STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS

Re: *Establishing the Emergency Connectivity Fund to Close the Homework Gap*, WC Docket No. 21-93

Last week, the New York Times highlighted the challenges facing Jordyn Coleman, a fifth-grade student in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Jordyn, who transferred schools during the pandemic, described his struggles with online school. Jordyn's family does not have internet access at home, and he can only participate in virtual classes by using his mother's cellphone. But his mother works night shifts as a security guard at a casino and, like most of us, takes her phone with her. Ms. Coleman has difficulty making it home in time for Jordyn's first morning classes due to her 40-mile commute on public transportation. Consistently connecting to online lessons would no doubt be easier with a home Wi-Fi connection. But for a family that has faced stiff economic headwinds during the pandemic, other basic needs have to come first. Ms. Coleman usually makes dinner on a hot plate or in an electric pot, because she does not have a refrigerator or stove in her apartment. She told the Times, "My priorities are a stove, a fridge, a car. . . . Then maybe we can talk about internet."[1] Millions of households are in the same spot.

Stories like Jordyn's illustrate a basic truth: families that are struggling during the pandemic should not have to choose between Internet and devices for their children—requirements for an equitable education—and paying for basic necessities. Internet access is a necessity. Beginning in March 2020, school for many children transformed into a virtual institution nearly overnight—locking millions of students without broadband and adequate devices out of the classroom. Though many schools and other organizations have worked to close the gap, Boston Consulting Group reported that as of January 2021, up to 12 million K-12 students remain digitally underserved.[2] And the problem is most significant in communities of color. The divide disproportionately affects Black, Latinx, and Native American students. Students of color, who make up 40% of the population, collectively make up 54% of the divide.[3]

The educational consequences have been significant. For many years, we have recognized that students who go home to a place without internet access after school miss important opportunities. During the pandemic, when so many children are learning at home all day, no home broadband access can mean no access to education. The Homework Gap has turned into a learning chasm. Researchers at McKinsey & Company found that, due to the pandemic and the transition to remote learning, on average, students could lose five to nine months of learning by the end of June 2021.[4] Students of color could be six to twelve months behind, compared with four to eight months for white students.[5] Other researchers

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[1] Rukmini Callimachi, '*I Used to Like School': An 11-Year-Old's Struggle With Pandemic Learning*, The New York Times (May 5, 2021), https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/05/us/remote-learning-education-pandemic.html.

[2] Boston Consulting Group, *The U.S. K-12 Digital Divide Has Narrowed, but Must Close to Eliminate Risks to Students and the Economy* (Jan. 27, 2021), https://www.bcg.com/press/27january2021-digital-divide-narrowed-must-close-eliminate-risks-students-economy.

[3] Titilayo Tinubu Ali & Sumit Chandra, et al., Looking Back Looking Forward: What it will take to permanently close the K–12 digital divide at 9 (2021), https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/pdfs/final_-_what_it_will_take_to_permanently_close_the_k-12_digital_divide_vfeb3.pdf.

[4] Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, COVID-19 and Learning Loss—Disparities Grow and Students Need Help at 6 (2020), https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help.

[5] *Id.* at 8.

have concluded that the pandemic has put low-income students in most grades "substantially further behind than higher-income students."[6]

Earlier this year, I heard directly from students about how challenging the transition to remote learning has been. In February, I met with students and Principal Willie Brewster from Brenda Scott Academy in Detroit, Michigan. Brenda Scott Academy is a performing arts school at which 88% of students are Black and 80% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. I met with middle school students who talked about their dreams of one day working in digital animation, film, and civil rights law. While I learned about the students' dreams, I also gained insight into their reality. They spoke about both the successes and challenges of their experiences with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were in need of faster, more reliable broadband, so they can engage in synchronous learning. They also needed upgraded devices, so they are not as dependent on their cell phones to learn. The most striking moment was when one eighth grader said plainly that she "needed a better internet."

I agree, and that is why I am pleased to approve today's Order. This essential $7.17 billion investment in our children, society, and future leaders has the potential to change the lives of children who need support to get the most out of school—especially those in low-income communities. The Emergency Connectivity Fund will also support the many Americans who rely on their local library for connectivity and access to educational resources. By leveraging the E-Rate program's discount matrix, the framework we adopt today will prioritize our country's highest-need schools and libraries.

I am especially pleased that the Commission has made special provisions for organizations that serve students, staff, and patrons with disabilities. A group of 13 organizations representing people with disabilities demonstrated in the record how connected devices support accessible video conferencing platforms and other software necessary to ensure students who are deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind, or deaf with mobility issues can fully participate in the remote learning experience.[7] These students can experience accessibility problems when using video conferencing platforms that do not provide captioning, causing them to miss crucial information during class.[8] But accessible equipment can be expensive. Giving organizations that serve students with disabilities the opportunity to see a waiver from the standard price cap for connected devices will ensure that these students, staff, and patrons receive equipment that meets their educational needs.

I also thank my colleagues for agreeing to changes to the draft Order that will allow the Commission to gather data that is critical to creating better policy. As I have consistently stated—from the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund to today's Emergency Connectivity Fund—we must push for better, clearer data to drive sound policymaking. And when so many schools were forced to go online-only in spring 2020, many collected information about students who needed devices or connections. More than a year into the pandemic, many of those schools have refined their data-gathering techniques to get an even clearer picture of which students are still in need of devices and connectivity. By adding a few basic questions to the Emergency Connectivity Fund application, the Commission will gain insight about where

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[6] Heather J. Hough, *COVID-19, the educational equity crisis, and the opportunity ahead*, Brookings (Apr. 29, 2021), https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2021/04/29/covid-19-the-educational-equity-crisis-and-the-opportunity-ahead/. A study for Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) of learning loss between fall 2019 and fall 2020 found a "learning gap of approximately 12 percent of a year of typical growth" between low-income and other students in Grade 4 and similar results in Grade 8. The PACE researchers warn that this "severe" equity impact will "continue to widen achievement gaps that already existed between individual students in these groups." Libby Pier, Heather J. Hough, Michael Christian, Noah Bookman, Britt Wilkenfeld, and Rick Miller, COVID-19 and the Educational Equity Crisis: Evidence on Learning Loss From the CORE Data Collaborative (2021), https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/covid-19-and-educational-equity-crisis.

[7] Telecommunications for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Inc., et. al. Comments, WC Docket No. 21-93, at 2 (filed Apr. 5, 2021).

[8] *Id.* at 3.

the Homework Gap is and how wide the gap is. This information will help inform all of us, including policymakers.

While I am confident that the Emergency Connectivity Fund will improve the educational outlook of millions of children across the country, I am mindful that making sure every child has the necessary digital tools will require a long-term commitment. Tens of millions of Americans lacked access to broadband services long before COVID-19, and the digital divide will not go away when the coronavirus does. For example, in October 2019, before the pandemic, as many as 40% of Detroit residents did not have an Internet connection in their home.[9] Even when students are back in the classroom full time, equitable education will require connectivity at home. The Emergency Connectivity Fund is an important step forward, but we also need to develop a long-term solution.

I thank the Commission staff who have put a tremendous amount of effort and expertise into preparing this Order on a short timeline. Your unwavering dedication will ensure members of our most vulnerable communities experience the transformative impact of broadband connectivity.

[9] Meghin Mather, *A City Offline: Bridging Detroit's Digital Divide* (Oct. 17, 2019), https://datadrivendetroit.org/blog/2019/10/17/a-city-offline-bridging-detroits-digital-divide/.