

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

### **AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – FEBRUARY 22, 2021**

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

We have a lot to cover today. We'll start with a quick update on our continuing efforts to provide a safety net to the communities we serve, take a look at our first school-based COVID vaccine site as well as plans for a site at Hollywood Park to provide access to vaccinations for anyone who works in schools across Los Angeles County, we'll introduce a groundbreaking program to help students and staff return to schools in the safest way possible and we'll continue our tour on the Magic School Bus and highlight celebrations of Black History Month.

Since campuses closed in March, we've operated the largest school-based relief effort in the country, providing more than 106 million meals along with 24 million items of much-needed supplies to the communities we serve. We've also provided nearly 500,000 free COVID tests to students, staff and their families, all part of our ongoing efforts to protect the health and safety of all in the school community.

If you or a member of your family need a COVID test, please make an appointment at one of our 42 school-based testing centers, located at a school near you. It's safe, it's quick and it's free.

We're grateful for the continued community support of these school-based relief efforts with more than \$35 million in donated funds and much-needed supplies. We would like to thank Yakult, which donated 300,000 of their probiotic drinks, and the Smithsonian Institution, which gave us 170,000 "Winter at Home" activity books to share with middle school students.

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

To join our relief efforts, please text NEED to 76278 or visit [lastudentsmostinneed.org](https://lastudentsmostinneed.org).

For each of the past 346 days since March 13<sup>th</sup>, my day has started with the same question: What can we do to get students back in the classroom as soon as possible and in the safest way possible? And my day has ended many hours later with the same question. I am painfully aware of the hardship that closed schools inflict on students, their families and the communities we serve.

As difficult as the decision was to close school classrooms, reopening is even harder. We have to balance the learning needs of students, the support we provide to working families and the responsibility to protect the health and safety of all in the school community. We cannot – and will not – compromise on health and safety.

All of the health practices and protocols in place at our schools already exceed the most recent guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Just one example of the progress Los Angeles Unified has already made was highlighted during a recent CDC press conference. A reporter from KNX asked the CDC Director, “Los Angeles Unified put in high-end air 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’s part of your recommendation?” The CDC Director replied, “That’s great. I think that what you’re describing are 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 the work on the filtration systems in our schools last May.

The same is true for COVID testing at schools. The CDC recommends risk mitigation strategies at schools 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 provide tests to everyone at schools – students and staff – weekly with overnight results.

This testing program, it’s been in place since September.

This past week, Los Angeles County health authorities announced that average COVID levels were low enough for elementary schools to reopen. Los Angeles County spans more than 4,000 square miles and communities with very different family circumstances where COVID has had vastly different impacts. Any average can be misleading as this picture of two people, average 6-foot-4-inches in height, shows. One of us, an NBA Hall of Famer, the other just an average fan.

In La Cañada, for example, the average household income exceeds \$175,000 and COVID case levels are less than 2 per 100,000 people. Let’s contrast that with the community of South Los Angeles served by Los Angeles Unified schools, where the average household income is less than \$30,000, and the COVID rate is more than 15 times greater than that in La Cañada. But the average COVID rate of the two communities is about 15. That doesn’t provide much comfort to the family living in South Los Angeles.

And, while 4,100 students in La Cañada schools all live in La Cañada, students from neighborhoods in Los Angeles Unified with high COVID levels attend schools in neighborhoods with low COVID levels, and vice versa. A quick glance at Hamilton High in West Los Angeles makes this picture clear – people from neighborhoods with the highest levels of COVID in the Los Angeles area are connected in schools throughout Los Angeles Unified.

Looking across the state to the Bay area in the North, Alameda and San Mateo counties have already started vaccinating school staff. School staff are being vaccinated in Atherton where the average household income is more than a quarter-million dollars, the highest of any city in the country. All students had access to computers and the internet prior to the pandemic, and less than 2% of the students are from families living in poverty. Meanwhile school staff in Los Angeles Unified where 80% of the students are from families living in poverty, where COVID rates are more than 20 times higher than Atherton, haven't had access to the vaccine.

And just next door, in Long Beach, the city has already vaccinated all elementary school staff so schools can reopen on March 29. Orange County has also begun offering vaccinations to school staff.

The vaccine plays a critical role in reopening schools as safely as possible, in particular in communities which have been hardest hit by the virus.

