



Durbin, Colleagues Push To Ensure All Students Can Remotely Continue Education During Coronavirus Emergency

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WASHINGTON – U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL), along with Senators Edward J. Markey (D-MA), Michael Bennet (D-CO), Brian Schatz (D-HI), and 12 of their colleagues, today called on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to temporarily allow schools to utilize E-Rate program funding to provide Wi-Fi hotspots or devices with Wi-Fi capability to students who lack internet access at home. This action would help ensure that all students can remotely continue their education during the current public health emergency. The coronavirus pandemic is highlighting the so-called “homework gap” experienced by 12 million students in the country. The gap refers to those students who do not have internet access at home and are unable to complete their homework – at a time when more than 70 percent of educators assign schoolwork that requires the internet.

“The E-Rate program is, and has been for over two decades, an essential source of funding to connect the nation’s schools and libraries to the internet,” wrote the Senators in their letter to FCC Chairman Ajit Pai. “We believe that the FCC can use its emergency powers to temporarily waive relevant E-rate program rules and allow its beneficiaries to utilize universal service funding to provide home wireless service to existing school devices and hotspots for students who lack internet access at home. This swift, immediate action would help ensure that all students can remotely continue their education during the current public health emergency.”

The E-rate program is capped at \$4 billion each year, with the FCC having already allocated about \$2 billion this year, leaving approximately half of the funding available for potential emergency action. In their letter, the Senators call on the FCC to determine how much of this funding can be spent on one-time discounts for schools seeking to

loan Wi-Fi hotspots to students who do not have internet at home, as well as those trying to equip school-distributed devices with Wi-Fi capability that can be lent out while physical classes are on hold. The Senators requested the Commission make clear to state and local institutions that undertaking any similar measures during this crisis will not affect their future E-rate eligibility.

Along with Durbin, Markey, Bennet, and Schatz, today's letter was also signed by Senators Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Kamala Harris (D-CA), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Jack Reed (D-RI), Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV), Patty Murray (D-WA), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Ron Wyden (D-OR), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Angus S. King, Jr. (I-ME), and Maggie Hassan (D-NH).

Without FCC action, the existing inequity of the "homework gap" is likely to be exacerbated by the increasing number of schools that are suspending in-person classes and have transitioned to remote learning over the internet to protect the health of students, faculty, and staff. Temporarily changing E-rate rules to allow financial support for home internet access would be of immense help to schools, students, and families at this time.

The E-Rate program, having to date provided nearly \$52 billion nationwide, is designed to connect schools and libraries to the internet, as well as ensure access for low-income students and families. Prior to E-Rate, only 14 percent of K-12 classrooms had Internet access. Today, Americans benefit from near ubiquitous deployment in schools and libraries.

Full text of the letter can be found below:

March 16, 2020

Dear Chairman Pai:

We write to urge the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to take immediate action to ensure all K-12 students have adequate home internet connectivity if their schools close due to the coronavirus pandemic. We believe that the FCC can use its emergency powers to temporarily waive relevant E-rate program rules and allow its beneficiaries to utilize universal service funding to provide home wireless service to existing school devices and hotspots for students who lack internet access at home. This swift, immediate action would help ensure that all students can remotely continue their education during the current public health emergency.

The coronavirus pandemic has shone a bright light on the "homework gap" experienced by 12 million students in this country who do not have internet access at home and are

unable to complete their homework – at a time when more than 70% of educators assign schoolwork that requires the internet. Without FCC action, this existing inequity is likely to be exacerbated by the increasing number of schools that are suspending in-person classes and have transitioned to remote learning over the internet to protect the health of students, faculty, and staff. Temporarily changing E-rate rules to allow financial support for home internet access would be of immense help to schools, students, and families at this time.

The E-rate program is capped at \$4 billion each year. We understand that the FCC has already allocated about \$2 billion this year, leaving approximately half of the funding available for potential emergency action. We strongly urge you to consider how much of this funding can be spent on one-time discounts for schools seeking to loan Wi-Fi hotspots to students who do not have internet at home, as well as those trying to equip school-distributed devices with Wi-Fi capability that can be lent out while physical classes are on hold. We also request that you make it clear to state and local institutions that undertaking any similar measures during this crisis will not affect their future E-rate eligibility.

The E-Rate program is, and has been for over two decades, an essential source of funding to connect the nation's schools and libraries to the internet. These institutions are vital outlets to help connect all Americans, including millions of students and Americans in both rural and urban parts of the country. As the coronavirus pandemic develops, this program offers a solution that may help mitigate the impact on our most vulnerable families. We call on you to use the FCC's emergency powers to narrow the homework gap during this crisis, and we look forward to finding a long-term solution when the coronavirus subsides.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. Due to the closure of many Senate offices during the coronavirus outbreak, physical signatures are unavailable. The listed senators have asked to be signatories to this letter.