

AUSTIN BEUTNER UPDATE TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – FEBRUARY 1, 2021

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

Today, we'll recognize an important milestone in our continuing efforts to provide a safety net to the communities we serve, I'll outline the path to the reopening of school classrooms and we'll continue our school tours to share some of the innovative ways students and teachers are exploring new interests and ideas.

None of these extraordinary efforts are possible without the ongoing support of dedicated teachers, administrators, school staff and community partners across Los Angeles. For example, Anthem – which is providing support to our school-based virus testing and contact tracing program – has contributed 20,000 COVID safety kits for students and families who come to local schools for free COVID testing in neighborhoods across Los Angeles. These kits include a reusable mask, water bottle and hand sanitizer.

Los Angeles Unified's collaboration with Verizon has set a new standard for schools across the state to provide internet access to help students learn online. This partnership has helped homeless students and students in the foster care system throughout the Los Angeles area by providing supervised places to study and additional one-on-one instruction and other services. This \$1 million initiative was born out of our agreement with Verizon, which provides funding to Los Angeles Unified when other school districts in California take advantage of the internet arrangements we pioneered back in March. That same agreement has also resulted in more than a quarter of a million children from other school districts in California receiving internet access.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's Skyhook Foundation is about to introduce its fourth Eco-Van to visit school sites and provide students with hands-on outdoor learning experiences in STEM and environmental science. The program works together with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, NASA and the UCLA Science Project to provide lessons about our amazing planet. Each van has a theme that focuses on different parts of Earth: the hydrosphere, geosphere, biosphere and atmosphere.

When we return to classrooms, we'll integrate these new opportunities into the school day. Please enjoy a few highlights of my conversation with Kareem.

We can't allow the struggles of today to diminish our hope for tomorrow. And there is much to be hopeful about. For the first time in almost a year, it looks like things are headed in a better direction. But COVID isn't going away any time soon and there's a lot that has to happen to get schools reopened.

Today, Los Angeles Unified reached a sobering milestone in our nation-leading food-relief effort, providing 100 million meals at schools to students and their families. We've also provided 19 million items of much-needed supplies, along with computers and internet access for all students to help them stay connected with their school community. 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. This effort to provide a safety net will continue until we can welcome students back to classrooms.

The topic of how soon schools can be reopened is back in the news with comments from federal, state and local officials. Their views have been mixed and at times, confusing or even contradictory.

While some of the news is encouraging, there's a lot more to it than the comments or headlines suggest. Let's take a careful look at the facts on the ground in the communities we serve.

Infection rates in the Los Angeles area are still well above the level which must be met to reopen schools – more than three times the proposed new state standard and 10 times the standard from December. As we've seen repeatedly during this crisis, it's not as simple as flipping an on switch and returning to normal. When communities have tried that approach, even in limited circumstances, we've seen infections, hospitalizations and deaths all rise. The bad news is COVID remains at dangerously high levels, the good news is community spread of the virus is coming down.

I'll try to provide some context by looking at the 4 pieces of the puzzle which need to be solved to reopen schools in the safest way possible:

- Community spread of COVID has to be at an appropriate level.
- The state needs to provide clear, consistent and well-understood standards for what constitutes a safe school.
- Schools must put in place health practices and protocols to mitigate risk.
- Health authorities must provide vaccinations for school staff.

The level of the virus in the Los Angeles area has dropped from roughly 15,000 new cases a day in late December to about 6,500 over the past week. That's good news. But it should be clear we're not out of the woods yet.

A recent *San Francisco Chronicle* story illustrates the seemingly contradictory response to this news. When Governor Newsom relaxed restrictions for communities across California in late January, both Los Angeles and San Francisco followed suit. Los Angeles County's case rate was about 97 per 100,000 residents compared with 27 in San Francisco. But when the stay-at-home order was put in place back in early December, San Francisco's daily case rate was about 14 and LA's about 39. San Francisco closed down at 14 cases and reopened at 27. Los Angeles is reopening at 97 after closing at 39. How does that make sense? Los Angeles' hospitalization rate is nearly triple San Francisco's and the death rate is more than four times that in San

Francisco.

It's been 10 very long months and the Los Angeles area has yet to meet the state COVID standards for schools to reopen. If schools are truly a priority, why are malls and cardrooms being allowed to reopen when the Los Angeles area is nowhere close to meeting the state standards for schools to reopen?

In late November, when both state and local authorities enacted strict "stay at home" orders, the case count in the Los Angeles County of the virus averaged about 7,500 per day, not that much different from what they were last week, especially when one accounts for the closure of about 1/3 of the COVID testing capacity in the area including at Dodger Stadium, which was identifying about 1,500-2,000 positive cases a day before it stopped testing. It's reasonable to assume those positive cases didn't just disappear when the testing did.

