



MARCH 25, 2021

# LESSONS FROM ONE YEAR OF DISTANCE LEARNING

*"THE WAY WE SPEND OUR TIME DEFINES WHO WE ARE." JONATHAN ESTRIN*

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# Lessons from One Year of Distance Learning

*"The way we spend our time defines who we are." Jonathan Estrin*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over a year has passed since San Francisco shuttered its schools to in-person learning. The City's COVID positivity rate is consistently the lowest of major US cities, having risen, fallen, spiked, and dropped since mid-January to a current level of 1.1%. In September, the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) allowed schools to begin reopening, and most of our City's private and parochial schools have done so and currently serve more than 15,000 students. City-run learning hubs have been operational all year, serving over 2,000 of SFUSD's most high-risk students.

On March 5, 2021, a year into the pandemic and following months of massive public pressure, the San Francisco Board of Education finally announced a plan for "in-person learning at some schools."

By late April, 60% of SFUSD students should have the opportunity to return to school in person for an undetermined number of days per week until the last day of school, June 2nd. However, there is still no plan for nearly all middle and high school students.

Additionally, parents are still confused regarding plans for the 2021-2022 academic year. The recent declaration of commitment to in-person learning for all grades by August did not specify if students would be returning for 5 days or not, or for how long per day. Even the President of the United Educators of San Francisco (UESF), Susan Solomon, called in to publicly comment at the March 17th Board of Education Special Meeting, saying San Francisco needs to prepare for the possibility that "maybe it won't be full-day, five days a week" in the fall.

SFUSD teachers have now all been given the opportunity to be vaccinated. And Governor Newsom has announced that all Californians should have access to vaccines by May 1st.

There is much work left to be done to safely bring our students back to school full-time and to address the losses and damage. But it is also important to take a look at how we got to this place, in order to glean lessons and point ourselves towards a better future.



This imperative prompted Families for San Francisco to look more closely at the Board of Education's actions between May 12, 2020 and March 11, 2021. Our assessment reveals some uncomfortable truths about our current Board (for a more in-depth review of each of the following four points, please go to the Lessons Learned section):

1. **The Board of Education did not understand the magnitude of the challenge before them.** Their first critical error was rejecting outside help, insisting that developing a plan must be done in-house despite the recommendation of the Superintendent to hire professional education consultants for much needed assistance.
2. **The Board of Education failed to deliver a plan** that followed the California Education Code's requirement that information to the public be "specific, concise and clear." The information has been confusing, incomplete, and in many cases not a plan at all but rather, as City Attorney Herrera stated, "a plan to make a plan."
3. **The Board of Education's priorities are out of sync** with those of San Francisco's families. The Board consistently placed reopening discussions far down on their meeting agendas, forcing parents to wait for hours to share public comments or hear the latest reopening updates. Just this past January, only two Commissioners (out of seven) identified reopening schools as one of their top two priorities. Reopening stalled while actions on renaming schools and changing the Lowell admissions policy were swift and decisive. Despite insisting that reopening has always been their priority, their actions belie their words.
4. Efforts to prioritize educating our students began only when public pressure became insurmountable for the Board. Our assessment highlights the importance of public engagement in local government. The Board of Education did not act until public pressure mounted to a level that included national ridicule, a legal challenge, an active effort to recall them, and public calls for resignation. **Public pressure works, get involved and stay involved!**

As we emerge from this pandemic and our children and teachers go back to school, we cannot forget these lessons. So many of us care deeply about and pay attention to national and international politics, but we need to pay attention to our local government as well. On a local level, our voices can be heard and effective – but only if we pay attention and stay involved.

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.**

# Reopening Timeline

This timeline in no way reflects the full scope of the year's activities. To identify key points in the timeline we reviewed publicly available sources, such as: BOE meeting agendas, recordings, presentations, social media, and published articles.

This timeline attempts to consolidate many of the important moments and events that shaped the trajectory of the BOE's planning efforts in response to COVID school closures.

We begin in May 2020 because, in the immediate aftermath of the declaration of the public health emergency of SARS-CoV-2, the top priority was to quickly pivot to distance learning across the entire school district, as well as provide tertiary support systems (needed technology, social and emotional support, meals, etc.) to a large number of students. This was, indeed, a Herculean effort, and we applaud the teachers and administrators who made it happen.



May 12, 2020 Superintendent Matthews announces formal Request for Proposal process to identify an outside partner to help facilitate reopening plan. The cost of hiring to be fully funded by outside donations.



Superintendent Matthews officially recommends Promise54 as an outside partner to help the district project manage the return to in-school learning using outside funding. The BOE rejects this opportunity.

Commissioner Collins states, "If it's not based on actual input that's authentic...I don't care about a plan, it doesn't matter." Superintendent Matthews calls the decision "a body blow."



The Board of Education shares its Fall Planning, 2020 presentation, identifying three phases of return: distance learning, hybrid model, and full return.



The San Francisco Department of Public Health (SDFPH) allows schools to begin reopening



The BOE Committee on Status of Reopening School delivers an update that includes **NO MILESTONES, DELIVERABLES, OR CONCRETE OBJECTIVES.**



BOE advisory committee sends letters to principals at schools selected for renaming (who were not asked for input on name-change effort).



BOE discusses resolution to change Lowell admissions criteria for the 2020-21 school year only.



Principals at the 44 schools targeted for renaming are formally asked to brainstorm new names by December 18.



BOE approves one-year change to Lowell High School admissions.

