unprecedented leap in closing the digital divide. Before the program's launch, officials estimated that up to one-third of Hamilton County Schools students did not have internet access at home.

More than 14,000 students have enrolled, who together with their household members, represent more than 25,000 people who now have internet access through HCS EdConnect. Students who are on free or reduced lunch or whose families receive SNAP benefits are eligible for the program, which installs internet service with at least 100 Mbps from EPB in each qualifying child's home.

"We love it, we don't have to worry about the internet anymore," said Kimberly Rios-Gonzalez, Hamilton County Schools parent and HCS EdConnect participant. "My daughter no longer worries about turning her work in on time. I can connect my phone and talk to my mom and stay on there for hours — the little things rank up to something huge."

"The impact of HCS EdConnect goes far beyond the benefits it provides for students," said Hamilton County Mayor Jim Copping. "The whole family can use the internet to access online services, work remotely, seek employment, and access entertainment."

Chattanooga is one of a handful of leaders in the United States - including Chicago, Detroit, San Antonio, and Washington, D.C. - that have launched a program in the last year aimed at closing the digital divide. Chattanooga is taking the most comprehensive approach with a commitment to continuing the program for at least 10 years while providing a connection at least twice as fast as typical educational access offerings from other providers with symmetrical speeds (same speed for uploads and downloads) and no data caps. Additionally, while other programs are heavily dependent on WiFi hotspots, which can be unreliable, HCS EdConnect delivers a fast and highly dependable fiber optic connection to the vast majority of participants, relying on hotspots for only six percent of students who live in areas that EPB cannot serve, as well as students who do not have a permanent address.

HCS EdConnect has been recognized by, among others, Bloomberg, U.S. News & World Report, and Vox, as a model program. The program also has the chance to deepen our understanding of how internet access can impact individual learning outcomes and the local economy, as program partners have engaged researchers from Boston College to study the impact of HCS EdConnect.

“We are showing the rest of the country what it looks like to close the digital divide in education,” said Chattanooga Mayor Tim Kelly. “HCS EdConnect is a comprehensive solution, and since the partners have made a 10 year commitment to the program, this will be a lasting solution.”

The digital divide existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the health crisis highlighted how severe the consequences of the digital divide can be. Initially, remote learning was extremely challenging, if not impossible, for a sizable portion of Hamilton County Schools students. However, HCS EdConnect, coupled with other efforts such as the rapid expansion of EPB public WiFi access points, improved learning for students.

“For the next decade and hopefully beyond, HCS EdConnect will provide high-speed internet access to nearly 30,000 economically disadvantaged students as well as their families, and I’m proud to be part of a community who prioritized closing the digital divide in the midst of global pandemic” said Dr. Bryan Johnson, superintendent of Hamilton County Schools. “Private and public partnership was a critical part of this program being possible and we will continue to seek community partners who can join us in helping all children thrive and experience a future without limits.”

HCS EdConnect is possible because EPB deployed a ubiquitous, community-wide fiber optic network in 2010. As a result of this in-place infrastructure which passes every premise, the new program is able to provide the final link in delivering the service both quickly and affordably.

Funding partners have provided \$7.9 million to cover upfront infrastructure costs for the program including additional equipment, fiber optic drops and wireless routers. HCS EdConnect is a public-private partnership made possible through support and engagement from Hamilton County, Hamilton County Schools, the City of Chattanooga, EPB, BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee, The Benwood Foundation, the Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga, the Footprint Foundation, The Maclellan Foundation, Lyndhurst Foundation, private donors, and CARES funding from the State of Tennessee.

Each year, eligible students will be able to opt into the program, and their families will stay connected year-round, including summers, for at least 10 years or until the child is no longer enrolled in Hamilton County Schools.

“The internet is no longer a luxury, but a necessity of modern life,” said Deb Socia, president of The Enterprise Center, which has been integral in coordinating HCS EdConnect. “Every child gets a schoolbook and when the internet is the medium for learning, every child must have access.”

“HCS EdConnect is one of the most exciting ways Chattanooga’s community-wide fiber optic network benefits the people we serve and helps enhance our area’s quality of life,” said EPB President & CEO David Wade. “HCS EdConnect leverages our smart infrastructure to support students and their families, as well as the local economy.”

Hamilton County Schools, The Enterprise Center, and EPB continue to work with their partners to add even more eligible families to the program.

About EPB

EPB serves the greater Chattanooga area by providing world-class energy and connectivity solutions as a means of promoting economic development and enhancing quality of life for our community. We deliver electricity to more than 170,000 homes and businesses across our 600 square mile service area which includes most of Hamilton County as well as parts of surrounding counties in both Tennessee and Georgia. In 2010, EPB Fiber Optics, which offers internet, TV, and telephone services, became the first provider in the United States to deliver up to 1 Gig (1,000 Mbps) internet speeds utilizing a community-wide fiber optic network which is accessible to every home and business in its service area. In 2015, EPB became the first, and to date, only American ISP to make up to 10 Gig (10,000 Mbps) internet speeds accessible to all of its residential and commercial customers as a standard offer.

EPB has also utilized its community-wide fiber optic network to deploy the most advanced and highly automated smart grid power management system in the nation. In recognition of EPB's groundbreaking infrastructure, the Department of Energy and Oak Ridge National Laboratory are utilizing EPB's smart grid as a national model for researching and developing best practices. EPB is also the first major power distribution utility to earn the USGBC's PEER certification for having a highly automated, modernized electric power grid.

EPB is an independent board of the City of Chattanooga which began serving customers in 1939. Visit EPB.com for more information.

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