

Coalition for Education Equity 2020-2021 Legislative Priorities

Broadband capacity/access/cost. Equitable access to high-speed Internet for our schools, students, and families.

There is inequity in access to the Internet for our students across Alaska. This is especially true for our BIPOC children and children in rural Alaska. For many families, access to the Internet is cost prohibitive, and with much of our education delivery moving online this fall, lack of Internet access is exacerbating access to education for these students.

Most schools are operating and delivering education via distance learning due to COVID-19. To be effective, distance learning requires reliable Internet access, which can be cost prohibitive, especially in the more remote areas of our state. Current e-rate rules prohibit the use of school Internet purchased with e-rate funding to be used beyond the school walls. Additionally, the Federal Communications Commission is not allowing a 1-year waiver for schools to push out broadband access to students' homes.

The recent award of \$46 million to increase broadband access in rural Alaska was great news and our Federal delegation played a key role in securing the grant funding from USDA. This funding will improve internet connectivity for both the Prince of Wales Island region and across Southwest Alaska and the Aleutians and is a good start in addressing rural Internet and broadband issues. However, it doesn't address the immediate need for affordable or subsidized Internet access to fairly deliver education to all of Alaska's students.

With close to 4000 students in areas of extreme poverty, many of our students in Alaska do not have the same level of Internet access as students in areas with more affordable Internet access. This of course raises a serious equity issue regarding education delivery. CARES Act funding could be used to alleviate this problem and bridge the gap of Internet access between school and home. We support amending current CARES Act funding to allow for (or include in a second round of CARES Act funding) at-home student Internet and generally allowing more flexibility on how school districts can spend their CARES Act allocation.

There are new exciting developments around expanding high-speed Internet across the state with the USDA grants and also the launch of low-earth satellites, but we know these don't solve the problem. We ask our legislators to continue looking at how we can use existing (or new) funding and mechanisms to get affordable Internet to our students and families in the near term, and work on viable solutions for building an infrastructure for statewide access to high-speed Internet in the future.