

AUSTIN BEUTNER UPDATE TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – JULY 13, 2020

Good morning. I'm Austin Beutner, Superintendent of Los Angeles Unified.

Today we'll talk about our continuing efforts to provide a safety net to students and families and discuss the latest information about the virus and its impact on the new school year.

Sometime this week, Los Angeles Unified will have provided more than 45 million meals to the communities it serves. Since this effort started, we have been helping hungry children and adults – no questions asked. Schools don't receive funding to serve meals to adults – states, counties and cities do. It's of great concern that none of the other parts of government are supporting this effort with the funding they have. Elected officials at all levels in California speak often of the virus, its impact on the community and provide guidance on how to slow the spread of the disease. Why no mention of the need to feed hungry people?

Public schools are the center of the community they serve and many challenges society face present themselves in schools, including those which Covid-19 has brought. We closed school facilities before there was any case of the virus at schools. That proved to be the right call. Science was our guide and will continue to be.

While the new school year will begin in August, it will not start with students at school facilities. The health and safety of all in the school community is not something we can compromise. The news about the spread of the virus continues to be of great concern. Last week was the worst yet in the Los Angeles area. The rate of those who tested positive for the virus is approaching 10%, well above the level of 5% the World Health Organization guidelines say is appropriate for communities to reopen. The comparison with New York should also be a cautionary note for all of us in Los Angeles.

The challenge for schools is how to strike the right balance between three sometimes conflicting objectives – the learning needs of students, the health and safety of all in the school community and the impact the virus is having on working families.

The more than 75,000 employees of Los Angeles Unified serve almost 700,000 students of whom about 80% are from families living in poverty. Surveys tell us more than 50% of these families have lost a job due to the pandemic. They also tell us many children are struggling to learn online.

Studies have looked at the “summer slide” when students regress during a traditional summer break. When the new school year starts in August, students will have been absent from schools for about 5 months, the longest stretch in recent history. For some, in particular younger students, students learning English, students with learning

differences and disabilities and those who were struggling before school facilities were closed, there may be a lifelong impact if they are not back in school sometime soon.

Since school facilities closed, health officials have learned the virus is more contagious than they first thought and that asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic individuals can transmit the virus to others. A recent study by scientists from Italy's University of Padua and Imperial College London on the experience in Italy shows a considerable portion of the spread of the virus was attributable to individuals who showed no symptoms.

There's been a great deal written about the need for different health practices in schools to prevent the spread of the virus. Wash hands, sanitize surfaces and wear masks to avoid spreading germs. Reconfigure school schedules and facilities to keep students a safe distance apart. It's become a familiar list and schools can and will find a way to handle these parts of a strategy.

But this will not be enough. Not when a meaningful number of silent spreaders of the virus might be on a campus. Families and staff share this concern as a significant number of them have reservations about returning to school facilities unless more is done to mitigate the risk.

The answer? Test students and staff for the virus at schools on a regular basis. Some claim children are less likely to carry the virus or they may suffer less severe medical consequences if they get the disease. There's little research to back up these claims and simple reasoning may explain why fewer children are testing positive – they're not likely to be frequenting high-spread places. One recent outbreak tied more than 140 cases of individuals between the ages of 16 and 63 to one bar in a college town. No young children were at that bar.

Reopening schools will significantly increase the interaction between children and adults from different families. A 10 year old student might have a 30 year old teacher, a 50 year old bus driver or live with a 70 year old grandmother. All need to be protected. There's a public health imperative to keep schools from becoming a petri dish.

In one of our high schools, for example, the almost 2,900 students and staff have frequent contact with another 100,000 people. Testing the few will protect the many, and experts from epidemiologists at Harvard University to a Nobel Prize-winning economist from Stanford have said testing at schools is the right approach. If just 5% more families are comfortable with the risk of their child returning to school, about 25,000 more students will be in our schools each day with a better chance to learn.

The companion piece to testing -- tracing those who might have come in contact with an individual who has the virus is equally important. Many of the early efforts in this area have struggled because they lack the information or access to those who might have been exposed. Schools are much better placed in this regard. Students and staff are in regular cohorts and can be quickly isolated. Contact can be made with others in the school community including family members. Schools have accurate, real-time

information about students, staff and families to begin contact tracing and they're trusted by families to use the information appropriately.

The places that have done the best in responding to the virus – South Korea, Denmark, Germany and Vietnam – have deployed all three of the strategies. They changed behaviors – practicing good hygiene, wearing masks and staying a safe distance apart. And importantly, they have implemented a robust system of testing and contact tracing.

Testing and contact tracing will cost money. Preliminary estimates are an effort in Los Angeles Unified would cost about \$300 per student over the course of a year to test students and staff every week, as well as family members of those who test positive for the virus. \$300 is a small fraction of the \$17,000 Californians invest each year to educate a student. And the dollars pale in comparison to the importance schools will play in reopening what was the 5th largest economy in the world just a few months ago.

Federal officials have recently suggested students need to be in school and, like a Nike ad, told educators “Just Do It.” We all know the best place for students to learn is in a school setting. While Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz might have said “Tap your heels together three times and say ‘There’s no place like home’ and you’ll be there,” actually returning to schools is not so simple. The Federal government could help by providing the funding schools need to make it safe and appropriate for students and staff to return. The cost of testing all at schools, maybe \$15 billion, will help make it safer for all 50 million students and their teachers in public schools across the country.

But this is about something that can't be measured in dollars and cents; it's about creating opportunity for children. A good education is the path out of poverty for many of the students we serve and the promise of a better future for all of them. Children need to be in school to get the best possible education. The right way to reopen schools is to make sure there is a robust system of testing and contact tracing to mitigate the risk for all in the school community.

Whether the instruction will be at schools or online, a team of educators is continuing to work around the clock to put in place plans for the new school year. Our commitment to students and their families is to provide the best possible education in the classroom – whether online or at school.

Online, this will include a regular schedule with standards-based instruction, including daily, live engagement between teachers and students. Regular assessments of student progress will be used by teachers to guide their work with students and keep families informed.

Where possible, schools will add instruction and one-on-one tutoring after school and on Saturday mornings to help students make up for lost time and accelerate their progress.

More detailed information about both online and at-school programs will be shared in the coming weeks with final plans by the first week in August. While the school year will begin without students at school facilities, our goal is to welcome students back to school as soon as it is safe and appropriate for us to do so.

In addition to input from families and individuals who work in almost every type of job in the school district, we're working side by side with our labor partners as we share this same common objective.

I'm 60 years old with a pre-existing condition, have a wife and four children and considered in a high-risk category according to some guidelines. My promise to all in the school community is to be right there with you when we return to school.

It's July 13th, and August 18th is about 5 weeks away. In ordinary circumstances, we would have already shared all of the details about the upcoming school year – from the time of the school bus pickup to the schedule of volleyball and football practices. These aren't ordinary circumstances. As we've seen over just the past 5 weeks, things can change quite quickly.

We'll incorporate the latest information in the plans we share in August. I wish we had a crystal ball, but we don't. We'll continue to do the best we can with the information we have at the time.

We're working to balance the learning needs of students, the impact the virus is having on working families and the health and safety of all in the school community. You have my commitment to do the best we can.

Thank you for your continued patience and support.