

**REMARKS OF
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FOR TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATION & TRAINING COUNCIL
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Thank you for having me. This coalition is all about making digital connections, but it's great to connect with you in person. It's been far too long.

I've been asked to tell a bit about my personal journey as a policymaker working to promote digital learning and equity. Specifically, I've been asked to explain how closing the Homework Gap became a signature issue for me, and of course, what the Federal Communications Commission is doing about it.

Let's start by looking back. On this day ten years ago, I was first sworn in as an FCC Commissioner. A lot has happened in the intervening decade—I was on the Commission, off the Commission, and now I serve as Chairwoman. But back when I joined the agency, I was hardly new to communications policy. I had already had more than a decade of experience working on these issues and a bunch of that time was spent working for one of the godfathers of the E-Rate program, Senator Jay Rockefeller from West Virginia.

So here I was, new to the role, figuring out what issues I should focus on and what policies and programs can move the needle and really make a difference. So of course, that led me to E-Rate.

For more than two decades, E-Rate has provided vital support to help connect schools and libraries to high-speed, modern communications all across the country. It got its start as part of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Remember 1996? I called the internet the "information superhighway" and I bet you did, too. In terms of technology, it was a long time ago. But back in 1996, Congress saw very clearly that these connections were essential for the future of education. When the law was passed, only 14 percent of public schools were connected to the internet. Today more than 95 percent of classrooms are connected. E-Rate has been a success.

But great programs do not thrive without continuous attention and care. And when I joined the agency, I quickly became convinced that E-Rate needed a reboot. The budget was capped, it had failed to keep pace with inflation, cutting purchasing power for school by billions. Plus, the program and its rules had an analog-era quality. As a result, we had schools subscribing to broadband at speeds not much higher than the typical household. It needed a recharge for the digital age.

So one of the first things I did as Commissioner was put out a call to reboot and reinvigorate E-Rate. I gave it a name—E-Rate 2.0. With your help, we made E-Rate 2.0 happen. The Commission approved a major E-Rate modernization that refocused the program on high-capacity broadband, streamlined the application process, and increased its budget and indexed it to inflation.

But that's not the end of the story. Because something interesting happened along the way.

To inform my thinking about E-Rate modernization, I decided that I needed to get out of Washington and go on the road and visit schools across the country to learn more. Here is what struck me: I wound up in big cities and in small towns, in urban America and rural America, and I heard the same thing from educators no matter where I traveled. It went like this: “The E-Rate program is great. We now have these connections we can use in all of our classrooms. But when our students go home at night, not all of them have reliable internet access at home. It’s hard for us to assign homework if we don’t have the confidence that every student has reliable access outside of school.”

The more that I talked to teachers, the more I heard the same stories over and over again. By now, these tales have become familiar. But at the time no one was talking about them in Washington. I heard about kids sitting in the school parking lot with borrowed laptops late into the evening, pecking away at their homework because it was the only place they knew they could get online. I heard about kids sliding into the booths at fast food restaurants to do use the free Wi-Fi connection to do to their schoolwork with a soda and fries. These are the images that stay with you; they’re hard to forget.

I took my on-the-road learnings back to the office and I combed through all the data I could find. I found that seven in 10 teachers were assigning homework that required internet access. But FCC data consistently demonstrated that one in three households do not have broadband at home. I started calling where those numbers overlap the Homework Gap because I felt that this portion of the digital divide really needed a phrase to describe it because it’s so important to fix.

I said this was the cruelest part of the digital divide—and the data at the time said it affected more than 12 million students. By early 2016, *The New York Times* was running a front-page story on the Homework Gap, focusing on the story of Isabella and Tony Ruiz of McAllen, Texas. Isabella was 11, and her brother Tony was 12. Every weeknight they would stand on a patch of sidewalk across from the elementary school near their home. They took up residence there as night would fall in order to pick up the wireless signal they need to do their homework. Over the cracked screen of their family smartphone, they would download math materials and review research for class. These were kids with grit in spades.

Shortly thereafter the President of the United States shared Isabella and Tony’s story on social media. This brought attention to the Homework Gap like never before.

This mattered because action follows awareness and getting Washington to focus on the Homework Gap was an important first step. But the next step I didn’t see coming. Because everything changed with the pandemic. Classes moved online, and we went from having millions of students who couldn’t do their nightly homework to having millions of kids who couldn’t go to school at all. Because children living in households without a reliable internet connection were locked out of the virtual classroom. The Homework Gap became a full-fledged education gap.

The problem was bigger than we previously thought. A new study found that the Homework Gap had grown to affect nearly 17 million students nationwide.

As a result, the costs of Homework Gap had become too glaring to ignore. Somebody had to act. And Congress did. Big time.

Congress provided the FCC with the funds to create the nation's first-ever program to help with the Homework Gap. It began last year and is known as the Emergency Connectivity Fund. It's Washington, so we call it the ECF.

Since September 2021, the ECF has been helping schools and libraries get devices and broadband connections to students who would otherwise be stuck offline and left out of virtual learning.

