

**Before the
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of

Addressing the Homework Gap
through the E-Rate Program

WC Docket No. 21-31

**COMMENTS OF THE ACSA-CSBA FEDERAL PARTNERSHIP REGARDING
ENSURING THE E-RATE PROGRAM SUPPORTS REMOTE LEARNING**

The Association of California School Administrators and the California School Boards Association (collectively the “ACSA-CSBA Federal Partnership”), respectfully submit these Comments urging the Federal Communications Commission (the “Commission”) to modernize the E-rate program to support the remote learning needs of students, school staff, and library patrons. Expanding access to off-campus digital learning opportunities, including expanded access to instruction, collaboration opportunities, and high-quality digital resources, is a top priority for California school administrators and school board members. Updating E-rate to add students’ and library patrons’ off-premises use of Wi-Fi hotspots and wireless internet access services will facilitate remote learning and support the public interest consistent with the requirements of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the Commission’s long-time administration of the program.

The Association of California School Administrators represents more than 17,000 school leaders and the California School Boards Association serves more than 5,000 locally elected school board members. The groups formed the ACSA-CSBA Federal Partnership to educate federal policymakers about California’s school districts and to work collaboratively to champion programs and policies important to the state’s students and their families, including the vitally

important E-rate program. Ensuring California students and teachers have access to secure broadband and sufficiently powerful devices for learning is one of our members' many responsibilities. As the California leaders responsible for administering the state's over-10,000 schools, our members deeply understand the E-rate program's value and the need to ensure all students have access to high-capacity broadband for learning on- and off-campus.¹

Modernizing E-rate to include Wi-Fi hotspots and related service will serve a vitally important educational purpose recognized by California's school districts and state leaders. The draft *California Digital Equity Plan*, recently published for public comment by the California Department of Technology, includes the following priority area: "Students and educators can use technology at home and in the classroom to enable more equitable educational services online."² The ACSA-CSBA Federal Partnership strongly supports the state's decision to focus on digital learning as part of the digital equity plan given that many California students and staff lack access to broadband at home. According to a report written by the Alliance for Excellent Education, the Small School District's Association, and the Linked Learning Alliance, "[a]cross California, more than 1.6 million children live in homes without high-speed internet access and nearly 750,000 live in homes without a computer."³ According to Cal Matters, "[a]ffordability is

¹ National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, *Table 2. Number of operating public schools and districts, student membership, teachers, and pupil/teacher ratio, by state or jurisdiction: School year 2020–21*. https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/202021_summary_2.asp (Last visited January 10, 2024)

² California State Digital Equity Plan, p.9, <https://broadbandforall.cdt.ca.gov/state-digital-equity-plan/> (Last visited January 5, 2024)

³ 'Closing the Homework Gap in California' (2021) <https://futureready.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Closing-The-Homework-Gap-California-FINAL.pdf>, p.1, (Last visited January 10, 2024)

a main barrier to [home broadband] access...” in California, which demonstrates the great need for the expanded E-rate assistance proposed by the Commission in this proceeding.⁴

The ACSA-CSBA Federal Partnership encourages the Commission to use the successful Emergency Connectivity Fund (“ECF”) as a model for modernizing E-rate to include home Wi-Fi hot spots and related services. California ECF applicants requested over \$1.3 billion to connect students and educators to digital learning.⁵ With ECF funding exhausted, many schools and libraries will need other assistance to facilitate remote learning.⁶ The ECF’s processes and framework are well understood by school districts applications and worked effectively to facilitate home connectivity. Therefore, it would be prudent to use relevant aspects of the ECF to develop the policies and procedures for modernizing E-rate to help close the Homework Gap. For example, the ACSA-CSBA Federal Partnership supports the adoption of inflation adjusted spending caps on devices and service costs consistent with the average of such costs in California and recommends following the ECF’s approach to implementation of the Children’s Internet Protection Act.

The ACSA-CSBA Federal Partnership also urges the Commission to apply other cost effectiveness policies to this proposed expansion of the E-rate program’s eligible investment. For example, the Commission should apply the E-rate’s local funding contribution requirements, pricing transparency obligations, and other efficiency tools to these proposed new uses of the

⁴ ‘The Wires May Be There, but the Dollars Aren’t: Analysis Shows Why Millions of California Students Lack Broadband’ (*CalMatters* 28 April 2021) <<https://calmatters.org/projects/california-broadband-student-access/>> accessed 29 December 2023

⁵ Federal Communications Commission, *Emergency Connectivity Fund Program Demand by State*, <https://www.fcc.gov/reports-research/maps/ecf-state-demand/> (Last visited January 5, 2024).

⁶ Federal Communications Commissioner, *Emergency Connectivity Fund*, <https://www.fcc.gov/emergency-connectivity-fund> (Last visited January 10, 2024)

program's funds. Continuing these and other cost effectiveness strategies will help to ensure the other vitally important purposes of E-rate are achieved, including enabling the Commission to address, fully, the other essential elements of Chairwoman Rosenworcel's Learn Without Limits proposal.⁷ E-rate funding for home connectivity needs should not displace the program's new investment in Wi-Fi on school buses nor should it preclude the Commission from later providing desperately needed assistance to schools and libraries for cybersecurity. With proper protocols and plans in place, the E-rate will be well positioned to address each of these areas.

The ACSA-CSBA Federal Partnership strongly supports the Commission's longstanding efforts to protect E-rate from waste, fraud, and abuse. Maintaining the program's integrity is essential. As the agency explores ways to prevent redundant home connectivity investments, we urge you avoid creating an application process or data collection requirements that make it difficult or impossible for school districts to benefit from the E-rate program. Simplifying the program's application, while also adopting protections against waste, fraud, and abuse, will help to ensure that as many students as possible benefit from digital learning at school and at home. Please carefully consider the scope of data collection requirements and potential application burden as you develop final rules for this proposed new E-rate use.

While this change will make a significant difference for California's students and teachers, the ACSA-CSBA Federal Partnership also urges the Commission to recognize that subsidies for Wi-Fi hotspots and services will not close the Homework Gap for every student and teacher. California, like other states, has geographically isolated rural communities that lack adequate telecommunications infrastructure to support the effective use of hot spots for learning.

⁷ Federal Communications Commission News Release, *Chairwoman Rosenworcel Announces 'Learn Without Limits' Initiative*, <https://www.fcc.gov/document/chairwoman-rosenworcel-announces-learn-without-limits-initiative> (Last visited January 10, 2024)

The BEAD investments authorized by the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (P.L. 117-58) are poised to help California communities address this challenge, but we urge the Commission to be prepared to take other steps – in addition to the important policy changes sought by this proceeding – to ensure that every student and teacher has access to broadband speeds that support off-campus instruction, collaboration, and independent learning.

In conclusion, the ACSA-CSBA Federal Partnership respectfully urges the Commission to modernize the E-rate program to include home Wi-Fi hotspots and related services. This policy change will ensure that the program aligns with and supports the education system’s recognition of the many advantages digital learning provides to students, including expanding access to high quality digital materials, remote instruction, and off-campus collaboration with their peers and teachers.

Sincerely,

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