BROADBAND, CONNECTIVITY, CYBERSECURITY, AND E-RATE

COSSBA Requests

Executive Requests

- Efficiency and equity in the operation of the E-Rate program.
- Enhanced and expanded capacity of the E-Rate program.
- Flexibility in E-Rate program requirements and eligibility, as communities continue to utilize virtual instruction at an unprecedented level.
- Sustained quality and speed of connectivity in schools.
- Focus on closing the education technology gap and "The Homework Gap" for students in rural and low-income communities.
- Additionally, COSSBA opposes proposals to place any budget cap on the Universal Service Fund and the E-Rate program.

Congressional Requests

- Enactment of legislation that codifies and funds federal support for implementing effective cybersecurity measures for K-12 schools.
- Distribution of emergency funding for students who lack access to devices and/or connectivity.
- Implementation of a permanent exemption or solution to the Anti-Deficiency Act.
- Reinstatement of net neutrality to ensure that schools are not paying additional costs.
- Continue to support robust funding for rural broadband deployment when the farm bill is reauthorized.

Issue History

A vast majority of schools across the country have the capacity to connect students to the internet every day. Data from Connect K-12, funded by EducationSuperHighway, shows that by 2023, approximately 74% of all districts (roughly 9,573 out of 12,911) met or exceeded the FCC-recommended level of one megabit per second.

Recent data[1] from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the U.S. Census Bureau show that approximately 97% of U.S. households with children aged 3 to 18 have internet access. Still, only 93% have access through a computer, while 4% relied solely on a smartphone for access. This reflects the increasing importance of internet connectivity for educational purposes and the efforts to close the digital divide. Further, while a high percentage of households have internet access, a smaller proportion have reliable access through a computer, which is often necessary for more effective educational activities compared to access through mobile devices.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, federal and school-district-led initiatives such as the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF), Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), and ESSER-funded device programs substantially narrowed the digital divide. Multiple studies report that these programs reduced the number of students without home broadband by approximately 20-40%, and students lacking a device by about 40–60% compared to pre-pandemic levels. Over 75% of those emergency access and device-provisioning efforts were designed to expire within 1–3 years of deployment—meaning many of those gains are at risk unless made permanent.

Cybersecurity

Public schools rely on information technology for many operations. But cybersecurity incidents, like ransomware attacks, significantly affect everything from educational instruction to school operations. K-12 schools have reported significant educational impact due to cybersecurity incidents. Cyberattacks can also cause monetary losses for targeted schools due to the downtime and resources needed to recover from incidents. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), officials from state and local entities report that the loss of learning following a cyberattack can range from 3 days to 3 weeks, and recovery time ranges from 2 to 9 months.

The number of cyberattacks on K-12 public schools has significantly increased in recent years. The 2021 "State of K12 Cybersecurity: Year in Review" reported 1,200 publicly disclosed cybersecurity incidents affecting U.S. K12 public schools—covering data breaches, ransomware, phishing, Distributed Denial of Service, and other incidents. As of early 2023, the K12 Cyber Incident Map showed a cumulative total of 1,619 incidents between 2016 and 2022. Ransomware attacks, where hackers encrypt a school's data and demand payment for its release, have been particularly prevalent. These attacks can have severe consequences, including disruptions to learning, financial losses, and the exposure of sensitive student and staff information. Some schools have had to shut down operations temporarily to address cybersecurity breaches. Further, the financial impact of cyberattacks on schools can be substantial. Costs can include ransom payments, recovery efforts, legal fees, and investments in improved cybersecurity measures. According to a July 2024 report, the mean cost for K12 organizations recovering from ransomware attacks was approximately $3.76 million, more than double the $1.59 million figure reported in 2023. School districts that paid demands incurred a significant financial burden: almost two-thirds (62–63%) paid ransoms, with ransom averages around $7.5 million in some surveys. Impacting millions of students across the nation, this problem is growing at an alarming rate as are the costs to address it adequately.

E-Rate Program

The federal E-Rate program helps eligible schools and libraries access affordable telecommunications, internet access, and internal connections by providing discounts of 20-90%. E-Rate is administered by the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC), which was created in 1997 under the FCC. Its legal validity was confirmed by the US Supreme Court in 2025.

Funding for the E-Rate program is based on demand and is currently capped at $4.456 billion. To be eligible for funding, a school must meet the statutory definition of an elementary or secondary school. An eligible school may submit a request to the USAC for identified goods and services, followed by the school selecting the most cost-effective goods and services from competitive bids. Next, the school must apply to the USAC for approval of the purchases, and the USAC will issue funding commitments dependent on eligibility. Discounts for goods and services depend on the poverty level and the location of the school. The E-Rate program is a vital component of the national effort to ensure that all students have access to the digital resources necessary for modern education.

During the pandemic, the importance of the E-Rate program was further highlighted as schools transitioned to remote learning. While E-Rate funding itself cannot be used to cover off-campus internet access, the FCC introduced additional initiatives, such as the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF), to help address connectivity needs for remote learning. The ECF program, which has since sunsetted, invested $7.17 billion to provide support to approximately 18 million students, 11,500 schools, 1,070 libraries, and 130 consortia, and provided nearly 13.5 million connected devices and over 8 million broadband connections. Subsequent FCC action on wi-fi hotspots and other services has allowed a significant part of ECF's homework gap support to continue through the E-Rate.