

Luke Messer
6th District, Indiana

Committee on the Budget

Committee on Education
and the Workforce

Committee on Foreign Affairs

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780

July 23, 2014

The Honorable Tom Wheeler
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street SW
Washington, D.C., 20554

Received & Inspected

JUL 23 2014

Dear Chairman Wheeler:

FCC Mail Room

I am writing to share my concerns about the ability of rural schools and libraries like those in my district to access federal E-Rate program funds in a manner equitable to their urban counterparts.

The E-Rate program was created to connect schools and libraries to the Internet and other telecommunications services. Such access is undeniably crucial to helping students access the tools they need to learn and succeed in the 21st century. This worthy effort to bridge the digital divide between urban and rural America needs updating to close this still significant gap as soon as possible.

The Universal Service Fund, which funds the E-Rate program, was established in part because "consumers in all regions of the Nation, including low-income consumers and those in rural, insular, and high cost areas, should have access to telecommunications and information services . . . that are reasonably comparable to those services provided in urban areas." Unfortunately, that promise remains unfulfilled in rural America since more than 14 million people in these areas do not have access to any Internet service.

I appreciate the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) recognition that the 18-year-old E-Rate program needs to be reformed. However, I am concerned the Modernization Order the FCC adopted on July 11 will require the agency to scale-back efforts to provide broadband Internet connectivity in rural areas like those I represent or increase fees on phone bills to make up potential funding shortfalls resulting from new spending necessary to carry out the plan. I also am troubled that the FCC is proposing to increase E-Rate spending without determining the existing needs of schools and libraries, creating the potential to siphon program funds for unneeded capacity.

I am convinced that fundamental structural reforms—such as simplifying the application process, providing more certainty to schools, and resolving inequities in the distribution of funding—are needed to ensure that E-Rate program funds are distributed fairly based on need so that all students, no matter their geographic location, have the same opportunities to succeed. As the FCC continues to evaluate the E-Rate program, I urge you to ensure that funding is distributed in a manner that is fair in both urban and rural areas so everyone has access to the information superhighway.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Luke Messer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "L" and "M".

Luke Messer
Member of Congress