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Health director calls for hard 3-week school shutdown in L.A. county amid deadly COVID surge



Los Angeles County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer on Thursday called for all K-12 campuses to stop in-person instruction through January but stopped short of ordering them to do so. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

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Los Angeles County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer on Thursday called for all K-12 campuses to shut down through January amid the [raging coronavirus surge](#), but

stopped short of ordering them to close.

Ferrer said the danger is too great from the [unprecedented prevalence](#) of COVID-19 in the community to continue to provide in-person services and instruction on campuses except in rare cases where it is absolutely necessary. She also called for a pause in athletic conditioning, which has been allowed.

“I’m strongly recommending that schools not reopen for in-person instruction,” Ferrer said on a call with school leaders. “I’m recommending this for three weeks until the end of January.”



She also urged school administrators to strictly limit exceptions to her recommendation.

Regarding “students who really do need the additional support, but could, in fact, go back to virtual for three weeks, I would highly recommend that schools consider providing as many services for students virtually as possible.”

No school in L.A. County has been allowed to reopen fully for all students since the pandemic resulted in campus closures last March.

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Instead, the vast majority of students have been taking classes online from home. In October, the county began permitting schools to bring back [up to 25% of enrollment at a given time](#) to serve students with special needs, such as those learning English or those with disabilities. Under these guidelines, students can receive in-person services individually or as part of small, stable groups. Schools also can bring back students in transitional kindergarten through second grade [with a county-approved waiver](#).

Some districts have pursued these options [more assertively than others](#). Generally, districts in higher-income communities — where infections rates have been lower — [have moved more quickly](#) to provide in-person services and instruction.

Ferrer made her recommendation in two calls that she and other officials defined as private briefings for senior school district officials and school operators, including those who manage private schools. The Times was able to listen to a recording of one call and obtained information about the other.

In the taped call, Ferrer prepared school leaders for the bad news by outlining the [grim situation in L.A. County](#) — 22% of tests are positive for the virus, over 19,000 daily cases, more than 200 deaths each of the last three days, more than 8,400 hospitalized, taking up nearly half the beds available to adults in the county and overwhelming intensive care units.

In such conditions, she said, all activities are significantly riskier and should be limited — and that includes providing in-person services at campuses.

One school leader asked why Ferrer did not simply order schools to close. She said such an order would make it easier to explain to parents.

Ferrer replied that the county is trying to remain consistent with the state's preferred regional approach. It wasn't clear whether she was referring to less-restrictive approaches in nearby counties or Gov. Gavin Newsom's push to open campuses.

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Newsom last week announced that he plans to seek \$2 billion in funding to open schools, hoping to bring back students in kindergarten through second grade by mid-

February, with older elementary students soon to follow. His plan contained few details, which Ferrer and her team acknowledged in the calls. She said they, too, are trying to learn more details.

Ferrer's associate Dr. Robert Gilchick offered one important detail from a draft of Newson's reopening plan that he had seen: Districts that want access to the new funding would have to conduct coronavirus testing according to recommended state guidelines. Another expected state rule calls for all students to wear masks, which L.A. County already requires, he said.

For the moment, the pandemic [has curtailed reopening efforts](#) in many school systems.

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On a more encouraging note, Ferrer said she expected teachers could begin receiving a vaccine in February. But she added a caveat: Those plans would rely on the availability of vaccine doses and the county is not yet certain what its allotment will be.

Ferrer also reiterated that the health department is looking at the potential effects of a [new, more contagious variety of the virus](#) that has made it to the L.A. area.

One school leader wanted to know if the presence of the new variant might mean that students and teachers would need to be more than six feet away from each other, which

is the current standard.

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Ferrer said her department is looking at that issue along with many other unknowns.

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