



September 28, 2020

Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors
Supervisor Kathryn Barger, First District
Supervisor Janice Hahn, Fourth District
Supervisor Sheila Kuehl, Third District
Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, Second District
Supervisor Hilda Solis, First District

Dear Honorable Supervisors,

We, the undersigned, are part of a diverse coalition of K-12 public, private and faith-based school leaders, parents, civic leaders and physicians in Los Angeles County. **Today we are urging you to put *Students First* by creating a pathway to safely expand the reopening schools.**

To do this, we are seeking the following action steps:

1. Communicate transparent, data-driven public health metrics to further reopen schools.
2. Expand reopening of schools under state elementary school waiver process beginning with grades TK-3, immediately.
3. Phase-in reopening of upper grades (4-8 and 9-12) on two-week intervals based on achievement of public health milestones aligned with the State of California's Blueprint for a Safer Economy.
4. Restore the Department of Public Health's K-12 working group to provide regular input to department leadership on guidance and protocols from school administrators and local health care experts.

A Vital Public Trust is Fractured

Since March of this year, more than 1.4 million children have been prohibited from in-person instruction in schools throughout the county. The negative impacts of nearly seven months of isolation has inflicted social, emotional, mental and instructional harm on students and their families. The K-12 school community has worked with county public health officials in solidarity to protect all of our community members from the effects of COVID-19. We have been patient, understanding and willing to make sacrifices to advance county public health orders informed. A trusting relationship was formed, and we partnered in securing that trust within our school communities. Now, after recent decisions by the department of public health to shift from quantifiable, transparent public health metrics to ambiguous, fluid timetables to determine a return to school, this trust is fractured.

Current Health Orders Disenfranchise the Poor and Amplifies Inequities

Under the current public health order, children are permitted to attend childcare, preschool, day camps and in-person instruction for up to 10 percent of enrollment if designated as a Special Education or English Language Learner. For many families, the cost of school-hour day care is impossible to afford and inaccessible to reach. Affording \$200-\$500 per child, per week disenfranchises the very communities who are already disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent survey by USC and the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools featured in the LA Times found that three-fourths of families in South and East Los Angeles have experienced loss of income and food security. More than one-third don't have an appropriate place to study or participate in online learning, while 1-in-3 families made investments to support online learning. These outcomes will only worsen if students, particularly for the poor, are prohibited from attending school.

Cohorts Don't Go Far Enough and Leave Many Behind

At the time of this letter, according to the LACDPH publicly posted data on 9/21/20, 9,435 students are attending school in-person under the county's student cohort program. Public health leadership has stated on multiple occasions that because the state permitted in-person instruction under this model, it retracted its plan to permit elementary school waivers because it anticipates over 140,000 children to return to school in cohorts. After two weeks of opening, less than 10,000 students are in school. To add insult to injury, our county's youngest children in primary grades, the fundamental building blocks to advanced learning, are left behind. Recently, the Los Angeles Unified School District reported a 14-percent enrollment drop in kindergarten alone. Many of our schools have experienced the same declines as parents have disenrolled students from school completely. While we applaud the return of our highest need students to our schools, the reality is many of them cannot attend because many faith-based schools are too small (many less than 200 students) to afford a full-time teacher to provide instruction.

We Must Strike a Balance Between Public Health and Child Development

Life during the pandemic has gone on for many in our community – why not students? Restaurants, gyms, hair salons and barbershops, libraries, hotels, childcare and day camps, some retail and other consumer outlets are open with modifications. In fact, according to LACDPH, among the 7,238 day-care facilities that have been open as of the end of July, 75 cases among children have been reported. This equals approximately 0.00029 percent of total cases in LA County.

For months, K-12 schools have been preparing for a safe return to in-person instruction investing an extraordinary amount of resources, including personnel and funds (none of which was budgeted) to pay for Personal Protective Equipment, deep cleaning, additional personnel, training of staff and creating schedules to accommodate distancing in classrooms. We all know that transmission of COVID-19 cannot be eliminated through these safety measures, but schools are committed to reducing spread at all costs. We have a duty to protect all of our school community members and we are committed to adhere to all of the public health guidance – distancing, masking, hygiene and using outdoor spaces where possible to ensure all students and staff are safe.

Faith-based and independent schools have smaller enrollments and are able to physically spread out on campuses to ensure distancing. In fact, many of our elementary schools average less than 200 students and high schools average less than 500 students. Surely, with small enrollments like this, we can figure out how to safely return to in-person instruction. Our first priority is safety; this social compact is sacred with families and staff. Students cannot be isolated indefinitely – we must find a way to facilitate in-person instruction safely, balancing public health and the child development needs of students.

Give All School Communities a Voice

The state has provided counties a pathway to reopen elementary schools through a waiver process if they met certain public health metrics – fewer than 200 cases per 100K residents over two-weeks. LA County has met those metrics for nearly four weeks. The waiver process requires “consultation” with multiple school stakeholders, including staff, parents and community organizations. We know that members of school communities may not be ready to return to campuses; schools are prepared for this. Through various methods, like hybrids and distance only options, schools can accommodate families who wish to remain at a distance for their child’s learning. **The state’s elementary school waiver process empowers local school communities to decide whether or not to reopen grades TK-6; it does not force schools to reopen.** If you believe that families and staff should have a voice in this process, then opening the waiver process ensures their voice is heard.

Students have no do-overs with regard to their education. Students are falling behind and suffering emotionally. Distance learning is an inadequate solution for many children. The lack of academic and social development of students by remaining

isolated will not only impact their own lives, but those of our future as a society. A safe and balanced approach to in-person instruction starting with our youngest students is possible. We need you to act.

Thank you for your urgent attention to our children's need for a safe and accessible education.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Konjoyan".

Tom Konjoyan
Head of School, Village Christian School
Representative for LA County Christian Schools Coalition

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul M. Escala".

Paul M. Escala
Superintendent of Schools and Senior Director
Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Casey Nagel".

Dr. Casey J. Nagel, M.D.
American Academy of Pediatrics

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cecil Swetland".

Cecil Swetland, Ed.D.
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