

TOM UDALL
NEW MEXICO

531 HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510
(202) 224-6621
(202) 228-3261 FAX
<http://tomudall.senate.gov>

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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October 3, 2016

The Honorable Tom Wheeler
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Wheeler:

I am writing to urge the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to take additional steps to close the “homework gap,” the digital divide facing too many students from rural areas and low-income families in New Mexico and across the nation.

Today almost all American schools and libraries have internet access thanks in part to sustained investments over the last 20 years from E-Rate, the nation’s largest educational technology initiative. In 2014, the Commission significantly upgraded E-Rate to help schools meet growing demand for bandwidth and support innovative digital learning technologies in the classroom. By overcoming geographic distances, such broadband infrastructure can be particularly helpful for rural schools and libraries in my home state of New Mexico.

Yet a digital divide persists for school children across the country. According to a Pew Research Center analysis of Census Bureau data, five million American households with school-age children do not have high-speed internet service at home.¹ While seven in 10 teachers assign homework that requires internet access, one in three households across the country do not have broadband. This “homework gap” especially impacts students from low-income families living and rural areas. Broadband should help create educational opportunities for these children, not a new barrier to their success at school.

In some small towns and Native American communities in New Mexico, students who do not have internet access at home go to school or library parking lots to access free Wi-Fi after hours. When you visited Acoma Pueblo with me in 2014, we heard how the librarian keeps the Wi-Fi signal on after hours for this purpose. At Hatch Valley High School, FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel and I met young students who cannot complete and submit some homework assignments from home since they do not have internet access or rely on mobile broadband service with data usage caps. So they come to the school parking lot or the local Pic Quik convenience store where free Wi-Fi is available.

¹ See Horrigan, John. “The numbers behind the broadband ‘homework gap’.” Pew Research Center. *available at*: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/20/the-numbers-behind-the-broadband-homework-gap/>, accessed 9-26-16.

STATE OFFICES:

ALBUQUERQUE:
400 GOLD AVENUE SW
SUITE 300
ALBUQUERQUE, NM 87102
505-346-6791

CARLSBAD:
102 W HAGERMAN
SUITE A
CARLSBAD, NM 88220
575-234-0366

LAS CRUCES:
201 N. CHURCH STREET
SUITE 201B
LAS CRUCES, NM 88001
575-526-5475

PORTALES:
100 SOUTH AVENUE A
SUITE 113
PORTALES, NM 88130
575-356-6811

SANTA FE:
120 SOUTH FEDERAL PLACE
SUITE 302
SANTA FE, NM 87501
505-988-6511

A Hatch Valley High School student explained to me that his varsity football team travels over an hour by school bus to away games. When he gets back, he sometime does his homework in the parking lot so he can access the school's Wi-Fi signal. He suggested making Wi-Fi available on school buses. This strikes me as a bright idea to help extend internet access to students while they travel to and from school. A handful of school districts are already experimenting with this "Wi-Fi on wheels." Since schools cannot currently use E-Rate to support such service, however, it is unlikely to reach rural schools in my home state of New Mexico.

I therefore call on the Commission to use its existing authority to allow E-Rate to support school bus Wi-Fi service in a manner that is both technically feasible and economically reasonable. If the Commission does not believe that such an initiative is possible under its current authority, I will seek legislation to provide the flexibility to do so. Students in New Mexico and across the country deserve our best efforts to remove barriers to their success in school.

Thank you for your consideration and reply. I look forward to working with you on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Tom Udall
United States Senator