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

Co-authored with Dr. Mark Edwards, Superintendent of Mooresville Graded School

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 broadband capacity, Mooresville schools have dived head first into digital age learning. A year ago, Mooresville highlighted improvements in academic performance, student engagement and graduation rates—all with improved digital broadband capacity. It’s no wonder that so many educators and education leaders want to know how they can achieve those same results. So we have come together, as the superintendent of Mooresville Graded School District and the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, because we believe that what has been done in Mooresville can also be done in communities across the country.

It starts with the Federal Communications Commission’s little-known E-Rate program. Since 2001, the E-Rate program has brought high-speed broadband connectivity to schools and libraries nationwide. So far it boasts the success of efforts to connect every classroom to the Internet. But while this has been a great start, the job is not done. We need to go further. What matters is connectivity to a world where what matters is capacity. So last week, the Federal Communications 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: that broadband is not just a nice amenity, it’s a necessity for our students to be able to compete in the global economy for knowledge, jobs, and capital migrate to places where workers have digital age skills. But how do we compete for today’s jobs—much less the jobs of tomorrow—if we expect digital age learning to work at dial-up speeds? Unfortunately, a recent Harris survey found that roughly half of E-Rate schools in the US connect to the Internet at less than 1 Megabit or less. That is too slow for streaming high-definition video and not fast enough for doing real work. This means our school administrators are facing tough choices about limited bandwidth capacity—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 to ensure that in South Korea, 100 percent of schools are connected to broadband. With a national goal 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 a tablet. Uruguay also has revamped its secondary school science and math curricula adding robot science labs and digital curriculum.

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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 countries choose a future where all American students have the opportunity to gain the skills they need to succeed, or where they 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 (FCC) and rally around clear broadband capacity goals for every school. Here's what we can do: every school should have access to 100 Megabits and by the end of the decade, 1 Gigabit. We can do it in every school district in every state. We are rolling up our sleeves and getting ready to help answer the challenge to make E-Rate 2.0 available in every classroom across the country. This is big and complex infrastructure, and it's essential for the next generation of students to be able to compete in the global economy.

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