

February 10, 2020

The Santa Monica-Malibu Classroom Teachers Association (SMMCTA) is a union that represents many of the people who have devoted their lives to the incredibly challenging but profoundly rewarding work of teaching children.

The last eleven months have been the most challenging of our careers. Since March of 2020, we have been in constant collaboration with the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District (SMMUSD), the school board, and parent groups to craft and continuously adjust the plans to support the robust learning of our students *while* protecting the health of staff, students, and community.

Now, our union and our teachers, like others around the country, have been unfairly accused of prioritizing our own “selfish” interests above our students', and of *not* following science as it pertains to opening classrooms. Similar accusations have been leveled at us by some district leaders and by some community members. These accusations are wrong.

Our district and union engage in interest-based bargaining (IBB), which is where both parties work on their issues together to find mutual solutions. These negotiations are not meant to be adversarial but a way for us to find a way that works for all involved. *But it only works when both sides share information and are open to different strategies.* We have responded to the district constructively on everything they've presented to us. Yet district leaders have implied or stated in public meetings that SMMCTA is delaying or obstructing reopening. This is not the case.

On February 3rd, the day before the most recent school board meeting, the district shared with our negotiations team a preliminary draft for a “possible” agreement for school reopening -- the first time such a reopening proposal was presented to us. We had less than an hour to discuss and respond to the draft with district leaders. This does not constitute union delay or obstruction. We have a commitment to represent our members and to advocate for their and our students' safety.

SMMCTA will continue to negotiate with the district to move toward a safe reopening of campuses as public health conditions permit, and we call on our district leaders to make the safety of staff and students -- not political expediency -- their number one priority.

While the district has agreed to implement safety and cleaning protocols, they have not yet demonstrated they will be able to follow all of the risk mitigation recommendations for in-person learning at all sites. This includes testing, enhanced cleaning in classrooms and bathrooms, evaluation of air quality and ventilations, and even extra basic supplies.

Teachers know how hard distance learning is on their students and families. They face the same challenges in their own homes. They miss being in the classroom with their kids. But the health and safety of every person that walks onto campus must remain our number one priority.

We also worry about the many kids who will not come back to in-person learning. The virus is mutating, and more contagious strains will become widespread in our community. We also recognize there will be students and teachers who live in multigenerational and/or immunocompromised homes and will not be able to go back to in person. These families are more likely to be of color, and in our community, they are the ones hardest hit by this pandemic in terms of infections and deaths. As we shift to a Distance Learning Plus model, we must also continue to provide a robust, five days distance learning plan for *all* kids.

Teachers should not be viewed as *obstructionists* because they worry about catching or spreading a highly contagious virus that has killed almost half a million Americans and compromised the health of millions more.

Despite the conversation about teachers being essential workers and the importance of children returning to some form of in-person learning, there has been a lack of urgency from government leadership in prioritizing access and availability of the vaccine for our teachers and onsite support staff.

We need the SMMUSD Board of Education, Superintendent, and PTA to urge the Governor to make teachers a vaccine priority and provide all school districts with the additional funding we desperately need to keep kids and teachers safe.

Sarah Braff, SMMCTA President