

Rural students deserve a 21st century education

By SEN. JERRY MORAN and AJIT PAI

As sons of rural Kansas, we are committed to ensuring that children who grow up in the Sunflower State receive the same educational opportunities as students anywhere in America. One of the tools for making certain rural students receive a 21st Century education is broadband Internet access. Broadband can be the great equalizer; with an Internet connection, where you live doesn't determine what information and resources you can access.

The good news is Congress recognized the importance of offering all students access to technology when it directed the Federal Communications Commission to create the E-Rate program nearly 20 years ago. Today, that program distributes more than \$2 billion every year to help schools and libraries connect to the Internet, and every American who has phone service contributes to the E-Rate fund through charges on his or her monthly bill.

The bad news is this federal program meant to close the digital divide is actually making it worse for rural schools. A few commonsense reforms, including simplifying the application process and providing certainty to schools, could fix that.

Schools in rural areas routinely get less funding-per-student than those in wealthier, urban areas. For example, E-Rate distributes to students in Washington, D.C., roughly three times the amount that Kansas students receive – even though our nation's capital has a much larger tax base and broadband is cheaper to deploy there than in rural Kansas. Indeed, small Kansas towns from Colby to Coffeyville, and Elkhart to Seneca, tend to get less money than large school districts with more resources. These disparities undermine E-Rate's core mission of giving rural schools the same technological tools as their urban and suburban counterparts.

One reason for this unfair distribution of funding is the complex E-Rate application process. To apply for E-Rate funds, schools must complete a seven-step process with six application forms spanning 17 pages – just for basic service. If a school wants to invest in a technology the federal government does not consider a priority, additional paperwork is required. Moreover, schools are required to sign service contracts months before the school year begins, and possibly years before the school knows if E-Rate funding will even be available to offset the cost of those services.

All of this means that it is expensive and burdensome to apply, forcing some schools to divert money away from the classroom in order to hire consultants to help them navigate the process. Other schools just give up entirely because they just don't have the budget to hire consultants, accountants or lawyers. And even those who hire help can still make mistakes.

In all, administrative delays and missteps result in E-Rate collecting about \$400 million more from American consumers each year than it spends – money that sits in a bank account instead of going to help out schools in need.

On top of the complicated application process, E-Rate doesn't give schools a budget. That means urban schools at the front of the line often get as much money as they want while many rural schools at the back of the line must make do with what is left. The result is some schools using E-Rate to subsidize Blackberries for administrators while other schools can't even get funding for classroom Wi-Fi. That's not right.

