

AUSTIN BEUTNER UPDATE TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – MARCH 22, 2021

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

Today we'll share an update on school reopening plans, discuss how the virus plays a role in the willingness of families to send their children back to schools and talk about the importance of providing vaccinations to working families who have been most impacted by the virus.

As part of plans to reopen schools, families have been provided with Return to Campus Guides which contain information on the health and safety preparations at schools, COVID testing for students and staff, COVID safety protocols and instructional schedules. Copies of the Guide are also available in multiple languages and at any school. Last week, school principals held meetings to review the information with their school community and more than 40 town halls were held throughout the Los Angeles area to answer questions as well.

Many have asked me what school will look when students return. One of our students, Mia, a second-grader, kindly volunteered to show us what a typical day for an elementary school student will look like. Please enjoy highlights of her experience.

For every school we publish COVID safety readiness and COVID Data Report Cards. These can be found on the Daily Pass, at schools and on school and Los Angeles Unified's websites.

Our schools have in place the highest standards of COVID safety in the nation. We've upgraded the air filtration systems in every classroom, reconfigured school facilities to keep all at a school appropriately distanced -- doubled the custodial staff and we'll provide weekly COVID testing at school for every student and staff member.

Family responses to the survey about whether their child will return to school or stay online are providing schools with the information they need to finalize plans to make sure every student gets the best possible education. What we've heard so far identifies a big concern, which arises from the disproportionate impact the virus is having on many of the communities we serve.

We see the greatest reluctance by families in the communities hardest hit by the virus to sending their children back to schools. These also happen to be the same neighborhoods where families are struggling to get by and most likely to have someone who lost work due to the virus.

Families in communities less impacted by the virus are planning for their children to return to in-person instruction at almost twice the rate of those in low-income communities which have been hardest hit by this crisis.

The Los Angeles area ranks in the top 5 cities in the nation in COVID deaths per capita, more than twice that in San Diego, 3 times in San Francisco and well above the national average. Some of the communities served by schools which are part of Los Angeles Unified have death tolls about 5 times higher than other neighborhoods in the Los Angeles area.

We've heard from about half of families -- 42% have indicated a preference for their child to return to school. The survey makes clear that a student will remain in online instruction if a family doesn't respond to the survey.

So if we did the math now, and assumed no additional students would attend school in-person that would mean about 28% of elementary school students will return to schools in April, 17% of middle schoolers and a bit more than 10% of high schoolers.

The final figures for in-person instruction are likely to increase a bit as more families become comfortable over the next couple of weeks with all of the safety efforts at schools.

But even if $\frac{1}{3}$ of elementary school students are in classrooms, it means $\frac{2}{3}$ won't be. This is an urgent challenge for all of us to address, not just those who work in schools.

The best learning for most students happens in a school classroom and some children may face a lifetime of consequence if they're not back in a school classroom sometime soon.

We will continue outreach efforts including good old-fashioned knocking on doors to make sure all families are informed about the opportunity for their child to return to school.

Yesterday, I participated alongside faith leaders from the First AME Church, Brookings-Kirkland Community AME, Faith Community Coalition, Ward AME, Second Baptist Church, Temple Beth Hillel, West Angeles Church of God in Christ and City of Refuge Church in a town hall meeting with families to talk about school reopening plans.

I was joined by Pastor Edgar Boyd and Citywide Faith Liaison David Price of First AME, Director of Christian Education Dr. Oscar Owens and Director of Education and Enrichment John Wilson of West Angeles Church, City of Refuge Youth Pastor Brandon Towns, and Temple Beth Hillel Rabbi Sarah Hronsky.

The faith leaders and I share a common goal to make sure we're doing all we can to provide children with the best possible education and we know that happens in a school classroom.

Our hope efforts like this will help all families make an informed decision and help them recognize schools are being reopened in the safest way possible.

The Board of Directors of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce have joined the cause as well. These business leaders will help reach families by sharing information about school reopening with their employees.

We're also working with community partners, to check in with families, answer their questions and see how we might provide them with any assistance.

The disparate impact of the virus and related reluctance to return to school among low-income communities we are seeing in Los Angeles is mirrored in other large urban school districts across the country.

New York and Chicago also serve mostly low-income communities. The impact of COVID has been higher in each of them as reflected in death rates, while vaccination rates of low income, minority populations remain much lower. This connects directly to the concerns families have about their children returning to schools.

Low-income communities of color are home to essential workers -- people who fill jobs which have supported all of us during the pandemic and people for whom work is essential to put a roof over their head and food on the table for their families.

They haven't had the luxury to work from home during this crisis. And it's when they leave the house and are at work where they've been exposed to the virus.

New York has seen about 26% of elementary school students return to classrooms and in Chicago it's well below 30%.

