

**STATEMENT OF
CHAIRWOMAN JESSICA ROSENWORCEL**

Re: *Modernizing the E-Rate Program for Schools and Libraries*, WC Docket No. 13-184, Declaratory Ruling (October 19, 2023).

For more than two decades, the E-Rate program at the Federal Communications Commission has helped connect school classrooms and libraries to high-speed, modern communications. It got its start as part of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Since that time, the E-Rate program has been a quiet powerhouse. It has helped support broadband in schools and libraries in urban America, rural America, and everything in between. But great programs do not thrive without continuous attention and care. We need to make sure E-Rate meets the moment and keeps doing good.

That is what led me to Vermont last week where I joined Senator Welch. The Green Mountain State in the Fall is something to behold. But I was not there to take in the leaves and the seasonal vistas. I was there to visit Williamstown, a rural town with a school up in the hills. This is an area of the country where students, like many in remote communities, spend a lot of hours on a school bus. Lots of them ride an hour to get to class in the morning and then ride an hour again back home at the end of each day. It is also an area where broadband connections are sparse. But so much schoolwork today depends on students having access to the internet—not just in class but at home. And the students who have no broadband at home fall into the Homework Gap. They struggle with nightly assignments because they lack the connections they need to succeed in school.

The school in this little town in Vermont decided they were going to do something about it. They got support to outfit their school buses with Wi-Fi. For their rural students, they decided to turn ride time into connected time for homework. Call it Wi-Fi on wheels. It was something to see.

But what stayed with me most from this visit was the story the school librarian told about one of the students. She had no internet connection at home. At the end of every school day she rushed to the library before the bus left and furiously printed out her assignments, web pages for research, and anything else she needed for homework. She printed stacks of paper day after day because she had no broadband at home.

Let's be clear. This is a kid with extraordinary grit. But it shouldn't be this hard.

She reminds me of another student I met in rural New Mexico traveling with former Senator Udall. In Hatch, an area known for the chiles that are grown in its dry soil, I spoke with a high school football player. Like that student in Vermont, he did not have broadband at home. He would head to school on the bus and then take the bus long distances to get to games and then back home again. Because when you are on the football team in a rural area, it can be a long haul to play neighboring schools. Whenever he returned after playing it was dark. But he would sit late at night in the pitch black of the school parking lot with a laptop for hours, using the school wireless signal just to do his homework.

Senator Luján took a look at this and joined with Senator Graham to introduce a bill to prod this agency to use the E-Rate program to support broadband on school buses. They saw what students in rural communities go through and urged us to help get more kids connected.

Today we answer their call. Today we make clear that schools can use E-Rate funds to outfit school buses with Wi-Fi. This is smart, creative, and consistent with the statute. Section 254 of the Communications Act sets up the E-Rate program and specifically provides us with authority to use it for additional services for educational purposes. Moreover, it was two decades ago when President Bush was in the White House that the FCC made a similar decision to support E-Rate connections on school buses by supporting cell phones and mobile wireless services for these vehicles. We are just updating it to meet the moment.

I am proud of what we are doing today. We are going to help close the Homework Gap and get more kids connected for school. This is especially vital in rural areas, where commutes to school are long

and broadband is not always available. It is no wonder then why four rural-focused education groups, the National Rural Education Association, the National Rural Education Advocacy Consortium, the Rural School and Community Trust, and Organizations Concerned About Rural Education have come out in support of this effort. But they are not alone. The National Education Association has also endorsed our approach, as has AASA, CoSN, SHLB, and the ALA. There is good to do here and they see it clearly. So let's get to it.

For their work on this, I want to thank Allison Baker, Callie Coker, Kate Dumouchel, Jodie Griffin, Gabriela Gross, Trent Harkrader, Sue McNeil, Molly O'Connor, and Johnnay Schrieber from the Wireline Competition Bureau; Zachary Dileo from the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau; Alejandro Roark and Cara Voth from the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau; Malena Barzilai, Michele Ellison, Richard Mallen, Linda Oliver, and William Richardson from the Office of General Counsel; and Guilia McHenry, Mark Montano, Stephen Tolbert, and Aleks Yankelevich from the Office of Economics and Analytics.