

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Non-Internet-Based Virtual Solutions Make Distance Learning Accessible to Kids in Need

SAND POINT, Alaska, July 28, 2020 – The Aleutians East Borough School District is launching a digital content delivery system that will give all students the ability to interact with teachers and access study materials without leaving the comfort of their homes. The system comes with no additional cost to the students. It comes in a place where internet services are unreliable, which leaves many students unable to access the internet and unable to learn.

Sand Point, which made international headlines this past week after a magnitude 7.8 earthquake caused a tsunami alert, takes pride in developing this system as it showcases its resilience and determination to find a creative solution to overcome the many challenges that come with living in remote areas.

“This exciting new technology will allow us to extend school services through a wireless system to the homes in our communities and allow our teachers to interact virtually with our students,” says Patrick Mayer, the superintendent of the AEBSD.

Kirk Feldbauer, the AEBSD’s director of technology, developed the blueprint for the design of the system that will fill the immediate needs of distance learning for the AEBSD community.

“The system will include content servers at each school building, which will allow the classes to have age- and grade-level-appropriate content to be delivered within our communities, simply by connecting to a wireless network at home,” Feldbauer says. “Students will be able to complete homework assignments, tests, and quizzes, all while keeping distance. Also, we will be able to offer the ability for the students and teachers to interact virtually in a classroom-type setting, with a virtual whiteboard in a full-featured offline video system.”

The school district is planning to open this fall following state and federal guidelines for SMART START. At the same time, the AEBSD is preparing for the worst due to the COVID-19 pandemic challenges and its continually changing situation, which could impact the decision to conduct the school in the classroom or at home in an instant.

“We sincerely hope to be able to see all of our kiddos return to school this year,” Mayer says, “yet we realize that may not be possible. With these exciting developments, the AEBSD will still be able to provide a first-class education safely, without direct access to the internet. We hope that you will all join us in fighting through these challenging times and making this next school year a huge success.”

The AEBSD is reaching out to other school districts in rural communities that are facing similar challenges. The district believes the Alaskan people are resilient, innovative, and generous and would love to share its expertise, including any planning or advice, with other school districts in need. Those with questions or in need of assistance should feel free to call the AEBSD office at 907-383-5222, option 4.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ):

COVID-19 has, to date, not been prevalent in Aleutians East Borough. Why is this needed?

The AEBSD has been following mandates and guidelines very closely and is striving to mitigate all potential risks as soon as possible to keep communities safe. This district is very fortunate that COVID-19 is not prevalent here, but the district realizes that could change in an instant and preparedness is key. With the lack of affordable internet to many homes in the region, the AEBSD is limited in the methods of service delivery of content to its students. The district believes that, by offering this service, it will be able to provide real-time instruction, new content and appropriate technology and that it will be ready to go in the instant it should ever be needed.

Is this available to the whole community, and can we get to the internet?

FCC regulations mandate that any internet circuit that is funded through E-rate must follow specific guidelines. As such, the district is unable to broadcast direct internet content off of school properties. The AEBSD has been diligently working on getting this amended for the current situation and has filed waiver paperwork with the FCC. While the initial request was denied, the district is hopeful this will be better addressed in the future. In the meantime, the district will work with what it has. Guests to the district's new system are allowed and will be encouraged to sign up for learner accounts, giving anyone in the community the ability to access this educational content.

Is there a charge for this service to the families?

No! It is free of charge to any of our residents with students. The Chromebooks and wireless access points (WAPs) will be provided to the students. However, not every family will be receiving a WAP, as this is unnecessary. Some WAPs may cover multiple households and you will see the wireless network without a local device.

I need access for my children. What can I do to get it?

Please contact your school if you have questions about how to gain access. While the district intends to offer in-school classes at this time, the AEBSD has been working on the configuration of this solution and is developing a plan to reach all current students in the district. We will have some additional radios to install for outlying new registrants. However, most students will have access to the system by the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year

How do we connect? Is it difficult?

It is not difficult to connect. The AEBSD will be automatically pushing out the wireless connection information to our students' Chromebooks. For the radio connection, we will send out detailed instructions with photographs. It must only remain connected to power.

Will there be future improvements?

Absolutely! The district will be continually evaluating what services it can provide. Currently, the district has meeting rooms, classroom whiteboards and educational content in various forms (audio/video/text). As the district learns more, or if the restrictions are removed, the AEBSD will continue to enhance its digital capabilities to provide the most enriching experience possible for its students.

Oh, no! I live in rural Alaska but not in Aleutians East Borough. Can I get this service?

Contact your internet service provider. While the AEBSD technology department developed this system for internal use, there were many weekly planning sessions attended by most of the internet providers in the area. They may already be planning to provide this solution to others and can assist your community in this upcoming school year. Additionally, the AEBSD is happy to help neighboring communities with any planning or advice. If you have questions or need assistance, feel free to call the AEBSD office at 907-383-5222, option 4.

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The AEBSD wishes for you and your family to stay safe.