BOE releases readiness dashboard so parents can monitor progress. The dashboard applies only to students in phase 2A

**(3.5% OF SFUSD STUDENT POPULATION).**



BOE approves formal plan and timeline to return approximately 10,000 students to school by January 25, 2021

**(19% OF SFUSD STUDENTS)**

BOE requests a new staff position, Strategic Policy and Project Manager, to "increase the Board's capacity to strategically plan, prioritize resources, and monitor implementation of Distance Learning, schools reopening and transition back to in-person learning that is responsive to changing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic."



Superintendent Matthews officially recommends Promise54 as an outside partner to help the district project manage the return to in-school learning using outside funding.

**THE BOE REJECTS THIS OPPORTUNITY.**



BOE announces they will not achieve January 25th milestone, due to inability to reach a work agreement with UESF



Families for San Francisco releases Report on Renaming, highlighting the deeply flawed school renaming process.

Commissioners attend a yearly facilitated session to identify district priorities and clarify the values and goals that would **"drive our leadership attention, how we use our time, and our budgeting decisions."**

**2 out of 7**

commissioners

declared school reopening as their top priority



## JANUARY / FEBRUARY



Articles published nationwide question the SF BOE's actions and priorities, including: The New York Times, The Atlantic, The New Yorker, Los Angeles Times, USA Today, Fox News, New York Post, Politico, The Washington Post.



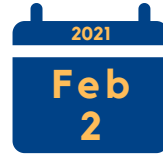
BOE votes to approve resolution to rename 44 schools.



SFUSD announces in an email to parents that **"it is unlikely that most middle and high school students will return to in-person learning this school year."**



Attorney Paul Scott sends a letter to the Mayor re: potential legal action against the BOE for Brown Act Violations and due process in the renaming resolution.



BOE introduces resolution to permanently eliminate merit-based admissions at Lowell in response to a hate crime at Lowell. (SFUSD finds it does not reach the level of a crime and the investigation stalls)



San Francisco City Attorney's office, in collaboration with Mayor Breed, files suit against SFUSD in response to its lack of a legally mandated reopening plan stating, **"Respondents indicate that the District has a plan to make a plan."**



Board President López insists that efforts to rename schools and address racism are not delaying reopening schools, quoting Rev. Amos Brown: "we can pat our heads and rub our bellies at the same time."



BOE votes to permanently change the Lowell admissions policy.

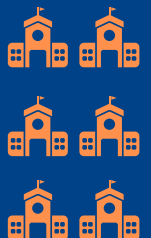
BOE spends two hours discussing and rejecting the candidacy of a well-qualified parent for one of 8 available volunteer spots on the Parent Advisory Council.



BOE cancels reopening plan vote to address current and pending litigation (on renaming)



Superintendent Matthews announces that 6 SFUSD elementary schools have completed public health inspections.



**6 SFUSD SCHOOLS**

2021  
**Feb 18**

Two SFUSD parents and Families for San Francisco members launch **Better Public Schools to push for a new way of selecting the SF BOE** through exploring an amendment to the city charter.



2021  
**Feb 20**

Two SFUSD parents launch a campaign to **recall three members** of the Board of Education. As of March 17, over 8,000 people have joined their movement.

**8,000 people!**



2021  
**Feb 21**

BOE places the school **naming plan on hold** and declares reopening their only focus. Board President López says, **"We need to prioritize reopening"**

2021  
**Feb 23**

Newly-elected Commissioner Matt Alexander **admits**, **"I just learned...that the current negotiation around the MOU doesn't even include middle school and high school, and that was rather disturbing to me. That process needs to start immediately."**

2021  
**Mar 5**

Limited reopening **plan** announced for some schools by April 12. The plan misses the **state timeline** potentially forfeiting state funds earmarked for schools that resume in-person instruction by March 31.

Phase A (26%) may begin returning April 12th

Phase 2B (10%) may return sometime later in April

3rd-5th graders (20%) received surveys March 9th to assess their interest in possibly returning in late April.

2021  
**Mar 10**

Superintendent Matthews **announces his June 30th retirement, stating "There are many new commissioners on the San Francisco Board of Education and I want them to have the opportunity to select a new superintendent who is aligned with their approach."**

2021  
**Mar 11**

BOE votes to approve plan.

SFUSD **commits** to in-person learning in the fall

2021  
**Mar 13**

UESF votes to approve plan

2021  
**Mar 15**

**Decreasing the Distance** sends a **letter** signed by 7 supervisors urging the BOE/SFUSD to commit to 5 full days of learning in the Fall.

2021  
**Mar 16**

Commissioner Collins reminds a speaker to refer to learning loss from distance learning as **learning change**.

UESF president Susan Solomon cautions families to have **"realistic expectations"** and **"maybe it won't be full-day, five days a week"** in the fall

2021  
**Mar 17**

SFUSD publishes an **updated timeline** for PK-5 with some dates clarified.

Still only **6 SFUSD schools approved** for reopening by SFDPH, 75 letters of interest submitted.

2021  
**Mar 24**

14 SFUSD Schools approved for reopening.

City Struggles with anti Asian tweets by Commissioner Collins.



# FOUR LESSONS LEARNED

# The Board of Education did not understand the magnitude of the challenge

## Lesson 1

Last May, as the school year wound down, determining what the fall of 2020 would look like for our students was an unprecedented challenge. The hard job of creating a plan to safely return almost 54,000 SFUSD students and their teachers and staff to school rested with the Board of Education and Superintendent Vincent Matthews.

On May 12, 2020 during his report to the board, Superintendent Matthews announced, "We know that reopening schools will be a challenge and will require extraordinary coordination and planning. As a result, we have opened an RFQ...to help identify an outside partner to help facilitate and plan this work."

