

Testimony of Timothy Chavez
Technology Director
Cuba Independent School District
Cuba, New Mexico, USA

Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Subcommittee on Communications, Media and Broadband

“The State of Universal Service”

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Chairman Lujan, Ranking Member Thune, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Timothy Chavez. I have been an employee of the Cuba School District for 22 years. I grew up in Cuba and graduated from Cuba High School.

Located in Sandoval County, Cuba Independent School District (ISD) is approximately one and a half hours north of Albuquerque, New Mexico. The District covers a total of 120 square miles and has three schools: Cuba Elementary, Cuba Middle, and Cuba High School. The district enrollment has increased greatly from 489 students in 2019 to 769 students in 2023, and the District draws most of its funding from state and federal sources. Many students are Native Americans who live on the Navajo Nation and are bused to school over long distances each day. The remainder of students live in the Village of Cuba or the surrounding areas.

I’m proud to say that our graduation rate was 95% in 2021, significantly higher than the national average.

After high school, I left to attend college, but returned to my home in rural Northern New Mexico to give back to the community that helped shape me. The Cuba School District comprises 72% Native American students from the Eastern Navajo Nation and 25% Hispanic students from Northern New Mexico. Most of these families have lived there for hundreds of years. The roots of these communities run deep, but so do some of the barriers they face accessing basic necessities—including broadband. Cuba is a prime example of a rural community stuck on the “wrong” side of the digital divide. Fortunately, the Universal Service Fund—in particular, the E-Rate program—has allowed us to make real progress to close that divide. With these dollars, and others from the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) and Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) Cuba Schools has made an enormous, life-changing impact through broadband availability. We fully support the Universal Service Fund, and recognize that the support it provides allows communities like ours can survive in the 21st Century.

Providing a fiber infrastructure to the Eastern Navajo Nation has been a topic of discussion for years. Building a traditional fiber infrastructure in these areas seemed impossible because of easement barriers, existing infrastructure challenges, and high costs that the community could not afford on our own. However, leaders at Cuba School District knew that the only way to ensure our students received the high-quality education they deserve was to ensure their homes were fully connected. There is no reason our students should not have all of the resources and opportunities that students have in wealthy areas and in big cities. That's why our Superintendent Dr. Sanchez Griego didn't take no for an answer, and pushed forward to make 100% connectivity for our student body a reality.

The COVID-19 pandemic only served to worsen the many challenges faced by those in my community. Many Native families still do not have access to basic necessities like electricity, sewage lines, and Internet. The unique checkerboard of land-ownership and trust lands in the area makes it so there is no one easy solution. Every small town—every household—needs a unique solution to bring these necessities to every family. The school district took on the challenge to get Internet to every household, because in the 21st century, our students cannot get the education they need to come out of school prepared without it. Cuba Schools is part of the landmark, Yazzie/Martinez case in which equitable funding for students in New Mexico was found to be required by the State constitution. The State was not funding some students at an appropriate level, particularly for technology in areas like our District.

In 2019, Superintendent Dr. Karen Sanchez Griego, a major advocate of equity in education, proposed narrowing the Digital Divide by providing one-to-one solutions for students. This means that every student attending Cuba Schools would receive a laptop. Dr. Sanchez-Griego's next goal was to bring internet to students' homes. This would be the beginning of the Cuba School District Starlink project.

In 2020, the pandemic provided a new urgency to her project. Starlink provided a solution that avoided many of the easement issues common to New Mexico. We installed some equipment on the ground, but other units were put on rooftops to keep them safe from sheep and goats that could trample the hardware. Preventing livestock damage is just one of the many unique challenges faced in the deployment of broadband networks in rural communities like Cuba. And we didn't have big crews of professionals at our disposal to install this infrastructure—staff at the school went out to each and every household and did it ourselves. Every single one of us, from our most senior administrators down, rolled our sleeves up, drove out to our students houses, and took the time to get them connected.

As we began directly connecting students' residences, I was shocked at how bad the conditions were for so many students attending the Cuba School District. Growing up in Cuba, I always knew that conditions like these were present, but I was heartbroken to see just how many of our students were living in homes

lacking the things that many of us take for granted, such as a steady source of electricity and a means to heat the home. The consequences of extreme poverty negatively affect these families and drive them into a continuous cycle of struggle, conditions that make learning difficult, if not impossible, for Cuba students.

Cuba Schools cannot independently address all these issues, but with the assistance of critical E-Rate dollars and the Emergency Connectivity Fund, we have been able to decrease the impact of the Digital Divide and have brought our students and families into the 21st Century. All students of the Cuba School District have now received a Starlink internet satellite system which runs at 230Mbps download and 25Mbps upload speeds. Cuba students can still learn during remote days, whether due to pandemic restrictions or other issues unique to rural areas like Cuba. For example, due to the poor condition of roads in the area, heavy rain and intense weather can make it impossible for school buses to bring our students to school. On those days, we still utilize the technology and methods we relied on during the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure our students are not missing out on crucial days of their schooling due to the poor infrastructure around them. . With this technology, our students are now a part of a global, interconnected and digitally-literate society. They are connected socially, emotionally, and in the future financially as we close the digital divide and open up opportunities here at home and across the world to our students.

This project will continue as the school district enrolls new students and continues to grow. Federal funding is critical to providing the resources needed to continue this project, one that is vital to the education of impoverished students of the Cuba Independent School District. We have used every dollar of E-Rate we can get, as well as funding from the Emergency Connectivity Fund and from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, to meet our technology needs. We support growing and expanding E-Rate, so that school districts like ours can access more resources to meet modern challenges and give our students the education they deserve.

While Cuba Graduation rates were 62% in 2019, they have risen substantially to 95% in 2021 as a result of the strategic goals and initiatives implemented by the district with the help of federal funds. I believe that our situation is not unique, I know there are many other communities throughout the U.S. that struggle with similar issues and I hope that we can provide an example of what is possible.

Images Below:



Cuba School Landscape



Pre-K student excited about Starlink



Setting up Starlink on a pole, away from livestock



Starlink setup, digging trench



Starlink setup, running cables



Starlink for home without power



Student sleeping on 2-hour bus route



Students going home on a 2-hour bus ride



Cuba Schools campus



On campus learning



Camera Setup for Zoom