

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

### **AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – MARCH 1, 2021**

Good morning, I'm Austin Beutner, Superintendent of Los Angeles Unified. Today we'll share an update on our continuing efforts to provide a safety net to the communities we serve. We'll visit the COVID vaccination site for school staff at Hollywood Park which opens today, discuss the timeline for the reopening of school classrooms and share how we've already started on the path to recovery for students and their families.

Since school campuses closed in March, Los Angeles Unified has worked tirelessly to provide a safety net to the communities we serve. 108 million meals, along with 24 million items of much-needed supplies, computers and internet access for half-a-million students, and almost 500,000 free COVID tests to students, staff and their families – all of these have been provided at conveniently located neighborhood schools.

Shelter Partnership is helping the team at Riley High School which has campuses in East Los Angeles, South Los Angeles and Gardena. Riley is a school that is currently home to 58 pregnant and parenting students from ages 12-22.

It serves as a place where young women can learn about self-care, health, and parenting while earning their high school diploma, and it serves as a resource for the entire community. Families and community members know they can count on Riley when they are in need.

After earning a diploma from Riley, students have gone on to attend Cal State Northridge and live on campus with their babies while others have pursued a career in public service, healthcare, the Sheriff's Department or the military in service of our country. And most keep in touch with their school, which helped them flourish during a very difficult time in their lives.

Together with Shelter Partnership, we are providing Riley students and families, foster youth and families experiencing homelessness with clothing, shoes, blankets and personal items including shampoo, conditioner, moisturizer, deodorant and feminine hygiene products.

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're here to help.

To join in our relief efforts, including those at Riley, please text NEED to 76278 or visit [lastudentsmostinneed.org](http://lastudentsmostinneed.org). Thank you.

The young women at Riley and all of the 650,000 students we serve will have extraordinary needs when they return to school campuses. But in Los Angeles Unified,

the path to recovery won't have to wait until a new school year starts in August. We started back in August of last year.

One example is the Primary Promise which is our commitment to build a foundation in literacy, math and critical-thinking skills for students in elementary schools. We started this program last September and it's already making a difference for our youngest learners.

Let's look at the experience of current first-graders who were in kindergarten last spring when the virus struck and many were just learning to read. When this school year started, teachers helped students who were struggling take a relatively quick diagnostic test called DIBELS to get a sense of how they were doing.

As one might expect, the reading skills assessments showed that many students had fallen behind and lacked basic understanding of the way letters sound corresponding to the printed word. More than half the students weren't at grade level to start the year. Remember, these students missed out on critical learning opportunities last spring so one could expect to see gaps. The challenge for educators is what to do about it.

The path to recovery began immediately. We added reading teachers to provide small groups of students with an additional 20-30 minutes of instruction each day. Specific skills are taught to help students increase fluency and phonemic awareness and students apply these skills to reading grade-level materials. This extra instructional time and intentional focus on the basics is having a big impact.

A pilot effort was created for more than 400 first-graders from high-needs communities who needed additional help – 91% of them began the semester far below grade level in reading. After just 10 weeks of intensive help, more than a third of the students already met or exceeded grade-level standards. This sort of progress is being made with all types of students in the program and we expect to see continued big gains throughout the school year.

While the numbers are impressive, the importance is best illustrated by a couple of students' stories rather than a bunch more statistics.

Lisandro started first grade in August with a reading score of 0. He knew some letter sounds but couldn't decode words and couldn't apply the letter sounds he knew to written text. After just 10 weeks of participation in the additional instruction that Primary Promise provides, Lisandro achieved a reading score of 23, or 2 points above the benchmark that indicates he's reading at grade level.

Ericka started first grade with a reading score of 1. She struggled with the letter sounds necessary to decode words and learn to read. After 10 weeks of intensive support, Ericka achieved a mid-year assessment of 25, 4 points – or 20% higher – than grade level.

We know that students who build a strong foundation in reading by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade are more likely to graduate from high school and will be better prepared for college and career. The support that Lisandro, Ericka and 428 of their classmates are receiving will provide the foundation to help them succeed in school and in life.

The Primary Promise is being expanded to young learners in all elementary schools throughout Los Angeles Unified. These students are receiving the extra support they need to help recover from the impact this crisis has had on their learning.

School leaders and teachers at all grade levels continue to work tirelessly to help students learn online and keep them on a path to recovery. They monitor student attendance, grades and overall engagement to help identify students who might need additional help and reach out to offer support.

When Ashley, a 10<sup>th</sup>-grader, wasn't participating in class or turning in homework, her English teacher and a school counselor stepped in to help. They made sure she had support from her family at home and gave her more opportunities in class to express herself, like writing in a journal and through an online discussion board. Thanks to their collective efforts, Ashley brought her English grade up from a D to B and she tells us she feels more engaged because "my teacher cares and my voice is being heard."

To help students who are struggling because of this crisis, middle- and high-schoolers who were failing their courses last semester were given extra time, until the end of January, to work and improve their grades. Teachers scheduled extra sessions after school and on weekends, and more than 12,000 students improved their grades by taking advantage of this extra help and additional time.

