

AUSTIN BEUTNER UPDATE TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – MAY 3, 2021

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

Today, we celebrate an historic milestone. After more than a year of extraordinary challenges due to the crisis created by the COVID-19 virus, all schools in Los Angeles Unified are now open and welcoming students back. This morning I'll share some highlights on school reopenings and thoughts on where we go from here.

Across the 710 square miles served by Los Angeles Unified, students and their families were excited to see familiar faces, meet new teachers and classmates, and rekindle the magic of being with other people they had been missing over the last 14 months. Our commitment since schools closed was to reopen them as soon as possible and in the safest way possible. We have been deliberate and we have been careful in the steps to get to this point. And it has taken the collaborative efforts of all of my colleagues to accomplish this.

I'm proud of the work that's been done to reopen schools and it's our shared commitment to keep schools safe which will help them stay open.

My ride on the Magic School Bus this week traveled over 175 miles as we visited 17 schools and SoFi Stadium. All in all, the reopening of schools has gone remarkably well. Like anything else this large and complicated, there are bound to be some surprises -- things that go better than planned and problems which arise and have to get fixed. Our two biggest challenges at the moment are to make sure we have enough people to help with childcare and sufficient clinicians to administer all of the COVID tests. Progress is being made on both fronts and I expect this week will be better than last.

But a bit of context might be helpful. Los Angeles Unified is one of just a few large, urban school districts in California offering a full-day, 5 days a week program, for elementary school students and the only school district in the nation with COVID testing for all students and staff at schools. We know we're stretching ourselves to provide both of these but they reflect our continuing commitment to do the best we can for students and families that we serve.

Students in middle and high schools returned last week. They found a safe environment with all they need to focus on their studies and a place to reconnect with friends. Please listen to what students, their families as well as teachers and staff have to say about their experience in school.

When I visited Cortines High School for the Visual and Performing Arts last week, I met with Emily, a senior, who told me that for her and many others, "School is a family." Time and time again, at every school I visit – principals, teachers and school staff

describe themselves as a family, and students and their families talk of returning to schools feeling like a homecoming. For many employees and students, school is literally a place of family as well. Our schools are home to spouses, partners, and siblings working alongside each other, and employees who also wear the hat as parents of children in our schools. Every day, they work to make the schools a place where they would send their own children, and it shows.

I caught up with Andrea, a Building and Grounds Worker at Santee Education Complex whose son attends Ascot Avenue Elementary. Ronnie-Marie, a college and career coach at Fleming Middle School has a daughter at the same school. Assistant Principal Lisa from Banneker Career & Transition Center has two children enrolled in a Korean dual-language program at Denker Avenue Elementary. Teachers Mario and Nicole from Hart Street Elementary met at school 26 years ago and their children attended the same school they now teach at. Please enjoy some highlights of our school family.

Last week was also special for 240 middle school students who are in a music program we created with the help of Fender Guitar. The students taped a performance with Grammy- and Oscar-winning artist H.E.R. for the upcoming Global Citizen event: VAX Live: The Concert to Reunite the World. Other performers in the event will include Selena Gomez, Jennifer Lopez, the Foo Fighters and President Biden. You heard that right -- Los Angeles Unified students will perform on a global stage alongside some of the world's brightest stars and world leaders.

For me, it's Christmas come early and a dream come true. I'm a music kid -- as a shy fifth-grader in my third different elementary school, it was a teacher handing me a cello which changed my world. I found friends and I found my voice.

In the midst of a global pandemic, we knew children would, now more than ever, need to find a way to connect with one another. I reached out to Fender and they answered the call to serve.

Students received guitars, basses and ukuleles from Fender – free and theirs to keep. They participated in teacher-led lessons and made new friends in a community of musicians when the pandemic had everyone longing for a connection.

I'm pleased to announce that in the coming school year, the program will expand from the 5,000 students currently participating to more than 10,000 students. Every student in the program learns to play in a teacher-led music class and receives an instrument as well as access to the Fender Play app. Fender Guitar is providing the guitars and Fender Play free of charge to all students in the program.