In New Bedford, Massachusetts, for example, they've used ECF support to provide 1,200 Chromebooks, 900 laptops, and 1,500 broadband hotspots to their students. The local superintendent said these tools are helping their students "grow academically and . . . thrive socially and emotionally."

In Westerville, Ohio, they've distributed 4,000 Chromebooks and 300 Wi-Fi hot spots to local middle schoolers thanks to ECF support. A local administrator says this help will "increase students' in-home internet connectivity and provide technology to meet their learning needs at home."

We have already reached more than 12.5 million students with this program. But there is more good we can do and more connections we can make. That's because we recently opened a third application filing window to award roughly \$1 billion in Emergency Connectivity Fund support. This window will close on May 13, 2022.

Looking at past demand, this third application filing window will likely be the last opportunity for schools and libraries to request funding before the remaining ECF support that was appropriated by Congress is exhausted.

As ECF draws down, that raises an obvious question: What's next in the FCC's push to close the Homework Gap? I've got a new proposal that I'd like to unveil today.

For context on what we're doing, let me share a story from my visit to Hatch, New Mexico way back in the pre-pandemic days.

Hatch is a rural community. It's known for the chiles that are grown in its dusty soil. While I was there, I met a student at the high school named Jonah Madrid. He played for the football team. Jonah explained to me that being an athlete in a rural community was not easy. You had to play teams that are far away. When the school day ended, Jonah would pile on a bus with his teammates and often travel an hour and a half just to play a game. Then after the game was over and the equipment was packed up, the team got back on the bus and traveled home to Hatch. After making it home, Jonah would sit in the school parking lot, lingering in the pitch-black dark, a glowing computer in his lap, doing his homework at night in the only place he had Wi-Fi access.

Listening to Jonah, I couldn't help but think about how much better off he would have been if he could have been doing online assignments on this bus ride home, rather than waiting to get to the school parking lot where he could connect.

Of course, the same could be said of so many other young people all across this country. Setting aside long road trips for football games, over 25 million children take the bus to school every day. In rural areas that ride can be long. It can easily be an hour to school and an hour to return home at the end of the day. It's good for young people to spend some time daydreaming, decompressing, and talking to friends, but wouldn't it be nice if kids had the option of using this time to connect for homework?

The good news is we have a workable, common-sense solution. We can connect our school buses and make them Wi-Fi-enabled—think of it as Wi-Fi on wheels.

We know it works because we've seen it done.

Years ago, in Coachella Valley, California, the local school district was able to provide their students with some tablets. There was just one problem. Many of the students had no internet access in the trailer homes where they lived, making the tablets not all that useful for homework. This was a rural area where students typically rode the bus a long time from the farming areas where they lived to get to school and then took that same long ride home at night. So the local superintendent came up with a plan to equip their school buses with Wi-Fi routers. He turned ride time into connected time for homework. I visited Coachella and what I saw was transformative.

During this past year, we also saw the same thing happen with FCC support. When we set up the ECF, we followed the law carefully and did our best to make sure it was easy for schools and libraries to apply. But at a higher level, our criteria for proposals was really simple: Will it connect students who are in need in a cost-effective way? We made clear creativity was welcome.

A bunch of school districts requested funding to bring broadband and Wi-Fi to school buses. In fact, to date the FCC has committed over \$35 million to help schools do this. In Sand Springs, Oklahoma, for example, they equipped 40 buses with Wi-Fi kits. According to the district's IT director, the benefits are big. As she tells it, students can now complete assignments in transit every day and during long extracurricular trips it helps keep kids safe and focused on their schoolwork while they ride. Plus, the community in Sand Springs has made plans to park these buses overnight in neighborhoods where connectivity is lacking, so the kids living nearby get more opportunity to complete their homework.

I think that what's worked for the Emergency Connectivity Fund could work for E-Rate. I think now is the right time to do this, as the ECF effort is drawing down. So, today, I'm announcing that I am proposing a plan to my colleagues to make Wi-Fi on school buses eligible for E-Rate support. This is not a far leap to make. It's both consistent with the law and the history of the program. After all, for many years E-Rate supported the use of communications for school buses—like wireless phones used by drivers—when shepherding students to and from school.

In the end, this isn't just about helping students like Jonah and who struggle without an internet connection at home. Every student who rides the bus and feels like they don't have enough time in the day to get their homework done while juggling activities will benefit.

This idea has enjoyed bipartisan support on Capitol Hill. A coalition led by Senator Ben Ray Luján, Senator Lindsey Graham, and Representative Peter Welch have sponsored similar efforts. I hope my FCC colleagues will join with me to make this common-sense change to E-Rate and take the next meaningful step to narrow the Homework Gap.

I know I was asked to tell my personal story today. In talking about my experiences, I wound up sharing the stories of people from Hatch, New Mexico; McAllen, Texas; the Coachella Valley in California and a bunch of other places. Some of these places I have been fortunate enough to visit firsthand. Those visits leave their mark. They have influenced my thinking and have left me more convinced than ever than closing the Homework Gap is within reach. So let's do it. During the last decade we have made amazing progress connecting students across the country. But I think we can do more to expand digital learning, address digital equity, and make sure no child is left offline. That's my story. That's our story. That's what working together I believe we can achieve.

Thank you.