

13 November 2020

Dear Dr. Austin, Ms. Ofek, Ms. Laurence, and Trustees of the PAUSD Board of Education:

The Gunn English, Social Studies, and Special Education departments strongly urge you to reconsider the current reopening plans for secondary schools that the board approved during the November 10, 2020, meeting.

The impetus for writing this letter was to set straight some of the misrepresentations put forth by Dr. Austin and Ms. Ofek at the board meeting on Tuesday night. It is important to us that you know:

Facts were misrepresented to the public and the Board.

- Educators were not consulted; we were given a directive. We were only included after key reopening decisions had been made. Instructional leads were included in an optional district meeting on October 28th. The slides for this meeting (see Appendix) show nothing about teacher input in the timeline, and the slide for data is blank.
- The timeline and details of the PAEA plan were misrepresented.
- The facts about standard operating procedures of master scheduling were misrepresented.
- The facts about projections of class sizes and elective offerings were misrepresented. On Monday, November 9, Instructional Leads ran projections for course offerings based on 30% enrollment in hybrid learning. They shared the projections with department members on November 10. Social Studies class sizes in 11th and 12th grade were projected at an average of 43. Only two English electives could be offered in the hybrid model.
- The facts about when a healthy student could have to quarantine for weeks *without* their cohort moving to distance learning were misrepresented. According to County health guidelines, a COVID-negative student with a COVID-positive household member cannot return to school “until 14 days after the COVID-positive household member completes their isolation, which may be 24 days or longer,” but their cohort would not quarantine.¹ When asked, site administrators were not aware of a district plan to maintain students’ access to their education in this scenario.
- The surveys given to students and teachers asked leading questions and were only open for very short periods of time.

¹“COVID Transmission Schools Flow Charts,” Santa Clara County Public Health Department (Oct. 2020), 3.

The District's plan does a disservice to our students and exacerbates inequity.

This plan is pedagogically unsound. One of the central premises of modern pedagogy and classroom management is that students learn best in environments with consistent routines and expectations when teachers are rigorously prepared.² Radically changing the learning environment in the middle of the year limits educational effectiveness for students in person and at home. In person, students cannot engage safely in the activities that make up the bulk of effective instruction in the humanities—discussion³ and heterogenous groupwork.⁴ Teachers have worked hard to recreate a culture of discussion over synchronous Zoom meetings and using educational technology and are just now finding a rhythm and structure within the constraints of distance learning. Through Zoom, we are able to utilize breakout rooms to conference with students, facilitate interactive groupwork, and encourage critical thinking in virtual Socratic Seminars. These activities will not be possible in a distanced classroom with teachers and students interacting behind multiple layers of protective equipment. That we can simply “move classes outside when possible” is just not viable when we consider that we will return in January and have cold and rainy weather until April. In 2019, for example, it rained 34 days in February and March.

Shifting to the hybrid model only adds further uncertainty to the already daunting task of readjusting our curriculum for the hybrid mode, while also being ready to go back to remote learning should we need to quarantine or fully close school sites. We fear losing sight of the best practices of unit design and backward planning.⁵ Navigating an entirely new hybrid process while still being asked to undertake the challenge of distance learning will stretch teachers too thin and be a disservice to our students.

This plan will have a deleterious effect on all students involved. The projected increase in class sizes is untenable—even if the number of students starts with the number “three.” Classes in the upper thirties will significantly reduce our ability to support and engage all students; provide timely and meaningful feedback, especially given the labor-intensiveness of grading in

² Most modern commentary on teaching supports this claim. For examples of successful routines, see *The First Days of School: How to Be an Effective Teacher* (Wong and Wong, 1997). Myron Dueck’s *Grading Smarter, Not Harder* (2014) also emphasizes the importance of establishing clear, consistent goals and grading practices with students.

³ There is such extensive research backing the effectiveness of discussion that it hardly bears stating. A brief list of research pertinent to the PAUSD Promise, Gunn SLNs, and Gunn SLOs follows. Reninger and Renhark (2009) found that student talk has both academic and social benefits. Boyd and Markarian (2015) found that dialogic teaching supports cognition, inquiry, and classroom relationships. Piazza et al. (2015) found that discussion facilitates connection between old and new information, comprehension, critical thinking, and achievement. Michaels et al. (2007, 2010) found that discussion enhances achievement across backgrounds and skills, suggesting its importance in achieving educational equity. Gillies (2014) found that discussion promotes critical thinking and problem solving. Wilhelm (2014) found that it transitioned students from rote learning to making meaning.

⁴ Stanford researchers found that carefully monitored group work increases the learning gain for all students in heterogeneous groups. This was especially true for historically underrepresented students (Cohen and Lotan 2014).

