FCC may kill $2B program that connects schools and libraries to Internet

The Federal Communications Commission was roundly criticized today for proposing to scale back or eliminate E-Rate, a $2 billion-a-year Universal Service program that provides discounts for telecom services and equipment in schools and libraries.

FCC Chairman Brendan Carr said E-Rate should be changed because students are getting too much screen time. He led a 2-1 vote to issue a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) that proposes changes and asks the public to comment on them.

“Over the last decade, school districts across the country experimented with a massive increase in screen time for students,” Carr said at today’s meeting.

Carr blamed schools for replacing books and pencils with digital tools and said data shows “that more than half of students now use a computer for up to four hours a day, and a quarter of them spend more than four hours on screens.” He said that E-Rate began in 1997 “with a clear focus—supporting basic Internet access to schools and libraries for educational purposes,” but has “expanded exponentially.”

“We seek comment on whether the program should be reoriented in light of all of the above developments, as well as the increase in connectivity to schools and libraries across the country since 1997,” Carr said.

FCC seeks comment on ending E-Rate

Despite Carr’s use of the word “reoriented,” the options on the table include shutting down E-Rate. This is made clear in a public draft of the NPRM, which asks for comment on whether E-Rate should be limited or sunset:

> *Should the E-Rate program be limited or sunset to reflect today’s extensive connectivity rates? At what point should policymakers conclude that the program’s core objective has been achieved? We seek comment on whether Congress intended E-Rate to operate indefinitely, regardless of the extent to which schools and libraries have achieved universal connectivity.*

Commissioner Anna Gomez, the FCC’s only Democrat, asked Carr’s office to remove the language seeking comment on whether to sunset the E-Rate program. The chair’s office declined that request, a spokesperson for Gomez told Ars today.

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