

AUSTIN BEUTNER UPDATE TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – JANUARY 11, 2021

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

As we return from winter break and educators work to prepare for classes to resume tomorrow, I want to wish all of you a happy and healthy new year.

Today, we'll talk about the tragically high levels of COVID-19 in communities throughout Los Angeles, how that impacts the reopening of school classrooms and what state and local government needs to do to protect the health and safety of our school community. We'll also hear from students on the topic of returning to schools.

But first I want to comment briefly on the shocking events last week in our nation's capital. The violence and unrest have added another level of stress and uncertainty to the lives of students and families we serve as well as employees in our schools who have been working tirelessly to help students continue to learn and provide a safety net to families.

While Los Angeles Unified supports the right of individuals to exercise freedom of speech and engage in peaceful protest, that's not what happened last week – we do not condone violence or hatred in any form and those involved and responsible must be held accountable.

History teaches us that for many individuals character is destiny. As we work together to right past wrongs and build a better, more inclusive society, we as educators share a special burden because the words we share and the deeds we model will help shape students' character.

We'll be providing instructional resources and social emotional supports for students and all in schools to help them process these horrible incidents.

Since this crisis began, we've tried our best to provide a safety net to the families we serve. Our food relief effort has provided about 95 million meals to students and families in need. Many partners have also contributed more than \$32 million and provided more than 18 million items of much-needed supplies and special gifts. And the giving continues.

Harbor Freight Tools Foundation recently donated \$200,000 to help us continue to address food insecurities in the communities we serve, and we are grateful for their support.

SNAP has joined our efforts and are using the kitchens in their employee lunchrooms to prepare bag lunches for our relief efforts.

And I want to acknowledge the continuing support of our friends at See's Candies. Since this crisis began they've provided more than 300,000 pounds of candy, almost \$8 million worth. The company is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year and I'm grateful for their continuing support of the community. It's nice to see the Class of '21, and by that I mean the Class of 1921, still active in schools.

To join the effort to support students and families, text NEED to 76278 or visit LAStudentsMostInNeed.org.

COVID levels in the Los Angeles area are at dangerously high levels and getting worse. Los Angeles has become the epicenter of the pandemic in our country, with 1 in 5 residents now testing positive for the virus. Hospitals are overwhelmed, putting patients in the cafeterias and parking garages. Ambulance services and emergency workers are no longer able to respond to all calls for help. I wish I could provide more encouraging news but all I can do is to ask you to stay safe while state and local health authorities try to get a grip on this situation.

Something has to change. Local leaders need to learn what's being done across the country and around the world where other cities aren't experiencing the same levels of the virus we are here in Los Angeles.

It's not sufficient for state and local authorities to just provide daily updates of how awful it is, it's time for additional steps to be taken to protect the health and safety of all in the communities we serve. It's time for an all-hands-on-deck effort at all levels of government.

This tragically high level of the virus is having a direct impact on Los Angeles Unified's ability to reopen classrooms. It's not safe and appropriate when COVID levels are so much higher than the current state guidelines to even consider reopening school classrooms.

To help those in our communities stay safe, we'll continue to provide free COVID tests for families, our students and employees. Please visit lausd.net to make an appointment to have your family tested. It's free, quick, safe and painless. All testing centers are open weekdays from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and many are providing services on evenings and Saturdays.

On December 30th, Governor Newsom announced a plan to support the reopening of school classrooms. Unfortunately, it falls well short of what's needed to help our schools.

In response to the Governor's proposed "Safe Schools for All" plan, I asked the superintendents from 6 other large school districts in California – which together with Los Angeles Unified serve about one-quarter of the students in the state – to join me in reviewing the plan so we could share our suggestions on how it can be made better.

While “Safe Schools for All” acknowledges the importance of reopening public schools, the plan fails to provide the help our schools will need to reopen classrooms.

The Governor’s plan does not address the disproportionate impact the virus is having on low-income communities of color. It leaves the definition of a “safe school environment” and the “standard for reopening classrooms” up to the individual discretion of 1,037 school districts across the state, creating a patchwork of safety standards in the face of a statewide health crisis. And it reverses a statewide commitment to equity-based funding of schools.

