

## **AUSTIN BEUTNER UPDATE TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

### **AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – AUGUST 17, 2020**

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

This week marks the start of a new school year which brings excitement as the doors of opportunity open for students. The doors may not be open at school facilities as we start this year but the opportunity to learn must be there for all students. Our efforts, whether online or at school, are to make sure we provide students with a good education. The impact of COVID-19 requires us to take different approaches and put forth extraordinary efforts, we are committed to both.

As we've discussed, health factors in the community don't allow us to bring students back to school at this time.

The level of new cases in Los Angeles are still two and a half times the state guidelines and while the portion of those testing positive is below state thresholds, it's still considerably higher than the World Health Organization standards and those in place for New York.

School will start a bit differently this year, including the schedule. In simple terms Monday is a day for teachers to plan and prepare, on Tuesday afternoon all school principals will hold a meeting for their families and on Wednesday afternoon students will have a chance to meet their teachers. Thursday and Friday are regular school days which will start at 9 a.m. More detailed information for your school can be found in the Family and Student Handbook, on the school's website or on Los Angeles Unified's website.

The first week of school is always a long one for all who work in schools. Our friends at Peet's Coffee want to help get the week off to a good start with a free drink for any employee of Los Angeles Unified. Shira Goldman, a parent of a 6<sup>th</sup> grader, wrote me with thanks for the Fender Guitar music program and wanted to find a way to help. She reached out to Peet's Coffee and here we are. Thank you Shira and thank you Peet's.

When the decision was made to close school facilities back in March, I made a commitment to the students and families we serve and all who work in our schools to do the best we could as we entered uncharted waters.

Since then, we have provided children and adults with more than 53 million meals and raised more than \$22 Million from businesses and individuals to support this effort, we made certain each of the almost 500,000 students in our schools have a computer and internet access to remain connected with their school community and continue to learn, we collaborated with PBS to create student-centered, learning shows which have been adopted by school districts in 30 other states, we provided training in online learning to

more than 35,000 educators without missing one day of school and we made summer school available to every one of the students in our schools. To name just a few.

Today, we continue our commitment to establishing the highest standard in public education with the launch of an effort to prepare for an eventual return by students to schools. In addition to appropriate health practices at schools, we will provide regular coronavirus testing for students and staff as well as for family members of students and staff who test positive or show symptoms for the virus. Simply put, we can meaningfully reduce the risk at schools by testing all at a school to isolate both symptomatic and asymptomatic carriers of the disease.

Any return to schools will include an appropriate set of health practices when conditions in the community allow for students to be at schools. Students and staff will be provided with the appropriate personal protective equipment including masks. Facilities and school schedules are being reconfigured to help all at schools maintain a safe distance apart. Students will stay in small cohorts, where possible. And facilities will be kept clean and sanitized. Classrooms are sanitized top to bottom every day with electrostatic cleaners and MERV 13 filters (the equivalent of an N-95 mask) are being used in air conditioning systems. As additional practices are shown to be effective and appropriate for schools, we'll incorporate those as well. But that's not enough.

Back in March, the director of the World Health Organization told the world how to manage the threat the virus posed as he said, "We have a simple message ... test, test, test." He noted, without testing, cases cannot be isolated and the chain of infection will not be broken. In April, I told our school community that a robust system of testing and contact tracing would be needed to make it possible to return to schools. In May, we started working on a plan.

The almost 75,000 staff and 700,000 students in our schools are in regular contact with another 2-3 million people. Schools are the place which connects them all.

Los Angeles Unified will begin testing for the virus when the new school year starts. We'll build this program in a measured fashion and will start by carefully fine tuning systems and operational logistics. Then tests will be provided to staff who are currently working at schools as well as their children who are participating in the childcare provided for Los Angeles Unified staff. Tests will then be provided for all staff and students over a period of weeks to establish a baseline. On an ongoing basis, sample testing based on epidemiological models will be done for each cohort of staff and students. Testing will also be provided to family members of students and staff who test positive for the virus and family members who show symptoms. This will help get students back to school as soon as possible while protecting the health and safety of all in the school community. And it will help keep them there if an isolated outbreak were to occur.

