

**Comments from David Fisher, President of the Sacramento City Teachers Association to the Sacramento City Unified School District Board of Education, September 3, 2020.**

**Agenda Item, 10.1, Employee Organization Reports**

Good evening. I'm David Fisher, president of the Sacramento City Teachers Association. I'm also a second-grade teacher and the parent of recent Sac City graduate as well as a current Sac City high school student.

The start of the school year as a parent and teacher always brings with it a sense of excitement with the hope of a new year of possibilities. This year, however, it is different. Rather than excitement, many teachers feel anxiety. Some of that anxiety is understandable—a national political leadership working to heighten tension and chaos rather than calm fears; the murder of African-Americans by police officers across the country; an international pandemic that has already taken nearly 200,000 American lives and has devastated the economy; the 900 wild fires burning throughout California.

And then there's Distance Learning. During this pandemic and through the District's proposed Distance Learning plan, we are deeply concerned that the equity gap in Sac City will widen.

Over the weekend and through Monday, our 85-person bargaining team met with the District for over thirty hours in an effort to reach an agreement on the District's Distance Learning plan. Our proposal, which was developed by more than 200 frontline educators with the additional input from more than one thousand more of their colleagues emphasizes the importance of relying on the professional judgement of teachers to meet the educational needs of our students. Unfortunately, it was completely ignored by the District's bargaining team, rejecting the input and experience of some of the most dedicated educators in the region, if not the state.

Sac City teachers are united in their belief that the distance learning program proposed by the District that stresses the quantity of screen time over the quality of learning, with rigid, inflexible schedules will only serve to create a demoralizing learning environment that will put hard-to reach students even further behind their peers when classes resume in-person.

Internet connectivity is a serious issue in many of Sacramento's most impoverished neighborhoods. In Sac City many of our students will have to leave their homes to access Internet spots, including city school buses parked in lots, while braving temperatures that continue to soar above one hundred degrees. Sacramento isn't a special case. A photo of two Salinas, California elementary students studying on the curbside of a Taco Bell went viral on social media and national broadcast television during the first week of the month. We now also understand that several schools have run out of Chromebooks, further worsening the problem.

In addition to the digital divide challenges faced by those just starting school during the Covid crisis, many older students will have to work to help support their families during this time of economic hardship. Other students are living in tight quarters or are forced to share devices and connections with siblings and parents. It is critical that teachers are given the flexibility and support to do what they have been trained to do—teach. The public health and educational challenges we are facing during the pandemic are constantly changing. It makes no sense for districts to be rigid.

The “more is better approach” emphasized by the Sacramento City Unified School District dismisses the importance of the professional judgement of teachers in the educational process. A good teacher is like a doctor. They prescribe remedies based on experience and best practices and if the first approach doesn't work, they try a different remedy.

As teachers, we, rather than administrators in the central office building, are in the best position to assess and address the ongoing educational needs of our students. For those students who need additional intervention and support, we can adjust our teaching to accommodate our instruction to provide the differentiated instruction our students deserve. The District's proposal does not allow for teachers to exercise this flexibility and professional judgement.

During one recent bargaining meeting with the Sacramento Unified School District this weekend, one of the teachers on our bargaining team, an elementary school teacher with twenty-four years of experience put it this way: “It's like a patient whose doctor recommends one milligram daily of vitamin C decides that if one milligram is good, maybe ten milligrams would be better.”

And it's important here to identify what is and what is not in dispute.

The length of the teachers' workday—is not in dispute.  
Teacher pay—is not in dispute.

The use of Google Classrooms as the District instructional platform—is not in dispute.

How Distance Learning is defined—is not in dispute.

The need for teachers to collaborate with their colleagues—is not in dispute.

So what then are the major sticking points?

1. The minimum number of minutes required for live screen time instruction. Unlike other surrounding districts where those minutes are either left entirely to the discretion of teachers, or are closer to the standards recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization, SCUSD is demanding a “more is better,” excessive number of required screen time instruction.
2. Services for students who are unable to participate in regularly scheduled distance learning. SCUSD is demanding an impractical, one-size-fits all approach. According to SCUSD’s demand, teachers will record their lessons for students to access at some unspecified time, potentially with no additional support. In contrast, SCTA is proposing multiple pathways including
  - Independent study
  - District-sponsored home school
  - Additional tutoring
  - Alternative work schedules for some teachers
  - Additional staff who can provide individualized targeted support
  - Teacher-created Grade level website based instruction
3. Special Education. Special education teachers are drowning under the increased volume of paperwork—with distance learning the District now faces making changes to 7000 IEPs in the beginning of 2020-2021 alone. Rather than provide any additional administrative or clerical support that District administrators acknowledged was necessary during our 2 workgroup meeting, the District ignored that commitment and simply proposes to continue to pile that work on teachers with no relief and no solution. As a result, special education teachers will be taken away from providing valuable instruction in order to focus on paperwork that could be handled by District administrators.
4. Split Classes. By contract, the District is obligated to make every effort to avoid split classes. Split classes are never a good option, in a distance learning environment even less so.

Fortunately, the California Public Employment Relations Board has agreed with teachers that are bargaining is at impasse. That means that we now will be joined in

our discussions by mediators appointed by the State of California to help us bridge our differences.

We hope to be in mediation as soon as tomorrow, with the hope of reaching a mutually-agreeable solution by the time classes resume on Tuesday.

In a brick and mortar setting, classroom teachers are empowered to use their professional judgement to educate students, consistent with the board-adopted curriculum. Distance learning should not be any different.

And here, the recent comments from an assistant superintendent in neighboring Folsom Cordova “who placed his full faith in teachers” are worth noting: “Teachers are the educational experts. They went through a lot of training, a lot of college, and a lot of credentialing classes on how to engage kids and help them with their learning.”

There is no reason such respect for teachers should not apply here in Sac City as well.