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Senator Manchin and FCC Commissioner Rosenworcel urge Lewis County to speed test

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Last fall, we went back to school. We visited Lewis County High School in Weston to gather in the auditorium and speak at an assembly about broadband access in the community. Our message to the students was simple: If you can't connect, you can't compete.

Today, having broadband is essential for everyone. It's how students do their homework. It's how businesses communicate with customers. It's how health care gets to patients – especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when telehealth is more critical than ever before. In short, having internet access is necessary for every community in West Virginia to thrive.

In Washington, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has maps describing where broadband is available, but they don't always reflect the experience of folks living in the community. They often overstate service, suggesting that it is more widely available and more reliable than it truly is. Having incorrect data like this slows down work to expand high-speed networks to rural areas. It makes it hard for West Virginia to compete with other states for federal resources to increase the reach of broadband service across the Mountain State. We think it's time to do something about this data problem — and students can help.

When we were in that auditorium, we asked those students whether they had the broadband they needed to do their schoolwork. Some did; some didn't; and many said that their service simply didn't stack up.

That's why we're challenging students at Lewis County High — the Minutemen — to step up during this pandemic. We're asking them to conduct speed tests while they learn at home and send the results to the FCC.

It only takes a few minutes, but having accurate data makes a big difference in proving the FCC's broadband data maps are wrong. And we need to hear from the students in droves. In the process, they can show Washington what needs to be done to connect their community.

Even better, we hope the Minutemen can set an example for other rural areas across West Virginia and the nation. By getting our young people to come together to improve the data at the FCC, they can start a nationwide data-driven effort to get broadband to all of rural America.

And it's worth the effort. During this pandemic, life without broadband is hard. Students sent home from school without internet access are stuck in a homework gap and shut out of digital classrooms. Getting any kind of services, health care or entertainment at home without reliable internet access is nearly impossible.

We can fix this. We can help connect communities across the state and around the country. But it all starts with better data. When we have correct data, we can do a better job of identifying areas eligible for loans and grants that can help expand the reach of broadband. Until we do, too many communities in West Virginia will be consigned to the wrong side of the digital divide because someone in Washington points to a map that says a town is served when it is not.

With the students of Lewis County High School, we are on a mission to help Washington understand where broadband is and is not in the Mountain State. We are looking forward to having the Minutemen lead the way with speed tests, but we also encourage every West Virginian who wants to participate to do so by visiting <https://www.manchin.senate.gov/speedtest>.

Together we can close the digital divide in West Virginia.