In response to the plan, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote in an editorial: “It’s entirely possible that low-income schools will receive the worst of everything – no new funding, kids still stuck learning from home – while those in more affluent areas open for business and get \$450 per student extra to boot.”

Los Angeles Unified and our labor partners stand ready to resume in-person instruction as soon as it’s safe and appropriate to do so, but we can’t do it alone. The past 10 months have been a well-documented struggle for millions of California schoolchildren and their families. “Safe Schools for All” is a start toward recovery, but the state must acknowledge the needs in our schools and take the following actions necessary for *all* California children to receive the education they deserve:

- An immediate, all-hands-on-deck, public health effort to reduce the spread of the virus in low-income communities.
- A clear state standard for COVID-related health issues in schools, with a requirement for in-classroom instruction to begin when the standard is met.
- Public health funds, not K-12 educational funds from Prop. 98, should be used for COVID testing and vaccinations.
- School-based health services should be integrated with COVID testing and vaccination plans.
- Learning-loss recovery plans, including funding for summer school, need to be established now.
- Reopening plans need to include specific funding for special education students.
- A timetable and plan for vaccinations of school staff should be made public by February 1st.
- The state also needs to begin to publish detailed information on school and district status in meeting COVID health standards, providing in-person instructions and school-based occurrences of the virus by February 1st.

We believe these additional steps will ensure that “Safe Schools for All” lives up to its name. Nothing is more important than making sure students get the best possible education and for many, that happens in a classroom at school.

All of us in the school community – educators and the students and families they serve have learned a great deal in the past 10 months. It’s critical we apply the learnings to help students and it’s critical for the Governor and State Legislature to share in what

we've learned so they can change state budget and policies to provide what schools need to open as soon as possible in the safest way possible. Let me take you through the essential elements of what's needed.

Let's start with the most basic – schools in Los Angeles Unified are ready to reopen classrooms if appropriate steps are taken at the state level.

Since March, our schools have fed the hungry, provided the technology necessary for students to participate in online instruction, trained educators, cleaned and reconfigured school facilities and adopted new health practices to reduce the risk from the virus at schools.

In Los Angeles Unified we're providing COVID tests at schools and have put in place the logistical support and data systems needed to provide vaccinations to school staff and eventually all in the school community.

Much of this has been at our own direction and in advance of any guidelines, funding or support from the state.

Los Angeles Unified has prepared reopening plans which address health and safety protocols, instructional programs and other issues including childcare. These plans have been shared with all of you previously and are available online and at schools. Our schools are ready to provide in-person instruction once health standards are met and the state determines schools should be open.

It's fair to say Los Angeles Unified has led the nation in our response to this crisis and we'll continue to do so.

The virus is having a disproportionate impact on low-income, communities of color and immediate action is need to address this.

There is a greater occurrence of COVID in the low-income communities we serve. Individuals in Black and Latino communities are two to three times more likely, respectively, than those in white communities to be hospitalized for COVID. The families we serve are more likely to be essential workers or those for whom work is essential to put a roof overhead or provide food for their family. They don't have a choice to work from home. A survey of families in Los Angeles Unified, where more than 80% of the students live in poverty, showed about 75% of families have had someone lose work due to the virus.

The disproportionate impact of the virus is also reflected in schools. School-based COVID tests in December of children in Los Angeles Unified, with no known symptoms or exposure to the virus, showed almost one in three children in the lowest-income communities had the virus compared with about 1 in 25 in more affluent areas.

The potential solutions to reduce the spread of the virus extend far beyond the schoolhouse. These may include additional COVID testing and health measures in communities which are most impacted, further restrictions on businesses like shopping malls, job or income support for low-income families and priority vaccinations for essential workers and those families most impacted by the virus.

If nothing changes, many students in high-need communities are at risk of being left behind.

Additional funding must be provided to all schools, not just those in more affluent areas which are less impacted by COVID.