⁵ In backwards design, as outlined by McTighe and Wiggins (1998), teachers design curricular skill progressions with a sense of the desired learning outcomes at the end of the unit. Dramatically reducing available instructional minutes and the mode of instruction can impede this process, to say nothing of switching courses mid-year.

English and Social Studies; and build community and relationships with students, compounded by the fact that we will be starting with new groups of students. This increase in class size is contradictory to our district's goal of mastery-focused education, as teachers will be unable to build the necessary rapport with students to encourage them through the revision process, and their students' skill progression over the past semester will be jeopardized by the abrupt change in instructor.⁶ Additionally, without knowledge of students, teachers will be unable to differentiate effectively or incorporate appropriate components of universal design for learning.⁷

Moreover, the discrepancy in class sizes is an equity issue.⁸ Students in hybrid classes will receive a radically different experience than students in distance classes, effectively punishing students who want or need to stay home. A student should not be forced into larger class sizes because they have a parent with cancer or severe asthma. As cases in Santa Clara County accumulate, the odds increase that students who select the hybrid model will remain home doing full distance learning—in classes a fraction of the size of their peers'. Regardless, students who are already struggling may now find themselves in distance classes that are significantly bigger with teachers they haven't had before and who have an even greater workload.

We also believe that this plan will impact the students in the hybrid classroom negatively. Rather than productively engaging in group work on Zoom, students will need to work independently, separated from each other, and will mostly still be on their computers. This model will inhibit the kind of constructivist collaborative learning we were trained to facilitate. Teachers' attention will be split between teaching and enforcing safety measures, limiting the quality of their instruction and shifting the focus from learning to compliance. (It warrants consideration how classrooms centered on compliance unduly affect marginalized students.)

Significant questions remain regarding how the hybrid model will support our students with IEPs who have co-teaching written into their IEPs as a service. Will a hybrid model truly support Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) when fewer interactions with teachers and fellow students will be possible? Moreover, we know that a master schedule needs to be built around special education classes first, with the remainder of the master schedule built around that. Will the hybrid schedule support best practices in master scheduling so that our most vulnerable students will be able to access all of their services, including co-taught classes and specialized academic instruction? Will these classes continue to support an ideal of no more than 30% of students in a class with IEPs? We do not believe this was taken into account, and fear that our

⁶ The Equity and Excellence section of the PAUSD Promise encourages “second-chance opportunities for mastery and award[ing] full credit for second attempts when appropriate” (*The PAUSD Promise – Equity & Excellence*).

⁷ The Equity and Excellence section of the PAUSD Promise further aspires to provide “evidence-based instructional strategies (differentiation, universal design, student assistance programming, positive behavioral supports) to meets students [*sic*] where they are” (*The PAUSD Promise – Equity & Excellence*).

⁸While researchers acknowledge it is difficult to quantify the benefits of small class sizes, Ehrenberg, et al., provide a concise summary of the importance of smaller class sizes in “Class Size and Student Achievement” (2001). Using data provided by the Kentucky Department of Education, a 2010 study concluded that the optimum class size is between 21 and 24 students, with potential benefits for even smaller sections (Borland, Howsen, and Trawick).

students with IEPs will not be able to make the progress that they have been making in a distance learning environment.

Furthermore, students' top request was to maintain their current schedules. Students and teachers have established community, connections, class norms, and routines. We will lose all of that relational work. Juniors thinking ahead to college applications were building relationships with teachers who will write their letters of recommendation; seniors who have applied to colleges have to notify schools of all of their course changes. Students, especially juniors and seniors, will face even more stress and uncertainty—the last thing we want for them right now.

This plan also jeopardizes special programs and electives in English and Social Studies. It is almost guaranteed that students in the Small Learning Community and Social Justice Pathways will have to choose between hybrid learning and the program they have joined. Ironically, the students in SLC and SJP are already in stable cohorts, and yet cannot meet in person—one more example that this plan is sacrificing sound pedagogy in favor of numbers and logistics.

Half of our juniors and seniors are scheduled to take a variety of electives in English next semester, yet only a couple of these electives are viable hybrid options. Many students will have to make difficult choices between hybrid learning and the electives they were passionate about taking. Contrary to Dr. Austin's and Ms. Ofek's assertions, this problem is *not* like any other school year, only magnified. It is *not* normal for a section that was already scheduled and populated with students to vanish as an option midyear. In a normal year, a course might not run one semester if enrollment is too low, but that decision is made in the spring, when the master schedule for the next year is made. A small number of students might make schedule changes midyear that impact their elective choice, but that is *nothing* compared to the scale of disruption in students' course selections we will see now.

