

**LEFT OUT:**  
**Media bias allows wealthier and healthier communities to set terms of in-person instruction debate**

**March 2021**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a disconnect playing out between what parents want for their children during the COVID-19 pandemic versus the narrative that large media organizations have constructed portraying an overwhelming demand for in-person instruction. Corporate media outlets have prioritized the voices of those representing affluent neighborhoods that have escaped the worst health and economic impacts from the pandemic, and those in the business sector who stand to gain financially from a move to in-person instruction, regardless of widespread transmission of COVID-19.

A particularly egregious example of this bias in coverage was a February 17, 2021 editorial from The Editorial Board of the *LA Times* where they asserted that “most parents vehemently want their kids back in the classroom.”<sup>1</sup> The editorial board made this unfounded assertion when polls across the country contradict it: the majority of parents, especially when disaggregated by race (Black, Latinx, Asian) and class (working class/lower-income), will not be ready to send their children into physical buildings for in-person instruction until it is safe. The manufactured narrative portraying an overwhelming demand for in-person instruction is reflected in the supposedly unbiased articles as well as the editorial pages of the *LA Times*.

This report analyzes the geographic and economic class of the voices the *LA Times* has chosen to elevate on the subject of in-person instruction in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also examines the position that the quoted individuals take on a return to in-person instruction, especially individuals identified as parents. The analysis covers *LA Times* articles from June 2020 through January 2021 and finds that the voices of the most affluent are disproportionately given a platform, over those who are most at-risk of exposure to the most debilitating and long-term effects of the pandemic.

We focus on the *LA Times* because it is a respected national newspaper and arguably particularly important for both shaping the perception of, and the actuality of, public opinion that local politicians use to justify their policy decisions. Our analysis shows that:

- 58% of the voices elevated by the *LA Times* over the last 8 months have been from professional/higher income individuals, small business owners, or millionaires – even though more than 80 percent of Los Angeles Unified families qualify for Free and Reduced-Price Meals. Less than 9 percent of the voices come from persons identified as working class or low-income.
- Voices are also concentrated among those representing higher income communities within LAUSD, with over 40 percent of voices representing Central and West Los Angeles: voices closest to financial institutions in Downtown and Mid-town Los Angeles and those on the Westside, representing beach communities like Venice, wealthy enclaves like Westwood (consistently one of the most expensive places to live outside of Manhattan) and the Pacific Palisades (where 78% of residents are non-Hispanic white, compared to only 29% in Los Angeles overall).<sup>2,3</sup> Meanwhile, those representing communities in

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<sup>1</sup> “Editorial: L.A. Unified is officially out of excuses for keeping elementary schools closed,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-02-17/editorial-l-a-unified-is-officially-out-of-excuses-for-keeping-elementary-schools-closed>, accessed on February 28, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> “Los Angeles County (Central)–LA City (Central/Pacific Palisades) PUMA, CA,” American Census Reporter, 2019, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/79500US0603727-los-angeles-county-central-la-city-centralpacific-palisades-puma-ca/>, accessed on February 28, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> “Los Angeles, CA,” Census Reporter, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US0644000-los-angeles-ca/>, accessed on March 2, 2021.

South LA (Watts, Gardena) and East San Fernando Valley (Pacoima, Sun Valley) made up less than 10 percent of voices the *LA Times* has chosen to platform. The geographic disproportionality becomes even more stark when looking only at individuals identified as parents within LAUSD borders: 28%, or over 1 in 4, of the parental quotes come from individuals representing the West Local District.

- Finally, when looking quotes provided by individuals identified as parents, 65% of those quoted say they want to return to in-person instruction now, with only 35% of parents saying to open only when it's safe. Unsurprisingly, given the bias towards providing a platform for higher income individuals and individuals representing wealthier, healthier, and less diverse communities, this last data point contradicts what many surveys show: that most parents want safe, reliable instruction during this crisis. Especially for parents from communities that have suffered disproportionately during this pandemic, this means investing in improved distance learning until it is more clearly safe to return to in-person instruction.

The data are clear: **The *LA Times* is manufacturing a narrative around supposed overwhelming demands for a return to in-person instruction by choosing to dominate their stories with voices from affluent individuals and individuals from geographies that tend to have experienced less illness and death from the pandemic.** The implications of this biased coverage are far reaching as it impacts public policy decision making. Politicians like Governor Gavin Newsom, Los Angeles City Councilmember Joe Buscaino, and County Supervisor Kathryn Barger, among others, have taken aggressive stances on reopening schools and the economy despite the depth of illness and death in Black, Brown, and Asian communities – influenced, no doubt, by the media coverage of large news organizations.

A newspaper should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. When the *LA Times* manufactures a narrative that overrepresents whiter, healthier, wealthier communities, at the expense of communities whose children make up the vast majority of students in LAUSD, they give permission to policymakers to do the same. It is imperative that the media provide people with information they need to make the most informed decisions about their lives, especially one as fraught with consequences as a return to in-person schooling during a deadly pandemic. That requires fairly representing the communities that would be impacted by these decisions.