There is no chance the low-income communities we serve will meet the “Safe Schools for All” initial target date of February 1st and many experts say even March 1st is unlikely, given current health conditions. Sadly, local COVID numbers appear to be moving in the wrong direction in nearly every meaningful category – infections, hospitalizations and deaths.

The deadline of February 1st doesn’t reflect the COVID reality in the communities we serve. Dollars need to be provided to all schools to support opening for in-person instruction, not just those in more affluent communities that already meet health standards due to lower COVID levels.

The dollars promised by the Governor must be available to our schools in Los Angeles. A funding model which supports only schools in communities less impacted by the virus is at odds with California’s long-standing efforts to provide more support to students from low-income families.

Additional funding that goes only to school districts in communities with low COVID levels will reinforce the disproportionate impact of the virus. Affluent communities where family members can work from home will see schools open with more funding. Low-income communities bearing the brunt of the virus will see schools remain closed with lower funding.

State standards for COVID-related health issues are needed along with a requirement for in-classroom instruction to begin when the standards are met.

California needs a clear and consistent standard for COVID-related health factors in schools. Schools must be made a priority and clear standards are needed to make sure every student is provided with the opportunity for in-person instruction if that’s what their family chooses.

California has long had among the highest standards in the nation for public education. These standards regulate everything from the physical size of an elementary school classroom to how many hours of instruction must be provided each school year while

other state regulations prohibit teens from visiting tanning salons in malls. Little is left to chance or local discretion when it comes to children and schools.

COVID presents a very real risk to the health and safety of everyone in the school community. This crisis is no time to lower the standards for instruction, health and safety in schools or the protections for school employees.

State COVID standards must set consistent, minimum practices necessary for all schools and all communities – rather than the patchwork that currently exists. The risk of the virus is the same in every classroom throughout the state and the standards of safety should be the same.

Nothing highlights the confusing nature of the state guidance on reopening more than the fact the new plan proposes to raise the reopening threshold to 28 cases per 100,000 – a significant increase from the current level of 7.

For many months, California's guidelines have stated schools may consider reopening if the adjusted case count is at or below 7 per 100,000 population, the so-called purple tier. Yet most stakeholders in the school community can't reconcile that figure to the actual case counts published every day by local health authorities because the details on the state adjustment factors are not made public.

"Safe Schools for All" proposes a new and different standard. It's important that we all understand how the figure of 28 per 100,000 adjusted cases was determined, what science provides the foundation for this. Students, families and staff need clear, consistent and well-understood guidelines in order to maintain confidence in the level of safety at schools.

While we all recognize the need for our youngest learners to return to classrooms as soon as possible, it's important the reasoning behind this new standard be shared in detail so all stakeholders can have confidence in the soundness of the approach.

Once the state COVID standards for safety are met, schools should be required to be open for in-person instruction. No local stakeholder – whether a superintendent, school board, labor partner or community organization – should have an effective veto over the reopening of classrooms.

Public health funds should be used for COVID testing and vaccinations while Prop 98 funds should be used for instruction as the law provides.

Community health needs should be addressed with public health funds, not money which voters intended for K-12 education. "Safe Schools for All" proposes to use Proposition 98 dollars to pay for COVID testing and other health-related costs. Prop 98 specifically sets aside state funds for "instructional improvement and accountability," including reducing class size; providing supplies, equipment and other services to ensure that students make academic progress; providing professional development to

staff to improve and increase the quality of classroom instruction; and paying teacher salaries and benefits.

Every dollar of Prop 98 funds spent on public health costs is a dollar which won't be available to be spent on students in a classroom.

School-based health services can be part of the solution and should be integrated with state and local COVID testing and vaccination plans.

School-based health services can be part of the solution but schools must be fully integrated into COVID testing and vaccination plans. While public health agencies have primary responsibility, Los Angeles Unified is already providing COVID testing and contact tracing. Rather than forcing schools to use only a state-run testing program which isn't yet operational, state leaders should recognize the initiative taken by Los Angeles Unified and reimburse our schools for the testing program that's already operating both cost-effectively and well.

