

AUSTIN BEUTNER UPDATE TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – JUNE 22, 2020

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

Today we'll provide an update about Los Angeles Unified's continuing efforts to provide a safety net to the communities we serve. We'll hear from students who are learning to play guitar, take a look at Summer School and a new effort to connect families with enrichment opportunities for their children, and I'll give the quick update on the budget process and the review of school police.

Since school facilities closed, we've provided more than 35 million meals. That's one meal for every person in Costa Rica, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, New Zealand and Singapore. Think about that the next time you're reading about schools reopening in Denmark or New Zealand being free of the virus. While we're seeing more activity in the community as state officials talk about a reopening, the virus is still very much with us and the impact on children is very real. We need your help. Please text NEED to 76278. \$20 will provide a week's worth of meals for a hungry child.

Guitar and ukulele classes started last week for about 1,000 students in what could be the largest guitar class in the country. School teachers and the folks from Fender have teamed up to provide lessons to middle school students across Los Angeles Unified. This one's a passion project for me as I'm a music person – a 5th-grade teacher convinced me to try the cello and I immediately found a group of friends and a way to express myself. Cello became string bass, bass became electric guitar and a whole new world opened up for me. Please listen as a few students share what this opportunity means to them.

Wednesday starts a new chapter for students in Los Angeles Unified. For the first time, every student was offered the opportunity to participate in Summer School and more than 100,000 students will be doing so. About 6,000 dedicated educators signed up to help students continue to learn. In addition to working on literacy and fluency in math, students will learn about sports, science, physics, animation and drawing, space, environmental science and much more.

In addition, Los Angeles Unified is launching A World of Learning on YouTube, an effort to connect families with enrichment opportunities for their children. Families will find access to the Natural History and Getty museums. They can go behind the scenes with Disney's Pixar and much more. Students can take advantage of the device and internet connection their schools have provided and learn about the people of ancient Egypt, participate in story time with the LA Football Club or learn how to land a rover on Mars with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

Families can find age-appropriate materials on almost any subject. Please give it a try and check the site often as more opportunities will be added regularly. This will be a summer of learning like never before for students in Los Angeles Unified.

California officials in Sacramento continue to wrestle with budget challenges which have big implications for schools since 90% of school funding is provided by the state, the rest by the federal government.

Public education in California faced serious challenges before this crisis due to the lack of adequate funding. In New York, public schools receive about \$30,000 each year to educate a student, but in Los Angeles that figure is closer to \$17,000. The symptoms of inadequate funding have been well chronicled – class sizes which are too big, the lack of full-time nurses at schools, libraries without librarians and the lack of computers and technology needed for online learning to name just a few. The funding issues will be made even worse with the proposed cuts the state is considering. At the same time as the cuts in funding, schools will also face large costs to mitigate the risk of the virus including the need to purchase personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies and hire additional people to clean and sanitize school facilities.

The state is currently proposing about a \$600 million cut in funds to our schools, or almost 10%. 97% of the funds Los Angeles Unified receives are spent at schools so schools will feel the impact of any cuts. At the same time the state is proposing a reduction in funding, schools will face at least \$200 million of additional costs for the actions needed to mitigate the risk of the virus at school facilities and continue with online learning.

This is an impossible situation in which the most important thing to consider is the impact this will have on students. Federal and state governments have provided the money to take care of the medical system and people who became sick. The same commitment has to be made to support schools and the children they serve.

School budgets are created within a complex labyrinth of state rules and process. The short version is that in current circumstances any budget a school district passes in June will be subject to further revision when the state changes its budget later this year as they are planning to do. Voters will also go to the polls in November to consider an initiative which could increase funding for schools. We expect to finalize all of the budget around December according to the latest guidance from state officials.

Let's talk a bit about the role of school police in Los Angeles Unified, which the Board of Education will consider on Tuesday.

We cannot ignore the legitimate concerns and criticisms that students and other members of the school community have about all forms of law enforcement, including school police. No person should feel the presence of a safety officer on a campus as an indictment of them or their character. Students deserve to be heard on this topic and their views taken into account.

But before one rushes to judgment on this issue it's important to look carefully at the lived experience in schools in the communities we serve and remember that school campuses must be safe for all members of the school community – students, staff and families. Those looking for a simple answer will be disappointed because it does not exist.

School police are not part of the Los Angeles Police Department, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department or any of the 13 other municipal law enforcement agencies in the communities Los Angeles Unified serves. They are trained differently and their role is different. They responded to over 100,000 calls last year, including threats of mass shootings and bombs at schools, and handled many robberies, sexual assaults, burglaries and other serious crimes. At the same time, school police try to develop relationships with students and staff so they can help de-escalate incidents on campus.

A careful look at the data and views expressed by various stakeholders show the complexity of the situation.

Teachers union leadership have expressed a desire to eliminate school police, while union leaders representing school principals, library aides, clerical staff and maintenance workers have shared the opposite view. Yet school staff of all types have been victims of assault at schools.