## LEFT OUT: MEDIA BIAS ALLOWS WEALTHIER AND HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES TO SET TERMS OF IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION DEBATE

Based on polls and articles found in mainstream media, there is a fraught debate on whether in-person instruction should be provided right now during a pandemic. A significant population want to remain in remote learning until community conditions are safe enough to ensure that school staff, students, and their families, who may live with different risk factors such as crowded multigenerational housing, are protected from the virus. There are also many people who believe schools can use in-school mitigation measures such as distancing and hand washing to provide a safe return regardless of community spread. There are some who have calculated a cost-benefit analysis that prioritizes the “learning loss” students are experiencing during a global pandemic over the risk of infection and death. All these varied positions respond to the question: How do we reopen schools during an uncontrolled pandemic?<sup>4</sup>

Science may provide guidance on how to proceed, but that does not necessarily address other factors, such as how the role of corporate mainstream media affects public opinion and elected officials’ actions regarding a safe restart of in-person instruction. Polling, when done appropriately, provides a snapshot of where a given population stands at a specific point in time. Many polls and surveys have been performed regarding when students should restart in-person instruction, and the results are varied. FiveThirtyEight surveyed the universe of polls on in-person instruction and found that results vary widely based on several factors, such as how questions are phrased, where the poll is conducted (e.g., if schools have already opened for in-person instruction in that location), and which group is conducting the poll. However, FiveThirtyEight makes three conclusions from its collective analysis:<sup>5</sup>

- 1) The debate on in-person instruction has been simplistically framed using the traditional journalism practice of situating two groups on opposite poles. This approach results in constructing a narrative that pits parents, calling for schools to reopen, against teachers, resisting those demands; even though parents and teachers have roughly the same opinion as the general public.
- 2) This debate has become highly politicized, with Republicans on the “in-person instruction now” side and Democrats on the “reopen when it is safer” side.
- 3) Parents, regardless of political affiliation, are generally satisfied with the decisions made by their school districts.

FiveThirtyEight’s first finding is critical. As groups, both parents and teachers’ opinion on restarting in-person instruction range across the board but positioning these groups as opposites is a *constructed narrative*. Polling suggests that parents are generally satisfied with decisions made by their school districts, whether that

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<sup>4</sup> This approach has resulted in over 500,000 dead Americans. Perhaps instead we should have asked the more fundamental question: how do we control the pandemic so we can safely reopen schools and other sectors of the economy?

<sup>5</sup> Nathaniel Rakich, “Polls On Reopening Schools Are All Over The Map,” *FiveThirtyEight*, February 19, 2021, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/polls-on-reopening-schools-are-all-over-the-map/>, accessed on February 19, 2021.

decision is to restart in-person instruction now, in-person instruction for vulnerable students only, or staying in distance learning.

*Parents who want more in-person instruction “may have outsized sway with politicians and those hoping for better remote instruction, who are disproportionately families of color,” have received less attention.*

Traditional journalism often positions at least two entities on a given issue. However, presenting this as a “balanced” position is not necessarily reflective of actual public opinion. Many polls since the summer of 2020 show that a majority of parents do not feel comfortable sending their children to in-person instruction until it is safer. But if one based their understanding of parents’ position on returning to in-person instruction solely on *LA Times* articles, a conclusion would be well over half of parents want their children to return to school campuses

now. A recent *Chalkbeat* article suggests that parents who want more in-person instruction “may have outsized sway with politicians and those hoping for better remote instruction, who are disproportionately families of color,” have received less attention.<sup>6</sup>

Our results demonstrate that mainstream media like the *LA Times* amplifies professional/higher-income voices at the expense of working class/low-income voices. This paper analyzes the class and geography of individuals represented in *LA Times* articles, where LAUSD is central to the article. We find:

1. Individuals quoted in these *LA Times* articles are disproportionately professional/higher-income socio-economic class relative to the demographics of LAUSD families, where 80% qualify for free or reduced meals.<sup>7</sup>
2. Quoted individuals disproportionately represent Central and West Los Angeles: voices closest to financial institutions in Downtown and Mid-town Los Angeles and those on the Westside, representing beach communities like Venice, wealthy enclaves like Westwood (consistently one of the most expensive places to live outside of Manhattan) and the Pacific Palisades (where 78% of residents are non-Hispanic white, compared to only 29% in Los Angeles overall).<sup>8,9</sup>
3. This geographic disproportionality becomes even more stark when looking only at individuals identified as parents: 28%, or over 1 in 4, of the parental quotes come from individuals representing the West Local District.

Analyzing this editorially distorting filter of disproportionate reporting from specific classes and geographies is important for deconstructing how the media helps manufacture consent for policy decisions on in-person instruction, and understanding who benefits from the manufactured narrative that parents want in-person instruction whether or not it jeopardizes lives.

<sup>6</sup> Matt Barnum, “Polls show most — though not all — parents are getting the type of instruction they want for their kids,” *Chalkbeat*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2021/2/18/22289735/parents-polls-schools-opening-remote>, accessed on February 18, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> “Los Angeles Unified,” Education Data Partnership, <http://www.ed-data.org/district/Los-Angeles/Los-Angeles-Unified>, accessed on February 16, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Los Angeles County (Central)--LA City (Central/Pacific Palisades) PUMA, CA,” American Census Reporter, 2019, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/79500US0603727-los-angeles-county-central-la-city-centralpacific-palisades-puma-ca/>, accessed on February 28, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> “Los Angeles, CA,” Census Reporter, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US0644000-los-angeles-ca/>, accessed on March 2, 2021.

## ■ METHOD

We focused on the *LA Times* because it is a respected national newspaper and arguably particularly important for both shaping the perception of, and the actuality of, public opinion that local politicians use to justify their policy decisions. We reviewed *LA Times* articles written by 22 reporters and columnists from June 2020 (the approximate start of the summer COVID surge) through February 5, 2021.<sup>10</sup> We found 105 articles on LAUSD from June 25, 2020 to February 5, 2021. Articles on LAUSD like School Board elections and defunding the school police are included in the study even though there is no mention of returning to school for in-person instruction or distance learning. Articles on tutoring services during a time of remote learning or restarting in-person instruction in other California counties that do not mention LAUSD are not included among the 105 articles.

We counted a total of 304 quotes by individuals in the 105 articles. We did not count the individuals who are directly related to the LAUSD or public health governance, rather only counting what we classified as supplemental voices (herein referred to as “voices”) in the articles. For example, LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner and elected political figures and official county-wide or state-wide representatives like Public Health Directors Dr. Barbara Ferrer or Dr. Mark Ghaly are not counted in our analysis. We also did not include Superintendents from other districts that are often compared with LAUSD. If we had included these categories, the count of quotes would be overwhelmingly those three categories. There is a journalistic logic of approaching and quoting individuals with direct authority over LAUSD and school reopening policy. We focused the analysis on the other individuals that reporters chose to supplement their articles. We include school principals, parents, educators, students, pundits, and unnamed voices as voices. We identified multiple variables for the individuals who provided the 304 different quotes, some of which are based solely from the content of the article and some which are based on exogenous sources.

