

AUSTIN BEUTNER UPDATE TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – FEBRUARY 15, 2021

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

Today, I'll share an update on our continuing efforts to provide a safety net to the communities we serve, talk about a few of the historic steps we're taking to help Black students, discuss the impact the digital divide is having on students and families we serve, review the actions Los Angeles Unified is taking to get ready to reopen schools as soon as possible and as safely as possible, and we'll continue our tour on the Magic School Bus to look at what's happening in schools.

Since March, we've provided about 104 million meals along with 24 million items of much-needed supplies to the communities we serve. 104 million, 24 million. These are big, abstract numbers but each one has made a difference in the life of someone in the communities we serve. This week, I'd like to share a few stories which illustrate how important this safety net is.

A short time ago, a young mother reached out to her 5th grade son's school – he was ill and she was worried about him missing class. The school found out that the mother, father, the 5th grader and their middle school son had all tested positive for COVID and were quarantined at home. A team at the elementary school got together, purchased groceries, followed-up with a care package including shampoo, toothpaste, Kleenex and laundry detergent, as well as a grocery gift card. Thanks to the team – led by David Kooper, who oversees schools in the Wilmington community, and many dedicated school staff, the family is making it through their struggle, and the 5th grader is back in school.

Thanks to a generous donation from Phillips 66 and help from the Wilmington YMCA and local Parent Teacher Organization, care packages have been provided to families experiencing homelessness and to foster youth in the Wilmington community.

Another team of educators has been using funds from the \$1 million commitment Los Angeles Unified has made to ensure youth in the foster care system and students experiencing homelessness are connected with their school community and able to participate in online classes. Because of the team's dedicated efforts during the first semester, about 90% of identified students missed no more than two days of school.

One of these students attends a South Los Angeles middle school and his school counselor noted that, although the student logged in to classes fairly regularly, he didn't turn on his camera or complete a lot of his school work. The counselor reached out and learned the young man and his mother became homeless when she lost her job. They had been living in a car for several weeks, unable to pay for a motel room or obtain a housing voucher. Despite the difficult circumstances, the student had been logging in to

class on his mother's phone from their car but couldn't complete all of his assignments on the phone. While the young man had a computer and an internet hotspot, he didn't have access to electricity to keep his devices connected.

The team at the school immediately set to work, helping them to find a motel room and a voucher to pay for it, and even had pizza delivered to them. The school team continues to be in frequent contact with the family, and the student's schoolwork is much-improved now that he has access to electricity and a roof over his head.

Finally, last week, during one of my regular calls with faith leaders from throughout the community, we were discussing our joint efforts to help families understand how Los Angeles Unified's school-based program will provide access to the vaccine in underserved communities.

Pastor Brandon Towns from City of Refuge Church shared a remarkable story about a young man he was mentoring who had contracted COVID while taking care of his 91-year-old grandfather. The young man was asked by his roommates to leave their apartment until he could show a negative test result. Not having a place to stay, he spent several days living in a Walmart parking lot, during which time his health insurance ran out. He was unable to make an appointment for a COVID test or travel to a distant test site.

That's where the young man's pastor and Los Angeles Unified stepped in. Together, we set him up with an appointment at one of our local testing centers at a school right in his community – quickly, safely and without cost – and he is now in a temporary shelter awaiting his move back in with his roommates.

If you or a family member need a COVID test, please make an appointment at one of our school-based testing centers, located at a school near you. We've provided almost half a million tests to students, staff and their families to protect the health of all in our school community. It's quick, it's safe and it's free.

If your family is quarantined at home or experiencing food or housing insecurity, please reach out to your neighborhood school. We are here to help.

These stories are just a few examples of the countless ways in which Los Angeles Unified is helping take care of people in the communities we serve. In times like this, we all need to do what we can do and I'm grateful our dedicated employees and our community partners are going above and beyond to provide a safety net for all who are in need.

To join in our efforts, please text NEED to 76278 or visit lastudentsmostinneed.org.

