

NEWS RELEASE

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Los Angeles County
Office of Education

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

LA County Board of Supervisors approves funding to address digital divide

Action supports LA County Office of Education proposal to ensure all students have tools for distance learning

LOS ANGELES (Sept. 15, 2020) — The drive to close the digital divide in a region with the nation’s largest school-age population gained momentum today when the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved a proposal from the Office of Education to allocate \$12.8 million in federal coronavirus relief funds to purchase computer devices and internet connectivity for students in need.

“With most of our students learning from home, a computer device and internet connectivity are now basic school supplies,” said Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools Debra Duardo. “Equity is at the heart of today’s action. Internet connectivity is no longer a luxury but a basic utility that families need to access public education and other critical online services.”

She added, “I am grateful to the Board of Supervisors for their support and for making our students’ needs a priority. Their support will have a tremendous positive impact on our children and families who have been historically underserved.”

The Los Angeles County Office of Education conducted a survey of all 80 school districts the last week of August. The survey found that while progress has been made in technology access, some 27,000 devices and 21,000 hotspots are still needed by districts for students to use at home.

LACOE has already secured 15,000 computer devices and hopes to soon distribute devices and hotspots to each district based on the certified remaining student need that districts cannot address. The allocated \$12.8 million is expected to close the gap based on what districts identified as their need in the survey.

The action supports school districts and their ability to respond to the changing COVID-19 environment. Students will need technology at home when campuses re-open as schools are likely to continue physical distancing and adopt hybrid learning models. Some online instruction is expected to continue.

LACOE is also exploring a longer-term solution that would involve a countywide Request for Proposal to provide high-speed internet at the homes of underserved students. LACOE's focus is not only on providing all students access to what they need to learn now, but also on closing the digital divide so they have the necessary tools to learn and effectively prepare for college and careers beyond the pandemic.

"Let's not forget that every child has the constitutional right to a free public education," Duardo said. "My priority is to ensure that no child in Los Angeles County is denied that fundamental right because they don't have a computer or internet at home. That is a societal issue beyond the ability of school districts to solve on their own."

Comments from the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors:

Supervisor Kathryn Barger:

"Our action today fills an emergency need for thousands of the most vulnerable students and families in Los Angeles County. Based on surveys conducted by LACOE and our school districts, we are able to identify the number of students who lack the basic tools they need to learn — computer devices and hot spots — and provide them with those essential tools. I want to thank our partnership with LACOE and the school districts of Los Angeles County, whose leadership and direction helped us identify and resolve the massive problem of students and families being left behind without devices or connectivity."

Supervisor Hilda L. Solis:

"Every student in Los Angeles County has a fundamental right to a free, quality education. But remote learning under COVID-19 requires tools, which include computer devices and reliable internet connectivity/ As LA County continues adhering to physical distancing requirements, we are committed to providing families access to internet connectivity. This will not only help students, but also their families as parents can access online health services. With this \$12.8 million allocation of CARES Act funding, we are bridging the digital divide for students and families who otherwise would have lacked the access they need and deserve."

Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas:

"Well before the pandemic and schools' implementation of online learning, I was deeply concerned about students and families who are most impacted by racial and socioeconomic inequity. The pandemic has only exacerbated that inequity and resulted in yet more students falling behind. Today's action applies more than \$12 million to narrowing the profound digital divide, the uneven distribution of access to digital devices and the internet, by supplying 27,000 new devices and 21,000 internet connections. That is a success story we can all be proud of."

Supervisor Sheila Kuehl:

"I am very happy that the County will dedicate a portion of our Federal CARES Act funding to make it possible for as many public school students as possible to get online and continue their education," said Supervisor Sheila Kuehl. "Among the pandemic's many lessons is that universal broadband access is a critical necessity in every home and I am hopeful that state and federal legislators will take note of this when planning for the future. In the meantime, this County investment in hotspots and internet connectivity will allow students to participate in distance-learning now as well as in any hybrid classroom models when we are able to re-open our school campuses."

Supervisor Janice Hahn:

“Distance learning is a challenge for every family, but it is impossible when they don’t have access to a computer or an internet connection. Today, with this new funding, we will be able to supply more than 27,000 Los Angeles County students with the computers and tablets they need and get more than 21,000 students online. This is a hard school year for everyone, but we need to make sure our students have the tools they need.”