When designating voices, we counted multiple quotes by the same individual in the same article as one voice. A voice may be represented multiple times in the analysis if that individual is quoted in multiple articles. A unique individual will always have the same socio-economic class but may have a different relationship to education or position in restarting schools based in the description of the voice in the discrete article itself.

Among the variables analyzed are:

1. Socio-economic class
2. Geography
3. Relationship to education
4. Position on return to in-person instruction

Socio-economic class is designated among the list of working class/low-income, middle class, small business owner, professional class/higher-income, millionaire class or unknown. Socio-economic class determination is determined first as given in the article, second from self-identification, and third if information on employment could be found elsewhere (e.g., LinkedIn). Working class/lower income include tutors who make a stipend, individuals who self-identified with quotes like, “We’re mostly working class, and we go to factories and we take the bus.” An Uber driver, and part-time workers are also classified as working class/lower income. Middle

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<sup>10</sup> The *LA Times* is notoriously known to have a non-functional search function for a word search which is why “LAUSD” or “Los Angeles Unified School District,” was not used to find articles on LAUSD.

class voices include educators, organizational non-managerial staff, and also police officers, librarians and hospital nurses. Professional class/higher income include school and district administrators, professors, doctors, lawyers, managerial staff, and non-profit directors. Elected union officers that come from the membership are coded as their respective socio-economic class (e.g., UTLA officers are educators and classified as middle-class), but a Union Communications Director is coded as a professional. Individuals are coded as millionaires only when it is explicitly mentioned in the article itself.

Geography is based on location as given in the article or the location of the quoted individual's affiliation, such as a school or organization. Geography is then associated with one of the six LAUSD local districts, or "other LA County," or "Not LA County."<sup>11</sup> We matched schools and organizational locations through the maps located on the LAUSD website.<sup>12</sup> When geography is ambiguous based on our geography grouping, web research is conducted to narrow the focus, for example, San Fernando Valley is large and the size of city of Philadelphia. Through additional research, the location can be narrowed to West San Fernando Valley (Northwest District) and East San Fernando Valley (Northeast District).

Relationship to education is based on the description in the article itself and is chosen from a set list of educator, parent, student, educational organization, other organization, or unknown/other. Educator includes teachers and other educational setting classifications like counselor, school nurse, school librarian, or school psychiatric social worker. Parents and students are designated as identified in the article. Education organization is used as the designation when the individual is affiliated with a university, college, individual K-12 school campus, or an organization whose mission is based on education. Other organization is designated when an individual is associated with an organization, corporation or company whose mission is not directly related to education, such as a law firm, healthcare company or community organization. Coding the category of "relationship to education" is based on the context of the article. For instance, Melina Abdullah, co-founder of Black Lives Matter LA, is quoted as a parent in a *LA Times* article regarding education, so she is coded as a "parent" instead of "other organization."

## ■ RESULTS

### ■ ■ ■ Class

We found that the *LA Times* quoted professional/higher-income individuals most frequently. 44.1% of voices are categorized as professional/higher-income, versus only 6.9% from working class/Lower-income individuals. When professional/higher income individuals are grouped with small business owners and millionaires, these individuals make up the majority of voices given a platform by the *LA Times* (see **Figure 1**). Juxtaposed against the fact that over 80% of LAUSD students receive free or reduced-price meals, in which eligibility is up to 200% of the poverty line, supplemental voices clearly overrepresent professional/higher income voices and are not representative of LAUSD demographics.<sup>13</sup>

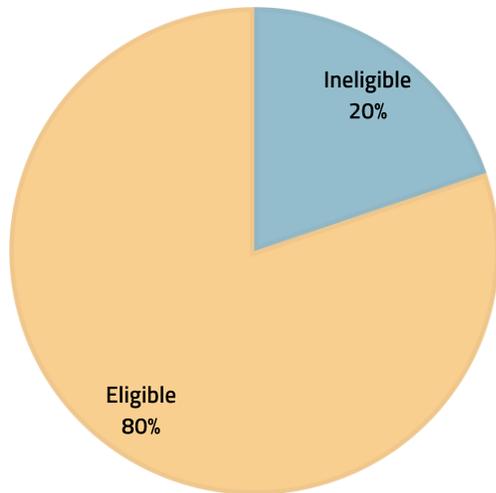
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<sup>11</sup> As a result of designating geography by Local LAUSD District, some designations do not fit with the commonly known areas like South LA, which contains parts of East, South and West Local Districts within that area. Dorsey High School is a known large school in South LA, but when based on the political boundaries, the school resides in the West Local District. Additionally, some voices reside just outside the LAUSD boundaries, like Lynwood or Burbank. These voices are designated as "Other LA County," despite residing blocks away from the LAUSD border.

<sup>12</sup> Los Angeles Unified School District, <https://achieve.lausd.net/ld>, accessed on February 12, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> "Los Angeles Unified," Education Data Partnership, <http://www.ed-data.org/district/Los-Angeles/Los-Angeles-Unified>, accessed on February 16, 2021.