Please enjoy some highlights of students and their performance with H.E.R.

While at SoFi, I also got to visit with a group of dedicated school nurses who were there to provide vaccinations for school families and community members as part of the event.

Set your calendar and remember to tune in at 5 p.m. May 8th on ABC, CBS, YouTube as well as iHeartMedia radio stations. The concert will also air at 11PM that night on Fox.

Last week was full of excitement on elementary campuses, as well. Attendance continues to climb each day, as more families become comfortable with the nation-leading safety measures we have put in place, and their children return to in-person learning. But attendance isn't the only thing on the rise. Reading scores for students who are taking part in our Primary Promise early literacy program continue to increase. The majority of students all of whom were struggling – and even those who were non-readers – last August, are now reading at or above grade level.

The Primary Promise was launched in August 2020 as the centerpiece of our commitment to help all elementary school students build a foundation of literacy, math and critical-thinking skills. Quick diagnostic reading tests taken by first-graders at the start of the school year confirmed our concerns, that students whose kindergarten year was interrupted by the pandemic were falling behind. This learning loss has been well chronicled. But we're not standing around contemplating our navel, we're doing something about it.

We took immediate action and added more reading teachers to work directly with 2,500 high-need students who were struggling to read. A specific plan was created for each child. You often hear the phrase "meet the unique needs of each child" in education circles. This is what it looks like in action. Students in the Primary Promise program who were well behind in reading when the school year started have already caught up with their peers in less than half a year with this focused help. Imagine what they'll do when they're back in school classrooms.

In one part of Los Angeles Unified the portion of 450 first-graders meeting grade-level standards at the beginning of the year increased from 9% to 37% by February. That compares with 37% of all 6,000 first-graders in the same area who met grade-level expectations at the start of the school year and 39% by mid-year.

Building on that early success, the program was expanded this semester to 6,700 students in grades K-3 at 225 high-needs schools. These students are now outpacing others in their progress in reading fluency, accuracy and decoding letter sounds and words.

Los Angeles Unified will expand Primary Promise by the start of the 21-22 school year to help 14,000 students in 453 Title 1 elementary schools.

We need to provide the foundation in literacy, math and critical-thinking skills for every child in elementary school. The Holy Grail of education is early literacy. What we're

seeing in early results of the Primary Promise tells us this is a very big step in the right direction.

Ask any of our youngest learners what the biggest news of the past week is, as far as their concerned, and they'll answer in unison: "The playgrounds are now open at school." Students are allowed to use playground equipment at schools for the first time since the pandemic hit last March.

We waited until we had welcomed young students back and made sure they were familiar with all of the safety protocols – wearing of masks, social-distancing, hand washing and staying in small cohorts – and we're comfortable now that they can take these practices to the playground.

When I visited schools last week to share this news, there were smiles all around. The path to recovery includes the opportunity for youngsters to exercise and play outdoors in a way that's safe and appropriate.

Amidst all of the progress in reopening schools lies a troubling fact. The portion of students from low-income families in high-needs communities returning to school lags well behind their peers from more affluent communities.

We know most students learn best in the school classroom and the continued absence of so many children from schools will compound the struggle many already face.

If we truly believe in a greater push for equity in public schools -- this is the challenge of the moment. How do we help families understand it's safe for their child to be back in school and how do we provide more time in a school classroom when students do return to help them make up for lost time.

As part of our continuing commitment to safety, last week, Los Angeles Unified crossed the million mark of COVID tests provided free of charge to students, staff and their families. We continue to provide regular testing at school sites for all staff and students participating in in-person learning, while maintaining 12 stationary sites for employees and students who are not participating in in-person learning but may need testing to participate in athletics or for other reasons.

Los Angeles Unified provided more than 450,000 tests in just the past few weeks before school opened and is now testing about 20,000 people each day. On an average day, that's about 1/4 of all COVID tests being administered in the Los Angeles area, making Los Angeles Unified the single biggest provider of COVID tests in the region. As Los Angeles Unified has done throughout the crisis, we're doing our part to help the school communities we serve with COVID tests, along with more than 125 million meals and computers and internet access for half-a-million students.

