



Viewpoints: Make sure Comcast provides low-income Internet access as part of merger

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The digital divide remains as wide as the [Central Valley](#) for the poorest California children, but not because of a lack of interest among our low-income families. After a short news item aired on Spanish-language TV recently about an affordable home Internet offer, 2,700 calls jammed the [call center](#) – on a Friday night.

As a lifelong educator, I know access to affordable technology at school and at home is the great equalizer. Yet, with 25 percent of Californians lacking high-speed [Internet access](#) at home, we are a long way from granting equality to low-income Californians who remain stuck on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Now is the time to act. Affordable access to the Internet is vital to our children's educational achievement and to our nation's prosperity. It is an investment in the common good, and it must be provided for when a merger of the scale of [Time Warner Cable](#) and Comcast is to occur. We must not leave access to this new [information highway](#) to chance, especially for our poorest children.

The nations with which we compete will hope we do not make this highway accessible to our next generation because it will signal America has lost its will to be an economic leader in the long term. And we will severely diminish one of the nation's founding principles that all are created equal. This is a propitious moment.

If Comcast is to be granted access to the first ([New York City](#)) and second ([Los Angeles](#)) largest metropolitan areas in the nation, regulators are compelled by law to identify a tangible public benefit. That benefit must include an affordable broadband rate available to all low-income households in the new Comcast footprint, especially students who live in low-income neighborhoods and attend low-performing schools.

As State Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1996, I provided the backbone and blueprints for the first NetDay – an electronic barn-raising that brought out more than 30,000 volunteers, including the U.S. president and vice president, to California – which was then copied in 40 states and more than 40 countries. Today, if we expect our students to apply technology in the

learning process and thrive in the digital world, we must provide them and their families an affordable way to obtain broadband at home.

The most immediate opportunity to make that quest a reality is to enlist the [Federal Communications Commission](#) to set and enforce acceptable [performance standards](#) by Comcast on the implementation of their Internet Essentials program, which was proposed in order to secure regulatory approval of their purchase of [NBC Universal](#) in 2010.

Although the program, which is currently offered to families in Comcast service areas with at least one student eligible for free-or-reduced lunch, has a laudatory price-point at \$9.95 a month, there is ample evidence of numerous problems that have plagued the subscription process. The evidence is that just 11 percent of the eligible households in California have been signed up during the last three years – a mere 35,200 households.

I am joining with California leaders, including Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and Los Angeles County officials, to ask the FCC to closely review Comcast's performance in implementing Internet Essentials. If regulators are inclined to approve the merger, they should require:

- Internet Essentials include all low-income households.
- Comcast be held accountable to meet specific subscription goals.
- Comcast capitalize an independently managed fund to support nonprofit broadband adoption programs and coordinate with states.
- The FCC establish an advisory oversight committee.
- Comcast offer Internet Essentials as a stand-alone service, not bundled with other services.

The [California Public Utilities Commission](#) in its filing to the FCC also recommends the FCC closely review Comcast's implementation and administration of Internet Essentials to ensure if the program has met the company's commitments as to the public benefit of the transaction.

I share the growing recognition that Comcast-TWC-Charter corporate consolidation may be the “ballgame” for California when it comes to securing equitable access for all children and families: The new Comcast service area will include 87 percent of all California students on free-or-reduced lunch. Bold action is an imperative so these families and other low-income Californians can get connected to affordable broadband. [Call center](#) operators stand by ... the future of California will be on the line.

[Delaine Eastin](#) was California's Superintendent of Public Instruction from 1995-2003.