



SANTA MONICA - MALIBU UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

January 13, 2021

## **Focusing on Equity, Engagement and Facility Improvements**

Dear Parents, Guardians, Staff, and Community Members,

As we remain in the darkest days of the worst public health crisis in the last century, it is hard to look ahead to when we return to “normal.” For the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District (SMMUSD) it has been equally challenging, as we must focus on facing the daily challenges of Covid-19 while at the same time maintaining progress on the long-term vision for the school district. Instead of focusing on virus response, this letter hopes to remind our community of the work we remain committed to in spite of current conditions.

### **Social justice and ethnic studies**

Our dedication and commitment to social justice remains as strong as ever. While we have reduced professional development demands on teachers during distance learning, we continue to offer trainings toward enhancing our K-12 social justice standards, which were launched in 2018. Restorative justice has been implemented in new and creative ways that will continue to expand. The Zoom meeting platform has led to an increase in participation and expansion of our family engagement programs.

Affiliated organizations like Puente Parent Group and the Black Parent Group are expanding and meeting regularly to provide support for both parents and students. Samohi has created “Affinity Groups” for students to gather together in cohorts to discuss important race and social justice issues. From a curriculum lens, our American Cultures Ethnic Studies graduation requirement, which was approved unanimously by the school board in December 2016, has been moving forward through a collaboration with high school teachers transforming our 11<sup>th</sup> grade US history curriculum. This program is reflective of multiple points of view and fully embraces the positive educational and social values of ethnic studies courses. We are working to grow these opportunities for students at all grade levels TK-12. Finally, as we prepare for Black History Month in February, our students can expect many engaging classes, conversations, and projects.

Last summer, the district made a commitment to anti-racism and created a [webpage](#) with resources and our commitment.

### **Engagement and opportunity**

As a high performing, high achieving district, we know that SMMUSD has been very successful in reaching certain segments of its student population. But the achievement and opportunity gaps speak to those cohorts of students who are not advancing to their fullest potential. Many students have different learning styles and needs that must be addressed in new and unique ways. Engagement will be the key to success and long held structural norms must change.

### **Project-based learning and academies**

Our advancements in project-based learning are taking root in all schools and our personalized PBL pathway is showing tremendous potential in engaging students in deeper and more intrinsically-motivated ways. Twenty first-century education is finally becoming more than an expression as it is now practiced in our classrooms throughout the district. The new Exploration building at Samohi will house our academy programs, yet another way to engage our students in more authentic ways.



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### **Career tech education**

Finally, we are putting finishing touches on a partnership with our local “trades” to offer a course at Samohi that will lead to opportunities for our students to enter an apprentice program leading to careers in construction professions. These are just a few examples of our ongoing efforts to address real needs within our district. The district and school board are committed to continuing and expanding these efforts.

### **Facility improvement projects**

A positive unintended consequence of distance learning has been our ability to accelerate some facility improvement projects on our campuses. Malibu Middle/High School students will return to a transformative new building housing a library, labs, and 21<sup>st</sup>-century classrooms. The Samohi Discovery building is on track to open in fall 2021 with its new Olympic-sized pool opening this summer. And speaking of tracks, the field at Samohi underwent a much-needed replacement to match the new Patrick Cady Track.

Samohi students and staff will return to a refreshed library and additional solar panels have been installed on the Innovation building, to name a couple of the recent campus improvements. Construction of the JAMS Performing Arts Center has continued and the new 750-seat auditorium, plus a choir classroom and rehearsal room, is anticipated to be completed with equipment and furnishings by May.

Students at Malibu Elementary School have an interactive and accessible new playground to utilize upon return. Window, paint, floor, door and HVAC projects as part of our three-year plan were accelerated and completed at McKinley, Franklin and Webster. New HVAC systems at Lincoln, Grant, SMASH/Muir, Roosevelt, and Will Rogers will be completed this summer. New ionization air filters were installed in classrooms across the district that will benefit us now and in the post-Covid world. There have been many more projects, both big and small, with work continuing daily. Our campuses will be ready and refreshed when our students return.

### **Looking forward**

School board topics to watch for as we enter 2021 include:

- 1) January—Multiple discussions of campus plans/construction projects
- 2) February—An annual review of our diversity in hiring practices
- 3) May—An annual review of our American Cultures Ethnic Studies program

It is hard to look past the social, emotional, and academic devastation that Covid-19 has unleashed on our world. Our families and our community are suffering. But, with vaccines now being administered, it is probably safe to say that we are at the beginning of the end.

SMMUSD is working tirelessly to provide the best education for our nearly 10,000 students in challenging circumstances where safety concerns color every action. At the same time, we are also continuing the important work that this school board has dedicated itself to, unanimously, for the future success of our district and our students.

Sincerely,

Ben Drati, Superintendent, Ed.D  
Jon Kean, School Board President  
Laurie Lieberman, School Board Vice President  
SMMUSD