

September 26, 2022

Sent via Email

Superintendent Alberto M. Carvalho
LAUSD Board of Education Members
333 South Beaudry Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90017
superintendent@lausd.net
boardmembers@lausd.net

Dear Superintendent Carvalho and LAUSD Board of Education Members,

On Tuesday, September 15th, a 15-year-old LAUSD student tragically died from a drug overdose at Bernstein High School. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident, but part of a series of fentanyl overdoses impacting youth across LA County. Amidst the struggle to deal with post-pandemic mental health issues, rising inequality, homelessness, and conflict in their communities, fentanyl overdoses among today's youth are surging. This tragedy has brought a growing issue to light and positive action needs to be taken.

However, in light of this tragedy, LAPD Chief Moore and LAUSD Sup't Carvalho are responding with knee-jerk reactions that will criminalize entire school communities and make our schools less safe.

LAPD Chief Moore has called for more school police presence at schools and Superintendent Carvhalo is rallying for increased security on campuses. We have heard reports that one co-located charter school, Apex, has undermined LAUSD policy by conducting random searches & some have called for K-9 searches.

However, some students on the Bernstein campus are calling for alternative solutions. Jaylene Mora Torres, a junior at STEM Academy of Hollywood and a leader in Students Deserve shared, "People feel uneasy and scared around police. I myself am, and even my parents are. My dad gets racially profiled a lot, and we've gotten stopped and searched so many times. We shouldn't have more of a police presence because kids [will get] racially profiled or profiled on stereotypes. And we shouldn't bring back the random searches."

The young student who allegedly provided the drugs to the overdose victim, has now been arrested by LAPD and charged with manslaughter. However, we know from decades of student criminalization that increased policing of students is not the answer to creating safer schools. We know from the "War on Drugs" and the explosion of mass incarceration that zero tolerance policies that harshly criminalize drug possession and low-level sales do not prevent drug use or overdoses. Sentencing a 15-year-old child to prison is not the answer to preventing this tragedy from happening again. We must move towards forms of accountability and harm prevention that address

the root causes of drug use and distribution and transform the conditions that perpetuate these tragedies - mental and social emotional health issues, poverty and insecurity, a lack of resources and support systems, and more.

Instead of criminalizing students for using drugs, we should be providing meaningful interventions, training in drug awareness and overdose prevention, medical health-care practitioners, and providing mental health supports. Criminalizing youth will only isolate students experiencing anxiety and depression further and prevent them from communicating their feelings and needs with trusted adults at school. This will lead to more high-risk drug use, more overdoses, more deaths, and more young people being pushed out of schools and into the criminal justice system.

We must foster trusting, non-criminalizing relationships between students and adults at school so our youth can feel safe sharing what they are going through.

We must get rid of strategies based on criminalization and zero-tolerance policies that fail to prevent drug use and abuse, and only create a culture of fear and distrust between adults and students.

We must invest in real solutions that create an environment where students feel comfortable sharing their mental health struggles and possible drug use with trusted adults.

We must equip campuses with mental health professionals to help identify students who need additional support, prevent drug abuse, and prevent death if students do use substances.

We support training all adults who are not law enforcement on campuses in how to recognize and deal with drug overdoses, including the use of vital medicines like naloxone. We support trauma-informed education around drug use and overdose prevention for all students. We support community-based strategies that address the root causes of youth drug use.

In 2021, we and our partners in the Police-Free LAUSD Coalition pushed the LAUSD School Board to commit \$15 million to community based safety measures like safe passage, violence prevention and intervention, and community peace-building as part of the Black Student Achievement Plan (BSAP). We've also demanded similar community-based safety strategies district-wide. As of today, none of those community based safety initiatives and programs have been implemented. If Safe Passage had been implemented between Bernstein HS and Lexington Park – where these drugs were allegedly distributed – and greater mental health and trauma informed prevention resources were available on campus, we believe this tragedy could have been prevented. Let's take care of our young people, not criminalize them with more police presence.

Additionally, we and our partners in Reclaim Our Schools LA submitted a series of proposals to LAUSD as part of the Beyond Recovery platform that call for a safer school climate including more counselors and mental health services for students and increasing funding for programs that increase resources and supports for students and families, like Community Schools and the Black Student Achievement Plan. Rather than reversing the progress that LAUSD has made to

decriminalize our students by bringing police and random searches back to schools, the District needs to bargain on the Beyond Recovery Platform and adopt the safety approaches crafted by teachers, students, and parents.

Sincerely,

Students Deserve

Reclaim Our Schools LA

United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA)

Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE)

ACLU of Southern California

The Collective for Liberatory Lawyering