

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

### **AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – OCTOBER 5, 2020**

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

Today we'll discuss continuing efforts to provide a safety net, take a look at challenges the coronavirus will bring to students seeking financial aid for college, share more details on Los Angeles Unified's program to provide COVID-19 testing to the school community and highlight the work to make sure schools have the funds they need to reopen in the safest way possible.

We continue to be joined by businesses and individuals in efforts to provide a safety net for students and families. Cartoon Network recently donated 30 computers to schools, Wendy Holden had a fundraiser during a Zoom yoga class, raising about \$700 in contributions for LA Students Most In Need and Baby2Baby donated another half a million diapers. Los Angeles Unified has now provided nearly 67 million meals and 8 million other items to the communities we serve. Let's put that in context. This effort is one of the largest responses to a national disaster in this country over the last 20 years.

The biggest difference this time is the lack of support by local, state and federal government for Los Angeles Unified's food relief effort. The federal government is helping with funding for the meals provided to children. But more than a quarter of the meals have been provided to adults yet no other government agency is helping. In past relief efforts, the work and the funding would have been the responsibility of other parts of government. It's just not reasonable to expect schools alone to address so many of the challenges society faces and it's not right to expect schools to pay the cost.

The application window opened October 1<sup>st</sup> for students to complete financial aid applications. Unfortunately, this year's financial aid application forms or "FAFSA" will rely on outdated 2019 income tax information, which may not properly reflect the impact the crisis is having on many families with job losses and medical bills.

College counselors at schools can help students and families and high schools will be hosting online information sessions about financial aid. These workshops can help students and their families understand how to apply to college and participate in online visits with college representatives. Experts on financial aid will also be available to answer questions.

This past week Dr. Pedro Noguera, Dean of the USC Rossier School of Education and Dr. Courtney Malloy, Professor of Clinical Education, hosted a forum to share results of research on efforts by Los Angeles Unified to put schools and students at the center of all we do.

This Community of Schools approach puts a local administrative leader in charge of the schools in each of the communities we serve to bring together all stakeholders – students, families, teachers and staff and community members – to help their local schools. These local leaders have the ability to make decisions and allocate resources to help schools address the unique needs of the students and families they serve.

This shift began about two years ago led by an experienced team of educators who started by listening to thousands of students, teachers and family and community members. The feedback was clear and it was consistent. Solutions are best found in classrooms of schools in local communities, not in a top-down, one-size-fits-all bureaucracy. In effect, we're turning Los Angeles Unified upside down or really, right side up, placing the students and their families at the top. Last school year we piloted this approach in about 1/3 of our schools and based on the good results, it's being rolled out across the entire school district this year. Even in the midst of a pandemic, the impact is so encouraging and the work so important we're moving ahead.

This community based approach fosters more collaboration amongst educators, professional development can be tailored to specific, local needs, community partners are able to connect with and support their local schools and families can have their concerns addressed quickly by schools in their own neighborhood.

A team at USC, led by Dr. Malloy, has been studying this work and their findings are encouraging. Please watch a few highlights from the discussion.

Another important initiative to accelerate the pace of student progress is something we're calling the Primary Promise. We're doubling down on our commitment to make sure every student builds a strong foundation in literacy, math and critical thinking skills in elementary school.

The Promise has started with one on one tutoring at schools while classes are online and we're adding teachers in elementary grades to provide more direct instruction. This will allow one teacher to keep working with most of the students in a class while the extra teacher or aide can focus on those who might need extra support.

Together, reconnecting schools to the communities they serve and building a stronger foundation in early grades will put schools on a path to address the opportunity gaps which have been the biggest challenge facing public schools for more than a generation.

We continue to put in place plans to have students back in schools as soon as health conditions in the area allow. Unfortunately, the overall level of the virus is still too high. Los Angeles is still rated in the state's highest risk category with widespread disease. The recent, sustained uptick in COVID-19 cases over the past two weeks keeps us far away from the levels scientists and state guidelines say are needed to reopen schools. If one looks at the recent guidelines you can see clearly both Oakland and San

Francisco are below the levels set by the state for the reopening of schools and we'll be carefully watching their progress.