On June 9, Superintendent Matthews and Daniel Menezes, Chief HR officer of SFUSD, appealed to the Board for assistance. They pointed out that the work of reopening schools was "a massive undertaking" and "given all the uncertainties and all of the complexities," they were seeking "a partner who would help support a comprehensive plan for returning to in-person schooling." They had issued a request for quotation (RFQ) for help reopening schools, considered seven options, and were now seeking the Board's approval of their recommendation.

The partner they chose (Promise 54) was noted for:

- 1) Having previously worked with SFUSD
- 2) Specializing in equity, diversity, and inclusion work in education spaces
- 3) Possessing deep project management experience

Dr. Matthews explicitly explained they were seeking "the planning and partnership group to focus on a scope of work that includes a comprehensive project plan that accounts for multiple contingencies and scenarios. Scenarios where we fully reopen in brick and mortar settings, scenarios where we fully reopen virtually, hybrid models, so on and so forth."

Furthermore, this contract was going to be paid for by outside funds. As explained by Gentle Blythe, the Deputy Superintendent of Strategic Partnerships and Communication, donations to the city's Covid-19 Response Fund would fund the planning phase of this project. SFUSD's budget, already facing deep shortfalls, would not be affected.

The Board was, overall, not receptive to the request. They believed inside resources should be used for project management, with Commissioner Alison Collins stating "it is also concerning to me that we have to hire somebody to do project management. We should be able to do project management. I don't understand why we can't do that."



In addition, Project 54 and the other top-two contenders all had previous involvement with charter schools, and this made them unacceptable to Board members. Commissioner Collins went so far as to declare using an outside consultant who had worked with charter schools akin to “recreating white supremacy” and “disaster capitalism.”

Collins accurately pointed out that unpaid parent volunteers provide many valuable services for the district and suggested that maybe we should pay these parents instead, since the main need (in her view) was not project management, but outreach: “I want to shift the way we do things, and definitely there's work in project management. But, you know, most of the work is outreach...we need to do it differently and now might be a good time to do that.” She ends with the assertion that having an authentic plan is more important than having any plan at all, closing with “And if it's not based on actual input that's authentic and is co-created with community members, in partnership and trust, then it doesn't—***I don't care about a plan—it doesn't matter.***”

Commissioner Gabriela López also expressed that current staff should be capable of planning for school reopening during the pandemic, stating “So, I just want to hold that I think we have a lot of bright minds. We certainly pay for a lot of bright minds.” She also appears to underestimate the importance of project management expertise when she says, “If they're developing a plan, but we're the ones who will execute it. Why do we need them anyway?”

Commissioner Rachel Norton expressed her shared distaste for the chosen vendor, but suggested it was more important to prioritize the urgent needs of the students and families, stating: ***“we don't have the capacity internally to do this work in an unprecedented time. I just think we're losing sight of the real important underlying issue here which is that we need to have the best opening we possibly can.”***

Board President Mark Sanchez called the choice of vendor “unfortunate” and pressed Dr. Matthews on what Plan B might be. Dr. Matthews stated clearly that there was no Plan B. “*We were counting on this,*” he said. With approval of the plan they intended to “hit the ground running tonight. And actually begin setting up meetings tomorrow.”

Ultimately, the proposal was defeated. Commissioners Collins, López, Lam, and Moliga all voted against it; Commissioner Cook was absent, only Commissioners Norton and Sanchez voted for it. *Superintendent Matthews called the decision “a body blow.”*

At the close of this meeting, it is fair to conclude that, in addition to their ideological concerns, the Board of Education turned down the request for outside assistance because they believed the task could be handled in-house. It is through this lens that we evaluate the outcome of this decision: after an entire year of distance learning the Board announced a plan in which 60% of the students have the opportunity to attend partial school in-person for six weeks at most, *and with no clear plan for the fall.*

# The Board of Education was unable to deliver a plan

On June 9, 2020, when Superintendent Mathews asked the Board of Education to approve his request to hire an education consulting group, he was clear that he did not believe that SFUSD was well positioned to address the complexity and severity of the challenges presented by Covid. The Board ultimately rejected the request for outside assistance because they believed the task could be handled in-house.

Our review of meetings from June 9 until present reveal that our Board of Education came up well short of their duty to the families and children of San Francisco to develop and execute a comprehensive plan. Their failure is a huge factor in why San Francisco's children are still not in classrooms. We can't help but conclude that the Board should have listened to Board member Rachel Norton who pointed out "we have kind of sucked at doing this in the past."

The task set before the Board was a monumental one. It required planning across many departments, creating multiple contingency plans, and maintaining communication with a complicated array of stakeholders, all while adjusting to constantly shifting health and safety guidelines. We do not underestimate the difficulty of this task. However, the challenge does not forgive their shortcomings, which include:

## 1. Lack of urgency

One of the most notable things is simply the lack of focus on preparing for the day when students could safely return to schools. This is evidenced in several ways:

- The summer of 2020 was a critical time to ramp up planning and prepare for the new school year. The Board did not present a [Fall Learning Plan](#) until the [July 28th](#) Board Meeting. What they presented was vague and lacked details such as prioritization, level of effort, and resources required.
- Between June 9, 2020 until March 16, 2021, the Board conducted more than 80 meetings. In these, reopening has been an official agenda item only 20 times.
- When reopening did make the agenda, it was most often found near the end of schedule, listed as item H or I.
- Updates were often brief and/or insubstantial. A "Distance Learning Update" at the October 8 meeting was essentially just two slides, soliciting feedback from SFUSD families and staff.
- The October 20 meeting ran almost 9 hours. The reopening discussion began somewhere around the 7 hour mark. This was not unusual.

