

AUSTIN BEUTNER ADDRESS TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – MARCH 23, 2020

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

Good morning. I'm Austin Beutner, superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District.

I hope everyone watching is safe and taking care of themselves and their loved ones. These are uncertain, even frightening times – particularly for children. We can take comfort in knowing that we are in this together, all one community.

At the center of every community is a neighborhood public school. Our lives are built around schools and the relationships we form in them -- the lifelong friend you met in kindergarten, in a chemistry lab, or on the JV soccer team, the 10th grade English teacher who helped you tell your story in a coherent and powerful way and the bus driver who greeted you every morning with a smile.

Parents also form bonds around school, whether watching their children compete in a robotics competition or volunteering to help with the PTA. For me, a fifth-grade teacher encouraged me to play the cello – helping me to find a group of friends and a way to express myself. My wife and I are still close to families we sat with during circle time at our children's preschool more than 20 years ago.

The old saying “you don’t realize how important something is until it’s not there” has never been more true as we find the essential role schools play in our lives has been dramatically altered.

I want to share what Los Angeles Unified is doing to support our school community and all who are part of it – students, families and all who work in our schools – and how we are trying, as best we can, to restore some sense of stability.

In ordinary times, our focus is on three things - to help students learn, provide support to students and families most in need, and take care of all teachers and staff in schools who make possible the learning and support. Even in these extraordinary times, these are still our goals.

I wish I could start by telling you it will all be back to normal sometime soon, but that is not the case. School closures will extend through May 1st. We’ll continue to listen to State and Local health authorities, and keep the safety of all in our school community in mind as we consider what is best for students. I’m particularly mindful of our graduating seniors for whom this spring should be a culmination of what, for them, has been a lifetime of hard work and commitment. We will do our best to prepare them for the next chapter and find a way to celebrate all they have accomplished.

Let's review our progress toward our three goals and start with how we're helping students continue to learn. On Friday, March 13th, which seems like a long, long time ago now, every student was sent home with a learning plan for the next two weeks. High tech, low tech or a combination of both. Many students have continued with their instructional program using a tablet computer and are participating in regular online discussions about their studies with their teacher on various communication platforms. Some took home backpacks with a series of materials to work on with a pen or pencil, while other students are learning from shows we created with PBS which are airing on KLCS, KCET and PBS SoCal. These shows have lesson plans, including questions and assignments for students to follow. And some students are learning using a blended approach.

But we know we can do better. We estimate about one-half of our students are continuing to learn at the pace they had been at school; one-quarter are doing okay, but additional work is needed to make sure students are getting the full benefit of the learning; and one-quarter aren't getting the learning opportunity they should be.

Standing in the way is a great big digital divide – not all of our students can participate online because they lack needed digital learning devices at home or access to the internet. And not all students, families and educators have been provided with enough training to support online learning.

We've authorized an emergency investment of \$100 million to close this gap and make sure every student, regardless of their circumstances, gets the education they deserve. Los Angeles Unified will provide devices and internet connections for all students, and training for all students, teachers and families. This is an unprecedented commitment, but a necessary one. Many of our families are struggling to make ends meet and cannot afford to do this on their own – but their children deserve the same opportunity those in more affluent communities have. I'm pleased to announce the support of Verizon in this effort. We reached an agreement late last night to provide free wireless internet access for all students in our schools who do not have it.

We know there is no substitute for great teaching in the classroom, and this investment in technology cannot supplant the additional training and investment which is needed in our classrooms. But this action today will pay dividends down the road in support of classroom learning when we return to school. Meanwhile, in the weeks and months ahead, we need to make sure all students continue to learn. All means all including English learners and students with disabilities and learning differences.

Let me be clear about expectations as we build capability in online learning. Our focus in elementary school will need to be on the foundation pieces like literacy, math and critical thinking. Some things we are able to do in a high school setting, science labs and physical education for example, will need to be different. It's not reasonable for students or educators, nor is it sound educational practice, for

teachers and students to spend six hours a day in online, two-way communication. And families who are struggling to get by in this crisis may not be able to spend all day trying to help their children do schoolwork.

