



*New England Cable & Telecommunications Association, Inc.*

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**WRITTEN COMMENTS OF THE NEW ENGLAND CABLE &  
TELECOMMUNICATIONS ASSOCIATION, INC. IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 6666**

**AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION -- HEALTH AND SAFETY OF PUPILS**

**January 26, 2022**

**Introduction**

Good evening, Chair McNamara, and esteemed Members of the House Education Committee. My name is Tim Wilkerson, and I am President of the New England Cable and Telecommunications Association (NECTA).

With unprecedented federal support flowing to Rhode Island for broadband, legislative leaders have a once in a lifetime opportunity to close the digital divide in this state, and the spirit of House bill 6666 seeks to advance that goal. While NECTA supports the policy goal of the bill, connecting all students to high-speed Internet, we urge the committee to amend the legislation to ensure that any state program supporting the adoption of high-speed broadband service also support related equipment, and digital literacy training to ensure the state program complements the federal Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). A coordinated state and federal effort on broadband adoption will avoid duplicating benefits and efforts recently established by Congress.

NECTA respectfully suggests that the House bill 6666 be amended to create a state broadband adoption voucher program that will complement the ACP voucher program. Just as the ACP voucher, a Rhode Island voucher program would provide additional financial support to eligible families to help subsidize their Internet connection and provide the equipment, tools, and training to help them be successful online. To do this, Rhode Island would enter into public private partnerships with existing broadband providers and deliver support in four critical areas:

1. Support eligible families in need by subsidizing a low-cost, high-speed broadband subscription at home that allows families to learn, work, and access critical services like healthcare online.
2. Provide subsidized computing equipment like a laptop or tablet.
3. Subsidize installation and in-home equipment like routers and Wi-Fi extenders.
4. Provide for digital literacy programming that delivers foundational and advanced digital literacy training to help students and families learn the tools and skills they need to be successful online.

## **State of Broadband Access, Speeds and Reliability in Rhode Island**

Rhode Island is in a unique position as a national leader in broadband connectivity, and with companies like Cox continuing to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in their infrastructure, Rhode Island is a national model for access to high-speed broadband. 99 percent of RI homes have high speed broadband passing outside their front door. Cox Communications alone provides broadband availability to 98.2% of the entire state, passing 497,000 households. As reported by a 2021 story in the Boston Globe, Rhode Island has the fastest internet speeds of any state in the country.<sup>1</sup>

Because of hundreds of millions of dollars of capital investments, Rhode Island's actual remaining digital divide challenge, which is not *access* to the Internet, but the *adoption* of Internet service. It is incumbent on the public and private sectors to support Rhode Island students and families by providing solutions to these barriers so they can fully participate in online learning and the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy. Establishing a state voucher program similar to the ACP will help end the adoption of Internet challenge for Rhode Islanders.

## **Adoption programs in other New England States**

Just last month, the Massachusetts Legislature passed a bill distributing American Rescue Plan Act dollars. The law includes \$50 million to close the digital divide through the creation of a broadband adoption program that will include the four critical areas outlined above: monthly subscriptions, free computing devices, in-home equipment to maximize Wi-Fi, and digital literacy training. NECTA respectfully suggests that Rhode Island's approach to closing the digital divide for students and families should follow Massachusetts' and establish a similar state voucher program.

In July 2020 preceding the establishment of the ACP, Connecticut Governor Lamont's administration announced the *Everybody Learns* Internet adoption program to empower families with school-aged children through distance learning by subsidizing broadband subscriptions and computers for 60,000 Connecticut households; and creating public hotspots free to the public at 250 community sites across the state. As part of the program, the NECTA members and other Internet service providers partnered with the Connecticut State Department of Education and local school districts to identify and reach out to households with students in need of home internet access. By the end of 2020, through the Everybody Learns program, over 44,000 of students had the internet connections needed to enable their distance learning.

It is the experience of these adoption programs in neighboring states that can be instructive for Rhode Island policymakers. NECTA member companies work every day through low-cost broadband programs such as Cox's Connect2Compete to ensure that all Rhode Island residents who have high-speed broadband running outside their front door are able to adopt that service at an affordable price. By expanding these low-cost Internet adoption programs for families facing financial, cultural, digital literacy or other complex insecurities or barriers, such as immigration status, English fluency or literacy, our members are leading the effort to close the digital divide.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/04/30/metro/study-rhode-island-has-fastest-internet-speeds-country/>

Using the one-time influx of federal dollars to create a voucher program for broadband adoption and following the lead of Congress by partnering with provide providers, Rhode Island can ensure that digital equity for every individual and family in the state becomes a reality.

Thank you for your time and attention to this testimony. I am happy to answer any questions or be a resource to you as you further consider these important issues.

Sincerely,

Timothy O. Wilkerson  
President

### **About NECTA**

NECTA is a five-state regional trade association representing substantially all private cable broadband providers in Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont. In Rhode Island, NECTA represents Cox Communications. In a recent economic impact study conducted by Dr. Tebaldi of Bryant University it was concluded that Cox produces nearly \$700 million annually in economic output and labor income for the state and employs approximately 800 Rhode Island residents. Cox also generates \$35.6 million in tax revenues for local and state governments and between 2020 and 2023, Cox is targeting to add \$197.5 million in capital investments.