LAUSD ELIGIBILITY FOR FREE AND REDUCED PRICE MEALS



LA TIMES VOICES BY CLASS

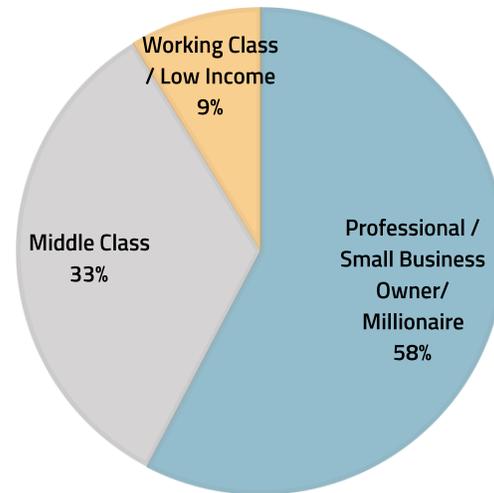


FIGURE 1: LAUSD Eligibility for Free and Reduced Price Meals vs. *LA Times* Voices By Class (excluding “unknown”)

### Geography

LAUSD is the second largest school district in the county and is divided into six local districts: Northeast, Northwest, West, Central, South, and East. The six local districts are roughly the same size, with Central, East and South slightly larger than Northeast, Northwest and West. Each of the six local districts would by themselves be the second largest school district in the State of California behind San Diego Unified. The local districts do not have a clear neighborhood designation are divided like a political district (see Figure 2).

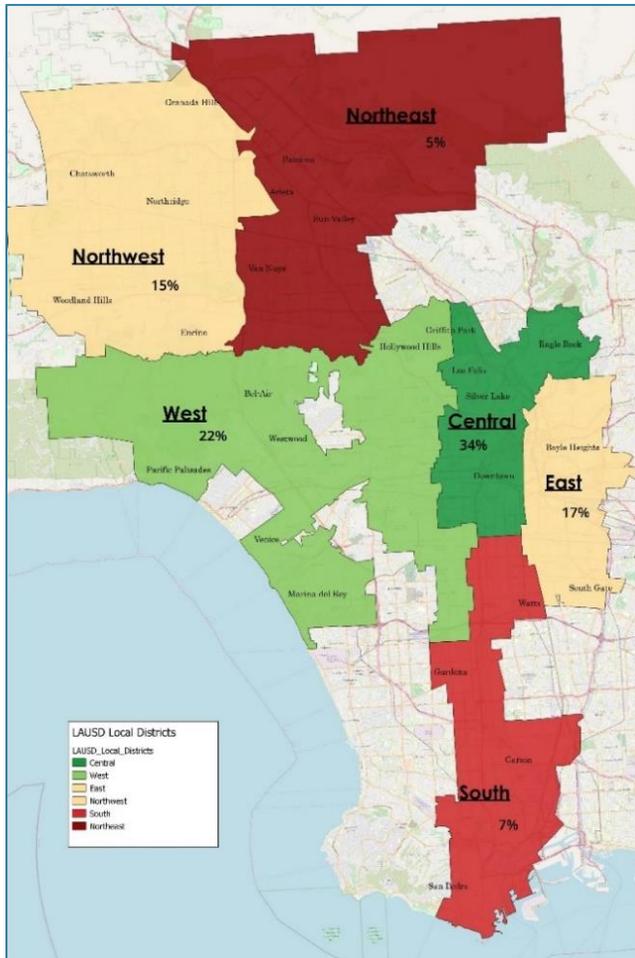
- The Northwest Local District can be described as the West San Fernando Valley, which is adjacent to Simi Valley, and includes neighborhoods like Granada Hills, Encino, and Chatsworth.
- The Northeast Local District can be described as East San Fernando Valley and includes the City of San Fernando and neighborhoods like Pacoima (where approximately two-thirds of adults have less than a high school education) and Sun Valley.<sup>14</sup>
- The West Local District includes wealthy beach enclaves like Venice and Pacific Palisades (where the average household income is over \$300,000); Westwood, home to the world-renowned University of California Los Angeles and which consistently ranks as one of the most expensive places to live outside of Manhattan, as well as Baldwin Hills, the Miracle Mile and parts of South LA.<sup>15</sup>
- The Central Local District includes the financial hub of Downtown Los Angeles (DTLA) as well as rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods such as Eagle Rock and Silver Lake, as well as parts of South LA, including the University of Southern California.
- The East Local District includes heavily Latino neighborhoods such as East L.A. (where 1 in 10 people have tested positive for COVID 19, the highest of any region in the county), and SE Los Angeles County

<sup>14</sup> “Los Angeles County--LA (North Central/Arleta & Pacoima) & San Fernando Cities PUMA, CA,” Census Reporter, 2019, <http://censusreporter.org/profiles/79500US0603707-los-angeles-county-la-north-centralarleta-pacoima-san-fernando-cities-puma-ca/>, accessed on February 28, 2021.

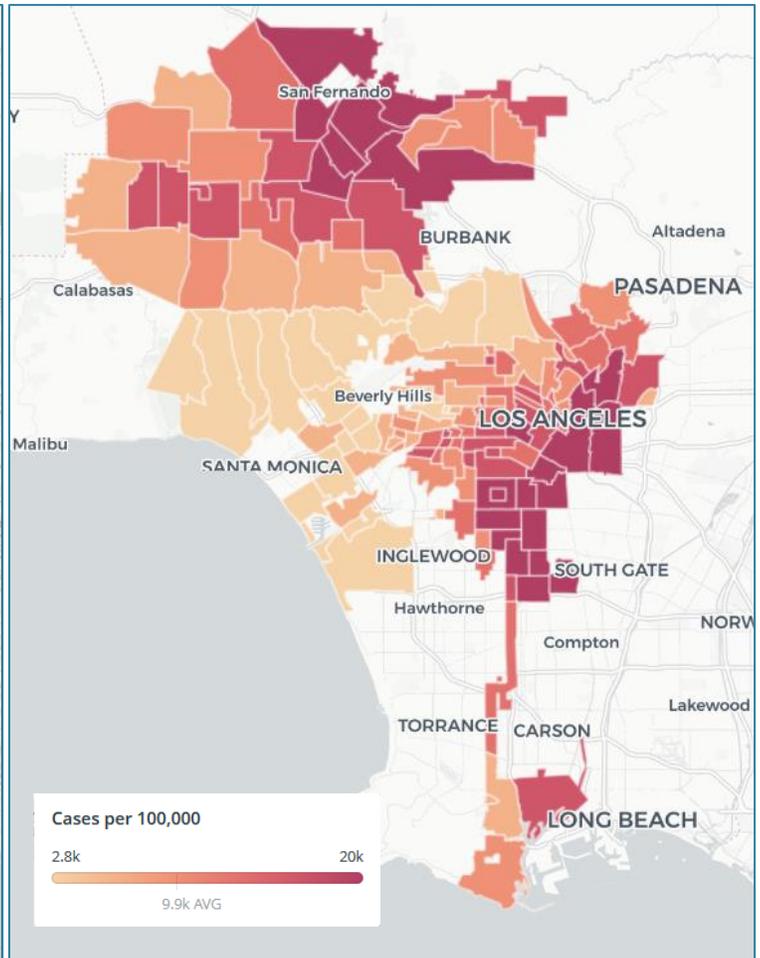
<sup>15</sup> Census 2019 American Community Survey “Pacific Palisades Demographics,” Point2Homes, <https://www.point2homes.com/US/Neighborhood/CA/Los-Angeles/Pacific-Palisades-Demographics.html>, accessed on March 2, 2021.

