

ABIGAIL SPANBERGER
7TH DISTRICT, VIRGINIA

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

March 26, 2020

Chairman Ajit Pai
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20054

Dear Chairman Pai:

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to impact our nation and many of our nation's schools are forced to close, it is of vital importance that students be able to access the resources needed to learn remotely. Yet, across the United States, nearly 12 million students lack reliable home access to broadband connectivity. Across the United States, lack of access to broadband connectivity continues to impact large numbers of families and students. As of 2019, 27% of rural residents do not have access to broadband. This limits K-12 students' ability to complete assignments after school and creates what is commonly referred to as the "homework gap."

During the current health crisis, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended that if schools are dismissed, schools should consider implementing e-learning programs, including digital and distance learning options like online lessons – options that often require reliable access to broadband connectivity. The CDC also urges schools to determine how to deal with students who potentially lack Internet connectivity at home. Currently, many students who lack access to broadband at home complete their out of school assignments at public places with connectivity, such as restaurants or local businesses. However, CDC guidance also directs schools to discourage students from gathering in restaurants or shopping malls – presenting a further challenge to students who do not have broadband access in the home.

The success of our students and the opportunities afford to them should not be based on where they live. It is especially important that during a time of public health crisis, we take steps to ensure that all students can learn from home and that parents do not feel pressured to expose their children to contagions so that they can access public Wi-Fi to complete their schoolwork. While permanently addressing this digital divide caused by lack of broadband access will take time and broad investments in infrastructure, the FCC can take steps to mitigate these impacts today.

The FCC should utilize its broad emergency powers to temporarily waive relevant E-rate program rules to allow schools to receive funding to enable the provision of home broadband internet access service, as well as wi-fi hotspots, modems, routers, and connected devices, for

students who lack internet access at home. We urge that the FCC take immediate steps to remedy to ensure that all students have adequate home access to internet should their schools close in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The E-Rate program was established in 1997 to help schools and libraries gain affordable access to the internet through discounts ranging from 20-90% on telecommunication and internet service-related technologies. While historically the program has not been utilized for expanding home internet access for students, we urge the FCC to consider taking action to allow one-time discounts for schools seeking to loan equipment to students who do not have internet at home, as well as those trying to equip school-distributed devices with Wi-Fi capability that can be lent out while physical classes are on hold. The FCC should consider making as much of the approximately \$2 billion in funding still available this year for the E-Rate program available for these purposes. In addition, we request that you make it clear to state and local institutions that undertaking any similar measures during this crisis will not affect their future E-rate eligibility.

Student success should not be determined by zip code, and at a time when schools need to be focusing on keeping their children safe, families shouldn't be forced to worry about how their children will be able to keep up with their peers because of a lack of access to broadband. Temporarily changing E-rate rules to allow financial support for home internet access would be of immense help to schools, students, and families at this time.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Abigail D. Spanberger
Member of Congress



Rodney Davis
Member of Congress



Stacey E. Plaskett
Member of Congress

Request Letter to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to Temporarily Waive e-Rate Program Rules to Help Students Gain Internet Access During Covid-19 Related Closures

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