This effort will also set a new, higher standard in the work force to respond to COVID-19. A recent survey of employees found 88% felt a robust system of testing and contact tracing at schools would make them safer.

The plan will also include an information campaign to all in the school community as well as rigorous health screening protocols.

We will do our best to keep the school community informed. There is a special section in L.A. Unified's website, which will have information on the program to provide staff or families with answers to any questions they might have.

The spread of COVID-19 in the Los Angeles area exceeds the guidelines from the state of California which govern the possible return of students to school campuses. Any decision about the return of students to schools is still some time away. The launch of this effort now, however, will allow a program of testing and contact tracing to be built and made to operate seamlessly so it can provide a base of knowledge to help prepare for an eventual return to school campuses.

Since schools were closed, science has been our guide and it's science which creates the foundation for this effort. A few points are worth emphasizing in this regard.

1. The virus is highly contagious and can cause severe health consequences.
2. A significant portion of those who have the virus show no symptoms while spreading the disease.
3. Children can carry and spread the virus.
4. The long term health consequences of the virus for both children and adults are not known.
5. Schools bring together individuals from different families and different generations.
6. Many students and staff live in multi-generational households, often with someone in a high-risk category.

Several leading organizations are helping in this effort. The collaboration is the result of months of around the clock work by many and I'm grateful for their efforts to get us to this point.

- SummerBio is an automated diagnostic testing company. They'll be providing the volume of tests in a timely manner at a cost which makes this program feasible.
- Clinical Reference Laboratory, one of the largest privately held testing laboratories in the U.S., will provide in-cheek swab test kits for our youngest learners.
- Microsoft is providing the tools and the technologies to manage the work flows and make sure the information is shared appropriately.

- Anthem Blue Cross has been a thought partner and will provide access to health-related data to better inform the testing and tracing program.
- Health Net will support a portion of the testing-related costs and will work to make sure every eligible family is enrolled in Medi-Cal or Covered California. They'll also provide support to route claims for students and staff with existing health coverage and explore sharing additional information about the health impact of the virus.
- UCLA, the Johns Hopkins University and Stanford University will be providing scientific expertise to optimize the use of testing resources as well as support to coordinate the information and help make it available to other researchers.

We are grateful all of these world-class institutions will be helping in this ground breaking effort.

Former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has agreed to co-chair the oversight of the testing and contact tracing effort with me. He brings extensive experience in overseeing the creation and implementation of effective education policy at the local, state and national level. Secretary Duncan and I will make sure the effort is well coordinated with other government agencies and that the public policy implications are shared with the appropriate policy makers.

Extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary actions and while this testing and contact tracing effort is unprecedented, it is necessary and appropriate. This program will provide public health benefit to all in the school community as well as the greater Los Angeles area. It will also provide significant education benefits for students as it will get them back to school sooner and safer and keep them there. We hope this effort will also provide learnings which can be shared with other school systems and communities across the nation as we all combat the pandemic.

An effort like this is not simple and the scale is daunting. If it was easy, it would have been done already. A pilot program is likely to experience difficulties, some we can anticipate and some we cannot. The labs may have issues, test results might be late, students or staff might be absent on the day of testing at a school or contact tracing efforts might not reach every family. But if it works, it can be a model for other school districts and communities across the country.

Critics may challenge the cost. But if we can isolate even just a few cases and keep others from the harm the virus causes, it will be worth it. We have seen the disproportionate impact the virus is having on essential workers and those for whom going to work is essential to put food on the table and a roof overhead for their families. These are the same families, 82% Black and Latino, which Los Angeles Unified serves. Testing must be available for all, irrespective of your circumstances.

Testing and contact tracing will cost money. The effort in Los Angeles Unified will cost about \$300 per student over the course of a school year to test students and staff regularly, as well as family members of those who test positive or show symptoms for the virus. That 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 the world's fifth-largest economy.

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 students and the promise of a better future for all of them.

The opportunity to use testing to get ahead of the virus was missed in January and again in May due to a lack of capacity. Californians are now looking at several weeks or even months of shutdown to reduce the overall level of the virus so communities and schools can begin to carefully reopen.

This time we must be ready with a robust system of testing and contact tracing so the third time can be the charm.

We appreciate your support as we embark on this effort.

Thank you.