

AUSTIN BEUTNER UPDATE TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – DECEMBER 7, 2020

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

Today, we'll talk about the extraordinarily high level of COVID-19 in the Los Angeles area which will cause us to immediately reduce the number of students and staff at schools, we'll reinforce our commitment to returning students to schools as soon as possible in the safest way possible and we'll remind policy-makers in Sacramento and Washington about the importance of a relief program for schools and the continuing need to provide a safety net for the students and families we serve.

In March, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the head of the World Health Organization, said the only way to get ahead of COVID-19 is to "test, test, test." Here we are 8 months later with a crisis that's likely to last well into next year and there's still no national or state testing plan and COVID-19 is at dangerous levels. Disparate screening programs are run by state and local authorities as well as businesses and private organizations with various levels of effectiveness and little coordination of protocols and results.

President-elect Biden has described the crisis in public schools caused by the pandemic as a "national emergency." Despite heroic efforts being made by educators, the experience of online education for many students pales in comparison to what they receive at school.

The dire situation faced by schoolchildren deserves the same extraordinary response we have come to expect after floods, wildfires and hurricanes in order to help return students to schools as soon as possible in the safest way possible. Our country needs to address the "national emergency" in schools before it becomes a national disgrace that will haunt many children for the rest of their lives.

There are 1,037 school districts in California, from Los Angeles Unified which serves about 650,000 students to Indian Diggings Elementary School District with 13 students. COVID-19 presents the same threat in each as it does in the more than 130,000 school districts across the country.

Existing federal and state programs govern services to students with differences and disabilities and make sure no children go hungry while requiring adults to be tested for tuberculosis and students to be vaccinated for measles and mumps. This crisis is not the time to lessen standards which protect the health and safety of all in a school community – students, teachers, staff and their families.

So how do we get from this current mess to a place where families have the opportunity to send their children to schools if they choose?

It starts with the right set of actions by federal, state and local officials to bring the spread of the virus under control. As Dr. Fauci said recently, “Close the bars and keep the schools open.” The local response matters – COVID-19 case levels in Los Angeles are almost 3 times higher than those in San Francisco and twice those in New York. Schools in Los Angeles can’t consider reopening until the spread of the virus is at much lower and safer levels.

And when the community spread of the virus is reduced, federal and state government must be ready with direct financial and operational assistance for schools. Imagine a Marshall Plan for Schools. While much of the responsibility for school funding lies at the state level, this crisis has created additional needs which only the federal government has the resources to address. These needs are similar whether states are near the top in school funding like New York, with about \$30,000 a year in per-pupil funding, or closer to the bottom like California, with about \$17,000.

A federal relief package for schools should contain four essential elements – creating a safe school environment including cleaning and sanitizing of facilities and PPE, school-based COVID-19 testing and contact tracing to identify and isolate those with the virus to help reduce the risk for all in a school community, mental-health support for children to address the significant trauma they are dealing with which will accompany them back to classrooms, and funding so school districts can offer in-person instruction next summer to help students recover from learning losses due to the pandemic.

Similar to the Paycheck Protection Program that provided hundreds of thousands of businesses and their employees a lifeline, support for schools must be carefully targeted. Unfortunately, not all relief dollars wound up where intended – in part, because the CARES Act and subsequent efforts didn’t designate school districts as recipients.

In Los Angeles, our schools have led an effort which has provided almost 85 million meals to hungry children and adults along with 10 million items of much-needed supplies. Yet not one dollar has been contributed by state or local government to help fund this community safety net even though each received federal dollars specifically for this purpose.

A robust system of COVID testing and contact tracing in schools will help identify and isolate those with the virus, keep it from spreading and keep students who haven’t been exposed in school. The data from a focused, proactive program like this provides a clear picture of the spread in each local community. National and state systems of school-based testing will also provide much-needed information showing where schools have been able to open, what the occurrence of the virus has been in those schools and how that compares to other parts of society.

As part of the federal relief program, school teachers and staff need to be near the top of the list to receive vaccinations. And schools should be used to help provide vaccines

to children just as they were for polio. The best way to provide health services to students and their families in high-needs communities is at the place families trust and where children are most every day – their local public schools.

We hope that many people in the communities we serve will have had access to vaccinations before this school year ends. We're already planning for a summer session like no other for students to help them recover lost learning opportunities, add enrichment to their lives and help them deal with the anxiety and trauma this crisis has brought into their homes.

The operational issues involved in all of this are not simple and may exceed the capacity of individual school districts and even some states. In Los Angeles Unified, we're as ready as we can be.

We've upgraded the HVAC systems in all of our schools – 80 million square feet of them – and replaced the filters with MERV 13, the equivalent of an N-95 mask.

Every room is cleaned top to bottom with ionized disinfectant and thorough hand cleaning.

Facilities are carefully marked and furniture rearranged so all at a school can maintain a safe distance apart.

We've already provided free COVID-19 tests at schools to almost 200,000 students and staff and have the capacity to increase that to weekly tests of all students and staff at schools when the virus has been reduced to levels where it would be appropriate to consider reopening schools.

We created a consortium with world-class research universities, biotech testing companies, health insurers, a technology giant and a national medical center to help build and oversee this testing program. Through hard work and creative problem solving we pay less than \$15 for a PCR test with results delivered before 5 a.m. the next day. An App integrates everything from an individual's daily health check and COVID testing results to extensive data reporting and analytical capabilities.

The contact tracing is reaching virtually all of those who test positive because the call comes from a trusted partner, a local school, not a mysterious government agency.

Granted, not every school district can build an effort like this but they shouldn't have to. Federal and state authorities can learn from the experiences of Los Angeles Unified and other school districts and create a model which can be offered to any school district which wants to participate. That's where a FEMA-like approach comes in. No need for every school district to reinvent the wheel.