It's hard to be confident we're somehow safer today than we were back in December when health authorities told us similar virus levels put us in dire straits. And it was only a couple of weeks ago that hospitals were overrun and health authorities were telling us "the devastating impact of the pandemic is about to collapse emergency medical care."

Here's one small example of how confusing things have gotten. Last Friday Los Angeles County health authorities published guidelines that limit outdoor dining to no more than six people per table – all of whom must be from the same household. Four days earlier, the California Secretary of Health and Human Services encouraged people to go out to eat with their friends, saying: "If you miss a friend, you can go out to eat."

Which is it? If state and local officials on whose judgment we must rely can't agree, how are the families we serve or those who work in schools supposed to have confidence in the guidelines and health standards.

The whole approach to reopening has to be built on public trust. Inconsistent and seemingly conflicting standards won't help. All of this reinforces the need for the second piece of the puzzle – clear and consistent state guidelines for the reopening of schools which are well understood by all in the school community.

Families and school staff have many unanswered questions on this topic. Here's just one example. Why does California use an "adjusted" case rate instead of the actual rate of COVID in a community? California is the only state which takes the actual number of COVID cases then "adjusts" them to determine whether schools or businesses can reopen. As the chart shows in comparison with other major cities, there are big differences between actual and adjusted case rates.

We must listen to health authorities as it's their responsibility and they have the expertise to determine the appropriate standards but all in the school community deserve a full explanation of the science and reasoning behind them. And a full

understanding is necessary for all to have confidence that schools are as safe as possible.

The Governor's staff and health advisors have offered to provide a briefing to Los Angeles Unified and our labor partners, along with six other large school districts in California, to help our employees better understand the proposed new reopening standards. We'll share what we learn.

The good news is that Los Angeles Unified has already put in place the necessary measures to reopen schools in the safest way possible once the appropriate state COVID standards for reopening schools are met. The CDC last week reinforced the importance of risk mitigation practices at schools and we have already in place measures which meet or exceed every one of the CDC guidelines. The practices have been in place for many months at all schools in Los Angeles Unified as we wait for COVID levels in the community to meet state standards.

Los Angeles Unified has upgraded the air-filtration systems in more than 80 million square feet of buildings; reconfigured facilities, office spaces and classrooms and marked restrooms, halls, cafeterias and other common areas to keep people safely apart; and provided PPE and masks at every school and in every classroom. Workers clean and sanitize every room in every facility with ionized cleaning systems and hand-clean high-touch surfaces. Staff have been trained on health protocols and practices.

The health practices and protocols are just one piece of what we put in place in schools. The other is monitoring any spread of the infection. Since September, Los Angeles Unified has provided free COVID testing for students, employees and their family members at schools.

This regular testing and contact tracing at all schools will be necessary when classrooms reopen and it's an important part of the overall strategy. We use state-of-the-art PCR tests and deliver overnight results to health authorities and all in the school community so we can quickly identify and isolate anyone with the virus to keep it from spreading to others. It's free, quick, safe and painless. Please sign up and get tested at your local neighborhood school.

The final piece to reopen classrooms is vaccinations for all who work in schools. This will not only protect the health and safety of school staff but will provide enormous benefit to children and their families with a faster reopening of schools and of the economy more broadly by enabling the working families we serve to go back to work.

Most people know about the importance of the vaccine and the current scarcity of doses. But we don't gain much by having an existential debate comparing a 66-year-old retiree living in a single-family home who can minimize outside contact with a 59-year-old reading teacher working in a classroom with young children from families hit hard by the virus, or a 64-year-old bus driver taking special-education students to school. All need to be vaccinated as soon as possible.

I'm encouraged by Governor Newsom's remarks last Wednesday in an appearance with Long Beach Mayor Robert Garcia. The Governor said vaccinating teachers is key to resuming in-person instruction and "that is why we kept teachers and school support staff in that top tier" for receiving the COVID vaccine. He's acknowledged the importance, now that has to be turned into action.

Increasing access to the vaccine is essential to recovery in the communities we serve. Los Angeles Unified is ready to operate vaccine sites at school campuses to take the pressure off crowded, makeshift vaccination mega centers. The *Los Angeles Times* reported last week about the difficulty senior citizens are having with the online lottery of booking vaccination appointments and the hours-long waits to receive their shots. Los Angeles County health officials last week announced plans to move forward with Los Angeles Unified to use school campuses to provide vaccinations to individuals in high-needs communities which have been most impacted by the virus and often lack access to healthcare.

This graphic from the New York Times shows the disproportionate impact the virus is having in the Los Angeles area. One could overlay a map of schools which are part of Los Angeles Unified and you would see schools located in the middle of the communities which have been hit hardest by the virus. No organization is better situated to provide access to the vaccine in the communities which need it the most.

