Looking to Maximize Your E-rate Dollars?
Here are 10 tips from E-rate pros

For two decades, E-rate funds have made technology more affordable for schools and libraries across the U.S. In that time, many have discovered how to make the most of the E-rate dollars available to them. We've taken their input — as well as recommendations from E-rate consulting firm Funds for Learning — and developed this list of best practices: our top 10 tips for E-rate success.

1 The E-rate program is strong! Don't miss the opportunity to take advantage of the help it can offer to fund your digital education initiatives.
In spite of the funding available, E-rate applications — particularly for Category Two funding for managed Wi-Fi, internal connectivity, and basic maintenance — have declined by 25 percent since 2015.

2 Nearly $4 billion is available in the E-rate program for Funding Year 2019. Calculate how much E-rate funding you may be eligible to receive. Schools and libraries that serve economically disadvantaged communities qualify for the highest discounts under the E-rate program, but most schools and libraries are entitled to some support. This information from the Universal Service Administrative Co. (USAC) can help you calculate your funding.

3 Assess your resources and decide ahead of time who will manage your application. The process works best when a small team coordinates efforts to apply for E-rate funds. Some schools and libraries rely on a mix of in-house resources — such as the heads of technology, finance, and procurement — and others take advantage of outside support; in 2017, 56 percent of schools and libraries brought in outside expertise in the form of consultants.

4 Create a technology vision for your school or library. At the start of any major technology initiative, it's tempting to focus on the nuts and bolts, but the most successful projects start with the vision first. Engage your stakeholders, take a step back, and consider the big picture: What will a typical day look like for administrators, educators, and students in your school or library of the future?

5 Once you've established your vision, assess what is needed and then prioritize. Scott Miller, Director of Technology and Information Systems at Wayne Highlands School District in Wayne County, PA, sums it up: "What are you looking to accomplish? Are you looking to stream video in every classroom or support a full 1:1 initiative with digital curriculum? Decide what you want to do first, and then build your plan around that." WHSD wanted to move to a flipped classroom model and create a 1:1 collaborative learning environment, and they were able to leverage E-rate Category Two funding for a new, comprehensive wireless environment. In fact, 44 percent of E-rate applicants say that their Wi-Fi network is four years old or older, and more than 50 will need to upgrade their Wi-Fi in one to three years, making wireless a top E-rate funding opportunity.

6 **Plan and design your network to align with the vision, goals, and priorities you've established.** Consider where you are today and the actions and resources needed to help you achieve your vision. Many schools begin with bandwidth, but a network readiness assessment may help you determine where you should start. CR Hiestand, Network and Systems Administrator at Reading School District, knows the importance of using E-rate to achieve their technology projects. "E-rate has been really supportive of our technology projects over the last couple of years. Without E-rate, we likely would not be able to do the breadth of deployment that we have already achieved." The district was able to use E-rate funding to increase their network capacity to support digital instruction, and the district now provides equal access to all students, no matter which school they attend.

7 **Make sure you conduct a competitive bidding process.** It's not unusual to have a preferred vendor, but one of the most common missteps in the E-rate application process is the failure of a school or library to consider all competitive bids equally. Your bidding process must remain open for at least 28 days.

8 **Familiarize yourself with the E-rate Productivity Center (EPC), and stay on top of deadlines.** 44 percent of applicants admit to struggling with the EPC, so if you have questions, ask for help. Meeting the E-rate program's strict deadlines is essential to your success.

9 **Identify other complementary funding sources.** A comprehensive funding strategy is one of the most important elements of a successful digital learning plan. E-rate will only fund certain technologies, and as a discount program, it requires that schools provide matching funds for projects. This means E-rate can't be your only funding source. (Don't let this stop you from applying!) In fact, 84 percent of applicants report that E-rate funds are not sufficient to meet their needs, and successful schools and libraries budget for matching funds and identify grants and other programs to make up the difference. This blog lists other funding sources to consider. Additionally, Cisco offers a range of programs that can help increase schools' return on technology investment. In many cases, these special offers align with E-rate — though schools do not need to use E-rate funds to benefit from these programs.

10 **Manage the process year round.** The most successful applicants understand that E-rate funding is a marathon, not a sprint. From competitive bidding and the application process to filing for reimbursements, the E-rate program involves many steps throughout the year. Manage your deadlines and document your work to stay ahead of the game and keep those E-rate funds flowing to your school or library.

To learn more about E-rate and Meraki, visit meraki.cisco.com/erate

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Source — Funds for Learning 2016 survey: https://www.fundsforlearning.com/docs/2018/01/2017%20-%20E-rateTrendsReport.pdf

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