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01-348

Duane Obermier, President Jim Griess, Executive Director

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Michael K. Powell, Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

Dear Chairman Powell:

I am writing to let you know of the Nebraska State Education Association's (NSEA) strong support for the proposed merger of EchoStar Communications Corporation and DirecTV. NSEA applauds EchoStar's ongoing commitment to students all across America, but especially in rural areas, where cable educational programming is often unavailable or cost-prohibitive.

Our organization, representing 25,000 members, is committed to making broadband Internet service more accessible to schools in both rural and urban areas. We believe that the combined company will have the financial wherewithal and geographical reach to make the broadband revolution a reality for all children. This merger will take an important step in bridging the digital divide, particularly in rural areas where many schools and students do not have access to cable or other alternative routes to diverse programming and high speed Internet access.

Our interest in this project is directly related to its impact on children and public education across the nation. Currently, 25% of the zip codes in America have no access to high speed internet use. But what is most troubling is that rural America is currently dramatically underserved. **In Nebraska 44 % of the zip codes still do not have access to high speed internet.** Echostar and Direct TV have agreed that if the merger is approved they will enhance their current high speed internet capabilities to ensure that every zip code in the country has access and thus making it possible for every child in America to be able to cross the digital divide. Their current business plan calls for this enhancement to take place by early 2004. Since it is not cost effective for either company to provide this enhancement alone, the expansion of high speed internet will not take place without the merger. In addition, competing land based cable companies which have 85% of the market have not and would not in the future provide this service because it is not cost effective to do so. You can imagine the cost of running wires and putting up towers in rural areas of Nebraska where the residents may or may not purchase the product.

Studies have also shown that many teachers use the Internet at home. Furthermore, it is more and more common for children to use the Internet at home for homework.

Unfortunately there is a huge disparity in who can access broadband at home. In fact a recent joint study by the Departments of Commerce and Agriculture confirms that only 5% of small and rural towns have cable modem broadband choices compared to 65% of larger cities. Chances are many rural and remote communities will never see broadband choices come into their communities anytime soon. At the same time, the teachers, parents and students who live in these communities -- separated by distance and geography -- are perhaps the communities that can benefit most from the delivery of broadband. They are on the other side of the digital divide that the Association has fought so hard to close.

NSEA has recognized and applauded DirecTV's ongoing commitment to transmitting educational programming to schools throughout the country. Through the company's "DirecTV Goes to School" public service initiative, a special programming package called "School Choice" is provided free of charge to thousands of K-12 educational institutions. As we move into a new century, this important commitment to children will help them better prepare and compete in a demanding economy filled with the promise of the convergence of educational opportunities and technical advancements.

This merger will also assist America's teachers and professors in their ongoing research and in their efforts to relay information to their students as effectively and creatively as possible. We believe the combined resources of these two satellite companies will lead to a quicker roll out of advanced television programming (including interactive TV) and other enhanced services video services. All of these improvements will also allow our members to communicate and share information with their students and each other much more easily.

On behalf of the thousands of elementary and secondary teachers, higher education faculty, education support personnel, school administrators, retired educators, and students preparing to become teachers who belong to the NSEA, I urge you to join us in supporting this important merger for the benefits it will bring to students and schools all across America.

Sincerely,



Duane Obermier, President
Nebraska State Education Association