Looking ahead, the challenge in the next many months will be to help 75-80% of the population get vaccinated per the targets Dr. Fauci has set. Further down the road, it may be necessary to provide booster shots or implement other efforts similar to those for the seasonal flu to keep COVID-19 and other variants at bay. It makes sense to set up a vaccination system, like one at schools, which can provide consistent, safe and convenient access.

There is nothing more important to families than having their children return safely to school. These initiatives I just described will help do that. But we also must keep our eye on the needs of today. And as I've said before, while the primary mission of schools is to provide the best possible education for children, local schools also provide services that families depend on. More than 80% of our students come from families living in poverty and the job losses caused by the pandemic have fallen disproportionately on them.

That's why, when the crisis began, Los Angeles Unified started a food relief effort at schools to provide a nutritious meal to anyone in need, no questions asked. We expanded the relief effort to include other things families needed. Today we are serving our 100 millionth meal and have also provided more than 19 million items of much-needed supplies. It's not possible to overstate the significance of today's milestone.

Fortunately, Los Angeles Unified has been joined in this effort by many who understand the need. We're grateful to our partners in the business community, philanthropic

organizations and many individuals for their support. I had the opportunity to talk this past week with just a few of the many thousands of people who have helped. Please listen.

100 million. To give you some sense of the scale of the program, the milk and juice alone is enough to fill the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool and if you laid every milk carton end to end you'd reach from Los Angeles to New York. The fruits and vegetables weigh about the same as 1,400 elephants. 100 million meals is one for every person in Germany, plus their neighbors in Switzerland. And it's about the same number of people who visit Disneyland over five years.

Along the way, we've also provided millions of diapers, personal care items and anything else we can find to help families at this time. Local companies like Mattel have donated toys, See's Candies donated 350,000 pounds of candy, that's enough to give every fan a piece of candy at sold-out Dodgers stadium for the next two years, and Baby2Baby donated almost 4 million diapers, one for every baby born in the United States last year. LA84 donated about 39 full seasons worth of NBA game balls – 13,000 in all. And if you want to see a Teamster's heart melt, watch him give a child a toy and a lollipop after he's driven all night to bring the treats to the school.

While 100 million meals is a testament to the efforts of thousands of my colleagues who have been working tirelessly in difficult circumstances, it is also a stark reminder that families across Los Angeles area are suffering. Almost a year into this pandemic, our neighbors remain vulnerable. Children and their families worry about where the next bag of groceries will come from. Despite the heroic efforts of Los Angeles Unified, food insecurity remains a real threat to many thousands and thousands of our fellow Angelenos.

What strikes me when I talk to people at all stages of life and varying degrees of prosperity is the universal recognition that public education is the key to both individual and shared success. A child challenged and inspired by a dedicated and dynamic teacher can engage the world on her terms. There is no greater gift than that. And there is no greater urgency than reuniting teachers and students in classrooms where that work happens every day. We cannot allow the very real challenges we face today to block our view of what's possible.

We're already working on the process of recovery with extra attention spent on those who need it most. The Primary Promise is our commitment to make sure every student builds a foundation in literacy, math, and critical-thinking skills while in elementary school. Education is cumulative. We first learn to read and then read to learn. When students get it right early, we see big gains in achievement in all grades. We're investing almost \$100 million for additional teachers to help young learners and we're doing it now. We can't wait.

We're also increasing the amount of one-on-one tutoring schools can offer to students.

And we will be seeking to add more time in the classroom for the 2021-22 school year. An extra 10 days to work on the fundamentals in reading and math, help children deal with the trauma and anxiety caused by the crisis and rediscover the joy of learning in enrichment activities.

As we conclude today, we'll share a glimpse of what's possible as we continue our Magic School Bus tour. This past week, I paid a visit to the Girls Can Create Club at Eagle Rock Junior and Senior High School. Founded by junior Tomiko Younge and sponsored by Principal Mylene Keipp and Spanish teacher Ana Mendoza, the Girls Can Create Club empowers young women of color to follow their dreams and passions by meeting with female role models from different walks of life – and then applying what they learn to projects of their own.

I also had a chance to join the Works of Art and Day Traders Clubs at Sutter Middle School. These are very different clubs, but they both reflect the things that make us human: creativity, critical thinking and a desire to share with others, whether it's creating a thing of beauty or investing for the future. What you see in these clubs are teachers and instructional staff devoting time to share their passions with young children and the excitement of young minds opening to new ideas and possibilities.

In the Works of Art Club, Bethany Tidwell and Debbie Vermeo encourage students to learn, explore and share their art and ideas. In the Day Traders Club, Trevor Owen works with students interested in saving and investing and encourages them to test their investment strategies while building important life skills in financial literacy.

As we head into this week, these students are a wonderful reminder why it's so important to get students back into school classrooms as soon as possible in the safest way possible and why the investment we make in doing so will, to borrow from the language of the Day Traders Club, pay dividends well into the future.

Thank you for your continued patience and support.