As we celebrate Black History Month and recognize the accomplishments of extraordinary individuals, it's also a time to recognize the extraordinary potential of every Black student in every school across the country. Opportunity gaps for Black

students have persisted for more than a generation. We've been systematically failing Black children as a country. Schools must be part of the solution because a great education is the most important part of the path out of poverty. While we in LA Unified don't have all of the answers, we're committed to making change.

Los Angeles Unified is taking a series of unprecedented actions to help Black students from our youngest learners all the way through high school. It starts with the Primary Promise which is our commitment to build a foundation in literacy, math and critical thinking skills while in elementary school. This effort focuses on the unique needs of each student by providing more individual and small-group instruction. This investment of \$100 million is the biggest commitment we've ever made to early literacy in our schools.

We've also committed an additional \$70 million to highest needs schools across the school district. Many of these schools will see an increase in the number of counselors and psychiatric social workers helping build student health, wellness, and engagement to address the historical pattern of intervention after a child has lost engagement with their peers and with the school. Schools will also have more funding to support professional development for leadership. And they'll be adding people to help connect families with their child's education and providing all educators with more training to help them serve the unique needs of each child.

Much of this investment will happen in schools with the greatest concentration of Black students, about 50 schools as well as other schools with highest needs students. The entire effort to help schools with the highest needs students will be in excess of \$200 million.

To give you some sense of order of magnitude, investments in the 50 schools I mentioned could result in an increase of as much as 25% in the budget at an elementary school and about a 10% increase at a high school. All of these investments and programs need to be made coherent and work is under way at the school level to finalize all of details. These plans will be completed in March and incorporated into school budgets for the 2021-22 school year.

The question might be asked how can we afford this, the answer is how can we afford not to?

In June, I asked a small group of community members with expertise in public safety and the juvenile justice system to help a team from Los Angeles Unified who work in schools take a careful look at the role of police on campus and the operations of the Los Angeles School Police Department. We cannot ignore the legitimate concerns and criticisms that students and other members in the school community have about all forms of law enforcement. No person should feel the presence of a safety officer on a campus as an indictment of them or their character.

The Task Force rolled up their sleeves and got to work. They surveyed students, families and those who work in schools and all in the communities we serve. They looked at what is needed to keep schools safe, as well as what students need to feel free from stigma and feel they are a respected part of their school community. They looked into practices in other school districts. And they asked hard and uncomfortable questions and came up with concrete recommendations.

This week we'll be sharing with the Board of Education a plan to implement changes based on the policy that they passed regarding the involvement of school police on school campuses. Sworn officers will no longer be deployed on high school campuses but instead will be positioned nearby for quick response to emergencies. The on campus presence will be replaced by School Climate Coaches, individuals who are from the community and can help mentor students. In addition there will be a major investment in training for all school staff to help shift the mindset and practice from relying on school police to handle student issues to other approaches like restorative justice. There will also be a significant investment in partnerships with community organizations with proven track records of mentoring youth.

These changes are made possible in part due to the tireless efforts of many in the community who have advocated for change. And these proposed plans owe much to the passion and commitment of the Task Force. I am grateful for each member of the Task Force and the time they devoted to this work.

These initial recommendations by the Reimagining School Police Task Force are just a step in the process.

There will be continuing work to evaluate the effectiveness of this new approach and explore further reforms. There also must be a recognition that the root cause of many of the issues we see in schools extend far beyond the school house.

This week we'll also share with the Board our continuing work to close the digital divide. When we closed schools in March, many students didn't have a computer at home and about ¼ of the families we serve didn't have access to the internet. We took dramatic steps to address these issues by buying more than \$100 million of computers and creating an arrangement with an internet provider which has since become a national model of how to provide internet access for students and their families.

But the challenge remains how to make sure every student continues to have the computer they need and a reliable internet connection in the months and years to come.

