

AUSTIN BEUTNER UPDATE TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – NOVEMBER 2, 2020

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

Today we'll discuss continuing efforts to provide a safety net for the students and families we serve, unveil plans to help more students at schools, talk about the high level of COVID-19 in the Los Angeles area which is keeping schools from reopening and explain our commitment to returning students to schools in the safest way possible.

Los Angeles Unified has now provided more than 74 million meals to children and families throughout the communities we serve as well as 8 million items of needed supplies from diapers and baby supplies to books and noise canceling headphones to candy and sports equipment for children.

In every other major metropolitan area across the country, cities and counties have joined with school districts on relief efforts like this. Unfortunately, here in Los Angeles, county and city governments have yet to help. That's not right as they share in the responsibility and are receiving significant federal dollars which are intended to be used for programs like the food relief effort which schools are providing.

Fortunately, however, Los Angeles Unified has been joined in this effort by businesses and individuals who understand the need. People don't come to schools for food by choice, they come because they're hungry and it's the best option available to them. That's what a safety net is.

The Anthem Blue Cross Foundation understands this and is donating \$100,000 to LA Students Most In Need to help make sure nobody goes without food during this crisis.

Please help if you can by texting NEED to 76278 or visiting LAStudentsMostInNeed.org to donate. \$20 will buy a week's worth of lunches for a hungry child.

In addition to an unprecedented relief effort, Los Angeles Unified is leading by bringing businesses together to help students continue to learn, including the use of technology in the classroom.

In March, we reached out to Amazon for help setting up call centers and with Schoology, the learning management system used in schools. We asked Verizon for help in connecting students with their school community. Since then, we've worked with many leading businesses to create new learning opportunities for students which take advantage of the tools and technologies. More recently, we began working with Microsoft to build the information system needed to reopen schools in the safest way possible. We're proud of the work being done by so many principals, teachers and staff at schools and the support it's receiving from our many partners.

Throughout this crisis we've had to balance the learning needs of students, support for working families and the health and safety of all in the school community.

While educators in schools are trying their best to help students continue to learn online, we know the best learning takes place at schools. And for certain types of students – early learners, students learning English, students with differences and disabilities and those who were struggling before school facilities closed – the absence from school has made the challenges even greater.

Until all students are back at schools, we'll do our best to help those most in need with individual and small group support. All of this is being conducted under a very strict set of health practices.

We've been providing childcare for children of essential workers – the teachers and staff at schools – and one-on-one instruction, both in person and online, for students who need it most.

In the coming week, we'll build on that in a careful and deliberate manner with additional support for students at schools.

- The one-on-one instructional efforts at schools will also include small groups of students, with up to three students in each group.
- Special education professionals will conduct assessments for students, as well as in-person instruction in small groups.
- Coaches will lead athletic conditioning on school fields outside and students will be kept in small, consistent cohorts.
- And schools will provide extra support for students experiencing homelessness and students who are part of the foster care system. These will include supervised childcare so students have a place to learn and learning aids like noise-canceling headphones.

The effort to support homeless and foster students is part of a \$1 million commitment we announced last week. The money for this is coming from an innovative agreement we reached with Verizon back in March for broadband access at a significantly reduced cost, which Los Angeles Unified is providing to students and their families for free. In May, the agreement was amended to enable participation by other school districts throughout the state of California. Under the amended agreement, Verizon is providing a rebate to Los Angeles Unified based on the usage of the agreement elsewhere in California. To date, this rebate has exceeded \$1 million.

All of these efforts involving students, teachers, staff and coaches at schools will be conducted according to the highest standard of health practices, including testing all students and staff who are involved for COVID-19 before they can start the program.

While these additional steps will help more students, we're still a long way from the reopening of schools. That's of great concern to me as it has to be a priority for all in the community to have students back in schools as soon as possible, in the safest way possible.

The overall level of the virus in the Los Angeles area is still well above the guidelines state authorities have set for school authorities to consider reopening and the number of COVID-19 cases is unfortunately increasing, not decreasing. Los Angeles is at 8 on the state dashboard and needs to be below 7 for at least three weeks before schools can reopen. As a practical matter, that means it will not be possible for schools to reopen this semester. Under state guidelines, and given the current level of the virus, there is simply not enough time left in the calendar for the Los Angeles area to meet the state guidelines before the holidays.

Let's take a step back and consider where we need to go from here. A couple of things ought to be clear to all of us. The Los Angeles area is not making the progress it needs to in reducing the overall level of COVID-19 and that's having a direct impact on children in public schools.

