

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER ANNA M. GOMEZ**

Re: *Promoting Fair and Open Competitive Bidding in the E-Rate Program Schools and Libraries Universal Service Support Mechanism*, WC Docket No. 21-455, CC Docket No. 02-6, Report and Order and Order on Reconsideration, (Apr. 30, 2026).

Today the Commission is taking steps to improve and strengthen the E-Rate program, one of the most consequential tools this agency has to close the digital divide and to ensure that every student and library patron has access to the connectivity they need to learn, work, and to participate in our economy.

E-Rate works. It has connected hundreds of thousands of schools and libraries across the country. The program has a strong track record, and that deserves to be said plainly.

The FCC's own Managing Director recently reported to the Inspector General that E-Rate's improper payment error rate dropped from 1.59% to 1.27% in FY2024, falling below the statutory threshold of 1.5%, and that the program is no longer considered susceptible to a significant risk of improper payments. A GAO report from late last year found that E-Rate was the only federal program among those it reviewed to have documented procedures for all nine of the GAO's leading practices for fraud prevention and program oversight. That is a program that works, and one worth protecting.

Protecting the integrity and success of this program means being thoughtful and proactive about the systems we put in place to keep it running well. The competitive bidding portal this order establishes, while not perfect, is best understood in that spirit. The FCC's Inspector General identified a reliance on self-certification as a structural vulnerability, not because E-Rate is riddled with problems, but because any program of this scale and importance deserves oversight tools that match it. This order provides stronger oversight, but it goes far beyond the IG's recommendations, which merely called for the creation of a simple bid repository.

This order also includes a number of administrative improvements that reduce the burden on applicants and that I am glad to support.

It also reflects engagement with the serious concerns raised by E-Rate advocates, who came to our office with well-grounded questions about whether the portal could be built and implemented in a way that works for the communities this program is designed to serve.

I am glad that some, although not all, of those concerns are reflected in the final order, including clearer guidance on how the federal portal will work alongside existing state procurement processes and commitments around training, testing, and stakeholder feedback before the portal is fully required. I expect those commitments to be fulfilled on a timeline that genuinely helps applicants prepare.

That said, I will be watching implementation closely, and I want to be direct about what I will be looking for.

The communities most at risk of being burdened by a more complex filing process are the same ones E-Rate was built to reach. Small rural libraries. Schools in tribal communities. Underfunded districts without dedicated E-Rate staff or the budget to hire consultants. Those advocating for measured restraint made a compelling case, backed by history, that new USAC system builds have not always gone smoothly, and that the consequences of a rocky rollout fall hardest on the smallest and most under-resourced participants.

We cannot let this process undermine a program that is working. If implementation of the portal creates barriers that make it harder for schools and libraries to connect students and library patrons, those issues must be taken up promptly by this Commission. I expect the Bureau to report on implementation progress, and I expect that if problems emerge, we act on them.

E-Rate is one of this agency's great success stories. It works because the rules are sound, the process is fair, and the program reaches the communities that need it most. We must keep it that way.

For these reasons, I will vote to approve this item in part and dissent in part. The improvements reflected here are important, and I am glad to support them. But given the implementation challenges that lie ahead, the fact that this bidding portal goes beyond the recommendations from the inspector general, and my continuing concerns about whether the structure and implementation timeline of the portal will work for the schools and libraries that depend on this program most, I cannot offer my full support today.

I look forward to watching implementation closely, and to continuing this work together.

I want to thank the Chairman for working with my office on changes, and the Wireline Competition Bureau for their work on this item.