Los Angeles Unified is leading the nation by setting a new standard in public education with a comprehensive system of testing for the virus at schools and contacting all of those who may have been exposed.

This week brings another step forward in the Return to School program as we'll begin offering tests to all staff as well as our youngest learners – students in early education centers and elementary schools. By the end of last week we were testing about 5,000 people a day and this week we're aiming to reach 10,000 a day. Soon we'll provide 20,000 tests per day with 40,000 a day the target when it's possible for students to return to schools.

We serve the needs of almost 700,000 students and have over 75,000 employees so we expect it to take some time for all to get an initial baseline test during this time while all students are in online classes.

These initial tests will provide valuable information about the incidence of COVID-19 in the communities we serve to help inform the scientists, researchers and epidemiologists who are assisting with the program. The baseline testing will also help reduce the spread of the disease by identifying those with the virus so they can be kept apart from others. Los Angeles Unified's program is the most extensive effort in the state to bring testing into underserved, communities of color. More than 80% of students in our schools are from families living in poverty and 89% are kids of color. Many have not had access to testing.

Immediately prior to the reopening of schools, all students and staff who will be returning to schools will be provided with a further, back-to-school, baseline test. Students whose families choose to remain in online instruction and staff who are not working at school facilities will not be part of the testing program once students return to school facilities. The students and staff at schools will continue with periodic testing based on advice from our science partners.

The testing process is simple. You'll receive a notice from your child's principal (for students) or immediate supervisor (for employees) that it's time to be tested. You can make an appointment online, using a phone or computer including the one Los Angeles Unified has provided, at one of the many schools where testing is being provided. There's a quick check-in upon arrival at the site and a clinician will be there to help oversee the testing. While we recommend the use of nasal swabs, anyone can request a sputum test if they prefer. Both tests are what's known as PCR tests, the gold standard for COVID-19 testing. The test is free and the process should take less than 10 minutes, start to finish.

You'll receive the test result within 24-36 hours via text and email. All results are kept confidential and stored in a separate, secure database. Information will be shared only with the appropriate scientists, administrators and health authorities.

You will also receive a text or email asking you to download a Daily Pass App built for Los Angeles Unified by Microsoft that helps tie all the parts of the program together. All students, staff and visitors to schools will be able to use the App to be admitted to a campus, much like one uses an electronic ticket to attend a Dodgers' game or board an airplane at LAX. The App will help you with a simple, daily health check and inform you when it's time for a COVID test. In simple terms, after an initial, negative test and as long as an individual shows no symptoms, the App will admit that person to a school campus or district facility. If the test is positive or symptoms appear, then the individual will be referred to the appropriate health authorities for care.

A pilot program to test the App will be conducted at several schools this week. Feedback gathered during the pilot will assist us as we roll out the Daily Pass App for use by all in the school community. An email or text will be sent in another week or so with a link that includes instructions on how to download the App.

This new Daily Pass App is an example of the innovative ways we are working to make our schools as safe as possible. It will allow healthy people onto campuses and advise those who may not be feeling well to stay home and seek medical care. The App will also inform the school community about the importance of health practices to help reduce the spread of the virus.

Microsoft has provided this App to more than 1,000 of its most sophisticated customers around the world and we're proud to be the first school district to use it. Together with Microsoft, we're adapting this App for use in schools. For example, we had to change the front end because we have such a diverse group of people who visit a school campus – not just employees, but students, most of whom are minors, and families as well as people who are part of support organizations like City Year, Brotherhood Crusade or Communities in Schools. We also incorporated testing and contact tracing into the App as we're the first large organization, whether a business or a school district, to incorporate COVID testing for all.

An important part of the plan to return to schools in the safest way possible is to communicate with all in the school community why we're doing this, how we're doing it and answer any questions.

We held a meeting with our Community of School leaders and families last week to share the plan and discuss it in detail. Here's a bit of the discussion.