cities like Bell, Cudahy and South Gate, which are among the most densely populated areas in the U.S.<sup>16,17</sup>

- The South Local District includes areas like areas Watts and San Pedro, and cities like the ethnically diverse Gardena, and Carson, one of the cities with the highest Pacific Islander communities in the U.S.<sup>18</sup>



**FIGURE 2a:** Percentage of LA Times voices by LAUSD Local District, of those voices within LAUSD boundaries



**FIGURE 2b:** COVID-19 cases per 100,000 by Los Angeles Neighborhood as of January 30, 2021<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 2a** illustrates how the Central and West local districts compose 56% of all the voices from LAUSD when the South and Northeast local districts compose only 12% of all the voices. Juxtaposed against **Figure 2b**,

<sup>16</sup> Marisa Gerber, Andrea Castillo, Julia Barajas, Andrew J. Campa, "COVID-19 has stolen lives, broken families, widened the wealth gap and rewired life in East L.A.," Los Angeles Times, December 28, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-12-28/coronavirus-east-la>, accessed on February 28, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> "List of United States cities by population density," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_United\\_States\\_cities\\_by\\_population\\_density](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_United_States_cities_by_population_density), accessed on February 28, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.kcet.org/people/elson-trinidad>. "L.A. County Is the Capital of Asian America." KCET, 27 September 27, 2013, [www.kcet.org/social-focus/l-a-county-is-the-capital-of-asian-america](http://www.kcet.org/social-focus/l-a-county-is-the-capital-of-asian-america), Accessed Mar 1, 2021.

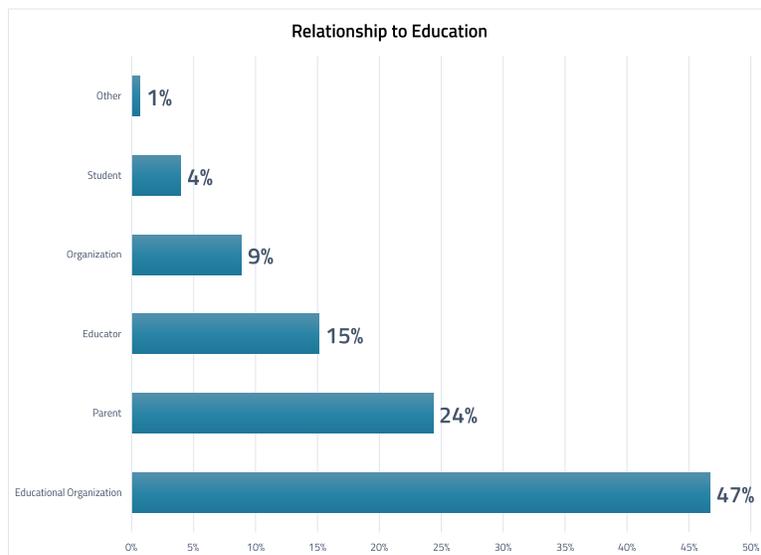
<sup>19</sup> City News Service, "LA Neighborhood Map Details COVID-19 Cases and Deaths," December 21, 2020, NBC Los Angeles, <https://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/coronavirus/southern-california-coronavirus/los-angeles-la-neighborhood-coronavirus-cases-deaths-map-covid-19/2490987/>, accessed on March 2, 2021.

which illustrates the cases per 100,000 for Los Angeles neighborhoods, it becomes clear that a high number of voices are coming from areas that have experienced less illness and death from the pandemic. The high number of voices from the Central Local District is partially due to the high number of unions and non-profit organizations located in or adjacent to the downtown area. When considering all voices including those outside of LAUSD, 18% of voices are from outside of LA County. The Bay Area in particular, with 17 voices, represents a greater number of voices than from the Northeast or the South. The *LA Times* may be competing to represent itself as the paper of record for the state of California, and thus see the need to use statewide voices, but in that process, they further marginalize less financially influential neighborhoods in the LA metro area.

Even though the six local districts are approximately the same size, the *LA Times* chooses to disproportionately provide a platform for voices from DTLA and the Westside, leaving residents from neighborhoods such as Watts and Pacoima without a prominent platform to speak on the issue of a return to in-person instruction. This geographic disproportionality becomes even more stark when looking only at individuals identified as parents within LAUSD borders: 28%, or over 1 in 4, of the parental quotes come from individuals representing the West Local District

### Relationship to Education

We found that quoted voices are strongly weighted toward individuals from educational organizations. 47% of the quoted individuals are from educational organizations. On the other hand, teachers, parents and students are underrepresented, at 15%, 24% and 4% respectively (see **Figure 3** for *LA Times* voices' relationship to education). The sum of educators, parents and students combined is less than the total number of individuals quoted from educational organizations. This may be indicative of who the *LA Times* believes is an important voice, seeing leaders in educational organizations as the experts in education. While educational organizations no doubt provide important expertise, editorial decisions bear scrutiny when the result is to provide those leaders a platform at the expense of parents, students, and teachers who would be most directly impacted by policy decisions on a return to in-person learning.