Each student's story is different, and our job is to listen carefully, meet students where they're at and give them the help they need to succeed. While extraordinary efforts are being made to help students learn online, we know the best learning happens at school.

Today, we are taking an important step toward reopening school classrooms by expanding our COVID-19 vaccination program to include all employees in Los Angeles Unified who are, as of today, now eligible to have access to the vaccine. Vaccinating school staff is a critical piece of reopening school campuses in the safest way possible.

Vaccinations for school staff will initially be available at three school sites, as well as Hollywood Park in Inglewood, and transportation to Hollywood Park will be available from each of Los Angeles Unified's 44 Community of School offices. Additional school site locations may be added as more doses of the vaccine are made available for school staff.

Last week, I was joined by Kenny Young of the Los Angeles Rams to visit Hollywood Park and see first-hand how our team was getting ready. It's quite an operation – the largest vaccination site in the country dedicated to school staff. The traffic cones alone, more than 10,000 of them, took an entire day to set up.

Providing vaccinations for school staff in an organized manner will help Los Angeles Unified open schools sooner. Employees can avoid the online “vaccine lottery” trying to find a vaccination appointment. Most importantly, the effort recognizes how staff are all connected at schools – a school 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 vaccinations 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.

Los Angeles Unified’s vaccination program uses a technology and information system built with the support of Microsoft which includes registration and scheduling, tracking of vaccines in stock, contactless appointment check-in and the ability to share the information with the school community and the appropriate health authorities.

We started working with Microsoft on this last Summer. We knew we’d need help to bring students and staff back to schools in a safe and coordinated way and we planned ahead by integrating COVID testing and vaccinations into the solution.

I’m proud of this work and grateful for the time and thought our team of technologists, operations and procurement specialists, legal advisors and administrators put into this. Los Angeles Unified is the first school district and likely the largest employer in the nation to use a comprehensive technology solution like this.

Microsoft will soon make this solution available to other states, school districts and employers around the world.

On February 8<sup>th</sup>, 21 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. 60 days would be April 9<sup>th</sup>.

As we’ve shared for many months, this plan has three parts – the highest standard of health practices and protocols at schools, lower levels of the virus in the communities we serve and timely and sufficient access to vaccinations for school staff. 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. COVID levels in the Los Angeles area are declining as people heed the advice of health authorities to wear masks and practice social distancing, more people have natural immunity from being exposed to the virus and more people are being vaccinated.

In order to complete the puzzle and bring students and staff back to school in the safest way possible, school staff need to be offered the opportunity to receive the vaccine.

There are more than 86,000 people who work in traditional and charter schools in Los Angeles Unified and our initial focus will be to vaccinate school staff who are currently working at school sites and all who are involved in preschool and elementary school.

Our team has been working closely with the Governor's office to significantly increase the number of doses of vaccine available for school staff. Governor Newsom has made vaccinations for school staff a priority from the beginning and is ensuring that's the reality on the ground in the communities we serve. He's prioritizing access to school communities with an eye to expanding educational opportunities, especially for our younger students in communities most impacted by the virus. We're seeing the focused support right here – the Governor has dedicated access for 25,000 additional vaccine doses for school staff in Los Angeles Unified over the next two weeks. That commitment aligns with his and my values – our community serves students and families who've been amongst those most impacted by this virus. This is a game-changer, I want to thank Governor Newsom for putting equity first, and for being such a strong partner to the families and staff of Los Angeles Unified. This plan will allow us to complete during the next two weeks vaccinations for school staff who are already working at school sites, staff who are working with our youngest learners and those working with students with learning differences and disabilities.

As we prepare to reopen schools as soon as possible and in the safest way possible, we expect to see the State Legislature and Governor agree on budgets and the guidelines for school reopening sometime this week. It's important these state standards align with federal standards. The current federal CDC guidelines tell us red means COVID is high, which is bad. In California, red means COVID levels are improving and schools can open, which is good. Those need to be consistent.

After 11 months of politicized commentary and changing guidelines of what constitutes a safe school environment, it's critical that clear and consistent guidelines be aligned and properly explained to the public. That will be needed to build trust with all in the school community that schools are as safe as possible.

In anticipation of more complete reopening of schools in April, this week we'll start offering childcare, one-on-one and small group instruction, services for students with special needs and a return to athletic conditioning. Please contact your child's school for more information on this.

Our journey on the Magic School Bus this past week took me to Riley High School that we talked about earlier. And to help make sure all of our school buses are part of a cleaner, more sustainable future, we recently added another 10 electric buses to our fleet. A single electric bus will save more than \$10,000 in maintenance costs and reduce greenhouse gases by 54,000 pounds each year. Kenny Young and I got to take a closer look, and it's pretty impressive.

Please enjoy this short clip of my conversation with Principal Linda Roussel from Riley and her colleague, Wendy Cholico, as we talk about how they're working to help students reach their dreams.

Thank you for your continued patience and support.