

October 20, 2020

Dear Catholic School Community,

I pray this correspondence finds you and your family safe and healthy. With our school year well underway, I'd like to provide you with an update on our current public health status and its impact on our return to in-person instruction.

When I wrote to you last, Governor Newsom had just announced a new public health monitoring system using tiers to determine which sectors would be allowed to reopen at the local level. Since then, we have seen improvement in public health conditions across the archdiocese. These improvements have permitted counties to allow a return to in-person instruction for high-need students through small group instruction ("cohorts") and re-opening waivers for grades TK-6. In fact, Santa Barbara County has remained in the "red" tier for the required two weeks to allow all grade levels to return to campus and Ventura achieved this status today. All TK-12 schools are now permitted to reopen in those counties – each school will employ their own timetable and plan to return.

The situation in Los Angeles County, sadly, is different. Though public health conditions have improved since the summer, the county remains in the "purple" tier which means schools are not permitted to return to in-person instruction unless a waiver is approved for grades TK-6. As a result of a coalition of schools ("*Students First Los Angeles*") led by the archdiocese, the LA County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to allow the waiver process to open for grades TK-2 only. The county will approve 30 applications per week and will prioritize schools serving students who qualify for free/reduced priced meals. To date, over twenty Catholic schools in LA County have applied for waivers. We are making progress, but more is still required.

Our office has received numerous letters, phone calls and emails from desperate parents asking the archdiocese to do more to reopen schools. Conversely, we have also received communications from parents and staff concerned that it is still not safe to return to campuses. I want you to know that everyone's voice is being heard. We continue to ask that you share your opinions, whatever they may be, with the LA County Board of Supervisors. The initiation of the waiver process is a result of thousands of calls, emails and public comment – your voice counts.

We are seven months into this pandemic and one this is certain – isolated learning for children is creating another public health crisis; emotional, social and academic decline. Trading one crisis for another is not acceptable – we must strike a balance. As a result, the archdiocese will continue to advocate for a safe return to in-person instruction while offering a distance learning option for those who seek it. We will continue to demand public officials put students first when considering reopening sectors of the economy and demand fair and equitable access to personal protective equipment and federal and state resources for Catholic school students.



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As students and staff return to modified in-person instruction, it's vital to emphasize the importance of maintaining personal health safety measures outside of school. Young people are not immune from this virus. Our ability to reopen schools and keep them open requires the entire school community – parents, family members, students, and staff to remain vigilant. We're all feeling the fatigue of the pandemic, so it's very easy to let our guard down. When we do so, we put ourselves and each other at risk. Moreover, we put our schools at risk of closure. Let's be good Christians – love thy neighbor by using masks, frequently wash hands and maintain distance from those outside of our household. Together, we will keep each other safe in and outside of school.

Despite the many challenges our community faces, our Church and school ministry continues to demonstrate incredible resilience. To date, our schools have served over one million meals at over 40 school sites to needy students and their families. Our schools have distributed over 20,000 digital devices to students with more on the way. Our generous benefactors have donated over \$6 million in funds and resources to help keep our most vulnerable students educated in our schools. The archdiocese has secured over 80,000 pieces of personal protective equipment from the state for all of our schools and has provided additional equipment to our schools in high-need communities.

Above all, our school communities are fueled by the Holy Spirit which shines through our people. Our teachers, principals and school staff – our greatest resource, continue to demonstrate why Catholic schools such an incredible gift. We owe them a debt of gratitude for their ministry of teaching and leading our students during these challenging times. Our parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters and family members – your sacrifice of time, treasure and talent make it possible for students to learn at a distance. Though the exhaustion of these times seeks to wear us down, God's love and presence continues to fuel our hearts with love and support for our most precious gift – our children. Thank you for your trust, faith and confidence.

Our Catholic schools continue to prove that a true education of the whole person cannot exist without the presence of God. Through these difficult times, we pray as one community in faith to His divine grace and blessings. On behalf of Archbishop José Gomez and our entire school ministry, thank you for your partnership, commitment, and solidarity. We pray for all those who have been lost as a result of this pandemic and for healing for those who are recovering.

Yours in Christ,

Paul M. Escala
Superintendent of Schools

The God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory through Christ [Jesus] will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you after you have suffered a little. To him be dominion forever. Amen.

1 Peter 5:10