



Comcast helps needy families get online

By ROBERT STANTON, HOUSTON CHRONICLE
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Hundreds of thousands of Houston schoolchildren will qualify for reduced-cost Internet access and computers in a program aimed at getting more low-income families online.

The program, Internet Essentials, "is probably the largest broadband adoption experiment of its kind that's really been undertaken," said [Ray Purser](#), vice president of government and public relations at Comcast, the plan's sponsor.

"It really can be a game changer for a family," he said.

The program targets families with children who receive free lunch under the National School Lunch Program.

About 440,000 students in the greater Houston area are in the program, Purser said.

Qualified families may sign up for high-speed Internet at a cost of \$9.95 a month.

In comparison, in its standard package, Comcast offers a promotional \$29.99 monthly rate for 12 months, after which a monthly rate of \$44.99 kicks in, a company salesperson said.

Knowledge is power

Through a partnership with Dell and Acer, each family also will be provided a voucher to purchase a Netbook computer for \$149.95. The computers will be loaded with Windows and anti-virus software.

Comcast has partnered with 16 school districts in the Houston area to help get the word out to families, as well as to provide technology training.

Neighborhood Centers Inc., which operates 59 services sites in the greater Houston area, will take part in the training.

"At the end of the day, knowledge is power," said [Emelda Douglas](#), NCI's senior vice president and chief development officer. "The Internet is a tool and so the program really will empower our clients. Probably 80 percent of our client base fits into the reduced program, either themselves or their children."

Neighborhood Centers also will subsidize part of the monthly broadband cost for some families, Douglas said.

"We look at it as a way to make it more affordable," she said. "Even at \$9.95, that may not be quite doable. If they can't pay it, we will subsidize a modest amount of our families for a limited time."

Filling a need

Purser, of Comcast, said the company plans to fund the program for at least three years for qualified families.

Houston Mayor [Annise Parker](#) said the program will fill an important need.

"In today's digital age, it is vital for households to have basic Internet access to do simple, but necessary tasks as well as receive information," Parker said in a prepared statement.

"Whether it's a child learning to do Internet research with a parent or a senior citizen looking for information on medical benefits ... this (program) will hopefully help bridge the digital gap in Houston," she said.

For information about the program, call 855-846-8376 for details in English, and 855-765-6995 for Spanish.

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