Black and Latino residents in New York have a death rate of nearly twice that of white residents. At the same time white residents have been vaccinated at nearly twice the rate compared with Black and Latinos.

In Chicago, Black and Latino residents have a death rate more than 50% higher than that of white residents. While 1 in 5 white residents have now been vaccinated, but those numbers drop to 1 in 8 for Latino residents and 1 in 9 for Black residents.

Closer to home, white residents in San Diego are being vaccinated at roughly double the rate of both Black and Latino residents.

And in Los Angeles... see a pattern here? The impact of the virus together with the lack of access to vaccinations is having a direct impact on the willingness of families to send their children back to schools.

The issue of whether students attend schools in-person rather than remaining online has enormous implications for public education in this country. The opportunity gaps for students from families who are struggling to get by will only worsen if they're not back in schools with their peers from more affluent neighborhoods.

It's simple enough to see the solution – providing access to vaccinations for the families we serve is the single most important thing we can do to get children back in schools.

We hear directly from families what their concern is -- it's not the relative safety of schools. They know in Los Angeles we have created the safest possible school environment. Their concern is a child might go to school, and however remote the possibility, bring the virus home to a family member in a multigenerational household. Vaccinating family members will enable more children to return to school without the fear of bringing the virus home to a grandparent. If vaccinations for family members of students from low-income communities are the barrier, let's fix the problem.

In the weeks and months ahead, stadium parking lots will be needed for returning fans, while drug and grocery stores and even medical clinics aren't always present in low-income communities and may not have adequate space for people to spend the required wait times after the vaccine.

Many barriers still remain for those most in need – access to technology, the lack of time or the inability to navigate the online vaccine lottery to find an appointment, the lack of access to transportation to a distant vaccination site, and a lack of trust in government as a whole. Let's face it -- look at the death tolls in many low-income communities. It's easy to see why they may be reluctant to trust government to protect them.

School-based vaccination efforts – in the neighborhood by trusted partners – can help solve all of these issues. Schools have regular contact with the families they serve and are a trusted part of the community.

I'm pleased to announce we'll start by opening two vaccination centers at schools specifically to help families with children in schools – one in East Los Angeles, one in South Los Angeles.

We're working with St. John's Well Child and Family Center, a long-time partner in our schools. St. John's will provide the doses of vaccine and the clinical staff to administer the shots while our schools will oversee the outreach to the school community, appointment scheduling and operational support at the school sites

This is just a start, our 1,413 schools serve a diverse set of communities spread across more than 700 square miles. We should have many dozens more school-based efforts like this to provide the access to vaccinations which are so needed in the communities we serve.

Recent CDC guidelines suggest that the spacing of desks 3 feet apart as opposed to 6 feet in school classrooms might be appropriate in certain situations. This doesn't help address the challenge facing schools in New York, Chicago or Los Angeles.

There are plenty of seats in classrooms that remain empty in New York and Chicago. And putting more desks in the room won't convince families that schools are safe.

Much more important is to align federal, state and local health standards and make sure schools operate at these standards. Health authorities also need to make their guidelines clear and consistent and then take the time to properly explain them to the families we serve. Working families aren't logging on to the CDC website every day to find out the latest changes like they might check box scores at a Dodgers game.

Standards which change, seemingly by the day or week, won't help build public trust. And families won't necessarily believe schools are safe just because a few politicians say schools should be open.

Schools need to be open as the best learning for most students happens in a school classroom. We've known that for a year. What we need now is for all who think schools should be open to join us in the hard work to make sure schools are open in the safest way possible. And they need to help explain to families that children will be safe and will learn best while at school.

Elementary students in Los Angeles Unified schools will have the opportunity to attend for the full day, every day. Part of each day will be filled with in-person instruction and part of the day with one-on-one tutoring, recess, lunch and extra-curricular activities.

In total, it's much like a regular day a year ago in elementary schools. The main difference is the core instructional part will be concentrated in one part of the day and the other part of the day will be filled with other activities.

We've also announced a plan for middle and high school students in our schools, admittedly with some limitations.

But we don't believe it's safe or appropriate to have 200 plus students and their teachers in a cohort at school and that's exactly what would happen if high schoolers participated in all of their 6 or 7 classes in person. 12 students in the 1st period each go onto a different 2nd period class filled with other students and teachers. And so on throughout the day.

Just one person with the virus could pass it on to hundreds and just one person testing positive would cause all 200 plus people to be quarantined at home for an extended period of time. The goal is not just to reopen schools, it's to keep all students and staff there safely.

And it would be a mistake to change instructional schedules for high schoolers this far into the school year to try and reduce the number of classes they attend in order to solve the health and safety issues.

So these limits take us to the only possible solution which is to bring middle and high school students together to be with friends and the support systems at schools and provide them with a safe and secure place with good internet access to learn. They can participate in sports and many extracurricular activities as well. We know it's less than ideal but it's a step in the right direction.

