

AUSTIN BEUTNER UPDATE TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – NOVEMBER 16, 2020

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

Today, we'll discuss the continuing work to provide a safety net to students and their families, share an update on COVID-19 and discuss preparations being made for students to return to school when it's safe and appropriate for them to do so.

Sometime this week, we'll provide the 79 millionth meal to someone in need. We've many partners in this effort and are recently joined by the Oprah Winfrey Foundation, which facilitated the donation of printers and document scanners for families to use at our Community of School offices, and Universal Music Group which contributed \$25,000 to help keep students connected with their schools. Los Angeles World Airport Duty Free stores, Lucky Brand and the Anthem Blue Cross Foundation have donated chocolates and cloth masks which are handed out to students at our school-based COVID testing sites, along with hats from the LA Chargers and popcorn from Popcornopolis.

To join our efforts, text NEED to 76278 or visit [LAStudentsMostInNeed.org](https://www.launified.org/la-students-most-in-need).

We continue to provide free COVID-19 tests to students and employees, as well as the families of those who test positive or show symptoms for the virus. All who come on campus must be tested prior including students and coaches who are participating in athletic training and students, teachers and aides involved in small group instruction and childcare.

After an initial baseline test, regular visitors to a campus will receive a notice for additional, periodic testing which they'll need to do. We have expanded the number of sites offering Saturday and evening testing, and continue to offer books, treats and other fun things to children who come in for a test.

I had the opportunity last week to visit with the football team at Taft High School, together with Coach Gideon and Principal Steiner. Students are finding it nice to be back on the field with their teammates and coaches for athletic conditioning.

The football team at Taft has also agreed to be part of a pilot to test the App we are creating together with Microsoft. This App will help students, their families and staff participate in the testing program and allow for quicker access to schools once students return to campuses.

I can't think of a better group to test how the App works than our high school students.

While the portion of people testing positive for the virus at school testing centers continues to be relatively low, the percentage is rising. Similarly, the rate of those

testing positive in Los Angeles County continues to rise as do the number of COVID-19 cases, and levels of the virus in the Los Angeles area remain widespread.

We should all be troubled by the relatively high level of COVID-19 in the community. Not only because of the impact it's having on those who become ill and their families. We must think of them first. But the continued widespread level of the virus stands in the way of reopening schools.

Tomorrow, if you were you so inclined, you can take your family and walk into the Glendale Galleria without so much as a temperature check and spend hours browsing alongside hundreds of shoppers from all parts of Los Angeles.

What you can't do is drop your child off at their neighborhood school for a day of instruction in classrooms where access is carefully controlled, students and their desks are spread apart, all rooms are deep-cleaned daily and every student, teacher and staff member undergo regular testing for COVID-19 under the guidance of national experts in epidemiology.

Eight months into a pandemic that's likely to stretch well into next year, our priorities are misplaced when malls receive more focus than the public schools that provide children with the foundation of literacy, math and critical thinking skills they need to succeed in school and in life.

Without significant changes in priorities and a greater focus on public education, it's unlikely that schools in Los Angeles will reopen for in-person instruction any time soon.

Local policies and actions matter. Since September, the Bay Area has seen a significant reduction in levels of the virus. While Midwestern cities have seen cases rise as temperatures dip and people head indoors, potentially increasing the spread of the virus. It was 80 degrees in Los Angeles on the same day a record number of cases was reported last week. We can't blame the weather.

Time away from teachers, friends and the structure of a classroom is having real impact on children. Many students are struggling with online learning, in particular young learners, students learning English, students with differences and disabilities and students who were struggling before school facilities closed. All students need the opportunity to be back in the classroom where the best learning takes place.

In our schools, more than 80% of students come from families who lived below the poverty line before the pandemic started and estimates are 75% of those families have had someone lose work due to COVID. The struggle is very real, and the virus is having a disproportionate impact on low income families. It's an issue of equity – we must provide the option for students to be at schools if that's what their families choose. And we have to do this in a way which protects the health and safety of all in the school community – students, staff and their families.

It's time to flip the script. Rather than wait for the rest of society to reopen – and stay open – before we can even contemplate reopening schools, California needs to

recognize the vital role schools play in the lives of children and working families and make students the priority.

Earlier this month, Los Angeles Unified led seven of the state's largest school districts, which together serve more than a million students and their families, in an appeal to Governor Newsom to adopt a clear framework that could be applied across the state for all school districts to reopen. California has long maintained a set of strict standards for health, education and employee practices in schools. This crisis is not a time to lessen standards which could compromise the health and safety of the school community, the quality of education being provided to students or the protections for employees in the workplace. COVID-19 presents the same health risk in Los Angeles Unified with more than 650,000 students as it does in Panoche Elementary School District with a single elementary school, and the response should be the same.

In addition, we need complete and transparent information on the prevalence of COVID-19 in schools that are open.

At Los Angeles Unified, we've begun to share information on the results of our virus-testing program even though school campuses remain closed. It's also important to know what the experience is at schools in California and across the country that are open. Anecdotes and one-off stories won't provide the complete picture we need and our science advisers need to make sure we are doing all we can to reduce the risk at schools.

While we wait for the level of COVID-19 to meet state requirements for reopening, we're doing everything we can to prepare for an eventual return to in-person instruction. These plans include the highest standards for health, education and employee practices at schools. This crisis is not a time to lower standards which could compromise the health and safety of the school community, the quality of education being provided to students or the protections for employees in the workplace.

In order to maintain the appropriate distance between people on campus, we'll need to have fewer students in a classroom at any one time. This means that, when it is safe to do so, we will implement a "hybrid" model of instruction, where students alternate receiving in-person instruction in a classroom at school and learning online, either at school or from home.

In the next week, we'll begin to share information about what to expect when students are able to return to schools. Our goal is to provide everything families need to make an informed decision about what's best for their child and their family – a return to school or continuing online learning. Every family will be offered this choice.

The information will include details on safety practices at schools such as cleaning of classrooms, social distancing and grouping students in small cohorts and our school-based system of COVID testing and contact tracing. There will be details on the instructional program, both in person and online, as well as sample schedules of what a student's day will look like. Families will also be able to learn about other supports that

will be available during school days including athletics, extracurricular activities and childcare.

All the information, including a Return to Campus Family Guide, will be shared in Community Town Halls and meetings with school principals. These forums will also include time for questions and answers. Families should be on the lookout for the opportunity to learn more.

All who work in Los Angeles Unified will receive a Return to School Guide for Employees and the appropriate department head or supervisor will be arranging forums to discuss reopening and answer any questions employees might have.

When health conditions are appropriate, we plan to reopen schools in a careful and measured fashion. The current thinking is we'll start with Early Education Centers and elementary schools over the course of the first week when it's safe and appropriate to do so, middle schools the next week, and high schools the week after. All students and staff returning to schools will need to receive COVID tests sometime the week prior to their school reopening.

With 1,413 schools, this will be an enormous undertaking. Teams of specialists in health practices, school operations, technology and instruction will be available to help each school, and their staff and the families they serve.

When schools first closed, I said the transition to online learning would be the equivalent of trying to fly an airplane while changing the seats and the wiring in the midst of a terrible thunderstorm in a plane running low on fuel.

That's certainly proven to be the case. Reopening schools in the safest way possible while implementing hybrid instructional programs means we have to try to land that plane on the very small deck of an aircraft carrier, at night, in stormy seas.

It won't be easy and there will be many challenges along the way, but we'll do the best we can.

Thank you for your continued patience and support.