**FIGURE 3:** Voices by Relationship to Education

## ■■■ Position on return to in-person instruction

Many polls have been released that examine public positions on a return to in-person instruction during the pandemic. In a June 2020 Politico poll with over 2,000 registered voters, 54% responded that they were somewhat or very uncomfortable with K-12 in-person instruction. In a May 2020 Politico poll, when COVID numbers were not as high as they would later be in July, 41% said it was a bad idea to return to K-12 schools.<sup>20</sup>

The most recent public opinion poll, released on February 24<sup>th</sup> by the Pew Research Center, shows that 59% of all adults believe schools should wait to open until teachers have access to coronavirus vaccines. These numbers are particularly high among communities of color: 80% of Black adults, 69% of Latinx adults, and 72% of Asian adults. But a majority of white adults (51%) agree as well.<sup>21</sup>

*...voters without children represented 70% of the poll population. "They don't have firsthand knowledge of what is happening in schools right now. Mostly, it's being driven by what they're seeing in the media and what's on cable television."*

Looking only at voters regarding restarting in-person instruction can be deceptive. An analysis of the Politico poll in Arizona, a state with a high retiree population, revealed that voters without children living with them represented 70% of the poll population and they may differ dramatically in wanting a return to in-person instruction. Paul Bentz, a pollster for HighGround Inc., one of the oldest public affairs firms in the State of Arizona, stated that voters without school kids "are not dealing with the day-to-day operations of a school, particularly in a pandemic. They don't have firsthand knowledge of what is happening in schools right now. Mostly, it's being driven by what they're seeing in the media and what's on cable television."<sup>22</sup>

Regarding returning to in-person instruction in the articles examined in our analysis, when looking solely at individuals identified as parents, 65% of those quoted say they want to return to in-person instruction now, with only 35% of parents saying to open only when it's safe. The geographic disproportionality highlighted earlier becomes even more stark when looking only at individuals identified as parents: 28%, or over 1 in 4, of the parental quotes come from individuals representing the West Local District. This data point shows that the *LA Times* may be contributing significantly to the manufactured narrative of pitting parents against the teachers' union, with parents (disproportionately representing wealthier and healthier neighborhoods) represented as majority in favor of an immediate return to in-person instruction.

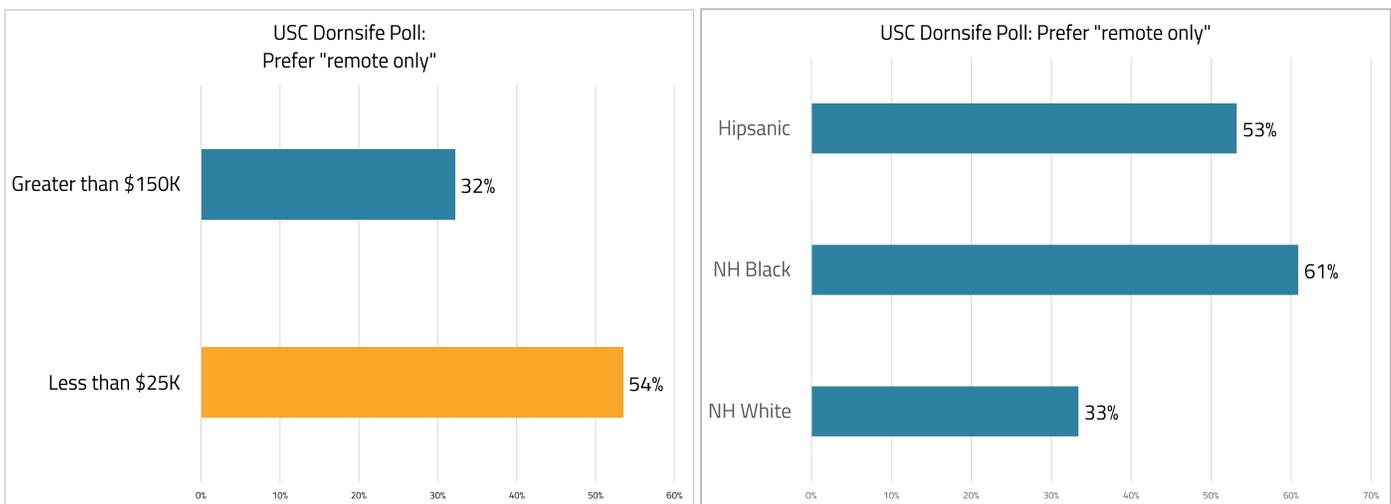
<sup>20</sup> Terms like "uncomfortable," and "bad idea," are terms from the polls. Juan Perez Jr., "Rush to Reopen Schools Worries a Majority of Voters," *Politico*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/24/rush-to-reopen-schools-worries-voters-337539>, accessed on February 17, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Juliana Menasce Horowitz, "More Americans now say academic concerns should be a top factor in deciding to reopen K-12 schools," Facttank, February 24, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/02/24/more-americans-now-say-academic-concerns-should-be-a-top-factor-in-deciding-to-reopen-k-12-schools/>, accessed on February 28, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew Impelli, "Arizona Pollster Suggests Majority of State's Residents Who Want Schools Opened Don't Have Kids," *Newsweek*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/arizona-pollster-suggests-majority-states-residents-who-want-schools-opened-dont-have-kids-1569727>, accessed on February 19, 2021.

