

Remarks by David Fisher President, Sacramento City Teachers Association Dial-In News Conference, March 30, 2020

Good morning. I want to thank everyone for getting on the phone today. I'm David Fisher, president of the Sacramento City Teachers Association, a second grade teacher here in Sacramento and a parent of two Sac City students, and with me are two of my colleagues, Nikki Milevsky our first vice-president and also the parent of two students in the District and Lori Jablonski, a humanities teacher, who continues to teach high school students through distance learning in these extraordinary times.

We speak for the nearly 3000 educators in the Sacramento City Unified School District who teach more than 40,000 students in one of the most diverse school districts in the entire country.

Our students speak more than fifty languages, and, before our schools were closed, they attended 76 different schools. The students we teach range from preschoolers, to elementary and secondary students, to adult learners. A large proportion of our students come from low-income households, 70% of SCUSD's students qualify for free and reduced

lunch. Some of our students live in cars, homeless shelters or on the street.

At the same time, our members teach in some of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the county. We have many students who live in multi-million homes and are blessed with a myriad of learning opportunities outside the school day.

We in SCTA are teachers, psychologists, school nurses, social workers, librarians, language speech and hearing specialists, counselors, , behavioral intervention specialists, and program specialists who help to coordinate the more than 7000 students in our district who are classified as having special needs.

Above all we are teachers, and we want to teach.

When the Coronavirus pandemic began to spread throughout the United States, some in our community seemed to think that the threat was overblown and downplayed its impact. When students in our district circulated an online petition demanding safety measures be put in place, some dismissed their concerns as teenagers wanting to get out of class. We now know, as those of us who teach see almost every day, often our students are smarter than we are and have things figured out a few steps

before we do. We also now know that their fears were, if anything, understated. Just a few short days after that petition was released, an SCTA member, a substitute teacher who worked at Sutterville Elementary became the first teacher in the United States to die from complications of Coronavirus.

Throughout this pandemic, Governor Newsom has been a true, courageous leader among elected officials spearheading the fight to slow the spread of this dreadful disease, and we want to express our appreciation for him and his leadership. Ahead of any national leader, Governor Newsom understood the need to balance the health and safety of Californians generally with the educational needs of California's 6 million K-12 students.

On March 13, he issued his Executive Order closing schools. With great insight, Governor Newsom agreed to continue to fund schools during the closure provided that they:

- **Continue to deliver high-quality educational opportunities to students to the extent feasible through, among other options, distance learning and/or independent study;**
- **Continue to provide meals to students**

- **Arrange for supervision of students during schools hours, where practicable;**
- **Continue to pay employees**

When schools closed throughout the state, on or about March 16, school districts like ours were faced with a monumental task—in a matter of days, Sac City and other districts needed to develop a program to continue to deliver high quality educational opportunities to the extent feasible to students unable to step into a school building. In a matter of days!

Sac City has done a great job in providing meals to students. Before schools closed, our district provided approximately 21,000 meals per day to students. Today, starting the second week of our school closure, the District is providing 29,000 meals per day.

The efforts to move a Distance Learning model has been far more challenging. Even before schools were closed, teachers throughout the district, at their own initiative, were preparing to continue educating Sac City students, even if classes were cancelled.

And since schools have closed they have continued to do so in the wonderful and creative ways that our members use to teach students

every day. In some cases they have done this over the protests of their principals who told them to wait on the central office for direction.

We do not have the infrastructure to carry out this monumental task of moving a bricks and mortar school system to the virtual world, through no fault of our administration. If any one of us were asked to design a non-school site-based learning program for 40,000 students, we think reasonable people would agree it would take longer than two weeks to develop such a program. In the surrounding Elk Grove Unified School District, schools were closed one week before Sac City, and its Distant Learning program isn't scheduled to begin until one week after Sac City's target date.

That being said, the Sac City Unified School District must systematically move to distance learning and do it now. We have no other choice.

We think it is highly unlikely that our schools will reopen this school year. We need to be prepared to educate all of our students through distance learning for the nine-week period, April 13 through June 12. Nine weeks.

With that understanding how do we “continue to provide high-quality educational opportunities to students to the extent feasible”?

The proposal we presented to the district today has three primary components:

First, is teacher professional development and connectivity. It is essential that SCTA members be provided with the technology and training to prepare for teaching to resume on April 13, building off the extraordinary work that they have already been doing. We have had a number of constructive, albeit challenging discussions, with the district over the last several days and hope to be able to put technology into the hands of every teacher along with a schedule for distance learning professional development training by the end of this week.

Second, but not second importance, is putting technology and learning tools into the hands of students. Here, again, the task is somewhat overwhelming. Identifying the students who need a computer or Chromebook has not been as easy, and there also is a need to recognize that not all students will be able to use the technology even if it were available. Consider just a few examples, homeless students who may lack living space with electricity, English language learners who are just learning the alphabet and are confronted with a computer with an

English language keyboard, kindergarten and first grade students who may lack the dexterity, and special education students who bring with them their own special needs.

Adding to these challenges, the district has identified that it has roughly half the number of Chromebooks needed to supply every Sac City student. We then have to confront the challenge of providing Internet access through hot spots and other means. As you can imagine, there is a shortage of hot spot availability.

Recognizing this need to help Sac City students bridge “the Digital Divide,” today the Sacramento City Teachers Association is announcing our intent to redirect \$1.7 million in health plan savings that was achieved by the district through changes offered by our union in the SCTA/SCUSD contract. Our proposal would immediately redirect that \$1.7 million in savings to purchase Chromebooks and/or hot spots for students to enable them to participate, to the extent feasible, in Distance Learning instruction beginning on April 13. The use of these funds has been at dispute between the district and SCTA up to this point. We believe this use of funds should be sufficient to provide every student who lacks a computer or tablet with a device and should be immediately applied

so that we can have serve our students who suffer from an opportunity gap.

Additionally, SCTA has already been working with Barry Broome of the Greater Sacramento Economic Council to help with outreach to Internet service providers such as Comcast and ask them to donate access to high speed Internet for the remainder of the school year to families in need.

Third, while the work providing technology to teachers and students goes on over the next two weeks, we have proposed the creation of several work groups to develop a curriculum and distance-learning program. The work groups include:

- High school graduation
- Secondary education
- Elementary education
- Special Education
- Physical Education
- Waldorf Education
- And others

Our proposal calls for those work groups to convene as early as tomorrow, to develop an initial set of recommendations so that our teachers can continue to teach.

Finally, and most importantly, our proposal puts the decisions about student learning activities, consistent with the school board adopted curriculum, in the hands of those who know our students best—the teachers—rather than bureaucrats in the district central office. Our teachers are the ones most likely to know which students have parents who are struggling to survive and which children are expected to become home school teachers for their siblings, and which students are facing severe social and emotional challenges, and which students who have a parent who can read to them at night and help them stay on task during the school day. Teachers in Sac City have been up for the challenge and we're ready to do even more. Our proposal makes that possible. We will be announcing other initiatives to help our students learn and our to help our teachers teach in coming days.

Let me now turn the microphone over to Nikki. Following Nikki's brief remarks, Lori Jablonski, an SCTA member who regularly teaches through distance learning will share some of her expertise.

Nikki...

