

Wellsboro Area School District

Chairman Yaw and members of the Board of Directors for the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, I wish to thank you on behalf of the Wellsboro Area School District for including our experiences regarding the challenges and opportunities of accessing broadband in rural Pennsylvania communities and schools.

My district is fortunate to have multiple service providers available. PenTeleData, partnering with our local cable company; Blue Ridge Communication, proposed our Wide Area Network build to connect all four of my schools in 1997, and it was complete in 1998. This has been a good relationship in many ways. The biggest advantage to the district is that we do not have to pay pole rent, provide insurance to the pole owner, worry about work being done on the poles by the utility companies or worry about maintenance or emergency repairs.

Our current Internet service is also provided by PenTeleData. The district has had several options to choose from such as: Zito, PenTeleData, IU 17, and Frontier as well as a few other small companies. I would estimate that Blue Ridge Communications; our local cable provider, covers approximately 70% of our residents with high speed Internet options.

With this said, my district is experiencing a digital transformation in our curriculum and instruction. Our students demand an educational environment that thrives in technology and the use of high speed internet. Their expectations include virtual reality experiences, digital classrooms, computer programming and a plethora of STEM opportunities involving high speed internet.

Technology has also changed the way in which we connect to our parents. We have online parent portals that allow parents to see real time assignments and progress of their children. Teachers post lessons that can be viewed from home. Students use Google classroom, and digital drop boxes to turn in assignments. We also offer an online pathway for our students; much like a cyber charter school offers. We have made the investment in our high school to have a 1:1 device initiative and are expanding that concept to our middle school students. We not only need, but demand access to high speed internet at a cost that is affordable to our rural region.

In our schools we are preparing our students for the world in which they live in now, with possibilities to expand their future. However, when they leave our buildings, not all of our students have internet access at home. Today's students are technology savvy. When cell phones first became available we would ask our students to power down when they entered our buildings. Now we are in the reverse of this sentiment when we talk about high speed internet. Some of our students power down when they leave our buildings because they simply do not have access to high speed internet at home. Parents do not have the ability to partner with us on homework, grades, or basic communications. Nor do they have the option of participating in our online academy.

Not all of my communication issues are internet related. I have many areas of my district that have no radio or cell phone connectivity. Many times, my buses are without communication services during their runs to and from school. This creates a huge safety issue. We have a definite need for the last mile to be built. It is my hope that through these hearings you will better understand our rural region and see the need for the last mile to be built as well.

While I am proud that our region has access to high speed internet options for at least 70 % of my district, at least 30% may still be underserved. Any support that you can give to my students and communities will be greatly appreciated. Thank you for your time and effort on this matter.