

February 10, 2021

Dear Catholic School Community Members,

I pray this correspondence finds you and your family safe and healthy. Today, I'm providing you with an update on new public health orders for schools and the status of in-person instruction.

On January 14, 2021, Governor Newsom released a revision to the K-12 school reopening guidance for all schools in the state, including Catholic schools. The guidance included new requirements including the establishment of the COVID-19 Safety Plan (CSP), reporting of operational status every two weeks and new criteria for school reopening. The revision to the guidance and reopening criteria is located on the new *California Safe Schools for All* site: <https://schools.covid19.ca.gov/>. The following is a breakdown of the reopening process:

- Any school that had received a waiver to reopen or reopened under the “red tier” are permitted to reopen based on their level of readiness and according to their safety plan.
- If a school did not receive a waiver or was unable to reopen due to their county’s public health condition (i.e., purple tier), then that school serving grades K-6 must wait until case rates decline to 25 cases per 100,000 residents for five consecutive days.
- Schools serving grades 7-12 are not permitted to reopen until case rates decline to 7 cases per 100,000 residents for five consecutive days in their county – the red tier.
- Schools serving students requiring specialized services (i.e., Special learning needs, English learners, distance learning challenged) in stable groups of up to 14 are permitted to continue to serve those students in-person.

Reopening across the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, in fact, across the state and nation for Catholic schools will look different depending on local regulations. In Santa Barbara and Ventura counties, many have or will be returning to in-person instruction because they were in the red tier in the fall. In Los Angeles County (including Long Beach and Pasadena), 96 schools applied for a waiver to serve grades TK-2; 72 were approved. 24 pending applications were not approved due to the state eliminating the waiver program in January. Approximately 83 Catholic schools (K-12) have filed an attestation form with the county to serve students requiring specialized services in stable groups of up to 14 students.

The new state guidance was announced when we were experiencing the highest case numbers, hospitalizations and deaths due to COVID-19. These heightened concerns triggered a strong recommendation from public health officials and the archdiocese to continue distance learning through the month of January. Fortunately, we have seen a decline in cases and hospitalizations this month, but the toll the winter surge took on thousands of our neighbors, friends and families continues to be devastating.

With the winter surge now diminishing and our most vulnerable being inoculated, our office is receiving numerous letters, phone calls and emails from parents asking the archdiocese to do more to reopen schools, including some asking us to defy health orders. I want to assure you everyone’s voice is being heard. It’s important to note that public health orders have the force

of law. Violating health orders can result in a fine and possible closure. In fact, there have been schools (not ours) that have been cited by the public health department for failing to enforce health orders. The consequences are real.

We are nearly a year into the pandemic and one thing is certain now more than ever – isolated learning for children has manifested another public health crisis: emotional, social and academic decline. As I stated in October, 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 need to 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.

To that end, the archdiocese has contributed to a number of recent local and national stories regarding safe in-person instruction and vaccination of all school personnel. Most recently, we've participated in interviews with ABC 7, FOX 11, Angelus Magazine, Wall Street Journal and the Los Angeles Times. We continue to advocate with our coalition partners at the local and state level as well. We encourage you to share your concerns with the LA County Board of Supervisors, your state assembly member and senator, and the governor. Also, for those who are advocating for a safe return to in-person instruction, go to <https://studentsfirstcoalition.org> about how you can amplify your voice with other parents, teachers, physicians and students.

The continued disruption brought about by the pandemic is impacting us all; we're experiencing fatigue and frustration that is warring on us all. The decisions that principals and pastors are making regarding in-person instruction are significant. They are weighing many factors, some competing, including meeting public health requirements, personal protective equipment costs, parent and teacher input, and the case rates in their community. Every campus is making the best decision possible under considerable pressure based on information that can change daily. We owe them our appreciation, trust and a debt of gratitude for their ministry of teaching and leading our students during this on-going public health crisis.

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. Wearing masks, washing hands and maintaining distance will help to ensure we keep everyone safe and our schools open.

On behalf of Archbishop José Gomez and our entire school ministry, thank you for your partnership, commitment, and solidarity during this time of crisis. Please 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