



May 1, 2023

National Telecommunications and Information Administration  
U.S. Department of Commerce  
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW  
Room 4725  
Washington, D.C. 20230

RE: Digital Equity Act Comments

Common Sense Media submits these comments to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) in response to its Request for Comments (RFC) on the implementation of the Digital Equity Act.

Common Sense Media is the nation's leading independent nonprofit organization dedicated to helping kids and families thrive in an increasingly digital world. We empower parents, families, teachers, and policymakers by providing unbiased information, trusted advice, and innovative tools to help them harness the power of media and technology as a positive force in all kids' lives. Our research investigates technology's effect on kids and families; our ratings and reviews help parents navigate the evolving world of online content; our advocacy makes the internet safer, healthier, and more accessible to all; and our outreach campaigns connect thousands of households to benefits for broadband affordability and family wellbeing.

One of our core and longest standing workstreams is the creation and distribution of digital literacy content for children and families. For over a decade, we have led a whole-community approach to digital inclusion. We provide digital literacy curriculum to students, professional development to teachers, and family engagement resources to parents and caregivers. We reach over 150 million families through our website, and over 1 million educators use our curriculum in nearly 100 thousand schools, including 74% of Title 1 schools.

Through this work, we have developed a deep understanding of the digital needs of parents, caregivers, educators, teens, and children, including those in covered populations. We submit these comments to share that understanding. In short, we suggest that the NTIA should (1) recognize that digital literacy requires a comprehensive and evolving set of skills and knowledge, (2) allow participation in the Competitive and Capacity Grant Programs by nonprofit entities that receive funding from Internet Service Providers (ISPs), and (3) include the utilization of school- and parent-based content distribution models.

For the questions we do not address, we encourage the NTIA to give full consideration to organizations with a demonstrated history of working in digital equity and with covered populations. The Digital Equity Act is novel in its scope but not in its purpose, and many organizations, Common Sense Media included, have been active in this space for decades. We encourage the NTIA to use the Capacity and Competitive Grant Programs to scale and replicate these organizations' proven strategies.

Please see the following Appendix for responses to specific questions from the RFC.

Respectfully,

/s/ Drew Garner  
Drew Garner, State Broadband Policy Advisor  
Common Sense Media

## Appendix

### **Question 9: What kind of activities or projects should the Assistant Secretary consider for inclusion in eligible projects and activities for the Competitive Grant Program?**

The NTIA should consider projects and activities that, collectively, promote a wide range of digital literacy skills — from operating a mouse to understanding the risks of sharing information online. A comprehensive approach is important because the internet contains both the best and the worst of what society has to offer, and the distinction between the two is not always obvious, particularly for children and teens.<sup>1</sup> As the NTIA and other entities help to bring the internet to every American, every American needs to be prepared for what the internet brings to them.

Congress foresaw this issue and tailored the Digital Equity Act accordingly, defining digital inclusion as activities that “encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration”<sup>2</sup> and digital literacy as the skills to “find, evaluate, organize, create, and communicate information.”<sup>3</sup> These qualities demand more than basic technical skills. They require users to independently evaluate the risks, benefits, and context of an ever-changing world of online content, much of which they will encounter for the first time while on their own and without the support of a navigator. This is why Congress structured the Competitive Grant Program to promote a comprehensive range of “basic, advanced, and applied skills,”<sup>4</sup> so that users are equipped to independently navigate any scenario.

The following is a list of digital skills that our user base — parents, caregivers, educators, teens, and kids, including those in covered populations — have helped us to identify as important for a healthy, safe, collaborative, and productive experience online.<sup>5</sup> We recommend the Capacity and Competitive Grant Programs support training in these skills:

- Protecting online privacy and personal information;
- Mitigating online harm, cybersecurity threats, and susceptibility to scams;
- Navigating challenging content, such as pornography, misinformation, addictive design, monetization, and cyberbullying;
- Implementing device restrictions and screen time controls;
- Understanding emerging technologies, such as generative AI and new platforms;
- Supporting users with disabilities, such as autism and information processing disorders;
- Identifying safe and appropriate resources for creative expression, socialization, entertainment, and information gathering.

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<sup>1</sup> See Common Sense Media, *List of Social Media Harms*, (Dec. 2021) [www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/featured-content/files/list\\_of\\_social\\_media\\_harms\\_formatted\\_edited.docx .pdf](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/featured-content/files/list_of_social_media_harms_formatted_edited.docx.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> 47 U.S.C. § 1721 (11)(A)(iii)

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at (12)

<sup>4</sup> 47 U.S.C. § 1724 (2)(A)(iii)(I)

<sup>5</sup> Based on surveys, usage patterns, and user requests.

- Evaluating a household's relationship with technology, including self-monitoring, reflection exercises, and conversation prompts.

To contextualize the importance of a diverse and comprehensive approach to digital skilling, we suggest an analogy to drivers' education. Driving is the method by which many Americans engage with the physical world. Safe and effective driving requires knowledge of both vehicle operation *and* how to interpret road signs, use maps and mapping apps, fit a seat belt, follow road etiquette, acquire a license and an insurance plan, and defend against distracted and impaired driving. This is why state governments invest in many types of driver training and education.<sup>6</sup> Like driving, digital skills are the method by which Americans engage with the digital world. Like driving, digital skills are multifaceted. Thus, NTIA's approach to digital skill training should be similarly comprehensive to state governments' approach to drivers' education.

