

**REMARKS OF
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TO THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION (AASA)
AND THE ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL BUSINESS OFFICERS
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Good morning! School is out for summer but no rest for the weary, because here you are in force on a hot July day. You are deep in your efforts to plan for the upcoming school year and the educational opportunities that matter so much for our children, our communities, and the future of our country. That is an important task, so let me start with thank you for what you do. Thank you also for being here today.

The way I see it, this community is a really important partner for the Federal Communications Commission. Because at the end of the day, you are the people who help translate the education technology policies we develop—into tangible support for students, parents, and teachers. That means you have not been shy about speaking up when you thought we needed to do things differently. I know because we have listened. And working together we have made great progress expanding access to modern communications that are essential for education.

Now I want to talk to you about the next big swing the FCC is taking to better serve students and educators. We call it Learn Without Limits.

History is an important part of any school curriculum. So allow me to start with a quick recounting of the events that set the stage for what I want to announce today.

Our story starts in 1996. That was when I called the internet the information superhighway. Maybe you did, too. But in 1996, Congress had the foresight to task the FCC with developing what became known as the E-Rate program. E-Rate was visionary. Because Congress saw clearly—in 1996—that it would be a good idea to bring high-speed internet service to every school and library in this country. In the years since, this program has been a quiet powerhouse. It has helped support broadband in schools and libraries in urban America, rural America, and everywhere in between. And because great programs do not thrive without continuous attention and care, over time the FCC has updated it from low-speed to high-speed services and from wired connections to Wi-Fi connections. If this story sounds familiar, well, it's because with all these changes, you were with us every step of the way.

Then, in response to the pandemic, Congress created a new FCC program to help meet the adapting connectivity demands of schools and libraries—the Emergency Connectivity Fund. This one-time fund was designed to make sure that schools and libraries could connect students and patrons not just in schools and libraries but at home, with funding for devices and connectivity. It was needed. Because every one of us saw what the pandemic exposed—that when we were told to go online for modern life, too many people in too many places lacked the connections they needed to get there. We saw it with students lingering outside of fast food restaurants with laptops on their knees, using the free Wi-Fi just to stay in online class. We saw

it with people who could not take telemedicine appointments because they didn't have the bandwidth to keep up with their healthcare. And we saw it in the parking lots of libraries, where folks sat in their cars with their devices just to connect to family, friends, and co-workers during the height of the pandemic.

The Emergency Connectivity Fund has been a remarkable success—helping roughly 18 million students, 11,000 schools, and 1,050 libraries with greater access to connected devices and broadband connections. But it was a one-time effort. The support it provided has largely been allocated; the fund will sunset next year.

That brings me to Learn Without Limits.

Despite E-Rate's overwhelming success connecting schools and libraries, too often, that connectivity ends at the edge of the building. Yes, the Emergency Connectivity Fund was a great down payment on narrowing that gap—which I've long called the Homework Gap—but it is time for a permanent solution. It is time for an E-Rate program that supports students and library patrons wherever they are.

That is why, as part of our Learn Without Limits initiative, I have *already* announced two major proposed changes to the E-Rate program.

First, we are working to allow E-Rate support to be used for Wi-Fi connections on school buses. We already know this can work, because dozens of school districts used the Emergency Connectivity Fund to make this happen. This could make a big difference in rural areas where students spend long hours on school buses just to get to class and home again. We can turn ride time into connected time for homework. We can take E-Rate policies from two decades ago that supported mobile phones on these buses and modernize them so we have Wi-Fi on wheels—and students can Learn Without Limits.

Second, at a speech to the American Library Association's annual conference in Chicago a few weeks ago, I called on my FCC colleagues to join me in a rulemaking to modernize the E-Rate program to support Wi-Fi hotspots for loan in libraries—and school libraries—nationwide. The Emergency Connectivity Fund taught us is that when schools and libraries around the country were able to loan out Wi-Fi hotspots to their patrons, they helped their communities stay connected. We should build on this success and make sure that every library—including school libraries—can loan out these devices to any student or patron in need—so they can Learn Without Limits.

Now for the third part of Learn Without Limits and what I want to announce today.

To an outsider, cybersecurity might not be an obvious priority for schools and libraries. But to those of you working first-hand with education technology, cybersecurity is a major area of concern. That's because schools are increasingly a prime target for cyberattacks. And perhaps the most concerning is the rash of ransomware attacks on schools, including major attacks on districts in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and Baltimore.

The FCC has a role to play here, but like AASA and eighteen other national education organizations wrote us last year, this a problem too big and complex for one agency to handle alone. It requires thoughtful action and careful coordination.

To get that going, here is what we are planning to do. Later this week, I will share a proposal to establish a FCC Pilot Program to support cybersecurity services for K-12 schools and libraries. I believe that taking this step now will give us valuable insights about whether and how the FCC can leverage its resources to help address the cybersecurity threats that schools and libraries face. A central theme that I hope we can explore is how to balance this in light of the complementary work of federal agency partners, like the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency and the Department of Education that have greater experience and other programs in this area.

This Pilot Program will run for three years with a proposed budget of \$200 million. Along those lines, we are proposing to establish the Pilot Program within the Universal Service Fund, but separate from the E-Rate program. Based on the public record, we think this is the best approach to make sure gains in enhanced cybersecurity do not come at the cost of undermining E-Rate's success in promoting digital equity and basic connectivity. Plus, we have experience doing it this way because we are modeling this initiative on another program at the agency from a few years ago, known as the Connected Care Pilot Program. Ultimately, we want to learn from this effort, identify how to get the balance right, and provide our federal, state, and local government partners with information about the most cost-effective way to address this growing problem.

So that is the third major policy proposal at the heart of our Learn Without Limits initiative. To review, we have three things we can do to update the connections that matter for schools and students. We have a Wi-Fi on wheels effort; we have an effort to bring up the baseline so that every library and school library will have hotspots to loan; and we have an effort to thoughtfully address emerging cybersecurity challenges. That is ambitious. But what I know is that we have done big things before. In fact, the effort to update E-Rate from the analog era to the digital age was something we did together. So I know from experience that when we lock arms we can make things happen—for our children, schools, and communities all across the country. So let's get to it.

Thank you.