

## **Community FAQ About Reopening Schools to In-person Instruction**

### ***What do teachers think about returning in person?***

Teachers know that Distance Learning is not ideal. We miss our students and want to be able to teach them in person. But we also know that the virus spreads when people gather indoors and we want everyone to be safe. BFT members have a wide variety of health concerns, both their own and their families'. The current headlines create even more unease across the community and teachers are no exception.

### ***Why aren't negotiations finished?***

BFT and BUSD have been negotiating non-stop since spring of 2020. We had to create an entirely new Distance Learning program from scratch and work out all the unforeseen details as they arose. This fall we shifted to figuring out the conditions for possibly reopening schools. This was very challenging, as our understanding of the virus and the public health guidance continually changes. We have a strong Health and Safety agreement in place, which is the foundation for BUSD's [PRE-K & ELEMENTARY SCHOOL](#) Campus Safety Plans.

### ***What's taking so long?***

Creating an entirely new model of hybrid learning is complicated. We are required to serve the students who need to stay in Distance Learning as well as those who wish to return in person. Any type or amount of in-person learning necessarily reduces the amount of time teachers will be able to devote to Distance Learning. There is simply no possible way to add hours of in-person instruction without trade-offs. One of the major risks of shifting so much of our focus and resources to a hybrid reopening that benefits *some* students is that we will dismantle the Distance Learning structure that *other* students rely on. The district's own recent Elementary Hybrid survey shows that the majority of families are not ready to return to school sites. How will we maintain the remote learning that they will continue to depend on? Balancing these needs is the work we are engaged in during our negotiations, but there are no easy answers. BFT and BUSD continue to discuss how to meet these varied needs.

### ***Why do we have to use a hybrid model?***

Public health guidance requires physical distancing in classrooms. There isn't space for an entire class to be present at the same time. So students will need to do a combination of in-person and online learning. There are many versions of hybrid models. We are working now to find the one that will work best in Berkeley.

### ***What's so complicated about that?***

State law (Education Code 43503) requires that students receive live instruction every day, as well as a certain number of instructional minutes. Providing that time to students who are fully remote while also teaching children in person is the challenge.

### ***Why is there not a five day a week plan being discussed?***

Because of Health Department guidelines, there is not the staff or facilities available to serve all students 5 days a week. Each student needs 240 minutes of instructional time but in person

instruction can only serve half the students at a time (or less in small classrooms/large class sizes). Additionally, there needs to be credentialed staff for the distance learning program. Coursework also needs to be developed for the times students are not in-person. There is no logistical way to double the facilities and staffing needed for five days a week. Right now, there aren't even credentialed subs available.

***What do teachers think of the plans BUSD has shown at the Town Halls?***

Honestly, it's daunting. All of the plans involve a major rearrangement of schedules and pedagogy.

We basically agree with the Superintendent's assumptions that we need to be able to preserve a strong DL program for the majority of our families who will likely choose that. We have seen other districts go in and out of in-person learning, and create disruption and despair for students and families, so we need a plan that doesn't have to be completely revamped every time there is a surge. The model of keeping some form of DL in the morning while adding some in person time in the afternoons is likely the closest we can come to meeting those goals.

But teachers are already working more than full time to do the Distance Learning program we have. Some commenters seem to equate the time teachers spend live on zoom with the amount of time they are actually working, but there is a huge amount of invisible work that goes into recreating every element of the curriculum to work in an online environment and supporting students who need the extra help. We will have to make hard choices about what part of that to cut out in order to allow time for the in-person experience that some families want.

State law requires that students receive live instruction every day, as well as a certain number of instructional minutes. Providing that time to students who are fully remote while also teaching young children in person--and monitoring their mask use and distance from each other--is the challenge.

***What about middle and high schools?***

In secondary schools, students rotate throughout the day changing classes, teachers and classmates. Keeping a small, stable group of people together while also providing the classes that students need is simply impossible. Each student has their own individual path for graduation (and A-G requirements have not been waived by the State) so we cannot reduce the number of classes being taken over the course of the year. The size of the hallways and classrooms, especially at Berkeley High, makes physical distancing difficult.

