

IMPACT OF THE ALASKA BROADBAND EDUCATION
GAP ON STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES AND INSTRUCTION



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The Alaska School Broadband Audit project also studied the impact that the broadband gap has on student opportunities and instruction in the state. To explore this impact, Connect Alaska contracted with Hays Research Group, an Anchorage-based research firm, to conduct telephone and online surveys of 55 Alaska schools to examine current broadband infrastructure in educational institutions, how students are accessing the Internet for schoolwork, and what educational opportunities might be available to students through more robust access to online resources. While the Alaska School Broadband Audit aims to understand what technology schools possess, the Needs Assessment Survey asked educators how they see technology being used in schools presently and in the future. The results of this survey were analyzed and reported in a white paper released in February 2015 (see Appendix 1).

Hays Research conducted the Needs Assessment Survey by interviewing Alaska school instructors and administrators between November 19, 2014 and December 17, 2014. Once respondents agreed to participate, the questionnaire took approximately ten minutes to complete. Multiple attempts were made to contact the principal at each school, and if unsuccessful, callers asked to speak to the individual at the school with the most knowledge about incorporating technology into the school's curricula. Overall, 9.6% of public schools in the state responded to the survey. Approximately 75% of these schools surveyed were located in rural districts, representing an appropriate sample of largely rural Alaska where 72% of schools statewide are located in rural or remote communities – many of which are located off the road system.

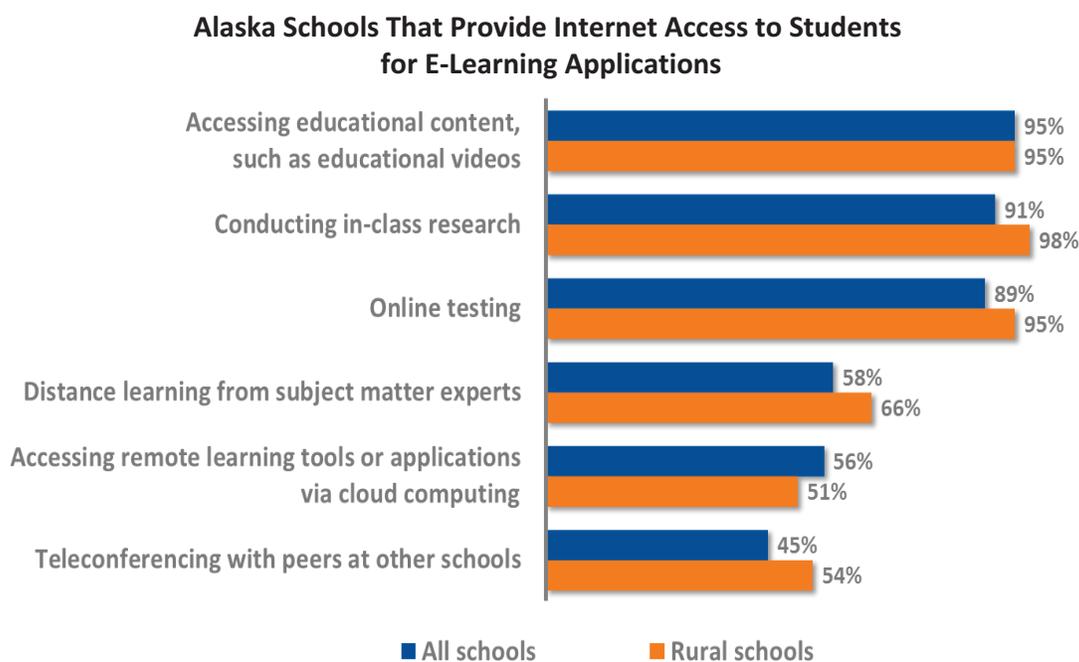
Figure 16: Map of Alaskan School Districts



The key findings from the school Needs Assessment Survey indicated that despite their connectivity challenges, rural schools were using what technology they did have to better serve the educational needs of their students. Results showed that 100% of rural schools surveyed reported that students were allowed to access the Internet during the school day for classwork (surpassing the 96% of non-rural schools that reported allowing online access). To bring computer usage to their students, 93% of rural schools (91% statewide) provided laptops and tablets to their students, often on carts used in classrooms or in computer labs.