To do this right we need to make sure the tools are in place -- each student with a device connected to the Internet, supported by Schoology (a learning platform Los Angeles Unified schools use) and communications technologies like Zoom and Google Meet Up. And then we need to train teachers, students and families so they are comfortable working with them.

Most important, we need to help educators create and teach instructional plans using them. We are fortunate to have many teachers who were already doing this in their classrooms and are now continuing online. The training will be to share this great practice with all teachers and help them put in place a plan they feel best suits the unique needs of their students.

Our second goal is to make sure we help students and families we know rely on the social safety net which schools help provide. On an ordinary school day, we serve our students more than 1 million meals. These are not ordinary days, but our students and families still need support, in particular those most in need.

We are operating 60 Grab n Go Food Centers at schools in the communities we serve to provide meals to those in need. This effort is being led by Los Angeles

Unified employees and volunteers from the Red Cross. Others have joined to help, including chef Jose Andres and World Central Kitchen and Snap Inc. Last Friday, we served almost a quarter of a million meals and helped more people than any other food bank in the country.

In addition, we have started a charitable fund to support the food efforts as well as to provide critical supplies and learning materials to students who do not have them. For those who want to learn more, please visit [LA Students Most in Need.org](http://LAStudentsMostinNeed.org).

This is just a start. We know more is needed and we are working with City, County, State and Federal officials to provide additional, much-needed services to those most in need. This morning we started providing meals at the 8 temporary homeless shelters set up by the City of Los Angeles.

This health crisis has led to a crisis in our communities. It's important to recognize many of the challenges we see in our schools -- children experiencing homelessness and lacking access to healthcare, families in search of food, adults without good paying jobs and a gaping digital divide -- are rooted in the community and are challenges which extend beyond the school house. A great education may be the best path out of poverty, but much needs to be done to support the communities we serve.

During all of this we want to keep our employees safe and provide stability in their lives, including making sure they continue to get paid, so they can help students and families in our schools as well as take care of their own children. We are one of the largest employers in the state and we hope our actions will cause other employers, large and small, to do the right thing for their employees.

The more than 75,000 people who work at Los Angeles Unified have one mission – to support the students and families we serve. My position has been clear from the start, we are going to take care of our employees. Because it's the right thing and because it's the tireless efforts of each and every one of them which allow us to help students and families.

Here's what's ahead. Over the next few weeks, we'll have days where students can continue to pursue their learning independently while their teachers are sharpening their online skills and preparing instruction plans. On other days we will distribute devices to students who do not have them and have training for students and families. Along the way, a week of spring break will give all of us some much-needed time to rest, be with our families and recharge for the work ahead.

A schedule for each of the days through May 1st has been posted on our website and we'll be providing details shortly on how the devices and needed technology will be distributed to students who do not have them. The effort will start with

high school students and eventually all the way to elementary school students. We'll also be setting up help desks for students, teachers and families to provide answers to questions ranging from "How does this device work?" to "Where can I find my child's homework assignment?" to "What is Zoom?" And, before this week is out, all students will be provided with an update on the learning plan they will continue with while we cross the digital divide.

It may sound simple, but it's not. We're making sure to include those at schools in the planning. We surveyed almost 4,000 teachers and 100 school principals to help develop the plan. We asked questions about how many students lack access to the internet, how are principals communicating with teachers and teachers with students, how are teachers providing instruction and feedback to students and where teachers and principals felt they could use help. We have 1,386 schools and we're counting on the great leadership in each of them, together with their teachers, to implement the appropriate plan for their students.

We're going to continue to explore new ways to keep our school community connected. Our work with PBS is just one example. The shows provide the opportunity for a family to watch together, discuss what they learned and escape from the uncertainty outside. It's interesting to note the ratings for all 3 PBS channels improved once we began showing the student-centered shows and by the end of last week, more than 100,000 people were watching each day.

We welcome your thoughts on how we can keep our students learning and provide support to families. We've set up a special email address -- suggestions@lausd.net -- for you to share your ideas with us. And we will do our best to keep you informed.

These are truly uncharted waters and there is no map for this. We will try some things that will work well and others not so well. But everything we try will be with the best interests of our students and families in mind. You have my unwavering commitment to do all we can for everyone in our school community – the students and families we serve and our employees who are committed to supporting them.

Thank you for your continued patience and your support.

Austin