## 2. Lack of Robust Project Management

Dr. Matthews specifically requested Project Management assistance. Project Management, at a minimum, requires an initiation, a plan, execution, and accountability. One expects to see milestones, status updates, engagement of stakeholders, and performance metrics. Reviewing the planning documents through this lens reveals some gaping holes. Here are a few:

- The July 28 [Fall Learning Plan](#) was the Board's first attempt to offer a roadmap for what lies ahead. It summarized results of summer town halls, outlined CDC guidelines, and highlighted some potential challenges. Upon closer inspection, however, this document was heavy on rhetoric and light on substance. While it referred optimistically to the possibility to "explore the use of outdoor spaces" and pointed out the need to "Build out school sites to comply with COVID-19 health and safety guidance," the actual discussion of Operations and Logistics represented approximately 7 pages of the 50 page document. *No specific goals or milestones were identified, nor were dates assigned, nor was it even clear whether they were talking about all of SFUSD or just certain grades.*
- On September 30, the Board's Committee on Status of Reopening School delivered a 5-slide [presentation](#), with two slides of reopening-related information describing their in-person learning logistics decision tree and proposed hybrid learning partnerships protocol. The presentation included *no milestones, deliverables, or concrete objectives.*
- It took until October 7th for the district to issue their [first request for proposals](#) to identify providers who could oversee regular COVID testing.
- It took until [November 17](#) for the Board to assign a target opening date for the reopening process. [In a special resolution, the Board pointed to data from New York's low transmission rates, emphasized the importance of in-person learning, and "directs and authorizes the Superintendent to begin reopening in-person instruction" for "preschool students, elementary grade students with moderate to severe disabilities, and all other students in grades TK-1 including students in general education no later than January 25, 2021."]
- Throughout the fall and winter, facilities updates were minimal. At the [December 3rd](#) meeting the Buildings, Grounds, and Services Committee provided some information, but not updates for any classrooms for grades 3-12. As of February 3rd, only one site assessment had been completed. As of March 18th that number increased to 6 out of 128.
- Communication with stakeholders didn't go smoothly. The October 20th meeting featured many irate comments seeking more information. At the December 8th meeting, the Board's own [Parent Advisory Council report](#) detailed this frustration, saying "The District needs to do better in communicating with and supporting Principals, Teachers, and Families during this process."

### 3. Blind Spots

We want to acknowledge, again, that this task was a daunting one. And ultimately, some areas were addressed adequately. Unfortunately, a successful school reopening plan is contingent upon all areas being adequately addressed. The whole is only as strong as the weakest link. The school reopening process had several areas that were identified but consistently under-explored, ignored, or deprioritized. Even school sites that developed comprehensive, implementable plans, and identified funding opportunities were not approved by SFUSD to explore such options even as a pilot.

#### **Outdoor Learning:**

From early on, parents and community groups pressed the district on the possibility of outdoor learning. They pointed out San Francisco's favorable climate, relative abundance of outdoor spaces, and—again and again—the urgency of getting kids away from screens and back to engaging with their peers and teachers. Despite this pressure, the potential for outdoor learning never really gained any traction. The closest the committee came was at the December 3rd meeting, which included some bare-bone outdoor classroom parameters, but nothing actionable. There never appeared to be a real attempt to give it serious consideration. Given what research was telling us about the inadequacies of distance learning, especially for our youngest learners, this is a discouraging oversight. As of this writing, there is still no clear process for school sites to utilize outdoor sites in their planning.

#### **Middle and High School:**

Consistently, the Reopening Updates that SFUSD provided focused on our youngest and most vulnerable learners. We completely agree with this prioritization. However, prioritizing some groups shouldn't mean ignoring others. The initial Pre K-1st grade focus expanded in December to include 2nd graders, and then eventually, in the spring, to include all of PK-5. Consistently, however, Middle and High School families have been left in the dark.

This is true as late as the December 8th Meeting, when the Board finally presented a fairly comprehensive "Return Safely Together" report. This report fails to mention Middle or High Schools, beyond a brief recognition that "opening all middle school and high school campuses would require additional custodial support, either through additional employees or in-kind assistance from the City and County. As plans for middle schools and high schools become clearer, we will have more precise estimates of these costs."

Even by the January 26th Meeting, there is no mention made of when these students, representing approximately 40% of the student body, might be able to return to in-person schooling.

