



# Norway-Vulcan Area Schools

300 Section Street | Norway Michigan 49870 | Phone: 906.563.9552 | Fax: 906.563.5169

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

August 6, 2019

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.

Norway-Vulcan Area Schools is a rural district with a student poverty rate between 40-50%. Without adequate e-rate funding, we would not have been able to afford the internal network upgrades needed to link to high speed internet now available in our county. We have used the connection to provide learning opportunities for students in all grades as well as to allow our students to take tests such as Michigan's M-Step exams, NWEA testing and results and i-Ready assessments. Without these we would still be a paper an pencil district an our kids would be working in an environment left behind long ago by businesses and other institutions.

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 be focused 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 be focused 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, and I am concerned that the proposed rule will unnecessarily pit two important priorities—connectivity in schools with rural health care—against each other, 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. Specific to E-

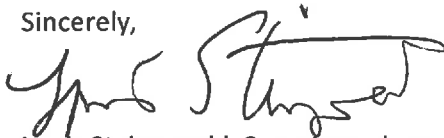
Rate and schools, where school system leaders have a responsibility to balance their budget annually, the idea that the E-Rate funding would be hamstrung and lack certainty in availability will certainly impact how districts plan to continue (or discontinue, should funding not be certain or reliable) their effort to build out connectivity to meet the learning needs of their students.

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.

Specifically we have used e-rate funding to build our internal technology network to provide access to all areas of our building for staff and for students. Additionally, our security network runs via the improvements made via e-rate. Administrators and law enforcement have access to our internal camera network via a smartphone app. Moving forward we need to continue to build out this network for security purposes. There is no way we could have afforded on our own to do this without e-rate.

In closing, I reiterate my district's continued, strong support for and reliance upon the E-Rate program for being able to access and afford the high-speed connectivity that is so central to our students' learning. Thank you for considering these comments.

Sincerely,



Louis Steigerwald, Superintendent

Norway-Vulcan Area Schools