



FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION  
WASHINGTON

OFFICE OF  
THE CHAIRMAN

November 17, 2016

The Honorable Tom Udall  
United States Senate  
531 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Udall:

Thank you for your letter recognizing the important role of E-rate in helping to ensure that our nation's schools and libraries have affordable access to high-speed broadband services, and inquiring about the use of E-rate to fund Wi-Fi on school buses.

As you note in your letter, the Commission took major steps in 2014 to modernize the E-rate program. In the two E-rate Modernization Orders, we refocused support on high-speed broadband to and within schools and libraries. Refocusing the program on broadband and raising the annual E-rate cap has allowed us to fund all eligible requests over the last two funding years. Before these changes, we had lacked sufficient funding to meet the full demand for connections within schools and libraries.

You are also right to recognize that even as schools and libraries take advantage of E-rate funding to support the networks needed for one-to-one digital learning, we still face the challenge of having far too many students struggling to keep up with schoolwork because they do not have access to the Internet at home.

One part of the solution is to provide financial support for broadband services to low income families. Earlier this year the Commission modernized the Lifeline program to support broadband connectivity for low-income households, many of which include student-aged children. Our action will provide an additional means of addressing broadband adoption barriers through low-cost broadband availability for low-income consumers.

The E-rate program is also playing a role to address the challenge of broadband access for students outside of school hours. Libraries, which are eligible to receive support through the E-rate program, are the only source of free Wi-Fi in many communities. In addition, the Commission's rules allow for community use of E-rate supported school Internet access services when classes are not in session.<sup>1</sup>

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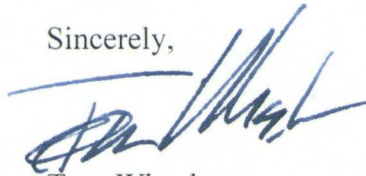
<sup>1</sup> *Schools and Libraries Universal Service Support Mechanism; A National Broadband Plan for our Future*, CC Docket No. 02-6, GN Docket No. 09-51, Order, 25 FCC Rcd 18762, 18774, para. 22 (2010) (*Schools and Libraries Sixth Report and Order*).<sup>2</sup> 47 U.S.C. §§ 254(h)(2)(A).

Traditionally, the Commission has limited E-rate support to on-campus broadband services to focus E-rate resources on schools and libraries and to remain consistent with statutory provisions. Section 254 of the Communications Act directs the Commission to establish competitively neutral rules “to enhance, to the extent technically feasible and economically reasonable, access to advanced telecommunications and information services for all public and non-profit elementary school classrooms...”<sup>2</sup>

However, just last month, the Wireline Competition Bureau sought comment on two petitions that raise issues regarding eligibility of off-campus use of E-rate supported services for educational purposes.<sup>3</sup> As you mention in your letter, a few school districts have been experimenting with Wi-Fi on school buses, and others have expressed an interest. I fully expect the record in response to the Bureau notice will touch on issues relevant to Wi-Fi on buses. With respect to Wi-Fi on buses, there are particularly interesting issues regarding technical feasibility and economic impact of the cost of equipping buses with Wi-Fi equipment and paying monthly recurring costs to provide broadband services to those buses. We will keep your office apprised of the record in this proceeding.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts on this important issue. As always, I look forward to working with you as we continue to improve this vital program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Tom Wheeler", is written over a horizontal line.

Tom Wheeler

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<sup>2</sup> 47 U.S.C. §§ 254(h)(2)(A).

<sup>3</sup> *Wireline Competition Bureau Seeks Comment on Petitions Regarding Off-Campus Use of Existing E-rate Supported Connectivity*, WC Docket No. 13-184, Public Notice, DA 16-1051 (WCD Sept. 19, 2016).