I also visited a few testing sites with families as they took their first test. Please listen to what they had to say.

We appreciate your participation in this important school-based, health effort. Much like efforts to screen for tuberculosis or other infectious diseases, this program will be more effective if everyone is part of it.

More information can be found on our website, on LA Unified's YouTube channel (@LosAngelesSchools) or by calling the Helpdesk at (213) 443-1300.

Online learning is no substitute for being in the classroom. While it's a necessary stopgap, every day away from the classroom can weaken the foundation in literacy, math and critical thinking skills children need to reach their full potential. And families struggling to get by can't return to work until their children are back in school safely.

Congress continues to debate another round of federal funding for COVID-19 relief and economic stimulus, but it can't continue to ignore the immediate need in public schools and the role they'll play in the recovery of local communities and the nation as a whole.

Unfortunately, the pandemic response has overlooked the vital role schools play. Some officials contend that the extraordinary, emergency actions taken by school districts – from providing millions of free meals to the families they serve to buying computers for students to creating their own COVID-19 testing programs – are somehow optional. They aren't.

As part of any new funding package, Congress must specifically designate funds to support schools. Like my colleagues from school districts in towns and cities across America, we fed hungry families because others did not. We redirected scarce funds to buy computers and internet access because children not in classrooms would otherwise have no way to participate in school. We created a virus testing and contact-tracing program for the school community because it's needed and didn't exist. Schools have long been on the front lines of dealing with broader societal issues and that has never been more true than during this crisis.

Democratic lawmakers in Congress have proposed \$175 billion for schools, Republicans \$70 billion and a bi-partisan group from the Problem Solvers Caucus \$100 billion. Big differences remain in other areas, but there's agreement about schools. We need Congress to pass a bi-partisan bill to help schools now.

Public schools in California are sadly used to operating with inadequate funding, but school districts have invested millions of dollars as they scrambled to live up to the moral imperative of educating children and providing a safety net for families.

Since March, we have served meals to families that otherwise would not have enough to eat. While Federal school-lunch funding reimbursed the costs for the children, the meals for hungry adults we've received no funding. Although we provide much-needed meals, we are left holding a \$70-million bag.

When school facilities closed, Los Angeles Unified committed to provide laptops, tablets and internet access so students could connect with their schools and teachers. We struck a deal with a major telecom provider for broadband access at significantly reduced rates so we could provide it for free to students. That arrangement has become the blueprint now used by schools in 40 other states serving millions of students. Again, these efforts are praised – but not reimbursed.

Los Angeles Unified is collaborating with major universities, health insurers, biotech companies and a tech giant on a new approach to COVID-19 testing and contact tracing that significantly reduces the cost to about \$30 per test for everything involved – lab materials and processing, administering of tests, logistics and data reporting and community engagement and contact tracing. This makes it possible to test every student and staff member on a regular basis and provide a foundation for a return to campuses in the safest way possible.

These costs for food, computers and internet access and COVID testing are just a portion of the additional investment we're making to keep students and families safe and connected as we plan a return to school campuses. Los Angeles Unified, together with its labor partners, the Los Angeles delegation in Sacramento and in Washington and other large school districts in California have been advocating at all levels of government for the funds schools desperately need to reopen in the safest way possible.

Los Angeles Unified has created a special page on its website called Reopening Schools in the Safest Way Possible and on it you'll find all of letters. Please take a look, add your voice and send a message to the appropriate elected leader about the immediate need in schools. There's lots of work to do and the kids are counting on us.

As the events in Washington late last week remind us, this crisis is far from over. It's been a long stretch and while we may grow accustomed to hearing about COVID, many challenges still lie ahead. For schools, figuring out how to bring students back to schools and keeping them there in the safest way possible will be our toughest challenge yet. The disease is highly contagious and can cause serious health consequences. We remain in a state of emergency as does our state and the nation.

Our commitment remains the same – to do the best we can to help students continue to learn while we protect the health and safety of all in the school community.

We'll continue to keep you informed on our plans to bring students back to schools in the safest way possible.

Thank you for your continued patience and support.