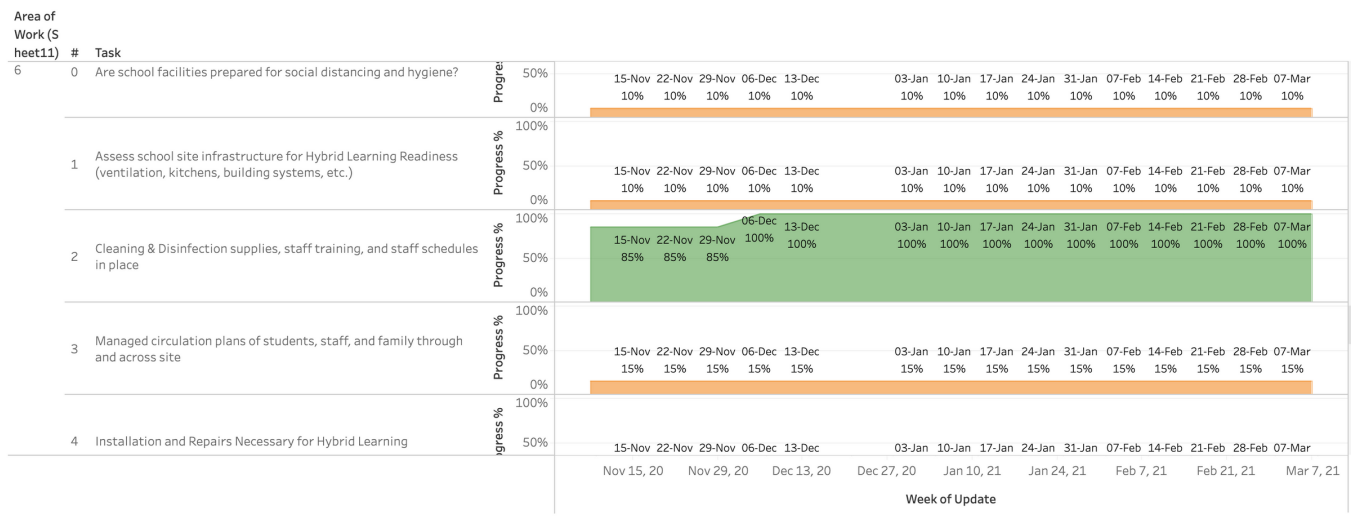
Evidence of this blind spot is very clear at the February 23 meeting when newly-elected Commissioner Matt Alexander admitted "I just learned, and this is maybe my naivete in this process, I just learned that the current negotiation around the MOU doesn't even include middle school and high school, and that was rather disturbing to me. That process needs to start immediately."

At the [March 2](#) meeting we finally see a slide called "In-Person Learning: Secondary (MS/HS) Update." Ultimately, however there is just one slide ([out of 45](#)) that offers any insight at all into what in-person schooling might look like for a middle schooler or a high schooler, and it refers specifically to "Secondary School Priority Groups" which focused on special education students and does not include the general student population.

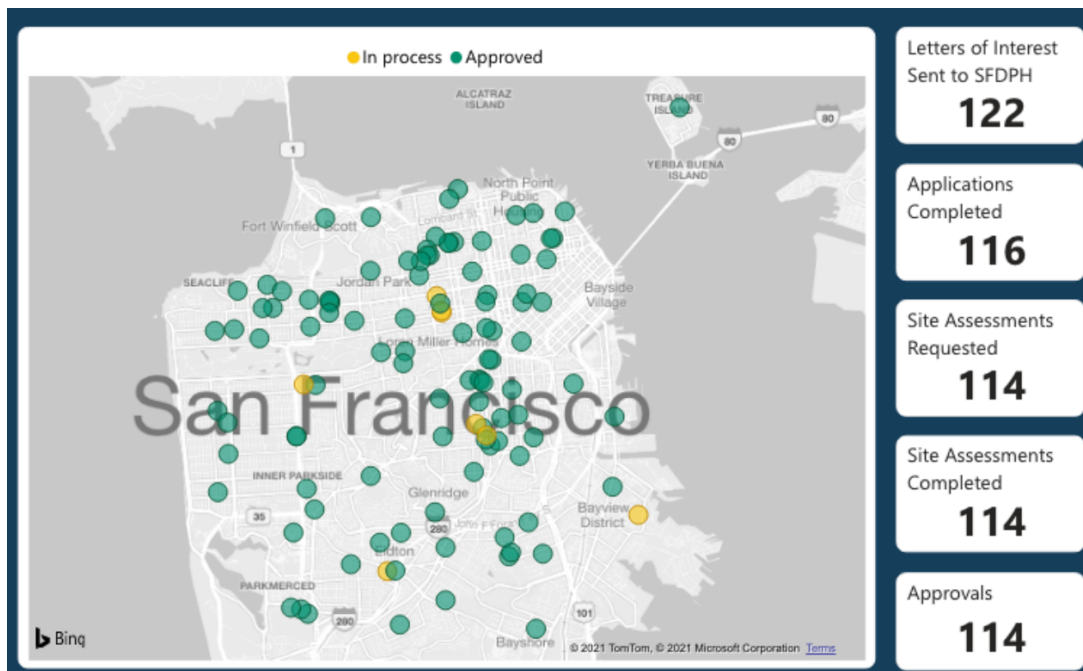
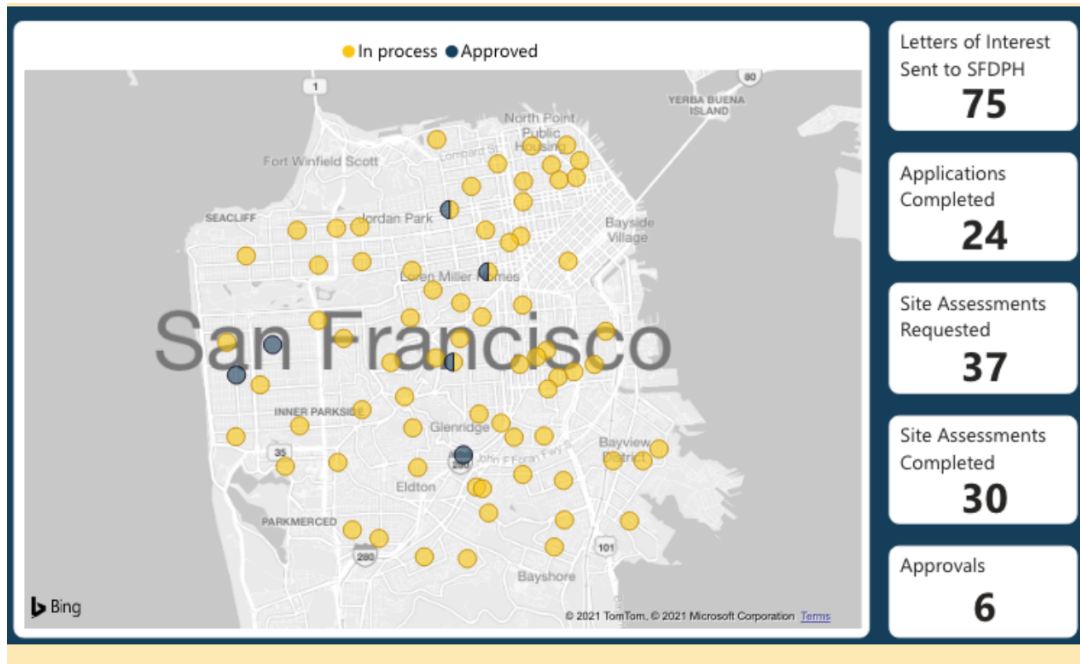
## Facilities

