Dear LAUSD Board Members:

As a network of parents and organizations that work with LAUSD families in the education of their children, we are writing to advocate for specific improvements primarily for distance learning this fall and for these to be included in the district’s “Learning Continuity and Attendance Plan”. These recommendations were informed by 18 focus groups with a total of 78 parents (51 percent of whom are LAUSD parents) held during the month of June. Our objective was to get first-hand accounts of parent perceptions about why services provided to their children either worked or did not work during emergency distance learning.

Recommendations:

I. Stakeholder Engagement

*Education is a process to be done with parents and students, not to them.* Partnership means integrating feedback on the plans throughout the entire school year.

*Recommendation:*

- Making a concerted effort to bring parents into the loop, by explicitly stating the roles of school site committees (i.e., ELAC, SSC, LSLC), when these committees meet, and making meetings accessible (i.e., by providing interpretation along with meeting times that are convenient for parents rather than only for staff).

II. Continuity of Learning

A. In-Person Instructional Offering

*Recommendation:*
As we return to in-person instructional offering this year or next, **prioritize services for students who are most behind or whose families are experiencing situations that make it difficult to study at home** (e.g., homelessness, no supervision and/or support because parents work, not enough space).

B. Distance Learning Program

i. Access to Devices and Connectivity

**Recommendations:**

- **Ensure that low-income families have consistent Internet access**
  LAUSD supplied equipment (e.g., Chromebooks, hotspots) to most students and negotiated an agreement with Spectrum to provide free Internet service. Despite a District flyer stating there is no income or other eligibility requirement, some parents reported not being able to access the service because they did not have a bank account or were asked to sign a long-term contract in order to receive two months of free Internet access. In some areas, Spectrum is the only or the most reliable Internet provider, with a monthly cost of $49.99 plus taxes and fees, which many families cannot afford right now.

  Please note that although a hotspot can be a viable alternative, it does not adequately support multiple students connected to a single device. Additional devices would need to be issued for households with multiple K-12 students.

- **Provide technical support at a physical location to minimize lost instruction time.**
  Currently, technical support is offered online via chat or over the phone at LAUSD as well as cell-phone and Internet providers. However, parents reported high levels of frustration due to long wait times in getting through on phone calls to obtain the necessary support. In comparison, parents in other school districts with designated physical places where they could check out, return, or exchange equipment proved more efficient in resolving equipment issues sooner and minimizing lost instruction time.

ii. Pupil Participation and Progress

**Recommendation:** *Parents are your partners in ensuring pupil participation and progress. Help them help you in this endeavor by:*

- **Establishing a process for parents to share if their student(s) is receiving enough synchronous instructional minutes and if the overall workload is appropriate, too light or too heavy for the time value.**
- **Establish clear expectations for parents, ongoing two-way communication, and professional development for them.** For more details on this, see subsequent sections.
iii. Distance Learning Professional Development

Recommendations:

▪ **Offer professional development for staff and parents to use virtual platforms.** Parents who were able to connect their children to online classes saw a wide variation in teacher proficiency with using virtual platforms. They recommended continuing to ensure that teachers receive professional development on effective distance-learning strategies, so classes are carefully structured, engaging, and effective for student learning.

▪ **Support teachers and counselors with training to effectively work in partnership with parents to support student achievement, especially given that most educators do not receive significant training on family engagement in pre-service or professional development.** Now more than ever, parents truly need to be viewed and treated as equal partners in the education of their children. In order for distance learning to improve from the first attempt in the Spring of 2020, parents need ongoing, effective, two-way communication, which would allow them to receive clear information about expectations, rules, attendance requirements, goal setting, and share feedback about the education plan for their children. Families experienced a wide variation in the amount and quality of communication with teachers and administrators. For instance, some educators were not returning phone calls or e-mails, and when eventually reached, they did not provide helpful responses, leading to increased ambiguity and confusion. More efficient, positive, effective communication occurred when teachers and administrators answered and resolved calls and e-mails, hosted ‘town hall’ Zoom meetings for parents, and provided guidance in using the Parent Portal.

