



San Diego Unified
SCHOOL DISTRICT



OAKLAND UNIFIED
SCHOOL DISTRICT

Community Schools, Thriving Students



January 6, 2021

Dear Mr. Governor,

While pleased that “Safe Schools for All” prioritizes the reopening of public schools with substantial funding, we cannot ignore that the plan fails to address the needs of the urban school districts that serve nearly a quarter of California students, almost all of whom live below the poverty level.

The plan does not address the disproportionate impact the virus is having on low-income communities of color. It leaves the definition of a “safe school environment” and the “standard for reopening classrooms” up to the individual discretion of 1,037 school districts, creating a patchwork of safety standards in the face of a statewide health crisis. And it also reverses a decade-long commitment to equity-based funding.

As the *Los Angeles Times* noted in response to the plan: “It’s entirely possible that low-income schools will receive the worst of everything – no new funding, kids still stuck learning from home – while those in more affluent areas open for business and get \$450 per student extra to boot.”

Our schools stand ready to resume in-person instruction as soon as health conditions are safe and appropriate. But we cannot do it alone. The past 10 months have been a well-documented struggle for millions of California schoolchildren and their families. “Safe Schools for All” is a start toward recovery, but we call on the state to acknowledge the following needs and take the actions necessary to implement them so *all* California children can receive the education they deserve:

- An immediate, all-hands-on-deck, public health effort to reduce the spread of the virus in low-income communities.
- A clear state standard for COVID-related health issues in schools, with a requirement for in-classroom instruction to begin when the standard is met.
- Public health funds, not K-12 educational funds from Prop. 98, should be used for COVID testing and vaccinations.
- School-based health services should be integrated with COVID testing and vaccination plans.

- Learning-loss recovery plans, including funding for summer school, need to be established now.
- Reopening plans need to include specific funding for special education students.
- A timetable and plan for vaccinations of school staff should be made public by February 1.
- The state should begin to publish detailed information on school and district status in meeting COVID health standards, providing in-person instruction and school-based virus occurrences by February 1.

We believe these additional steps will ensure that “Safe Schools for All” lives up to its name. Despite heroic efforts by students, teachers and families, it will take a coordinated effort by all in state and local government to reopen classrooms. “Safe Schools for All” provides a foundation on which to add other necessary elements which, together, will lead to the reopening of schools in the safest way possible.

- **Our School Districts are Ready to Reopen Classrooms if Appropriate Steps are Taken at the State Level**

Since March, our districts have fed the hungry, provided the technology necessary for students to participate in online instruction, trained educators, cleaned and reconfigured school facilities and adopted new health practices to reduce the risk from the virus at schools.

Some of our districts already provide COVID tests at schools and have put in place the logistical support and data systems needed to provide vaccinations to the school community. Much of this has been at our own direction and in advance of any guidelines or support from the state.

We have prepared reopening plans addressing health and safety protocols, instructional programs and other issues including childcare. These have been shared with all of the stakeholders in our school communities. Additionally, a great deal of time and effort has already been undertaken to review those reopening plans with our various labor partners, all of which will be impacted through the implementation of the “Safe Schools for All” recommendations. This reinforces the need for coordination on systemic health protocols with labor leaders at the state level.

Our schools are ready to provide in-person instruction once health standards are met in the community and the state determines schools should be open.

- **The Virus is Having a Disproportionate Impact on Low-Income, Communities of Color**

There is a greater occurrence of COVID in low-income communities. Blacks and Latinos are two to three times more likely, respectively, than whites to be hospitalized for COVID. They are more likely to be essential workers or those for

whom work is essential to put a roof overhead or provide food for their family. They do not have the choice to work at home. A survey in Los Angeles Unified, where more than 80% of students live in poverty, showed 75% of families have had someone lose work due to the virus.

The disproportionate impact the virus is having is also reflected in schools. School-based COVID tests in December of children in Los Angeles, with no known symptoms or exposure to the virus, showed almost one in three children in the lowest-income communities had the virus compared with about 1 in 25 in more affluent areas.

The disproportionate impact is consistent across the state. There is little likelihood the low-income communities we serve will meet the proposed “Safe Schools for All” deadline of February 1 and many experts say even March 1 is unlikely, given current health conditions. Sadly, statewide COVID numbers appear to be moving in the wrong direction in nearly every meaningful category – infections, hospitalizations and deaths.

Public health officials must tackle this challenge head-on or we will be left with more of the same: continued high rates of the virus in low-income communities that make it unsafe to reopen classrooms. The potential solutions to reduce the spread of the virus extend far beyond the schoolhouse. These may include additional testing and health measures in communities which are most impacted, further restrictions on businesses like shopping malls, job or income support for low-income families and priority vaccinations for essential workers.

If nothing changes, many students in high-need communities are at risk of being left behind.

- **Dollars Must be Available to all Schools**

A funding model which supports only schools in communities less impacted by the virus is at odds with California’s long-standing efforts to provide more support to students from low-income families.

The initial target date of February 1 doesn’t reflect the COVID reality in many of the communities we serve. Dollars need to be provided to all schools to support opening for in-person instruction, not just those in more affluent communities that already meet health standards due to lower COVID levels.

Additional funding that goes only to school districts in communities with low COVID levels will reinforce the disproportionate impact of the virus. Affluent communities where family members can work from home will see schools open with more funding. Low-income communities bearing the brunt of the virus will see schools remain closed with lower funding.

