

YDSA + Teachers Union = Big Win for Safety

Via [The Call](#)

In Tuesday at a special school board meeting, high school students and teachers in Albany, California stood up to the board for a just reopening plan at their high school and won.

Earlier this month, the Albany Teachers Association had voted to approve one of the best reopening plans in the state: two afternoons per week of academic support and social-emotional learning activities led by one of each student's teachers. There would be contained cohorts of 16. Students choosing to stay home would be in a group of only-online students, eliminating the need for simulcasting (where teachers instruct students in their classroom and on a Zoom call at the same time, an impossible task).

But some parents, organizing in Facebook groups and by protesting outside the district office, demanded an immediate full reopening. Acceding to this small group, the school board betrayed the union by going behind members' backs to propose a second plan, mandating full days of in-person academic instruction.

Because of the complexity of Albany High School's student schedules, this plan necessitated both simulcasting and a monumental cut in the minutes of synchronous instruction (students and teachers together at the same time), which would be replaced by homework. In a survey of over 800 of the school's 1,300 students, respondents stated overwhelmingly that they valued synchronous instruction directly from their teachers above all else and did not feel comfortable moving between classes in AHS's infamously congested staircases.

The Albany Teachers Association sprung into action,

circulating a letter condemning the board's undemocratic, anti-union move and turning out supporters to Tuesday's special board meeting with their Zoom names changed to "I Support Albany Teachers."

Albany High School YDSA forwarded the letter to students, circulating a pro-union Zoom background for them to use in classes and at meetings. On Monday, AHS held a student opinion forum for the board to observe. Over 300 students attended and voiced a clear and unanimous opinion: We do not want to lose face-to-face time with our teachers. We do not want to be exposed to over 60 people per day. We stand with our teachers and are heartbroken that the board would consider abandoning a carefully considered, legally binding agreement in a hastily called emergency meeting.

Tensions ran high at Tuesday's 6pm board meeting, which had over 700 observers. The board started with its new plan for Albany's three elementary schools, drastically increasing the number of in-person minutes. Teacher after teacher described the deep betrayal they felt at the board's shutting them out of the process of determining safe working and learning conditions. The board went against the recommendations of the principal of Albany Middle School and its own superintendent by voting to have middle school students return for two full days of in-person instruction weekly, with simulcasting for students staying at home and no contained cohorts.

Teachers have suggested that by approving a safe reopening for the high school while forcing elementary and middle schools back under dangerous conditions, the district is trying to divide teachers and make organizing harder.

It was 11pm by the time discussion began for Albany High School. Students and teachers delivered fiery pleas for the board to stick by the original plan. They pointed to their need for structure and synchronous class time to prepare for their AP tests. They described the injustice of simulcasting

and the disrespect to teachers and students of disregarding the union's legal agreement.

The board put forward an offensive twofold narrative: students are deeply struggling with remote learning and must return to in-person school immediately if their mental health is to be saved. Simultaneously, they said, students are lazy and the overwhelming student opposition to the new plan is because they want to stay home and play video games all day. "It's what I would have done at your age," said one board member, who was immediately rebuked by the two student board representatives. The student board reps praised the maturity and foresight of students advocating for a plan that will help them excel, saying "we have been hit harder by the pandemic than anyone else here."

Past midnight, the school board voted against its own plan in favor of the original agreement, with several members expressing their displeasure before begrudgingly siding with the majority. Albany's elementary and middle schools were done a great injustice that night and this is not the end of the fight for them. Albany High School won because students and teachers organized to stand in solidarity with each other, making it impossible for the board to renege on the original agreement.

The fight shows that while surveys and forums can try to explain what students need, the only thing that can actually protect those needs is organized labor – and organized students!