If a stated goal of in-person learning is social connection, this plan has unintended consequences for students' actual opportunities to connect. Because they will be commuting, students in the hybrid model may not be able to stay in clubs that meet at lunch. These clubs have widespread participation, are valued spaces of social interaction, and help students build experience in their fields of interest. Participating in the hybrid model may also limit students' ability to participate in other extracurriculars, per Santa Clara County guidelines.⁹

The system for how students will be enrolled in hybrid classes also raises questions. Parents rightly expressed concern about the fairness of the lottery system that may have to be used when we allot spaces in hybrid classes after prioritized students are placed. And as Ms. DiBrienza pointed out, there is a lack of clarity in *how* we will systematically prioritize students and determine their relative need to participate in the program and how we balance visible and invisible struggles, or academic and emotional struggles. Will students at different schools be subject to different decision processes? Will the luck of the draw determine if their educational needs are met?

⁹ Again, this is not in keeping with the PAUSD Promise, which seeks to “[e]nsure that historically underrepresented groups gain entrance into, involvement of and full participation in schools, programs and activities within those schools” (*The PAUSD Promise – Equity & Excellence*). Transportation over the lunch break would prevent many students from participating in virtual clubs.

Despite all of the focus on logistics at the Board meeting, there was a missing logistical detail that raises a major equity concern: transportation for students in the Voluntary Transfer Program. Given the time the bus route and cleaning take, is it possible for the proposed number of students to commute between East Palo Alto and school during lunch—and when, exactly, *do* they eat lunch if they spend the whole time on a bus? Given the number of buses in the PAUSD fleet, is it possible to maintain sufficiently distanced and stable cohorts of students so as not to increase the safety risk incurred by some of our most vulnerable students? We do not know, and families do not know. This is an egregious oversight and a blatant retreat from our PAUSD Promise.¹⁰

There was no clear justification given why we should return with *this* plan.

When asked multiple times at the November 10th meeting *why* we are rushing to bring students back with this plan, Ms. Ofek could only answer in broad strokes *how* we would return with this plan. When the question was clarified, her answer was, “So students can come on campus and have a learning experience that’s in person. … We heard that similar thinking [that student-teacher relationships would be disrupted] from when we were presenting the elementary model, and we currently have over 2,000 students returning to the elementary school every week for in-person instruction. So, you know, I can’t—this is the proposal, this is the plan, this is how we can achieve an on-campus, in-person experience for students who choose it.” This response is a non-answer at best. It disregards safety. It disregards pedagogy. It disregards PAUSD’s push for all teachers to build bonds and relationships with all students.

We have other options to get students back on campus. We can expand and improve PAUSD+. We can expand on-campus activities within County health guidelines. We can revisit the PAEA counter-proposal (see Appendix) and work out the logistics of an asynchronous day with in-person options that would be strikingly similar to the “joyful Monday” suggested at the Board meeting. Teachers *are* willing to work in-person when the academic and social-emotional benefits to our students outweigh the costs and risks incurred by all.

Also at the November 10th meeting, Dr. Austin said, “Not coming back is easier. We chose hard. I hope that we’re a district that chooses the tougher route every single time.” We know that for board members, the politically expedient option—what most of their constituents want—is for us to bring students back. Bringing students back is the *easy* choice for administrators and for board members.

We should be a district that makes the hard decision to choose wisely, to choose reality over what is politically easy. We *all* want our hallways to “sound like school again,” but the appearance of school is not the same as real public education - one committed to principles of equity - and we know that student learning is what matters most. We should be a district that

¹⁰ This directly violates the PAUSD Promise to “provide equitable access with transportation to after-school services and opportunities” (*The PAUSD Promise – Equity & Excellence*). While in these extraordinary times after-school services and opportunities are limited, surely access to class time and time to eat fall under this mandate.

follows sound pedagogy. We should be a district that chooses to do right by our students. We urge you to reconsider your vote on coming back in this model.

