

**Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of:)	
)	CC Docket No. 02-6
Schools and Libraries Universal Service)	
Support Mechanism)	WC Docket No. 13-184
)	
Notice of Proposed Rulemaking)	

Comments of the National Association of Independent Schools

Summary of Comments:

The next generation E-Rate will be successful in its goal of connecting schools and libraries to new, high capacity networks if the program remains flexible, accessible, true to its original purpose, and minimally burdensome.

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Introduction:

The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) provides services to more than 1,700 schools and associations of schools in the United States and abroad, including 1,400 nonprofit, private K-12 schools in the U.S. that are self-determining in mission and program and are governed by independent boards of trustees. NAIS schools are urban, suburban, and rural; day and boarding; co-ed and single sex institutions that educate over 674,000 students annually.

Pursuant to the Commission’s Public Notice, FCC Docket No. 13-184 (“Notice”), released on July 23, 2013, NAIS submits these comments. While the Public Notice requests comments on a large number of issues, NAIS will address only those that could potentially dissuade its schools from participating in the re-envisioned E-Rate program and thereby deprive them of the opportunity to provide both teachers and students access to high capacity broadband, which is the future for teaching and learning in this increasingly competitive global environment. In addition to its own comments, NAIS supports those of the Education and Libraries Networks Coalition (EdLiNC), of which it is a member.

Issue #1: Benchmarks

While NAIS strongly supports access to high capacity broadband for schools and libraries, we find the recommendation to set a standard ratio of bandwidth to student users to be both arbitrary and contrary to best education practice. NAIS believes that, rather than using such a ratio, the appropriate level of bandwidth for a particular educational institution is best determined by that individual school, which is responsible for establishing the educational vision, mission, and goals that make possible a 21st learning experience for its students. The FCC should not impose a floor or ceiling on numbers of students to

bandwidth use, but should leave this decision to the education entity, which is in the best position to ascertain how to most effectively and efficiently educate its young learners. Given the wide variety of curricular approaches taken by schools – ranging from traditional lecture structure to flipped classrooms, synchronous distance learning, and everything in between – the idea of a one-size fits all ratio makes little sense.

Such a ratio also ignores the equally important issue of availability (and affordability) of broadband connectivity. While broadband is both affordable and available in some communities, in many others it is either unaffordable or entirely unavailable. Even as innovative programs like US Ignite (a multi-year pilot to bring ultra-high speed connectivity to a number of communities across the country) and Google Fiber are being deployed in a small number of cities across the country, most of the country has limited access, if broadband is available at all. Rather than setting ratios, the Commission should focus on the proliferation of providers in order to drive down prices and expand choice, and should allow users (whether academic institutions, households, or businesses) to determine how to take full advantage of the capacity.

Issue #2: Reduce Burden

The current program's administrative burden is already such that it has had the effect of dis-incentivizing schools with limited staff capacity to participate in E-Rate. Most NAIS members' technology staffs are focused not on the paperwork for the E-rate process, but on promoting the effective use of learning technologies in classrooms. Any increase in the administrative burden associated with the E-rate, unless offset in some way, would result in diminished E-rate participation as it would further remove technology staff from working with teachers to integrate digital learning into their classrooms; the net losers would be students.

NAIS understands the FCC's interest in collecting pertinent data and recommends that this should be re-examined in the light of determining what data are indeed program-critical (and not just desired), and that it consider sampling a cross section of E-Rate participants to gather selected information that will demonstrably increase the program's value for schools and libraries. In a related vein (and as has been discussed in prior filings by EdLiNC), the E-Rate program is not an education initiative; as part of the Universal Service program, it is a mechanism for ensuring schools and libraries have the ability to connect to the nation's telecommunications infrastructure. Therefore, NAIS would oppose recommendations to measure the educational outcomes of the E-Rate as this is not in the FCC's purview.

Issue #3: Preserve Flexibility

Simpler is better. Since the E-Rate's inception, the program has become more complex and more burdensome for schools, resulting in decreased participation. The proposed changes to the E-Rate program that would support access to high capacity bandwidth, would be a game-changer for the school and library community. However, the success of these changes will be reliant on preserving program flexibility, which will encourage participation and therefore make it possible for more children to engage in digital learning. Mandating education goals, specific architectures (e.g., wireless), participation in master contract agreements, etc., will have the net effect of reducing program engagement. NAIS believes that schools and libraries should determine what is best to meet their specific educational needs.

Issue #4: Preserve Eligibility

NAIS supports preserving the ability of schools and libraries to participate in the program and encouraging those institutions to do so. As a goal of E-Rate is to "close the gap between the broadband needs of schools and libraries and their ability to purchase those services," (FCC 13-100, p. 8, paragraph 13), NAIS supports the current discount matrix, and believes that lowering the discount rate will discourage its schools from participating in the program. In addition, the use of the NCES codes as the primary identifiers of institutions could have unforeseen impacts on rendering some institutions

(including NAIS schools in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands) ineligible to participate in the program as those schools are not assigned such identifiers. Given the importance of ensuring that all schools and libraries have access to the best online resources available, every effort should be made to preserve the eligibility of schools and libraries and incentivize their continued participation in the program.

Conclusion

The extraordinary value of E-Rate is its commitment to connect schools and libraries to the Internet so that all students and adult learners, regardless of location or income, can access the wealth of educational resources available digitally. The technology landscape is evolving and so should the E-Rate program. The vision to enable schools and libraries to access high capacity bandwidth in the coming few years is to be applauded and supported. The nation's future relies on the generation of children now in school, and it behooves us to make sure that they are given every opportunity to succeed in an increasingly competitive global environment. The next generation E-Rate will be successful in its goal of connecting schools and libraries to new high capacity networks if the program remains flexible, accessible, true to its original purpose, and minimally burdensome.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/

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