

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS**

Re: *Schools and Libraries Universal Service Support Mechanism* (CC Docket No. 02-6), Third Report and Order and Second Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking

Great programs like E-Rate do not thrive without regular review and care. With justifiable pride we can now say that 92 percent of public school classrooms are connected to the Internet. Only 14 percent of these classrooms were connected when Congress passed the Telecommunications Act in 1996. Yet the gains we have made will evaporate without our continued vigilance. This leads me to support today's decision. It is one in a series of positive steps we are taking at the Commission to ensure that the E-Rate program functions with the integrity it must have.

I am particularly pleased that today we finally formalize the process for making available carryover funds from prior years. This is a major step forward. I also think our new rule limiting support for internal connections to two times within a five-year period strikes the right balance between applicant needs and efficient use of program support. These are but two of numerous positive steps contained in this item.

We don't solve all problems today, however. An abrupt change in the eligible services list has left applications from rural schools and libraries in North Dakota and elsewhere high and dry. These rural schools and libraries have built cost-effective networks based on the use of dark fiber. Now the signals have changed and dark fiber is no longer eligible. We need to reverse this recent action and get our policy regarding support for dark fiber straight once and for all. I see nothing in Section 254(h) that compels the exclusion of dark fiber facilities from E-Rate program support. I hope we can correct this mistake as soon as possible.

Finally, I think all supporters of the E-rate should frequently caution themselves that we not add to the growing complexity of the application process. As we tighten procedures and take necessary steps to weed out waste and fraud in the program, we could unwittingly make the application process so daunting as to discourage needy schools and libraries from even applying. As we strive to improve accountability, so also should we commit ourselves to ensuring that as the program evolves, it continues to serve the needs of students and patrons of our schools and libraries—the real beneficiaries of support.