

AUSTIN BEUTNER UPDATE TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

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

Today we'll take a closer look at how students are engaged in their studies, the critical role families play in their children's education and we'll learn about efforts to help students who are learning English.

But let me start with a few comments on the state budget and its implications for public education. We'll share more information about the facts and figures and what they mean for schools in the coming days and weeks. But today, I want to make clear what the impact of the state cuts in funding will have on children.

We teach a young child to read so she can read to learn for the rest of her life. Study after study tell us that if a child doesn't become a capable reader in elementary school her life will be more difficult and she's a lot less likely to reach her full potential. If she's not a capable reader, it will be a lifetime of consequence. She's four times more likely to drop out of school, and her income will be about half of her classmates who do graduate from high school.

We have to teach her to read now because the chances of her making up for lost learning are very, very small. Cuts will cause direct harm which may not be apparent right away but she will suffer as will society as a whole.

I'm struggling to understand why this is looked at so differently than the healthcare system. When the virus landed, state and federal governments jumped into action and made sure there was more money to try to help patients who became ill, more money to try and make sure fewer people became ill and more money to make sure hospitals were adequately staffed and those serving on the front lines were taken care of.

That makes sense to me. It's the right thing to do.

We are looking at the same challenge in public education and we need the same full-throated response to the education crisis which looms ahead. Governments have established virus task forces and job task forces. Where's the education task force? Cuts to funding at schools will forever impact the lives of children. The harm children are facing is just as real a threat to them as is the coronavirus.

Why aren't we able to provide the funding to prevent this from happening? Is it because the harm is silent and unseen unlike the images of overrun hospitals? Is it because children don't have a voice? Or is it because so many of the families we serve are living in poverty and don't have access to the corridors of power in Sacramento and Washington DC?

California prides itself in being where America comes to see its future. We have led the nation in efforts to help those who are most vulnerable and the most marginalized among us. This is the starkest test we've faced yet about our commitment to these values and we cannot fail.

Our commitment in Los Angeles Unified remains unwavering – to help students learn and help students and families most in need. My colleagues continue to rise to the occasion. Many have been working tirelessly to reconnect every student with their school community and help teachers transition their students to online learning. Just about every student now has a device and access to the internet. Teachers are being trained and the focus is now shifting to keeping students engaged in their studies.

When schools are open it's relatively simple to measure attendance and have a pretty good sense of how engaged a student is in their school and in their studies. You can see it in their body language, their interaction in the classroom and in their work. Online, it's not so simple.

A login on a computer doesn't necessarily mean a student is engaged and learning, and the absence of a login if a student is reading a book or working on a writing assignment can also be misleading.

Attempts to measure a digital footprint are more complicated. One of the virtues of the Internet is the limitless amount of information that is available and the many, many different tools and technologies which can help share this. One of the challenges is to simplify all of this into a more coherent framework to help teachers, principals and families keep track and measure progress.

A team of educators are working on this and they've spoken with teachers and administrators from more than 20 school districts across the country and hundreds of colleagues in our schools. A similar pattern emerges. We know there's no simple standard or measure one can look at. The engagement will vary from school to school and by type of school, depending upon the tools the teachers are using and the grade level of students. The measures may look very different at a high school, for instance, compared with an elementary school.

Let's start with the good news – all of our teachers are using the same basic learning management system, Schoology. The system is relatively straightforward to use and has additional features which can be added to help inform educators about student engagement. The investment we made in training teachers and principals to use this is making a difference and we've a foundation on which to build.

Let's look at Solano Elementary School and International Studies Learning Center to see the challenge. These schools also help illustrate the opportunity and how we are working toward a solution which can be used at all schools.

Just about all of the students at these schools are connected, only 1% haven't yet logged on. The elementary school started from a lower base, as we had to buy the devices, provide them to students and their families and make sure all knew how to use them. In both schools, the level of engagement is increasing.

If we flip to the student side, we'll see some differences in the use of Schoology and its ability to serve as a proxy for engagement. But if we add in all of the platforms and the many ways a student can participate in studies, a more complete picture emerges. Just about all students are connected and most students are engaged, it's the platforms and systems which are not yet connected.

The level of engagement in classrooms and schools varies a great deal and many students aren't as engaged as the students in these two schools. That is of great concern as we want to make sure every student is engaged and learning. Teachers from all schools will continue to reach out to individual students and encourage them to participate, just as they would in a classroom. A few weeks ago I spoke of the transition to online learning as somewhat akin to changing the seating and wiring on an airplane while it's still in flight. This is a very good example – we want learning to continue and it wouldn't help students or teachers to switch tools or technologies in the middle of a lesson.

