

School Board Speech January 6, 2021

Good evening School Board Directors and Superintendent Stephens. I'm Matt Meyer, President of the Berkeley Federation of Teachers.

I'd like to start by thanking the many people who sent congratulations on the birth of our second child, Lorca. The arrival of a new baby is a wonderful gift at any time, but especially now when so many other things are so dark. Hearing from well-wishers lifted our families' spirits.

I'd also like to thank BFT Vice President Janine Waddell for her tremendous work on behalf of BFT while I was on leave. She represented our members, negotiated with the district and engaged with the community during a very challenging time.

It's very difficult to focus on returning to in-person instruction when California is setting grim records with each passing day. Headlines and ongoing restrictions on daily life have a huge influence on how our members think about working in close quarters with many students.

We've been told not to gather with anyone outside our households, but teachers are asked to prepare to host students from a dozen different families. We are told to assume that anyone can transmit the virus due to the prevalence of asymptomatic transmission, but then are asked to accept that the advice doesn't apply to students. We learn that a new, more easily transmitted variant of the COVID virus is spreading, but teachers are asked to move forward without knowing how it affects children or their ability to infect others. Restaurants are closed indoors and outdoors because eating without masks is risky, but BUSD proposed that teachers supervise maskless children while they eat lunch. We have been asked to put all these concerns aside and work quickly toward reopening. We are doing our best, because we hope and believe that there will come a time when it is safe to reopen schools. But it is crucial that everyone acknowledge the very real, SCIENCE-BASED concerns that our members have.

As of right now, the District has not followed contractual agreements made in October. There needs to be improvements in how and when staff are tested. Even this week teachers are not getting timely results. On numerous occasions, the District has not informed the Union of positive Covid cases at sites as is specified in our agreement. There is a steep learning curve and mistakes can have grave consequences. We are worried that the district can't follow through on future agreements as we increase the numbers of adults and students on campus.

BFT's negotiating position was developed with our community's safety and educators' valid concerns as a high priority. Tonight I'd like to review some of the key elements of BFT's proposal and explain the rationale behind them.

As Janine said in her December 17 union comments, the centerpiece of BFT's proposal is that return to in person work should be voluntary. Just as families have varying concerns about how and when to return, so do educators. Just like the rest of the community, teachers have their

own health issues, or they live with or care for people at high risk, or they have unmet childcare needs or other barriers to in person work.

BFT has been receiving an increasing number of inquiries from teachers researching options for leaves of absence. Forcing teachers to return will result in many leave requests and huge staffing problems. It will have a severely negative impact on many students, as these teachers will be absent from the Distance Learning portion of the day and the momentum of learning will be lost.

There are teachers who will be willing to return when conditions substantially improve. Let's support them, learn from their successes and challenges and build on what we learn. If it is safe and workable, other colleagues will join them.

Another key element to the BFT proposal is that there be a robust and easily accessible COVID testing program for students, in addition to the program that is underway for staff. Children are often asymptomatic, so we can't know if they carry the virus without tests. It's simply not possible to say that students don't get or transmit the virus at schools without widespread testing of children that has not yet been done. Testing is the only way to identify and curb potential outbreaks. The discovery of a more easily transmissible variant, and the possibility that this variant is more easily transmitted by children, makes frequent student testing even more essential. It is predicted that this will be the dominant strain of Covid in a couple of months. For these reasons, all students on campus need to be tested every two weeks. We need to make sure that these testing protocols are fully in place and able to be implemented for all students well before any reopening occurs.

BFT has proposed that Alameda County reach the Orange Tier in order to reopen.. These metrics align with the CDC guidelines for lower risk school reopenings. A recent study by the National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research found that when community transmission is high (over 5% in the Washington State data they analyzed), school reopenings contribute to community spread, but at lower rates they do not. The report was published in December 2020. This would normally be considered very current, but in COVID times, a few weeks can make a lot of difference. In this case, the more easily transmissible COVID variant was not part of the data, which makes it even more imperative that we ensure a low rate of transmission before we resume in-person school.

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.