Governor Newsom and State Superintendent Thurmond Announce Deployment of Up to 3 Million Free Rapid COVID-19 Antigen Tests to Help High-Needs Schools Safely Reopen Classrooms

SACRAMENTO – Governor Gavin Newsom and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond today announced a partnership between the California COVID-19 Testing Task Force and the California Department of Education to deploy up to 3 million rapid COVID-19 antigen tests at no cost to support the safe return to in-person learning for staff and students in some of California's most disadvantaged school districts.

The tests will be delivered to school districts in regions hardest hit by the pandemic and serve greater numbers of high-risk students and families, such as households in poverty, farmworkers and communities of color, as part of an expansion of an existing pilot program for antigen testing in schools.

“Every day, more and more school districts are opening for in-person instruction or announcing plans to reopen,” said Governor Newsom. “By deploying these rapid tests, California is adding another tool in the toolbox to support schools as they continue on the path to reopen as safely and quickly as possible.”

“It’s imperative we get these tests – another valuable tool among many options to enable a safe return of children to the classroom – into the hands of those who may lack the access to testing or medical care,” said State Superintendent Thurmond. “Being able to quickly identify who is positive, and who is not, will be critically important for day-to-day operations on a school campus, and will help protect not only students, but teachers and support staff.”

The State Superintendent and the California Department of Education (CDE) are assisting with the coordination and outreach to high-need school districts using the Healthy Places Index, a tool created by the Public Health Alliance of Southern California that uses census-tract demographic data to identify communities that are under-resourced, highly impacted by COVID-19, and are low-income, and Black and Latino populations.

The credit card-sized rapid antigen tests – which can be administered by any trained member of the school staff and can provide results in just 15 minutes – will be free to school districts. The California COVID-19 Testing Taskforce will provide the required training and oversight to participating K-12 schools.

“Antigen testing is one testing component of a full suite of COVID-19 testing offered by California and the COVID-19 Testing Taskforce. I’m proud that we can expand access to some of our highest need schools and communities in California,” said California Health and Human Services Secretary Mark Ghaly.

The California Endowment, the Public Health Institute and the California COVID-19 Testing Task Force implemented this successful rapid antigen testing pilot program, *Safely Opening Schools (SOS),* in January 2021 at 11 school districts. The antigen tests, which provide rapid results to help identify asymptomatic or presymptomatic individuals, were secured by the Governor’s Office

as part of its ongoing efforts to support the safe return to in-person learning and provide another safety tool that can complement the numerous options available to school districts.

The Public Health Institute, with support from The California Endowment and The Ballmer Group as part of the Together Toward Health initiative, has reported promising early data from the SOS initiative with more than 80 participating elementary schools and over 41,000 students. Data from the first eight districts where testing has started shows that out of the first 3,256 tests conducted, there have been only 7 positive tests, a positive test rate of just 0.21 percent, or one in every 465 staff and students tested. This data demonstrates that COVID-19 cases can be caught early and contained quickly before spreading.

Other school districts not affiliated with the partnership announced today can find resources for how to provide COVID-19 testing to their school communities on the California COVID-19 Testing Taskforce Website.

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