If 90% of the people on a school campus are children who have not been vaccinated, the safest thing to do is test everyone, children and adults, before they start school and

regularly thereafter. And that's exactly what we're doing at schools in Los Angeles Unified.

This past week saw 21 students and 7 staff members who had returned to school test positive for COVID-19 in the school-based testing program.

Los Angeles Unified's contact tracing team contacted nearly everyone with a positive COVID test within a day of the test being taken. School principals are informed and able to prevent the individuals with the virus from coming back on school campuses until they are no longer contagious.

Just last week, for example, a second-grader at Bryson Avenue Elementary who had a negative baseline test prior to returning to school tested positive during a subsequent test at school. The other students in the child's cohort and their teacher had not been in close contact. Those students and the teacher were able to stay in school and continue with in-person learning. The child who tested positive is quarantining safely at home.

So far, there have been no cases of COVID at schools linked to any of the people who have tested positive. This is a good sign, all of the mitigation measures we put in place - not just the testing but the upgraded air-filtration systems, the wearing of masks, adequate supplies of PPE, social distancing, extra custodial support and vaccinations for school staff - they're working. We're not the NBA and we can't create a bubble. But we're doing everything we can to reduce the risk of spread of the virus in schools.

Every child continues to be able to receive meals at any school, every weekday, whether they are participating in school in-person or online. During the first three weeks since schools reopened we served approximately 2.2 million meals to children, about 75% of those to students at schools. That means more than a half-million meals have been provided to children who remain at home. A stark reminder the need continues.

Adults in need of food assistance may visit the Los Angeles Unified website for information about alternative sites for food assistance.

We've expanded the safety net to include vaccinations at school sites as part of our commitment to do all we can to protect the health and safety of everyone in the school community.

Eleven school-based vaccination clinics are now open in neighborhoods most impacted by the virus including Lincoln Heights, Westmont, West Athens, South Gate, Vermont Square, South Los Angeles, South Central, as well as Huntington Park, Watts, Boyle Heights and Cudahy. Additional clinics will be opening soon and we want to add more sites as soon as health authorities provide additional doses of the vaccine for school-based efforts.

This access at a trusted, local institution will help communities which have been hardest hit by the virus recover. Media reports talk of less demand for vaccinations but some of this may be attributable to lack of easy access.

School-based sites are open to those who may lack transportation to get to other sites or don't have the time or technology to make an appointment on the computer. A considerable portion of those who are getting help at schools just use the hotline, make a phone call or walk in and get vaccinated.

This school-based approach has already begun helping high-schoolers, aged 16-18, who are eligible to be vaccinated and it will be needed in the months ahead when vaccines are proven safe and effective for younger children. Ninety percent of people on a school campus at any point in time are children. Herd immunity won't be reached in schools or in the broader community until children are vaccinated.

And further down the road, booster shots or seasonal vaccinations may be necessary. A system needs to be put in place to provide these safely, reliably and as efficiently as possible. Schools will be an important part of the solution.

If you have any questions or need assistance in receiving a free vaccination at a school in your neighborhood, please call our Family Vaccination Hotline or visit Los Angeles Unified's website.

We've had the privilege to host several elected officials last week at schools who recognize the importance of the work all in schools are doing to help students and their families on the path to recovery. State Superintendent Tony Thurmond joined us at Sylvan Park Elementary and Van Nuys High School, state Senator Henry Stern visited Hale Charter Academy and Assembly Member Wendy Carrillo stopped by a school-based vaccination center at Lincoln High. Please enjoy highlights of their visits.

As we finish this week, I want to share the excitement of students, their families and all who work in schools. We have reopened schools in the safest way possible and now we look forward to the return of all students to the classroom.

Looking ahead, adjusting school schedules, together with further progress in vaccinations and continued reduction in the spread of the virus, should allow for all-day, in-person instruction when the new school year starts. In the words of student leaders from Gardena High School, "We're protected. We're encouraged. We're educated."

Thank you for your continued patience and support. I look forward to seeing you at school!