Mills Administration Secures WiFi & Learning Devices for 100 Percent of Maine Students Reporting a Need In Face of COVID-19's Impacts on Schools

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Governor Janet Mills and Maine Education Commissioner Pender Makin announced today that the Maine Department of Education has secured internet access and devices to facilitate at home learning for 100 percent of Maine school children for whom there was a reported need. The success comes as Maine educators have demonstrated extraordinary commitment and creativity in response to the suspension of classroom-based instruction as a result of COVID-19, providing invaluable and meaningful personal connection and assurance to students in a time of great uncertainty. However, it is still difficult for educators to offer equitable online learning opportunities without individual student internet access.

Through a combined effort with the Department of Administrative and Financial Services, ConnectME, and business and philanthropic entities, the Maine Department of Education (Maine DOE) has acquired 14,494 service contracts through three different service providers, nearly all of which are for WiFi-enabled Samsung Galaxy Tablets that can be used as learning tools and hotspots or hotspots only. Through one of the service providers, DOE was also able to order MiFi, a wireless router that acts as a mobile WiFi hotspot, to fulfill internet-only needs. To fulfill the device only needs, Maine DOE was able to order 7,450 Chromebooks.

> *"The suspension of classroom-based instruction because of the Pandemic has brought on new challenges and we should all be grateful for how Maine's educators have adapted to provide a quality education to our children," said Governor Mills. "It is our responsibility to ensure that Maine's teachers, and all students, have the tools they need to stay connected during these unprecedented times. These new connections will allow Maine students to do just that and stay engaged remotely with their school no matter where they live."*

All schools who indicated a need are receiving the information and devices directly from the vendors. Need was assessed by the Department of Education through several surveys of all traditional and non-traditional public schools and private schools who serve public students to understand the connectivity needs statewide. Of the 21,845 students statewide lacking connectivity, based on data from the 75 percent of schools that responded, 14,494 students needed a wireless contract and 7,351 students needed only a device in order to have equitable access to online learning opportunities.

The need for universal connectivity was identified as the top priority of stakeholders across the state in terms of mitigating the impact from the COVID disruption. Teachers have been struggling to connect with the many students and families who do not have access to the internet. A fourth round of surveys has just been completed for schools to report student connectivity needs, and DOE is working now to fulfill this final round of requests. In addition, the department has reached out to both higher education institutions and adult education programs to determine their student connectivity needs.

"This pandemic and the educational disruption brought to light the extreme inequities that exist across our state," said Commissioner Makin. "The emergency provision of connectivity to all students allows for educational continuity, and I am grateful to our team for their strategic and efficient execution of this enormous effort."

The Administration utilized federal funds, including a portion of Maine's $9.3 million allocation from the Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) Fund, which was allocated through the federal CARES Act, as well as philanthropic donations, to purchase the devices and wireless service contracts to meet the identified need for universal connectivity for Maine students.

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