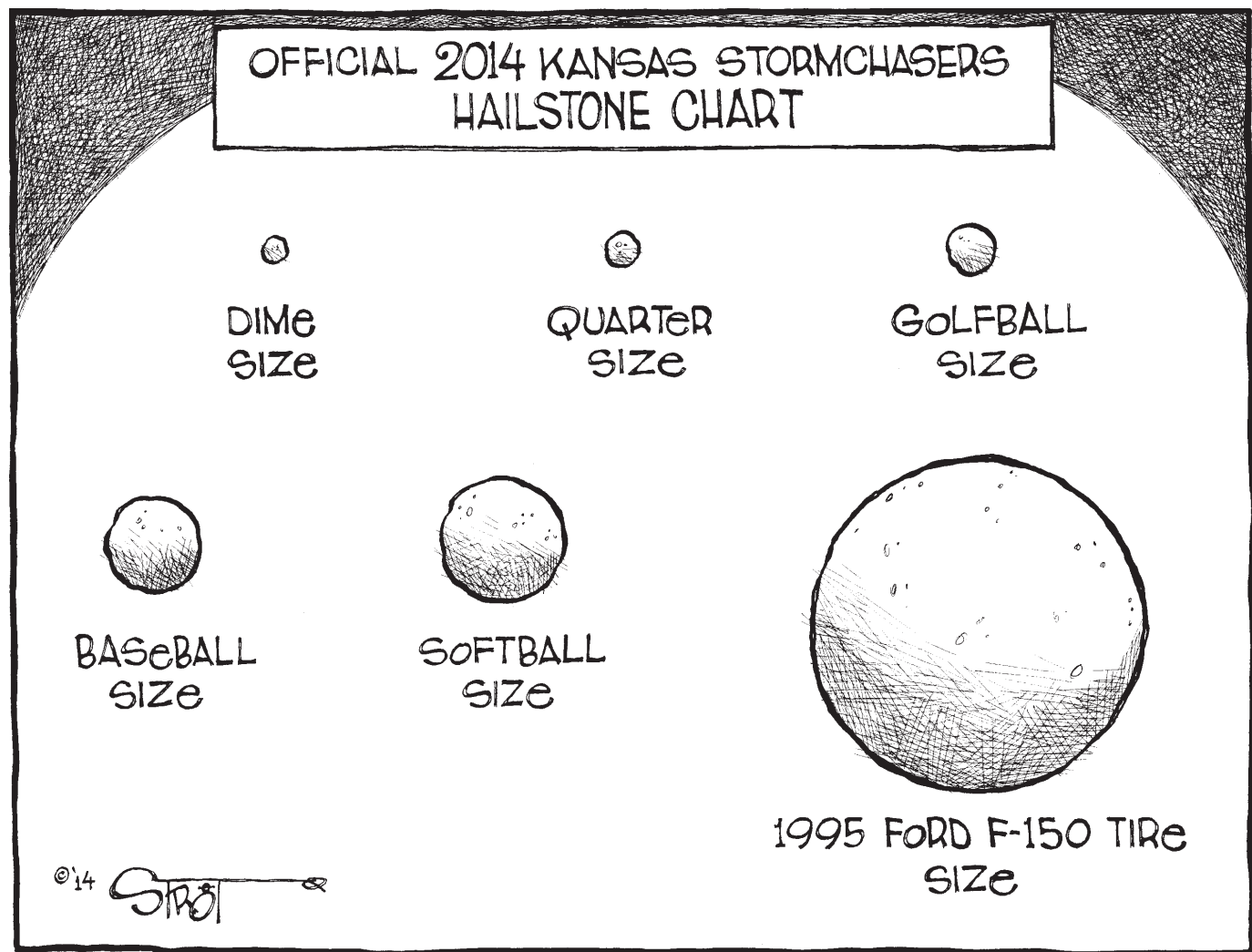
To fulfill E-Rate's promise to all of our students, we must cut the bureaucracy and refocus the program on our children's needs. We must create a student-centered E-Rate program.

Let's start by streamlining the process and cutting the initial application down to one page. All schools should be able to apply on their own without hiring a consultant. And, let's speed up the funding process. Schools need certainty that E-Rate funding will be there before – not after – they sign service contracts. They shouldn't have to wait months for paperwork to wend its way through a large bureaucracy.

Next, let's fix the inequities in distributing E-Rate funds. If we allocate E-Rate's budget on a per-student basis across every school in America on day one, then every school board, every teacher, and every parent will know just how much money is available. If the money follows the student – with higher amounts for schools in rural or low-income areas – we can better give schools the resources they need to connect the classroom. Indeed, a per-student funding model would encourage all schools to be fiscally responsible while giving a funding boost to the rural schools that need it most.

Helping our students prepare for the digital economy is necessary in order for America to compete in the 21st Century; to do that, we need real reform of E-Rate. With a student-centered E-Rate program that is simple and certain, we can give all Americans – including those in rural areas – the chance to compete with the rest of the world for next-generation jobs. It's time for kids in rural Kansas, too, to share in the bounty of broadband.

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Sharing the love of cherry picking

Upon first glance you might think I am an Afghan woman who had recently voted. But you would be wrong.

No. The reason for my purple finger(s) is it's "cherry time" at our house. One late afternoon last week, Jim came home from work and announced, "Carolyn, we have to pick those cherries tonight. They cannot wait." He thought he was encouraging me when he added, "You pick low and I'll pick high off the ladder." But he was wrong.

The only thing that encouraged me was the thought of cherry pie or cherry cobbler at the end of the process. I did, however, share the pain. I called our young friend Alex who lives across the street.

Alex is a remarkable young woman. Not quite 21, she is a college graduate holding down a very responsible job in a mostly male dominated line of work – agronomy. That's only part of what makes her remarkable. She knows her business and can "talk shop" with any farmer or load a ton of seed bags onto a truck. She might wear her cowboy boots with her jeans legs piled up on top or she might look like she stepped out of a band-box when she's dressed

Out Back

Carolyn Plotts



up and ready for church. But that's still not what sets her apart from most young women her age.