That's going to take two things – consistent funding from the state and better coordination among the providers of internet access with schools. Both problems are solvable and we've been advocating at the state and local level on these issues since May. There are a bit more than 6 million public school students throughout California and about 20 percent – or more than a million – don't have access to the internet at home, either because of geography or the inability to afford it. The investment in the

digital future of all students will help make sure there's opportunity to match the talent we know is in every student in every classroom, whether at school or at home.

Schools will need continued funding as there will be ongoing costs to replace computers and pay for internet access. Maryland has shown us what might be possible as legislators there have recently imposed a very small tax on internet ads to provide funds to schools. If not that approach, California needs to come up with a consistent source of funds and not continue to use Prop 98 funds. The use of Prop 98 school funds will merely reduce monies that otherwise would have been available to be spent on other needs at a school like a teacher in the classroom or a school bus driver to bring students to school.

Internet providers need to collaborate to provide schools with a clearer picture of which technology solution best serves a household at a particular location. Sometimes it's a WIFI hotspot from one provider or another. Other times it's cable access which provides the best signal. The providers already have detailed technical maps which can be shared and, together, show schools the optimum solution for a family at a particular location.

Schools are well placed to make sure the student and their family have what they need but only if the state provides the funding and the internet providers show us the right technology.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued new guidelines late last week on reopening schools. This provides much needed clarity and we hope this will lead to alignment at the state and local level with these federal guidelines. That's not currently the case. The CDC also emphasized the ultimate authorities on school reopenings are each of the 50 states which govern how public schools operate.

I'll remind you, the Los Angeles area has yet to meet state standards for schools to reopen since the first case of COVID was reported.

Let's review step by step what the CDC said. The new Director, a very well-regarded scientist, doesn't speak in sound bites or headlines so it's important to listen carefully to all of what she had to say.

The guidance starts with a firm statement that the most important piece to the safe reopening of schools is the health protocols and practices in place at schools. On this measure Los Angeles Unified is in the right place as our schools have led the nation in preparing their campuses.

- We've retrofitted 80 million square feet of buildings to ensure the air is filtered to remove any virus, using Merv-13 filters, which are akin to an N-95 mask. This is particularly important as the vast majority of COVID cases are from airborne spread of the virus.

- We clean and sanitize every room in every school, and are prepared to do so every day when students and staff return.
- We reconfigured the layout of each school to spread out the desks and workstations to ensure six feet of separation.
- We installed health-screening stations at each school entrance to make sure no one enters who has a fever or exhibits other COVID-19 symptoms.
- We added plexiglass partitions in offices and other work spaces.
- We designated hallways, walkways and stairways for one-way traffic to keep students and staff six feet apart.
- We implemented rules requiring rigorous disinfection between users of any shared equipment like printers, telephones and keyboards.
- We placed hand sanitizer stations throughout schools and make sure each room has the PPE – masks, hand sanitizer.
- We created the most comprehensive school-based testing and contact tracing program in the nation. And,
- We trained staff on health protocols and practices.

An example of the progress Los Angeles Unified has already made in schools was highlighted during the CDC press conference last Friday. A local, Los Angeles radio reporter asked the CDC Director, “Los Angeles Unified put in high-end filters with the air conditioning system at all campuses, and the filters are equivalent to N95-mask-level filters. I wanted to know if that is part of your recommendation?” The CDC Director replied, “That’s great. I think that what you are describing is MERV-13 filters and those would be top-line filters.... That would be one of the checkboxes in our toolkit that we would aspire to. So that would be terrific.” We completed this work in our schools last May.

The same is true for COVID testing. The CDC recommends key mitigation strategies which include “contact tracing and diagnostic testing in combination with quarantine and isolation.” Los Angeles Unified is already operating the nation’s most comprehensive school-based COVID testing and contact tracing system which can test everyone at schools – students and staff – weekly and provide overnight results. This testing program has been in operation since September.

The second major point the CDC made is that the community spread of the virus matters. According to their guidelines, the Los Angeles area is in the highest risk category. Levels of the virus currently fall into the red or high transmission category.

