

Effort to lift investment in tech education making a stop in Dallas

11:41 PM CDT on Sunday, May 23, 2004

By VICTOR GODINEZ / The Dallas Morning News

Dallas is the next stop in a campaign to step up Americans' investment in educational technology.

Backed by tech luminaries and a roster of high-powered foundations, the Digital Promise Project is trying to rally support for federal legislation that it says could be as important to American education as the post-World War II GI Bill.

Digital Promise wants Washington to create the Digital Opportunity Investment Trust, or DO IT. The trust would provide grants to private companies so they could develop technologies aimed at better educating students, retraining workers and expanding access to educational resources.

And the trust itself would be funded by technology: Digital Promise wants Congress to set aside 30 percent of the revenue from the auction of publicly owned electromagnetic spectrum until 2020.

Ultimately, that would create a fund of about \$20 billion, the bill's backers say, with the DO IT program funded solely by the interest – eventually, more than \$1 billion a year.

For example, DO IT could help companies create software-training programs for emergency personnel, or digitize books and images that have been confined to libraries and museums.

Digital Promise contends that in the information age, the United States needs to jump-start "education, training and lifelong learning to meet the needs of the nation's new knowledge-based economy."

As the legislation languishes in Congress, program leaders will promote their vision Tuesday to Dallas business executives and educational leaders.

"The meeting in Dallas gives us an opportunity to talk to many of the leading citizens and get them on board," said Larry Grossman, former president of NBC News and PBS and co-chairman of the Digital Promise Project.

Former Federal Communications Commission Chairman Newton Minow is the other co-chair. Digital Promise's leadership forum includes tech executives such as Google Inc. chairman and CEO Eric Schmidt, and eBay Inc. president and CEO Margaret Whitman.

Digital Promise itself was launched by the Carnegie Corp. of New York, Century Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Open Society Institute.

Mr. Grossman will attend the invitation-only meeting in Dallas, which is being hosted by Robert W. Decherd, the chairman, president and chief executive officer of Dallas-based Belo Corp. Belo's holdings include *The Dallas Morning News*, WFAA-TV (Channel 8) and Texas Cable News (Channel 38).

University of North Texas chancellor Lee Jackson, who will attend the Tuesday meeting, said he hadn't had a chance yet to examine the proposal but agreed that more investment in education is needed.

"We know our math, science and engineering programs in Texas are not coming close to turning out enough graduates to meet the needs of a growing economy," he said.

Among other local executives and educators expected to attend are Bill Blase, chief executive of the Southwest region of SBC Communications Inc.; Dr. Jesus Carreon, chancellor of the Dallas County Community College District; and Liener Temerlin, former chairman of TM Advertising and now head of Temerlin Consultancy.

Digital Promise marks the latest in a series of initiatives – many championed by tech executives – to bolster government support for educational technology.

Critics say the efforts behind advanced technology are misplaced, diverting attention from a much-needed focus on educational achievement. Supporters counter that applying new technologies is now more critical than ever to drive educational progress.

Digital Promise calls the proposed trust "the 21st century counterpart of the 19th century's Land-Grant Colleges Act and the 20th century's GI Bill."

Companies that receive DO IT money would be able to sell some of the technology developed for educational uses.

Legislation to create the trust is stalled in congressional committees.

The Senate sponsors are Republican Olympia Snowe of Maine and Democrats Christopher Dodd of Connecticut and Richard Durbin of Illinois.

The House sponsors are Democratic Reps. Edward Markey of Massachusetts and John Larson of Connecticut.

Mr. Grossman acknowledged that asking Congress to divert funding to the DO IT project amid a presidential election debate over deficit spending is a hard sell. Still, he's optimistic.

"Nobody should make any predictions in an election year," Mr. Grossman said. "But we have some hopes. There is strong bipartisan support. There is a movement to get something done this year."

E-mail vgodinez@dallasnews.com