PLAYERS COALITION

Comments on WC Docket No. 21-31

Since March, the majority of America's 56.4 million K-12 students have had to attend classes from home at some point due to COVID-19-caused school closures. Though some schools have re-opened, many more continue with full-time or part-time distance learning. For students without their own computer devices and broadband access at home, participating in virtual classes and completing assignments is difficult in the best of cases, and sometimes completely impossible.

Congress' CARES Act, passed back in March, and the more recent CRRSA Act, passed in December, provided some key funding for K-12 schools, and to address some of the digital divide. That was a start, but more funding is needed to support our education system in a variety of ways, including to make sure all students have the resources needed to learn remotely. According to a recent report, up to 12 million students still suffer from inadequate access to devices and broadband. That is why it is so urgent for the FCC to act promptly to, prospectively, open the FCC's E-Rate program – which provides billions of dollars annually that help support broadband and telecom connectivity in schools and libraries – so that it can address student needs in remote learning and close the "homework gap". Tragically, every day that passes without a complete solution to the homework gap is another day students are left without much-needed access to education.

Players Coalition wants to do our part to work towards closing the digital divide. In 2020, the organization provided $350,000 in grants to 11 schools, districts and technology programs in cities throughout the country. These funds will primarily be used to purchase computers for students to use while learning from home (and eventually back at school) and to provide students with hotspots to ensure internet connectivity so they're able to participate in classes and to complete assignments. We are proud of the work Players Coalition is doing, but we also understand this is a short-term fix for a limited number of students. Developing sustainable solutions to ensure technology access and internet connectivity is a much larger issue that is going to require a much more complex solution involving a variety of stakeholders and resources – including full utilization of the FCC's E-rate program for remote learning.

Championing education and economic advancement in low-income communities is a priority of the Players Coalition mission. We have had the opportunity to visit schools in underserved communities and to speak to school administrators. These are places full of bright and eager students, but we as the adults in our society are failing them by not ensuring they have the needed resources to keep up in school. Over the past year, the situation for these students has grown more dire than ever. With each passing day, millions of students are falling further and further behind due to the digital divide. They deserve better and we know America and the FCC can do better. Please open the FCC E-rate program, prospectively, for remote learning.