Amidst all of the planning for curriculum, contracts, testing, vaccination readiness, etc, it seems reasonable to expect work on facilities preparation to continue apace. And indeed, contractors were busy throughout the 2020-21 school year working on many facilities-related issues. Meeting agendas are filled with approvals of Contracts, Order for Service, Work Orders and Modifications in connection with the School Building Program that range from updates to multi-million dollar facilities improvements to simpler tasks such as replacing doorbells or updating security systems.

What was NOT happening, however, was readying the classrooms for new safety standards. SFUSD's dashboard demonstrates that progress on preparing facilities for social distancing and hygiene, and assessing site infrastructure readiness for aspects including ventilation, has been stalled since November:



Also frustrating is the lack of SFUSD's progress relative to San Francisco's Private and Charter schools. Contrast the state of SFUSD schools with Private and Charter schools on March 17:



More discouraging still, the dashboard indicates that Letters of Interest to prepare for opening have only been submitted for 75 of SFUSD's 128 sites.

We close with two other notable facts that we believe further demonstrate the Board's failure to deliver

### 1. Board seeks to hire a Project Manager

At the November 17, 2020 meeting, the Board's Special resolution included a request for a new position: a Strategic Policy and Project manager to "increase the Board's capacity to strategically plan, prioritize resources, and monitor implementation of Distance Learning, schools reopening and transition back to in-person learning that is responsive to the changing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and health directives established by the City and County of San Francisco and State of California...the Strategic Project and Policy Manager shall work and report directly to the President of the Board of Education."

## 2. SF City Attorney sues SFUSD and the Board of Education

On February 3rd, The SF City Attorney's office, in collaboration with Mayor Breed, took the highly unusual step of [suing SFUSD](#) in response to its lack of a legally mandated reopening plan.

The petition stated "SFUSD and its Board of Education have no meaningful plan for how or when in-person instruction will begin for any of SFUSD's students. Other than proclaiming—contrary to the weight of evidence from health experts—that schools cannot be opened safely..."

The petition further stated that "the learning continuity and attendance plan (LCAP) prepared by SFUSD and adopted by the Board is ambiguous empty rhetoric. It states, for example, that SFUSD is 'exploring a variety of innovative ways to implement a hybrid model,' 'modeling options for scheduling,' and 'rethinking time and space.' Essentially, Respondents indicate that the District has a plan to make a plan."

*"Essentially, Respondents indicate that the District has a plan to make a plan.*

*"We at Families for San Francisco can't say it any better.*

# The Board of Education's priorities are out of sync with those of San Francisco's families

## Lesson 3

When schools closed in March 2020 no one knew when they would reopen for in-person learning. But we knew from day one that returning our students to their classrooms was a critical goal, and that it would require an enormous, well-coordinated effort. We knew that tackling a challenge of this scope would require focus and unwavering commitment. For the San Francisco Board of Education, as for all districts nationwide, this should have meant a full-scale prioritization of planning for a safe return to school.

Unfortunately for SFUSD families, this urgent prioritization of the needs of our children did not happen. Instead, the Board prioritized issues that, while important to us all, did not help our children return to school. We explore the evidence for this below in the Board's decisions, statements, and actions.

### *Example A. The Board's Priorities were Misplaced from the Start: Rejection of Professional Help.*

The Board's June 9th decision to reject Superintendent Vincent Matthews' request for outside help from a professional education consultant with demonstrated project management experience has been widely discussed, and deservedly so. (Lesson 1) It was a defining moment of the Board's failure to rise to the occasion and to acknowledge the level of effort required to do so. We discuss it again here because it was an early indicator that, in the minds of our Commissioners, ideology ranked higher than getting SFUSD students back into the classroom. "I don't want to make a decision because there's an urgency," said President López, regarding the vote to approve the hire.

The main issue was that the recommended partner, Promise54 had worked with charter schools in the past. However, as Superintendent Matthews explained, "almost all, if not all, [of the potential consultants] had some connection with both charters and traditional public schools." He goes on to protest that, "as we move forward...over time, there's going to be more and more either principals or teachers or paraprofessionals who all have some connection with charters and with traditional public schools."



Commissioner López made clear that messaging was more important to her, saying "So for me it's just what the messaging really is. When we are connected, whether we want to admit it or not...What is the message, if we do work with these organizations and really follow the money." Commissioner Collins reiterates that her decision is based on ideology, saying "This is a principle-based decision. We need to stop doing it [referring to partnering with outside consultants]."

