Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

December 18, 2013

Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Wheeler, Commissioner Clyburn, Commissioner O'Rielly, Commissioner Rosenworcel, and Commissioner Pai:

As Members of Congress concerned with improving our education system and preparing students for the jobs of the future, we are writing to urge swift action to improve and modernize the E-rate program in order to help connect our nation's schools with high-speed broadband over the next five years. This critical update will ensure every school has the ability to accelerate next-generation education reforms, support teachers, and enhance student learning. We believe this is an important step we can take to provide our children with high-quality digital learning opportunities in order to improve student outcomes and prepare them to succeed in a 21st century economy.

Improving our children's ability to take advantage of learning technologies has always been a bipartisan endeavor, as has been the E-rate program itself. We are proud to support the bipartisan recommendations to update E-rate and we call for those across the education, government, and business communities to recognize the opportunity we have to improve and modernize our schools. Therefore, we ask the Commission for swift action to bring high-speed broadband to our students on an expedited basis.

Closing the education gap means ensuring that our schools and libraries have access to digital learning opportunities that require high-speed broadband. However, too many of our children are currently trying to learn skills for tomorrow with outdated infrastructure from the past. While the E-rate program was enormously successful in bringing basic telephone and broadband to schools and classrooms, the connectivity provided is no longer sufficient. The average American school has about the same bandwidth as the average American home, but with 200 times as many users. Therefore, 72% of our schools do not have the Internet infrastructure they need to take advantage of digital learning opportunities today, and fewer than 1% have the infrastructure they will need in the future.

In an age when high-speed broadband is transforming almost every aspect of our lives, we must extend digital opportunities to every classroom. This is particularly crucial in rural areas, where students are less likely to have the speeds and infrastructure they need to take advantage of new technologies and high-quality educational content. Forty million of our nation's students—the next generation of talent in the United States—are being left behind without the speeds they need to succeed. As Commissioner Ajit Pai has noted, "Today, too many kids walk off the school bus, only to walk decades into the past. This is unacceptable. … Parents are right to expect that schools will help prepare their children for the America of tomorrow, and they know that can't happen in the classroom of yesterday."

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Experts agree that to enable students to take full advantage of digital learning, America's schools should aim for 100 Mbps of bandwidth or more for every 1,000 students and staff members today, and 1 Gbps by 2017. In today's global economy, these high speeds aren't just an educational imperative, but a competitive necessity. Test results released this month show that American students still lag far behind countries like China, South Korea, Japan, Switzerland, and the Netherlands in math, reading, and science. It's no longer enough just to compete for jobs; we have to compete for higher educational outcomes enabled by higher broadband speeds.

This means we need to: (1) Focus E-rate on broadband connectivity and infrastructure to ensure that we maximize the impact of the program on learning by limiting support for yesterday's outdated dial-up era technologies; (2) Create an upgrade fund within the E-rate program to connect every school and library, particularly those in rural areas, to high-speed broadband; (3) Increase transparency and accountability for the program in order to reduce costs, research effective practices, and ensure that all students have access to the connectivity they need; and (4) Simplify and streamline onerous paperwork requirements to improve program efficiency. These reforms will make possible strategic investments to deploy high-speed broadband to schools and classrooms across the country.

We simply cannot prepare our kids to compete for 21st century jobs by leaving them stranded with age-old technologies. Therefore, we ask you to support swift action to modernize and expand the E-rate program to bring transformative learning opportunities to every school in America.

Sincerely,

Jared Polis
Member of Congress

Chris Gibson
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Jared Huffman
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