The nationwide cost of a school relief program like I'm proposing would be about \$125 billion or less than 20% of the total earmarked for PPP and about twice the amount

already provided to airlines. That's a small price to pay to give millions of children a shot at the American dream and their families a chance to get back to work.

Schools must come first, not last. Prioritizing education requires every Californian – from the governor down – to take the steps necessary and demonstrate with their actions how to lower community transmission of the virus to a level where it's appropriate for kids and teachers to return to schools. Once this happens, we'll do our part to keep students and school staff – and the broader community – safe.

We can't shrug off rising case counts as inevitable. All of us need to work to lower virus levels by wearing masks, social distancing, avoiding gatherings and staying home whenever possible so we can get children back to school.

Time away from teachers, friends and structure of a classroom is harming children. Many students are struggling with online learning, in particular young learners, students learning English, students with differences and disabilities, and students who were struggling before school facilities closed. We can see it in a 15% increase in D's and F's amongst high school students compared with last year and a 10% drop in reading proficiency in elementary school students. The gaps are more pronounced in some of the highest needs communities we serve. The desire and capacity of all students is the same, but for some students online education just isn't working.

Even before the pandemic, more than 80% of the students in our schools lived with families below the poverty level, and estimates are that 75% of the families we serve have had someone lose work due to COVID-19. They need the support school provides which includes a safe place for their children to be while family members are at work.

We must provide the option for students to be at schools if that's what their families choose, and more than 1/3 of the families we serve have told us they want their children back at schools. To put that in some context, those students alone would represent the seventh largest school district in the country.

The same survey also tells us the vast majority of families support what we're doing now.

But that doesn't mean we can't do better. We're working to find ways to improve online education and incorporate additional time for students and families with teachers. And we've agreements with labor partners who represent more than half of the employees in our schools on how we can best serve students when it's safe to reopen. Our goal is to be able to offer students as much in-person instruction and engagement as possible, not just Zoom in a room.

We're working to iron out the details with all of our labor partners as soon as possible so educators can plan appropriately and families will be able to make an informed choice at the time we're able to offer in-person instruction.

The survey together with information we're learning from our school-based COVID-19 testing program present a sobering warning.

Children from families with more means are more likely to return to schools and more likely to participate in free COVID-19 testing. The converse is also true.

If the best learning opportunity for most students happens in a classroom, children who aren't at a school may fall behind and face a lifetime of consequences.

As soon as we started receiving survey results, educators from our schools got together with families to try and understand their concerns about returning to school. What we found goes well beyond the schoolhouse.

Families struggling to get by have been those most impacted by the virus and many are living in fear. Fear of the virus and all that goes with it.

- They are more likely to live in a multi-generational household so any family member, including a young child, could expose other more vulnerable relatives.
- They are more likely to lack access or have inadequate healthcare so any illness can cause major issues.
- They don't have an extra room or space for a family member to self-quarantine.
- They don't trust government to protect them.

The consequence of this is truly profound. Students not at school will fall further behind which may lead to another generation stuck in poverty.

Gandhi told us, "the true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members." Well, this is our moment and history will judge our actions.

The next time you read an article about pandemic relief negotiations between Democrats and Republicans in Washington, or hear from an elected official in Sacramento or locally, see how long it takes them to mention public schools. If it's not near the beginning, they don't have their priorities right.

Rather than wait for the rest of society to reopen before we even contemplate reopening schools, we need to recognize the vital role schools play in the lives of children and working families and make students the priority.

My commitment remains the same as I made when we were forced to close schools in March – we will not reopen schools until it's safe and appropriate to do so.

This commitment also means we must respond to current conditions in the community. Because of the dangerously high level of COVID in the Los Angeles area, it's no longer

safe and appropriate to have any students on campus. We'll also be asking those who are currently working at schools to work from home if it's at all possible for the rest of the semester.

This is greatly disappointing to all who have been working so hard to build a proper foundation for students' return to campus. Clean schools, proper health protocols and COVID testing for all at schools make a difference but they don't provide immunity to the virus. We can't create a bubble for the school community. When things are so dangerous in the communities we serve it has implications for schools as well.

A Stay-At-Home Order means what it says. While our practices and protocols are working, the level of risk is too high and it's growing.

These changes at schools will remain in effect until the next school semester begins. We'll continue to evaluate the situation and provide updated information along the way.

Our food relief efforts at schools will remain open because the need continues – we've provided almost 3/4 million meals to hungry children and adults just this past Friday alone.

We'll also continue providing COVID testing at schools because it's keeping our school community safer and it provides us with important information we'll need to reopen schools in the safest way possible.

Our goal remains the same – to return students to schools as soon as possible in the safest way possible. If the level of COVID-19 in Los Angeles was like that in San Francisco or New York, we would not be taking these steps.

My hope is this action today will not only protect the health and safety of all in the school community but will keep the focus where it needs to be – getting the spread of COVID down to levels where schools can reopen.

My challenge to elected leadership who believe the future of children in public schools is truly a priority is to match your words with deeds.

Please take all necessary actions to reduce the level of COVID-19 so schools in Los Angeles can reopen safely.

Provide the funding for the work Los Angeles Unified has been doing for eight months – 85 million meals along with computers and internet access for all students.

Recognize the extraordinary needs in schools which lie ahead with the money and operational support in a relief effort which includes:

- Cleaning and sanitizing schools
- COVID-19 testing for students and staff at schools

- Mental health support for students
- Summer school for all students

The time for action is now. We in Los Angeles Unified will do all we can to help.

Thank you for your continued patience and support.