It’s also important to note community can mean different things to different people. Los Angeles Unified serves about 650,000 students spread across more than 700 square miles. That’s almost 30 times the largest school community in Rhode Island.

We continue to see the disparate impact the virus is having in the area. Back in December, we saw the portion of students who tested positive, despite showing no symptoms and having no known exposure to the virus, ranged from about 1 in 3 in certain communities to about 1 in 25 in others. While overall rates have come down it’s

important to note the disparity still exists and has a direct impact in schools. Depending upon the school, as many as $\frac{3}{4}$ of the students may come from outside the local community. The implication becomes clear for schools in Los Angeles Unified – students from communities where the virus spread is much higher, may attend schools in areas where it's much lower and vice versa.

The average level in an area as sprawling as Los Angeles can be misleading, especially when compared to much smaller and less diverse communities.

An unsaid, but related piece in the CDC guidelines is the need for coherent, clear and consistent state and local standards. Changing and inconsistent guidelines undermine the trust all in the school community need to have that their schools are as safe as possible.

State and local authorities should align their guidelines and approaches with each other and with the federal views. I'll highlight just a few of the differences.

- The federal guidelines are based on a current full week's worth of cases, the state uses a lagging daily average with cases from the prior week.
- California then "adjusts" the actual case rate based on a relative measure comparing the volume of COVID testing for counties within the state. No other state uses an adjusted measure like this one. The issue becomes apparent when the City of Los Angeles stops providing COVID testing at Dodger Stadium as it did recently, shutting down about 1/3 of the COVID tests in the area. Reported cases dropped significantly, in this case they should have by at least 1/3, but it's hard to know how actual levels of the virus compare with prior weeks due to such a large change in the number of people tested. The adjustment factor at the state level also changed significantly, both in Los Angeles and elsewhere in the state as a consequence of the reduction in testing. And the general public don't have the ability to reconcile the state adjusted figures with the actual figures reported each day by local health authorities.
- The federal guidelines show red as the highest level of spread or what we can think of as bad. Yet in California, red is good because schools can reopen. Each of orange and yellow have different meanings in California versus federal guidelines and blue is good according to the CDC but we are lacking that color in California. This all seems like an Ellsworth Kelly exhibit gone awry.
- State health authorities encourage Californians to dine out with friends, while Los Angeles officials forbid the practice.

More importantly, California authorities need to make clear what should happen at schools when COVID standards are met. The state has a 3,500-page Education Code which sets forth everything from the physical size of an elementary school classroom to when the school day must start for middle school students. Surely, the law should require schools to be open when appropriate standards are met?

We're already seeing consequences of the lack of clarity. San Francisco schools have tentatively agreed to reopen when the adjusted case rate is below 4 daily cases per 100,000 population even if school staff haven't been vaccinated. This isn't consistent with the state guidelines of 25 with no vaccination requirement or the CDC guidelines which make no explicit reference to a case level.

The threat posed by COVID is the same in every classroom throughout the state of California and everyone in each school deserves the highest standard of safety. Consistency and alignment will help build the trust of all stakeholders in the school community.

We're continuing to do our best to help inform the school community about the latest information on COVID and what that means for schools. In addition to weekly meetings for families with principals, regular community town halls and my weekly address, I've started a LinkedIn account with the assistance of Microsoft.

While the main purpose of this is to foster information sharing between school districts, it's a public site and you may find the information of interest.

The final point made by the CDC is schools must be the priority, as they in effect stated, schools should be "the first to reopen, and the last thing to close." That is not the case in California or locally. How can card rooms and malls be open while schools are closed? If teens can go to the mall together, surely they can be at a school and on practice fields in a carefully supervised setting with strict health protocols, including daily temperature checks and regular COVID testing. Or if the risk of the spread of the virus is too great, then let's close the malls to keep everyone safe and reduce the level of the virus to the point that schools can open. The CDC Director spoke publicly again on this past Sunday and concluded her remarks by stating, "If we want to get our children back to school, and I believe we all do, it all depends on how much community spread is out there. We all need to take responsibility to decrease that community spread..."