Only Commissioner Rachel Norton seemed to understand the priorities of the moment saying, "I don't love who they've worked with, either. To me, that's less important than supporting our superintendent and holding him accountable for making sure he gets this process right, because that is the most important." Board President Mark Sanchez followed up on Norton's comment, asking "How do we guarantee what Commissioner Norton is actually saying, a smooth opening, that works well for all, as well as they can, for our students and families. Can we do that without this organization?"

Matthews replied, "I wish I could give you that answer. I mean we're gonna do everything we can to make that happen. Were we counting on this? There's – there's no doubt we were."

Superintendent Matthews made clear that he and SFUSD's leadership team had no Plan B, yet, the majority of the Board – Commissioners López, Collins, Lam and Moliga – voted against it.

#### *Example B. This Board Does Not Understand the Priorities of the Job They Were Elected to Do*

Most of our current Commissioners did not choose to serve their terms during a pandemic, yet that is the situation in which they found themselves. They had worked hard to get elected to a position of enormous power and responsibility, but when the stakes grew higher, they failed to comprehend that they were the only governing body with the authority to make things happen in this critical arena at this critical time. Their behavior suggests that they understood their power but misunderstood their responsibility. On January 5th, 2021, ten months into the pandemic and with no reopening plan in place, the Board convened for a special, facilitated meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to clarify the values and goals that would "drive our leadership attention, how we use our time, and our budgeting decisions" for the upcoming year.

During the meeting, Commissioners engaged in various exercises to unearth shared values and identify differences of opinion and opportunities to connect. At the end of the meeting each Commissioner was asked to state their top two priorities. Collectively they identified a range of important goals, including addressing budget deficits, reallocating resources to target underserved students, and making schools physically, emotionally and intellectually safe for all students.

Astoundingly, *only two of the seven Commissioners* – Jenny Lam and Kevine Boggess – listed school reopening as one of their top two priorities.

#### *Example C. The Board Revealed its Priorities in How They Conducted Public Meetings*

An examination of how the BOE organized public meetings reveals that reopening schools was, literally and figuratively, not at the top of their list.

Between June 9, 2020 and March 16, 2021, the BOE conducted more than eighty meetings; by our count only twenty listed reopening as an official agenda item. At the majority of the public Board of Education meetings that took place while schools were shuttered, the topic of school reopening did not even appear on the agenda.

When reopening did make the agenda, it was near the end of the schedule, often listed as item H or I. At the October 20th meeting, which ran over nine hours, the reopening discussion began somewhere around the seven hour mark. Parents repeatedly expressed frustration at the low prioritization of the reopening discussion at meetings, complaining that they had to wait until late at night before they began...as late as 11pm for meetings that had begun at 3pm.

This issue came to a head during public comments at the February 9th BOE meeting, and some Commissioners felt compelled to speak out: "I have a comment surrounding the agenda," said Jenny Lam, "and also just wanting to acknowledge the fact that there's a lot of parents who'd like to be here who can't, because you know they're busy...they work a lot...and not to say that anyone who is on here isn't busy, but I think it would be really beneficial for everyone, to move these conversations to the beginning of the agenda."

Matt Alexander went even further, saying "...this is kind of crazy that we're talking about this at 11:30 at night. We still have 200 people on the call which shows, I think, the dedication of folks who care about this and are trying to find out about it, and it just seems...I think we have to figure out a different way."

#### Example D. *The Board Wasted Energy and Capital Pursuing Other Priorities:*

We find further evidence that the Board misunderstood their top priority by comparing their slow pace developing a reopening plan with their swift, decisive progress in enacting two significant changes in the SFUSD system – changes that were unrelated to reopening schools.

##### Misplaced Priority #1: The Project to Rename SFUSD Schools:

During the same basic timeframe as when schools were closed, the Board made significant headway on their goal to rename schools whose namesakes have connections to slavery, genocide, or oppression. A "[Blue Ribbon](#)" Panel tasked with renaming began their work in January 2020, and seven months later issued their list of schools to be renamed. (Families for San Francisco's [A Report on SFUSD School Renaming](#) documented the deeply flawed process undertaken by the Board in designing and overseeing this effort.)

On October 5, the [Panel sent letters](#) to principals at schools that had been selected for renaming, instructing them to begin a comprehensive community engagement process with four separate school groups in order to collect their thoughts on alternate names. They were told to submit up to eight names for the panel to consider; the initial deadline was November 15 ( it has been extended twice and is currently April 19, 2021). These principals were already eight chaotic months into supporting their teachers and students in distance learning, with no end in sight. None of these school sites were open nor had plans to reopen.

On January 26, 2021, seven hours into the meeting and prior to any discussion of the “*Return to In-Person Learning Update*” agenda item, the Board voted 6-1 to rename 44 schools, representing  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the schools in the SFUSD system; Commissioner Kevine Boggess was the only “nay” vote. The Board’s vote to rename the schools gained national media attention that subjected the San Francisco school district — and the city as a whole — to ridicule and derision.

The following day, an announcement was tucked in the 3rd paragraph in a parent email that said “it is unlikely that we’ll be able to offer most middle and high school students the opportunity for in-person learning this school year.”

On February 1st, San Francisco attorney Paul Scott sent a letter to Board President López demanding that the Board repeal the resolution it had passed to rename schools because their public notification efforts had violated the Brown Act — California’s open-meeting law — and denied due process to the public.

On February 3, the San Francisco City Attorney’s office, in collaboration with Mayor London Breed, filed suit against SFUSD in response to its lack of a legally mandated reopening plan, saying that “Rather than prioritizing resources on creating a reasonable plan to reopen schools, Respondents have dedicated limited time and money to renaming empty schools now. For that misguided priority, Respondents created a plan, established a “blue-ribbon panel,” and took action. Respondents seem to feel no similar urgency to reopen schools or, at the very least, even create a plan to do so.”

