

# Public Pressure Works. Get Involved, Stay Involved

## Lesson 4

Among all of the lessons we have learned this year regarding the Board, this final one is simple but potent. Our Board consists of seven *elected officials*. We, the residents of San Francisco, are their constituents; it is our duty and our right to hold them accountable.

Reopening is a critical priority for the families of SFUSD. Some families are eager to return to school, some are more cautious, but regardless, all of the families are anxiously awaiting guidance from the group responsible for these decisions.

As we have seen, however, reopening was not a key priority for this Board. It was only when parents, the media, and even legal action reached a fever pitch that this Board began to respond to their constituents. This is the reminder that we all need to get involved and stay involved.

In mid-October when the school board sent out letters announcing name changes to a third of the district's schools, families around the city were confused as to why this was being addressed at this time. Mayor London Breed echoed their frustration saying, "And now in the midst of this once in a century challenge, to hear that the District is focusing energy and resources on renaming schools—schools that haven't even opened—is offensive."

Around this time a new parent collective, Decreasing the Distance was formed: "In a time of incomplete institutional support and responsiveness, we are committed to devising community solutions that support all children's learning and well-being...and hold SFUSD accountable for transparency and progress."

Additionally, a petition was created on Change.org stating, "As parents/constituents, we strongly disagree with this decision - when schools are still yet to open and SFUSD has not come up with an effective plan for remote learning, we believe that renaming schools is the wrong priority." As of March 22, 2021, the petition has garnered 28,629 signatures. Then-Board President Mark Sanchez insisted that the renaming process was not hindering their efforts to open.

Media coverage began to emerge outside of the Bay Area. A New York Times article noted "Even as private and parochial schools have begun to reopen their doors, the [San Francisco] school district has not set a timeline for resuming in-person instruction, except to say that it is not likely in this calendar year." During this same time period other major cities were beginning to share their plans or even open their doors.

On December 18th, the Board announced they would not be able to achieve a January 25th milestone that would have returned 19-26% of the student body to school, due to their inability to reach a work agreement with UESF. Mayor London Breed expressed her frustration in a public statement: "Let's be honest: San Francisco's public health officials have been among the most conservative in the country in terms of reopening. When they say our schools can start opening again, our kids should be in the classroom the next day."

On January 5th, the same day that only two Board members listed reopening as a District priority, Families for San Francisco released their Report on Renaming, highlighting the deeply flawed school renaming process. This precipitated the flood of mocking national coverage with headlines like [The Holier-Than-Thou Crusade in San Francisco, 'We've become parodies of ourselves': California Democrats bemoan SF school board](#) and [It's Liberals vs. Liberals in San Francisco](#).

Families exploded with a year's worth of frustration. The mocking coverage from national papers was a black eye in the face of a city known for its progressive values; instead we were now being accused of performative liberalism. In the midst of the swirl around renaming, SFUSD announced in the third paragraph of a January 27 [email to parents](#) that "it is unlikely that most middle and high school students will return to in-person learning this school year."

On February 1st, Attorney Paul Scott sent a [letter](#) to the Mayor regarding potential legal action against the Board for [Brown Act](#) Violations and due process in the renaming resolution. Two days later, the San Francisco City Attorney's office, in collaboration with Mayor Breed, [filed suit against SFUSD](#) in response to its lack of a legally mandated reopening plan. On February 6th, hundreds of parents [rallied](#) in front of City Hall to protest the Board's inaction. This was the first of many protests and "zoom-ins" organized by Decreasing the Distance, a parent collective with a rapidly growing membership list.

By this point, Board meetings were flooded with parents. On February 9th, at 11:30 at night, there were still 200 people listening in to the Board of Education meeting. This was after two hours of debate on whether a white gay father was adequately diverse enough for one of 8 empty spots on a volunteer PAC (which led to even more embarrassing [coverage](#)).

Parents continued to organize on several fronts. February 18th, two SFUSD parents, Families for San Francisco founding member Patrick Wolff and Families for San Francisco member and former SFUSD principal Jennifer Butterfoss, launched Better Public Schools to explore an amendment to the city charter on how our board members are selected. They focused on long-term changes to ensure that future Boards are accountable to San Francisco parents and students. Their campaign garnered coverage on multiple local media outlets including the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle.

On February 20th, SFUSD parents Autumn Looijen and Siva Raj launched a campaign to recall three members of the Board who had served long enough to qualify for a recall (Gabriela López, Alison Collins, and Faauuga Moliga). As of March 17, over 8,000 people have joined their movement.

Finally, after months of pressure; zoom-ins, rallies, local and national media coverage, floods of parent comment, and the establishment of two parent-led efforts to change the Board selection process and launch a recall campaign, Board President López announced that she was putting the school renaming process on hold and declared reopening their only focus. "We will not be taking valuable time from our board agendas to further discuss this, as we need to prioritize reopening".

Then, on March 5, one week shy of a year of distance learning, the Board and Superintendent Matthews finally announced a reopening plan for in-person learning at some schools. If all goes as scheduled, roughly 60% of the SFUSD student body will be given the option to return to school beginning mid-April. On March 11th the Board voted to approve the plan, and on March 13th, on the one-year anniversary of school closures, UESF voted to approve the plan.

This feels like progress, and it is, but we must remember that Middle and High School students haven't been addressed at all; as of today, only 11 out of 129 sites have been formally approved to open; and on March 16th, UESF President Susan Solomon stated in public comment that we should have "realistic expectations" and "maybe it won't be full-day, five days a week" in the fall.

It's important that we stay engaged, and families are doing just that. On March 15th, Decreasing the Distance sent a letter signed by 7 supervisors urging the SFUSD to commit to 5 full days of learning in the Fall. Another SFUSD parent has created a website with crowd-sourced transcriptions of Board meetings, making it easier for families to stay informed and hold our elected officials accountable. These collective actions and others unmentioned in the above story are the privilege of a democratic society: we vote, we stay informed, and we advocate for change when it is needed.

**As Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has said, *"Having a Dem rep isn't a "set it and forget it" thing. Don't just say "oh, they'll do the right thing."***

**Families for San Francisco's objective is to keep you informed and educated on the issues that affect your daily life. We do this so that when we advocate for change, we do it from a position of knowledge and collective strength. We are already 4,000 members strong, from all walks of life.**

**Join us and let your voice be heard.**