

Matt School Board speech January 20, 2021

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

Tonight I share a deep sense of relief that our country has made a peaceful transition to a new President and Vice President. I'm especially inspired by the swearing in of Berkeley's own Kamala Harris.

Tonight the Board will hear a report about How Distance Learning is working so far this year. In a recent survey of BFT members, we received over 450 responses with 300 comments specifically about what is working in Distance Learning. Teachers report strong engagement and attendance. They believe the amount of zoom time is about right at their grade level, with a good balance between students' ability to focus online and their need to move and work independently. They talk about developing strong class routines and making good use of small group time with an equity focus. The tight structure of limited zoom time has forced us to focus on key curriculum, which many teachers say will inform their teaching in the future. Teachers and students alike are becoming more digitally adept. And contrary to expectations, some kids are actually doing better online. There are fewer distractions, less peer drama and fewer triggers for emotional responses. It's easier for some shy kids to participate and students have more control over their daily schedule.

We also received another 300+ comments about how to improve Distance Learning. Teachers are very clear about the need for more support for some students and families in the areas of tech, attendance, translation, materials to send home, IEP's, and Social/Emotional Learning. It's worth noting that these are the same areas that teachers cite as challenges during normal times. They also want more time to collaborate and learn from colleagues who are successful at remote teaching. Next Monday's Professional Development Day is a promising opportunity to share best practices.

Our attention is split between doing the best job we possibly can in Distance Learning and looking toward the future when schools can safely reopen. In our negotiations with the district to create a workable plan, we have proposed that schools reopen after Alameda County reaches the Orange Tier. Tonight I'd like to explain the reasoning behind that proposal.

Public health officials have been saying that schools can open safely in the Red Tier **IF** there is rigorous adherence to risk mitigation practices such as mask wearing and social distancing AND community transmission is low. But these are kids--they don't rigorously adhere to anything! Teachers are asking for a more conservative tier for reopening because of our real life expertise in classroom management. Teachers and caregivers know that kids will sometimes follow the rules--but sometimes they won't. Getting children to keep their hands to themselves and allow personal space for others is challenging work even in "normal" times when the stakes are low.

Teachers who have students in BUSD's Phase 1 program can see in real time (on our video screens during zoom class and out the window during recess) that real live children do not keep their masks on. They do not keep distance from each other or their teachers. Given the realities of working with real children in-person, we need to account for the inevitable lapses in risk mitigation practices by choosing a standard of lower transmission for reopening.

It can induce whiplash trying to follow "the science" about school reopenings and the dizzying pace of new developments and changes. One day we hear a panel of experts saying that children don't easily transmit COVID and a couple of days later we read that one of the new variants is more easily transmitted by children. We are asked to look to the best practices of European countries, but now schools are closing there as a consensus is emerging that children are a considerable factor in the spread of COVID 19. Recent studies and outbreaks show that children, even younger ones, can play a significant role in spreading infections. The problem is not that the schools are unsafe for *children*, but that they act as vectors for transmission, spreading the disease between households to the adults. The most recent CDC Morbidity and Mortality Report says that in settings with LOW community transmission, it is possible to successfully control (not eliminate) transmission in schools. But when it is high, schools can contribute to community transmission.

So it is not surprising that we are having a hard time finding consensus about how and when to reopen schools when there is so much contradictory scientific evidence. BFT believes that our proposal to wait to reopen until Alameda County reaches the Orange Tier reflects appropriate and reasonable caution.

BFT is particularly concerned about our members who are at high risk for complications from COVID, or those who live with or care for someone else who is. The ADA Interactive process that BUSD is using is simply not designed for a pandemic, as it is focused on highly individual needs and possible accommodations. BFT members' descriptions of how their interviews have actually gone do not match the district's description of how the process should go. When someone needs an ergonomic keyboard to prevent wrist pain, it's pretty easy to get the right documentation and provide the right accommodation. When someone needs to avoid contact with other people in order to prevent the serious complications that might occur if they catch COVID, the accommodation should be equally simple--allow them to work remotely.