

BACK IN OUR OWN BACKYARD

July 17, 2020

Dear PS1 Families,

At a time when large school districts are making the determination to hold only virtual classes in the Fall, it is most important to realize that one intentionally small school in Santa Monica – PS1 Pluralistic School – can remain more flexible. There continues to be a continuum of possibility for the coming school year. I can't promise we'll all come back to school in person in the Fall and remain there throughout the coming school year – no one can. I can promise, however, that we're going to continue to make decisions that prioritize physical and mental health, safety, wellness, and optimal learning for all members of our community.

Our feeling today is that "Business as Usual" is not a reasonable expectation in the coming year. No matter what, the COVID-19 pandemic will influence what we can and will do. Instead we need to look at two ends of the continuum in order to establish parameters within which we will operate this coming year. One end of the continuum is a full-time Distance Learning Community Program (DLCP). We know we can do that, and we are working this summer through research, professional development, practice, and the purchase of new and different materials in order to make improvements to that program as necessary. The other end, to be discussed in further detail in this communication, is to think of what things could look like if we were able to operate an open campus to all students. **We must focus and prepare on both ends to remain flexible enough to make decisions along the continuum as conditions dictate.**

We are living through a period of uncertainty. We wish it were different, but it is not. Unless you are far better able than I am to ignore everyday politics in our country, you too have seen the intrusion of politics and political drama into the question of school openings. There is enough said and written every day, and this will continue for quite a while, to support anyone's and everyone's position. "We have to be on campus." OR "We can't be on campus."

While we are preparing for any eventuality every single day, we continue to focus on preparations for a return to an on campus learning program since that involves purchasing of materials and equipment (which we began in the Spring) including personal protective equipment for teachers and staff, learning how to practice contact tracing to limit mitigation, formulating policies to promote health and vigilant hygiene, setting of very limited parameters, planning utilization of classroom and other spaces, emphasizing using the outdoors as much as possible, limiting visitors to campus, installing more handwashing stations throughout the campus, enforcing physical distancing, implementing strenuous disinfecting and sanitizing procedures, and of course developing the best learning program for each student. Even in this period of a surge in COVID cases, we still need to prepare for any and all eventualities.

LAUSD decided earlier this week that they will be starting with only virtual learning. I wish public schools had the same flexibility and capacity to create as safe an environment as possible for children and teachers as we do. Here are some initial reasons I wouldn't let what is going on with LAUSD and other large public school districts overwhelm you or make you assume we are in an identical position:

1. We are a nimble institution, not a large bureaucracy - that is an advantage of being a small independent school. We are small, flexible, adaptable, intentional, and focused. We can decide what fits our specific community as citizens in a larger society. We are confident that PS1 parents, staff, and faculty can adhere to rules and guidelines that will best protect us all - it takes both school and home working together even more than ever before!

2. Their top three considerations have to do with busing (how to get kids to and from school using only one of every four seats), serving food to thousands of kids, and their inability to figure out where they can get the money to do all the necessary things to equip their campuses for student learning during COVID-19 (initial estimates were over \$ 200 million while also facing budget cuts). We have none of those concerns to deal with.

3. We have a campus much better suited for on campus learning in a pandemic (not that it will be easy) - at least 10 aspects come immediately to mind – we have: an open campus rather than enclosed hallways; enough interior spaces to house classes and still observe physical distancing; contiguous outdoor space to every classroom; two exterior staircases on both sides of the alley to accommodate one way movement from one space to another; six separate access points to campus from the street and alley to ease flow; ability to retrofit a campus whose basic design inadvertently but fortuitously make accommodations easier than most; a favorable climate that gets neither too hot nor too cold, even by Southern California standards; consistency of staff personnel with years of PS1 experience; substantial outdoor play space which can maximize fresh air; (that's nine!) and ... you get to fill in your own # 10!!!

4. LAUSD and many other schools open two to three weeks before we do. As we have learned throughout the pandemic, even just a few days can make a huge difference in what is written, spoken, predicted, and permitted. It is why I wrote and spoke about the issuance from different organizations of oxymoronic *interim final guidelines*. Everything changes.

Next week we will write about specific things we have done and are doing to retrofit our campus. For now, let me outline one way we could be able to use our campus and accommodate all students during the pandemic assuming no more viral surges, getting permission from authorities, and demonstrating best practice.

We have approached formulating our on campus plan based on all of the meetings I hold

weekly with the school's Corona Virus Task Force, a Going Forward Task Force, my Senior Administrative Team, and Board leadership. We attend seminars and webinars, get expert advice from public health personnel, read articles and current updated literature, and depend on the perspectives that each member brings to this work as a person and professional. We study the guidelines and recommendations of the CDC, WHO, American Academy of Pediatricians, epidemiologists and public health personnel, the LA County and California Departments of Health and of Education, and also local authorities and jurisdictions as well as what is happening in schools that have opened in this and other countries.

We know that children benefit from being around each other – human connection – as long as we can keep the environment safe. **While a hybrid program may be necessary, it is important also to understand what an all students on campus situation can look like as well.** With a campus open to all children, we will utilize 18 interior spaces (two for each class – the nine classrooms plus what previously have been multi-use spaces such as the MPR, Community Room, specialist rooms and the like). Each space will be reconfigured as necessary. In all situations, physical distancing will be observed; student cohort groups will be limited to the same children every day to mitigate possible transmission and to enable contact tracing. The two lead teachers in every classroom will still be planning their programs together.

In addition, we would still have as work space options contiguous outdoor space to classrooms, retreats, and designated portions of play yards. We will use class specific designated outdoor spaces as much as possible daily to lessen possibilities of transmission.

We cannot ignore COVID-19; nor can we be paralyzed by it. Modified or hybrid programs remain a strong possibility; if stay-at-home orders are reissued,** we would have to resort to the DLCP. Today, I wanted you to be able to visualize what things would look like when we can all return to campus during the pandemic, including the possibility of our opening the entire campus on September 2nd. We know we will get through this ... together. Planning for all eventualities must continue and it has ... every single day!

I will be in touch again soon.

ENJOY. STAY SAFE. STAY CALM. STAY HEALTHY. AND HAVE FUN.

Joel

** In light of my writing above about ever-changing guidelines, the announcement today by the California Department of Public Health could represent further obstacles to re-opening the campus. Remember that we are more than six weeks away from September 2nd. Again, we are on top of every announcement and continue to make the full range of contingency plans.