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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

May 21, 1999

Docket # 96-45

Honorable Susan Ness
Commissioner
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Commissioner Ness:

We write to express our continued strong support for the E-rate program and the recent recommendation by Chairman Kennard to fund the E-rate at \$2.25 billion. Full funding of the E-rate will demonstrate the FCC's commitment to providing telecommunications services and Internet access to all eligible applicants and internal connections to our neediest schools and libraries.

The E-rate is making a real difference in America's schools and libraries. It helps to ensure that all Americans share in the benefits of the Information Age by making available at schools and libraries computers connected to the Internet, distance learning technologies that allow classrooms to share teachers and courses, and other beneficial information technologies. These tools enhance traditional classroom teaching, strengthen technological literacy and skills, open worlds of information to students, and give children and adults life-long learning opportunities.

Although 89 percent of public schools have Internet access, only 51 percent of our nation's classrooms are connected to the Internet. Moreover, the "digital divide" still persists because only 39 percent of high-poverty classrooms are connected, compared to 62 percent of their wealthier counterparts. Fully funding the E-rate in year two will help bridge this divide by continuing to provide Internet and telecommunications services to all applicants and internal connections for all 70 to 90 percent discount level recipients. Any reduction in this level of effort will represent a significant cut in the E-rate program, a burden that will fall most heavily on poor and rural communities.

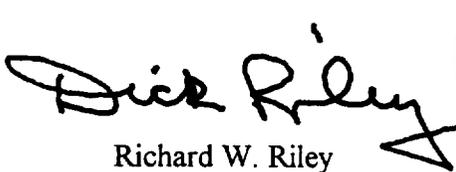
Access to Information Age tools and the development of technological skills are key to succeeding in the global economy. Every day, more jobs require computer skills. The E-rate is helping prepare children at schools and adults through their local libraries for the economy of the next century. Greater access to the Internet also creates greater demand for information technologies in the private sector and furthers the development of an advanced telecommunications infrastructure, especially in rural areas.

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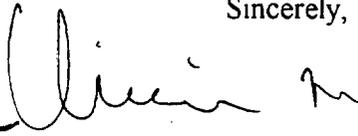
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We urge the Commission to fulfill the vision of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and continue to strengthen a policy that has already delivered substantial economic benefits and savings by opening telecommunications markets to competition. The Act calls for the preservation and advancement of Universal Service. The Commission can achieve this goal by fully supporting the E-rate along with other Universal Service programs.

Sincerely,



Richard W. Riley
Secretary of Education



William M. Daley
Secretary of Commerce



Dan Glickman
Secretary of Agriculture