And Los Angeles Unified can use this same operational expertise and data system to administer vaccines to school staff who may be amongst the first to receive the vaccine and then to the families we serve and eventually to students when vaccines are shown to be safe for children.

An enormous operational challenge lies ahead in providing the vaccine to essential workers in our schools – teachers, librarians, bus drivers, custodians and all who are involved in public education. The best place to provide the vaccine is at the place families trust and where students, staff and their families are most days – their local public school.

State funds should be provided directly to school districts to cover these costs – in the same way and at the same rate as other municipal agencies and providers. Cities and counties are using public health dollars to provide COVID tests so these same dollars should be available to schools who are also providing COVID testing. CVS and Walgreens are being paid to administer COVID vaccines to seniors. School districts which are able to administer vaccinations to school staff and the school community should be paid the same fee to offset their costs as private pharmacy chains.

Learning loss recovery plans, including an extended school year, need to be established now.

The time to adopt budget actions and policies to address student learning needs is now. While each local school will need to address the unique needs of the students and communities they serve, there are some common needs across all schools in Los Angeles Unified. In addition to preparing to return students safely to their classrooms, all schools and all students will need additional time at school to recover lost learning opportunities and deal with the anxiety and trauma the pandemic has brought into their homes and our communities.

Los Angeles Unified is already planning how to provide these services including expanded tutoring, in-person academic and enrichment classes this summer and behavioral and mental health supports. While all students can benefit from these opportunities, they're essential for students who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including English-learners, students with learning differences and disabilities, and homeless and foster youth.

Teachers will need additional professional development that is focused on intervention and credit recovery.

This need for additional instructional time and support in schools will be ongoing, and the State funding and policies to implement it needs to be committed now.

Reopening plans need to include specific funding for special education students.

School reopening plans must address the needs of our most vulnerable students. While "Safe Schools for All" proposes to provide supplemental funds to schools which serve low-income students, English-learners and foster youth, it fails to acknowledge or provide funding for the extraordinary needs of students with learning differences and disabilities. These students are served in greater proportions by large, urban school districts. Los Angeles Unified, for example, serves almost 50% of all students in Los Angeles area with moderate to severe disabilities despite serving only about a third of students in the county. Said differently, the portion of students with significant disabilities Los Angeles Unified serves is almost twice that of the average school district in the state.

Special needs students and their families have been amongst those most impacted by the closure of school facilities and the costs are greater to serve students with disabilities. Any reopening plan needs to take this into account.

The state needs to publish detailed information on school status in meeting COVID health standards, providing in-person instruction and school-based occurrences of the virus.

We have sought to provide the most accurate information to all in our school community to help them make informed choices about the risk in a school setting.

The State needs to begin publishing school and district information on health standards in schools, the level of in-person instruction and COVID occurrences in schools by February 1st. Anecdotes, incomplete information and changing guidelines don't provide the complete picture schools need and families deserve.

The reopening of schools and classrooms isn't simple but we've taken steps to keep the families we serve and those who work in schools informed all along the way. Principals hold weekly meetings with their school community. School leaders publish bi-weekly

newsletters in each of the 42 communities across the district and hold monthly town halls. We've published and shared guides for families, employees and school leaders and we've surveyed families and employees.

And each week I've tried to share my perspective on the challenges we face, what we're trying to do to help students continue to learn and the work we're doing to provide a safety net to the families we serve.

But we can't do this alone. We need the support of state and local government and the elected officials who share the responsibility to make sure our students get the best possible education.

The last 10 months have been a well-documented struggle. Elected leaders at the state and local level need to join with us to discuss what we've learned in schools, what can be improved and how we can all make sure the next 10 months are better for students and families than the past 10 months.

At the end of last semester, I had the opportunity to visit a leadership class at Sun Valley Magnet, and discussed school reopening plans with students. They want to return to school as safely as possible as soon as possible. Please take a moment to hear from the students, in their own words. We've got to get this right because the kids are counting on us.

Thank you for your continued patience and support.