

Chairman Ajit Pai

Federal Communications Commission

445 12th Street SW,

Washington, DC 20554

July 29, 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) in obtaining affordable telecommunications and internet access.

I represent the Connecticut Association of School Superintendents ( CAPSS). We currently represent 99% of the superintendents in Connecticut. As a former superintendent in a large urban area and now representing all Connecticut superintendents, I want to reiterate how important the E-Rate funding is to our districts. It is crucial to enable districts to offer on-line learning- programs such as credit recovery and world languages. For rural districts, the E-rate can allow access to Advanced Placement (AP) classes and other distance learning opportunities. E-Rate allows districts in which other resources have been diminished, to access quality professional development for their educators.

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.

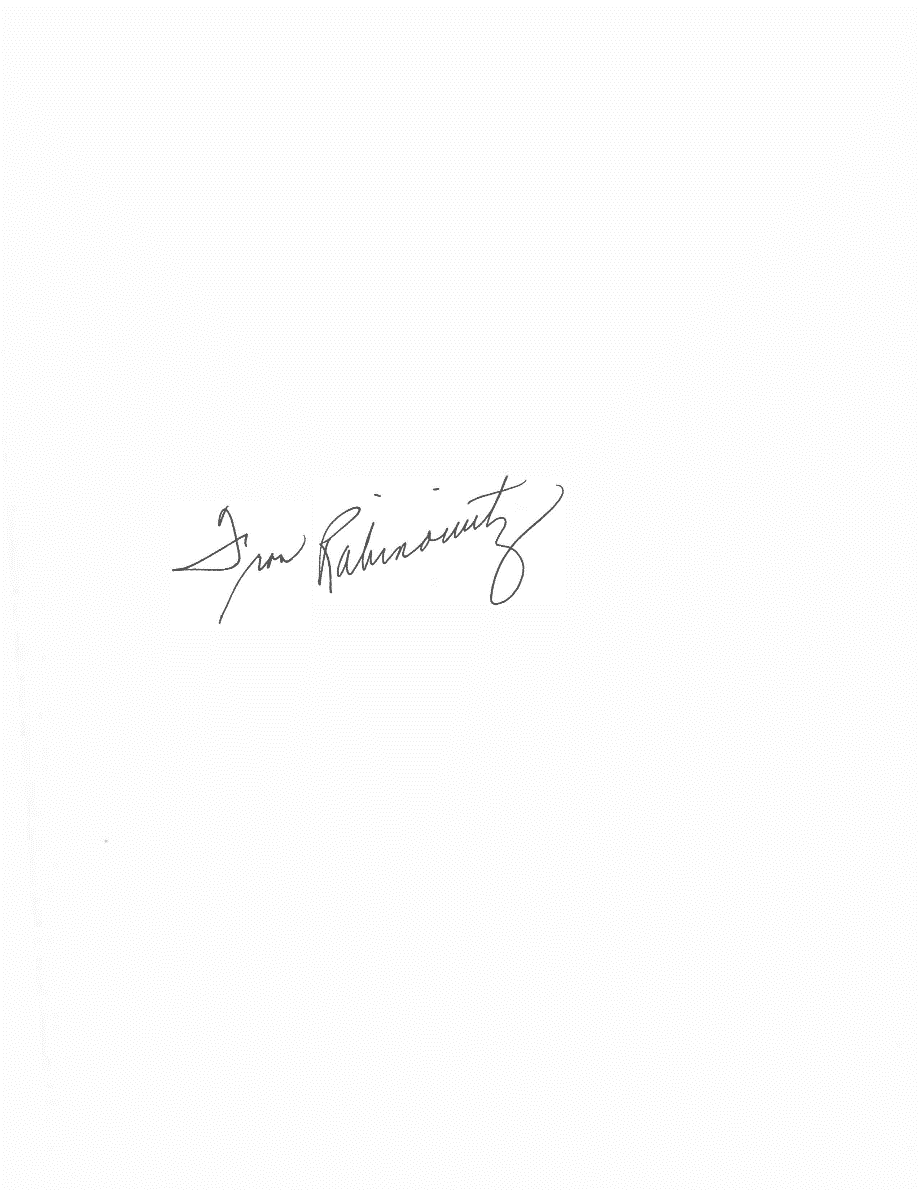
The goal of the E-Rate program is simple: equitable access to affordable connectivity. While the overwhelming majority of schools and libraries are connected, the ongoing conversation about connectivity and E-Rate must continue to support and protect the shift from establishing connectivity to ensuring 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 the continuation of an E-Rate program that remains focused on expanding the E-Rate program from simple connectivity to expanded connectivity.

The E-Rate funding allows Connecticut districts to upgrade connectivity within and across schools throughout the state of Connecticut. It allows us to impact the achievement gap by providing access to on-line learning that many students and educators would not have without this funding. As the face of education changes to a more personalized learning environment, E-Rate funding will be more important than ever.

Districts need the certainty of funding for planning forward. Combining this program with rural health will be an impediment to this. I would also add that if the application for E-Rate funding could be simplified, districts would not have to hire consultants to assist with the application. In Connecticut, nearly 75% of districts use a consultant to assist in the application. The average cost per district is $6,322.24 or $2.70 per student. Streamlining the application would result in significant savings and allow greater capacity for expansion within districts.

In closing, I reiterate Connecticut’s Public Schools’ 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,



Fran Rabinowitz

Executive Director

Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents