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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

Bridging the Digital Divide in Education
Tuesday, March 30, 2021 | 11 a.m.

Hosted by State Representatives
Jordan Harris, Pam Snyder, Peter Schweyer, Morgan Cephas

11 A.M. **PANEL 1**

Hillary Linardopoulos, Legislative Representative | Philadelphia Federation of Teachers

Lawrence Jones, CEO | Richard Allen Prep

Dr. Robin Cooper | Philadelphia Principals Union

11:30 A.M. **PANEL 2**

Dr. Lucretia Brown, Deputy Superintendent for Equity, Accountability and School Improvement | Allentown School District

Rebecca Bodnar, Principal | Central Elementary School, Allentown School District

Taylor Burnfield, Student | Jefferson-Morgan High School (Greene County)

12 P.M. **PANEL 3**

John Callahan, Chief Advocacy Officer | Pennsylvania School Boards Association

Dr. Erich May, Superintendent | Brookville Area School District

Dr. Amy Arcurio, Superintendent | Greater Johnstown School District

Todd Beatty, Superintendent | Northern Bedford County School District

12:30 P.M. **PANEL 4**

Joseph Schlingbaum, Attorney Advisor | Federal Communications Commission

Glenn Miller, Deputy Secretary & Commissioner for Libraries | PA Department of Education

Judd Pittman, Special Consultant to the Secretary of Education for STEM | PA Department of Education

Hillary Linardopoulos
Legislative Representative
Philadelphia Federation of Teachers

House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing:
Bridging the Digital Divide
March 30, 2021

PHILADELPHIA
FEDERATION of TEACHERS

Contact: HillaryL@pft.org

PHILADELPHIA
FEDERATION of TEACHERS

Hillary Linardopoulos, Legislative Representative
Testimony for House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing: Bridging the Digital Divide
March 30, 2021

Thank you Chairman Bizzarro, Representatives Cephas, Snyder, Harris, Schweyer, and the entire House Democratic Policy Committee for holding this important hearing on "Bridging the Digital Divide." I'm Hillary Linardopoulos, Legislative Representative for the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. At a time when remote learning continues for the majority of our students, this hearing is a timely and important opportunity to share some of our insight into virtual learning and the challenges our students and educators have faced throughout the pandemic.

In March 2020, in just a couple of days, educators and students had to upend years of practice and reinvent an entire school system, amidst a global pandemic the likes of which none of us has ever experienced. As we move forward, towards an expanded return to school buildings, let's make very clear that schools have been open this whole time--it's buildings that have been closed.

Educators have undertaken creative and innovative ways to teach through a screen. We've seen culinary teachers engage in virtual cooking challenges with their students. Science teachers holding experiments in their kitchens. Teachers travelling to deliver learning kits to each of their families. But none of this can replace in person learning, and it's why this union has been working diligently to ensure that a safe reopening of school buildings is possible.

A very significant issue throughout this crisis has been technology access. Technology and reliable internet access has served as an essential bridge between school and home during the pandemic. We appreciate and applaud the City's PHLConnectEd program, launched a year ago to address the issue of connectivity for many of our students and has enabled more than 15,000 internet connections. Since its launch, the program has expanded to include additional families for eligibility.

However, with the program's free internet scheduled to expire in June 2022, it is critical that we think now about ensuring that internet access and reliable connectivity is a permanent and easily accessible tool for students and families. Further, a one-time loan of a Chromebook or other device is not a long term solution. A plan needs to be in place to ensure that technology is kept up to date. Technology access should include up-to-date devices as well as reliable internet access.
The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated so many of the inequities that have been deeply rooted in our society for so long. As the District scrambled to provide access to the technology needed to make

remote learning accessible for students, it was a rush and a push that did not take place in wealthier, whiter school districts.

As we saw students and families lined up to receive a District issued device weeks into the pandemic, it should be lost on no one that in the surrounding school districts, students were able to seamlessly transition into virtual classrooms, as 1:1 technology programs are commonplace in many of the suburban districts.

In fact, a 2020 Carnegie Mellon and MIT study demonstrated the effect that both race and poverty have on internet access. In an article summarizing the study, *The Journal* author Dian Schaffhauser writes that the "research project quantified how much less likely low-income and non-white children and youth were to have access to the internet than their peers. As the researchers wrote, 'The empirical insights highlight how the digital divide might exacerbate existing educational inequalities in the face of school closures due to social distancing.'"

This inequity is pervasive in so many aspects of our society and our education system. And the digital divide is a clear example of how, for too long, students of color and students experiencing poverty have been shortchanged time and again. The return to in person learning does not mean that our attention should shift from addressing the digital divide. It is one facet of a deeply inequitable system that we need to continue to address in a holistic, long lasting way.

As we move towards allocating resources on a state level, from both within the state coffers and from the Federal government, these conversations and real plans to move forward will be key. Access to the internet and technology will be critical to help students continue to navigate their education. A majority of students are still learning fully virtually, and those in person learning in person part-time. Further, social distancing requirements make the use of a computer in class even more necessary.

Equitable access to the internet and to updated technology should be a given for every student, and it's not. Now is the time to make concrete plans to ensure that this is a reality for all of our young people. We can look to funding in the American Rescue Plan, such as the $7 Billion available to assist schools and libraries to bridge the 'Homework Gap' during the pandemic. And we can, and must, look to a long-term systemic investment in ensuring that our students have the tools and resources they need to thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to join this important hearing today. I have attached several articles and studies for reference, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

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ARP 'Homework Gap' Funding:

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Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee
Testimony of Lawrence F. Jones, Jr., M.Ed.
Chief Executive Officer
Richard Allen Preparator Charter School, Inc.

Presented this 30th day of March 2021

(4 Pages of Testimony)

Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee
Testimony of Lawrence F. Jones, Jr., M.Ed.
March 30, 2021

Good Morning. First, let me start by saying "Thank you" to Chairman Bizzarro, Representative Harris, and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee for holding today's hearing and for including me in this dialogue regarding the digital divide. My name is Lawrence Jones, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Richard Allen Preparatory Charter School. We are a middle school serving grades 5-8 located in Southwest Philadelphia. I am also a founding member of the African American Charter Schools Coalition and am the Vice President of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools. I am here today in my capacity as a school leader and on behalf of our employees and - most importantly - on behalf of our students and their families.

Our most vulnerable community members have been disproportionately affected by the virus, school closures, and the resulting shift to virtual and hybrid learning. The school closure of last Spring placed a spotlight on the inequities and gaps in educational resources and experiences among Pennsylvania's children. These resource disparities have been exacerbated by the pandemic but were present for years prior to COVID-19 and school closures. The digital divide is one such area of resource disparity, with far-reaching implications for students with limited or lesser access to technology.

Any examination of the digital divide in the United States begins with looking into poverty and inequitable distribution of resources. At the most simplistic level, we see that poverty limits people from obtaining, accessing, and/or using the newest technologies, whether in their home life or in schools. Poorer communities also have less robust technology infrastructures, making access difficult and in many ways impossible. But there are also cultural and environmental barriers that cause the digital divide to widen. Consider each of these contributors in relation to the events subsequent to Governor Wolf's March 13, 2020 school closure in order to get a picture of what the digital divide looked like on the ground.

On March 13, 2020, our school enacted an emergency school closure to prepare for what we believed would be a temporary (two-week) possible interruption of the school year. Our staff believed developing two weeks' worth of engaging at-home work packets would be more than sufficient for any temporary closure. . We were wrong. We quickly pivoted to preparing for virtual learning. We had to figure out how many students needed actual devices and then how many needed internet access. Our school did not have the resources to provide every student with a laptop or tablet at the time of Wolf's school closure. Accordingly, we had to prioritize who could receive the limited devices we had. Fortunately, we were able to secure additional Chromebook devices.

In Philadelphia, there was a rush to provide devices and internet access for students in need. The School District of Philadelphia secured emergency funding for approximately 50,000 Chromebooks and charter schools received philanthropic support to allow for almost 15,000 devices to be deployed in addition to current inventory. After the acquisition, the safe distribution of Chromebooks was the next challenge. At our school, we provided Chromebooks to serve 40 percent of our students via a drive-thru/walk-up distribution system. However, not all students in need were able to receive a device. For example, siblings without access to a device were relegated to one device per household due to our inventory. This of course impacted student learning and engagement levels. The remainder of our students had access

to the internet and a device in place at their homes. However, several of these students were using a device shared with siblings or a parent. Many were using smartphones to engage in the educational process, a practice that is less than optimal. This was an emergency response that was different from many school settings in the Commonwealth where one-to-one programs were in place or the majority of students had adequate access to technology at home. Those schools had only to worry about shifting their instructional programming and scheduling to a remote model (a task that also faced less affluent schools and districts). The good news is that with the summer to plan and acquire technology, the digital divide could be all but eliminated, right? Wrong.

While getting Chromebooks to every student and ensuring internet access was a task completed by many schools and we saw the digital divide decrease, there was more work to do. For instance, using the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey to provide a current look at access to computers and the internet among households with school-age children across the country researchers found that the rate of limited internet access fell from 42 percent of households to 31 percent. However, the digital divide is about more than Chromebooks, internet access, and bandwidth. Simply being able to access instructional content does not mean that a child can successfully engage with or navigate through the content.

In schools with greater access to technology, online learning and the use of technology was second nature in many ways. The concept of digital natives and digital immigrants is prevalent in K-12 education. Schools, where technology is utilized at school and at home as a basic tool beyond entertainment and communication purposes, create digital natives. Schools with limited access are more or less educational digital immigrants who are new to the world of online education and utilizing technology as an educational tool. The impact is not only pertinent for the students served by schools but by the teachers and parents as well. Online learning is a different experience for children. Navigating the learning platforms, accessing information, and even submitting assignments are new challenges for many that are far different than placing a proper heading on a sheet of paper and dropping the assignment on a desk. There is a learning curve for being able to successfully engage with online content that caused students to lose additional learning time.

For teachers, shifting to a Zoom-based virtual classroom was simply not just recording a regular lesson to video. Online instruction involves a solid grasp of the learning platforms, different pacing, new ways of monitoring students, and a different approach to engagement. Furthermore, developing a true semblance of a classroom community is a far different experience when conducted online. Planning and collaboration with colleagues became easier in many ways due to video conferencing, but actual planning of new lessons was a difficult task for many, especially those who had not been trained in their teacher preparation for this type of instruction. Schools that were already on par with the technology curve had already tackled many of these challenges and teachers were prepared and trained to some extent.

The inequitable and uneven distribution of technical support for schools also added to difficulties in teachers and students engaging with online education before, during, and most likely after the pandemic. Intermediate Units in many areas supported school districts with training, technical support, information, and coordination of services. Approximately half of Pennsylvania's charter schools received none of these supports, as Philadelphia's Intermediate Unit has historically and notoriously not provided anywhere near the level of services that other Intermediate Units offer. Again, the digital divide is more than just computers and cables. The services that are

provided or withheld contribute to the digital divide in Pennsylvania. Thankfully, the charter community came together seeking support from our cyber charter colleagues, philanthropic support, and one another.

To support both students and teachers, parents needed to be familiar with online learning tools and methodologies as well. We've experienced parents who found it difficult to assist their children in logging in and were also unfamiliar with learning platforms. Inequities in access led to differences in familiarity and greatly impacts engagement in online learning. In more affluent school districts, we often see that parents have advanced degrees and are more familiar with the technology. These parents were better prepared on March 13, 2020, to aid their children in adapting to online learning, increasing the likeliness of student success.

The causes and effects of the digital divide are well documented and we could dedicate days of testimony discussing both. How to bridge the divide by implementing policies and practices that will ensure equity in access is the concern today. The most basic solution to ending the digital divide is to end poverty. Absent that solution, developing funding and resource distribution systems that have the primary focus of bringing equity to public education is the next step. In short, the state needs to fund students based upon need rather than the type of public school they attend or location. While simplistically stated, this solution is one that will require significant political and social capital to enact. There are more school-based solutions that could assist in diminishing the impact of the digital divide.

Providing 1-to-1 programming, in which every child in a school is assigned their own device (laptop, Chromebook, tablet, etc…), is a start. However, research suggests that providing devices in school has a limited effect on learning gains if the student cannot take the device home and has access to high-speed internet. Most school devices are designed for students to save work and access learning programs from a shared server. Discrepancies in technology access would continue to support the current digital divide. Schools could utilize devices that allow students to save work locally and choose instructional programs that can be downloaded to devices that students can take home and access.

Securing after-school programming with access to the internet can assist students in increasing access to meaningful technology. After-school programs with open learning labs and internet access can be used to ensure students can access work outside of the classroom. Some districts have even looked at equipping school buses with mobile hotspot devices to create a study hall environment when children are being transported to and from school. Partnerships with local community centers and (like libraries, YMCA/YWCAs and Boys and Girls Clubs) organizations can also increase access. While much more complicated due to the need for equipment and having to account for transient families, developing a program to provide free- and reduced-priced internet access in a manner similar to free- and reduced-price lunches could be a valuable endeavor.

The pandemic saw public charter schools and school districts enact significant programmatic changes in a matter of weeks when many times similar shifts would take years. A large part of this time decrease was the willingness of the PA Department of Education and the General Assembly to relax certain bureaucratic restrictions, creating an environment where schools could be creative, innovative, and responsive to student needs rather than adult mandates. This form of mandate relief has been something that many educational leaders have advocated for in the past. Consider the fact that charter schools were created as a reform model that would be free from many bureaucratic restrictions. Over the years, the amount of

oversight and reporting in charter schools has increased significantly. A different approach could be to model mandate relief for districts after those initially created for charter schools (an idea that Governor Wolf has embraced in parts of this charter school reform proposal - like decreasing the percentage of certified teachers in school districts to 75 percent).

It is also necessary for our Commonwealth to embrace cyber instruction and recognize that this form of instruction is here to stay. In fact, there is currently open-source programming allowing students to take college courses online for free from institutions like Stanford University. My alma mater, Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia is offering a new online program with reduced tuition designed to increase the number of Black men who complete their post-secondary degrees. Unfortunately, a major flaw in PA's Charter School law prohibits public charter schools from offering dual enrollment opportunities to their students. I would encourage members of this Committee to support Rep. Marshall's legislation (HB358) to correct this flaw.

As more online opportunities become available, the digital divide will result in children without access to technology losing out on educational opportunities and falling further behind socially and economically. Our ability to make online education a priority and work collaboratively with various stakeholders - like district leaders, charter leaders, cyber charter leaders, parents, and community groups - to make technology accessible to all will determine the success of our public education system for decades to come.

In closing, I want to again thank you for the opportunity to testify today on this important topic. I'm happy to make myself available to the committee to answer any questions you may have regarding public education.

Thank you.

Robin P.Cooper, Ed.D.
President & Principal Officer
Teamsters Local 502: CASA

Equity Through Connectivity

The main focus of today's leadership should be on eliminating barriers that impact both student and teachers, and instructional outcomes. These are the barriers that maintain and increase the divide between the rich and the poor in this country. For far too long, marginalized communities, including people of color, low-income individuals, English Language Learners, people with disabilities, and populations experiencing homelessness are among those students who are most likely to lack access to high-speed internet. The impact of the digital divide during the pandemic on these students has been significant- and continues to worsen. There is and has always been a cry for a proper funding formula as it relates to the students in the Philadelphia School District, a district that everyone recognizes as being woefully underfunded.

For years, educators in the City of Philadelphia have had to work within the confines of limited budgets, huge overheads, and political decisions which have little to do with educating our young leaders of tomorrow. Instead of a focus on teaching and learning the focus for the last several years has been on removing lead, mold and asbestos and trying to figure out how to keep our children safe in schools that should be some of safest havens in the city. These environmental hazards were coupled with the pandemic of the century that crippled a nation and sent millions of children home to learn remotely, without access to quality resources that in this day and age should be universally available to all students regardless of schools, school districts, and/or zip codes.

A Pew Research report concluded that 35% of students in our nation lack access to broadband. The report stated that the quality of remote learning is decided by several factors:

- access to quality reliable internet
- quality of learning and of teaching
- home support and level of engagement

In addition, let's not forget that during the pandemic there is an increase in risk factors of the struggle for health care, nutritious food, and other basic needs in our low-income communities.

We all know that one of the most important factors in ensuring student success is guaranteeing that every student in Philadelphia has access to quality and reliable internet. We see this as a part of our fight for racial justice, equity, and inclusion in Philadelphia. Students whose families are struggling at this time should have equal access to quality education. They should not be excluded because of economic reasons.

We recoiled in horror as our students' parents were told to drive to their school's or district headquarters' parking lots to sit in the parking lots to access the district's WIFI in order for them to assist in helping their children to complete assignments. Yes, you heard

correctly. Parents were to park their cars there for four-six hours a day, every day, to engage in remote learning. We watched in disbelief as COMCAST gave limited bandwidth to needy children, not the broadband access necessary for appropriate remote instruction.

During the Summer of 2020, Teamsters Local 502: CASA rallied at Comcast headquarters requesting that the wealthy conglomerate give back to the various community neighborhoods whose generational families have assisted over the last three decades in building the dynasty into what it is today. We rallied and asked for what should have been a given for our inner-city students: equal access to high quality, high speed internet. Not being afforded broadband access like their suburban counterparts injured many of our students before the pandemic and paralyzed many more once schools closed their doors and retreated into the world of remote learning. Although Comcast pulled through for our district families, it came a little too late as some of our students still were not able to access the internet due to building structural element, limited technology support and/or lack of awareness of school and community resources. As a result some of our students are going back to school with poor communication skills, poor social skills and limited ability to research needed information to advance in a technologically changing society.

The impact of the digital divide easily widened during the pandemic and now we have to have a strategic plan in place to ensure that technology is given the priority that it deserves.

The most critical question for us today:
What effect will virtual learning, during this pandemic, have on the education of our students across our Commonwealth of PA?

- The digital divide in education is the gap between those with sufficient knowledge of, and access to technology, and those without.
- Why this divide is so critical to recognize and address, is that the digital split not only impacts the future of young minds, but also reduces the chance of having a great career.
- What we are seeing is the difference between equality and equity.

The PA House of Representatives has been an incredible source of financial assistance to Philadelphia schools for many years. We have appreciated your support through many initiatives, funding streams, and grants. Now we are asking for a dedicated funding stream to address the technological inequities in the School District of Philadelphia. Teamsters Local 502: CASA is calling on the PA House of Representatives to bring about true “Equity Through Connectivity” to all of Philadelphia’s students, especially during the ongoing Covid 19 crisis.

Robin P.Cooper, Ed.D.
President & Principal Officer
Teamsters Local 502: CASA

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

of the Allentown School District

Delivered by
Dr. Lucretia Brown
Deputy Superintendent
Equity, Accountability, and School Improvement

For a Public Hearing on Closing the Digital Divide

Before the Democratic House Policy Committee

Tuesday, March 30 at 11 AM

Thank you, Chairman Bizzarro, Representative Schweyer, and distinguished members of the Committee, for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Shortly before he passed away, U.S. Congressman John Lewis described "access to the Internet" as "the civil rights issue of the 21st Century." As we live through the current global pandemic, this salient statement becomes legitimized through the experiences of educators, students and families within urban settings served by public school systems.

Civil rights challenges are not new to the Allentown School District. Most recently, however, it is digital equity or the digital divide that has emerged as prominent amidst the global pandemic. As the district moved to shut down on March 12, after a potential COVID -19 exposure was reported, some would say the veil of ignorance was removed. Within the coming weeks as administrators and staff moved to shift a district, the size of a small city to a remote learning instructional model, all aspects of class, privilege and acute poverty, were magnified ten-fold. In zip codes where our most impoverished students lived, principals and administrators scrambled to distribute the limited devices on hand.

Within ASD, the student population is majority minority, and many identify as low-income households. COVID 19 exposed the desperate state of the digital divide present throughout the district. ASD is a public-school system of more than 16,000 students, twenty percent of whom are identified as English Learners, students with individual educational plans, or both, respectively. What is more, the overall district poverty rate within the district is so high that the district is designated as a community eligible partner district. This means all students receive free lunch.

At the district level, members of our equity and accountability team worked to identify federal funding that could be reallocated to purchase devices for our students knowing we forgo other supplemental instructional items in the pipeline to be purchased for our students. Simultaneously, we pushed out a technology survey for families to complete in hopes of ascertaining a clear picture of just how large a technology gap we faced. This survey was critical in helping us understand the breadth of the digital divide in our district, which we define as a lack of access to a personal device and/or high-speed internet access. As our families navigated the global pandemic, our administrative staff worked overtime making hard copy learning packets to support our students while we worked to acquire devices. What technology our building principals had on hand, we strategically distributed by household and student need. This meant while we couldn't promise a device to each student; we committed to providing a device per household. All of this while prioritizing our students with IEPs and English learners.

As survey result came in the harsh reality we knew existed was quantified. Based on a 79% response rate, the survey revealed that approximately 6,500 students did not have a device at home or had to share the household device with other family members Another 2,000 indicated the only device they had access to was a smartphone.

As school districts across the nation completely shut down indefinitely, local, and regional partners convened to discuss how to address the digital divide within ASD. As those efforts moved from conceptual to practical, several community agencies found ways to expand existing partnerships with ASD to include philanthropic, technology, and data collection and analysis support. Specifically, partnerships with the United Way, Lehigh Valley Planning Commission, Unidos, the Century Fund, and the Allentown School District Foundation were used to reduce the effect s of the digital divide exacerbated by COVID-19.

In the fall of 2020, approximately 6 months after ASD reallocated more than one million dollars to purchase devices for students in need, a UCLA report confirmed that nearly 1 in 3 American households had limited computer or internet access. It also found that Black and Hispanic households were 1.3-1.4 times more likely to experience limited access to technology as compared to non-Hispanic Whites. This finding confirmed a similar occurrence with the ASD community. Based on the same technology survey given at the beginning of the ASD COVID-19 closure, more than 10,000 students were found to have limited or no access to high-speed internet.

Again, local community partners galvanized to support the cause, and were able to acquire 1000 T-Mobile Wi-Fi hotspots to ASD students. Perhaps most profound, was the award to ASD from the T-Mobile Project10Million. Based on district level enrollment and poverty factors, ASD qualified for unlimited high-speed internet access for more than 2,000 families. Lastly, the District was able to allocate funds from the f Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to acquire an additional 3000 T-Mobile Wi-Fi hot spots.

Indeed, COVID-19 thrust such deep inequities in communities like Allentown into the spotlight. It forced our district and our families to grapple with the lack of technology and internet access in their homes, which became virtual schools overnight as the virus spread throughout our neighborhoods.

Conversely, the digital divide and the lack of broadband adoption in rural areas rightly gets plenty of ink in states like Pennsylvania. Whale urban areas generally have access to broadband, some data point to a digital ‘access’ divide THREE times as large in our urban areas. Here, the divide is characterized not by a lack of infrastructure but by a lack of family resources that especially afflicts low-income families and communities of color.

From a social justice perspective, the digital divide issue is particularly acute within communities of color, just as the prevalence of the COVID 19 virus. Black and Hispanic/Latinx families, on average, are a decade behind in broadband access. Four times more Black Americans say they have poor tech connectivity. Personal computers/laptops are 20 to 30 percent less prevalent in Black and Hispanic households. Specifically, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies reports that "30% of Black households with one or more children 17 or younger lack high-speed home internet (over 3.25 million Black children live in these households)." On top of that, low-income households are less likely to own a computer or laptop and, if they have one, there may be just one, needing to be shared among family members.

This is exactly what we encountered at the onset of the pandemic in the Allentown School District. Remote learning amid COVID-19 was a massive pivot for us. Our district - the third-largest school system in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania - operates 22 schools and educates more than 16,000 students. Eighty-three percent of our student population is economically disadvantaged, 15 percent of our students require English as a Second language instruction, and 18 percent of our students receive special education services.

Taking steps to ensure that our student's needs were met required a historic investment in new technology. The district has continued with remote learning since the start of the school year and will maintain a virtual campus to meet the diverse needs of our student population. Through grants and reallocation of district funds, ASD has spent more than $5 million dollars to date to create a promote digital equity throughout our classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Looking beyond COVID-19, it is imperative that students and families within the Allentown School District, must have access to devices as well as high-speed internet access. More importantly access to technology (divide and internet) are essential parts of 21st century literacy. As a result, cities and school district across nation are united in efforts to expand access to high-speed internet access via broadband agendas. Telecommunications companies like Comcast and T-Mobile have also taken up the digital divide cause. Yet, more localized efforts are required and seem to be mutually beneficial through urban municipalities.

According to a story in the Bloomberg Report, February 2021, municipal broadband through municipal networks could be a viable solution. Without discussing the "red tape" or other factors that either support or oppose the option, it is important to note several cities have moved in this direction. Cities such as Chattanooga, San Antonio, not only used existing

infrastructure to expand broadband access, San Antonio used approximately $27 million of it CARES Act funds to expand broadband access to students in high needs areas. Additional funding at the federal and state level proved beneficial in reducing the digital equity gap in this example.

Whether broadband or wireless initiatives are developed to reduce the digital divide in urban communities, a united coalition must lead the charge. It is imperative that, state, local, and community agencies partner with, and on the behalf of, cities where public school systems are charged with providing a high-quality education to students. state and local leadership must be used levers for change.

Although ASD is not fully 1:1 through strategic partnership, reallocation of funding, and an entire community supporting the cause the digital divide has been significantly reduced. However, digital equity must be the normative standard and the crisis response. We hope that the ASD story serves as a catalyst for digital equity support at the state and local levels.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to testify today.

Testimony to the PA House of Representatives Policy Committee for Chairman Bizzarro

Bridging The Digital Divide

Presented by

Rebecca Bodnar, Principal

Central Elementary School

March 30, 2021

Good Morning Representatives Cephas, Snyder, Harris and Schweyer. My name is Rebecca Bodnar and I am the Principal at Central Elementary School in the Allentown School District. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of all administrators and school entity who have experienced the digital divide and its true effects on our students once the pandemic hit last year.

Access for ALL

It's Wednesday, March 11th, and I am reviewing our plans for our In-Service day on Friday the 13th. The news just broke about schools shutting down due to COVID. Students and staff will not be returning to school until further notice and are not permitted back in the building at this time. A week or so later, ASD announces that students and staff are going to pivot to on-line learning. In any other district, this may have been a simple ask but for our district, it meant we had to move mountains. Surrounding school district like Parkland and East Penn seamlessly transitioned within one week and other school districts like Bethlehem and Easton were fully online within two weeks. How can we be on different playing fields when we are all from essentially the same block?

One to (N)one

Central had roughly 200 devices to share among 700 students. With the news of all learning transitioning to on-line content, I immediately thought: How were we going to acquire and distribute technology to all of our students? What if students do not have internet at home? What about the families who have more than one child and need high speed internet to keep up?

One to one technology was always a goal of ours and over the years I was able to purchase roughly 50 devices a year but as soon as I had more in the building, the older ones were being phased out or could not keep up with demands of the on-line programs we were using. We were nowhere close to being one-to-one and now we needed to find a way to ensure all of our students had access to the tools they needed to participate in school.

Unfortunately, due to only being able to lend one device per household, we had a very limited number of students participating in instruction last Spring. As you can imagine, this caused a snowball effect heading into this school year. If students were able to access online content, they were primarily completing enrichment programs. Central had approximately 25% of our students logging onto zoom sessions to participate in lessons and instruction which means 75% of our students were going to miss being taught critical elementary standards for three and a half months.

As our neighboring schools were logging on daily to partake in virtual lessons and continuing to progress through grade level content, we were left working on how to acquire additional devices and work with families to set schedules so siblings could share the one device per household.

Pre-pandemic

Last year, pre-pandemic, about 10% of my students accessed on-line programs at home. Majority of our work was done in school and if something needed to be completed at home, our teachers ensured it did not require technology or internet access. Of course, there was the local Library but that is not a reasonable ask of 700 students.

Thankfully, Allentown School District was able to secure funding and devices to help Central distribute at least one device per student this Fall. Last Spring and we were able to give out 391 devices and over 200 hotspots. Through the district's work all summer, we distributed 680 devices and over 400 hotspots this year. Many of our students were using iphones or ipads at home to complete work which was not ideal. Once we had additional devices to distribute, 95% of my students needed to borrow a device. 95% out of 715 students. That was a very sobering realization that we need to do better to help level the playing field.

Internet is not a Luxury

Politicians and school officials have been talking about equity among students for years and yet we have not taken the time to consider equity between school districts. Children do not decide where they are born, what zip code they reside in or which district they attend. Providing equitable opportunities for all students in the commonwealth must become a priority.

Internet access is no longer a luxury, it is a necessity and needs to be treated as such. Everything we do is on a cell phone, tablet or laptop. I am not talking about dial up or low speed 11Mpbs (megabits per second), I am referring to at least 100Mbps or faster. We need to ensure that all of our students, including those in shelters and daycares, have the access they need to complete their work.

Recommendations for Investment in Our Students

1. Tax Credit

I am proposing that we instate a tax credit, similar to the one which you can claim for working from home with these additional three criteria:

1. Does the child attend a Title I designated school?
2. Is the child residing in a shelter or currently displaced?

3. What is the household income and does it fall on or below the poverty line (income based will assist rural and urban school families)?

2. Sliding Scale Access

We need to leverage access and insist internet providers offer a sliding scale for monthly access charges. There seems be no cap on the monthly charges and every year, it seems to increase. I understand there are costs associated with fiber-optic internet but we need to simultaneously be mindful that not everyone can afford covering the cost of new lines being added or updated. The cost of internet service in the Lehigh Valley, start from $29.99 a month starting at 10 MBPS, a very minimal service. Why couldn't our service providers work with families who have students in school to do their part to ensure they are helping to pave the way for our future leaders?

Conclusion

There has to be a better way to ensure all students have access to the same technological opportunities as their neighboring schools. Knowing that high speed internet access can provide a wealth of educational opportunities both as necessities and enrichment, and we are not doing everything we can to help secure it for our families, we are doing a true disservice to our students. I hope that you consider creating a tax break for our Title I schools and neighboring communities who fall on or below the poverty line.

BROOKVILLE AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

104 Jenks Street, Brookville, PA 15825
Website: www.basd.us

Dr. Erich G. May, Superintendent (814) 849-1100 Fax: (814) 849-6842
Ellen K. Neyman, Business Administrator (814) 849-1103 Fax: (814) 849-1133

March 30, 2021

Honorable Members of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives:

I am here today at the request of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association to speak on behalf of my students and staff, Jefferson County, and rural Pennsylvania. My testimony today is intended to be entirely nonpartisan.

While I understand that our focus here is instructional technology and access to the internet, I would be remiss if I did not at least mention two great threats to public education. Special education costs have risen at a rate that far exceeds increases in funding. In counties like ours, cyber charter costs have also skyrocketed. We need the legislature to take a hard look at special education funding and charter school tuition.

The cyber charter problem takes me to today's topics. We had to develop remote learning capacity or we were going to lose even more students to cyber charters. In our increasingly competitive industry, public schools were already losing students to charter schools. Once the pandemic hit, cyber charters took full advantage of the situation – and the limitations imposed on traditional districts by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

It is not just charter funding reform that is needed. We need the legislature to extend to public schools the same flexibility that has been granted to cyber charters with regard to instructional time. If charters can count remote learning days as instructional days, then public schools should be allowed to do the same – without being limited to five Flexible Instructional Days.

At Brookville Area School District, remote learning capacity has been central to our success during the pandemic. When I came to Brookville not two years ago, we were a relatively low tech district. When the pandemic hit, we provided planned instruction through project based learning – last spring our students chose two projects from a menu of options. That was a big hit and highly engaging for students and families.

But coming into the fall, we knew we would need to get back to providing all of our students with all of their courses, and we knew there was a chance that we would be in school and then out of school and then in and out. So we purchased Chromebooks and Chrome tablets for all 1,400 of our students. We did that with CARES Act funding.

While buying devices, we also purchased a learning management system to house our courses and content. There again, we paid for that LMS, Brightspace, with CARES Act funding. We also used federal funding to purchase insurance for the devices and some other software like a device roster and a plagiarism checker. In all, we spent over $300,000 in grant funding on new instructional technology – tech that we will have to pay to maintain.

But it was money well spent. For one thing, it allowed us to give every family a choice between returning to the building or staying home online with our teachers in our courses in our learning management system. We gave families an Educational Pathways Selection Card over the summer, 85 percent said they would send their children to school, and come August, they did. Since then, some students have returned to the buildings, and we are currently serving almost 90 percent of our students in person in the buildings.

Our new remote learning capacity allows us to keep that other 10 percent on roster with our teachers in our courses, rather than assigning them to a third party like Edgenuity or Odysseyware or losing them to a cyber school like Reach or Agora. We are convinced that students who stayed with us, even in this distance learning arrangement, are getting a better education than they would with a third party vendor or cyber charter.

It is worth noting, too, that keeping kids on roster with our teachers in our courses has made it easier for them to return to the district. It is an open border of sorts. In the same vein, our new remote learning capacity has made it easier for our students and families to deal with the quarantines that have resulted from close contact tracing. When students have to stay home for two weeks, we can easily move them online, and when they come out of quarantine, they transition easily back to the classroom.

This new remote learning capacity was made possible, in part, by federal funding, and we are grateful for that support. We are also grateful for the patience of parents and students who gave us time to get better at distance learning. After all, we put into place in just a few months what cyber charters have had twenty years to develop.

I am also appreciative of the faculty whose flexibility has made this possible. Over the summer, they received training on distance learning and the LMS. Then they put their courses and content online, and all this year, they have been juggling two sets of students – those in the classroom and those in Brightspace.

While we have had great success in this area, challenges remain. We distributed hot spots to students whose families lack internet, but those devices only work where cell phone service is available. You cannot use a hot spot in a dead zone. So some of our students still lack internet. They can save work on their Chromebooks and work offline when they are home, but we are almost at the point where going without internet is like going without electricity.

I bought a farm in Sigel last summer, just eight miles from my office in Brookville, and we do not have cable on the farm. We rely on a phone line for internet, and the signal is not as strong or quick as it would be with broadband. A weak signal adversely impacts students and teachers – and not only during a pandemic but also during other local emergencies.

And rural broadband is not just about instruction and education; it is also about economic opportunity and development. All kinds of people have been allowed to – or required to – telecommute during this pandemic, and all kinds of businesses are being built on that model. We need broadband in counties like ours not just for the sake of our learners but also to attract prospective employers.

There has been a lot of talk about equity over the last year, and all this talk about equity – in our industry and in the media – is usually framed in terms of racial and gender equity. But the conversation about achieving a more just and fair society should not omit rural populations that lack access to cultural capital and educational and economic opportunities.

Today I tried to describe our successes with remote learning and some of the challenges that remain. Let me add, finally, that these obstacles are the purview of government. We did not wait for private companies and free markets to build roads and highways; nor should we wait for Comcast to run the cable.

Thank you for your attention to these important issues and thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of my students and staff, Jefferson County and rural Pennsylvania.

Sincerely,

Erich May, Ed.D.
Superintendent

GREATER Johnstown SCHOOL DISTRICT

1091 Broad Street, Johnstown, PA 15906
Superintendent of Schools (814) 533-5670 ext. 1560 Fax Number (814) 533-5068

Re: PA House Democratic Policy Hearing on Bridging the Digital Divide

From: Amy Arcurio, Superintendent

The Greater Johnstown School District is a small urban district of around 3,000 students located in the city of Johnstown, PA. We are a city that has felt the decline of our once thriving population when the city boasted a healthy economy. Both steel mills and coal mines once provided thousands of employment opportunities for our residents. The 1980s and 90s provided the backdrop for the "brain drain" as folks left our city like so many other communities, that are now a remnant of their former self. A steady population decrease and an overstock of public housing has led to a highly transient population in our schools where we transition approximately 800 students in and out each school year.

The district has felt the strains of being sorely underfunded for years. With a very small fund balance and most of our annual budget going to employee salaries and benefits, we had a very limited technology budget. Our annual technology plans provided less than half of the necessary student laptops or chromebooks for a potential one-to-one opportunity. Technology was housed at school and shared throughout the district. The closure of our schools in March 2020 left us with one option for our students to continue learning. We provided paper and pencil enrichment and reinforcement packets to our students for the remainder of the 19-20 school year. No new learning was achieved during this time.

A spring telephone survey showed that 37% of our families did not have a device at home. It also provided the data that 42% of our students, or nearly half, did not have access to the internet. The first round of ESSER funds was used to plan for the fall and ensure we had enough devices for our students. We also planned to provide access points or hotspots throughout our city.

Chromebooks were ordered and routers were installed in all HUD housing units. Community partners opened their guest internet sites, which provided over thirty free internet connections to our students.
As summer continued we were faced with the new challenge that our ordered devices were not going to arrive over the summer due to an embargo as well as an overall shortage of chromebooks. Our next step was to complete a census of our families to determine how many families we had in order to provide one device to each family. We learned that we had 1,700 families and about 1,200 devices on hand. We began the distribution of one device per family in August 2020. We remained hopeful that our survey results were accurate and that some families had a device. Knowing our chromebooks were eventually going to arrive, we gave out our supply of devices.

Community COVID transmission rates continued to climb throughout the fall and early winter. Our students ability to access the internet remained a significant challenge during the changes from hybrid to full remote learning. No consistent access to the internet meant no synchronous learning for our students. Allowing students to learn in the evening, on weekends, and whenever they could log on to WIFI became the learning option for our children.

In December, our chromebooks arrived and we were able to ensure every student in our district had access to a device but we could not provide internet access to all. The local internet company provided monthly savings packages to our families, but the cost of the internet to families living in deep poverty, was not a savings or even a viable option.

In February, a national company that we had engaged with throughout the pandemic was finally able to provide us with 500 individual MIFI devices for some of our students who needed access to the internet. With a special education population of nearly 600 students, we made internet access the priority to those students.

We currently have around 650 full-time virtual learners in our district. Families remain concerned regarding the transmission of the COVID virus. Our county has reported about 30% of its residents being vaccinated. Our employees were able to take part in the facilitation of the vaccination through the local Intermediate Unit. We currently offer the option for hybrid learning with four days of face to face instruction at our middle and high school. Starting quarter four, our elementary school will offer five days of in-person learning. We know our students are best served by being at school where their many needs are met.

The digital divide continues to place our students and their families at a disadvantage. We fully recognized that the lack of technology was a major concern prior to the

pandemic. We now are faced with the challenges of lost learning on top of the numerous challenges our students, growing up in poverty, already face. With over 500 students residing in the community housing properties, the access to internet remains a missing link. Families are not only missing access to education, but are missing access to physical health care, mental health care, employment opportunities, and connection to the world. The social determinants of health rely on a community's ability to access these resources and until access to the internet is a common utility, communities like mine will continue to struggle.

House Democratic Policy Hearing on Bridging the Digital Divide

Northern Bedford County School District

Todd Beatty, Superintendent

March 30, 2021

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to be part of the hearing today. NBC is a rural district with 890 students K-12 and encompasses 113 geographical square miles. In addition to traditional coursework, we also have four Career and Technical (CTC) programs. Last year, NBC was one of 8 schools to be recognized by PDE/CTE with the Career and Technical Education Excellence Award. To qualify for a CTE Excellence Award, 75 percent of students at a school must score advanced on an end-of-program technical assessment. In addition, we routinely score in the high eighties to mid-nineties on the Keystone exams and average well above the state on the PSSA tests.

I give this information to set the stage for the rest of the information that will be provided. The past year in brick-and-mortar public education has been like no other year. When schools were ordered closed, we only had 1:1 computers for students in grades 6-12. Between May and June of 2020, we relied on parents having technology of their own for students to use in grades K-4 to grade 5 and teachers provided enrichment through the SeeSaw program. For families that did not have any technology, we were able to provide devices. Families that could not get internet service or did not like using technology everyday were provided paper packets of work to be picked up at the school on a weekly basis. Students in grades 6-12 were 1:1 and used Canvas and Google Classrooms depending on the grade/subject matter. We purchased technology with grant money to have the elementary 1:1 and received the devices in late September. For the 20-21 school year, grades 6-12 live streamed classes and grades K4-5 continued to use an upgraded version of SeeSaw.

We saw it impractical for students to be in front of a computer screen all day so we limited the live streaming to 10-15 minutes and the remaining time was for independent work or asking questions. With the younger students, short video clips were recorded for students to watch when it worked for the families.

I do not consider remote learning a best practice in any form; however, felt the process we used was the best under the circumstances. We believe there are many shortcomings to remote learning. The Northern Bedford County School District has approximately 25% cell service and 10-15% of residents cannot get internet service. A combined lack of educational routine and structure in many homes along with the difficulty parents had working and then attempting to help their children was impractical. The more children in the family, the more this issue was compounded. We also dealt with the challenges of sharing bandwidth between parents working from home and students trying to keep up with school requirements. I had conversations with teachers that found it difficult as a parent to teach their own children at home. Teachers found it difficult while working remotely to read their students' body language and truly gauge the learning taking place each day.

I realize this hearing is about remote learning, but I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to emphatically state the absolute best place for a child to be educationally is in front of their teacher for live instruction. It allows a teacher to read each child's body language, allows for consistency in structure and routines, and allows for the social and emotional growth of children that was sorely missed throughout the past year even though we had students in person as much as possible. I feel so strongly about students being in front of teachers that even though we were approved for Flexible Instruction Days (FID), this district intends to use the traditional snow make up days allotted in the school calendar and only use FID as a last resort to avoid extending the end of the school year.

Thank you for your time and I trust I was able to provide some insight into the struggles and concerns of remote learning during the past year.

Federal Communications Commission

E-RATE PROGRAM AND EMERGENCY CONNECTIVITY FUND

MARCH 2021

Agenda

- E-Rate Program
  - E-Rate Principles
  - E-Rate Application Process
  - COVID-19 Response
  - Resources
- Emergency Connectivity Fund

E-Rate Principles

Access for Schools and Libraries: Congress mandated, in 1996 Telecommunications Act, that the FCC enhance access to broadband and telecommunications services in elementary and secondary schools and libraries.

Regulatory Overview

- Eligible schools and libraries (as well as consortia of eligible schools and libraries) may apply for USF discounts on the following services:
  - *Category One*: Services that support connectivity to schools and libraries (including special construction).
  - *Category Two*: Services that support connectivity within schools and libraries (aka internal connections).
- Annual Funding Cap: $3.9 billion per funding year, adjusted annually for inflation. (approximately $4.277 billion in FY2021)
- Timeline: Commitments are made by funding year (FY), which runs from July 1 through the following June 30.

E-Rate Principles

Eligibility

Schools:

- Must provide elementary and/or secondary education, as determined under state or Tribal law.
- Cannot have an endowment exceeding $50 million.
- Cannot operate as a for-profit business.

Libraries:

- Must be eligible for assistance from their state library agency under Library Services Technology Act (LSTA).
- Budget must be separate from any schools.
- Cannot operate as a for-profit business.

Consortia:

- Consortia that comprise of eligible schools and libraries may also apply for E-Rate program funding.

E-Rate Discounts

Range: 20 percent to 90 percent of the costs of eligible services and equipment; schools/libraries must pay remainder

Levels: Dependent on poverty level, the urban/rural status of the school district, and on the category of service requested.

Percent of Students Eligible for NSLP	Category One Discount Rate		Category Two Discount Rate	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Less than 1%	20%	25%	20%	25%
1% - 19%	40%	50%	40%	50%
20% - 34%	50%	60%	50%	60%
35% - 49%	60%	70%	60%	70%
50% - 74%	80%	80%	80%	80%
75% - 100%	90%	90%	85%	85%

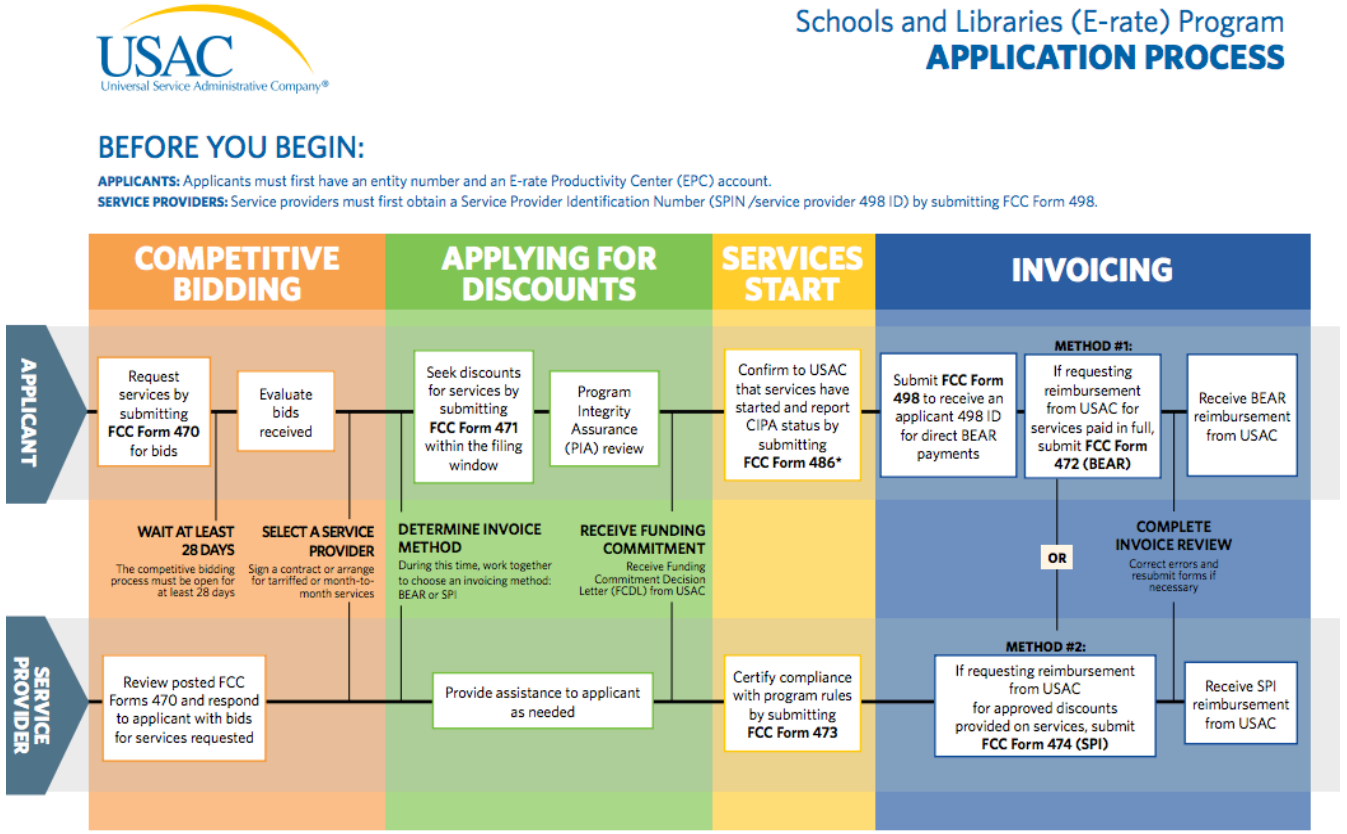
E-Rate Application Process

Competitive Bidding:

An eligible school or library identifies the eligible services and equipment it needs and submits a request for competitive bids to USAC. USAC notifies providers of the bidding opportunity by posting the request on its website.

Application for Funding:

After reviewing bids, and selecting the most cost-effective offering, the school or library may submit a funding request to USAC during the applicable funding year's filing window. USAC issues a funding commitment pursuant to its review of the request.



Federal Communications Commission

E-Rate Services and Equipment

Delivery and Installation of Services

- **Recurring services** (e.g., monthly internet access) must be delivered during the funding year.

- **Non-recurring services** (e.g., equipment installations) can generally be installed through September 30 following the close of the funding year.

    - The September 30 deadline can sometimes be extended, either automatically or by request.

    - Delivery and installation can sometimes start before the funding year.

COVID-19 Response

The FCC is working to help schools and libraries that participate in the E-Rate program as they implement remote learning in response to the pandemic by providing additional funding for bandwidth needed to meet unexpected demands, waiving several program rules, and extending deadlines.

- **Emergency Connectivity Fund PN:** Sought comment on implementing the recently appropriated $7.171 billion Emergency Connectivity Fund to help schools & libraries provide devices & connectivity to students, school staff, and library patrons during the pandemic at locations other than schools and libraries (comments: Apr. 5/replies: Apr. 23) (DA 21-317, rel. Mar. 16, 2021)

- **Remote Learning PN:** Sought comment on petitions for emergency relief to support remote learning during the pandemic (comments: Feb. 16/replies: Feb. 23) (DA 21-98, rel. Feb. 1, 2021)

- **Second E-Rate Filing Window:** Opened second filing window for schools so they can purchase additional bandwidth for this academic year to address needs resulting from the increasing shift to 1:1 student-to-device ratios in classrooms, live streaming of classroom instruction to students at home, and expanding use of cloud-based educational tools and platforms (DA 20-1091, rel. Sept. 16, 2020).

COVID-19 Response (continued)

- **Gift Rules Waiver:** Waived gift rules in the E-Rate (and Rural Health Care) programs to make it easier for broadband providers to support remote learning efforts during the pandemic (DA 20-290, rel. Mar. 18, 2020), extended through Dec. 31, 2020 (DA 20-1021, rel. Sept. 3, 2020), extended through June 30, 2021 (DA 20-1479).

- **Community Use Clarification:** Clarified that schools and libraries that are closed due to the COVID-19 outbreak are permitted to allow the general public to use E-Rate-supported Wi-Fi networks while on the school's campus or library property (DA 20-324, rel. Mar. 23, 2020).

- **Filing Deadlines Extended:** Extended key service implementation and filing deadlines to provide relief to E-Rate program participants (DA 20-845, rel. Aug. 6, 2020; DA 20-598, rel. June 8, 2020; DA 20-364, rel. Apr. 1, 2020; DA 20-273, rel. Mar. 13, 2020).

- **Outreach regarding Remote Learning Funds:** Coordinated with Department of Education and Institute of Museum and Library Services on COVID-related resources and outreach.

Resources

Further information on the E-Rate Program and the Commission's COVID-19 Response can be found at:

Federal Communications Commission

- https://www.fcc.gov/general/e-rate-schools-libraries-usf-program
- https://www.fcc.gov/coronavirus

Universal Service Administrative Company

- https://www.usac.org/e-rate/
- https://www.usac.org/about/usacs-covid-19-response/

The Emergency Connectivity Fund

Overview

- The **$7.171 billion Emergency Connectivity Fund** was created as part of the recently enacted American Rescue Plan Act of 2021
- By **May 10, 2021**, the FCC must adopt rules governing the distribution of funding to eligible schools and libraries.
- Funding must be used for the purchase of eligible equipment and/or advanced telecommunications and information services for use by students, school staff, and library patrons at locations other than a school or library, during the COVID-19 emergency period.

The Emergency Connectivity Fund (cont.)

- **Eligibility:**
  - **Eligible schools or libraries** include elementary and secondary schools, and libraries and include Tribal schools or libraries.
  - **Eligible equipment** is defined as Wi-Fi hotspots, Modems, Routers, Devices that combine a modem and router, and Connected devices (e.g., laptop computers, tablet computers, or similar end-user devices that are capable of connecting to advanced telecommunications and information services).
  - **Eligible services** include advanced telecommunications and information services (broadband services).

The Emergency Connectivity Fund (cont.)

- **Timing:** The COVID-19 emergency period is defined as beginning on the date the Secretary of HHS declared a public health emergency as a result of COVID-19, with the end date calculated based on a declaration by the Secretary of HHS that a public health emergency no longer exists.

- **Reimbursements:** 100% reimbursement of the costs associated with eligible equipment and services, so long as the FCC determines the costs are reasonable and funding is available through the Emergency Connectivity Fund**.**

- **Administration:** The Act provides that the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC) will administer the Emergency Connectivity Fund.

The Emergency Connectivity Fund (cont.)

- On March 16, 2021, the Wireline Competition Bureau released a Public Notice (DA 21-317) seeking comment on various proposals and the rules that should be adopted for the Emergency Connectivity Fund.
  - Comments are due April 5, 2021
  - Reply comments are due April 23, 2021
- We encourage all stakeholders to comment.
- Interested parties can contact Molly O'Conor at Molly.OConor@fcc.gov for more information.

- Thank You!

TESTIMONY ON
BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Presented to the House Democratic Policy Committee

By
Melissa Gates
Government Relations Associate

March 30, 2021

The County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP) is a non-profit, non-partisan association providing legislative, educational, insurance, research, technology, and similar services on behalf of all of the commonwealth's 67 counties.

We appreciate the opportunity offer our remarks on the importance of expanding broadband access to all of Pennsylvania's residents. Counties are a key partner with the state and federal government in solving the technological divide, and we appreciate the continued attention of the General Assembly on this issue.

Broadband expansion was a top priority for counties in both 2019 and 2020, long before the current distanced, digitally-reliant environment in which we find ourselves. We recognize that high-quality communication infrastructure is essential to our communities and critical for education, employment, economic development and the provision of efficient and effective services to our residents. High speed and reliable internet access have become a necessity for all Pennsylvanians, regardless of where in the commonwealth they are located. Rural, urban and suburban communities alike cannot continue to wait for infrastructure that is critical to our economic vitality and our personal quality of life. Without broadband, a significant number of Pennsylvanians are missing access to opportunities, while rural areas find it harder and harder to attract and retain residents and encourage business development.

Every citizen in the commonwealth deserves the access to broadband. Without broadband access opportunities are missed; access to broadband increases access to healthcare, education, and business. Whether it is a farmer seeking advice from an extension office, a senior studying to graduate, students and parents navigating virtual education, or an individual seeking counseling, all benefit from broadband access. The void in broadband is eroding cornerstones to healthy growth for thousands of citizens. Through the pandemic, communities had to adapt and develop new alternatives to access education, work and telehealth through broadband, further exposing the lack of availability and the need of Pennsylvanians for high speed and reliable internet access. Some individuals get to experience continuity and healthy growth, while others wait and potentially whither. Broadband, or the lack of it, is creating an arbitrary divide based on geography and economics. To create a viable and vibrant future with a healthy and educated public, high speed broadband access throughout Pennsylvania is necessary.

The need for access to broadband continues to be echoed at all levels of government as one of the biggest hurdles of the 21st century. Counties have been engaging in their own local solutions to provide internet connectivity for their residents, especially in rural areas, and better bandwidth capacity statewide. In many rural parts of the state, internet service providers have to build the infrastructure over long distances for few customers, which is often cost-prohibitive. County initiatives piloted throughout the state include leveraging of existing structures, investment in dark fiber and development of centralized community location hotspots. From innovators to investors and funders, counties convene stakeholders and act as support systems to give our communities this basic need.

Additionally, many counties utilized some of the County Relief Block Grant dollars from the

federal CARES Act to develop, deploy and expand broadband. As society transitions into a more digital, physically distanced world, broadband will continue to remain a key focus of budget and legislative conversations at the state and federal levels.

Counties understand how critical this issue is and so we keep searching for solutions. For instance, Pennsylvania's counties have partnered with the National Association of Counties (NACo) to assess broadband download and upload speeds to better provide data about broadband coverage across not only the commonwealth, but the entire nation. NACo's Understanding the True State of Connectivity in America synthesizes information from the TestIT app, which measured broadband upload and download speed information to create more accurate broadband speed maps nationwide.

Data from more than 78% of the nation's counties was collected over a year, and showed 76% of counties averaged cellular connections below the FCC's minimum of 25 mbps download and 3 mbps upload, and 59.6% of counties were experiencing fixed-wireless internet below the FCC minimum. In addition, more than 65% of counties were experiencing the internet at speeds slower than the levels reported by the industry.

The report also focuses on what the lack of connectivity and discrepancies in service mean for different aspects of life including challenges to economic development, education, workforce development, health and human services, justice and public safety, and agriculture. It further identifies reasons for gaps in coverage, including incomplete and inaccurate data, prohibition of local solutions and the high cost of deployment. While this report does not solve the broadband issue, it is one step in the path to solving the issue of access to broadband.

CCAP supports moves toward closing the technology access gap and looks forward to working with the General Assembly on issues related to accessing technology more broadly. As we continue to discuss the road forward on deployment of high-speed broadband across the commonwealth, counties must have a seat at the table as a partner in these discussions. The commonwealth must also develop partnerships among federal, state and local government, as well as the private sector, that can help to deploy the resources and data needed to make meaningful progress on rural broadband expansion. The state can also learn from the best practices and innovative ideas, such as regional cooperative models, that have seen success in Pennsylvania and throughout the country. This issue cannot be tackled unless government and industry partner together to make broadband availability a reality.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments. We would be pleased to follow up on any questions you may have.