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May 24, 1999

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**FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY**

EX PARTE

Magalie Roman Salas
Office of the Secretary
Federal Communication Commission
445 Twelfth St SW Room TW-A 325
Washington, D.C. 20554

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**RE: Twelfth Order on Reconsideration and Sixth Report and
Order concerning the funding level for year two of the schools and
libraries and rural health care support mechanisms.
(CC Docket No. 96-45)**

Dear Ms. Salas:

The Benton Foundation writes in support of the expansion of educational opportunities for millions of children made possible through the E-rate program. We ask that the Commission fully fund the program at the legal limit of \$2.25 billion.

Created by Congress to make access to telecommunications services, Internet access, and connections to classrooms affordable for schoolchildren and library users – the program connects communities across the country to the information resources of the 21st century. In year one of the E-rate program, \$1.66 billion was committed to 25,785 school and library applicants. Schoolchildren and library users nationwide are now seeing the benefits of E-Rate discounts.

But Congress did not intend for this to be a one-year program, and not all needs have been met. The E-rate is a response to the tremendous potential of the Internet as a tool for education and the growing divide of use between schools with primarily disadvantaged and advantaged children. In 1994, only 3% of public school classrooms were connected to the Internet and just 35% of public schools had any access to the global information network at all. By 1997, these numbers had changed dramatically: 78% of public schools had Internet access and 27% of classrooms were wired. But with this explosive growth, great disparities emerged: schools with high poverty rates among students, schools with high minority enrollment, and smaller schools were much less likely to have access to the Internet.

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List A B C D E

Recent data released from the National Center for Education Statistics show the Nation's goal of connecting schools and libraries by 2000 may be realized. By the fall of 1998, 89% of public schools were connected to the Internet and 51% of classrooms were wired as well. In 1996, 74% of schools with Internet access did so through dial-up services; in contrast, by 1998, 65% of public schools were connecting to the Internet via high-speed, dedicated lines. Most striking, however, is that differences in poverty levels, minority enrollment, and size no longer determine the likelihood that a school is connected to the Internet, although these factors do continue to point to differences in classroom access.

Since ongoing costs are the principal obstacle preventing administrators from investing in educational technology, the E-rate is a necessary condition to spur telecommunications infrastructure development in poor communities. In part, the idea animating the E-rate is that, since residents of America's poorest and most geographically isolated communities will probably not experience Internet service in the home for some time to come, these public access points would ease the competitive disadvantage these communities face in a digital age. By providing e-mail, the Web, and distance learning capabilities in disadvantaged areas, society makes a modest investment in bridging the digital divide that tears at the egalitarian fabric of American society.

The first year of funding saw many large and small school districts and libraries invest in telecommunications infrastructure as administrators sought to outfit classrooms with Internet hook-ups or to pull cables through school walls to usher in the wired school house. While some E-rate critics focused on whether wiring a school internally even qualified for discounts, the overwhelming demand for these services reveals plenty about the state of America's learning institutions. Others suggested that since there is no real evidence that computer-aided instruction and the Web actually enhance student performance, federal regulators ought to roll back their investment in a largely untested classroom tool.

A sufficient response to these two criticisms involves taking a broader view of the role of the E-rate in addressing longstanding social and educational problems. The fact that over one-half of all E-rate funding for year one went to help applicants pay for internal wiring of schools -- rather than showing how off-track the E-rate has become -- points to the overriding need to build a quality education telecommunications infrastructure. The average public school building in America was 42 years old in 1998, which means that kids unlucky enough to attend older schools will probably not be surfing the Web without a hand up from this federal program. Renovating older school buildings is a priority for school boards, parents and principals who want to harness the Internet's potential in the classroom. The E-rate makes it possible for many administrators in poor communities, with children housed in outdated classrooms, to establish an infrastructure that meets the challenges of a technology-reliant society.

The E-rate thus squarely addresses the growing inequalities sprouting as a result of uneven access to computers and the Internet. Although it is often heard that the Internet

is beginning to look a lot like America, it remains the case that minorities and the poor are substantially less likely to be online than you would expect by chance. Whilst 13 percent of all households in the US are African American, only 6 percent of these households are using the Internet, according to the latest Census computer survey. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports, moreover, that classrooms in affluent areas are twice as likely to have access to the Internet as in low-income schools.

If school personnel cannot afford to lease high-speed, broadband connections and if they are unable to muster the resources to wire their buildings, then will this not adversely affect their opportunity to learn and earn at the highest level? Only through sustained funding to build capacity and infrastructure in schools and libraries can we straightforwardly address the social gap to which uneven telecommunications deployment contributes.

While appropriate investment in ed-tech is not *the* answer, it is one response to the growing social and educational gaps in our nation. As long as teachers are properly trained and the accompanying curriculum and content are edifying and fun, then we can expect that the E-rate will have a salutary effect on the overall life of poor communities. We ought to finish the business of providing all our communities the opportunity to utilize educational technology to its fullest. As the Commission turns its attention to E-rate funding, it should be mindful of the E-rate's potential to address the growing divide between haves and have-nots, while also providing students the opportunity to learn the skills that are key to success in our society. Only through meeting the demand for telecommunications services in a sustained and thoughtful way, meeting the professional needs of dedicated staff while funding the E-rate at its maximum level, will we ensure that the E-rate's potential is harnessed.



Anthony Wilhelm
Director, Communications Policy & Practice
Benton Foundation

cc: Chairman William Kennard
Commissioner Susan Ness
Commissioner Harold Furchtgott-Roth
Commissioner Michael Powell
Commissioners Gloria Tristani