FCC shift could close "homework gap" with quick fix to subsidy policy

[Margaret Harding McGill](#)   4 hours ago - [Technology](#)

As the pandemic forces students out of school, broadband deployment programs aren't going to move fast enough to help families in immediate need of better internet access. But Democrats at the Federal Communications Commission say the incoming Biden administration could put a dent in that digital divide with one fast policy change.

State of play: An existing FCC program known as E-rate provides up to $4 billion for broadband at schools, but Republican FCC chairman Ajit Pai has resisted modifying the program during the pandemic to provide help connecting students at home.

By the numbers: A [recent study](#) by the Alliance for Excellent Education and other groups estimates that 16.9 million students are stuck in the "homework gap" — without sufficient access to the internet at home to do their work.

- That includes children in one out of three Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native households, according to the study.

Why it matters: "We have an educational crisis in this country, a digital equity crisis," Jessica Rosenworcel, senior Democrat on the commission, told Axios. "And we need to use this program to fix the homework gap as fast as we can."

What they're saying:

- "I think it is a pretty straightforward argument that the FCC E-rate

program should be able to provide funding for those who otherwise lack access to home internet so they can be in school," Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser told Axios.

- Democratic FCC Commissioner Geoffrey Starks also told Axios during an event Thursday that the program needs to be expanded to meet students where they are.

Meanwhile, government officials at the state and federal levels have urged the FCC to allow more flexibility to use program funding now to help connect students at home.

- Weiser, a Democrat, [petitioned](#) the agency in September to allow schools to use E-rate money for Wi-Fi hotspots or other connectivity solutions, noting that 65,000 Colorado students don't have broadband at home.
- The U.S. Department of Interior [also asked](#) the FCC to expand the program to help connect the more than 32,000 Bureau of Indian Education students who don't have adequate home broadband.
- More than 30 Democratic senators, led by Ed Markey, pressed the FCC in September to use E-rate program funding to connect students at home.

Yes, but: Pai has argued the law requires program funding be used in "classrooms" and virtual classrooms don't cut it. An FCC spokesperson said Pai has instead called on Congress to establish and fund a new remote learning initiative.

- Dr. Susan Enfield, superintendent of Highline Public Schools outside of Seattle, said she is hopeful the FCC will handle the program differently in the next administration.
- "It really is unconscionable in my mind, that the capacity and

opportunity has been there and the FCC has chosen not to do it," Enfield said.

What's next: Expect this to be a priority for the Biden FCC, especially if Rosenworcel (who coined the term 'homework gap") leads it.

- Democrats may not have the majority at the start of the Biden administration as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has teed up a vote to confirm Trump nominee Nathan Simington next week.
- Simington's confirmation would deadlock the agency at 2-2 until the new administration's pick for another commissioner is confirmed.
- But a Democratic FCC head would still have leeway to make some changes to the program without a commission vote.