

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Schools and Libraries Universal Support Mechanism*, CC Docket No. 02-6; *Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service*, CC Docket No. 96-45; *Changes to the Board of Directors of the National Exchange Carrier Association, Inc.*, CC Docket No. 97-21, Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (July 20, 2023).

I was excited when we adopted a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking earlier this year to update our E-Rate rules – supporting those living on Tribal lands is imperative given how many struggle with access to broadband. In approving the Notice, I wrote that I hoped that we could move quickly, and I’m proud that we have done just that here today. I strongly support today’s item, which continues our efforts to expand broadband access in unserved and underserved locations, making the Tribal college and university libraries that serve a wider public eligible for E-Rate funding. It also implements changes which will ensure that all eligible applicants can easily access E-Rate benefits.

E-Rate is a crucial source of support for schools and libraries on Tribal lands, and their surrounding communities. I heard and saw this in May traveling with Senator Ben Ray Luján to visit the Pueblo of Santa Clara. There, we met with Governor Chavarria and heard firsthand the importance of E-Rate funds in the Pueblo.

I also experienced this last month in Alaska, where I was fortunate to be able to visit several remote villages of indigenous Yup’ik people. I visited Oscarville, a village of about a hundred people, and Napaskiak, a village of about 400, both on the banks of the Kuskokwim River. As we pulled up in our motorboat – neither of the villages is accessible by road – I was immediately struck by the number of kids running around. Or should I say riding! The villages are built around a boardwalk, because the ground is permafrost, and I saw kids’ bikes all along the side of the path. Instead of car many residents also travel via ATV, and a local dad drove by on his ATV, with five children hanging off the back. These communities may be remote, but their educational and connectivity needs are real. Napaskiak is home to the K-12 school serving the area villages – it was the largest building I saw, and rightly so.

On the same trip, I had the opportunity to visit with leaders of the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, a district as large as West Virginia, and a proud recipient of E-Rate funding. Everyone I met with, from the assistant superintendent to the IT manager, spoke about the vital role E-Rate funding plays in their students’ success. I got to see the district’s network room – those humming racks of servers were literally being powered by E-Rate dollars. I always find it valuable to get out and see how our programs are actually doing at connecting Americans. These trips helped crystalize the need to act, and act quickly, for the benefit of our nation’s young learners.

I’m glad we have quickly taken this step to promote additional broadband deployment and adoption on Tribal lands. It should expand the E-Rate program on Tribal lands, and accordingly help ensure more reliable internet in these vital communities. I am proud to support this result, and thank the Chairwoman for her leadership and the FCC staff for their continued great work.