Making schools a priority also means vaccinations for all who work in schools. California is providing vaccinations for cannabis delivery drivers but not school bus drivers and teachers. How does that make sense?

In Israel they have truly made students a priority by providing vaccinations for 16- to 18-year-olds (with a vaccine that has proven safe for them), this is ahead of adults under 40. Their priority is clear – these children are at a critical stage of their development and need to be in school with their peers and their teachers or they may suffer a lifetime of consequences.

Schools as the priority means just that.

This past week, nearly 60 community organizations shared their voices by sending a joint letter to Governor Newsom and Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors Chair

Solis to request vaccinations be made available immediately for teachers and other school staff.

These organizations, ranging from the Alliance for Children's Rights and Communities in Schools of Los Angeles to United Way and the YMCA, serve the needs of hundreds of thousands of businesses and individuals in the same communities served by our schools.

We know a critical part of reopening school classrooms will be creating the safest possible school environment, and that includes providing vaccinations to all who work in schools. This will not only protect the health and safety of the essential employees in schools, but will provide enormous benefit to children and their families, leading to a faster reopening of schools and of the economy more broadly by enabling working families to go back to work.

We're pleased with Supervisor Solis's response to the letter and commitment to open school-based vaccination sites to serve communities which have not had access to the vaccine. She also shared her view that all who work in schools will be provided with vaccines in "the coming weeks." The sooner that timeframe can be made clear, the sooner we can provide a clear timetable to reopen schools.

California can regain a national leadership role in the fight against COVID-19. A clearly articulated plan to provide vaccinations to school staff in the nation's second largest school district, combined with the leadership Los Angeles Unified has already shown in preparing its campuses, can be a model for other school districts across the country.

In line with this, I am pleased to share we are taking another important step towards reopening schools by launching a school-based vaccination effort. We will start with school staff age 65 and older and employees currently working at COVID testing and vaccination sites, consistent with current public health rules.

Los Angeles Unified was offered 100 "slots" in a vaccination program which was providing vaccinations to individuals not eligible under current County guidelines. We elected not to participate as we'll only be involved in vaccination efforts which are run in accordance with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health rules.

Starting Wednesday, February 17, the Moderna vaccine will be administered by Los Angeles Unified school nurses and other licensed healthcare professionals at the Roybal Learning Center, becoming Los Angeles Unified's first school-based vaccination center. Microsoft, Anthem and Cedars-Sinai are also helping in this effort. We're working to open as many school-based sites as possible.

Los Angeles Unified's vaccination efforts will use a technology and data system built with the support of Microsoft which includes registration and scheduling, tracking of vaccines in stock, contactless appointment check-in and data capture at the time of appointment, rules to sort high-risk individuals and offer waitlists to

low-risk individuals, and dashboards to view data, among other features. All of this information can be reported to the appropriate authorities.

Our ride on the Magic School Bus this week took me to Northridge to celebrate Valentine's Day and Huntington Park and Inglewood to celebrate Black History Month.

During my visit to Ms. Tyler's 4th grade class at Dearborn Elementary in the Monroe Community of Schools, students engaged in critical thinking exercises around Valentine's Day gifts, and they all filled with emotion as one of the students shared his message of unity and hope.

At Holmes Avenue Elementary, I visited with students who were learning about Paul Williams, a prominent African-American architect and a graduate of John Francis Polytechnic High School. Paul Williams was a man of considerable talents who managed to overcome many obstacles to accomplish extraordinary things. As we celebrate Black History Month and recognize individuals like Mr. Williams, his story is a vivid example of the work which still needs to be done to eliminate systemic bias and institutional racism across our country.

As we close this week, I want to share with you a short video of my visits to Dearborn and Holmes, and a special performance by Makayla, a 1st grade student in Ms. Dotson's class at Century Park Elementary. Please enjoy.

Thank you for your continued patience and support.