

Good evening President Gilles, members of the School Board, and Superintendent Perez, and welcome Dr. Luzelena Perez,

Happy New Year! Yesterday we celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Day and I'd like to start tonight with one of his quotes. In his book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, in which he documented the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, King wrote: **“Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.”** As a history teacher, I often look to the past to guide me, and as this new year brought turmoil to our nation's capital and further exposed the divisions present in our society, King's words are just as relevant and important today as they were in 1958 at the height of the civil rights movement. Over the past two weeks I have seen the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals at work here in our District and our community, and it gives me hope that we are indeed moving towards progress, justice, and understanding. Teachers have been grappling with how to explain and teach about the January 6th attack on the Capital while continuing to provide students with guidance, comfort, and direction. They have delivered timely lessons and provided space for reflection, while also examining the role that education can play in addressing and dismantling societal inequities. I was also very pleased to receive Dr. Perez's timely and pertinent community letter on January 11th that so eloquently called for us to recognize our divisions and find ways to respectfully communicate and work together for the sake of our children and their future. While we all may have differing opinions on the right steps forward, we can recognize our shared humanity and consider the impact that our actions and our words have on our children and students who are watching us so closely and rely on us to model the change we wish to see in the world.

Considering this, tonight I have some updates for you on our work on the Memorandum of Understanding as well as the Governor's budget proposal. While the MOU process may seem slow going, I can assure you that we are working with the District management and getting close to an agreement. Although the guidance and protocols for schools have continually shifted and changed, our two teams have been dedicated to adjust and find common ground in

order to be fully prepared to safely open campuses once the state and county health officers allow for it. We have developed a tiered re-entry plan with safety guidelines for both staff and students at each level that mirror the Governor's requirements and includes regular testing and contact tracing. Since schools are at the heart of our community, regular surveillance testing is essential to limiting the spread of the virus and protecting our citizens. We are also cautiously optimistic that the Sonoma County Office of Education is working with the local districts to ensure that educators will start receiving vaccines in February. The county estimates that the process of vaccinating teachers will take at least 10 weeks. While the details are still being worked out, this is the first step towards re-opening campuses for in-person learning. For safety and equity, our position is that all RPCEA members must have the full vaccination regimen available to them prior to being required to return to the classroom with students. Our members are anxious to return to the classroom with students as we know that most students learn better in-person; however we also know it is currently not safe with the current surge of Covid cases. The vaccine provides a path forward and a way to better serve and protect our community.

While opening for in-person instruction is on the horizon, we want to make sure that the community knows that at first, even with the vaccine, school will look very different from what we are used to. Students will be grouped into cohorts of 14 or less and will only attend school on-campus for a partial day or only a few days a week. While the details of this are being determined, this may mean that student classes may be shuffled to accommodate those students who are returning to the classroom and those who are continuing with distance learning. In addition, classrooms will be set up so that desks are six-feet away from one another and students will have all their own supplies and materials. Teachers will be stationed in a location near their own desk and their movement around the room may be limited. Many classrooms will also need to be rearranged, with book shelves, additional furniture, classroom posters and other items removed to allow for space and cleaning. While we all want to return to the classroom and get back to in-person school, we want to make sure that the Board and the community understand that there will be significant shifts in the way that school happens which will have an impact on classroom culture and may be difficult for some students to adjust to, especially so far into the school year.

The final topic I'd like to address tonight is the Governor's 21-22 state budget. This month we received some good news, especially in education! Governor Newsom's budget is a \$227.2 billion fiscal blueprint that provides funding for immediate COVID-19 response and relief efforts, and a sizable increase in funding for education. On January 8th, School Services of California wrote that the education budget, *"offers us a collective sigh of relief, if not feelings of jubilation. The economy has recovered from the pandemic much faster than originally anticipated and state revenues are much more robust than what was projected just six months after the 2020 Budget Act was enacted. As a result, public education funding has increased year-over-year, allowing Governor Newsom to meet the state's yearly obligations to K-12...while proposing sizeable investments across a plethora of priorities mostly aimed at continuing to combat COVID-19 and its devastating impact on student learning."* While there are many facets to the budget, I'd like to highlight a few important items. First of all, the 2021-22 budget proposal includes Proposition 98 funding of \$85.8 billion, which is an all time high. Proposition 98 is the mandatory education spending bill which dictates the amount of the general budget that is spent on schools. Another significant point of the new budget is that the Cost Of Living Adjustment (or COLA) is returning for the 21-22 year. The Governor noted that COLA was not provided in 20-21, so COLA for 2021-22 is essentially two-years worth at 3.84% with an expectation that COLA will continue to be provided in the coming years. Since the District can expect a COLA increase, we urge the board to prioritize a Cost of Living increase for our educators who have not seen a wage increase in three years despite the roughly 8-10% rise in the price of living in this area during that time. Another positive part of the budget is that School Districts will retain the ability to receive funding based on the average daily attendance from 2019-20 or 20-21, whichever is higher. This will provide some respite over the concerns of declining enrollment, although our District does seem to be maintaining enrollment this school year. The budget also simplifies the special education base formula and provides \$300 million in ongoing funds for the Special Education Early Intervention Grant. As the school board, I ask that you work with the district to find out more about the new funding formula and determine how it may free up some funds to better serve our students.

One item in particular that I want to make sure to address is retirement costs. During the last school board meeting there was some discussion of the employer cost of CalSTRS and

CalPERS. The first interim report presented that the District funding for retirement had increased in recent years, however, according to School Services, “previous investments to assist employers reduce the employer rate for calSTRS from 18.1% to 15.92% in 2021-22 and CalPERS from 24.9% to 23%.” This means that while the new budget does not include new funding for the retirement system, the cost is still lower than it has been in the past. Finally, the Governor’s budget proposal pays down \$9.2 billion of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) deferrals, which effectively eliminates the ongoing deferrals scheduled for February 2022 through May 2022. While deferrals can be risky, this is really good news for the future budgets, especially since the incoming Biden administration has committed to investing more resources in schools within the first 100 days. While circumstances can always change, the new budget is indeed a sigh of relief for our District. Considering this good news, we ask you to plan for the future and make our educators a priority so they can stay in the District and continue to serve our students and live in our community. As a final note, our RPCEA executive board would like to extend an invitation to meet with each of our Board of Trustees to share our vision, our needs, and our concerns. We will reach out in the next few days to set up a meeting with each of you. Thank you all for being among the dedicated individuals doing your part to ensure the health, safety, and progress of our community.