The February 17, 2021 *LA Times* editorial that claimed “most parents vehemently want their kids back in the classroom” and is framed entirely as parents versus teachers, blaming UTLA for schools not fully reopening.<sup>23</sup> This is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it falsely homogenizes what is likely the true position of many parents in LAUSD. Secondly, it obscures the role of other decision makers: Supt. Beutner and several members of the LAUSD school board have also repeatedly stated that it is not safe to reopen schools due to widespread transmission of the virus. Thirdly, it obfuscates the role of other institutions in the debate, like corporations and business lobbyists such as the Chamber of Commerce and Restaurant Association, who have repeatedly pushed for rushed reopenings of both schools and other workplaces.

For a more realistic picture of where parents stand, we can turn to USC Dornsife, which regularly runs national and Southern California-based polls. USC Dornsife asked 6,066 adult U.S. residents a series of questions from December 23, 2020 through January 19, 2021 regarding consumer behavior, lifestyle, employment, family, health, housing and COVID-19. Looking just at parents with at least one child in TK-12, **Figure 4** shows that the lower-income parents were more likely to prefer remote only education. 54% of parents who annually make less than \$25K preferred remote only education while only 32% of parents who annually make over \$150K preferred remote only education. These differential preferences also held when results were disaggregated by race: 61% of Black and 53% of Latinx parents preferred remote only education while only 33% of white parents preferred remote only education.<sup>24</sup>



**FIGURE 4:** USC Dornsife Coronavirus Tracking Survey: “Given the state of the COVID-19 pandemic in your area and your school’s safety protocols, how would you prefer [NAME] to attend school right now?”<sup>25</sup>

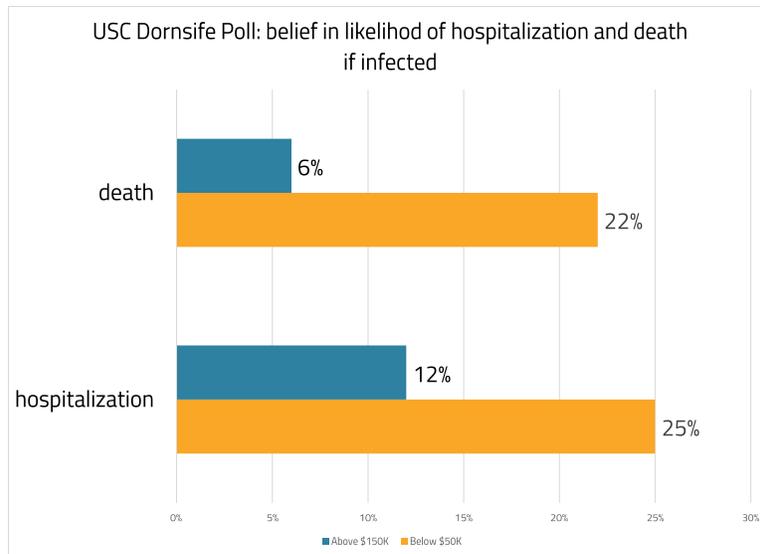
USC Dornsife also found that lower-income families are more likely to be employed outside of the home, which should suggest that they need the reprieve from distance learning and should want to restart in-person instruction to relieve themselves from childcare and home as the formal education site. However, if instead

<sup>23</sup> “Editorial: L.A. Unified is officially out of excuses for keeping elementary schools closed,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-02-17/editorial-l-a-unified-is-officially-out-of-excuses-for-keeping-elementary-schools-closed>, accessed on March 2, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Arie Kapteyn, Daniel Bennett, Kyla Thomas, and Jill E. Darling, “Center for Economic and Social Research Understanding America a Study, Coronavirus Tracking Survey Methodology and Selected Crosstab Results” *Understanding Coronavirus in America*, (University of Southern California: Los Angeles, 2021), 176.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

we consider the fact that COVID-19 positivity rates and death rates are much higher in lower-income communities, “the greater support for physical school closure among lower-income individuals makes sense” given that “these differential perceptions align with data indicating that lower-income and racial minority individuals and households are disproportionately at risk of death if infected by COVID-19.”<sup>26</sup>



**FIGURE 5:** USC Dornsife Understanding America Survey: belief in likelihood of hospitalization and death, if infected with COVID-19

## ■ CONCLUSION

Our analysis shows that *the LA Times overrepresents professional/high-income voices compared to low-income voices regarding articles on LAUSD*. Our analysis also shows that *particular areas within LAUSD (Central and West), which tend to be wealthier and healthier spaces, are overrepresented while other local districts (South and Northeast) which tend to be more impoverished, are underrepresented*. The limited number of parent voices and a high number of unknown socio-economic category for parents make drawing conclusions about the breakdown on relative positions on a return to in-person instruction challenging, but with the limited data, professional class/higher income voices quoted in the LA Times are more likely to want to reopen schools for in-person instruction than working class/lower-income voices.

This is not simply a problem with the journalistic method of framing an article using opposite poles and a supposedly “balanced” argument. The editorial staff is in control of choosing content, and reporters have discretion in choosing the voices they provide a platform to represent positions. The choice to provide a disproportionate platform to professional/higher income voices is stark, especially juxtaposed against 80% of LAUSD families being eligible for free and reduced price meals, 18% of Angelenos living in poverty, and an

<sup>26</sup> “Parents’ Perspectives on the Effects of COVID-19 on K-12 Education, April-July 2020,” USC Dornsife, August 3, 2020, <https://healthpolicy.usc.edu/evidence-base/parents-perspectives-on-the-effects-of-covid-19-on-k-12-education-april-july-2020/>, accessed on February 17, 2021.

“House Republicans think school reopenings may be their winning issue in key races in the 2022 midterm elections that could help them recapture the chamber.” – NBC News

annual median household income of \$62K.<sup>27</sup> The *LA Times* is utilizing an editorial filter that reinforces the dominant narrative in who is heard – affluent voices – and who is disproportionately silenced – low-income voices.

