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Let's Give Our Students a Chance to Compete in the Digital Age | Commentary

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Across the nation, the powerful combination of broadband, affordable devices and increasing opportunity for cloud-based content is transforming education. Traditional teaching tools like blackboards and books are giving way to interactive digital content delivered directly to students' devices. We have moved from a world where a connected computer lab down the hall was a luxury, to one where high-speed broadband delivered directly to the classroom is a necessity. Indeed, we have graduated into the digital age.

On Thursday, the Federal Communications Commission will vote on a proposal to modernize E-Rate, our nation's largest education technology program. As a senator and FCC commissioner, we have come together to say it's time to bring E-Rate into the modern era because we believe access to high-capacity broadband is imperative for our students and our economy.

By modernizing E-Rate, every student in America will have access to the best of digital age learning, no matter who they are, where they live, or where they go to school. We can already witness the success of connectivity in places like Maine. For example, through the Maine Learning Technology Initiative, a landmark program that enables one-to-one learning and professional development statewide, students and teachers have had laptops and digital learning tools in the classroom on a one-to-one basis for more than a decade. In some of the most rural parts of the state, students are working with faculty at Vanderbilt University Medical Center to design, build, and test medical devices through an interactive distance-learning curriculum. In remote island communities, through the Outer Islands Teaching and Learning Collaborative, technology enables teachers and students in one- and two-room schools to learn and work together virtually. And in the town of Freeport, an enterprising math teacher created an online algebra curriculum that evolved into an online interactive textbook now used across the state.

Maine is not alone; similar success stories are playing out across the country. But without adequate broadband capacity, none of these innovations would be possible.

This is where E-Rate comes in. For nearly two decades, E-Rate has provided federal funding to schools and libraries in every state to support access to modern communications and the Internet because students so often rely on modern libraries to get online to complete homework assignments after school, access electronic books, and STEM learning tools. And modern libraries bring digital learning to the whole community with collaborative workspaces and resources for entrepreneurs and our next generation of innovators. The E-Rate program was born out of the bipartisan efforts in the 1996 Telecommunications Act by Senator Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia, Senator Olympia Snowe of Maine and then Congressman, now Senator Edward J. Markey of Massachusetts. Their work was visionary, and now thanks to E-Rate, virtually every school and library in the country is connected to the Internet.

And while E-Rate has provided connectivity, the program hasn't kept pace with changes in education, technology, usage and costs. Indeed, up to 80 percent of schools and libraries that rely on E-Rate — often in low-income and rural communities—have reported to the FCC that they do not have the Internet access it takes to thrive in the digital age. Annual support for the E-Rate program was capped sixteen years ago, a time when less than one percent of American households had Internet access at any speed above dial-up and when gas was a dollar a gallon.

The good news is that in July, the FCC started to modernize E-Rate and make the program more cost efficient. They provided a necessary reboot and took steps towards putting in place E-Rate 2.0. This Thursday, the FCC will vote on even further upgrades that are essential to complete the full modernization of the program ensuring rural schools and libraries benefit from access to high-speed broadband.

The change that broadband and connected devices bring to our lives does not stop at the school doors. Today, 50 percent of jobs require some digital skills. By the end of the decade, 77 percent of jobs will demand employees with such skills. The rest of the world recognizes this - nations from South Korea to Estonia to China and India are leading the way when it comes to bringing broadband and digital learning to schools. We are not doing our students any favors when we strand schools, classrooms, and libraries in the industrial era.

As jobs and capital migrate to places where workers have digital age skills, our country will fall short if our students lack access to high-speed broadband. We cannot afford to let other nations surpass us in education and achievement. We need to act decisively to equip our children and nation for tomorrow. That is why we urge the FCC to vote to modernize E-Rate and strengthen the program's ability to meet the demands of tomorrow's economy.

The future success of our students and our nation depend on it.

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