

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

January 8, 2014

14-35

Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Wheeler, Commissioner Clyburn, Commissioner O'Rielly, Commissioner Rosenworcel, and Commissioner Pai:

I write to urge swift action to improve and modernize the E-rate program in order to help connect our nation's schools and libraries with high-speed broadband over the next five years. Access to high-speed internet is necessary to prepare students of all ages for the jobs of the 21st century. Modernizing the E-Rate program will help ensure every school has the ability to accelerate next-generation education reforms, support teachers, and enhance student learning. It would also allow libraries to provide personalized education for non-traditional students who may be homeschooled, distance learners, or seeking their GEDs.

These reforms are particularly crucial in rural areas, where students are less likely to have the speeds and infrastructure needed to take advantage of new technologies and high-quality educational content. Too many of our students are currently trying to learn the skills of tomorrow with outdated infrastructure. The average American school or library has about the same bandwidth as the average home, but schools have 200 times as many users. Whether it's checking assignments through a course management system, watching a science video on YouTube, or practicing foreign language pronunciation via a tutoring website, students are consuming increasing amounts of bandwidth. But with such limited resources available, a single user watching video can leave other students or library patrons with only intermittent internet access, significantly inhibiting their access to online education.

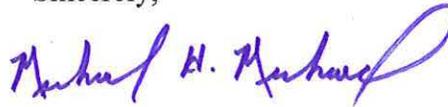
While the E-rate program was successful in bringing basic telephone and broadband to schools and libraries, such connectivity is no longer sufficient. 72% of our nation's schools do not have the internet infrastructure they need to take advantage of current digital learning opportunities, and less than 1% have the infrastructure they will need in the future. In Maine, the public library is the only place people can go for free internet access in 77% of our communities. As distance learning needs grow and the GED exam moves online in 2014, even greater educational demands are expected to be placed on already limited library bandwidth.

In order for students to take full advantage of digital learning, America's schools should aim for 100 Mbps of bandwidth or more for every 1,000 students and staff members today, and 1 Gbps by 2017. In today's global economy, these high speeds are not just an educational imperative, but a competitive necessity. Test results released this month show that American students still lag far behind countries like China, South Korea, Japan, Switzerland, and the Netherlands in math, reading, and science. It is no longer enough just to compete for jobs; we have to compete for higher educational outcomes enabled by higher broadband speeds.

For these reasons, I support modernizations to: (1) Focus E-rate on broadband connectivity and infrastructure to ensure that we maximize the impact of the program on learning by limiting support for yesterday's outdated dial-up era technologies; (2) Create an upgrade fund within the E-rate program to connect every school and library, particularly those in rural areas, to high-speed broadband; (3) Increase transparency and accountability for the program in order to reduce costs, research effective practices, and ensure that all students have access to the connectivity they need; and (4) Simplify and streamline onerous paperwork requirements to improve program efficiency. These reforms will make possible strategic investments to deploy high-speed broadband to schools and classrooms across the country.

If we do nothing we risk letting our kids and our current workforce fall further behind on the international marketplace. By acting now, we will lay the foundation to ensure our future as global leaders. Therefore, I encourage the Commission support swift action to modernize and expand the E-rate program to bring transformative learning opportunities to every school and library in America.

Sincerely,



Michael H. Michaud
Member of Congress