

**STATEMENT OF
CHAIRWOMAN JESSICA ROSENWORCEL**

Re: *Addressing the Homework Gap through the E-Rate Program*, WC Docket No. 21-31, Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (July 18, 2024).

Remember the pandemic? The images from those days still sting. For me, the most searing are the ones that exposed that when we were told to go online for modern life, so many people in so many places lacked the connections they needed to get there. The pictures are hard to forget. We saw students lingering outside of fast food restaurants with laptops on their knees, using the free Wi-Fi just to keep up with school. We saw people who struggled with telemedicine appointments because they did not have the bandwidth they needed to keep up with their healthcare. And we saw it in the parking lots of libraries, where folks sat outside in their cars with their devices just to connect to family, friends, and co-workers.

It is hard to believe this happened in the United States. But we saw it with our own eyes. The pandemic exposed the depth of our Nation's digital divide. We also saw Congress respond quickly to meet the moment by establishing the Emergency Connectivity Fund, which allowed libraries and schools to support internet access through devices and connectivity. But this fund was a one-time effort. It expired this year. Still, it demonstrated what a modern library and school can do to help a community learn without limits and keep connected.

Today we have a choice. We can go back to those days when people sat in parking lots to get a signal to get online and students struggling with the Homework Gap hung around fast food places just to get the internet access they needed do their schoolwork. Or we can go forward and build a digital future that works for everyone.

The Federal Communications Commission has been a long-time champion of libraries and schools. We see clearly the role they play in our digital future. After all, for more than two decades, we have supported the E-Rate program. It is a quiet powerhouse responsible for providing schools and libraries in every state with support for communications. Yet despite E-Rate's overwhelming success connecting schools and libraries, too often that connectivity ends at the edge of the building. The time has come to modernize this program and support students and library patrons wherever they are.

I believe every library and every school library in this country should be able to loan out Wi-Fi hotspots to help keep their patrons and kids connected. It is 2024 in the United States. This should be our baseline. We can use the E-Rate program to make it happen.

That is why today we modernize E-Rate to ensure that schools and libraries nationwide can loan out Wi-Fi hotspots to support high-speed internet access in rural America, urban America, and everything in between. The time to do this is now. We do not need to go back; we can go forward and make it possible for everyone to get the connections they need.

The Communications Act clearly supports this approach. Section 254 directs the agency to update the definition of universal service, which includes E-Rate, so that it evolves over time. That is what we do here. Moreover, in the same section Congress specifically directed the Commission to designate additional services in this program as needed for schools and libraries. Again, that is what we do here. To the extent that classrooms get a mention in the law, the statute makes clear it is descriptive and not restrictive.

We also have developed a way to do this within the existing E-Rate budget. That means this modernization does not require new universal service funds nor does it come at the cost of the support E-Rate provides to connectivity in schools and libraries.

In addition, we establish that the Children's Internet Protection Act applies here. That means, as with other E-Rate supported efforts, providers with hotspot lending programs must comply with this law, which requires restricting access to content that is harmful to minors.

We can help close the digital divide, keep our communities connected, and support the millions of students who fall into the Homework Gap with this updated approach to E-Rate. So let's make it happen.

I want to thank Senator Markey, Senator Van Hollen, and Representative Meng for their commitment to connect students and library patrons across the country. Their work in this area is historic and it has informed our efforts today.

I also want to thank the staff responsible for their work connecting schools and libraries, including Allison Baker, Bryan Boyle, Callie Coker, Kate Dumouchel, Veronica Garcia-Ulloa, Jodie Griffin, Gabriela Gross, Trent Harkrader, Molly O'Connor, Kiara Ortiz, and Johnnay Schrieber from the Wireline Competition Bureau; Jim Bird, Terry Cavanaugh, Sarah Citrin, Thomas Driscoll, Richard Mallen, Rachel May, Erika Olsen, Karen Onyeije, Joel Rabinovitz, Anjali Singh, Elliot Tarloff, and Chin Yoo from the Office of General Counsel; Liesl Himmelberger, Eugene Kiselev, Paul Lafontaine, Cher Li, Eric Ralph, Emily Talaga, and Maciej Wachala from the Office of Economics and Analytics; Warren Firschein and Mark Stephens from the Office of the Managing Director; and Joycelyn James from the Office of Communications Business Opportunities.