There are almost a quarter-million students in preschool and elementary school in Los Angeles Unified. To vaccinate the people who work in these schools, we would need to vaccinate about 25,000 people. You heard that right – vaccinating 25,000 people will allow us to reopen pre-school and elementary school classrooms for 250,000 children and help their half-million-plus family members start on the path to recovery and allow many of them to get back to work.

This past week we opened the first school-based vaccination site at the Roybal Learning Center. We received 100 doses of the Moderna vaccine and, in compliance with state and county policy, provided them only to eligible employees who are 65 and older. The vaccines were administered by Los Angeles Unified school nurses with support from Microsoft, Anthem Blue Cross and Cedars-Sinai. This is just a start as we hope to open many more school-based sites in the near future to provide vaccinations to people in high-needs communities which have been most impacted by the virus and often lack access to healthcare.

This access for our school staff and the families we serve is a matter of equity for the communities we serve.

Los Angeles County recently shared results of vaccination efforts thus far – there is a vast difference in participation by white, relatively affluent communities compared with the Black and Latino families served by our schools and many of our employees. A third of our bus drivers are Black, 62% Latino, and more than 83% of the families we serve are Black or Latino.

A “pop up” vaccination site in a low-income neighborhood where affluent families from outside the community drive up and get vaccinated may not be the solution.

A different solution – let's get school staff vaccinated and start using school-based vaccination sites to provide access to the families we serve. We have the trust of the

community and we are well placed to offer vaccinations to the families of the students we serve.

Los Angeles Unified has also created the capability to provide vaccinations at Hollywood Park for all Los Angeles County public and private school employees starting March 1<sup>st</sup>.

We want to provide a service to the entire education community and hope County Health authorities will help us get open this week by providing the appropriate doses of the vaccine.

The Hollywood Park effort is a partnership with the Rams, Anthem Blue Cross and Cedars-Sinai. It will help school district employees avoid the online “vaccine lottery” and recognizes how educators are all connected at schools – a bus driver takes students to school, a principal unlocks the front door, a teacher leads in the classroom, a cafeteria worker prepares lunch and a custodian keeps the school clean. Coordinated vaccines for school staff will help reopen schools quickly so we don’t have a situation where teachers at a school are vaccinated, but not the bus driver or vice versa.

At Hollywood Park, Los Angeles Unified school nurses and other licensed healthcare professionals will administer the vaccine and monitor people for adverse reactions. Anthem will provide volunteer clinical personnel and Cedars-Sinai is providing training in support of this vaccination effort.

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, Los Angeles Unified has proven its ability to meet the needs of the community on a dramatic scale: providing 106 million meals to the community along with 24 million items of much-needed supplies; computers and internet access to half a million students; and operating COVID testing centers at schools that have administered 500,000 tests to staff, students and their families – the largest school-based program in the nation.

The food, computer and internet access and COVID testing programs are operating at the highest health and safety standards and are reporting the necessary data to relevant local, state and federal authorities in a timely and accurate manner. The programs are cost effective, which allows scarce public dollars to go further to help more individuals in need. Our commitment is to make certain the Hollywood Park effort operates at the highest possible standards as well.

While some school districts in the area may have other vaccination arrangements already in place, we are prepared to serve any school, public or private, if this program would be of assistance.

Los Angeles Unified’s vaccine program uses 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,

as well as dashboards to view all of this information and other features. All of this can be reported to the appropriate authorities.

This technology and data system, called Daily Pass, will make it simple and safe for students and staff to return to school buildings. The information from this system will also allow us to quickly isolate anyone with symptoms or the virus itself and reduce the risk of the virus from spreading at a school. We built the nation's most comprehensive school-based COVID testing program and are now launching the first system which can coordinate health checks, COVID tests and vaccinations all in one simple, easy-to-use App. We're the first school district in the nation to implement a system like this and, as far as we know, the largest employer in the country to use something like this to create the safest possible environment in the workplace.

The Daily Pass is a simple digital tool anyone can use. Once individuals answer daily health screening questions and commit to healthy practices, they will receive a Daily Pass QR code to enter. Sort of like the Golden Ticket in Willy Wonka, everyone with this pass can easily get into a school building. This will help all at a school get into the building quickly and safely by avoiding crowds at the entrance and we'll know the status of everyone in the building. There will be staff at the entrance to help and anyone lacking a phone or computer will be guided through the process in person.

