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Independent Analysis Unit

INFORMATIVE

TO: Members, Board of Education
Austin Beutner, Superintendent

DATE: March 25, 2020

FROM: Glenn Daley, Director, Independent Analysis Unit

SUBJECT: INITIAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS AND L.A. UNIFIED

As of Friday, March 13, business as usual has ended at L.A. Unified in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Just as some factories are re-tooling to provide emergency medical equipment, the District is re-tooling to deliver the essential public service of education and related supports to students and families.

Although conducting instruction, feeding students, and planning how to finish out the 2019-2020 school year successfully are the most immediate needs, **realignments of District activities will be needed for many months or even longer**. The crisis—and decisions made now in response to it—will certainly impact the 2020-2021 school year, and repercussions may last well beyond.

Based on the best scientific and economic information we have been able to glean from experts and reliable publications, we predict that **the crisis and its implications will certainly extend in various ways at least through the 2020-2021 school year, and probably somewhat longer**. More specifically:

- **Experts predict a second surge of Covid-19 cases in the fall of 2020**, even if current efforts appear successful at slowing the spread of the disease. There may be a vaccine breakthrough by fall, but experts advise against counting on it; a new vaccine must be tested through randomized trials, manufactured in large quantities, and distributed almost universally to eradicate the disease. Those things are unlikely to happen within 12 months, let alone six.
- **It now appears that a long recession is looming**, with a gradual recovery at least as difficult as the one following the 2007-2008 financial crisis. Although some officials were talking about a short, ‘V-shaped’ recession only a few weeks ago, most experts were less optimistic then, and have become even less so. Some are warning against a global depression based on the collapse of consumer demand and the sidelining of the workforce across every continent.
- **There will be irreversible changes to the infrastructure of social services**. Many of the support resources that people (including the District and its students, families, and employees) rely on in normal times depend on complex networks of large and small businesses, nonprofits, and public agencies. Under current conditions, many of these may either collapse, reduce their scope, or perhaps be reshaped into a new model. Even as pro-education voices speak up to demand that society as a whole take more responsibility for social needs instead of relying on schools to fill the gaps, schools may be left with more responsibility in some areas for a while. The present crisis will change how the burden is distributed and how services will be carried out.

If we are fortunate, some early breakthrough may happen that softens these consequences, but wishful thinking is not a strategy. **While these long-term predictions cannot dominate immediate crisis management decisions, it is important to keep them in mind, and wherever possible to make current decisions that strengthen the District's hand in dealing with future implications of the crisis.**

In that spirit, we offer **three initial observations** on issues facing the District.

1. **Students need remote access to education, not just now, but into the next school year.**

Distance learning cannot replace face-to-face classroom instruction, especially for younger students and many students with disabilities, but it is the only way the District can maintain some amount of educational continuity. To avoid a “lost cohort” of students who fall behind and either drop out or never catch up, and to maintain public confidence in District schools, the District is acting quickly to concentrate intense effort on distance learning. This entails:

- a.) acquiring and distributing devices,
- b.) providing connectivity,
- c.) reaching the hard-to-reach,
- d.) instructional design, and
- e.) support and coordination of distance education delivery.

All five of these activities are currently underway in the District, but not to the same extent.

The District has been correctly concentrating major efforts on the first two steps of this initiative: acquiring and distributing devices and providing connectivity. Even on these points, there is **much more we need to know about patterns of access and how to target help that is needed.** With help from community partners, the District is working to find such students and distribute devices to them as soon as possible. If they lack connectivity, their contact information is unavailable or outdated, and they do not appear at one of the grab-and-go food centers, the District will have difficulty reaching them.

Going forward, the remaining steps will grow in importance.

Instructional design for distance learning entails creating or synthesizing online content aligned to Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards for all grade levels. **The District needs more than repositories of useful resources; it needs online curricula,** complete with lessons, materials, assignments and grading protocols for every grade level and every subject.

Teachers need to know how to deliver this curricula and principals need to know how to support teachers. A crucial component of distance learning is protocols governing how teachers interact remotely with students. This work needs to be conducted in extensive collaboration with labor partners.

Decisions about online instruction to finish out this school year are rushed by necessity. However, most of these decisions do not need to be permanent or long-term. **To the extent possible under the current conditions, planning for the next school year should take a deliberate approach.** And the District should plan for the possibility that the next school year will begin with school buildings closed.

