



July 25, 2019

OUR STUDENTS. OUR SCHOOLS. OUR FUTURE.

Alabama is home to over 730,000 aspiring young learners, many of whose families are poor. In addition, every county in Alabama contains rural areas, many of which are underserved regarding Internet connectivity. It is through their schools, and with the guidance of their teachers, that poor and rural Alabama children gain access to the same digital world resources as children who do not face such challenges. This would not be possible without the E-Rate program.

In 2016, School Superintendents of Alabama, in partnership with the Alabama Educational Technology Association, worked with our state legislators who unanimously voted to invest over \$15 million in the wireless capacity of our schools. By using the state funding as matching money for the E-Rate Category 2 program, every school in the state was equipped with high-quality wireless within two years. As you can see from this single example, Alabamians value the E-Rate program.

Our comments are as follows:

Combining of E-Rate and Rural Health Care Programs.

We oppose the FCC's proposal to institute a sub-cap that combines E-Rate and the Rural Health Care programs for the following reasons:

We expect demand for broadband connectivity for school systems to rise. Why? For nearly ten years, schools that wished to implement more technology could not do so due to budget cuts. Even though they were able to install and upgrade their wireless networks thanks to state and E-Rate funding, since 2008 money to purchase devices for students has been scarce. Now that the economy has improved, many school systems are poised to put more devices into the hands of students.

This will mean that more students will gain access to the online resources that are essential to today's classrooms. More devices will also mean that more students will develop the digital skills they need to be successful in the future. A substantial increase in devices, however, will require greater access to the Internet and, in some cases, further infrastructure upgrades. This in turn, will result in higher demands for E-Rate funding.

Although the USF supports other worthy programs, it is the E-Rate program that has the greatest potential -

- To improve the capacity of our youth to contribute to our nation's future economic development and international competitiveness; and
- To serve the widest range of citizens in every U.S. community, rural or urban. In other words, all families with children are positively impacted, and every community as a whole is positively impacted because the quality of its schools is improved.

Therefore, we believe that the E-Rate program stands alone in its ability to serve U.S. communities and the future goals of our country. For this reason, the E-Rate program should be considered as a high priority by the FCC and be invested in accordingly.

Sincerely,

Lisa A. Woodard

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