Alex likes to cook. And I'm not talking bologna sandwiches or Hamburger Helper meals. This girl makes gourmet dishes. At least they sound gourmet to me. Anyone who uses pesto must know what they're doing, right? We talk recipes and I loan her cake pans and rolling pins.

Here I am, old enough to be her grandmother, but we have become good friends. On the spur of the moment she will ask if I want to ride into town with her. Of course I do, and we talk faster than the speed limit all the way. Like all young people she communicates through texting and we text each other several times a day.

Alex and her fiance, Zach, were out of town over the Fourth of July week-

end. All day Sunday, I found myself glancing across the street to see if their vehicle was there. When I finally saw it, I said to Jim, "The kids are home." That's the way we feel about them. Like they're our kids.

But back to the cherries. I texted Alex, "If you want some cherries, get a bucket and come on over."

Not knowing we had cherry trees in our back yard, she texted back, "Where are you?"

When I told her we were in the back yard, she shot back that she would be right over. So we three picked cherries 'til our buckets were full.

Jim really hates to leave any cherries on the tree, so while he was still trying to get a few more, Alex and I went into the house and ran her cherries through the pitter. She took home two big bags, ready for the freezer. I sent along pie crust so she can make pies when she has the time.

Many complain about "kids these days." But I will contend that if Alex is representative of her generation, we don't have anything to worry about. Her momma raised her right.

The white combine of wheat destruction

Tuesday, June 24 arrived like most mornings in Finney County. The only difference – humidity levels were high and the dew point skied off the chart.

Two inches of rain the last couple days after nearly four years of drought concerned veteran farmer Dwane Roth. He believed conditions were ripe for a serious storm.

Shortly after noon, a cloud bank began forming on the northern horizon. Throughout the afternoon it gradually moved closer and closer to his fields north of Highway 50. At 3:45 the rain began falling slow and easy.

But not for long. In little more than a minute marble-sized hail stones dropped straight down. A couple minutes later, hail the size of golf balls started blowing horizontally.

Within five minutes, the sky turned white and the wind blew so hard visibility dropped to less than 100 feet. Reports of hail a foot deep were not uncommon.

The white combine (hail) left a swath of destruction seven miles long and five miles wide approximately eight miles northwest of Holcomb. The aftermath was devastating.

Wheat ready for harvest was hammered by the storm. The next day, the heads, stripped clean by the hail, drooped in the bright morning sun. Plump, golden berries covered the ground between rows and the prom-

Insight

John Schlageck



ise of a 70 bushel-per-acre irrigated crops evaporated as the white combine reaped its wrath.

A beautiful, chest-high corn crop also met a similar fate. Stalks lay twisted and broken while the leaves were left torn and tattered. Some of the crop lay pummeled into the soil and the corn left standing stood less than knee high.

Bruised and battered corn stalks are prone to disease, especially when they're growing as fast like they are at this time, Roth said. Stock rot and lodging could result in major losses.

One veteran farmer pulled up in his pickup, stepped out and looked to the west at one of his fields of corn.

"It looked pretty crappy," he said. "My dad always told me after a bad storm you should take off and go fishing for a week, but he never did."

When asked how he slept the night after the storm and before he could survey the damage the next morning, he replied while interjecting some patented western Kansas humor.

"I slept just fine," he smiled. "I'm a

good Catholic with a clean conscience and we always sleep well – even after farming for nearly 50 years."

Then he added as he cocked his head to the right and looked me squarely in the eyes, "I'd much rather be looking at this crop than looking at you, if you were my doctor, telling me I had six weeks to live."

Always able to look at the bigger picture, many of the Finney County farmers surveying the damage believed their corn crop would come back. Some even hoped they'd harvest at least half a crop if no more hail hit their farms.

With years of farming under their belts, most of these farmers understand that by the end of June there's little they can do but wait and see how the rest of the growing season pans out.

"This is usually the way it goes out here," Roth said rolling the battered corn stalk in his hands. "When you come out of a drought you're going to get some significant weather. So many times the results aren't what you hope for."

And what about the drought that has lasted for years, especially in southwestern Kansas?

"You know they say farmers are the eternal optimists and I'm hoping it's over, Roth said. "I'm not certain it is. But hey – I'm breathing, we're going to be okay."

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