

3/26/2020

To: LAUSD

Cc: Austin Beutner, Anthony Aguilar, Marco Tolj, Jeffrey Aaron, Richard Vladovic, Kelly Gonez, Jackie Goldberg, Nick Melvoin, Scott Schmerelson, Monica Garcia, George McKenna

At the beginning of 2020, frustrated by the glaring inequities that special education students across LAUSD face in accessing quality services and education, a group of parents of students with disabilities, educators, administrators and special education therapists and providers gathered to brainstorm solutions on how to improve special education in the district. Knowing that both IDEA and state law are very clear about what kinds of supports students with disabilities should be receiving, and seeing that the district is constantly falling short, we were able to boil the issue down to two main and closely interrelated themes: teacher and parent training. The vast majority of stakeholders on the ground simply do not have the tools, support and training to effectively implement the IEPs and 504s that our federal laws mandate.

Then COVID-19 and school closures hit, and the problem has been magnified, as the great digital divide became more apparent and its effects grew more dire. Digital access has fast become as basic a need for quality education as knowing our ABCs. We are encouraged by LAUSD's announcement that it is investing \$100 million to make sure that every student has access to a digital device and its partnership with Verizon to provide broadband Internet access to families that need it. However, having access to a digital device and Wi-Fi is not enough. Having special education services adapted to a digital platform is also fundamental, and we have seen no plan in place to address this issue.

Only two weeks into school closures, our group has collectively heard dozens of stories from parents saying that they have not received any special education services, regardless of whether they have access to digital devices. One parent from local district NE complained that although the school gave her and other parents laptops, they aren't able to use them because of a firewall that prevents them from being used outside of the LAUSD network. Other parents have not yet received digital devices at all yet. Still others have their own digital devices, but have not gotten any special education services via distance learning, even when general education learning at the same schools has moved full steam ahead.

When Superintendent Austin Beutner released the news about investing \$100 million into LAUSD to overcome the digital divide, he indicated that the district had surveyed almost 4,000 teachers and 100 school principals to help develop the plan. However, did LAUSD survey parents? Have they been hearing the parent stories on the ground to learn which schools are following through on providing students the Free Appropriate Education to which they are legally entitled, and which are falling short?

We are writing to express urgency around this situation, and request that you answer the following questions:

- What is the district doing to ensure FAPE for all students?
- What is the plan to adapt special education services to a digital platform?
- What accountability framework exists to make sure that all schools are following through with FAPE?
- How will you provide devices to all students with disabilities?
- Will you provide training for parents to utilize the devices, and how?
- Why haven't parents of students with disabilities been surveyed?

At minimum, we urge you to do the following:

- Survey all parents of kids with disabilities to understand their critical needs and the best ways to serve their kids. We have attached a sample survey below.
- Begin offering virtual services to all students with IEPs, immediately.
- Supplement services that are not easily rendered by a provider via video (for ex: PT, ABA therapy), create video trainings or partner with existing content providers that help parents support their children with disabilities at home. Make them easily available online and on television (PBS).
- Model existing systems that work, such as iLEAD Exploration, a hybrid homeschooling program that has been supporting special education students for many years. iLEAD has the capacity to train all schools in LAUSD, and is standing by. We are happy to connect you.

Students with disabilities have routinely been discriminated against in LAUSD, and lack of access to special education “distance learning” is just one extra layer of inequity that threatens to deepen existing achievement gaps during this crisis. However, it also presents us with a great opportunity. It's time to finally bridge the digital divide for ALL STUDENTS. Let's do this, and let's do it now! Our students with disabilities cannot wait a minute longer.

Respectfully,

LA Voices Supporting Students with DisAbilities, c/o Speak UP

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