Regarding the use of broadband in the classroom, two out of three rural schools (66%) responded that they rely on broadband to provide their students with educational opportunities through distance learning. Nearly all rural schools (95%) said their students use broadband to access educational content, 98% use it to conduct in-class research, and 95% use it for online testing. Distance learning is also particularly important for rural schools, as 66% of rural schools use broadband for distance learning, compared to 58% of all schools statewide (see Figure 17).

Figure 17: Alaska Schools That Provide Internet Access to Students for E-Learning Applications



Teachers are now hamstrung without better connections . . . ALL courseware is now including online content but schools in remote Alaska cannot use it.

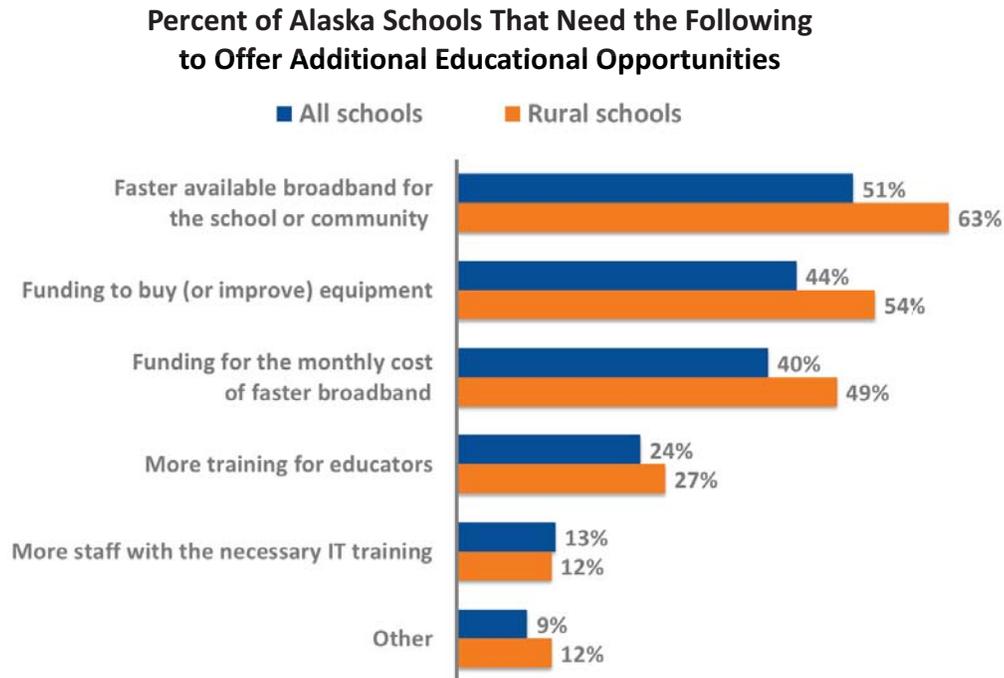
Surveyed School Representative

While schools are attempting to connect their students, particularly those in rural communities, the needs of schools are greater than the current technology offerings and those demands are only rising. Nearly three out of four rural Alaska schools (73 percent) reported that they would offer more educational opportunities to students if more bandwidth were available. Educators reported that they would use tools such as live-streaming lectures, offer online courses, and incorporate online content that complements the

lessons being taught in their classrooms. Additionally, many schools expressed that faster speeds were needed to run their existing educational programs.

A major source of concern for the schools surveyed was the issue of funding, particularly among rural schools. A majority of rural schools surveyed (54%) said that they needed funding to buy or improve their equipment while 49% stated the need for funding to cover the monthly costs of faster broadband service (see Figure 18).

Figure 18: Percent of Alaska Schools That Needs the Following to Offer Additional Educational Opportunities



The Needs Assessment Survey showed that districts across Alaska have very real broadband needs today and planning for improvements to technology well into the future is crucial. With 89 percent of schools statewide seeing broadband needs rising in the next five years, broadband planning and funding must be a part of Alaska’s education priorities moving forward.

Having unlimited access to resources around the world without technical barriers will allow for broader and deeper student exposure, along with personalized instruction that will be appropriate for the student's learning style and needs.

Surveyed School Representative