

**REMARKS OF  
COMMISSIONER JESSICA ROSENWORCEL  
STATE EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY DIRECTORS ASSOCIATION  
BROADBAND IMPERATIVE AND THE HOMEWORK GAP  
WASHINGTON, DC  
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Good morning and thank you to Senator King and Congressman Polis for hosting us today. It's back-to-school season so it's a special treat to be here with the State Education Technology Directors Association. As an organization you have done so much good to champion access to technology for students in every state. We are grateful for your work.

You also have been responsible for a little bit of history. Back in 2012 you released your first Broadband Imperative Report. You suggested that it was high-time for the Federal Communications Commission to update the E-Rate program. You pointed out that this program—the nation's largest education technology program—was frozen in the dial-up era. It needed to be streamlined, simplified—and re-focused on high-speed service.

We took your words to heart. We worked with schools and educators across the country to develop E-Rate 2.0—which now supports broadband and Wi-Fi access in schools in every state. In fact, according to one study, 20 million more American students are connected today as a result.

Fast forward four years and you have a second Broadband Imperative Report. Your new work calls attention to digital equity in new ways—including the importance of access for all students outside of school. This is an issue that demands attention—and I believe your work here is a clarion call.

That's because today seven in ten teachers assign homework that requires Internet access. But according to data from the FCC one in three household does not have broadband service. Think about where those numbers overlap—it's what I call the Homework Gap.

According to the Pew Research Center the Homework Gap is real. There are 29 million households with school-aged children in this country—and 5 million of those households lack Internet access. According to the Speak Up survey, that means 1 in 5 students today are affected by the Homework Gap.

Think about what it means to be a student in one of those households.

Think about how getting just basic schoolwork done is hard.

I know, because in states all across the country I have talked to them. I have spoken with students in California who linger in the halls as long as they can after school just to do their work in a safe place with Internet access. I have heard from high-school athletes in New Mexico who get back late at night from their football games and sit in pitch-black darkness in the school parking lot to pick up the wireless signal they need to do their homework. I have spoken with

kids in Texas who do their schoolwork at fast food restaurants—typing their papers with fizzy drinks and a side of fries. I have spoken with girls—and this one is near and dear—who want to go on to careers in science and plead with their parents to drive them night after night to the house of a relative or friend with broadband service.

These kids are resilient. They are cobbling together whatever connectivity they can find to do their schoolwork. Their grit is impressive. But it shouldn't be this hard. And it is not just about them. It's about us. Our shared economic future depends on having a smart digital workforce. And we are shortchanging these students—and our economy as a whole—if we do not bridge the Homework Gap and close this new digital divide.

The good news is we are doing something about it. Earlier this year, the FCC updated a key program to support connections at home. Specifically, we modernized our Lifeline program to support not just telephone service, but broadband service. This simple change will help bring more broadband to low-income households with school-aged children. But significantly, we did not stop there because we also modernized the program by making sure that the devices used for Lifeline are able to access Wi-Fi signals and can even be turned into wireless hotspots. In addition, our counterparts at the Department of Housing and Urban Development launched the ConnectHome initiative, a public-private partnership designed to bring broadband service, devices, and digital literacy training to families living in low-income housing.

But here's the thing. We can't stop now. We need to do more—and I believe that more takes place at the state and local level. We need to tap into the creative efforts to bridge the Homework Gap in communities across the country—and make sure that federal policy supports these efforts. Your report calls attention to some of these local initiatives. Let me highlight three examples myself.

First, imagine you are far away from Washington, DC. Leave the marble and stone of this room on Capitol Hill behind. Picture yourself in Coachella Valley, California. It's an agricultural community bounded by the red cliffs of the San Jacinto Mountains and San Bernardino Mountains. Between the hills are fields that produce dates and citrus fruit. Many of the students in the schools are the children of migrant farm workers. The school superintendent wanted to show his students the world beyond the crops and fields nearby. He worked with the school to provide every child—every child—a tablet for use at school and home. But he found he had a problem. Students sat by his office in school every day as late as 6 PM tapping on those devices, because it was one of the only places they had to get a reliable signal to do basic homework. His students were falling into the Homework Gap. But he came up with an innovative way to get them out. He installed Wi-Fi routers on district school buses. After all, in this rural area, students often ride buses an hour just to get to school—and an hour to get home at night. With Wi-Fi on board, they can turn this ride time into connected time for homework. Even better, the school system parks these buses next to some of the most remote trailer parks in the district, leaving the routers on so the students least likely to have broadband at home have yet another way to connect. Better still, similar efforts wiring buses are underway in communities from Marengo, Illinois to Huntsville, Alabama and many other school districts in-between.

This idea came from the ground up. It developed locally. But now it's time to see how federal policy can bolster these local initiatives. In other words, let's explore how E-Rate can support connected buses and help bridge the Homework Gap in communities everywhere.

Second, imagine Las Vegas, Nevada; Topeka, Kansas; and Athens, Georgia. Three communities that could not be more different. The first is the nation's premier gambling and entertainment destination. The second is a city at the heart of the Midwest. The third is a university town. But they have something in common. These towns all saw a Homework Gap affecting their students and they decided to do something about it. In their own way, they each identified free Wi-Fi hotspots in their communities and developed directories and maps to indicate where students can safely do their homework. Some places are predictable—like the library and municipal buildings. But businesses of all stripes and sizes have pitched in to do their part. In Athens, for instance, insurance offices, hotels like Howard Johnson, and stores like Walmart have all stepped up to help out. The businesses—large and small—that are a part this effort get a colorful decal to put in the window announcing that they are safe spaces for homework. Now imagine those decals multiplying around town, and imagine the statement that makes to students. Every one of those decals says your schoolwork matters and your community supports you.

Again, this idea came from the ground up. It developed locally. But we can do our part to make sure that federal policy supports these local efforts. The Federal Communications Commission and the Department of Education should create a clearinghouse for communities seeking to develop these initiatives so we can connect them—and they can learn from one another.

Third, picture the libraries of New York City. You can start with the iconic main branch on Fifth Avenue with its marble columns, grand windows, and cavernous spaces. Next, imagine the Cherryfield, Maine library. It's a small beige colonial with green wood shutters in a town with a population of 1200 in the easternmost county in the United States. Again, what could these locations have in common? Like libraries everywhere, they are noticing more and more of their patrons come in for Internet access—especially students who lack connectivity at home. These libraries are on the front lines of the Homework Gap—and they are doing something about it. In addition to books, they are loaning out wireless hotspots. So students can take Internet access home to do their schoolwork. That small hotspot can make a big difference. It can mean the difference between keeping up in school and falling behind.

One more time—this is the kind of program that developed locally. But we need to do our part to make sure that federal policy supports this initiative—for urban areas, rural areas, and everything in between. The Library Service and Technology Act is the only federal program exclusively for libraries. It is run by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Funds from this federal program are used to support a range of statewide initiatives to support libraries and learning—and I think this kind of connectivity lending effort deserves support.

Let me end here and sum it up simply: As we wrestle with the new challenges of technology, access, and equity, local solutions deserve federal support. Cooperative policymaking between state and federal authorities is the way forward—just like it has always

been the way to tackle our hardest and most intractable problems. By working together we can bridge the Homework Gap and close the cruelest part of the digital divide. And when we do we are going to be able to turn all of our students—all of our students—into not just digital consumers but digital creators. We are going to build a better education system, a stronger economy, and a brighter future. That’s exciting—and I know you’ll be a part of it.

Thank you.