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Viewpoints: Let's upgrade our schools for the digital age

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This month, across California, 3 million students began taking practice tests in English and math that, for the first time, were taken solely on computers, online. To prepare, Sacramento schools have invested millions to upgrade broadband connections and computer systems.

Whatever results from these tests, they have energized schools to boost technology access. And that's a good thing.

Across the nation, education has moved into the digital age. Beyond testing, education technology brings amazing opportunities for teaching. The traditional teaching tools that we grew up with – blackboards and books – are being replaced with interactive digital content delivered through high-speed broadband.

This means students in urban schools can take virtual field trips to explore their state's vast parklands. It means students in rural schools can visit museums in cities far from home. It means teachers can use real-time assessment tools to figure out what students are really learning each day and tailor their lessons daily instead of waiting for test results. And it means students can access more and better science, technology, engineering and math training than ever before.

But all of this requires schools to be connected to adequate broadband capacity. Today, the Federal Communications Commission's little-known E-Rate program distributes support to schools and libraries for broadband connectivity. With that support, many Sacramento schools are connected to the Internet. Connectivity is essential, but it's not enough.

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Indeed, 80 percent of schools have reported to the FCC that they do not have the really high-speed Internet access it takes to teach in the digital age.

This merits our concern. We believe that access to adequate broadband for digital learning is not a luxury – it's a necessity for students to have a chance to compete. As jobs and capital migrate to places where workers have digital-age skills, our students will fall short without access to the broadband capacity they need for digital-age learning.

With E-Rate 2.0, every school should have broadband at speeds of 100 megabits per second to each school in the near term, and by the end of the decade, speeds of 1 gigabit. These are the speeds students need to compete. These are the speeds we need to upgrade our schools for the digital age.

So let's work on E-Rate 2.0 now, not just in Washington, but in schools in Sacramento, across California, and across the country. Because it is time for every American student, whoever they are and wherever they live, to have a chance to develop the skills they need for the global economy.

Jessica Rosenworcel is a member of the Federal Communications Commission. Kevin Johnson is mayor of Sacramento. Rep. Doris Matsui, D-Sacramento, represents California's 6th Congressional District.

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