

**Prepared Remarks of FCC Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn
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Good afternoon, and thank you, Mick, for that wonderful introduction. I am proud to stand before a group so committed to educational excellence. It's through the work of individuals like you, at school districts and institutions around the country, that we can see the difference being made in the every day lives of our nation's students. You strive to increase educational opportunities through digital access for students, and as a result, your dedication and hard work are helping our nation truly address the digital divide.

As you know, the significance of broadband in our everyday lives has grown tremendously over recent years. In 2000, only eight million Americans had high-speed Internet at home. Today, more than 200 million do. Through broadband, Americans can obtain better educational opportunities, health care can be provided in areas where it currently isn't offered, and energy can be delivered and consumed more efficiently. Broadband is essential for driving innovation and economic growth in our nation.

In order for all Americans to obtain the benefits of high-speed Internet, it must be made available to them, they must be able to afford it, and they need to know how to use it. Currently, data available to the Commission indicates that 14 to 24 million Americans do not have broadband available to them where they live. Moreover, one-third of American households have not adopted broadband. Of those, over a third say they haven't done so because it's too costly. Either they cannot afford the computer equipment, or they cannot afford the monthly payments for high-speed Internet service.

The most significant recommendations for making broadband available to all Americans is the ongoing work of the Commission to overhaul the Universal Service Fund to address both the availability of the Internet, as well as the affordability of it for low-income families. However, until we have completed our work on the reforms of the Universal Service Fund, many citizens will continue to rely on two key institutions for Internet access—their local schools and area libraries. But it wasn't that long ago that students in the best public schools had little access to Internet resources. Students crammed into small computer labs, or crowded around library computer terminals for a chance to take advantage of the significant research opportunities the Internet provided. Fortunately, in 1996, when Congress revised the Communications Act, it had the foresight to direct the Commission to promote telecommunications and advanced services, like the Internet, by allocating monies from the Universal Service Fund to provide for discounted services to eligible schools and libraries.

The Schools and Libraries Universal Service program, also known as the E-rate program, has been instrumental in providing affordable telecommunications and Internet services to schools and libraries for over a decade. The program has achieved remarkable success—97 percent of American schools have broadband connections and nearly all schools and public libraries now have at least basic Internet access.

Despite the accomplishments achieved by the E-rate program, Commission staff recommended upgrading and modernizing the program in the National Broadband Plan released last March to improve digital connectivity to schools and libraries. The Commission reviewed those recommendations and approved an Order in September of last year to do just that. For those of you that may not be aware of FCC process—we accomplished this task *really fast*.

Let me highlight a few of the improvements we made to the E-rate program. First, we made it easier for schools and libraries to get the *fastest Internet speeds* for the *lowest prices* by increasing their service options. The FCC's data showed that 78% of the E-Rate recipients said they needed faster Internet access, so we amended our rules to allow participants to use E-rate funds to connect to the Internet in the most cost-effective way possible, including via unused fiber optic lines already deployed across the country and through existing state, regional, and local networks.

Schools and libraries can now provide students and communities with cutting-edge connectivity, while at the same time saving millions of dollars by bypassing alternative and more costly service options. For example, one Ohio school district reported that it will now be able to increase its capacity by 750% while also reducing its costs. Schools and libraries have the potential to accomplish more with less, allowing program dollars to be stretched even further. It also allows schools and libraries to use the services of and benefit from the broadband projects that were funded by Congress through the Recovery Act, ensuring those government grants support as many digital users as possible.

The Commission also made permanent its temporary waiver to permit E-Rate funded schools to open their doors after regular school hours, so that the surrounding communities can use those E-rate funded services without the schools incurring any funding penalties. This flexibility is a significant step to achieving the National Broadband Plan's goal of connecting anchor institutions in every community, to affordable 1 gigabit per second broadband. Schools can now strive to become hubs of connectivity in their communities.

The Commission also indexed the current funding cap on the E-rate program to inflation, so that the program can more fully meet the needs of students and communities. Since 1997, when the E-rate program started, inflation has raised the costs of the services supported by 30 percent. But the program has remained capped at \$2.25 billion. In fact, the National Broadband Plan estimated that the E-rate program's annual spending had fallen by about \$650 million in inflation-adjusted dollars since the program began, impacting its effectiveness in providing needed services to schools and libraries. Therefore, the Plan wisely recommended an inflation-adjusted index on the E-rate program, which the Commission adopted, to enable continued support for high speed broadband and internal connections for schools and libraries in the future. The Commission also extended E-rate benefits to residential schools that serve populations with unique challenges, such as schools on Tribal lands, schools for children with physical, cognitive, or behavioral difficulties, and schools designed for children with medical needs.

Overall, the modifications the Commission made to the E-rate program will provide schools and libraries with more flexibility in providing services to students, staff, and their local communities. Our revisions to the program grant schools and libraries more choices in terms of how to meet their connectivity needs and service goals. The National Broadband Plan is about increasing opportunities for bringing broadband to local communities. The Commission's E-Rate changes will do just that, and local communities and citizens will benefit. I fully expect that as a result we will see further shrinking of the digital divide.

We have all heard the stories of students desperately trying to finish a research paper at their local library before their time limit on the computer expires or before the library closes. I recently had one story relayed to me of a young man who surreptitiously stayed in the library after hours to finish his course work. And I have witnessed up close and personal the queue for a computer at a public library so that citizens could use the Internet to apply for a job, check their e-mail, or research a health issue. As such, I firmly believe that we must continue to support the efforts of schools and libraries which play a key role in providing digital connections to those who cannot afford broadband services at home.

These anchor institutions are essential to sustaining crucial services to our neediest residents. Yet, schools and libraries have been greatly impacted by local budgetary strains due to the economy. As you are intimately aware, schools and libraries have had to reduce staffing. Some libraries have been forced to reduce their operating hours. More often than not, schools and libraries are the only local source of high-speed Internet for low-income and minority communities. The Commission should do all it can to provide flexibility for these anchor institutions to address their citizens' broadband needs. In doing so, we should consider the impact it will have on the surrounding community, other broadband projects that have been funded either through the Universal Service Fund or the broadband grants that resulted from the Recovery Act. For example, we have several pending requests for funding flexibility for unique programs to provide broadband via Wi-Fi connections within and around schools and libraries. We should assess the needs for those programs and determine their sustainability and the impact such service would have on our other programs.

No matter how successful policies to promote broadband adoption at home may be, we must continue to help schools and libraries be successful digital anchor institutions. The Internet is too powerful a tool not to be promoted and improved in our nation's classrooms and libraries. All of you have seen the wonders of this technology become a larger part of each child's daily curriculum. Teachers have integrated their lectures with content from the Internet. Students are using the Internet to supplement their education in the classroom. Students and teachers don't rely solely on their textbooks anymore. Through the Internet, children who would never have the opportunity to travel to another city, much less another country, can experience the sights and sounds and learn about distant places.

In addition, digital connections have the potential to save local schools time and money. Through distance learning, schools can offer classes where they don't have enough students to justify hiring a teacher. Accordingly, school districts can aggregate their resources to meet their collective needs. Teachers and parents can more easily communicate with one another through e-mail and websites. The work you do every day supports these functions, and I am certain so much more. I applaud your efforts and ask that you continue to help us at the FCC find new and more efficient ways to increase educational success throughout the country.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. I hope you enjoy the rest of the Summit.