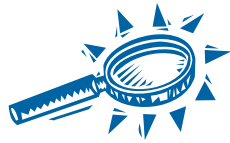




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# Blueprint Brief



A closer look at the research in  
**Blueprint for Opportunity:**  
**Issues that matter • Ideas that work**

Blueprint Brief No. 2

Aug. 22, 2006

*High-speed Internet and video conferencing now make it possible to transmit urban educational resources to rural classrooms.*

*Districts that have made use of education technology for distance learning have seen notable results in student achievement.*

*Partnerships with private Internet providers can be an effective way of helping schools gain access to educational technology.*

## Close the technology gap that leaves some kids behind, especially in rural communities

By Curtis Lee Garcia  
*2006 Summer Fellow*

Innovative instruction methods such as distance learning can greatly improve education in rural schools. Technologies such as high-speed Internet and video conferencing now make it possible to transmit urban educational resources to rural classrooms.

The U.S. Department of Education National Education Technology Plan recommends that all schools support distance learning as a way to improve education. The NET plan highlights Florida's success in implementing a statewide virtual school system, which now delivers courses to more than 30,000 students, including those with special needs and learning disabilities.<sup>1</sup>

In Colorado, districts that have made use of education technology for distance learning have seen notable results in student achievement. Just this year, for example, the Vilas School District's Hope Online Learning Academy reported higher-than-expected CSAP reading scores for third graders enrolled in the district's online academy.<sup>2</sup>

At present, only nine of Colorado's 178 school districts have virtual schools,<sup>3</sup> including the rural Branson, Karval and Vilas districts. This low number is due in part to Colorado students having limited access to technology and broadband Internet.

Partnerships with private Internet providers can be an effective way of helping schools gain access to educational technology. In 2000, state lawmakers launched the Multi-Use Network Project (MNT) and the Beanpole Project<sup>4</sup> to expand broadband Internet access to rural communities.<sup>5</sup>

The MNT project established a partnership with Qwest Communications Inc., which involved a \$60 million investment from Qwest and a \$23 million investment from the state to build a statewide telecommunications infrastructure. The \$4.7 million Beanpole Project, meanwhile, awarded cash grants to counties to expand access to schools and libraries.

Despite these efforts, communities in Colorado still lack access to broadband Internet service. A December 2005 MNT update notes that 11 percent of

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Colorado's school districts (equal to about 20 of the 178 districts) are connected to the MNT.<sup>6</sup> And while Beanpole allowed local communities to purchase hardware and pay Internet bills, the program's rules prevent it from offering grants to lay fiber.

Federal grant programs can offer some help to schools in gaining technology. The federal E-rate program, for example, provides discounts to assist most schools and libraries in the United States to purchase telecommunications hardware and Internet access. The program is funded through a universal service fee charged to companies that provide interstate or international telecommunications services.<sup>7</sup> According to the 2005 MNT report, 61 percent (about 109 out of 178) of Colorado's school districts are E-rate participants.

In addition, the Colorado state government has offered grants to help schools meet the costs of buying and upgrading education technology. The state used funds from the federal Enhancing Education Through Technology program to offer competitive grants through Colorado's Power Results Project. Grants to schools ranged from \$5,000 to \$50,000 and the program distributed \$500,000 to \$700,000 per year.<sup>8</sup> The grants were discontinued this year.

Broadband Internet is increasingly becoming the preferred mode of communication in the 21st Century. Colorado state government has made a good effort to equalize access to broadband service for rural areas, but the job isn't finished yet.

✓ **Close the technology gap that leaves some kids behind, especially in rural communities.**

**We need to encourage distance learning by providing every classroom with quality education technology. Efforts should focus on schools in rural communities and serving low-income families. A top priority should be to lower the number of students per Internet-connected computer. Colorado should encourage partnerships with private Internet providers, and offer a multi-year grant program to help schools upgrade broadband capacity and training for faculty and staff.**



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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> National Education Technology Plan, U.S. Department of Education. <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/technology/plan/2004/site/edlite-default.html>

<sup>2</sup> Morson, Bernie. "Debated school scores big." Rocky Mountain News, July 5, 2006. [http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/education/article/0,1299,DRMN\\_957\\_4822221,00.html](http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/education/article/0,1299,DRMN_957_4822221,00.html)

<sup>3</sup> Online Learning and Distance Learning K-12 Programs in Colorado Schools & Districts, Colorado Department of Education. <http://www.cde.state.co.us/edtech/distance-coloradoprograms.asp>

<sup>4</sup> Also called the Community Incentive Fund.

<sup>5</sup> MNT authorized by SB 96-102, Beanpole by HB 99-1102.

<sup>6</sup> A December 2005 update on MNT highlights school participation. [http://www.colorado.gov/dpa/doit/MNT\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2005\\_Final.doc](http://www.colorado.gov/dpa/doit/MNT_Annual_Report_2005_Final.doc)

<sup>7</sup> E-rate was established by the Telecommunications Act of 1996, and is under the direction of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). <http://www.universalservice.org/sl/about/overview-program.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> The Colorado Department of Education provides a list of the latest state grants offered to support technology in education: <http://www.cde.state.co.us/edtech/e2t2.asp>