

District Union/Organization Statements  
February 10, 2021 Board Meeting

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Hello Board Members, Superintendent, Staff

I am Jane Kwiatkowski and I am the 1<sup>st</sup> VP of the CST Local One Union Unit, representing our 220 plus Clerical, Secretarial and Technical members. I am also the Registrar at Concord High School and have been employed in MDUSD just short of 20 years.

We, the CST unit, entered into our second MOU with MDUSD regarding Covid 19 guidelines and protocols on August 19, 2020. In that document, on page 5, section 7, the district agreed to work with our members who asked to work from home, be it for their families' safety, to protect a vulnerable family member, themselves or for other valid reason. It was stated an interactive process would ensue, however, our members were not supposed to have to go through a tedious unnecessary process of providing extensive documentation including personal doctor notes and having meetings with Risk Management that usually went nowhere to accomplish a simple ask, that I remind you all, was totally what we did from March 16<sup>th</sup> thru the end of May, quite successfully, and work from home. Instead, members who have parents that are vulnerable or their own physical ailments have been denied over and over and over to work from home. Is the board aware of this? Is the board aware that it is against our MOU? Is the board aware that we, CST membership, are being treated like second class citizens and yet we are considered Essential Workers by the government? And by the way, where is the extra pay most essential workers have received over the last 11 months? We are one of the few school districts in the area whose Clerical staff has been working ON SITE for months and yet we are being disrespected by being denied part of our MOU.

If you wonder why I am addressing this, it is because our requests within district have fallen on deaf ears AND because the Friday letter of 1/29/2021 contained a NEW MDEA MOU that states our members will man classroom pods if the teachers cannot, which is illegal; that we will take temperatures, which is NOT our job, that we will man isolation rooms, which we definitely will not do, and more...all these statements were put in that signed MOU without our knowledge or input at all. Enough is enough – honor our MOU and stop trying to walk all over us.

Thank you.

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I want to try again to explain why we believe that the decision to reopen schools should be based on metrics by city, especially the metric which quantifies the number of cases per 100,000 in the last 14 days.

I have come to think of metrics by city as a preferential protection for the most vulnerable.

Our concern for safety is but about keeping everyone in the community safe. If schools reopen when transmission rates are high, the interactions at the school can increase the spread of the disease. This can lead to more infections in the wider population, putting vulnerable people at risk. When transmission rates are low, the interactions at schools are not as problematic.

The people in communities with continuing high transmission rates deserve protection. Very few people promoted a return to in-person instruction in January when the transmission rates were high everywhere. The reality is that transmission rates are still high in parts of our district.

Most school districts are more homogenous than ours – having either low transmission rates throughout the district or high transmission rates throughout the district.

What we are seeing now is that communities with low transmission rates are now feeling it is safe to open. In our county the school districts that are planning reopening are for the most part in areas with low transmission rates.

In districts with high transmission rates, there is no talk of reopening (including West Contra Costa, Antioch, and Pittsburg). San Francisco Unified just announced that they will not reopen until the Red Tier, and only then if everyone has the opportunity to be vaccinated.

Our district contains some communities with low transmission rates and some with high rates. This is causing a lot of conflict in our district.

To protect vulnerable people, we must not reopen until we see low transmission rates in all eight cities in our district.

The state and county have issued guidelines about reopening but have also allowed for local control so that the decision can be based on local factors. The local factors for our district are different than many other districts. The very first sentence of the state guidelines reads, “The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) developed the following framework to support school communities as they decide when and how to implement in-person instruction for the 2020-2021 school year.” The guidelines also state, “Recommendations regarding in-person school reopening and closure should be based on the latest available evidence as well as state and local disease trends.” The state recognizes that best course of action will be different for different districts.

The guidelines pertaining to reopening are minimums, not mandates. For example, the minimum requirement for minutes of daily live interaction in most grades is 120 minutes, yet most teachers are online with their students far more than this. It is a minimum, not a mandate. The dietician recommends five servings of vegetables per day some people eat 5 or 6. It is a minimum, not a mandate. Or perhaps the best analogy is of a speed limit of 65 miles per hour. When it is foggy, we drive much slower because that is the safe thing to do in that instance. The state has decided that it is not safe to open with more than 25 cases per 100,000, but has not dictated that any district must open after that point or at any specific point.

As of today, the number of cases in our county is 370 per 100,000 in the last 14 days. In our eight cities, the rates are 954, 562, 434, 348, 354, 228, 210, and 202

The activities of our schools impact their surrounding communities. MDEA's focus is on keeping everyone safe, especially the most vulnerable people in our most vulnerable communities. This isn't "just" about keeping teachers and students safe. That is not even the primary focus. We must act in a way that gives preferential protection to the most vulnerable people in our most vulnerable communities, even if it means sacrifices for everyone. The education of each child is tremendously important to MDEA, but not at the expense of even a single human life.