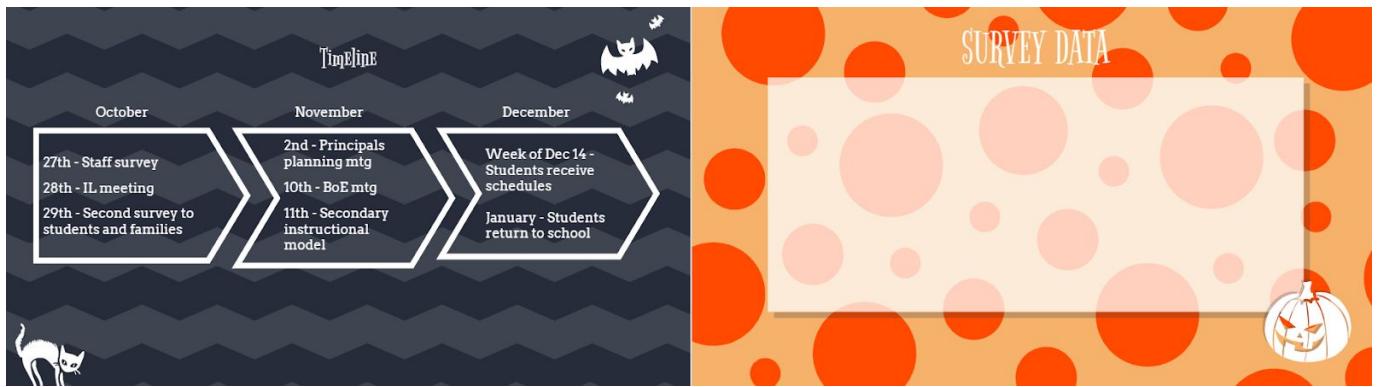
Sincerely,

Kate Zavack, English
Laurel Howard, Social Studies
Diane Ichikawa, English
Chris Johnson, Social Studies
Terence Kitada, English
Brian Miguel, Social Studies
Philip Lyons, Social Studies
Katherine Ja, English
Ethan Halter, English
Nicole Menache, English
Haley Perkins, Social Studies
Shaina Holdener, English
Patricia Holmes, Social Studies
Arthur Kinyanjui, Social Studies
David Bisbee, Social Studies
Mark Hernandez, English
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Adriana Aro, Special Education
Cathy Bissegger, Special Education
Ginny Moyer, English
Lynne Navarro, Social Studies
Quan Sims, Special Education
Julie Munger, English
Jennel Lopez, Special Education
Marjorie Paronable, English
Marc Igler, English
Paul Dunlap, English
Tarn Wilson, English
Nora Matta, Social Studies
Lynn Tabuchi, Special Education
Justin Brown, English
Jeff Patrick, Social Studies
Warren Collier, Social Studies
Ariane Richard Tuomy, Social Studies

Appendix

Slides prepared by the District for October 28th optional IL meeting:



PAEA's proposed schedule:

Proposed Secondary Bell Schedule –Asynchronous for FDL or 7-Period In-Person v. 1

Maintains current FDL master schedule with opportunity for face-to-face interactions

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Prep/Collaboration Time 9:00-10:15AM 1°	Prep/Collaboration Time 9:40-10:55AM 5°	8:30-9:30 Staff/Dept. Meeting 10-11:10AM: 1° / 2°	Prep/Collaboration Time 9:00-10:15AM 1°	Prep/Collaboration Time 9:40-10:55AM 5°
10:25-11:40 2°	11:05-11:40AM Advisory/GT	11:20-12:30PM 3° / 4°	10:25-11:40 2°	11:05-11:40AM Advisory/SELF
11:40AM-12:10PM Lunch	11:40AM-12:10PM Lunch	12:30-1:10PM Lunch	11:40AM-12:10PM Lunch	11:40AM-12:10PM Lunch
12:20-1:40PM 3°	12:20-1:40PM 6°	1:10-2:20PM 5° / 6°	12:20-1:40PM 3°	12:20-1:40PM 6°
1:50-3:05PM 4°	1:50-3:05PM 7°	2:20-3:30PM 7° / Schoolwide community activity	1:50-3:05PM 4°	1:50-3:05PM 7°
3:10-3:40PM Office Hours	3:10-3:40PM Office Hours		3:10-3:40PM Office Hours	

Proposed Secondary Bell Schedule –Asynchronous for FDL or 7-Period In-Person v. 2

Maintains current FDL master schedule with opportunity for face-to-face interactions

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Prep/Collaboration Time 9:00-10:15AM 1°	Prep/Collaboration Time 9:40-10:55AM 5°	8:30-9:30 Staff/Dept. Meeting 9:40-10:20AM 1°	Prep/Collaboration Time 9:00-10:15AM 1°	Prep/Collaboration Time 9:40-10:55AM 5°
10:25-11:40 2°	11:05-11:40AM Advisory/GT	10:30-11:10AM 2°	10:25-11:40 2°	11:05-11:40AM Advisory/SELF
11:40AM-12:10PM Lunch	11:40AM-12:10PM Lunch	11:20AM-12:00PM 3°	11:40AM-12:10PM Lunch	11:40AM-12:10PM Lunch
12:20-1:40PM 3°	12:20-1:40PM 6°	12:00-12:40PM Lunch	12:20-1:40PM 3°	12:20-1:40PM 6°
1:50-3:05PM 4°	1:50-3:05PM 7°	12:40-1:10PM 4°	1:50-3:05PM 4°	1:50-3:05PM 7°
3:10-3:40PM Office Hours	3:10-3:40PM Office Hours	1:20-2:00PM 5° 2:10-2:50PM 6° 3:00-3:40PM 7°	3:10-3:40PM Office Hours	