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POLICY

SAGE SALVO

Expanding Broadband Access Through the E-Rate Program

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The FCC should expand discounted broadband rates under the E-Rate program to residences of underserved K–12 students. Funds for this program expansion can be drawn from the Digital Equity Act under the new 2021 Infrastructure Law, which earmarked $2.75 billion in funding to help close the digital divide.[1]

Furthermore, the FCC should work with the US Department of Education to give students' residences access to discounted broadband services via a new **Community Youth Broadband Technician (CYBT) program**. Under this program, youths in disadvantaged communities are hired to help with broadband setup and installation. Expanding the E-Rate program through the CYBT program would help close the digital divide and provide quality broadband access to more students across the country.

PROBLEM

The biggest obstacle facing the continuity of public education during the pandemic has been the lack of student at-home access to quality and reliable broadband. As of July 2021, an estimated 12 million students lacked any form of internet access, making it almost impossible for them to attend remote schooling consistently.[2] Even as students return to school, issues with broadband access have negative implications on their performance, given the emergence of other ed tech platforms that students without quality broadband access are unable to utilize.

Current government attempts at closing the digital divide suffer from a lack of awareness of broadband subsidy programs. Despite the federal government subsidizing broadband services during the pandemic through its Emergency Broadband Benefits program, takeup rates were low due to a lack of awareness of program eligibility. For example, an estimated 40 percent of eligible New York City families had no knowledge of the broadband subsidy programs available to them.[3]

The FCC's current E-Rate program provides discounted broadband services to schools and libraries. The program is not currently set up to support K–12 students from these schools who need broadband access at home. In addition, the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC) under FCC provides support to E-Rate applicants through Helping Applicants to Succeed (HATS). HATS provides targeted assistance to schools and libraries applying for the E-Rate discount, including application assistance. Oftentimes this takes the form of phone or video conferencing calls.

RECOMMENDATION

To help close the digital divide, the Federal Communications Commission should:

1. Expand its E-Rate program to cover the residences of underserved K–12 students;

2. In partnership with the US Department of Education, facilitate the development of a Community Youth Broadband Technician (CYBT) program that would pair youth technicians with fellow students to install broadband access. To enable this, the FCC would need to mandate that internet service providers (ISPs) and telecommunications companies train and manage youth technicians; and

3. Reorganize the HATS (Helping Applicants to Succeed) telephone support line into a billing support hotline for CYBT client families via an E-Rate @Residence app.

(1) Expand the E-Rate program for underserved K–12 students. The FCC's current E-Rate program, which provides discounted broadband services to schools and libraries, should extend the same rates

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to students at home. This program will expand broadband access for K–12 students, and will also allow the CYBT program (as further described below) to be put into place.

The FCC has the authority to expand the E–Rate program to the residences of students through the newly passed Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. Title V of the new Act includes a provision on Broadband Affordability that gives the FCC the regulatory latitude to expand the E–Rate broadband discounted fee structure to households in need of affordable broadband services.[4]

(2) Facilitate the development of the CYBT program by mandating that ISPs and telecommunications companies train and manage youth technicians. To facilitate adoption of broadband in disadvantaged communities, the FCC and US Department of Education should run a CYBT program that trains high school youth to set up broadband services in their classmates' homes. More specifically, these youth technicians will be responsible for installation, configuration, and testing of equipment for broadband access subsidized by the E–Rate program. These technicians will establish connectivity between equipment and end–user devices (such as laptops, tablets, smart TVs, etc.) at their clients' premises and will carry out troubleshooting in order to identify, localize, and rectify cable, connectivity, and equipment faults. Lastly, these technicians would also be responsible for raising their clients' awareness of the new E–Rate discount.

Although the funding for the training and supervision should be allocated through the US Department of Education, the ISPs and telecommunications companies must be supportive of training and managing the youth technicians. The local ISPs will need to work directly with the high schools to identify the number of youth technicians needed. To do this, the FCC will need to mandate the local managerial oversight of these youth technicians with management funding coming from the Department of Education. For more details on setting up this program, please see the accompanying operational plan.

(c) Reorganize the HATS telephone support line into a billing support hotline for CYBT client families via an E–Rate @Residence app. Finally, the FCC should reformat the HATS support hotline into a strictly billing support hotline. Currently, the HATS line supports

several different types of school customer inquiries, including help-ing applicants understand why they've been denied funding and providing applicants with training and resources to eliminate appli-cation errors. The FCC should streamline the HATS hotline to focus on the most critical functions and turn it into a strictly Billing Sup-port hotline for schools, libraries, and E-Rate households.

Once the HATS hotline is reorganized, the FCC and US Department of Education can create an E-Rate @Residence App that allows local families to request tech support from CYBTs. This app would con-nect to the HATS hotline for billing support when needed. A demo of the E-Rate @Residence app can be found here.

A case study of EducationSuperHighway, a nonprofit that has con-nected over 43 million students to quality internet in classrooms, has implemented three core components for successfully closing broadband service gaps:

1. High-touch engagement with clients to understand their needs;

2. A direct service program that allows clients to meet with techni-cal specialists when needed; and

3. Self-support tools that allow clients to troubleshoot issues them-selves when necessary.[5]

The proposal outlined in this policy brief includes all three of these core components. First, schools are able to directly request the num-ber of CYBTs they need for their district, thus ensuring that there is *high-touch engagement.* These CYBTs can be trained to provide families with information about broadband subsidies that might be available to them, hence improving any awareness gaps that may exist. CYBTs also directly service students' homes, ensuring there is a *direct service* component. Lastly, clients can directly use the E-Rate @Residence app to request support services or to resolve billing in-quiries, illustrating the use of *self-service tools.*

This multipronged approach will help close the digital divide and allow students across the country to meaningfully engage in remote learning opportunities.

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ENDNOTES

1   Yvette Scorse, "NDIA Celebrates the Senate Passage of the Infrastructure Bill," National Digital Inclusion Alliance, August 10, 2021, https://www.digitalinclusion.org/blog/2021/08/10/infrastructure-bill/.

2   Emily Tate, "Millions of Students with Home Internet Access Still Can't Get Online," *EdSurge*, July 23, 2021, https://www.edsurge.com/news/2021-07-23-millions-of-students-with-home-internet-access-still-can-t-get-online.

3   Reema Amin, "All NYC School Families Can Get $600 a Year for Internet – but Few Know It," *The City*, October 20, 2021, https://www.thecity.nyc/2021/10/20/22737423/nyc-public-school-families-can-get-money-for-internet-service.

4   US Congress, House, *Investment in Infrastructure and Jobs Act*, HR 3684, 117th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 167, https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/3684.

5   "On the Ground Work," EducationSuperHighway, accessed December 2021, https://www.educationsuperhighway.org/our-story/on-the-ground-work/.

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Ed Tech Access for

All Students