I realize that no plan will ever be completely safe and this disease will be with us for a long time. There will always be some risk. This is not a question of if we value education or even equity. It is a question of safety. Of course we value education and equity, but our highest priority is safety.

Districts in affluent areas are starting to reopen due to pressure regarding parent donations. Donations from parents make up a large part of the budget in these districts and by threatening to remove their donations, wealthy parents are dictating policy. Many parents and community members contribute to our district, but none so much so that they can dictate policy. Seeing low transmission rates in their own cities, these donors are forcing the districts to reopen. Those districts are not better than other district. It is unlikely that students in those districts will see significantly different learning outcomes because they are going to start experimenting with hybrid learning. What they will get is the enjoyment of feeling they are in control and the illusion, however temporary, that things are going to go back to normal once the kids go back to school. They will be disappointed. Hybrid is not normal.

We, too, will start the hybrid phase. I hope it will be sooner rather than later, but I don't want anyone to have any illusions that hybrid will be fabulous and everyone will be happy. It will be another bumpy road.

I assure you that everyone who has a role to play is working hard to prepare for that bumpy road. We need to be ready to open just as soon as it is safe. It will be safe when all eight cities have low transmission rates. Ideally that will be in a few weeks. I truly hope so, but again, we cannot pass a motion to make it happen. The transmission

rates will decline when our virus containment strategies bear fruit everywhere. Before that, we must respect the virus and prioritize health and safety.

We must also be thoughtful about our preparations for next year. We call on the district to refrain from layoffs this year. Next year, the district will receive the same amount of funding or more than this year. There is no justification for layoffs. We will need every existing staff person to serve students next year. Any projection that anyone might make about next year's enrollment is a simple guess. What is fact, however, is the students who enroll next year will need all of the help we can give them.

Members have overwhelmingly told us in surveys, in meetings, and in emails that they support the Executive Board's direction to base the reopening decision on metrics by city. We continuously engage with members, we are member driven organization, the decisions of our organization come from our members. Most, but not all of our members are telling us that this is what we need to do to keep our communities safe. This is a democratic organization made up of human beings. We are not all going to agree on everything. We are continuing to represent the will of the supermajority. A democratic organization isn't about everyone getting everything that they want. The Executive Board decision to base reopening decision on the metrics in the eight cities was based on input from members and is overwhelmingly supported by our members.

This crisis is shedding a brighter light on the problem of economic inequality worldwide, and in our own district. This district had struggled for decades with the conflict between the affluent and the less fortunate. In some ways, decision making would be easier if our district were comprised entirely of families living in poverty. Everything would be much easier if all of our families were affluent. But that is not our lot of life. We are the microcosm of the modern world.

It's nothing new: Last year the Census Bureau found income inequality was at its highest level in 50 years.

Consider this: two-thirds of the total wealth in this country is owned by the richest 5%. At the same time, more than 38 million Americans are living in poverty, and it's projected that up to 54 million people might not have enough to eat this year.

I highly recommend the book, "Capital in the Twenty-First Century," by French economist Thomas Piketty. He has surveyed centuries of economic upheaval. When asked about the current crisis, Piketty said: "The pandemic illustrates... the need to change the economic system and to get in the direction of the more equal and more equitable and more sustainable model of economic development,"

More than 29 million people are now collecting unemployment benefits, while at the top end of the economic ladder, during the first three months of the pandemic, the net worth of the more than 600 billionaires in the U.S. grew by about 20%.

Jeff Bezos, the owner of Amazon, saw his net worth increase by \$43.8 billion in the first months of the pandemic.

Valerie Wilson, director of the liberal Economic Policy Institute, explained: “those who have the least advantages, the least economic opportunities, are going to bear the largest burden of any kind of downturn, whether it be an economic downturn, or whether it be a public health crisis.” She went on to state: "The combination of COVID-19, and it being such a universal problem – not only in this country but around the world – has really challenged us to sort of question the idea of whether or not we really are all in this together."

That is what we must all ask ourselves: Are we all in this together? Do we care about those who are less fortunate?

We are learning more about the problems caused by vast differences in wealth. We are learning about a system where those with wealth are amassing greater fortunes while those with limited resources are suffering more and more negative impacts. Some of us are learning and some of us have known for a long time that this system is very wrong and must be changed.

There is a lot of work to do. But we must not let these conflicts or our despair or our fear lead us to hatred. We must avoid hatred. Our task is to find out how to get along in spite of our differences. Our task is to be an example to our children of how to treat people with respect.

Thank you.

Anita Johnson  
President  
Mt. Diablo Education Association

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