Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

December 14, 2022

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Senate Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
House Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

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

We write to request your support for $1 billion in additional funding for the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) in the disaster supplemental division of the forthcoming omnibus legislation. The ECF has helped more than 15 million students and educators connect to the internet at home, proving particularly important when an emergency — such as a hurricane, tornado, or public health crisis — forces students to attend class remotely. Unfortunately, the ECF's resources will imminently be exhausted, and the Federal Communications Commission will be unable to fund all schools and libraries that applied for ECF funds for this school year. We urge you to support an additional $1 billion for the ECF program to ensure that students do not fall off this digital cliff.

Although the Homework Gap — students' inability to access the internet at home — predated the COVID-19 pandemic, the last two years have illustrated the critical importance of devices and connectivity for students and educators at home. The recent National Assessment of Educational Progress Report Card shows that roughly 80% of U.S. students in the top quartile for reading and math scores had access to a computer, laptop or tablet all the time, compared to around 50% of students in the bottom quartile.[1] Such findings confirm what was evident throughout the pandemic: High-income students already had reliable access to high-speed internet at home and more easily transitioned to remote learning, while low-income students — who previously struggled to complete homework that required an internet connection — disproportionately suffered the consequences of school shutdowns.

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[1] National Assessment of Educational Progress, *NAEP Report Card: 2022 NAEP Reading Assignment*, https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/reading/2022/; National Assessment of Educational Progress, *NAEP Report Card: 2022 NAEP Reading Assignment*, https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/mathematics/2022;

The Emergency Connectivity Fund helps correct this inequality by providing devices and internet connectivity to students and educators. Since the FCC approved the first applications in September 2021, the agency has committed over $6.4 billion to schools and libraries across the country.[2] With these funds, 10,000 schools, 900 libraries, and 100 consortia have delivered 12 million devices and 8 million broadband connections to students and teachers.[3] The program has allowed students to complete their homework, connect with their classmates and teachers, and develop the digital skills necessary for our increasingly connected world.

Unfortunately, the ECF program is running short of funds, potentially disconnecting millions of students. In its third application window last spring, the FCC received $2.8 billion in applications but estimated it had only $1.5 billion in ECF funds remaining, leaving a shortfall of roughly $1 billion.[4] Since then, the agency has continued to approve new ECF applications, but the funds are dwindling — fast. The FCC has now committed over $6.4 billion of the $7.17 billion in funds provided for the ECF program, and according to FCC data, nearly $1.5 billion in applications remain pending.[5] Although the FCC will likely fund some of these applications with its remaining resources, others — affecting thousands of schools and libraries and, potentially, millions of students — are unlikely to be approved due to this funding shortfall.

Without congressional action, we may stumble over this digital cliff with devastating consequences. Kids who relied on ECF-provided laptops and hotspots to complete their homework could suddenly find themselves in the dark, returned to pre-ECF years when they struggled to keep up with their connected classmates. Teachers who counted on the ECF program to allow them to draft lesson plans and connect to students and their parents at home will lose these crucial resources. And this impact will fall hardest on the low-income, disadvantaged, and rural communities that relied most heavily on the ECF.[6] The end of the Emergency Connectivity Fund will effectively turn an important investment in our students into stranded assets and a wasted opportunity.

Although Congress created the ECF program to ensure students and educators were connected to the internet during the pandemic, the program remains essential even as students return to a physical classroom.[7] Teachers often assign homework that requires internet access,

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[2] Press Release, Federal Communications Commission, FCC Announces Nearly $54 Million In Emergency Connectivity Funding For Schools And Libraries (Dec. 7, 2022), https://www.fcc.gov/document/fcc-announces-nearly-54-million-emergency-connectivity-funding.

[3] *Id.*

[4] Press Release, Federal Communications Commission, FCC Announces Over $2.8 Billion In Funding Requests For Final Window In Ongoing Work To Close The Homework Gap (May 25, 2022), https://www.fcc.gov/document/fcc-announces-over-28-billion-final-ecf-funding-requests.

[5] To view this figure, see the Emergency Connectivity Fund Program Data Tool on USAC Open Data and filter the applications to view pending applications. USAC Open Data, *Emergency Connectivity Fund Program Data Tool*, https://opendata.usac.org/Emergency-Connectivity-Fund/Emergency-Connectivity-Fund-Program-Data-Tool/yug3-zpzs.

[6] *See, e.g.*, Monica Anderson & Andrew Perrin, PEW RESEARCH CENTER, *Nearly one-in-five teens can't always finish their homework because of the digital divide* (Oct. 26, 2018), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/26/nearly-one-in-five-teens-cant-always-finish-their-homework-because-of-the-digital-divide/.

[7] COMMON SENSE MEDIA, CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE BENEFITS EVERYONE, NOT JUST THE DISCONNECTED 7 (2022), https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/2022-cs-bcg-closing-digital-

placing those students without connectivity at a disadvantage. And when a natural disaster strikes and shuts down schools, students will be forced to return to remote learning. In fact, some schools in Florida did just that after Hurricane Ian hit the state this year.[8] When such disasters occur, the ECF is critical for schools and their students with limited financial resources. The abrupt end of the ECF — and the failure to fund even *existing* applications — would leave schools, libraries, teachers, and students in an extremely difficult spot as they continue to recover from hurricanes, tornadoes, and other disasters this year.
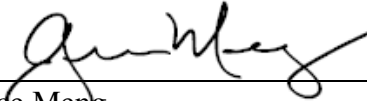
To avoid this damaging outcome, we urge you to support an additional $1 billion in funding for the Emergency Connectivity Fund as part of the disaster supplemental division in the fiscal 2023 omnibus. We cannot let millions of students fall back into the digital divide.

Sincerely,

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

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Member of Congress

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divide_final-release-3-for-web.pdf ("Even for students who are returning to traditional in-person classrooms, the use of online curricula and edtech tools will necessitate high-quality connectivity at home.").

[8] *See* Danielle J. Brown, *More than month after Ian: Southwest FL schools still struggling, adapting after hurricane damage*, Florida Phoenix (Nov. 3, 2022), https://floridaphoenix.com/2022/11/03/more-than-month-after-ian-southwest-fl-schools-still-struggling-adapting-after-hurricane-damage/.