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Alaska hopes to lead in digitizing classrooms

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JUNEAU, Alaska — Jolene Kinsland's two classrooms look like those at any other elementary school in the United States. An American flag hangs beside the window. Cubbies greet students at the open-door entrance of one room, filing cabinets at the other.

The out-of-place, old-fashioned scale that sits in the back of one room is the first clue that this school with shockingly bright yellow walls and cabinets actually isn't like every other.

Hundreds of miles away from Anchorage, across the Alaska Range - home to North America's tallest mountain, Mount McKinley - the 10 students in grades three through 10 at the Takotna Community School in face challenges unfamiliar to most in Americans but all too common for Alaska's rural youth.

Here, it takes a whole lot of effort to stay on the good side of the digital divide by keeping up to date with the latest technology, but they might be getting some help soon.

Some educators and politicians, including Gov. Sean Parnell, want to even the playing field for students in Takotna and every other of the state's approximate 500 schools by giving each student a tablet computer and establishing a unique digital learning infrastructure. It's part of a push for digital learning initiatives as a way to improve the classroom experience, better engage students, and help teachers become better instructors.

Takotna is one of the smallest communities in the Iditarod Area School District, which covers nine schools situated along the famed Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in Interior Alaska about 225 miles northwest of Anchorage.

There are no roads leading in or out of the village; planes come in twice a week to deliver mail or groceries. McGrath is the closest community to go grocery shopping. It's only 18 miles away, but a round-trip flight costs upward of \$200.

Takotna's school is very much like those throughout rural Alaska.

"You walk into schools, and you step back a few years," says education commissioner Mike Hanley. "Our schools are absent to technology that we use in the rest of our lives."

The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development wants to add expand three digital learning projects already in place, but the ambitious centerpiece of its effort is the Alaska 1-to-1 Digital Technology Initiative, which would put an electronic tablet in the hands of every Alaska child over a four year time period.

"Almost no businesses can function without technology," says Carl Rose, the executive director of the Association of Alaska School Boards. "If business is totally dependent on it, if government is totally dependent on it, if world communications is totally dependent on it, what about our schools?"

The school board association is partnering with the department to hopefully implement the program in districts, organize partnerships with private companies and lobby legislators for funding.

However, the program is about more than just the hardware that would be given to teachers and students; it's about building a new infrastructure for education, changing the way instructors teach and helping students develop 21st century skills by the time they graduate.

"It's not just to put a textbook on an iPad and call that new technology. We really haven't gained anything from that," Hanley said. "We're looking at helping teachers become more effective and more efficient."

With today's software, Hanley says teachers can upload work from multiple students and analyze their deficiencies much more quickly. They can choose different assignments tailored to each student and differentiate instruction to tailor the needs of children of multiple skill levels using apps and other software.

If all goes to plan, the 1-1 initiative would be rolled out over four years at a cost of around \$15.5 million. The state and districts will split the \$200 per-student cost of supplying Alaska's 129,000 K-12 kids with tablets, with the state covering 60 percent and the district contributing the rest. Teachers will be supplied with tablets and laptops as well.

One rural superintendent called the idea "revolutionary."

"I think it's going to be one of the great equalizing initiatives," says Iditarod superintendent Scott Ballard.

But some districts without extensive broadband access worry that they'll be on the hook for a device and system that requires an Internet connection.

Even the state's largest district has concerns.

The Anchorage School Board, which serves over a third of Alaska's public school students, hasn't taken an official position on the program, according to President Jeannie Mackie.

As a parent, Mackie likes the idea of engaging her kids in a way that appeals to them and focuses their education in a way that emphasizes technology skills. But like other districts, Anchorage is concerned that the project will end up costing more than what the state is willing to allocate, at a time when Anchorage is laying off staff due to budget cuts.

"Implementing something like this is much different in a small district," Mackie said.

Parnell's initial budget allocated \$5.9 million for the project, but much of that was removed in the House version of the bill. The Senate proposed \$5.16 million for digital learning tools, and it will likely be up to the conference committee of House and Senate negotiators to reach a final agreement.

The department also wants to expand three digital learning initiatives already in place - the Alaska Online With Libraries project, which would expand broadband access to some of the state's most isolated areas, the state's online homework help and the Alaska Learning Network, which broadcasts online live, interactive classes taught in other districts around the state.

"When we look at Alaska and we look at our vast geography and the challenges that we have there, we can offer a highly qualified teacher to a student in a small community that only has one in their building, we can offer them a highly qualified teacher in calculus that they don't have the opportunity to have now," Hanley said.

And that appeals to Nell Huffman, the vice president of the Iditarod school board.

"It will enable students, even in our very remote sites, to be on an equal playing field with students in the larger school," she said.