

AUSTIN BEUTNER UPDATE TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

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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 instruction in elementary schools, give an update on preparations for a return to school campuses and share more details on Los Angeles Unified's program to provide COVID-19 testing to the school community.

This week our food relief effort will likely reach 65 million meals, making it the largest school-based program of its kind in the nation. More than 1/4 of the meals we've provided have been to adults. They're hungry and they're in need and we're helping because it's the right thing to do. In every other major city across the country, cities, counties and states are leading these efforts and they're incurring the cost. Here in Los Angeles, the city, county and state should be helping Los Angeles Unified by providing a portion of the CARES Act funds they received to help pay for the cost. That would also be the right thing to do.

Businesses and individuals continue to support these relief efforts. Soles4Souls, along with Foot Locker, have helped provide shoes to 1,500 children who are experiencing homelessness. This crisis isn't going away and the need is great. Please find a way to help.

Overall enrollment patterns in schools are consistent with prior years. The biggest differences are increases in enrollment in 4th and 5th grade and high school and a decrease in transitional kindergarten and kindergarten.

Outreach efforts by schools have found the difference in young learners is attributable to a combination of factors – families struggling to get by who don't have the supports at home to help a young student engage with school, families who've lost work, lost hope and are leaving the area to try and find opportunity, and families who are leaving their children in an existing childcare setting until campuses reopen.

A closer look at first grade highlights progress as well as the challenges teachers, students and their families face. It also reinforces the need for students to be back in school as soon as it's safe and appropriate.

On average, 93% of first-graders attend class each day, compared to about 96% during the same period last year. Regular attendance in school provides students with the best chance to learn and schools are working to help families understand the importance of this.

We're seeing extraordinary teaching by many first grade teachers – using technology and Apps to engage students, facilitating student discussions, and exploring the curriculum while also providing classroom routines, physical activities and stretch breaks.

Whether at school or online, teachers try to get to know their students so they can work with each of them on their strengths and areas of need. In an in-person classroom, a teacher might pull a student aside for a few minutes to work with them, while the rest of the class works independently or with an aide. Online, that's not so simple.

Similarly, it's not straight forward to assess the progress students are making while online. In first grade, students are tested for reading fluency and comprehension. Most elementary schools used DIBELS, or the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, to assess reading proficiency. Students don't study for the test and in a classroom setting it normally takes about fifteen or twenty minutes to administer the test for all the students in a first-grade class. A low stakes, formative assessment like this is an important diagnostic tool a teacher can use to measure progress and fine-tune instructional plans.

Online, it's a much greater challenge. Some students may not have a quiet space in which to complete the assessment or become distracted. Students might experience technology issues or internet outages. And some students inadvertently receive help from siblings or a family member. Each of these can result in assessments which do not provide an accurate picture of the students' learning needs.

This small glimpse into a first grade classroom online makes clear the need for students to be back in classrooms as soon as possible. Young learners, those learning English, students with learning differences and disabilities and those who were struggling in the classroom before school facilities were closed are facing real challenges with online learning. Studies tell us about the "summer slide," when students regress during a traditional summer break. It's now been more than 6 months since students were in schools and the learning loss for some may be significant.

But schools have to balance the learning needs of students with the health and safety of all in the school community.

A necessary precondition for students to return to schools is overall health conditions need to be better. Los Angeles County is still rated purple, the state's highest risk category with what's characterized as "widespread" disease. And, unfortunately, there's been a recent, troubling uptick in COVID-19 cases in the area. The Los Angeles County Health Department has said schools may not reopen before November 1st which is consistent with the state's guidelines.

At the risk of repeating myself, schools cannot open until the overall level of the virus is much lower. We're dependent upon state and local health authorities to put in place and maintain the appropriate guidelines to manage this.

We're using this time to put in place a program to provide for students, teachers and all in schools to return in the safest way possible.

We have started to provide testing for COVID-19 at schools and follow up with anyone who tests positive or those they may have come in contact with. While unprecedented, the virus testing, community engagement and contact-tracing program is necessary and appropriate as we must do everything we can to protect the health and safety of all in the school community.

This program is an enormous undertaking and it's complicated. A team of nurses and logistical support oversee the testing. Scientists, virologists and epidemiologists from UCLA, Stanford and The Johns Hopkins University are looking at the test results and comparing it with the latest research and information that Anthem and HealthNet can provide about the prevalence of the disease in the communities we serve, which will help inform the pattern of testing. Microsoft is building an App to connect all of the parts. And others are working to ensure the data is reported to health authorities as required, provided to the university research teams and shared with the community through our COVID Report Card.

I'll try and address a few of the more frequent questions about this ambitious return to school program.

Are schools being cleaned? Is there personal protective equipment at schools and in classrooms?

Classrooms and facilities are electrostatically cleaned top to bottom, air filtration systems have been upgraded with the equivalent of N-95 membranes, personal protective equipment is provided to all individuals on the campus or in a classroom and facilities have been reconfigured to keep all at a school a safer distance apart. When students return, they'll be kept in small, stable cohorts.

How often will I get tested?

All students and staff will get an initial baseline test sometime in the next few weeks. After this first test, everyone will be tested periodically based on the advice from our science partners. Testing will also be offered to family members of those who test positive or show symptoms for the virus. These initial tests before schools reopen will provide valuable information about prevalence in the communities we serve. They'll help reduce the spread of the disease by identifying those with the virus so they can be kept apart from others. We'll gain valuable experience in operating the testing program and we'll help foster the participation of all in the school community as we plan for an eventual reopening of school campuses.

