

National School Boards Association Reply Comments

**Before the
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Washington, DC 20554**

In the Matter of)
)
Addressing the Homework Gap through) WC Docket No. 21-31
the E-Rate Program)

REPLY COMMENTS FROM THE NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION (NSBA) IN SUPPORT OF THE PETITION NSBA JOINED CALLING FOR AN EXPEDITED DECLARATORY RULING AND WAIVERS ALLOWING THE USE OF E-RATE FUNDS FOR REMOTE LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

RE: Reply Comments in the Form of a Letter

Dear Chairwoman Rosenworcel, Commissioner Carr, Commissioner Starks, and Commissioner Simington:

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) recently joined the Schools, Health, & Libraries Broadband (SHLB) Coalition and seven other education groups (Petitioners) in a petition calling for the Federal Communications Commission (Commission) to issue an expedited declaratory ruling and waivers allowing the use of E-Rate funds for remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ The actions outlined by the Petitioners would help connect millions of students to the Internet by allowing for the use of remote and online learning required by students during the closure of school buildings across the nation as a result of the pandemic.

NSBA is a not-for-profit organization and federation of 49 state school board associations and the U.S. territory of the Virgin Islands, representing more than 90,000 school board officials, that advocate on behalf of the more than 50 million students who attend a public school. NSBA files this reply comment to reinforce our strong continued support for the Petition and for the Commission and other federal officials to undertake every means within their power to help the millions of students that lack adequate access to the Internet and/or devices. It is vital the

¹ Petition for Expedited Declaratory Ruling and Waivers filed by the Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband Coalition, et al., WC Docket No. 13-184 (filed Jan. 26, 2021), <https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/filing/101260036427898> (SHLB Petition). The Petitioners include the Schools, Health and Libraries Association (SHLB), National School Boards Association (NSBA), American Library Association (ALA), Consortium for School Networking (CoSN), State Education Technology Directors Association (SETDA), State E-rate Coordinators Alliance (SECA), Urban Libraries Council (ULC), Wireless Futures Project Open Technology institute at New America, and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

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Commission permit schools, on a temporary basis, to use the E-Rate program to connect students to home broadband necessary for them to continue their learning remotely.

Closing the homework gap, the common term for the digital divide in education, was a priority for NSBA prior to the pandemic, and it has only grown in urgency since school buildings across the nation were forced to close making online learning the only option for most students. In August of 2019, NSBA and its 49 state association members filed reply comments urging the Commission “to proactively pursue steps that address the digital divide in education. The lack of access to high-speed broadband remains one of the major obstacles standing in the way of a high-quality education for many students.”² The pandemic has only exacerbated this issue.

NSBA urges the Commission to take prompt action to allow this limited use of E-Rate funding during this national emergency. The lack of Internet access hits the systemically underserved students the hardest. The Alliance for Excellent Education (All4Ed), National Indian Education Association (NIEA), National Urban League (NUL), and UnidosUS issued a recent report that found 16.9 million children lack high-speed broadband access at home.³ This serious equity issue must be addressed. The Commission will also need additional emergency funding from Congress to close the homework gap, but the action requested by NSBA and its fellow Petitioners would help many students access the Internet while they learn remotely from home. NSBA is pleased by the high number of positive comments calling for the use of E-Rate for this limited funding including the support of many other organizations such as NSBA’s fellow members of the Education and Libraries Networks Coalition (EdLiNC) who supplied their own comments addressing this important issue.⁴

Specifically, NSBA calls for the Commission to allow E-Rate funded services and equipment to be used off-campus to enable remote learning; support a range of technologies, including wired or wireless network equipment and services for learning, including wireless hotspot devices and fixed or mobile wireless towers; and provide this E-Rate flexibility for remote learning expeditiously so that as many students as possible can be reached during the remainder of the school year.

Moreover, NSBA urges the Commission to explore other ways it can lead during this crisis and in permanently closing the homework gap. During the pandemic, NSBA has been calling on Congress to provide emergency funding for the E-Rate program to help students connect during the pandemic and additionally, for the Commission to allow current E-Rate funds to be used in the manner prescribed in the NSBA petition and in these reply comments. This dual strategy is the best way to help the many students who lack Internet connectivity. NSBA strongly supports

² Reply Comments to the Federal Communications Commission, National School Boards Association et al, Accessed February 23, 2021,

<https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/filing/1082769606228>

³ Future Ready Schools, “Students of Color Caught in the Homework Gap” (July 2020), available at <https://futureready.org/homework-gap/> (Future Ready Schools Report). Accessed February 23, 2021.

⁴ Comments to the Federal Communications Commission, Education and Libraries Networks Coalition (EdLiNC), Accessed February 23, 2021,

<https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/filing/10217635027995>

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the current Congressional legislation calling for direct homework gap funding but believes this action by the Commission is also an imperative. NSBA looks forward to working with the Commission, the Biden Administration, and Congress to address the long-term equity needs to connect more students at home. NSBA recently announced its Public School Transformation Now! initiative focused on future ways to improve learning through access, equity, and innovation. Technology and access to high-speed broadband are essential to have meaningful public school transformation that allows for a more personalized learning experience for students leading to improved life ready skills. Closing the homework gap is a high priority equity issue for NSBA, our state association members, and school board members across the nation

The E-Rate program plays a vital role in aiding schools and libraries to connect to high-speed broadband so that students have access to the Internet and the digital tools that are essential for successful learning in today's modern world. Thanks to the past work of the Commission in modernizing and expanding the program, E-Rate has connected thousands of schools to high-speed broadband. During the pandemic, through the actions outlined in the Petition and these reply comments, the program can provide vital assistance to many millions of school children whose classroom experience has moved online.

We thank the Commission for the opportunity to comment on this important issue and urge it to take a strong stand in support of America's public school students and the families impacted by the homework gap. The Commission's leadership on this issue will help students gain improved connectivity and access to an equitable and excellent public education. NSBA stands ready to work with you moving forward to close the digital divide and connect our students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Anna M. Chávez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

Anna Maria Chávez, Esq.
Executive Director & CEO
National School Boards Association