

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

April 1, 2020

The Honorable Betsy DeVos
Secretary of Education
United States Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos:

I am writing regarding the connectivity challenges many school districts in central Ohio are experiencing as they work to ensure all K-12 students have the opportunity to continue to learn and receive an education during the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) public health emergency.

First, I want to thank you for the Department of Education's early actions to alleviate burdens on public schools as they work to provide students with a proper education in this unprecedented time. The Department of Education's offer to waive federal requirements for standardized testing in K-12 public schools, which was codified under H.R. 748, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, will free educators from federal burdens and allow them to focus on the needs of their students.

I have recently heard from several school districts across central Ohio that their students do not have reliable access to internet and broadband. As many schools transition to online learning for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year, this presents a major problem for students and parents without internet access and for teachers who want to ensure every student has an opportunity to continue his or her studies. Many schools have incorporated creative solutions to address this issue, such as allowing students to receive printed packets and supplies and physically drop off their work in accordance with social distancing recommendations by the CDC. These schools are also working to ensure the same curriculum is available to students working online and those working from printed documents. However, many schools are uncertain of the best ways to administer or develop such solutions.

The CARES Act appropriates \$30.75 billion to the Education Stabilization Fund, of which over \$13 billion is available for elementary and secondary school emergency relief grants. States and local education agencies are authorized to use these funds to "provide technology for online learning to all students" and to "[purchase] educational technology (including hardware, software, and connectivity) for students who are served by the local educational agency that aids in regular and substantive educational interaction between students and their classroom

instructors.” I am increasingly concerned many students will not benefit from these funds, particularly in rural America.

Providing broadband to all Americans is one of the most challenging tasks Congress has undertaken in recent years. It has become increasingly clear that without proper connectivity, rural Americans struggle to keep up with their urban and suburban counterparts. As technological advances and online learning methods continue to create new education forums, we cannot leave behind rural students.

I have supported numerous efforts to drive this vital technology to all Americans, including legislation that improves the National Broadband Map, penalizes the misreporting of connectivity availability, and appropriates billions of dollars to help small business broadband providers provide connections for voice, distance learning, and telehealth purposes. However, it will take several years for federal, state, tribal, and local governments working alongside private industry and stakeholders to achieve this goal.

The ongoing pandemic has exacerbated connectivity shortcomings, and I urge the federal government to work alongside private industry to lessen the impact this emergency has on our education capabilities. Countless service providers have signed FCC Commissioner Ajit Pai’s “Keep America Connected” pledge, which asks companies to waive late fees, not terminate service to any household or small business, and open their Wi-Fi hotspots to any American who needs the service over a 60-day period.

In addition to this pledge, other providers – such as Charter Communications – have announced plans to provide broadband at no expense specifically for education purposes. This community-based leadership is what so many educators and students across the nation need in this historic moment. I respectfully request the Department of Education issues guidance regarding best practices for home learning methods in areas without reliable broadband infrastructure, and federal recommendations that K-12 schools may take to ensure students without proper internet access do not fall behind their peers.

Thank you for your assistance on this matter. Please do not hesitate to reach out to my office if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,



Troy Balderson
Member of Congress