

10 Questions

Rural School Districts Should Ask
Network Providers



Alaska's Most Advanced Network.®



Choosing a service provider can be a difficult process. Finding one who operates in rural areas and understands the unique needs of your industry and community is even harder. A rural school district looking for a partner to support their connectivity and communications needs should ask the following questions when assessing potential providers:

1. How many other rural school districts do you serve?

Why you should ask: In Alaska, the vast distances and terrain can make it difficult for providers to deliver and maintain services unless they already have experience in rural communities. If a provider has only ever worked with urban school districts, do you want to be their first rural customer? Aside from the fact that they might not have the infrastructure needed to deliver your service reliably, they probably don't have local agents or support staff ready to dispatch to remote Alaska. They are even less likely to know how to support distance education and culturally relevant lesson plans for Alaska's diverse student populations.

2. How will the communications technologies you leverage in my community support my education needs?

Why you should ask: Just as every rural community has its own unique communications needs, every community has access to different combinations of delivery technologies. Some may have access to fiber, while others use microwave or satellites. Each delivery technology has its own performance characteristics, and the performance of the service you select will depend on that underlying delivery technology. For example, the perceived slowness of satellite compared to fiber is due to the distances between satellites and Earth causing delays in data transmission known as latency. Latency can significantly impact your experience and is something you should ask potential providers about upfront.

3. What service guarantees do you offer?

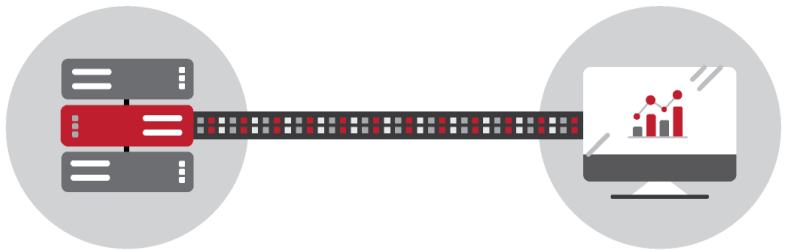
Why you should ask: Many providers do not provide service guarantees regardless of the nature of the customer's industry. In education, a problem with the network doesn't just impact district staff — it impacts Alaska's students and their opportunity to learn. That's why having a Service Level Agreement (SLA) that guarantees reliability and performance matters. Beyond just a promise of reliable service, that SLA should have penalties in the form of credits to make sure the provider is held accountable.



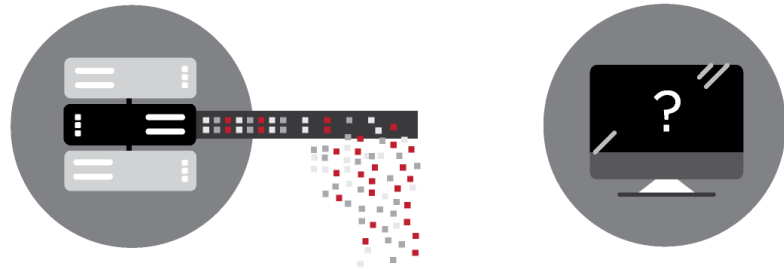
4. Are your service guarantees based on how available your service is or how well it performs?

Why you should ask: For some providers, availability is everything, and that is the primary way they measure the quality of the service. For most customers, however, consistent and reliable performance is just as important, if not more so, than availability. For educators in particular, a degradation in service isn't just a slow down or inconvenience; it's a barrier between the student and the education content they need. Because of this, it's critical that school districts have guarantees for all performance characteristics, including packet loss, latency and availability.

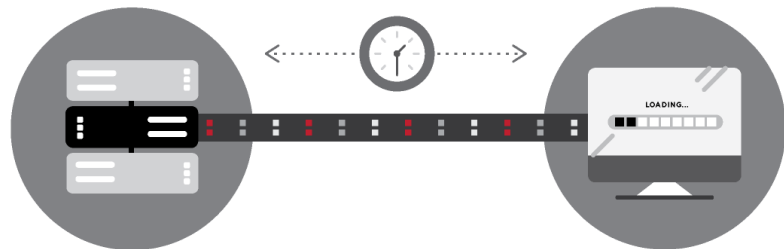
✓
ALL IS WELL
Good User Experience
Good Performance



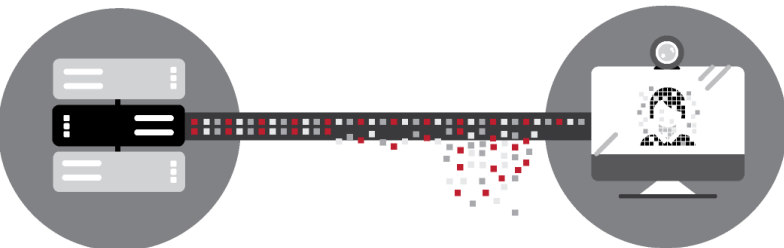
✗
AVAILABILITY
Loss of connectivity
Zero throughput



✗
HIGH LATENCY
Poor User Experience
Slow Performance



✗
HIGH PACKET LOSS
Unpredictable/high packet loss





5. When something goes wrong, who answers my call and how quickly do they resolve the issue?

Why you should ask: Service providers with experience working in rural areas understand that the critical public service provided by school districts requires a higher level of support than for standard businesses. Do they offer a dedicated team of support professionals empowered to see every issue through to resolution or are your critical issues going to be routed through multiple tiers of support that takes time away from your staff to manage?

6. Where are your support personnel stationed?

Why you should ask: In rural Alaska, where the speed and method of travel can vary greatly, having regional or even local support is critical to ensure issues are resolved in a timely fashion. Without that support layer, you could be waiting days on the provider to dispatch a technician from Anchorage or even the Lower 48.

7. How do you handle on-site troubleshooting and support?

Why you should ask: While remote network management, monitoring and technical support are now common, particularly in rural areas, some issues require on-site troubleshooting, especially when equipment repairs or upgrades are necessary. Do you want to wait for a dispatched technician from hundreds of miles away? Can you risk having your network offline while you wait? Having local and regional technicians throughout the state takes a dedication to support that some providers just aren't willing to make.

8. What security measures have you put in place to protect students and educators?

Why you should ask: In an educational setting, where students learn and grow with the help of their teachers, safety and security are critical. Today's students are Alaska's next generation of business leaders, thinkers and educators, and they deserve protection from bad actors. Your provider should take the security of all network solutions seriously and should have real world cybersecurity solutions and trainings relevant to your industry already available.

9. What experience do you have with the E-rate Program?

Why you should ask: Historically, USAC's E-rate Program has provided billions to support the connectivity needs of school districts across the United States. Without the E-rate Program, most rural schools would not have access to the services their students need. This complex program comes with a plethora of rules and paperwork that can be challenging to stay on top of, but thankfully your provider is allowed to help with some of that. Your provider is also required to fulfill a number of obligations that only experienced and well-trained staff can do. If your provider fails in their obligations or provides you the wrong information, it could put your funding at risk, so it is in your best interest to select a provider with years of success with the E-rate program.

10. Is your proposed solution eligible for funding through the E-rate Program?

Why you should ask: It's important to know that not all network services are available for funding through the E-rate Program. You want a provider who has years of experience with the program and knows how best to supplement eligible services, where needed, with ineligible services at your request. When evaluating network providers, look for one that knows how to craft solutions with the parameters of the E-rate Program in mind.