The Daily Pass will be available to all Los Angeles Unified employees, students 13 years or older, family members and school visitors via their computer or any mobile device. Since all students have been provided with computers and internet access, families may also use these at home to access the Daily Pass.

The Daily Pass is part of my commitment to reopening schools in the safest way possible. Please watch this brief explanation.

On February 8<sup>th</sup>, 14 days ago, I proposed a plan to reopen all preschools and elementary schools in Los Angeles Unified and offer services to students with special learning needs within 60 days. No later than April 9<sup>th</sup>.

We've done our part – the highest standards of health measures are in place at schools.

The community continues to do its part as the levels of the virus continue to decline. Experts tell us the combination of more people being vaccinated, the immunity provided to those who have been exposed to the virus over the past many months and continued safe health practices should lead to continued declines.

A critical piece remains – timely and sufficient access to vaccinations for school staff. We've set up the systems and are ready to vaccinate our staff at schools and at Hollywood Park.

I'm encouraged by recent actions by both the state Legislature and the Governor to help. Each have indicated there will be more vaccines available for school staff. They

must act with urgency as students can't wait. We need a specific plan with a specific commitment of doses to Los Angeles Unified so we can protect our school staff and all in the school community. That's what Chicago did and that's what Long Beach did. We need to do that here.

My goal of April 9<sup>th</sup> is still possible, but we need to start today, not tomorrow, not next week. We stand ready to work with state and local health authorities – get us the doses and we'll get it done as we have in food relief, computers and internet access and COVID testing for the entire school community.

But the clock's ticking – we need to act now.

The families we serve as well as our staff have every reason to be concerned – just weeks ago Los Angeles had the highest COVID levels in the nation and many in our school community were directly impacted. Our goal is to reopen classrooms for students and staff in April and demonstrate, like the CDC tells us, that a school environment can be kept safe.

A positive experience this semester will lead to increased, in-person participation by students who are part of summer school and even greater participation when the new school year starts in August. But we have to start now.

In anticipation of a more complete reopening of schools in April, we will begin next week to offer child care, one-on-one and small group instruction, services for students with special needs and a return to athletic conditioning. Your school principal will have more information on this during the course of the week.

Our ride on the Magic School Bus this week took me to West Los Angeles, South Los Angeles, and the Fairfax neighborhood to continue our celebration of Black History Month.

At Brentwood Science Magnet, I joined Ms. Ebony Batiste and her 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students to learn about Black political figures Shirley Chisholm, Kamala Harris and Barack Obama, and cheered the students on as they tested their knowledge playing "Family Feud" in celebration of the Black Family.

Ms. Rose White's students at 95<sup>th</sup> Street Early Education Center rehearsed a poem called "When I Rise Up" and performed a dance from Madagascar. It was nice to join in the dance, get my blood flowing and energy up.

At Rosewood STEM Magnet, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade students from Ms. Beth Dror's class shared their reflections on the importance of family and its connection to the values of Black Americans including Amanda Gorman, Duke Ellington, Dr. Kizzmekia Corbett and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Please enjoy a short video of my school visits, and be sure to look for the students' work on our website next week.

Before we visit with the students, I want to acknowledge the tireless efforts of my colleagues who keep doing extraordinary things during this crisis. The unsung heroes behind the scenes –food service workers, truck drivers and school nurses who rise before dawn to provide meals, COVID tests and vaccinations to all who help produce the video you're watching.

Each week the communications team finds interesting stories to share about the work in schools, help turn the complex puzzle of school reopening and COVID information into a story we can all understand and then edit and produce this show in multiple languages. The words, they're mine as I write the remarks, but it takes a big effort behind the scenes to make this come to life so we can share it with you. Last week's remarks weren't finalized until Sunday afternoon, the video wasn't filmed until the early evening and final edits weren't made until the wee hours of the morning before the remarks aired at 8 a.m. Monday morning on KLCS.

Like all who work at Los Angeles Unified, the communications team is driven by our mission to do the best we can to help the students and families we serve. I'm grateful for their commitment and all of their support.

And thank you for your continued patience and support.