Gov. Newsom’s latest executive order aims to help close digital divide

In a wide-ranging press conference today addressing the challenges of implementing distance learning and reopening schools, Gov. Gavin Newsom spoke about newly issued Executive Order N-73-20, which aims to hasten the closure of the digital divide. Gov. Newsom was joined in the press conference by, among others, State Board of Education President Linda Darling-Hammond who said the California Department of Education and the California Department of Public Health will issue new guidance next week regarding students with special needs. Specifically, the guidance will focus on a district’s ability to assemble small groups of students with special needs that are better met in person — such as students with disabilities and English learners — despite the county being on the state monitoring list.

In summarizing the work of the CDE Digital Divide Task Force led by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond, Gov. Newsom said “nothing is more foundational to the future of the state of California and to address the issue of equity” than to address the state’s digital divide. Newsom noted that hundreds of thousands of devices have been set aside for California schools through the partnerships the state has developed with private companies, including a new deal offering discounted iPads equipped with an internet connection. “There is a global demand for supplies, for Chromebooks and for equipment for education,” Gov. Newsom said. “I want to thank the superintendent for working with these companies to set aside and prioritize the access of quite literally hundreds of thousands of these devices for our school kids.”

Below are highlights from today’s executive order:

- Prioritizes actions to bridge the digital divide throughout state government
- Directs agencies to pursue a goal of 100 megabits per second download speed
- Outlines actions to accelerate mapping, data collection, funding, deployment and adoption of broadband by local governments.
- Requests the Broadband Council create a new State Broadband Action Plan by Dec. 31, 2020, and to review the plan annually thereafter
- Directs the California Public Utilities Commission to lead data aggregation and mapping efforts in collaboration with the California State Transportation Agency and other relevant state agencies to identify, among other things, areas without broadband access and the costs of deploying various middle and last-mile network components
- The California State Transportation Agency and California Department of Transportation are directed to work with the California Transportation Commission to identify and incorporate the installation of conduit and/or fiber into all appropriate and feasible transportation projects along strategic corridors
- CPUC, in collaboration with CDT and other relevant agencies, is requested to seek opportunities to use programs under its jurisdiction to accelerate broadband deployment and to leverage utility infrastructure to increase access to existing fiber and cost-effectively deploy new fiber

Gov. Newsom also said that the state will continue to leverage purchasing power in ways that schools will be able to get their hands on the lowest-cost devices.