

## The Kids Are Not Okay

### An open letter to regional and state policymakers in California

Our job as school board members is to advocate for children. In fact, we are the only elected officials in the nation with the sole responsibility to represent the interests of children. While other policymakers may represent constituencies that implicitly include children, *this letter is from our perspective as advocates exclusively for children*. As such, we would be derelict in our duty if we remain silent in the midst of a pandemic that has devastated our nations' structures of learning.

We applaud the efforts of teachers and school personnel who had to radically shift educational strategies to engage in distance learning. We are very proud of the work undertaken by our school community in response to a massive and abrupt change to the world of public education. Our school personnel are true heroes in their efforts to do their very best to adapt to an impossible situation. That being said, this is what our nation has learned from an experiment with distance learning over the past six weeks:

- ✓ *Children are not learning enough.* Even at its very best, distance learning does not offer an environment comparable to a classroom. Effective learning is critically dependent on face-to-face human engagement. The outcomes of a quality classroom learning experience are not possible online. It cannot provide what our children deserve in terms of content mastery, engagement, and the right to full participation in the life of our communities and our nation. In addition, astounding numbers of children are simply not participating in distance learning at all. Nationally, over 40% of high school students reported that they hadn't attended a single online or virtual class in the month of March.
- ✓ *Children are suffering from serious and unreported abuse.* Cases of child abuse serious enough to require hospitalization have almost doubled since the pandemic began. In March, for the first time ever, half of the visitors to the National Sexual Assault Hotline were minors. Without access to caring professionals within a school setting who would normally report signs of abuse to local child welfare departments, children are left with no other option than to report their own abuse.
- ✓ *Children are witnessing domestic violence.* Since the beginning of the pandemic, reports of domestic violence have increased sharply. Without a safe place to go, children are witnessing family violence in homes suffering from the intense stress of a nationwide lockdown and global economic collapse. Research has shown that witnessing domestic violence carries the same risk of harm to children's mental health and learning as being abused directly.
- ✓ *Children are hungry.* The National School Lunch Program typically serves nearly 35 million children daily. Although school districts have worked hard to continue to serve families with school meals, it is inevitable that thousands, perhaps millions, of children nationwide are going without enough food and adequate nutrition while schools are closed.
- ✓ *Children are isolated.* Research shows that social isolation unequivocally stunts social and emotional development at all ages.

In spite of our very best efforts, *school closures and distance learning are catastrophic to children*. Quite simply, those experiencing the greatest amount of collateral damage from this pandemic are our nation's children – those least able to advocate for themselves.

Free and public education is a bedrock of America, and its foundation is built upon the in-person interaction between teacher and student. As an educational culture, by closing schools, we have taken a massive step backward in our ability to address crippling and systemic inequity. It is simply impossible to implement distance

learning in a manner that is equitable. With distance learning, we are essentially asking children to teach themselves. Moreover, the notion that public schooling can be reduced to the online or hard-copy distribution of opportunities to learn not only fails to recognize the tremendous gaps in those opportunities, it does not take into account the myriad other essential outcomes that result from spending days building community outside of the home. While the move to close schools was necessary in the moment of crises when COVID-19 first appeared in the United States, this is an untenable situation moving forward.

As school board members, *we do not accept “the new normal” of distance learning as a viable strategy for our educational institutions.* The cost to our children, and to our society, is too great. We urge state and regional leaders to prioritize the needs of our children with as much care, attention, and scientific analysis as they prioritize the needs of adults.

We are concerned and alarmed about state-level policy proposals for the fall of 2020 that do not go far enough to substantially restore the essential elements of a successful learning environment. Decisions must be based on the impact of distance learning on children weighed against the science about this particular disease. *Frankly, strategies of socially-distant learning and staggered schedules are impractical and unacceptable.* We have time now to use science and advocacy to better understand the disease and to establish plans and structures that will allow kids to return to school with a bare minimum of restrictions necessary to protect lives.

We believe there are ways to limit risk to children without implementing socially-distant learning. Instead of dramatically restricting in-person interaction, we believe the following modifications are possible and, most importantly, limit the risk to children of unintended consequences. These strategies require that we use our considerable moral authority to advocate for practices and sufficient resources that prioritize children and educators.

- 1) Prioritize school personnel for surveillance and testing. School personnel are essential workers, and they should be prioritized in the same category as health care providers and first responders in recognition of their immeasurable value to the health and safety of our community.
- 2) Implement aggressive contact tracing at all school sites and for all school personnel.
- 3) Provide for alternative teaching and learning environments for high-risk students and adults, while still allowing the majority of students to interact in a traditional school setting.
- 4) Limit crowd size at school sporting events without forbidding children from engaging in school sports.
- 5) Mandate intensive hand-washing and sanitation practices in our schools.

We demand that policymakers champion the rights of children to learn, and to interact with each other and in real life with the school personnel who love and care for them. Returning children to a traditional school setting, with the bare minimum of modifications, should be an absolute top priority for our elected policymakers and their public health advisors.

Signed by:



*Bea Arkin, Anne Molgaard, José Díaz, Zoey Fernandez, and Megan Van Sant are elected members of the Ukiah Unified School Board of Trustees. This letter represents their personal views and does not necessarily represent the opinion of the Ukiah Unified School Board as a whole.*