The LAUSD Office of Parent and Community Services (PCS) has provided training to administrative staff to improve relationships with parents. This office also has deep experience on research, laws, and best practices related to family engagement and staff training. **It is imperative that the expertise of PCS be drawn upon to offer districtwide training for teachers and counselors, which will help strengthen family-school partnerships and meet the SB 98 requirement for providing professional development opportunities to staff.**

▪ **Parents are education partners and, as such, want training from schools on how to use e-mail, virtual platforms, and the Parent Portal.** Although many resources are available online via the LAUSD website, these ultimately do not reach parents who lack the equipment or skills to connect. Given that parents reported being more comfortable with texting and Facebook, many nonprofits effectively used these

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platforms not only to initially reconnect with parents but also to transition parents to Zoom and other virtual platforms. Partnering with nonprofits could help to create a more meaningful and sustainable level of engagement with parents.

iv. **Staff Roles and Responsibilities**

In addition to describing new roles and responsibilities for staff because of COVID-19, we also recommend the following:

- **Establish clear expectations for parents about the new rules for Fall semester and clarify the process for parents to provide feedback to adapt learning plans as the year goes on.** During the Spring semester of 2019-20, families and students experienced a wide variation on the amount and quality of instructional services. Although SB 98 addresses many of these issues, parents want to ensure that a leveling process is in place to support teachers in setting fair expectations and workloads for students, and to include student and parent feedback in this process.

*Education is a process to be done with parents and students, not to them. Partnership means integrating feedback on the plans.* When individual students and parents provided feedback on these topics to individual teachers, they reported feeling as if their feedback was often perceived as an excuse to avoid completing assignments. Some students saw their grades negatively impacted, even though a directive from Superintendent Beutner explicitly stated that grades would “not be penalized by circumstances.” Parents also became distressed when they felt responsible for helping children complete all their work despite connectivity issues, and all to find out that assignments were not going to be collected, revised, or even contribute to increasing the students’ grade. In the end, many students and parents ended up stressed, overworked, and/or disengaged.

Parents want clear expectations on:
- Attendance requirements, including excused and unexcused absences
- Grading policies
- Academic standards and goals for the 2020-21 school year
- How students will be assessed initially and evaluated throughout the year
- Roles of, and expectations for, parents, teachers, and students
- The process to provide feedback and express concerns over homework, grades, academic plans, technology challenges, student health, and challenges a family may be facing
- Clarifying the process for how COVID-19 affecting student and family health, technology challenges, or other adverse circumstances (*i.e.*, job loss, evictions, homelessness) will be handled and who they should contact about excused absences, accommodations, and resources.
v. **Support for Pupils with Unique Needs**

- **Uphold the IEP process and provide services outlined in plans after adapting these to the virtual experience.** Ensuring ongoing communication with both teachers and therapists or other professionals providing specific supports or accommodations will lead to the high-quality educational services that these students are entitled to receive. Furthermore, providing avenues for ongoing feedback on whether services delivered through a virtual platform are functioning as intended will allow for adjustments to be made along the way, in order to maximize learning outcomes and goals for each and every student. Lastly, making relevant training available for parents, in their home language, will allow them to reinforce concepts and engage in educational activities with their children at home, further contributing to student academic achievement.

- **Provide services and supports to English Learners as required by law and offer training for parents** to fully understand the ELD entrance and exit process, their role and responsibilities in that process, and how to review and monitor their children’s progress. This means going beyond mere compliance and signing documents, to developing sessions where parents of English learners can truly understand the process, the ELPAC, and the various strategies used to support student success. Moreover, parents want to know how schools and the District are addressing the needs of students who were on the brink of reclassifying but have not yet done so. What methods are being implemented so students can continue on a path to successfully reclassify? These questions are urgent for English Learners because they are more vulnerable and susceptible to suffering from learning loss, which in turn could hinder them in the long term as they prepare to be college- and career-ready.

C. **Pupil Learning Loss**

Parents want to stay informed and up to date on students’ progress and the extent to which they may have suffered learning loss. They also want to help their student catch up. Recommendations:

- Ensure that parents not only receive information about homework and academic progress reports, but also assessment results and supports they will be given to accelerate student learning.
- Enlist parents’ support to monitor progress and reinforce concepts at home. This includes explaining where the child is at, the goal to achieve, and the activity(ies) that are supposed to help the student; and showing them ways they can help at home.
- After a few weeks, check-in with parents to see if progress was made or if the plan (e.g., goals, activities) needs to be modified.
III. Mental Health and Social and Emotional Well-Being

Recommendations:

- **Continue to support student socio-emotional well-being by providing resources through the hotline.** We are currently surveying students and will have additional and more specific recommendations on this topic in September.

- **Considering using current structures to support parent mental health (e.g., parent centers).** Parents felt relief in connecting with peers over virtual platforms to discuss their experiences, process what is happening, and problem-solve together. Consider repurposing parent center staff at school sites to host sessions for increasing information sharing and two-way communication, which can inform what is working or not working, as well as reducing stress among parents.

