



Tens of thousands of Colorado kids still lack internet access. State stimulus dollars will only offer a short-term fix.

Lawmakers are devoting \$20 million to help improve internet connectivity for students. Education leaders are grateful, but say the money won't solve the root of the issue: inadequate infrastructure.

DEC 3, 2020 - Erica Breunlin

One of the kids in Patsy Burenheide's third grade class earlier this fall met with her class via Zoom by sitting at the edge of her family's garage in Milliken, where she could access her neighbor's Wi-Fi. The connection inside her house was so weak that she and her siblings couldn't study online at the same time.



Other students' families have opted to send their kids back to school in person this fall, even as they face a high risk for COVID-19 or are fearful of the virus, because they aren't equipped for remote learning.

"I still have students with me online who live in certain rural areas or more to the edge of our district that have weak connection or service," Burenheide, who teaches online for Weld County School District RE-5J Johnstown-Milliken, said Wednesday morning during a virtual summit focused on improving internet access for northern Colorado students.

"We do have hotspots that we are using with a lot of our families, but even the hotspots don't have service. They freeze again, so we're losing out on our time with instruction with kids trying to get back on," she said. "Younger students have to have parents get them signed back in, and then we repeat directions and have them sign in and out. So it's frustrating for the kids. They get very upset if they think they've missed out. Sometimes it's hard to get them back on task."

State lawmakers on Wednesday passed a bill that could help ease some of that frustration, providing \$20 million in grants for districts to broaden internet access to their students at a time the internet has become the main mode of learning across much of the state and country. But the dollars, part of a state stimulus package at the

center of a special legislative session this week, won't ensure every young Coloradan has a reliable internet connection.

The investment is widely viewed — by lawmakers, educators and education advocates — as a short-term fix. It's nowhere near enough money to address the root of the access problem: a lack of adequate infrastructure to sustain a quality internet connection for every Colorado family.

The \$20 million in [House Bill 1001](#) is focused on “giving access and infrastructure in as quick a way as possible,” state Rep. Mary Young, a Greeley Democrat and one of the bill's prime sponsors, said during Wednesday's summit. The virtual event was the third in a series hosted by

[Coloradans for the Common Good](#), a nonpartisan organization that works to elevate the voices of community members in the issues that impact their lives and neighborhoods.

“The money we allocated for these grants is not going to solve the long-term difficulties that rural areas and some smaller communities continue to encounter,” Young said.

State Rep. Matt Soper, a Delta Republican, another of the bill's prime sponsors, supported it hoping that if Colorado students face one, two or three years of disruption because of the pandemic, “they don't become a lost generation.”

The \$20 million will be added to the Connecting Colorado Students Grant Program, which was created earlier this year to distribute \$2 million in federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act money to help school districts make sure low-income families and school staff had broadband access.

Grants will be distributed through an application process administered by the Colorado Department of Education. Soper said districts with a high percentage of kids who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch — a federal indicator of poverty — and whose communities have significant gaps in internet access will get priority.

One main goal of the legislation: to fund internet connections robust enough for all the members of a household to be engaged in their coursework at the same time.

Soper said the \$20 million, the sum recommended by Gov. Jared Polis' office, isn't enough to provide internet service to all the kids who lack it, but he's optimistic that it's enough to make “a real dent.”

“It's just a start,” he said.



Patsy Burenheide teaches her third graders remotely from her makeshift home office in Johnstown on Wednesday, Dec. 2, 2020. (Valerie Mosley, Special to the Colorado Sun)

Legislators folded a lot of flexibility into the program. Grants can help cover any technology capable of delivering broadband access, Soper said.

For some districts, that might mean investing in more hotspots. Others may want to purchase a subscription to an internet service provider or build their own antenna system.

“We’re leaving it up to districts to tell us what their needs are,” Soper said.

An issue of equity: A lack of internet connectivity translates to a lack of learning

Grant dollars will be allocated by February. The entire grant program will sunset in February 2022, Soper said, so it won’t compete long term with Colorado’s Broadband Fund, which also disperses grants to bring broadband to areas of the state lacking it.

Michelle Murphy, executive director of Colorado Rural Alliance, which represents 146 rural Colorado districts, echoed the need for a far larger investment in infrastructure around the state.

“The broadband issues were real before the pandemic,” Murphy said. “The pandemic puts an important spotlight on the issues, but they’re also going to exist for rural communities well beyond the pandemic.”

One-time or short-term fixes “are not the answer for rural Colorado,” she added.

What’s really needed, she said, is a broad-based investment in infrastructure development, which isn’t necessarily cost effective or enticing for internet service providers.

“It costs a lot to connect a few in rural areas,” Murphy said, “and that’s part of what’s created the current circumstances.”

During Wednesday’s summit, Colorado superintendents repeatedly pointed to infrastructure as the root of the connectivity problem.

“We can increase the number of hotspots, but if we don’t have reliable internet towers and everything else that will sustain and help us in this process, then it is kind of a waste of money in many ways,” said Johan van Nieuwenhuizen, superintendent of Weld County School District RE-1 in LaSalle. “So we really need to focus on changing some of the rules and then using the infrastructure and increasing that first.”



Patsy Burenheide is the Johnstown-Milliken Education Association co-president and a third grade teacher at Letford Elementary School in Johnstown. (Valerie Mosley, Special to the Colorado Sun)

In Fort Lupton, 30 miles north of Denver, the school district is installing an antenna on one of its buildings so that families can access a Wi-Fi signal from the parking lot. “I think at times people think if we just throw more money at a problem, it’s going to solve itself, but without a clear solution it’s just throwing money at a continued issue that becomes a larger problem,” Superintendent Alan Kaylor said.

Other rural districts are taking similarly drastic measures. In Centennial School District R-1 — which installed an antenna on its school building in the spring — Superintendent Toby Melster is trying to fund a project that would relay fiber that comes to the school out to the community. That will allow students to access an internet connection so long as they’re using one of the district’s devices. The initiative involves erecting towers, which are on backorder.

The project would be able to boost coverage among students so that at least 85% could access the internet from their homes deep in the rural San Luis Valley. If done well, it would cost about \$1.5 million, which the district can’t afford. Melster said he’s piecemealing funding together, in part by applying for grants.

His district is also considering creating a couple remote learning centers in old buildings.

Students in the district face many of the same hurdles as their peers — from satellite internet that isn’t always reliable to hotspots that don’t always get a signal and families having to decide who in their household will use their hotspot at what time.

It boils down to an issue of equity, and as much as lawmakers like Soper want to prevent students from falling behind, educators are already seeing some academic learning losses play out in real time.

Burenheide, the third grade online teacher in the Johnstown-Milliken district, said kids who can be online are learning.

“If we can upgrade that connectivity and just give them that upload speed, give them that contact, we can still teach them in a safe environment and they are learning,” Burenheide said. “But not if they’re not on, not if we can’t get to them.”



Patsy Burenheide teaches her third graders remotely from her makeshift home office in Johnstown on Wednesday, Dec. 2, 2020. (Valerie Mosley, Special to the Colorado Sun)