

President's Message for 9-7 to 9-11

I sincerely want everyone to be safe and healthy. I want for you and your family the same well-being that I want for my own. I wish I could allay everyone's fears. I would like to tell everyone that teaching during a pandemic is going to get easier for all of us. At times, like Prospero in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, I've replaced "analysis with affectation." This happens, as literary critic Terry Eagleton describes it, after the power of reason fails to find a solution. When I dig deep down, I rail against the disease itself. But like air is to fire, life gives birth to disease, right? And when I try to formulate a position on when and/or whether we should go back to work on site, I find myself assuming the pose of an epidemiologist—agreeing with the science of the State and County, or questioning those who have more knowledge than I do. One member asked me, "Who gets to decide when it is safe?" My reply was "not me." Another member told me that we should strike if we have to return. I said, "Strike against what? COVID?"

We teach during a pandemic. We must continue to do so knowing that COVID is an irrational entity. At one moment it blows into the direction of detection and containment and, in the next, it morphs like a trickster into deranged contagion. It appears in different guises to different people based on a variety of factors we may not be able to understand, at least not yet. The best analogy I have right now is the valiant firefighters who battle the horrific blazes in California's mountains and hills. They must battle the natural elements that influence a fire and the flames that seemingly assumes a sociopathic personality erratically hell bent on scarring the land and murdering all in its path.

An analogy is an analogy because it is similar, not the same. Nurses and doctors, for example, are trained to treat diseases. Firefighters extensively rehearse. For many teachers, the runway was far too short and our preparation for the dynamics of teaching during a pandemic were rudimentary at best. Despite this, we are still delivering quality instruction. We must teach as the invisible blaze burns. All that we do is more difficult, more stressful, all of our tasks seem to take longer. We have had to alter our routines, our delivery of curriculum, our pedagogy. The distress seeps into the core of our existence—our relationships, our relaxation, our recreation—denouncing almost every joy. And this virus hangs looms like a phantasm that we once offended in a past, "normal" life.

I hope (hope another form of affect) you accept that MEA leadership will do anything and everything in its power to design the safest working conditions possible. A local employee association cannot decide *when* we return, but we have a strong role in determining *how* we return. Because our jobs are more difficult and the most routine of tasks take more time, MEA will attempt to bargain for areas of relief as we did during the traumatic furlough days. Currently, we're focused on the disproportionate amount of work for elementary combo teachers, the work conditions for one-on-one testing, and the immediate transition of 12 SPED teachers to on-campus instruction. In addition, MEA is working with MUSD to figure out conferences, report cards, and how to maximize the usefulness of Canvas.

MEA cannot take a formal, pronounced position on when we return to our campuses because we must trust the data and pronouncements of public health experts. The alternative is for MEA leadership to question the science and the scientists. In addition, there is no unanimity amongst our membership on when it is safe to return. We do have members who want to return to campus as soon as possible. MEA leadership must represent its membership in a global manner. It also will not enter into any politicization of this issue. MEA's issues are health and safety.

Who decides? Well, in short, the county has and our school board does. This Tuesday, MUSD trustees (they are called trustees because they are entrusted with the power to make these tough decisions) will choose whether to pursue the Ventura County Waiver process that will allow for blended learning for TK-5. Last Tuesday, they approved the State mandated return of 12 SPED teachers to on-site learning. Your voice does count. You can send a message to the school board during public comments. You can and should influence the school board's decision-making.

The hope is, of course, this trend means that COVID has dissipated and it will be safe enough for all students and teachers to return. The flip side of hope is despair, and I am not willing to concede to it. MEA will continue to fight for your well-being regardless of what confronts us.

Sincerely,

Brian