2. In addition to general distance learning challenges, **the District faces extraordinary challenges related to the services it provides to its populations most in need: homeless families and families in poverty, students with special needs, English learners, and students needing health and mental health services.**

Special education is an extraordinary challenge. **If an LEA provides educational services to the general education population during a school closure, they have a moral obligation and a mandate to ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to the same educational opportunities.** This means systems must be in place to assure accessibility to digital platforms, and the design of online instruction must be differentiated for student needs just as we have learned to do with classroom instruction.

English language learners, homeless students, graduating seniors, and students in dual language immersion programs are three other groups that face special challenges in a remote-only schooling system.

Furthermore, the District does more than provide essential educational services; it is also a key provider of essential social services, perhaps the only provider accessible to many families. District management has gone to remarkable lengths to distribute food to its students. It is also **vital to actively reach students and families who no longer have access to critical health and mental health care services due to school closures.** We also need to be concerned about students who may not have a safe home environment during the day, or who have relied on after-school programs as their only opportunity to obtain personal help in a positive environment.

Given what we know about how trauma and a lack of basic necessities interfere with learning, in addition to the challenges presented by special needs and other barriers described above, the design of a comprehensive distance learning system needs to include careful consideration of the needs of all children.

3. **For now, the District has the funds to pay for the essential public services they are providing, but funding for the next school year and beyond is in doubt.**

Although the governor and the legislature provided a *hold-harmless apportionment* that will allow schools to maintain funding despite service disruptions, **the recession brought on by coronavirus crisis will affect the District's current process of budgeting for 2020-2021.** First, the drop in the value of the stock market will decrease the state's tax receipts by several billions of dollars, which will reduce the amount of Proposition 98 funding that goes to K-12 education. An estimate of this new amount will be reflected in the governor's May Revise. However, even estimating revenue will be difficult this year in part because the deadline to file taxes has been extended past the start of the fiscal year to July 15.

Major uncertainty in the state's revenue projections, combined with the enormous costs of dealing with the health crisis, will make it difficult for the legislature to budget for fiscal year 2020-2021. This situation, combined with unusual spending demands, the emergency procurement powers granted to the superintendent, the public health restrictions that make Board meetings difficult, the school closures themselves—which mean principals will likely struggle with school-site budgeting—all present logistical challenges to budgeting for next school year. **The District is fortunate that**

school-site budgeting was pushed up several months this year. This foresight may be rewarded in the coming months, although some of the decisions made at the school level may be pre-empted by a prolonged crisis.

Another positive fact is that **the governor's proposed budget includes almost \$20 billion in reserve, which is designed to be used to cushion the impact of financial downturn.** Furthermore, the state has focused in recent cycles on paying down debt and has a substantial cash cushion. If state leadership chooses to prioritize PK-12 school districts with in-need populations, this prudent fiscal stewardship could mitigate the effects of the recession on L.A. Unified for fiscal year 2020-2021. Such a priority is not guaranteed, though.

As of this writing, it appears that **the federal government will provide about two trillion dollars in funds to support the American economy. However, the amounts and conditions of support for public education are not yet known,** and the distribution of such funds will depend on decisions by the Department of Education over time. It is important for the District to keep track of these details, and to engage in the public comment process and other advocacy activities to ensure that the needs of large urban school systems are not neglected. Based on the experience of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, it is likely that substantial funds will be provided through grants requiring timely application, so it is vital for the District to stay active in grant-obtaining activities during the crisis.

Finally, even if revenue losses can be avoided, **many of the rising fixed costs that have impacted recent budgets will continue to rise.** And any costs associated with repurposing District operations may continue to accrue. Thus, **fiscal pressures faced by the District will probably increase.**

From another perspective, though, the shutdown of classrooms and offices may make it possible to carry out structural changes that would be very difficult during the usual school year cycle. In thinking about future budgets, it would be useful to look for such opportunities to make changes so that the District can emerge from the crisis with improved efficiency, effectiveness, and equity in the long term.

In conclusion, we have provided careful predictions of the course of this crisis based on available information and cautiously pessimistic assumptions. Given those predictions, we have identified three broad categories of activity that require critical attention, not just immediately, but in planning for at least the next school year: a) the content, practices and logistics of distance education, b) social service provision, including providing food, health and mental health services, and c) the budget implications of the pandemic and resulting recession.

We will address some of these issues in greater detail during the coming weeks. We welcome your questions, and we are available to meet with you electronically to discuss these concerns.