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**Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia**

***Delivered by Darren Reed, SVP of School Services, Stride, Inc.***

***May 24, 2021***

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. My name is Darren Reed and I am a Senior Vice President of School Services for Stride, Inc. I am a life-long educator and have served in various teaching and leadership roles in public, private, and online schools. In my role at Stride, I oversee all our school partnerships across the northern and eastern region of the U.S., including in D.C.

Stride is the nation’s largest provider of online learning for grades K-12. Our company provides high quality online learning opportunities for students, schools, and districts, including general education, electives, and career learning. Since 2000, Stride (formerly known as K12 Inc.) has served over one million students in online public and private schools across the U.S. and throughout the world. Currently, we serve nearly 200,000 students in full-time online public schools in over 30 states, including in the District of Columbia. We also work with the largest network of online school teachers in the U.S. – providing professional development, training, and support to help educators excel in the virtual classroom.

In the District of Columbia, Stride works in partnership with Friendship Public Charter School to offer a high quality full-time online school program. Friendship Online Academy is D.C.’s only award-winning, fully virtual elementary and middle school. The school is available to all students in DC, tuition-free, providing equal access and opportunity for all students regardless of race, gender, academic need, or socio-economic circumstance. Our Company is headquartered in Northern Virginia, so we are extremely proud of our longtime partnership with Friendship, and the opportunity to serve students, parents, and educators in DC.

One of the great attributes of online schools is the ability to reach students from all corners of a city or state. Online schools are often the only public school alternative students can access outside their locally-assigned school, and for some students – especially those with medical, social and emotional, or special education needs that can’t be met in a traditional classroom – online schools are a critically important public school option. Stride-powered online schools provide equal access and equal opportunity to students regardless of geographic location. Statewide full-time online schools are unique in that they are the often the *only* schools to have students in urban, suburban, and rural communities enrolled in the same school. Stride-powered schools generally reflect the same demographics of the state or city as a whole, but with one exception: they often serve a significantly higher population of economically-disadvantaged students than state averages.

But in an online school, equity of opportunity requires equity of access – specifically around access to technology. This is a significant challenge, and one Stride has worked with our school partners to address directly.

Rather than bringing students to school, we bring school to the student. In the traditional model, transportation to the school building is essential. In an online school, technology access is essential. Internet is to online schools what school buses are to brick-and-mortar schools.

This is why Stride has worked so hard to help close the technology gap – also known as the “digital divide.” Here is what we do: Stride works with our school partners to provide students computers and reimbursements to cover home internet costs. In many our client schools, economically-disadvantaged students receive internet subsidies and free computers. In some states, all families are eligible to receive at least partial reimbursement for home internet. Reimbursement amounts vary by school, primarily based on state funding.

But as the speed and quality of internet connectivity increases, so do the costs. And as more and more devices in homes are connected to wifi, there is greater demand for better, faster – and higher cost – internet service. Further, as online providers like Stride continue to develop more innovative, engaging online curriculum and instruction, the need for faster speed internet increases as well. The same is true for traditional schools, especially as more schools require students to access online learning platforms from home to complete homework or long-term assignments.

The barrier is not just around connectivity, but cost as well. Because of limited state funding – and, it’s important to note, full-time online schools are often funded significantly less than traditional schools – these partial internet reimbursements are often borne directly by our Company to help families cover these costs. We do this because of our commitment to ensure equity of access. States often provide many categorical education funds, but not to cover home internet costs for public school students, even for educational purposes.

We are extremely proud of how we’ve helped close that technology gap by shipping computer devices to hundreds of thousands of students – many of whom never had a computer in their home before enrolling in a Stride-powered online school – and helping lower home internet costs. But the burden to achieve equity of access cannot fall solely on the backs of education services providers or schools that already operate with scarce funding. After all, schools can’t lay broadband cable or launch satellites, nor should they be mandated to fully cover the ever-rising costs of home internet for every student without additional funding. More must be done by private sector, internet providers, and government to ensure every student – whether learning in a traditional school or at home – has access 24/7 to reliable high speed internet for learning.

This is why Stride made internet access a central pillar in our education equity policy goals. Our Executive Chairman of the Board, Nate Davis, said it clearly: high speed internet access for all is fundamental to America’s infrastructure. It involves investing in new technologies to ensure access for all regardless of geographic location, and allocating additional resources to ensure all families – especially low income families – have the resources needed to connect to the internet at home so education can be delivered to them directly and reliably, every day and all day.

Through our school partnerships, Stride is helping to close the technology gap for economically-disadvantaged for families in DC and across the country and delivering innovative education opportunities to families. More needs to be done to fully eliminate the digital divide, and Stride stands ready to help.

Thank you.