

Here's Why We Closed Los Angeles Schools

They are a place of refuge for nearly 700,000 students. But they can't protect them from a pandemic.

By Nick Melvoin

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March 14, 2020, 1:47 p.m. ET

This week, as a member of the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education, I voted to declare a state of emergency. On Friday, we made the difficult decision to shut down schools for nearly 700,000 students across 700 square miles for at least the next two weeks.

This decision has forced us to grapple with two crises. The first is the one we are seeing in every headline: a pandemic ravaging communities across the world. Also urgent, however, is the crisis of child poverty, which increasingly strains education systems that are trying to fill in the gaps of our social safety net.

We had to weigh both crises in deciding how to protect the health and safety of families and employees. If we close schools, will children have access to food and a refuge during the day? Will parents be forced to decide between taking a child to work or staying home and losing wages? Will more children congregate outside of school or be shuttled off for child care to grandparents, who are at higher risk?

On the other hand, if we keep schools open, can we minimize the spread of the virus, especially without access to adequate testing? Are we protecting higher-risk employees? With our bus routes traveling the distance of 4 times around the globe each day, are we creating unnecessary travel and touch points throughout the city?

In L. A. Unified, over 80% of our students live in poverty. We serve three meals a day and provide health care in our clinics and wellness centers. We offer a safe and welcoming space for nearly 20,000 students experiencing homelessness.

To continue to support our students in these extraordinary times, we are opening family resource centers at 40 school sites throughout the county to provide child care, meal distribution and other services in collaboration with partners.

These centers are intended to help mitigate some of the destructive effects of closure on our community. Health care workers at these centers will follow protocols to minimize the risk of further spread of the virus, and will be equipped with thermometers and supplies to monitor student and employee health.

In addition, we are planning for continued learning under these new circumstances, in part by putting to use existing technological resources and purchasing 50,000 new devices for distribution. We are also partnering with our local P.B.S. affiliates to supplement lesson plans, and teachers have prepared materials to send to students.

Even so, we also know that many of our low-income families lack internet access, which would be required for any sustained remote learning. In this connected era, Wi-Fi is a necessity, not a luxury. It shouldn't take a pandemic to make global connectivity a priority.

A school district alone cannot formulate the entire response for children. Other governing bodies and social groups need to ensure that parents have adequate wage replacement to stay home with their children and protection from eviction should they lose wages. State governments must modify rules to allow schools to do the best they can under these circumstances. Hospitals, nonprofits, governments, private companies and individuals all have a role to play — as they always should.

The relief package that came out of Congress on Saturday — expanded paid emergency leave included — offers one needed response. I hope this makes it easier for New York's leaders to close the city's schools. It's a tough call to make, and it requires city officials and public health experts collaborating, but it's the right call.

We are in uncharted territory and there are still open questions as we grapple with the gravity of our decision. I'm hoping that the school closure is as smooth as possible for families, but we know it won't be easy. School may be out, but our work — and our responsibility — continues.

When we emerge on the other end of this public health crisis, we must address the broader crises of an eroded social safety net. We must redouble our efforts to ensure that all children receive the foundational support they need to thrive.

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3/15/2020

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