***Why can't we just video the teacher and show it to kids at home?***

We are in contact with colleagues who are trying to do this in other districts. They report that it is inadequate for both sets of children. The students haven't been in school all year, so the students who will return to limited in-person learning will need lots of attention to learn how to be together in the classroom and the kids in class will require close monitoring to follow safety procedures. Meanwhile, it is very difficult to hold the attention of young children on the screen

when their teacher isn't directly interacting with them. We've heard reports of distraught children doing remote learning watching their peers play together while they have to stay at home due to health concerns.

Also, BUSD lacks the tech tools and bandwidth to do this type of concurrent teaching (in person and remote simultaneously). Schools that are using this model have professional grade cameras and giant screens to support the remote portion of the class. BUSD teachers have Chromebooks.

### ***Why aren't we setting up outdoor classrooms?***

It's a great idea and we hope there will be a way to spend lots of time outdoors when students do return to school. To really hold all classes outdoors we would need substantial shelters, which cost thousands of dollars each. BUSD has said they will set up several of these at each site, starting with the ones who are already hosting Phase 1 cohorts, but most BUSD playgrounds wouldn't even have space to set up enough tents for all of their classes. We'd also need to haul furniture and materials in and out of the school every day. There are also some practical issues, like using the restroom and being able to communicate with the office.

### ***What else are you negotiating about?***

Epidemiologists and infectious disease experts as well as the Governor recommend frequent COVID testing to prevent the spread of the virus. In fact, increased school funding is dependent on a student testing plan. We have been making progress with the District on a student testing plan as well as accommodations for high risk staff.

In addition, we believe that staffing for in-person instruction should be voluntary. Like the rest of the community, teachers have a wide array of risk factors and health concerns--their own and their family members'--along with unmet child care needs, that will affect their ability to return.

### ***Some parents are expressing a strong desire to come back in person.***

We know remote learning is a struggle for families. Many teachers are parents themselves and are facing the same struggles--trying to work while helping their own kids with online school, trying to support their kids social and emotional health, trying to figure out which activities are safe enough to participate in and which aren't. We absolutely respect parents' advocacy for their own children.

But we are in close contact with a wide variety of parents in our classes and many of them are more hesitant to return. Just before Thanksgiving break, elementary teachers held parent conferences and talked to every single family in their classes. Of course the focus was mostly on student progress, but many parents also wanted to talk to us about the School Board's reopening plans. Some were eager to return in person, some were adamant about not coming back until they get a vaccine, but the vast majority are in the nuanced middle. BUSD's most recent elementary (December 2020) survey showed 38% of families want to return as soon as possible, while the rest prefer to wait.

***Schools seem safe and kids don't seem to get very sick. Why do we have to wait?***

Popular articles in the media repeat the claim that schools are safe without deeply analyzing the data. Most schools and districts across the country aren't even required to report COVID cases. Some of the most widely shared data includes many schools that aren't even open, so of course they will appear to be safe, and well resourced private schools are overrepresented in much of the data. Most schools and districts aren't testing students to know if they are actually bringing COVID to schools or not. The new COVID strain that has recently begun to circulate may be more easily transmitted by and among children.

Of course, it's also important to remember that many hundreds of adults are needed to make our schools run. Even if the children aren't likely to become seriously ill, the adults may be at higher risk. It is difficult to take care of the children without coming into contact with the other adults, which may be an even likelier path to infection.

***Schools in other countries are open. Why can't we be like them?***

Many other countries have quelled their community spread to a much greater extent than we have. They have strong public health systems to do testing and tracing along with support systems so that people can quarantine and still have enough resources to survive. They have poured resources into their schools so that those places have what they need to stay open safely. Sadly, our country has not yet fully focused our leadership, vision or resources on safely returning to schools, or even controlling the exponential spread of the virus.

***How can parents and caregivers partner with the teachers?***

Districts haven't been given the necessary extra resources to do any of this. Parents and their allies can advocate for the state to set up a student testing program and provide funds for extra staffing so that schools can serve both in person and remote students well.

***How will access to a vaccine change the conversation?***

Educators have not yet been granted access to the Covid vaccine in Alameda County. We have not received a timeline when a vaccine will be available. A vaccine will resolve many issues in the hybrid schedule with how many cohorts can be seen by an adult. A vaccine will make a return to in-person education sooner as operational issues become easier to resolve.