In response, on February 4th, Board President Gabriela López stated in an opinion piece in the SF Chronicle that efforts to rename schools were not delaying reopening schools. “Our efforts to dismantle racist symbols and white supremacy culture does not diminish the board’s focus on other pressing matters,” she insisted.

Finally, on February 21, in the wake of overwhelming public pressure, Board President López announced that the Board was putting the renaming process on hold. She explained that the renaming effort “was a process begun in 2018 with a timeline that didn’t anticipate a pandemic.”

This explanation begs the question: why did it take 11 months for the Board to recognize and acknowledge they should not “be taking valuable time from our board agendas to further discuss this, as we need to prioritize reopening.” (Note: The Paul Scott lawsuit continues and a judge recently ruled to require the Board to vacate their decision and disband the “blue ribbon” panel or explain why they haven’t already done so.)

#### Misplaced priority #2: Eliminating Merit-Based Admissions at Lowell High School

The Board’s actions regarding the Lowell admissions policy further demonstrates their ability to act swiftly and decisively when it chooses to.

On October 9, 2020 the Board announced a proposal to change the admissions process of Lowell High School for the school year 2021-22, shifting to the rank-choice lottery system used by most schools in the SFUSD system. Because of decisions made early in the pandemic, they explained, they didn't have the data needed to implement Lowell's merit-based admissions policy. Notably, this rank-choice lottery system is the same one the Board is actively working to overhaul for elementary school admissions because, according to SFUSD and the Board, the system has failed at racially integrating SFUSD.

At a public board meeting on October 13 many people objected to, among other things, the sudden announcement and quickly approaching vote. Board members Jenny Lam and Stevon Cook expressed concerns over the timing of the proposal and lack of transparency. The debate quickly broadened to address long-standing concerns about the Lowell admissions policy, which some people believe furthered racist outcomes and enabled a toxic school culture. Commissioners López and Sanchez declared that the time might be right to discuss a more long-term solution to the Lowell admissions process.

Regardless of these concerns, on October 20th, eleven days after announcing their intentions, the Board unanimously approved this interim, one-year change to the Lowell admissions criteria.

On January 20 2021, during an on-line anti-racism lesson at Lowell, the school's "Padlet" system was hacked and a class of students were exposed to racist slurs and pornographic images. People across the City and beyond were universally outraged, and district leaders vowed to investigate the incident.

On January 26th, a public Board meeting became an hours-long, highly contentious debate during which people emphatically expressed vastly divergent points of view. Many condemned the school and pushed for the admissions policy to be permanently changed, linking the incident to a long history of racist acts and marginalizing behavior at the school, and accusing school administrators of repeatedly ignoring and under-responding to past incidents. Others decried the change as premature, and the decision-making process as flawed. They further asserted that it would not bring about the desired change of increasing diversity at the school and would destroy the school's rigor and reputation. During the meeting several Commissioners made clear their personal belief that a merit-based admissions process is inherently racist.

Shortly afterwards, on February 2nd, Commissioners Collins, Lopez, and Alexander introduced a resolution at a special meeting to permanently eliminate merit-based admissions at Lowell, presenting the change as part of a resolution of the Padlet incident. The Resolution also called for an in-depth equity audit and action plan to be developed in collaboration with social justice/civil rights organizations and Black student leaders.

On February 9, twenty days after the racist incident, seven days after introducing the resolution, and following three hours of debate, the Board voted to permanently change the 55-year old Lowell admissions policy. At that same meeting they spent two hours considering, and ultimately rejecting, the candidacy of a well-qualified parent for one of eight available volunteer spots on the Parent Advisory Council without recognizing him at the meeting or asking him one question. The board finally turned to the topic of reopening seven hours into the meeting.

During the public comments part of this meeting one parent spoke directly to the issue of misplaced priorities: **"It's clear to me that kids just aren't being prioritized,"** said Jennifer Sey, a San Francisco parent of two kids in public schools and a member of the grassroots group Reopen Schools California. **"I don't understand how you couldn't spend the entire nine hours focused on opening. What could be more urgent than getting schools opened for our kids?"**

*Update: On March 3rd the district shared the outcome of the investigation by the Department of Technology, who worked with the Padlet CEO and Padlet engineers to trace 5 student IP addresses, none of which were related to Lowell (the perpetrators could have used a VPN, however). The SFUSD Legal department says that the incident did not reach a level sufficient to be named a crime, so at the moment there is no resolution or known responsible party. The administration says it will try to communicate with the Lowell Community and the BSU with further updates when possible.*

### Misplaced Priority #3: Semantics over Solutions

At several points during the year, Commissioners attempted to recast the situation instead of solving it.

In a January 21, 2021 article about mounting evidence of racial and socioeconomic disparities in learning loss Commissioner López declared that students in distance learning "are learning more about their families and their cultures, spending more time with each other." "They're just having different learning experiences than the ones we currently measure," she said, "and the loss is a comparison to a time when we were in a different space."

More recently, Commissioner Collins was heard discouraging the use of the term "learning loss" when describing the academic impact of distance learning. During a March 16 meeting she appears to remind Ritu Khanna, SFUSD Chief of Research, Planning & Assessment, to use "learning change" instead. This is similar to her insistence that the expression "achievement gap" be replaced with "achievement opportunity."

This focus on semantics belittles the experiences of our students. Whatever words we choose — *problems, losses, gaps, opportunities, or change* — the Board needs to acknowledge there are real-life difficulties facing real-life students and work to solve them rather than rename them.

# 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.**