IV. Pupil and Family Engagement and Outreach

Collaborating with parents in their children’s education will result in increased student engagement and achievement. However, do not limit parent’s involvement only to attendance issues. To foster stronger collaboration, we recommend the following actions:

- **Improve communication with parents who do not have e-mail addresses, who are non-English speakers, and those with children in secondary grade levels.**
  - Help all parents establish e-mail accounts and become familiar with using e-mail. Partner with nonprofits to help more parents acquire these skills. Send communication in multiple media forms, including phone, text, and Facebook, in multiple languages.
  - Clarify the District’s plan to address language needs and overcome language barriers. How do schools and parents access on-site resources who may serve as cultural bridges (e.g., bilingual staff, interpreters, parent center directors, and community liaisons)?
  - Parents with children in middle and high school want more communication about their children’s educational process and progress. Many parents found themselves left out of the usual parent-teacher-student communication routine, particularly parents who do not have digital-literacy skills to use the Parent Portal, the platform predominantly utilized by schools to communicate directly with students. We recommend:
    - Providing training to all parents on how to use the online Parent Portal, especially for those with lower digital-literacy skills
    - Redefining expectations for communication with parents for staff at secondary school sites

- **Strengthen parent support for distance learning and access to the resources provided by the District by ensuring that PCS can reach out to parents directly.**
  Through our focus groups we learned that 99 percent of parents are not aware of the state grade-level standards their children are expected to meet. Therefore, it is
important to listen when parents consistently ask for training on virtual platforms, for mental health supports for students, and for strategies to support their children’s learning at home. By working in conjunction with PCS to provide these necessary resources, distance learning will likely operate more smoothly and become more effective, because students and parents will have all the tools they need to be supported and successful.

Despite the vast resources offered by PCS and other District offices, most of these are accessible only online, which leaves out parents who lack access to Internet or e-mail. While PCS holds an array of expertise on family engagement, working with diverse families, and regularly develops training and resources exclusively for families, parents reported that unless they participate on a district-level advisory committee, they are forced to rely on the school to pass along information about resources from PCS. This means they do not always receive the information in a timely manner if at all. **A system where PCS directly communicates with parents will speed up receiving communication, resources, and support.**

**Also, assist PCS in developing an outreach plan with differentiated strategies for connecting with diverse parent groups to increase the number of families matched to available services.** Refer to Migrant Education programs for effective outreach and relationship-building practices to connect with and engage families.

V. School Nutrition

We are aware that for students to receive free or reduced-price meals during in-person instruction or distance learning this school year, they must be physically present with their identification at the pick-up location on campus.

This requirement makes it burdensome for some families to receive much needed meals during distance learning as it interferes with class schedules, especially if they do not live near the school or do not have access to reliable transportation.

Consider adjusting plans to allow families to pick up meals before classes begin, so it minimizes learning loss. As local schools work with families to identify ways to facilitate meal distribution, please designate a place where schools or local districts can share the various models, so we can all learn and consider various options.

We urge the Los Angeles Unified School District to make a dedicated, sustained effort to adopt these recommendations. We call upon District leadership to address the firsthand accounts and experiences from parents on emergency distance learning. We believe these are necessary steps that will contribute to a productive and equitable education for all students. Should you have questions or need additional information, you may reach Araceli Simeón, PON Project Director, via e-mail at asimeon@parentnetwork-la.org, or by cell phone at 626-991-1610.
Sincerely,

Joyce G. Watts  
Senior Coordinator  
African American Parent/Community Coalition for Educational Equity (AAP/CEE)

Victoria Dominguez  
Education Equity Director  
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | Los Angeles

Jack Suria Linares  
Education Policy Coordinator  
CARECEN

Martha Cota  
Executive Director  
Latinos In Action

Adrián Sandoval  
National Parent School Partnership Program Director  
MALDEF

Araceli Simeón  
Project Director  
Parent Organization Network

Maria E. Rosales  
Program Director  
PROedu Inc.

Maria Daisy Ortiz  
Parent Leader  
Member, LAUSD Parent Advisory Committee  
Former Executive Board, LAUSD District  
English Learner Advisory Committee

Paul Robak  
Parent Leader  
Executive Board and Immediate Past Chairperson, LAUSD Parent Advisory Committee  
Former Executive Board, LAUSD Community Advisory Committee

CC:  
Austin Beutner, Superintendent of Schools  
Pedro Salcido, Chief of Staff, Office of the Superintendent  
David Baca, Chief of Schools, LD Support  
Derrick Chau, Senior Executive Director, Strategy and Innovation  
Alison Y. Towery, Chief Academic Officer  
Tony Aguilar, Chief Special Education, Equity, & Access  
Antonio Plascencia Jr., Administrator, Office of Parent and Community Services