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# A New Year, a Bolder and Better E-Rate



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In schools across the country, December means more than the start of the holiday season. It's when first-semester classes come to an end. That means students taking tests and teachers winding down instruction as the calendar year comes to a close.

It's also time to wind down analog-era education. The teaching tools so many of us knew in class years ago -- from the blackboard to the bulky textbook -- are no longer the only essential instruments of education.

We know this intuitively. That's because broadband and connected devices are changing every aspect of our lives. So many social spaces are now virtual. Plus, the combined power of mobility and cloud computing means we can take content with us wherever we go.

All of this change simply does not stop at the school doors. So if we are smart, we will let it in, wrestle with its potential, and do good things. Because doing anything else will not prepare our students for the world they live in and will deny them the digital skills they need to compete.

The good news is that we have a program that can help put classrooms across the country on course for digital age learning in the new year. It's called E-Rate. But to do this, we need a better and stronger E-Rate for the future -- call it E-Rate 2.0.

E-Rate is the nation's largest education technology program. It helps schools and libraries in every state, by supporting access to modern communications and the Internet.

The E-Rate program was launched nearly two decades ago, when the Internet was known as the "Information Superhighway" and President Bill Clinton was in the White House. The program was the bipartisan brainchild of Senator Jay Rockefeller, Senator Olympia Snowe, and then Congressman, now Senator Ed Markey. It is run by the agency where I work, the Federal Communications Commission.

Thanks to E-Rate, more than 95 percent of classrooms in this country are now connected to the Internet. While this sounds good, the challenge today is no longer connection -- it's capacity. Too many of our schools and libraries that rely on E-Rate -- often in low-income and rural communities--access the Internet at speeds as low as 3 Megabits. That means too many schools are unable to offer high-definition streaming video, take advantage of the most innovative digital teaching tools, or provide modern science, technology, engineering, and math -- STEM -- instruction.

We can fix this. The FCC started the process of upgrading the E-Rate program last summer. It refocused it on broadband capacity and streamlined the application process. This is a good start. But to take this program to the next level and truly make it modern, we need to take a fresh look at its funding for the digital age.

The E-Rate program was capped sixteen years ago at \$2.25 billion a year. That was a long time ago. It was when gas was a dollar a gallon and the price of a new home was 45 percent lower than it is today. That means E-Rate funding has not kept pace with inflation, cutting its purchasing power by as much as \$1 billion annually. Think about that. At a time when digital skills are an essential part of preparing students for the modern economy, one of our most effective programs is frozen in the age of dial-up.

The FCC is working on a proposal to right this wrong. It would raise the E-Rate cap by \$1.5 billion. That would put us on a course to have broadband-enabled Wi-Fi in all of our schools over the next five years.

We need to go for it -- because the stakes are high. Other nations are now leading the way when it comes to bringing broadband to schools. South Korea has wired all of its schools with high-capacity broadband. So has Estonia, where there is a nationwide effort to teach students as young as seven years old how to write code. Uruguay has connected nearly all of its primary and secondary schools. China, India, and Thailand are working on ways to bring one-to-one connected device learning to students through large scale purchasing at low cost. In so many ways, these countries are different than the United States. But they have students, like ours, who will be competing in a global economy -- and there is no reason to let other nations outspend us, outeducate us, and outachieve us.

So before our students file out of their classrooms and head home for the holidays, the FCC should act. Because it is within our means to choose a future where all American kids have access to digital age learning, no matter who they are, where they live, or where they go to school. It's time to be bold -- and put in place E-Rate 2.0.

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