Black students are disproportionately represented in arrests yet they are also disproportionately the victims of crimes in schools.

I've received thoughtful and well-reasoned views from countless individuals offering suggestions and spoken with other Superintendents across the country about what might be done. And I've received form letters urging Los Angeles Unified to "cancel its contract with LAPD" and "abolish the police like Camden did." Los Angeles Unified does not have a contract with LAPD, and while the city of Camden did disband their police department, they replaced it with a contract to be served by the county. Since then, the police force in Camden has grown to 400 officers from the 250 they had before.

Those who want to abolish school police must provide a reasoned answer how the threats of mass violence and incidences of serious crime will be handled at schools. And they need to explain to those who are in favor of school police why campuses will be safer in their absence.

And those who think it's just fine the way things are must provide a reasoned answer to students who feel the stigma of an armed presence on campus.

Los Angeles Unified has long been a leader in school culture. Over the last decade, the number of school days students have lost due to suspensions has been reduced from 60,000 to less than 3,000. Arrests of students have been reduced more than 90% and

work is ongoing to reduce that even further by changing laws in Sacramento and practices in schools to allow for more counseling of students in lieu of arrests.

But that progress is not sufficient and the pace of change must be more rapid.

The Board of Education voted to eliminate random wandering in schools, effective July 1st, and I'll be recommending to the Board to eliminate the use of pepper spray and the policy which allows the use of carotid holds. Last school year, there were 4 incidents involving 4 students where pepper spray was used. There's been no use of chokeholds in schools for as long as anyone can remember. These may be symbolically important but with more than a half-million students and staff on school campuses every day this conversation needs to be much deeper if we're going to make real change.

I've asked a small group of community members with expertise in this area to work alongside a team from Los Angeles Unified with deep experience in schools to take a careful look at the role of school police. Their charge is to keep an open mind and weigh the information objectively, listen carefully to all stakeholders and tell us how we can make it better. They will listen to students, families, those who work in schools and all the communities we serve. They will look at what is needed to keep school safe, as well as what students need to feel free from stigma and feel they are a respected part of the school community. They will ask hard and uncomfortable questions and come up with concrete recommendations. The objective is to present the findings, as well as any suggested changes in budgets, practice or policy, to the Board of Education for their consideration as soon as possible.

It's time to look at different approaches. For example, I will be asking the Task Force to look at the addition of experienced community counselors to campuses to help mentor students and influence potential incidents before they escalate. This approach has been effective in other areas of law enforcement. Los Angeles Unified could shift 10% of the school police budget to try this initiative without significant changes to the current deployment of school police.

But if the real objective is to look at systemic bias and institutional racism in schools, we need to take a much broader perspective. The lived experience in schools is about much more than school police. School police represent less than 1% of Los Angeles Unified's budget and the 400-or-so people in the department are an even smaller fraction of the more than 75,000 employees in Los Angeles Unified. Together, they serve almost 700,000 students in 1,386 schools spread across 710 square miles.

Let me share just a few examples of the work which lies ahead.

Los Angeles Unified introduced ethnic studies courses in the 2016-17 school year, yet this past year the 12,279 students who enrolled in them were a small fraction of those who were eligible to take the classes.

Civics, on the other hand, is a state requirement for all 30,000 12th-graders but the curriculum says little about Juneteenth, the Greenwood Massacre in Tulsa or the role redlining by cities has had in creating the disparity in funding for school districts which serve predominantly students of color.

Research tells us about the importance of teachers as role models, yet there are only 85 Black males currently earning their teaching credentials in Cal State's Los Angeles area campuses in a state with about 900,000 African Americans under the age of 25.

Jordan High School made the news recently because of the harm an adjacent business is causing to the school environment. But there was no mention that David Starr Jordan, after whom the school is named, while the first president of Stanford University was also a leading proponent of Eugenics, which is rooted in the flawed notion that individuals of Anglo-Saxon descent are genetically superior to Blacks and Jews.

We have people looking at these areas, as well as other ways we can directly address the issue of systemic bias and institutional racism. This moment cannot be about more words and false promises. It has to be about real change based on logic, reason, thoughtful analysis and genuine engagement with all of the stakeholders in the school community.

Our goal in this should not be to make a political statement; rather, to make real change to provide the best possible learning environment for students.

Summer has started and it's normally a time for those who work in schools to recharge just a bit and start getting ready for the new school year.

This summer will be very different for most who work in Los Angeles Unified. Educators are teaching summer school, operations teams are cleaning schools and getting them ready for a new school year and a whole bunch of people are working around the clock to plan for the possible return to school facilities on August 18th. Balancing 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 is not simple. It will require creativity, persistence and maybe a bit of luck to get it right. I'm grateful for the efforts of those who are working so hard to make this a possibility and am confident they will create a plan which best serves the needs of students and families, as well as all of our employees who work tirelessly on behalf of students and their families.

Thank you for your continued patience and support.