- **California Needs a Clear and Consistent Standard for COVID-Related Health Factors in Schools**

California has long had among the highest standards for public education in the nation. This crisis is no time to lower the standards for instruction, health and safety in schools or the protections for school employees.

State COVID standards must set consistent minimum practices necessary for all schools and all communities – rather than the patchwork that currently exists. The risk of the virus is the same in every classroom throughout the state and the standards of safety should be the same.

Nothing clarifies the confused nature of the state guidance on reopening more than the fact the new plan raises the reopening threshold to 28 cases per 100,000 – a significant increase from 7 last month. Our students, parents and staff need clear, consistent and well-understood guidelines in order to maintain confidence in the process.

Once the state COVID standards for safety are met, schools then should be required to be open for in-person instruction. No local stakeholder – whether a superintendent, school board, labor partner or community organization – should have an effective veto over the reopening of classrooms.

- **Community Health Needs Should be Addressed with Public Health Funds, Not Money which Voters Intended for K-12 Education**

“Safe Schools for All” proposes to use Proposition 98 dollars to pay for COVID testing and other health-related costs. Prop. 98 specifically sets aside state funds for “instructional improvement and accountability,” including reducing class size; providing supplies, equipment and other services to ensure that students make academic progress; providing professional development to staff to improve and increase the quality of classroom instruction; and paying teacher salaries and benefits.

Every dollar of Prop. 98 funds spent on public health costs is a dollar which will not be available to be spent on students in a classroom.

- **School-Based Health Services are Part of the Solution**

Schools must be fully integrated into COVID testing and vaccination plans. While public health agencies have primary responsibility, some school districts are already providing COVID testing and contact tracing and may be able to help with administering vaccines to staff, students and their families. Rather than relying only on a state-directed testing model which is not yet operational, the state should recognize this initiative taken by districts and reimburse all local testing initiatives.

State funds should be made available directly to school districts to cover these costs – in the same way and at the same rate as other municipal agencies and providers. Cities and counties are using public health dollars to provide COVID tests and these same dollars should be available to schools for testing. CVS and Walgreens are being paid to administer COVID vaccines. School districts able to administer vaccinations should be paid the same fee to offset their costs as private pharmacy chains.

An enormous operational challenge lies ahead in providing the vaccine to the essential workers in our schools – teachers, bus drivers, custodians and all who are involved in public education. When local conditions, capacity and infrastructure make it possible, the best place to provide the vaccine is at the place families trust and where students, staff and their families are most days – their local public school.

- **The Time to Address Student Learning Needs is Now**

While each local school will need to address the unique needs of the students and communities they serve, there are some common needs in all school districts. In addition to preparing to safely return students to their classrooms, all students will need help to recover lost learning opportunities and deal with the anxiety and trauma the pandemic has brought into their homes and communities.

Districts must begin planning now to provide these services including expanded tutoring, in-person academic and enrichment classes this summer and behavioral and mental health supports. While all students can benefit from these opportunities, they are essential for students who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including English-learners, students with disabilities, and homeless and foster youth. Also, teachers will need additional professional development that is focused on intervention and credit recovery.

This need for additional instructional time and support in schools will be ongoing, and the planning and funding for it needs to begin immediately.

- **School Reopening Plans Must Address the Needs of the Most Vulnerable Students**

“Safe Schools for All” proposes to provide supplemental funds to schools which serve low-income students, English-learners and foster youth. But it fails to acknowledge or provide funding for the extraordinary needs of students with learning differences and disabilities who are served in greater proportions by large, urban school districts. For example, Los Angeles Unified serves almost 50 percent of all students in Los Angeles County with moderate to severe disabilities despite serving only 35% of students in the county.

Special needs students have been amongst those most impacted by the closure of school facilities and the costs are greater to serve students with disabilities. Any reopening plan needs to take this into account.

- **The State Must Provide School and District Information on the Health Practices of In-Person Instruction and COVID Occurrences by February 1**

State guidelines on COVID must be clear, consistent and communicated to all stakeholders in the communities we serve.

We have sought to provide the most accurate information to all in our school communities to help them make informed choices about the risk in a school setting. Anecdotes, incomplete information and changing guidelines do not provide the complete picture schools need and families deserve.

For many months, California's guidelines have stated schools may consider reopening if the adjusted case count is at or below 7 per 100,000 population. Yet most community members cannot reconcile that figure to the actual case counts published every day by local health authorities because details on the state adjustment factors are not made public.

"Safe Schools for All" sets a new and different standard for elementary schools. It is important the public understand how the figure of 28 per 100,000 adjusted cases was determined and what science provides the foundation for this approach.

While we all recognize the need for our youngest learners to return to classrooms, it is important the reasoning behind this new standard be shared in detail so all stakeholders can have confidence in the soundness of the approach.

Schools must be made a priority and clear standards are needed to make sure every student is provided with the opportunity for in-person instruction if that's what their family chooses.

As we requested in our November 2 letter on this topic, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues with you or the appropriate designee at the earliest possible convenience. We are disappointed that discussion has not yet happened but hope the sharing of the proposed "Safe Schools for All" plan will provide the opportunity for the engagement we have been seeking.

The issues involved in reopening schools are complicated. We have discussed them publicly in local school board meetings and with our labor partners, the families we serve and other stakeholders. We hope your team, together with the state legislature, will provide a similar, extensive opportunity for public engagement about the proposed Safe Schools for All plan with all of the stakeholders involved in public education.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



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