At the same time a very complex set of tools and technologies will need to be made more simple and more coherent. One might ask why this wasn't looked at before and the reason is actually pretty straight forward. Students were in classrooms, grades at all levels were posted on Schoology and use of any of the tools was generally a minor supplement to in-class instruction. Now these tools are the main event. ClassDojo, Seesaw, Google Classroom and Nearpod are all popular tools for elementary school teachers and their students, but we are not yet able to track usage within these platforms. We are working with the providers of these tools to tie them together. Fixing it will take a bit of work but it's not rocket science.

We'll make progress in the weeks ahead and a much more complete picture will be in place by the start of the new school year in August. As we have said since we embarked on this journey on March 13th, it won't be perfect but we'll do our best to continue to make it better.

Our focus on instruction this week takes a closer look at English Learners. We have almost 100,000 students learning English in our schools, the most of any school district in the country. A good instructional plan includes multiple opportunities to practice their language skills and master their studies in live, synchronous interaction. During normal times, this is focused and intentional work with lots and lots of interaction.

The change from practicing language with peers and receiving regular feedback from teachers in a classroom setting to an online setting presents a new set of challenges. About 4,000 educators have participated in professional development to hone their skills in creating lessons for English Learners to use in a virtual setting and incorporate the assets of home language as well.

Families of English Learners have also been sent additional materials to help with conversation skills, literacy and math in both English and Spanish. The student materials are similar to those used by teachers in classrooms. We've also provided students with access to Middlebury Interactive Languages™ an online program for English Learners and Rosetta Stone so students can continue their studies in French, Arabic, Spanish, and Mandarin, to name just a few.

We'll take a look at how instruction is being provided for English Learners at Corona Elementary School, Belvedere Middle School and Legacy STEAM High School. At these schools you'll see almost all students are connected to their school communities and English Learners are participating at the same level as their peers. You will hear from teachers and principals at these schools about the important role families play in supporting the needs of their students.

A shared theme in these conversations is the very purposeful work to address the unique needs of English Learners and the work with students and their families.

[video]

As you heard in the video, families play a critical role. Each community we serve has its own unique history, culture and rhythm of life. Local schools address the unique needs of students in the context of the community they serve. While families may be different and live in different circumstances, all parents have the same desire for their child's school – a safe and welcoming environment in which to learn and teachers and staff who understand the unique needs of each child and are working to help them reach their full potential. There's no substitute for family engagement and even in this environment, we're doing all we can to communicate with families and keep them engaged in their children's learning.

Principals at all of our schools have held virtual meetings with families, and many are doing so weekly. Town hall-meetings have been held in 35 of the communities we serve. We want to answer questions and concerns and help families support their children in the transition to online learning.

In order to better understand the needs of families, we conducted a survey on the eastside of Los Angeles in the area from Lincoln Heights to South Gate. More than 12,000 families participated in the survey.

Overall, almost 75% felt schools and the school district are doing a good job in managing the issues related to the school closures and the coronavirus.

Almost 80% of the families are receiving help three or more times a week from schools on issues ranging from homework and health care to financial assistance, mental health and food. Schools are truly the center of the community they serve.

The biggest challenge for families was access to the internet and technology, with 50% lacking reliable internet and 25% a device. We're addressing this with our efforts to provide every student with a device and internet access. As we noted last week, we've connected just about every student and work continues to help all of them. If any family is having an issue in this area, please contact the family hotline and help will be provided right away.

I had a conversation last week with a few of the families who took part in the survey. As you'll hear, they all care deeply, they are very much engaged in their children's studies and they are working closely with teachers in schools. Please enjoy a bit of the conversation.

[video]

In closing, I want to go back to the survey and what it tells us about the needs in the communities we serve. Before the pandemic, 70% of families reported a household income of less than \$50,000 and 35% less than \$25,000. Since then, 57% of families reported that one or more individuals in their household have lost their job due to COVID-19. Let that sink in. Most families were struggling to get by before this crisis and for more than half of them, their situation has gotten worse.

Los Angeles Unified continues to provide a safety net providing meals, mental health support and other critical supplies. We've already provided more than 20 million meals, or more than 4 times the size of the Red Cross effort in Texas and Louisiana in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. Please join us in this relief effort if you can. The need has never been greater.

Thank you for your continued patience and support.