

November 18 School Board speech

Good evening School Board Members and Dr. Stephens. I'm Janine Waddell, Vice President of the Berkeley Federation of Teachers. I also teach first grade science at Washington where I have worked for almost 10 years.

BFT continues to work with BUSD to find models for hybrid learning that meet the requirements of state law *and* preserve the structures of Distance Learning for students who will choose that option, *while also* meeting the needs of those who hope to come to school in person.

However...sadly, and despite the best efforts of so many people, Covid infection rates have taken a turn for the worse in our city, county, state and nation. With Alameda County falling back into the purple tier that represents widespread Covid infections, we need to face some hard facts about the BUSD timeline for elementary reopenings.

There is nothing in our current situation to indicate that rates will fall by January 13. People are traveling and gathering. Teachers are hearing their students talk about plans to "go on an airplane", "drive a long time" or host visitors from all over the country. These cherished traditions will inevitably result in more infections, many of which will become apparent in early January.

Whether or not the January date is possible, there is much to be done before we are ready to offer in person learning. We encourage the entire school community to participate in the Town Halls and Educator Advisory groups that BUSD will hold over the next few weeks. We know that more focused outreach will be needed to learn about what our least connected students and families need and we encourage the district to make every effort to get that input as well. We think it is important to be honest with the community about the trade offs that will be necessary and the challenges that remain.

One of the challenges that remain is Covid testing for staff and students. Epidemiologists recommend a very high rate of testing of all staff and students. Yet it remains a major hurdle for many districts, including BUSD. As we watch in dismay while the infection rates rise in our area, and we learn of a case in one of our schools, the need for a robust testing program becomes even more obvious.

We appreciate the Superintendent's agreement to change this item on the reopening dashboard to reflect the current realities of our testing program.

Testing must be easy for people to do--and it must honor their time--so that they can keep their focus on the important work they are doing for students. We need testing to be available at school sites. We need employees to be able to make appointments rather than standing in hours-long lines. We need clear and accurate communication about the procedures that must be followed, and when problems arise, we need prompt responses and assistance from district leaders.

Our entire community is preparing to put the safety of their children and families in our hands. They need to know that we are actually ready to open safely. The ability to frequently and reliably test students and staff is an essential component of our readiness.

Thank you.