

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER ANNA M. GOMEZ**

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

High-speed broadband access is an essential part of students' learning in the 21st century. As the pandemic taught us, the "classroom" is wherever learning occurs—school campuses, football fields, parking lots, picnic tables, kitchen tables, and, school buses. More so, the pandemic highlighted the fact that no longer is connectivity merely necessary for educational *success*, it is required for education, *period*. And yet, nearly 17 million school children do not have reliable high-speed broadband at home.

Today, over half of the nation's public school students use a school bus to get to school. On average, students spend close to 45 minutes a day on the bus, and many spend longer. What's more concerning is that the students who travel the longest distances are also the ones who are least likely to have reliable high-speed connectivity at home. Both long commutes to school and lack of connectivity at home can negatively impact academic outcomes and achievement. This is an issue of equity—as communities that are most affected by long commutes and lack of connectivity, are those that have been historically underserved—rural, Tribal, black, brown, and Latino communities.

We must use all available tools to ensure all students have what they need for academic success. That is why I am grateful to the Chairwoman for her leadership on closing the Homework Gap, and drawing attention to this aspect of the digital divide. Closing the Homework Gap is in all of our interest as the next generation prepares to be competitive in the evolving global economy. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects employment in computer and information technology to grow much faster than other occupations in the next ten years. We must ensure that we are providing today's students with the academic resources for tomorrow's economic success.

To address this modern problem, we need to think about modern and innovative solutions. That is why I support today's Declaratory Ruling, which clarifies that Wi-Fi on school buses is eligible for E-Rate support. It is an important piece of the puzzle to address the needs of students and teachers through the E-Rate program. It is going to take a multi-pronged approach to eliminate the Homework Gap, and this action is commendable because it leverages a piece of the problem to become part of the solution for the many students with long bus rides. Moreover, I support this action because we have evidence that it works. Thanks to Congress's recognition of the importance of connectivity during the pandemic and the FCC's quick action to stand up the Emergency Connectivity Program, we know that Wi-Fi on school buses can make a difference for many students, and particularly for those communities most often caught on the wrong side of the digital divide.

I look forward to continuing to work to close the Homework Gap with my colleagues, school administrators, teachers, and students. Thank you to the staff of the Wireline Competition Bureau for their work on this Declaratory Ruling. It has my support.