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Giving Our Kids a Chance to Compete in the Global Economy Means High-Speed Broadband Capacity

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In Mooresville, North Carolina, school may be out for summer, but the halls are not quiet. Mooresville last month highlighted Mooresville Graded School District's innovative digital age learning. Mooresville schools have dived head first into digital age learning. They have seen improved academic performance, student engagement and graduation rates--all with the help of high-speed broadband capacity. It's no wonder that so many educators and education leaders want to know how they can replicate this success in their communities. So we have come together, as the superintendent of Mooresville Graded School District and a member of the Federal Communications Commission, because we believe that what has been done in Mooresville is a model for other schools.

It starts with the Federal Communications Commission's little-known E-Rate program. Since 1998, E-Rate has provided broadband connectivity to schools and libraries nationwide. So far it boasts the success of connecting thousands of classrooms to the Internet. But while this has been a great start, the job is not done. We need to ensure that what matters is connectivity to a world where what matters is capacity. So last week, the Commission began the process of rebooting E-Rate for the 21st Century, call it E-Rate 2.0.

The Commission's action last week recognizes what Mooresville has already figured out: high-speed broadband is not just a nice amenity, it's a necessity for our students to be able to compete in the global economy. Knowledge, jobs, and capital migrate to places where workers have digital age skills. But our students need to be able to compete for today's jobs--much less the jobs of tomorrow--if we expect digital age learning to succeed. Unfortunately, a recent Harris survey found that roughly half of E-Rate schools are still connected at speeds of 10 Megabits or less. That is too slow for streaming high-definition video and not fast enough for many other digital age learning applications. This means our school administrators are facing tough choices about limited bandwidth: what grades and classrooms get it, and what programs they can run on it.

Contrast this with efforts underway in some of our world neighbors. They are pouring resources into ensuring that all students have access to high-speed broadband. Consider that in South Korea, 100 percent of schools are connected to broadband. With E-Rate 2.0, we are underway to transition all students from traditional textbooks to digital readers. In Uruguay, all primary and secondary schools have been connected and every primary school student has access to high-speed broadband. Uruguay also has revamped its secondary school science and math curricula adding robotics and coding.

We recognize that these two countries are smaller than the United States. They have different education systems. But we can still take from these examples that improving broadband learning must be a national priority if we want to give our kids a chance to compete. So we have a choice. We can wait and see where the status quo takes us and let other people choose a future where all American students have the opportunity to gain the skills they need to live, or where they go to school.

We believe it is time to compete. To do this, we need to work together with the Federal Communications Commission on E-Rate 2.0 and rally around clear broadband capacity goals for every school. Here's what we want: every school should have access to 100 Megabits and by the end of the decade, 1 Gigabit. We are rolling up our sleeves and getting ready to take the challenge to make E-Rate 2.0 available in every classroom across the country. This is broadband infrastructure, and it's essential for the next generation of students to be able to compete.

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