Summer and fall schedules will be different but we can only play the COVID cards we're dealt and for middle and high schoolers, they're more limited at this time.

It shouldn't be a surprise that New York, which has been wrestling with this issue about high schoolers for months, or Chicago have both yet to put forth plans which are meaningfully different than ours in Los Angeles.

As we prepare to reopen schools as soon as possible and in the safest way possible, we are continuing to provide vaccinations for our school staff. At many schools more than 85% of staff have received vaccinations, are scheduled to do so or have told us they don't wish to be vaccinated at this time. We continue to operate seven school sites, as well as SoFi stadium at Hollywood Park, to complete the vaccination process for school staff.

Based on the progress we are making, it looks like we'll start opening the first group of schools the week of April 12th.

Current plans are to reopen about 50 elementary schools and 10 early education centers that week. Any issues that arise can be addressed and everything we learn can be shared in advance of the reopening of all elementary schools and all early education centers the week of April 19th. Specific dates for the reopening of individual schools will be shared by the end of this week.

The reopening of schools isn't a simple exercise – COVID testing and safety protocols, class schedules and lesson plans, after-school programs, transportation, meals and much more all need to come together at each school.

In order to do this safely and smoothly, we'll stagger the reopening of each school over several days. For example, an elementary school might see a quick online check-in for students with their teachers to start the day on April 12th. Students will then work independently that day while all staff – principals, teachers, bus drivers, librarians, counselors, custodians, cafeteria workers and others – carefully review their safety protocols and fine tune schedules for the rest of that day.

Kindergarten and first grade students would then return on the 13th, Grades 2 and 3 on the 14th and 4th and 5th Graders on the 15th. We'll start with the youngest learners

because many of them will be visiting school for the first time. This will help them get familiar with their routines.

The same, careful phased-in approach will be used for middle and high schools later in the month. Our commitment has always been to reopen schools in the safest way possible and this very deliberate approach will help us to do so.

Los Angeles Unified continues to lead the nation in providing a safety net to the communities we serve. We have served more than 116 million meals along with 26 million items of much-needed supplies including masks and hand sanitizer, diapers and baby wipes, clothing and shoes, toys and sports equipment, books and school supplies, as well as computers and internet access for half-a-million students. We've also provided close to 550,000 free COVID tests at schools to students, staff and their families. This school-based testing program is the most comprehensive in the nation and an important part of creating the safest possible school environment when we reopen schools.

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

The path to recovery for all students will be supported by about \$1.8 billion of additional investment at schools. This unprecedented effort is needed – it's the Marshall Plan for schools that we've been calling for and it's becoming a reality.

To keep schools clean and safe, we'll invest an additional \$120 million in custodial staff, cleaning supplies and upgraded facilities. Instruction at all levels will be supported by an investment of more than \$1 billion for additional reading and math teachers, extra staff for tutoring and small-group instruction, state-of-the-art technology and tools and an extended school year. \$170 million will provide additional counselors and psychiatric social workers at schools to help students process the anxiety and trauma of the past year. More teachers and staff from a \$140 million investment will be available to help support students with learning differences and disabilities – they'll allow staff to quickly update Individualized Education Programs and provide more direct services to students.

An example of this recovery effort is the Primary Promise we've launched in elementary schools. When the new school year started last fall we saw that young learners were struggling. The abrupt transition to online learning in the Spring of 2019 left children who were just learning to read in a particularly difficult spot.

At the beginning of the 2019-20 school year, about 55% of first grade students were reading at or above grade level. That number dropped to 46% at the start of the 2020-21 school year. To put this in context, about 4,500 fewer first grade students were

reading at grade level at the beginning of this school year compared to the students in first grade last year.

We acted immediately with the Primary Promise to provide additional reading teachers and other support in elementary schools to help children who were struggling.

But it's more than just numbers about reading proficiency. To help explain the work, I spoke with 2 reading specialists and a Local District Superintendent Frances Baez about the Primary Promise program.

You'll hear how the focus on the unique needs of each child is making a real difference.

For our youngest learners, the path to recovery that started last August with a focus on literacy is expanding to math. You'll see the same approach – extra teachers to support more direct, small group instruction, the use of quick diagnostic assessments to measure progress and a specific instructional plan for each student.

Our journey on the Magic School Bus last week took us to Wilmington STEAM Magnet, where I visited with Mr. Godinez and his students who were learning about the COVID-19 pandemic, including epidemiological modeling and containment strategies. They're using the Operation Outbreak curriculum created by teachers and scientists at Harvard University and the Broad Institute. These students are living in the most important science class our nation has seen in a century and it's interesting to see how real life lessons are incorporated into each day's studies. Please enjoy a quick look at the lesson and our conversation.

And thank you for your continued patience and support.