

## Education Equity for Rural Black Communities in COVID-19

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### PROBLEM

Lack of internet access in rural Black communities limits educational opportunities and sustains inequality. In 2018, [Pew Research](#) reported that 58% of rural residents surveyed believed that access to high-speed internet is a problem in their area. The report shows that while the sentiment is consistent across economic status, **non-White Americans in rural areas are more likely to report that access to high-speed internet is an issue.** The [Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies](#) reports that 46% of households in the Black rural South lack broadband access.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, a 2017 report shows that about 80% of low education attainment counties are in rural areas, and 79% of those are in the South. Further, [70 of those counties](#) are majority Black and more likely than others to be high poverty as well.

The need for widespread, high-speed internet access is a longtime issue, recently exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. A [majority of K-12 students](#) (90%) rely on public schools for their education and in 2015, [35% of these schools](#) lacked sufficient access to broadband internet. As these data show, **school-aged Black children in rural areas are not likely to have access to high-speed internet necessary for successful online education at home.** Rural Black students are likely to come from households and communities that are suffering disproportionately from the COVID-19 pandemic and [more likely to come from households](#) with parents whose highest formal education is a high school or a trade school compared to their suburban or urban peers.

### SOLUTIONS

Schools have varying models of re-opening, including both in-person and online instruction. However, students who lack internet connections will not have access to all options. Supporting Black rural communities with access to high-speed internet is necessary for equity in quality of life and education access. Leaders must think critically and creatively to address these issues for the duration of the pandemic and following. State and local officials must prioritize:

- Increasing high-speed internet access for rural residents,
- Training teachers and parents on increased internet and virtual classroom usage, and
- Expanding access to devices with internet access.

For example, [Alabama](#) dedicated CARES Act funds to a \$100 million Educational Remote Learning Grant Program and \$100 million Alabama Broadband Connectivity for Students. The Connectivity program will offer vouchers to low-income students for high-speed internet service. [Arkansas](#) will use \$124 million in federal CARES Act funds on rural broadband with a focus on student connectivity. [Mississippi](#) passed two bills in July aimed at expanding student connectivity with \$200 million.