

**Testimony to the Senate Communications and Technology Committee  
On Issues Related to High-Speed Broadband Internet Access  
Presented by Gary Seelye  
Brownsville Area School District Board of Directors  
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Good morning, my name is Gary Seelye, and I am a school director in the Brownsville Area School District here in Fayette County. I have been asked by the Pennsylvania School Boards Association to share my perspectives with you today regarding the need to expand access to broadband internet services, especially as it impacts schools, students and families. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today.

Before I begin my comments, I would like to thank Senator Phillips-Hill and Senator Santarsiero as chair and minority chair for their leadership and willingness to bring this issue back to the table for public comment. I would also like to thank Senator Stefano for hosting this hearing.

It is my understanding that these specific hearings are addressing the lack of rural broadband access in the Commonwealth. The reality is that conversation surrounding this issue was prominent over two decades ago under President Bill Clinton. The technology and definitions may have changed but the basic issue has not changed. Does every household in Pennsylvania have access to high speed internet? At this point, we all know the answer is no!

As I began preparing my testimony, I quickly concluded that I knew very little about this issue other than the digital divide is real. I started by reading an article authored by Eleanor Bader and published by Truthout.org entitled *Technology Access Gap leaves Millions of Students Struggling to Keep Up*. There were several testimonials of how high school students survived without access to the internet in their homes.

So, I thought I would take a course of action by attempting to identify one of our students and share their story. I began by contacting some of our teachers who might be able to share a name of a student in a similar situation. While they do exist, the teachers could not share their names because in all cases, the students informed their teachers confidentially before or after class of their situation because they were embarrassed. Then it hit me like a ton of bricks. Why did I ever think that a student or students would voluntarily identify themselves as not having internet in their home without first having a personal or professional relationship with them. I was a little embarrassed myself.

I asked the teachers if they assigned homework that required use of the internet and if so, how they managed it. Fortunately, the teachers that I spoke with gave time in class or went to a lab to use the internet. Even though it took away from class time, the students' identity and situation were protected. As one of the policy makers for the district, I struggled answering the question what are we doing to help a student in this situation? As Treasurer and Finance Chair who is very aware of the district's struggles to meet its day to day expenses, the answer was clear; nothing currently.

So, I felt I needed to further educate myself. One of the suggested readings was a report prepared by a team of researchers from Penn State University for The Center for Rural Pennsylvania titled *Broadband Availability and Access in Rural Pennsylvania*. I must assume that each of you on the panel have read this report and it may well have been the motivation to conduct these hearings.

After reading that report, the task before all of us is enormous if we are to succeed in assuring every Pennsylvania household and business has access to broadband. This report seemed to me to be very unbiased but eye-opening. It conveyed that in February 2019 the FCC issued a press release stating that two-thirds of Americans have access to 250 Mbps broadband service and 90% have access to 100 Mbps broadband service.

Based on the testing (over 11 million individual tests across PA) conducted by the Penn State research team, there are very few areas in Pennsylvania where the median internet speeds meet the minimum criteria set by the FCC to qualify as broadband connectivity (25 Mbps/3Mbps). The research has been made public and it is hoped that other states will adopt the methods to obtain a more accurate measure of internet speeds. The FCC currently relies on the self-reporting of the ISP's. The method used by the Penn State team tends to nullify the ISP data. The Penn State report presents options that may be used to move forward and identifies many of the hurdles that will be faced in order to make broadband service available to all Pennsylvanians.

I certainly concur with the report and Indiana County Commissioner Rod Ruddock's testimony last month at a similar hearing that government and industry must partner to make broadband availability a reality. Based on the complexity of this issue, government is not restricted to the state of Pennsylvania and industry is not limited to the technology corridor. A 2016 MIT study found that communities in which mass-market broadband was available experienced more rapid growth in employment, number of businesses overall and businesses in IT. Therefore, all business should benefit from broadband service and need to be part of the solution.

Although now retired, I spent my entire 38-year career working with students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, when I read that a study by the Investigative Report Workshop at American University found that the best values for broadband services were in the most affluent areas, I became alarmed. I believe that consumer cost should also be part of the discussion to expand broadband service.

You see, it won't matter if broadband service is available to every household in Pennsylvania if the families cannot afford it. This is particularly a concern for the students attending Brownsville Schools. I believe we are the only district in Fayette County that is eligible to receive 100% reimbursement for student lunches. Our district is eligible based on USDA's formula since 62.6% of our students are Directly Certified (DC) meaning they receive SNAP or TANF. I would dare to say that most of the other districts located in Fayette County are not far behind. Therefore, even if the broadband issue is resolved, if families cannot afford the cost, the digital divide will remain. This could have devastating consequences regarding Pennsylvania's and our nation's ability to compete in the global market.

In closing, I thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today. Let's work together and solve this issue once and for all.