Immediately prior to returning to school, all students and staff will be provided with a back to school baseline test. Then all students and staff will continue to be part of a periodic testing program.

How does the test work?

The process is simple. An individual makes an appointment online at one of the many testing centers at schools. Upon arrival, there's a quick check-in process and then a clinician will help oversee the testing. It takes less than 10 minutes start to finish.

While we recommend the use of the nasal swabs, any individual can choose a sputum test if they prefer. Both tests are what's known as PCR tests, the gold standard for COVID testing. They identify the genetic material of the virus that causes COVID and determines if the person has an active infection, whether or not they display any symptoms.

Results will be provided to the person taking the test, or their family member, within 24-36 hours. All results will be kept confidential and the information will be kept in a separate, secure database. It will be shared only with the appropriate scientists, administrators and health authorities.

What's the role of the App and how is that connected to the test?

Microsoft is creating an App which will be available in early October to help tie all the parts of the program together.

All student, staff and visitors will use the App to be admitted to a campus much like one uses an electronic ticket to attend a Dodgers' game or to get on an airplane at LAX. The App will be sent by email and text to all in the school community and can be downloaded on any mobile device or computer, including the computer devices Los Angeles Unified has provided to students.

The App starts with a quick, self-check of health symptoms. An individual who tests negative for COVID-19 can use the App to complete a daily health survey and will be provided with a Daily Pass that allows them to return to schools.

That sounds expensive. How much is all this going to cost?

We estimate the cost, including the App and all parts of the testing and contact tracing program, to be about \$300 a student for the entire school year, or about \$150 million in total.

Let's put this in context. The state of California provides public schools with about \$17,000 a year to invest in a child. By any measure that's inadequate and the symptoms have been well chronicled – class sizes which are too big, the lack of a full-time nurse at

schools, school libraries without librarians and the lack of computers and technology needed for online learning to name just a few.

But \$300 makes sense when one considers how important it is to bring those first-graders I spoke of back to classrooms.

But this isn't a dollars and cents question. It's about our values as a society. The moral imperative is to help not just first-graders but all students return to schools in the safest way possible.

Let's take a closer look at the detailed costs of this program. The all-in cost will be bit more than \$30 a test. Be careful when comparing this effort to those by other agencies. The \$30 is for everything – lab costs, nurses and test administrators, logistics and operations, data reporting and analysis, and community engagement and contact tracing.

This didn't happen by accident. We had a team in Los Angeles Unified, together with outside science and legal experts, carefully review all the potential testing providers over a period of several months. They evaluated many labs, looking for ones which could provide a sufficient volume of tests, with timely results, at a price which would make the program feasible.

Los Angeles Unified got creative and chose a start-up company, SummerBio, to be the main test provider. The team negotiated a tough contract which protects the school district – Los Angeles Unified doesn't pay if the test results aren't delivered on time or if the test results don't meet specific quality standards. So far it's working. Los Angeles Unified has already tested more than 25,000 people and is quickly becoming one of the largest test providers in the state. The terms of the contract with SummerBio will save Los Angeles Unified more than \$150 million compared with the next lowest bid submitted by any other provider. Without the savings made possible by the innovative deal with SummerBio, the overall program would cost more than twice as much and might not be possible.

We'll continue carefully building the program to 20,000 tests per day within a few weeks and have contracts to increase that to 40,000 tests per day once the timing is clear on when students can return to classrooms.

How does one measure the results of a testing program?

This effort to test for the virus at schools and quickly isolate those who may have come in contact is the first of its kind. The goal is to provide the information needed to create the safest possible environment in schools for students and all who work there. It will create the ability to keep schools open because any occurrence can be quickly identified and isolated so it doesn't spread throughout a school.

While this program will operate at considerable scale, it's not to be confused with widespread, random testing. This testing is very focused on each school community and the people who are part of it. The program is also one of the first to combine the latest research and information about the prevalence of the virus in particular communities to help further refine and focus the COVID testing.

The coherence of this approach is made clear as Los Angeles Unified has been able to contact everyone who's tested positive and make sure they're isolated from others and are following proper health protocols.

It's the testing and tracing together which will help make this program in schools effective.

This isn't the first time Los Angeles Unified has done something different to respond to this crisis. In March, we reached out to PBS and created a partnership to provide student-centered learning shows. More than 200,000 people are watching these shows each week in Los Angeles and the content is being used by school districts and PBS affiliates in more than 30 other states.

We reached an agreement with Verizon for deeply discounted pricing on internet access so our schools could provide it for free to students who didn't otherwise have it. That agreement has now been used by Verizon throughout California and 40 other states to provide millions of students across the country with internet access. Los Angeles Unified's agreement with Verizon has a provision in it which ensures a cheaper price if it's offered to any other school district.

And the food relief effort being led by Los Angeles Unified is providing meals for less than \$4 each. Not to mention the millions of items ranging from books and noise cancelling headphones to baby supplies and sporting equipment which have been provided for free to students.

All of these – meals and supplies, internet access and testing for the virus – are made necessary by this crisis. But this crisis is also putting pressure on public sector budgets so we must work to make sure every dollar spent benefits the students and families we serve.

The challenges are great as are the needs in many of the communities we serve. That means we'll keep providing meals to children and adults, we'll make sure all students and their families have the computers and internet access they need to connect with their school community and we'll provide all in the school community with testing for COVID.

We'll continue to try and provide the best possible education while students are online and keep you informed on efforts to bring students back to schools in the safest way possible.

Thank you for your continued patience and support.