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

Dear Chairman Pai,

I am writing today in response to the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Public Notice, which among other things, considers changes to the Universal Service Fund (USF) programs, including E-Rate. Before delving into my response to the proposed changes, I want to thank the FCC for its continued support for the E-Rate program and for the critical programmatic and policy changes, the commission adopted in 2014. The E-Rate program provides critical discounts to assist schools (like mine) to obtain affordable telecommunications and internet access.

Livingston County School District is a small Rural K-12 public school system with approximately 1250, students. We are located in far western Kentucky. Our poverty level qualifies all students to receive free breakfast and lunch through the Community Eligibility Provision USDA FNS Program (CEP). E-Rate dollars enabled our district to provide dense wireless infrastructure in all schools. Continuation of E-Rate funds allow our students to have Internet access and bandwidth comparable to surrounding districts. Due to the topography of our county, cell service is sporadic at best. For many students, their only access to the Internet is at school. If our student are going to be successful in in a digital world, E-Rate dollars are vital.

The E-Rate program, and the broader USF program, is a program succeeding in its mission. As the FCC moves forward with this public notice, it is prudent to remain focused on the fact that E-Rate is a program that works. Any changes to the E-Rate program should focus on expanding a successful program that has yet to reach its full potential and ensuring the FCC remains a good steward of the changes adopted 2014, allowing those changes to progress and play out as intended. Changes to the E-Rate program and the broader USF program must focus on bolstering and strengthening the original intent of the underlying programmatic statute, expanding equitable access to connectivity in multiple areas, through all four USF programs (E-Rate, Rural Health Care, Lifeline, and Connect America Fund).

The organizing theme of the proposed rule is a focus on a funding cap for the USF program, including pairing E-Rate under a funding cap with Rural Health Care. E-Rate played a critical role is the rapid and significant expansion of connectivity in schools. I am concerned the proposed rule will unnecessarily pit two important priorities—connectivity in schools with rural health care—against each other. Potentially resulting in an arbitrary funding pressure that not only disregards and dismisses the original intent of the statute creating all four USF programs, but also stands to undermine and threaten the great progress of E-Rate.


I am opposed to the rule as drafted. The proposed rule conflicts with the original legislative intent of the underlying 1996 Telecommunications Act, which was explicit in its creation of two separate and distinct programs for schools/libraries and rural health care providers. The proposed rule unnecessarily pits schools/libraries against rural hospitals/clinics, creating a false race to the bottom under which both programs and the communities they support lose. The proposed rule will likely immobilize E-Rate funding and expand confusion among beneficiaries. E-Rate and schools are unique as school system leaders have a responsibility to balance their budget annually. The idea that the E-Rate funding would be hamstrung and lack certainty in availability, will affect how districts plan to continue (or discontinue, should funding not be certain or reliable) their effort to build out connectivity to meet the learning needs of their students.

In 2014-2015, the Category 2 services included a cap increase. Livingston County Schools was able to purchase the infrastructure to support wireless access in every classroom and common areas across the district. Without E-Rate funds, a project this large would be too costly to do in a year. They were critical to make this project successful. Technology in education is moving toward a 1:1 student to device ratio. In addition to network capacity on current equipment, increased bandwidth will be a necessity. Since 2009, our district has qualified to receive E-Rate funds in excess of \$1,300,000. E-Rate funds are vital to Schools/Libraries. Any change in the current structure of the E-Rate system, will adversely affect our students.

The goal of the E-Rate program is simple: equitable access to affordable connectivity. While the overwhelming majority of schools and libraries are connected, the ongoing conversation about connectivity and E-Rate must continue to support and protect the shift from establishing connectivity to ensuring adequate connectivity (specifically, access to high-speed broadband). A massive overhaul of the E-Rate program without considering its initial purpose—one that has yet to be fully recognized—is poor policy. The FCC must support continuation of an E-Rate program that remains focused on expanding the E-Rate program from simple connectivity to expanded connectivity.

In closing, I reiterate that my district has strong support for, and reliance upon, the E-Rate program. Those funds allow access to the Internet, and afford the high-speed connectivity, that is so central to our students' learning without crippling our finances (which are already spread thin). Thank you for considering these comments.

Sincerely,



Victor Zimmerman
Superintendent

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