If we go back to the start of school in August, the level of the virus in San Francisco, Oakland and Los Angeles was well above state guidelines. By early September, all three cities had about the same level of community spread. Since then, COVID-19 levels in the Bay Area have decreased by more than 50% while virus levels in the Los Angeles area are now above those levels back in August.

We need to learn what worked in Oakland and San Francisco and determine what could be done differently in the Los Angeles area. We can't compromise the health and safety of the school community by reopening schools until the level of the virus is significantly reduced. But something has to change as it's not acceptable for students to be denied the opportunity to return to schools where we know they'll learn best.

Another, perhaps even more sobering, fact is that many students continue to struggle online. We can see it in attendance figures which are below those typically seen when students are at schools. And we can see it in the assessments of progress students are making in their studies. Ten weeks into this semester the portion of students in both middle school and high school receiving D's and F's have grown compared to last year.

The attendance figures and interim assessments don't reflect the desire or capability of students. They're eager to learn and every bit as capable as they were before school facilities closed. But the struggle to cope with COVID-19 and online learning for children and their families is very real. The struggle to get by and the resulting attendance and academic challenges are even greater in high-needs communities.

The attendance figures and interim assessments don't reflect the efforts of educators. Principals, teachers and all in schools are working their tails off. Extraordinary things are happening in classrooms. But the simple fact is some students are struggling online. It's not their fault, their families' fault or their teacher's fault. The students need to be in a school where they can learn best.

I spent some time last week with a middle school teacher who shared his experiences which are common to many. He can see students who are late to class or watch their computer screens turn off during a Zoom class, and note the assignment that doesn't get turned in or the phone call to the student or family that doesn't get returned. And he's heartbroken. Because he knows most of these students would be doing better in a classroom at school with the structure it provides, the comfort of friends and the focus and routine of his teaching.

Before one spends more time on the symptoms or asks hard-working educators to do the impossible, understand two things. There are limits to what can be done by schools to combat COVID-19, and the challenges are made greater because students are not in the place they learn best – a classroom at school.

The best solution for this is to get students back to schools as soon as possible in the safest way possible. We made a commitment to all in the school community to maintain the highest standard of safety at schools and we are taking all of the necessary steps to put this in place. This standard includes testing teachers, staff and students at schools for COVID-19 and we've now provided about 95,000 tests. This robust system of testing for the virus and contacting those who test positive will reduce risk at schools because those with the virus can be quickly identified and isolated to keep the virus from spreading to others.

And longer term, this school-based health system may provide the way to vaccinate children for COVID-19. It wasn't that long ago, in 1954, when the first children received a vaccine for polio at Arsenal Elementary School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

I'm pleased to share that we're now joined by other major school districts across California in a commitment to the highest standard at schools. Together, we have provided a path to a Common Standard for all public schools in California and asked Governor Newsom, the state Legislature and our local county and city governments to join us in this commitment.

California has long maintained a strict set of standards for health, education and employee protections and practices in schools. This crisis is not the time to lessen standards which could compromise the health and safety of all in the school community, the quality of education being provided to students or the protections for employees in the workplace.

Many of the challenges faced by society present themselves in schools – including poverty, hunger, a gaping digital divide, inequity and now COVID-19. But schools alone cannot provide the answer. We ask all to join us in a commitment to this Common Standard. This is the path we need to be on to return students to schools in the safest way possible and keep them in school while we deal with the impact the virus is having on all in the school community – teachers, staff, students and their families.

We have to learn how to live with the virus while providing the best possible education to students and protecting the health and safety of all in the school community. There is much discussion about vaccination and treatment for the virus and we hope progress is made soon. But experts involved in this work tell us it could be the end of next year before children are participating in any widespread vaccination program. There are no children participating in the current vaccine trials so we're a long way from knowing any firm timetable.

Seven months' absence from schools is having real impact on students. It's time for state and local authorities to work with schools to make sure students and all who work in schools can return safely in January. That's more than two months away, with a clear plan, consistent commitment and a dedicated focus it can be done.

That means health authorities have to keep the Los Angeles area on a path to reduce the overall level of the virus.

State authorities have to provide the funding and commit to a common standard of health, education and employee practices so schools have a clear path to open in the safest way possible while providing the in-person instruction students need.

And educators have to provide the best possible education to students when schools are able to reopen.

In closing, I want to remind you to please make sure your voices are heard on November 3rd. Leaders at the national, state and local level will have an impact on policy in public education and measures on the ballot will have a direct impact on our local schools. The polls are open until 8 p.m. tomorrow, please vote.

Thank you for your continued patience and support.