***Question 10: What group or groups that are not already listed should the Assistant Secretary consider to be eligible to apply for the Competitive Grant Program?***

We encourage the NTIA to allow participation by entities that receive contractual funding from ISPs. We see no indication in statute or the RFP that such entities would be ineligible; we simply raise this point as a precaution. Such entities were barred from the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) recent Affordable Connectivity Outreach Grant Program,<sup>7</sup> and we believe a similar prohibition in the Capacity or Competitive Grant Programs would be counterproductive and diminish participation from otherwise well-qualified organizations.

For background, the FCC included the prohibition to ensure that public funds promote the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) on an ISP-neutral basis. Specifically, the FCC sought to avoid the risk of ISP-contracted sales agents using grants to drive ACP enrollment with their contracting ISP. However, the prohibition had the secondary, and we argue unintended, consequence of barring *all* entities that contract with ISPs for *any* reason, even those unrelated to internet service. For example, Common Sense Media licenses our ratings and age recommendations to cable television providers, many of which are also ISPs. Because of these arrangements, we were discouraged from applying for the grant program despite our demonstrated capacity to achieve its goals.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [Maryland Driver Education](#); [California Driver Education and Safety](#); [Texas Driver Education and Safety](#)

<sup>7</sup> See Ineligible Entities, definition of a Contractor. FCC, *Affordable Connectivity Outreach Grant Program*, Funding Opportunity No. FCC-ACOGP-23-001, Notice of Funding Opportunity at 11 (Nov. 10, 2022), [https://www.fcc.gov/sites/default/files/acp\\_outreach\\_grant\\_program\\_nofp.pdf](https://www.fcc.gov/sites/default/files/acp_outreach_grant_program_nofp.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Broadband.money, *How Common Sense Media deployed activism, media, and a key partnership to drive ACP Adoption in Arizona*, (Mar. 21, 2023), <https://broadband.money/blog/how-common-sense-media-deployed-activism-media-and-a-key-partnership-to-drive-acp-adoption>

We have no indication that the NTIA is considering a similarly broad prohibition, and we would discourage it from doing so. Some ISPs are large and vertically integrated companies, and blanket prohibitions on their contractors may affect a large number of organizations performing important and ISP-neutral work in the field of digital equity. However, if such restrictions are deemed necessary, we encourage the NTIA to create a process for considering exceptions where appropriate.

***Question 19: For each of the Covered Populations, what are proven strategies and tactics, projects or programs, with outcome-based measures and impacts, that promote and achieve digital equity?***

Based on our experience, school- and parent-based strategies are effective, evidenced-based models of promoting digital equity among covered populations.

School-based strategies can reach many covered populations, including those individuals who live in low-income households; individuals with disabilities; individuals with a language barrier, including English-language learners and those with low levels of literacy; racial and ethnic minorities;<sup>9</sup> and rural inhabitants. Schools can be sorted based on their proportion of covered populations, allowing for precise targeting. Moreover, strategies that benefit students often spill over to parents, caregivers, and educators, multiplying the strategies' effect.

School-based strategies are also exceptionally efficient because they use existing infrastructure — staff, networks, communication channels, and events — to distribute content through trusted local institutions. This maximizes the impact of finite Capacity and Competitive Grant resources.

The effectiveness of school-based strategies is demonstrated by Common Sense Media's own work. We provide educators with research-based curricula for teaching digital literacy to K-12 students, and Digital Teaching programs to help teachers use technology to improve student outcomes. Nearly three quarters of Title I schools have registered to use our resources, demonstrating that school-based strategies can effectively promote digital equity among covered populations.

Parent-engagement strategies can also be effective, especially when coupled with school-based strategies. Schools and school districts maintain family engagement teams, which are often composed of trusted, active members of the community who raise awareness and distribute resources to parents and caregivers. Properly utilized, these teams can help define local needs, build appropriate tools, and deploy those tools among covered populations. Common Sense Media has established a model for such work, and we routinely deploy content in multiple languages and

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<sup>9</sup> Roughly half of the 50 million students in public primary and secondary schools are racial and ethnic minorities. See National Center for Education Statistics, *Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and level of education: Fall 1999 through fall 2030*, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22\\_203.60.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_203.60.asp)

on topics of interest to local communities, such as social media, parental controls, screen time, internet safety, and more.

***Question 20: Youth and young adults are members of each of the Covered Populations except for Older Americans. The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on academic achievement, physical and mental health, and earning opportunities for our youth and young adults. How can NTIA encourage and measure the effects of investments in our youth and young adults?***

The NTIA can remediate pandemic-induced harms in youth by using school-based digital inclusion programs (see our response to Question 19). In 2020, there were roughly 41 million youth aged 10-19, over 80% of whom were enrolled in elementary or secondary school.<sup>10</sup> Schools also share the goal of promoting youth academic success, physical and mental health, and career and earning opportunities. Taken together, schools offer perhaps the most effective channel for delivering resources to youth impacted by the pandemic.

The NTIA can measure the effects of school-based activities in two ways: by allowing Competitive and Capacity recipients to survey representative samples of students about digital equity topics,<sup>11</sup> and by encouraging school districts and state departments of education to incorporate digital needs assessments into existing Student Information Systems.<sup>12</sup> Both of these methods offer efficient and well-established methods for evaluating the state of digital equity among youth and young adults.

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<sup>10</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey, School Enrollment Supplement*, (Oct. 2020) <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2020/demo/school-enrollment/2020-cps.html>

<sup>11</sup> See Rideout, V., Peebles, A., Mann, S., & Robb, M. B. *Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens*, 2021. (Mar. 9, 2022) <https://www.common sense media.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens-2021>

<sup>12</sup> See Common Sense Media, *Maximizing Federal Funding to Close the Digital Divide* (Jan. 2022) [https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/featured-content/files/homework\\_gap\\_state\\_policy\\_primer.pdf](https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/featured-content/files/homework_gap_state_policy_primer.pdf)