

The Hon. Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Hon. Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Hon. Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
1236 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Hon. Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
2463 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

July 22, 2020

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi and Minority Leader McCarthy:

The undersigned education and related national associations write to **urge Congress to act quickly to include the *Emergency Educational Connections Act of 2020 (S. 3690)* in the next COVID package.** Public and private schools' and public libraries' ability to ensure students have Internet access from home this school year is dependent upon Congress **appropriating at least \$4 billion to the Federal Communication Commission's E-rate Program to quickly, efficiently and most importantly, equitably, disseminate the funds.** Our nation cannot afford to ignore the fact that between 15 and 16 million students – many of whom hail from rural areas or from low-income families – do not have access to technology they need to learn from home during this coronavirus pandemic. We must also note that up to 400,000 educators do not have adequate Internet connectivity to teach from home.¹ Congress must step-up on this issue right now.

While we are all working toward safely reopening schools this fall, it has become abundantly clear that most students will need to be online for at least part of the coming school year. In many of our nation's largest school districts – including Los Angeles, San Diego, Houston, Phoenix, Broward County in Florida and Prince Georges County in Maryland – and even in smaller school districts like Selma City, Alabama, Washington Township in Indiana and Alcoa in Tennessee, the school year will begin with remote learning for all. Other school districts, including Scott County in Mississippi, Klein ISD in Texas and West Bloomfield in Michigan, have elected a hybrid model, which will require students to engage in remote learning for at least part of every week. Additionally, many school districts are using online learning to deliver virtual access to after-school, enrichment and learning loss programs. **Without specific, targeted funds to help students who do not have Internet access at home - whether it is Internet service, devices or both – we will be denying students the fundamental right to an education.**

Long before the onset of COVID-19, the homework gap was a significant problem, denying students in every single state the ability to complete homework, conduct research, communicate with teachers and peers, apply to colleges or for jobs and receive government services. Common Sense Media's recent report, which is based on 2018 data, shows that vulnerable student populations are disproportionately affected by the homework gap:

¹ See Common Sense Media's report "[Closing the K-12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning.](#)"

- 37% of rural students and 21% of urban students lack home Internet access
- 35% of Native American students, 30% of Black students, and 26% of Latinx students have inadequate Internet access at home compared to only 18% of White students

The Alliance for Excellent Education’s new study includes similar findings but found slightly more children (16.9 million) lacking the high-speed home Internet access necessary to support online learning². Additionally, the Alliance’s study found that:

- One in ten families do not have a desktop, laptop or tablet
- One in three Black, Latino and American Indian/Alaska Native families do not have high-speed home internet
- One in three families who earn between \$25,000 and \$50,000 do not have high speed home Internet
- Two in five families in rural areas do not have high-speed home Internet

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown these technological disparities into the national spotlight and now threatens to turn the homework gap into a learning gap. We cannot allow this to happen.

In addition to recognizing and providing adequate emergency funding to address this issue, **we believe Congress should direct funds appropriated for the homework gap through the existing E-rate program – a program schools know and trust.** We have very serious concerns about the Commission’s demand for “flexibility” to start a new program from scratch rather than use the existing trusted E-rate program preferred by schools. The Commission has held up as an example the new \$200 million COVID-19 Telehealth program established by the CARES Act as the model for a new “outside the E-rate” program. We believe the ability to use the existing E-rate to open a “COVID-19 emergency application” window for schools and libraries to apply for homework gap funds should be used in this case, because: 1) the Commission had to develop the new Telehealth program and receive approvals from other government agencies whereas the E-rate program would require only a few tweaks to retrofit for homework gap purposes; 2) the Commission established criteria for the Telehealth program that resulted in three states – Alaska, Hawaii and Montana - receiving no money whatsoever whereas E-rate’s existing rules ensure equitable distribution to all eligible schools and libraries; 3) the Commission itself processed applications for \$200 million in funds whereas the \$4 billion in homework gap funds would be 20 times the size of the Telehealth program; and, 4) the FCC’s Universal Services Administration Company (USAC), has more than two decades of experience processing E-rate applications from schools and libraries, disseminating more than \$50 billion to them and is best positioned to act quickly.

Additionally, Congress should bear in mind that the E-rate has often been used to assist schools during emergencies and that there is even precedent for using E-rate for home Internet access. In response to devastation caused by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria in 2017 and Katrina back in 2005, the Commission made available emergency funding and adopted temporary rules and waivers. In 2011, the FCC used its authority for a “Learning On-the-Go” pilot program funded via the E-rate that supported off-premises access to the Internet so that students and patrons could “connect with online resources even when they’re not at school or at a library.”³

² See the Alliance for Excellent Education’s [Students of Color Caught in the Homework Gap](#) (Alliance for Excellent Education, National Indian Education Association, National Urban League, and UnidosUS, 2020)

³ See the FCC’s “[Harnessing the Power of Mobile Broadband for Digital Learning](#)” on EDU 2011 Pilot Program.

Time is of the essence. Schools do not want nor need a new program to navigate as they prepare for the school year's start in mere weeks. We implore Congress to help our schools and libraries ensure that ALL students and educators – no matter their race, ethnicity, socio-economic status or where they live – have Internet access for remote teaching and learning this academic year. During this unprecedented time in modern history, we depend upon you to appropriate one-time emergency funds of at least \$4 billion through the FCC's E-rate program – the strong preference of schools who are on the front lines of ensuring all students and educators can continue teaching and learning this fall.

Sincerely,

AASA, The School Superintendents Association
Advance CTE
Alliance for Excellent Education
American Federation of School Administrators
American Federation of Teachers, AFLCIO
American Library Association
American Psychological Association
American School Counselor Association
ASCD
Association for Career and Technical Education
Association of Educational Service Agencies
Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO)
Code.org
Common Sense
Consortium for School Networking (CoSN)
Council of Administrators of Special Education
Education Reform Now
Family Centered Treatment Foundation
First Focus Campaign for Children
Girls Inc.
IDEA Public Schools
International Society for Technology in Education
KIPP
Learning Forward
Magnet Schools of America
MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership
National Association for Music Education
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Federally Impacted Schools
National Association of Independent Schools
National Association of School Nurses
National Association of School Psychologists
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of State Boards of Education
National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE)
National Catholic Educational Association
National Council of Teachers of Mathematics
National Education Association
National PTA
National Rural Education Advocacy Consortium

National Rural Education Association
National School Boards Association
Project Tomorrow
Public Advocacy for Kids (PAK)
Save the Children
Stand for Children
State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA)
Teach for America
The Education Trust
USCCB, Committee on Catholic Education

cc: The Hon. Roger Wicker, Chairman, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation
The Hon. Maria Cantwell, Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation
The Hon. Frank Pallone, Chairman, House Committee on Energy & Commerce
The Hon. Greg Walden, Ranking Member, House Committee on Energy & Commerce
U.S. Senate
U.S. House of Representatives