United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 10, 2014

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

Dear Chairman Wheeler:

We write to encourage the Commission to approve the proposal to increase investment in the Universal Service Schools and Libraries Program, known as E-Rate. This proposal will help ensure students and education programs across Minnesota and the United States can benefit from high-speed broadband connection in our schools and libraries.

Since its establishment in 1997, the E-Rate program has helped schools and libraries make great strides in improving Internet connectivity. The percentage of classrooms connected to the Internet nationwide has grown from 14 percent when the program was first started to nearly 100 percent today.

However, with increased emphasis on the integration of education and technology, the demand for high-speed Internet connections in schools and libraries is higher than ever before and is expected to grow. Nearly seven out of ten school districts across the nation report that not a single school in their district can currently meet high-speed Internet connectivity targets.

The digital divide is particularly glaring when it comes to rural areas. This is a problem not just at schools, but in rural areas more generally. In Minnesota, nearly 30 percent of rural residents do not have access to broadband Internet, compared to less than one percent without broadband access in non-rural areas. While progress has been made to bridge this broadband access gap, one important step we can take is to remedy this problem at the many rural schools and libraries in need of high-speed broadband connections.

The E-Rate program is not keeping up with the demand for its services and is in need of reform. In Funding Year 2013-2014, schools and libraries applied for E-Rate funding in excess of $4.9 billion despite only $2.5 billion being available. By increasing investment in the E-Rate program, numerous schools and libraries in remote areas will be able to improve connectivity and provide new technological resources for their communities.

The availability of modern technologies in our classrooms and libraries is crucial to our success as a nation in the 21st century and beyond. Therefore, we support the proposal to increase the funding cap for the E-Rate program and urge the Commission to adopt this proposal. Thank you for your continued leadership on this important matter.

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Sincerely,

Amy Klobuchar
United States Senate

Al Franken
United States Senate