Additionally, while our research focuses on the socio-economic class status of *LA Times* voices, questions generated from our study can focus on how racialized

voices are also privileged or suppressed by corporate mainstream media. When corporate media constructs a narrative of pitting parents against teacher unions to frame the in-person instruction debate, other institutions and individuals are rendered invisible. Organizing systems like race, class, and gender are absent or appropriated in the debate, while retail businesses, chambers of commerce, and in particular, the restaurant industry, who have all clamored to “reopen the economy,” while hiding behind (predominantly affluent and able to work from home) parents to support their business interests. Our analysis illustrates how a well-respected media institution privileges affluent voices. This constructed narrative pitting parents against organized teachers provides plausible deniability for a neoliberal, pro-business agenda. Republicans have seized this opportunity to target and weaken teachers unions as a key tactic to win important swing districts.<sup>28</sup> Pro-business Democrats have also gone along with this vilification of teachers and their unions, using politics, rather than science, to shape their policies on returning to in-person instruction.

Governor Gavin Newsom’s moves on school reopenings is an exemplar of this politics-driven approach that caters to the concerns of wealthier (and more likely to vote) individuals. In August 2020, the State’s Department of Public Health passed the Blueprint for a Safer Economy metrics found in **Figure 6**. In December 2020, the Governor moved the goal posts by stating that School Districts can reopen safely for TK-6 in-person instruction if county numbers were under 28 positive cases per 100,000 *without any conclusive scientific research* to erode safety standards.<sup>29, 30</sup>

Newsom’s push to reopen schools comes despite the fact that, by his own admission, his administration has failed to ensure equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>31</sup> Of vaccines administered in California, only 2.8% have gone to Black residents, 16% to Latinx, and 12% to Asian Americans, while 31% have gone to white residents.<sup>32</sup> The hardest hit communities are receiving the least protection. These inequitable outcomes do not happen in a vacuum: they reflect the broader systemic racism and inequality of our society. This systemic

<sup>27</sup> “Quick Facts, Los Angeles City,” United States Census,

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/losangelescountycalifornia,losangelescitycalifornia,US/PST045219>, accessed February 21, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Seitz-Wald, Alex, and Allan Smith, “#OpenOurSchools: GOP Targets Teachers Unions in Bid to Retake Suburbs.” NBC News, February 16, 2021, [www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/openourschools-gop-targets-teachers-unions-bid-retake-suburbs-n1257899](http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/openourschools-gop-targets-teachers-unions-bid-retake-suburbs-n1257899), accessed March 2, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> The original metrics were for counties with over a population of 106,000 and in October, an additional “Health Equity Index” was added to ensure that the lowest income quartile of the County also fit under the established metrics in order for the County to enter a less prohibitive tier. See California Department of Public Health, <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/COVID-19/CaliforniaBlueprintDataCharts.aspx>.

<sup>30</sup> John Fensterwald and Louis Freedberg, “Newsom offers \$2 billion plan to bring back in-person instruction in elementary grades,” *EdSource*, December 30, 2020, <https://edsources.org/2020/newsom-to-announce-plan-to-encourage-in-person-instruction-in-elementary-grades/645983>, accessed on March 2, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> “Newsom admits California vaccine rollout problems in Black, Latino communities,” *Fox News*, February 22, 2021,

<https://www.foxnews.com/politics/newsom-california-vaccine-rollout-problems-black-latino-communities>, accessed on February 28, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> “Vaccines,” State of California, <https://covid19.ca.gov/vaccines/#California-vaccines-dashboard>, accessed on February 28, 2021.

racism and inequality is also reflected in the fact that some politicians and media have chosen to privilege wealthier and/or whiter voices over voices of people of color or people living in poverty.

	Higher Risk $\longrightarrow$ Lower Risk of Community Disease Transmission***			
	Widespread Tier 1	Substantial Tier 2	Moderate Tier 3	Minimal Tier 4
Measure				
<b>Adjusted Case Rate for Tier Assignment**</b> (Rate per 100,000 population* excluding prison cases^, 7 day average with 7 day lag)	>7	4-7	1-3.9	<1
<b>Testing Positivity^</b> (Excluding prison cases^, 7 day average with 7 day lag)	>8%	5-8%	2-4.9%	<2%

**Figure 6:** CA Department of Public Health Blueprint for a Safer Economy metrics

A newspaper should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. The *LA Times'* editorial bias means that it is instead allowing wealthier, healthier communities to set the terms of the in-person instruction debate. This media bias in turn allows politicians to justify policy decisions that cater to those communities. It is imperative that the media provide people with information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, especially one as fraught with consequences as a return to in-person schooling during a deadly pandemic. That requires fairly representing the communities that would be impacted by these decisions.

## APPENDIX A: SEGMENTED RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

- Total articles: 105
- Articles without any supplemental quotes: 24
- Total number of quotes: 304
- Unique individuals quoted: 250
- By category: Educational organization (142), Parent (74), Educator (46), Other organization (27), Student (12), Pundit (1), Unknown (2)
- Geography: Central (60), West (39), East (30), Northwest (26), South (13), Northeast (9), Other LA County (24), NOT LA County (55), Unknown (48)
- By class: Professional class/higher-income (134), Middle class (79) Working class/Lower-income (21) small business (5), millionaire (1), unknown (64)
- Reopening for in-person instruction: n/a (163) Reopen when safe (49), Reopen now (32), Reopen for targeted services (14)

### Among Parents:

- Geography: Central (9), East (14), West (12), NW (4), South (4), Other LA County (11), Not in LA County (10), Unknown (11)
- Class: unknown (44) over half
- Reopening: open now (14), open for vulnerable populations (6), Open when safe (11)

### Educational Organizations

- Geography: Central (39), Not LA (35), Unknown (25), West (15), NE (7), NW (7), East (6), Other LA (6), South (2)
- Class: professional (103), middle class (26), unknown (5), low income (5) – three on a stipend – small business (2), millionaire (1)