



A bold vision for broadband access for all U.S. schools

By John Diaz | October 22, 2015



Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez, The Chronicle



Evan Marwell, CEO of Education Superhighway, listens as he is chosen as the Visionary of the Year at the San Francisco Chronicle's ceremony for the Visionary of the Year Award at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, Calif., on Tuesday, March 31, 2015.

The magnitude of Evan Marwell's challenge was underscored at a recent event at a

Bernalillo, N.M., elementary school. Marwell's mission is to help bring high-speed Internet access to "99-point something percent" of American schools.

About 30 percent of New Mexico schools have inadequate Internet access. Among other sobering facts spelled out during Gov. Susana Martinez's news conference: The total broadband capacity of one Sandoval County elementary school is equal to a single 4G smartphone.

"We think (high-speed Internet) is everywhere ... but it's not," Martinez said, announcing a plan to equip all public schools with high-speed access by 2018.

New Mexico is among a growing number of states that have turned to Marwell's nonprofit group, EducationSuperHighway, to help develop and execute a plan to bring modern digital capability to classrooms.

Marwell's success in getting attention and funding from the federal government for this critical issue was a prime reason he was winner of the inaugural Visionary of the Year award that has been established by The Chronicle and St. Mary's College.

I caught up with Marwell at the nonprofit's San Francisco office last week to get an update on the project in the months since he received the award in March. He recently returned from a meeting with the Gov. Steve Bullock of Montana, where EducationSuperHighway has determined that up to 160 schools need a broadband upgrade.

EducationSuperHighway is about to release its "State of the States" report that will show great progress since its 2013 survey showed just 37 percent of U.S. schools were connected with the fiber-optic cable required for high-speed Internet.



Marwell said the report would show “a dramatic increase in those numbers” — and a significant narrowing of the gaps between wealthy and poor districts and urban and rural schools.

Marwell, who founded companies focused on telecom, software and hedge funds, has tried to infuse a startup culture into EducationSuperHighway.

“I’m a student of startups in Silicon Valley,” he said. “There’s one lesson that we always observe, which is: for companies — not for people, but for companies — there are no second acts in Silicon Valley. They’re built to go after a particular opportunity: They find it, they exploit it and get a ton of success. Then the growth starts to slow down and they go looking for the next opportunity.

“If for-profit companies that are incredibly successful, with ridiculous amounts of resources at their disposal can’t come up with a second act ... then why should a nonprofit be any different?”

Marwell makes plain that he wants EducationSuperHighway to accomplish its mission and “go out of business in 2020.” That get-it-done-and-say-farewell sensibility, he said, has helped him to attract both funding and recruit skilled, high-energy idealists who otherwise might prefer to change the world in the private sector.

He sees EducationSuperHighway as a three-phase operation: awareness building, securing resources and implementation. The first two phases were robust: The goal of wiring all U.S. schools was incorporated into President Obama’s 2013 State of the Union Address, and the Federal Communications Commission has pumped in \$3.9 billion a year from its E-Rate fund (drawn from a charge on monthly phone bills) into bringing high-speed access to schools and libraries.

Now that the mission is entering the implementation phase, EducationSuperHighway is rapidly adding staff. It has grown from 30 to 55 employees in the past year. The nonprofit provides one-stop consulting service for states trying to give their students the digital tools they need to compete in a wired global economy.

Cost is one of the barriers EducationSuperHighway has been able to knock down. Marwell said his team has found enormous discrepancies in how much districts are charged for broadband access. In Virginia, for example, a survey of 15 school districts found that “five of the districts were getting a bad deal. They were paying twice as much for half as much bandwidth.”

Once armed with the knowledge of what others were paying, those five districts were able to renegotiate deals with their providers.

Marwell’s group help persuade the FCC to soon require all schools and libraries receiving E-Rate money to disclose “who is buying what from whom and at what price.” Once a school is wired with fiber-optic cable, the cost of greatly expanded capacity is relatively small. Marwell’s goal is to get the cost down to \$3 a megabit — about what the average home consumer pays from a cable company. Some schools have been paying as much as four times that amount, EducationSuperHighway found.

The Visionary of the Year award came with a \$10,000 grant from the St. Mary’s School of Economics and Business Administration, and a \$10,000 scholarship in honor of the winner for a St. Mary’s student.

But Marwell said the award also had a significant intangible benefit for his mission. It’s had national resonance.

“It was a real credibility builder for us,” he said. “We’re a small organization compared to others that these governors are dealing with. As one governor said to me: ‘Your job as governor is to figure out who you can trust. You’re having to deal with making decisions on issues you know very little about ... all the time.’”

“I gotta tell you: The Visionary of the Year award has helped our organization garner that trust.”

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A region full of world-changing innovation

Last year, The Chronicle partnered with St. Mary's College to establish the inaugural "Visionary of the Year" award.

Why it was created: To identify innovators whose work is making a difference in their communities — and, in many cases, the world — and to inspire fledgling visionaries.

The 2015 winner: Evan Marwell, founder of EducationSuperHighway.

Who made the 12 nominations: Laurene Powell Jobs, founder and chair of Emerson Collective and widow of Steve Jobs; Daniel Lurie, founder of the poverty fighting nonprofit group Tipping Point; Ronnie Lott, former 49ers star now prominent in business and philanthropy; Anne Wilson, CEO of United Way Bay Area; and Zhan Li, dean of the School of Economics and Business Administration at St. Mary's College. A 13th nomination was made in an online vote by SFGate.com readers.

The 2016 award: A committee of prominent Bay Area residents is being formed to come up with nominees. The award will be presented at a dinner in March. Profiles of the nominees will be published early next year.

For more information, including profiles of the 2015 nominees, go to SFGate.com/VisionSF



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